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European Languages

زبانهای اروپایی

JUNE 7, 2018

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08.06.2018

## *Against the Cuba Embargo, Man-Made Hurricane, Wall before the Wall*



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Cubans explain their island has the shape of a caiman, a cousin of the crocodile. Some live upon the head, other on its tail. But that shape could also be that of an anvil, these days without the hammer and sickle of a Russian benefactor.

The island in the shape of a caiman has held its breath for 40 years. When will the blockade fall? How could the West have spoken of the fall of iron curtains, and then kept

this one iron curtain, the blockade, oxidizing and cutting the toes of the island people while sermonizing to their need for freedom? What is the revenue the bastards and patent office made on that Miamian concoction, the mixed drink ‘‘Cuba Libre’’? And where’s the crystal river of *agua ardiente* (literally, ‘‘burning water’’) liquor, promising forgetfulness and severance, adding melody to melancholy?

In Cuba, a heaviness reigns.

Dancing to son and drinking the r3n and aguardiente does not help undo it.

The gravity of Cuba presses more upon the shoulders and head-tops of its dwellers than the gravity of sub-sea-level Curaao and Aruba—the latter, minor islands I know well, having been born and raised there; these share the culture of that Latin American part of the Caribbean, beginning at the Caribbean coasts of Venezuela and Colombia.

The Europeans came to put the burning tobacco of Holguin’s fields to their mouths. The first human inhabitants of some parts of the Americas had priests who favored the binding, in some places of not-so-far Mexico even trepanation of skulls, making a hole in the soft skull of a human child who would then continue to live and grow afterwards, like a circumcision of the cranium. The first tools found in Holguin, in Easternmost, mountainous Cuba, resemble earthenware daggers—multi-purpose knives and idols at once, with a built-in face of what could have been an anthropomorphic godhead.

Gravity is more intense on the major island of the Antilles. Perhaps owing to the island’s mountainous elevations. A pressure comes from the sky, enters the lungs, grinds against the old colonial and modernist architecture of Havana and sits also upon the daintily painted, well-kept pagodas of Vedado on the coastline along the Malec3n.

Despite the lightness often attributed by outsiders to the Caribbean, those who do not know or see the Caribbean’s blatant melancholy, it becomes undeniable when scouting the cities and villages ranging from Santa Clara to Holguin. They were built, and rebuilt, upon the surface of an immense mythological anvil that stood on a rock above sea-crests. Nickel factories with obsolete machinery belonging to another era achieve what Western bourgeois art galleries only pretend at. Pressure comes from outside, a punishment maybe, for not having participated in the brutal wheel of ‘‘renovation’’, a renovation that capitalism tells us is Progress, when old products expire and must be replaced by new, alienated designs, like the Darwinian evolutionary mutations of insects.

True progress is not necessarily ‘‘renovation’’: the latter often means the renovation of packaging to sell the same products, the same practices, discarded values and ideas anew at a higher price. An intellectual from a different and faraway island, Sardinia, had written

eerily “When the old does not die and the new cannot emerge, then we are living in the time of monsters.” The new does not necessarily mean “the latest”, the recent, or the chorus of the young. An outsider to the Caribbean who wishes to criticize the Cuban system would claim the obsolete status to be unique; when, in fact, most Caribbean islands, one way or another, inhabit another era, though not necessarily that era of ideologies—the Caribbean lives in a state of ‘obsolescence,’ in many parallel baroques. Even on prosperous half-colonies like Aruba, or like the affluent parts of Puerto Rico during the 1990s, underneath the consumerism and its ornamentation, everything is antique, still in the time as if bitten by the Stonefish or the Basilisk, a mythical creature that stuns. In that stunned state, I find beauty. In the slowness and bureaucracy, in the Caribbean corruption where an agile tongue and social savvy gains favors and products yielded to the doorstep by the political party, I do not see an ideological failure or an exception: I see the typical politics and problems of Caribbean islands neighboring Cuba. European and American critics have always avoided looking at context, the immediate surroundings of the island, comparing Cuba to themselves, instead of to neighboring, unknown islands.

In Cuba, despite the many “time machine” dream cars, old pre-revolutionary Fords bright as bright dreams, observed by the tourist as beautiful picturesque throwbacks, I see a dynamism that is absent in many other parts of the Caribbean. Polemical conversations and a battle of ideas, outside the parameters of the daily Granma newspaper, go unreported by the Western media. The Western media is not limited to large corporations: academics from the USA and Europe come to the island armed with either a naïve and deaf solidarity, or with progressive values masked as critique that carry the agenda of profiting from further colonization of the island and deconstruction of the inhabitants. The academic explorer from the politically correct university campus embarks to Cuba, the island of “Old Left” narratives and values, armed with the scalpels and instruments of a new left that lost its core commitments, and instead seeks only evidence for the failure of the old grand narrative of the Left and of modernism. The aesthetic of farce and parody are only permitted aesthetic of subversion within Western mainstream societies where art, philosophy and literature are controlled by a unanimous academic discourse that accrues financial capital on private university campuses, occasionally dispatching missionaries to the third world. Such visitors, lacking all but the hard jungle hat, quickly find themselves overwhelmed by what they encounter, by profanity and by a belief in “the religion of art,” by penniless audiences for classic music, by a lack of the expected censorship, by big butts of all known pigments and by politically incorrect speech, by creoles and a mixture

that defies the suffocating compartmentalization of the first-world's identity politics. And yet the island has a stronger, caiman-toothed identity politics that lashes with its caiman tail against the towering hospice-for-the-young represented by North American corporate identity politics. The visiting academics struggle, reduced to thrashing asthmatics by the sudden withdrawal from the high-speed Internet they continuously must consume at home or on the road. Humbled by the high intellectual level of the people from a different upbringing and era, they are daunted and look for a speedy exit. But they also flee that mysterious pressure from the sky, which a Christian fanatic fundamentalist might explain away as the anger of God at an atheistic island and its people who disbelieve in the "Gospel of Prosperity" or who practice the African paganism of Yoruba as a form of subversion, a fetishism further angering the monotheistic Christian God who hangs like a bell jar over his blessed flock.

An explanation for the heaviness, other than God, is still possible. An at once inhuman and human cause. The blockade has surpassed the merely financial and economic, it surpasses the merely elemental realities of Import/Export. The blockade has become part of the physics of Cuba, it penetrates the ether, the interactions, in the way weight and air are distributed in the streets of cities and towns. Only the birds hover free and immune, as the avian is generally unaffected by customs or Import/Export machinations.

But for all other inhabitants, the blockade is an impact felt in lungs and limbs, in bed, on the scarcer meals of tables. In sold-out theater shows in the Trianon and other Havana theaters, fairy-queens conjure laughter and solidarity as they moan in comedies about scarce resources appointed to them, such as meager chicken-leg but very rarely chicken-breast and almost never beef, their sense of suffocation and lack of a future perspective on the island.

Witnessing the crisis of their neighbor and ally Venezuela, Cubans express their memories of the "Special Period" (Período Especial) of the early 1990s, when Cuba lost Soviet Russian endorsement, as Soviet Russia disbanded. Then Cuba entered panic and financial crisis, hit by sudden scarcity, a situation entirely opposite of the sudden rush of freed capital and consumer-culture that characterized the liquid 1990s for many capitalist Latin American countries that would only later experience such a crisis in 2001.

A certain group of exiles from Cuba in Miami made global headlines when they danced at the radio news of the death of the commandant. Less than one year later, in 2017 the same ensemble, like a bad merengue orchestra whose off-key sound and vain shriek you can also recognize though it riles the listener, made news once more. They danced again, on

live television around the real-estate mogul turned primetime president, Trump who they greeted as a defender *against* tyranny.

A Miamian Cuba-Libre-lobby of vengeful entrepreneurs regularly use their own plenty, acquired by business they conduct in Miami, in Orlando and in Fort Lauderdale, to celebrate the scarcity, the brokenness, the state of struggle caused by a blockade-embargo against their own people.

The lobby is only one section of the Cuban diaspora, yet that part of the exile population forms the main pillar of support from the Floridian peninsula for an archaic blockade. When the leadership of the Miami Cuban exile lobby jeered and celebrated Trump's signing of the pact to reinvigorate the blockade, in what is marked on the calendar as *Anno Libido Dominandio* of 2017, they also made art-history: their dance recalled Francisco Goya's Black paintings of hysterical and cruel witches partying in a consecration. (Spain was hysterical, when Goya went about documenting with aquatint what no narrative nonfiction journalist of century 21 would be able to capture.)

Resentment of their own island cannot and was not the sole reason for their hysterical embrace of Trump, however. Until Obama ended the "wet foot, dry foot" policy granting automatic residency to Cuban immigrants in the United States, they had known a state of exception, for the past decades having been mostly exempted of the brutal treatment afforded to most Latin American and Caribbean immigrants to the USA. Obama, who within his 8 years surpassed the deportation tolls of Clinton and Bush combined, had announced "With this change we will continue to welcome Cubans as we welcome immigrants from other nations, consistent with our laws".

Deigning to strip Cuban immigrants from privileges that had distinguished them from the rest of the "Latinos"—the group most aggressively hounded by the immigration-police, and most cajoled against by hawks on both sides of the US bipartisan spectrum—threatened many of the Cuban immigrant community in the US. They are unlikely to fare any better under the watch of a Jeff Sessions.

The Spanish-speaking audience of the gala event, the welcoming committee for the mogul who owns one Trump Hotel and a golf course on Puerto Rico, and naturally hopes to open another in Havana in competition with military-owned hotels, saw no irony in their warm reception for the hoodlum winner of the 2016 US election. "Buenos días" they said, and "viva" and played Celia for him. They shook to maracas for him like scepters anointing King Crook.

They venerated Primetime TV's primal screamer, the same one who roared that all the Mexicans, meaning all of those born to the South of the Tex-Mex border—are rapists (or pitiful promiscuous and raped women, the stereotype of the Latina). They glorified the hoodlum; their dark lips sung his praises. Fuck them.

The blockade on the long face of the island Cuba weighs as a fact of geo-physics, and has contorted the Cuban state and the Cuban people into a condition of acrobatics. Cuban society is the society of acrobats: a feat in which anything that functions to any measure, including the prominent cultural life, the theater, which often also houses dissidence against the state, such as the always sold-out shows in the Trianon and other theaters of Vedado. Courting censors, the directors, actors and virile hermaphroditic extras tickle the information-ministers in their noses armed with special receptors until retaliation. Educational and medical programs all hover, in a suspension resembling the muscular miracles of Soviet gymnasts. The blockade is an immense anvil suspended above the island, softening the fall of the sunrays until they are pliant and unable to diminish the strange pallor of many Cubans. The gravity of the blockade makes the full moon into a constant crescent upon the anvil-horn, like woman on a Tropicana stage playing with a feathered fan and with her big bottom for the entertainment of night-tourists and gangsters of old pre-revolution Havana (an old Havana which, according to official accounts is abolished, prehistoric, and yet is always to some extent returning through the many cracks in the system, like lunar tidal trickery.)

Cubans go to bed surprising early, even after drinking an evening cup of their famous coffees. It is the heaviness of the blockade, which, like the asthma that Vaclav Havel carried on about in "The Specter of Dissent", sits in the lungs of the people.

Not long after the Revolu, when Cuban gymnasts went to Puerto Rico to compete under the Cuban flag, the pro-Battista exiled landowners who were settled on Puerto Rico showed up in the auditorium to opionate on sports. Puerto Rico, or Boricua in the Tayno-language, was always known as that sister-island of Cuba, turned into the laboratory-colony of the USA and an island-pawn in the Cold War. (Case in point: to this day, Puerto Rico appears to be the one part of the Latin world where in conversation on sports the word "soccer" will pop up interjecting itself in the Spanish, instead of "futbol", so as to avoid the confusion between football and the space-gladiator game of the Superbowl, its rules incomprehensible to the rest of us earthlings.)

The expropriated Cubans of leading business families stood up in the audience, forming the bully-pulpit they unrolled large banners saying in English "Russians Go Home!"



Like mirrors flashing sunrays, the Cuban-Rican hecklers' banners attempted to defocus and throw off the spear-throwers and runners, to unnerve their morale. But the sunned island Russians, strangers to snow, won. Against banner and blockade and a million strange and funny games and the exploding cigar (torpedoed by the CIA into the bearded commander's box of Montecristo's or Cohiba's) Cuba endured.

“BACK TO MOSCOW! RUSSIANS GO HOME!”

this was the slogan of those called “Marielitos” in the region, the Cuban exiles.

The suspect Russians who had never seen snow were greeted, by Cubans who called them out as impostors who'd robbed them of their nests. The black Russians, the whites of melodious bones who had never tread snow, heard “go home to Moscow” an accusation so psychotic it must have been exhilarating. Where they Russians? (I would have loved to hear that accusation from dark lips on dance-floors—being the one unsmiling Russian child of the Caribbean—go home Russian thief!)

They struggled, and prolonged their own existence, balancing their doctors' needles, their books at a price affordable to the cleaner and the waiter, their vinyl and radio with lyric ballads of Silvio Rodriguez as he remained a socialist even after run-ins with persecutors from among the rigid Marxist bureaucracy. The achievements of the Cuban revolution are much more, infinitely more than a cheap Castro-Fidelity to awe the Western Leftists' T-shirt and accessories' sales departments.

They contained and upheld their project the way a fisherman pulls up the wooden contraption with a rope net and keeps the catch. The fish-school treasure lasts a fortnight, given by the sea-goddess who goes by an Arawakan or an African or a European name. They resisted Orkan, whose name in every Western language is from the first inhabitants of the hurricane-torn islands. The priesthoods of the Caribbean and the area of today's Bogota called a human sacrifice a Quihica: word that meant a door, portal to another world.

The embargo was put there to thwart, ever since JFK signed it: the island was not to be an example to the other coral reef republics, who must not hope to have more industrial manufacture beyond rum and cigars.

For the embargo's designers, withdrawal of the blockade is meant to happen only when the last bastion of 20<sup>th</sup> century socialist experiment is withdrawn. While Obama promised relaxed prohibitions on Cuba, thus gaining the sympathy of that population, he also imposed more collective punishment and austerity on its nearby sister-island, Puerto Rico. The melodrama of post-Cold War that took place in Europe decades after the Berlin wall,

under Obama finally took place in the Caribbean. Thusly, Obama sought to resolve these loose ends of American imperialism and to even out the map of Fukuyama's much-mocked End of History, by undoing those last nodes of Cold War fault-lines, pushing American triumphalism.

After the end of Cold War, Puerto Rico, like many other social experiments tolerated by the West, lost part of its function. Puerto Rico had been a competing experiment, a US colony serving as counter-example to the sister-island Cuba, an island with a similar culture but where the inhabitants—or at least the more affluent part of the population—had a right to consume, and to acquire certain enviable aspects of the North American “way of life”, the spiritual identity of the United States spelled out in its iconic brands. Puerto Ricans and Cubans were the two exceptional Latin American nations spared the pitiless and near-martial immigration policy reserved for all other Latin American immigrants heading North-bound.

Following the end of the Cold War, the Puerto Rican population no longer could be treated as a valuable good example of American consumerism, of accessible San Juan shopping malls full of muzak and capsules of American dream for the colonized. The severity of the Obama administration emboldened the popularity of US Republicans on the island.

Barack Obama's administration reinforced the status of uselessness and obsolescence of Puerto Rico in the imperial plans after the Cold War. Formerly the island colonial laboratory offered what Kissinger's Realpolitik called “The threat of a good example”. In that theory of propaganda, PR served to convince other islanders in the Caribbean that it might be more attractive to be a colony of the USA than to follow the revolutionary examples of Cuba or of the crushed Grenadian revolt. It sure was convincing; on the Dutch colony island Aruba, many ascending Arubans flocked for years to Puerto Rico and Miami in the hope of escape by ditching the Dutch colonialism in exchange for becoming a US colony, an archipelago, selling souvenir handicraft pieces of the American dream to tourists.

In the gestated, ditched deal that Trump shredded on live television jeered by the Cuban Miami Lobby, Washington had promised to relax the long history of fiscal collective punishment towards Cuba in exchange for Raul Castro's promises to allow startups private enterprise. At the same time, that collective punishment was redirected to Cuba's neighbors, such as Puerto Rico and Venezuela: run of the mill *Divide Et Impera*. Today Venezuela lives under the conditions that typified the “Período Especial” crisis of the Cuban 1990s. The EU and US tighten sanctions, collectively punishing a population and



denying exports of medicine—thereby creating refugees that the US and USA will not accept in their farcical “solidarity” with the opposition. While Venezuelans suffer from sanctions that inevitably bring to mind the financial blockade on Cuba, as Venezuela attempts to shut its borders with neighbors, present-day sanctions on Venezuela are arguably harsher than Kennedy’s measures against Cuba: Venezuelans cannot expect residents rights or a “wet foot, dry foot” immigration policy should they flee to the US or even to the European Union. They EU screams its “solidarity” imposing sanctions while barring refugees. No “wet foot, dry foot” this time.

Today, Trump plays the imitation of Cold War games. The Trump Hotel stands, imperious in San Juan. The interior of the Trump hotel resort, with its suites and facilities and satellite televisions might seem the exact opposite of the interior of Guantanamo’s dungeons, yet they exist in parallel. Hopefully activists on both islands can suggest an exchange between the guests (and not only the personnel) of the Puerto Rican Trump Hotel and the Guantanamo Bay penal settlement. If it was possible for US administrations to spread capitalist fantasies as well as collective punishment through different parts of the Caribbean, perhaps the values inherent to that origins of the Cuban revolution can also travel the region like Orkan, the Hurricane. It stalks a region like a giant, more devastating than Roosevelt appears in the caricatures made of him in early Puerto Rican resistance newspapers, wlier Kennedy and all the imperial successors.

Despite all the disgrace, the poverty and mediocrity of the lies, there is still what the first inhabitants of the region called “Quihica” a door out of the weighed-down world, into another world more like one envisioned by those hopeful islanders of the revolution