On Racism and Revolution: An Interview with Cuban Activist Norberto Mesa Carbonell

written by Luisa Steur, Norberto Mesa Carbonell | December 19, 2015

Since 1959, the Cuban revolution has been dedicated to racial equality. In a country where slavery was abolished only in 1886, the revolution offered many black Cubans their first access to land and education, through the new universal egalitarian policies, and an explicit commitment to eliminating racial discrimination. Even critical scholars argue that though it falls short of racial democracy, Cuba has done more than any other society to eradicate racial inequality.

Yet since Cuba's "Special Period" began in the early 1990s, resources have been severely limited. Market-oriented reforms have come at the price of rising inequalities, which are not color-blind: racial tensions have increased substantially. To counter this trend, several black artists and public intellectuals have created a vibrant anti-racist activist scene, partly attached to the government-sponsored "Regional Afro-descendant Articulation of Latin America and the Caribbean, Cuban Chapter" (abbreviated in Spanish to ARAAC).

It was at one of ARAAC's events, that the interviewer, Luisa Steur, first met Norberto Mesa Carbonell – a sixty-year-old black man, leaning forward on his chair, eyes brimming with political passion. The following are excerpts from several long interviews in late 2014 and early 2015. Luisa Steur is from the University of Copenhagen and does research in Cuba. A longer version of this interview is available at *Global Express* http://isa-global-dialogue.net/?p=4222

LS: Norberto, can you tell us a bit about yourself?

NMC: Politically I am complicated. One of the revolution's first great campaigns was the Cuban Literacy Campaign (1961); I had barely turned ten when I began to teach others to read and write! In 1963, when hurricane Flora swept over the island, I was thirteen, with a brigade picking coffee in Oriente. I wasn't even sixteen in May, 1966, when there was a big military mobilization: we were there, behind the canons, waiting for American boats! That is to say, I was brought up with the practice of revolution. On the other hand, I read a lot. I was a leader of my worker group, organizer of a party cell.

The revolution meant a lot in my life. But something happened in 1980 that made me leave the party. During the "Mariel boatlift," many poor people, many blacks, were leaving Cuba, because of poverty.

We were supposed to treat them as traitors, to throw eggs at them. I found myself in a meeting where a young comrade was being criticized because he refused to participate. They expelled him! Leaving that meeting I was thinking, if my brother left on a boat, and people wanted to treat him like that, as scum, they'd have to fight me first. And so, I decided to send in a letter requesting my resignation. It was a question of conscience.

The revolution has achieved many positive things, including for blacks. That's why I continue appealing to the governing institutions, sending them public letters; unlike political dissidents, I still think positively about those institutions. And I've stayed a revolutionary according to Fidel's definition. The majority of blacks are with the Revolution – it's logical, given all the revolution has brought to black people. But that's not to say we should be "grateful" forever.

So when the 1990s came, with growing inequalities, including racial inequalities, we created the*Cofradía de la Negritud* [Brotherhood of Negritude] to fight racial discrimination. What is threatening about the *Cofradía* is that we cannot be labeled political dissidents. We work within the socialist discourse, even though we're critical: we simply don't want socialism with racial discrimination! Our struggle calls on the Communist Party to confront the problem of racism in Cuba. So long as the party doesn't explicitly take up the problem, all other institutions will be hesitant to act.

LS: What are the major problems related to racism in Cuba today? And have you experienced any of them yourself?

NMC: Organizations of black people have often been repressed, accused of being "racist." Blacks have had little chance to form a positive identity. You can see it in this idea of *adelantar* (moving forward), which means marrying a white person, getting rid of blackness! This whitening ideal limits the extent to which people can identify with their racial condition. It makes it difficult to confront the most serious racial problems today, which are about blacks being excluded from well-paid positions in the Cuban economy.

I have some first-hand experience. For years I worked at the Marina Hemingway. I started there in 1997, when a neighbor of mine became the boss of the shops there. So I asked whether there was a job for me – after all, we were from the same village, we had worked together before. And by then I had experience at the reception of international hotels, plus I spoke English. So he said, "Norberto, I'm going to help you, but listen, what are you saying about working at the reception or in the shops? That's not possible. I'll put you to work in the storehouse *because here in the Marina Hemingway, blacks don't work in contact with the public*." And that was someone who used to be a party leader! I needed the job so I said, "Ah, yes, the storehouse, why not…"

After a while, I heard they were looking for porters and I managed to secure a position. There were five of us – two who had some higher-up backing and felt secure, while myself and two others, all three of us black, actually had been studying English. But who were the first to be sent for re-training when the hotel didn't need so many porters? Of course, we three blacks, who actually spoke English! I was sent to be trained as a security guard. I remember entering the place we were sent. There are few blacks in the tourism sector, but there, where they send excess staff for retraining, it was at least 60% black!

But things got worse: they laid me off, totally illegally. I complained to the union but nothing happened. I decided to file a complaint on the basis of the violation of the right to equality, established in the Penal Code. I went to a lawyers bureau first; from there I was sent to the municipal Prosecutors Office, who eventually sent me to the police station. I remember telling the official that I wanted to make a grievance regarding the right to equality. She looked at me with

total incomprehension: “violation of the right to equality??” “Yes *compañera*, I want to accuse the hotel manager of racial discrimination!” She was dumbstruck. The head of the unit took my complaint – and they started an investigation! The hotel was full of commotion: the police investigator took it seriously and the manager of the hotel was transferred to another hotel. But eventually I received a letter from the prosecutor stating that the subject of my complaint did not constitute a criminal offense; no appeal was possible. And that’s where it died.

Cubatur were looking to hire tourist guides. I went running; with my hotel experience and English I was perfectly qualified! I was told the manager was not in, come back tomorrow. The third day, I was waiting for the manager when two young white men came in, talking about the job I had been waiting for. Suddenly the manager appeared to be in! When I wanted to join the two boys inside I was told there were no places left.

These problems exist with all the better jobs in Cuba. Most of my life I worked as a geneticist at one of Cuba’s most advanced dairy enterprises, raising Holstein cows. At the beginning, when I was at high-ranking meetings and noticed almost all the other attendants were white, I didn’t think much of it. Nowadays I pay more attention. Too many times I’ve seen blacks, well-qualified for their jobs, getting replaced by whites. This happened in the last job I held at Cuba’s prestigious bio-pharmaceutical enterprise: they were trying to get rid of all the black professionals – and of me all the more because of my activism. Many of my black colleagues left because of harassment. In the end I chose to take early retirement.

Last year our organization wrote an open letter to the CTC (the Worker’s Central Union of Cuba), asking them to denounce this racism but did they do something? Nothing. We need the party to take leadership and acknowledge the problem exists. As long as that doesn’t happen, no other civil society organization will talk about it. “Building a prosperous and sustainable socialism” is the order of the day. “Prosperous and sustainable,” great – but what about racism?! All these new economic reforms, attracting foreign investment, increasing *cuentapropismo* (small entrepreneurship) – all this is bound to worsen racial inequality in this country.

LS: Does the economic problem of racism in Cuba mostly concern more skilled, more educated black workers?

NMC: The main problem of racism in Cuba is poverty. Many black youngsters cannot go to university. Instead of studying, many take small jobs simply to keep the family afloat. How is it possible that we bring almost a thousand Pakistani youngsters here to study to become doctors, paying for their education, but we can’t provide the five thousand poor Cuban youngsters who need money to study? This revolution was supposed to be “by the humble, for the humble” – and now only those families with money can let their children study?

You know that in Cuba there are thousands of acres full of weeds, because people don’t want to work on the land. At the same time, we have all these people who migrated to the cities but cannot find a proper place to live. My suggestion is to find black families who want to move to the countryside and set up an agricultural community. Of course, they need a lot of support, inputs, a tractor, etc. Why not ask some NGOs to support this financially? Of course the Cuban state has to grant them *ownership* of the land. These days land is being sold all over the place, so why not?

Here in Cuba in the nineteenth century, some farms actually belonged to free blacks, particularly in the Oriente Province. Many free blacks fought in the War of Independence [against Spain] – they left their farms to join in the Liberation Army. But American companies bought up their lands, because their title deeds weren’t registered properly. What happened to those blacks? They were ready to protest of course. To reclaim their land, many of them joined the 1912 revolt in the Eastern

province, led by the Partido Independiente de Color. In the ensuing repression, many of them were killed.

So this resettlement program of today is a question of historical justice – for this government to give land to these people would be a great gesture. It should be for those who want – a program of historical justice for black families, but if some whites want to join, why not? But for blacks, this is one of the few ways to improve their economic conditions.

LS: How do you yourself get by these days, how do you find the resources to organize the activities of the Cofradía?

NMC: I live on a pension paid in *pesos,* a few dollars, and it's not easy. I work at night as a guard for some rich guy, for $30 a month. It's difficult to organize with so little money – people travelling from far expect at least something to eat. Sometimes we have to postpone meetings simply because we don't have the means and everyone is too busy "*luchando*" [making ends meet]. But at least people know we are doing it out of sincerity, not because of ulterior motives. And we will continue, that's for sure. I cannot think of my grandchildren facing the same problems that I faced or *worse*, falling back to where we were before the revolution.

Direct all correspondence to Luisa Steur (luisasteur@yahoo.co.uk) and Norberto Mesa Carbonell (nmesacarbonell@gmail.com)

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