

# 1912: The Resistive Cabala of the *Criollo* Nation

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Cuba is regressing back to 1912. This is a repeated but seldom studied fact. I believe that what is essential for understanding the kind of nation we live in—both in moments of crisis and considering its consolidating ability—is shaped by the way in which the Cuban elite deals with the inclusion or integration of difference, of the racial or cultural ‘other.’

1912 is the Cabala for understanding and deciphering the essence of the permanent crisis this national model creates. If one can figure it out, it is a cultural mystery that this date hides and can explain the dysfunction, cultural backwardness, atrophied political model and discrepancies that Cuban society has been experiencing in many arenas, and some specifically involving ‘others.’

This mystery is not religious in any of its confessional or mystical varieties. My definition of ‘mysterious’ is technical, regarding an essential incomprehension and ignorance of social and cultural coordinates and norms that determine our lives and coexistence, just the same. Thus, even if the mystery of God

can never be revealed, our social mystery can be. Which is why 1912 seems recurrent to me, because it represents the kind of mystery whose cause and profile few attempt to examine.

I believe doing this is essential to provoke the kind of abreaction that is fundamental for people and cultures wanting to explore all their potentialities, according to Sigmund Freud. Given what is known now, we could easily understand that nightmares are the nocturnal result of a repression and self-repression that efficiently neutralize a possibly coherent future and wellbeing. If we open up and examine the core concept of race from the perspective of 1912, and using social criticism, this would restructure the Cuban imaginary and reestablish our national project via culture.

Of course, in revealing this mystery, one needs a creative confluence of disciplines that facilitate a revelation of the hidden and unfetters the way through different foci and sources. An historical or media approach to this, while necessary for this aperture and to

destroy the taboo on it, is not enough. It may confuse things.

The problem with the historical approach is that it hardly ever questions the foundations of its own discipline. Due to its traditional methods, it lacks a way to fill in the silence of the missing or illegible sources. This is why two books as different as *La Conspiración de los Iguales*, by Rolando Rodríguez, and *La Guerrita del 12*, by Rafael Fermoselle, are equally insufficient in their ability to explain anything important, despite the fact they offer unknown data and the stories they actually tell have not been sufficiently circulated or told.

A media focus, for its part, could create the public illusion that it is actually talking about something, about content, when in reality there is nothing being talked about at all; more likely, it is hiding the essential. Journalism is fine and very necessary for a critical focus on the present, but it can be disastrous when it deals with the past because it lacks a critical perspective on the very foundations of the society from which it speaks. We would need extremely perceptive journalists to control this natural tendency, and there are few of those—especially in closed societies.

Culture is one of the perspectives that would make possible a penetration of our mysteries. This involves the way in which our manner of thinking and our behavior either frame the circumstances or resist that our circumstances be framed. A history of mentalities would be helpful with this, however this could not be done in Cuba, given our cultural immaturity and the fact that this is not an area developed by Cuban intellectuals.

Despite its limitations, when I try to understand what I believe is our unique, historical-cultural Cabala, I rely on this cultural perspective. Something different from what

evolutionist theory and teleology taught us happens: the present helps us understand the past. This leads us to ask: “If this is the way it is today, how must it have been yesterday?”

This profound, cultural reality is present today, as one might expect, but its hypotheses are not critically studied. The organic intelligentsia and press take up a defensive position when they can no longer deny the existence of racism and its consequences in Cuba. They blame culture, as if it were a scab, without assuming blame for their own perception of the cultural process. It is as if they could separate culture and subjects and they jointly develop.

Isn't the intelligentsia the most resistive part of that scab? Furthermore, seen partially, what are the nuclei of this resistive Cabala that is 1912 in and of itself? The mentality with which those in power see black subjects during times of crisis; the right they assign themselves to define for them a limited, containing space within the model's deconstruction; the political, social and intellectual resources they deploy to neutralize their autonomy; and the way it deals with their resistance.

This is not without contradiction, however, because when the power elite's defense creates dissonance with society's greatest needs, the elite's contortions and distortions, their conceptual inability become apparent, as do the pathetic and ridiculous nature of their gestures and actions, too.

As a Cabala, 1912, with all its mystery, has the ability to reveal that the national model designed for Cuba does not function in terms of its essence, component and heterodoxies. The proof is in the fact that our elite never respond to our multiple crises by inviting the nation to a debate and change, but rather with repression and intellectual gymnastics. The eternal mediocrity of poli-

tics in Cuba, which astounds all of Cuba's intelligentsia, observers and apologists, is at the root of the *criollo* elite's defensive strategies. With few, acceptable exceptions, this has determined our country's and our State's lack of vision.

Let us begin with the mentality with which those in power envision the black subject in times of crisis. He is treated like a newcomer and stranger whose autonomous actions can threaten the country's sense of unity. What sense? There can be a threat to unity from abroad. Yet, it can be only a political threat, not one to our cultural hegemony. It should not cause us more worry than the very same elite would feel as if it lost control within its own group.

However, there is a threat to the unity invoked for the purpose of symbolically protecting cultural hegemony; it comes from those who are or consider themselves to be outside our national model's norms. This threat does not grow during times we might see as normal, when the very underpinnings of that hegemony have not accumulated a critical number of structural flaws whose cracks become visible. The moment this happens, an urgent sense of preservation erupts, and defenses against the imminence of other subjects are sharpened. From their silence, marginality, passivity and otherness, these subjects, however, have permitted the peaceful circulation of the artifices upon which that cultural hegemony has been constructed.

In times of crisis, these artifices reveal all their artificiality in two ways: as a humanly crafted cultural creation (there would be no civilization with no cultural artifices) and as enforcement of the cultural reality upon which they are constructed. This forced framing on the part of the hegemonic elite is the cause of our national project's permanent,

critical state. In the Western hemisphere, Cuba is the only country in the twenty-first century where people are still talking about what it means to be Cuban. This is a result of the instability of our artificial, tired and passé model.

What becomes more visible about the black subject in this permanent crisis? Now, as before, he is an outsider who should remain silent. Someone who denies the power elite's norms and concept (ideas he has not had a hand in shaping), and takes refuge in ancestry, hides in marginality, passively waits for some change to happen during the crisis, or organizes his marginal protests and acts of resistance. He is a strange being who does not "understand" and is misunderstood, someone who most definitely lacks the ability, resources and instruments that might solve the crisis, which is true, if one tries to solve it within the framework of the model that causes it in the first place.

This way, the black subject can be reduced to a triple condition that is assumed to be foreign to the underpinnings of the national or society project: a holistically religious, socially, culturally marginalized and folkloric subject. Neither his religion or his marginal survival skills or his aesthetic are virtuous or substantial enough for one to read and examine in them solutions to this crisis. He is a dancing, marginalized *santero* (practitioner of Afro-Cuban religion). Could a subject such as this possibly rise up to the challenges of the national project? This is the classic question the *criollo* elite asks from behind the Cabala of 1912, a question that is repeated and emphasized at all levels and in many ways the deeper the crisis becomes.

Perception and the crisis are creating a closer association with and projected substitution of the cause-effect relationship. For

the *criollo* elite, the causes of this crisis are never structural (there is no introspection in scholastic thought) but social. The social effect of the crisis becomes the cause of the structural problems that in reality are what provokes it. This results in a constant exportation of the crisis, its causes and effects. For a philosophical model as simple as that of the *criollo* elite's, the faults never stem from the model's underpinnings, but rather from its subject's behavior. This kind of thinking is blameworthy, but not responsible, and always deflects the blame on someone else.

Thus, the black subject is seen as guilty and responsible not only for his situation but for the general crisis, too.

This monopoly on the view of the 'other' is equal to having the right to determine the limited place and containment of black subjects. What is it? The following paradox, present in mental rhetoric (few people have the courage to blame them in spoken rhetoric), says that blacks are responsible for the crisis because instead of working, studying, participating and thinking, he devotes himself to religious rites, dance, and marginal behavior as a way of life. An exception is made for the third of blacks who are educated and who, in times of crisis, actively defend—each from their own position—the underpinnings and episteme of a structure that structurally segregates the other two thirds: the *criollo* model.

Paradoxically, spaces for dance, religiosity and marginality are exactly what *criollo* thought destined for that very same black subject when the possibility of integration into the model disappears. It is from this scholastic resource that Spanish and Catholic tolerance for ethnography (but not anthropology) blacks during the colonial period emerged. It was also the source of the concept 'weak racism,' since there is no segregation.

The proliferation of popular feasts and industrial sized servings of beer and rum, popularly known as *pipas*, are in keeping with the *criollo* methodology for limiting the reproduction and containment of black subjects, distancing them from the fundamental debate concerning ways out of the crisis and the model's underpinnings. This is particularly noteworthy because this method is deployed precisely when there is a crisis, at time would normally require austerity and little spending. There is something more to this than just Roman bread and circuses. In Rome, the praetors, emperor and senate defined the circus and bread, and the way in which the spectators partook of them. With the black subject, the *criollo* elite exploits the "ethnic" group's particularities in order to entrap them during times of crisis—far from the ethnos.

A paradox: using the supposed causes of the crisis as a space in which to contain what in reality are the effects of it, which reflects an anthological and ontological perversion of the political in Cuba, which exists as a result of 1912: the demonization of the black subject goes hand in hand to using supposed demons to limit and contain him. This is at the root of 1912: a mentality much more than just a historical and historic event.

Thus, the space of limitation and containment go from being cultural expressions to public policies; political, social and intellectual tools deployed to neutralize their autonomy. These are spaces and resources that converge: the space is the resource. Feast, religiosity and marginality are the spaces constructed both by culture and the elite's historical reaction to otherness. Simultaneously, they are tools for those in power: they offer the feast, the religion and marginality to control the effects of autonomy. One can dance, but not convert that corporal flexibility and

gestural freedom into civic behavior; one can worship one's own saints, but not shape the civic, social and political imaginary from within the tolerance of one's own religion; one can commit a crime, but only to a certain degree, while not questioning the underpinnings of power. One can serve the State well from a position of marginality.

There is yet one more thing about this 1912 behavioral fallout: the way the elite treats resistance on the part of blacks. At the core of this treatment is racialized repression. We should understand it as a conceptual and intensifying bonus in the State's marginalization of otherness, as well as that of other punitive and cultural institutions in all spheres: intellectual, social, political and with the po-

lice. There are abundant examples, but their objective is always the same: keep 'others' from having power, first over themselves, and then over the definition of the national model.

In this sense, we live 1912 every day. In our daily lives, there is a public policy structured upon the idea of dismantling resistance, be it spontaneous or organized by 'otherness.' For this purpose, the black subject also becomes the enemy of the black subject. The clearest example of a *criollo* model that constantly threatens another 1912—not only as history of daily life, a fact that is part and parcel of the lives of millions of black biographies in Cuba—but also as a punctual, terrible and graphically moving event for the attainment of power.