

J11: Return of the Cuban Proletariat

The Spirit of May 28

October 5th, 2022

On July 11th, 2021, after nearly a year and a half of the coronavirus pandemic and many more years of an increasingly unlivable economic situation, millions of Cubans took to the streets to express their anger with the current regime and to reclaim their lives. In a highly censored media landscape confused by a U.S.-based arch-conservative opposition, international Stalinist groups who cried CIA intervention, and independent Cuban sources suffering extreme repression, it was hard to get a real picture of what went down.

In February of this year I was welcomed in Havana by some comrades who generously talked me through what happened that day within the context of the current political, economic, and social conjuncture in Cuba. After returning to the states, I wanted to share what they so generously shared with me, and so we conducted this interview via Signal over the summer.

Contrary to conspiratorial narratives about the right wing, petit-bourgeois nature of the actions of July 11th and the social environment from which they arose, we might better understand the popular explosion of that day as the largest generalized proletarian mobilization in Cuba since 1959. From a set of unique and in many ways isolating circumstances nonetheless structured by globally recognizable phenomena, the Cuban people burst forth once more onto the world-historical stage. Using social media to spread the revolt, the surplus population of Cuban state capitalism emerged from the peripheries of the city to challenge the state and expropriate the stolen and hoarded wealth of government and private businesses.

Given the recent resurgence of popular mobilizations in Cuba in response to power outages and food and medicine shortages in the wake of Hurricane Ian, the following conversation seeks to function as an aperture for an ongoing, concrete, and transnational analysis of the vortex of forces that animated the actions of July 11th. Seizing hold of the memory of that day as it flashes up in a moment of danger, we hope proletarians and revolutionaries in the US and around the world can learn from and apply the lessons of our Cuban comrades, as well as find ways to support their struggle in the decisive years to come.

First, do you want to introduce yourself?

I am an anarchist and anti-authoritarian social activist. I've spent a significant amount of the past few decades in assembly-based environments and situations which are horizontal and autonomous from the Cuban State. These efforts seek to foster a social fabric of communication and solidarity in the Cuban context. From this point of departure, I have been part of various initiatives of social activism in Havana and other regions of Cuba.

Right now, for security reasons, I speak as an individual and not as part of any organization, but much of the content that I share here is the result of collective experiences, which transcend my simple authorship, but are part of my personal perspective on the Cuban reality in its broader context.

To lay the groundwork, what happened on July 11, 2021 in Cuba?

The question of what happened on July 11th is difficult to summarize in all its breadth, as the protests reached a level of dispersion and distribution that had not been seen in Cuba in the last 60 years. The extension of anti-government protests that happened on July 11th has no precedent since 1959.

Nevertheless, in trying to define what happened on July 11th, we must inevitably talk about a city in the interior of the Havana plain: San Antonio de los Baños. A small city or a town (pueblo), as they say here in Cuba, San Antonio de los Baños is in the middle of the south central plain of Havana. It's part of the province of Artemisa, an area that is full of important military units and constitutes a strategic military defense belt for the great capital city. It is a town in which a very interesting countercultural scene has developed in recent years, and it must be said that it was not directly from that countercultural environment that the protest arose, but we could say it did arise adjacent to this environment.

So in this context a young guy who is part of the LGBTQ activist community in that city made some posts on Facebook about the visit of the current president Miguel Díaz Canel to the city of San Antonio. Basically, the visit triggered mass social rejection. There were protests stemming from the questions that the visit generated. What did it mean for the president to visit a city that in its time, just a few years ago, had a modest prosperity, but that has now fallen into a deep decline and a great productive incapacity, a common result of what all the small cities in Cuba are suffering under the iron control of bureaucratic-military centralization, carried out by the State, which this president represents? That initial demonstration in San Antonio was quite peaceful. The people simply questioned the presence of the President of the Republic in their city and called attention to the contradiction between what he was saying and what was actually happening, the level of collapse of the health system in the face of Covid, food shortages, the transport crisis and local isolation. But the people addressed all this in a fairly typical protest framework, without any violent attacks on authority.

When the young guy who reported on the events in San Antonio, Andy, posted about what was happening, it went viral in a whole series of small cities in Havana that were all in similar situations. Andy's post was quickly shared by many Internet users and was also taken as an example and as an encouragement to carry out similar protests and similar challenges to the central authority in Cuba. But the most powerful catalyst for the collective actions of July 11 was not so much the video that Andy published but the similarity of the conditions of daily life in Cuba (and throughout the global south, for that matter) and the inability of the Cuban State and its corrupt "revolutionary" elite to respond to the arduous social problems that are accumulating in small cities in Cuba. Cuba is a country with a dense urban fabric, a deeply urbanized society based on the predominance of small cities of 40,000 or 30,000 inhabitants, which are the basic social nerve of daily life in Cuba and yet have been strangled for decades by the bureaucratic and military elites.

The most recent example of this is the creation of the provinces of Mayabeque and Artemisa a few years ago, which are two territories that are mostly made up of small cities and small towns. What the State did is artificially create two new capitals in these territories, Artemisa and San Jose de las Lajas, cities into which a very significant amount of resources were concentrated at the expense of all the smaller urban centers that surround them. This makes visible the process of concentration of territorial power by the Cuban State, which it is executing as part of its

oligarchic and authoritarian vision with which it conceives socialism. In this context, small cities like San Antonio and dozens of others are going through a process of marginalization that is very similar and very painful, which is also accompanied by a process of migration and settlement of the populations of these small towns in the outer belts of the bigger cities. Such is also the case with La Güinera, which is another example of an urban settlement that is peripheral to the city (Havana) but is also closely connected to these smaller cities.

What happened in the streets that day, though? When this wave caught on across the country, what went down? There was widespread looting and direct confrontations with the state, which from my understanding looked different from what you describe about San Antonio de los Baños, no? Could you describe the predominant tactics, or a bit about the terrain of action that day? What can we learn from them?

First of all, I would have to say that I was one of the many who was pleasantly surprised by the nature and extent of these events.

I think the most important tactical or strategic reflection is related to the fact that Facebook and its related “social networks” were the exclusive articulating axis of these massive street actions. These platforms are also, of course, the space of social surveillance preferred by the political police right now, at least in Cuba, forming the basis upon which the repressive apparatus was subsequently deployed. Based on the virtual information registry kept by Facebook, the political police targeted, almost surgically, those individuals who used their platform, their Facebook wall, to publicize what was happening with the public demonstrations across the country that day.

A significant part of Cuban society participated in the demonstrations with an extraordinary naïveté, with an extraordinary lack of familiarity with this type of mass action, which in Cuba has not been common at all. We are talking about unthinkable events in the Cuban social context of the last 60 years. Maybe partially because of this, because of the naïveté derived from inexperience, the massive popular action of July 11 was mounted from a social platform that essentially operates as an apparatus of police control.

The naïveté that I’m talking about was also fed by the notion of “Citizen’s Rights,” an idea that has been intensely promoted by the Cuban liberal and social-democratic opposition and the global democratic media, with their narrative about the duty of States to guarantee the freedoms of expression, association, etc. These are ideas that are deeply desired and little realized in a society like Cuba, which has experienced a schizoid segmentation between the right to health, education, and tranquility, and the guarantor of these rights: a Stalinist State that demands the renunciation of all other human rights in return.

Facebook, as the most popular of the virtual social networks in Cuba, has offered for the first time the possibility of exercising the right to free expression in its new digital public space. Most people have never considered its basic character as an instrument of surveillance and social control. Derived from this, the vast majority of the protesters on July 11 went to the streets with

very few precautions to protect their identities, and with very few tools to defend against police violence. In this sense, it was a very unequal battle.

With regards to the looting, the most emblematic acts came from the city of Cárdenas in Matanzas. A 19th-century sugar plantation city, Cárdenas is today in decline, with a large Afro-descendant population at the very limits of precarization. It's adjacent to Varadero, the Cuban tourist capital par excellence, which may explain a little why it was an important epicenter in the struggle and why acts of expropriation or looting occurred there. During these actions, though, people took no precautions to protect their identities, capturing each other on videos that were live streamed or later uploaded on Facebook. Something very similar happened later in San Antonio de los Baños, in Palma Soriano, a municipality attached to Santiago de Cuba, or in La Güinera, in the south of Havana, where some of the most violent confrontations between the police and the population took place. It was in the latter location where Diubis Laurencio was murdered, the only protester that the Cuban National – and Revolutionary – Police officially recognize as such. These massive and unprecedented events in Cuba, scattered throughout the country's geography, had an organizational dynamic that occurred at the same time that the videos of the protests in different locations were circulated on Facebook.

So while it may be true what the Invisible Committee, among others, maintains – that insurrections, with their grassroots organization, create the People, and not the other way around – it is also important not to lose sight of how insurrections are themselves produced and what weaknesses they carry. Such an evaluation must be carried out in order to overcome the weaknesses of certain instances of struggle and make our movements more effective in the face of the repressive apparatus that we face in Cuba and throughout the world.

But in any case, we must insist that the events of July 11–12, 2021 in Cuba were the moment in which, after 60 years, a concrete, palpable, and renewed notion of the Cuban People was born, and this occurred in the vortex of confrontation with the repressive machinery of the Cuban State and not by requesting rights. So much of the knowledge of our comrades who were in Centro Habana on July 11, where there were experiences of confrontational, horizontal self-organization, remains to be collected, documented, and analyzed.

The fact that Facebook was the organizational nexus of all these popular actions on July 11, 2021, contributed to people overlooking questions about how to organize, questions about how to generate a dynamic, organizational environment for the confluence of subversion and solidarity, an environment that would allow for the generation of skills and confidence, the capacity for emancipatory collective action in the face of the immense popular organizational inexperience and massive repression of the movement.

The question is how to prevent the events of July 11 from being study material for the “revolutionary” police intelligence departments in Cuba, and instead make them our material, for us, the people actually making revolution in the world and within ourselves.

This analysis of the experiences of July 11 must open pathways for how to sustain the confrontation with the authoritarian repressive apparatus of the Cuban State. Connecting with the entire rich history of social struggles in Cuba, it must reject the false dichotomy between violent or non-violent lines of action, a dichotomy preferred by States and their police. Instead, this contradiction must be overcome in order to consider forms of daily existence that are subversive and opposed to all expressions of authoritarianism in our environments and interpersonal relationships, to all States, their institutions, and the candidates that seek to govern us.

We must learn from the events of July 11, 2021 in Cuba. First of all, we must consider the problems generated by the use of Facebook as a space for coordinating these actions and the way that these networks contribute to police repression, and to the mediation of popular self-organization.

There are also other avenues of coordination to be learned from. Less than a month ago, profoundly significant events¹ occurred in the small city of Nuevitas in the province of Camagüey, specifically in the Pastelillo neighborhood, a place hitherto unknown to the vast majority of Cubans. The residents of that neighborhood gave a sample of what the precarious Cuban proletariat has been learning, and what we have yet to learn, about the need for solidarity as a key tool that connects with the other tools of struggle. They showed us that in the face of a system of organized repression it is not enough to appeal to “rights.” They showed us that we must identify the strengths and weaknesses of our communities, the antagonistic elements animating the plurality of our struggles, as well as the moral and infrastructural weaknesses of the system we confront, so that when events such as those that occurred in Cuba on July 11 burst forth once more, they find us better organized, better mentally focused, and better equipped with subversive forms of life that can qualitatively surpass the actions of last year. It will not be a question of aspiring to an idyllic and definitive popular victory, but instead of having a suitable mental state for the difficult challenges that come from recognizing that wherever we are and however we position ourselves, we will always be struggling against the dilemma of the State and its agencies of colonization that seek to destroy our communities and ecosystems.

Can you talk to us a bit more about what led up to July 11th? In terms of the preceding year and a half of covid, and the previous few years of big changes in the Cuban regime?

On July 11th or 12th we made an evaluation as anarchists of what happened. We talked about the end of what we call the “social enchantment” of the notion of “Revolution” managed by the State in Cuba. We talked about how the notion of Revolution had become a magic word that gave meaning and official explanation to everything that was happening in Cuba and above all gave a sense of transcendence to daily life in Cuba. We believe that if something changed after July 11th, it was precisely the end of that social enchantment, the end of the capacity of the official language to account for and even replace reality itself. In that sense, the year in which last July

¹ Translator’s note: on Thursday, August 18th, 2022 after repeated and continuous electricity shutoffs, hundreds of people took to the streets in the Pastelillo neighborhood of Nuevitas to demand that the power be turned back on. This demand quickly expanded to the call for the renunciation of local politicians, the freeing of political prisoners, and ultimately the fall of the entire Cuban regime (“¡Abajo la Dictadura!”). The state responded with threats of force if people returned to the streets on Friday, which they did, marching and eventually blocking and occupying a bridge. According to some reports, the protestors fought off police and riot squads with rocks and other projectiles for two hours that night, leading to injuries on both sides. In videos viewers can see demonstrators with t-shirts or scarves covering their faces defending the bridge. On Saturday August 20th the government brought in specialized anti-riot units from Santiago de Cuba and Matanzas, and also turned the electricity back on during night-time hours, which diffused the demonstrations. Over the following weeks, people have been seized from their homes and arrested for participation in the protests. Unfortunately, media coverage is abysmal. Any independent sources in Cuba risk immediate censoring and arrest, the state media outlets deny the occurrence of any disturbance (even though there are reports that a policeman was killed on Friday), and what remains are conservative, Miami-based outlets and Twitter personalities.

11th is inscribed is a year in which the contradiction between the discourse and the reality in Cuba intensified to an absolute extreme. It was a year in which the number of deaths in the country soared by many thousands, due to the decision of the ruling elite in Cuba to allow the entry of hundreds of Russian tourists in the midst of the pandemic, with falsified covid tests and inaccurate reporting of infections.

The scarcity of resources and shortage of supplies, and State abandonment as a daily policy in the face of the pandemic, was something that was experienced above all by the small cities in the interior of the country where more than half of the population is concentrated. In this context, these populations have directly lived the contradiction between the facts and the discourse of the Cuban government and also the devastating blows dealt to the peasant and small town populations in Cuba. This applies particularly to the old sugar cultivating populations, who saw all their sources of employment destroyed, their lifeways eroded with no solution in sight either from the State or in general, as the State has also demonstrated a complete inability to facilitate a process of popular local self-management. As a result of all this, there has been a very strong migration from these small towns and the rural sugar world to the outskirts of the big cities. The actions of July 11th were carried out precisely by these social actors, people increasingly marginalized and excluded from the State's social security. We speak without precise statistics, but in our analysis these internal migrants constitute around almost 2 million people, out of 11 million in Cuba, without access to subsidized food resources, without access to quality medical care, practically marginalized, silenced, because they've made home in illegal settlements in the periphery of the big cities. That, in our consideration, was a fundamental social factor for the explosion of July 11th.

To these issues should be added, in the longer term, the growing tendency of the Cuban State and its armed forces to capitalize on the country's financial resources. The feverish construction of hotels owned by the FAR, the "Revolutionary" Armed Forces, in the midst of the pandemic, is a very clear sign of the regime's disinterest in socialized or communized methods of crisis management. On the contrary, they have opted to develop an economy of services for international tourism, which allows the military-police State to generate the resources needed to preserve its monopoly on the management of social life. In this sense, July 11th showed the repressive side of this government, which drapes itself in the name of the Revolution, but only considers the idea of socialism as a State maintaining its predominance over the rest of society. On July 11th, that notion of "socialism" was challenged and thrown into question, in a much broader way than ever before. The social geography of the protests reflects the regional tensions that are emerging in Cuba today, where for the first time Havana was not the only epicenter of resistance to State authoritarianism.

Can you talk a little more about this “end of the social enchantment”? What does the death of Castro have to do with it, if anything? What are the biggest changes to the Cuban situation in the last five or ten years? What’s the difference between, for instance, the crisis of the 90’s, the so-called “special period,” and that of today? Why weren’t there massive mobilizations like July 11th at that time?

Well, this question contains 3 questions, so I will try to answer them in the same order in which they appear. First, let’s address the relation between the end of the social enchantment and the death of Fidel Castro. I would say these things are related. In a society where the definition of the concept of Revolution was monopolized by Fidel Castro himself, undoubtedly the physical disappearance of this individual is an important piece for the weakening of that social enchantment. Fidel, in 2010, in one of his last public interventions, presented us with a concept of Revolution, the essence of which is dangerously ambiguous, like everything he created. He said that “Revolution is to change what must be changed,” a vague definition that has served to legitimize the ruling elite in Cuba. The problem is that the sentence grammatically omits the subject. “Change what must be changed” does not say who is going to carry out the changes, at what time, when, or under what circumstances. In short, it is a great little masterpiece showcasing the ambiguity of this man’s public communication. When Fidel Castro formulated this phrase, this word-concept (“Revolution”) was already undergoing a process of erosion at the popular level. There was already an intuition that this notion of Revolution could no longer account for how or how not to build emancipatory paths.

This popular knowledge, realized by my generation, was amplified in the context of the significant changes taking place in the management of power in Cuba, which resulted from the fact that in 2004 Fidel suffered a public fall in Santa Clara. This accelerated the process of the transition of power. And so began the reign of Raúl Castro, who moved on from the position of head of the “Revolutionary” Armed Forces, to replace Fidel Castro. Raúl was an individual who, since the time of the guerrilla war against the previous dictatorship (that of Fulgencio Batista), demonstrated significant management skills in the territory occupied by his guerrillas, which made him appear to have somewhat of a military-entrepreneurial capacity, an operational capacity, which to some people indicated that major changes were about to take place when he assumed the presidency.

Some changes did occur, such as the possibility, for the first time in a long time, that people could travel outside of Cuba, get personal passports, sell or buy houses, sell or buy cars, and access spaces designated for international tourism, which for the Cuban middle classes offered a quite significant reprieve from everyday life in Cuba. Along with this, there was a growing process of de-ideologization of government management, an increase in operational pragmatics and an expectation that deeper changes could also occur regarding the problem of the dual currency in Cuba, perhaps resulting in a clear convertibility with respect to the dollar and thus resolving all the problems that the lack thereof generated at the business accounting level. But the truth is that Raúl Castro left these questions pending for more than 10 years before conferring formal

command on a completely anodyne figure, a puppet managed by the military caste, the current president of the republic, Miguel Díaz Canel.

Upon entering his post, in the worst circumstances the country had seen in decades, Díaz Canel was ordered to start the monetary unification process. In the midst of the pandemic and the concomitant economic contraction, this led the country to galloping inflation, to an unstoppable accounting crisis that right now means that we have practically 4 units of monetary measure. The financial chaos has deepened, the discouragement of socialized production has deepened, and all future plans have been postponed, especially the question of expanding the cooperatives, a prospect which has been a failure and a scam. All of this has led to the fact that obtaining food in Cuba has become a daily challenge and a heroic act, increasing the government's lack of credibility and the general uncertainty in the country. This has triggered a mass exodus of Cubans, especially of young people.

With regard to the difference between the crisis today and the crisis of the 1990s, the so-called Special Period, it must be said that the Cuban society that faced the crisis of the 1990s has since suffered a significant process of erosion of the social fabric, of solidarity practices, and of fraternal relations between ordinary people. In the 1990s, for example, it was perfectly possible to travel around the country by hitchhiking, it was possible to get around by asking for the solidarity of truck drivers, while today that is becoming increasingly rare. In the 1990s there was also a whole exchange network without money, there was a wide array of popular productive initiatives, massive production of organic food at the grassroots level, and a huge sense of creativity with all the inventors we have here in Cuba. We had a tremendous inventive capacity that is escaping us now.

Now there is a much greater dependence on imports at a social level. There is an overvaluation of imported products. While there is a greater awareness of "organic" products, there is also a great desire to eat capitalist industrial food products. A comrade of ours who is a genius at producing concepts speaks of a "hamburgerization" of Cuban society, more than a gentrification.² It's a way of naming the voracious desire to consume a hamburger and all that this implies, a way of expressing the social disbelief in all the official discourse and of all the solutions that come from the State. In fact, the discourse of the President of the Republic in recent years has made use of the experience of the Special Period, of the creativity of that moment, which has generated massive ridicule from a significant part of society, and therefore seems very dangerous. This is because there is a depth of solutions that are being lost because the emissary, the State that claims to take up these solutions, was the same one that destroyed them. With respect to the 1990s, today's Cuban society is now much more vulnerable, much more fragile, with much less imagination, which is very dangerous. All the supportive networks of people with a conscience and the ability to seek solutions meant that the social explosions that were expected in those years did not occur. Now there is a desperation and a greater inability to generate popular solutions. Along with this comes an impulse to simplify everything into demands on the State, with the illusion that magical changes can occur, a typical State of mind of a society tired and disbelieving of itself, forced into manufactured dependence by decades of a punitive import economy. But it is also a very interesting moment in which several generations can see more clearly that we are a

² Translator's note: in Spanish this is a play on words since "hamburguesamiento," "hamburgerization," sounds a lot like "aburguesamiento," gentrification, or at the social level, "bourgeoisification."

common society occupied by an ordinary State. As a result, the authoritarian impunity that had been naturalized in our country until now has become more difficult to live with.

I want to return to the accumulations of internal migrant populations on the outskirts of the big cities. In the United States I think we've experienced a similar dual pattern of urban deindustrialization and the abandonment of rural areas, which leads to this accumulation of people in the immediate periphery of big cities. I wonder if understanding who these people are could serve as a lens to better understand social and economic stratification in Cuba. One way of asking the question might be: what type of person makes up the surplus population in Cuba? And what does this have to do with the protests?

The growth of peripheral populations in the outskirts of the big cities is something that has been developing intensely in the last 30 years in Cuba and especially in the last 10 years. The process is taking place in many parts of the world as part of the destruction of the rural world, of small cities, and, well, in Cuba that is also happening. It must be said that in the Cuban case the process of extinguishing the peasant world has a long history. Cuba is one of the societies in America where the process of the destruction of the peasant world began earlier and has had a more immediate and devastating impact, along with other Caribbean islands, as a result of the extremely powerful presence of sugar production. With the 1959 revolution the monoculture pattern of sugar production continued and multiplied even more. The so-called Cuban Revolution, then, was actually also a very powerful process of the destruction of the peasant world that was able to garner a lot of popular support, given the massive alienation from the land experienced by the poor majority in Cuba. This was accompanied by an aggressive urbanization process based on the intensive development of small cities closely interconnected by the railway, which enjoyed a large density across the entire island, that linked them to the transfer of sugar to agro-industrial centers and seaports. In the last 20 years, however, the Cuban State has destroyed the Cuban sugar industry itself in a centralized and authoritarian manner, without providing viable social and productive alternatives. This has produced a profound collapse in the life of dozens and dozens of small cities and sugar estates known as Bateyes. This project of the destruction of the sugar industry is known as the "Work of Álvaro Reynoso", a brilliant Cuban agronomist from the 19th century whose image has been appropriated by the Cuban State to represent this massive destruction. Ironically enough, twenty years after the beginning of this process, the current spokesmen of the State in Cuba are attempting to distance themselves from the devastating "Work of Álvaro Reynoso."

The population of the former small sugar towns in Cuba has been leading a silent exodus from the countryside, above all towards the outer edges of the big cities such as Havana, Santiago de Cuba, Camagüey, Holguín, Santa Clara, and Pinar del Río. There is also an unstoppable process of migration from the cities in the east of the country to the cities of the west, and especially to

Havana. The population with the highest standard of living in Havana is going abroad. Currently, all the small cities in western Cuba are receiving a massive incoming population from the east that is being integrated haphazardly, and that is also closely related to the actions of July 11th.

In this world of peripheral populations in Cuba there is a strong ethnocultural mixture, and in that sense I do not think that the racial variable is the only one that can describe the phenomenon; there are other variables. This phenomenon has generated a stark regional redefinition in Cuba. What's so fucked up is that these internal migrants are called "Palestinians." They are in a social situation that unifies them around the issue of being unemployed, having a link with peasant lifeways, with a strong female role, single mothers, disintegrated families, all of which feeds into movements like July 11th. This is the new globalized misery that is being found in all parts of this world, with sibling situations in Caracas, São Paulo, Buenos Aires, Mexico City, Chicago, San Francisco or New York. But at the same time, these other places still feel very distant due to the harsh reality of daily survival in Cuba.

Has there been any follow up to what happened on July 11th? Were any social or political organizations formed that still exist?

The popular continuity with the events of July 11th has materialized around support for those imprisoned on July 11th. A solidarity movement has developed around these people, with a diversity of currents of thought, that has focused mainly on making visible the State repression and the excessive sentences, just for protesting, with penalties equivalent to those doled out a half century ago by the Batista regime for the assaults on barracks by those who govern Cuba today. The Cuban State has continued on its repressive trajectory, imprisoning and harassing people who practice solidarity with prisoners. The prisoner solidarity movement has grown a lot nonetheless and popular pressure has led to a selective process for the release of certain prisoners, which is not exactly the revocation of their sentences but rather the continuation of their sentences in their homes, from which they cannot move beyond a certain perimeter. For instance, they recently convicted a music student, Abel Lescay, to a 5-year sentence to be served in his home, without the possibility of leaving the municipality. There are also several cases of young guys from San Antonio de los Baños. Andy, for example, who was the youtuber who practically detonated the protests, has been released but also still has to serve out a sentence at home in his municipality. And it's the same with others. There are still hundreds and hundreds of prisoners from July 11th, in many cases very young people. These selective releases have come as a way to disintegrate the solidarity movement, but I do not think it will stop the movement, although it is very hard to support because of the general misery in which the overwhelming majority of Cuban society lives and because of the appalling prison conditions in Cuba.

But this has also served as a painful organizational catalyst and has made the prison issue visible in Cuba, an issue highly controlled by the Cuban State. There is very little information available about the Cuban prison system. From 1959 onwards, prisons in Cuba have not stopped multiplying. There are hundreds of prisons in Cuba and a huge prison population, which we know about because of our social ties and personal knowledge of people impacted by the system. There are no official statistics. It's a big open secret that the State manages. Even less is known about prison conditions. There is a whole prison language that has been brought to the streets, with a large Afro-descendant population in the Cuban penal world. The Cuban State wants to

eliminate the figure of the political prisoner, the prisoner of conscience, which has become very visible after July 11th, but it is something that the Cuban State has been doing for more than half a century. In the southeast of Havana, there is a gigantic prison known as Combinado del Este, which is a city with an architectural style very similar to the Soviet-type modules of gigantic neighborhoods like Alamar. This urbanization of prisons will have to be challenged as the anti-State confrontation in Cuba increases and as the realities generated by the huge world of prisons in Cuba are rethought. The only solution offered by the State is more repression, and in order to generate alternatives to this, it is necessary to make visible the horror that surrounds us right now and what is being achieved by the July 11th prisoner solidarity movement.

Is there any relation between the mobilizations in Cuba on July 11th and the massive wave of uprisings around the world in 2019 in places like Colombia, Ecuador, Hong Kong, Lebanon, and Sudan, among others, that finally arrived in the United States in 2020? What role did knowing about these movements in other places play for the Cuban people, if any?

Well, regarding this question of whether there is a relationship between the mobilizations of July 11th in Cuba and those of the past few years around the world, and if the former have as a reference the latter, it is a very interesting question and I have to say that I don't have a record of this being the case. While I would like to be wrong, at the same time I have the notion, and almost the certainty, that what most influences the social movements in Cuba, in terms of what happened on July 11th, is not so much the protest movements in the rest of the world as it is the life trajectory of Cubans who emigrate to the United States and the connections they leave behind here in Cuba. In this sense, the Cuban who arrives in the United States becomes a reference, a model of the life that could be led, and it must be said that the situation of Cubans who go to the United States is in general terms a situation of privilege. I don't know of any other migration from the global south that arrives in the United States and on day one has the possibility of taking advantage of a recognized legal residence. This legal status in the imperial core allows the migrant to live a much less hard life than they probably led in Cuba, an opportunity that is much more viable for them than for their Latin American counterparts. So that means that Cuban migration to the US tends to overshadow any other influence, any other referent of social movements outside of Cuba and any other rebellious tendencies critical of the established global order. At the same time, the youth revolt in Chile, in Colombia, the so-called "Arab spring," did have a lot of resonance here. I just don't think any of that had any influence on the imaginary of the protagonists of July 11th in Cuba. In fact, if that influence had existed, it would have been a more articulated movement, less naïve and more aware of its limits and possibilities.

I'm interested in hearing you talk about that "imaginary" you referenced, or the popular awareness in Cuba right now. Can you comment on the relationship between the Cuban regime and its external supporters? And in particular on the impact those relationships have had on the Cuban popular consciousness, or understanding of what capitalism is and what communism is?

Cuba is a laboratory case of a State monopoly capitalism highly dependent on external imperial powers. What's peculiar is that this State monopoly capitalism arose from a quite interesting social revolution that generated a number of themes, concepts, discourses, and narratives that now adorn the State that we have in Cuba with a certain sense of transcendence. At the end of the day, however, the State is highly dependent on outside forces, always in need of an external imperial power to support it, to give it sustenance, supplies, and resources. This has been the function that the Soviet Union, Venezuela, and China have had, as the external supports of the internal imperialism of the Cuban State. In this context, of course, Cuban State capitalism has no problem with reproducing the logic of the commodity, consumerism as an ideal of life, the logic of wage alienation, and the capitalist exploitation of work, as is now openly promoted by official discourse. All of this is stimulated by the Cuban State, is promoted indirectly, informally as well as formally, to prevent the formation of a communal collective consciousness, resistant to the State, because this communal collective consciousness is the great terror of the Cuban elite. That is something that many liberals and orthodox Marxists have had a hard time understanding. There is no conflict between authoritarian State capitalism donning socialist or communist rhetoric, on the one hand, and an ordinary consumerist society, on the other.

This paints a picture of the Cuban state as relatively effective in its goals, at least in certain ways. On the other hand, there's also widespread discourse about "mismanagement." What are people talking about when they say that? The state's narrative about why the economy is a wreck puts pretty much exclusive blame on the American blockade. What does this have to do with it? What are the real impacts of the blockade and what are the other roots of the current crisis?

This expression, referring to the fact that there is poor governmental economic management, expresses a fairly widespread opinion. I would have to say that this alleged "mismanagement" is nothing more than the normal management of an authoritarian, centralized State that monopolizes social life. It is nothing more than the way in which the current Cuban oligarchy manages its social domination, as any ordinary oligarchy would do anywhere in the world.

For the dominant Cuban military, police, and bureaucratic caste, this alleged "mismanagement" has been the ideal way in which it has been able to guarantee its predominance and maintain basic social services typical of a welfare State that is highly dependent on external powers,

but very powerful and active within Cuban society. For that dominant caste that emerged from the social revolution of 1959 to exist in Cuba, there must be economic “mismanagement,” because, as is the case everywhere, what is essential is State hegemony, not that the economy functions autonomously, as a mechanism isolated from the whole.

It is in this context that it seems more pertinent to place the issue of the US blockade or embargo on Cuba. This is an issue that acquired relevance and centrality in the public discourse of the Cuban State from the nineties onwards. It is not that the subject was not discussed before, but it's that since the 1990's the issue of the US blockade has been a fundamental rhetorical element for the Cuban State. The Yankee blockade is a fact with a certain reality (although the US is in fact a very important trading partner for Cuba), but it is also a very successful rhetorical tool in the media. Created by Fidel Castro, it's a tool of extraordinary cynicism because the Cuban Revolution in 1959 was a revolution with a deep anti-imperialist content of national independence.

The point is that the strong anti-imperialist thrust of the Cuban Revolution with respect to the United States and the immense power that North American companies and corporations had in Cuba was a spectacular alibi for the new Cuban State that was born after 1959 to legitimize the growing rapprochement with the Soviet-Russian Imperial power in the Cold War context. This new imperial relationship very quickly replaced the dependence on the United States, and came along with the illusion that this distant imperialism would be better managed by the Cuban rulers, which was an official illusion of great proportions.

So when the influence of Russian imperialism in Cuba collapsed at the beginning of the 1990's, Fidel Castro began to make use of the US blockade discourse, of the cruelty of that US blockade, something that is still true in many important ways.

Now, this anti-imperialist and socialist revolution 90 miles from the US was carried out precisely to prevent Cuban dependence on external powers from continuing to grow, and to ensure that this dependence would at least diminish. But instead, since the 1990s in Cuba, we have had an official discourse in which Cuba's great problem is the abnormality of relations with the United States. And so, in a Machiavellian acrobatic turn of the Cuban State, it remains in question what exactly is the meaning of an anti-imperialist revolution that ends up calling for the normal presence of imperialism in the country, opening up an immense silent contradiction, where it is then possible to ask why an anti-imperialist and socialist revolution was made in Cuba in the first place. We lose sight of the fact that, in addition to Cuba being a small potential consumer market, the US imperialist blockade exists because there was a Revolution in Cuba and if the government that emerged from this Revolution does not have the ability to exist by itself, with a general operating capacity and reproducing its own social dynamics, independent of the United States, then that Revolution has failed.

But the official Cuban complaint [with regards to the US blockade] has become the sublime excuse to cover up the authoritarianism of a State that otherwise would be seen as just another ordinary State. The Yankee blockade is very real and with very direct negative effects, but at the same time, it could have been a tremendous and wonderful challenge to be able to live without the overwhelming presence of North American imperialism, which was one of the liberating potentialities with which the former 1959 revolutionaries presented themselves to Cuba and the world.

But since anti-imperialism was a simple alibi to change the imperial power that supported the new Cuban State that emerged in 1959–1960, that same State in the 1990s turned the Yankee financial and commercial blockade into a national tragedy, into an obstacle to the realization

of the revolution beyond rhetoric, creating a terrible contradiction that has been naturalized in a very profound way: the idea that the revolution needs imperialism in Cuba to exist. This is a tremendous contradiction. On the contrary, we know that for a social revolution to exist and succeed, it must realize the greatest freedom and autonomy with respect to imperialism and promote forms of work, forms of life, forms of production and social reproduction, forms of consumption and coexistence that are as far removed as possible from North American standards.

Thus we have arrived at this State narrative in Cuba in which what could have been an exceptionally liberating circumstance became instead a situation of calamity. Seizing upon this narrative, the pyramid of power in Cuba has induced a collective mentality of misery, of dependence on imperial alms, of collective creative incapacity, far removed from the daily popular creativity in Cuba. Such a mentality in practice serves to annul all the anti-authoritarian and liberatory social impulses that have been generated in Cuba over the course of more than half a century. It is this process that in turn gives rise to that expression about government “mismanagement,” which is nothing more than the representation of the hegemony of a ruling elite in Cuba that prefers to negotiate its surrender for US credits and investments rather than allow the release of the immense creativity that forms the heart of the Cuban popular world.

What role does race play in Cuban society? How do you relate to the idea of “racial capitalism,” an understanding of capitalism as fundamentally racist and white supremacist? For example, in the United States the composition and stratification of social classes is intimately related to race, and race is really the fundamental question for any revolutionary potential in this country. How is it in Cuba? Was there a racial dimension to what happened on July 11th?

I’m going to start with the question about whether there was any racial dimension to the events of July 11.

Yes, indeed there was a racial dimension. There was also an informal tendency to associate specific expressions of anonymous vandalism with the racial issue in Cuba. Not all, but many of the most active protagonists of the events of July 11 were Afro-descendants, in neighborhoods such as La Güinera in the south of Havana, El Condado in Santa Clara or El Palenque in San Antonio de los Baños, neighborhoods with strong Afro-descendant origins. The neighborhood surrounding the intersection of 10 de Octubre Street and Luyanó Avenue, Cristina Avenue, and Montes Avenue, in Havana, where some of the photos of overturned police cars were taken, has a Afro-descendant and mestizo composition, being part of the first peripheries produced by colonial, white, and imperial Havana from the 17th to the 19th centuries and continuing in the 20th century, before and after 1959.

In general terms, in several regions of Cuba there is a racial component to social stratification as in the United States. Cuba and the United States share the deep mark of Atlantic slavery and it is something that is very present in Cuba, especially in the regions of the Havana-Matanzas plain and the far southeast of Cuba, in contrast to other regions in the country with a smaller

Afro-descendant population, such as Camagüey, Villa Clara, Santi Spíritus, Holguín, Pinar del Río, and other regions that were not directly linked to Atlantic slavery.

This legacy of Atlantic slavery in Cuba is nuanced by the fact that in the wars for independence Blacks and mestizos in Cuba played a strong leading role and gained wide social recognition, unique in the Americas, which made them national heroes and in turn complicated the legacy of the slave plantation hierarchies. Later, the 1959 Revolution had a short but intense movement against the racisms of the previous order. Between 1959 and 1962, the Afro-descendant population generated a set of grassroots demands which actually enjoyed visible and tangible achievement, expressing one clear liberatory component of the 1959 Revolution. But from there no strong organizations emerged to keep this front of social struggle active and in the last 30 years the early achievements of the Afro-descendant population in Cuba have been thoroughly eroded, to the point that today in Cuba the old racial stratifications of colonial Atlantic slavery have been reconstructed and a social struggle around the naturalization of this order is reemerging, of which July 11th forms a part. So we now have a dynamic of oppression that at this moment is quite similar to the United States, which is in turn influencing the official discourse, associating racial markers with “vandalism,” with “disorderly” public attitudes, “rude” public attitudes.

The quintessential racist institution where these dynamics are expressed in all their crudeness in Cuba is the prison, where there is an overwhelming majority of Black and mestizo Afro-descendant population, whose most visible representatives now are the opposition figures Luis Manuel Otero and Maykel Osorbo. Suffice it to say that right now in Cuba we are fully inserted in that dynamic of racialized capitalism and the more that it deepens in Cuba, the more the problem of racism regains centrality.

At this point, it is important to insist on connecting racial oppression with the range of other social variables impacting oppression, such as gender, the urban/rural question, the regional question, and the class question. This is especially important due to the fact that there is a set of official State initiatives tending to intervene in racial oppression as a problem separate from the rest, as is also happening with gender oppression, in order to obtain from these initiatives isolated social bases of support for official authoritarianism in Cuba based on inevitably demagogic anti-racist posturing and pro LGBTQTIA+ posturing. Therefore, if we do not organize our front of anti-authoritarian struggle intersectionally, it runs the risk of being split apart and incorporated by the State as a new decoration and source of naturalization of State authoritarianism. In this sense, we must be very attentive both to what the State does, and also to how we organize ourselves regarding these issues.

How do you see the revolutionary horizon in Cuba? It seems like most of the population wants the fall of the regime, and many of those people may think they want a more open form of American capitalism, but what are the options for an alternative future for Cuba?

We believe that Cuba is becoming more and more like the dependent, neo-colonial capitalist country that it was until 1958. That is, we have a State that underwent a revolution, that then hijacked that revolution, and that is now finishing the process of kidnapping Cuban society and

subjugating it to a police State. Like in most countries of the global south, the Cuban State is a military-importer apparatus and predator of the environment. This process of subjugation is unfolding on the basis of the legitimization of the elite that emerged from the failed revolution of 1959. This elite is legitimizing itself by manipulating a series of themes that represented and symbolized the Cuban Revolution to the world and on the basis of those symbols they are reconstructing an authoritarian neo-colonial capitalism. They are also destroying all the fragile horizontal community production bases that have survived 60 years of revolutionary authoritarianism in this country. Unfortunately, the process of the destruction of Cuba's rich social fabric is generating a very slow response from Cuban society, due to a profound disjointedness, fragmentation, polarization, and deception.

All of this makes it quite difficult to talk about any proposal for anti-capitalist transformation in Cuba, be it socialist or communist, especially because those latter terms are so strongly associated with the Cuban State. But the social struggles, the experiences of insurrectionary communization, such as those in the Pastelillo neighborhood in the province of Camagüey, and the increase in State repression in Cuba, are already acting as painful but effective schools, making people reconsider the categories of socialism, socialization, communism, and communization.

It's a scenario that will be very hard and very bloody, but it is from these schools that the importance of mutual aid, of horizontality, of the decentralization of the struggle against social and State oppressions, will emerge with more collective clarity. This can probably lead to some interesting moments, but not necessarily, given the context of global collapse and the strengthening and technification of authoritarianism that we are experiencing.

Right now, the military police State in Cuba is growing more and more powerful and has already managed to dismantle almost the entire movement of social protest that exploded on July 11. But at the same time, this State has been almost totally unable to intervene on the conditions that gave rise to July 11. On the contrary, it is because of the actions of the State that these conditions worsen day by day. If the State in Cuba does not receive a multibillion-dollar financial loan or does not open channels for political reforms, co-opting new social bases, the only thing left for it will be to double down on the repression, to better organize it, to dole it out more openly. From here there will be a path of great conflicts, of great daily violence that will become increasingly physical and more explicit.

On the other hand, Cuba has always been a territory deeply interconnected to what is happening in the world, to the dynamics of force that occur between global powers, but also very aware of the social struggles against oppressions of all types around the world. We must be very attentive and feel ourselves as a part of the social movements that blossom around us. We must draw as many lessons as possible from them, because we're very far behind with respect to an understanding of how to organize ourselves relative to the development of the specific and original oppression of the State in Cuba. We find ourselves increasingly confronted by the problems of the global south, and of the south in the north, drawing us closer to what is happening in Ecuador, in Haiti, in Libya, Morocco and in the south that exists within the United States, France, or the Netherlands. Contrary to what the Cuban neoliberal democratic opposition thinks, we have to understand that the present and future social conflicts in Cuba are part of ongoing global struggles and have always been so. It is not simply a specific question of the intrinsic evil and particular malevolence of the tyranny in Cuba. All of this is part of the pulse of global social forces and the process of decline of the capitalist system, of wage labor, consumerism, and en-

vironmental degradation as engines of the current system, sick from its own resounding global success. Those of us struggling in Cuba are and will be present in that plane of social war.

–October 5th, 2022

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