

Cuba - A Personal Reflection

December 22, 2014



When in 1959 I was fourteen, my socialist, pacifist father gave me a gift subscription to *Liberation*, the leftist magazine sponsored by the War Resisters League that was published from 1956-1977. My parents had divorced and I lived with my mother in the town of Imperial Beach, California, on the Pacific Ocean and the Mexican border, while my father lived in Chicago. *Liberation* was my father's way of seeing to my political education from a distance. In the pages of *Liberation* I first read C. Wright Mills' essay (later a book) "Listen Yankee" as well as other articles about the revolution in Cuba.

I became a convinced supporter of the revolution against more than 60 years of domination by American mining companies, sugar companies, and gambling casinos—and behind the latter the Mafia. I was enthusiastic when in 1960 Castro's new government began expropriating both domestic and foreign capitalist property and applauded when in May of 1961 Castro declared Cuba to be "socialist." I was appalled by President John F. Kennedy's organization of the Cuban exiles' invasion of the Bay of Pigs and delighted to see it so rapidly crushed. I have to say that while I opposed it, I didn't fully understand in 1960 the significance of the U.S. embargo of Cuba that would help to keep the country economically isolated and to keep its people poor for decades.

By the late 1960s my sympathy for the African American civil rights movement and for the anti-Vietnam War movement had brought me into socialist circles where, while organizing to end the war, we also discussed and debated the nature of what later came to be called "really existing socialism," that is, the character of the Soviet Union, Eastern Europe, China, North Vietnam, North Korea and Cuba. I became drawn to the International Socialists (IS) whose intellectual leader was Hal Draper, and, after reading his famous essay "The Two Souls of Socialism," became convinced that all of those countries were not socialist at all. Their Communist parties ruled from above, while socialism had to be created and developed democratically from below. They were all variants of "bureaucratic collectivism," that is, they were nations where the Communist Party had merged with the state to become a new ruling class over the workers and peasants who were not permitted to organize independently in political parties or democratically controlled unions and social movements to defend their interests. Sam Farber's books and articles on Cuba further convinced me that Cuba was a unique Caribbean variation on the theme of bureaucratic collectivism.

A Critic of the Revolution—and a Defender of Cuba

I still believed that the Cuban Revolution of 1959, led by the radical lawyer and politician Fidel Castro, had been progressive vis-à-vis the United States, but it seemed clear that once Castro's 26th of July Movement—which already has such Stalinist leaders as Raúl Castro and Ernesto "Che" Guevara—merged with the Communist Party in 1961, and at about the same time chose to ally Cuba

with the Soviet Union, that things began to change fundamentally. The revolution was transformed and ceased to be progressive. By the early 1970s Cuba had structurally assimilated to the Soviet Union, adopting comparable party, governmental, state security, and economic structures. All independent social and political organizations were either taken over by the state-party or shut down. Cuba became a one-party state under the direction of the Communists and their leader Fidel Castro. Democracy it seemed to me had disappeared from the Cuban Revolution. I and many of my comrades came to the conclusion that it would take a new revolution to overthrow Castro's Communist government and bring democracy and genuine socialism to the island.

The Mariel Boatlift of 1980 seemed to confirm this. In the early 1980s I was working as a community organizer with Catholic Theology of Liberation activists at St. Thomas of Canterbury Church on the Northside of Chicago where the liturgical committee had become inspired and influenced by the theology of liberation. Together we organized the *Comité Latino* to deal with housing and other issues and I became its organizer. Most of our members were from Mexico and Guatemala, though there were also South Americans, including some Chilean exiles. This was not long after the Mariel Boatlift when Castro permitted 125,000 Cubans to leave the island, many of them freed from prisons and some from mental institutions, a good many of them Afro-Cubans and some of them unwanted homosexual men.

So it was not entirely surprising when one day a graying Afro-Cuban man named Gabriel walked into one of our meetings and joined our group. I asked him about his background and he explained that he was one of those who like Huber Matos had fought for the revolution, but turned against it as it became clear to him that Castro was a Communist. He had spent more than twenty years in prison in Cuba. Gabriel had been a Cuban nightclub singer and still had a marvelous, rather tinny voice that sounded like the great Cuban singer Arsenio Rodríguez. Gabriel made a wonderful addition to the *Comité Latino* and its singing group.

The Mariel Boatlift was a tremendous indictment of the Castro regime. Still, I believed that it was important to defend the Cuban nation and the Cuban people from the United States government and from the reactionaries in the Cuban exile community in Miami. When I lived in Mexico City in 1996 two planes of a U.S.-based Cuban exile group called Brothers to the Rescue, which had on several previous occasions violated Cuban airspace, were shot down by Cuban planes. The event led to an international controversy because the planes had not yet entered Cuban airspace when they were shot down, and because the standard procedure when such incidents occur is for the offended nation to force the planes down, not shoot them down. The United Nations Security Council passed a U.S. resolution condemning Cuba. While the Cuban government may not have handled the incident correctly, still I thought that the United States and the Cuban exiles were clearly the aggressors and Cuba the underdog whose right to independence and security had to be defended.

I and my friend Peter Gellert—who unlike me was and is a strong supporter of the Cuban government—collaborated to write a joint statement criticizing the United States, supporting Cuba's right to defend itself from U.S. inspired incursions into its airspace, as well as calling for a protest at the U.S. embassy in Mexico City. I remember being delighted to see our friend the writer John Ross walking up to join our demonstration of American and Mexican opponents of U.S. policy toward Cuba. The Brothers' 1996 incursions into Cuban airspace became the pretext for the passage of the Helms-Burton law, which strengthened the U.S. embargo of Cuba, even further isolating the island and hurting the Cuban people.

A Guest of the Mexican Embassy in Cuba

It was not until 2000 that I first visited Cuba under quite unique circumstances. In 1986, still living in Chicago, I had become friends with Ricardo Pascoe Pierce, then a Congressman for the

Revolutionary Workers Party (PRT) in Mexico. He had come to the United States to bring greetings to the founding convention of the new socialist organization Solidarity of which I was and remain a member. Ricardo later left the PRT, migrating with the historian Adolfo Gilly and others into an organization called the Movement toward Socialism (MAS) and then into the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD) led by Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas. Their efforts to bring Cárdenas to the presidency failed and it was the right which finally ended the rule of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI).

When Vicente Fox of the conservative National Action Party (PAN) became president in 2000, he chose Jorge Castañeda Gutman, a former Communist, to become the Minister of Foreign Affairs. Communism was just a youthful episode in the life of Castañeda who had been born and bred in Mexico's *clase política*, his father, Jorge Castañeda y Álvarez de la Rosa, having also served as Mexico's Minister of Foreign Affairs during the administration of José López Portillo (1976-1982). But to return to the story, having become Foreign Minister, Castañeda in turn chose my friend Ricardo to become the Mexican Ambassador to Cuba, the only member of the PRD in the administration.

I contacted Ricardo, interested to learn about how he saw his role in his new position, and he invited me to visit him in Havana and be a guest at the Mexican Embassy in the beautiful Miramar neighborhood. Off I went. When I arrived, I asked Ricardo why he had taken such an important position in a rightwing government, he told me that he felt that only a leftist like himself could defend the historic relationship between Mexico and Cuba. Ricardo was busy most of the time with his diplomatic business, including discussions with Castro, so I spent a week exploring Havana.

I went, for example, to meet a representative of the Cuban labor unions, who explained the unions' role in Cuba, but could not explain to my satisfaction why workers were not permitted to organize independent unions of their own choosing. I was also interested, however, in meeting with critics and opponents of the Castro government, so I asked Ricardo whether his embassy might be able to provide me with such a list. After Ricardo gave me the list, I went and visited dissidents of all stripes. The U.S. State Department clearly inspired some of them, though others like Oswaldo Payá Sardiñas were genuine advocates of political rights, and then too there were the intellectuals whose economic institute had been closed because they had made with what turned out to be premature proposals to create market socialism. While several of the opponents wanted to change the political system, I met none working to bring democratic socialism to the island. I know such Cuban socialists exist, but found no way to contact them.

On the Streets of Havana

Most interesting, of course, were the conversations with ordinary Cubans. I went on Sunday morning and walked to the *Iglesia de Jesús de Miramar*, interested in hearing what the priest would say in his sermon. The terrible sound system with its speakers spitting static made that impossible, but after the service I went up to the front of the church where a young Afro-Cuban woman was leading a discussion group. This was a meeting of the church's youth group to whom I explained that I was an American academic interested in how Cubans felt now that the Communist government had ceased persecuting the Church. They told me that Catholics still faced discrimination and only a Communist Party membership card would allow them to enter professions such as journalism.

One evening crossing Havana's *Plaza Vieja*, a woman stopped to ask me if I could give her money to buy milk for her baby. In the bar one saw young women, *jineteras* they are called, who accept food and gifts from foreigners in exchange for their companionship, but don't consider themselves to be prostitutes. Often teachers, social workers, or other educated women, many hope to establish a relationship with a foreigner who will take them away from Cuba. On one of the nicer streets off the plaza, a street lined with shops and a good bookstore, I saw a cop hustle two Afro-Cubans off the

street. I asked the men, both handsome and nicely dressed, why the police had given them the bum's rush, to which one replied, "They don't want black men approaching the European women." A white Cuban gigolo with a European woman would not have been so easily identified by the police.

I went to visit the *Cementerio de Cristóbal Colón*, curious to see among other things the grave of the leftist Antonio Guiteras (1906-1935) but found myself walking and talking with a man who was visiting the grave of his wife who had died only a year before. Suddenly listening to the man tell me about his deceased wife and how much he had loved her, one remembered that whatever the politics of a country as a certain level, life, love, and death persist. Leaving the cemetery, I went to a restaurant and was handed the menu with four pages of interesting dishes, only to find after asking for a few different items, that there was only available: fried chicken.

Like everyone, I talked to my cab drivers. When I asked one older driver how he felt about the revolution now, forty years later, he replied, "I was a poor boy from a village. I fought for the revolution. It has given me everything. My children are doctors and lawyers. I would defend it with my life." I asked the same question of my next cab driver, a young man who told me, "I am a gynecologist, but to supplement my income I drive a cab. The revolution was important, but today we need change."

Ricardo provided me an opportunity to see Cuba at an interesting moment in its development. Ironically, I helped to contributed to Ricardo's downfall as ambassador of Mexico to Cuba. Having so often been the guest of Ricardo and his wife Luz (María) in Mexico and then in Cuba, I wanted to return the favor, so while working as a visiting professor in the Latin American studies program at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio, in February 2002, I arranged for Ricardo to be invited as a featured speaker there. Ricardo and Luz came and stayed with us at our home in Cincinnati.

We held a dinner that night for Ricardo and Luz, but, just after our meal ended in, a group of Cubans in Havana had invaded the Mexican Embassy, imitating the event that had given rise to the Mariel Boatlift years before. Had Ricardo been in the embassy at that moment, perhaps he would have been able to handle the situation which in his absence became an international incident. At our house, Ricardo was on the phone all night talking with Mexico City and Havana and left the next morning. Meanwhile there were reports that he had been at the University of Miami (in Miami) not at Miami University (in Ohio), implying he was in league with the Miami reactionaries. When Ricardo had the temerity to tell Castro that no violence should be used in removing the Cubans from the Mexican embassy, Castro told him that no one should tell him how to deal with Cuban affairs.[1]

That minor international affair was followed by the more significant incident at the Monterrey summit where Jorge Castañeda reportedly told Castro "to eat and leave" in order to avoid Fidel crossing paths with U.S. President George W. Bush, ending the long period of mutual support between Cuba and Mexico. Castro loathed Castañeda—he called him "diabolical" and "Machiavellian"—not only for bringing up at the summit the issue of Cuban political prisoners, but more importantly for turning Mexico away from Cuba and toward the United States. The conflict with Castro ended the diplomatic careers of both Ricardo, who was forced out of his post in 2002, and Castañeda who resigned in January of 2003.

While teaching courses in Latin American Studies at Miami University of Ohio from 2001 to 2006, particularly the historical survey of Latin American culture courses, I frequently discussed Cuba. The university's students, mostly from the leafy suburbs of Cleveland, Columbus, Cincinnati, and Chicago, generally had conservative attitudes, so I found that I had to explain the role of Spanish and American imperialism, disabuse them of their simplistic, conservative anti-Communist attitudes toward Castro and Cuban Communism, while at the same time attempting to give them the basis for a more sophisticated critique of Cuban Communism inspired by my socialism-from-below politics. I

would have them both look at Cuba's health statistics, far superior to those of several developed and developing countries, but also have them watch *Before Night Falls*, based on Reinaldo Arenas' biography of the same title which discusses the persecution of homosexuals in Cuba, as well as reading articles from *NACLA* on the increasing racism in Cuba. My several years of teaching at Miami University gave me—and I hope the students—a more nuanced understanding of Cuba, its government, and its society.

Change Has Come and Will Now Come Faster

Change began to come to Cuba with the fall of the Soviet Union in 1989. Suddenly Cuba lost the hundreds of millions of dollars in economic support upon which it had relied for decades. The collapse of the economy led to hunger and by 1994 there were protest demonstrations calling for "*Libertad!*" Castro and the Communist government demonstrated their tenacity but also their adaptability as, forced by circumstances, they began to modify Cuba's political economy. Dozens of foreign companies were invited to invest in Cuba's petroleum, nickel, and tourist industries, among others. Cuba also permitted tens of thousands of its citizens to create their own small businesses and to make a profit. Since 2008 when Raúl Castro became president, the rate of change has only accelerated, creating a Communist state that oversees a mixed economy of nationalized and private enterprises. Now this situation has culminated in an agreement with President Barack Obama to restore the normal relations between the two countries that ended in 1960 when I was a boy in high school reading *Liberation* magazine. The restoration of normal relations and the end of the embargo are to be welcomed.

While the new agreement will create new economic opportunities—capitalist economic opportunities on both the island and in the United States—the question is will it create real possibilities for democracy. A remark by María Elena Hernández, a senior Communist Party official at the main hospital in the city of Cárdenas, is not encouraging. "We're going to be like China or Vietnam," she says, "a socialist country with capitalism. It's going to be hard, but it's necessary for the revolution." China and Vietnam have experienced the development of a hybrid or transitional society, where their citizens are oppressed by the Communist government and exploited by their capitalist employers—the worst of both worlds.

There is serendipity in the current situation: the Cuban bureaucracy is anxious to save itself and its political control and American capitalists want to bring Cuba back into their sphere of influence. What seems to be missing from the equation, or apparently present only in very limited ways, is an expansion of political democracy that could provide opportunities for the self-organization of the Cuban working class. We know that there are in Cuba a variety of leftists—traditional social democrats (not today's austerity Social Democrats), anarchists, and revolutionary socialists—who believe in the centrality of democracy to the establishment of socialism. At the same time, there is a working class whose pent-up desire for a higher standard of living, while maintaining their social welfare system, will lead to conflicts with both private employers and the government in the coming years. It is these two forces—the left and the labor movement—that might once again put on the agenda a struggle for a Cuba which is both *libre y socialista*.

[1] Ricardo Pascoe Pierce, *En el Filo: Historia de una crisis diplomática* (México: Ediciones Sin Nombre, 2004), pp. 295ff.