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The emergence of a Cuban socio-cultural phenomenon: *el falso policial* by Leonardo Padura Fuentes.

In this article I will examine contemporary Cuban crime fiction through the various manifestations of its relations to the State. My study is based on the premise that it is possible to establish a link between State traditions and crime genre. Here I am interested in exploring the consequences of this relationship inside the Cuban context, to establish to what extent recent social and economic changes find an echo in crime literature.

State institutions are one of the main protagonists in criminal affairs, due to their monopoly of legitimate violence. The genre has often been shown to display securitarian tendencies and reflect the creation of an organised network of surveillance and control. The detective, either himself an agent of the State or a “private eye” objectively fulfilling the role of an auxiliary of justice, classically pursues not only the punishment of deviant individuals, but the restoration of the social and political order. After the two World Wars the genre has undergone significant evolutions, which have introduced a more critical approach towards State institutions. Therefore post-war detective fiction has assumed a counter cultural value, denouncing State corruption, cultural domination and racial or sexist discrimination. Even though some contemporary crime fiction continues to buttress the authority of the State, at the same time an increased amount of crime fiction authors have explored the genre’s subversive potential. Leonardo Padura Fuentes is undoubtedly one of the main exponents of the critical regeneration of contemporary Cuban detective production.

The relationship tying State politics to literary production in general and detective literature in particular is such a strong and endemic phenomenon in the recent Cuban context that the crime genre has always drawn the attention of both readers and government. During the second half of the XX century detective fiction has undergone different changes and developed different forms to enclose elements of political propaganda and social commentary into the structure of the novel.

Since the 1960s the revolutionary government gave great importance to “popular literature” and built its hegemony also through crime fiction, using it as a propagandistic tool to popularize the new ideology, and to consolidate the socialist government. Therefore during the 60s and 70s the shadows of the State apparatus loom large over crime fiction both within the narrative plot of the novels and outside it as a referential background. In this historical moment, after the *Congreso de Educación y Ciencia* in 1971 and the polemic reaction of the world intellectual community to the “Padilla affaire” in the same year, the government was facing a period of crisis and conflict with the cultural world. The detective genre was promoted, then, by the political system as a form of fiction suitable to support the values and ideas of the revolution. As a result, a political radicalisation of the genre developed widely inside the revolutionary context giving birth to the socialist detective novel. The socialist crime genre was primarily designed as an ideological tool to serve the regime’s policy. Therefore its key feature was a political and ideological primacy over all other aspects of the story, including the artistic and aesthetic ones. The revolutionary police novel was clearly written with the intention of defending the conduct of

the revolution and thus presenting the world in Manichean terms, often neglecting general aesthetic principles¹.

The socialist detective model slumped in the late 80s, for both literary and political reasons. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, the background that sustained this form of detective fiction disappeared and the way was clear for a revitalisation of the genre. After 1989 Cuba experienced an alarming political solitude and a deep economic crisis, leading to the introduction of a new market-oriented economic policy called *Special period in times of peace*: the US dollar was made legal tender and the country opened its doors to international tourism and investments. These events had a strong impact on Cuban cultural life, determining two main phenomena: the crisis of the publishing sector and the emergence of alternative spaces for artistic expression. With the economic crisis, artistic production experienced a lack of institutional support and, as a consequence, many forms of sponsored publications and literary contests disappeared; but at the same time, without the help of State funding to finance their projects, cultural producers actually gained in independence and freedom of expression².

In this new historical and cultural environment Leonardo Padura Fuentes reformulated the 70s politically propagandistic Cuban detective fiction. He went against the work of its social realist predecessors and adopted the hard-boiled conventions to create a national *neopolicial*. The author explored the genre's subversive potential, regenerating and modifying the detective model to weave social critique into the narrative structure of his work. Although inspired by

¹ Examples of this kind of politicized novel called “socialist detective novel” are *La ronda de los rubíes* by Armando Cristóbal Pérez, *Joy* by Daniel Chavarría or *Si muero mañana* by Luis Rogelio Nogueras.

² Here I am not suggesting that censorship and self-censorship have disappeared from Cuba, but it is undeniable that the level of permissiveness and tolerance increased significantly since 1989, (See also JOHN M. KIRK, LEONARDO PADURA FUENTES, *Culture and the Cuban Revolution: Conversations in Havana*, Gainesville, University Press of Florida, 2001).

Raymond Chandler and Dashiell Hammett, Padura's work differs from classical US hard-boiled crime fiction, where the narration was led by the detective voice and the protagonist's alienated critical gaze and distant perspective influenced readers' judgement of the criminal events. In *Las cuatro estaciones*, an omniscient third-person narrative voice represents an external world in which the detective Mario Conde is not different or superior to the other characters. On the contrary, he is subject to the same circumstances affecting Cuban society and ruling the lives of the other characters. Nevertheless, in accordance with the hard-boiled criteria, Conde represents the moral anchor and critical point of view for the interpretation of life in Cuba. The reader is often positioned inside the character's mind and given access to all his thoughts, thus witnessing the flow of memory that the investigation recalls in the policeman's mind. This explains why the detective has been largely considered to be Padura's alter ego through which the author expresses a personal, ironic judgement on his country³. The series is set in 1989 and each novel focuses on the investigation and solution of a different murder. The circumstances surrounding the homicides represent a microcosm of the profound changes occurring in Cuban society during the collapse of the Soviet system.

The result of Padura's regeneration of the genre is a particular kind of socially committed detective literature, which the author defines as falso *policial*. In this kind of detective novels the focus is not on the crime investigation, but on the description of life in contemporary Cuba.

³ Cfr. STEPHEN WILKINSON, *Detective fiction in Cuban society and culture*, Bern, Peter Lang AG., 2006.

I call my novels “false crime novels”, because the crime novel structure is only a pretext to get to other places⁴.

The writer, thus, extends the boundaries of the detective genre to emphasize the Cuban social and political problems, entrusting literature with a specific social function. Padura said:

My decision to write that novel, which I titled *Past Perfect* (*Pasado Perfecto*) and which was first published in 1991 had several purposes, but the greatest was that, being a crime novel, it should also be a social novel, because I believe that one of the virtues of this genre is that one can utilize it in any way one wishes, as long as it [does not] violate the known rules of what one is doing. The “dark” novel can take one directly to the darkest corners of a reality, of a society, while always maintaining something that is very important to me: the possibility of communicating with readers. That is why I like the police-type novel so much⁵.

Padura's fiction uses the crime plot to create a faithful and dissident portrait of post-Soviet Cuban society and, at the same time, condemns State corruption and cultural oppression. Some of the social themes recurring in almost all the novels are the condemnation of the regime interference in many aspects of public and private life and the description of Cuban social malaise: poverty, hunger, the black market, political corruption, prostitution, decadence and exile.

The main features of the new genre born in the 1990s, that clearly mark the shift from the socialist detective novel, can be summarized looking at three key aspects of Padura's tetralogy *Las Cuatro Estaciones*: the representation of the

⁴ JOEL WENDLAND, *Not Your Usual Suspects: Leonardo Padura Talks to Political Affairs*, in «Political Affairs Magazine», April 2 2006, in <http://www.politicalaffairs.net/not-your-usual-suspects-leonardo-padura-talks-to-pa/>.

⁵ *Ibidem*.

criminal as part of the socialist community, the description of the psychological world of the protagonist and the possibility of expressing disappointment with the existing social and political conditions.

The first of these factors: the representation of the criminal characters includes a drastic distancing from the revolutionary detective model to come closer to a hard-boiled model⁶. In the socialist crime novel all positive characters belonged to the revolutionary institutions, such as the Cuban *Seguridad del Estado*, while negative characters were always counter-revolutionaries or CIA (Central Intelligence Agency) infiltrators. At the same time, the characterization of villains was strongly influenced by the *Parametrage*: a program of persecution of individuals who were perceived as imperfectly integrated into revolutionary society. By the 1970s, when the State began to promote detective fiction, every kind of deviation from the ideal *hombre nuevo cubano*, such as homosexuality or ideological and political differences, were assumed as classical features of a criminal suspect. These provided a catalogue of freakish, antisocial stereotypes that emerged as the perfect villains in the detective novels of the period. The protagonist of the socialist detective novel was an infallible revolutionary hero, a man perfectly integrated into the dominant political system. Despite the difficulties he encountered on his journey the detective never had doubts about the validity of his ideas and his socialist political faith. The reader was meant to identify with the agents of the State and to espouse State ideology. The protagonist of the socialist detective novels was a collective hero⁷; he was supposed to represent the good Cuban population. Additionally, as Persephone Braham suggests in her book *Crimes Against the State, Crimes Against*

⁶ Cfr. SABRINA COSTANZO, *La costruzione di un giallo sociale: «Las cuatro estaciones» di Leonardo Padura Fuentes*, Messina, Andrea Lippolis Editore, 2008, pp.14-19.

⁷ *Ibidem*.

*Persons*⁸, in this type of novel the crime was no longer conceived as damage against a single citizen, but as an injury to society and the revolutionary State as a whole. Every crime was perceived as a rupture of the socialist order and consequently it became a crime against the State. The dramatic conflict between revolutionaries and counter-revolutionaries was, though, omnipresent and there were scarcely any other themes to be found in the 70s' novels and even fewer nuances in the presentation of issues and characters.

Unlike the previous model, in the 1990s' detective fiction the simplistic distinctions between exponents of State order and criminals have been blurred, as well as the classical binary opposition revolutionary vs. counter-revolutionary, good vs. evil, order vs. disorder. Adapting the hard boiled model to the Cuban context, Leonardo Padura Fuentes created a totally different narrative universe populated by corrupt officials, dirty policemen, sneaks and prostitutes. The detective himself is no more the infallible hero without doubts and vices. Mario Conde is, instead, a policeman who drinks, smokes and breaks the rules to get by; he is a disenchanted man. With his sarcasm, scepticism and disillusion he would have been considered by the Cuban orthodoxy as a politically incorrect character.

An excellent example of the undermining of the 70s detective model can be appreciated in *Pasado perfecto*. In the first novel of Padura's tetralogy the characterization of the culprit overturns all the classical features of the previous Cuban police novels. René Maciques, the murderer, is a State officer; he is thus part of the institutional system, as well as Rafael Morín, the murdered, who is a high-ranking official of the Ministry of Industry. Both the murderer and the murdered are perfectly integrated into the State system and significantly both are corrupt and deceitful. In fact, in this case not even the victim is innocent; he

⁸ PERSEPHONE BRAHAM, *Crimes Against the State, Crimes Against Persons: Detective Fiction in Cuba and Mexico*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2004.

is instead an unscrupulous, corrupt official, who has been killed precisely because of his illegal affairs: Morín first corrupted and then threatened Maciques, who eventually kills him. Also the language used by the characters often reflects the shift from the revolutionary model. In the socialistic detective novel the criminals used vernacular language and swearing while the detective spoke pure *castellano*; instead, in the novels of the '90s both the criminals and the detective use idioms, swearwords and slang forms.

The blurring of fixed boundaries between heroes' and villains' social and political background is a symptom of the changed political situation of the 90s. After the disappearance of the socialist certainty it became impossible not to experience uncertainties and thus it became possible also for a fictional hero to have doubts and fears. This gave more space to the representation of the psychology of the character and of his personal and emotive world. Therefore Mario Conde is represented as an individual with his complicated affective and mental world, and not just as a colourless and stereotyped detective. The protagonist shows a problematic and ambiguous behaviour: on the one hand he feels alienated from the surrounding society and, on the other hand, as a product of the important historical changes, he feels the need to take part in the events going on around him. Conde always succeeds in getting the culprit for the murders and thus essentially performs his task as a detective; but his behaviour is no longer motivated by the State ideologies. On the contrary he often challenges traditional conventions to follow a personal moral and love for justice. In *Pasado perfecto* the detective sums up his personal ethical code when he explains to Tamara why he decided to become a policeman:

Es muy simple, Tamara, y a lo mejor hasta te da risa, pero es la verdad: porque no me gusta que los hijos de puta hagan cosas impunemente⁹.

⁹ LEONARDO PADURA FUENTES, *Pasado Perfecto*, Barcelona, Tusquets, 2000, p. 90.

The introduction of the protagonist's interior world, his moral code and his private dimension is what represents a crucial difference between this and the previous Cuban detective literature. The importance of the psychological aspect is so great that the reader has the impression that the crime events are embedded in the much larger story of Conde's personal and public life.

Finally, If we compare the detective Conde and the corrupted victim Morín, it is easy to note that the second one has much more features pertaining to the stereotyped revolutionary hero. Morín is a brilliant high-ranking officer, apparently faithful to the revolution; Conde instead is an alienated and frustrated man, who shows a constant feeling of disillusionment and an ambivalent view of the political establishment; he couldn't fulfil his expectation of a literary career and became a policeman by chance. By unmasking the truth about Morín's double life, the detective Conde subverts the socialist novel's canon and reveals the corruption hidden beyond the respectable façade of the revolutionary institutions.

Padura's novel, thus, does not only solve a crime, it also raises many other social questions. Even though Conde normally succeeds in solving the case and arresting the murderer, the novel leaves a lot of open questions, and the consequences and implications of the crime cast their shadows on the whole Cuban society. This explains why at the end of a case Conde is not satisfied: he does not feel that solving the mystery he has restored the order disrupted by the murder. Therefore at the end of each case the detective experiences a feeling of blankness and impotence because he cannot avoid or reverse the criminal act and its consequences:

[Manolo:] Oye, Conde, ¿Cómo te sientes tú cuando cierras un caso como éste?

El teniente extendió las manos sobre el buró. Las tenía abiertas, con las palmas hacia arriba.

– Así, Manolo, con las manos vacías. Ya todo el mal está hecho¹⁰.

The blurring of the binary opposition good/evil and the attention devoted to the characters' feeling and emotions lead to the most important of Padura's narrative innovations: the critical description of contemporary Cuban social and political conditions. Again, the lack of both institutional support and State control on cultural production resulted in the possibility for artists to treat several different topics previously considered taboos. Consequently themes and books that during the previous economic situation would have been censored were then accepted and considered as a reflection of the new social environment. Padura interprets revolutionary past and post-Soviet present through Mario Conde's life and memories. The protagonist's constant remembering of a positive past sharply in contrast with the disillusioned present is a fundamental feature of Padura's tetralogy. The continuous comparison between past and present was also typical of the socialist detective novel of the 70s. In that case, however, the negative past described was the pre-revolutionary period, under Batista's dictatorship, while the positive present was represented by the Castro era. In the new Cuban detective genre, instead, both past and present are dated after 1959, after the victory of the revolution. The watershed, in this case, is not the advent of Castro regime, but 1989 and the collapse of the Soviet system. This event revealed the hidden malaises of the Cuban socialist system, forcing Castro to admit his mistakes and take drastic measures such as the *Rectificación de los errores*. In the 90s' cultural environment, both contradictions and ideological weakness of the Soviet one-party system can be examined and exploited by Padura as dramatic resources to criticize and revisit

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 22.

official history. It is significant that the readership is now ready to accept the idea that the façade of respectability showed by Cuban government officers is a fiction; this is a result of the scandals that occurred in real 1990s life and which Padura refers in the description of characters such as Morín or Machiques.

However, even if the «Cuatro Estaciones» saga seeks to unveil the corruption and opportunism present in the highest spheres of revolutionary governmental institution, the tetralogy cannot be interpreted as an open challenge to the socialist Cuban State. In fact, Padura's critical analysis of Cuban society is not an explicit contestation of the revolutionary ideology; it is instead a condemnation of the methods used to implement this ideology. The final goal of contemporary Cuban crime fiction, thus, is not to debunk the established political system, but to denounce the faults, excesses and abuses of power hidden within the system. Therefore, no biased political message is conveyed by the new Cuban crime novel despite its constant references to the Cuban social context. Leonardo Padura Fuentes, in fact, refuses the use of literature as a mean for political propaganda. He assigns, instead, a double task to literature: to keep the memory of past events and to analyze objectively the Cuban society:

My motivation behind this novel and the Conde series was the desire to write detective novels which would be, above all, of a social character. Something I felt I had to do was to leave behind a mark of an historical moment that we lived through in Cuba and, more specifically, the feeling of disillusionment when the ideal world which they spoke of began to disappear and we heard rumours that the Soviet Union was not the country we had been taught about. This is why I think these are detective and social novels¹¹.

¹¹ ASCEN ARRIAZU, *Our man in Havana: introducing Leonardo Padura Fuentes and the quill of mystery*, in «Three monkeys online magazine», April 2006, in http://www.threemonkeysonline.com/als_page2/_leonardo_padura_fuentes_cuban_detective_fiction.html

In a time when the previous socialist revolutionary cultural paradigm has lost its validity, Leonardo Padura Fuentes carries out a regeneration of popular literature. His crime fiction represents the answer to a cultural demand for an art actively involved in the reformulation of a new Cuban national awareness.