

A 2004 Cuban notebook,
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the following 8 years on the grounds of "a
missing ending")

The journey to the New World took ages, two
whole weeks to be precise. Instead of heading
to Cuba, we tried to sail around a storm
ahead. Like the ancient Phoenicians, we went
down the coast of Africa, almost past
Mauritania before heading west in any way.
Alas, the storm took and shook us

nonetheless. For a good week I felt like a dying rat and being unable to shave in the constant rolling and bouncing of the vessel I certainly looked one right after the first couple of nights without real sleep. If the ozone hole would know about my heroic efforts to keep it just that little bit smaller and making the Airlines bankrupt just that little bit faster, both would probably feel a somehow moved, just as naivety beyond childhood is able to move us, I imagine.

At least for self-pity, I had no resources. That was really bad luck. It is so nice to pity oneself. Yes, I felt terribly sick on sea before, but never to the point of vomiting my heart out of my body. Well, as we get older, we learn that bad things can certainly become a lot worse still. I wonder if the contrary will happen with good things as well, one day. I would be quite surprised.

As I could not eat anything without seeing it return the other way round with the next big

wave, I took to the only thing which proved digestible: textbooks. After bouncing my headache through some 2000 pages, I remember to wake up one night wondering, why I was not bouncing from one sideboard of my cabin to the other any more. We had reached the (almost) eternal subtropic high. A zone cursed by sailors in former times, because they were set to wait for wind until all their horses were eaten up, in German they are therefore still called "Roßbreiten". As we were approaching Christmas and the geographic length of the Amazon, a long calm set of days set in with bored seamen who were far from home and could not work over-time to nourish their eternal dream of getting out of the lousy business one day. We submerged in fat meat. A swine was roasted with quite some difficulty to stage such a rustic scene on a rationalised machine of steel and oil. The Russian officers showed up reluctantly, took to melancholia and a kind of excessive drinking which made me drowsy watching. The Filipino crew seemed somehow more gay with

endless sessions of cheap beer and Karaoke, homosexual scenes of jealousy and other things which would bring about a bit of change to life in the steel cage. Well, they do make the best of it. Nevertheless, I use to get frightened when living together with Filipinos. They seem to be ideal breads of victims for US-colonialism. Search their hidden transcripts and dreams as you want, talk to them about their Communist guerrillas and its leader in exile. They will bring you back to the morale of their colonizers with startling routine: No money no friend. Religion is our only way out. Arabs have to be hunted down, they cause trouble even in Mindanao. But most of them are nice chaps. I wonder what political superficialities I would boast about if I had been born to go around in filthy vessels, filling oil to a hell of a monster of a motor on 8+4 hours night shifts for 500 US\$ a month. Sometimes they never go on land for a whole year, though there are exceptions when something gets broken.

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Loading technology has become so efficient that they hardly spend more than 8 hours of intense watch keeping for some 3000 container moves before sailing off again. Their tiresomely boasting stories about prostitutes are rather a set of tales from a "glorious past". Today only the Brazilian port authorities actually prove so intricately mingled with prostitution as to extend it into the vessels unloading. Nevertheless, seamen have a filthy double-moral. Ask them about their wives and what live they expect them to live during their year off shore and you hear one thing. Ask them about their attitude to love as a commodity in harbours and you will hear quite another thing. I hope their wives betrayal them all right to make up for such injustice.

Nonetheless it is nice to become involved in a close working community. As almost every patriotic Russian, the captain, the chief

engineer, his second and the Electrician soon turned out to be stout Communists. So, we were spending hours and hours discussing party lines, socialist organisation of work and leisure as well as Lenin's New Economic Policy (which is not that new any more after all). Normally, I become most acquainted with the electrician on board - a figure of sometimes literary reflection. They are the only ones which can never be advanced and never be degraded in this post-baroque universe of absolute hierarchy. They are a kind of swimming inteligencia in a corrupt tsarist rule, monks of pacifism in a bag-stabbing world of climbers before their captains. This time, the electrician was too much occupied with his alcoholism to take much notice of me. He would only attack me on the corridor for pretending to the captain to need one more bottle of vodka "just for me" and then smuggle it to his cabin. He had endless sets of ready counted money to spin into my pocket and I imagine him having quite some crew members buying vodka for this fixed

amount. As far as I can say, however, the Russian part of the vessel would not be much of a help for him however, because they exceeded their limits of spirit in the captain's eye anyway. This time, it was the fitter who caught my attention. There are few ships nowadays that have the luxury of a fitter any more. He does all sorts of mechanical jobs, disposing of a giant workshop close to the monster machine right down in the belly of the beast. This time the fitter was a Filipino of rare detachment and poetry. He could watch the water for ages and sometimes I managed to join him exchanging some observations every hour or so. When I used the flabbergasting quiet of the Havana Bahia to try out some echoes with the trumpet on that blessed morning we arrived, he soon retreated to the other side of the vessel to continue his observations in quiet. Well, I could not bother about my lack of sensitivity for too long, because the people on the land were actually taking up my tune to start to dance in the first rays of the morning sun.

I caught myself weeping with enthusiasm. Finally, finally, I have arrived again on our last and maybe first Island of Socialism in this world. Finally, after 14 days of a bluish nightmare, I saw colours, faces - actually quite embarrassing, how few faces of women failed to make my knees go weak - I started to smell something different from sea, salt and oily stink, faint at first but distinct. In one word, I experienced the return from a serious sensual deprivation. Gandhi deeply dismissed such exercise. If you deprive yourself of food just to exhilarate in tastes afterwards, you might as well continue your dumb life you lived before, he advised.

I managed to get around the ritual subordination under the state, the inheritor of colonial power over life and death, quite well. They did not cut my finger open for one of their dubious "blood tests" this time. No problem with yellow fever, whereas they were making a hell of a lot of fuss about that last time, keeping me for almost a day in custody.

All these senseless exercises of derelict central power seemed somehow faint in comparison to the first time I bothered them with my suspicious communist voluntarism. This regime functions like a patriarchal family. Once they identify you as someone who is somehow related with their Island, they let you pass through like a bad son. A slap in the face and next morning you can start the same story again. A state functioning like a family? It took me some days to find out another reality, investigating into the poor quarters where the death penalty was revived last march.

Coming to Cuba for the second time is definitely something else than warming up a derelict love affair for the second time. At the Historical Institute of the Central Committee, the party official took me in her arms, not making much of the fact that 8 months ago she had made signs to interrupt my seminar in progress because of evident heresy.

Yes, the city of Havana is full of music. But this time, I managed to perceive its second dimension. With the clues of scientific explanations of African animism, you can quite easily decipher the patterns of worship to things, i.e. gods and goddesses underpinning the colours and tunes. And it took only a queer mood and some hours of patient study (painting all the time, a very exciting thing to do in the presence of convinced animists) to enter into the inner circles of the Havana Santaria. Who would be surprised to discover, that a central figure, notably a woman, actually came over from New Jersey to kick off the new year with its fire-work of oracles and prophecies. I asked her where the difference lies between practising Santaria in Communist Cuba and in the belly of the beast (local newspapers actually call the US "the monster", queerly reminding of an animistic ritual, actually, conjuring by calling by the worst of all names). To my great disappointment, she

maintained, that there were no difference at all. I could not help to feel somewhat disappointed, my materialistic understanding of a superstructure suggested me something different. I am sure I will find out something else, if I manage to get into the monster, I thought secretly, while pretending a docile pupil all the time. Maybe this was the point where Martin and African religiosity departed for the time being, I left the circles after an exciting day and a rather disappointing night with not much more than esteem for the good old Afro-Cuban lady who had accepted me in her circle of influence. Somehow the young Cubans seem to me, devoted to African religiosity or not, quite easy a prey for consumerism. Luckily items for this reduced worship of fetishism are awfully expensive. Even their reduced availability is not preventing this queer atmosphere of consumerist void around such mega-events as new year - "revolution day".

But what about political repression? I have checked my network of friends and acquaintances in the leftist opposition to the new course in the first days and found them in quite a good state. They are exasperated about the lack of necessary items. They observe latest moves of further centralisation to combat sweeping corruption with curiosity and anguish. But they manage to publish (keeping up appearances with the system, but who does not in capitalist science, for instance). What really stroke me were not so much the details of the much-featured March repression in the wake of the lost Iraq war, but the campaign against "drug trafficking and drug abuse". This had been started in January 2003 with special units and a clumsy anti-abnormality campaign dragged through the CDR-circles (Comités de la Defensa de la Revolución). After 12 months it had turned out that anti-drug enforcement is being used to recriminate elements of the new rich, especially young careerists. They are being arrested and kept in custody in a

special quarter of Havana. Characteristically, there is no communication of the legal reproach towards the prisoner. Arrests happen at 4 o'clock in the morning. Intimidation and ill-treatment is notorious. Within the jungle of Cuban law, it is quite easy to get evidence against a young rich. No Cuban can officially own a car, etc. The case in the neighbourhood of Vedado was especially appalling. They actually kept the art dealer - who most certainly has nothing to do with drugs as makes good money with art trafficking - for 8 months without producing a transparent accusation. The young man was released all of a sudden with no money, almost no clothes in a most peripheral quarter of the capital in the middle of the night. Only by begging for money in the street - no problem with his appearances - he managed to ring up his family. When they picked him up they found a ruined body, pale with enflamed eyes, seemingly decades older than at the beginning of the year. I noticed quite soon, that my

informant had this story for me as a special favour due to our acquaintance. We might have talked quite superficially about the history of the revolution, which she knows intimately, she has given up the Art Academy in 1959 for its cause and sacrificed painting for politics. It was the fact that I had asked her to confuse my infantile sympathies for Cuba that she had dealt me this troubling story which had begun on a late March night only some flats away. She quite fulfilled her task and observed me weeping with this curious Cuban detachedness which convinces me more and more, that the island has got a good deal of Anglo-Saxon culture ahead of Latin American sentimentalism. They are a US-Colony, there is no question, they have been one for 105 years now and their outward opposition is full of hatred as you can foster only for a very close family member. Even the spectre of anti-drug repression rather takes up the lousy idealism of McCarthy than the brute use of force of a Latin American dictatorship, or beware a Stalinist

repression (that is quite another continent, really).

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Not that it is particularly sympathetic, though. And after drinking a good glass of Ron, darkened with coffee (dark Ron is considered to be better but available only with difficulty, white Ron is the opium of choice for the people) in that exceptionally nice family, I strolled off with my bicycle not feeling much like partying into New Year and Revolution Day that night. In the end, I partied nevertheless, with an old Chinese friend who made the impossible possible (unconsciously heeding to Che Guevara) and conjured up fish and meat, fruits and salad and even white bread in quantities. He had found out quite rightly somewhere that "Germans do not eat rice, they eat bread instead". I had a great meal apart from the masses of dry white bread which were served to me alongside to his plates of rice. Only one concession was finally enforced to mark

my upsetness about late Cuba: I slept deeply at 12:00 o'clock. Maybe this was also due to my 14 nights above a giant motor and the fact that I had land under my feet for only 40 hours by New Year. The festive days marking the glorious revolution - glorious it was indeed - conveyed the whole week into a lazy tickle of good rhythmic music. I decided to save an annual Cuban wage by not sleeping in a certified quarter for 3 nights, not paying the minimum 20 US \$ for Havana each night any more. So I took to the street for the Western provinces, sleeping in sugar cane fields and on the piled rubbish of beaches. I did not want to confront any Cuban with the crime of asking for an illegal accommodation of a foreigner then. I have become more daring by now. This tramp life was quite a success, due to climate and the inventiveness of Cuban peasants to produce the subtropical abundance of fruits and vegetables in it. As soon as you can protect yourself from mosquitoes, sleeping down and out is no problem. All my European precautions against

the cold, the disturbance by dogs and men, the cold from underneath turned out to be superfluous. Due to my excellent food, health and humour, I could paint incessantly. Actually oil painting is only feasible with the back up of a bourgeois household (I have to develop the impressionist technique of portable drying chambers in future). But watercolours are a great help in submerging into the subtropical affluence of colours, faces and atmospheric density on the way. I cycled down the transcuban highway for some hundred kilometres, not being bothered by more than 20 cars an hour. I have had to learn the patience to repair my flattening tires. There are many occasions on a bicycle-tour with the baroque Cuban ritual of smashing an bottle into glass-dust after drinking it up.

As in Poland, country people are a great relief once you manage to escape from the artificial utilitarianism of metropolitan customs. Actually, it is quite amazing how little you need to become thoroughly happy,

when the air is warm enough to allow you to sleep, paint, eat and watch the clouds in the air wherever you feel like it.

Friendship? In the countryside, I met a lot of enthusiasm for talking, exchanging ideas, observations and the wages of a workday in the starting sugar campaign. People know what they gained from the revolution and they seem to have a sincere affection for anyone who shows to respect their pride. But I already learned that you have to return to become real friends. I returned to Havana, though. And there are some elements which appear like friendship. What a bliss! There is, e.g. the Afro-Cuban Alicia, who does honour to her name, indeed, sharing the wonderland around her for the time being with her daughter, Naomi, having send her father to hell (What else should she have done? There seems to be hardly a different story to be found in Cuban families). She has a distinct sense of friendship and to my great help already one German friend, a woman called Anna. -Why

Naomi, that's a Yankee name? - I know, I like it, that's why! Alicia loves to discuss hotter issues, no matter whether she is in public space, even when I visit her at her workplace: "Why is abortion illegal in Cuba? Wasn't it different in your European Socialist societies? Why are Cuban judges always sending children to their divorced mothers? I couldn't care about the 1,60 US \$ per month, I could get from her father to bring her up! I am fed up with him. I love to work. I wouldn't know what I should do in your country when the daytime care for a child is a luxury for the rich only, as you say" (maybe he has exaggerated a bit there, but in Berlin the situation is certainly getting worse). She works 40 hours a week gaining 121 pesos a month, that is less than 5 US\$. The problem is, 1st that salary is not paid in dollars but in national currency, which makes it difficult to buy any product of importation, such as boots, textiles, kitchen tiles and screwdrivers of some value, ice cream without queuing up for sometimes hours etc. Secondly,

it is a deplorably small amount for surviving in today's Havana. There are lots of vegetable and fruits now in the market place mostly originating from co-operative farms. But when I go shopping with my Polish attitudes towards the yield of the countryside being humbly brought into town, I find myself quite easily spending more than a week of Alicia's wage just for filling up my rucksack. When I discovered after two days that my rucksack was empty and my stomach as well, I quite seriously started to bother how people can possibly survive on that. And with what decency and muse to discuss literature, unbelievable! Actually, poorness is common but not general. It is not only tourists who deal out tips for which an average Cuban works for weeks on ends. As far as I can observe, though, the strata of party officials is quite distinct from the emerging class of new rich who either work in tourism or have family members in the US. If this observation is right, the situation is distinctly different from, e.g. the late Soviet Union, where the

liquidation of the remaining Socialist traits in society was a matter of consistent change brought about by party officials as main subjects and profiteers of change. Cuban social policy is actually quite advanced in comparison with Latin American neighbour countries or even with the hell of impoverishment in affluence, the US. Alicia spends 20 pesos, 0,80 US \$ for the monthly daytime child care of Naomi. The fare is reduced because she is bringing her daughter up by herself. Actually social policy in Cuba is not really preoccupied with people in work. They are rather bothering about people out of the official working system and its organised benefits and subsidies, free preventive health care, goods, even modest monthly foreign currency grants for people working in the vast US \$-sector. Unemployed people are the real poor in Cuba. There are official statistics in specialised literature (available for US \$, which is a shame). They seem to be as sincere as formal

social scheme operators can possibly be. But the figures are disquieting.

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It was in a quarter marked by such marginalisation linked to informal work and unemployment that the March protests broke out. The three high-jackers of a harbour ferry were from the quarter. Unluckily, they had caught a Holy Cow in their high-jacked vessel, a foreign tourists, which made their action a capital offence, endangering the main sector of foreign currency income. But actually, they had not done any harm to anyone; they just wanted to go off to the US version of misery. It was never said that leaving the country can be punished by the death penalty. In fact, revolutionary Cuba has most rarely used the death penalty. Almost any US state has a more violent juridical record. Even people who have extremely damaged the revolution like the nowadays right-wing front figure Mato have been sentenced to long prison terms. In the

evening, a mother of the three culprits brought clothing for them to the jail, they told her to go home and return the next day. On returning, her son was already executed. In the following hours, a demonstration broke out in the poor quarter, a most unusual thing for today's Cuba. The only mass gatherings of a revendicative character are student manifestations in support of certain baseball teams. Those events cannot avoid the impression of being all too carefully planned and supervised. State manifestations are only accessible with entrance tickets, dealt out to politically reliable activists. When I tried to join the 15th of February peace demonstration, considering it to be "ours", as it was agreed upon on the Firenze European Social Forum, I found myself shielded off from the crowd quite instantly by a bunch of young and well-equipped secret agents. I would never forget the reaction of some elderly Afro-Cubans, who purposefully directed their steps right into the group of secret agents detaining me, asking with an

air of revolutionary comradeship if it was now not allowed to pass there. "Of course you are allowed to pass here", the agents answered politely, stepping aside and keeping a close watch on me all the time.

Silencing the March upheaval followed quite a similar line. The quarter was shielded off from the rest of the capital. No one entered, no one got out. When the movement of the inhabitants had died down without response elsewhere life was returned to its normal appearances. There is something deeply McCartherist about the Cuban political stagnation. Maybe it is a peculiar turn of self-pity or maybe even homesickness that lately I often muse about those strange words by Theodor Wiesengrund Adorno, who, having escaped from McCarthy's America, said in retrospective "Das Leben lebt nicht". Lately, I think he could have meant a whole continent without knowing. I am not talking about the surfaces of hot rhythms and subtropical colours, no, all that is lively

and fine. I am talking rather about the emptiness of some glances, I received and which chilled me deeply. Those half-emptied cans of beer, my neighbours on the official New Years concert threw carelessly down to my feet. I had spent a month's of their parents wages to treat them (heeding to their explicit suggestions). Not that it mattered much to me. But I had made a point in dealing out cash not beer in one of those pathetic gestures of futile solidarity. So it was up to them what to do with the foreign cash kick. They decided to drink half of it, hastily and let the rest drop down before my feet with an attitude of disarming carelessness. I sincerely believe, that they thought nothing about it. There was not even contempt in their attitude, just indifference, void.

Chic@s, political tourism is unsatisfying, we should start to build Socialism in Europe, soon. Cuba can only be a preparatory exercise in keeping awake the critical and the

uncritical senses. Both are thriving here, I assure you.

Havana, 6th of January 2004