

Letter to the New York Times (unpublished)

by August Nimtz

Roberto Zurbarano's charge that the Cuban "government hasn't allowed racial prejudice to be debated or confronted politically or culturally" ("For Blacks in Cuba, the Revolution Hasn't Begun" March 24) is belied by events in recent years on the island in which he himself has been involved; I know because I participated in one with him. In February 2011, the Havana International Book Fair, Cuba's premier cultural event, and under the auspices of the Ministry of Culture, featured a panel for the book launching of Esteban Morales' *La Problemática Racial en Cuba* (just published in English as *Race in Cuba: Essays on the Revolution and Racial Inequality*). Published by one of the country's most prestigious publishers, the book was a follow-up to one on the same subject published four years earlier and also by a leading press with close ties to the Cuban government. Both books document what has and hasn't been accomplished for racial equality on the island and, as the subtitle of the second book states, *Algunos de Sus Desafíos* (*Some of Its Challenges*). Owing to the impact of the first book and Morales' stature, black, professor emeritus of the University of Havana, and member of the Cuban Communist Party, a SRO audience, that included leading figures on the island, attended the panel. Along with Morales, the speakers included two Cuban academics and me because I wrote the Foreword to the book; Zurbarano chaired the panel and made extended remarks.

The panel, the ensuing discussion, the more than one hundred Cubans of all skin colors it attracted, the rush to buy Morales' book afterward (which sold out like his first book), and the report on Cuban radio—all registered the growing discussion in Cuba on the issue of racial equality. It was Fidel Castro at the end of the 1990's who initiated it owing to some of the reasons that Zurbarano mentions, specifically, the racial disparities aggravated by the economic crisis. Since the 2011 panel, there have been more advances that Morales lists in the Preface to the English edition of his book. Not the least of them, which Zurbarano only mentions, is the significant increase in the number of black and mestizo women elected to the Central Committee of the Cuban Communist Party in April 2011. That was no accident; it was a conscious decision that Raul Castro helped lead. There is no question that much remains to be done to realize racial and skin color equality in Cuba, a challenge that is not separate and apart from deepening the revolution itself and developments in the larger world. But to claim that the Cuban government is opposed to that discussion is disingenuous. As Morales argues, "Cuba is the only country in the world in which blacks and mestizos have the state and the government as their ally." Zurbarano hopes one day Cuba will have "a black president." Let's hope he knows that having "a black president" is no measure or guarantee of racial equality.

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