

EMPOWERMENT, DECOLONIZATION AND SUBSTANTIVE DEMOCRACY: HONING ETHICAL-POLITICAL PRINCIPLES FOR THE AFRO-AMERICAN DIASPORA

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RESUMEN

Hoy, en los umbrales del siglo XXI, la cuestión étnica y el problema de la desigualdad y discriminación racial todavía se cuentan entre los retos principales para un proyecto de sociedad donde primen la equidad real y la democracia sustantiva. Esto se registra luego de las luchas de independencias que lograron la descolonización formal de África y el Caribe, posterior al movimiento de las décadas de 1960 y 1970 por los derechos civiles y el poder negro, cuyo eje fue en los Estados Unidos, pero que tuvo envergadura e influencia histórico-mundial; después de la conferencia mundial contra el racismo y otras formas de discriminación celebrada en Durban, Suráfrica en el 2001, y tras celebrar el Año Internacional de los Afrodescendientes. ¿Cuál es el poder de la diáspora hoy en las Américas desde una óptica tanto histórica como global? Esto implica revisar nuestra memoria histórica colectiva y la definición misma de diáspora. Hay dos ángulos principales desde donde dirigir dicha mirada, que juntos dibujan dos historias entrelazadas, una de dominación y opresión, en relación con otra de apoderamiento y liberación.

Palabras clave: diáspora, descolonización, afrodescendientes, racismo, discriminación, América y África.

ABSTRACT

Today, at the threshold of the XXI century, the question of ethnicity and the problem of racial inequality and discrimination are still among the principal challenges for a Project of society where real equity and substantive democracy are a priority. This is registered after the struggles of Independence which achieved the decolonization of Africa and the Caribbean, after the movement of civil rights and black power of the decades of 1960 and 1970 whose focus was in the USA but which had worldwide importance and historical influence and after the world conference against racism and other forms of discrimination celebrated in Durban, South Africa in 2001 and after celebrating the International Year of Afro-descendants. What is the power of the diaspora, today, in the Americas from both a historical and global perspective? This implies reviewing our collective historical memory and the very definition of diaspora. There are two principal

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angles from where to direct this perspective, that together picture two interlaced histories, one of domination and oppression in relation with empowerment and liberation.

Key words: diaspora, decolonization, afro-descendants, racism, discrimination, America, Africa.

INTRODUCTION

"The problem of the XX century is the problem of the color line", declared, at the beginning of the last century, the eminent African American intellectual WEB DuBois. This celebrated phrase turned out to be prophetic and revealing both of the centrality of the racial issue and the problem of racism, in the principle dramas of the epoch, such as the protagonic historic importance of the African and afro-descendant peoples and populations, in the most developments of the modern world; above all in the gesture for liberty and equality which are orientating values of any project of justice and democracy. Today, at the threshold of the XXI century, after the struggles for independence which achieved the formal decolonization of Africa and the Caribbean, after the movement of the 1960's-70's for civil rights and black power, whose central point was in the United States, but had historic-world magnitude and influence; after the world conference against racism and other forms of discrimination, celebrated in Durban, South Africa in 2001, and after celebrating the International Year of the Afro-Descendants, the ethnic issue and the problem of racial inequality and discrimination are still counted among the principal challenges for a project of society in which true equality and substantive democracy reign.

This text will attempt to answer a key question: (what is the power of the Diaspora today in the Americas from both a historic and global point of view? This implies a revision of our collective historic memory the very definition of

Diaspora. There are two principle angles from which this outlook can be directed, which together lay out two interlaced histories, one of domination and oppression in relation with another of empowerment and liberation. The Greek word Diaspora means dispersion which evokes a long history of being uprooted, banishment, forced displacement and over-exploitation.

In this sense, the histories that build and the links that bound the African Diaspora as a transnational population are directly related to the institution of slavery and permanence, after the abolition of inequalities, the distribution of wealth, social and political exclusion, and cultural devaluation of the African and afrodiasporic subjects. The difficult drama of forced displacement lived daily by a considerable percentage of Afrocolombian descendants is a sign of continuity with long process of dispersion and banishment that started with slavery and continues to this day, as a result of plurality of processes (wars, genocide, economic and ecologic crisis) which created a structural condition the modern world system, that keeps Africa as continent of perpetual poverty in spite of its immense human and resource wealth.

In the same way the majority of afro-descendants are maintained in a situation of economic inequality, racial and cultural discrimination, and a lack of political power. I consider it important to highlight these connections with Africa, which are not simply cultural, but rather point to the refacion between subordinated inclusion of the African continent to the imperial western powers with the long journey of over exploitation and economic inequality from plantation slavery to today. This is what we call structural racism, which also has its institutional and daily dimensions. But the African Diaspora can also be visualized from another angle, or we will only be seen as victims and as creator and makers of history.

The African Diaspora is one the main sources of cultural creation and democratization of society, the economy and politics on the planet. In this narrative that sees the African Diaspora as modern alternative to the dominant eurocentrism, there are key moments such as the Haitian Revolution at the turn of the centuries 18 to 19, where the actions of the afro-descendants occupy the centre stage of change not only at a local level, but also on a world scale. The liberation wars of the Cimarron and the enslaved, in the plantations, headed the most profound social revolution of the era, since it opposed both colonialization and slavery, and in favour of the construction of a new nation with full citizenship for afro-descendants. This implied a deepening of the project of the French Revolution, on a par with a vision of a self practice of freedom, cradled in favour of the struggles for emancipation. This luck of centering the struggles and cultural creations of the afro-descendants, both on the national and regional stages as well as world stages, forms part of the duties that we call decolonization of our historic memory an afrodiasporic point of view.

This decolonization requires nothing more and nothing less than a profound revision of how we view and understand the critical moments, who are the principal actors, and the stories they tell and should tell, and what are the forces that move the past and the present and, therefore, what are the possible horizons for the future. Two fundamental milestones to understand the world-history significance of Africa and the African Diaspora, in the post WWII period, are the movements of national freedom between the 1950s and 1960s in the African continent and the Caribbean, as well as the movement for civil rights and black power of the decades of the 60s and 70s whose focus of action was the United States. The so called movements for national freedom of Africa and the Caribbean brought an end to the formal colonialism politics of the European empires,

and cultivated ideas of political and economic freedom, together with a search for Pan-African unity and cultural pride.

In this context a Pan-Africanism was forged whose voices and most critical and lucid proposals are still valid, *such as the thesis of Amilcar Cabral about the need to foment a culture of freedom, of distinction that Franz Fanon established between mere national independence and true national freedom, and the analysis of Nkuame Nkrumah about the danger of neo colonialism (economic, political and cultural) after the formal decolonization. In the field of decolonization it is worth to merit the encounters between Africa and Afro-America such as those that took place in Senegal in 1963 and Argelia in 1975 which were part of a luck of re-identification between the African continent and the Diaspora, whose fruits we still see in the recent resolutions of African countries, declaring the Diaspora as the fifth region of the African Union.*

But without neglecting to recognize the great importance of the formal independences of Africa and the Caribbean, it is also important to point out the problems of hunger, genocide and inequality that the African continent is living today, is in large part, both the result of colonial legacy and significant elements of continuity in the structural economic dependence, in conjunction with political subordination to the western powers. To add insult to injury, this situation feeds the western racial imaginary that considers Africa as a backward and primitive continent in relation to developmentalist ideals, that emerged as criteria of modernism at the end of the decade of the 40s. This global pattern of economic, political and cultural inequality had its beginnings about 500 years ago in the region of the Caribbean, and later independence became subordination relative to imperial power of the state and the capital of the United States, which we, together with Anibal Quijano, denominate as

coloniality of power. Due to the tenacious permanence of this pattern of power, in spite of all the achievements of the African and afro-diaspora movements, today we still search to realize the unfinished project of decolonization.

Another great historic event to analyze and evaluate the power of the Afro-American Diaspora today is the black movements developed between the 1960s and 1970s. It can be said, with certainty, that the constellation of social movements in this period (feminist, ecological, indigenous, Afro-American, student, worker groups) constituted the biggest wave of change in modern history, similar to the actual tsunami of mobilizations in the Middle East, Europe, The United States, Latin America and the Caribbean. The black movement in the United States was one of the pillars of that moment, not only of living protests, which its effects we still enjoy, for example, the democratization of the relationships of gender and the dismantlement of the regimes of racial segregation, legalized first in the south of the United States and later in South Africa.

Especially in the global milestone, between the late 60s and early 70s, the U.S. black movement elevated its leadership in the wave of global change and came to have a major role in opening avenues towards racial Fairness and full citizenship for afro-descendants on various fronts, including legal and legislative reforms such as laws against discrimination, reparation justice and programs of affirmative action.

They also opened furrows in the field of electoral politics and this together with the growth of the middle class of African descendants, promoted by relative improvements in education and employment, resulted in a significant increase in the amount of black legislators, mayors and commissioners. The election of Barack Obama as president would

not have been possible without the opening caused by the black movements of the decades of 60 and 70. But the growth of the middle class and African-American political class was accompanied by an increase in the gap with the working classes and the socially marginalized black population.

This bifurcation of class, in the interior of the Afro population, deepened with the neoliberal policies, which since the Reagan administration insists on reducing social spending in areas such as housing and education, and privatize basic services in their offensive against the welfare state. This, in turn, came accompanied by a neoconservative campaign against racial-Fairness policies including affirmative action laws and measures against discrimination. These policies are supported by racial ideology that declares an end to racism and the existence of an inclusive society. However, the persistence of racial inequality, not only in the economic but also in the political and in the experiences of everyday discrimination, is a patent fact that Afro, Latino, Asian, and indigenous majorities testify to. What the sociologist Bonilla-Silva called colour blind racism.

Here a key issue is the relation between the state, electoral politics and afrodiasporic social movements. My argument is that, firstly, it is necessary to have representation in the state and participate in the electoral arena all the while maintaining social movements with autonomy and independent power to open spaces of non-state power, cultural life and economic development, while continuing to push the state to make policies of racial Fairness and social justice.

After the wave of change in the decades of 60s and 70s, there was a decline in the political activism of black social movements in the United States. In contrast, since the late 1980s in Latin America there was a remarkable emergence of indigenous and afro social

movements. We characterize this as a shift to the south in the backbone of Africanamerican movements, which eventually pulled the 150 million Afro-Latinos who remained out from invisibility, from both cultural and political maps of Latin America as from the anglonorteañas representations of the African Diaspora. There is a long history of Afro-Latinamerican diaspora organization and it is worth noting that in Cuba in 2008, the centenary of the founding of the first explicitly afro political party in the Americas, the Partido Independiente de Color, was commemorated.

Nevertheless, the excitement of independent African social movements in local and regional spaces culminated with the weaving of national and hemispheric networks with the capacity to convene and influence scenarios of power, is a development that came to fruition in the early years 90.

Here there is no space to analyze the whys, but we what to highlight three key moments, starting with the campaign in 1992, against the miss named discovery of America, which facilitated the organizing of both indigenous and afro-descendant communities. This same year the network of Afro-Latinamerican and Caribbean Women was organized, expression of both emergence of a new wave of feminism in the region as well as the agency of black women in raising the racial question in the feminist domain and further. The second, are the constitutional changes as in 1987 in Nicaragua and 1991 in Colombia, which declared the pluri-ethnic and multicultural nation, and the "Ley 70" of 1993 that recognizes collective rights of land ownership, with self governance of the community councils, political representation and ethno-education to the Afrocolombian society, being this a legislative piece without precedence and still without parallels, that influenced in the rest of the region. The other is the process and agenda of Durban, where transnational networks like the strategic

Afro-descendant Alliance was organized, constituted in the process towards the world conference against Racism in Durban South Africa in 2001; the conference in Durban as such, and its impact on the policies of the governments and movements. Latin America has proved to be the only region of the world where the majority of the governments declare in favour of the agenda of Durban and its program has served as the platform for the struggles against racism and for racial Fairness of the black movements of the region.

The process in Durban opened a historic period for racial justice in Latin America. An important product is the institution of state offices and branches in favour of racial Fairness in a series of countries, whose main example is the Ministry of Racial Fairness of Brazil which has elevated the issue to the level of executive cabinet and works the racial topic as transversal axis with other ministries such as education, health and culture. As a result of the actions of the movements we have a series of achievements, including having elected Afro legislators in various countries and the organization of a Black Parliament in the Americas that we have to revive. Another significant example is the Observatory against Racial Discrimination of the "Universidad de Los Andes" and the Process of Black Communities in Colombia that combines legal legislation and litigation with research and public education to combat racism. But our achievements must not blind and impede us from seeing, analyzing and combating the serious problems and major challenges that we still face.

Let us not forget that the World Bank shows Afro-Latin-Americans as having the highest levels of poverty, to which we can add the highest levels of incarceration and lower rates of higher education. This structural racism revealed by the persistence of socio-economic inequality, is also expressed in a daily experience of violence caused by both the

deterioration of the social fabric in urban neighborhoods, and the loss of land of farmers and overexploitation of rural workers, which is exacerbated by neoliberal policies that promote mega-development projects and free trade agreements. If we add to this the deaths and displacement in situations of armed conflict, the picture of a re-diasporización condition in the sense of exile and violent dispersal is completed.

We postulate four key achievements in the political culture and racial politics of the states of the region. The first is the recognition of racism as a problem and therefore the need to develop antiracial policies, which in itself represents a kind of Cultural Revolution in a region where historically the existence of racism has been denied, attributing it only to the United States and stating that there is an alleged racial democracy in Latin America. The second point, derived from the first, is that they have established offices and programs that cater explicitly to Afro populations and the racial issue in many countries of the region. These government efforts are, in part, the results of the efforts of Afro communities and movements, most of which has almost no power or budget, and with the exception of the Ministry of Racial Equality in Brazil, do not have much institutional status.

The third achievement is the political representation and here an important fact is that with its ups and downs, and more symbolic than legislative, there is a Black Parliament of the Americas, which is actually from Latin America, and that its very existence testifies that it raises the number of elected politicians and senior officials who identify themselves as African-descendants and in favor of ethnic-racial policies. The fourth aspect, which clearly reveals the link between movements and states, is what we characterize as a change in the political culture towards a greater recognition of the histories, afro cultures and identities, both in their own

dimensions and in their contributions in each country and the region as a whole.

We still have to evaluate precisely up to where these four areas of change have affected the conditions of life of the Afro people, but what is clear is the situation of racial discrimination, cultural devaluation, serious social inequality and lack of political power for the afro-descendant masses of the region who still appear with highest rates of inequality in the official indicators. Any analysis and debate about the permanence of these conditions must inquire in the root causes, which implies investigating both the systemic and structural determinants and the limits and possibilities of governmental policies in the context of neo-liberal global capitalism and its crisis.

The very fact that The United Nations proclaim 2011 as the International Year of Afro-descendants was a product of the agenda of Durban and resulted in the actions of the Afro-Latin-Americans, as a first step towards the decade and later the Permanent Forum in the UN. Playing this drum in afro-descendant code, 2011 has been an inestimable occasion to fundamentally deepen anti-racist policies and widening the struggle for racial equality, both in the cultures of the new wave of anti-systemic movements as in the government projects of the progressive type in Latin America and the Caribbean.

We emphasize the sequence of two conferences in view of the International Year of People of African Descent in the month of June, first in Cuba and then in Venezuela, where we discuss both the challenges given by the continuity of racism in socialist construction processes, and the importance of racial equity policies for the realization of a global project of decolonization and liberation. In both there was a productive dialogue of activists, intellectuals and government leaders, and a critical dialogue where it was inquired about

the forms of racism and policies to combat it, and the need to promote racial equality as pillars of policies and projects of decoloniality and liberation. In this time of crisis in the region and the world it was made clear that the debate in Cuba is alive and as stated by Fernando Martínez Heredia in his opening remarks, "the deepening of socialism in Cuba is necessarily anti-racist". In Venezuela we wove a network of black movements in Latin America that we call Afro-descendant Regional Articulation, we approved a declaration calling for a Afro-descendant Fund and Advisory Board within the ALBA and the Council of States of Latin America and the Caribbean (CELAC), to prioritize solidarity with Haiti and the African continent, in the general spirit to highlight anti-racist policy and for racial equity in the new agendas of emancipation and regional integration.

In this sense, we understand integration as an endeavor to articulate the diaspora, of reuniting its multiple fragments from and in the interest of a project of decolonization, in the broad sense of decolonizing the memory, the imaginary, education, the economy and culture; which means reinventing the nation and redefining the state; that is to say, for the construction of a new substantive democracy and equal society. These are the ethical-political principles that I suggest and which are the fruit of a long process of historic agency and empowerment of the people and movements of Africa and its diaspora.

In view of both the achievements and limitations, I will conclude by enumerating what I understand are six of the biggest challenges and contradictions of today, followed by five of the areas and main work proposals for the Afro-descendant agenda to be defined collectively. I present these with a critical view, in the good sense of seeing contradictions, limitations, and possibilities; and identifying

both obstacles as routes to transformation. The five challenges are the following:

1. In view of the multiple crisis of the western capitalist civilization (food, economic, ecological, political, cultural, ethical, epistemic) that have effectively given a coup de grace to the neoliberal model of globalization, with the implications in terms of massive unemployment, fiscal pressure to the states, accompanied by a reduction in social salary and increases in social inequalities surges, in this critical moment of transition in the global, the question about which are the projects of historic change and the paradigms of development that we have to design and implement?

2. The issue of the paradigms of development is also related to the life projects or "good living", that in South African speech we denominate as "Ubuntu" and in Aymara "Suma Kawsa". In view of an ecological crisis exemplified in global warming which puts the stability of the planet at risk, and of the agricultural crisis that points to the increase of hunger, two key topics appear: ethnic economies, popular of ecologic harmony and food sovereignty, both pillars of afro-descendant and indigenous ethnic-development. In this scope the question is, what is our ecological policy? This is directly related to the increased loss and violates our ancestral territories that threaten the fabric of life of many of our communities.

3. The third challenge concurs in relation with the scale of a network of forms of violence (domestic, social, political, military), at all levels, from urban neighborhoods of our Afro-America to wars and massive genocide such as Dafur and Rwanda, which also constitute structural racism that affects the people that DuBois called "the obscure races of the world" and that Fanon denominated as "the condemned of the earth", who are the ones that most suffer its consequences.

4. All this relates with the persistence of racism in its three dimensions: structural, institutional and daily, at the same time that the ideology of its denial prevails (the so called racism blind to color), and therefore the need to make it visible (that is why we assume the need to make it visible in census, as a field of political struggle) and combat the reconfigurations of racism in the era of neoliberalism and its crisis.

5. Said reconfigurations have implied a strong relationship between racism and xenophobia, where the new racisms are practiced ever more against immigrants in the context of the emergence of new Diasporas from the African continent to various parts of the Americas such as The United States, Argentina, and regional migrations of afro-descendants throughout Latin America such as Afrocolombians in Chile. These processes of re-diasporization require anti-racist policies of rights of migrants.

6. This, in turn, points to a major contradiction in the power and strength of the diaspora where on one hand we have greater political representation in the states and more relative recognition of our identity and culture, while deepening economic marginalization, displacement and violence in the life experience of the majority of African-descendants. How to combine cultural recognition with political empowerment economic welfare? How to combine short-term social policies (in basic areas such as health, education and employment) with historical transformation policies and social justice profound and permanent character?

Now I want to point out six principles and work areas for our collective agenda:

1. The first principle is that there is a fundamental relationship between racial equality and the democratic substantive. In contrast to democracy in the merely formal sense (that is to say, just as a question of discourse and procedure), substantive democracy implies

identifying the social inequalities and its roots, elaborate public policies in favor of equality and facilitate the process of empowerment of the subjects and sub-alternated and excluded sectors. This supposes a correspondence between economic, cultural, racial, sexual and political democracy; and, public policies implies coordination between economic, cultural, racial and educational policies.

2. This takes me to the second point that emerges in relation with the area of cultural policies. It is interesting to observe that until recently we had three ministries of afro-descendant cultures in Latin America (Paula Moreno in Colombia, Gilberto Gil in Brazil, and Antonio Preciado in Ecuador) and now we have Susana Baca in Peru. The most skeptic would say that they are minor ministries without a lot of power and budget, but by assuming culture as a resource (to use the expression of George Yudice) for economic development, to redefine the national space as an inter-cultural stage, for the democratization of the citizenry itself and all the institutions in for the sake of a true inter-cultural democracy, where identity is based on difference; it is a fundamental pillar of any horizon of justice and substantive democracy. Here a priority task is bring forth and negotiate a relationship between cultural policies of the communities and social movements with those of the state.

3. The third area is education itself. Here a major challenge is the defense of public education against the impulses of privatization which are the pillars of the neoliberal paradigm, which has been and still is a pillar of education as a field for political contention. This serves as environment to the educational policies as a whole and particularly to Afro-Diasporic Studies in its two main variants, on one side the very education of the communities sustained by a vibrant social movement of afro-descendant ethno-educators and their allies; and on the other side, by the efforts to change

the educational system from first grade to higher education to conceive and implement educational reforms that combat racism, at the time that it transforms the curriculums and pedagogies, recognizing the present and past values and the contributions of Africa and its Diaspora, in a chance of decolonization of memory, identity and education. As for higher education this implies a profound educational reform that more than the affirmative actions to open university institutions to include and retain afro-descendant students, lecturers and researchers, elaborates educational policies to transform the curriculums in such a way that it includes the afro memories, histories and cultural expressions; not just through programs of Black, Afro-Diasporic and African Studies, but also transforming the epistemic perspectives and Eurocentric and western pedagogies and racist practices throughout all the institutional fabric.

4. The fourth area that I propose for the discussion relates to the paradigms of development, topic that I have already mentioned but in which I want to stress that there are cosmovisions and practices of development in our communities that have been conceptualized and converted in explicit paradigms of self-sustainable ethno-development, ecologically harmonic, and based on forms of coexistence, re-distribution and self governance. In this moment of crisis, possibilities of change are opened that enhance the importance and viability of said practices and proposals of development.

5. The fifth point is the need to combine universal policies such as the right to a just salary and public education with ethno-racial policies such as Afro-preparations and Affirmative Action. There exists a false debate between the policies of universal equality and the policies of recognition of ethno-racial and cultural difference. But on one the hand ethno-racial equality requires social and

economic policies in favor of the distribution of goods and resources, and on the other hand, the realization of democratic ideals of equality and full citizenship requires the recognition, valorization and the empowerment of the excluded differences.

6. The sixth area is the legal and political front. It is fundamental to reflect on the advances and limitations of the legislative changes. How to conduct the intercultural democracy that is constitutionally declared in many countries? How to realize and extend the program of Durban against racism? How to defend the achievements, realize the potential, and extend the coverage in policies and legislations against racism and in favor of racial equality in view of the continuity in racial oppression and the re-diasporization? I suggest that all this supposes a multifaceted strategy of collective empowerment where, on one hand, the levels of organization and autonomy of the black movements and afro-descendant communities are promoted, and on the other hand to increase the influences and forms of representation in the states. That is to say, a road of visibilization to empowerment and the representation to collective power. This requires combining a plurality of spheres of action from the transnational, where we are united by the advocacy for the declaration of the Decade of the Permanent Forum for the Afro-descendants in the United Nations, to stages in different regions and countries, including local arenas.

The greatest strength of the Diaspora lies in the empowerment, i.e. assuming power in itself and building new forms of collective power. In light of past and present struggles of peoples of African descent, we need to formulate clear answers to key questions: what should be the role of African descents and their claims in the new policy of decolonization and liberation? Our claims fall within projects for the democratization of democracy, in a number of justice

(social, economic, political, cultural, cognitive, sexual and gender).

How to combine the achievements of the emergence of a sphere of African descent racial policy and the spaces we have opened, both at the state level and in transnational organizations with strategies of grassroots organization and claims to report radical reforms that move the collective agenda in the sake of a more just and equal society from local to global levels?.

These questions relate to the question of the ability of African American movements to propose motions and build real answers to the deep and versatile crisis (economic, ecological, epistemological, ethical, political, cultural, in short, civilizational) confronting the world. How to cultivate future horizons and how to build cultural spaces and political practices that are carriers while creatively develop the libertarian tradition of Afro-descent policy?

¿These challenges are both for movements and governments. In conclusion, providing a general answer to this question, I want to reiterate the argument that one of the main tasks for African American movements is to reinvent and reconstruct the long lasting tradition of black movements as bearers of a radicalization of democracy to continue building the African Diaspora as a transformative force for alternative futures, as a major source of hope in favor of life and

happiness to convert the entire planet into a big Quilombo, Cumbear Palenque of hope, justice and freedom.

Ashe!!!!!"¹

1. Refers to the primal force of the Yoruba cosmovision.