

The Cuban Left, More Critical and Decolonized

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The contemporary Cuban political climate is so adulterated with labels and slogans that we find ourselves in a pitched battle between extremes that do not recognize themselves as such. The typical epithets, characterized by occlusions and narrative voids, resist any discursive efforts to demonstrate weak elements in the arguments. The rigid schematism fosters segregation and dogma in a language game whose object is to prejudice certain political positions by means of fallacies only loosely connected to the reality they claim to refer to.

From its peculiar triadic vantage of party/state/government, the political establishment in Cuba pigeonholes all dissenting individuals with delegitimizing and offensive adjectives. These designations, typically accompanied by a tagline about mercenarism in the service of imperialism, effectively solidify the authoritarianism of the ruling caste that undermines the collective right to a plurality of political positions. In this manner, the government increases physical and psychological repression, ideological coercion, and the desperation of the citizenry.

After the widespread protests of July 11, 2021, this hermetic and repressive order was greatly fortified. There were thousands of arrests and cases of police brutality—normalized in the days following the protests—a new penal code that criminalized dissent was enacted, and many activists were pressured or forced into exile. While it is true that these repressive measures existed before the protests, they did not get nearly as much coverage in the days before the Internet and the proliferation of independent media outlets in Cuba.

For its part, at the other extreme, there are conservative groups enclosed in a bubble of elitism and exclusivity that frame their politics in terms of pro-capitalist and liberal narratives, with an agenda devoted to discrediting any perspectives from the political left that question, dissent, or confront the high-handed and dehumanizing histrionics of imperialism.

In this camp we find people who refuse to recognize subaltern identities, sexual nonconformity, or vulnerable segments of the population and whose media coverage manipulates and disparages this important activism. In this way they reveal their ultraconservative ideology, denying and attacking these subaltern communities even as they attempt to discredit their struggles.

These conservative groups reproduce structures of domination similar to those of the government they oppose, pigeonholing as pro-government anyone whose political orientation accords with

Marxist principles, with a decolonizing project, with transfeminist discourse, and so on. Any political position calling for unity, for sustainable development, for equity, or for integration and social justice becomes a target of their attacks, which tend to be confrontational or aggressive, lacking in any theoretical grounding, and with ethics grounded in accordance with the dictates of capital and aligned with the economically privileged groups.

It is no secret that far-right groups in the United States, including the U.S. government itself, devote millions of dollars to the oppositional groups in Cuba that undermine progressive discourse. In a very real sense, then, these groups have the same level of media power as the Cuban government—possibly more—and they use this power to reproduce a politics of hatred and exclusion with caustic formulas, Miami being the epicenter of these efforts.

In the Cuban context, the very idea of what constitutes a leftist position has been effectively sequestered by the factionalism that I discussed above. For more than sixty years, the Cuban political establishment proclaims itself to represent the left and even to embody the revolution itself, employing Fidel Castro and Ernesto “Che” Guevara as icons of this international movement.

Today, however, with the social advances that the revolution and the citizenry achieved now largely buried, and with the political establishment constituted as a centralized, single-party state, totalitarian and dictatorial, the concept of the political left as something co-substantial with the government in Cuba is promoted chiefly by intellectuals, artists, and political scientists serving the regime, by individuals who enjoy, moreover, political and economic benefits, legal impunity, and the support of communications media monopolized by the government.

At the same time, pro-government groups and movements that emerged as a response to the November 27, 2020, sit-in outside the gates of the Ministry of Culture building and to the popular uprising of July 11, 2021, carry out, at the behest of the government, an apologist campaign that promotes the false image of unity and solidarity of Cuban youth with the vertical political structure.

While these individuals enjoy a freedom of action, with public events, open letters, meetings with the president and high-ranking officials, institutional recognition, privileged professional positions, opportunities for publication in official media platforms, and more, the more critical groups suffer harassment, censorship, expulsions from the workplace and educational institutions, defamatory campaigns, illegal citations from State Security (Seguridad del Estado), and repression and exile as punishment for their critical posture, even when this posture is framed in Marxist terms, from a leftist perspective committed to social justice—that is, in accordance with principles that the Cuban government claims to honor.

Among the principal challenges to a reasoned analysis of the Cuban left are the various individuals and collectivities outside of Cuba who validate the official Cuban government discourse. Numerous political parties, academic associations, intellectuals, and researchers on the left identify the Cuban political project as “socialist” or “leftist” even as many rigorous economic and political studies demonstrate the totalitarian character of the state, which in economic terms embodies a state capitalist model grounded in self-serving notions of legality.

It is broadly understood that the Cuban Revolution, at least in the last three decades, lost its character as a social revolution of, for, and by the *humildes* (the disenfranchised or the subaltern), transforming itself into a fiefdom, the property of an elite few who govern the country according to their own interests. A clear example of this is the existence of the entrepreneurial entity GAESA (Grupo de Administración Empresarial) which, subordinated to the FAR (the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias), administers and centralizes enormous capital under the aegis of the Cuban military and the ruling caste, while the Cuban population suffers high levels of poverty.

Data published by the ONEI (Oficina Nacional de Estadísticas e Información) in September 2021 shed some light on this issue. According to this data, 0.5 percent of new public capital investment has been devoted to education and 1.0 percent to health and social assistance, in marked contrast with the 42.3 percent devoted to building and hotel construction. In view of these data, the misuse of public funds becomes evident, so much so that a simple tour of Havana will reveal luxurious five-star hotels in the same neighborhoods where dwellings, state centers, and urban buildings are collapsing.

Official government propaganda and its supporters outside of Cuba promote a false view of the national situation, thereby extending and reinforcing erroneous ideas that do a great deal of harm to people on the island, including the leftist opposition. In so doing, they inadvertently strengthen oppositional narratives from the political right, and, in portraying the exercise of Cuban political power as just, legitimize the myth of socialism in Cuba.

The perspective of outsiders who don't fully understand the reality on the island and who support the policies of the current government is unjust to the hundreds of political prisoners, to censored journalists, to Cubans living in exile, to the millions of Cubans living in precarious economic conditions, in extreme poverty, to the thousands of people who experience hunger in Cuba, who are unhoused, who do not enjoy decent labor conditions or adequate salaries, to the people killed by police—let us always remember the murders of Zidane Batista and Diubis Laurencio—to the millions of Cubans who live under the bootheel of an oppressive totalitarian political system whose legal system deprives us of the right to demand our basic rights.

This article is part of a symposium on the critical left in Cuba.

James Buckwalter-Arias, "Introduction to Marginalized Discourse: Voices from the Critical Left in Cuba"

Alexander Hall Lujardo, "The Historical Burden of Actually Existing Socialism"

Lisbeth Moya González, "Cuba and the World"

Alina Bárbara López Hernández, "The False Dilemma Fallacy"

Lynn Cruz, "The Cuban Reality"

Raymar Aguado Hernández, "The Cuban Left, More Critical and Decolonized"