THE REINVENTION OF CUBAN SANTERÍA AND THE POLITICS OF IDENTITY

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Che Guevara and the Santeros: The Resistant Spirit of an Army of Light

« Somos un ejercito de luz y nada prevalecerá contra nosotros ». This sentence by José Martí (1853–1895), the poet and leader of the Cuban Revolutionary Party, promoter of Cuban independence from Spanish and North American rule and very well known among Cuban and foreign people,1 strongly expresses the mystical afflatus and spirit of resistance elaborated on by Cuban culture. This historic national character, which radiated into society since the fight for independence that led to the constitution of the Republic, is still alive and concrete in contemporary Cuba. As Cuban semantics reveals, everyday life is conceived as a « lucha » in which people have to “resolve” concrete matters fundamentally linked to the precarious economic situation. But this idea of lucha marking the individual and collective horizon of everyday Cuban life now expresses both a tired, protesting sense of hardship and a daily militant commitment which reflects an adherence to the ideology of revolution, as the different opinions of revolucionarios and antirevolucionarios show.

A walk through contemporary Havana from Vedado, the residential quarter frequented by tourists, to the magnificent Habana Vieja and passing through the beautiful and decadent Habana Centro allows not just the anthropologist but every attentive observer to notice the constant representation of Cuba’s revolutionary ideals and national revolutionary construction. Apart from the monumental architecture which in Havana assumes a particular importance with a pedagogical logic of

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1 “We are an army of light. There is no surprise or discourse that can check our march to victory”. The sentence appeared in August 1983 in The New York Times, in a document reproducing a call to arms for the freeing of Cuba from the Spaniards made by José Martí some days before in San Antonio, Texas. Cf. « For the freedom of Cuba », The New York Times, August 18, 1893. The document circulated among Cuban sympathizers in Mexico, the United States and Cuba. José Martí distributed it at the end of July among the different presidents of the clubs comprising the Cuban Revolutionary Party. The Spanish version is reported in José Marti 1963–1975: 359.
revolutionary education expressed by stone or iron, statues and icons\(^2\), a less formal urban language, the *murales*, attract the attention.

In the Vedado, a huge and impressive poster hung on the side of the famous Hotel Habana Libre represents the profiles of three revolutionary heroes: Ernesto Che Guevara, Camilo Cienfuegos and Julio Antonio Mella and reports the slogan: « *Todo por la revolución* ».

Going downtown along the Malecón and entering the Habana Centro neighborhood, the view is conquered by other *murales*, warning: « *Fieles a nuestra historia* » (« Faithful to our own history »), « *Con la guar-dia en alto* » (« Stay on high guard »), « *Seguimos el combate* » (« We must struggle on »).

These sentences painted on city walls in bright colors and accompanied by the Cuban flag do not correspond to the kind of anti-institutional and spontaneous graffiti art diffused in New York, Los Angeles Paris, Berlin or Mexico City. These *murales* are most often signed by the Cdr, the committees for the revolution. This informal and cool style was adopted by the institution and these messages accompany the everyday life; part of the urban landscape, they transmit an official message and contribute to the political construction of Cuban revolutionary identity, history and memory. Do Cubans believe nowadays in the message these *murales* advertise? Is the message perceived as alive and not as residual ideals of past decades, as many North American and European antirev-olucionarios would affirm?

Rather than answering by a sharp yes or no to this question, which would open a long investigation of the revolucionarios and dissidents’ points of view, I will try to draw an itinerary through contemporary Cuban culture, focusing not just on political beliefs but on the more general Cuban people’s beliefs.

Considering the historical mixture of races that characterize Cuban culture, the religious perspective seems to be an important access point to the national identity. Moreover, the recent religious revival in a state which fiercely claims its laical basis suggests the need to consider the demand people address to the spiritual sphere and to reflect on the connection between political and religious faith in the *isla de la revolución*.

To introduce my analysis, which will focus on the territory of Havana, I will also consider some details of the urban landscape.

\(^2\) On the collective construction of memory and urban space see Halbwachs 2002: 197–201.