

ERNESTO TEUMA

A NEW LEFT IN CUBA

Cuba has been battered over the past few months by nationwide power cuts and major hurricanes. What did this reveal about the economic, social and environmental situation of the country?

CUBA IS PARTICULARLY vulnerable to this kind of catastrophe. As a Caribbean country, it's exposed to high temperatures and extreme climatic events. October is a winter month here, but thanks to climate change temperatures haven't dropped as fast as they should, and energy demand is off the charts for this time of year. Cuban infrastructure is also technologically backwards, dating to the late 70s and 80s, and the country doesn't have the money to import enough fuel or properly maintain its electricity infrastructure. Much of this is because of the US's tightening grip on the economy, especially since Trump's 2019 executive orders, which placed further restrictions on fuel, spare parts and new technologies. Similar power cuts have recently happened elsewhere in the region, in Panama, Ecuador and São Paulo. But when you combine these hostile climatic conditions with attempts to obstruct Cuba's insertion into regional and global trading networks, you get a perfect storm.

What is the impact on daily life?

Everything comes to a standstill, waiting for the power to return. In the meantime, food rots; it's difficult to cook, especially when it comes to using domestic appliances—most people use rice cookers or electric pressure cookers; it's hard to sleep without electric fans or air conditioning. Schools are usually shut, all the way from kindergartens to

universities. Health facilities operate with very limited capacity and most small businesses are forced to close. People developed certain strategies to cope with the lack of electricity after Trump's measures severely limited the oil supply. But it still comes as a shock, especially in Havana, which isn't as accustomed to power cuts as other regions. The private sector and some richer households have been importing their own generators, which is quite different to what we saw during the Special Period in the 1990s, when the collapse of the USSR caused a prolonged economic slump. Back then, it was only certain state-sector facilities—like hospitals or factories or critical infrastructure—that had autonomous power sources.

Would you say that Cuba's new class differences, or differences in income, have become more visible during the blackouts?

They have become more visible in general, both at the upper and lower ends of the spectrum. After the liberalizing Reform process initiated by the Sixth Party Congress of 2011, the housing market was loosened up, and those who could afford it started buying better houses as well as building or renting properties for private businesses. There has been a proliferation of security devices, from private CCTV cameras to sophisticated fences. High-end vehicles have begun to appear around Havana, imported by the private sector, and some parts of the city have become more expensive—dominated by a tiny, solvent minority. At the lower end, meanwhile, you can see things that either weren't there or weren't as noticeable before, such as street begging. There is more trash cluttering the neighbourhoods hit by oil shortages. And there has been a marked deterioration in some public services and social guarantees. These were once universal, the social grounding of a certain way of life. But with rising inflation and material deprivation, they have given way to more individual solutions, which exist for some but not others. For example, a lack of guaranteed medications has caused the black market to boom, but at prices that were unheard of even five or six years ago: up to thirty times more than they were in public pharmacies.

This reflects a dynamic, typical of capitalist societies, in which access to good and services is increasingly mediated by income level—rather than by, say, people's political access or position in the state economy, as tends to be the case in highly centralized economies like the former USSR and Eastern Bloc, where there is a political distribution of the social surplus.

Along with this shift, we have seen a change in the expectations of the wider population, whose wellbeing often relies on sheer luck: on remittances from family members in foreign countries or opportunities in the new private sector.

What is your analysis of the reforms introduced under Raúl Castro, after the Sixth Congress in 2011? How have they affected Cuba?

In some ways, the reforms were prompted by sudden external developments. The 2008 financial crisis hit the Cuban economy at the same time that hurricanes Paloma and Ike devastated large swathes of the country. But a slower internal process had also been playing out since the Special Period in the early 1990s. There was an ongoing debate about the state sector, which was not as dynamic or efficient as it should have been, and suffered from many of the typical shortcomings of centralized, state-managed economies. By 2008, the Cuban economic model was little more than a patchwork of solutions from the Special Period: the trading relationship with Venezuela, the recentralization programme, the Battle of Ideas—that is, the period of national debate launched by Fidel in late 1999, building on the popular mobilization to free Elián González, the six-year-old Cuban boy detained in the US. There was a double currency system: the so-called convertible peso was used by a sector connected to the world market through exports, remittances and tourism, while the standard peso was used by a sector that comprised much of Cuba's domestic economic activity, social services and state budget. These realms coexisted and overlapped to some extent, but they remained fundamentally distinct, with separate prices and exchange rates. This led to difficulties in assessing the relative efficiency of the economy, as well as in accounting and investment.

This patchwork was unravelled by the 2008 financial crisis, and couldn't be put back together. The 2011 Reform tried to move away from a state-centred model—involving the universal distribution of every important element of daily life—to a mixed one, in which the state sector continued to control the commanding heights, while allowing non-state actors, from co-ops to transnational capital, to form a new private sector. The seeds of this transition were already in place in the 90s, for instance in the expanding tourism sector, where the previous policy, of a social wage that the state sector would use to meet certain needs, was supplanted by a system in which prices, salaries and income played a much more

pronounced role. This called into question the very idea of a command economy, and introduced more automatic price-based and market-based solutions. There was also change in who participated in the economy, how work was organized and how people reproduced themselves at an individual level.

The private sector, dominated by tourism and small traders, has improved the lives of a narrow stratum of business owners and workers, but it consists mostly of low-value activities which concentrate the country's scarce opportunities for growth. It is still small, representing only 10 to 12 per cent of GDP, even though it employs a third of the total economically active population and its imports have risen dramatically over the last three years. The risks associated with this model became more apparent during the pandemic. For the duration of the crisis, state-sector employees received a percentage of their wages, providing a low but regular income, while many in the private sector lost all their sources of income and had nothing to fall back on. They still had some universal social guarantees, but that wasn't nearly enough. So if the 2011 Reform was induced by an exogenous shock, it also created its own endogenous ones, because switching from one model to another meant that people's livelihoods were endangered by this kind of deeply uncertain bet on the private sector.

There were a number of zigzags in the implementation of the Reform. Its first phase planned to eliminate various state subsidies and rations. The famous *Libreta de Abastecimiento*, the ration booklet introduced in 1963, had been designed for an economy that wasn't developed enough to provide abundant foodstuffs, clothing or consumer goods to its citizens, but which nevertheless tried to guarantee the basic minimum by subsidizing food, electricity and so on. Under the 2011 Reform, it was supposed to be abolished and the state sector was to shrink, with a million workers made available for the private sector. In the end, though, the state retreated from these ambitions. A much smaller number of workers were laid off and a much smaller *Libreta* survived.

This occurred because different economic sectors, including workers and militants, pushed back against the proposed changes, creating an 'in between' situation in which you no longer had the guarantees of the old model nor the prosperity of the new one. The rise of a limited private sector was partly a way out of these deadlocks in the Reform plan. In

2021, the convertible peso was abolished, but sections of the economy continued to use a different monetary arrangement—which meant that, as in the Special Period, we saw the emergence of a grey and black market of hard currency on which some of the private sector now operates.

What we have, then, is a kind of collage: a complex and heterogeneous society which has suffered shocks both by design and by accident: hurricanes, the Covid-19 pandemic, the reverberations of the Reform. On the one hand, these societal changes were the result of deliberate policy choices; on the other, they have involved a number of accidents and contingencies. The transition has been very painful, not least because the principles of solidarity and egalitarianism are still very present in how ordinary Cubans live, and how they imagine society should be.

Were the reforms always unlikely to dynamize the economy, or might they have worked if not for the American blockade? What role did Trump's tightening of sanctions play?

Cuba's decision to invest in tourism, develop the private sector and use unorthodox monetary arrangements had a lot to do with how 'normalization' played out between 2014 and 2018. The tightening of 2019 then limited the room for manoeuvre during the Reform process. A lot of people, including Cubans, still see the US blockade as something quite abstract, but it has a range of concrete effects. Some are short-term. You can't use US dollars for transactions: banks will be fined for transactions with Cuba, especially since the country is now—absurdly—on the list of state sponsors of terrorism, imposed by the departing Trump Administration in January 2021 and continued under Biden and Blinken. The same goes for access to technologies. During the pandemic, Cuba was denied ventilators that were needed for acute Covid cases because they contained US components and technologies. Or, to take another example, if a firm which provides technology for dialysis is bought by a US company, that technology suddenly becomes unavailable, which forces Cuba to seek out a new logistical chain that could be ten times the distance, significantly increasing the costs. You see this sort of thing in every sector.

Then there are the medium-term effects. By reducing the available resources, the US blockade constricts the space for political experimentation, because decisions taken in conditions of crisis tend to be very

executive and limited in scope. For example, there are imports of food-stuffs, energy and certain basic medication and supplies, but not much more. So the blockade also places limits on political imagination and capacity. Finally, there is the long-term fallout. It's akin to desertification, in the sense of a gradual drying up of the Cuban economy's capacity to sustain itself, or of certain sectors to survive. If the government is forced to prioritize investment in some areas, then others like housing and infrastructure are neglected, and you get the kind of crisis we've recently been experiencing in the energy sector.

This also creates a situation in which different economic sectors enter into political competition for investment. Tourism has tried to pitch itself as an engine of the Cuban economy, a sector that's promoting medium-term growth, and therefore deserves to be protected. There have been selective wage increases in public health and education which aren't available for workers elsewhere in the state sector. In the shortage economy, decisions about how resources are distributed are often zero-sum.

How have gender relations been affected by the crises?

The liberation of women—what was called ‘the revolution within the revolution’—has been a key part of Cuba's history over the last sixty years: women freeing themselves from the household, becoming workers, achieving forms of social status and recognition that weren't previously attainable, gaining a greater degree of sexual and reproductive freedom. These advances are perhaps even more striking today, considering the attacks on reproductive rights in the US, Chile, Nicaragua and some states of Mexico. In Cuba, abortion remains uncontroversial despite low birth rates and an ageing population, which speaks volumes about the depth of the changes brought about by the Revolution. Most household breadwinners are women, not men. A generation of women currently in their fifties and sixties occupies leading roles in social organizations and many hold elected office. But services remain mostly feminized, so reproduction—social and even political—is still women's work. The crisis also tends to place a heavier burden of household reproduction on women. More women care for their elders, work from home and quit their jobs to focus on their private lives—although, even then, many of them remain pillars of their communities.

What has the regional impact been, within Cuba?

The economic crisis is causing the regional gap between Havana and the other provinces to widen. This rift has been visible throughout the entire modern history of Cuba from colonization onwards. Havana acts as a major commercial and economic hub, while the rest of the country lags behind in terms of investment, infrastructure and development. The Revolution managed to reverse that tendency during its first thirty years. Cuban society was rebuilt in many important ways, through universal access to healthcare, education, social housing and employment. There was a dramatic reduction of internal migration towards the capital. But revolutions are never a matter of absolute discontinuity. They incorporate elements of the old society, however reluctantly. And from the Special Period onwards, the old inequalities began to reemerge. Race became a factor in access to the job market or economic opportunities; we saw the racialization of the population of the marginal *barrios*; Havana reestablished its centrality; poverty was refeminized, and so on.

Can the government still rely on popular mobilization in times of crisis, as it has done in the past? Did people organize to support each other during the recent disasters?

Social and political organizations called on their members to help restore normality, clean up their neighbourhoods and prepare the ground for technical support coming in from across the country. When Guantánamo was badly affected by Hurricane Oscar, people gathered donations and other forms of aid to complement the state relief. But the resources available, both at popular and government levels, are scarce. The Cuban economy has experienced negative economic growth for the last four years along with rising inflation. This has resulted in mass emigration: around 10 per cent of the population left Cuba during this period, further depleting state resources.

Since 2019 there has also been a shift in how civil society relates to public institutions like the Committees for the Defence of the Revolution, the Party or the Communist Youth. The rise of the private sector as an important actor in the economy has changed the rules of the game—including the price of basic goods, labour policy and the share of the population it employs. As the state's economic activity has declined, the

social provisions and guarantees that were essential to the Cuban model since at least the late 70s have been weakened. This has diminished both the state's visibility and its capacity to deal with the crisis: not only when it comes to the mobilization of material resources, but also of people.

How does the present crisis compare to the Special Period?

The current situation can only be explained if you consider it in terms of the long-term effects of the Special Period. By the end of the 1980s, the relationship with the Soviet bloc and the USSR had stabilized Cuba's role within the international state-socialist economic sector. Cuba was a society that was built upon and functioned through the state: economically, culturally and politically. It wasn't identical to the state—that's a common error. In fact, Cuban society resisted state management in various ways. It became generationally and culturally differentiated, as the Revolution reached its maturity and the generation that had been born with it grew up. So you had a society that was structured around the state but which was in many ways dynamic and conflictual, and capable of working towards future-oriented goals.

Today, those conflicts have for the most part been forgotten and the 80s have come to be seen as a sort of golden era, before the collapse of 1990. The Special Period was characterized by a threefold crisis. First, there was Cuba's position in the international economy: we lost 80 per cent of our exports, GDP dropped dramatically, 35 per cent in a year, and we lost some of our main commercial partners as well as our sources of fuel, investment and spare parts. It was a shock in every possible respect. Second, the state could no longer play such an expansive role, so it started to withdraw. This was not by design: it was a subsistence response to the crisis, to secure the economic fundamentals at the expense of much of the country's social fabric. Third, there was an ideological crisis, or perhaps it would be more precise to speak of it as a crisis of faith. The future had in a certain sense evaporated. Cuba realized that it had modelled its expectations on a world that no longer existed.

The next thirty years saw a series of attempts to resolve these crises. An economy run entirely by the state was no longer efficient. With the Soviet bloc gone and the most acute phase of the crisis receding, alternatives started to emerge. There was the expansion of tourism in the state sector

in the 90s; the slight but self-sustained economic recovery during the latter part of that decade; the bilateral relationship with Venezuela after Hugo Chávez came to power. After the Sixth Party Congress in 2011, the ideas of the more neoclassical Cuban economists gained greater currency in public debates. Ideologically, nationalism became a centrepiece of revolutionary thought, while orthodox Marxism faded somewhat into the background—although it's still strong in certain areas of academia and among public intellectuals. Both Cuba's vision of the future and its view of the region were increasingly articulated in national-popular terms, even though the country remained internationalist in other important respects.

Cuba has long combined nationalism and internationalism in interesting ways. How has that evolved over time?

The overthrow of Batista in 1959 represented the triumph of a particular strain of revolutionary nationalism that had developed from José Martí onwards. But there were other strands as well. Batista himself promoted a culturalist, folkloric, idiosyncratic, exoticizing form of nationalism, and the government he toppled in 1952—that of the *Auténticos*—had its own nationalist ideology as well. So disputes around the nation have been part of Cuban history since the 19th century, with a diverse range of national projects: some linked to the Spanish Empire, some leaning towards annexation by the US, and some revolutionary variants rooted in the struggle for independence.

In the late 1970s and the 80s, Fidel spoke of Cubans as 'Latin African' because of their deep involvement in internationalist campaigns across the continent, as well as the engagement in Angola. During that period, African influences were strong in academia, music, popular culture, language—I know several people named Kenya who were born back then. Then through the 1990s, you could see a Latin Americanist and Caribbean strand of internationalism developing, which was reinforced by the Pink Tide. But you could also see different types of nationalism starting to emerge among counterrevolutionary, dissident, Catholic or conservative intellectuals. A number of pre-1959 thinkers and public figures were recuperated in the public sphere at this time, and some of the narratives of national history associated with the Revolution lost traction, or became insufficient, for certain intellectuals.

The Fourth Party Congress of 1991 then called for a public discussion about socialism. Progressive tendencies—for example, the discussion of gender in terms of public infrastructures and the economy of care; the automation of certain tasks; the socialization of cooking, cleaning and laundry—ground to a halt. The Communist Party started to define itself not as the party of the working class, peasants, students and women, but as the party of the Cuban nation, whose main goals were sovereignty, independence and social justice. All the same, there were still advances on a number of ideological, organizational and institutional fronts. The Fourth Congress repealed the ban on religious people joining the Party and prepared a major constitutional reform that reshaped Cuba's institutions in a more democratic mould, bringing them closer to the organs of local popular power, while dissolving certain executive and centralizing elements.

How important has the relationship with Venezuela been for Cuba's current economic situation?

Cuba remains heavily reliant on Venezuela, not only in terms of energy supplies, but also to conduct most of its foreign trade and even to export some basic services. In recent years, however, the most important precondition of the Venezuelan economic recovery was restarting exports to the US. Because of the American blockade, Venezuela can't use the same ships for commerce with the US and with Cuba, which makes it difficult to sustain a steady flow of energy exports to us. As a result, fuel shipments from Venezuela to Cuba have declined since 2019, while several other players like Mexico and Russia have been coming in and out of the picture. So although Venezuela is still the main trading partner in the region, this relationship has been waning steadily, with oil revenue and especially oil exports well below the level of a decade ago. In that sense, at least, Biden's easing of restrictions on Venezuela was bad news for Cuba.

Have the Morena governments in Mexico, under AMLO and now Sheinbaum, made things any easier for Cuba?

Mexico has long been a bridge between Cuba and the rest of the region because it is the only regional power that never cut off diplomatic ties back in the 60s. Since then, there have been periods of distancing—during the PAN governments of the 90s for example—but the two

nations have always maintained a certain amount of investment and trade in basic consumer goods. Morena has strengthened that relationship, yet there are limitations because of Mexico's economic integration with North America through the NAFTA free trade agreement. US investments have been largely responsible for driving the Mexican economic boom through near-shoring at the border. So Mexico has to manage this close relationship with the US, with implications for the extent of its proximity to Cuba. This dynamic played out with AMLO during Trump's first term, and we will see it again with Sheinbaum during his second. That's not to understate the importance of Mexico's technical, economic and humanitarian assistance, which has helped to alleviate some of the disasters that Cuba has suffered in the last few years. But Mexico is more important to Cuba as a diplomatic and political ally than as a trading partner.

What about Brazil under Lula?

Since the start of 2023, Lula has assembled a coalition with the establishment forces that enabled his electoral victory: a fragile political arrangement, premised on his personal charisma. Its scope for ambitious policies—such as the project to create Cuba's Mariel Special Development Zone, initiated during his first term—is limited; he is mostly preoccupied with preventing the return of Bolsonarismo in 2026. As well as this, Brazil's outlook on the region has shifted. In the 2000s, Lula collaborated with Chávez on opposing US-backed free trade agreements; since returning to power, he has banned Venezuela from entering the BRICS. It's a sharp contrast, which has more to do with a realignment in Brazil's international relations than with the specifics of the Venezuelan elections in July. Following the political and cultural defeats of the Brazilian left over the past decade, Lula has moved away from the project of neo-developmentalism and regional integration that characterized earlier PT governments. He wants Brazil, as perhaps the most important economy in Latin America, to play both a leading and a mediating role.

Cuba's influence in Latin America and the Caribbean has always functioned on two simultaneous levels: working with other progressive governments on the one hand, and with social movements, non-governmental parties and left-wing intelligentsias on the other. Over time, however, there has been a growing emphasis on governmental and

diplomatic relations and a steady decline in Cuba's relationships with left movements. Roberto Regalado calls this the 'governmentalization' of Cuba's external relations. This is partly a result of the weakening of the Latin American and Caribbean left, but it is also a deliberate turn in Cuban foreign policy, part of the wider Reform programme.

At *La Tizza*, we have tried to explore the question of Cuba's international position by looking at its relations with left movements and governments over the last sixty years. We think that Cuba's relations with the US must be analysed alongside its relations with the region as a whole. During the Pink Tide, the country established a political articulation with progressive forces in Latin America and the Caribbean, which led to the 'normalization' period under Obama. Yet, subsequently, a US backlash against these governments effectively exploited their internal contradictions and helped to weaken the left across the Americas. This opened the door to the more aggressive Trumpian approach, which Biden retained.

And Africa? Does Cuba have any meaningful continuing relationship with, say, Angola or the ANC, in terms of material solidarity to help break the blockade?

Africa has voted *en bloc* against the blockade, so it remains an important source of diplomatic and political support. Cuba is an observing partner of the African Union and has been involved in policy discussions around integration and diaspora culture. It is one of the few countries where Swahili is taught in universities; you can go to the University of Havana and study Swahili as a regular course. So the relationship with Africa is still close. But in terms of trade and investment, it is not very significant. Cuba supplies state-funded medical assistance to African countries and gives full scholarships for people to study medicine, plus providing training facilities and expertise for affordable prices. But over the decades, this relationship has become much more transactional. There's an economic relationship of this sort with Angola that dates back to the late 90s: since Angola has never had enough doctors per person, it has always relied heavily on Cuban medical personnel.

There have been significant social and political shifts in Cuba in recent years. The 2019 Constitution, drafted under Raúl's leadership and then put to a national referendum, recognized private property and foreign direct investment, put term and age limits on the presidency, banned discrimination on

the grounds of race, sexuality or gender, and removed the requirement for marriage to be between a man and a woman. In 2022, a referendum on changes to the Constitution's Family Code ratified same-sex marriage. What lies behind these developments?

The process for developing new legislation in the Cuban political system involves mass consultation in which everyone gets to give their opinion, followed by a period in which experts make amendments based on the data that's been gathered. Both the Constitution and the new Family Code were drafted in this way. There were energetic national campaigns for and against the Family Code. A wide segment of society that is socially conservative, including some in the revolutionary camp, opposed it, as did the evangelical churches. But almost 70 per cent of voters backed the measure, which states that 'love and solidarity are the axes on which family relationships revolve'. The confrontation was important not only for its scale, but also because it revealed a political map of the country that was different to what we saw in municipal elections in 2022 or the national elections a few months later.

The Family Code was a state project: the culmination of fifteen years of promoting sexual diversity, reproductive rights and a general programme of reforms to family and civil law. Behind this legislative change there was a wider shift in Cuban society, from a regressive vision of the family based on close kinship and heterosexual monogamy to a more flexible set of arrangements for an increasingly complex society: an ageing population, the need to codify the rights of grandparents, a majority of households led by women, the question of who cares for whom. The Code allows for many different types of family relationships based not on blood but on affective kinship. In this way, it also raised the interesting question of what form private life takes after the retreat of the social; the sole subjects of the Code are the state, the individual and the family—socialist civil society is hardly mentioned.

The new Constitution also brought about a major shift in how the state is organized. Until 2019, the President was the head of the Council of State, which was a surrogate for the National Assembly when it wasn't in session, and of the Council of Ministers, which oversaw the executive session of the state, the ministries and several other institutions. Now, the Prime Minister is the president of the Council of Ministers and the President's role is neither executive nor legislative. The President issues

separate legislation in the form of decrees, as well as representing Cuba internationally and dealing with foreign affairs and the military. There is not much room for manoeuvre here, because these are highly professional, well-organized bodies at the heart of the state, on which little influence can be exerted by an individual.

There has been a paradigm shift at lower and local levels, too, with the strengthening of a Municipal Assembly of Popular Power and reforms to middle-level government. In place of the older Provincial Assemblies of Popular Power, there are now provincial governors who report to the Prime Minister. Unfortunately, this shift coincided with Covid, which demanded quick decision-making and therefore made the new branch very powerful—weakening the principles of autonomy and popular participation on which it was supposed to be based. So while in theory this set-up establishes more political balance, in practice it has so far been skewed towards the executive element of the state. When coupled with the Reform's tendency towards governmentalization, the results tend to be dissatisfying.

How would you contrast the political approach of the revolutionary generation, under Fidel and Raúl, to that of the new leadership since 2019 under Miguel Díaz-Canel?

When it comes to the political-institutional relationship between the Cuban state and its citizens, there have been three main vectors of change. First, there is governmentalization. Under Fidel, Cuban politics was premised on mobilizing different sectors of the population with the aim of unravelling the state and 'becoming social', as he put it. With Fidel gone, that model became impossible to sustain, and Raúl had to work out a new political model: a more stable form of government and a different relationship with the population. This led to the return of the expert, or functionary, in Cuban politics—a whole system was devised for producing such figures. The idea was that a more professional body of public administrators would make up for the absence of popular mobilization.

Second, state rationalization: closing or fusing ministries and creating new ones, reallocating administrative responsibilities and positions in the hierarchy. For example, the status of anti-corruption politics—previously handled by an ordinary government ministry—was heightened

by the creation of the Contraloría General in 2009. This process of institutional reshaping continued through to the passage of the 2019 Constitution, which had been incubating during the Reform period, though it came into operation under Díaz-Canel's government.

Third, the rule of law. Mobilization doesn't rely on the legitimacy of law, but on mass support for a particular political project. Yet for this new type of revolutionary state to function, it needed to ground the work of government in a set of effective protocols and decrees. Changes in the economy, in public institutions, in the entire mission and scope of the state—all this needed codification. That, in turn, changed the way political legitimacy functioned. Whereas Fidel and Raúl's cohort drew legitimacy from their commitment to the revolution over fifty or sixty years, the newer generation of cadres had to rely on the law as a source of legitimacy—on the proper functioning of the institutions, the provision of social goods, universal guarantees and successful negotiations with different sectors. If the economy could no longer operate as it used to, then politics couldn't either.

Díaz-Canel's outlook was shaped by these changes. He's an engineer, an expert; his legitimacy relies on the rule of law and the stability of government. He's also the head of a body created by the Reform process—the presidency had been abolished under the socialist Constitution of 1976. In its new form, it is much weaker than it seems. The President doesn't wield executive power as in the US. Power is still concentrated in the Council of Ministers and in the legislative bodies: the Council of State and the National Assembly of People's Power. The Party still supplies the vertebrae of the system. But a new source of power has also emerged from the Family Code and Constitution campaigns: autonomous social movements of every sort, from small street protests to marches by LGBT activists to mobilizations of evangelical churches.

This kind of visible social mobilization—with the capacity to lead its members to political conclusions that could influence national decision-making—is strikingly novel. In Cuba, political culture has remained somewhat static, while society, the economy and even the state have evolved in various significant ways. Some Party and state officials understand that, but others are still struggling to grasp this new complexity, which naturally affects how they manage social contradictions and respond to crises: the protests of 2021, the pandemic, the hurricanes.

Of course, there is a huge difference between the social demands that emerge from such crises and, say, those made by evangelical churches mobilizing against the Family Code. But navigating them is difficult for a generation raised in a political landscape with other, very different sources of legitimacy. They are being forced to adapt to these new institutional arrangements while also being hamstrung by the economic situation. One wouldn't want to be in their shoes. But it's not a matter of personal failings; it's a unique historical conjuncture—a crisis on so many levels that it's hard to grasp even from within.

Could you tell us about the development of digital media in Cuba?

Digital media emerged in the 90s as a means of creating news websites for official or Party print media, such as *Granma* or *Rebelde*. There followed new online publications like *Cubadebate*, which launched in August 2003 and was read by professionals, doctors, college students and mid-level workers in ministries and enterprises—those who had access to the internet and to the email platforms that had been developing slowly but steadily into the 2000s. Email was used more widely and much earlier than the web in Cuba, and email chains became a sort of decentralized platform for discussion and the exchange of information. They allowed prominent intellectuals to express their concerns about the return of certain repressive features of Cuban culture from the 1970s.

There was a boom in digital education around this time too—part of what Fidel called 'general integral culture' and the Battle of Ideas. The University of Information Sciences was founded in 2002; computer labs were installed in every school and the programmes for these courses were regularly updated. This meant that Cuba developed a digital culture without widespread digital access: people knew how to use a computer but wouldn't usually have one at home. Blogging became popular, first among individual writers and journalists, then as a series of collective projects, some of them funded by the US State Department. Washington quickly found an opening in the blogosphere to support a crop of new journalists who would advocate regime change.

But there were positive political developments as well, such as the 'email war' of 2008, led by the brilliant literary theorist Desiderio Navarro, which involved a public debate on revolutionary culture and Cuba's

cultural history from the 1960s onwards, with a focus on the events of the *Quinquenio gris*. Among the many revolutionary blogs at this time, there was a prevalence of what Fernando Martínez Heredia would call ‘defencist’ positions: a narrow focus on US imperialism and the blockade to the exclusion of all other factors, sometimes with the political implication that certain topics of discussion are off-limits. Then, around 2012–14, social media arrived along with the expansion of public Wi-Fi networks. And soon after, the quantum leap of mobile data enabled much wider access to platforms of expression.

How did your online journal La Tizza get started?

There were a number of preconditions. The first was technological: the expansion of internet services in Cuba since 2002 and the sudden appearance of a public sphere that was no longer mediated by access to resources like paper and printing. Some members of *La Tizza* were formed by that moment when the blogosphere was booming. The second was intellectual: many of us were close to Fernando Martínez Heredia, who was then head of the Juan Marinello Institute for Cultural Research, and had been a major figure in Cuba’s heterodox Marxist tradition since the 1960s. He was the editor of *Pensamiento Crítico*, a sister journal to *New Left Review* at the time. In 2015, Fernando taught a course on the ‘Marxism of Marx’, which condensed his life’s work. From his historical reading of Marx’s intellectual development, he went on to consider the evolution of Marxism: what he called its ‘universalizations’ in the Second International and the aftermath of the Russian Revolution, its assimilation into national liberation struggles up to the Cuban revolution, and his own personal experience of this process. This was an extraordinary reading—through the lens of this critical, open Marxism—of the political and theoretical history of the revolution, from the Movimiento 26 de Julio right up to the Reform.

For a brief period in 2016, a group of young people from the Marinello, and from some other political collectives that had sprung up during that time, coalesced around a group called the Young Anti-Capitalist Network. It launched a blog called *El Punto* and organized actions and workshops, both on the streets and in more academic settings. When it dissolved in February 2017, at the start of the first Trump presidency, some of its members founded what later became known as *La Tizza*. As a maga-

zine, it aimed to rethink the organizational problems of a transition to socialism in the 21st century by grounding them in critical Marxism; to analyse the Reform process by drawing on the relevant academic discussions; to promote the work of a broader spectrum of revolutionary thinkers, beyond the ‘defencists’; and to bring the free-thinking Marxist tradition of the *Pensamiento Crítico* into the age of digital media.

Pensamiento Crítico was shut down in 1971, with the Brezhnevization of the revolution. How far did that constitute a rupture in the tradition of Cuban intellectual history? As well as the personal connections with Fernando, what allowed La Tizza to pick up that thread?

There was certainly an interruption when the political environment changed after 1971. That affected the social sciences, making discussions of Marxism more difficult, and probably set us back a whole decade. But it was a slowdown rather than a full-stop. Several strands of that critical project survived: in the Casa de las Américas, among the film directors and intellectuals of the Instituto Cubano del Arte e Industria Cinematográficos, in the University of the Arts and in several other spaces. It would reemerge in the late 80s, during what Fidel called the rectification process after the Third Congress in 1986, coinciding with the Gorbachev era. Then, after the onset of the 2011 Reform, there was a wider space for dissent and different kinds of critical thinking. We saw a series of open debates and consultations, discussions about economic management, the political system, the very meaning of socialism. This was stimulated from above, by Raúl himself, but it was also channelled through new media. It coincided with the political challenges posed by the Obama and Trump administrations, as the imperial assault on Cuba was escalated amid the decade of Reform.

Why did you call the online journal La Tizza—‘The Chalk’, but with a double Z?

In the Cuban vernacular, ‘being *la tiza*’ means ‘being cool’—but chalk is also related to learning; to drawing, mapping, planning. And you can even throw it around, like a weapon. The double Z was used as a mark of graphic distinction. With the name, we were trying to add a new flavour to the mix—nothing like *Iskra* or *Potemkin*, *Red Star*, *Vanguard*.

How did the journal develop?

La Tizza published slowly at first but gained pace in 2018–19, especially during the debates on the Constitution and religious fundamentalism. These were windows through which you could see a shift in social dynamics, ideological allegiances and popular mobilizations, as public expressions of dissent became increasingly common, across the spectrum—whether from churches or LGBT groups. Analytical and political clarity were often lacking in the fog of war around such issues. We set out to offer our analyses amid a series of eruptions like the 2021 protests and a political atmosphere shaped by extreme conditions, from national blackouts to natural disasters and economic crisis.

Who are the people involved?

As a collective, *La Tizza* spans people born in the 1980s up to the late 90s. The youngest is around 23 and the oldest 42. Among the older crew there are people who were active in the Battle of Ideas, as college students; my cohort emerged later, in the 2010s, after both Chávez and Fidel had died. The younger members were politicized in the debates around the 2019 Constitution and the pandemic. Though some of us were born and raised in other parts of the country—Santiago de Cuba, Artemisa province, Matanzas—most were politicized in Havana. Almost all of us are members of the Party, but *La Tizza* operates according to firmly non-hierarchical principles. We don't have a central board or editor or coordinator; we work as a horizontal collective which takes decisions by consensus, with a division of labour of sorts between editing, finding new texts and so on. We receive no funding and don't pay contributors; it's completely voluntary.

La Tizza is aimed at a wide readership, although it is mostly read by militants and intellectuals in Latin America. It publishes conjunctural analysis of the region: Venezuela, Brazil, Central America, El Salvador, Chile, Puerto Rico, Colombia and so on. It provides a revolutionary perspective that is not just 'defencist', as official positions tend to be. It does not view the ideological struggles within Cuba as mere symptoms of imperial aggression. Instead it tries to describe Cuban society as a complex whole, marked by the shifting needs and aspirations that the

Reform released: the conflict between different sectors within the state economy, the private sector and organized activists.

What might Cuba expect from the second Trump presidency, with Florida's Marco Rubio as Secretary of State?

The US approach is still one of 'maximum pressure'. A major reason the Biden Administration decided to maintain Trump's policies of economic strangulation, rather than reverting to Obama's normalization agenda, was that they thought it could be a way out of the *cul de sac* that Cuba policy has been in for the last sixty-five years. They thought they might be able to resolve the problem with one final blow. So they reinforced the unilateral sanctions regime, trying to restrict tourism and remittances, blocking investment and dollar-denominated transactions, intimidating companies that dealt with Cuba in critical areas such as infrastructure and medical supplies—while also funding subversion more generously, directing money to figures in the Cuban media and cultural sphere who would promote regime change. This was a way of intensifying the contradictions within Cuban society and suppressing any possibility of extending the revolution.

It's a sure bet that Trump's second term will continue in that vein, aggravating the current crisis with the help of Latin America's resurgent far right—leaders like Bukele in El Salvador and Milei in Argentina. Cuba is navigating turbulent waters; we will need to hone our skills as sailors—to learn from past shipwrecks and avoid new ones, knowing how much the future depends on our own efforts. It will take time for the storm to abate.