To What Extent Can Decolonisation Achieve a Future of Racial Equality: A Study of Races in Cuba

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Abstract

In 1959, on the main street in the centre of Havana, Fidel Castro marched with his companions in the most prominent public parade the small island of Cuba had ever seen. Fidel and his comrades from the small revolutionary 26th of July group had finally arrived at their destination of overthrowing the government, which they saw as the puppet of colonialism and a source of discriminating racial inequality in the country. As the charismatic leaders were celebrating the victory of their violent struggles, for the first time in Cuban history, black descendants of Afro-Cubans could have equal access to social justice, medical care and education opportunities as people of other races. Under new political conditions and the revolutionary leaders' idealistic view of society, the problem of racism seemed possible to forget. Significant thinkers used to propose a violent revolution inspired by socialism against racial inequalities caused by colonial imperialism and its devastating consequences. In the twentieth century, it had been widely seen as a feasible solution to distort this unequal social and political relationship between different races and rebuild a new one. Fanon and Césaire justified and promoted such movements and participated in these endeavours. Even if not supportive of violence directly, Dubois also showed sympathy and sentiment on the violent movements of sacrifice and national liberalisation in her later year of disillusion from his liberal humanism. However, a violent revolution may not be as ideal as Césaire and Fanon demonstrated. Despite the victorious revolution, it could not ease all the existing racial inequalities in society. From the observations of Esteban M. Dominguez and Jafari S. Allen, we know that having the opportunity of being born in the same hospital and attending the same school is not enough for Black children whose parents live in shabby tenements earning salaries much lower than the White parents. For Jafari, it is more concerning that Cuba, as an isolated socialists state that remained disconnected from the post-colonial world of racial inequalities, is gradually re-exposing to the outside world and reimporting the notions that the colours are unequal. This essay will engage with this gap between the imagination of the early thinkers about the future of racial equality and the practices in the reality of a post-colonial state, particularly Cuba, which is a post-colonial state after a violent revolution and theoretically has removed all institutions of racial discrimination from the former government. It has always been an unaccomplished adventure, as Róman Grosfoguel described decolonisation as always on its way. Therefore, the future of racial equality due to the decolonisation process is always on its way for people to accomplish. However, the incompleteness of the reality of decolonisation should not be a denial of these initially violent struggles. This essay will demonstrate the aim of decolonisation to achieve a future of racial equality, which early thinkers like Du Bois, Fanon and Césaire had clarified. With the analysis of the progress and limitation made in the case of Cuba, the ethics and moral burden of decolonisation, regardless of the incompleteness of the initial violent process, are still essential to pursue.

Keywords

Decolonisation; Racial Equality;Races in Cuba.

1. Decolonisation and Racial Equality

The early thinkers had evaluated the relationship between decolonisation and racial equality before the process of decolonisation presented as the violent struggle against imperialism and the pursuit of national independence. They made the causal relationship between the two clear that the history of Western dominance led by global colonialism and the establishment of unequal economic exploitation of other races is the key to this unequal relationship between different races. However, among the three key thinkers, Du Bois, Fanon and Césaire, there are differences and development in their interpretation of the relationship between decolonisation and racial equality.

Du Bois, one of the first thinkers who demonstrated the struggle of decolonisation between races, expressed his idea of the "Negro" or "African Americans" being souls collectively struggling against the existing racial structure in America, predominantly prioritising the White over other races. His life experience of being a well-educated African America enabled him to foster the belief that decolonisation was possible to achieve through a peaceful process of persuasion by liberal humanism with the acceptance of universal modernity for people of other races. Although in his later years, he gradually accepted that the failure of the US society, which was built upon the structure of racial inequality, could not be fixed peacefully through simple persuasion. He was inspired by socialists revolutions that happened worldwide and the possibility that these revolutions could fix the failures that a capitalists society could not. However, Du Bois became disillusioned in his last years of life about his idea that "A violent revolution is always a loss and a lowering of ideas".

Fanon is one of the thinkers inspired by the violent revolutions of national independence to overthrow the existing political structure created to facilitate the inequalities between races. He justified violence during the initial process of decolonisation and participated in one of these violent struggles against colonialism, the Algerian War of Independence. He stressed that a future of racial inequality can and should be achieved through violence, even if not guaranteed. In his work *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon expressed that the existing social and political structures of the colonies populated by non-White people were imposed by violence from the colonisers initially, and it established a racial relationship between White colonisers over the other races. Therefore, such structures should be overthrown morally and reasonably by violence to ensure that the facilitating function of racial inequality is removed. Fanon added that after the violent revolution and achieving national independence, there should be prevention of the non-White bourgeois, which had been benefiting from the racial inequalities built by the White colonisers, to hijack the independence and continue the unequal relationship between different races, as a harmful legacy of colonialism.

Fanon's idea of the prevention of the bourgeois who benefited from the unequal relationship between the race of the colonisers and the race of the colonised echoed the contemporary wave of violent left-wing revolutions of national independence. These revolutions, inspired by Marx-Leninism, which emphasised the restoration of social and political order after the demolishment of the bourgeois' privilege as a class in society, sought to overthrow colonialism and capitalism established with colonialism. Césaire believed that this capitalism built after the violence of colonialism was the main obstacle for people of different races to achieve their specificity in the life of liberty. Notably, the colonial conquest of Africa not only ruined the spirit of the Black race of affirming themselves with their power and genius to stand as the real men on the earth but also broke the so-called civilisation of the Western White people because of the violent core of colonisation. Unlike Du Bois, who did not support the violent struggles to

overturn racial inequalities even after seeing the failure of American capitalism and understanding the economic cause of racial problems in the US, as a long-standing communists party member, Césaire believed the use of violent revolutions to fulfil decolonisation and the ease of its legacies.

2. The Imagination of Racial Equality

In his earlier life, Du Bois struggled over his identity and how to achieve the future of racial equality he could imagine. Du Bois grew up as a well-educated American gentleman but still received discrimination because of his racial background as an African descendant. He struggled with his own identity as an intellectual of American liberal modernity and an advocator of Pan-Africanism of his race. On the one hand, he believed in the liberal modernity of the society he lived in, unlike Fanon and Césaire, who thought the liberal nor modernity were neither because the society they lived in was initially built with violence. However, on the other hand, Du Bois' work inspired Pan-Africanism or the Black race with a shared soul of being suppressed in a society of colonialism and racism. In his later years, he gradually understood the relationship between society of racial inequality and the limitations of accepting liberal modernity to solve the fundamental race problem in his society. He received the idea of socialists revolutions for national independence after realising the failure of western capitalism in the US. He showed his sympathy over the use of violence to fix such failures.

According to the socialist revolutionists in Du Bois' later year, "the liberal ideas of Euro-American Modernity" is just another form of the establishments that should be overthrown, like the Orthodox and Confucius social hierarchy in Russia and China. For Fanon and Césaire, these establishments were introduced through the violent colonial process and, therefore, should be removed by violent struggles, which explains why Du Bois found it impossible to achieve racial equality through peaceful persuasion. The US society where Du Bois grew up used violent enforcement of slavery and other forms of institutions to guarantee the inequalities between different races. The "Euro-American Modernity" was also built upon this society of inequalities. As a result, the inequalities enforced by violence could be overturned by violent struggles.

Césaire described this future after the violent struggle to remove racial inequality's social and political establishments, "Without White European being the dominant, and every race, every people would be part of equal beings in the same world with pluralities." However, after the violent revolution in former colonies, we do not see the imagination of racial equality that Césaire and Fanon predicted today. The reality in the independent post-colonial state is that the unequal racial relationship still exists, and arguably the Euro-American White is still the dominant race of our world today. Violent revolutions did secure national independence but have not yet achieved a world of racial equality. This essay will use the case of Cuba to analyse the success and limitations of this violent process of decolonisation in terms of racial inequalities to present the endless way until decolonisation is fully achieved. The current limitations should not deny the future of racial equality.

3. The Reality of Cuba

The *República de Cuba* is an island in the central north of the Caribbean Sea with its minor archipelagos, which ten million residents populate, and about one-tenth of its ten million population is with African ancestries. Today the independent republic, which is only 150 kilometres from the southern coast of the United States, is still one of the few existing constitutionally Marxist–Leninist one-party socialist states. Moreover, Cuba operates its unique economic, social, and political structure relatively isolated from the rest of the world because of the US trade embargo. These special features of Cuba made it an ideal sample for studying how a country claims to ease racism from a violent revolution, as Fanon and Césaire proposed,

and failures which Du Bois found in a White-supreme capitalists society, but still encountered the racial inequalities in the reality of its society. The prejudice, stereotyping and discriminating treatment against the Black Cubans originated from the colonisation in the history of Cuba, just like how it had started in other colonies around the world. The African Cubans were imported for slavery in the Spanish colony, and the independent state of Cuba inherited this inferior status. Even if Cubans fought with violence against the Spanish colonial power, the imperialists did not retreat after the struggle of violence. Under the supervision of the US, Cuba codified its constitution. It granted all Black Cubans citizenship in 1901, but the constitution still protected the privileges of the White elites from the colonial era. The US at the time was what Du Bois described as "a shadow of colour discrimination of barbarism" Cuba, under the protection of the White supremacy US, was not much better. The few exceptions included that in Cuba, the colour discrimination was about colour rather than the "Black blood". In 1959, a wave of violent revolution of decolonisation against the US neo-colonialism took place to overturn social and political establishments of inequalities in Cuba. This revolution successfully mobilised the suffering Cubans in the exploitative capitalists society. It made its manifesto of making the whole population in Cuba independent and equal from the colonial legacies without preferential treatment based on race and social origins. Dominguez concluded that this revolution unquestionably moving in the direction of the search for equality.

Gayle L. McGarrity conducted an ethnographic study on the nowadays Cuban racial relationship. Because of the restrictions of the Cuban state, McGarrity relied on the participant-observation methodology and case studies, combined with the collection of qualitative data through informal, unstructured interviews to collect data during her living experience in Cuba. Her appearance and linguistic advantage enabled her to find some real cases of the still-existing racism in Cuban society. One of her colleagues in Havana, Dr Mario Escalona, who is a White Cuban and married to an Afro-Cuban woman, encountered a "volume of racist insults directed at his wife and him, and the lack of support from his militante friends for his decision to "casarse con esa negra"—marry a black woman." Mario was a high-ranked doctor in the Cuban state apparatus and close to the inner circle of the revolutionary leaders in Cuba. However, he still faced the threat of racism against his family. Within the public mass of Cuban society, as McGarrity's ethnographic study discovered, racism was increasingly concerning and repressed the country's Black population. Black women are at the bottom of the social race pyramid, which is topped by White males in the post-revolutionary state, just like in American or other European societies of White supremacies. These black women comprise the group with the highest suicide rate in Latin America. Teenagers with darker skin are more likely to be targeted by the police just because them being suspicious of committing a crime. Regardless of the law that all Cuban citizens are equal and must be treated equally, McGarrity still received the compliance that people with darker skin could not get the medical care as good as their White neighbours who went to similar medical centres and were examined by the same doctors. Even if these communities of Cubans with different colours of their skins are neighbouring, few interactions could take place between blancos (White people) and negros mulatos/

mestizos (blacks and those of mixed African European descent).

Even at the state level, racial discrimination against Afro-Cubans is not disappearing but strengthening. Mcgarrity concluded that "the creation within the "Revolution" of a repressive state and party apparatus that ensures the continued control of the non-White Cuban majority by a powerful White military, political, economic, and social elite."In other words, the establishment of the imperial powers that facilitated racism and racial inequalities in the colonies of the non-White population, and what Fanon and Césaire assumed could be vanquished by violent revolutions, is reinvented by the state established after a violent revolution. This state claimed to eradicate all forms of racism imposed by the imperialists in the country, but Mcgarrity's ethnographic research indicated that it is far from reality.

Furthermore, the revolutionary state also issued restrictions on the cultural products of Afro-Americans, like musical forms such as jazz, rhythm and blues, and rock, by claiming these are cultural divergences from the revolution, regardless of whether these music's origins emerged from the resistance of racial discrimination in the US. This discriminating attitude towards the black population and their culture originated in the Cuba before the revolution in 1959 and was inherited by the República de Cuba today, and was not eased after the revolution's success. Mcgarrity argued that Fidel Castro made a class broke-away with his bourgeois father, but of his mix-raced mother, Castro felt ashamed and avoided contacting her. The bourgeois class in Cuba before 1959, as Fanon argued, was a class the beneficiary of imperial power like the US, racially predominately White and contributed to the discriminating racial relationship in Cuba before the revolution. However, the revolutionists who overthrew them through violence had to govern a country of discriminating racial relationships since the Hispanic colonisation. The economic basis of this relationship was that the Afro-Cubans were much less likely to become skilled workers or state officials in the revolutionary regimes because of the hundreds of years of being inferior. Regardless of having equal opportunities for education and medical care after the revolution, the cultural disadvantage of the Afro-Cubans still made them less accessible to these services provided by the revolutionary government. The leaders of this revolutionary government more or less still kept the culture that fostered racial inequalities in their minds, which on the other hand, boosted the cultural disadvantage of the Afro-Cubans.

4. Moral Burden of Decolonisation

From the case study in Cuba, we can see that what happened, in reality, is still far from what Fanon and Césaire believed would happen after violent decolonisation struggles. On the contrary, after the removal of the imperial establishments that created and fostered the racial relationship of inequality, the new establishments built by the revolution still maintain and even strengthen the features of racism and racial inequality from the time of being colonised.

However, because decolonisation has yet to be fully accomplished and a racial equality society has yet to be achieved, it is not an excuse for judging the moral burden of decolonisation. Moreover, tuck and Yang demonstrated no universal framework or metaphor for decolonisation. Decolonisation is not a methodology but a process that needs to be different in all the other places. For instance, Afro-Cubans comprise 10% of the population of Cuba, while Haiti, also a Caribbean country, has Black African descendants of almost all of its people. Therefore, the decolonisation approach in the two countries must be very different. Moreover, our moral burden of decolonisation to achieve a future of racial equality originated from the facts of history that the European conquest and enslaver of other races entrenched racial inequalities. This violent process took five hundred years from the Discovery of the New World to the Suez Crisis, but decolonisation has yet to achieve its bicentenary. The limitations of decolonisation until now allow us to see the success and achievement of the decolonisation process in Cuba and other places. Not fully achieving the aim of decolonisation does not challenge the direction of decolonisation; on the contrary, it gives us the new objective of carrying out and conducting the unique process of decolonisation until the very end of racial equality is established.

Besides, just like McGarrity said in her ethnographic research on the racial relationship in Cuba, she did not want to discredit the current post-revolutionary regime in Cuba but wanted to urge the Afro-Cubans and the government of Cuba to continue the process of decolonisation to provide the marginalised Afro-Cubans with a bright future of racial equalities. We should not look at this question through the lens of the simple philosophy of "enemy of my enemy is automatically my friend." The fact that the Cuban government used to fight bravely against the neo-colonialism of the US does not legitimise its tolerance and enhancement of racism in Cuba

today. As Tuck said, "Decolonize (a verb) and decolonisation (a noun) cannot easily be grafted onto pre-existing discourses/frameworks." Their discourse, which achieved progress in decolonisation and racial equality, is insufficient to solve racial discrimination. This task is far from the end. Similarly, the limitations of post-colonial, like Cuba after the revolution in 1959, do not stop us from a future of racial equality through decolonisation.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, based on all the arguments provided above, we must admit that from the recognition of Du Bois of the failure of the Western capitalists society to achieve racial equality, to the imagination of Fanon and Césaire that the violent struggle of decolonisation can achieve a future of racial equality, and the reality in Cuba, there has always been a gap. This gap exists between us who lived as a result of the history of colonial conquest, racial slavery, and other forms of discrimination and the future, which is far away but always right to chase. Therefore, in order to achieve a future of racial equality, decolonisation, not as a form of metaphor or a standardised framework but as a process we have to encounter for the brighter future we all mean to face, is always inevitable to complete.

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