

Buying Books At The People's Forum

On Wednesday, July 14th, I made my first subway trip from Queens to Manhattan in fifteen months. While I had ridden the F express train, and the R and 7 local trains, it was always within Queens; I had gone from Jamaica to Jackson Heights, to Elmhurst and Sunnyside, criss-crossing neighborhoods of Uzbeki Jews, Hindi-speaking Nepalis, and even visited an African American-turned-Mexican enclave (where Malcolm X once lived) for fresh tortillas. Crossing under the East River felt different. It was something I hadn't needed to do. Queens had hunkered down as coronavirus had ping-ponged through Richmond Hill and South Jamaica, killing our neighbors and coworkers. Meanwhile the rich fled Manhattan, forwarded their mail and darkened their luxury towers. How would the citadel-bank of the world look now? Bombed-out or busy?

As it so happens, both.

I got out at 34th Street and turned up Eighth Avenue. Intersections were strewn with usual debris but were surprisingly devoid of cars. Both the expected shiny shoe office-workers and camera-laden tourists were gone. Action, however, came instead from groups of people in thick jackets or tee shirts in the bike lane and, then, a block up, around the entrance to a 7-11. A small group of elderly, shirtless and wheelchair-bound people gathered on some public benches, and a larger group sat on the private benches in the courtyard of what, pre-pandemic, was an overpriced three-star hotel.

These, I guessed, were among the thousands of housing-insecure put-up in vacant Manhattan rooms during the worst of the pandemic. Back then De Blasio had paid hotels 300 million dollars; now with the virus abating, he wanted them out. Yet two weeks earlier, on July 2nd, *Curbed* reported that 25 men, fearful for their health, had refused to leave their rooms during a transfer. People would not go easily.

I passed a shirtless man shouting at friends. The smell of marijuana mixed with perspiration made me wonder if my mask was doing what it was intended to. Two young policemen, just a few feet ahead, stood talking to each other, transfixed. I couldn't tell if they were out-numbered or just numb, but either way I was glad, turning onto 39th Street, to leave them. I was heading to meet L at The People's Forum--a new event space, with a leftist mission, a place I had heard about but never been.

A few blocks down, announcing itself in red lettering, I found it, with a *movement incubator for working class and marginalized communities* in white, on an adjacent glass pane. The big, beautiful windows and shiny, sturdy metal trim surprised me; I had imagined a dusty, old dark space, like the basement of a church, or a college radio station, someplace one would have to sign to get into. Inside, instead, was like a studio or loft, with a cafe and wine bar on one side, and huge white bookshelves with screens attached to them and rainbowed murals hanging above them on the other. L was already there, chatting with M, the Forum's affable and

charming director who had cut his teeth doing solidarity work with Cuba. While they sat and talked, I bought a coffee and began looking at the new books section.

I saw several Verso-published books by Walter Rodney, the Guyanese historian and activist, including the recently discovered *The Russian Revolution: A View From The Third World*. Also *Reawakening of the Arab World* by the late Egyptian Marxist Samir Amin, and *Halla Bol: the Death and Life of Safdar Hashmi* by Sudhanva Deshpande, about the 1989 targeted killing of a communist playwright in India. There were books by Assata Shakur and Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, and one collection I hadn't seen before: *February 1965: The Final Speeches* by Malcolm X. I bought *The Palestine Communist Party 1919-1948: Arab and Jew in the Struggle for Internationalism* by Musa Budeiri for my brother-in-law. I bought *Our America*, by Jose Marti and *Race and Revolution: The United States and Cuba During Slavery and Jim Crow*, by historian Gerald Horne, for myself.

The conversation between L and M was on events in Cuba. A recent agitation in Havana had the United States interventionists frothing. L brought news that a black Cuban journalist and filmmaker was hoping to visit New York. Could an event at the People's Forum be arranged? Yes, said M. But it would have to be private. The pro-Cuba crowd was zealous, and violent. His recollections reminded me of dark details in Joan Didion's *Miami*. I made a note, in spite of her acerbic style, to finish it.

While we were talking a woman with small shells in her hair passed us, rolling a battered rollerboard. She took a book from the library and sat down at the next table. I thought she might be a regular from the neighborhood who came there to read. Then I noticed that the coffee was not coffee from the snack bar, and remembered that we were not in a residential area, but in Midtown. More likely was that word had gotten around in the hotel-shelters about the empty bookstore with air-conditioning and a clean bathroom, where one could read something from the borrow-shelf without being hassled. Not that many places you can do that in Manhattan anymore.

After the chat we toured the three-story compound. The basement featured a television studio and an art workspace. Big, framed posters featuring Patrice Lumumba and unnamed Guatemalan fighters hung from the walls of the basement. Smaller sets of political art decorated the first floor. Upstairs, in the meeting rooms, small sheet-sized pictures of leftist political heroes were taped to walls. I saw Ida B. Wells, Ho Chi Min, Che Guevara, and, strangely, the American lawyer Micheal Ratner, who passed away in 2016. We left the Forum in a buoyant mood, with a tote bag filled with books, and plans of some future event with Cuban journalists.

On July 23rd People's Forum held an event celebrating the release of a new book, *Anti-Capitalist Chronicles* by David Harvey. L and I passed by again. Vijay Prashad was amongst the other guests. Prashad praised Harvey's book but challenged him on the exclusion of Imperialism in his analysis. "How we understand the fact that the United States spends more on its military force than the other nine or ten countries in the world. Why are there so many U.S. bases? How are we to understand the hybrid war that the U.S. prosecutes against Cuba,

Venezuela, Zimbabwe, Syria..." he asked. Harvey, in his remarks, circled back to the evictions and the housing consolidations currently happening. "The investment bank Blackrock is currently the world's largest landlord," he reminded the audience.

After the talk people milled around, in masks. I surveyed the crowd. Millennials, with the requisite spiraling tattoos, cross-body satchels, and short, multicolored hairstyles. As Prashad waited around, talking to some attendees. I noticed an older man, perhaps in his late thirties, in athletic gear and a baseball cap. His style and age added visual diversity to the crowd and I wondered if the interest in these kinds of talks might be wider than I thought. However as he passed by me on his way back I saw that he cradled a bottle of bright blue liquid--MD 20/20, the fortified low-cost wine, blueberry-flavored--and decided he was probably just dropping in to use the bathroom. Not many places you can do that in Manhattan anymore.

Back at home I thought again about Micheal Ratner. The People's Forum was founded in 2017, one year after his death. Could he have been a funder? Searching the internet I saw that the Forum had received twelve million dollars in funding from the Goldman Sachs Philanthropic Foundation, which manages the receipt of "charitable contributions" (their words). "This happens in the absence of strong movements," my brother-in-law said, when I gave him the book I had bought him, and described what I had learned. "Someone needs to pay to keep the fight going. It's happened many times before, all over the world."

In the subsequent weeks, L and I watched as the online debate amongst "progressive" Americans became sharper around Cuba, with fewer and fewer popular figures speaking out against the United States aggression. Language around race began to be deployed. One prominent African American Instagram activist stated that they would have to to "rethink" their "relationship to Cuba"; while in another case dozens of graffiti artists were organized to donate work to fund the San Isidro Movement, an upper-class Havana artists group against the Cuban regime but with murky origins. The articulation of an coherent anti-Imperialist position was left to a few smart and savvy people; people like the filmmaker Boots Riley and the hosts of the Blowback podcast, American millennials who became popular last year explaining the outrages of the Iraq War to other American millennials. Outside of the "popular" social media accounts, the analysis was stronger: Gerald Horne, author of *Race and Revolution*, was his usual, unflappable self. In a July 21st YouTube conversation with Dr. Layla Brown, he said: "People in the United States, when they begin to analyze Cuba, they should keep a number of factors in mind...if this current regime is overthrown, or even weakened, do not expect black people in Cuba to engage in or have some kind of renaissance. If anything, they'll be thrown even further back, possibly to the level of black people in the United States."

These sort of exchanges went on, back-and-forth, week-by-week. ratcheting up, until about August, when all eyes turned to Afghanistan, and the Instagram influencers soft on Imperialism suddenly fell silent. Perhaps the images of teenagers clinging to the huge wheels of massive military planes, or The New York Times' front-page acknowledgement that seven children were killed in a "mistaken" strike made "American help" appear as what it is: deadly as a fresh-faced

footballer falling from the sky; deadly as a Hellfire missile consuming a family whose only crime was living undefended, in an undefended city.

Perhaps, in a month, or a year, when the shock wears off (as it always does) the apologists will be back again, eschewing serious reading for a grab-bag of meme-like quotations, retweeting the most attractive commentator with the most followers, serving the powerful, all in high-definition. If so, then we will need more like Boots, and more like Horne, to confront them. Hopefully the Forum's millions will be used towards such a worthwhile end.