

## THE SMALL HERESIES OF LEONARDO PADURA FUENTES

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Soy un escritor, en lo fundamental, de la vida cubana, y la política no puede estar fuera de esa vida, pues es parte diaria, activa, penetrante de ella; pero yo la manejo de manera que sea el lector quien decida hacer las asociaciones políticas, sin que mis libros se refieran directamente a ella. De verdad, no la necesito ni me interesa, pero, en cambio, me interesa muchísimo que mis libros puedan ser leídos en Cuba y que la gente pueda dialogar con ellos.

—Leonardo Padura, 19 December 2008

“People think that what I say is a measure of what can or can’t be said in Cuba,” Leonardo Padura said (quoted in Anderson, 2013). In fact, what he says is a measure of what *he*—along with some other Cuban writers or artists—is allowed to say in Cuba. It is a privilege, not a right. In Cuba lesser authors who don’t enjoy his international fame (and Spanish pass-

port<sup>2</sup>) probably couldn’t have published a book like *El hombre que amaba los perros*, as he did in 2010, a year after it was published in Spain by Tusquets. The book probably couldn’t have been published at all in Cuba decades or even years ago, which makes him the beneficiary (and the proof) of a recent opening.<sup>3</sup> The Cuban’s “gatekeeper state” (Grenier, 2014)<sup>4</sup> grants Padura some recognition (he won the National Literature Prize in 2012), as well as some privileges commonly bestowed to successful writers and artists: he can travel and publish abroad, and accept monetary compensation in foreign currency.<sup>5</sup> But he is kept in a box. His books are nearly impossible to find in the island. The prestigious awards and accolades he is receiving abroad are mostly passed over by the

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1. I would like to thank colleagues Al Cuzan, Orlando Luis Pardo, Jorge Pérez-López, Enrique Pumar and Eduardo Triff for their valuable comments.

2. In 2011 the Spanish Council of Ministers gave Padura an honorary Spanish citizenship for his literary merit.

3. As he told Allan Woods (2014): “Curiously on the day of the launch at the book fair no news appeared in the media about the presentation. Also afterwards the papers kept quiet even though the launch of the book was the most exciting meeting in the book fair, and the room was completely full with people outside trying to get in. A week ago the book won the national critics prize in Cuba, this highlights Cuba’s contradictions: twenty years ago maybe I wouldn’t even have been able to think about writing this book; ten years ago I could write it but it wouldn’t have been published in Cuba; now it can be published and even though it is silenced in the media it can win prizes.”

4. In my 2014 ASCE paper, I write this about the “gatekeeper state”: “In an insightful article on economic reforms and the ‘gatekeeper state’ in Cuba from 1989 to 2002, political scientist Javier Corrales (2004) argues that “behind the pretense of market reforms, the Cuban government ended up magnifying the power of the state to decide who can benefit from market activities and by how much” (Corrales, 2004: 46). It deployed a system of “formal and informal controls,” alternatively using tactics of “openness and rigidity” to achieve its goals.

5. Padura published his first Mario Conde novel (*Pasado perfecto*) in Mexico in 1989 and was paid an advance. He was told by the Cuban authorities that this would be tolerated only for that one time. A few years later it became public policy.

Cuban media.<sup>6</sup> Finally, his insightful but politically cautious journalism is read all over the world but not in Cuba (with few exceptions).

Numerous times Padura has made clear his desire to live in Cuba, in the house his father built in Mantilla, a working class municipality in the outskirts of Habana.<sup>7</sup> He sometimes signs his articles “Still in Mantilla, Leonardo Padura.” He also wants to be a “Cuban writer”—and as such, he feels he has “a certain responsibility because our reality is so specific and so hard for many people” (quoted in Jakeman, 2008). His success in conciliating these two potentially conflicting ambitions is, as John Lee Anderson put it, “a tribute both to his literary achievement and his political agility” (Anderson, 2013). Similarly, blogger Yoani Sánchez wrote that “His ‘rarity’ lies fundamentally in having been able to sustain a critical vision of his country, an unvarnished description of the national sphere, without sacrificing the ability to be recognized by the official sectors. The praise comes to him from every direction of the polarized ideological spectrum of the Island, which is a true miracle of letters and of words” (Sánchez, 2012). In sum, Padura constitutes an interesting “hybrid,” almost an experiment in how to express freedom in a land bereft of freedom of expression. A prominent member of the cultural elite and at the same time, a marginal of sort, Padura constitutes a great case study to understand how the “cultural field” works in Cuba.<sup>8</sup>

### Parameters

To understand Padura’s unique situation one needs to look at his itinerary, his public comments on cultural and political issues, and of course, his literary work. As I have argued elsewhere, for the study of the

Cuban case (and arguably in other non-democratic countries), it is useful to distinguish the “primary” from the “secondary” parameters (Grenier, 2013). The *primary* parameters shield the meta-political (foundational) narrative of the regime from cross-examination. In Cuba the master narrative revolves around the notion that the totemic “revolution” is an ongoing movement, not a single historical episode. Furthermore, the revolution is teleologically embodied in the persona of Fidel Castro and now, by extension, Raúl. No public criticism of *La Revolución/Fidel/Raúl* by anybody else than Fidel or Raúl is possible in Cuba.

The *secondary* parameters, on the other hand, delimit political participation *within* the regime, i.e., what can be said and done, how, where and when.<sup>9</sup> To quote Fidel Castro’s most famous admonition in his epochal speech given the title *Palabras a los intelectuales* (1961): “Against the Revolution, nothing is possible; within the Revolution, everything is.” The last part can be rephrased as: “within the Revolution, it depends.” It has been generally possible to publicly (1) deplore mistakes made in the past by fallen bureaucrats; (2) lament the poverty of criticism and debate on the island as a consequence of internal problems within the cultural field and because of a misunderstanding of Fidel’s policy; and (3) constructively highlight problems in Cuba without discussing their political root causes. Government officials can make mistakes, and the population can help identifying those. Same with cultural policies, as long as culprits are “dogmatists ensconced in the cultural institutions” (Weppeler-Grogan, 2010: 146). To be sure, Fidel and Raúl can admit mistakes and “rectify”

6. Padura has received the Café Gijón Prize (1995), the Hammett Prize on two occasions at Gijón’s Semana Negra or Noir Week (1998 and 2006), the Premio de las Islas (2000), the Prix des Amériques insulaires et de la Guyane, the Prize for the Best Crime Novel translated in Germany and in Austria (2004), the Raymond Chandler Prize (2009) and the Francesco Gelmi di Caporiacco Prize (2010) for *The Man Who Loved Dogs*. This book also earned him the Prix Initiales (2011), the Critics Award from the Cuban Institute of Books (2011) and the Carbet del Caribe Award (2011). Holder of the 2012 National Literature Prize of Cuba, France’s Ordre des Arts et des Lettres in 2013, and the 2014 City of Zaragoza International Prize for Historical Novels, he was recently awarded the 2015 Princess of Asturias Award for Literature.

7. In fact, he lives on a second floor he built for himself and his wife, Lucía López Coll.

8. The concept and theory of the “political field” is developed by French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (2000).

9. Primary and secondary parameters correspond broadly to what authors Baogang He and Mark E. Warren (2011) called “regime level” and “governance level.”

them, for *La Revolución* is adaptable, grows from its lapses and can never be wrong on the fundamentals. Last but not least, constructive criticism should always foster unity so it goes down better with praises of Fidel and the revolution, and comforting words on how things have already improved.

All in all, to repeat, some criticism is possible within secondary parameters, and indeed the possibilities have expanded in recent years, at least for many writers and artists. Criticism is a seed that can grow and have unforeseen implications. Authoritarian regimes open up at their own risk. But at face value, “within the revolution,” no genuine criticism can possibly be considered legitimate and legal in Cuba. The few writers and artists who are in the fast lane of criticism in Havana (this is much harder in the provinces), like Padura or Tania Bruguera, are like sports cars: they need to have good brakes—Bruguera didn’t recently (Grenier, 2015). To be a bona fide *public intellectual* in Cuba is virtually impossible.<sup>10</sup> But the possibility of criticism is there, arguably more for certain actors than others, provided it does not challenge at all the primary parameters and not too much the secondary ones.

### Research Question

In this paper I argue that Padura’s work appears to studiously maneuver along walls and edges of the secondary parameters, while never coming close to testing the primary parameters. Additionally, I suggest that Padura’s work and itinerary exemplify how the Cuban gatekeeper state has managed the cultural field over the past quarter of a century, creating or tolerating limited space for public expression and successfully inciting writers and artists to confine their criticism of Cuban reality to the cultural field, where it can effectively be “culturalized” and depoliticized (Grenier, 2014).

### ITINERARY

Padura was born in 1955 in the Havana neighborhood of Mantilla, where he has lived all his life. He studied Hispanic-American literature at the University of Havana from 1975 to 1980, in a time of institutionalization of the regime.

Padura is an interesting case study because he has been both a writer and a journalist, two “parallel, almost complementary, apprenticeships” (quoted in Hijuelos, 2014). He worked as a journalist for two publications of the ruling party: *El Caimán Barbudo*, the monthly supplement of the Communist Party youth branch’s daily, *Juventud Rebelde*, from 1980 to 1983, and then the daily itself, from 1983 to 1989.

In his reception speech of the National Award, he describes *El Caimán Barbudo* as “renacido de las cenizas del decenio gris” (Padura, Premio Nacional, 2012). At *El Caimán* he “became acquainted with the world and with the figures of Cuban literature of the time,” and “developed a strong sense of generational belonging” (Padura, November 2012 speech at the *Casa de las Americas*). As a matter of fact, at *El Caimán* he wrote book and theatre reviews as well as literary criticism. He rarely fails to mention, perhaps with some pride, that he was thrown out of the monthly for breach of political orthodoxy. There was no major ideological quarrel though, only what he remembers as a series of “tonterías” (Padura, personal interview in Cuba, 2015) involving him and other journalists, which cumulatively caused unease on the part of the political leadership vis-à-vis the whole editorial team. This led to a major turnover in the direction of the magazine in June of 1983 (Padura, *Un hombre*, 2012: 279–280).<sup>11</sup> Though he often says that he and writers of his generation were under “presiones constantes” and experienced “miedo” (Padura, *Un hombre*, 2012: 281), this was the only time when Padura was victim of *parametración*.

In what hardly looks like a demotion, compared to the fate of so many writers in Cuba, he was trans-

10. For Cuban writer Arturo Arango: “La figura del intelectual clásico a lo Zola, o, en términos más contemporáneos, a lo Monsiváis, Poniatowska, Saramago, Benedetti, Galeano, entre los de izquierdas, o Paz, Vargas Llosa, entre los de derechas, creadores de opinión, poseedores de una vasta audiencia ciudadana, no ha sido permitida en la política cubana (Arango, 2009: 16).

11. *Un hombre en una isla* offers a collection of Padura’s articles but without providing the original source of publication or the date.

ferred to *Juventud Rebelde* itself, to be (as he put it) “ideologically reeducated.” He pointed out that “At that time in Cuba, the state was the only employer, and they could send you wherever they liked, and generally you had to comply or look for another job that was invariably worse (as happens to my character Iván in *The Man Who Loved Dogs*)” (interview with Hijuelos, 2014). This was a blessing in disguise, for this is where he really started his career as a journalist. In this daily he dedicated himself to long-form investigative journalism for the Sunday edition.<sup>12</sup> His contributions consisted of well-crafted essays on pre-revolutionary Cuba (historical themes, historical characters, lost legends of Cuban folklore, as he puts it), with no politics either in content or in style. They could have been published in *Bohemia* in the 1950s. He remembers that “It was a strange and beautiful period, during which I could write about whatever I wanted—something that isn’t common in the press, and even less so in Cuba. The result was a very literary journalism, based on historical research—a kind of journalism that, by the way, is now considered a classic model in Cuba” (interview with Hijuelos, 2014). Thankfully, what he wanted to write about fell safely within the parameters of the time.

Padura contends that during the 1980s, the quality of journalism improved dramatically for about a decade, even becoming a “reference” in Cuba and abroad (Padura, personal interview, 2015). He talks about a “soplo de aire fresco que recorrió en aquellos tiempos propicios a la prensa cubana, sin que por ello se lograra una renovación completa de un medio cuya subordinación a los intereses propagandísticos de la dirección política del país ha decretado su destino, cualidades y calidades” (Padura, *Un hombre*, 212). And yet, he (at least) once admitted that “there was still a lot of pressure about what you could and couldn’t say, and there was a member of the Ministry of the Interior who read our work and called us to account if we got out of line” (quoted in Anderson, 2013). In his speech to the *Casa de las Américas*, in

2012, he makes a different claim: “For a would-be Cuban writer, my work destinations during the decade of the 1980s were the best that I could imagine or choose even today.” He talks often about how beneficial the experience has been for his career as a writer.

All in all, he says very little, and almost nothing critical, about his experience at either of these venues. In essays and interviews he routinely points out that his time at *Juventud Rebelde* gave him an opportunity to polish his skills as a writer, and taught him the political “rules of the game” in publishing (without explaining what those are). The experience had some indirect impact on the evolution of his consciousness as a Cuban writer and as a member of a “generation” (a favorite theme of his, as will be discussed later). While he sometimes talks about the constant pressure he and his colleagues felt, in others, he contends that he was free to write what he wanted while working at *Juventud Rebelde*.

Between 1985 and 1986 Padura spent a year in Angola working “como redactor para el semanario de los colaboradores civiles cubanos allá destacados” (Padura, *Un hombre*, 153). According to John Lee Anderson, this experience “helped inspire some of his first published short stories: ruminations about revolutionary faith, the varieties of exile, and loneliness” (Anderson, 2013).<sup>13</sup> “The year I spent in Angola,” Padura said in an interview, “acquainted me not only with fear (something very personal) but also with true material poverty, misery, and the kindness of human beings, manifest in their clearest and most strengthened states” (Padura, November speech, 2012). That was during the tail end of Cuba’s extraordinary intervention in this African country (over 425,000 Cubans fought in this strange mission). Padura’s journalism on Cuban affairs does not include a serious examination of either this war or its repercussion in Cuba.

12. A selection of his articles are reproduced in a book of his book entitled *El viaje más largo*, 1994.

13. See for instance “La Puerta de Alcalá” (1991), reproduced in his recent collection of short stories entitled *Aquello estaba deseando ocurrir* (2015).

From 1990 to 1995 Padura was *Jefe de Redacción* at the *La Gaceta de Cuba*, a high-brow cultural magazine published by the writers and artists association (UNEAC). In one statement he sounds almost apologetic for accepting the position: “Unless you worked for an official ‘organismo,’ you really couldn’t work at that time.” The UNEAC is officially a “non-governmental organization” but in fact it is evidently a government-controlled organization, like its sister institution, the ICAIC in the cinematography sphere. It is routinely used to ostracized writers and artists (for instance by expelling them from its ranks, as it did to writer Jesús Díaz and recently to visual artist Tania Bruguera). Unlike the daily media (newspapers, radio and television), however, the *Gaceta* deals with cultural issues and managed to publish moderately critical material (within the parameters) from time to time. UNEAC and especially the ICAIC have also been used to defend individual artists or writers against conservative elements within the cultural field, but when the chips are down they work as conveyor belts for the country’s political leadership.<sup>14</sup>

During his time at the *Gaceta*, the magazine ceased to publish for two years for lack of resources, leaving him with a modest stipend but no real responsibilities and lots of time to write. “I wrote and wrote,” he said. “Almost everyone thought about leaving Cuba, but I decided to stay, and from ‘90 to ‘95, I worked like a crazy man.” I found no specific comments of his on the actual experience of publishing in Cuba or the challenges facing a government-controlled writers and artists association. Samuel Farber contends that Padura “se ha abstenido de apoyar muchas de las declaraciones impulsadas por los aparatos culturales del Estado cubano para denunciar a disidentes” (Farber, 2012: 22). As far as I know, Padura never signed

a petition to protest against the government either (like the Group of Ten’s petition in 1991). In all, he seemed to have kept a low profile at the *Gaceta*, as he did in the previous two publications.

Since his experience at *Juventud Rebelde*, most of his journalism has been destined to foreign readers. Some of them circulated online on the island and a few were reproduced in *Espacio Laical*, a project of the Father Félix Varela Cultural Center of the Archdiocese of Havana. He participates from time to time in “debates,” organized by that Center, with other writers or artists. (Note: The word “debate” in Cuba generally means that everybody agrees with each other.) In short, even though he seems risk-averse he is also keen to occupy whatever space is available for public expression. Padura is very astute when dealing with censorship (and autocensorship), and given his reputation he would be costly to castigate in a major way. Nevertheless, since the secondary parameters are never entirely clear and do change, one can imagine how Padura can never feel completely safe and sound in “revolutionary” Cuba.

## FREEDOM

“He tratado a lo largo de todos estos años, y cada vez con más conciencia e insistencia, de ser un hombre todo lo libre e independiente que puede ser una persona en un mundo y en una sociedad como estos en que vivimos. [...] yo lucharé por continuar siendo el mismo, por pensar con mi cabeza, por ser cada día un poco más libre.”

—Leonardo Padura, Discurso, Premio Nacional, 2012

Padura is on the record denouncing the poverty of media, the mediocrity of much of what was considered literature during the 1970s and 1980s, and the continuous challenges to find great books in the island.<sup>15</sup> He talks about the “problema de información cultural gravísimo para un país con la capacidad de

14. Padura also wrote screenplays: “Seven days in Havana,” directed by various artists; also for a TV series (Conde). “In all of these cases I’ve gone into the screenwriting with another writer (with Lucía, in recent projects including *Seven Days in Havana*, or with the director of the film).” (Interview in Hijuelos, 2014.) “They proposed that I write storylines for various directors. Of the 11 we wrote, four were chosen by the directors Benicio del Toro (US), Julio Médem (Spain), Juan Carlos Tabío (Cuba), and Pablo Trapero (Argentina). Lucía and I worked closely with all of them in writing the screenplays except for Trapero, who chose to write his own script. The film, like all omnibus films, is uneven, but I think it has one important virtue: it is valuable artistically and also sociologically because it offers, from very different angles, a view of life in Havana at the present time—a life that will soon be very different” (Interview in Hijuelos, 2014).

consumo cultural como Cuba” (*Cubaencuentro*, 4 October 2011). He asks “¿Cuándo un lector cubano leerá a Roberto Bolaños? ¿Cuándo van a poder leer al japonés (Haruki) Murakami o al sueco Hening Mankell?”. All of which implicitly raises the key issue of political control of cultural activities and censorship, something he can’t or won’t discuss explicitly in either his essays or his literary work.

In his novels, political problems are more openly mentioned and discussed if they belong to the past, becoming, to repeat, evidence of how things have changed for the better. Hence in the past, “a *compañero* was someone capable of handling with skill the castrating art of self-censorship to avoid the insult of being censored” (Padura, *Discurso*, Premio Nacional, 2012). In a comment on the Obama/Castro accord: “Por muchos años en Cuba se promovió la unanimidad como única alternativa. En los últimos años se ha abierto la posibilidad de la pluralidad. Si bien eso no se ha concretado en la existencia de partidos políticos (...) sí ha significado la posibilidad de comenzar a establecer puntos de vista diferentes sin que eso signifique ser un opositor. Es muy importante entender eso y ponerlo en práctica” (*Diario de Cuba*, 26 December 2014). When talking about “liberty” in Cuba, Padura points out, in an interview, that the situation for writers has improved, as a result of their determination to conquer more space: “ese espacio de libertad no fue un regalo, fue un logro, que costó mucho sudor, sangre y lágrimas” (In Cancio Isla, 2014). Again, what Padura won’t or can’t talk about is the political cause of the problems he is examining. In Cuban literature, he wrote, “el hecho político se sumerge, muchas veces queda innombrado, intencionalmente supuesto” (Padura, *Un hombre en una isla*, 33). Which does not preclude the reader from drawing political conclusions. He makes that clear in the following two statements:

Mi novela *Pasado perfecto* (1991) demoró cuatro años en salir en Cuba; *Máscaras* (1997) fue criticada como una obra complaciente con el ‘mercado’...

pero yo insistí y cada vez más fui buscando fondo, bajando hasta los fosos de la sociedad y sus problemas, sin convertir mis novelas en documentos políticos, aunque sin eludir las lecturas políticas que se puedan hacer, no solo sobre temas como la libertad y el totalitarismo, sino muchos más, como la pérdida de valores y esperanzas, el drama del exilio, la presencia del oportunismo como forma de vida y la traición como actitud... (In Cancio Isla, 2014).

En mi caso, los límites que no me interesa transgredir están justo en el universo pantanoso y manipulado de la política. No me atrae para nada hacer una literatura que juegue a la política, porque soy escritor y no político, y porque tampoco me interesa que los políticos utilicen mi literatura como fenómeno de feria. Y como me repele ese universo, me alejo de él. Soy un escritor, en lo fundamental, de la vida cubana, y la política no puede estar fuera de esa vida, pues es parte diaria, activa, penetrante de ella; pero yo la manejo de manera que sea el lector quien decida hacer las asociaciones políticas, sin que mis libros se refieran directamente a ella. De verdad, no la necesito ni me interesa, pero, en cambio, me interesa muchísimo que mis libros puedan ser leídos en Cuba y que la gente pueda dialogar con ellos (in *Cubaencuentro*, 19 December 2008).

This last sentence is important: his books are not easily available in Cuba, but they do circulate. Padura told me that his books are hard to find for three reasons: first, the economic crisis makes it difficult to publish many books; second, the high demand for his books; and third, the “lack of will” to publish them (Personal interview, 2015). He says that his friends are pressuring the proper cultural authorities to reprint some of his detective story books for the twenty-fifth anniversary of the first one, *Pasado Perfecto* (1991), and especially for the anniversary of its famous main character, the detective Mario Conde. Although 4,000 copies of his book *El hombre que amaba a los perros* were published in Cuba, to his knowledge, only 1,400 copies were sold, during two public presentations of the book (first 400 copies were made available, then 1,000). Padura doesn’t know what happened to the other copies.<sup>16</sup>

15. For a discussion on this see Rojas, 2009.

16. A friend told me that on the street she was offered a “rare” Cuban edition of *El hombre que amaba los perros* for 25 CUCs, roughly \$25 (about one month’s salary in Cuba). The original price was 30 Cuban pesos, a bit more than \$1.00.

When journalist John Lee Anderson asked Padura if his novels had ever been censored, he answered “Fortunately, no.” About the current situation Padura recently said to a Cuban audience at the Spanish Embassy in Havana: “There is no current policy of what should or should not be published [ . . . ] I believe enough space has been achieved for almost everything to be published in Cuba” (quoted in Anderson, 2013). But according to Anderson, “Onstage, Padura acknowledged that he had frequently suffered from political anxiety: ‘Every time I finish a novel, I say: This is the one they’re not going to let be published.’” Between this and the “almost” of the previous statement, one finds enough qualifying elements to make the first statement (“There is no current policy of what should or should not be published”) ring hollow. “You never know how far you can go,” he also said, adding: “Sometimes it seems as if spaces open and then close again.” (Padura, quoted in Burnett, 2015). With each book, his wife Lucía López commented, “it’s been a matter of pushing the envelope a little further, seeing how far he can go” (Anderson, 2013). Asked if he ever fears retaliation, he responds: “He hecho ese trabajo desde mi narrativa, pero también desde mi periodismo, y te miento si te digo que por momentos no tuve miedo. Cuando terminé *La novela de mi vida* (2002) pensé que había traspasado ciertos límites de permisibilidad, pero me lancé. Igual con *La neblina del ayer* (2005), mucho más con *El hombre que amaba a los perros*. Pero el problema no es sentir miedo, es normal y humano en una sociedad como la cubana, con la experiencia adquirida de lo que pasó con tantos escritores cubanos en el pasado, con lo que me ocurrió a mí mismo en determinados momentos... El problema, o la solu-

ción del problema, es imponerse al miedo. Y es lo que he hecho” (In Cancio Isla, 2014).

Of course with institutionalized censorship comes the other side of the coin, the “arte castrante de la autocensura” (Padura, *Un hombre en una isla*, 291), a phenomenon he mentions briefly in a few essays. In one of them, he compares what he deplores as the hyperpoliticization of Cuban literature from exile, “mientras los que permanecían en el país, tentando los límites de la permisibilidad oficial, empujándolos muchas veces, acudían a los recursos de la literatura (metáforas e hipérbolos de los más diversos e imaginarios tipos) para lanzar su mirada a lo social desde los conflictos reflejados” (Padura, *Un hombre en una isla*, 43).

Padura arguably mixes the signals of communication on everything related to freedom of expression and free art in particular. Hence, Cuban art appears to be both free and not quite free; his books circulate in Cuba without censorship (he thanks the *Editorial Unión* for that), though they do not circulate widely and he is always afraid of censorship; he is free to write what he wants but he strives to be a “bit more free every day”; and so on.<sup>17</sup> This ties in nicely with an insightful comment made by Marie-Laure Geoffroy about artists and writers in Cuba: “On the whole, the best strategy was to seem not to be clearly positioned, and thus hard to blame” (Geoffroy, 2015: 11). To the question of whether he considers himself a “heretic” (the title and topic of his most recent novel), his answer is revealing: “Yo siempre mantuve una actitud crítica respecto a lo que se vivía en Cuba. Sin excesos. Nunca he militado activamente en ningún bando: ni en el partido ni en la disidencia. Mi gran lucha ha sido siempre ser independiente” (Padura,

17. Variation on the same pattern: he often uses the interrogative form. On the need for economic (not political) reforms for instance: “¿Habrà llegado el momento de acortar las pausas y alentar la prisa? ¿Y el momento de que los ciudadanos empiecen a saber qué futuro les espera con esas transformaciones más profundas y complejas, que podrán definir el destino del país y, seguramente, sus propias vidas? Parece que sí” (IPS, 27 March 2013). His titles themselves are often interrogations, like: “Cuba: ¿En línea con el mundo?” (IPS, 15 February 2011), “¿País nuevo?” (IPS, 220 December 2010), “¿La hora crítica de la burocracia?” (IPS, 15 January 2009), “¿Cambia o no cambia?” (IPS, 7 February 2008). After vague admonitions of both socialism and capitalism: “¿Cómo podrá ser ese futuro por el que ya muchos sentimos una ansiosa nostalgia? ¿Cuándo acabará la crisis, cuándo se superaran los fundamentalismos y los terrorismos, cuándo se mirará con seriedad el tema del hambre, o las vilipendiadas y modestísimas metas del milenio, o la cabalgante devastación ecológica? ¿Aún tendremos tiempo de construir ese futuro mejor, con democracias reales y sin demagogias, de salvar nuestra propia vida en el planeta? Como no tengo respuestas, prefiero dejarles las preguntas y quizás haberles despertado esa nostalgia extraña por lo que no hemos logrado.” IPS 15 June 2009.

“En Cuba, la herejía,” 2013). Again, he puts a totalitarian government and a weak and persecuted opposition on the same moral scale. But the interviewer (Fernando García) persists and asks: “Pero la independencia es una herejía en Cuba, ¿no?” He answers: “Mi pensamiento es más bien heterodoxo, en el sentido de que me opongo a la ortodoxia de cualquier tipo. Y eso puede llevar a la herejía. Pero en esencia, lo que yo he querido siempre es mostrar lo que es la vida en Cuba sin perder la cualidad literaria; si convirtiera estos textos en declaraciones políticas haría panfletos. Pero también hago periodismo, y ahí suelo ser mucho más crítico.” (Padura, “En Cuba, la herejía,” 2013). Asked about the recent lifting of restrictions to travel abroad for Cubans, and if it means they are more free, he answers yes, “Una persona que tiene la posibilidad de vivir en el lugar que decida es una persona más libre.” He then adds that “La libertad nunca es completa, en ningún lugar” and talks about the time he censured himself in Spain, in an article that had little to do with politics (it was about hurting sensibilities on violence against women) to illustrate his point. In sum, he manages to depoliticize the issue of censorship in Cuba. Similarly, in a book entirely devoted to reminiscing on the mistakes of the past, Padura and co-author John Kirk passively write: “The freedom for all cultural figures on the island, as Antón Arrufat explained, is conditioned by the political and social reality of the country” (Padura in Kirk and Padura, 2001: 183).

“In all of my crime novels,” he told Oscar Hijuelos, “from *Havana Blue* to the one I will publish in Spain this year, *Herejes* (Heretics), I have always taken a critical view of Cuba’s reality” (in Hijuelos, 2014). The story of detective novels in Cuba is interesting. In 1972, the Ministry of the Interior announced a competition to develop the genre: “The works that are presented will be on police themes and will have a didactic character, serving at the same time as a stimulus to prevention and vigilance over all activities

that are antisocial.” The heroes were to be champions of the people, so upright that they refrained from swearing (Anderson, 2013). As Samuel Farber points out, “The first two prizes were awarded in 1973 to two works authored by two MININT lieutenants, but in subsequent years the prizes were awarded to civilian writers.”<sup>18</sup> In Padura’s novels, on the other hand, the bad guys are not the typical “counterrevolutionaries”: they are typically “bad apples” of the ruling class. As Anderson puts it, “what Padura does is to find a politically acceptable way to acknowledge the obvious” (Anderson, 2013).

His most daring novels, from the point of view of publishing in Cuba within the parameters, are the past two: *El hombre que amaba a los perros* (2009) and *Herejes* (2013). Both are historical novels, which a priori is a smart way to handle the parameters: it is always easier (in fact it is often encouraged) to talk about faults committed in the past (*El hombre*) or in any society at any time (*Herejes*). His previous novels also tended to think of the past as a cemetery of errors—for instance institutionalized homophobia during the 1970s in *Máscaras* (1997)—hinting that they may or may not have been rectified today, something the reader has to figure out for herself. As he publicly stated (in Spain): “A mi modo de entender, en la novela que se apoya en la historia para realizar su trayecto artístico, el escritor debe tener en cuenta que solo cumple su misión si su esfuerzo sirve para iluminar el presente a través del examen de la experiencia ya acumulada por el hombre en su transcurrir temporal, o sea, histórico” (Padura, 2014, “El instinto de libertad”). How does *El hombre* illuminate the present? “My novel has been experienced as a revelation in Cuba, since that history is still unknown here today. The fact that this novel was published in Cuba and that it has won prizes also shows that it is possible now to talk about Stalinism in the Soviet context and in relation to the rest of the world—with respect to the Spanish Civil War, for

18. “In contrast to the police novel popular in capitalist countries, where the private detective plays the central role, the Cuban police novel inaugurated in the seventies had two central sets of actors. One involved the members of the intelligence agencies; the other were ‘the people,’ usually members of the CDRs, who collaborated and privided information to the intelligence agencies. The genre reached its peak in the first half of the seventies and declined considerably by the late eighties” (Farber, 2011: 24).

instance, and, of course, to Cuba” (quoted in Hijuelos, 2014). But the novel does not shed direct light on the relations between Stalinism and Cuba, and he does not make that link clear in interviews either. It does not address the simple question: what was Ramón Mercader (Trotsky’s assassin) doing in Cuba? As we know, he lived in Cuba and worked as an adviser to the repressive Ministry of the Interior. Mercader’s mother Caridad worked for seven years in the sixties as the functionary in charge of public relations at the Cuban embassy in Paris (Farber, 2014). Padura can’t or won’t connect the dots. None of this takes away the importance and interest of the novel in the Cuban context. Almost anywhere else in the world, this novel would be appreciated primarily for its historical and literary value. There are few other places in the world where condemning Stalin’s assassination of Trotsky “rompe mitos,” as he said about the book’s impact in Cuba. This suffice to acknowledge that the novel was clearly dissonant in the Cuban context, and therefore an act of courage on the part of the novelist.

The novel *Herejes* is more ambitious but it is also further steps removed from controversies about how Cubans are ruled. As Padura said in September 2013: “Para reflexionar sobre la libertad del individuo en Cuba, me pareció adecuado encontrar paralelos que demostraran que este fenómeno ha sido *una constante en la historia del hombre* ... (my emphasis). His new search for the present gets drawn in the history of humanity, leaving the quest for freedom in today’s Cuba a distant and diluted quest. Thus, he said, “el totalitarismo es una actitud eterna de las formas de poder, que puede llegar a ser, digamos, un totalitarismo más total en determinadas sociedades y sistemas. Y la libertad individual es una condición o necesidad por la cual debemos luchar todos los días *en todas las sociedades, incluso en las que han proclamado ser más libres y abiertas*. Pero, por supuesto, todas esas lecturas que hago de realidades universales parten de mi experiencia cubana y, literariamente, salen y llegan a Cuba, como es evidente para cualquiera que haya leído mis novelas” (Interview in Cancio Isla, 2014). *Herejes* is a celebration of freedom and a condemnation of intolerance, in different periods and situations, emphasizing the rather obvious fact that intolerance has

been part of the human condition for ever (i.e., it is not specifically a Cuban issue). In an interview Padura calls José Martí a “heretic,” (“el intelectual que había cometido la herejía de tener un talento y una sensibilidad humanas superiores”), which arguably defuses the possibility of talking about heresy to critically “highlight the present” in Cuba. If the official hero of the regime is a heretic, then possibly, Fidel is too, fighting for freedom in Cuba, and so on. A heretic is a rebel, and officially, in Cuba, rebels are in power.

There is no doubt that both *El hombre que amaba a los perros* and *Herejes* can be read as critical of the regime and the official history in Cuba, as indeed they are by most readers. But they can also be read as criticism of Stalinist Russia (which is allowed and to some extent encouraged in Cuba since the end of the USSR) and as an ahistorical celebration of freedom, a value that is officially embraced, in principle, in the 1976 Cuban Constitution. His choice of the situation of Emos in Cuba, in *Herejes*, is interesting for it concerns persecution for being different socially, not politically, although their apoliticism is in a way a critique of utopia and hyper-politicization: “Y ahí entran el mundo de las tribus urbanas, y más en concreto los *emos*, que se reunían de noche y que tú viste en la calle G de La Habana. Parecían bichos raros, pero eran una manifestación de algo más profundo: el deseo de apartarse de la masa y crear una identidad propia, lo que en el fondo expresa un cansancio histórico. Los cubanos necesitan reafirmarse y su estrategia más habitual es tomar distancia, no creer. Son herejes” (Padura, “En Cuba, la herejía,” 2013). The political ramifications are clear, but perhaps less so than the psychology of urban youth, making Havana just another city dealing with youth alienation in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In sum, *Herejes* may be read as a Cuban-style *J'accuse* or as a mostly apolitical historical novel that confirms Tory prejudice on human nature.

In sum, novels like *Herejes* and *El hombre que amaba a los perros* are small heresies in the Cuban context and not predominantly political novels anywhere else. But they *can* be read as condemnations of intolerance and celebration of freedom, with full political implications, which no doubt is a source of concern

for the most conservative and short-sighted members of the regime. If one can't call Padura a dissident, it is equally impossible to deny that his work can be read as an invitation to "romper mitos" and to foster freedom. Which is why Padura's books are not readily available, let alone publicly discussed in Cuba.

### THE PASSIVE VOICE: A TALE OF GENERATIONS

When Padura looks back at his and his country's itinerary he thinks in terms of decades (1960s, 70s, 80s), periods (e.g., since 1959, since the 1990s), and most importantly, *generations*. He devoted some of his writing to individuals and events in the distant past: typically, the heroes of independence, or non-political characters (musicians, baseball players), but not much at all on key political events of the mid-twentieth century, such as the revolution of 1933, the democratic years (1940–52) or the coup of 1952. All of this is basically *préhistoire*, a bias strongly encouraged in official Cuban history (Rojas, 2011).<sup>19</sup> He is clearly generation-centric: he talks a lot about his own generation, which he calls the "hidden generation" (Anderson, 2013); he talks some on the previous generation (the one that made the revolution); and finally, he has much to say on the younger generations, practically conflated into one: all Cubans who came to adulthood since the late 1980s-early 1990s. Here generations are somewhat dissolved in a "period": the crisis of 1990s and its apparently endless aftermath. Thus,

"En la generación de mi padre estaban los que creían en el proyecto y los que no. A la mía nos educaron en el sistema; creer en él era parte de la lógica cotidiana. Fuimos los primeros que llegamos masivamente a la universidad. Éramos competentes. Al iniciar nuestro desarrollo, en los años ochenta, vivíamos de nuestro sueldo y empezamos a soñar con el futuro: tal vez uno podría conseguir un apar-

tamento, o que le tocara un Lada. O viajar a la Unión Soviética, la RDA o, a España o Canadá. Y de repente, en los años 90, el suelo se nos hundió y caímos en un foso" [...]

On his generation:

"Mi generación se frustró. Venía de una larga obediencia. Cortamos caña, recogimos café y tabaco, abrimos las desastrosas escuelas de campo, fuimos a Angola como soldados y al final nos quedamos sin nada. Y en este momento, cuando la sociedad empieza a cambiar, somos demasiado jóvenes para jubilarlos y demasiado viejos para emprender una dinámica diferente. Una generación atrapada, y que aún hoy tiene la responsabilidad de seguir ayudando a los hijos y de mantener a los padres pensionistas" (Padura, "En Cuba, la herejía," 2013).

The disenchantment started slowly during the 1980s and became a glaring reality for the country after the downfall of the Soviet bloc. For him, "the 80s was a golden age but after 1989 (and the fall of the Soviet Union) that artificial world vanished and there was an economic crisis. A more critical vision of the past arose and that was when I started writing my novels" (interview in Campbell, 2006). The 1990s were a time of great suffering and hardship on the island, perhaps the least of which was "la crisis del papel" (lack of paper and resources for publishing), which resulted in cuts in the publishing budget and coincided with yet another massive exodus of artists and writers. "We grew up in its romantic period—the sixties and seventies," he says in one interview. "I remember in school we had posters that said that the future of humanity belonged completely to the socialists" (interview in Jakeman, 2008).

If his generation experienced disillusion, the younger generations never really had much illusions to begin with, something Padura laments in part (they do not acknowledge the sacrifices of his generation) but understands. As he said in an interview: "Los tiempos

19. An interesting exception can be found in his book *Un hombre en una isla* (2012), where one can read this: "Desde la atalaya del hoy revolucionario, el *antes* prerrevolucionario suele dibujarse oscuro, nebuloso, deslavado; además es malévolo, corrupto y muchas veces indigno, por lo cual nunca se deberá regresar a él y, si se regresa (analíticamente), sólo será para apuntalar el después, pero sobre todo para mirar sus máculas y estar aún más seguros de que ese pasado nunca podrá regresar (en la realidad). En cambio, el después tiene características muy diversas: se revela y se comporta como un eterno presente revolucionario, glorioso y limpio, pleno de victorias, un devenir que se confunde con el futuro, pues el futuro le pertenece. Este *después* se alimenta de su propio pasado y se levanta sobre las ruinas remotas, casi sin forma, del otro pasado, el del *antes*" (p. 367). Like the other articles in this collection, the article is not referenced, but it is interesting to note that it is an article on baseball in Cuba.

son diversos, el país es distinto, y a nosotros nos obligaron a creer, pero hoy la mayoría no cree en nada, porque el mejor ejemplo para no creer lo dan los miembros de nuestra generación, con la suma de fracasos y frustraciones que llevan encima” (Padura, “El Problema,” 2014).

The motif of generation is all over his literary work as well. “Creo que el drama de mi generación recorre toda mi obra,” he said to Mauricio Vicent (quoted in Vicent, 2015). His main characters, starting with detective Mario Conde but also Iván Cárdenas in *El hombre que amaba a los perros*, are both emphatically from his own generation. “If you think Iván is similar to Conde, it’s because he is,” he said. “They are two Cuban men from the same generation [i.e., Padura’s], who have had the same historical experiences, the same passion for literature, and the same frustrations and lost dreams,” he said to Oscar Hijuelos (2014). Incidentally, the little history of Mario Conde is that he wanted to be a writer as a young man, but when his first short story was about to be published in a magazine, the publication was shut down for being anti-Communist. Conde never wrote again; instead, he became a policeman. Talking about the film *Retour à Ithaque*, to which Padura collaborated as a screenwriter (it is loosely based on an episode of his novel *La novela de mi vida*, 2001): “Es la historia de una generación rota, una verdadera crónica de la supervivencia,” referring again to his own generation (interview in Pazos, 2014).<sup>20</sup>

Padura considers that his generation, unlike the previous one, never had power and was the most “golpeada” (Personal interview, 2015). From this

common experience he and many writers and artists of his generation developed a strong bond of solidarity that has more to do with friendship in adversity than artistic coherence. They look up for each other, like comrades who went to war together—in fact, they are still fighting. Many are now living in exile but they keep in touch and refused to be divided, despite efforts of the regime to do so (Personal interview, 2015). What is striking here is how they all are on the generational raft and basically strive to defend themselves and to survive, not to change conditions beyond their control.

This is, it seems to me, an important point to understand Padura’s viewpoint: individuals are historically determined; they are presented a deck of cards and try to make the most of it. Politics is divisive, and one should never let it stand in the way of more important things like loyalty to place and friends. In art and literature, his generation was negatively impacted by politics and, to survive, what it needed to do was to keep politics at bay, giving themselves and their work some distance and autonomy from official rhapsodies. Thus, if characters in, say, Jesus Díaz’s *Las iniciales de la tierra* (published in 1987 but written in the early 1970s) live in osmosis with politics, characters in 1980s-novels are typically driven by personal experiences in a disenchanting environment. Same thing happened in visual art: the 1980s generation sought to distance itself from the politically didactic trend adopted by its forebearer. The new trend was one of rupture with the revolutionary didacticism, what painter (from Padura’s generation) Flavio Gar-

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20. Laurent Cantet’s French-Cuban film, shot in La Habana, was scheduled to be presented at the Festival Internacional del Nuevo Cine Latinoamericano in December of 2014, after winning the El Abrazo prize at the Biarritz Film Festival, as well as the Venice Days Award at the Venice Film Festival. But the political leadership, via the ministry of culture and the ICAIC, curiously took it out of the program at the last minute, without explanation. According to Padura, the “official” explanation became that the president of the festival had seen the film, but the director, Iván Giroud, had not. Hence the need to withhold its presentation... It was finally presented early in 2015 during the French films festival, where because there were fewer films being presented, it could reach a larger audience, according to Padura. If it is clear that the film was censored, after someone made the mistake of including it in the program, one can only guess if the decision was reversed because of the pressures coming from the film community, in the form of a petition signed by twelve filmmakers. While the authors of this petition denounce this as a case of “censorship” it also praises the “five heroes,” the former director of ICAIC Alfredo Guevara, and of course, Fidel. Padura, on the other hand, made no public comment about the event, a silence that is condemned by exiled Cuban writer Antonio José Ponte, in a scathing article. Ponte also highlights the fact that while the novel and the movie examine the controversial issue of political persecution and exile, the culprit winds up being the bad apple, not the political leadership or the totemic Revolution. See Ponte, 2014.

ciandia called *contenidismo programático*. In Padura's words:

"An emerging consciousness that politics and literature should have independent existences, that man and his dramas can or should be the center of artistic creation, and that looking critically at one's surroundings was a possible responsibility for a writer began to shape collective interests, becoming obvious in the works that we created and even published in those years" (Padura, November speech, 2012).

For the cultural field as a whole, Padura sees a silver lining in the hardship of the 1990s. This harsh decade made possible "a new sense of both literary and economic independence" (Padura, November speech, 2012). Before the 1990s the publishing output was marked by abundance and mediocrity. The "crisis of paper" weeded out mediocrity and gave genuine authors (he mentions Abilio Estévez, Senel Paz, Pedro Juan Gutiérrez, Eliseo Alberto Diego and himself) a chance to publish and gain recognition abroad. During the previous three decades only authors who were famous before the 1959 revolution (Carpentier, Sarduy, Lezama Lima) were known internationally (authors known in the Soviet block thanks to cultural agreements do not count here).

Padura's interpretation of his and his country's itinerary is fundamentally affected by (or perhaps is a consequence of) the passive role he bestows to actors. Basically, history gives two options to individuals: to stay or to leave the country. Those who stay are shaped by the dominant trends of their generation. Though one can hardly think of a single country in the world that has been more decisively shaped by political will than Cuba, indeed by the political will of one individual, the decision-making process is almost entirely absent in Padura's account of life in Cuba. Padura is a character in this *comédie humaine*, coping like everybody else. Hence, he writes sentences such as: "(due to fortuitous cosmic conjunction or a simple historical-concrete necessity) the 1990s

would be my decade of real and definitive transformation into a writer who was Cuban, of course, and who would live in Cuba, ending in the culmination of my becoming a professional writer in 1995" (Padura, November speech, 2012). Needless to explain, this interpretation irons out variations within and between generations. Most significantly, it leaves out individuals (many writers and artists among them) who "exit" the situation and live in exile. It deals only with the ones who play by the rules.

### REALITY CHECK: PADURA'S JOURNALISM

Padura subscribes to the fairly common view in Cuba about literature replacing government-controlled media as a source of information and reflection on the reality of daily life in Cuba—though he can't bring himself to explain *why* journalism is so poor.<sup>21</sup> On the other hand, in her foreword to a collection of Padura's essays mostly published abroad, his wife Lucía López writes that "El propio escritor ha reconocido en más de una ocasión que acude al ejercicio periodístico para decir lo que no puede expresar en su narrativa" (López, 13). In any case, one has to turn to his articles for foreign readers to find Padura's famed journalism on current events in Cuba.

Most of Padura's articles on Cuba were commissioned by the Inter Press Service (IPS), an independent and moderately leftist "international communication institution with a global news agency at its core, raising the voices of the South and civil society on issues of development, globalisation, human rights and the environment" ([www.ips.org/institutional/](http://www.ips.org/institutional/)). They were published for twenty years under the rubric *La esquina de Padura*, in many countries but not in Cuba—except illicitly via the internet, or the few times his essays were reproduced in the Catholic magazine *Espacio Laical*. Padura underlines, defensively, that IPS doesn't belong to any government and that it pays him very little: about 15 CUCs per article (Personal interview, 2015). His pieces vary in

21. "Muchos de nosotros, casi todos, hemos sentido la complicada necesidad de hacer la crónica de nuestro tiempo, en vista de que esa crónica no aparece o aparece mal en la prensa cubana. Muchas realidades, personajes, actitudes y, sobre todo, modos de pensar de los cubanos de estos años sólo han tenido espacio en la literatura (y algún reflejo en el cine: recuerda Suite Habana o los documentales hechos por los más jóvenes realizadores), y muchos escritores, no sé si conscientemente, hemos asumido esa responsabilidad, que no tiene por qué ser de la literatura, y la hemos llevado a nuestros textos" (Padura, "Cuba es un país," 2008).

genres from “street” journalism (if not very “investigative”) and storytelling to thematic essays on the meaning of history or utopias. A selection of those finally came out in Cuba in three books published in 2005 (*Entre dos siglos*, *La memoria y el olvido*, and *Un hombre en una isla*), all with marginal publishers. One looks in vain for any of these books in Cuban bookstores.

Padura explained to *Le Monde*'s journalist Pablo Parangua why his journalism is not considered acceptable for publication in Cuba because his “vision de la réalité n'était pas celle que prétend promouvoir la presse cubaine, qui privilégie la propagande plutôt que l'information ou l'analyse” (quoted in Parangua, 2014). During the presentation of one of his books featuring a collection of his articles (*Un hombre en una isla*) at the Feria del libro in 2014, Padura publicly stated that these articles were considered unfit for publication in mainstream Cuban newspapers. It begs the question: why?

To begin with, unlike the Panglossian views peddled in Cuban media, his journalism is not triumphalist in tone, quite the opposite. His articles discuss the harsh conditions of living in Cuba, the growing inequalities, problems of corruption, bureaucratic inefficiencies, opaque and top-down decision making, and the bland kowtowing of the media. Padura's unadorned portrait clashes with official media but it is quite in sync with the dominant literary trend that started during the 1990s, which he characterizes as a “narrativa de la deconstrucción, de las ruinas, del apocalipsis y la marginalidad” (Padura, *Un hombre en una isla*, 33). Always mindful of boundaries, Padura warns that one can go too far in this direction: “Como cualquier reacción,” he commented, “ésta corrió el riesgo del exceso y la narrativa cubana antes desbordaba de luchadores, milicianos, obreros abnegados y campesinos felices, se superpobló de prostitutas (jineteras), emigrantes (balseros), corruptos, drogadictos, homosexuales, marginales de toda especie y desencantados de las más diversas categorías” (Padura, *Un hombre en una isla*, 43). In his journalism Padura alludes to the collapse of the Soviet Union

(another rather unusual topic in Cuban media), often referring to it as the “Stalinist” model. It is not always clear if he does that to distinguish it from the better Leninist original model, i.e., to denounce the *deviation* from the model rather than the model itself, or because it is a safe way to denounce communism in Cuba. One of his articles entitled “Utopías perdidas, utopías soñadas” (2010) discusses the Kattyn massacre and the censorship of Vassili Grossman's *Life and Destiny* (a book that impressed him tremendously). It quotes Orwell and states that totalitarianism is still alive today, though without saying where. He calls for a lucid understanding of past mistakes but remains elusive on lingering effects of those in Cuba.

“I am and will always be convinced that it is useful, indeed urgent, to know and relive in the 21st century the political as well as social and human reasons for the perversion of the marvelous idea that man can live in a society with equality and not only with free health care and education but also the maximum freedom and the maximum of democracy, to make human existence truly more full and whole. The urgency and relevance of this understanding derives from the reality of our world today, battered by economic, ecological, migratory, and religious crises. It is a world that extols its democracy but in which millions of humans suffer from chronic hunger and misery, which makes us consider the necessity of refounding a utopia, a better world, and one doesn't repeat the mistakes and horrors and that characterised (and ruined) the first attempt, scarring the 20th century.”<sup>22</sup>

In this quote, it is typical that as he is becoming more specific with comments on tradeoffs between health care and education on one hand, freedom and democracy on the other, he changes course and revert to beauty contest platitudes on “a better world” free of hunger and misery.

In both his essays and his literary work Padura condemns the most egregious mistakes committed years ago by the “revolution” (one is left to wonder: not by Fidel?): the UMAP, the *quinquenio gris*, and the persecution of homosexuals. All of this is done in scrupulous compliance with the primary parameters. In

22. This is from the English translation available on the IPS website.

fact, Fidel Castro is rarely mentioned in his essays and never in his literary work. True, government officials admit some of these mistakes from time to time. But comments like this are a rarity in the media, so just to admit the possibly admissible appears edgy.

Padura and Raúl Castro seem to agree on what is the most urgent problem in post-Soviet Cuba: the lethargic economy, still reeling from the post-Soviet crisis, and the persistently low standard of living of the population. He told *El País's* columnist Mauricio Vicent that in his view, the worst legacy of Stalinism in Cuba has been its economic model (i.e., not its totalitarian political system, which Padura can't or won't discuss.) For Padura, as we saw earlier, the relative prosperity of the subsidized 1980s was a mirage and the contradictions of the socialist economic model were exposed when the socialist bloc fell like a house of cards. Most of Padura's articles deal with how Cubans can't afford basic necessities. He talks repeatedly about the weight and inefficiency of the bureaucracy as a particularly negative legacy of the "Stalinist" model. All of his articles on Raúl's reforms find some faults; typically, they are not fast and comprehensive enough, there is no sufficient information and transparency in the process, and the like. As with many "middle class" Cubans, he seems particularly frustrated by the clumsy policy on sale of private cars. In sum, for him, "El problema es que la gran asignatura pendiente de la isla caribeña está en su funcionamiento y desarrollo económico interno, que ni siquiera la política de cambios realizados al calor de la 'actualización del modelo económico,' como se le ha llamado, ha logrado concretar" (Padura, "Cuba," 2014). Still, he remains supportive and cautiously optimistic about the *actualización's* chance of success.

On the issue of relations between the islanders and the exile, he comes across as generally tolerant and favourable to reconciliation. He berates "los fundamentalistas de dentro y de fuera" and advocates dialogue and reconciliation. Many of his avowed literary influence squarely belong to the anti-Castro camp (Padilla, Cabrera Infante, Vargas Llosa), or to American literature (Chandler, Chester Himes, Faulkner, Hammett, Hemingway, Salinger, Updike), none of

which is officially beyond the pale, of course, but it still gives his intellectual profile an aura of independence. Since the election of Barack Obama his articles are cautiously optimistic about the possibility of a rapprochement with the US. He does denounce the "embargo/blockade" (prudently remaining neutral on which term is most appropriate) but does not dwell on this issue and never indulges in anti-Americanism. He emphatically welcomed the Cuba-US December 17th agreement and the rapprochement between the two countries more generally.

Padura is on record saying he is "not a dissident," adding that he can't even imagine what he could be dissenting against" (Interview in Curet, 2013: 27). Dissidents do not appear to be part of the "reality" he describes in Cuba either. He simply never talks about groups or individuals opposed to the Castro regime. When I asked him about this (June 14 interview), he first responded half in jest that two out of three are undercover security agents, admitting that this assessment hardly does justice to the third one. Then he added his main point: he wants to preserve his independence from all sides. As he explained to John Lee Anderson, he has "no militancy, not with the Party, nor with la disidencia" (quoted in Anderson, 2013). This equal distance between the Party and dissidence means that he must be equally critical of the latter, which may seem absurd, since the Cuban dissidence is minuscule, oppressed and powerless. In fact, he has nothing to gain from the opposition "side," whereas he clearly needs to have a good working relationship with the reigning regime. He should therefore at least seem to be more jealous of his independence from the much maligned opposition. A recent event illustrates this. In March of 2012, protesters occupied a Church in Havana just days before Pope Benedict was scheduled to arrive in Cuba. They demanded a papal audience and political change on the island. Cardinal Jaime Ortega, who Padura considers a friend, had police called in to break up the sit-in. In a speech delivered at the Harvard's Rockefeller Center of Latin American Studies, Ortega defended his action and described the protesters as "former delinquents" with "no culture." This was taking place in a time when his gentle prodding of the Castro government (to speed up reform and release political prisoners) was

accused of legitimizing the government's plan of "orderly transition" (as Haroldo Dilla put it: more order than transition). Padura wrote an article for IPS, which was soon reproduced in *Espacio Laical*, where he offers support to the Cardinal and appears to lose his cool when alluding to the Cardinal's critics, referring to them as the "extremistas de afuera y de adentro" and denouncing their "ingratitude y posturas extremistas" that "solo sirven para exhibir protagonismos personales o, en el peor de los casos, para que nada cambie" (Padura, ¿Odio o conciliación? 2012). Here Padura's fire has one clear target: the opposition. This prompted exiled social scientist Haroldo Dilla to reply that "Si somos absolutamente fieles a los hechos, habría que reconocer que el Cardenal no ha sido una víctima inocente del 'fuego cruzado de los extremistas', sino uno de los fusileros." For him Padura too had become a fusilero. Padura doesn't understand or respect opponents who, unlike him, are not given space to express themselves "within the revolution," because they are not part of the "cultural elite" and are not satisfied with "críticas *lights*" of the system. For Dilla: "Otra vez volvemos a lo mismo, a buenos y malos, a virtuosos y pecadores, a amorosos y odiosos. A toda la dicotomía maniquea que efectivamente nos llevará a ese futuro de 'odio y resentimiento' que Padura quiere evitar ensalzando unilateralmente al Cardenal" (Dilla, 2012).

Padura evidently has no illusion about the authoritarian nature of the regime in place.<sup>23</sup> But he believes in the possibility of participation under this system of government. In 2009 he wrote: "Ahora la dirección del país ha convocado a la población por segunda vez en tres años a debatir los problemas, las carencias, ineficiencias, disfunciones de la sociedad, la política y la economía desde la perspectiva de cada cual y, otra vez se insiste, *sin temor* a las disensiones algo realmente novedoso en un país que en su discurso oficial se preció de la unanimidad más compacta y se caracteriza por la decisión vertical de los asuntos nacionales"

(Padura, "Cuba a debate," 2009). In sum, for all of his open-eyes chronicles of day-to-day hardship in the island, his musing on the political situation in Cuba—undoubtedly the central part of the "reality" he professes to describe—is overly cautious. I don't know the extent to which this results from choices he made freely (like when he was writing uncontroversial pieces for *El Caimán Barbudo*). Here we touch again the thorny issue of free will in a totalitarian or post-totalitarian environment. Arguably, the binary scheme "free will/censorship" doesn't begin to illuminate the gray zone of autocensorship and path dependency (one gets used to work within some parameters and it becomes part of "reality"). In this Padura is right: he was shaped by the revolution.

## CONCLUSION

Leonardo Padura found a sweet spot allowing him to navigate the tumultuous waters of censorship while searching (and finding) his own expressive voice. In doing so, he became, as one observer wrote, "perhaps the foremost chronicler of the island" (Anderson, 2013). To consider him a "comisario cultural," as Antonio José Ponte does, is a poor use of a term better suited to describe more deserving cultural agents of the state (Ponte, 2012). But it does seem that as a general rule, Padura is less keen on pushing for more space for expression than in occupying all the space available, without crossing the line. He always manages to work within the parameters, avoiding the fate that befell so many writers in Cuba. His criticism of many aspects of Cuban society is achieved at the expense of a double depoliticization: he does not talk directly about the political system in Cuba, and secondly, for him Cubans are mostly passive in dealing with what history and their generation have in store for them. This strategy works, in the sense that it provides him with a fairly clear strategy to practice his métier. Padura is not an exponent of the "art for art's sake" viewpoint. He wants to talk about the "re-

23. His caustic description of the electoral process, for instance, leaves little doubt about that. Soon after the "elections" of February 2013, he wrote: "En los primeros días de este mes, los cubanos fueron a las urnas con la misión de elegir a los diputados de las asambleas municipales y provinciales del parlamento isleño, última instancia en la que el voto ciudadano tiene capacidad de decidir. Las cifras de votación, como es usual, sobrepasaron 90 por ciento, y todos los candidatos de todos los municipios resultaron electos, como también es usual" (Padura, "Cuba, cinco años," 2013).

ality” in Cuba, without being an activist for change. He cultivates an “ejercicio de introspección social y humana que en ocasiones llega a la política, pero que no parte de ella” (Padura, “Un hombre,” 345). But one wonders, what happens when it “llega a la política”? The answer is: not much, because he can’t go there and continue living and working in Mantilla. Furthermore, living and working in Cuba is most valuable not only for him, but also for his readers. In one of his essays entitled “I would like to be Paul Auster,” he complains that he would love not to be constantly asked about politics in his country and how and why he continues living there. But this is very much his niche: he is widely seen as the best writer *in Cuba*. He offers us an off-the-beaten-path visit of a relatively close society, a prose that is free of propaganda (though not liberated from surveillance). No writer could attain global respectability producing a prose laden with official propaganda. By occupying a small but significant critical space in Cuba, Padura becomes more interesting for Cuba observers and more intriguing for students of cultural and literary trends in the island. In that he can be compared to authors and artists who produce somewhat critical

material under dictatorial regimes. Padura is one of those experimental types, comparable to authors such as the enigmatic Ismael Kadaré (Albania-France) or Murong Xuecon (China)—in fact closer to the first than the second.

From the state’s perspective, finally, it seems clear that after decades of rather disastrous management of the cultural elite, the new policy of controlled opening achieves the same goal (promotion and control of cultural production) at a much lower cost. This policy involves risks for the regime, but at face value it seems to have curbed the exodus of writers and especially artists (in fact some of them have come back, living in Cuba part of the year), stabilized the cultural field and, by extension, reinforced the regime itself. All of this amounts to a much smarter way to control a writer, who clearly benefits from the state’s new largesse while contributing to restore his country’s image. By removing the most petty and unnecessary restrictions to speech and movement, the Cuban gatekeeper state is better equipped to confront the challenges ahead.

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