

James Petras' Photographs of Cuba Before and After Developing: An Anarchist Commentary on his Declarations about Cuba



By CHRISTOPHER Z. HOBSON

The Cuban Libertarian Movement (MLC—Movimiento Libertario Cubano) makes some pertinent observations about certain declarations by somebody who was until recently an unconditional defender of the Cuban revolution.

Editor's Note: James Petras is a veteran U.S. leftist organizer and editor.

It's long been known that James Petras is one of the most devoted in the choir that sings the praises of the Cuban government. Even in that rare moment when the doors of critical reflection opened up for a left long used to look askance—March and April 2003, notwithstanding death penalties and massive imprisonment—Petras shot at those followers who dared hesitate and doubt more than the usual, an article that soon mutated into a command: “The Intellectuals’ Responsibility: Cuba, the United States and Human Rights” (www.rebellion.org; May 6 2003). There, among other genial blunders he brands morality as “lack of honesty.” He also recklessly attacks those who, when talking about Cuba, “make a gamut of unjustified accusations and falsifications out of any context that could help clarify the questions and provide a well reasoned base for ‘the moral imperatives.’” According to Petras, the critics of that time were victims of a sudden attack of irresponsibility: “The total lack of seriousness in Chomsky, Zinn, Sontag and Wallerstein’s moral diktats is due to their failure to recognize the imminent threat of war by the United States with weapons of mass destruction, advertised beforehand.” Having lost all sense of moderation, he pronounces the more or less definitive sentence: “What’s truly shameful is that they ignore the big accomplishments of the Cuban revolution in labor, education, health and equality, ignore her heroic and principled opposition to the imperial wars—Cuba is the only nation that says it clearly—and ignore her steadfastness resisting almost fifty years of invasions” (sic). Back then, in spite of gross violations of human rights, the Cuban government enjoyed total immunity and whoever dared minimally transgress the inviolable precept would see falling upon their heads James Petras’ imprecations; the very same exalted thinker who systematically assumes radical and socializing positions everywhere in the world except in Cuba, shamelessly vying for the top spot among the temple’s guardians.

As time went on, and while the threats from the United States continue in a state of cataleptic and repetitious routine and the

invasions never happen, Petras seems to have mellowed some, putting aside for the moment his avenging sword and his fiery condemnations. For starters, on Monday February 20 of this year, in an interview by CX36 Radio Centenario of Montevideo (Uruguay) and reprinted (in Spanish) a day later in *La Haine* (www.lahaine.org/index.php?blog=3&p=12739&more=1&c=1) he critically examines the Cuban situation, doing so, surprise surprise, not against the most egregious abuses of power by the centralized and excluding government, but against the supposedly unassailable social achievements of the “revolution.” Keep in mind his statements, and to avoid any misunderstanding we repeat them verbatim below:

“There are things I believe are part of a process of development, these are the contradictions Cuba has shown in regard to the challenges, belatedly the government starts to take measures which I believe necessary, as with the housing problem with a deficit of approximately one million houses. The government’s plan is to build 100 thousand houses per year as the housing situation is dire and there’s great need.”

“The people demand the start of this program given the positive international policies Cuba maintains with respect to health assistance, but I believe that conditions at clinics and hospitals in Cuba have gotten worse, in my personal opinion. I believe they have to concentrate more on development and restoration, on the improvement of the medical infrastructure that I think is badly deteriorated in Cuba, in spite of some efforts at mending them currently underway. In contrast, I think there are some clinics in Africa and Venezuela that are better than what the Cuban people has. This internationalism is very positive but I believe people demand more internal development; this is something that has to be balanced.”

”The government has begun an exploratory program on health and education and it is to be seen whether this internal development program succeeds, which is necessary as they now have more resources, and the political decisions on how this surplus is utilized are very important. This surplus comes from an electricity savings plan that according to Castro could climb to one billion dollars.”

”There’s also the problem of wastefulness, even the theft of state’s resources, particularly gasoline; this has been acknowledged and thrown at the new generations as a challenge to

rectify the situation and replace the gas vendors who are committing these crimes. But I'll tell you [...] what worries me, more than the petty theft of individual functionaries or employees is the problem of ministers tolerating the theft of hundreds of millions. What were they doing? I asked, were they asleep or were they involved in the theft and didn't fire anybody? I asked why, if this were to happen in any public or private enterprise, they didn't own up. This is very serious. They should get a kick in the ass at the minimum, take them to trial."

"They have launched a program to rectify, mobilizing people and setting some urgent matters straight. I believe the current team is politically responsible and begins to acknowledge

these problems, and also the problem of balancing black people's participation in society. One notices in many places a disproportionately white presence and I believe there's a lot of work to do here."

"I believe these points are real; it's a shame people have to wait for Fidel to throw the ball for things to start to take shape. I believe the intellectuals and the politicians have to take initiatives and not always wait for Fidel to give the speech in order for the problem to suddenly come to the surface."

Thus, Petras regales us with a series of six photographs of Cuban society that, even if he doesn't say it with the requisite drama and the essential punch, touch upon main features of



the “socialist” construct. They’re still negatives of photos, blurry with undefined contours, without obvious articulation; but, even in this confused state, are more than enough to embark on some exemplary reading. Most curious in this affair is that if these photos had been taken by a militant of the MLC, we wouldn’t have long to wait before hearing the usual list of accusations: “imperialism’s useful idiots,” “worms in the service of a foreign power,” “incorrigible dividers,” “hopeless liberals” when not actually “CIA agents.” Like it or not, these photos don’t belong to us, they’re James Petras’ who, as we insinuated, is a loyal and incorruptible “friend of the process of building socialism”; that is, in plain language, friend of the Cuban government, definitively, irrevocably and “revolutionarily” constituted as such.

Developing Shows the Inconsistencies

Let’s add the first drops of development solution and let’s try to decipher with a bit more light, one by one and in order, the skimpy proposals of Petras. What do they tell us?

(1) Cuban “socialism” suffers from a huge housing crisis since we face not only a very large deficit but you would also have to consider the decrepit state of the existing housing stock and the many situations of overcrowding. In the short term we see social struggles for access to urban space and even a budding squatter movement that has yet to be granted that noble condition by part of the revolutionary left.

(2) Cuba’s health organization, a showpiece of the “process of building socialism” doesn’t have the remotest resemblance to the official version. This begs acknowledging and this is a feather on Petras’ cap, but he could also have remarked the not so socialist distance that exists between Maradona’s medical treatment or the ophthalmologic “miracles” and the medical treatment the common people get, which according to him can be worse than in Africa.

(3) The “electricity savings plan” rather than a proactive governmental policy must be seen as an energy catastrophe—even with the generous oil subsidy from Venezuela—which the Cuban people suffer, mostly under the guise of continuous and unbearable blackouts. But sometimes light comes from

the shadows and the people have started to make use of the darkness to paint graffiti and put up posters against the government.

(4) Cuban “socialism” in its current stage of development has also created corruption and according to Petras’ well founded suspicions, it would be not just a bunch of anonymous bureaucrats at the bottom of the pyramid, but that corruption had found a home in the very Council of Ministers; that is, nothing less than the headquarters of the “revolution,” presided over, in public and with great notoriety, by the “commander in chief” in state.

(5) After 47 years, 1 month and 20 days have passed since January 1, 1959, and the date Petras wrote his opinions, it is finally acknowledged that the “revolution” has been incapable of solving the problem of racial discrimination, the latest confirmation that the state’s discourse on the matter lacks the ability to modify the real social dynamic. It’s obvious that Cuba’s black population noticed the problem long ago and there we also see stirring tremors of opposition.

(6) The much touted critical culture alive in Cuba is a myth or a carefully planned clandestine exercise. It’s incredible that Petras shows surprise and complains that the “enlightened” discoveries and initiatives always come from Fidel Castro, more so when he himself should know well that the in-depth critics that historically anticipated him had no choice but to pay the price by death, jail or exile.

In any case these observations are only a preview and now we must do the development proper, having already established a sketch—as yet imprecise but very real—of a popular mobilization in embryo rejecting the government’s performance. Now, whether James Petras likes it or not, the conclusion that follows from his naively sincere but also measured and partial photographic impressions is just this: the total failure on every count of a model of socialism militarized and under the spell of the caudillo. How can one think otherwise after confirming problems in housing, health, education and electrical supply; more so when they only affect the popular sectors but never even brush past the ruling elite? How is it that situations of social inequality go deeper than class position and affect the very large black population in the country? How come when it’s a proven fact that

corruption affords the dominant class extra income above and beyond the institutionalized privileges they enjoy? When all the state traditions, customs, habits have established for all eternity that only Fidel Castro—the one and only, unequalled, indispensable shepherd of the Cuban people—can talk about the thorniest problems with no hanging noose of state’s repression tied around his neck nor “moral” and “revolutionary” condemnations falling upon his head? How can one think otherwise when it looks like neither the blockade nor the threats of invasion nor the clownish pronouncements of Condoleeza Rice nor the 90 miles that separate Cuba from Florida have anything to do with this situation? How come, James?

have to be replaced by social workers or if the construction of “socialism” depends on the recipe for Coppelia ice cream. No: the subject is much bigger and demands to put aside the eternal and erratic “talents” of Fidel Castro and deserves to be treated once and for all with due seriousness.

The Hidden Image

What would therefore be the in-depth discussion the dominant elite are not willing to tolerate in any way? In Cuba, today as always, the only dilemma worth considering is the autonomous action of the people vs. the never ending and



James Petras’ analytical limitation is because his camera is only capable of capturing the most glaring manifestations of the situation but misses the inner substance. In other words: the chronic problem with Petras is that he blindly believes in the misnomer of “rectification of errors” but can’t see that almost all of them could be reduced to a set of congenital, basic and fundamental errors/horrors that few in power or their clique of bored bureaucrats seem disposed to seriously discuss in depth. What we’re talking about is not confronting once again the dull succession of marches and countermarches or arguing whether the people will be allowed or not to have dollars in their hands; or if the peasants may or may not sell their produce in the towns, if the “paladares” (privately owned home restaurants—translator’s note) will create a new class of “nouveau riches,” or whether the 60 watt light bulbs have to be replaced by 15 watt units in a new cycle of austerity, if gas station attendants will

unbearable tutelage of the “Communist” Party and its maximum pontiff; a self-awarded tutelage forever that has nothing left to rectify but its own existence. If James Petras is incapable of understanding the reasons why “intellectuals and politicians” don’t take the initiative that is precisely because his superficial perception of the problem doesn’t let him develop the photos he himself has willingly taken of Cuban reality. Because in that reality problems officially and legitimately acquire such status only when the infallible helmsman decides to make a turn more or less ingenuous that “rectifies” his own past decisions. Can anybody think that nobody but the “commander in chief” is the maker of all the “wonders” but always keeps himself behind the scene and completely away from whatever disaster has happened, happens and will happen in the process of “building socialism”? The answer to this is obvious and it’s long overdue

that James Petras and so many like him dare take the necessary bad step and lose their virginity. We now add some additional details.

The failure of Cuban “socialism” is the failure of Leninist centralized planning in its impure Caribbean version. It is the failure of a strategy for “building socialism” based on the scientific hegemony of the techno-bureaucratic elite supposedly “enlightened” whose opinions and “vanguard” wisdom lie forever above self-management praxis. It is therefore the failure of an idea that infuses hierarchy in all state decisions—it doesn’t matter if it is planning the budget in the Guevara style or based upon the surplus value theory according to the old soviet vision, since they have alternated in Cuba—rather than of people’s autonomous decisions articulated in grass roots organizations. Besides it is the failure of a style upon which a militaristic leadership has been superimposed that dismantles the minimal “rationality” the soviet model could boast of; and not precisely because we think the latter worthy of admiration but because the Cuban version falls squarely in the terrain of the nonsensical. How else can we consider the centralized planning of a small peripheral country that gives such importance to a very expensive and wasteful police-military establishment whose only use is the control of the people and its daily operations for the greater glory of Castro? How else can we consider the inclusion in the centralized plan of all the occurrences and whims of the caudillo that go—in its most sublime expression and taking the productive achievements of “socialism” as if it were an Olympic event—from that failed sugar harvest of the 10 million tons to the building of free-ways totally out of proportion with the number of vehicles, to such “brilliant” ideas such as raising crocodiles, or transforming every square meter of land into a coffee plantation or the exporting of toothpicks? James, could it be true that this may have something to do with the systemic lack of initiative on the part of the “intellectuals and politicians”?

The key to the Cuban problem has long ceased to be a problem to decipher and consists in basing the only possible form of socialist construction in the conscience and the will of the people. Today those single note echoes dare recognize that Cuban “socialism” can be reversible as a consequence of all its own errors and not because outside aggression: even Fidel Castro, in its speech of November 17 last year, took

care of extending to his minions the corresponding “permission” to make such opinions. However, the latest check yields a very different result. The “socialism” built by the “Communist” party and its leader is not reversible for the simple reason that it never was; and the only chance in sight is nothing less than the development of a vast autonomous project that returns to the people everything the state and its “vanguard” perversely took from them. And this is inseparable from an ample and lasting and unrestricted regime of liberties: liberty to think and opine, liberty to organize, liberty to mobilize and liberty for people to take charge of their own lives without mediation or interference. Because in the end, socialism will be libertarian or it will not be: a historical confirmation that James Petras’ timid, hesitant and belated step forward doesn’t quite acknowledge.

—Movimiento Libertario Cubano



