The Revolutionary Imagination in Cuba and Venezuela

By Sujatha Fernandes

The historic revolutionary moment of January 1, 1959, when General Fulgencia Batista escaped Cuba, came on the heels of another, lesser known revolutionary moment just a year earlier. On January 23, 1958, General Marcos Pérez Jiménez fled the capital of Venezuela, as a multi-class opposition ended a long era of military rule. Although both countries had engaged in similar armed struggles to overthrow pro-U.S. military regimes, Cuba moved to a revolutionary socialist government, as U.S.-owned corporations were expelled from the island and passed into state management.

Venezuela, meanwhile, became a “pacted democracy.” Political elites forged explicit agreements with commercial and business sectors, preserving alliances with foreign capital and excluding the Communist Party, which had played an important role in the pro-democracy movement. Foreign oil companies, threatening to leave the country if their operations were disrupted, limited radical changes in Venezuela. The reformist Democratic Action party, which had previously established itself as the vehicle through which the poor could channel their demands, cemented its hegemony while the country’s armed guerrilla movement had less widespread support.

Fifty years on, it seems Venezuela and Cuba have again diverged in their revolutionary paths. The legacies of earlier revolutions have continued to shape their current trajectories, but this time around, it is Venezuelan president Hugo Chávez who has pursued a more radical agenda, while the Cuban government has been forced since the 1990s to make concessions to global capitalism—expanding its tourism sector as the major source of foreign-exchange income; transferring the production and distribution functions of state-owned enterprises to foreign business through joint ventures; and legalizing the dollar in a dual dollar-peso economy.

If oil companies in Venezuela restricted radical reforms in 1958, in the post-Soviet era, oil wealth has allowed Venezuela a degree of independence. Yet Latin America’s leftist governments, including that of Venezuela, must today confront a new stage of capitalism, one in which production and accumulation have been global-
ized. These governments are thus much more limited in their ability to bring about social change than the revolutionaries of 50 years ago. For all of Chávez’s rallying against the Bush administration (and cautious welcoming of the Obama government), he recognizes that the United States is still the main market for Venezuelan oil, and both sides are reluctant to jeopardize that relationship. The Venezuelan economy continues to depend on a boom-bust cycle of fluctuating oil rents and an export-oriented development model.

In this era of circumscribed possibilities for revolutionary praxis, we ought to ask: How has the legacy of struggle been preserved and passed down? How have alternative visions for social justice been kept alive? And where has the social conscience of leftist governments to fulfill their mandates persisted? It is in the domain of culture where much of this, which I call the revolutionary imagination, has been free to develop.

Given the predominant focus by both the mainstream media and the left on the actions, thoughts, and rhetoric of leaders as the prime measure of revolution, we might miss the subterranean spaces where ideas of revolution are being renovated. But in the new millennium, the revolutionary imagination is more strongly at work than ever, liberated from the dogmas associated with Soviet Communism.

Taking on novel languages of cultural protest and identity politics, it has engendered new forms of participatory politics not tied to parties or mass state organizations.

Wandering through the Plaza in Old Havana, with tourist stalls selling Che Guevara ashtrays and Cuban Revolution T-shirts, one wonders if this is what the idea of revolution has been reduced to. But go to a Cuban rap concert, and it’s apparent that young black people are reworking the vision of revolution to encompass the kinds of changes they want to see. During a performance in Central Havana by Anónimo Consejo (Anonymous Advice), one of Cuba’s most popular rap groups, MC Sekuko Umoja, wearing a purple and yellow dashiki with his hair in short dreads, stood before a microphone. Sekuko, formerly known as Yosmel, had changed his name to emphasize his spiritual connections with Africa. “We, as hip-hop, say no to war and imperialism,” he said. “Anónimo Consejo revolución!” The crowd cheered. “Hip-hop revolución. Put your fist in the air.”

With ideas like “hip-hop revolución,” the children of 1959 are taking the slogans and analysis they were taught and using them to question the changes going on around them. As the revolutionary years gave way to the austere Special Period, racism became visible once again. And so Cuba’s young rappers ask: If the birthright of the revolution was to make all Cubans equal, why are some more equal than others? Why are blacks not treated the same as whites? Under this same rubric of equality, black women are fighting for equal space alongside black men. As the all-female lesbian trio Las Krudas rap: “There is no true revolution without women.” For Cuban rappers, this revolutionary imagination is part of a longer historical trajectory of black cultural resistance.

In a song titled “Mambi,” the rap group Obsesión identify their struggle with the mbhises, or Afro-Cuban fighters in the War of Independence against Spain. In “A Veces,” Anónimo Consejo connect the history of Cuban slaves with the situation of contemporary Afro-Cubans. They see the aspirations of slaves and independence fighters expressed in the Cuban revolution, and this desire for freedom continues to orient the thoughts and actions of a new generation. As Cuban poet and cultural critic Roberto Zuriano says, there is “one element that shapes the thought of the Cuban rapper and that, moreover, differentiates them from others in the world: the emancipatory imaginary that these youth share with the Cuban Revolution, its forms of struggle, its acts of resistance; as its characteristic cultural cimarronaje at work from the time of the Haitian Revolution through today’s Cuban culture and history.”

The quality of cimarronaje, or the rebelliousness of the runaway slave, is identified with the Cuban revolution as a lone voice contesting neoliberalism in a global capitalist order. At the same time, rappers invoke cimarronaje as a way of criticizing the inequalities and hierarchies that are developing as market integration deepens.

Meanwhile, in Venezuela, the past has also come to play an important role in reconfiguring the revolutionary imagination in the context of Chávez’s Bolivarian Revolution. Venezuelan community media producers, for example, frequently make claims to indigenous and black identity as a way of positioning themselves in broader relations of class and marginality. “We are the children of Guáicaipuro,” says Carlos Carles of Radio Perola, referring to a mythical indigenous chief, “those who screamed in the last moments of their lives, ‘Come, Spaniards, and see how the last free man of this land dies.’”

In Chávez’s Venezuela, where the republican hero Bolivar occupies a central role in official narratives, barrio residents re-create marginalized figures from the past as the basis for their social activism. Palmiro Avilán, a community leader from the popular parish of Petare, is a devotee of Maria Lionza, a cult based on various spirits of indigenous and black fighters from the past, such as Guáicaipuro, Ne-
gro Primero, and Maria Lionza herself. “These spirits have the elements of blackness,” Avilán told me, “a spirituality that’s been gestating and has its roots in the rochelas [communities of escaped slaves] that existed for more than 250 years in the plains. It was in the plains that they created the liberation army of resistance to rescue five countries from Spanish imperialism. One of the first leaders was José Tomás Boves, who led a group of ragtag Indians and blacks against a republican army that was in the hands of mantuanos [creole elites].”

In nationalist histories, Boves is an anti-hero who betrayed the cause of independence by launching a rebellion against the Bolivar-led republican army in 1814. But he has been mythified in popular culture as a renegade caudillo who gave importance to marginalized Indians and blacks. Avilán sees himself as a modern-day Boves, leading an army of those excluded from society.

Mural brigades and community radio stations in the barrios of Caracas also draw on these figures from the past in shaping new revolutionary imaginaries and identities. In one mural by the La Piedrita collective in 23 de Enero, Bolivar is represented as encapuchado, or wearing a hood, in this case a hood painted with the colors of the Venezuelan flag. The hood is a form of symbolic protest strongly associated with the student movements of the 1980s and 1990s. Next to the mural is a sign that reads, “Bolivar Reclains the Hood in Latin America and the World.”

Carlos Carles from Radio Perola merges the anti-heroes of Venezuelan history with the popular figure of Bolivar. On the radio show Tomando Perola (Taking Perola), Carlos describes Bolivar: “Simón Bolívar was not Bolívar. Simón Bolívar was also Paez, he was also Zamora, he was also Boves, he was also Piar.” Carlos refers to this mix of celebrated caudillos, radical populists, and anti-heroes, some of whom were suppressed within official historical narratives, only to be appropriated and recirculated in popular oral traditions.

Carles presents himself as a descendant of the chiefs, in both a literal and a metaphorical sense. Indigenous people were not eliminated by the colonizer; they continue to exist both in their descendants and in the living traditions of popular resistance. “We are children of indigenous resistance, Caribbean indigenous resistance,” Carles said. “They almost wiped out our population, but we will not accept that the invader, the colonizer, can wipe out our dignity and our territory.” Carles, an urban resident of the parish Caricuao, invokes the specter of indigenous resistance as a means to recreate a sense of collective action.

The revolutionary imagination, powered by this identification with the past and new forms of cultural resistance, has been a means for holding Latin America’s left governments in check. In Venezuela, urban residents came together with rural indigenous groups to protest the Chávez government’s plan to increase coal mining in the state of Zulia. In October 2004, just months before signing a trade agreement with Cuba under the auspices of an anti-neoliberal, pro-sustainable-development model known as Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas, the Chávez government announced plans to increase coal mining in Zulia. The indigenous Wayuu, Bari, and Yukpa people from the area worried that the plans would increase water contamination and health risks for the mostly indigenous population of the region who depend on scarce water supplies.

Urban media activists joined indigenous groups in mobilizations in Caracas to protest the plans. On March 31, 2005, a group including more than 600 indigenous people marched from the Plaza Morelos to the Miraflores Presidential Palace. In a statement to the press, the activists claimed that coal extraction violates the rights of the indigenous people, “whose culture and mode of life are absolutely connected with nature.” Posters at the march read: “Coal Miners of Maché, Socuy, and Yachirí Out: In Defense of Water!” and “No to Coal, Yes to Life and Nature.” The indigenous protesters wore traditional outfits, including grass skirts, beads, painted faces, and woven baskets on their heads, and many of the women were bare chested. They emphasized their identity as indigenous people as a way of laying claim to water as a resource that belongs to them as a collective right. The urban protesters who joined them similarly drew on the language of Andean spirituality and cultural heritage.

Alongside the momentous changes that have taken place in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, the revolutionary imagination has also been evolving. A panoply of figures from the past, including mambises, runaway slaves, and indigenous chiefs have come to represent historic desires for equality and freedom at the base of revolutionary movements. Languages of Andean and Afro-Cuban spirituality and religious cults of Maria Lionza form repertoires of contestation and resistance. Leftist leaders, struggling to forge new social and at times socialist orders, do so in both dialogue and contention with a revolutionary imagination that is constantly being renovated from below.


Reading the Black Jacobins, Seven Decades Later


2. Ibid., 25. For more on Raynal and Toussaint-Louverture in the context of the Haitian Revolution, see Laurent Dubois, Avengers of the New World: The Story of the Haitian Revolution (Harvard University Press, 2004).


8. Ibid., 361.

9. Ibid., 377.

10. Ibid., 155.

MALA: Socially Dangerous


5. Cuba’s small opposition groups remain a seductive subject for foreign journalists, even for those who make it clear that these groups lack big followings. See, for example, Patrick Symmes, “The Battle of Ideas: Searching for the Opposition in Post-Fidel Cuba,” Harper’s Magazine, May 2008.


