

## *Daily struggles under a totalitarian regime: the relationships between society and state in Cuba*

Lutas cotidianas sob um regime totalitário: relações entre a sociedade e o Estado em Cuba

Luchas cotidianas bajo un régimen totalitario: relaciones entre la sociedad y el Estado en Cuba

Luttes quotidiennes sous un régime totalitaire: les relations entre la société et l'État à Cuba

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BLOCH, Vincent; LÉTRILLIART, Philippe (dir.). *Cuba, un régime au quotidien*. Paris: Choiseul, 2011. 224 p.

Studies on the Cuban revolutionary experience have recently gained an important contribution. It is the book “Cuba, un régime au quotidien” (Cuba, a daily regime), a collective work organized by Vincent Bloch and Philippe Létrilliart that gathers texts about the permanent aspects and the transformations of the relations between state and society in Cuba, with a discussion of the multifaceted traits that characterize the daily struggles and negotiations under the political regime implemented in the country just over 50 years ago.

The analysis of Cuban daily life undertaken in this work is quite plural, and it contemplates the entire revolutionary period. There are, in the ensemble of texts, studies centered on the more recent phenomena and on the transformations that were accentuated in the course of the last two decades, after the fall of the socialist party, as well as other studies dedicated to an analysis of historical processes of longer duration that date back to the period of the revolutionary triumph and then follow the vicissitudes of the Cuban experience up to the 21st century. Both synchrony and diachrony are conjugated in these analyses.

The variety of approached themes and perspectives of analysis is added to different temporalities, which allows the interweaving of questions related to politics, culture, economy, and the Cuban society. This plurality is noticed in the six chapters that make up the work in question. They are: 1) The Daedaluses of the Cuban regime, 1959-1989, written by Vincent Bloch; 2) The Vázquez: a familial economy in Havana, by Julia Cojimar; 3) Condemning and punishing in Cuba: the penitentiary system under the revolutionary regime, by Elizabeth Burgos; 4) Religion in the Revolution: the return of Cuban Catholicism, by Philippe Létrilliart; 5) Cuban artists and intellectuals: between uncertainties

Study received on June 03, 2012, and accepted for publication on September 19, 2012.

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and groping, by Yvon Grenier; and 6) When the Cuban rappers negotiate with the State, by Sujatha Fernandes.

Besides the temporal and thematic diversity, the epistemological principle that guides the work in its entirety deserves highlighting: the idea that, in the same way that the structuralist approaches are insufficient to tackle the complexity of reality, the analysis of micro-historical objects particular to daily life only makes sense when utilized to think about the relation between the part and the whole, that is, to explain the relation that each one of these objects of study has with the global functioning of the Cuban political regime. In this sense, far from a merely descriptive approach that would only charge itself with presenting curiosities, what the reader finds in this book are analyses that seek to explain the manners and the historical conditions of the perpetuation of the Cuban revolutionary experience.

The discussion on the foundations of the domination exercised by the State in Cuba is already present in the first chapter of the book. In “The Daedaluses of the Cuban regime (1959-1989)”, sociologist Vincent Bloch examines, on one hand, the ideological thread and the political imagination that guide the actions of the Cuban government in order to obtain legitimacy and to establish rules that lead to a greater “revolutionary conformity”, an indispensable

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condition for the political regime to exercise its domination and to remain in power. On the other hand, the author demonstrates that the logic that presides over this revolutionary conformity attends not only to State interests but also to those of segments of Cuban society, given that thoroughly abiding by the rules established by the regime is a fundamental requisite for the individuals to be able to ascend socially and to obtain political capital. Thus, the deeper the revolutionary commitment, the greater the benefits and privileges obtained by the individual: the access to the consumption of goods and to positions of command.

However, although some social segments obtained advantages due to their adhesion to the Revolution’s precepts, it would be a mistake to think about the existence of a total obedience to the norms instituted. That is because the intensity of the control exercised by the State as well as the abiding of these rules by the Cuban society came across variations in accordance with the economic situation of the country in different historical contexts and the position occupied by the individual in the social pyramid. In periods of economic scarcity, a greater noncompliance to the revolutionary rules was seen, along with an intensification of non-submissive ways and

the violation of laws by a portion of society. In regards to the State, the tacit acceptance that some of these rules were to be surreptitiously violated was verified during these periods, especially when the perpetrators of these violations were at the top of the social hierarchy (Communist Party directors, white-collar military men, etc.).

These contexts of crisis, according to Bloch, make clear that the strategies of perpetuation of the revolutionary order by the State, and the practices of deviation in relation to the norms by the Cuban society imbricate themselves in the language games around the verb “to fight”. There is in Cuba, according to the author, a “lexical field of the fight” common to the State and to society. In revolutionary propaganda, the “fight” is omnipresent: fight against Batista’s dictatorship, fight against North-American imperialism, fight against internal counter-revolutionary threats, fight for the maintenance of revolutionary conquests, etc. The appeal to “fight” is also present in routine speeches, a term that lends itself to polysemic use, almost always associated to “to fend for oneself”, “to arrange”, “to solve”, etc. One observes, in this case, that the meaning of the “fight” and the “fighter’s” posture are not related to the revolutionary cause but to the idea of not resigning oneself before the adversities of daily life, of acting in face of the limitations imposed or not solved by the regime, which indicates an inventiveness, sometimes mischievous, in the social behavior of Cubans.

This inventiveness that frequently extrapolates the narrow limits of socialist legality is also approached in the chapter “The Vázquez: a familial economy in Havana”. In this chapter, anthropologist Julia Cojimar undertakes a study of the current Cuban economy, and by correlating micro and macroeconomic aspects, she demonstrates how alternative, familial and neighboring economies, characterized by a system of purchasing and/or exchanging practiced in the black market, develop under an omnipresent state economy. Drawing on the method of participative observation, the author examines the daily domestic economy of a Cuban family — whose real identity was protected under the fictitious denomination of “Vázquez” —, presenting some of their strategies of access to consumption goods in a scenario marked by recurring shortage and scarcity. Cojimar demonstrates that, in their search for complementary income sources to face the economic situation, Cubans risk their lives daily in illegal activities that must evade the control exercised by the regime.

The ways of controlling and punishing are themes of the chapter “Condemning and punishing in Cuba: the penitentiary system under the revolutionary regime”, written by anthropologist Elizabeth Burgos, where she examines the mechanisms through which the leaders of the Revolution established a totalitarian regime in the country. In her view, more than in the areas of education and health — foundations of revolutionary propaganda — the most exemplary success of the Cuban regime lies in the sophisticated repression and punishment system. The author affirms that the Cuban punitive system has as its goal, besides terror dissemination and freedom deprivation, obtaining the prisoner’s loyalty and cooperation with the intention of making him adhere to the official ideology. Inspired by the Foucauldian perspective of a “political economy of the body”, Burgos

emphasizes in her study the performance of the “*plantados*”, a category of anti-Castro political prisoners to whom are offered the possibility of being free from punishment and of having their sentences reduced as long as they cooperate with the regime. However, these prisoners would rather keep on being submitted to punishment in prison than to adopt any collaboration measures with the Cuban regime, such as the forging of self-criticism or the denouncement of other dissidents. By acting in this manner, the “*plantados*”, according to Elizabeth Burgos, reaffirm their political position, and remain irreducible in their posture of avoiding any form of ideological submission to the revolutionary government.

The repression and the marginalization to which the Catholic Church was submitted in the course of the revolutionary experience, as well as the efforts undertaken to rehabilitate its role in the Cuban nation, are analyzed by Philippe Létrilliart in “Religion in the Revolution: the return of Cuban Catholicism”. By privileging the idea of “conflictive competition”, which opposes the Church and the State in the Caribbean country, the author argues that the regime could not bear the competition posed by Catholicism, given that the latter would have in common with Castro’s regime, among other characteristics, the aspiration to universalism and the affirmation of a tran-

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scendence element that gives meaning to human history and allows the symbolic legitimation of power. According to Létrilliart, in a scenario marked by religious syncretism and the growth of santería, the church seeks to reestablish the primacy of Catholicism through its role of dialogue mediator between civil society and the State, as well as through the resumption of its power of influence over the determination of social and civic norms.

The authoritarian regulation exercised by the regime over the intellectual and artistic productions is dealt with in the chapter “Cuban artists and intellectuals: between uncertainties and groping”, in which political scientist Yvon Grenier demonstrates how imprecise and frequently mutable are the lines that set the symbolic borders between revolution and counter-revolution. Using the notion of “parameters”, the author argues that the meta-political discourse that founded the regime is based on three aspects of the Revolution that must not be questioned: the idea that it is an endless process; the figures of the absolute leaders (Fidel and Raul); and the unitary principle. When it comes to the criteria and parameters that define what is counter-revolutionary, uncertainty hovers, given that those depend on the arbitrariness of power, varying according to the circumstances of the moment. In his analysis of the Cuban

political and cultural sphere in the present, Yvon Grenier highlights the hardly combative profile of the traditional intellectuals, catching a glimpse of the forces of protest in the young musicians and artists (rappers, punk-rock groups, graffiti artists, etc.), the practitioners of symbolic resistance.

An analysis of the Cuban hip-hop culture as a privileged means of expression and cultural resistance is undertaken by the sociologist Sujatha Fernandes in the chapter “When the Cuban rappers negotiate with the State”. Besides presenting the very specific conditions — economic, social, and expressional — that mark the emergence of Cuban rap in the mid-1990s, the author highlights the ambiguities present in the relationship between the rappers and the Cuban State, which are characterized by negotiations and subversions, but also by conscious cooperation with the regime. Among the many particularities that surround rap in the Caribbean island is the lower pertinence, in relation to other countries, of the division between commercial rappers and underground rappers. That is because, in Cuba, the latter are the ones who usually get involved in power relations, producing in accordance with the official discourse of the socialist regime, and seeking, on the other hand, that the State not only sponsor and promote their insertion into institutional spaces but, above all, that the government attend to their vindications related to racial inequality in the country. According to Sujatha, the more or less autonomous ways in which some themes are approached, such as racial policies, nationalism, and anti-capitalism, point altogether to the plurality and specificities of the Cuban hip-hop movement.

The six chapters that compose the work in question attest the meaningful contributions it brings to the comprehension of daily life in Cuba in the course of over five decades of revolutionary experience. On top of that, the chapters are accompanied by a prologue and an afterword that enrich this publication, making noticeable the aspects that grant its unity in spite of its thematic diversity.

Historian Rafael Rojas highlights, in the prologue, the disharmony and the contradictions between a society undergoing change and a State that remains attached to the same premises, institutions, leaders, and ideology of the time when Communism was established in the country. Furthermore, he counts as one of the great merits of “Cuba, a daily regime” the fact that it does not rely on the binary polarizations that characterize the majority of studies on the Cuban Revolution: socialism versus capitalism, Cuba versus the United States, pre-revolutionary Cuba versus revolutionary Cuba.

In the afterword, writer Antonio José Ponte discusses José Martí’s centrality — enthroned by the Cubans as the hero of national independence — in the political imagination of the country, demonstrating how his figure has been submitted to the most diverse appropriations with the purpose of legitimizing Castro’s regime. In addition, he emphasizes the fact that Martí is evoked not only by the revolutionary government but also by the opposition groups, which would indicate the limitations of a political imagination shared by antagonistic forces, given that, in their criticism to the regime, the Cuban dissidents remain attached to the vindication of the same libertarian reference used by Fidel Castro in his strategies of legitimization of the revolutionary experience.

“Cuba, a daily regime” is mandatory reading to all who wish to think beyond the official discourse, who are not satisfied with reductionism and simplifications, with pamphleteering and extremist interpretations made either by the left or the right parties. It is, then, a work of merit, among other reasons, for the epistemological principle that guides it; for overcoming the horizons of intelligibility particular to the times of the Cold War but still present in part of the recent studies about the Cuban Revolution; and for presenting the complexities and singularities of this multifaceted Cuba of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.