The Intra-Immigrant Dilemma

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> "Black people should do more to help themselves. . . . We worked for everything we have. They should too." *(Cuban-American Miami resident)*

> "[Whites] are racists by tradition and they at least know that what they're doing is not quite right . . . Cubans don't even think there is anything wrong with it. That is the way they've always related, period." *(African-American Miami resident)**

IN HIS RECENT PIECE ON RACE, immigration and African Americans, Stephen Steinberg challenges progressives to think outside our own box — a box that has held strong support for a liberalized immigration policy and the immigrant struggle for social/economic inclusion in the United States. However, in our call to defend, organize, and empower newcomers, social outcasts, "have-nots" and people of color, we often forget to question institutional structures that allow the transfer of power and privilege from one set of hands to another in a way that sustains pre-existing forms of inequality. As Steinberg duly noted, this transfer of relative privilege comes at the cost of those the farthest down, spurned by society in a discriminatory preference toward newcomers they can easily exploit. Today, we have come full-circle, once again "preferring" immigrants over native- born African Americans (and various U.S.-born groups of color) while in many cases allowing elite ethnic communities to bask in the limelight of exploitation, engaging in similar practices as their oppressors to their own advantage.

In this brief response, I use the growth, power and privilege of the Cuban-American community in South Florida as an explicit case-example of Steinberg's necessary argument. When African Americans could have been absorbed into the local economy and looked to make political gains after the legal death of Jim Crow, predominantly "white" recently-arrived high-skilled elites from Cuba were ultimately allowed to transplant pre-Castro-like conditions of segregation and economic exploitation, transferring them onto native-born African Americans and eventually Caribbean/Latino immigrants of color (even Afro-Cubans). The result after 45 years is a diverse yet tumultuous, mostly "elite" immigrant-dominated environment with a history of ethnic/racial tension and conflict, continued social and economic segregation, and deeply concentrated pockets of poverty. Moreover, the root causes lie in the wake of government policies that have given Cubans relative preferential immigrant status and the often-unquestioned right to favor "their own" in local economic, social, and political institutions.

Before continuing, what I argue in this commentary should not be received as a negation of

historical facts, or as a public attack on the community of my roots. Cuban-Americans, like any other refugee or immigrant group, clearly entered this country as an "other," subject to the likes of xenophobia and ethnic-racial discrimination that have plagued this nation since its very inception. I am also aware that Cubans were also manipulatively used as an instrument in U.S. Cold War policy, given their open discontent toward Fidel Castro's government. More importantly, this argument should not be applied in every context where immigrants outnumber African Americans. It is easy to scapegoat and blame post-1965 immigrants as the cause of the native-immigrant struggle, when Steinberg very well illustrated that today's conflict is no different than yesteryear's.

Instead, my purpose is to provide a perspective in which the person at the lowest position, looking to integrate into a society that has historically denied them due process and economic mobility, is (to borrow from Nicolas Vaca) "passed by and shut out" by a group that has been aided through U.S. refugee and immigrant-adaptation policy more so than any other group in U.S. history. More importantly, as Steinberg noted, it is the unannounced endorsement by academics and policymakers for immigrant groups to "prefer" their own in local hiring through "networks," as well as those allowed to maintain a relative monopoly through "ethnic niches," that is most detrimental to African Americans and marginalized groups. Scholars including Patricia Fernandez-Kelly, Alex Grenier, Alejandro Portes, and Alex Stepick have written extensively on the Cuban "ethnic economy," sometimes comparing it to other local native-born and immigrant group enclave communities. Their results allow an observer to perceive Cubans as a "model-minority" Hispanic/Latino group overall, although with some reservations toward our overbearing political power, yet one that has been deemed one of the most economically successful immigrant groups in U.S. history.[1]

However, what many scholars and policymakers seem to ignore gives even more credence to Steinberg's controversial thesis. Scholarly research on today's immigrants informs us of the divergent paths groups take while incorporating into U.S. society. It has been clearly documented, for example, that not all Latin-American and Asian groups adapt the same way. The reason, scholars have debated, range from the strength of social networks, skills, and human capital to the amount of economic aid given upon initial arrival. Likewise, "culture" is a defined motive and reason of economic success by some groups and cause of relative poverty in others. Racism, deemed a declining factor in life chances, takes the most subservient position in many of these studies.

However, it is the racialized identity of peoples *within* their own ethnic communities that begs the need to discuss the impact of immigration and immigrant-adaptation policies on U.S.-born African Americans and vulnerable minority groups. As the previous U.S. Census illustrates, more Latinos, for example, are self-identifying beyond the traditional black/white social categories, choosing "other" or their home country as the source of their ethnic identity. However, scholars like William Darity, Jason Dietrich, Darrick Hamilton, and John Logan have dug deeper, using different methodologies, but find similarly significant disparities in wages and the overall socio- economic position of Latinos by "race."[2] For instance, Logan's detailed extraction of census data found that Latinos who identified as "white" had the highest socioeconomic standing and were more likely to live around non-Latino whites. The group that identified as some other race, or what Logan calls "Hispanic-Hispanics," held less favorable positions than their "white" Latino counterparts. "Black" Latinos, the smallest group, occupies the lowest socio-economic position, which are more likely to live near and have income and unemployment rates similar to African Americans.[3]

Let us apply the above inequalities in a historical context by using South Florida as an example. The prevailing narrative is that Cubans first entered as a high-skilled, politically persecuted group that initially experienced discrimination and used hiring networks to establish an economic foothold before less-skilled relatives and other Latinos arrived whom they would aid and employ (i.e., Nicaraguans). Another perspective, which most scholars seem to ignore, is that Cubans eventually

replaced white economic and political power and adopted similar Jim Crow-like patterns within their own economic circles. As immigration increased from Latin America and the Caribbean, immigrant groups of color (even Afro-Cubans) were forced to battle it out with African Americans for scarce economic and housing opportunities. Meanwhile, Cubans and other "white" Latinos segregated themselves from African Americans and dark-skinned Caribbean groups as they moved up the socioeconomic ladder. The result throws out any credibility to arguments that cite "culture" as an indicator of economic mobility and instead places race smack dab in the middle of the equation.

While growing up in the surroundings of the Cuban ethnic economy, African Americans (and Haitians) were consistently blamed for their own struggles and living conditions. What we rarely questioned (although we very well knew and lobbied for) is that we were given the go-ahead through preferential immigration policies such as the Cuban Adjustment Act (1966, 1996), aided with additional benefits and resources, and allowed to employ the same workplace hiring and economically manipulative tactics that led to revolutionary resistance and our initial expulsion from Cuba in the first place. As a former "other," we took no responsibility for the plight of African Americans and unapologetically had them occupy that former space. But we did the same to members of our own group, even though we heralded Jose Marti's famous "*mas que blanco, mas que mulato, mas que negro,* (more than white, more than mulatto, more than black). Alejandro Portes and Juan Clark's post-Mariel boatlift survey shows the degrees that Cubans (of whom roughly 25-40 percent were Afro-Cuban) felt discriminated against by their fellow Cuban counterparts as by whites and African Americans.[4] Mirta Ojito, whose ethnographic piece details the lives of two young best friends from Cuba who arrived with relatively similar skills; one "white," one "black," details this phenomenon. The result is divergent paths, with the light-skinned Cuban moving up in Cuban-American social settings, benefiting from economic opportunities, while his Afro-Cuban counterpart lives alongside African Americans, jumping from unstable job to job in the secondary labor market.[5]

Policymakers and researchers are too often blinded by labels and categories; frequently forgetting that immigrants themselves have internal intra-enclave/community race and class issues that evolved prior to their arrival and are often accentuated in U.S. society. Scholars like Juan Flores, Miguel De La Torre and others teach us that these dynamics often go unmentioned, overlooked by scholars due to an extensive focus on the oppressive structures of dominant Eurocentric culture.[6] Scholars who study race in Latin America and its transnational implications support their works. For instance, Amy Chua's *World on Fire*, argues that a pigmentocratic phenomenon in Latin America, where lightness in skin color means more access to the upper echelons of society, is allowing oppressed groups to identify away from national terms and embrace their ethnicity as they organize against the power and privilege of "white" elites.[7] Eduardo Bonilla-Silva argues the United States is moving beyond the traditional "black," "white" and "honorary white" stratification and now encompasses this new pigmentocratic component through factors including Latin-American immigration.[8]

What the above circumstances imply calls for a whole new approach to understanding existing tension between immigrant and U.S.-born groups, especially in cities where minorities (especially elite Latinos) are making significant political and economic gains. The debate should no longer just consider that ethnics hire, rent, loan (or sometimes appoint) co-ethnics in cities as a forced or chosen response to greater oppressive structures. Yes, we must indeed organize around issues and policies that disallows "white" to discriminate against "yellow," "brown," "red," "black," and shades in- between. However, we must also be vigilant in cases in which immigrants of all colors of the spectrum are "preferred" and exploited through immigration/refugee policies and are eventually allowed to prefer "their own" to the detriment of "black." In other words, we should also turn our focus to groups that lean into the "expanding boundaries of whiteness" as they discriminate against

African Americans, even their own, and exploit others in order to achieve this status.[9]

Footnotes

* Nicolas C. Vaca, *The Presumed Alliance: The unspoken conflict between Latinos and Blacks and what it means for America* (New York, Rayo Press 2004).

1. See Orlando Patterson's comments on the Cuban success story in his book, *The Ordeal of Integration: Progress and Resentment in America's Racial Crisis* (Washington, D.C., Civitas/Counterpoint 1998): 181.

2. Darity, Jr., William, Hamilton, Darrick and Dietrich, Jason. "Passing on Blackness: Latinos, Race and Earnings in the USA," *Applied Economics Letters*, Vol. 9 (2002): 847-853.

3. Logan, John R.,"How Race Counts for Hispanic Americans," Lewis Mumford Center (July 14, 2003).

4. Portes, Alejandro and Clark, Juan., "Mariel Refugees: Six Years Later" (*Migration World 15*, fall, 1987), 14-18.

5. Ojito, Mirta, "Best of Friends, Worlds Apart" in *How Race is Lived in America* (New York: Times Books/Henry Holt, 2001).

6. De La Torre, Miguel*, La Lucha for Cuba: Religion and Politics on the Streets of Miami* (University of California Press 2003). Flores, Juan. "Islands and Enclaves: Caribbean Latinos in Historical Perspective," in *Latinos Remaking America*, eds. Suarez Orozco, M. and Paez M (University of California Press, 2002.)

7. See Chua, Amy*, World on Fire* (New York: Doubleday 2004).

8. Bonilla-Silva, Eduardo, "From bi-racial to tri-racial: Towards a new system of racial stratification in the USA," *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, November, 2004, vol. 27, no. 6, 931-950.

9. For a discussion on the expanding boundaries of whiteness, see Omi, Michael and Winant, Howard, *Racial Formation in the United States: from the 1960s to the 1980s* (New York and London: Routledge and Kegan Paul 1992).