

Puerto Rico: ¿Waking up to racism?

By Wallace J. de la Vega

George Floyd died last May 25 without knowing that his murder would impact practically the whole world. Once again comes up a wave of racial riots in the U.S., but this time with the greatest force ever seen. And so the race difference theme is once again front and center in the public attention, not only in the U.S. and a large parte of the world, but also including one of the U.S. remaining colonies: Puerto Rico.

Amid its problems related to the Coronavirus pandemic, to the remaining reconstruction after several earthquakes, to Hurricane Maria's remaining damage, and to the central government's perennial corruption, there have surged several public demonstrations supporting the U.S. protesters. Among these there was a vigil around the coastal municipalities of Rio Grande and Loiza, which are predominantly of African descent. Next day, about 200 people gathered in front of La Fortaleza, which is the governor's residence and the insular government's center. Also, the San Juan mayor issued an order to lower at half mast the Puerto Rican and American flags for the following 46 days, in memory of Floyd's age on the date of his murder.

By analyzing the U.S. population's genetic contents, one can understand the strong racism that has prevailed here since slave African workers were forcibly taken to Jamestown, Virginia, starting on 1619. As years went by, those slaves' descendants ethnically mixed with the general population. The American Journal of Human Genetics published in 2015 a study titled "Genetic study reveals surprising ancestry of many Americans", which shows that "in the United States, almost no one can trace their ancestry back to just one place" and highlighting that "at least 3.5% of European Americans carry African ancestry" and that a tiny bit of the population also carries Native American ancestry.

By comparison with Puerto Rico, a study titled "Recent Genetic Selection in the Ancestral Admixture of Puerto Ricans" showed that "Puerto Ricans, on average, have genetic contributions from European (66 percent), African (18 percent), and Native American (Tainos, 16 percent), respectively". Given that Puerto Ricans are a wide racial mix of mostly caucasian, negroid and indigenous taino - but more recently including semite and others - ¿could there be any racism in "The Enchanting Island"?

The shorter answer is: Depends on who is asked. An improvised local survey would have a high probability of summarizing that there is no racial discrimination in Puerto Rico. My experience tells me that practically no Puerto Rican would confess being a racist. However, my perception tells me that indeed there is a type of racism here, but it is different than that in the U.S. There the population's slight genetic mix naturally receives the protection of the caucasian majority; in Puerto Rico racisms is more veiled, more cautious, more subtle, but it undoubtedly exists.

A living example of this is offered by local writer Rafael Carrera, a millennial, who has been exiled in the U.S. when he wrote: "Those who think that in Puerto Rico there isn't or hasn't been any racism live on a mental trip or in negation. I have lived it during my childhood, my youth and my adulthood. ... I saw it happen to other people around me. I saw it on national (PR) television. I saw it in my teachers. I saw it in my schoolmates. I heard it in jokes and mockery towards Dominicans. I saw it in church. I saw it in white families who would've never allow their daughters marry a black man, not even a light-skinned one. My grandfather, as a black man, lived it and this racism is still exists in our island. We can lie to ourselves, but reality is still there, decade after decade".

I have witnessed hidden racism in Puerto Rico, the one seen in the subtle ways used to insult the island's African descendants. When their references are public, denominators like "blacky", "darky", and "of color" are used. When they are private they slide towards "dirty black", "useless black", "that black", and others too improper to mention.

Nevertheless, in Puerto Rico's case racist violence can't be compared with that of the U.S., for being less extremist. That doesn't mean that there has never been deaths directly related to race in the island, but that these have been relatively few in recent decades.

Obviously, this has to do with the above-mentioned genetic composition that points to the reality that practically every Puerto Rican is, at least partially, Afro-American. However, the cases most widely covered by the local press traditionally have yielded very little public indignation within the general population.

Witnesses of racism were also the participants on four focus groups studies done in 2010 in municipalities located in the island's central region - where Afro-Americans are the minority - about how school children were treated. Investigators summarized that "there predominated reports of daily racism experiences towards boys and girls at school and in the family that impress due to their high degree of physical violence and psychological mistreatment. (...) Taking into account that daily racism is systemic, we suggest taking several measures at the individual and institutional levels to counter it".

In another similar case with Afro-American youths from Loiza, the focus group study focused on their community relationship with the state police. As told by lawyer Nelson Colón, "these youths told that when police officers stopped them in their neighborhood they knew they would be 'turned'. That is, to throw them to the ground, turn them face down, pull out their pockets and take their money. They also tell that when they enter a nearby renown shopping center, the place's security (agents) follow, question, and harass them".

The most extreme racism case happened September 2010 after a hold-up at a fast food restaurant in Guaynabo. Upon two police officers' arrival at the scene, one of them saw an African-American youth running. In an instant, he drew his gun and some of his more than 10 shots hit the young man's back. The deceased, nicknamed "Oreo", turned out to be an outstanding athlete, member of the Puerto Rico Olympic Committee, and a model citizen. The policeman initially received an eight-year home arrest sentence, which later was suspended.

In general terms, racism in Puerto Rico runs below public and government attention. Upon such lack of attention - and now with the U.S. situation's thrust - the local Colectiva Feminista organization has published what it calls the Anti-racism Manifesto. It starts: "The racial states are not outside history or outside time. They belong to a concrete political experience called modernity/colonialism and originate from the social construct of the 'race' category to establish differences and hierarchies between individuals. This experience has survived the decolonization processes and has generalized the state".

Colectiva is pushing several items to be addressed by the central government: 1) An end to the war against black people, 2) Reparations (compensation), 3) Investment (in safety programs), 4) Economic justice (for Afro-American communities' development), 5) Community power (participation in decisions), and 6) Political power (Political participation).

The events that have taken place in the U.S. in recent weeks definitively have also impacted the Puerto Rico colony. It was well said by Colon: "These deaths — Floyd's and the others in Puerto Rico — are a reminder for the whole Puerto Rican society's acknowledgement of its racism expressed through the "colorism" that grants greater privileges and acceptance of light-skinned people. This acceptance and acknowledgement shall give us the social and emotional air captured in George Floyd's last life scream: "Let me breath".