

The Legacy of Zapata

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The news spread around the globe like wildfire; a Cuban political prisoner had died from an extended hunger strike while in custody. This event caused pain and indignation in the pro-democracy community, and an intense stir within the Cuban populace. Beyond that, it also provoked a rarely seen global display of disdain for what by now is too lengthy.

Orlando Zapata Tamayo was born after the Cuban revolution's triumph; he was a humble, Afro-Cuban worker, and a peaceful defender of human rights who was unjustly sentenced to over 30 years by authorities who were set against him. His rebellion was a hunger strike that lasted till his death, which cast light on Cuban prison's customary excesses and abuses.

This is not the first time a Cuban mother, or many other international empaths, have had to mourn the death of someone who has sacrificed his life. It was meant to cleanse a shameful sin. With almost forty years between them, Orlando Zapata Tamayo and Pedro Luís Boitel were also separated by their skin color and

social origin—yet they were of equal stature. The characteristics they shared were their manhood, their love of Cuba, of freedom, and their resolute commitment to valor and nonviolence. This explains why they were handed over to death.

Boitel died in 1972, at that time that few people outside of Cuba knew that Cubans—a people who had been stripped of their freedoms, and whose greatest hopes had been betrayed—were shouting out with pain. Boitel, a poet and student leader, fought for democracy against the dictatorships of Fulgencia Batista and Fidel Castro.

Tamayo—a bricklayer, plumber, and democracy fighter—died after an 86-day hunger strike. He was condemned for his open and peaceful struggle, and died because his victimizers insisted upon demonstrating their disdain for life and dignity. He was a humble Afro-Cuban man who till then was an unknown. They were convinced that someone like him was not capable of sacrificing his own life for his faith in the values and principles he defended.



Reina Luisa Tamayo with family members and friends at the Banes cemetery, where Orlando Zapata Tamayo was laid to rest

This unspeakable act of inhumanity confirms that Cuba's leaders have a skewed perception of values and reality. History would judge as a passive accomplice to Castroism's persistent criminality anyone from the civilized world who refused to acknowledge the importance of this tragedy.

As always, whenever the Cuban government exposes its criminal nature, it provokes a wave of disapproval that reaches every corner of the world, and mars its public image. Sadly, it takes something like the tragic death of an innocent—a frequent 'gift' from the Castro leadership to us—to shake the public's conscience, which generally accepts as normal its daily state of intolerance, fear and hopelessness. Unfortunately, other innocent people die

in this world, too, but they don't make the international news.

The case of Zapata Tamayo give us the chance to mourn the shameful indolence of most of Latin America's political elite, those democrats who know very well what a dictatorship is, and also swear allegiance to freedom and pluralism. Their response to the atrocities of the only current totalitarian state in our hemisphere reiterates their complicit and guilty silence. Many hypocrites have limited their description of Zapata Tamayo's death to saying it was lamentable—just like the Cuban government. Might any of them possibly know of a human death that isn't? Deaths are mourned whether they are natural or accidental. Crimes, however, are condemned.

Some honorable exceptions are those of Chilean president Sebastián Piñera, the distinguished Oscar Arias, and Mexico's senators; these sub-continental democrats insist on validating with their silence the Castro brothers' degradation. Latin America's politicians were not even moved by the unscrupulous, propagandistic games that the Cuban authorities played with a mother's pain.

Brazilian president Luis Inácio da Silva, spurred by his illusions of global leadership, was not embarrassed to show his support for the Castro regime; he blemished his own name with Zapata Tamayo's death by hiding behind an ever-so-useful policy of non-interference. A few hours later, da Silva was offering solutions for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

It's shocking to think that these Latin American democrats could actually have their good sense clouded by an ongoing, inexcusable saga, or equally unacceptable political commitments. These include benefiting politically and economically from the needs and frustrations of the professionals exported by the Cuban government to their countries, and the use of the Cuban case to channel their anti-American passions against crimes. Such attitudes make one think that many of our region's politicians have hidden behind the trappings of democratic rhetoric, but feel the

same disdain towards human beings that the Castro government has shown itself to have over the past half century.

In facing such criminals and accomplices, one might ask what more the Cuban government could do to its people, so that the world's democrats might become more aware and take action against the magnitude of this dangerous tragedy?

Zapata Tamayo's valient sacrifice served to show the world the high price that people must pay because of messianic *caudillos*. It also reaffirms that there are men who are ready to do anything in Cuba. Men like Tamayo are not likely to submit to the cowardly ambition of a dynasty. They also will not allow it to forever destroy a country that belongs to everyone, by indiscriminately plunging it into public disgrace.

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