

Cuba's 1968: Between Revolution and Authoritarianism

by **Carlos Aguirre** | University of Oregon | caguirre@uoregon.edu

The year 1968 has become a powerful symbol to mark a number of political and cultural processes that took place during the (long) decade of the sixties, and that for reasons hard to pinpoint had some of their most visible and long-lasting manifestations during that critical year. It is commonplace to associate 1968 with a spirit of rebelliousness, a desire for radical change, a questioning of the existing status quo, the proliferation of utopian dreams, and the mobilization of urban masses comprised of students and workers, not always marching to the same tune. Paris, London, Berkeley, Prague, Mexico City, and many other cities were the scenes of those mobilizations and clashes, which, although they did not change the world as some of their protagonists wanted (or thought they wanted), left a powerful imprint on future developments, particularly in the realm of culture, forms of socialization, the exercise of authority, and relations between different generations and sexes.

When it comes to 1968 in Latin America, the most obvious references are the mobilization and repression of students in various countries, particularly in Mexico, where student demonstrations were crushed at Tlatelolco on the infamous afternoon of October 2, 1968. But there were other developments and scenarios of 1968 in Latin America that are not always included in accounts of that pivotal year: the nationalist coup that started a “peculiar revolution” in Peru, for instance, or the Medellín Bishop Conference and the consolidation of liberation theology as a major religious and political force in the region. Another such scenario rarely mentioned in global or regional accounts of 1968 is Cuba, a surprising absence given the prominent place that the Cuban Revolution had and still has in the imaginary of the global 1960s. In this brief essay, I will argue that

the two sides of 1968—its rebellious, liberating, and contestatory dimensions, and the authoritarian reactions they generated—coexisted within the Cuban process and help us understand the tensions and dilemmas that the Cuban Revolution faced as it entered the critical decade of 1970.

On April 9, 1968, Casa de las Américas published a Cuban edition of *Cien años de soledad*, the novel that would take Latin American and world literature by storm and whose first edition had been published the previous year in Buenos Aires with enormous success. On October 10, 1968, Fidel Castro gave a speech to commemorate the centennial anniversary of the beginning of the anticolonial rebellion led by Carlos Manuel de Céspedes that would lead to the so-called Ten Years' War. In that speech, Fidel stated that Cuba was completing “cien años de lucha.” The reference to Gabo's novel was pretty obvious, as it was Fidel's intention to emphasize the revolution's connection to a longer history of Cuban nationalist, anticolonial, and anti-imperialist efforts.

By 1968, almost ten years after the victory of the revolution, Cuba continued to struggle against US hostility, diplomatic isolation, and economic shortages while, at the same time, trying to maintain and expand the social reforms that had benefited the Cuban people since January 1959. Because of these two elements—Cuba's defense of its autonomy and dignity and its insistence on a socialist and egalitarian path—by 1968 the revolution was still a source of inspiration for many around the world and particularly in Latin America. Although armed struggle had begun to decline as the main revolutionary tool, and Che Guevara had been defeated and killed just a few

months before, the Cuban example continued to enthuse revolutionary and utopian dreams in both developed and underdeveloped societies. The denunciation of US intervention in Vietnam and other parts of the world, for instance, an important component of many of the mobilizations of 1968, found inspiration in Cuba's anti-imperialist resistance. The spirit of the Cuban Revolution and of Che Guevara were important, although not always central, ingredients behind the mobilization of students and workers and their critique of bourgeois society, totalitarianism, and traditional ideas about power, culture, and gender relations.

At the same time, however, there were political and cultural developments in Cuba that were counter to "the spirit of 1968" and contributed to the gradual consolidation of a more rigid and authoritarian model of socialism in the island. Certain signs had appeared earlier: instances of censorship, the repression against homosexuals, the creation of the UMAPs (Unidades Militares de Apoyo a la Producción), or the Neruda affair in 1966, to name but a few. But 1968 would prove to be a decisive year in the consolidation of a new course for the revolution.

It could be argued that, for Cuba, 1968 started with the capture and death of Che Guevara in October 1967. It represented the end of an era marked by revolutionary idealism, resistance to the Soviet model, and active promotion of guerrilla-style revolution. It also signaled the beginning of the gradual entrenchment of a more Soviet-like system, which would reach its peak in the 1970s, particularly during the so-called *quinquenio gris*, the period of obscurantism and cultural repression that, as writer Leonardo Padura has pointed out, was actually longer than a *quinquenio* and darker than gray: he and others have referred to it as "el decenio negro."

In January 1968, Cuba held an international Congreso Cultural in Havana, a major event that gathered hundreds of Cuban and foreign intellectuals to discuss a number of issues including, quite centrally, the role of intellectuals in the revolutionary process. The congress reaffirmed the subordination of cultural and artistic creation to the needs of the revolution. In a lengthy speech

at the end of the congress, Fidel launched a frontal attack against the United States, defended the legacy of Che Guevara, and praised intellectuals for their role in the struggle against imperialism. He also questioned what he referred to as intellectual individualism: "el análisis, las concepciones, cada vez más tendrán que ser la obra de equipos de hombres más que de hombres individuales." Critical thinking was encouraged, but only to the extent that it stayed within the parameters of the revolution. The final declaration signed by the participants in the Cultural Congress stated that the fundamental duty of intellectuals was to resist imperialist aggression and to support struggles toward national liberation and decolonization efforts in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. The commission that debated the issue of the "responsibility of the intellectual" went a bit further in its rhetoric: "hacemos la revolución, luego existimos."

But not every intellectual or topic was welcomed in those debates in Havana in January 1968. It is well known that many were excluded, in particular a group of black intellectuals (among them Walterio Carbonell, Nancy Morejón, and Nicolás Guillén Landrián, nephew of the poet) who were demanding a more clear and direct commitment of the revolution against racism and discrimination. They were accused of opening a "racial breach" in the revolution, and some would eventually suffer various forms of ostracism, including temporary imprisonment.

Simultaneously, the revolution intensified its hostility against multiple cultural manifestations, both local and imported, that were perceived as counterrevolutionary: foreign music, fashion styles, religious beliefs, and, most ominously, homosexuality, that in official propaganda was equated with both cultural alienation and counterrevolutionary activities. Some of the very manifestations that were central to the mobilizations of 1968 around the world were seen in the island as detrimental to the revolution and actively discouraged and persecuted. In 1971, during the First National Congress of Education and Culture, homosexuality would be explicitly defined as a social pathology and a counterrevolutionary type of behavior: "With regards to homosexual

deviance, its character as a social pathology was established. The militant principle of rejecting all these manifestations or their propagation was clearly stated. . . . Cultural media should not be used as hotbeds for the proliferation of false intellectuals who try to convert snobism, extravagance, homosexuality, and other social aberrations into expressions of revolutionary art.”

Let’s get back to 1968. In August of that year, as is well known, Soviet troops and tanks invaded Czechoslovakia to put an end to the so-called Prague Spring, a period of reforms led by Alexander Dubček that was attempting to liberalize the existing Soviet-like Communist regime. The Cuban press did not offer much coverage of the events in Prague as they were unfolding, and Fidel said nothing publicly about it; at the same time, according to some testimonies, the “Casa de la Cultura Checa” in Havana had become a sort of cultural oasis, where foreign music and cinema unavailable elsewhere were made available to locals. Once the troops of the Warsaw Pact intervened and crushed the Dubček government, Fidel took a stand and publicly expressed his support to the intervention, which disappointed many on the left who wanted to think of Cuba as an independent and democratic socialist experiment, not a replica of the Soviet model. For Fidel, the Prague Spring was leading Czechoslovakia “into the arms of imperialism”; intervention for him was indubitably (even if painfully) justified.

Later that year, in October, the Cuban cultural establishment would be shaken by the first phase of what would be known as the Padilla affair: the scandal surrounding the prize that poet Heberto Padilla received for his book *Fuera del juego*. Padilla was a poet who had worked for the revolution in a variety of positions, including that of head of the office in charge of cultural imports and exports. He was not yet an open critic of the revolution, but he had been involved in various polemics, including his defense of the already exiled writer Guillermo Cabrera Infante and his critique of Lisandro Otero’s book *Pasión de Urbino*. Padilla’s book was chosen by an international jury comprised of José Lezama Lima, J. M. Cohen, César Calvo, Manuel Díaz Martínez, and José Z. Talled for

the 1968 Julián del Casal Award in poetry, a contest organized by the Unión Nacional de Escritores y Artistas de Cuba (UNEAC). Díaz Martínez revealed, many years later, that there were strong pressures from Raúl Castro to prevent Padilla from being the winner, and Díaz was temporarily discharged from the jury under various accusations, one of them being that he had publicly criticized the Soviet intervention in Czechoslovakia, although he was eventually reinstated. Nicolás Guillén, UNEAC’s president, allegedly tried to convince Lezama Lima not to vote in favor of *Fuera del juego*.

Despite the pressures, the jury awarded the prize to Padilla. In their resolution, jury members stated that “*Fuera del Juego* is located on the side of the Revolution, is committed to it, and adopts the attitude that is essential to the poet and the revolutionary: that of the nonconformist [*inconforme*], of somebody that has higher aspirations because his desire projects him beyond the existing reality.” Such characterization of Padilla’s writings and of himself as a poet did not convince the official Cuban intelligentsia. An “inconforme” in Cuba was perceived as a dissident, a counterrevolutionary, an ally of the enemy. Padilla’s book was eventually printed, since that was one of the conditions of the award, but it appeared with a “warning” to readers written by UNEAC’s Executive Committee, according to which Padilla’s book was “ideologically contrary to our revolution,” “a defense of individualism against the needs of a society that is building its future,” and reflected an attitude of “skepticism or critical rejection” typical of a liberal intellectual that, in the context of an “impetuous revolutionary development,” “objectively became reactionary.” Authors like Padilla, they continued, did not serve the revolution but its enemies; they were sort of “Trojan horses of imperialism.” What needs to be mentioned here is that several poems by Padilla had been already published in mainstream Cuban journals, including *Casa de las Américas*. The scandal surrounding *Fuera del juego* is a clear indication of the tightening of control over dissent in Cuba. As Cuban literary scholar Jorge Fonet has underlined, by 1968 the official line of Cuban cultural politics was being set in the pages of *Verde Olivo*, the magazine of the Cuban Armed Forces: “To appeal to the organ of the armed forces,” Fonet writes, “was akin to sending military tanks

to the (lettered) city.” Padilla’s book, according to many sources, was not allowed to openly circulate in Cuba. Some reports suggest that most of the print run was burned or otherwise destroyed.

Space constraints prevent me from addressing other instances of this increasingly hostile attitude toward critical intellectuals in Cuba, such as the attacks penned in *Verde Olivo* against specific writers, including references to their sexual orientation, or the ostracism suffered by intellectuals such as Walterio Carbonell and Manuel Moreno Fraginals, who were critical of certain aspects of the official line of the revolution but by no means could be considered counterrevolutionary. I do not have time either to do justice to the existence in Cuba of individuals, groups, and spaces (such as the journal *Pensamiento Crítico* between 1967 and 1971) actively engaged in debates that did not necessarily follow or endorse the official line, or to the vibrant cultural and artistic scene that the Cuban population had access to thanks to an effective (albeit still subject to government control) democratization of education and culture. Although the trend was clearly toward a tighter official control of the cultural scene, critical and independent voices were not fully suppressed.

The episodes reviewed in this brief essay point to the contradictory nature of Cuba’s 1968. On the one hand, the revolution was still, objectively speaking, conducting a heroic effort toward self-determination, the fulfillment of its promises to build a new society, resistance against US hostility, and solidarity with national liberation movements around the world. The Cuban Revolution and Che Guevara inspired, at least in some cases, the mobilization of students and workers demanding more freedom and justice and/or denouncing US intervention in Vietnam. The project of 1968 was not always a socialist one, but many participants in those demonstrations and strikes had sympathies for a revolution that was still perceived as a model of dignity and courage.

On the other hand, many developments, including some key events that took place in 1968, pointed in the opposite direction, that is, the adoption of a more rigid and authoritarian model of socialism.

To a certain extent, the Cuban “*decenio negro*” began in 1968. To say this does not imply ignoring the context in which this was taking place: a revolution besieged by foreign powers and in need of defending its real existence. But even its most sympathetic defenders would acknowledge that the way in which the revolution responded to specific manifestations of cultural and political dissent was way out of proportion and revealed an authoritarian tendency that was at odds with the spirit of 1968. The revolution, I would argue, was actually trying to prevent a Cuban version of 1968.

What this proves, among other things, is that building a new and just society, while at the same time maintaining the fullest of freedoms and rights to everyone, including those that are critical of those changes, is a difficult if not utopian goal. Fifty years later, that challenge continues to haunt us, both in our interpretation of past events and in our vision for the future of our societies. //