EDITORIAL

CUBA – REVOLUTION IN RUINS OR STILL BEING BUILT? REFLECTIONS ON A VISIT TO THE ISLAND 1–17 FEBRUARY 2022

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Shall we ever find that lovely land of might-have-been?

Ivor Novello

At the risk of sounding facetious, if capitalism is renowned for the process of ‘creative destruction’ then in an ironic sense one might have to concede that, on the face of it, Cuban socialism is marked by a sense of ‘entropic decay’.

At least that is the initial impression one gets walking through the streets of Vedado, Havana, as I made a point of doing on a recent visit for 17 days in February, seven months after the ‘social explosion’ of 11 July 2021, when people took to the streets in unprecedented scenes of protest. These protests were against the government’s handling of the economy, food scarcity and a perceived lack of COVID response that has produced a general anxiety about the future of this socialist revolution, now in its seventh decade with no utopian end anywhere in sight.

Even in February, Havana basks in the providential glow of intense sunshine, which always has the effect of making places appear rather more cheerful than they would otherwise seem. This is a blessing because everywhere one finds ruins.

Walking the streets of Vedado, the 20th-century city built largely during the ‘American’ period, after Cuban independence in 1902, is an unsettling yet pleasurable experience in which architectural wonders of art nouveau and art deco, now in their second century of existence, rise resplendently in decorative defiance amid piles of rubble, broken pavements and crumbling facades. Here and there, wooden scaffolds prop up buildings, balconies cling on with their rusted
iron skeletons bare to the elements and, all around, walls that were last painted years ago are marked by the inexorable erosion of the tropical salt sea air.

Years and years of neglect and slow decay have created a cityscape I doubt can be found anywhere else in the world. It is as if the people here weave their lives in surroundings akin to those in which the people of central European cities found themselves some years after the end of the Second World War. Except it is not a shooting war that has caused this decay but the cumulative effects of an economic war that the US has waged for more than half a century. The 60th anniversary of the signing into existence of the embargo, or blockade as the Cubans call it, took place while I was in Havana. And yet...

And yet to walk though Havana is also to encounter diamonds in the dust. For amid the rubble there are houses being repaired, walls being painted, hotels about to be completed and we find shops, cafes, small hostels and workshops buzzing with activity. There is a palpable and growing commercial life of small traders, craftspeople and entrepreneurs. As I walk from my lodging towards breakfast at the Hotel Presidente, I also pass a funeral parlour, a driving school, a primary school, a nursery, a book publishers and the prestigious Higher Institute of International Relations, where Cuba trains its diplomats – all of which are functioning and busy with purpose and seeming efficiency. The attributes of development amid the destruction, lives being lived in a friendly, calm and resigned sort of way.

I find no evidence of mass disaffection here. Of course, this is not to deny that disaffection exists, if not in Vedado, then elsewhere in more deprived parts of town, but I did not find it much at all during my stay. We are not dealing with a corpse. The revolution is still breathing.

I came to Havana to attend an international conference organised by the Cuban Ministry of Higher Education, Universidad 2022, with the stated theme of sustainability. After two years of the pandemic, the organisers were pessimistic. I was lucky enough, as one of the few British participants, to have the opportunity to talk to the Cuban Minister of Higher Education, who was very happy: “We expected 200 delegates to be present, but in the end there were 400,” he smiled. “It is a result we did not expect.”

With another 1,000 attending virtually from all around the world, the event was indeed a success. More than that, it was an illuminating display of what Cuba is still capable of. Despite the ravages of the pandemic, the crippling effects of increased US sanctions and a hiatus of two years, the event, held at Havana’s impressive Palace of Conventions in the leafy suburb of Miramar, enabled its powerful Higher Education sector to show and celebrate its achievements. Some 21 institutions, universities, research centres and publishers had stalls, and Cubans from all disciplines spoke in the conference with passion and exemplary
professionalism. Talking to them in conversation, I was struck by the way these academics had gone through enormous difficulties in their private lives and yet had continued to work hard with stoical loyalty to a project that many outside the island have assumed is in terminal decline. Not so, at least as far as these protagonists are concerned.

I was particularly impressed by the speaker from the Instituto Finlay, where Cuba’s Soberon 2 COVID vaccine was produced. He spoke informatively about the challenge the government gave them to produce their own vaccines quickly. Cuba is the only Latin American country to have produced a vaccine and they have five, not just one. Now, seven or eight months after the crisis of July last year, COVID is driven down to a very low level, 95% of the population is vaccinated, including all children over 2. That is because Soberon 2 is designed specifically for use in children, the only vaccine in the world of that type. This is a remarkable achievement for any developing country – let alone one under sanctions.

Delegate after delegate spoke with evident pride at the way they had confronted the challenge of the COVID lockdown and the increased economic pressures, and had produced innovative ways to develop online courses and deliver teaching and learning. They expressed a commitment to education as a liberating process that was refreshing and inspiring. As one delegate put it: “We are determined to build a better world by forming a new generation of young people with necessary skills, knowledge, confidence and morality for a sustainable and prosperous future.” José Martí, the poet hero of Cuban independence, a great advocate for education as a liberating force, could have said this, perhaps more poetically, but his message is clearly still alive. Amid the ruins of aspiration, then, there is a corner of the revolution that remains faithful. I asked a Cuban colleague why they thought this might be and the answer was because they felt the new President, Miguel Díaz-Canel, had been a very well-liked Minister of Education. “They feel he is their President”, she said.

This response implies that there are others who feel he is not “theirs” and, it is clear, there is much talk about factions. A German expert on Cuba says that Díaz-Canel has little power. He lacks the charisma of Fidel Castro and the gravitas of Raúl. Not being a hero of the revolutionary generation and a civilian, he struggles to lead. “He has not replaced any of the old guard at the top,” is a common lament, “and he cannot get them to budge.”

Inefficiencies and the slow pace of promised economic reforms are the gripes I hear mostly when talking to Cubans, peppered occasionally with indications of mistrust, even accusations of corruption from a few. “They are all OK,” said a barber, “they all live well. They have big houses and cars. We have nothing. We are living worse now than in the Special Period!” He was referring to the privations of the 1990s following the collapse of the Soviet Union. “Wait a minute!”
comes the interjection from an older man in the chair next to me. “How old are you? I was around then and if you think this is worse than then, you are sadly mistaken. Stop filling the foreigner with false ideas.”

He didn’t know that I too had been in Cuba, actually lived in Havana, during that time and he was correct. For all the lines and shortages and the difficulty to make ends meet that is the current fate of this people, the situation is certainly not as bad now at it was then. I am also very accustomed to hearing exaggerated tales of woe, especially from barbers and taxi drivers, milking sympathy in the hope of a bloated tip.

However, this time was different in a couple of respects. I spent a lot of time in taxis because I got across Havana using the Cuban version of Uber called ‘La Nave’ (the fleet) that takes advantage of the brand-new Chinese-installed data service providing accessible, fast internet connectivity to everyone. This technology is a game changer. Cubans have access to the internet on their smartphones and all over town there are cellphone walk-in workshops offering repairs. Internet entrepreneurs were unblocking phones and offering all manner of software maintenance. I was able to use WhatsApp to communicate with my family back home for a fraction of what it used to cost. Havana is connected.

The ‘La Nave’ drivers are named by the app and you get their number so you can call them to make sure they find you. The app gives you the price so there is no haggling and, after the drop off, it automatically sends a receipt to your email address. The map on the app tells you where the car is as it makes it way towards you and the service is 24/7. The conversations I had on these rides were interesting. I would say they were evenly split between those who didn’t like the government and those who supported it. But that is unusual. After travelling by taxi in Havana for nigh on 40 years, I expect taxi drivers to be universally critical. This time there were far more who were prepared to defend the government.

“What do they think?” said one, “That this government has suddenly changed? Were they rioting in 2018 when everyone was doing fine? No one was complaining about the government then. Did the government suddenly become evil and useless? It’s the same government. Of course the problems we have now are due to changed circumstances that the government can’t control.”

Another showed an individualism that many North Americans would applaud: “Those who blame the government don’t want to face up to their own responsibilities!” he scoffed. “Look, I lost my job when the wall came down and so I did whatever I could to make a living. That’s what we do. We try to eat beef but if we can’t eat beef, we eat bread instead. There’s always a solution. It’s not the government’s fault. It’s our fault, too. But we are Cubans, we will get through this.” There is an old Hungarian saying: “Hope dies last.” Certainly, that point has not yet been reached in Havana.
If there is a cruel metaphor anywhere, it is at the Cuban Institute of History. This seat of academic endeavour, in charge of investigating and safeguarding the history of this defiant nation, is located in one of the most important historical buildings in the city: the Palacio Aldama, in the Parque de Fraternidad, Old Havana. This enormous house, named after its owner, was finished in 1840 and had, it is said, the first water closets in the island. It is a magnificent neoclassical palace, adorned with wrought-iron balustrades and grilles that indicate its early industrial heritage. Its owner never lived in the palace. Aldama, one of the richest men in Cuba, was exiled by the Spanish for his seditious activities. It is a monument then, to the independence struggle and sadly it, too, is in ruins.

The historians who work here have to occupy ever decreasing spaces because literally the ceiling could come down on their heads at any moment. It is a living example of a trope that has been used in art and literature ever since the Soviet Union collapsed. But again, things are not entirely beyond hope.

“We are moving, soon.” The Director of International Relations tells me cheerfully, “We are being moved elsewhere and the City Historian is going to renovate the entire palace. The move would have happened already but the pandemic has slowed things down.” “What will it be?” I ask, expecting her to say a hotel. “A cultural centre.”

This is the thing. Culture is everywhere. Despite their problems, Cubans still find the means to enjoy life, to paint, sing, dance and go to the theatre. Old Havana is full of cultural centres, museums, art galleries, musical venues and studios. If this is a desperate country, it knows how to represent it.

One of the more interesting experiences was to find oneself to be the only tourist in Old Havana, a place that was full of Cubans instead. It was a strange moment when one realised that the people sitting in the tables opposite or passing in the street were Cubans and not Germans, French or Brits. It was even more surreal to not be approached at every turn by people trying to sell cigars, inviting one to a restaurant or offering the promise of carnal delights.

This was explained to me simply: because there were no tourists for so long, the people that made their living doing that sort of thing had had to find employment elsewhere. I remark to my cynical friend that Cubans were out enjoying themselves a lot, it seemed. “Perhaps they sing and dance because they have no tomorrow.” He says. I comment that on 14 February, Valentine’s Day, all of the restaurants, both private and state, were bursting at the seams with couples treating themselves. I could not get a table, as every restaurant I visited had a queue of Cubans outside it.

“Not everyone is hungry or without money,” I quipped. “This is part of our live for today culture” came the reply. “It is like during the 1970s. We said: Hey the Soviets are subsidising us, let’s have a party! Instead of planning for the
future.” This may seem like a fair comment until one contemplates the history. “To be fair,” I replied, “I remember those days and no one anticipated the collapse of the Soviet Union. In fact, until the early 1980s everyone thought the Communists were winning the Cold War.”

This is a curious reprise of an argument that dominated not a few dinners. All over Havana, huge new five-star hotels are approaching completion and the criticism my fellow diners would make was how this is a terrible waste of investment because there are no tourists to use them. Indeed, one of the cries during the protests of 11 July was about how there was lot of money to build hotels but none to build houses (which are in short supply). However, of course the hotels were planned when Obama opened Cuba up to American visitors. Cuba raised the capital to build hotels that were expected to house the tourists promised by his loosening of the embargo. No one expected Trump and a pandemic would follow. As they stand therefore, the hotels provide another metaphor for a revolution that is a litany of might-have-beens.

Someone asks me how Cuba has changed since the first time I came here in 1987, when I was also one of a very few tourists. The new hotels are testimony to great transformations indeed, but there is much also that proves the French saying, the more things change, the more they stay the same. There were ruins in Havana then, too. . .