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Report from Cuba: Polycrisis, Slow Death, Cruel Optimism

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ABSTRACT

There is a silent catastrophe unfolding in Cuba since the Trump administration blocked all oil shipments to the island in January 2026. This article attempts, as of September 2026, to examine the impact of the crisis on daily life, to search out its roots, and to try to read the tea leaves of what the US administration might be contemplating based on actions it has already taken. Drawing on Cuban sociologist Mayra Espina's concept of 'polycrisis' it surfaces the multiple dimensions and dynamics of the seemingly existential crisis of Cuban state and society.

TAGS:

Cuba; United States; Economic Warfare; Polycrisis; Mayra Espina

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1 Report from Cuba: Polycrisis, Dis-orientation, Slow Death, Cruel Optimism

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INTRODUCTION

How to narrate the story of Cuba's current near total economic and social collapse? The evolving catastrophic human reality, as Cuban writer Leonardo Padura reflects, "is sometimes difficult to decipher even for those of us who live it day to day." What follows is an effort, as of September 2026, to examine the impact of the crisis on daily life, to search out its roots,and to try to read the tea leaves of what the US administration might be contemplating based on actions it has already taken.

DAILY LIFE UNDER SIEGE

The immediate catastrophe has been unfolding since the Trump administration blocked all oil shipments to Cuba in January 2026. This came after he implemented the "Donroe Doctrine"[1] to remove Nicholas Maduro from power in Venezuela, Cuba's principal oil supplier since 2000 following the election of Hugo Chavez in 1998. One ally after another (Russia, Mexico) succumbed to Trump's threats and stopped sending oil to the island and Cuba's slim reserves were exhausted. The country faces ever longer daily blackouts, lasting twenty to twenty-two hours daily in Havana, even longer in the provinces. As we write in September, Cuba is undergoing its seventh total national collapse of the power grid since January.[2] Darkness descends on streets emptied of people every night, and barrios look like ghost towns.

Aside from darkness and unreliable electronic devices, people resort to charcoal or wood for cooking, if they can find and afford it. Acquiring food is a constant and daily pre-occupation. Food spoils in refrigerators; garbage accumulates in the streets with no fuel to power garbage trucks; fans can't operate to provide relief from stifling heat; and there is virtually no public transportation. Buses have become relics of the past, though electric powered vehicles, such as tricycle taxis have sprouted to provide some—minimal—relief. And solar powered charging stations [*solineras*] have sprung up—some state-run, others private– to keep them, as well as household electrical devices, from cell phones, and rice cookers to UV nail lamps, in operation.[3]

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[1] Claiming the right (or rather the might) to control the entire "American" hemisphere; an interesting contrast to the "American Century" that projected US hegemony through time, versus controlling a limited, reduced, space. Another expression of the decline of the US empire, and the emergence of multi-polarity.

[2] Dave Sherwood, "Cuba's electrical grid collapses again, plunging island into darkness," *Reuters*, September 18, 2026. https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/cuba-energy-grid-suffers-nationwide-collapse-2026-09-18/

[3] See for example, Dánica Coto and Andrea Rodriguez, "A solar-powered charging station in central Cuba brings life to a darkened island," *AP*. May 6 2026 https://apnews.com/article/cuba-solar-power-chargingstation-panels-santa-clara-solinera-0dc6f6ea3fcc3edb37a4e045425e26f0 and Katy LeRougetel, Martín Koppel and Cladia Kaiser-Lenoir "Cuban Workers Take Steps to Make Conditions More Liveable," *The Militant*, September https://themilitant.com/2026/09/11/cuban-workers-take-steps-to-make-conditions-more-livable/

The lack of water is a critical problem increasing in gravity; it takes 10-12 hours of steady electricity for the water pumping system to operate, something most areas of Havana have not counted on for months. The US Embassy recently issued an alert about a significant increase of diarrheal illness across Cuba due to contaminated water and inadequate refrigeration as the government rushes to ensure enough electricity and repairs to the water infrastructure to ensure a steady flow of water. Drivers of trucks delivering water to government institutions regularly divert this water for sale on the black market. Meanwhile, there are reports of people in desperation digging wells in the streets of Havana, and holes in sidewalks for makeshift pumps that suck water from main pipes.

Without transportation and electricity to power medical equipment, both the health care system[4] and education[5]—two standout achievements of the Cuban revolution—have nearly collapsed. We read reports of doctors conducting surgery with their cell phone lights, and hand pumping ventilators to keep them in operation. Schools have re-opened, with an estimated 73% teacher capacity; the government has made an appeal for university students, professors, and retirees to fill the gap.[6]

We can measure the maelstrom in which Cubans have been forced to live in generational terms. Young people, understanding clearly that they have no future in the land of their birth, are migrating in ever escalating numbers. Many estimates register a twenty four percent decline in population between 2020-24—over two and one half million people out of a population of eleven million—mostly due to youth migration: the sort of figure seen typically in wartime.[7] The older population who remain seek some form of meaning in the psychological and at times even physical dysphoria that envelops them as they try to grasp daily what is happening to them and to those they love.

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[4] "Production of medicine has been mostly halted because factories run on diesel. Vaccine makers are searching for ingredients because flights that once carried them are canceled because of a lack of jet fuel. And refrigerated vaccine stocks could soon spoil if the blackouts continue," Ed Agustin and Jack Nicas, "Cuban Patients Are Dying Because of U.S. Blockade, Doctors Say," *New York Times* March 26, 2026 https://www.nytimes.com/2026/03/26/world/americas/cubas-health-system-us-oil-blockade.html

[5] In-person university classes were suspended in May. Professors and students rely on unstable internet connections to hold and attend classes and provide access to scholarly materials; students submit assignments via What's Up and Telegram. Elementary and secondary schools ended two weeks early in May due to lack of transportation and food in the cafeterias; the school day had already been cut to half days. See "Lights Out for Cuban Students as Blocade Bites," *Jamaica Observer,* May 18, 2026. https://www.jamaicaobserver.com/2026/05/18/lights-cuban-students-blockade-bites/#google_vignette

[6] Dania Cotto, "Schools reopen across Cuba as fuel, water and power shortages persist," AP, September 1, 2026.
https://apnews.com/article/cuba-schools-reopen-students-class-86391f70038266c1c4dd05972384994c

[7] Cuban economist and demographer Juan Carlos Albizu-Campos is the generally accepted source for population figures. See "The population of Cuba is reduced to eight million, according to an independent study," *CiberCuba* March 26, 2025. https://en.cibercuba.com/noticias/2025-03-26-u1-e43231-s27061-nid299621-poblacion-cuba-reduce-ocho-millones-segun-estudio

Disorientation is described by the philosopher Sarah Ahmed[8] as a "bodily feeling or experience that shatters our belief that the ground on which we stand can support what it takes to make a life feel livable. The body might be reoriented if the hand that reaches out finds something to steady it. Or the hand might reach out and find nothing and might grasp instead the indeterminacy of air." For many older people on the island, there is no ground, only air. Their efforts are futile. They have no capacity to put things together, to look beyond the immediate tasks of basic survival. And of course, the elderly are not the only ones dis-oriented. A recent poignant short film, *La Retaguardia*, [Those Who Stay] captures the feelings of those young people who, unlike so many of their friends, have stayed in Cuba.

ECONOMIC WAR

In his essay "Necropolitics," [9]Achille Mbembe extends Foucault's theory of the state to colonial formations, emphasizing not "biopower," which focuses on the administration and optimization of life, but "necropower," the power and ability to dictate who must live and who is disposable, relegating populations to conditions of extreme precarity, exposure, and death. This form of politics regards the production of death or a slow death in life as the maximum expression of state power. Short of the term genocidal, this is an apt characterization of the Trump administration's policies toward Cuba. A group of UN human rights experts recently warned that without international intervention, Cuba risks becoming a "silent Gaza."[10] Since the January oil embargo, a series of further US measures have been proclaimed with unrelenting fury whose goal, it appears, is the collapse of the regime from within [whatever that might mean]. Their effect is the slow death of a population. "Economic war is war, it strangles life" a Cuban blogger reminds the world. These new measures include sanctions on foreign enterprises doing business in Cuba (hotels, nickel and cobalt mines), forcing them to close shop.. They include the elimination of credit card transactions: Cuba can no longer be paid for the sale of goods and services with internationally recognized credit cards.Visa and Mastercard were both forced to withdraw from the island under the sanctions pressure facing their overseeing banks. Every day the stranglehold tightens.

A driving objective of the Trump imperial project—finding international opportunities for economic ventures that make money for himself, his friends, and family—is evident in Cuba. Sherritt Mining, a Canadian nickel and cobalt mining company, that operated a joint-enterprise with the Cuban state for more than thirty years, providing the government with much needed foreign exchange, offers a striking example. Sherritt was

[8] Sarah Ahmed. *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Duke University Press, 2006), 157
[9] Achille Mbembe, "Necropolitics," *Public Culture* 15 (1): 11-40. 2003 p. 40
[10] "Cuba: Independent experts condemn new US sanctions as humanitarian crisis deepens," *UN News*, August 6, 2026. https://news.un.org/en/story/2026/08/1168094

forced to pull out of Cuba after the US-imposed secondary sanctions cut off the company's access to global banking and compliance services on May 1. Within a week a Trump crony, Ray Washburne of Gillon Capital, was authorized by the State Department to buy the company at a fire sale—a striking new deployment of sanctions by the US. Historically used to isolate countries like Cuba, Iraq, Iran, and Venezuela, in the case of Sherritt and Cuba, Trump is using sanctions to appropriate land and resources even before he achieves the collapse of the regime.[11]

Beyond executive orders imposing sanctions, recent Supreme Court decisions have legalized the "recovery"—or retaking in Jafari Allen's formulation—of property expropriated over sixty years ago by the Cuban Revolution, such as sugar mills, mines, refineries, gas stations, docks, and ports. In one striking case, the Supreme Court supported payment of damages by cruise lines that docked in Havana between 2016 and 2019 to the former owners of the Havana Docks. As Allen insists, given who owned property in pre-Revolutionary Cuba, the deeper implications of the Court's decision is [hope for] the restoration of a racial economic order under the neutral guise of property law.

Aside from the President's self-enrichment, what or who is driving US policy toward Cuba and what will happen in the face of this worsening humanitarian catastrophe? As supervised by Marco Rubio, current US policy seems to be that making life for the Cuban people unlivable will force the regime to collapse from within. Since he is busy elsewhere, Trump enters into this scheme only occasionally to apply further sanctions suggested to him no doubt by Rubio et al. Based on his statements, Trump thinks he has only to crook his little finger and Cuba will fall into his pocket. As he declared some months ago, "I can do what I want to with Cuba."

Venezuela and the capture of Maduro convinced Trump of a great strategy: all he had to do was cut off the head of the leader in a given country he opposed to achieve a quick victory and a glorious new accomplishment. Hoping that entry into Iran would be, like Venezuela, short and sweet, Trump set his sights on Cuba next. But the catastrophe of his war in Iran has dictated a different playbook for Cuba, raising two opposing possibilities. The war's unpopularity even among his own following might cause him to think twice about undertaking another overtly aggressive regime change operation. On the other hand, Trump's confidence in his success against Cuba might persuade him that such actions, particularly if taken quickly, could make memories of the mess he made in Iran fade into the background.

But why Cuba in the first place? Without major resources to exploit like Venezuela's oil, why has the Trump administration put the island near the top of its hit list? We can articulate two reasons. First, Trump prides himself as a visionary, a real estate genius and what better real estate than the entire northern coast of Cuba? Here he can borrow

[11] See Logan McMillen, "The Imperial Plunder of Cuba Has Begun," *Jacobin* June 27, 2026 https://jacobin.com/2026/06/trump-cuba-canada-mining-sherritt

the pre-Revolution Mafia scheme, who had plans to pockmark that coast with hotels and casinos. As Hyman Roth in *Godfather 2* declared, they'd make the Cuban coastline "bigger than Las Vegas," a site of leisure, as the old 1940s advertisements enticed, "the place where your conscience can take a vacation."

The second reason for Trump's interest, is that Cuba would be the jewel in his crown; twelve presidents, he would boast, from Eisenhower on tried and failed to bring down communism in the hemisphere, but he and he alone had the courage, the resolve, and the guts to finally do it. Trump's appetite for bragging has proven insatiable. Whether it would improve his standing in the polls, outside of South Florida and other Cuban enclaves, is another question. According to Noam Sheiber, Cold War anti-communism no longer operates within the affective political economy of the majority of Americans; and here as elsewhere the generational divide is stark.[12]

Recent reporting has added another dimension to what appears to be the emerging Trump strategy for Cuba: using exports, particularly of fuel, to make Cuba financially dependent on the US—as it once was on the Soviet Union and to some extent Venezuela. In the face of sanctions against every other potential supplier of necessary goods to the island—from fuel to solar panels to frozen chicken—US companies have taken advantage of loopholes in the Embargo to become Cuba's main trading partner. Exports to Cuba are up sixty percent through July compared with the same period last year and amount to more than all of 2024. As Michael Bustamonte wryly comments, this appears to be a modern take on dollar diplomacy—the early 20th century use of US power—in this case, sanctions--to promote US commercial interests.

EXPLANATIONS FOR CUBA'S CRISIS

When to begin the story/explanation of a crisis is always a political question. Do we start with the return of the Trump administration to power and his Secretary of State appointee Marco Rubio—US-born son of Cuban pre-Revolution 'refugees' and single-minded regime opponent? Or with Biden's failure to reverse most of the first Trump administration's punitive measures, and continue on the path Obama initiated, as so many had anticipated? What of the Cuban government's fear and failure to take advantage of the Obama opening, which had inspired so much hope among the island's population? Or its numerous prior promises to reform the economic system—if not the political system—that as economist Pavel Vidal succinctly summarizes, "were later only partially implemented, slowed down, reinterpreted by the bureaucracy, or reversed when they began to produce unintended consequences for political and administrative control"? Focusing on the other major propeller of youth migration, a key factor in the crisis, should we emphasize the repression of the protests of 2021 and the prior

[12] See his interview with Anand Giridharadas, "Explaining the Socialist Surge," *The Ink*, July 1, 2026. https://the.ink/p/explaining-the-socialist-surge?utm_source=live-stream-redirect&triedRedirect=true

suppression of the San Isidro Movement of young artists against a repressive institutional decree? And this coinciding with the pandemic, and the severe blow to tourism—the government's bet for the growth of the economy?

For sixty-seven years Cuban leaders have declared the blockade the sole villain in undermining possibilities for economic prosperity on the island. The US and international Left largely echo this charge, portraying any criticism of the Cuban regime as "blaming the victim" or siding with the enemy.[13] But it is not in fact the whole tale, and it is not the view among a large and growing part of the population. What one regularly hears on the streets is a profound disgust with the ruling bodies, contempt for every organization tied to the state, and a deep bitterness born from expecting reforms that never come. The material problems people live with-–lack of food, high prices, low wages, unreliable transport, decaying housing, and blackouts—are not new, even as they are now exponentially worse. As Dick Cluster summarizes, "the decades of official rhetoric about a 'socialism' that bears little resemblance to people's daily experience mean that socialism sounds to young people not like an appeal to idealism but either a cynical evasion of responsibility or a proof that 'socialism' must be the cause of all their problems; to older people, who remember the Special Period [in the 1990s following the collapse of the Soviet Union and Cuba's Eastern bloc trading partners], it's evidence of a dead end, because here we are again."[14]

Moreover, focusing singularly on the embargo does not give space to critical voices on the island—a key goal of this article. As the Cuban sociologist Mayra Espina argues, if we accept the idea of the totality of the blockade's impact, "then we must conclude that Cubans are bereft of agency, that there is nothing we can do about the inferno in which we are living."[15] Espina is among the most insightful of those analysts whose work over years has challenged the Manichean binary that blames Cuba's dire situation either on the imperialist blockade or on the entrenched "totalitarian, Communist" regime's ineptitude and corruption. What follows draws principally upon her work to try to illuminate the character of the crisis and the options that the government has had (and may still have, though the room for maneuver is ever more constrained): options that preserve the socialist commitment to the health, education, and welfare of the population; and that address persistent structural inequalities of race, gender, age, and rural vs. urban location. And crucially, options that transform the centralized,

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[13] See, for example, Renzo Llorente, "Blaming the Victim: Ada Ferrer's Letter to the Cuban President," *Monthly Review online*, June 12, 2026; https://mrone.org/2026/06/12/blaming-the-victim-ada-ferrers-letter-to-the-cuban-president\

[14] Dick Cluster, author with Rafael Hernandez, of *History of Havana* (OR Books, 2018) personal communication. See also excerpts from the recent debate in the National Assembly over the reform package introduced by Cuban president, Diaz Canel, "The Silence is Broken: What No one Expected to Hear Inside the Cuban National Assembly," *Noticias Cuba*, June 19, 2026. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wLhiGqXoaMk "When my generation hears talk of 'socialism,' for them it's synonymous with poverty, with blackouts, with scarcity, with the sadness and frustration of their parents."

[15] Mayra Espina, in conversation, February 23, 2026 Havana.

bureaucratic, inefficient, undemocratic, and corrupt state system of economic and political control.

THE CUBAN POLYCRISIS

Espina uses the notion of "polycrisis" to analyze Cuba's socio-economic-political-existential reality. Besides her formation in the "critical/Marxist tradition" in sociology, her principal methodology for comprehending the meaning of the crisis in the daily life of Cubans is what she calls "street corner sociology"—interacting with people wherever she can encounter them, a methodology made easier in its Cuban variant by the long lines that have traditionally formed to access life's basic necessities—food on the ration card, entry into a bank, in front of the various foreign embassies where people seek travel visas, etc.

Usually attributed to the French sociologist Edgar Morin,[16] "polycrisis" insists there is "no number one problem [such as the Embargo] to which all others are subordinate." Rather "polycrisis," refers not to a series of parallel crises—economic, social, political, for example— but "multiple structural and systemic crises, articulated synergistically and recursively (repetitive, looping). No dimension of life escapes the crisis…no problem is more important than another." Solving one problem in isolation can in fact unpredictably worsen others.

The crises Espina identifies are economic, political, social, demographic, and environmental, with related crises in health and education. Starting with the *economic crisis*, we look at the dramatic growth of both poverty and social inequality. By Espina's calculations, ten percent of the population constitutes the elite; with a standard of living equivalent to middle classes in both the US and Latin America. Forty percent are middle class, though barely, i.e., they have access to modest means that cover, albeit with some strain, their essential needs. This sector is always in danger of sinking, and in fact is now shrinking relatively, as the number of people living in poverty grows. Most unsettling is her conclusion that perhaps forty five percent of the Cuban population lives in poverty, and a significant portion of them are likely in extreme poverty. In both cases they lack the material means to meet basic needs, meaning they forgo meals, medicine, etc. In a recent article, Espina has increased this figure based on rampant inflation in

[16] For Morin, the polycrisis was global. "Climate change leads to human displacement and forced migration, which fuels xenophobia and nationalism, weakening global cooperation and further accelerating ecological collapse. Economic inequality erodes trust, fueling authoritarianism and violence. Technological innovation offers solutions, but also causes new problems: fractured communities, destabilized work patterns, and distorted public discourse. The COVID-19 pandemic, new wars, growing mental-health crises, and democratic backsliding are not isolated phenomena, but rather symptoms of a deeper systemic rupture." Edgar Morin and Claudio Pedretti, "The Polycrisis Demands a Renewed Humanism," *Project Syndicate*, September 22, 2025.

food prices to between 66 % and 70% of the population currently living in poverty—i.e., unable to obtain sufficient food on a daily basis.[17]

These figures on poverty are all the more shocking when compared with those of the 1980s (when Cuba was integrated into the Soviet bloc and COMECON insured steady subsidized trade relations). At that time six percent of the Cuban population was estimated to live in poverty, compared to elsewhere in Latin America where more like forty percent, in some places as much as seventy percent, of populations lived in poverty. Poverty in Cuba is not equally distributed throughout the population.It disproportionately affects Black Cubans [*Afro-descendientes*], female heads of households with children, senior citizens, often living alone, and people living in rural areas or far from city centers. A critical divide exists between those who have access to remittances from family members living abroad and those who don't—those who don't are disproportionately concentrated in the social categories just named.

Highlighting the inequity of distribution, farmers' markets have food, and a series of small and medium-sized enterprises [*MiPyMEs*] now exist and are supplied with a variety of items not available elsewhere but the prices in these stores and even in the farmers' markets make them inaccessible to many. Pensions for retirees have recently risen to 3,000 pesos a month (the exchange rate on the black market is changing daily and as of late October is around 800 pesos per dollar) while a small bag of coffee available in the MiPyMEs costs 2,000 pesos; and prices continue to rise at breakneck speed.

Not only are poverty and inequality growing, social media highlights these differences in access, as the grandchildren of the elite post reels of themselves and their friends stylishly dressed, in their fancy cars, at their clubs and restaurants—at least this was so until very recently when the total oil blockade and galloping inflation have likely curtailed such conspicuous consumption During the Special Period, when food was scarce, privation was worse than it is now, yet it was broadly shared. Then, people shared in the struggle, today's suffering is fragmented. Aside from this sociological dimension of economic crisis—growing poverty and inequality—the macro-economic picture is also grim. Estimates are that since 2019, GDP has fallen between nineteen and twenty three percent. Official estimates predict a seven percent decline for 2026, while some economists believe it may be as great as fifteen percent.[18]

The *political crisis* today derives, in Espina's analysis, from the persistence of a vertical, centralized, and authoritarian relationship between the state and its citizens, with narrow margins for expressing demands and criticism or for autonomous association. Dissenting voices are delegitimized or persecuted, cast as aligned with an anti-system,

[17] Mayra Espina, "¿Las 176 medidas podrán con la pobreza?" *On Cuba News*, September 14, 2026. https://oncubanews.com/opinion/columnas/la-calle/las-176-medidas-podran-con-la-pobreza/

[18] Cibercuba, "Pedro Monreal advierte sobre una posible caída del PIB cubano de al menos 15% en 2026, May 10, 2026.

enemy agenda. This sclerosis is nothing new. Combined with the fear of losing power and its accouterments, the regime consistently rejected alternative plans for economic growth. During the Special Period desperate people staged a visible riot in central Havana, and with great reluctance, Fidel reopened farmers markets (which had existed from 1981 until 1986 when he shut them down, decrying the profits being made by middlemen). In 1996, two young economists at the Center for the Study of the Americas (CEA), an institution set up by the Party, laid out a plan for an economy centered essentially on the equivalent of a welfare state. The regime denounced CEA and dismantled it.

Aside from its rigidity, in terms of social welfare, the Cuban state's capacity falls short of meeting existing needs. The famous '*libreta*' or ration book that since the Revolution guaranteed a universal basic minimum of food [rice, beans, meat, oil, coffee, etc.] still exists, but practically nothing is provided through it—a bread roll every three days, an occasional offer of rice--with dire consequences for significant sectors of the population. Yet in July of 2025, the Minister of Labor and Social Security insisted before the National Assembly that there were no beggars in Cuba; there were, rather, well-dressed lazy people disguised as beggars who were looking for an easy way of life without working. The minister was fired afterward—surprisingly, given that state denial is all too frequent. Lost state legitimacy is represented in the fugitive graffiti that regularly appears on walls in Havana: "2 + 2 = 5.".

The political crisis at its root derives from what Espina identifies as the fundamental contradiction of socialism in power: to carry out the agenda of transformation the state had to be strong, but to realize its *social*-ist character, it had to begin at the same time to dismantle itself. Socialism in practice took care only of the first while inhibiting citizen participation, resulting in the virtual non-existence of an autonomous civil society: of people capable of self-organization, not directed or supervised by the state. The Cuban state today confronts its cascading crises, in Espina's words, with a "tradition of relying on economic policies of control and restriction over those of promotion."

A siege mentality of caution and suspicion, is a consequence of the long US economic war, meaning that the government has had every rationale to maintain the strong state, *and* is likely to prolong inaction under the belief that *waiting* will open opportunities to control any change. Consider the regime's schizophrenic reaction to Obama's visit to Cuba. Popular support on the street for the Obamas was overwhelming, because it seemed an omen of real possibilities, of openings for the future, particularly for young people. Obama's open meeting with potential entrepreneurs gave force to these hopes. For the leadership, however, the very word "entrepreneurs" raised a red flag: The day after Obama's visit, *Granma*, the Party newspaper, published an article by the dying Fidel, "El hermano Obama" ["Brother Obama."] in which he rehearsed attacks on imperialism and wandered off into a strange reflection on the Angolan war. Wheeled into a Central Committee meeting shortly after, we can imagine his point of view had not changed. Indeed reports have it that he insisted on being at the meeting to ensure the rejection of

the kind of relations with the US that seemed in the offing, which he saw as no more than a re-entrenchment of US imperialism.

Alejandro de la Fuente analyzed the lost opportunity in *El Pais*, pointing to the sequence of events: "A month [after Fidel's article], Foreign Minister Bruno Rodríguez describes the visit as an attack on Cuba's values. Months later, Raúl Castro refers to the United States as the enemy. The Cuban establishment reacts with terror, because it doesn't know how to deal with the United States outside of a dynamic of confrontation … After so many decades of denouncing the blockade, the American president comes and that opportunity is let slip away. The Cubans try to rectify things at the last minute, but Trump had already won and it was too late."

Returning to Espina's notion of polycrisis, consider the example of accumulating garbage mentioned earlier. Trash festers on the street and, in hot and humid conditions, becomes a breeding ground for mosquitoes; in the winter of 2025-26, chikungunya, a mosquito-borne disease resembling dengue, reached near epidemic proportions in Cuba. While there are vaccines available in the US, none exist in Cuba; and large numbers of people experienced the excruciating joint pain that characterizes the disease, with many suffering long-term after-effects. This, in a situation in which pain medication is scarce and expensive, created untold misery. In the midst of this crisis, Abel Tablada, a popular and respected professor of architecture at Havana's Technological University published an article[19] underlining points he had long insisted on: that garbage/waste can be a source of wealth if separated, recycled, reused, and converted into energy, fertilizer, and new products. Because this process is well known, has been taught in Cuba's universities, and is underwritten by many scientific papers, the fact that recycling has not been implemented can be attributed only, in Tablada's view, to lack of political will—what Espina calls the instinct for the politics of control and restriction over those of promotion. Tablada urged authorities "to move from being recipients of guidance from higher levels with the approval of the Party to real leaders committed to solving problems with the participation of the people and experts." He further insisted that criticism and pointing out mistakes should be taken not as an attack, as siding with the enemy, but rather as essential for survival and development. Finally, he argued that "private entrepreneurs in vital areas such as agriculture, energy, and recycling should receive support instead of obstacles, threats, and fines, as they are working and risking their capital and time on something that the state has failed to do and cannot guarantee for whatever reason." Shortly after the publication of this article, he was fired from his academic position. Instead of recycling, the state has encouraged or allowed people to burn garbage, creating significant environmental consequences, as smoke and fumes permeate densely populated areas.[20]

[19] Abel Tablada, "Garbage and the Paradigm Shift," February 23, 2026. We have not been able to re-locate his original Facebook post, which was presumably taken down.

[20] Recently, a small recycling project has been organized by a private bar/cultural center in one of Havana's most densely populated neighborhoods. Garbage is separated at home into organic and other recyclables, and collected frequently door-to-door. The organic material is used as animal feed; and the other recyclables sold to the state-owned Raw Materials Recovery Company. All of this is financed by the

SUBJECTIVITIES OF CRISIS: DIS-ORIENTATION, SLOW DEATH, CRUEL OPTIMISM

In Espina's analysis, a sense of helplessness and abandonment by the state to a "slow death" has fueled annexationist fantasies. The Cuban-American historian Ada Ferrer echoes this perception. More Cubans, she claims, say they are willing to accept a change no matter where it comes from, and this is new. Espina notes the existence of subjectivities that are "tense and contradictory, simultaneously permeated by despair, religious faith, defeatism, individualism, and a commitment to solidarity."[21] Sometimes, still permeated by cruel optimism, to borrow Lauren Berlant's formulation: "Moments of uncertainty can make us feel as though situations that produce terrible anxiety can be quelled by embracing optimism—yet attachment to optimistic fantasies can too often become…cruel."[22] Examples abound: the frequently encountered refrain, heralding "the resilience of the Cuban people in the face of sixty seven years of unrelenting assaults" or in a review of the film "*Estrés*" "beyond the difficulties, Cuba remains an inexhaustible source of art, emotion, and truth."[23] Or the electrical engineer and general manager of the constantly collapsing Matanzas thermoelectric plant: "It's causing us a lot of problems. But we're used to difficult times. We made it through the Special Period…Now we're going to pull through just as we've done on other occasions." Or, finally, physician Karen Valdes Paz when asked about conditions in Havana's signature hospital Ameijeiras [featured in Michael Moore's *Sicko*] where she works, replied "As my mother reminds me, Cervantes wrote Don Quixote with a candle."[24]

ALL THAT FOR NOTHING

Two recent works of film and literature, by Marylin Solaya and by Leonardo Padura respectively, capture the intimacy of what Cubans live through in a disintegrating society. Marilyn Solaya's film, *Estrés* (Stress), her second feature, following her breakout

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local bar/cultural center/community project. See "Small Havana Neighborhood Manages Its Solid Waste," *Inter Press Service In Cuba*, June 10, 2026. https://www.ipscuba.net/medio-ambiente/pequeno-barrio-de-la-habana-gestiona-sus-residuos-solidos-urbanos/#more-79054.

[21] Mayra Espina, "En la espera todavía es posible ser un país peor," ["While we wait, it is still possible for us to become a worse country," *On Cuba News,* February 26, 2026. https://oncubanews.com/cuba/sociedad-cuba/mayra-espina-en-la-espera-todavia-es-posible-ser-un-pais-peor/

[22] Lauren Berlant. *Cruel Optimism*. (Duke University Press, 2011).

[23] Yaimara Portuondo Cisneros, "Stress, a plural look at contemporary Cuba," *CUBAHORA*, March 30, 2026. https://www.cubahora.cu/cultura/estres-una-mirada-plural-a-la-cuba-contemporanea

[24] In conversation, Havana, February 2026.

trans film, *Vestido de Novia* [available on Amazon Prime],[25] debuted in Havana in late March, 2026 to a full house and a rapt audience at Charlie Chaplin cinema. Its central character, Dmitri, a Havana bus driver is charged with the care of his aging parents, especially his mother who suffers dementia, leaving him no choice but to take them with him each day as he drives his bus. Along the route they encounter the other characters whose stories comprise the film: a child oncologist nearing retirement whose children want her to migrate—to a place where her life's work and commitments will have no meaning; a single mother, once a concert singer, caring both for her son and her ageing mother who has to resort to other means of earning money; a poet who wanders along the Prado distributing verse to passersby, etc. Evoking in the character of Dmitri, Charon, the ferryman carrying passengers across the River Styx, the film concludes with a haunting image: Dmitri and his parents walk at night down a street with no visible end.

Leonardo Padura is perhaps Cuba's most widely read contemporary novelist. As he commented wryly after the publication of his latest book, *Morir en la arena [To Die in the Sand]* "This book is in bookstores in all Spanish-speaking countries—except Cuba." He is not interviewed in the national press or on television; and his books are not part of the catalogue of state publishers. Nonetheless, he is well known on the island. His novels circulate in digital form as well as in print. Padura indeed notes, "a distinctive reading culture that has evolved in Cuba," as "an aging book (or pdf), full of footprints, [is] passed hand to hand; a single copy often read by forty people until it is in tatters."

Padura is the chronicler of the dreams and disillusions of his generation, the generation born into the revolution (he was born in 1955), who benefited from it: became well educated, decently housed, with access to excellent health care, and even travelled; and who also fought in Angola. In *Morir en la arena*, we follow Rodolfo, a man marked by two events: the trauma of the Angola War and the murder of his father at the hands of his brother Geni—who is about to be released from prison after 30 years, suffering a fatal illness. Rodolfo is almost on the point of retirement. After a lifetime of work, he faces not sweet happiness, but the reality of Cubans of Padura's generation that we have already alluded to: pensions that don't cover basic needs; dependence on their children abroad, who want them to emigrate, which they stubbornly resist. Dis-oriented: a sense of being un-moored, a sense of abandonment.

The chronicle of a collapse, Padura calls *Morir en la arena* the "saddest novel [I] ever wrote," an elegy for his generation. The novel's title is from the saying: *Tanto nadar para morir en la orilla*—to swim so hard only to die on the shore; or, colloquially, "all that for nothing." It is part of his continuing chronicle of a generation that didn't make it to the shore and ends its life in the midst of the serious crisis that Cuba is going through.
In a recent interview, Padura responds to a question about the current moment: "What could happen in Cuba tomorrow, next week? Suffocation, agony, collapse? The most terrible thing is that the worst could happen–it doesn't matter what, only that it could be

[25] https://www.amazon.com/dp/B0B69FZ3T1?lv=shuf&channelId=510&plpRedirect=mhFallback

the worst….” “In the meantime,” he continues, “we wake up every day with the tremendous feeling that the dark tunnel through which Cuban society was traveling no longer has light at the end, and increasingly resembles the dystopian “country of last things” depicted in Paul Auster's novel, because among the last things lost, for many, hope has also vanished.”[26]

Unmoored, abandoned–by their state, by the world– after ten months of siege aimed at shutting down their life support systems, Cubans face a dark road with no end in sight, and little hope to carry them forward. Alarm bells have been sounded again recently that facing disastrous midterm election results and a quagmire in Iran, Trump will return his attention to Cuba with the hope of a quick and dramatic “victory,” a “friendly takeover” in his cringeworthy phrase; the creation of a dependent republic as in 1898, with a profound blow to sovereignty and the prospect of a long slow boil to another transformation.

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[26] Leonardo Padura, “El país de las ultimas cosas,” *El Pais*, February 14, 2026. https://elpais.com/opinion/2026-02-15/el-pais-de-las-ultimas-cosas.html.

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