

Deprivation and depopulation: inside Cuba under US siege

Danny Shaw, a scholar of Latin American and Caribbean studies and longtime supporter of the Cuban revolution, documents harrowing conditions across Cuba following the Trump administration's imposition of a blockade on fuel to the island. A humanitarian crisis has been manufactured by Washington to unravel the last vestiges of Cuba's revolutionary structure. Traveling from Holguin to Banes to Santiago this February, Shaw finds a population increasingly deprived of nutrition, with dwindling transportation options as gas runs low, schools are shuttered, and surging inflation makes life unaffordable. The US embargo has hollowed out once-thriving areas, pushing young people to migrate. Shaw explains how concessions imposed on the Cuban government have created a new class of crypto-capitalists which forms an economic bridge to Miami, and a base for Trump's promised "takeover" of the country. Having lived among average Cuban people throughout the latest crisis, Shaw delivers an unflinching chronicle of their painful experience under siege. ||| The Grayzone ||| Find more reporting at <https://thegrayzone.com> Support our original journalism at Patreon: <https://patreon.com/grayzone> Facebook: <https://facebook.com/thegrayzone> Twitter: <https://twitter.com/thegrayzonenews> Instagram: <https://instagram.com/thegrayzonenews> Minds: <https://minds.com/thegrayzone> Mastodon: <https://mastodon.social/@thegrayzone> #TheGrayzone

#Danny Shaw

Saludos de Santiago de Cuba. This is Danny Shaw reporting for The Grayzone. For the next 10 days, I'm going to bring you footage—uncut, unfiltered—of what the Cuban people are living through: a transportation crisis where people wait hours and hours to try to see a loved one, crammed like cattle into vehicles unfit for human beings. This is a humanitarian crisis. None of the agricultural products from the countryside can get to the cities. I've watched Cubans scramble, trying to sell their last antibiotics or whatever they have just to get a meal for the day. And this is only the beginning. We have to sound the alarm because this war on Cuba, this blockade, began intensely in 1990, and Cuba was left isolated—and they're more isolated than ever. This is the intensification of 36 years of a Marco Rubio, Donald Trump, Joe Biden, Democrats, and Republicans assault on Cuba's sovereignty.

#Danny Shaw

I first went to Cuba in 1995. I was a 16-year-old brigadista. I saw Fidel Castro speak, and we had meetings with him. The U.S. socialist delegation was always one of the most well-received in Cuba, of course, because we were representing the country that has had this long-time siege on Cuba. I returned in 2001, then again in 2014. I was there for Fidel's funeral across Cuba in 2017. I was

there for boxing in those years as well, and boxing took me in different ethnographic directions. A big part of what I was doing in Cuba was filling up all these different pocket notebooks with Cuban slang and vocabulary.

So I'm a student of Cuban Spanish. I've been fluent in Cuban Spanish since around '98 or '99, and I filled up another notebook on this trip. Having traveled there for 31 years, it gave me the opportunity to compare this criminal period to what has been a special period of 36 years. I flew into Holguín, which is a city of great commerce in the center of Cuba, and then I made my way across the interior of Holguín down into Santiago. The Cubans have endured 36 years of a special period. This is the pinnacle—the apex—of that special period. I talked to one woman who was sitting outside, selling her fried peanuts.

And if she were in Washington, D.C., or in New York City, we might have, quote-unquote, mistaken her for maybe a homeless person or something. But no—she was extremely alert. I had asked different Cubans, if that was the special period, then what is this? And she responded very candidly, "This is the criminal period," because of how many people, including herself, were hungry, who couldn't get their **chequera**—that's the pension. I saw lines again and again of elderly folks trying to get their pension. The siege is impacting everybody across Cuba. It's impossible to get any gasoline. Transportation is basically down to a standstill.

But then you have the economic contradictions, which we'll look at later—where there's still oil getting into the private sector. Many children are no longer getting the food they rely on at school. I listened to people in neighborhoods who said, "Well, we used to get rice and lentils. Now we just get a little bit of white rice." Other schools aren't able to give anything. Some teachers can't even get there because they don't have transportation. So if they're not within walking distance, how can they get to work? Now nurses are doing 24-hour shifts because they have a hard time getting to work.

#Danny Shaw

This is a surgeon I just met—a surgeon from the hospital, a doctor—and she can no longer work. The hospitals aren't functioning. There's no electricity. This was a theater. It used to be a theater.

#Danny Shaw

It's not functioning.

#Danny Shaw

One thing I've heard in Cuba—and this is heartbreaking—is that people say, "We can't really have babies easily. Women don't want to have babies. It's too much. We don't have enough nutrition. We can't take care of ourselves. ¿Cómo vamos a cuidar a los niños?" So I don't know the exact numbers, but between migration and everything, there's a lot of **despoblación**—like a depopulation.

#Max

You went through places that looked like museums or ghost towns. Can you tell us about the depopulation trend you saw?

#Danny Shaw

I went to a town called Banes. I had some friends who were salsa dancers and marathon runners who, coincidentally, were from this small town near the ocean in the interior of Holguín. As I walked around and met people, it felt like a nation of **viejitos**—a nation of old people. You could see it was kind of a ghost town.

#Danny Shaw

Sometimes it feels like a nation of **ancianos**—of old people.

#Danny Shaw

Young people without access to food, without access to employment, internet—all the things we probably take for granted in our day-to-day lives—how many of them have had to take to the seas, trying to escape to Miami, trying to escape to really anywhere in the world? As I roamed Banes, it's the older generation that's still extremely enthusiastic about the revolution. You talk to people in their sixties and up, and they talk to you like it's 1959 or 1989. But young people drift away. As you walk around Banes and other places, many of the museums and revolutionary paraphernalia stores look like they would have been brand new in 1983 or 1985 or 1989—and they haven't been touched since.

#Danny Shaw

This is a museum of archaeology. You can just see the years and years of struggle. This was the first train over here—Panchito. Era Panchito ahí. A private store—what's it called?

#Danny Shaw

Mi Pime, mi Pime. Mi Pime, mi Pime—look at Panchito there.

#Danny Shaw

All of these stores have shut down. I was in the middle of Holguín, and we looked around with some of my friends, and they said, "You can see right from here—five movie theaters, five movie houses—that have been shut down. They haven't worked in 36 years." That's the socioeconomic terrain that so many Cuban youth today come of age in. And for them, it's extremely discouraging. I've heard

from so many Cubans, “We’re sick of being a museum for socialism. We’re sick of having to live decades in the past,” because, of course, they can still see social media and all the carrots dangling in front of them—the capitalist paradises, whether it’s in Miami or in Montreal.

#Danny Shaw

I found where Hamas is hiding—I found them here in Cuba. It’s definitely this 1980s roller coaster, or whatever you call this thing. I don’t think it’s worked since 1989. This is Jardines Las Enramadas. It used to be the big ice cream spot in Santiago de Cuba. Anyone who’s been to Havana knows the big ice cream spot. But it’s completely empty now. No families can afford it, no families have access. Every day that goes by, I feel like I’m documenting the collapse of a nation. And, you know, to watch it play out in the faces of everyday people—it’s a lot. It’s extremely tragic.

#Max

Back to the issue of malnutrition and the food crisis—you said you witnessed widespread hunger, especially in the eastern areas you visited.

#Danny Shaw

Yeah, there are regional differences within Cuba. Historically, relatively speaking, if you go to Havana—maybe not the outskirts as much, but of course Centro Habana, La Habana Vieja—those are the areas that leftist tourists would be most familiar with. But once you get out into the countryside, once you get out into the neighborhoods on the periphery, it’s a much more difficult reality. I went to many neighborhoods within Santiago—Nueva Vista, Alegre, Indaya, and Chicharrones—and in these different neighborhoods, the issue of inflation was huge. So if a Cuban nurse is earning something like 6,000 pesos per month, with the devaluation and the monetary attacks on Cuba, that’s only about twelve dollars. But a bag of pasta, a bottle of cooking oil—you’d see someone walking with one, and everyone else would ask, “Is it at 1,700 pesos today?”

“Is it at 1,900 pesos?” And every morning the prices would go up. Soon enough, a bottle of cooking oil would go from being one-fifth of a nurse’s salary to two-fifths, and then half of a nurse’s salary. That kind of inflation is what’s killing people. The Cuban government, the Cuban system, quite simply, is not strong enough. This is David versus Goliath. I did see extreme hunger—it was heartbreaking. I heard from little kids: “We used to get rice and lentils at school. Now we just get rice. Now they’ve taken away the rice. We can’t go to school. Our teachers can’t get there anymore.” So it’s a generalized crisis of malnutrition. And we know that malnutrition, at some point, becomes hunger and starvation.

And I don’t think we really have accurate numbers for how many people over the last 36 years have actually been victims—martyrs, murdered, or assassinated—because of these criminal unilateral policies coming from the U.S. You mean large numbers of excess deaths due to the embargo and

now the energy siege? No question. If there's no energy, then, you know, for example, anyone who works in a bar or a restaurant that deals with alcohol or beer—if the refineries are shut down because there's no electricity, and if transportation is shut down because there's no gas—how could any bar function? So you have mass unemployment creeping in now, day by day.

#Danny Shaw

Welcome to what they popularly call the Cuban stock market, or the Cuban Wall Street. This is where everybody comes—whether you need a new bicycle, antibiotics, new shoes, food—this is where you find it. It's called Calle 13, and people come from Las Provincias, from Guantánamo, from all parts of Holguín. You can find anything here. This is what they call La Economía Paralela, the parallel economy. The state has no control here. In fact, you see different military soldiers around, and they're not doing anything different from anybody else—they're here to buy fruit, vegetables, or whatever they need.

I was talking to some of the local business owners, and they were explaining that they pay rent to the property owner wherever they are on this street. So if you have property here, if you were lucky, then you can earn a little income from renting out your space. But all of this, in the parallel economy, is outside of state control, of course. It's not something the state's going to talk about openly. But this is how Cubans survive day to day. All of the distortions laid out in the framework of what the blockade was imagined as under John F. Kennedy and Lyndon Baines Johnson have really stayed intact.

It was calculated to starve the Cuban people, to suffocate the Cuban people. Of course, it's much easier to say, "It's all Fidel's fault, it's all Díaz-Canel's fault," which is an undialectical analysis. But this is the true center of the city, the real stock exchange. If I keep explaining all the details—ah, me voy a poner mareado para entender lo económico en Cuba. Muy difícil. Muy, muy, muy difícil. Those are the most common sayings you hear in Cuba: "Esto está complicado." This is so complicated. And Cubans themselves will tell you, "We don't understand it. How could we ever explain it to you?"

#Max

And what about medicine? People are trying to get antibiotics through some pretty unorthodox means.

#Danny Shaw

Medicine is a huge problem. Everything we take for granted—aspirin, Tylenol, ibuprofen, antibiotics—you'll find people trying to trade for on the so-called black market, in the informal economy. I was staying with a family where soccer is huge. FIFA and other soccer organizations made a lot of

investments in Cuba because, of course, we always associate Cuba with el boxeo y la pelota—boxing and baseball. But soccer was huge, and it's also the simplest sport, right? You just need a ball, and off you go.

And within this market in Holguín, I ran into different soccer coaches. By the afternoon, they were there, but they can't make a living. They can't feed their families as athletes, retired athletes, and coaches, so they'd be there hawking this or that antibiotic. People have had to be extremely creative. The government is, of course, aware of these underground markets, but they don't intervene. I even saw soldiers walking through them. That's where soldiers and police have to buy, but they're in there, you know, off-duty hours. So the Cuban economy has been distorted in ten and a half million ways, directly and indirectly. That's the entire *raison d'être* of this.

#Danny Shaw

The economic siege on Cuba, which the Cuban government is calling economic genocide—transportation by horse in 2026. Elon Musk can have 800 billion Teslas, while the Cuban people are reduced to getting around by horse. That's the world we live in.

#Max

And the transportation crisis is at the heart of the issue. If you can't get food to market, then people can't eat. You traveled around—you had to go by horse and buggy. Tell us about the transportation situation.

#Danny Shaw

Yeah, to get across Santiago, there were times I was able to take electronic tricycles with solar panels that had come from China and other places abroad. That's one form of electronic transportation. But then, yeah, it's horse and buggy—and it's hard to believe it's 2026. I was on this horse and buggy, and right in front of me there's a surgeon who earns 12,000 pesos per month—that's 24 US dollars. Twenty-four dollars today, and in a week it could be down to 21. So how can a surgeon eat? There were no supplies in the hospitals, in the polyclinics. The surgeons often had to buy their own supplies—the stethoscope, headgear, the thing to inject an IV—just the simplest things we would take for granted. One day I tried to go to La Maya, Alto Songo, outside of Santiago. These are historic Afro-Cuban regions, very famous for their music.

Once upon a time, Haitians came to cut trees and sugar cane there. I just couldn't get there. There were hundreds and hundreds of Cubans lined up on the road in Calle Cuatro, which is the main transportation hub of Santiago. After four hours, I gave up. Finally, a massive truck—the kind you'd use in Kansas or Nebraska to transport cattle or horses—showed up. Hundreds of Cubans needed to get home. You know, I don't have the same pressing needs. There were also a bunch of prisoners who had to report back to prison. So it was chaos—people elbowing and pushing. It was rough,

seeing hundreds of people trying to pack themselves into this truck. I just couldn't get in there. But that's the everyday fight to get from point A to point B.

#Danny Shaw

Behind me, you're going to see human beings forced to live like cattle. I did everything I could to get onto that truck. You have people packed in there—it's the most dangerous thing you could imagine. And look at all the people who couldn't get on. I gave up. I was trying to get to La Maya, outside of Santiago, but it wasn't worth it. It was too dangerous. To see Cubans reduced to this state for 36 years and counting by the largest criminal Goliath empire—it's ridiculous.

#Danny Shaw

But as we waited, it was very telling. All of a sudden, you see an SUV fly by at 50 miles an hour. Then a Mercedes-Benz speeds past. So of course, that raises a lot of questions too. And I think those are honest questions we have to raise and address as well.

#Max

The big issue is the mixed economy. I mean, this is what Trump is going to exploit. Can you explain how the mixed economy came about, what it means for average Cubans, and how Trump is aiming to exploit it through his talk of a "friendly takeover"?

#Danny Shaw

Yeah, just in the last few hours, we heard Trump float this rhetoric of a "friendly takeover." And I think over the past two days, Trump has been talking about a possible, you know, opening up. What Trump is saying, if we read between the lines, is that they want to continue to buttress and facilitate the private sector. And everyone who's a close Cuba watcher—look up the MIPIMES. MIPIMES is the abbreviation for the micro, small, and medium-sized entrepreneurial sector. So those people who have stores selling empanadas, those who have bars or whatever—in general, they're still able to get by because they import a bunch of stuff from Miami. And that's the thing, right? There's a blockade for 95% of Cubans, but these Miami-based Cubans, this new capitalist class, they're able to get along because they have dollars.

They have access to divisas, so they're able to set up their shops. But then you see that 95% to 98% of Cubans don't have access to that food. So there's a dual economy—it's a contradictory economy. In the time of the Soviet Union, it was called the New Economic Policy. And of course, the government has to be flexible. The problem is that everyday people have no way of buying in these stores because the prices are all dollarized. So now, something like 90% of Cubans have to cook

with charcoal or wood every day or night. I'd be with different families, and we'd cook a big Cuban stew, an ajiaco, together. And the first thing we all had to do was, you know, cut down a little bit of wood. So that's the environmental damage carried out against the Cuban people as well.

#Max

So there's this kind of capitalist class, and you said you saw them driving BMWs while other people couldn't even get any transportation. What do they represent politically? Are they now a factor in Cuban politics?

#Danny Shaw

I think that's the fifth column the Trump administration is trying to use. I think the Marco Rubios are the mouthpieces of this emerging class. They really started to appear in the early 2010s. You had Raúl Castro, and he passed legislation for a mixed economy and respect for private property, which was new in Cuban history. Then in 2021, you had the law around the MIPIMES. And I think this new class, which is now very stable, is how they're going to take over Cuba. It's been a steady process. I think the coup, in many ways, is already underway. That economic reality—that economic pillar, which is contradictory to the interests of the masses of Cubans—already has a certain political influence. And I think a lot of this is playing out behind closed doors. I'm not pointing the finger at David.

I know Goliath is ultimately responsible for wearing down Cuba over the course of decades and decades. The metaphor I've used is Muhammad Ali at the end of his career. Cubans were able to endure in the 1990s. The Soviet Union and that relationship, though it had fallen, were still fresh. Two generations of Cubans have been born into this special period. They've never seen abundance. They've never seen that socialism, at the end of the day, is material preponderance—and most young people have never seen that. So I think it's very discouraging for them. There's a very complex reality here. It's great to yell all these slogans, and I believe in those slogans, but we have to look at the nuanced, contradictory nature of what Cuba has become because of all this external pressure.

#Max

So the Trump administration, through Marco Rubio's little cartel, says they're in talks with Sandro Castro, an influencer and grandson of Fidel Castro. Who is Sandro Castro, and what element does he represent?

#Danny Shaw

From what people told me, Sandro Castro, the grandson, really does represent those interests—these interests of negotiation. But I don't think that reflects the reality of the vast majority of

Cubans. The term I settled on, that I felt in my gut of guts and heart of hearts, is that it's a kind of capitalist natural selection. I kept asking myself, as I walked the streets seeing so many hungry people and then, every ten blocks or so, a private store—well, there is food, you know, there is fuel. On my last day, and people can judge me for this, I said, I want to cover as much ground as I can. I hadn't been able to get around much because of the fuel crisis. So for a hundred bucks, I rented a car—with the gasoline included, the driver included.

I was able to do that. I'm an American. Everyday Cubans can't do that. So the social contradictions are right in your face. And I think Sandro Castro is deep within those contradictions. They're trying to pivot to this kind of negotiating—they call it negotiation, we know that. The capitalist class, the Trumps, the billionaire class, the Elon Musks. Elon Musk is worth three times more than what Cuba's GDP was last year. And that GDP is in sharp, sharp, sharp decline. I think that's why Trump now amended it to say, well, as long as the fuel, the oil, the electricity, the food, the imports are going to this burgeoning yet already stable economy—homegrown, or rather Miami-grown—small bourgeois, larger bourgeois class, we don't mind them. So that's the fifth column they're looking at.

#Max

And what are your thoughts on the boat incursion? Do you see this as a pretext for a wider military invasion? It seems pretty obvious that these terrorists were training under the watch of U.S. federal authorities and were granted some kind of special permission by the Coast Guard to test Cuba's defenses. That's my take.

#Danny Shaw

Yeah, putting out feelers, perhaps, because we know who the pirates of the Caribbean are. If they can surround Venezuela with 20,000 soldiers, if they can have nine bases in Colombia or 11 military bases in Panama, if they can control Venezuela—fourteen percent of Puerto Rico, the U.S. military—that is certainly very mysterious, that this boat is able to launch a raid deep into Cuba. Perhaps they were thinking it would trigger some kind of bigger effect. There have been thousands—something like over a thousand—of these raids. We know many anti-socialist Cuban Americans are drooling, chomping at the bit for these kinds of opportunities.

They're still upset about the 1959 revolution and all the nationalization of land. But the true war on Cuba hasn't come in that form. It's come in the form of economic sabotage—economic genocide, again, to quote the Cuban government. So many Cubans ask me, "Is there any way for me to get to Haiti? Is there any way for me to get to the Dominican Republic?" In Haiti, you go through the different neighborhoods, the ghettos, and little kids are still gonna find some marbles, a little doll, or a chunk of bread. Whereas in Cuba, it was just like a wasteland in a lot of parts. You saw the government stores—the cabinets were just run dry.

#Danny Shaw

How could anyone afford diapers? If the children and babies are lucky, this is what they get cleaned with.

#Speaker 2

The prices the government used to sell at.

#Danny Shaw

I think there's a certain pride among Cuban people. They don't want to talk about some of these things openly. A lot of the work I did there ends up being my voice—not because I wanted it that way, but because after I spoke to groups of people, after I visited homes and said, "Hey, let's get this on camera, speak directly to the American people, we'll try to get this material out despite all the censorship," they'd say no. We know they're beating the war drums against Iran, Venezuela, and Cuba, but as soon as I tried to turn that camera on them—no way. Cubans just don't feel comfortable speaking about this.

I often heard—and this is going to hurt a lot of leftists—but again, you have to be as dialectical and as nuanced as you can in your thinking. A lot of Cubans would say to me, "I could go to jail if I say anything negative, if I tell the truth about our hunger issues." So I was really wondering, because we know that's another part of their plan. That's what they did on July 11th, 2021. During COVID—a time when a lot of Cubans died unnecessarily because of the blockade—people were hungry, people couldn't go out in the streets. And that's when you had this July 11th explosion in Havana that spread elsewhere.

#Max

You're talking about protests that erupted—small-scale by U.S. standards, but very rare in Cuba—where people went out into the streets, and, you know, some of them were waving American flags. There was looting.

#Danny Shaw

Yeah. Attacks on police. And many were yelling that they were hungry and that they weren't going to be afraid anymore. And that's what the Marco Rubios—that's what they want to see. They want to try to provoke another type of crisis. And then, if there's some kind of standoff, some kind of clashes, the U.S. could try to come in as the, quote-unquote, superheroes, decontextualizing what has actually spawned this hunger. I mean, what could Cuba be today, in 2026, if it were allowed to freely grow and freely trade? So everything I'm saying comes within the context of what has now been a 66- or 67-year assault—a genocidal assault on Cuba's right to self-determination.