Racial Politics in Revolutionary Cuba

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2009 marks the 50th anniversary of the Cuban Revolution, hailed in 1959 by the vast majority of the Afro Cuban population as a liberating movement. Having had to suffer slavery first (from the arrival of the first black slaves in 1513, until abolition in 1880) and raging discrimination later (both in the Colonial and the Republican periods), most Afro Cubans perceived the Revolution as an extraordinary opportunity to create the nation “with all and for all” envisaged by independence hero José Martí.

If immediately after the Revolutionary triumph an “unprecedented attack” on racial discrimination was evident, by 1962 Fidel Castro had declared Cuba to be a nation free of racism, and implemented a policy of silence. The mere discussion of racism in Cuba was perceived as counterrevolutionary, Afro Cuban organisations were dismantled and the topic all but disappeared from the public sphere. For the revolutionary leaders, racial discrimination had disappeared in Cuba.

However, in the 1990s, the collapse of the Soviet Union, the ensuing crises, and the economic measures implemented by the Revolution had a very negative effect on the living conditions of the Afro Cuba population. More importantly, it led to a clear resurgence of racist attitudes which is still evident today.

The presentation discusses the racial policies implemented by the Cuban Revolution during the past fifty years, analysing the extent to which they can be seen as a success or a failure.