

Iván de la Nuez Apotheosis Now

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e-flux journal #68 — #68 december 2015 Iván de la Nuez
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1.

Fatherland or Death. With the Revolution Everything, Against the Revolution Nothing. The Future Belongs Entirely to Socialism. The Most Beautiful Land (according to Columbus). The First Free Territory in the Americas (according to Fidel) ...

These absolutes have not disappeared from propaganda or persuasion, from the dreams or nightmares of Cubans, but it is good to know that this Caribbean island has for some years now slowly abandoned “Life” in capital letters, as well as the bombastic all-or-nothing speeches that have characterized its politics, its culture, and its language.

At the beginning, maximalism in official discourse worked, and even contaminated segments of the opposition and the exile community. For the followers of official discourse promising an epic Life in capital letters, Cuba seemed to be limited to whatever originated from Revolution Square or the White House, fortresses in charge of playing military marches that barely allowed any murmur beyond the Cold War soundtrack.

Whether as Party cadre or critics, those who uttered soundbites tended to pay little attention to the Cuban masses they claimed to represent, to those Cubans who continued to move forward and evolve within their given circumstances. That was the silent society that tried all those years to dignify survival and to relax the ironclad dictionary that defined them sometimes as mere extras in a theme park called Revolution, and at other times as perfect beings programmed in the laboratories of the New Man.

Some of that went to a better place, by official decree, this past December 17, 2014, the day that many Cubans venerate Babalú Ayé (or Saint Lazarus, for the Catholics). That day, Barack Obama and Raúl Castro put aside their respective monologues and tried a duet, albeit not completely in tune, to notify the world of their imminent diplomatic relations. A small step for mankind, but perhaps a giant step in the history of equalization.

The schedule that established free elections in Cuba, and subsequently the end of the American embargo, culminating in the reopening of embassies, was abruptly dynamited as soon as the whole process was put into motion.

That December 17 may perhaps be remembered by history as the day when Cuba officially began to operate in lowercase. It was ground zero from which an island trapped – for better or worse – in its exceptionality took on the journey that would position it closer to normal life than to historical epic. The negotiations welcomed Cuba to the current world of

globalization, of market without democracy, and of the universalization of a Chinese model that long ago stopped being exclusive to that country.

For Cuba, the “enemy” turned into “the neighboring country.” For the US, a country on the list of sponsors of terrorism turned into an economic partner for the immediate future. This semantic transformation has been described by Cuban journalist Carlos Manuel Álvarez in an article in *El Malpensante* encouraged by the hope that a change in official discourse would prompt the language of ordinary Cubans to change too. For Álvarez, once that bellicose encyclopedia was put behind us, Cubans would become “a tribe that buries its dialect.”

Among the direct consequences of that burial, one must point to the elimination of the translators, the intermediaries – the European Union, Mexico, the UN, and Switzerland, all of whom were taken aback by the announcement. One must also point to the surprise of the “brothers of twenty-first century socialism,” whose shock was immortalized in the face of Nicolás Maduro, petrified after the announcement.

Nearly the entire world celebrated the New Deal between Cuba and the United States as the definitive burial of the Cold War. However, it could be thought of as the opposite: both

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contenders, far from burying the Cold War, decided to recover its effectiveness to deal with a chaotic world. Faced with Venezuelan instability and the growth of drug trafficking, failed states and the European crisis, the situation in Ukraine and terrorism, the threat of Islamic State and the buoyancy of China – not to mention falling oil prices – a return to the diplomacy of the bipolar era would have advantages in confronting a geopolitics without a compass.

2.

The waning of that epic *Life* in capital letters can also be seen as an erosion of the monopoly of the state over our lives – an erosion of its control of information, entertainment, food, school, health care, and the possibility of travel. A tide of TV “paquetes,” restaurants, academic tutors, street vendors, nurses, trips to foreign countries, and the trading of almost anything imaginable have managed to make the country dynamic and overturn the rituals of everyday life.¹ Thanks to or despite the state, Cuba assumes the trajectory of other Caribbean countries that prop up their social welfare with the more or less official and more and more buoyant private sector (note that we are talking about the Latin American country with the highest level of state ownership of its



Fidel Castro addresses a crowd in Havana, 1963.

economy).

One only has to think about the internet in Cuba, which is slower than broadband and under state control. In spite of this, a perverted version of networking has become common practice, whether for business, surfing the web, or downloading files. Cuban internet users give themselves a freedom that the state does not grant, but that it also cannot impede (at least not completely).

Around that famous December 17, in the midst of the open-air political forum that the country had become, someone suggested a graffiti with two possible variations. One: “Down with Raúl, long live Fidel.” The other one, the opposite: “Long live Raúl, down with Fidel.” Like the imminent US invasion – this time unarmed – that would supposedly solve all the country’s problems, that imaginary graffiti was obviously an exaggeration. But it also conveyed something true about the perception of both a reformist Raulism and a revolutionary Fidelism. Whatever the revolution may have been, and whatever was left of it, it has been closed for repairs, so much so that troubadour Silvio Rodriguez has proposed taking away the letter “R” and adopting “Evolution” to save the original project.

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3.

The “Raulist reforms” – as they are called even in official circles – are not designed to change the political model. Their immediate objective is an adjustment of the system to connect it to the market economy, to relax Cold War–era emigration policies, to reestablish diplomatic relations with the US, and to change the emphasis of official discourse from the importance of sacrifice to the benefits of work. That is, the goal is to tune up Cuban socialism for the twenty-first century without compromising the power held by the elite, and without extending the liberalism tolerated in the economic field to the political field. If in a previous era the Cuban government elected to follow the Soviet model, today it is following the Chinese model.

But in a country ruled by reforms, the opposite of reform is not counterrevolution, but counter-reform. And this detail is key to understanding the political spectrum generated by the new rules. This spectrum is a broad and contradictory field that includes, without a doubt, the government’s bureaucracy, but also a right-wing opposition and exile community that have banked on things staying the same. There is also the so-called moderate opposition, which



Fidel Castro makes a speech at a military parade and rally, Jose Marti Revolution Square, Havana, 1965.

sees the possibility of a transition negotiated with the state in these changes. We can also include a large portion of the dissident Left, which is interested in discussing the new political and economic models, especially insofar as the latter is likely to deepen inequality. Even from the arts, which are normally sheltered by a protectionist bubble, criticism has been swift.

The most notorious case has been Tania Bruguera's attempt to stage a public performance. But the graffiti artist El Sexto's work also opposes the status quo, though he made less of a media impact. Both were arrested. In another field, the theoretician Desiderio Navarro has developed campaigns against the sexist and racist advertising of the new economy, while the artists José Angel Toirac and Reinier Leyva Novo have returned to the original discourse of the Revolution to compare its leaders' current actions to their revolution-era rhetoric. If the sessions of the Cuban parliament are impossible to stomach, improvised debate in homes, around merchant stalls, and on street corners has turned the island into an unofficial forum where people discuss everything from the best ways to leave or stay in the country, to the latest frivolities of the new jet-set, to the inflated prices of nonrationed food, to the latest TV series. It doesn't matter if the series was

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smuggled in from abroad in a paquete, or aired on state television, like the series *Vivir del Cuento*, which keeps tabs on the contradictions of a country in which favoring change or trying to sabotage it are no longer tied to specific political orientations. (There are many revolutionaries who want to change things, and then there are the nouveaux riches who will earn the greatest return on their investment if everything stays the same.)

The counter-reform movement has incomprehensible moments, demonstrating that immobility is not exclusive to the bureaucracy. It is difficult to understand those representatives of the exile community, which has traditionally emphasized the importance of the US to Cuban politics, who have not aligned themselves with the reestablishment of diplomatic relations.

4.

There is no debate over whether capitalism is today's universal system – even North Korea is exploring its version of the Chinese model. And there is no doubt that capitalism only works for capitalists. Today's system is a kind of "selective capitalism" in which governments pass legislation favoring certain capitalists, but not all – only those who show loyalty. This capitalism has very little left of the classical liberalism celebrated by Adam Smith in *The Wealth of*



Raúl Castro and Obama pose for the media before meeting behind closed doors at the UN General Assembly, September 2015.

Nations. Selective capitalism has its origins in the South American dictatorships of the 1980s and in Deng Xiaoping's Communist China, models that David Harvey identified as the origins of neoliberalism. Another important chapter in the story of selective capitalism can be found in the transitions of the old communist societies to the "free market," with their shock therapies and the emergence of oligarchs from the ruins of the old regime. Yet another chapter can be found in the Arabian Gulf countries, where the marriage between oil and monarchy continues to seduce the West. The United States, Europe, and Russia are increasingly inclined toward this version of "capitalism for the party faithful" in which the state functions as either a director of operations, a mediator, or a mere subordinate. In this model, a capitalist is not evil by virtue of being a capitalist, but only for not sufficiently supporting the government's priorities. And conversely, for these capitalists, governments – even despotic dictatorships – are not evil as long as they allow them to act as they wish. Some theoreticians speak of "heritage capitalism," others of "One percent capitalism," and others of "speculative capitalism." I prefer to call it a "piñata" (a word used in Nicaragua to describe a landgrab scheme by the Sandinista government in 1990), since

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only those who accept the terms are allowed to pull the strings.

Today's Cuba is not alien to these tendencies. That said, we can expect little in Cuba's future for an economy based on services and entertainment, with tourism exalted as the latest mutation of the old monoculture, while critical thinking and the development of a "knowledge society" are ignored. (It is easy to establish a hair salon in Cuba, but almost impossible to establish a publishing house, and it is much more acceptable to the state for an artist to write these things than for an essayist to do so.)

This makes me think of the well-known saying that Jose Martí uttered to Máximo Gómez, a saying that has been a virtual Sword of Damocles over our failed Cuban democracy: "A nation is not founded, General, as a military camp is ruled." In the face of today's new economy, the phrase is worth updating: "A people is not rebuilt, General, as a new paladar is built."

5.

In her new novel *La Mucama de Omicunlé* (Omicunle's Chamber Maid), Dominican writer Rita Indiana offers us a Caribbean dystopia in



John Kerry peers into the interior of an old American car parked in Old Havana, Cuba, August, 2015. Photo: Associated Press.

which the great perennial topics of Caribbean literature – those of Alejo Carpentier and Lydia Cabrera, those of Aimé Césaire and Antonio Benítez-Rojo – are updated in a plot that unfolds between the Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, and Cuba (with the ever-present Haiti shaking up the future like the unburied zombie of a revolution that turned into a catastrophe). The book foresees, by 2024, the drifting of neoliberal states into total corruption, and the drifting of some Bolivarian states into totalitarianism, with a nuclear disaster thrown into the mix. This unfortunate premonition is repeated by Jorge Enrique Lage, a Cuban fiction writer born, like Indiana, in the 1970s, whose dystopia involves a Big Bang bringing forth a Cuba of old slogans and new mafias, of old loyalties and new tribes, united by a highway to nowhere. Painter Alejandro Campins, meanwhile, has produced works about revolution that are closer to Andrei Tarkovsky's *Stalker* than to Raúl Martínez's revolutionary Pop art. Looking at his series *Avalancha* (Avalanche), one does not know if it is our present that looms over formerly sacred spaces, or if those spaces in fact loom over us, further complicating our already uncertain reality. These works of art portray a country whose incomplete utopia dedicates itself to avoiding apocalypse.

Cuba today sees the possibility of a transition from predemocracy to postdemocracy, to something that perfectly accepts the world order. Classical liberal manuals do not provide much beyond this scenario, and we must recognize that among empty words, "democracy" has an important, singular definition – like those garden pots that are as beautiful as they are fragile, and as immobile as they are empty.

Now, it doesn't matter whether Cuban socialists claim that the transition to democracy already happened or maintain that it is yet to come. What none of them can escape is that their solutions are already worn out, and that to brag about having discovered the magic potion for the future is simply no longer believable.

The utopian generation has run out of time. The apocalypse generation – those children of the Revolution who came of age with the fall of the Berlin Wall – had no space for themselves. However, the apotheosis generation – the one that has come of age in the twenty-first century – has dimensions of both time and space at its disposal. Let's hope they can find that elusive formula that will allow them to build, against Cuba and against the world, a country in which social justice and democracy are not opposing terms.

Meanwhile – and now that *cuentapropismo* is allowed – many Cubans squeeze out as much liberty as they can by their own means, waiting

for the experiments looming over them to yield some results that might benefit their lives.

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Translated by Ernesto A. Suarez

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1

“Paquetes” (literally “packages”) refers to flash drives filled with pirated foreign television shows and movies, computer games, popular music, and print media that are sold illegally throughout Cuba. A paquete costs 2CUC (\$2.50). Cuban state officials frequently speak out against them as crass and immoral, but their widespread popularity has contributed to a decline the in viewing of state media.

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