

Something smells different in Cuba

Cuban Libertarian Movement

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With respect to the situation in Cuba these past few weeks, the Cuban Libertarian Movement – MLC (affinity group of Cuban anarchists in exile) speaks up to answer the unknowns and the challenges facing Cuban society. Ours is the voice of uncompromising commitment to freedom, equality and solidarity that has always been the sound of the Cuban anarchists.

Indeed, something begins to smell different in Cuba; perhaps in tune with the flavor of the post-Fidel era. For starters, that verbosity that filled all spaces until the 26 of July of 2006 is no longer there, where it was heard for almost half a century. Since then, the prostrate “commander” has begun to write, but we all know that the written word doesn’t have the same spell as the spoken word and even less when it is elusive, erratic and lacking in interest to anybody who thinks outside of the personality cult. Maybe that is why so many, more than was foreseen, in the streets, in clandestine films, in household blogs, show a desire to liberate the people’s voice from the ties that bounded it. Even the first violins in the governmental orchestra, surely egged on by the same old confidential and carefully whispered commentaries growing louder by the day, have no choice but to recognize what would have been unthinkable years ago. Vice-president Carlos Lage, for example, recently proclaimed at the VII congress of the UNEAC (National Union of Cuban Writers and Artists): “The dual morality, the prohibitions, a press that doesn’t write of our reality as we would like to, the unwelcome inequalities, our dilapidated infrastructure, are wounds of war, but of a war we have won.” (<http://www.kaosenlared.net/noticia/siento-hoy-mas-orgulloso-nunca-escritores-artistas-cuba>). It’s transition language, no doubt, since they can’t even keep alive much longer those moribund triumphal bellicose airs after admitting that the wounds are too many and too severe for a political regime self-conceived and presented to the world as “revolutionary” and “socialist”; even admitting that the military victory only means keeping the elite in power.

Even more direct and piercing than Lage’s was the language used by Alfredo Guevara in the aforementioned congress of the UNEAC, charging against undeniable stalwarts of “revolutionary” pride such as the educational achievements. About them, Guevara asked himself: “Can the primary, secondary and pre-university schools, such as they have become, managed by absurd criteria and ignorant of elementary pedagogic and psychological principles, violating family rights, be the forming mold for children and adolescents, and hence of the future?” He answers that “it can never be solidly built out of dogma, stubbornness, ignorance of reality or by dismissing whistleblowers and the citizenship”. This is a clear show of disconformities and even sorrow that Guevara quickly extended to the Cuban Institute of Radio and Television –under the direct supervision of the Ideological Department of the Communist Party – whose offices he called “neo-colonial media with its stupid programming dominated by such enormous ignorance that they don’t even know they are allies of capitalism in their obscene manifestation” (<http://www.kaosenlared.net/noticia/peor-enemigo-revoluciones-ignorancia>). Such discourses, however, in spite of their virulence and their bitter complaints, don’t quite criticize in depth the whole power scheme nor disturb its survival.

Old perfume in new bottles?

The web of power doesn’t seem to have changed too much besides the loss of its charismatic component. There will no longer be a Moses to guide the people through the Red Sea nor to angrily smash the tablets, and everybody knows there is no marketing campaign capable of ren-

dering Raul Castro a seducer. Therefore, the state's discourse, suddenly deprived of its most inspiring flights of fancy, doesn't have any other recourse than minimal sincerity and appeals to efficiency.

Today everybody knows – and now by word of the highest hierarchy of the State or its press – that Cuba can't produce enough food for its population, that agriculture is in a ruinous situation without immediate solution, that the transportation system is ancient, that a good portion of the population of Havana able to work doesn't even bother to obtain employment because it's just not worth the trouble! (<http://www.granma.cubaweb.cu/2008/03/21/nacional/artic10.html>) that there continues to be a deficit in water transport, etc. Everybody also knows about the “excess of prohibitions and legal measures that hurt more than they help” because, a few months before Lage, the then acting and later elected, President Raul Castro said it that way in person during his year-end speech at the National Assembly of Popular Power (<http://www.granma.cu/espanol/2007/diciembre/sabado29/deseo-e.html>) Nobody doubts that this all has to change and there are very few remaining that have not yet become aware that credit is for a finite time and patience runs thin. For the great majority of the people the changes have to be now –*hic et nunc*, they would say in Latin- or they will never happen.

But of course, those changes are in the hands of the same people who should take responsibility for the situation and that's why you can't expect much from intelligences and attitudes that up to now they haven't been able to demonstrate. For this reason the “changes” that have been proposed are trivial: permits for the sale of certain medicines in the neighborhood pharmacies or cell phones which until yesterday were only available from a friend visiting from abroad, permits for farmers to buy agricultural tools, seeds and fertilizer! And also for the permanent use of unproductive state land, permits for computer access, DVD's and car alarms for those with convertible currency, and also allowing Cubans to stay at the hotels that up to now were reserved exclusively for foreign tourists. What is surprising is not the fact that such prohibitions have been lifted but that such mundane things have been prohibited at all! Meanwhile, there's a fundamental permit among so many others we still don't have: Cubans will have to wait a while longer so that a trip abroad will not constitute a *via crucis*.

The old “commander” stirs in anger or anguish in his convalescent bed and in a letter to the UNEAC congress he expresses the annoyance that an eventual flood of appliances would provoke in him: “Can we even guarantee mental and physical health with the unknown effects of so many electromagnetic waves for which neither the human body nor the human mind have evolved?. The UNEAC congress can not fail to address these thorny issues”, (<http://www.kaosenlared.net/noticia/carta-fidel-vii-congreso-uneac>). His apocalyptic roaring is significant; mostly because he himself has been during all these years the Cuban most exposed to such “electromagnetic waves”. On the other hand there is a certain enigmatic tone in his exhortation to a congress of intellectuals and artists to take on a subject for which, in principle, other disciplines would be better suited to handle. Is it a last minute search for allies; a dramatic call for help to those who share his authoritarian atavisms?

Beyond these comings and goings, it's time to get used to the idea that the coming avalanche of “liberties” is not general and even less constitutes an abandonment of the harsh punitive measures or of the classic and absurd prohibitions: not paying your bus fare, with its attendant disturbance may be considered an “act of vandalism” that will land its perpetrators in jail (<http://www.noticiasdeautobus/tag/sucesos/page/11/>), while those who want to have their own blog will be blocked under the assumption that, by its circulation and use of certain programs,

they may endanger “national security” (<http://www.kaosenlared.net/noticia/potro-salvaje-tumbo-blog-yoani-revista-consenso>). Some prohibitions, considered “excessive”, begin to fall on their own weight, but none of that for the time being enables the institutionalized promotion of essential freedoms; amply demonstrated by the harassment of counter-cultural youth initiatives. We can show as evidence the citations and “inconveniences” suffered by the rock band Porno para Ricardo and in particular the harassment of its lead singer Gorki Aguila.

Self-management: aroma of freedom and equality in solidarity

Something smells different in Cuba, yes; but not enough to harbor too many illusions about the strategy for change that seems to guide the steps of the fossilized “vanguard”. In our view, the current flexibility is due to certain basic political and economic reasons. Among the political reasons, it’s worthwhile to note in the first place the need to make it understood that a change of orientation is taking place and that such change is the telltale sign of the transition from one Castro to another; and second, it’s urgent to encourage minimal expectations in a population that has begun to show with increasing clarity its growing discontent. Among the economic reasons these measures are geared to obtaining additional dollars to revitalize the state’s coffers that are in no condition to finance the importation of basic needs and for which the large Venezuelan subsidy is not enough; a contribution of foreign currency not everybody can afford. Betting mid-term the most frantic search surely consists of finding a way for the nation to recover lost productivity levels and food self-sufficiency before the situation really gets unbearable. Along this road, and not as the result of a coherent project, it is a matter of adopting the “Chinese model” in combination with other initiatives along the “Vietnamese model”, as has been recognized by Omar Everleny, university professor and high level director of the Center for the Study of Cuban Economy (<http://news.bbc.co.uk/hi/spanish/latinamerica/newsid7325000/7325340.stm>). Meanwhile, Raul Castro was more eloquent in his year-end speech and together with his wishes for a happy 2008, he said goodbye with the vanguard “materialist” equivalent of governmental hocus pocus: “Let’s work hard!” (<http://www.granma.cu/espanol/2007/diciembresabado29/deseo-e.html>).

The political regime wants to show a more flexible face, but that doesn’t seem to be anything other than a self-preservation tactic; something that the stubbornness and pride of the “commander in chief” had not allowed up to now. The extensive network of State repression and control is intact but, even so, we must celebrate that in Cuba there is a healthy tendency to broadcast a discourse different from the official one: one with a different content, different shades, and different rhythm, via other media that are not those still strictly controlled by the government. For the time being, criticism of the complete control of the economy by the state and the mayhem produced during long decades by centralized planning as well as the radical feeling of alienation that the Cuban workers feel towards the “socialist” production structure have led some analysts to return to self-management proposals; about which we anarchists have something to say.

The first thing we have to say is that self-management is not a cosmetic nor a band aid but rather an integral conception totally against private or state capitalism; an idea that rivals any other model of production, distribution and trade and which exists as a whole, without impediments or caveats, only as much as it can be generalized to all spheres of society. In short, self-management can not be understood as a test tube baby, as some practice worthy only of minimalist and isolated experimentation but as a model for relations between free, equal beings

in solidarity, capable of deciding, individually and collectively, the affairs of their lives. Just as centralized state planning and market competitiveness require totality, a self-managed economy also wants to be plenary, seeking expression on levels that are not purely economical but include people's whole lives. Self-management is not a decoration but a principle, is not a model for the occasion but a liberating and revolutionary project by which people can re-invent Cuban society.

Thus, many of us fear that the seditious "self-management" proposals circulating around Cuba can't go further than the search for a renewed identification of the workers with the state's enterprises aimed at increasing productivity, something the government may concede with a dropper to small agricultural cooperatives connected with the food industry. That is why it is not generalized and genuine self-management but another turn of the governmental screw that allows the elite the power to extend its time frame and to renew its capacity to control the workers.

Self-management, as we anarchists understand it, can't even be thought of if it isn't based on widespread people's freedom and autonomy for grass roots organizations. To put it clearly: those seditious "self-managers" manifesting in Cuba today will only appreciate one part of the problem as long as they're not capable of seeing that self-management is not possible in a repressive milieu with an exuberant military and police apparatus, with a monopoly by the only party over all the mechanisms of expression and decision making and with a perpetual disciplinary alignment of "mass" organizations with the power elite. As long as this doesn't change, it is true that something begins to smell different in Cuba but it is also true that the government continues to act as the most efficient deodorant. Once again we'll have to opt not for faith in the worn out machinery of domination but in trusting people's capacity for conquering and expanding their own spaces of freedom. To remember these things on such emblematic occasion as May Day is for the Cuban Libertarian Movement another signature of its dedication to anarchism and socialism; it is our emotional evocation of our far away roots and above all a committed reaffirmation of a horizon of freedom in unmistakable brother/sisterhood with all the people worldwide who struggle for their freedom.

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