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AUGUST 1 2015 - DAY 64

THE REVOLUTION IS DEAD—BUT LONG LIVES THE STATE!

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Cuba: The Fading of a Subcontinental Dream, August 1st 2015—[Day 64](#)

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Juan Carlos Cremata's production of *The King Exits*, a play by Ionesco, was recently censored in Cuba.

On the eve of the restoration of diplomatic relations between Cuba and the United States after a half-century standoff, I paid a visit to the Solidarność Museum in Gdansk. The museum's permanent exhibition is an encyclopedic display of documents, videos, artifacts, and photographs detailing the rise of the independent trade union in the adjacent shipyard, the repressive response of the Soviet and Polish authorities, and the spread of popular resistance that, we are to understand, led to the end of Communism in the East. Though Solidarność's retreat from politics in the 1990s and Poland's transformation into a neoliberal economy with an ever-widening gap between low wages and high prices are absent from the story told by the museum, I found it hard to feel cynical about the heroic tale of righteous workers who spearheaded a peaceful revolt against oppressive state authority. Who among the world's downtrodden wouldn't want what these workers asked for?

Solidarność's original twenty-one demands read like a blueprint

for a utopian society, a kind of socialism without fangs in which workers could organize, strike, and *also* get raises, where free speech was enshrined, affordable food and housing were guaranteed together with paid maternity leave, and the bosses' capacity to skew managerial policies in their favor was checked.¹

The workers' demands not only inspired compatriot intellectuals to assist them but also opened the door to a radical art fringe—the Orange Alternative—that staged irreverent street performances in defiance of authoritarian rule.

While many Cuban intellectuals also hoped for a political transformation in the 1980s, the Caribbean island's leadership managed to ward off the end of socialism by stepping up repression and blaming the US embargo for its financial woes, rather than its own inefficiencies and political miscalculations. The Cuban government responded to the withdrawal of Soviet subsidies by authorizing a few small businesses and decriminalizing hard-currency possession, which led to the return of farmers' markets, the emergence of home-based restaurants and barber shops, and a steady increase in remittances from exiles. Nonetheless, in the early 1990s, as food and power shortages dominated daily life, the value of wages plummeted and a wave of censorship hit the cultural sector. Cuban professionals and artists left in droves. At the height of Cuba's post-Soviet crisis, mass emigration on makeshift rafts for those who had no invitation to travel abroad was cynically encouraged by the state. It was not until Hugo Chavez took power in Venezuela and began supplying cheap crude oil to the Castro government that the island's economy stabilized.

Nowadays, Cuban dissidents supported by the Lech Walesa Institute Foundation travel to Poland and visit the Solidarność

exhibit, consult with former leaders of Eastern European opposition movements, and enjoy high-speed internet access free of charge at the embassies of former socialist block countries. They look to Eastern Europe for models and methods. They swap tales about growing up with Russian cartoons and black-market vendors, and about contending with secret police and impenetrable bureaucracy. But the comparisons stop there.

Cuban socialism was not imposed by a foreign power, nor can its government be characterized as a Soviet puppet. As historian Lillian Guerra has shown in her masterful study *Visions of Power in Cuba: Revolution, Redemption and Resistance, 1959–1971*, the majority of Cuban citizens willingly relinquished their civil rights in the early stages of the revolution, believing that this was necessary to safeguard the country from foreign-backed threats to national security.² The grand narrative about an underdog standing up to a foreign oppressor belongs to the Cuban government, with its anti-imperialist rhetoric and its invectives against the US embargo. While the middle and upper classes that fled to Miami are famous for their anti-Communism, the nationalist bent of the Cuban revolution and its dependence on a single charismatic leader who set policy via televised decree for fifteen years before approving a constitution made the tropical version of socialism quite different from any other.

Cuban dissidents are not trade unionists—they are intellectuals and professionals, many of whom fell out with the regime, and in some cases they are family members of political prisoners. The main audience for their muckraking remains outside the country and their attempts to intervene in Cuban public life are met with harsh responses from police and vituperative media campaigns in state media that dismiss them as mercenaries. No opposition group boasts membership as large as Solidarność once had—only

one broad-based effort to bring about constitutional reform took root in Cuba in the 1990s and its leaders were soon imprisoned; its founder, Oswaldo Payá, died in a mysterious car accident in 2012. The common adage among Cuba's critics is that the only way citizens can truly express their political will is by leaving the country.

Revolutionary rhetoric aside, Cuba's economy is closer to state capitalism than centralized state socialism. The country's public sector has been shrinking since the Soviet Union withdrew subsidies in the 1990s, while joint enterprise with South American, Canadian, and European companies has grown. Privatization in the economic sector, however, has not been coupled with political liberalization, a point that is often made by critics of the Obama Administration's new policy. There are many reasons why Washington may actually prefer to keep the current regime in power in Cuba. Unlike Eastern Europe, which enjoyed broad support from cold warriors in the US and Western Europe for its popular opposition to Soviet-style governance, Cuba operates in a post-Arab Spring geopolitical arena. Western powers are wary of popular uprisings and destabilized authoritarian states, which may explain why the Obama Administration appears so keen to negotiate with the Cuban regime instead of seeking to topple it. Indeed, despite the widespread belief that Cuba's transition is imminent, the main player in the process is the current leadership, not the opposition. What is changing then is US-Cuba policy, not the Cuban government. Human rights are a bargaining chip, not a game changer in the discussion. Cuban dissidents may have racked up human-rights awards in Europe and they may enjoy photo ops with American politicians, but they do not command a mass following inside the country. Nor are they being groomed for future leadership. The Cuban government knows that it has the upper hand. Many Cuban dissidents have expressed anger and

a sense of betrayal because realpolitik is not what they expected from Washington.

Since the December 17, 2014 announcement of a rapprochement between the US and Cuba, the political discussion in English has centered on who is perceived to have the upper hand in the negotiations. Unfortunately, the lack of nuance in most English-language reportage has encouraged many to confuse the announcement of renewed diplomatic ties with the termination of the US trade embargo, which it is not. Promised changes for Cubans, such as the expansion of internet services and the termination of a dual currency system in which most salaries are paid in worthless non-convertible pesos, have yet to materialize. But changes in the ways that Cubans see and speak about themselves have been taking place over the past decade.

Thanks to the development of citizen journalism on the island, Spanish-language media coverage offers more detailed and more critical accounts of the Cuban political apparatus and the country's social ills, its crumbling infrastructure, and its invasive policing practices. An expanding blogosphere led by a young generation of tech-savvy writers and activists has provided readers outside Cuba unprecedented access to social commentary from unauthorized sources and has facilitated public debate between island-based commentators and exiled intellectuals. While dissident musicians, writers, and indie filmmakers lash out publicly against the Cuban government, the artists who benefit from the support of the state's cultural apparatus for the most part have stayed out of political debates. One notable exception to this pattern is the controversial but highly regarded film and theater director Juan Carlos Cremata, whose recent dramatic production of Eugène Ionesco's *Exit the King* was shut down by authorities after one weekend on the boards. Apparently, a play about a four-hundred-year-old king whose kingdom is crumbling was too

dangerously close to Cuban reality for their liking.³

Cremata responded to the censorship by immediately publishing a scathing critique of state power in relation to the arts sector on numerous opposition blogs, and even granted an interview to Radio Martí in Miami.⁴ Visual artists are generally not so bold. They were among the first cultural producers in Cuba to be able to earn in hard currency and to negotiate independently with foreign entities; many enjoy a lifestyle that is envied by most Cubans. The beneficiaries of such privileges take a pragmatic approach to engaging both with the Cuban state and the global art market. Indeed, most of Cuba's artists share their government's desire for greater access to the global marketplace and its reticence to discuss human rights. Those who speak out about restrictions on speech, movement, and political conduct have either always been marginalized, or have fallen out of favor and have less to lose. Culture in today's Cuba is a profitable business and complaining about civil rights is tantamount to being a wet blanket at a wild party. American collectors, who are flocking to the island in search of bargains, are happy to find a cadre of smart young artists poised and ready for business and seemingly uninterested in politics.

The Obama Administration has just removed Cuba from its state-sponsored terrorism list, giving the island greater access to foreign trade. Washington has also taken other measures that increase capital flow to the island, easing the economic pressure that failed to bring about systemic collapse or regime change. Up to now the Cuban government has only agreed to the original prisoner swap and the reopening of embassies. It maintains its longstanding demands for the return of the Guantánamo base, the lifting of the embargo, and the termination of US-based pro-democracy programs. While the American media sings Cuba's

praises as a tropical paradise full of sunny beaches, colonial architecture, vintage cars, and skilled-but-low-paid workers, Raúl Castro insists regularly on Cuban television that the socialist character of the Cuban state is not up for negotiation.⁵ Cuban dissident groups prepare their proposals for new civil rights legislation and demand a referendum, but Washington does not appear to be pressuring Cuba on these issues. The rate of detentions of dissidents and activists on the island has not gone down as negotiations progress.⁶ Old-guard exiled conservatives grumble about the rapprochement, sensing their loss of decision-making power over US-Cuba policy, but a younger generation of Ivy League-educated Cuban-American neoliberals has aligned itself with the Obama Administration, trying to be first in line to invest in the Cuban economy if and when the embargo is lifted. Cubans on the island appear split between those who are trying to open small businesses and join the ranks of the island's nouveau riche, and those who are figuring out ways to emigrate before the Cuban Adjustment Act, which grants Cubans who set foot on US soil automatic refugee status, becomes a thing of the past. Rates of immigration in the past five years have been higher than during any other period since the onset of the revolution. Those most vulnerable are the elderly subsisting on pensions, an increasingly large sector of a country with a very low birthrate and a high incidence of migration.

Among the growing number of art-world itinerants who visit Cuba, there are many who are still in love with an idea of what the revolution was, or whose critical views of US policy lead them to downplay the significance of the problems with the Cuban economy and the repressive excesses of the state. There are also many global art-market players who turn a blind eye to Cuba's political apparatus just in the same way that they overlook the undemocratic character of the governments in China, the Gulf

States, and Russia so as to keep their art business unsullied by political fracas. The Cuban cultural ministry has banked on this combination of economic rationalism and political naïveté for decades. The seductive power of a tattered ideology draws cultural tourism, while the market-oriented pragmatism of most art-world cognoscenti helps the Cuban cultural apparatus to promote its favored artists abroad and secure financial support that substitutes for dwindling state subsidies. Unlike Cuban athletes and dancers who leave the country in search of better pay and working conditions, Cuban artists fare better financially when they keep the island as their home base, enacting a drama of national belonging for a foreign audience. Even those who work outside Cuba as much as possible rush back “home” when the Havana Biennial takes place. In recent years, several artists who went into exile in the eighties and nineties have returned with state approval in order to benefit from the media attention and marketing effort of the biennial as well.

It is against this backdrop that the recent confrontation between artist Tania Bruguera and the Cuban government is best understood. Her thwarted attempts to perform in Havana’s Revolutionary Plaza coupled with her highly successful international media campaign to publicize her treatment at the hands of Cuban authorities have complicated the international celebration of the US-Cuba rapprochement by foregrounding the ways in which the Cuban state, which goes to great lengths to present itself to the world as an enabling cultural force, simultaneously functions as a repressive agent. Bruguera’s notoriety turned an otherwise routine exercise of state control over a heavily policed public space into a political melodrama about artistic freedom in a country where no one has the right to express themselves freely and where the policing of public conduct is simply not news. The ruckus in social media outside Cuba contrasted with the virtual public silence of the Cuban art

community on the matter. State officials questioned not only her loyalty but also her status as a Cuban given the fact that she has lived abroad for many years.⁷ In response, Bruguera dug in her heels by insisting that she has always wanted to work in Cuba, even as she maintains residence in New York; teaches in France; and though her projects in recent years have focused on immigrants in the US, religious visions in Italy, and cocaine trafficking in Colombia. It appears that the case against Bruguera has been dropped as of this writing. Her passport, which had been held for six months by Cuban authorities, has been returned.⁸

While Bruguera was held up in Cuba by authorities, she won a major cash award in the US, sold a work to MoMA, and was appointed artist in residence for the NYC Mayor's office of Immigrant Affairs—benefits that have not gone unnoticed by her compatriots.

The international attention to Bruguera's case no doubt shielded her from the harsher treatment that opponents of the Cuban government routinely receive—her detentions were brief and physical mistreatment was minimal. Writer Angel Santiesteban was just released under terms of “conditional liberty” after serving a two-year imprisonment on what many believe are trumped-up charges.⁹ Street artist Danilo Maldonado Machado (aka El Sexto) has been imprisoned awaiting trial for over six months. Several other political prisoners are serving sentences for producing political graffiti against the Cuban government, but their marks are not considered art. When Cuban human-rights activists have been beaten, arrested, given lengthy sentences for nonviolent offenses, or died on hunger strikes, news rarely appears in English-language media and no one in the international art world jumps on a soapbox or signs a petition. Despite the good intentions of those in the art world who created a media storm

around Bruguera's case, the discussion never progressed beyond naive outrage at her having been censored, as if this were not standard practice in Cuba, and as if freedom of speech were never subject to limits in any part of the world. Commentary has been focused singularly on her situation as an artist whose freedom to create was curtailed, rather than considering the political question of how and why Cuba controls the public speech and public acts of its entire population via intimidation, brute force, and the rewarding of complicity. That failure to address the political dimension of artistic expression reveals the economic underpinning of the cries for freedom—in other words, what the global art world seeks is for its famous artists to be “free” to travel and peddle their wares, not for people in general to express their opinions.

The absence of a more analytical international discussion of civil rights in Cuba beyond the Cuban diaspora is also what enables the Cuban government and its supporters to discount Bruguera as a self-serving gadfly and reassert its authority. Cuban artists who cooperate with the system do not broach the subject as part of a tacit agreement that allows them to function professionally. Exiled intellectuals and dissident journalists do address these matters regularly, but foreigners interested in new economic prospects in Cuba ignore that discussion. Romantic Cuba-philis dismiss these concerns when they assume that the very existence of art on the island is evidence in itself of freedom. Insisting that “engagement” is the key to political change, many members of the global cultural elite forget that the Cuban government has been expert at cultivating and controlling its fellow travellers since 1959, and that those who deviate from an unquestioning support for the political order lose their status and access to power.

In the months between Bruguera's first detention and the 2015 Havana Biennial, I was approached by numerous journalists who

wanted quotes but did not want to consider the limits on speech for Cubans other than the artist they already knew. I was also approached by artists who felt torn between their desire to “commune with Cuba” and their sympathy for Bruguera. Not one of them wanted to discuss what Cuban laws govern acceptable public speech or behavior, or to consider what the current negotiations between the US and Cuba may actually result in for those who live in Cuba or for hundreds of thousands of Cubans dispersed throughout the world who have never worked for the CIA and do not advocate violent overthrow of the regime, but whose salient criticisms of the Cuban revolution are grounded in grim experiences of its darker side. The art-world globetrotters who have just “discovered” Cuba—yet again—are caught between two dreams: one in which artists are thought to be freer than the rest of humanity, and another in which Cuba and its revolution persist as a fantasy about a bearded, longwinded leader who liberated a third-world country from poverty and capitalism.

One way out of this impasse is to take a break from the media spectacle about Cuba as the hottest new destination and listen to poetic and political commentary on the current situation by Cubans themselves. In the coming months, a special issue of *e-flux journal* will publish translations of poems, letters, essays, and fiction by Cubans who think deeply, ironically, and sometimes hopefully about their country, wherever they may reside. To launch this effort, we’ve offered a poem by writer and political activist Orlando Luis Pardo Lazo about the psychological effects of living with a larger-than-life leader for more than five decades.