

“*Cuba no es el Congo*”: The Impact of the October 1962 Missile Crisis on Cuban International Identity

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There is a saying in Cuba: "Quién no tiene de congo (tiene de carabalm)". Literally, the phrase means, who doesn't have Congo [African] blood has Carabalm [African] blood; in other words, all Cubans share an African genetic and/or cultural heritage.

So, we can already see that this declaration by Castro, made at the height of the Missile Crisis in October 1962 - “*Cuba no es el Congo*” - identified an intrinsic frame of reference that posited Cuban international identity not only outside the bounds of US hemispheric and global domination, but, more problematically, also beyond the edges of the old triangular trade route of slavery we call the Black Atlantic, within which Cuba had always played a historic and pivotal role.

My goal for this paper is to explore the extent to which the Missile Crisis was, to use Laclau's term, a *dislocatory* experience for the Revolutionary leadership.¹ I shall argue that the events of October 1962 were instrumental in the development of Cuba's international identity along self-consciously racial lines, even though this ran counter to traditionally-held myths of a colour-blind society. Within this framework, the phrase “*Cuba no es el Congo*” reveals the continuing tension between race consciousness and race neutrality that had existed in discourses on Cuban nationalism since José Martí.

I will not take up too much time by going into details of the Missile Crisis, the story of which is probably very familiar to most of you. It has been told and re-told by scholars of the United States; each version a slightly different re-telling of the sequence of events that brought the world to the brink of nuclear war. But each

version similarly casting Cuba as ‘at best a pawn of the Soviet Union, at worst a raging mute offstage’; in any case marginal to the really important action between the two superpowers. Cuban writers, however, have focused upon how the crisis influenced the development of revolutionary ideology. For many of them the crisis was primarily one of identity.²

Laclau and Mouffe have theorized that ‘social antagonisms occur because social agents are unable to attain their identities (and therefore their interests), and because they construct an “enemy” who is deemed responsible for this “failure”’.³ By analyzing the Missile Crisis with reference to this hypothesis, we can confirm that Cuban interests were ignored, belittled or blatantly disregarded both by their avowed allies, the Soviets, and by the openly hostile United States.

The Cuban leadership really didn’t want the nuclear weapons; what they sought was a show of solidarity with the USSR in order to deter US aggression. Fidel Castro has said:

“We didn’t really like the missiles. If it had been a matter only of our own defense, we would not have accepted the deployment of the missiles. But not because we were afraid of the dangers that might follow the deployment of the missiles here; rather, it was because this would damage the image of the revolution, and we were very zealous in protecting the image of the revolution in the rest of Latin America. The presence of the missiles would in fact turn us into a Soviet military base, and that entailed a high political cost for the image of our country, an image we so highly valued.”⁴

(It is worth pausing here to recollect that earlier that year the Cubans had been ejected from the Organization of American States; officially exiling the nation within the hemisphere.) But once the decision had been made to accept the missiles; the Cuban leaders did not want secrecy. Having been cast adrift politically and economically within the Americas, Castro believed that a show of solidarity with the international socialist camp would best serve the island’s security interests.⁵ What he could not understand was the Soviet’s insistence that the installation of the missiles be kept secret; especially since over-flights by US military aircraft would undoubtedly detect the activity, and furthermore no attempts had been made to camouflage the missiles.

Up until the missile crisis, Cuba's international identity as a leader in the fight against imperialism had saved it from overt military intervention by the United States. Frantz Fanon, in *The Wretched of the Earth*, gives this account of the level of international support for the Cuban stance, particularly in the Third World:

...Castro sitting in military uniform in the United Nations Organization does not scandalize the under-developed countries. What Castro demonstrates is the consciousness he has of the continuing existence of the rule of violence. The astonishing thing is that he did not come into UNO with a machine-gun but if he had, would anyone have minded?⁶

Kruschev's insistence upon secrecy undermined this image by allowing Kennedy to gain the high moral ground in public opinion once the satellite photos of the missile installations were made public. This more than anything enraged the Cubans, who had always claimed supremacy in terms of morality and dignity. Furthermore, it triggered a series of responses by the Americans which included a naval blockade, refusal to involve the Cubans in any level of negotiations, and a call for weapons inspections, which was the final insult as far as the Cubans were concerned:

"Cuba is not the Congo. No one can come under that banner or any other banner to inspect our country. We know what we are doing, and we know how we must defend our integrity and our sovereignty.

"Any one who tries to come and inspect Cuba should know that he'd better come in full combat gear! That is our definitive answer to the illusions and to the proposals for carrying out inspections in our territory".⁷

Rebuffed by Washington, and unsupported by Moscow, the Cuban leadership received a further blow to its dignity when members learned from a Radio Moscow broadcast of Khrushchev's October 28 letter to Kennedy ordering the removal of missiles from Cuba. The Cubans had assumed that talks were at an impasse; nobody in Cuba knew about the secret negotiations between Khrushchev and Kennedy. Hours later, Fidel received a brief message from the Soviet leader, who recommended that the Cubans "not let themselves be carried away by emotion".⁸ Such language is akin

to that used by US state officials when discussing Third World leaders, who were routinely described as immature, irrational, or overly emotional.

By reformulating Lacan's discussion of 'the mirror-stage' in which the 'helpless' human infant literally recognizes itself in an external mirror image, Althusser has originated the concept of *interpellation* to capture the process by which a subject 'both recognizes and misrecognizes itself as a subject'. Interpellation is thus a 'specular' or mirror-like process, in which a subject can only recognize itself in an external image that is fixed and absolute, and it is this fixed image which can in turn confer an identity on the subject.⁹ For our purposes, we can connect this with Laclau and Mouffe's previously mentioned writings on the construction of the enemy. That is to say that, confronted by intransigence to their demands, which acted like a *specular* to Cuba's true position within the global geopolitical power structure, the result was a 'peeling away' or 'shedding' of a particular 'false consciousness' held by the leadership that stemmed from Cuba's geographical proximity and close cultural ties with the United States. Both physically and metaphorically Cuba resides within the US borderlands; that area which Gloria Anzaldúa, has called "*una herida abierta*" [an open wound] where the third world grates against the first and bleeds'.¹⁰

Unsurprisingly, the Cuban response to Soviet betrayal was to hold fast to the paradigm of sovereignty, which operated on the basis of a simple dichotomy: sovereignty versus submission. However a parallel paradigm of security also existed within nationalist concepts of *cubanía*, which Kapcia has described as the "teleological belief in *cubanidad*", and that is, 'patria o muerte' [fatherland or death].¹¹ In the wake of the missile crisis Cuban international identity was increasingly constructed through discourses of death, sacrifice, blood and survival, predicated upon Martian concepts of the United States as *el monstruo* [the monster].

Six weeks after, at a rally commemorating the death in combat of Antonio Maceo, deputy general of the Cuban Liberation Army, Ernesto Che Guevara made the following statement in reference to the Crisis:

"Our entire people were a Maceo. All of our people vied to be in the front lines of combat, in a battle whose lines might not even be defined, a battle where the front lines were everywhere..."¹²

Antonio Maceo was a highly regarded black military leader in the Cuban War of Independence against Spanish rule. His name invoked in this statement by Guevara acts on the national consciousness in the same manner as the phrase with which I started this paper; signifying a common African slave ancestry – previously shackled, but now liberated from bondage.

In the absence of a significant native Indian population, US hegemonic relations with Cuba were rooted in the cultivation of the European/Spanish and negation of the African racial and cultural roots. Cuba was prized as the ‘good example’ within the hemisphere, that after Castro became, as Cuban-American historian, Louis Perez JR., has reported: “an insult to American prestige, a challenge to American dignity”.¹³

Social psychologist, Erich Fromm, has observed that positive freedom [freedom to] is greatly differentiated from newly-won freedom [freedom from]; the latter often experienced as a curse where the subject is free from bondage but ‘not free to govern himself, to realize his individuality’. I propose that for Cubans, the Missile Crisis, represented a key turning-point—a transition from *freedom from*, which had been marked by an over-reliance upon the Soviets, to *freedom to*, in Fromm’s words ‘unite ... again with the world, not by primary ties but as a free and independent individual’.¹⁴

In the same way that early failures in planning and development strategies that had followed the Soviet model were now leading Cubans to question the compatibility of a system based on the economy of a European superpower with that of a Caribbean island, estrangement from the Kremlin after October 1962 similarly contributed to a revival of *cubanía*, which included the creation of the concept of a ‘new man’. This idealistic ‘new man’ was to be an unselfish, self-sacrificing, frugal, socialized, and egalitarian human being, armed and ready to assist revolutionary groups throughout Latin America and the world.¹⁵

By the time that the Organization for Solidarity with the Peoples of Africa, Asia, and Latin America was launched in the wake of the Tricontinental Conference, held in Havana in January 1966, Cuba had already provided military assistance to Algeria, and formed close ties to Congo-Brazzaville. While there in 1964, Che Guevara had met with leaders of the main nationalist groups from the Portuguese colonies, and

within a year Cuba had begun providing weapons and military advisers to the MPLA in Angola, the PAIGC in Guinea-Cape Verde, and FRELIMO of Mozambique. Cuba's African policy from the 1960s had far greater success than its efforts in Latin America. By September 1964, all Latin American countries except Mexico had broken relations with Cuba, and Cuban support for Latin American insurgents, a policy known as *focoism*, was abandoned after Guevara's failure (and assassination) in Bolivia in 1967.¹⁶

In his diaries, Guevara noted his inability to communicate with the Bolivian Indians in any meaningful way. His frustration at their inscrutability, and enduring belief that they would betray him, contrasted sharply with his experiences in Congo-Brazzaville in 1966, where he was readily embraced as a leader within the revolutionary forces—if only their fighting ability and organizational skills had matched their enthusiasm and loyalty.¹⁷ It is a matter of debate whether Guevara might have been more successful in Bolivia if Martí's efforts to define Cuban identity according to *mestizaje*, a combination of the Spanish and the Indian, had been more successful. The problem of course with Martí's rhetorical invocation of the Indian in the process of national self-identification is that it eliminates the role of the African.

David Campbell has written that, 'security (of which foreign policy... is a part) is first and foremost a performative discourse constitutive of political order: after all, 'securing something requires its differentiation, classification and definition. It has, in short, to be identified.'¹⁸ So we can consider Fidel Castro's identification of Cubans as a "Latin African people" in the mid-1970s as a poetic structure of the performative discourse defining a self-consciously racialized Foreign Policy. The axiom that there are no races in Cuba belongs to the 'history of the problematic silencing of race as a significant ideological category for the revolution'.¹⁹ However, the growing significance of Africa as a fertile site for the expression of Cuban internationalism, made it possible for Cubans to proclaim both their African-ness and their patriotism.

I would like to close by offering the following theory: Articulation of the 'Congo' within discourses on security after the Missile Crisis would ultimately allow the Cuban leadership to formulate a foreign policy based upon an international identity that is essentially Caribbean. As CLR James has written:

(The Caribbean) is the archetypal space of immigration, exile, demographic mobility, diaspora, nomadism. It yielded and still yields a world where identities are in a state of perennial flux and are constantly being revised in new encounters and improvised to confront new challenges. It is precisely this process that keeps the culture in motion and prevents its identity from ever crystallizing into a reified, recognizable entity.²⁰

¹ Ernesto Laclau, *New Reflections on the Revolution of our Time* (London:1990), 9-59

² Tomas Diez Acosta, *The 'Missile' Crisis as seen from Cuba* (New York: 2002), especially 13-26

³ Discussed in David Howarth, *Discourse* (New York:2001), 105

⁴ Quotation in Tomas Diez Acosta, *The 'Missile' Crisis as seen from Cuba* (New York: 2002), 102-103

⁵ Jorge I. Domínguez, *To Make a World Safe for Revolution: Cuba's Foreign Policy* (Cambridge: 1989); James D. Rudolf, *Countries of the World*; 1/1/1991; Chapter 4E. Foreign Relations ; Cuba and the Soviet Union accessed at <http://www.highbeam.com/library/doc3.asp?DOCID=1P1:28384002&num=7&ctrlInfo=Round18%3AProd%3ASR%3AResult&ao=&FreePremium=BOTH>

⁶ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (London: 1963), 61

⁷ From Castro Speech Database, accessed at <http://lanic.utexas.edu/la/cb/cuba/castro/1962/19621024>

⁸ Richard Gott, *Cuba: A New History* (London: 2004), 206-208; Tomas Diez Acosta, *The 'Missile' Crisis as seen from Cuba* (New York: 2002), 175-178

⁹ Louis Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. B. Brewster (London: 1971); Jacques Lacan, *Ecrits: A Selection* (New York:1977)1-7

¹⁰ Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: 1987)

¹¹ Antoni Kapcia, *Cuba: Island of Dreams* (Oxford: 2000)

¹² Quotation in Tomas Diez Acosta, *The 'Missile' Crisis as seen from Cuba* (), 204

¹³ See Louis A. Perez JR, 'Fear and loathing of Fidel Castro: sources of US policy toward Cuba', *Journal of Latin American Studies*, May 2002 v34 i2.

¹⁴ Erich Fromm, *Escape from Freedom* (New York: 1994), 34

¹⁵ James D. Rudolf, *Countries of the World*; 1/1/1991; Chapter 4E. Foreign Relations ; Cuba and the Soviet Union accessed at <http://www.highbeam.com/library/doc3.asp?DOCID=1P1:28384002&num=7&ctrlInfo=Round18%3AProd%3ASR%3AResult&ao=&FreePremium=BOTH>

¹⁶ Jorge I. Domínguez, *To Make a World Safe for Revolution: Cuba's Foreign Policy* (Cambridge: 1989), 35-45

¹⁷ See Daniel James ed., *The Complete Bolivian Diaries of Che Guevara and other Captured Documents* (New York: 2000)

¹⁸ David Campbell, *Writing Security: United States Foreign Policy and the Politics of Identity* (Manchester: 1992)

¹⁹ Lisa Brock & Digna Castañeda Fuertes, *Between Race and Empire: African-Americans and Cubans before the Cuban Revolution* (Philadelphia: 1998)

²⁰ James, C.L.R., *The Black Jacobins* (New York: 1989); James, C.L.R., *At the Rendezvous of Victory* (London:1984)