

The Paradigm's Color

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After half a century of stubbornly denying the existence of political prisoners in its country, Cuba's government saw no other option but to call upon the Catholic Church to enter into a dialogue with it. In principle, this conversation's goal was to alleviate the desperate situation of a few dozen political prisoners, the worse cases from among the 167 men recognized as political prisoners in the last report issued by the Cuban Human Rights and National Reconciliation Commission (CCDHRN). The health of these few dozen men is in the most precarious of states, due to the Dantean conditions of their imprisonment.

Governmental authorities even had the audacity to allege that Cuba's political prisoners were not what everyone said they were, but rather just mercenaries at the service of the United States. These affirmations were not only unsustainable; they bordered on the ridiculous, especially after they were repeated—unedited—at every international, human rights event in which Cuba had official representation. It also didn't keep many personalities, governments, and humanitarian institutions from expressing respect for the island's regime (silence implies consent).

Now, suddenly, the very same authorities that tried to hide a proliferating number of *de facto* political prisoners not only started being cautious when slandering these men, but also publicly accepted the usefulness of softening their treatment of this drama. Given the context, it was astonishing that this event coincided precisely with a great international outcry against the Cuban government—circumstances that were bolstered by very broad and unusual media coverage. Evidently, something quite exceptional had to have taken place for a calamitous situation that was neither new nor unknown to anyone to suddenly become worldwide, front-page, headline news.

In Cuba, analysts closely associated with official policymakers, such as political scientist Rafaél Hernández, director of the Cuban, social science journal *Temas*, publicly stated that the events associated with this exchange between the government and the Catholic Church were “unthinkable” only a few months earlier. On the extreme other side of this position was Laura Pollán, leader of the Ladies in White, and wife of Héctor Maseda, one of the political prisoners who was helped by this dialogue. She confessed to

feeling moved, surprised, and not yet able to process the results of this exchange.

This was not the first time the government had decided to mitigate the suffering of a group of political prisoners because of pressures not in keeping with its agenda, or saw itself obliged to act in a very specific and timely manner (see Table 1). It did so by improving (in a very relative way) the conditions of their imprisonment, or by exchanging or pardoning them under a legal form of parole that allows them to freely walk the streets but technically remain prisoners. What was absolutely unexpected and shocking this time was: a) the revealing circumstances around the case, which rightly made it seem scandalous, and is without precedent, from the perspective of the international media attention it received; b) that the government was not able to maneuver in a way favorable to itself, as it always had been able to; and, c) the government's shifting focus, in light of this phenomenon, even when this change was much more noticeable in its actions than its public rhetoric.

This was about the unraveling of a climax destined to mark a 'before and after' in Cuban political history over the last fifty years. Why did it happen just now? Who made it possible? Who was able to provoke this modification, as unthinkable as it was for those government supporters, and just short of unbelievable for its adversaries? What unique events determined it?

The paradigm

On February 23rd, 2010, or four months before the abovementioned events, political prisoner Orlando Zapata Tamayo died after enduring an 86-day, rigorous hunger strike while demanding an improvement to the inhuman conditions of his imprisonment.

This man, a simple, humble, black bricklayer from Eastern Cuba, not only shattered the official myth of merceranism among members of the internal opposition, but with his self-destruction, also consciously and voluntarily offered an incredible lesson in revolutionary radicalism. This lesson may be comparable (save the historical distance and distinct details between them), perhaps, only when considering another one, offered a century earlier in the Protest of Baraguá, by another humble descendant of African slaves: Antonio Maceo y Grajales.

Just like Maceo, and within the context of his own era and specific circumstances, Zapata Tamayo saw himself having to face agents of an overwhelming, intolerant, and unmovable power. He seems to have understood that it was not possible to do so without extreme firmness and sacrifice. Some may say his attitude was not the only thing behind this massive prisoner pardon. It is rarely the case that transcendental events emerge and develop because of only one person's spontaneous action. We also cannot ignore the role that the sustained, public pressure brought to bear by the valiant Ladies in White, an organization whose members are the wives, mothers, and other women, mostly family members of the political prisoners, who have peacefully marched the streets demanding freedom for their loved ones. Certainly, their actions have to be counted among the motives that led to the government's dialogue with the Catholic Church. We would also be remiss if we did not mention the constant denunciations of the independent press, the blogger movement, and general internal opposition. Yet, no matter how valuable some of these conditioning factors, they were not anything new. Not even the asphyxiating situation of the economic crisis the government faced was new to it, and some analysts

consider it one of the main reasons for the pardons. What is truly unusual, what is truly unacceptable, and destined to totally change peaceful struggle against the power elite's injustices in today's Cuba, was Zapata Tamayo's sacrifice.

Far from proposing his action to himself as having a premeditated political objective, Zapata Tamayo (and with him, the internal opposition), in his desperate firmness, and with the natural and spontaneous reflex of a common man, came upon the only way to effectively challenge the government's intransigence. He not only found a way to apply this method of struggle from below, as a member of the oppressed and defenseless mass, but also from a dark and dingy prison cell. It was Zapata Tamayo's extremely dramatic and heroic acts, and not the Catholic Church's or any other foreign entity's interventions (as some analysts allude) that forced the government to rectify its attitude, and even its focus, during this disgrace. Beyond facilitating the dialogue (which was really more like a monologue that was dictated and absolutely controlled by the government, in its attempt to save face), the Catholic Church and Spanish representatives were no more than adaptable figures for this scene's backdrop, and I must make it clear that I do not mean this pejoratively. Much less am I expressing ingratitude. I am simply asking that the event be studied objectively.

Suffice it to say that Orlando Zapata Tamayo's death was the spark, the basic cause of a process that seems to have resulted in the pardon of the 52 "Black Spring" prisoners—who are still behind bars. After the essential spark, what ensued was something we might call the apogee, the icing on the cake, an event whose leading figure is an extraordinary man whose skin is also black. The paradigm in this singular chapter of our contem-

porary history, as in so many others of bygone eras, bears the color of former slaves, and I don't believe this should be seen as a coincidence.

From Baraguá to Santa Clara

On February 24th, 2010, just a few hours after the death of Zapata Tamayo, Guillermo Fariñas, a black journalist and psychologist with a long and difficult history as a member of the internal, peaceful opposition, announced from his home in Santa Clara (in Central Cuba) that he had decided to follow Zapata in his refusal of food or water, and to demand the release of 26 political prisoners who were extremely ill due to the severity of their imprisonment. A former prisoner himself, a man whose body already bore the deteriorating scars of prison's rigors, the countless beatings he received at the hands of street gangs organized and directed by the Interior Ministry, and the effects of 23 prior hunger strikes, Guillermo Fariñas would awaken the awe and solidarity of much of the world through his tenacious, unbending, serene, and lucid attitude. In his case, as in Maceo's, the aplomb of his decision revealed a highly developed, political consciousness and a nearly revolutionary vision for his time.

During the 135 days of his hunger strike, Fariñas never stopped publicly denouncing—via the international press, the blogger movement, and Cuba's independent press—not just the horrors of prison in Cuba, but also the country's generally bankrupt state. His statements, often made from the brink of agonizing death, always adhered strictly to the truth, and remained devoid of personal rancor or hatred towards his oppressors.

A reporter from the Spanish newspaper *El País* confessed that after interviewing

Fariñas that the man's resolute disposition in facing death had frightened him. One could expect no less, especially since Fariñas' actions were not motivated by fanaticism, dogma, harsh remarks, dogged obstinacy, or suicidal tendencies, but rather as the result of careful reasoning and very patiently, well thought out convictions. Perhaps Antonio Maceo, too, inspired similar fear among the foreigners who heard his arguments in the Protest of Baraguá.

Like Maceo, Guillermo Fariñas, too, had to boldly and fearlessly face the accusations of his adversaries, and the pleas of his family members and close friends to abandon the strike. Yet, nothing was successful in derailing his plan for even a moment. Government spokespersons (and their cronies outside of Cuba) even dared to accuse him of being a common criminal, the same accusation that had been launched against Orlando Zapata Tamayo. After all, they were black, and the government must have thought this to be the most convenient way to tarnish their reputations.

Fariñas was hospitalized by the end of March, and was subjected to intensive therapy, in an attempt to artificially nourish him and try to reverse his precarious state. He twice refused the Spanish government's offer to immediately transfer him to Madrid, for medical attention, in case he changed his mind. But, he persisted. Not even the most tempting offers, or the Cuban government's coldest and cruelest intransigence, or even threats, the torture of hunger and thirst, or approaching death, changed this. Not even his family's tearful pleading did.

Fariñas is heir to a tradition of suffering, resistance, and rebellion (from the slaves who were brought from Africa). It is hard to find another like this in the annals of human civilization. He was also marked by the same

stigma that sealed the fate of his ancestors. Fariñas showed himself able to assume his role with an almost illuminated coherence, with an integrity solely found in those who must risk life and limb to ascend from the depths of Hell.

During his more than four, painful months with no food or water, there were those who were anxious, who at one time or another, hoped to see him escape death—many, but not him. Finally, one day, after confirming that political prisoners were being pardoned, a number greater than even he had demanded, he agreed to begin taking sips of liquid, but he was still at risk of dying, due to a blood clot lodged in his jugular vein.

Despite all this, and conscious of the fact that he will never again be a healthy man of 48 years, Fariñas told the *El País* correspondent, in his first statement after stopping the hunger strike that “he forgave those who have tortured and beaten me; now we should all be generous and move forward together, for the good of Cuba.”¹

Meanwhile, engineer and university professor Félix Antonio Bonne, another descendant of slaves, stood ready and able to replace Fariñas in his hunger strike, in case he died without accomplishing what he had wanted. It could be no other way.

Notes:

1. Vicent, Mauricio. «Se ha abierto una ventana y hay que aprovecharla» *El País* (13 July 2010). http://www.elpais.com/articulo/internacional/ha/abierto/ventana/hay/aprovecharla/elpepuint/20100713elpepuint_10/Tes

Table 1

Prisoners Pardoned in Cuba

Source:

<http://www.diariodecuba.net/cuba/81-cuba/2314-datos-los-indultos-ciclicos-del-regimen.html>

- April 14, 1962—60 political prisoners who participated in the frustrated Bay of Pigs invasion (Editor's Note: the notion of political prisoner here is conflated with that of prisoner of war).
- December 23, 1962—1,113 prisoners from the invasion are exchanged for \$53 million dollars in food and medicine (See previous Editor's Note).
- November 1969-December 1970—Some 1,600 prisoners in small groups.
- 1979—3,600 prisoners in groups of 400 and 500, as a gesture towards the dialogue established between Havana and exile representatives (Editor's Note: the liberation of these political prisoners was agreed upon between Havana and Washington at a private meeting in Cuernavaca, Mexico, in 1978).
- 1982—Armando Valladares, by petition of French president François Mitterrand.
- June 28, 1984—26 Cuban prisoners and 22 U.S. prisoners (common prisoners, drug traffickers and airplane hijackers), after negotiations by the Reverend Jesse Jackson.
- May-July 1986—130 prisoners, 27 of them by negotiation by French oceanographer Jacques Cousteau.
- December 1986—Ex-commander Eloy Gutiérrez Menoyo, by petition of Spanish president Felipe González.
- December 1988—40 prisoners, by petition from Cardinal John O'Connor.
- November 1991—Four prisoners of Spanish origin, after negotiations by Manuel Fraga.
- July 1993—Two prisoners condemned for "preparing attacks on Fidel Castro," thanks to negotiations by Fraga and the Spanish chancellery (Editor's Note: These were ex-commanders Rolando Cubelas and Ramón Guin).
- May 1995—Three prisoners, by request of governor Bill Richardson.
- February—Six oppositionists, among them Indamiro Restano and Sebastián Arcos, by petition of the *France Libertés* foundation and Danielle Mitterrand.
- February 1998—299 prisoners (common and political) after a visit by Pope John Paul II.
- January 2004-January 2010—22 of 75 dissidents condemned in 2003 to sentences of between 6 and 28 years. 21 were pardoned for health reasons, one because he completed his sentence, and others through negotiations of the Spanish government.
- June 12, 2010—A paraplegic prisoner.
- July 7, 2010—An announcement is made that another five of the 75 will be freed, and the rest required to serve a maximum of four more months. This makes up the rest of the 53 still incarcerated.