

Horrors of Yesteryear, Shadow of the Present

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While the violent nature of human beings has not changed in its essence since the days of Cain till now, it did become somewhat malleable with the advance of civilization. Thus, it doesn't take much to understand the violence Cubans of African descent sense in the fact that the revolutionary government promulgated social equality without attending to its true establishment, a purpose turned axiom. The reason for this is because it did not take the time to first study the specifics of identity or resources—real or subjective—to which each population group had access as part of a conglomerate, so it could promote their development under conditions equal to those of everyone else.

This inexcusable 'quick fix,' "we are all equal here," which for fifty years has forcibly silenced (preemptively sealing, with one stroke) any possible debate concerning our opinions about the specificities of our own nature as a race, or about our historical legacy, not only

seems ambivalent in origin but also twists the spirit of the ideas. It alters the very real principle that we should all be treated and helped equally without having the essential details of our lives ignored. These represent the inert words of a pipedream whose ideals far surpassed their fulfillment, and actually makes it difficult and prevent its realization. We should have begun by crafting a plan that would have ensured equality, declaring it as both a right and goal. Yet, everything seems to indicate that the declaration was made *a priori*. With that, we stalled. Our objective became a strictly fixed and apodictic slogan with which we accomplished nothing more than to violate its intention, obstructing the establishment of true equality. Today, Cuba's slave descendants, blacks who constitute mostly a mass representing the humblest strata of our society, suffer a three-fold kind of cold violence. They must first endure the irremediable weight of the inequalities they continue to encounter around

them. Secondly, they must acknowledge (and express gratitude about, however caustic it sounds) the revolutionary progress the slogan implies, no matter how much their daily lives don't reflect the equality they've so often heard about, incessantly, for half a century. In the third place, they affirm, with frustration, that what at the beginning might have been a proper goal has turned against its own objectives. This is further complicated by the fact that if anyone who feels adversely affected by this raises his or her voice to question "we are all equal here," because the facts seem to contradict this declaration, he or she runs the risk of being considered a dissident, and even a traitor to the anti-discriminatory desires of his or her socio-racial group.

Isn't it the case that there is violence in the situation that has blacks feeling morally and politically obligated to express their claims not as blacks but only as Cubans? Despite the centuries, and the march of history, doesn't this violence resemble the kind their ancestors endured when they were torn from their native soil, treated like animals, had their origins confused, and were denied full acknowledgment of their combined sense of identity?

Yet, the truth is stubborn, and always challenges dogma, putting speeches in their proper minimized place. Just one example will suffice to prove this—the housing situation in Cuba. A cursory review of the conditions in which most black Cuban families live, particularly in Havana, reveals enough to see the contradiction in this supposed equality relative to race or class. This is not the only evidence of this, yet it is so obvious that one need neither statistics nor empirical details. The ability to see and count is all one needs to confirm that it is mostly the descendants of slaves who today inhabit tenement blocks, bunkhouse-style dwellings, and other kinds of hovels in Havana—just like years ago. This is a fact that

requires no common sense to be able to conclude that we are not all equal, and I say this with due respect to the idealists, and the consent of more than one respectable historian.

For those with a good conscience

Famous black Cuban Juan Manuel Chailloux Cardona wrote his doctoral thesis in Law, Social Science, Politics, and Economics in the 1940s. *Los horrores del solar habanero* [The Horrors of the Havana Tenement Yard] started cropping up in Havana bookstores around 1945, destined to become an essential read for any study of our city.

Chailloux Cardona was detailed and precise in his examination of the evolution of housing in Cuba—from the indigenous *bohío* hut to the colonial manor—focusing on so-called tenement yards, bunkhouse-style dwellings, and other hovel-like housing in the capital. This was his basic goal, to create his own relevant contribution to Cuban historiography and sociology by focusing on the development of Havana society in his own time, before and after.

In fact, this book was without precedent and has yet to have any book with the same kind of passion follow in its path. No other book has had the impact *Los horrores del solar habanero* did; with its exposition, description, and denunciation of the conditions in which the poor Cuban masses, most of them, not coincidentally, descendants of the African slaves brought to the island, and the offspring of the Mambí soldiers who were heroes of the independence wars against colonial domination, lived.

In minutely examining the housing horrors of everyday life for this sector, Chailloux Cardona put his Cuban readers face to face with one of the greatest calamities of the



Entrance to tenement yard building on Monasterio Street. Cerro.

republican era; a national drama marked by indigence, frustration, and discouragement, and an endless list of the negative outcomes these produce. As such, he might have greatly disturbed the digestion of not only governments and also politicians but any sensitive person with a minimum sense of social responsibility. This may well apply to people of subsequent generations and, in fact, *Los horrores del solar habanero* is still a disturbing book.

It may or may not be a coincidence that this book was reissued in Cuba (La Habana: Editorial de Ciencias Sociales, 2008), with a new prologue by well-known historian Eduardo Torres-Cuevas. We should be doubly grateful for this book because of its rigor and rich-

ness help us better appreciate a reality essential for the study and understanding of our historical past, and allows us to weigh the present in an objective and responsible manner. In the prologue he wrote for the new edition, Torres-Cuevas states that even at the time of its initial release, the book's title "was itself both striking and worrisome for those of good conscience at that time."¹ It also deserves equal attention today, and as well should worry those of good conscience today.

Horror and its Shadow

Time gets bogged down in those tenement yards and blockhouses. Too little have they

changed since they were first built till now. Seven and even eight people can inhabit one room in one of these hovels, crafted from rusty panels of zinc, lumber remnants, bits of concrete, dry wall, or other discarded materials. They live “in colonies like mushrooms in stagnant water.”² Bathroom facilities are rare, shared, as are sinks or sometimes stoves. Running water neither runs nor is clear: darkness and lack of ventilation persist. Their location is not so much on streets, per se, but in a maze of inner alleys. It is disheartening to see how little difference there is between the current situation and the one described by Chailloux Cardona over sixty years ago: “All around one sees poverty. Broken chairs, dilapidated frames on boxes serving as beds, pieces of tables leaned up against a wall, buckets full of dubiously clean water, which makes up for lack of the precious liquid when the pipes are shut down. The air is heavy and suffocating, even in the higher floors. It becomes contaminated by all the filth everywhere that it comes into contact with before it reaches the rooms up there....”³

According to *Los horrores del solar habanero*, a 1919 housing census reveals there were 1,548 tenement houses in Havana (which includes tenement yards and blockhouses),⁴ a number that may have increased to 3,000 in the forties, given the city’s population growth. On May 17th, 2009, the Director of the *Plan Maestro para la Revitalización Integral de La Habana Vieja* [Master Plan for the Integral Revitalization of Old Havana], which is government sponsored, acknowledged that: “Old Havana has around 22,000 housing units. 50% percent of these are classified under the category of tenement yards, blockhouses, or ghetto housing. This is not a horse of a different color, but an over-crowded house or building; an old palace whose fresh-air patios have been taken over by tiny kitchen cubicles and bathrooms;

their inner ceilings have been divided into two, because they are very high, in order to create two units in the same space. These factors definitely contribute to creating bad and over-crowded living conditions.”⁵

This refers only to this kind of housing in Old Havana, where the oldest of these sorts of dwellings exist. Generally, they were built on the ruins of colonial-era mansions that were occupied by freed slaves, when their owners decided to move to other parts of the capital. Nowadays, there are 11,000 such dwellings in only one of the city’s 15 municipalities, which is a shocking fact when one considers how big the rest of Havana is. For example, Cayo Hueso, a neighborhood that is barely part of Central Havana (the second to be constructed outside the old city’s walls), has more than 200 tenement yards in less than one squared kilometer. More than 18,000 people in the Los Pocitos neighborhood of Marianao live in ghetto blockhouses and tenement yards. Atares, one of the capital’s smallest neighborhoods, has about 6,000. These are not only the same neighborhoods that the Revolution inherited in 1959. These neighborhoods have expanded at an alarming rate; other new ones have cropped up, too. Even the city’s outer limits have seen the proliferation of a new kind of shantytown comprised of migrants from the Cuban interior, particularly from the eastern region.

In the prologue he wrote for the republication of *Los horrores del solar habanero*, Eduardo Torres-Cuevas explains that: “by the 1950s, there was an increase in a phenomenon barely perceptible in 1930s Havana—extremely poor or indigent neighborhoods. By 1958, they numbered 23. According to the results from a survey conducted by the *Agrupación Católica Universitaria* group, and statistics from Chailloux-Cardona’s book, fully one third of the total population of the City of

Havana lives in the subhuman conditions of those marginal neighborhoods.”⁶

Just a few months ago, government media sources revealed the existence of 46 of these new shantytowns all along Havana’s outer limits,⁷ which is double the number that was reported in 1958. In his very famous legal declaration, *La historia me absolverá* [History Will Absolve Me], which Fidel Castro wrote after he was adjudicated for the attack on the Moncada Barracks (1953), he stated that the housing situation in Cuba, with its 200,000 huts and hovels, was “grave.” In 2002, almost fifty years after this denunciation, and after 43 years of Revolutionary government, a new official census counted the existence of 127,417 houses with walls made of *yagua* [the outer fronds of the Royal Palm] or palm lumber, and dirt floors. In other words, they are huts and hovels. Of course, the Cuban population did not stop growing in the past 50 years. Particularly, the numbers in Havana have increased dramatically. In Chailloux-Cardona’s time, in the 1940s, there were about 700,000 people. There are now more than 2 million people in the capital. They comprise about 20% of the total population of 11,241,291 counted in the official 2002 census. One could somehow deduce that the increase in tenement yards, blockhouses, and other kinds of precarious housing is more or less commensurate with the increase in population. Thus, the argument that the Revolutionary government has really done something to try to confront this tragedy is just not sustainable. Moreover, if one examines the situation logically, the fact that the inhabitants of this subhuman housing continue to be mostly blacks and *mestizos* makes this fact even less justifiable.

Statistics that would allow us a rigorous analysis of the evolution of the progress made in the economic arena by Cuban blacks and *mestizos* under the Revolutionary government

are non-existent or unavailable. What does seem clear, despite the fact one cannot see it in the most recent census data, is that there has been a dramatic increase in the black and *mestizo* population, so much so that few in Cuba can doubt that they constitute much more than half the population. Their majority is more than proverbial and tangible in Havana. Moreover, the city has been expanding in size. Even the government’s building plans began to include more and more housing. We have, on the one hand, a significant increase in the number of Havana’s black residents; on the other, a dramatic expansion of the city’s territorial limits, which was supported, in great measure, by the State’s own building plans. Yet, nowhere does there seem to be any corresponding attention being paid to the improvement of blacks’ living conditions. What does seem proportional to the increasing number of blacks and *mestizos* in Havana is the profusion of tenement yards, blockhouses, and shantytowns. Of course, the reason why and the way in which these hovels are increasingly scarring the Havana landscape reveals yet another fissure, a really curious one, if one compares it to another affirmation made by historian Torres-Cuevas in his prologue to Juan M. Chailloux-Cardona’s book and era: “It was interesting that the upper classes always found a way to escape to new zones in Havana, areas that were free of marginalized people: but a tenement yard would develop right there where they thought they’d be able to get away from the others’ dirty gaze. Havana did not have a Harlem. A Havana tenement yard could crop up right next to a small mansion, and the former developed its own form of subculture. Thus, the higher and middle classes strove to create new spaces hoping that the lower one could not abandon their old jaunts. The small mansion would move from Old Havana to El Cerro, to La Víbora, to El Vedado, to Miramar,

to Country, but the Havana tenement yard followed in its shadow.”¹⁰

This phenomenon, as it is described by Torres-Cuevas, met with its end under the Revolutionary government. Yet, the somber shadow of tenement yards have not been able to establish themselves in neighborhoods like Atabey, Siboney, Kholý, and other, which in Havana represent economic power and supremacy, and are populated by mostly the upper echelon—the highest officials and the most important, temporary, foreign residents. These are considered “frozen” neighborhoods insofar that no ordinary, common citizen can inhabit them. As is often the case, there are no statistics to confirm or deny this, but evidence of the fact that it is almost exceptional to find blacks residing in these areas is not only obvious but also helpful. The few one sees, in any event, are exceptions, occupying positions in the state’s hierarchy, breaking, in this case, with tradition. The flight of our upper classes to areas free of marginalized people has finally come to a happy end; they are far from where any hovels can reach them.

Notwithstanding, tenement yards and blockhouses kept reproducing themselves like mushrooms, but always in similar nooks and crannies, and at the city’s limits, far from the gaze of our all important visitors, and where those of good conscience, who tend to drive around on smooth asphalt streets—from Guanabacoa to Diezmero, from Mantilla to La Güinera, from El Cerro to Pogolotti, in Marianao, to El Palenque in Lisa, or to Las Piedras in San Miguel del Padrón, etc.—will not be perturbed. In fact, this very last site was featured in a report published by the *Juventud Rebelde* newspaper. It reproduced verbatim the language and even tone that Chailloux Cardona employed in *Los horrores del solar habanero*: “People in Las Piedras have constructed their little houses with material found

in garbage dumps: they have dirt floors. There are no streets there. Instead, the paths are really furrows. There are no electric cables, but long laundry lines abound. Water comes from pipes a few meters from the “squatters’ area.” Nearly two thousand people live in this housing in San Miguel del Padrón. They live in a legal vacuum, in a kind of citizens’ black hole. The authorities cannot give them legal status: the law prohibits it. Yet, they are there, and have occupied a space that at some time had to have belonged to someone else.”¹¹

Of course, it is not always the case that these Havana hovel dwellers set up their pigsties in a legal vacuum. Paradoxically, there have been cases when the government itself has taken the initiative to organize and promote the proliferation of tenement yards—another break with tradition. It may be the only time in all our history when it was not the poverty-stricken masses that took the risk, and by dint of their own efforts, built their very own hovels. This happened only a few years ago, when the government decided (in what we assume was desperation) to turn almost all of Havana’s inns into housing units. These inns, whose rooms were most often rented—by the hour—for the sole purpose of amorous, sexual encounters (particularly among the poorest classes), had been extremely popular among different generations of capital city dwellers. This type of unit, such as it was and existed in Havana, had characteristics that distinguished it a great deal from others in its class, which existed elsewhere. It must be acknowledged that these spaces served an invaluable social function.

We cannot now pause to evaluate what resulted when these units were ‘deactivated.’ That is one of the many tasks awaiting our researchers and scholars. Suffice it to say that one fine day almost all these inns (and nearly all Havana neighborhoods had at least one) were



Façade of the Old "Posada," now a tenement blockhouse

officially converted into tenement housing. As such, into it were stuffed a few—only a few—of the homeless poor who for years and decades had spent their nights in slave-like barracks called shelters. It was as cunning and injurious a solution as the problem itself, enacted in an inanely poor manner that I feel was like “robbing Peter to pay Paul”—although that was not fully achieved. The government stripped one saint of clothes, despite the fact these weren’t enough to serve as even a loincloth for the naked poor. Those erstwhile inns were themselves in terrible condition, with narrow rooms, humid and bare walls, leaky ceilings, and with a general air of truly pitiful

abandon and dejection. This is exactly the very same condition in which these inns-turned-housing have remained while they’ve housed an indeterminate number of inhabitants in each of their rooms, out of sight, even from government statisticians who publish their new data about the average number of Havana residents that share each of these spaces for dubious census reports and tourist propaganda.¹²

“If anyone wants to become acquainted with the greatest degradation of human living conditions, all he or she has to do is read this book,” emphasized respected historian Eduardo Torres-Cuevas in reference to *Los horizontes del solar habanero*. Perhaps I can add that

in addition to reading Chailloux's important book, one can go into the ancient inns of Havana, into the tenement yards, blockhouses,

and gloomy shantytowns of its marginal areas to know degraded human living conditions.

Notes:

- 1- Chailloux Cardona, Juan M. *Los horrores del solar habanero* (La Habana: Editorial de Ciencias Sociales, 2008): IX.
- 2- De Céspedes Benjamín. *La prostitución en la ciudad de La Habana* (La Habana: Establecimiento Tipográfico O'Reilly, 9, 1888): 156-157.
- 3- Chailloux Cardona, Juan M. Op. Cit., 121.
- 4- Ibid, 106.
- 5- "La restauración de La Habana es parte de nuestras políticas de desarrollo humano," *Cubainformación* 9 (spring 2009).
- 6- Chailloux Cardona, Juan M. Op. Cit., XV.
- 7- "La Habana sumergida," *Juventud Rebelde* (August 3, 2008).
- 8- See Chailloux Cardona, Juan M. Op. Cit., 107.
- 9- Chang, Arturo. "Censo de Población y Vivienda 2002 'Más cubanos, pero... 'menos' territorio," *Granma* (November 12, 2005).
- 10- Chailloux Cardona, Juan M. Op. Cit., XV.
- 11- "La Habana sumergida," Ed. Cit.
- 12- Benítez, María E. *La familia cubana en la segunda mitad del siglo XX* (La Habana: Editorial de Ciencias Sociales, 2003): Anexos.
- 13- Chailloux Cardona, Juan M. Op. Cit., XVIII.