



# Zapata is Written with a “Z”

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**O**rlando Zapata Tamayo’s black countenance offers anthropological evidence of the death of the so-called, Cuban revolution, with regards to its toughest structural dimension—religion. It is also indicative of the fact that it is undergoing another internal transition, a change in its essential rhetorical subject—workers. When Zapata Tamayo decided to abandon the Revolution’s temple, he was ceding his place to another subject whose street rhythm had become his primary source of income—music.

Then reggaeton artist Baby Lores arrived on the scene and definitively established to which field the temple’s main floor

belonged—to poetry. It is noteworthy that this change in style began slowly, at the end of the 1960s, with Silvio Rodríguez and other troubadours, and continued on through other song lyrics by writer, poet and essayist Cintio Vitier—with other, less known ones, ending its cycle through hip-hop’s more or less valuable contribution.

Baby Lores is an example of a decline in the quality of song lyrics, from high to low poetry. If Silvio Rodríguez and Cintio Vitier wrote complex, moving, and rich lyrics that for common mortals are sometimes incomprehensible, and whose scholastic and baroque wordplay is always interesting, they were guaranteeing the Cuban revolution a

more or less enthusiastic welcome into a world shared by a limited number of universal or local religions. In great measure, its impact on everyone's leftist confessionals depended upon them.

## *Fideism*

The Cuban Revolution should be understood as a religion, but not in its content or moral doctrine, or as reflecting the goals or significance of historical religions. There is an apparent abyss separating them, one which can be attributed to the place of man in the world, among other things. A religiously observant person attentive to the nature of his or her own religion would not easily follow a forced, obligatory faith. But the Cuban Revolution is, in fact, a faith, because of the religious structure it bestows on the relationship between the State, the government, and individuals—nothing more, nothing less. The Revolution's religion aspires, attempts to, and succeeds in joining together a group of people according to its beliefs, and punishes those who absolutely do not accept its liturgy, its demands, and pastoral missives; likewise its values, and its rigid view of the world and its people. Unlike those religions that leave to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, this religion is obligatory for all those born with a Cuban birth certificate. This explains why those who do not clinically accept its commandments, and military and police protection of these, are thrown out of the temple. This also explains why any attempt to analyze the Cuban revolution by means of categories and tools proper to modern economics and sociology have failed. Full modernity has not developed in Cuba over the past fifty years, precisely because the notion of God and Caesar are confoundingly housed in one same palace.

As it happens, faith can only be confirmed through failure. To turn setbacks into victories in Cuba—a possible recourse for a pedagogy on how to fight life's battles—means to scholastically bolster faith in the Revolution's religion with each real failure it experiences. Contrary to what one might think, defeat is victory for the Cuban revolution. The relationship between the mythical (the Revolution) and the *logos* (the nation) opened the door to a specific kind of national religion whose great praises were put to lofty lyrics, and sung beautifully by Silvio Rodríguez and Cintio Vitier. Yet, high-minded religiosity can crumble. In considering certain hip-hop, the Revolution is reflecting a need to preserve itself, even if the price is lowering the quality of its music. The times in which we are living demand this debasement. Old poetry discovered the market of excellence, or became sublime and ultimately reduced its audience to only certain groups of island and continental revolutionaries who were treated like aristocrats, because it distanced itself from popular language. Baby Lores uses this common language and attempts to keep the Revolution's mitre aloft for future generations—something the old poets view with obvious consternation.

It was between this high and low poetry that the Revolution definitively revealed its religious essence. Poetry, with its concomitant energy, is the only thing that makes it possible for the political process whose initial name was the Cuban Revolution to continue. It could be said that the Cuban revolution is a lyrical project that depends on the ability of its poets—be it with their prose or verses—within and outside Cuba. This is the only way it can keep up global enthusiasm for its cathedral. Thus, it is easy to understand how over fifty long years the Cuban revolution has managed to more or less keep the loyalty of

its poets but not its workers. This is the case everywhere. Intellectuals and artists who are working through their poetic-religious periods are the subjects who participate in this project, which was designed both to encourage confession and dole out punishment. Orlando Zapata Tamayo was precisely one of those subjects who slowly abandoned it.

Beyond its human impact, the brutality of Zapata Tamayo's death lies in the fact that it irremediably imploded the cathedral. It created the assumption that in its religious dimension, the Revolution could not connect with the black, poor, working-class nature of this important subject. The Revolution's political, social, and economic death had distanced itself from Zapata Tamayo, who was taken to symbolize a supposedly avenged workers' world, but for its own part the Revolution, from its adopted position, continued to possess a sort of atavistic core that was somehow connected to some modern victims —blacks, poor people, workers, marginalized people— and kept it tied to the legitimacy of its origin, and the real world of the living.

Yet, this religion's connection with one human body has highlighted its cruelty, and in addition, the vacuous nature of poetry. Can the religious dimension of the Revolution be supported without poetry? It would seem not. As a result of Zapata Tamayo, poetry has retreated. The one reason for this is that the Revolution is in no position to set into motion the mission of any poetry that will serve those in power; to justify and disguise violence, and sing praises to its heroes. There is one political law to which there should be few exceptions, if it has any at all. The more poetic the regime, the more violence it is. Beautiful stanzas, the aesthetic values of model societies, and ethical states

that assume as natural the representation of the truth, are all filled with poetic language that sweeten, make invisible, and sublimate the violence that is needed to build a poetic paradise on Earth. It is normal for these regime's fundamental subjects to somehow be working with poetry. The same could be said for weapons. Yet, this does not mean that all poetry serves to lyrically legitimate totalitarian regimes, but rather that no totalitarian regime exists without poetry. It is also possible to illustrate that there is also academic poetry.

What sort of violence can be dressed up in the finery of poetic legitimacy? Revolutionary violence against structural enemies, the "old order," and that fights the violence of that old order's emissaries. All other kinds of structural violence —the kind that revolutions create, is ignored by poetry. If the work of poets makes visible the revolutions' fissures, then poets run the risk of being morally discredited. The job of these wordsmiths is to poetically hide the physical and structural violence that the Revolution manages to hide from everyone. All this explains why in its religious dimension the Revolution inevitably flows in aristocratic ways, which disconcerts all the other confessional and critical leftists.

This aristocracy of style has one problem. It cannot versify in a way that is favorable to the Revolution the death of Orlando Zapata Tamayo, who died because of a hunger strike. This death has turned any epic sense Cuban revolutionary poetry has had to date on its head. Before Zapata Tamayo, poetry essentially took care of shaping for us the heroic death of men who were ready to go down fighting. It did this more or less successfully. After him, poetry is faced with the challenge of glorifying the simple death of men who are willing to die without fighting, to give up their lives strictly as an

offering. This is an impossible task: it is against the very nature of the Cuban revolution's religiosity. Thus, the revolutionary aristocracy has withdrawn poetry, and left its cruelty exposed. In doing this, it has destroyed its religious dimension. Is it possible to keep living in the cathedral after Zapata Tamayo? The answer is 'yes,' because the cathedral has its own army and police force, can dispense with poetry when it no longer matters to it, and loses sight of itself in an air of 'come what may.' The revolutionary aristocracy has more than just cruelty as its recourse. It has cynicism and racism, too.

## *Cynicism*

The cynical question posed to a Cuban diplomat when asked about the spelling of Zapata's name—whether it was written with an 'S' or 'Z,' when he was questioned about the whereabouts of the then still living Zapata Tamayo, was answered with an attitude only an aristocratic mentality could summon up—disdain for 'those who are nameless.' One of Germany's most important, post-war, philosophers, Peter Sloterdijk, explains this attitude very well. A cynic does not deny reality with lies. He accepts it so he can flout it because of its minimal impact and lack of weight, importance, and dignity. Ultimately, cynics exercise certain psychological privileges when facing reality because they feel well protected by the immunity and impunity of their class, and even their belongings, privileges and securities.

To get a sense of the aristocracy's mentality, psychology, and aptitudes, it is useful to ask it about any little known thing or person that is not within the range of its expectations, needs, or extravagancies. Almost certainly, the aristocrat will respond with assumed sarcasm, mockery, or ignorance.

Sloterdijk confirms that evidence of cynicism as "the modern conscience that is unhappy over the fact that the Enlightenment was both worked and been in vane."<sup>1</sup>

The diplomat's question is an efficient metaphor for cynical denial. It is an excellent way to deny a name to someone who already has one. It destroys his subjectivity and pulverizes his identity. An example of this can be found in Japan, before it went through its Meiji period (before the eighteenth century), where the poorest of the poor had no name. They were known only by virtue of the specific name given to them by the *Daimyo* (akin to a feudal lord) to whom they belonged. Slaves in Cuba underwent a similar process. For aristocrats, only their equals have names, even if they are adversaries.

Psychologically, even with revolutionary credentials, the aristocrat is more or less oblivious. Even if he commits a time- and class-specific error, as in the case above, he does not always worry himself about how to behave with poorer people. The abovementioned diplomat's sarcasm serves to highlight the cruel distancing of real power; only the aristocracy can mix the following ingredients into a 'cocktail': arrogance, disdain, underestimation and racism.

Evidently, in the final analysis Zapata died because his was a black oppositionist, a valiant black oppositionist who was till now unknown, who had to die to gain that recognition. There is some measure of truth to what some say, that his death surprised the authorities. This could be true. The government has aptly shown itself to think roguishly. It can seem to be surprised by truth or its enemies. Arrogance might be to blame for this element of surprise, but all the other aristocratic attitudes can be attributed to only one thing—racism, disdain for and an underestimation of counterrevolutionary

blacks, and the segregation of self-emancipated blacks. Thus, Zapata suffered physically from a sort of denial and neglect that in the earlier case was expressed diplomatically. This is an example of total coherence.

What is this all about? The punishment the liberators are doling out. Other articles in *ISLAS* have talked about emancipation and its snares. Since emancipation is understood as something that is granted or bestowed, it always has its limitations. One of them is that you cannot challenge the liberator. This is probably the best evidence there is of the fact that the Cuban Revolution is conservative. Its appropriation of religious grace, particularly as it concerns blacks, essentially represents a softer side of punishment's sting. If we must thank God for the things he gives us in this life—as all historic religions teach—then the Cuban revolution has instrumentalized grace so it can guarantee the submission of the underdogs. This is one way to destroy citizens and also guarantee social calm. This is how the Cuban revolution establishes its 'transcendental' legitimacy. Yet, two questions come to mind. If its nature and purpose are social, conceptually speaking, why be grateful for something that is an obligation? If it justifies itself based on the needs of a particular era, why thank Historical Reason for having acted according to the Revolution's own desires?

Clearly, Zapata Tamayo did not and could not ask anyone to make the Revolution happen. But as a black man, he was still tied to it, religiously. He had to express gratitude for the real and implied benefits that the Revolution had given his people—and remain silent and solicitous. If not, he had to accept the liberator's punishment, which was offered with all of the *Old Testament* God's fury. Because he rebelled, he suffered the extreme pain about which Gustavo Urrutia,

a black, Cuban intellectual from the Republican period, writes. During Zapata's extreme pain, the government ignored him, because it did not want to see that he was dying.

Of course, his death has philosophical and moral ramifications. It also has sociological and symbolic implications, as we have seen before. The government's attempt to reduce him to a common criminal seems to be exactly what it is—an act of desperation on the State's part in an effort to minimize—first in Cuba and then the rest of the world—the profound impact of an act that put an end to a Cuban era—one of revolutionary experiments and fantasies, and of an exhausted nation's project and model.

In philosophical terms, what is at risk here is how to know what the place is of one, single man in Cuban culture, as a Westerner. This specific difference has nothing to do with the role of man in the universe, but rather with the extremely limited process of Cuban culture, because it concerns a double dimension—that of generic man and of racial and cultural man. Philosophically speaking, there cannot be a single, unique man in Cuba; this is an anthropological limit for Cuban society's construction, the power structure, and the State.

The government's attitude towards Zapata Tamayo reveals an unrepressed subconscious like that of frustrated psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud, because it prevented him from being able to explain certain human behaviors. For me, this case unleashes an old, unrepressed nightmare of Cuban thinker José Antonio Saco's, who knew not what to do with blacks. They had to be excluded, as such, from Cuban modernity. For today's aristocracy, this nightmare is even more complicated. It does not try to exclude blacks from its temple, but it does attempt to assimilate

them, by folklorizing their identity. In their attempt to do this, they give that religious grace a bit of a lay touch, while also keeping its content the same, modernizing it according to the old *criollo* concept of ‘benign guardianship.’ The problem begins with blacks who begin to free themselves, with people like Zapata Tamayo refusing to be grateful and obedient.

Morally, it is important to examine the ethical connection between the State and its citizens, and its latest justification for how it has exercised its power. This is crucial when considering civilization and the *civis*. If the government does not respect its very own rules for the game, it is corrupting its use of violence to extra-legally bring down its adversaries and their followers. It is abusing its own Constitution when it uses paramilitary groups (Rapid Response Brigades), thus morally delegitimizing the very crux of civilization—self-control and respect for the rules of coexistence, even when they are not in our favor. Thus, the moral question is whether or not one considers one’s own values before acting. Given the State’s pedagogical practice, it has certainly stopped asking itself this question, or answering it in a satisfactory manner. Morally, we are facing the Cuban state’s ethical nature relative to its view of man. Who was Zapata Tamayo? A citizen, or a sick man?

The Cuban state’s ideologized, ethical view, which has allowed it to see individuals as patients who need to be cured, and not as citizens to whom it must respond, has led to the medicalization of Zapata’s hunger strike—even though it was really political. The State’s defense, that it did everything medically possible for a man who obstinately refused to eat, reveals that it sees man only in his physical, anthropological dimension. We are all seen as patients, sick or well. Yet, it

didn’t see him in his humanly political condition, in which we are all citizens who make demands. This explains why it has repeatedly tried to characterize the hunger strike via its medical implications, even though it is a political weapon that uses the human body to go up against the State, and satisfy its prolonged accumulation of demands. It is among the oldest of methods employed in political struggles, even by revolutionaries. Only a hypocrite could see this death as worse than those voluntary deaths caused by wars.

Zapata Tamayo’s death ritual shed a bright and smoking light on the open abysses present in Cuba culture and morality. In this case, it cost a human life to resolve that autonomy would win the tense battle between domination and self-determination. Zapata Tamayo exposed one of our history’s profoundest truths, that the only real property blacks have is their own bodies. This is the only property they have been able to sell, expose, show, submit, and exhibit to the world, and their dominators and liberators. It was Zapata Tamayo’s wish to sacrifice his.

He did not negotiate with his body. He only reappropriated his moral identity by personally destroying his physical one. That the remaining hunger strikers are mostly black reconfirms history’s dilemma regarding the identity and integration of blacks in Cuba. In no way do I applaud a final solution such as this. I will limit myself to discussing some of the premises one can derive from anthropological analyses of Cuban culture, and the permanent tension they cause within the nation-building project, particularly with regard to how and to what extent it is expressed, and what dramatic impact this has on the body. In their condition as physically enslaved people, blacks committed suicide, so to see what Zapata Tamayo did to the regime with his body as political negotiation seems

to me a willful application of a rationale that serves to intellectually mitigate how the rate at which the moral scandal surrounding this event intensified. Looking at it sensibly, it is psychologically inadmissible to let someone die on account of the State, but it was also clear that the Cuban government was not going to show any compassion to Zapata Tamayo because of his hunger strike.

Aristocracies do not negotiate with individuals. It is that simple. The government's behavior in matters concerning human rights has been very clear on this. It has never responded to any Cubans' requests, demands, supplications, or petitions. Never. There is not one single bit of evidence to show that this may have happened in the past, and not because it has been its enemies doing the asking. This would be a rational and understandable explanation during a war or conflict. Instead, though, the reason for this is because aristocracies are the enemies—in and on principle—of those underlings who play at being citizens. This is not a friend/enemy political paradigm, but rather the 'natural' relationship between an aristocracy and common people.

It doesn't take much theorizing to see that Zapata Tamayo knew this. It was confirmed for him in the 'happy' number of years he was condemned to prison, a common practice in Cuban prisons. That is why he decided—with chilling calm—to recover his identity by exploiting his body while he/it was at the hands of the thick-skinned aristocracy. It was a terrible decision that horribly reflects the kind of sovereignty that blacks enjoy over their bodies in other spheres—music, dance, sports, and religion. Where most see only a political conflict, they should also, and above all, see an anthropologically moral and cultural conflict. In his deadly gesture, Zapata Tamayo demonstrated

a profundity that was, above all, inadmissible to the authorities. That is the source of the publicly announced criminal record, which is even worse than it seems because it questions another recourse of which the mannered aristocracy makes use involving revolutionary language—racism.

## *Racism*

When renowned French philosopher Louis Althusser strangled his wife, Héléne, early in the 1980s, it caused quite a moral stir, primarily in the Marxist world. There were immediate and wildly varying interpretations and explanations made about the incident.

His political and philosophical enemies explained that Althusser had killed her because he was a criminal, and he had finally revealed his true self. The killing had unequivocally turned him into what he had always been, at his core. Another theory thought he had not been himself; that he was out of his mind when he committed the crime. He had just let himself go; he was rejecting his essence and his truth. He did not commit this crime of his own free will. Instead, it was his sensitivity to the violent and oppressive nature of his society—the heartless domination of multinational capitalism. So, it was not Althusser who had killed, but rather the period, and historical circumstances. The illustrious philosopher, the man who theorized the over-determination of impersonal structures, would never have hurt anyone in some other time or place. This was clearly the explanation his friends set forth.

Both sides felt the moral tension caused by this event. What could move a man of that stature to commit an act so simultaneously banal and twisted? For some, the blame is

entirely with Althusser the anthropologist, who cannot be taken out of the context of his specific mental and psychological world. For others, the blame rests with his era and circumstances. In an act of self-destruction, they chose a very well known and visible personality to denounce the wretchedness of this world. The former followed a truly conservative line of thought; the latter chose a more progressive view of events and people. It is as if we were considering two different actions. The moral tension involved in this was quite obvious, because Althusser's had a reputation prior to his penultimate act of dramatic farewell to the world. The last one was his suicide.

The question was whether or not the reputed, world-known master, had always been an assassin. Should he have been judged on what *came before* he killed his wife or for the time that transpired after his penultimate act? Essentially, the moral issue in the Althusser case forced us to consider whether or not a man should be judged according to his good and altruistic acts, or by his evil and destructive acts. What should have weighed more, his prior life, or his final deed?

The answer to this question will differ every time, depending on whether it is formulated on a moral or political premise, or a combination of both. It is morally possible to relativize Althusser's crime, because he was on the good side. But it can also be harshly condemned because he was on the bad side—according to some. It is also possible to say that he was on the side of good but behaved like a criminal at the end of his life, or he was essentially a criminal, but did something that could be taken as good for humanity—teach at universities and publish learned books. In the end, what Althusser illustrates is that it is possible to embrace just one moral premise and also explain man according to

his life and circumstances. Zapata Tamayo deserves this sort of analysis, too. Yet, in its effort to defend itself, the revolutionary aristocracy hid behind the conservative agenda that racist criminology created in Cuba. What a strange way to be on the left!

### *Who was Zapata Tamayo?*

According to the record used by his family, friends and acquaintances, he was born in Santiago de Cuba on May 15<sup>th</sup>, 1967, to a poor family. They moved to Banes (in Holguín province), and completed up to ninth grade. Then he became a bricklayer and builder. He moved to Havana at the end of the nineties, as part of a work detail manned by builders who worked on the building of hotels, which he alternated with work at Empresa de Obras Marítimas [a marine construction company], at the Port of Havana. It is not certain that he was a member of the Union of Communist Youth, although some versions state that he was. Yet, he was a worker from a detail whose members all came from the eastern provinces. As such, he would have been thoroughly politically indoctrinated, and had sworn personal loyalty to the Cuban revolution's leader.

A family in Regla took him in; he lived there for a few months. Then he started to divide his free time between the 'Plaza Mayor,' with its discussions about baseball, and the *plaza menor*, and its political ones—all in Havana's Central Park.

Clearly, he had political doubts, because he went from being a member of the indoctrinated work detail to being a dissident. His was an authentic dissidence, too, because testimonies confirm that he made his political debut while defending the Cuban revolution in the *plaza menor*. It was at the *Parque Central*, as a result of all those discussions,



that he made the natural transition that anyone who was born after 1959, and opened his or her eyes, would experience. It is also the case that Zapata Tamayo was first arrested on December 6<sup>th</sup>, 2002, in Havana, when he was trying to take a course on Human Rights that was being offered by Dr. Oscar Elías Biscet, who is now in prison. He was taken to the National Revolutionary Police Unit, in the town of Diez de Octubre. He was charged with alleged Public Disorder, Contempt, and Disobedience, jailed at the Guanajay prison (in Pinar del Río), and then later freed in January 2003. Once liberated, he completed his personal transition by going on hunger strikes at 157 Humbolt Street, where dissident Jesús Yáñez Pelletier, who today lives in Spain, and Marietta Villalta, lived. Those hunger strikes were organized by Martha Beatriz Roque, principal leader of the Assembly to Promote Civil Society in Cuba, and two other of his closest collaborators—jurist René Gómez Manzano and engineer Félix Bonne Carcasés.

While there, Zapata Tamayo was again arrested, for a second time, on March 20<sup>th</sup>, 2003, and again charged with Contempt and Public Disorderliness. He was sentenced in the wake of the repressive wave against the Cause of the 75, as it was known. They incarcerated him in the Quivicán prison (in Havana province) till 2005. According to some prisoners, he earned the nickname he was given while there—“rebel soul.” Judging from the charges, by now it is obvious that we are dealing with a typical man from Cuba’s eastern provinces—an indomitable type. From Quivicán, Zapata Tamayo was transferred to the Taco Taco prison (in Pinar del Río province), where he began what became his prolonged pilgrimage through many prison sentences—each time getting more severe sentences.

There are a couple of interesting points regarding his transition. The first, that Zapata Tamayo was a violent man. It is true that he fought someone at the intersection of Prado and San José Streets, one of the *Parque Central*’s borders, and drew blood. This passion-related violence is very common in Cuba; it does not necessarily make anyone a criminal. I mention this because the worse violence is that which is perpetrated against one’s own body, as Mahatma Gandhi, who carried out several hunger strikes in his fight against a far from Thatcher-like British government, maintained. Zapata Tamayo had to have accumulated and redirected a great deal of violence to go on the hunger strike that finally led to his death. The second point relates to the fact that Zapata Tamayo declared a desire to nourish himself with the principles of non-violence while on the hunger strikes at Humbolt Street. His time with Elías Biscet, and reading and following Gandhi, had already initiated him. He had already had his first practical lesson in prison, where he was stabbed by another inmate but decided not to take revenge. This means that Zapata Tamayo had already completed the purification (spiritual transition) that turns socially dangerous violence that harms others, into politically symbolic violence, with which one only hurts one’s self. This was *ahimsa*—the kind of non-violence that Gandhi practiced. It seems irrefutable that no one could give up his corporal life, little by little, over 86 days, without having gone through this process of transition towards a different view of humanity. One must be able to concentrate and have courage, a sense of purpose, an accumulated, controlled, and directed violence that is directed by the mind against some powerful thing. One must also have a dark sense of humor to be able to deal with the banal cele-

bration of men and women on the outside who ignore the sacrifice. It is quite important to understand that Zapata Tamayo carried out his hunger strike while being hidden from public opinion. This does not morally weaken Guillermo Fariñas's earlier gesture, but it does make it more moving.

A common criminal could not endure the first phase of this transition—the abstract and serene knowledge that there is something worth more than one's life. Yet, his enemies say he was a common criminal with a permanently damaging record of committed crimes. According to them, he was turned into a political prisoner via some kind of Judeo-Masonic conspiracy involving Amnesty International—which declared him a prisoner of conscience in 2003—and the United States of America, the European Union and—last but not least—the horde of island mercenaries who needed a martyr but didn't have one. Zapata Tamayo inspires a moral debate. According to his enemies, he should be judged not from Louis Althusser's position, on a life dedicated to noble and edifying gestures and actions, but rather by his death—because it was a criminal act. If Althusser's adversaries did not count his earlier life, then for Zapata Tamayo's enemies, the last stage of his life did not count either. Was Zapata Tamayo a criminal? It would be really good to know this for even a better reason, and not just to color his past, as the moral conservatives would do, but rather to write a biography of human proportions to put this new history in perspective. It would have to be written in a period of peoples' post-innocence. In it, on page after page, each human life would include all the hues of his or her existence. That would be the best way to end this patrological and hagiographic view of citizens as innocent and immature—as non-citizens. Zapata Tamayo's short life would

be a good place to start leaving behind the model for writing history that we copy from Thomas Carlyle, by which we are interested in writing only the history of great men. Better yet is to write fake stories about those who might consider themselves great men, and not ever remember they were evil, by virtue of mystical magic and oblivion.

## *Analysis*

The power elite's aristocratic response should be analyzed from the point of view of Cuba's social, cultural, and political history. Its reaction reflects not only a mindset but also the growing divorce between myth (Revolution) and *logos* (Cuban nation), which is actually a very good thing, although it is costly, too. To arrive at this conclusion one must assume that Orlando Zapata Tamayo was indeed a common criminal.

I now need to go back to the analytical model I employed for Louis Althusser's case, because it allows us to see a moral analysis of man within the context of his circumstances, and one that looks at man independently of his circumstances or conflict. The first of these models is fine for a socially progressive approach, the second for an aristocratic-conservative one that reveals that there is racism in Cuba.

The traditional, Cuban criminological perspective even now associates criminality with certain human types and cultures. Racial origins and cultural origins are always seen together, to create social typologies that pre-criminalize human groups according to certain origins, and prejudice any exercise of justice or authority. The assumption is that blacks are prone to committing certain kinds of crimes—not just any crime—for which reason they should be judicially neutralized, to control any possible

criminal acts they may commit. Two things are of interest in this case. One of them is that cultural precriminalization becomes a typical example of something virtual creating something real. Zapata Tamayo was a black man whose circumstances were created and compounded by his environment and lifestyle—his marginalization. Then his criminal typification totally keeps him from a reforming conversion, as is the case with Cuban anthropological tradition.

When analysis does not reveal this humanly created, social marginalization as a source of criminal behavior, and that there is no possibility for people to reform, because it has been eliminated, then we are indeed engaged in a conservative and reactionary examination that exclusively blames the individual for his faults, and blocks his possibility for recuperation. Was Zapata Tamayo a criminal who was in favor of society, or against it? One would assume that any study of living conditions in Cuba would serve as a point of departure for analyzing social conduct. In this sense, Zapata Tamayo would not be *a* criminal, but *the* typical and average criminal that is generated by Cuban marginalization, and that maximizes the already high number of Cuban prisoners who are in a large number of overstuffed prisons. This social kind of marginalization, which has been corrected and increased in recent years, exists principally in racially identifiable areas and specific regions in Cuba where poverty, race, and cultural impoverishment coincide and are generationally reproduced. To opt for living, which can very possibly serve to indicate how much freedom there is, and makes us responsible for our actions, should always be judged within the context of our formative social environment. This choice is made from experience, and either does or does not offer the option to rectify our cho-

sen path and pay our debts. This means that we can only make amends because we are guilty. Closing the path to one without contextualizing the other is exactly what Althusser's conservative enemies did, and what the aristocratic power elite did with Zapata Tamayo.

Would he have been able to make up for his past sins or not? Yes. It was context that determined certain behaviors in Zapata Tamayo, yet circumstances would not allow him to avoid them. Marginality is the one social condition that legal and moral circumstances do not forgive in either sense. Yet, the moment for his act of contrition arrived when Zapata Tamayo was recovered, one way or another. What is interesting about his recovery is that it did not follow the path of the society that had produced and reproduced the marginality that in one moment determined who he was, but rather moved towards civilly rebelling against said society.

His past and history weighed heavily on him. Zapata Tamayo was a violent man who repeated in Havana behaviors he had learned from the State, and in the heroic, cultural tradition of his place of origin. Without violence, there are no heroes. But he was also a man who learned to retrain his violence by means of a harsh, exacting, and civically epic method that allowed him to turn his prison bed into a bookcase. The capital, with all its rituals, is where he got initiated on how to morally select his next life project, this time with a difficult road to hoe—a struggle for freedom. He might say this choice worked against his moral and social past. There is something great in the simplicity of what avenges our history.

The problem for the revolutionary aristocracy was not so much that Zapata Tamayo had probably been a criminal (it knows very well that if this were a possibility for contri-

tion, there would also be blame), but that he recouped himself for the other side. Had Zapata Tamayo gone through a revolutionary reeducation process, he would have become a soldier of the Revolution and participated in some important, State mission. At any propitious moment, he could have been put out there as an example of a Revolution that rescues the kingdom's lost sheep and takes advantage of any slightly opened, under protected temple door. From his assumedly criminal position, upon choosing a freedom that is excluded by any and all perfecting, revolutionary projects, Zapata Tamayo connects with the history of the Cuban nation as *logos* and not with the Cuban revolution as myth. The revolutionary aristocracy attempts to deny this connection—against itself. It is understood that Zapata Tamayo signifies this epic inversion from the civic world that is psychologically intolerant to it and its project. This allows for part of his story, and that of Cuba's creation, to be forgotten.

## History

Cuban historiography has not yet overcome its racist epistemology, which has obscured these two things—black participation in the inchoate national project and that of bandits in political history. If it weren't for the impact of psychology, culture, and politics on this aristocracy's sclerotic perspective, it would be hard to understand how, despite its education, it is unaware of the fact that our nation's formation cannot be appreciated without taking banditry into consideration. There are two powerful reasons for this.

The first is that Cuba's independence struggles must be seen in terms of their social expectations, which means always including those who were exploited and mar-

ginalized—men who appreciated society's intersections, who risked danger, and understood the mechanisms by which to insert themselves and penetrate the darkness of their society, and the inhospitable areas of its geography. It also meant anything and everything that would help strengthen the nation's symbolism against foreigners and reaffirm everywhere what was considered as authentically Cuban. This means that pimp, womanizer, and criminal Alberto *Yarini* Ponce de León, who today could be completing a sentence of more or less 30 years, was and is an authentic icon of Cuban culture, of our effort to reaffirm who we are before foreigners, because he managed to successfully, intelligently, and courageously dabble in a business controlled by the French. This is why *Yarini* is the subject of books and films. But there's more. Developments in Cuba after the Zanjón Pact, which put an end to our first war for independence (1868-1878), essentially meant that peasants became outlawed subjects who were protected by residents of specific communities, which British historian Eric Hobsbawm suggests generated a specific form of rural protest identified as social banditry. Cuban American historian Louis A. Pérez, Jr, documents this in his book *Vagrants, Beggars, and Bandits: Social Origins of Cuban Separatism* (2010). This is a very interesting perspective from which to examine the role of a corrupt society such as Cuba's, in its own moral and civic regeneration, at all these strata and levels.

These bandits operated throughout Cuba during the decade of 1880 to 1890. They were led by people like Juan Vento, José Inocencio Sosa (Gallo Sosa), and Manuel García (the King of the Cuban countryside), the most famous leader of all who operated in Havana province. There were also Victoriano and Luís Machín, who dominated



Orlando Zapata Tamayo (1967-2010)

the Vuelta Abajo region (in Pinar del Río), José Plasencia, José (Matagas) Álvarez, Nicanor Duarte, Regino Alfonso, Desiderio and Nicasio Matos, and Aurelio Sanabria, whose territory covered the inner regions of Matanzas province. In Santa Clara we had Florentino Rodríguez and Bruno Gutiérrez. All of them joined the independence struggles that José Martí's Cuban Revolutionary Party (PRC) organized.

Manuel García, in particular, was an ardent defender of Cuba's freedom. He was one of the criminals who accepted early amnesty and a Spanish colonial subsidy with which to emigrate to Florida. His conversion to the independence cause happened while he was working, for two years, as a cigar maker, in Key West. He returned to Cuba in 1888 as an agent of Key West's Revolutionary Club, and often invoked revolutionary slogans in his assaults on property. Much of the money he collected during those years helped to support the revolutionary activities of his old associates in Key West. He donated the ransom he received for freeing kidnapped planter Antonio Fernández de Castro, in 1894, to the PRC's organizers in Havana.

Intellectual Octavio Ramón Costa y Blanco's book *Una vida sin sombra* [A Life with No Shadow] (1950), which properly highlights the life of Cuban revolutionary Juan Gualberto Gómez, who was also friend to José Martí, captures the experiences of many revolutionaries whose lives were in the shadows. Only an old, aristocratizing view of the history of Cuba—a country with no counties, but that had counts, and with no *marcas* [frontier or border], but that had marquises—could hide the issue of bandits as participants in history and not know their own country. What is certain, though, is that although U.S. writer Rosalie Schwartz, examines deeply the impact Martí's contact

with Cuban bandits had on his promotion of independence, in her book *Lawless Liberators* (1989), the cultural, social, and political schizophrenia that results from creating two parallel worlds inside just one cultural, social, and political history is the quickest and easiest way for us to repeat ourselves—because this cannot be understood without also understanding its created and derived marginalities. This is just like someone who cannot get beyond his trauma because he has refused to publicly acknowledge it, for himself and others.

The second reason is that Cuba has had too short a history for real aristocracies to be forged on blood, land, or origins. The only aristocracy that seemed to gel at some point was that of money, which, from the beginning did not really take off. Tradition takes time. Our pathetic attempts to invent ourselves an aristocracy on this island seems ridiculous; we lacked an element essential for all aristocracies—strong rules concerning conduct and honor that guarantee their ability to endure, and their irrevocable behavior in the face of tempting transgressions. An aristocrat who always laughs at his own codes is a mimicking ape. Only a genuine aristocracy can forge the mindset needed to distance itself from the customs and styles of the underdogs, particularly when it wants to shape a specific nation-building project.

The fact that we lacked a real aristocracy here, which was logical, opened the door to having an independence project based on a republican and civic legacy, and to democratic and popular ideals. To accomplish this in Cuba meant having to associate with the underdogs—and their customary habits, or with those who lacked class consciousness. This explains why the ideals of the nineteenth-century struggles, and the kidnapers, drug smokers, pimps, and other actors

with vulgar behavior and morality, worked side by side. The fight put up by Manuel García, the King of the Cuban countryside, was taken up and continued by Crescencio Pérez, the peasant who helped the rebels at the Sierra Maestra, and was then pursued on account of a law that considered him to be an anti-social criminal and livestock thief.

### *Could it be any other way?*

No. Where social and political history overlap in order to create a project, it is impossible not to cross social, moral, and behavioral boundaries associated with practices that don't seem objectionable, when they are considered abstractly. Basically, in developing nations, social classes forge themselves as a result of this process; their traditions tend to focus on everything that can in conjunction make their class as weak as possible when facing the new millennium. Where social and political history comes together for the purpose of an emancipatory project, the issue runs much deeper. The very process of the Cuban revolution is eloquent. *Secretos de los Generales* [The Secrets of Generals] (1996), conceived and edited by journalist Luís Báez (and of which I've not seen another edition), is a narrative filled with stories about men who got to be generals, and held high political and military positions after 1959. From a military perspective, they also had exploits worthy of consideration by any military academy anywhere.

Here are all the possible, explicit and implied ambiguities of the human experience—from those who protested, not for revolutionary reasons, but to free themselves from the classes and origins, to those who committed petty crimes and were arrested, and then passed off as people who were unjustly sentenced as common criminals,

when in reality they were jailed for opposing Fulgencio Batista's dictatorship, or playing the illegal numbers, or being other kinds of 'bad' people. All this was for the purpose of making an impression on those who thought they knew what the Revolution was, through its accomplishments—because that was what they had been taught.

With regards to Cuban history, it is not possible to make judgments without also believing that the course of our past should be like Austria's. If it turns out that in his earlier history, in Cuba's east, Zapata Tamayo was a criminal, then we must recall that anything is possible when we look back to the vivid pages of our origins, and to the potential paths towards our futures—any future. Furthermore, as usual, to disown the dark side of our history demands a critique of the present—and all of society's strata, levels, and environments. This should happen from the top down, and never in reverse, because people who have in essence been taught to be eternal children, do everything that children do—imitate their teachers. They do what

they see being done, and not so much what they are told to do.

### *Final point*

I want to remind the revolutionary aristocracy of just one more condition necessary for it to endure—that it judiciously use its own memory. Its documents state that just before his arrest, Orlando Zapata Tamayo was on a civic and political strike, on March 20<sup>th</sup>, 2003. My readers may forget the memories of others, but they should not forget their own, lest they run the risk of not being taken seriously. A cursory reading of *Disidentes*, by Rosa Miriam Elizalde and Luís Báez (2003), will help shape opinion. Zapata Tamayo was arrested during the largest political raid in the last 20 years, when he was undergoing his Gandhian liberation exercises. Enough said.

Note:

1- Sloterdijk, Peter. *Crítica de la razón cínica* (España: Ediciones Siruela, 2003: 32).