
Buena Vista Social Club

IN MY LAST POSTING here I upset a few people by suggesting that the left in Britain “is querulous and disunited because it is perpetually marginal – it has the permanent characteristics of an émigré life, in which the real action is always taking place elsewhere.” Left wing gatherings have throughout my life been immensely cheered up by communiqués from abroad in which the progressive forces were always reported as making giant strides forward. Stimulated by “Hands Off” demonstrations, embassy pickets, boycotts and campaigns, the left has a proud tradition of expressing its solidarity with those in struggle from Cyprus to Nicaragua, from Hanoi to Havana, Caracas, and Tehran. Poorly attended union branch meetings and raucous student gatherings, have endlessly debated resolutions concerning the latest struggle in foreign parts. While Tony Benn has spent the last thirty years attempting to maintain morale at numerous rallies in speeches larded with the heroic martyrdom of the labourers at Tolpuddle, and the feisty civil disobedience of the suffragettes, *Socialist Worker* and the aptly named *Fight Racism Fight Imperialism*, together with half a dozen other far-left red tops, have always given pride of place to the invigorating spectacle of struggles in faraway places.

So it is now. Events in Greece are “tremendously exciting”, the doomed violence of Spain’s coal miners is, apparently, “Inspiring”, and the masses in Tahrir Square are “showing us the way”. This kind of perspective has always been disrupted by massacres and contradicted by strings of defeats, but the defeats are always rapidly turned into “lessons”, from which we can

learn how to redouble our commitment to the project of “hope” and belief in a perpetually receding socialist future. This is not something which is restricted to the revolutionary left, it has a much wider resonance among a broad swathe of people who, unsympathetic to the rigours of the market, are opposed to foreign wars wherever they are, whatever they’re about. They too have sought inspiration over the years from Ho Chi Min, Robert Mugabe, Salvador Allende, Che Guevara, the Sandinistas, the Zapatista Army of National Liberation, and Hugo Chevez’s Bolivarian Revolution.

Since 1959 Cuba has alone, maintained its position in this kaleidoscope; it has been a perennial source of hope and inspiration. Although evidently Soviet in its rigorous commitment to centralised state control and its fluctuating nastiness towards homosexuals, the Havana model of socialism has had much to commend it. It’s record on literacy and healthcare has papered over many a crack in the communitarian narrative of popular democratic consultation promoted by Fidelistas. More than this, Cuba is neither snowy nor grey. Consequently, the mediocrity and dilapidation of Castro’s regime has been redeemed in many a Western eye by what might be called, Rumba Stalinism, in which Batista-era Cadillacs in pastel shades set off the sensuality, exoticism, and bright colours of the Caribbean, outshining the perpetual austerity and dreary police state realities of the place.

After a number of years attempting to diversify the Cuban economy Havana settled for supplying sugar and other tropical goods to Russia and Eastern Europe, and proxy soldiers for communist insurgencies in Congo-Kinshasa, Angola and Mozambique. This tragically neocolonial reality kept Cuba on an even keel for as long as the Soviet Union survived; rations were lean but adequate until the great counter revolution of

1989-91 swept all before it. Then Castro's dictatorship found its isolation redoubled, its regime kept upright only by Washington's paradoxical commitment to preventing capital and competition from eating away at Havana's tawdry foundations.

Following the collapse of communism Cuba entered what has been dubbed the "special period" in which her imports were cut by eighty per cent and the country's gross domestic product fell by around one third. Petrol, medicines, fertilizers, and imported foodstuffs were all in extremely short supply along with steel, electricity, public transport, and much else. An already very poor country became much poorer as the regime insisted on maintaining government control over all aspects of economic life. But with necessity, being the mother of invention, the Cuban authorities, bereft of petrol and fertilizer set out on a course of diversifying agriculture and promoting organic horticulture. It imported well over a million bicycles from China and contrived to manufacture hundreds of thousands more; it converted flatbed trailers into makeshift buses, and hauled them by tractors suddenly released from service in the cane fields.

Rumba Stalinism proved adept at promoting austerity and emergency measures in a positive revolutionary light. The ingenuity of the People, the Revolution, and the Party, would always provide. What's more, the international left could always blame shortages on the American embargo and be inspired by the doughty resistance of Cuba's hard-pressed but spirited and colourful workers and peasants.

More recently the regime has resorted to tourism as its principal means of attracting much needed foreign currency. Although corralled at special beach resorts and hotels, on closely managed tours to the "revolutionary mountains", or strolling through the picturesque byways of

“Old Havana”, tourists can enjoy the revolution and the romance of the place without encountering too much reality. Since Fidel bowed out and his brother Raul took over, Cuban’s are now allowed to enter, and even stay, in tourist hotels if they’re lucky enough to have some foreign currency, or are the guests of foreigners. It’s all very liberal.

This has been underpinned by the fabulous music of the Buena Vista Social Club who released their album in 1997. This music, the music of an ensemble of long-forgotten and often impoverished Afro-Cuban musicians rose astonishingly to worldwide acclaim because, as their copywriters put it, “you had to have a heart of stone not to be swept away by the music’s romantic impulses and uninhibited exuberance”. This success was bolstered by Wim Wenders’ documentary about the Buena Vista musicians, which was screened to rapturous reviews in 1999.

Their success led to “legendary” shows in Amsterdam and New York, feeding into a kind of Cuba mania of salsa dance classes and Cuban themed bars, all of which refreshed the sagging fortunes of Che Guevara’s timeless image. Like any good gallery or museum the Cuban Revolution has an excellent stock of themed CDs, mugs, and T-shirts, you can buy on your way out. After all, as Wim Wenders’ publicists put it, you can always cherish “scenes of Havana street life, its gloriously decaying architecture, and its colorful denizens”.

This is neocolonial chic, if ever there was, in which thoughtful and progressive leftist sentiment in Britain embellishes the socialist narrative, albeit unwittingly, with an ensemble of cultural consumption goods and services that help to keep up the spirits of an ‘émigré left’ apparently incapable of addressing its own predicament, other than shouting “Down with the Cuts!” and “Down with US Imperialism!”

I was reminded of all this a few days ago when Oswaldo Payá, the leader of the Cuban dissident movement, and a colleague, Harold Cepero, were both killed in a car crash. The authorities insist that the collision was accidental, and it may well have been, but suspicions of a communist conspiracy to murder Oswaldo Payá abound, and it has to be said, were greatly strengthened, when the secret police used Payá's funeral as an unmissable opportunity to arrest dozens of mourners.

The dissident movement in Cuba believes in the sovereignty of the people rather than the sovereignty of the Communist Party, and although it has attracted little support among the country's youth, it has remained a thorn in the side of the police state. This is because the rather staid and peaceful constitutionalism of the Varela Project does express a much wider popular desire for an end to the dictatorship and its dismal economic and cultural restrictions. It is very clear that the Castro brothers have no intention whatsoever of putting the continuation of their revolution to the vote in the multi-party elections demanded by Oswaldo Payá. They prefer to hang on to power with the able assistance of their extensive police and military apparatus, paradoxically reinforced by the isolation imposed by the US embargo.

There is nothing to celebrate or emulate here, nor should those who want to strengthen social solidarity in Britain seek to find comfort in dictatorships, revolutions, or disorders abroad. It's about time that our far-left abandoned its love affair with Lenin and Trotsky - the anarchists should also stop hankering after their all-too-brief victories in the Spanish Civil War, while the broader left should forgo the pleasures of Old Havana or the spirited promise of the demagogues of Caracas, La Paz and Bradford. Building an effective *working peoples alliance* in Britain is going to demand a return to the drawing board,

and an understanding that genuine internationalism can only be usefully expressed by a powerful mass movement in Britain, a movement capable of addressing, directly, the manifold economic and political problems confronted by our people at home.