

Democracy in Danger S3E11 Hot Spots Pt2 – Cuba

David Nemer [00:00:03] Hello, I'm David Nemer.

Robert Armengol [00:00:05] And I'm Robert Armengol.

David Nemer [00:00:07] And from the University of Virginia's Deliberative Media Lab, this is Democracy in Danger.

Robert Armengol [00:00:11] Well, David, thanks for being here today. We should tell our listeners that you and I are guest hosting this week for Siva and Will, and we're going to be talking about a place that matters a lot to both of us, Cuba. Now that's where my family is originally from, and you and I both have done research on the island. Can you say something just briefly about your own relationship with Cuba and how you became interested in it as a place because your Brazilian, right?

David Nemer [00:00:37] Yes. Brazil has a very interesting relationship with Cuba that goes back since the pre-military coup. And I've always been interested in looking into the appropriations of technologies, especially by marginalized communities. And ever since broadband became a reality in Cuba in 2015, then I decided to research that in depth. So I've been doing fieldwork over there, in Havana more specifically, to look into the ways that Cubans have creatively and critically appropriated technologies throughout these years.

Robert Armengol [00:01:10] Yeah, it's really interesting stuff, and you come at it as a scholar of the media with some solid chops in anthropology, which is my discipline. I started traveling to Cuba in 2003 and did my doctoral research there during a stint of fieldwork in Havana from 2007 to 2008. And I focused on working-class people and the networks of solidarity that they cobbled together on a daily basis. I was also in Havana at the start of the pandemic last year, and then I had to leave before flights were shut down.

David Nemer [00:01:41] And since then, of course, Cuba has really been struggling. The pandemic shut down an already teetering economy that after the collapse of the Soviet Union, communist Cuba's long benefactor has been heavily reliant on foreign tourism. Ultimately, that led to a remarkable crisis this past summer, where thousands of Cubans took the streets to protest a shortage of food and medicine.

Reporter [00:02:06] A display of civil unrest rarely seen in the communist-ruled island nation.

David Nemer [00:02:14] Hundreds of them were arrested. And we heard the usual line from the Cuban government that these were in the sway and even the pockets of North American interests.

Reporter [00:02:23] President and head of the Communist Party, Miguel Diaz-Canel blamed unrest on foreign influence.

Miguel Diaz-Canel [00:02:31] We will not allow any counter revolutionaries influenced by the United States to be carried away by all these strategies of ideological subversion.

Robert Armengol [00:02:41] Yeah, you know, it's really complicated. And since then, the Biden administration has taken a harder line against the Cuban government departing

from the Obama era relaxation of U.S. Cuban relations, which many observers, including me, thought and hoped might come back into play.

Reporter [00:02:57] One protester said he was struggling to make ends meet in an economy plagued by sanctions and the global health crisis.

David Nemer [00:03:05] While we want to get to those protests, how they were sparked, and what they might mean for Cuba going forward.

Cuban Citizen [00:03:11] We have no house. We have nothing. But they have money to build hotels.

David Nemer [00:03:19] But first, we wanted to unpack the country's tangled history, in particular, how it's tangled up with U.S. history.

Robert Armengol [00:03:25] Yeah, to do that, we're really fortunate to have with us one of the most accomplished historians of Cuba, herself a native of Cuba, Ada Ferrer. Ada is a historian at New York University, and she has a new book out, a sweeping history of her native country called Cuba: An American History. Ada, welcome to Democracy in Danger. It's so good to have you with us right here in our studios in Charlottesville.

Ada Ferrer [00:03:48] Well, it's great to be here. Thank you both.

Robert Armengol [00:03:50] So I'll get started with a simple question, a deceptively simple question. And I suspect the answer to it is not as intuitive as it may seem on the surface. Why did you call this book An American History?

Ada Ferrer [00:04:05] Yeah, the title appealed to me for several reasons. On one level, it seemed to me slightly mysterious, just made readers or viewers or somebody browsing a shelf think what? What does that mean? Is it a history of Cuba-U.S. relations? Is it Cuba in Latin America? Because all of Latin America is the America. So I like the fact that it's not, that the answer to the question is not clear. Cuba's been a recurring presence in the U.S. for or in what became the U.S., even for a long time. Going back to American independence, Cubans supported American independence and provided funds for it. Going back to American merchants who traveled to Cuba in the 18th century before American independence and started to make fortunes there. So it's been there from the very start. But what I meant by it in the title was that because the U.S. is such a power, or is historically such a power in Cuba, to tell Cuban history is also in a sense to view Cuba, I say from the outside in. It's a way to see what the U.S. is in the world from one of those places in the world, and seeing the U.S. that way just makes you see it differently. You know, the U.S. tends to or American leaders, I should say, tend to talk about the U.S. as a place that symbolizes freedom or liberation. And that's definitely the way they talked about Cuba, right? The idea of liberating Cuba from Spanish rule and helping it to become independent. But if you look at the connections between the two countries, what you realize is that the U.S. was explicitly opposed to Cuban independence for decades before. And then it instituted policies that really limited full Cuban sovereignty. And I think that's a perspective on the U.S. that, that not all Americans are familiar with.

Robert Armengol [00:06:00] Before we get all that. Let me just if I could follow up with a question about the intertwined histories of Cuba and the United States as slave societies. Both countries from before the time they were countries were deeply marked by the

institution of slavery and plantation slavery in particular. How does that help us see the connections between these two places?

Ada Ferrer [00:06:23] Yeah, I mean, slavery for all of the 19th century is at the root of that connection. It's partly why the Americans are so interested in Cuba. So, for example, in the early 1820s, when the U.S. is devising its Monroe Doctrine, there's already significant U.S. investment in sugar, in slavery, in the slave trade, in sugar plantations. And Americans are keen to protect those interests. They also imagine themselves as protecting American commerce, which is also very tied to the question of slavery. By later in the 19th century, the connection to slavery, or the way in which slavery is at the center of the connection between the two countries, becomes very clear because many of the people who imagined acquiring Cuba and annexing it to the United States imagine doing so specifically to promote and protect slavery. So white southerners want to make Cuba part of the United States. They want to not make it a territory, but a state, not one state, but two or three states. And what they're trying to do is buttress the power of slavery in the United States. They want to have more senators, more Congress people who represent slavery, and that is at the heart of U.S. interests in Cuba in the 1840s, 50s, and up to the Civil War.

David Nemer [00:07:47] So Ada, each one of us here has personal and professional ties to Cuba. Would you might bracketing our conversation for a moment and telling us about your own relationship to the island? Like so many stories, it involves leaving the country, enduring family separations and heartache, and then embracing a desire to reconnect and to understand the Cuban story on your own terms, right? So could you please narrate that story for us briefly?

Ada Ferrer [00:08:12] Yeah. Well, as I say in the second paragraph of the book, I was born in Cuba between the Bay of Pigs and the Cuban Missile Crisis, and my mother and I left shortly after the missile crisis in April of 1963, and we left my brother behind. Her son didn't come. And we settled in the U.S. eventually, in a place called West New York, New Jersey, which was full of Cubans like me and like my family. And Cuba was everywhere, you know, it was what everyone's parents talked about. It was what the priests to church talked about. It was this place that maybe we'd return to or this place where we, you know, we saved our hand-me-downs and our money to try to help them, right? So it was just always, always there. And as you know, as like a child, sometimes you want to escape that it felt just to over determining and you know, myself and a lot of my friends were always telling our parents, this isn't Cuba, you know, this is different and, and all that. But I succumbed to their obsession. And, you know, things just didn't make sense to me growing up, right? Because here I was in this working class community, no one I knew had gone to college. Most of my parents had not gone to high school. Most of their friends had not gone to high school. They were, I thought, people who might have benefit from a revolution that tried to redistribute income or that, you know, I imagine that. And and so I said, well, they left, but most of their siblings stayed, so what was that about? It just didn't make sense to me so I became kind of interested in how, you know, do revolutions change people? Like I had my parents become different people than their siblings who had stayed behind? Does migration change people? Is that what accounts for the difference? So I became kind of interested in these kinds of questions. I went to college, studied Victorian literature, mostly, and American literature. And then I thought, you know, I was born in this place, I'm interested in it, and I know nothing about it. And, and so I decided to go get a master's in Latin American history. And that's how I began, thwn I got a Ph.D. And I went back to the island for the first time in 1990. And then after that, I pretty much went, you know, every year and I kind of developed my own relationship with it. You know, met my family, made friends, made colleagues, interacted with Cuban

historians and scholars. I would say that it wasn't ever, I mean, I did make it mine. It was, I developed my own relationship with it, but it was, but in some ways it was also for my parents. So, you know, I almost felt like I was taking it in for them.

Robert Armengol [00:10:52] Well, of course, what you went through as a historian coming to terms with and making Cuba your own also entailed, I think, coming to terms with the U.S. involvement and intervention in Cuba for more than a hundred years, right? And you started to get into that a little earlier. I'm wondering if we could go deeper on that now because I think the nuances are not especially well covered in American schools. I mean, we call the second war of Cuban independence in the United States, the Spanish-American War. And you know, maybe you could start by taking us to that time and walking us through why the U.S. military became involved in that conflict in the first place and then how that played out in the long term?

Ada Ferrer [00:11:33] Right. Well, you know, as I suggested before, U.S. interests in Cuba long predated that moment. So the Spanish-American War refers specifically to the war between Spain and the U.S. The U.S. declared war on Spain in 1898 and arrived in Cuba and other places and defeated the Spanish. That war that, strictly speaking, the Spanish-American War is about a four month war. Americans think about it and they think about Teddy Roosevelt and the rough riders and so on. What I think most Americans don't realize is that that four month war came at the very end of a 30 year Cuban struggle for independence. So Cubans had been fighting for independence from Spain since 1868. There was the Ten Years war, the Little war, and there was a period of about 15 years of peace in which they did all this activism and writing and organizing for the final war, which began in 1895. So in some sense, the American intervention seemed to kind of shift the ground and turn that Cuban struggle for independence into this American war and that moment.

Robert Armengol [00:12:47] It was co-opted in a sense.

Ada Ferrer [00:12:48] Yeah, exactly. It's like that Cubans don't even, you know, have a mention, much less, you know, Puerto Rico or the Philippines, which became also part of the struggle because they were Spanish colonies at the time. So one of the things that that I think are so telling about that moment is that it's the perfect episode in which U.S. and Cuban history collide, right? They're, both major parties in this moment. So it's a kind of shared history, but each country views it from a completely different perspective. So Americans tend to see it, and American leaders definitely wrote about it this way at the time – and even for, for generations after – as an example of the U.S. aiding a neighbor, right? They stepped in and intervened, not out of greed or selfishness, they said, but help a neighbor, Cuba, win their own independence. So they tended to see it as an altruistic episode in history, and they tended to expect that Cubans would be grateful for that intervention because they had won. In their view, they had won Cuban independence for the Cubans. Meanwhile, the Cubans see it completely differently, right? They, the U.S. intervened at the end of the war. Some of the Cuban leaders of the independence were fully expected that they would win fairly soon. The Spanish were completely demoralized. They couldn't take over the countryside, right? So Cubans believe that they probably would have won independence anyway without the Americans. And they had already been fighting for it for so long, right? And so then the Americans came in and they see it more as like the Americans kind of swooping in and taking independence away from them.

Robert Armengol [00:14:29] A kind of theft.

Ada Ferrer [00:14:29] A kind of theft. And not the least of which, because then the Americans came and they didn't leave, right? So then they, you know, they, they celebrated, the Americans celebrated a peace treaty with Spain and didn't even let the Cubans in the room to negotiate it. They celebrated the defeat of Spain and raised the American flag, but they didn't even let the Cuban troops into the cities to celebrate. And the government of Cuba became an American government for four years.

David Nemer [00:14:56] Alright, so before we can, fast forward to the Cuban revolution in the 1950s, maybe you can tell us a little bit more about that period in between called the Republic.

Ada Ferrer [00:15:05] Yeah. So the Cuban Republic was established precisely when the Americans left, so they ended their military occupation in 1902, but they left something called the Platt Amendment, which gave the U.S. the right to intervene militarily in Cuba it prohibited the Cuban government from negotiating treaties with other countries, incurring debt from other countries and so on and so forth. So that Platt Amendment profoundly shaped Cuban politics. It that meant that the Cuban leaders always had to consider the view of of the U.S. in relation to policies and politics. It meant that if there was turmoil of any kind of rebellion, a contested election and so on, the words on everyone's lips were American intervention. Will the Americans intervene? So it created this strange dynamic for Cuban politics. So that's one aspect of the Republic. Another is tightening economic dependance on the U.S. So by the 1920s, the U.S. owns about two-thirds of the Cuban sugar industry, which is the principal industry and the principal export in the country. Cubans import almost everything from the U.S., appliances, cars, fashion machinery, etc. So there's a very close economic dependance to go along with that strange political dynamic. So those are two basic characteristics of the Republic. But there's something else too which is that there were people in Cuba who contested that all along, right? So they challenged U.S. power on the island and talked about having a Cuba that was more for the Cubans, and that became very common to hear, you know, in Cuban political discourse. There were progressives who wanted agrarian reform or who wanted to limit foreign ownership of land. They wanted more social rights. They wanted also freedom from corruption and freedom of the press. So there was a strong political current in Cuba, in the Republic, starting in the 1920s, that kind of linked all these things. It questioned and challenged and repudiated American intervention. It extolled liberal democratic principles, a constitution without a Platt Amendment, elections, freedom of the press and so on. But also supported policies that were socially and economically progressive – more along the lines of, say, some new deal policies, but put more radical.

Robert Armengol [00:17:47] Real quick on that point, talk a little bit about agrarian reform, because Cuba, since before the American intervention, had long been marked for centuries by the development of sugar plantations and this intense amount of labor and land that was necessary to sustain that economy which produced for export. And so now it's essentially during this period, right, influenced by U.S. interests as a purchaser of sugar and also an owner of land and factories and so on. So how does that all mark this political landscape you're talking about?

Ada Ferrer [00:18:30] So, you know, land concentration, as you said, you know, predated some of this. So in the final decades of the 19th century, you had a lot of sugar mills that were kind of smaller, but they were swallowed up. And as the industry mechanized, you had fewer and fewer mills with land, they became factories. So there was this tendency already towards the consolidation of larger and larger land holdings. But it takes off significantly with the U.S. occupation because what the Americans do is they open up the

eastern part of the island to that kind of development. So if you think about places like Santiago that are more mountainous, that historically has smaller forms of land tenure, that changes with the American occupation and a lot of the American sugar companies that set up, set up specifically in the eastern part of the island. And the Americans put in policies during the occupation that make it easy for American companies to buy up land and harder for Cubans to hold on to small, either to small plots of land or to communal land holdings. And so the communal estates are broken up during the American occupation. As soon as the Americans leave, you have some senators, people like Manuel Angele, calling for prohibitions on foreign ownership of land. So again, that kind of thinking was always there. It never passed, it never happened. The 1940 Constitution envisioned limiting the size of land holdings. It also imagined eventually having land revert to Cubans and away from foreigners. Of course, none of that was put into effect. So all those currents and those, that kind of vision of the Cuban Republic, you know, was part of mainstream Cuban political culture. It wasn't like Fidel Castro invented the words agrarian reform.

David Nemer [00:20:26] So it seems that this dissatisfaction and frustration actually led the people into the Cuban Revolution in 1950s. It was a popular uprising against a brutal dictator, Fulgencio Batista, and it began in the most unlikely of ways with an assault on a military garrison in Santiago de Cuba on the eastern side of the island, led by a young lawyer named Fidel Castro and his brother, Raúl. That was July 26, 1953, and it failed spectacularly. How did we go from such failure to a successful revolution?

Ada Ferrer [00:21:04] Yeah, that's a huge, that's a huge question.

Robert Armengol [00:21:08] Yeah, two minutes or less Ada, please.

Ada Ferrer [00:21:10] Yeah. So I would take it a little further back just to make clear that part of the frustration that people were feeling, you know, in the 1950s, it was economic. It was, you know, political. It was also specifically against Batista, right, that Batista staged this illegal coup in March of '52, where he took power illegally and suspended the Constitution. But it was also against what Batista came from. The governments that had been in place in the 40s and up to the 50s were notoriously corrupt. And so people had a critique of that. And when Batista comes to power illegally, it's not just Fidel Castro who leads the revolution. He leads that attack on the Moncada Barracks in Santiago, as you say, they fail spectacularly, and he is tried and sentenced to prison, which he serves as part of his prison sentence. And then he is freed, he's pardoned, and he goes to Mexico. And, you know, as all this is going on, while he's in jail, while he's planning Moncada, there's many other Cubans involved in opposing Batista and then struggling against Batista. So I think it's important for people to realize, you know, he was one revolutionary among many and students at the University of Havana and in universities across the country, even in high schools were very involved in the anti-Batista struggle. And for parts of that struggle, they had more support and more prominence even than Fidel Castro did early on. So there were students, you had housewives and mothers who, whose sons had been killed by Batista's police and came out in civic protests against Batista regime. You had sugar workers who went on strike. So it wasn't just Fidel Castro, it was a tradition of civic protest, you know, that was mobilized in opposition to Batista, and the civic protests became more violent because Batista became more violent. And so Fidel Castro's July 26 was part of that story, but not the only part of that story. So basically, I didn't answer your question of how we get to the revolution, I answered your question of how it all began, but I didn't get to what happened.

David Nemer [00:23:28] No, it gives a great, it gives a great foundation, given that this is the understanding when we talk about the revolution, right? That it was Fidel, his brother, then next thing we know there's a communist revolution over there.

Ada Ferrer [00:23:40] Right. And that's actually, that's a really important point, because that's another thing that some people assume that it was a communist revolution. It became a communist revolution, but it wasn't that to begin with. And the whole time that Fidel was fighting against Batista, he was not saying that he was communist. And in fact, the things he was supporting and advocating were not communists. They were part of this political tradition we've just been talking about that was anticorruption, that was pro-social rights, pro-political rights. So it was very mainstream, progressive stuff that he was advocating, not communist revolution. And actually, the Communist Party did not support his movement until the very end, you know, until about March '58. So, so they came to support it late. And historically, the Communist Party was strongly allied with Batista. So, so I think that's something that sometimes surprises people. So the revolution comes to power, not as a communist movement or a communist revolution. It comes to power as something that is very Cuban and, you know, that is supporting initially democratic principles that is opposed to political corruption. But what is so interesting is that, and I think this actually even surprised Fidel Castro himself. Just how much popular, widespread deep support there was from the very beginning. So the magazine Bohemia, which is like, you know, a Cuban life magazine, did a survey in February of 1959, so less than two months after the Castro's government came to power. And over 92 percent of the respondents said that the new revolutionary government was doing everything perfectly well. So he would have these rallies and, you know, hundreds of thousands of people would come out in support. You know, in, in May, they enact the agrarian reform and he has the the support of so many people in the country. Even in some cases, landowners are donating money or donating land. Not all of them, obviously, but you know, people are donating tractors there, you know. So there is massive support for these policies initially. And so that turn to communism comes out of this strange, dynamic and really interesting dynamic that unfolds in the first two years of revolution where, for one thing, I think Fidel Castro, it's almost like he realizes he can do it. He wasn't sure initially he could do it, but then he realizes that there's so much support that he can push further. He can enact radical reforms because people seem to support it, as was the case with the agrarian reform. So that's one dynamic that begins to take root. The other one, of course, is the dynamic with the U.S. Once, the U.S. has so, so many interests in Cuba that for the revolution to follow through on promises like agrarian reform means that it will come into conflict to some extent with the U.S.

Robert Armengol [00:26:44] Because properties had to be nationalized, right?

Ada Ferrer [00:26:46] Exactly. So, you know, so the agrarian reform begins to happen. And, you know, if you start confiscating large landholdings, a lot of those are going to be American. And so that, you know, that begins to set the stage for the conflict. And in the months that follow, you know, every action by Cuba then produces a response by the U.S. and then Cuba doesn't like the response. And it kind of, it ups the ante and that keeps happening until you get the breakdown of, of relations in January of 1961.

Robert Armengol [00:27:17] One of the things that you haven't mentioned is the Cold War, and you make an interesting argument in your book that runs contrary to a lot of the conventional history on this, which often suggests that yet another dynamic in play was this deep global division between the communist bloc and Western liberal democracies.

And I'm wondering, what do you really think about that? And why is that an insufficient way to understand what pushes Fidel Castro and his government toward the Soviet Union?

Ada Ferrer [00:27:53] Right. No, I think that there's, it's undeniable that the Cold War is one of those dynamics, right? That initially Fidel Castro saying is refusing that binary and saying, no, we're something else, we're devising a third way. But, you know, in practice, in a Cold War world where there are two poles, it's you know, and you are an island that just had a revolution, it's, it becomes kind of impossible to sustain that middle ground. So I do think that that that's part of the dynamics. So I would say it's the internal popularity, it's Fidel Castro's own kind of intellectual and political proclivities, it's the tension and dynamic with the U.S., it's the Cold War backdrop. I think that's, that it's all those things. But I do think that the Cold War is insufficient to understand the dynamic that takes root. And that is because Cuba and U.S. have a relationship long before the Cold War, and they have a complex, tense relationship where the subject of Cuban sovereignty is something that, that they're fighting about, right? So it goes back to the, you know, the 19th century when the Americans didn't want Cuba to become independent. It goes back to the Spanish-American War. When they intervened, it goes back to the Platt Amendment. That history is there. So when you have a new government that is trying to initially fulfill promises that have been made really for generations, right? Agrarian reform is a generations-old promise. And yet you have this U.S. power that resists those regardless of the Cold War, right? The U.S. was going to resist nationalization of U.S. land even if there had been the Soviet Union, right? So there is that that struggle between the two countries over what Cuban sovereignty is, what its limits are, what its relationship with the U.S. is.

David Nemer [00:29:44] As a Brazilian myself, I can't help but think that back in the 50s, the 60s, that was the sentiment around Latin America, that anti-imperialism, right? So there was, you know, the red wave that made people more critical about the presence of the U.S., not only in Cuba, but in the rest of Latin America, and that push towards social or human rights leaning governments, and that was not something that the U.S. appreciated. Thus sponsoring of the military coups all over you in Latin America. And Cuba was actually one of the few countries that managed to escape that because it aligns strongly with the Soviet Union that saw the island itself a strategic place for them to have a heavy presence.

Ada Ferrer [00:30:34] Absolutely. And Cubans, the Cuban leadership talked about that all the time. They talked about the example of Guatemala. I mean, that was really close at hand, it was only it had occurred just five years earlier. The Árbenz governor in Guatemala initiated an agrarian reform. The American government, working with the United Fruit, deposed Árbenz and ended the agrarian reform, right? So the Cubans were always well aware that that could be a result of this. So, so they were, they looked at it within a frame not just of U.S.-Cuba, but of the U.S. in the region.

Robert Armengol [00:31:06] And very much for your point, I'm going to take us back to a deeper history that I know you care about a lot. Jose Martí already in the 19th century, though, he lived most of his adult life in the United States, was very wary of U.S. imperialism even before the U.S. had taken a place on the world stage as an imperialist power, he had a very prescient sensibility about that. I'm wondering if you could just talk about why Jose Martí is so important? Why Cubans of every political perspective still revere him? And, and why are we still talking about him today?

Ada Ferrer [00:31:45] Yeah. Well, Jose Martí, I say in the book several times that Jose Martí is the second most famous Cuban after Fidel Castro because, you know, all Americans have heard of Fidel Castro, but no matter how much Cubans, you know, love

and revere Jose Martí, most, I think most Americans haven't. Anyway, so he's, as you said, a 19th century figure. One of the most important advocates for Cuban independence, he struggled for it and fought for it. actually, even before he was an adult. As a teenager, he was already writing in favor of Cuban independence and and was jailed for those efforts. So he, he lived most of his adult life in New York City, where he started he founded a revolutionary party that favored Cuban independence, as well as Puerto Rican independence. He founded a revolutionary newspaper. He also chronicled American life, you know, as an outsider, as an immigrant, and wrote amazing accounts of life in New York City and across the country. I think for, because he was the founder of that party, because he was the founder of the newspaper because he wrote about Cuban independence more than many people did and because he died, you know, he traveled to Cuba to actually fight in the war and was killed a month or so after arriving. So I think he's the martyr. He's the martyr for the nation, the martyr, you know, the ultimate patriot who made the ultimate sacrifice. So I think that's part of why, why he's, he's, you know, come to symbolize the nation. He also envisioned a Cuba that would be kind of a model for the world. And he he wrote about it that way that the Cuban revolution was a revolution for the world in at least two ways. One is that he saw it as a model of a new kind of racial equality. Cuba was a slave society in 1895. Slavery was only nine years dead. But he argued that part of what made the Cuban independence movement worthy that its merit. It's it's it's deep, you know, fundamental merit came in part from the fact that it had mobilized black citizens and that black citizens and white citizens were fighting together for independence, and he imagined that the Republic that would be established would be one that continued in that vein, that fulfilled the promise that would be an egalitarian republic. So that's one reason. The other one is precisely because of his critique of American imperialism. That he warned early on that the U.S. had imperial ambitions regarding Latin America, and he worried that Cuban independence might kind of open a path by which the U.S. could sweep in and take Cuba, and then from there take other parts of Latin America.

Robert Armengol [00:34:30] So I'm going to ask you a totally unfair question, the sort that historians hate to be asked. What would Jose Martí make of Cuba today?

Ada Ferrer [00:34:39] You know, I think it's a fascinating question kind of counterfactual, the kind of question, you're right, that historians tend not to like. So I think part of the difficulty in answering it is that it's unclear what today means. I mean, not just in terms of what's going on, but even what today means. So someone could ask me, what would Fidel Castro make of the Cuban Revolution? And somebody could ask me, what would Fidel Castro make of today? And those are two different questions.

Robert Armengol [00:35:08] Right, because the revolution is not one thing.

Ada Ferrer [00:35:10] The revolution is not one thing. And I think there's a way in which people talk about 62 years as if they were one thing and they're not. I'm a historian, so I'm always aware of the way things are changing or not changing the way that a different moments, different possibilities seem to open up and then they're shut down, right? You want to kind of look at the whole process more dynamically, more, more historically. So now I'll answer your question with that preface, I'll try to answer your question. So what would I say, Jose Martí make of Cuba today? Cuba's in a terrible spot right now, right? You know, there's the COVID pandemic there, severe economic crisis, there is, you know, widespread dissatisfaction and disaffection. There was a crackdown by the government of the protesters. So that's part of what Cuba today is. And I think if Martí saw that, his heart would break, really, you know, he would not support the repression of the protesters. He would, I think he would second the demands of young artists and others who are asking

for more freedom of expression and more rights, because Martí did value that in all his work. So I think he would support that. At the same time, Martí was always worried about the U.S., right? So I think he would worry about what the U.S. is going to do in regards to all this. You know, so he would support, I think, the calls for change, whether that be reform or something more, more total. But he would not want those calls to lead to anything like U.S. intervention or a reassertion of U.S. control in Cuba.

David Nemer [00:36:53] But hearing you saying about what Cuba is, the question that I often encounter as I'm doing this research in Cuba, is what is Cuba? Like which political model do they follow? Oftentimes, Cuba is appropriated in different countries by the left, by the right. For example, in Brazil, the left see Cuba as a role model for accessible healthcare, accessible education. Whereas the right sees Cuba as a dictatorship, like a lack of freedom, hunger. And it's very frustrating because both views tend to reduce the experience of Cuba, the Cuban way of life into their own interests, right? And maybe I need to give you more context. So in Brazil, they paint Cuba like it is Saudi Arabia, or it is like North Korea. It's this very voracious dictatorship that doesn't allow you to live. Like people, they are brainwashed, do exactly what the government tells them to do. But as we know, Cubans are very critical. They, they, they criticize the government. So what is Cuba? And what is the prospect of the government in Cuba in terms of leaning towards a more, I want to say...

Robert Armengol [00:38:18] Are you looking for the word participatory, maybe?

David Nemer [00:38:21] Yeah, participatory? And the reason I'm saying this is because Diaz-Canel has been a little frustrating because instead of bringing the country into this more participatory approach, he's actually enacting laws like the late Intecinco, which aims to control the internet, right?. Ever since the protests happened in July. So where is Cuba heading in terms of participatory models?

Ada Ferrer [00:38:46] You know, right now, I'm just deeply pessimistic. I don't, you know, young people and artists are calling for, for change for more, more freedom of expression. They're criticizing Law 35 and you know, the decrees before. But the government just is seeming unmovable on most of it, right? So I don't see much chance for participatory democracy. And I think, you know, that the situation has gotten so bad economically that I think I wonder how people hear the things that are said, right? Things that that have been said for so long, right? The, weather it's like accusing the protesters of being mercenaries paid by the CIA or anything else. Like, you know, it's, it's, I think people are just really deeply, deeply frustrated and tired right now in a way that feels to me having, you know, I've been going to Cuba since 1990, to me, it feels different right now. Yeah.

Robert Armengol [00:39:51] Well, I think we'll have to end there. Ada Ferrer, thank you so much for joining us and Democracy in Danger.

Ada Ferrer [00:39:56] Thanks for having me. I enjoyed it.

Robert Armengol [00:40:08] Ada Ferrera is a professor of history at New York University and a former Guggenheim fellow. Her new book *Is Cuba: An American History*. Democracy in Danger is part of the Democracy Group Podcast Network. Visit DemocracyGroup.org to find all our sister-shows. We'll be right back.

Well, David had to run off after our interview with Ada Ferrer, but my team asked me to stick around and offer some thoughts of my own on the current situation in Cuba, for what

they're worth. So I've been doing field research in Havana on and off over the last two decades and a few years ago, I taught a course at an independent institution that doesn't offer a formal degree, it's not allowed to, but it does give young people the chance to pursue a curriculum in the liberal arts outside of the state-controlled university system. And one of my students, Niefe Rigau, she went on to become an independent journalist based in the central city of Camaguey. She's been quite bravely posting on Facebook and Twitter about the grassroots efforts in Cuba to push for dialog and more engagement between the regime and citizens. So on July 11th, she set out to cover the mass protests that took place across Cuba, but she was detained by the authorities and spent 10 days behind bars. Niefe went through like a dozen rounds of questioning, she was charged with public disorder and threatened with 20 years in prison, and before being released on house arrest, she lost 10 pounds. But she says she didn't lose her faith. I had hoped to interview Niefe for our show, but we decided that like a lot of things in Cuba, it was just too complicated. The civic unrest in Cuba over the summer, it was unprecedented. Really, for a generation or more, nothing like that has happened. And it seemed to herald a new moment for the revolution and for the Communist Party, which has been in power now for 63 years, almost. Under President Miguel Diaz-Canel, who is the successor to Fidel and Raúl Castro, a lot of people believed there would be an opening for more freedom of expression and maybe even the chance for a more open electoral process.

Now, the buildup to July was long coming. The year before, as COVID was really taking a toll, hundreds of artists and writers gathered outside the Ministry of Culture to protest new restrictions on their work and to speak out against the arrest of rapper Denis Solis. That was part of the San Ysidro movement that had been brewing for about two years, and they got a brief audience with a deputy minister, but not much else. And this spring, the movement's leader staged a weeklong hunger strike. Since then, those efforts have been joined by an amalgam of journalists and opposition groups, including the umbrella organization Archipiélago or Archipelago. So just a couple of weeks ago, Archipiélago leaders planned a widespread, peaceful demonstration. But those plans petered out amid more government threats to crackdown on dissent. So instead, supporters just donned white clothes or hung signs outside their windows and carried roses silently as they went about their business – it was pretty low key.

A lot of people wonder why citizens in Cuba haven't done more to resist one party rule, and part of it is that they're afraid of reprisals – the history on that is pretty clear. But it's also, in my experience, once again, complicated. As, you know, Cubans like to say, complicado. Most Cubans don't want to wear the mantle of dissidents. They criticize the system openly, as David was saying earlier, but they don't necessarily want to completely overthrow a political system that, despite being authoritarian, has brought autonomy and a measure of stability and egalitarianism to Cuba after centuries of colonialism and imperialism. And yes, there's scarcity and inequality right now, but virtually no one is homeless, and that's just not the case for much of Latin America. Now, people in Cuba are and have been for a long time, utterly cynical and disillusioned. And for many young people, their sole focus is to take the decent education they've received under state socialism and get out. Historically, the party has vilified such emigres as worms, but lately they're more than happy for Cuban expats to return freely to the island and spend their dollars and their euros. So one thing I often heard from the ordinary folks in Cuba that I got to know is whatever comes next, they don't want to see a return to the savage capitalism and foreign domination of the early 20th century. You know, all that stuff we heard about from Ada. So I was all the more shocked last week to read an op-ed in the Miami Herald from the conservative historian Jaime Suchlicki, he's a Cuban exile who left in the 1960s. And his essay basically called for U.S. military intervention in his native country.

Now, given everything Ada told us about how the United States is actually again and again helped to create Cuba's problems, in the past and in the present, I just cannot imagine a more disastrous or anti-democratic foreign policy to pursue. Real change in Cuba, real change will have to come from the bottom up, as it always has, as it already has in the post-Soviet era with small-time entrepreneurs like the people I studied, pushing gradually and successfully for more freedom to sell produce, to rent rooms to tourists out of their homes, to run restaurants, open barber shops, drive private taxis and just, you know, pursue countless other small businesses that keep the everyday economy afloat. So all of this has been going on, even as the military and the party consolidate power over the large scale tourism sector, and that's created just a ton of frustration.

Ada Ferrer, you know, as we heard, she didn't end our conversation on a very hopeful note, and I got to say I, I do share some of her pessimism. On the other hand, some things are noticeably different with the dissent we're seeing this time around. For one thing, it's no longer contained to a smallish group of anti-communists, and the thousands who took to the streets last July really proved that. It's also no longer hopelessly fragmented thanks to growing access to the internet. That genie is out of the bottle, and Cuba's leaders, dinosaurs as people there call them, will be hard pressed to shove it back in. People like Niefe are publicly posting what they think, and their fellow Cubans are reading and listening and sharing those posts without fear, instead of leaving the country. Now all of that tells me there will be a breaking point in the not too distant future. We just don't know when exactly it will come. We're signing off to the tune of Patria y Vida. It's a song recorded by San Isidro musicians earlier this year, basically in a basement somewhere. And it has become the anthem and the slogan of pro-democracy activists in Cuba. The title "Homeland and Life," is a direct challenge to the state's mantra "Homeland or Death." My favorite line is addressed to the country's political leaders and alludes to the ubiquitous game of dominoes. Your five nine and I'm double twos, meaning you are fixated on 1959 and I'm looking toward the future.

Stay with us next week as hosts Siva Vaidhyanathan and Will Hitchcock return for a conversation with a democracy activist about his escape from Myanmar. Follow us on Twitter at [@dindpodcast](#) That's D-I-N-D podcast. Subscribe to the show on your favorite podcast app and visit us at [DinDanger.org](#) for much more.

Democracy in Danger is produced by me, Robert Armengol with help from Jennifer Ludovici. Sydney Halleman edits the show. Our interns are Denzel Mitchell, Jane Frankel and Elie Bashkow.

Special thanks to David Nemer for helping host this week. He's an assistant professor of media studies here at UVA, and his new book is *Tecnologia de los Oprimidos; Technology of the Oppressed*. It's all about inequality and the digital world in the slums of Brazil.

Support comes from the University of Virginia's Democracy Initiative and from the College of Arts and Sciences. The show is a project of UVA's Deliberative Media Lab. Were distributed by the Virginia Audio Collective of WTJU Radio in Charlottesville. See you next time!