How the Poor Got More

Medea Benjamin, Joseph Collins, and Michael Scott

Nutritionist Medea Benjamin lived in Cuba from 1979 to 1983, among other things, working with Joseph Collins and Michael Scott for a project for the Institute for Food and Development Policy about food and hunger in Cuba. After living for eight years in Africa and Latin America, Benjamin writes, "I had had my fill of starving children dying in my arms for want of clean water or a meager plate of food. . . . Landing in Havana, I remember feeling that I had entered the kingdom of heaven. The head of the Nutrition Institute laughed when I told her I wanted to work with malnourished children. . . . What an immense pleasure to live in a society that had abolished hunger!"[1] Indeed, Cuba's socially and economically redistributive policies have earned the revolution high praise from many international observers, whereas critics of the revolution have tended to focus more on political issues.

The following selection describes the basic redistributive logic of the revolution and why food rationing became a crucial component of government policy. The purpose of rationing was to ensure the poorest members of society adequate access to food. Despite ongoing problems with food production and availability, rationing has in fact guaranteed Cubans a basic minimum undreamed of by the poor elsewhere in Latin America and the world.

Suppose all of a sudden many people [in the Third World], especially the poor majority, had more money. This was the situation in Cuba in the first several years of the revolution. The revolution's leadership viewed inadequate income as the reason why people were undernourished, so it set into motion policies designed to boost the earnings of the poorer half of society as well as to enlarge the share of their earnings they could afford to spend on food.

But once people had more money to spend on food, it became clear that there was not enough food to go around. How could the government deal with the shortages? One simple solution would have been to let prices rise, thereby reducing the number of Cubans able to buy the food. That would have dealt with the shortages but not with people's hunger. As Prime Minister Castro recalled several years later, "A price policy to compensate for this imbalance

[between supply and demand] . . . would have been nothing short of a ruthless sacrifice of that part of the population with the lowest income." Such a policy was acceptable for luxury and nonessential goods "but never for necessities," he added.

Not only would high food prices have contradicted the egalitarian philosophy of the new government, but it would have been counterproductive to winning the broadest possible support for the revolution. "What should we do with what we have, which is more than we had before but still isn't enough? The answer is simple: we must distribute it better," Fidel proposed. In an attempt to find a more equitable form of distribution—by need rather than income—the government opted for rationing.

Money in More Pockets

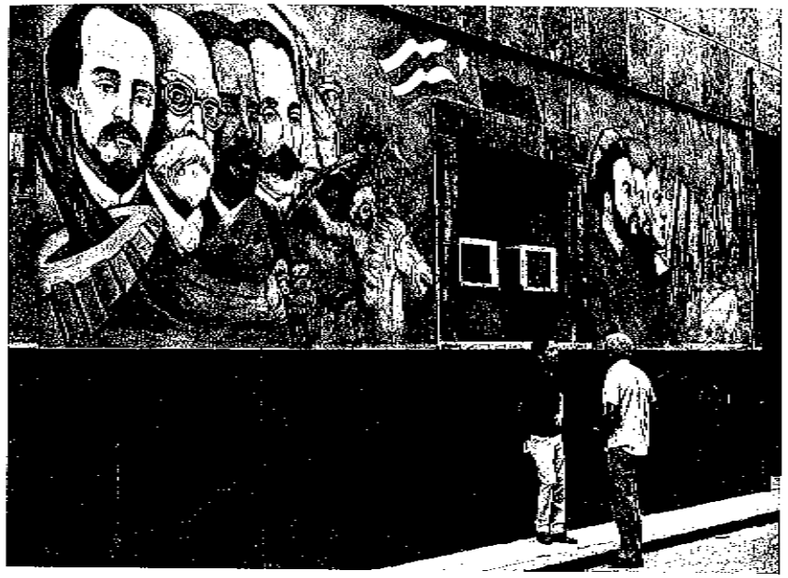
But let's take a closer look at the developments leading up to the decision to implement a rationing system, starting with efforts to increase the incomes of the poor.

Above all, the government sought to generate fuller employment. Job opportunities for farm workers soared. With the large estates converted into "people's farms" by the first agrarian reform law, there were 150,000 year-round jobs on these lands by August 1962 compared to fewer than fifty thousand in 1959. Sugar plantation workers, previously unemployed during the long "dead season," now found steady work on the construction projects that seemed to be springing up everywhere—roads, schools, clinics, government offices, housing, etc. Early on, the government raised the minimum wage in agriculture but then fought against further wage increases lest there be less money for job creation.

These and other measures made their mark: more and more of even the poorer farm workers had higher incomes than before the revolution. While only 29 percent of rural workers earned more than seventy-five pesos a month as of April 1958, two years later 44 percent did.

Thanks to the new government's policies, many poor farmers also found themselves with more money. By granting generous tracts of land to some one hundred thousand tenant farmers, sharecroppers, and squatters, the first agrarian reform of 1959 freed farmers from the obligation to hand over to absentee landlords as much as 40 percent of the value of their crops. Moreover, they could now obtain cheap credit from the government, as well as count on stable prices for their produce.

In urban areas, many workers won substantial wage increases, thanks to the strength of their unions. No longer did workers' demands for a larger share



Mural *Homage to Cuban Heroes*. Photo by Tania Jovanovic.

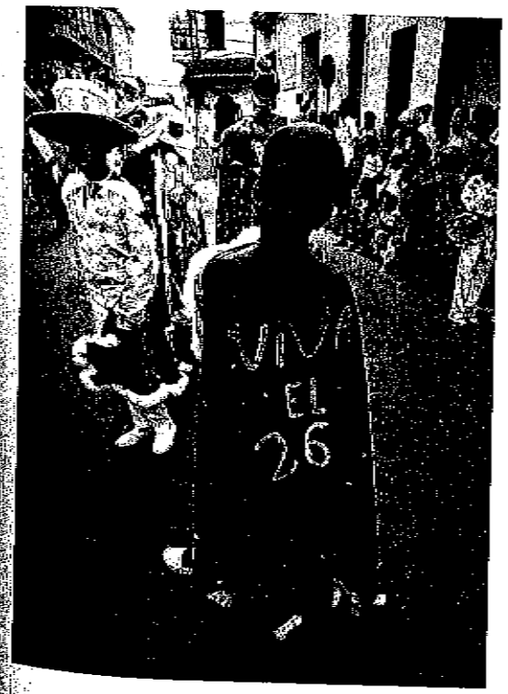
of the wealth their labor produced run up against the violent repression of the Batista dictatorship. Even the earnings of the poorest workers notched upward. By one estimate, the lowest 40 percent of income-earners enlarged their slice of the national income "pie" from 6.5 percent before the revolution to 17 percent by 1962.

Gains for the urban unemployed came more slowly, but by 1962 expanding state payrolls and productive investments were sharply cutting unemployment. Of those workers who had found employment for less than six months a year before the revolution, 86 percent were finding work for ten or more months three years later, according to one survey. Higher wages and reduced unemployment meant more money in the hands of poorer urban households, especially those with more than one wage earner.

The new government also sought to enable low-income households to spend more of their earnings on food. It made basic social services free for everyone. Included were not only schooling, medical care, medicines, and social security, but also water, burial services, sports facilities, even public phones. The government lowered the charges for electricity, gas, and public transport that had eaten up so much of working people's earnings. The numbers racket and other forms of gambling that preyed on the incomes of the poor were outlawed. In 1960 the government initiated its "urban reform" by decreeing bold rent reductions of up to 50 percent. A year and a half later, the maximum rent was set at 10 percent of the income of the head of the household. Since many poor families lived in tenement housing notorious for exploitative rents, rent reforms in particular left appreciably more money for them to spend on other things.

The net effect of fuller employment and expanded free or highly subsidized services was a historically unprecedented redistribution of income—the transfer of 15 percent of the national income from property owners to wage earners in the first year alone. In few other societies have the poor and middle classes so rapidly found themselves with "extra money" on their hands.

What did people do with so much extra money? Among the most pressing desires for the poor was to eat more and better. Rural families, freed from landlord obligations and moneylenders, could eat more of what they produced. Peasants who for years had raised pigs but could never afford to eat them, now could. Nationwide consumption of such coveted foods as pork and milk soared; beef consumption shot up by 50 percent in just two years. Even the



"Long live the 26th" (referring to the 26th of July Revolutionary Movement). Photo by Tania Jovanovic.

Demonstrators display the Cuban flag. Photo by Tania Jovanovic.

economically better off wound up consuming more locally produced goods since it was increasingly difficult to go on shopping sprees in Miami or buy luxury imports in Cuba.

Supply Lags Behind Demand

But supply failed to keep pace with the growing demand. Overall agricultural production was handicapped by the flight to the United States of administrative and technical personnel, an elite unwilling to adjust to the new changes. The consequent lack of organization and technical experience on the newly created people's farms and cooperatives lowered production. The Eisenhower administration's 1960 embargo on most exports to Cuba seriously disrupted the island's agriculture, which had become dependent on the United States for farm machinery, fertilizers, pesticides, seeds, and other inputs. In addition, the Central Intelligence Agency fostered acts of sabotage, including burning fields and slaughtering cattle. Such sabotage, as well as repeated military attacks culminating in the Bay of Pigs invasion in April 1961, forced Cuba to divert scarce human and material resources into defense, exacting a toll on production. As if all this were not enough, a severe drought in 1962 further aggravated food production problems. . . .

In a reversal of the pre-1959 pattern, shortages became more chronic in the

cities than in the countryside. Finding ever fewer consumer goods to buy, especially imports from the United States, tenants and sharecroppers had little need for cash and thus produced less for the market. Consequently, there was less food in the cities. *Viandas* [starchy accompaniments to the staples—rice, beans, and meat—including plantains and various types of sweet potato] in particular began disappearing from city marketplaces. Plantains . . . were no longer trucked in daily to Havana but consumed in the eastern provinces where they were grown.

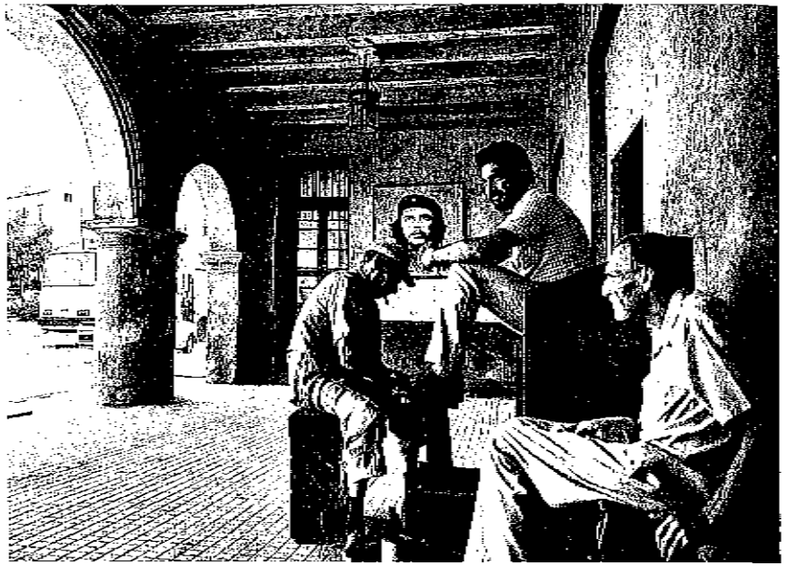
Shortages often triggered more shortages since the lack of one item meant greater demand for others. By mid-1961, when taro, a usually abundant root crop, became scarce, people bought out sweet potatoes, putting pressure on the supply of white potatoes, and so on.

The disruption of normal imports further aggravated supply problems. . . . Cuba had become dependent on the import of large quantities of food—wheat, rice, beans, lard, poultry, dairy products, and eggs, even onions and garlic. With over 70 percent of these imports coming from the United States, the abrupt embargo on U.S. trade with Cuba left the country in dire straits. . . .

The U.S. embargo created a myriad of additional import problems. Since Cuba was so close to the United States, its ports and warehouses had been designed for frequent short hauls by small ferryboats from Florida and New Orleans. Once those sources of supply were cut off, Cuba found itself ill-equipped for transoceanic trade. . . .

Cuba depended not only on imports of U.S. food, but also on importing the materials needed to package the food, the machines needed to process the food, the trucks needed to transport the food, and so on. The U.S. trade embargo revealed the true depth of Cuba's food dependence. In the famous Cuban novel *Memorias del Subdesarrollo* (better known outside Cuba in its film version *Memories of Underdevelopment*), the protagonist complains: "For the past few weeks there hasn't been a soft drink to be had anywhere. I never thought that the manufacture of soft drinks could be paralyzed just because there was no cork for the caps. Never . . . could I have imagined how many insignificant things are necessary to keep a country running smoothly. Now you can see everything inside out, all the hidden entrails of the system."

The irony of the mounting food crisis was apparent by the third year of the revolution. Prime Minister Fidel Castro, in a high-level national conference on production in 1961, responded to Western reports about Cuba's shortages: "The problem in Cuba is not one of hunger. That was the problem before, when three to four hundred thousand people didn't have a cent in their pockets. Our problem is precisely that now people have work and have money. . . . While production has gone up since the revolution, it hasn't caught up to the increase



Shoe shine at the port of Old Havana, San Pedro and Luz Streets. Photo by Tania Jovanovic.

in purchasing power. . . . The only way to produce more is to put everyone to work, but by putting everyone to work, we find that the goods and production capacity which existed fall short of the demand created."

Beyond the Free Market

Even in the revolution's first months, it was clear that the ground rules of the "free market" could have taken care of the shortage problem—with higher prices. Under that system, consumers with the highest incomes would pay whatever necessary to eat what they wanted, leaving the remainder to the next highest bidders, and so on down the income ladder until nothing was left. There would never be "shortages" because under the ground rules of the free market, there is no shortage when all effective (money-backed) demand is being satisfied. Thus from the free-market viewpoint, there would not have been a "shortage" of food in Cuba even if it were priced way out of the reach of many poor Cubans.

Cuba's new government knew that under free-market rules, profiteers would quickly corner every scarce commodity to speculate on skyrocketing prices, at least until food supplies caught up with the increased amount of money in people's hands. Whatever early gains in their living standards rural and urban workers had made would just as quickly be wiped out. Such a development was so unacceptable that the government knew it could not wait for the hoped-for production increases. Instead it tried price controls.

Just three months into the revolution the new government set official prices for rice, milk, bread, and beef products. Two months later, in May 1959, the Ministry of Commerce added to the list butter, pork, cheese, potatoes, and other items, including consumer goods such as soap. At the same time the Ministry placed ceilings of 10 and 20 percent respectively on wholesale and retail profit margins. In the subsequent months, the prices of children's foods and virtually all other staples were frozen and added to the list of price-controlled goods.

Still the situation was far from under control. Price controls are extremely difficult to enforce in a society with a multitude of small retailers and with the unwritten law that everyone looks out for him or herself. Speculation as well as hoarding were widespread enough for Fidel Castro to label speculators "the number-one enemy of the revolution."

In an attempt to stem speculation, the wholesale food business was nationalized and those retail stores accused of hoarding and profiteering were taken over by the government. By 1961, some eight thousand retail outlets had been taken over. And in August 1961 a law was passed prohibiting the resale of certain basic goods. At the same time, the government's agrarian reform agency set up *tiendas del pueblo* (people's stores) in the rural areas in an effort to improve the supply of basic consumer goods—at official prices. There were two thousand such stores spread throughout the countryside by 1961. These stores extended credit generously, in contrast to the usury that had been so common.

But try as the fledgling government might, speculators' prices reigned as supply problems multiplied; and it was poor Cubans who were getting the short end of the stick. What was amounting to rationing by income flew in the face of everything the revolutionary leadership stood for. The government might have opted simply to make certain basic staples available to the poor at low prices (and thus to create different diets for the rich and the poor), but they decided instead to institute a rationing system for *all* Cubans, covering the most important food items.

The first item rationed was lard. The neighborhood organizations, known as the Committees for the Defense of the Revolution, were instructed to conduct a "lard census." Based on the census and the total supply of lard, in mid-1961 the government set the maximum amount of lard that any person could buy at one pound per week. In March 1962, the National Board for the Distribution of Foodstuffs was created to ration rice, beans, cooking oil, and lard on a nationwide basis; soap, detergent, and toothpaste in the twenty-six major

Crumbling architecture of Havana. Photo by Tania Jovanovic, c. 1992.

cities; and beef, chicken, fish, eggs, milk, sweet potatoes, and other root crops in Havana only. All these items were eventually rationed throughout the country, and others were added: sugar, salt, bread, cigars and cigarettes, shoes, clothing, cloth, and numerous household items.[2]

Rationing was initially expected to be temporary. At the first National Production Conference, held when only lard was rationed, optimistic officials gave short shrift to problems. Not only would beef shortages be overcome, they predicted, but within eight years Cuba would be exporting $300 million worth of beef annually. With vast increases in pork, poultry, cattle, and dairy production, there would be "protein to spare" by 1963. In his closing address to the conference, Fidel Castro promised an end to lard rationing by 1963, as well as a quick solution to shortages of chicken, beans, root crops, and fish. In 1965, he predicted that food rationing would end the following year.

Cuban leaders were not alone in their optimistic projections during the early 1960s. French agronomist René Dumont, an early adviser to the revolutionary government (and later a strong critic), stressed in September 1960 that "underproduction was such, before the Revolution, that Cuban agriculture cannot but advance, even if errors are still committed." He pointed out that if Cuba were only cultivated with the same intensity as southern China, the island would be able to feed fifty million people, then over seven times Cuba's population. Economist Charles Bettelheim, also a foreign adviser, wrote of Cuba's "absolutely exceptional agricultural possibilities" and noted that "studies made by specialists in agriculture and livestock showed that within a relatively few years (generally from ten to twelve) it will be possible to multiply the production of many commodities by a factor of three, four, five, or even more, without any great investment effort." Such heady optimism emanating from these and other distinguished foreign advisers undoubtedly influenced the Cuban leadership in its conception of rationing as an interim measure.

But everyday reality proved to be far less generous. Rationing, as a way to equitably distribute scarce goods, continues to this day.

Notes

For complete references and notes, consult the work as cited in the acknowledgment of copyrights section.

1. Medea Benjamin, "Things Fall Apart," *NACLA Report on the Americas* 24:2 (August 1990): 13.

2. [Here] we are dealing only with the food ration book (*la libreta de comida*), which in addition to food contains detergent, soap, toilet paper, and cooking fuel. There is a separate ration card (*la libreta de ropa*) for nonfood items such as sheets, towels, shoes, toilet articles, and fabric, as well as ration coupons for gasoline. As with the food items, today [in 1984] many of these same goods are also available off the ration at higher prices (gasoline, for example, costs 1.03 pesos/gal. on the ration and 2.00 pesos/gal. off the ration).

Fish *à la Grande Jardinière*

Humberto Arenal

Novelist and author of numerous collections of short stories that capture, with great compassion and psychological insight, ordinary people's complex relationship to the society they live in, Humberto Arenal (b. 1926) worked as a theater director, traveled widely through Latin America and Europe, and lived in New York from 1948 to 1959, working at the magazine Visión, *before returning to Cuba.*

These pages capture in all their richness and pathos the contradictions unleashed by the passage from the republican to the revolutionary period. The shift to the Left in the program of the revolution in its first two years, which in addition to the (first) land reform included redistribution of urban incomes through rent reductions and the readmission to political life of Cuban Communists (whose party had been banned after Batista's 1952 coup), threatened sectors of Cuban society that had lived comfortably in the old order. In this short story by Arenal, an upper middle-class widow searches for all the imported ingredients—truffles, asparagus, Sensat olive oil, and Spanish sherry—needed to prepare swordfish à la jardinière. *While she searches Havana in vain, on public buses, now without a chauffeur, the enormous fish undergoes a grisly process of decomposition in her kitchen. In a clear allegory, yet with humor and affection for the protagonist, Arenal chronicles the decomposition of a certain sector, the Cuban bourgeoisie, unable to adapt to social change, anchored to the past and afraid of the future.*

Scale, clean, and rinse well a fish of 10, 20, or more pounds. Place in the pan a generous amount of oil or butter, a pound of veal cut into very small pieces, one quarter-pound of pork belly, a cup of sherry, and a dusting of bleached flour. Cook over a low flame until the meat is well done and tender, stirring constantly; press the veal and bacon through a sieve, squeezing the liquid out into the sauce.

I mean, try to catch the bus, you wait and wait and wait for the 22 and the stupid bus doesn't come, you can go crazy waiting for those damn buses, I mean, when one does come it's full and doesn't stop so you have to wait for

the next one, I mean, you really have to be patient, then another one comes that's not so full but it doesn't stop either, and why the hell not?, I mean, so I try to be even more patient and wait, and after a while somebody tells me that they moved the bus stop to the other corner, now it's on Tenth Street, I walk to Tenth Street and wait, then catch the 22, it's full too, completely full, but I get on anyway, on all fours if I have to, to get to Marianao, I mean, and there's Cuca on the bus all the way in the back, I'm up front next to the driver, and she's deafer than ever, I can't understand a word she's saying, she asks me screaming if I know if Jorge is living in Miami, if he's well, if he has a new car or something like that, the truth is I don't know because I'm all upset, and I can't hear a word she's saying, she asks me, screaming, if I know what's going on, so I tell her I can't hear her, and she's on the moon, in a dream, she doesn't know what's going on, so I tell her I can't hear her could she move closer but it makes no difference, she keeps saying eh? eh? and she puts her right hand to her ear, I make signs for her to move closer but she doesn't, finally I get through to where she is and I tell her in a normal voice that I'm going to Marianao to look for some ingredients and she screams *whose parents? is somebody sick?* she says, and I say no, nobody's parents, that nobody's sick, that what I said was *ingredients, in-gre-di-ents for swordfish* and she yells *ingredients, for swordfish?*, looking really surprised when I nod yes with my head and she asks me again, yelling, INGREDIENTS? even louder than before and I mean, earth swallow me up, because everybody is looking at us and listening, especially the militiaman with the green beret and everything in front of us who hasn't taken his eyes off me, you'll see, I'm going to end up in La Cabaña prison, you know, and Cuca just stands there like an idiot waiting for me to answer her, so just to say something, anything, I ask her how Florentino's doing and she says he's much better although right after that she tells me something's wrong with his vision, cataracts or something, and he's going half blind and his heart is bad and he's got something in his prostate, a tumor or something but they can't operate because his blood sugar is high or something, I don't know, but I say, to myself, how can he be much better with all that?, then I realize that I'm already at Crucero de la Playa so I say good-bye to her and she yells, when are you going to come over? soon, soon, I say and push my way to the door because the bus was starting to move again, and I scream, wait, wait, I'm getting off here, because I wanted to get to that place in Marianao to buy some Sensat olive oil from Spain and a bottle of sherry, and I was thinking how I had to get the pork belly too or else the swordfish recipe wouldn't turn out right and the sun was sticking to my back like a cat because it was around noon and it turned out the guy was a black guy who used to have a sweets shop, an old guy who used to

have a sweets shop in the Cerro. that's where I knew him from, but he didn't have olive oil or sherry or anything, just a couple of limes from a little tree he had in the backyard of his house.

In a separate receptacle, strain the juice of thirty cooked tomatoes, one cup of olive oil, two pureed onions, finely chopped parsley, one clove of garlic, crushed, ground pepper to taste, a pinch of nutmeg, sliced asparagus, mushrooms, petit-pois, sliced truffle, salt, the juice of one or two limes; fold this into the previous sauce, then pour the sauce into the kettle in which you are going to cook the fish, being careful to separate out the truffles, mushrooms, asparagus, petit-pois, etc., etc., etc.

"Señora Julia, we have to cook that fish. It's taking up the whole kitchen."

María Pepa was complaining because the fish took up all the available space in the refrigerator. The woman had taken out all of the shelves and put the fish in on the diagonal, occupying the whole space. The potatoes were rotting, the tomatoes as well. The bell peppers, garlic, onions, and limes were spread out all over the kitchen. Some of the potatoes had to be thrown out, and the tomatoes too.

"The smell of that fish is driving me crazy, señora. It's horrible, I can't stand it, it smells a bit off, I think it's rotting. When Niño Lindo comes near it, he smells it and runs away in horror. He knows, animals know these things.

"Be quiet, María Pepa, don't say another word. There's nothing rotten about it. It's a beautiful swordfish. Just the way Pepe liked them."

"I don't think so, señora, I really don't think so. It doesn't smell right to me. The gentleman . . ."

Place the fish in the kettle; cover it with the rest of the sauce and cook over a low flame.

So the driver says he used to be a teacher, and look at him now, I mean life, life you never know who you really work for, my husband used to criticize me for always wanting to save money but now I think he was right, life is hell, says the driver, and forgive me señora for using such a vulgar expression it's just that, and I say that he used to like to enjoy what he had and share it with others, he was a good man, a very good man, I say, too good, and the driver says that you can't be like that, people, forgive me, says the driver, but people are shit, pardon the vulgar expression, señora, the truth is, I say, he wasn't, he was a family man, that's all, everything for his family, and for his friends, he spent his whole life working to help other people, his mother, his brothers, his aunts, all his life he gave to others, that fish business is worrying me a little, but

mostly I'm doing it for him since he liked a big baked fish, my cousin Arturo suggested that I prepare it *à la Grande Jardinière* and that's why I'm out looking for Sensat olive oil and sherry, the driver says if we don't find it in Arroyo Apolo we can go to Mantilla to see a woman he knows who has Spanish olive oil and wine and asparagus, asparagus too? I say, and he says, at the very least, I'll find everything for you, don't you worry, señora, in El Cerro, in Miramar, or wherever, we have to help each other out, that's right, I say, because he seems like a nice person and I feel like I can trust him.

. . . when you are ready to serve the fish, garnish it with slices of hard-boiled egg, cucumber, and pickled cocktail onions, the truffles, mushrooms, etc., and the rest of the sauce. Before taking out the sauce, thicken it with a bit of finely grated bread crumbs.

"Mamá is not well, I'm telling you," says the woman.

"It's because of what happened to Papá," says the man.

"I've told her so, you know, I'm tough on her to see how she reacts, I've told her so: if that's the way you feel, then why not just kill yourself, *chica*, and that's that. Why don't you go ahead and do it? The truth is she's more of a woman than a mother, you know what I mean?, and I'm just realizing that now.

"You shouldn't talk to her like that."

"It's so she'll react."

"She's not going to react like that. You're mistreating her."

The woman looks at him.

"And now this whole business with the driver. When she called me today I said, this is too much, and I called Jorge. He took her all over Havana and he charged her twenty-five pesos, twenty-five pesos that I ended up having to pay because she bought olive oil and wine and who knows what else. She spent all the money she had because she wanted to make that fish, you know how she is. You have to help me."

"I don't have a cent. You know I don't have any money, I'm not working now and I'm making what little I have last until I leave."

"And until you leave for Miami . . ."

"For New York."

"For New York or wherever, I'm the one who has to be in charge of everything. It's no good, you know. You and Marta are leaving and I'm left to deal with everything. It's no good."

"The fish wasn't my idea, that's your thing."

"Mamá's thing."

"Whatever, but you deal with it."

"Why don't you tell Mamá that. You're always the good son, the noble son, and I'm the bad one. But I'm the one who's staying here with her, when you and that woman take off."

"You and your husband are revolutionaries. You can keep all of this, swordfish and all."

Calmly, no, first, rather slowly, perhaps even lazily, but not calmly, nor peacefully, nor with tranquility; and later, a little later, he began to move more hurriedly, with less tranquility, with less peace, with less serenity. The truth was, and the man knew it better than anyone, that he was always anxious, well, maybe not anxious but disgusted and annoyed from the moment the woman told him she had spent twenty-five pesos on a hired car looking all over Havana for Sensat olive oil and sherry and mushrooms and asparagus and all she came up with in Mantilla was a little bottle of sherry that cost ten pesos and the olive oil she bought was Spanish but it wasn't Sensat and the tiny tin of mushrooms she bought was in pretty bad shape. The woman had been crying and he had told her a moment ago that he would help her. He had called Jaime, the driver, and told him to get out the Rolls Royce and oil it, fill it with gasoline, put air in the tires, oil in the motor, and come get him. He had walked from the telephone to the table in front of it, one exactly three steps from the other, thinking of all the friends and acquaintances he was going to visit. Ramón in Miramar, and Cristina in Old Havana, and Sigifredo in La Víbora and Juan on Animas Street. They might have the truffles or the asparagus or the Sensat oil or would know of someone who did. They were difficult times and he had to help Julia who had always been like a sister to him. He climbed the stairs. More quickly than usual and when he got to the top he was panting more than usual. His wife was in the room when he went in and she noticed it. He told her he was going out. His wife noticed that he was panting and told him he shouldn't get so agitated. He had to help Julia find the ingredients, he told her. He felt good. It was something he had to do, for her and for all the others. His wife didn't really know who he was referring to, but she repeated that he shouldn't get all worked up. He sent her to get out his blue cashmere suit, his black patent-leather shoes, the white Irish linen shirt, the silk socks, and his red piqué tie. He took a bath and shaved. When he was almost finished shaving he felt a pain in his chest. He closed his eyes and brought his right hand up to the center of his chest. He breathed in deeply and slowly and the pain almost disappeared. He went to the medicine cabinet, took out a little bottle, shook out a pill, and took it. He went to the bedroom and got dressed. As he was going down the stairs he felt the pain again but didn't put his hand to his chest because his wife was coming up the stairs. He told her he was going to be out all afternoon and asked her if Jaime had come. Jaime wasn't there yet. He went to the garden and looked at the flowers. He didn't take care of the garden himself anymore and it wasn't as meticulously groomed as it used to be. He went up to the rosebush, picked a rose, and put it in the buttonhole of his jacket. He went to the gate and looked out to the corner and went back to the same rose bush. He went back to the gate. He opened it and walked out onto the sidewalk. He walked to the corner. Halfway there he felt the pain in his chest. That was, perhaps, the last thing he remembered. Jaime appeared at the corner. His wife, at that very moment, not a moment before or after, appeared at the corner too and saw him lying on the ground.

She was in the center of the kitchen looking at the refrigerator. From where she stood, which was not close, she could smell the stench but she did not want to open it to show la señora Julia the state the fish was in. She had told her a minute ago and the woman had screamed at her to leave her alone. That the fish was not rotten. That there was no stench in the house. That it was just an excuse so she wouldn't have to help her. That she would cook it all by herself. The woman was sitting in the living room, or on the terrace, the other woman didn't know exactly where, with her eyes closed and a napkin soaked in alcohol because she had a terrible migraine. Someone rang the doorbell and the other woman went to open the door. She approached the woman and touched her shoulder. She told her that someone, the next-door neighbor, needed to speak with her. The woman didn't answer. The other woman touched her shoulder again. The woman opened her eyes.

"What is it now, María?"

When she called her María, the other woman knew she was in a bad mood.

"It's the young man from next door, señora, he wants to see you."

She closed her eyes again.

"What does he want?"

"I don't know."

"Tell him I'm not here."

"It's about the fish."

She opened her eyes.

"What about the fish?"

The other woman pulled in her lower lip and crossed her arms.

"Well, the guy says. Look, señora—she had opened her legs and begun to sway—you talk to him. I'm sick of all this."

"I don't have to talk to anybody."

The other woman began walking.

"It's up to you and him, but the truth is that nobody can stand that smell.

That's the truth. Niño Lindo is lost and hasn't come back to the house since yesterday." When she was finished speaking she was almost to the kitchen, which was three or four meters away.

The seated woman stood up. Now she was walking fast. From the kitchen, the other woman could hear the grave, monotonous voice of the man and the now sharp, nervous voice of the woman without being able to make out the details of the conversation. She only heard when the woman began to scream.

"There is no stench, there is no stench, there is no stench!"

She stayed in the kitchen, heating up in a tin can the coffee she had made at lunchtime.

She heard the woman's footsteps and saw her stop in the doorway but she didn't turn around.

"I don't know why you bothered to call me, Maria. That stupid man has made my headache worse. Get me an aspirin."

When she returned, the other woman said:

"Señora"—she was looking at her, with the little tin can full of coffee in her right hand and the other resting on her waist. "The truth is nobody can stand it. The stench is horrible—she walked to the refrigerator and opened the door—look at this, look at that fish in the corner."

The fish was in pieces and had fallen down.

The woman couldn't see it from where she stood and began to yell:

"There's no stench, there's no stench!"

"It's rotten, señora, it's rotten, can't you see it's rotten," yelled the other woman.

"It's not rotten, there's no stench, it's not rotten, there's no stench, there's no stench. . . ." She walked over to the other woman and began to push her and closed the refrigerator door. "Go away, get out of here, everyone's against me because I'm alone, they're abusing me, there's no stench, Pepe is the only one who's on my side, he will never abandon me, he has never abandoned me. Get out, get out!"

The other woman was going to leave but then she looked at her. She was crying, she was pale, and her hair was a mess.

"Señora," she said, and reached out her hand.

"Just go, María, I tell you, just go!"

The other woman walked to the yard. Then she stopped and looked at her through the window. She had not moved. After that the other woman kept walking without looking back.

When the woman heard the iron gate close, she began to walk around, saying to herself:

"It's not rotten, it's not rotten. There's no stench. There's no stench. It's not rotten. It's not rotten."

She walked through the dining room, the hallways, the living room, the three bedrooms, the bathroom. Repeating:

"It's not rotten, it's not rotten. There's no stench. There's no stench. It's not rotten. It's not rotten."

Once again, she walked through the dining room, the hallways, the living room, the three bedrooms, the bathroom.

Then she went to her bedroom and lay down. For a while, for quite a while. She doesn't know for how long. She lay down on her right side and cried. Her tears dampened the pillow. Little by little she could no longer feel the dampness on the pillow.

María Pepa and Arturo stood next to the head of the bed to ask her if she would come with them to the kitchen. She was very tired, she said, very tired, she repeated, and she wanted to rest. She asked that they leave her alone. María Pepa insisted that she come, and pulled her by the foot. She protested. She was very tired. The other woman pulled her by the foot until she was forced to stand up. Arturo took her by the hand to lead her. María Pepa opened the refrigerator door. Niño Lindo was at her side, at María Pepa's side. The swordfish was not inside, she told her. She did not want to look. María Pepa insisted. She got a little closer because Arturo pushed her from behind and spoke something right in her ear which she didn't understand but which nonetheless upset her because she perceived the name Bilina, which was what her husband Pepe used to call her. Arturo kept moving her closer, pressing her on with a hand on her back. María Pepa opened the door wider and she covered her face with her hands. They both shouted at her to look, to look. She looked behind her, where Arturo was standing, and he pointed to the refrigerator with his hand. Then she looked. She turned to look at Arturo once more and realized that the fish was no longer there. Then María Pepa screamed: "Look, señora, look." She took a good look. There, inside the refrigerator, was her husband's naked body. She leapt to remove it, and the body began to break up into pieces. She picked up the right hand, the right forearm, the left hand, the left foot, the right foot, the left forearm. The head detached itself from the trunk and fell to her feet. María Pepa ran over, picked it up very carefully and placed it on the table, all the while repeating, "the gentleman, the gentleman, the gentleman, the gentleman." The dog ran around, following her, barking and jumping up and down. She ran back to the refrigerator to extract the rest of the body. It was now breaking up into even smaller pieces, which she tried to pull out with the help of María Pepa who was standing right next to her: a shoulder, a thigh,

a buttock, a foot, the other shoulder, part of the chest, the intestines, the heart. She was on her knees and now she stood up. She walked, with the heart in her hand, which was still beating, it was the only part of the body which she had felt warm and alive. María Pepa approached her and she clutched the heart to her breast, covering it with her hands and arms. Niño Lindo was running to her. The other woman asked her to give it to her. She told her that she wouldn't, that it was hers, that it was her husband's heart, all she had left of him. María Pepa ran to the table and picked up the head. The dog followed her, jumping up and down. She ran after her, screaming that she should give it back; María Pepa screaming "no." They kept on running and screaming. What with all that running around, she has no idea when, the heart fell to the ground and the dog picked it up with his teeth. Then it was gone. She let out a cry, a howl, a shriek. She no longer knew if she had been dreaming before or if this was the dream. The accelerated rhythm and sound of her own breathing brought her back to reality. She didn't get up for a little while. She began to smell the fish's odor. The stench she had failed to perceive until then. Right away, or almost right away, or perhaps after a while, she went to the kitchen. She put some paper down on the floor, in front of the refrigerator and opened it. She began to take out the pieces of rotten fish which were everywhere. She wrapped it up in the paper and took the large package out to the backyard, to the garbage can. She threw it in and walked away, without looking back. The flies immediately began to swarm around it, then alight. The silvery white fish was being covered in black.

She walked to her room. She would wait for María Pepa to arrive, and she would say to her:

"It was rotten, María Pepa, it was rotten. You were right."

"I could tell, señora, I could tell a while ago," the other woman would say.

She lay down on the bed, face up, legs stretched out, eyes closed, hands crossed, with fingers intertwined, on her chest. She was feeling herself breathe. Less. Even less. Less all the time. Until she couldn't feel anything.

TRANSLATED BY PAMELA MARIA SMORKALOFF

Women in the Swamps

Margaret Randall

If the former upper classes viewed the profound redistribution of their society's resources with horror, those sectors of society that had previously been marginalized and dispossessed had a completely different experience. Even the U.S. government, while opposing the process, acknowledged that the government's redistributive measures gave it "enormous popularity" among some 75 percent of the population. "In view of the government's policy of redistributing income away from foreigners and upper-income groups to the lowest-income groups and the lower middle classes, it is anticipated that the standard of living of the great majority of the population will show no serious decline and may even improve," a U.S. official in charge of evaluating the economic transformation in Cuba wrote grudgingly. "By such measures as price freezing, arbitrary reductions in rents and utilities, forced wage increases, forced maintenance of employment, transfers of unutilized urban land, agrarian reform, and other pressures on foreign and domestic companies, basic steps in the direction of a redistribution of income have already been taken. In the eleven months that Castro has been in power the standard of living of low-income groups appears, on the basis of available statistics, to have improved. . . . Income disparities in Cuba are very wide, and the present trend can probably be maintained for an appreciable period of time."[1]

The firsthand accounts of author, photographer, poet, and activist Margaret Randall (b. 1936), who writes of women's lives in revolutionary Cuba and Nicaragua, have become feminist classics. In the following selection, four women from the impoverished Zapata swamp area describe the material, and also the spiritual and psychological, impact of the revolution's commitment to social change and redistribution of resources to the poor.

La Ciénaga, the inhospitable swamp area which includes the Bay of Pigs beachhead, was one of the areas with the lowest standard of living before the Revolution. Formerly belonging to the Province of Las Villas, it is now included in Matanzas's easternmost edge.

The American and Cuban counterrevolutionary mercenaries didn't choose Bay of Pigs carelessly as a place for their all-out attack in April of 1961: as the

poorest and most backward area of the island, they thought people would rally and join them without struggle. What they didn't count on, as is always the case, was the Revolution.

Fidel came to the Ciénaga several weeks after the triumph, in 1959. He landed his helicopter in one of the clearings where the charcoal makers build their huge furnaces and the mountains of wood slowly smolder in the swamp. That was the only possible access. Before the triumph of the Revolution the only entrance to the swamp was a narrow-gage track, which was itself unusably covered over with water more than half the time. An old train made the trip in once a day when it was possible. When it wasn't, the swamp's inhabitants were often cut off from the rest of the island for weeks at a time.

The exploitation wasn't all foreign; Americans had better places to loot. Most of the owners of the big charcoal furnaces and the wood industry were of the Cuban oligarchy; a few were Spaniards. Around their dominions, *caserías*, or collections of miserable thatched huts, sprung up on stilts out of the water. Their occupants were the swamp people: ignorant, backward, totally without schools, medical aid, newspapers, even radios. Sometimes the *cienagueros* heard about the world on the radios that belonged to the bosses. Children didn't wear shoes and their feet were always swollen and split from the wetness. Malaria was a common disease because of the insects bedded in the swamp. Asthma and bronchitis were frequent because of the constant dampness.

The life was incredibly hard; the men hauled the wood after chopping it out of the mountain country. The women helped their husbands watch the furnaces endless days and nights. Everything was black. Sometimes the women helped haul the wood on the flat *chalangas* barges poled through the dull water. The children helped too. Everyone was a part of the same dreary life. . . .

Just past the Australia Sugar Mill, there is a billboard to the right of the highway.[2] It says: EVERYTHING PAST THIS POINT HAS BEEN BUILT BY THE REVOLUTION. "Everything." That means everything: the road, the houses, every shack built near the side of the highway was brought by its peasant owner out from the forgotten in-country, to civilization. Everything. The highway itself was the hardest task; tons of rock and gravel were needed for each meter of marshy earth. A highway into the swamp was an expensive process. Once the road was constructed, the rest was fairly quick and total. By the time of the Bay of Pigs, there were already a fishing cooperative, several new villages, eight doctors on full-time call, polyclinics, schools, the beginnings of a crocodile hatchery. The crocodiles had been rounded up and controlled; up to then they were just another menace in the swamp.

We were eating lunch at La Boca, seaside restaurant and tourist center, where workers and honeymooners fill the stilted cabins reached by small motor boats through the marshy inlets; good food and an organized artisans' workshop testify to the productivity of the project. The natural landscape has been tamed; the swamp is clean and filled with flowers. The women with us were from the provincial and local chapters of the [Cuban] Women's Federation [FMC]. We talked over lunch:

What jobs do the women here do?

They work in the tourist centers, in Guama, at the boarding school, at the Oceanic Institute.

What kinds of jobs at the Oceanic Institute, for instance?

Well, there are teachers, cleaning women, some work in the laundry, telephone operators. The Bay of Pigs Exhibition is there, too.

Is there an FMC regional office here?

Yes, it takes care of the whole area. But now we've gotten to the point where we've become a municipality, with four sectional offices: Agramonte, Torriente, Ciénaga, and Jagüey; Jagüey's the central office.

This whole area used to be part of the Province of Las Villas?

Yes.

Was it hard getting the women to join the Federation in the beginning?

No, it was easy; from the very triumph of the Revolution there was support for everything the Revolution did, because here the change was immediate and radical. A few days after the end of the war, Fidel came here in a helicopter, because there were no roads here, no communication, nothing. Fidel explained the plans they had, where the highways were going to come through. We'd never seen a helicopter in our lives!

But everyone in the swamp knew who Fidel was, being so cut off from civilization?

Yes, we knew who he was. We were cut off from the national reality, but we knew about the struggle because there were a few portable radios in the area. We didn't have any fighters because it was impossible even to walk; you'd be eaten by the crocodiles. There was total ignorance around here, about the tortures, about everything, because there was no communication.

But the people connected the conditions they lived under with Batista's regime, with the oppression? Because, for example, there are many places in all our countries where

people are made to believe that their misery is a punishment from God, things like that.

Well, both. There were those who understood the connection with the regime, and those who believed the backwardness was a punishment from above.

How did the women react at first to going to work?

Look, women around here were used to work, because the women made charcoal alongside the men in the hills, so it wasn't difficult for the women to incorporate themselves into the labor force. In the capital, for a woman who had never worked, that was hard, but here any job that the Revolution opened up in a tourist office was easier than working the ovens, burning your feet; that's a miserable job! The change was like night and day here. We had more trouble with the boarding school; the mothers didn't want to let their children go at first. That took a lot of political work, explanations, showing them the school. They saw the attention their children would receive, the hospital. We had to really convince them, because the little ones were barefooted, with swollen bellies, their feet cracked and bleeding. . . .

We turned to talk to Edita, an older woman we'd picked up along the highway, who had also accompanied us:

You've lived here all your life too?

Edita: All my life. We didn't have much to do with the rest of the country. Making charcoal, cutting wood.

Did your mother help your father in that kind of work?

Edita: In our house the women didn't do that kind of work. Only the women who lived farther into the swamp.

Did you study when you were young?

Edita: Where I lived there was a small school. I got as far as first or second grade. After that the teacher just up and left and we didn't have school anymore. Then we started going kilometers to a farm where there was another little schoolhouse, but imagine, when it rained. . . . So I went to work for some people who had money, for five pesos a month. . . .

Were you aware of the attack on Moncada?

Edita: Look, everyone here was very marginal to the Revolution. You might hear something or other, but you never knew directly.

What was the first thing you remember when the triumph came, the first thing that particularly impressed you?

Edita: The women who came in to organize the FMC, the militia, right away most of us joined up. That was because the change here was immediate, and enormous. That is, right after the triumph, right away they started building the highways, houses, right away the leaders came. We began to see that the city people cared about us; some of them hadn't even known we existed back here. The change was for everyone—the doctors who came in, the literacy campaign.

And the attitude of the rebels must have been very different?

Edita: Look, here the guards used to come around looking for pigs and they'd just carry them off. And chickens. That was the way the old army acted with the peasants. Then the change! The rebels were concerned about us, about sending the children to school; here the rebel soldiers did a lot for the peasants, built schools.

I wish you'd tell us more about how you got into this process, because the first thing we heard about you is that you're a primary school inspector; that's a pretty important job. And now I find out that when the Revolution came to power you had a third grade education!

Edita: OK, look, when the revolution triumphed, then they opened the adult schools. I went right off. Afterward I kept on taking the different courses they were giving.

Those were courses offered by the FMC, or by the work places?

Edita: Well, the FMC organized schools in all the different zones, and other organisms, the CDR [Comités de Defensa de la Revolución] shells. A nephew of mine went right out to the launches and we didn't see him again for eight days, and they killed one of his daughters, named Dulce María Martín: this FMC delegation bears her name. So when it cleared, it happened that they wounded one of our men in a leg. I'm telling the whole story.

Tell me how it all seemed to you then.

Amparo: Well, we understood what was happening, seeing all those ships out there, and everything lit up and all that gunfire. You knew you were being attacked.

You were already integrated into the Revolution by that time?

Amparo: Yes, I was organized since 1960, in all the organizations: the FMC, the defense, and later the CDR. They killed our secretary general there, Cira María García. So we went out in a truck and they attacked us there where you turn to go down to Playa Larga. Imagine, later they took us prisoner for twenty-four hours. You can imagine what that was like!

You were in the truck that was attacked by the mercenaries?

Amparo: Yes, we went out in the truck that was sent to get the boy who was wounded in the leg. They didn't even bother to look and see who was huddled there. They just opened fire with a bazooka, right off. They killed my sister, my husband, a niece of mine, and other people like the president of the FMC and others from the "339" from Cienfuegos.[3] That was a bloodbath; that's what it was. The boys from the "339" were in trenches but we were on the truck; it was a flatbed truck and they shot at it because they wanted to; later they told us their orders were to shoot anyone that didn't have their insignia. Even being women, they shot us just the same. They died right off, the ones hit; then the truck caught fire and there was nothing left but the motor. And then the mercenaries picked the rest of us up and took us where they had their headquarters. [She begins to cry] I'm ashamed, 'cause I get upset. . . .

But those were very heroic moments, and they've got to be recorded.

Amparo: Later, they took us in a truck to the dining room where the workers at Playa Larga eat; that's where they had their headquarters and they held us prisoner twenty-four hours.

How did they treat you during those twenty-four hours?

Amparo: Imagine, they started off by killing us; what were they gonna do after that? They talked about how they were entering Colón, how they'd come to liberate Cuba. Practically all of them were strangers; they were going to liberate Cuba from communism, and a whole bunch of atrocities. The next day, the next morning at seven, two more mercenaries came. Ah! First we were at their headquarters and around twelve at night they bombed the gas station and all around us it was burning, so they moved us to the cafeteria; they had the workers prisoner there, and other people too. And the mercenaries told us, "You people take these white sheets and go out on the highway and if you find a militiaman tell him we didn't do anything to you!" They didn't do anything to us! After all they'd done!

Were you wounded?

Amparo: Yes, I was wounded a little. One of the boys from Cienfuegos (later I found out, he was named José Luis Martínez Paredes), José Luis, when I passed him he pulled me down, pulled me by the skirt, and threw me to the ground. That's when they killed him and it seems I was wounded just a little; I lost my hearing, three years without hearing anything.

Without hearing absolutely anything?

Amparo: Yes. Later I was cured, with medicine in Havana. My brother took me, and they gave me electric current and all that because I was a little bad in the head. But later they cured me, completely.

Notes

1. Memorandum from the chairman of the Working Group on the Cuban Economic Situation (Young) to the assistant secretary of state for Economic Affairs (Mann), Washington, 14 December 1959, FRUS (*Foreign Relations of the United States*) 1958–60, p. 702.
2. The Australian Sugar Mill is a large refinery which also served as the high command post during the Bay of Pigs invasion.
3. The "339" was a combat unit that was key in repelling the attack.

Man and Socialism

Ernesto "Che" Guevara

Explicitly addressing the issue of the "new man," this excerpt is from an essay by the Argentinean Che Guevara, who fought in the revolution and contributed so much to shaping its direction in the early 1960s. He remains a very important revolutionary leader, martyr, and myth in Cuba today. Between 1962 and 1966 Cubans (and some foreign advisers) engaged in a wide-ranging debate over the economic, political, and ethical strategies involved in the building of a noncapitalist order. In what became known as the "Great Debate," Guevara maintained that a transition from capitalism to communism required the abandonment of market mechanisms and material incentives used to motivate workers. A true communist society, he argued, required the adoption of moral incentives by the "new man" and a radical diminution of the role played by money and markets.

The emphasis on promoting economic change via the radicalization of peoples' consciousness grew in the years following Guevara's departure from Cuba in 1965 and led to the campaign to produce ten million tons of sugar in 1970. The failure to reach this target and the damage done to the Cuban economy during the attempt led to a major reorientation of politics and economics in the 1970s and 1980s.

Critics have pointed out that Che's concept required a moral conformity and suggested a type of social engineering at odds with the humanistic rhetoric that accompanied it. Critics have also noted the "glorification of traditional masculine values" implicit in the "new man." Political scientist Ian Lumsden notes dryly that "there is scant evidence that the Cuban leaders have given much thought to the feminist critique of contemporary gender values . . . except for their negative judgments about capitalism's exploitative values."[1]

In capitalist society man is controlled by a pitiless law usually beyond his comprehension. The alienated human specimen is tied to society as a whole by an invisible umbilical cord: the law of value. This law acts upon all aspects of his life, shaping his course and destiny.

The laws of capitalism, which are blind and are invisible to ordinary people, act upon the individual without his being aware of it. He sees only the vastness of a seemingly infinite horizon before him. That is how it is painted by capitalist propagandists who purport to draw a lesson from the example of Rockefeller—whether or not it is true—about the possibilities of success. The amount of poverty and suffering required for a Rockefeller to emerge, and the amount of depravity entailed in the accumulation of a fortune of such magnitude, are left out of the picture, and it is not always possible for the popular forces to make these concepts clear.

(A discussion of how the workers in the imperialist countries gradually lose the spirit of working-class internationalism due to a certain degree of complicity in the exploitation of the dependent countries, and how this at the same time weakens the combativity of the masses in the imperialist countries, would be appropriate here, but that is a theme which goes beyond the aim of these notes.)

In any case the road to success is pictured as beset with perils—perils that, it would seem, an individual with the proper qualities can overcome to attain the goal. The reward is seen in the distance; the way is lonely. Furthermore, it is a contest among wolves. One can win only at the cost of the failure of others.

I would now like to try to define the individual, the actor in this strange and moving drama of the building of socialism, in his dual existence as a unique being and as a member of society.

I think the place to start is to recognize his quality of incompleteness, of being an unfinished product. The vestiges of the past are brought into the present in the individual consciousness, and a continual labor is necessary to eradicate them. The process is two-sided. On the one side, society acts through direct and indirect education; on the other, the individual submits himself to a conscious process of self-education.

The new society in formation has to compete fiercely with the past. This past makes itself felt not only in the individual consciousness—in which the residue of an education systematically oriented toward isolating the individual still weighs heavily—but also through the very character of this transition period in which commodity relations still persist. The commodity is the economic cell of capitalist society. So long as it exists its effects will make themselves felt in the organization of production and, consequently, in consciousness. . . .

In this period of the building of socialism we can see the new man being born. His image is not yet completely finished—it never will be, since the process goes forward hand in hand with the development of new economic forms.

Aside from those whose lack of education makes them take the solitary road toward satisfying their own personal ambitions, there are those—even within this new panorama of a unified march forward—who have a tendency to walk

separate from the masses accompanying them. What is important, however, is that each day men are acquiring ever more consciousness of the need for their incorporation into society and, at the same time, of their importance as the motor of that society.

They no longer travel completely alone over lost roads toward distant aspirations. They follow their vanguard, consisting of the party, the advanced workers, the advanced men who walk in unity with the masses and in close communion with them. The vanguards have their eyes fixed on the future and its reward, but it is not a vision of something for the individual. The prize is a new society in which men will have different characteristics: the society of communist man.

The road is long and full of difficulties. At times we lose our way and must turn back. At other times we go too fast and separate ourselves from the masses. Sometimes we go too slow and feel the hot breath of those treading at our heels. In our zeal as revolutionists we try to move ahead as fast as possible, clearing the way. But we know we must draw our nourishment from the mass and that it can advance more rapidly only if we inspire it by our example. . . .

It is still necessary to deepen his conscious participation, individual and collective, in all the mechanisms of management and production, and to link this to the idea of the need for technical and ideological education, so that he sees how closely interdependent these processes are and how their advancement is parallel. In this way he will reach total consciousness of his social being, which is equivalent to his full realization as a human creature, once the chains of alienation are broken.

This will be translated concretely into the reconquering of his true nature through liberated labor, and the expression of his own human condition through culture and art.

In order for him to develop in the first way, work must acquire a new status. Man-as-a-commodity ceases to exist, and a system is installed that establishes a quota for the fulfillment of his social duty. The means of production belong to society, and the machine is merely the trench where duty is fulfilled.

Man begins to free his thinking of the annoying fact that he needs to work to satisfy his animal needs. He starts to see himself reflected in his work and to understand his full stature as a human being through the object created, through the work accomplished. Work no longer entails surrendering a part of his being in the form of labor power sold, which no longer belongs to him, but represents an emanation of himself, a contribution to the common life in which he is reflected, the fulfillment of his social duty.

We are doing everything possible to give work this new status of social duty and to link it on the one side with the development of technology, which will

create the conditions for greater freedom, and on the other side with voluntary work based on the Marxist appreciation that man truly reaches his full human condition when he produces without being compelled by physical necessity to sell himself as a commodity.

Of course, there are still coercive aspects to work, even when it is voluntary. Man has not transformed all the coercion that surrounds him into conditioned reflexes of a social character, and in many cases he still produces under the pressures of his environment. (Fidel calls this moral compulsion.) He still needs to undergo a complete spiritual rebirth in his attitude toward his own work, freed from the direct pressure of his social environment, though linked to it by his new habits. That will be communism.

The change in consciousness does not take place automatically, just as the change in the economy does not take place automatically. The alterations are slow and are not rhythmic; there are periods of acceleration, ones that are slower, and even retrogressions. . . .

Now, I would like to explain the role played by the individual, by man as an individual within the masses who make history. This is our experience; it is not a prescription.

Fidel gave the revolution its impulse in the first years, and also its leadership. He always set its tone. But there is a good group of revolutionaries who are developing along the same road as the central leader. And there is a great mass that follows its leaders because it has faith in them. It has faith in them because they have known how to interpret its aspirations.

It is not a matter of how many kilograms of meat one has to eat, nor of how many times a year one goes to the beach, nor how many pretty things from abroad you might be able to buy with present-day wages. It is a matter of making the individual feel more complete, with much more internal richness and much more responsibility.

The individual in our country knows that the glorious period in which he happens to live is one of sacrifice; he is familiar with sacrifice. The first ones came to know it in the Sierra Maestra and wherever they fought; afterward all of Cuba came to know it. Cuba is the vanguard of Latin America and must make sacrifices because it occupies the post of advance guard, because it shows the masses of Latin America the road to full freedom.

Within the country the leadership has to carry out its vanguard role. And it must be said with all sincerity that in a real revolution, to which one gives his all and from which one expects no material reward, the task of the vanguard revolutionary is at one and the same time magnificent and agonizing.

At the risk of seeming ridiculous, let me say that the true revolutionary is guided by great feelings of love. It is impossible to think of a genuine revolu-

tionary lacking this quality. Perhaps it is one of the great dramas of the leader that he must combine a passionate spirit with a cold intelligence and make painful decisions without flinching. Our vanguard revolutionaries must make an ideal of this love of the people, of the most sacred causes, and make it one and indivisible. They cannot descend, with small doses of daily affection, to the level where ordinary men put their love into practice.

The leaders of the revolution have children just beginning to talk, who are not learning to say "daddy." They have wives who must be part of the general sacrifice of their lives in order to take the revolution to its destiny. The circle of their friends is limited strictly to the circle of comrades in the revolution. There is no life outside of it.

In these circumstances one must have a big dose of humanity, a big dose of a sense of justice and truth in order not to fall into dogmatic extremes, into cold scholasticism, into an isolation from the masses. We must strive every day so that this love of living humanity is transformed into actual deeds, into acts that serve as examples, as a moving force.

The revolutionary, the ideological motor force of the revolution within his party, is consumed by this uninterrupted activity that comes to an end only with death, unless the construction of socialism is accomplished on a world scale. If his revolutionary zeal is blunted when the most urgent tasks have been accomplished on a local scale and he forgets about proletarian internationalism, the revolution he leads will cease to be a driving force and sink into a comfortable drowsiness that imperialism, our irreconcilable enemy, will utilize to gain ground. Proletarian internationalism is a duty, but it is also a revolutionary necessity. This is the way we educate our people.

TRANSLATOR UNKNOWN

Note

1. Ian Lumsden, *Machos, Maricones, and Gays: Cuba and Homosexuality* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996), 119. Lois Smith and Alfred Padula, in *Sex and Revolution: Women in Socialist Cuba* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), draw similar conclusions (see especially 93).

In the Fist of the Revolution

José Yglesias

The revolution became a firm demarcation in most Cubans' minds that separated "then" from "now." For the rural poor—the majority of the Cuban population—the disappearance of the foreign sugar companies that had dominated their lands, their labor, and their lives, transformed everyday life in innumerable ways. Journalist and novelist José Yglesias [an American of partly Cuban ancestry] traveled to Cuba in 1967 with a contract from Pantheon Books to investigate everyday life in a Cuban village. He chose the town of Mayarí, in the heart of eastern Cuba's sugar lands, formerly surrounded by lands owned by the United Fruit Company. In a brief selection from Yglesias's In the Fist of the Revolution, *an elderly Cuban describes the change the Revolution brought to the meaning of sugar and labor in the sugar industry.*

It was in those days [the beginning of the century] that the United Fruit Company began to build the sugar mill and to buy up the land around here and plant cane. It was never all cane, you know; there was a lot of tobacco, it even had a certain fame, and now after the triumph of the Revolution some are planting it again. They have even started a little cigar factory. But what Mayarí was really famous for was its cedars and *caobas* [mahoganies] and pines. They had been there since time began, and two blocks from here, where the court building is, right there they began, east, west, and south, so that the little donkey lane to Cueto was a path among those enormous trees. Up into Los Pinares the trees went.

Do you know how much all that fine wood was worth? I estimate at least ten to twenty million pesos. La United sold them all to Las Bahamas, and they were cut down and rolled into the river after a railroad-tie nail was driven into the head of each log. In spring the river would rise and the logs floated all the way to the Bay of Nipe. It is a mystery to me—one of those things that nevertheless has its scientific explanation—why those big nails made it possible for those heavy logs to float, but that is what they did.

Those trees were marvels, and with some it took a few men holding outstretched hands to surround them. Once at an *arroyo* by the Guayabo—you

know the little Guayabo River on the way to Los Pinares? — whose water is still pure and delicious, right near there I saw a ceiba cut down, so large I thought it would take ten men to embrace it. Old man, I asked my father, why did they cut it down when this little arroyo does not get sufficient water in spring to float it? And my old man explained that they could quarter it and if it still did not move, they could slice it again. Do you know what I think such a tree would be worth now? I would say ten to twelve thousand pesos.

Those were the days when people were run off their own lands — though they had papers dating back to colonial days to show it was theirs — because corrupt officials would sell the land to La United. They began their measurements of huge tracts with just a millimeter off at the start, but when the line was extended to a distance that little millimeter widened out to become whole towns and farms. You may ask yourself what a pass we had come to that eventually we had to beg La United for a tiny bit of land to have a cemetery. It was these things that made me have a certain view of life.

I have always had ideas that have put me in the left wing, not Communist, you know, but left wing. I am what you could call a tame left-winger, for I have always known that what makes men is economic and political interests and passions of the heart, and that it is no use intervening in these factors. What do men seek but to dominate others and impose their wills? And I have known that it is futile to come between men and these aspirations. I have always wanted peace and reasonable fraternity between men, an end to those interests which create injustices. This was but a foolishness of mine, for it could not be.

Yet listen to how, being a tame leftist, I came to a laughable pass. I had been an *alzado*, a rebel, here in 1918, another foolishness, for there was no difference between the group in power and the group out of power; but some of us took to the *monte* in rebellion, not knowing that these were two bourgeois parties, whose differences were simply the different personal ambitions of the leaders. I did not know this then, I learned it later with the Revolution — the Revolution has taught Cubans many things. Cubans have never liked to work, for example, because we have always seen that to get ahead or to gain this or that you do not work; you do it through friends, never through sustained study or work but always by the proper cultivation of friendships and politicking.

It was not difficult to see this because men, by and large, speak what is on their souls. Sometimes they repeat what they have heard or what they think you want to hear, but in the main, men say what is on their hearts. And so it was, listening to men, that I thought all this will never end: it will always be these interests which will rule men. That is what it was like with my first experience of revolution and with the *machadato* in the twenties and again in 1933 and then with Grau and Batista. Why should I hope?

The Revolution triumphed here, and during the first months I said to myself, It is the same thing: so-and-so wanted to be mayor, and the judges were still the same ones who had been selling themselves, and all the same people were scurrying around to maintain their positions or change to another, for there were a lot of vacancies. And the time passed and before I noticed it, very intransigent things happened. The Revolution said to La United, You have to go, I say you have to go and you will go, man. And so it happened. La United went — incredible!

And Cubans who do not like to work go off in droves to cut cane for nothing, 50 percent real volunteers full of enthusiasm and 50 percent — well, they go, carried along by the others and catching some of their enthusiasm for the while. For it is wonderful how the government does this. It does not grab anyone and say, Here, you have to cut cane. Oh no, for no one is forced anymore. They go instead to a work center and say, It is our hope and need that three or four here will go cut cane. They say this to someone who is responsible, and they are the ones who by psychology and their own enthusiasm find three or four and even more to go.

So it was that three years ago I suddenly came to this laughable pass that all the things I had learned in a lifetime were superseded. There is a real revolution, and those woods will never again be cut down and shipped away to make money for someone else. Of course they are not there, you cannot replace that fine wood in a short time — it was the work of centuries — but they are planting everywhere and scientifically, and the pines and the fruit trees grow faster and bear sooner. See those houses behind you, old and crooked like me, they are going to be cut down and there will be a *malecón* [broad sidewalk or esplanade along seawall] to walk on and look at the view.

"I know what you are going to say," I said to Dr. Morales when we had left Felix Estol. "You are going to say that Mayarí has a reason for coming into being, but none for existing under socialism, right?"

"Right," he said.

The Agrarian Revolution

Medea Benjamin, Joseph Collins, and Michael Scott

A great paradox of Cuba's socioeconomic transformation since 1959 has been the enormously successful changes in the areas of distribution, versus the continuing stumbling blocks in the area of production. The agrarian reform was a major component of the government's successful program to turn peasants into citizens and to bring a decent standard of living to the countryside. Yet the goal of increasing or even maintaining production proved elusive. Medea Benjamin, Joseph Collins, and Michael Scott discuss the goals and the paradoxes of Cuba's agrarian reforms in the first decades of the revolution.

During the days of the guerrilla war in the Sierra Maestra mountains, Fidel Castro and his rebel army gradually won the hearts and minds of the peasants. The rebels treated the peasants with respect and, unlike most armed groups, paid for all the food and supplies they used. Gradually the guerrilla army was transformed into a peasant army—by 1959, three-fourths or more of the soldiers were peasants. . . .

Once in power, the revolutionary government instituted a series of reforms designed to improve life in the countryside. All land rents were abolished. Tenant farmers, sharecroppers, and squatters were given title to the land they worked, along with guaranteed fixed prices for their produce and low-interest loans. Many seasonal workers were given full-time employment. Rural salaries were raised. People's stores were created to bring cheap consumer goods to the countryside. In 1961, the government initiated a massive literacy campaign, sending urban students to the countryside not only to teach reading and writing, but to gain an understanding and appreciation of rural life. For the first time, rural communities were provided with schools, clinics, and recreational and cultural activities. Teams of projectionists traveled to remote villages showing movies, free of charge, to people who had never seen a film. . . .

The revolution's leadership assumed that private individual farming would eventually disappear. Many farmers, perhaps most, would move out of agriculture altogether. Others would join agricultural cooperatives, or sell their land

to the state and take jobs on state farms. Both state farms and cooperatives (in that order) were thought to be superior to small private farms in terms of both productivity and the social benefits they could offer their workers. Ideologically, state farms were considered superior to cooperatives, since they were not privately owned and the wealth they generated benefited the public at large.

But paradoxically, by giving land titles to tenants, squatters, and sharecroppers, the agrarian reforms helped make small farmers more secure. Small farming represents virtually the only private sector that still exists in Cuba. Since Fidel Castro has personally and categorically promised that small farmers will never be forced to give up their land, the state finds itself in the awkward position of having to guarantee the existence of islands of small farmers in a sea of large state farms. A look at the evolution of state versus private agriculture should give us a better understanding of how this relationship stands today.

The First Agrarian Reform

The revolutionary government instituted its far reaching land reform law just five months after taking power. Symbolically, it was signed at the former headquarters of the rebel army in the Sierra Maestra. The maximum land area one person could own was set at one thousand acres, with exceptions made for particularly productive farms. Land ownership was so concentrated that by expropriating twelve thousand large farms, the government gained control of 44 percent of farm and ranch land. State farms became key to Cuban agriculture for both domestic and export production.

For those with too little land to make a living, a "vital minimum," defined as the amount of land needed to support a family of five, was set at sixty-seven acres. Peasants with less were given that amount free, plus the right to buy another one hundred acres.

Whether they owned the land or not, farmers were still a minority of the rural population. Wage-earning farmworkers on large estates outnumbered them four to one. Most observers, both foreign and Cuban, assumed the government would divide the large estates among the laborers who had worked them. Traditional wisdom among socialist thinkers was that even if the eventual goal was to collectivize agriculture, the first step was to divide up the land among the workers, then at some later point encourage them to pool their resources and work together. In the Soviet Union, China, and all of Eastern Europe, land reform programs were all based on this principle of "land to the tiller."

But the Cuban land reform did not divide up the large estates among the workers, converting them instead into state farms and cooperatives. Why? "I

found upon the victory of the Revolution that the idea of land division still had a lot of currency." Fidel explained years later. "But I already understood by then that if you take, for example, a sugar plantation of 2,500 acres . . . and you divide it into two hundred portions of 12.5 acres each, what will inevitably happen is that right away the new owners will cut the production of sugarcane in half in each plot, and they will begin to raise for their own consumption a whole series of crops for which in many cases the soil will not be adequate." Castro believed dividing the land would lead to a decline in production, which would be disastrous for the whole country.

Castro offered the same explanation for not dividing up the large cattle ranches. During the guerrilla war, the rebels had confiscated herds and distributed them among the peasants. Within a few months, practically all the animals had been eaten. "The majority of the campesinos had killed their cows because they preferred the immediate benefit of being able to eat them to the longer-range value of having the milk," Castro explained. "This naturally fortified my conviction that the land of the *latifundistas* should not be divided."

Cuba's leaders understood that circumstances in Cuba were different from those of other countries which carried out significant land-reform programs. The workers on large estates in Cuba were not small farmers who aspired to own their own land, but rather a rural proletariat whose main concerns were job security, better working conditions, and a higher standard of living. Thus the decision to create cooperatives rather than divide up the land did not encounter resistance from the farmworkers.

How Was the Law Implemented?

Even with the exemptions for particularly productive land, the agrarian reform law still called for the expropriation of half of Cuba's cultivated land. The National Agrarian Reform Institute (INRA) was to determine where to start and how fast to move. . . .

INRA's first moves were timid. In ten months, only six thousand small farmers received redistributed land. French agricultural economist Michel Gutelman noted that, with 150,000 small farmers to be dealt with, "At this rate, it would have taken twenty years" to complete the redistribution. But as the large owners (both Cuban and American) began to actively oppose the reforms, INRA was forced to adopt a more radical position. . . .

Since one-fourth of the best land in Cuba was owned by U.S. companies, agrarian reform placed the Cuban government in direct conflict with U.S. interests and set into motion a series of moves and countermoves that eventually led to the Bay of Pigs invasion in April 1961. (Cubans themselves see the passage of the agrarian-reform law as "the beginning of the end" of Cuba-U.S. relations.) With history moving at lightning speed, the legal text of the agrarian reform law was soon left behind. In fact only one-quarter of the land taken over was actually taken under the terms of the law itself. The majority came from the nationalization of U.S.-owned sugar mills and agricultural enterprises after the U.S. cut its sugar quota and from the confiscation of land owned by persons who left the country or engaged in efforts to bring down the revolutionary government after the Bay of Pigs invasion.

Two years into the reform, nearly half Cuba's total land area had been affected. More than one hundred thousand peasants—mostly tenants, sharecroppers, and squatters—had gained title to the land they worked. But having made the decision to keep the large estates intact, the big winner was the state, which now controlled 44 percent of the land.

The State Sector

Apart from the ranches, the rest of the state's land was converted into "cooperatives." The cooperatives set up by the first agrarian reform were more akin to state farms than to traditional self-administered cooperatives whose members receive a share of the profits. Cooperatives were accountable to INRA and had little autonomy. Production targets were set by INRA and produce was sold to the state purchasing agencies. The cooperatives selected their own coordinator, but the administrator was appointed by INRA, creating a two-tier power structure in which the appointed administrator had the upper hand over the elected coordinator.

Workers reportedly were not enthusiastic about the creation of cooperatives. Their experience as farmworkers left them ill equipped to take on administrative responsibilities. While their monthly wage was theoretically an advance on their share in the year's profits, in practice it was simply a wage. (Since no accounts were kept, it was never known if there was anything left at the end of the year to distribute.)

The cooperatives also posed two challenges to the government's commitment to equality. One was the increasing difference between rich and poor cooperatives. Some co-ops had advantages—in particular, fertile land and high-value crops such as tobacco—that gave them higher revenues independent of the work of the members. The other problem was the friction between cooperative members and temporary workers. Temporary workers received higher wages than members (3.00 pesos a day vs. 2.50), since cooperative wages were supposed to have been supplemented by yearly dividends. Cooperative members, though, had a host of other advantages, such as free health care,

housing, schools, sick leave, and accident insurance. Temporary workers became, in the words of Fidel Castro, "second-class citizens."

By 1962, the cooperatives were converted into state farms. Like the cattle ranches, they were called *granjas del pueblo*. In part, this move was merely an acknowledgment of existing reality. But there were some important differences. Workers no longer even theoretically shared the farm's profit but received a fixed wage. All workers received the same wage. Planning and investments were made more centralized than before. Since state farms were often formed by combining cooperatives, purportedly to take advantage of economies of scale, the average size was larger. . . .

The Private Sector

While the state sector was being created, the private sector was being transformed. By giving titles to former tenants, sharecroppers, and squatters, the agrarian reform added about 110,000 peasants to the already existing forty-five thousand small farmer-owners. Thus two-thirds of Cuba's small farmers became farm owners thanks to the revolution.

The private sector included both small and large farmers. Defined as those with under 165 acres, the small farmers constituted 94 percent of the private farmers. Large farmers, while in the minority, still held 42 percent of the land in the private sector. Together they were important producers not only of food but also of foreign exchange, accounting for 85 percent of tobacco production, 80 percent of coffee, and 33 percent of sugarcane.

The small private farmers reaped the benefits of the government's first agrarian reform. With land rents abolished, their incomes grew dramatically. They were given low-interest loans, guaranteed fixed prices for their crops, access to low-priced "people's stores," schools for their children, free medical care, and more. Freed from exploitative intermediaries and price fluctuations—harvest prices were now fixed and guaranteed before planting—small farmers improved their material conditions considerably.

In May 1961, on the second anniversary of the agrarian reform law, the National Association of Small Farmers (ANAP) was formed. Membership was voluntary and restricted to farmers with fewer than 165 acres and larger farmers who had proven allegiance to the revolution. ANAP was to coordinate small farm production, mainly through the allocation of credit. Before the revolution, government credit was largely confined to the estates and large farms. Many small farmers were forced into the hands of loan sharks charging up to 30 percent interest. Now small farmers were given credit at 4 percent annual interest. (From 1967 to 1978, no interest at all was charged on loans.)

Excluding the larger farmers from membership in ANAP represented a critical step in differentiating the remaining large farmers from the small ones. Rich farmers were few in number: two years after the first agrarian reform law, only 592 farms over 1,000 acres remained. (The number of holdings between 165 and 1,000 acres had grown from 9,752 to 10,623, their ranks swelled by former large owners.) While small farmers received special support from the state, large private farmers were excluded from the mainstream of agricultural planning. With the nationalization of the banking, transport, and distribution systems, it became increasingly difficult for these farmers to obtain supplies and deliver their goods to urban markets. "Discrimination against this group of farmers was apparently official policy of the revolutionary leadership that wished eventually to nationalize these properties," according to Canadian economist Archibald Ritter. "It refrained from doing so immediately due to a scarcity of INRA administrators and to political factors, i.e., the wish to avoid creating another body of opponents to the regime."

But while the government made it difficult for large farmers both to produce and sell their goods, the increase in national consumption coupled with the inexperience of the newly created state sector made these farmers more important than ever in supplying the nation's food. Rather than sell to the state at fixed prices, these farmers preferred selling their produce privately to the highest bidder.

In an effort to force the farmers to sell to the state, serious errors were committed. A number of farms were illegally expropriated. The large farmers used these errors to make even small farmers fear expropriation. To quell the fears of the small farmers, the government was forced to hand back lands taken illegally. Fidel said at the time, "If the return of illegally confiscated farms is going to restore peace and quiet to thousands of people who must go along with the revolution, then they will have to be given back."

Although the government considered the remaining rich farmers incompatible with the revolution, it did not want to precipitate their downfall and affect the economy adversely. The idea was to organize the state sector for several years and then deal the death blow to the remaining large farmers. But once again, the course of events forced the revolution to speed up its plans. Many rich farmers sabotaged production. Others, particularly in the Escambray mountain region, were directly involved in counterrevolutionary activities. Perhaps even more critical were their efforts to convince small farmers that the government was out to do away with all private farmers, big and small alike. These problems, coupled with the need to control food supplies in the face of ever-growing demand and shortages, led the government to promulgate a second agrarian reform.

The Second Agrarian Reform

In October 1963, the second agrarian reform was instituted, expropriating the land of all farmers with more than 165 acres. The government believed that state farms would guarantee food for everyone as well increased exports. They would make resurgence of capitalism in the Cuban countryside impossible. INRA took over about ten thousand farms, comprising approximately 20 percent of the nation's farmland. This left the state in control of about 63 percent of the cultivated land, as well as all agricultural credit, inputs, and marketing facilities.

Now the small farmers were the only significant private sector remaining in the entire economy. The government went to considerable lengths to reassure them there would be no "third agrarian reform" and that all future steps at collectivization would be strictly voluntary. Fidel Castro himself made a strong and highly visible political commitment towards the small farmers and their style of production. Not until a small farmer personally believed it was advantageous to farm collectively would his farm be joined with others in a cooperative, Fidel promised. If a farmer chose to live out his years as an individual farmer, this was fine. . . .

During the late 1960s, however, there was a big push to persuade farmers to sell or lease their land to the government for its ambitious agricultural projects. (Undoubtedly the deal was attractive to some; others, we have been told, felt forced more than persuaded.) Between 1967 and 1970, the government purchased about twenty thousand farms, then slowed down to buying fewer than fifteen hundred a year. . . .

Private farmers are private only in the sense that they own their land and live mainly off the sale of their produce. But unlike private farmers in capitalist countries, they cannot freely sell their land, they must respond to the government's request as to what to grow, they are dependent on the government for inputs, and they must sell part of their produce to the government at prices the government sets. . . .

Virtually all private farm families are better off in food terms than other Cubans. Not only are small farmers able to grow much of their own food, but along with all other Cubans they purchase foods inexpensively through the ration system. In addition to receiving guaranteed prices for their crops and low-interest credits from the government, private farmers can take advantage of food shortages to sell part of their produce through nongovernment channels (mainly the black market) at high profits. Many farmers also have leased part of their land to the government in return for a lifetime monthly "rent check"—often higher than the average monthly wage. And all farmers and their families reap government benefits from free education and free health care. Little wonder that many joked that Cuba's small capitalist farmers were exploiting the socialist state.

For complete references and notes, consult the work as cited in the acknowledgment of copyrights section.

1961: The Year of Education

Richard R. Fagen

The Year of Education provided the revolutionary leadership with an opportunity to fulfill a long-standing commitment to eradicate illiteracy as part of the revolution's educational reform program. But the campaign was much more than an educational effort. Coinciding with the breaking of diplomatic relations with the United States and the Bay of Pigs invasion, the Literacy Campaign underlined the relationship among neocolonialism, underdevelopment, and educational backwardness. As Fidel Castro exhorted departing literacy brigade workers: "The battle to be won against ignorance will give our country more glory than the military battles already fought or still to be fought. . . . While imperialism wants to destroy us and our revolution, we are going to destroy imperialism with our example, our success."[1] The highly politicized nature of the Literacy Campaign and the ways in which it contributed to the transformation of political culture can be seen in the extract from one of the literacy texts used in the campaign. Richard Fagen, professor emeritus of political science at Stanford University, collected and translated these texts for a study he wrote on revolutionary political culture in Cuba.

Of the 18 employees of a business, 9 are militiamen, 5 belong to Committees for the Defense of the Revolution, and 4 form part of a Battalion of Voluntary Workers. How many employees of this business are contributing their efforts to the progress of the Fatherland during this period of sacrifices?

A family's bill for electricity used to be $8 monthly, and after the reduction in rates ordered by the Revolutionary Government it is $3 less. What is the family's present monthly expenditure for electricity?

Some residents of Havana sent the following gifts to a peasant family that they had met during the 1959 26th of July peasants' rally: a doll worth 3 pesos, a set of table linens worth 5 pesos, and a flower pot worth 1 peso. How much did they spend on gifts?

On 2 December 1956, Fidel Castro and 81 other expeditionaries disembarked near Belic, at Las Coloradas beach, facing the Sierra Maestra. By land and by sea the forces of the tyranny bombarded them; 70 men lost their lives. How

many expeditionaries from the "Granma" began the epic struggle for the liberation of Cuba?

In the battle of La Plata, which took place on 17 January 1957—1 month and 15 days after the landing—the Rebel Army won its first victory. How many years have passed since then?

The Revolution is developing goat raising in the mountainous regions of Cuba in order to increase dairy production. If one goat gives 6 liters of milk every day, how many liters will 4 goats give?

To defend our Socialist Revolution, we Cubans have organized ourselves into Committees for the Defense of the Revolution. If in one block there are 4 committees, each one made up of 9 citizens, how many people are part of those 4 committees?

The Guaniguanico Mountain Range, which extends between Guane and Mariel, is some 150 kilometers long. The Sierra Maestra, a chain of high mountains which runs from Guantánamo Bay to Cape Cruz, is 250 kilometers long. How many kilometers longer than the Guaniguanico Range is the Sierra Maestra?

I have $50 in the bank and save $8 more. How much do I have?

If a spool of thread costs 5 cents, how much will 4 spools cost? . . .

At one People's Farm [Granja del Pueblo], 374 liters of milk were collected during the morning milking and 379 during the evening one. How many liters of milk were collected during the day?

If you pay 9 cents for a liter of gasoline, how much will 5 liters cost?

The Popocatepetl volcano in Mexico is 5,450 meters high and the Orizaba volcano, which is the highest mountain in that country, is 300 meters higher. What is the elevation of the highest mountain in Mexico?

Cuba's first city and capital was Villa de la Asunción de Baracoa, founded by Diego Velázquez in 1512. How many years ago was that ancient Cuban city founded?

La Paz, the capital of Bolivia, at 3,640 meters above sea level, is the highest capital in the world. Mexico City, the capital of Mexico, is located at an elevation of 2,252 meters. How many meters higher than Mexico City is La Paz?

The electric milking machine, which is used in our modern dairies, frees the dairyman from the exhausting job of hand milking. In milking by hand, it is necessary to squeeze the cow's teat about 98 times in order to get one liter of milk. How many times will the milker have to repeat the same motion in order to get 8 liters of milk?

Approximately 500 people go to the reading rooms of the Havana National Library every day. How many readers will go to the National Library during one week?

The Revolution has put books within reach of the people. In a Galiano Street bookstall a railroad worker bought Palevói's work *A Man of Truth* (*Un hombre de verdad*) for 1 peso and 10 cents,[2] the *Song of Great Achievements* (*Canción de gesta*) by Pablo Neruda for 50 cents, and *Bertillón 166* by José Soler Puig for 35 cents. How much did his purchase of books amount to?

A peasant who used to earn 70 cents a day before the Revolution now earns 2 pesos and 80 cents. How much more does he earn now?

A medicine which cost $4.75 before the Revolution now can be bought for $3.16. How much less do we pay for this product?

In the battle of El Uvero, which took place on 28 May 1957, some 120 rebel soldiers fought against the much superior armed forces of the tyranny [of Batista]. About one-third of the rebel soldiers were killed or wounded. What were the losses suffered by the Rebel Army in this memorable battle?

In the United States there are 6 million unemployed workers, of which three-tenths are white and the rest Negroes. What part of those 6 million unemployed men are Negroes? (Think of the number "1" expressed as ten-tenths.)

TRANSLATED BY RICHARD R. FAGEN

Notes

1. Fidel Castro's speech at Varadero to departing Conrado Benitez Brigadistas and their families, 14 May 1961. Havana Domestic Service FBIS Report Date 19610504; 19610515.
2. *Eds. note*: The correct English translation for this work is *A Story about a Real Man* by Boris Nikolaevich Polevoi.

The Literacy Campaign

Oscar Lewis, Ruth M. Lewis, and Susan M. Rigdon

The mobilization of Cuban youth for the literacy drive challenged a number of gendered and class assumptions about the relationship between city and countryside. The intrafamily and personal tensions aroused by the literacy campaign are well conveyed in the testimonial account of a young woman interviewed by sociologist Oscar Lewis (1914–1970) for his oral history of the Cuban Revolution.

In February 1961, I volunteered for the Literacy Campaign, which aimed to combat illiteracy in the country. Fidel had been asking for volunteers for several weeks, and I suggested to my friend Milagros that we join. She was reluctant at first but I argued until she agreed. The family made a terrible fuss about my decision but *mami* accepted it. My aunts and uncles, who were still here then, thought it would be a disaster. How could mami permit me to go alone to God knows where, to live among God knows who, in the countryside where there was no running water or electricity? Angela Rosa Collazo practically had a fit! "Beatriz, my child, you must be insane to let Mónica go out to the country!"—adding a phrase that was habitual with her, "The country is for the birds!"

Uncle Bernardo and Aunt Mercedes said to mami, "Well, Beatriz, you know how it is, one goes and two come back." Mami was such a stern moralist they thought the fear that I might come back pregnant would be the strongest deterrent. But mami is a fighter, especially when people insinuate things like that. She faced right up to them, saying she'd brought me up to be incapable of such a thing.

Mami let us make decisions ourselves, although she had very definite opinions about what we should do with our lives. She wanted us to grow up into independent human beings and often had to stand up against the family to give us children a measure of independence. She, herself, had more individuality than any of the others in her family. She dared to think for herself and to act on her beliefs. In that sense, she does have self-control and I admire her for it. . . .

You see, to me the Campaign was such a great thing, such a historic event.

I thought: when I was a little old woman I'd be embarrassed to explain to my grandchildren, "No, I didn't join the Literacy Campaign: I was too eager to see my sister again, and meet my niece." It seemed to me that would be downright immoral. Besides, it was a beautiful opportunity to experience perhaps one-thousandth of the things Fidel had been through.

I'd get to know the people and be independent of my family for the first time in my life. All those things were important to me. And then, after eight months to return and be able to say, "Seven or eight little old men and women know how to read and write because I taught them."

At last the day came when I was to go to the country. We spent the first week in Varadero, learning how to use the phonetic syllabary to teach people to read. The first few days there was a sort of mild mass hysteria among us. Everybody got sick. We were all young girls who had never been away from home before, and there were so many different rules and regulations to follow. We were strictly segregated from the boys. They lived at Camp Granma and the girls at Kawama.

One day there was an incident. We were all taken to the movies and a net was hung in the auditorium between the boys' side and the girls'!

That created a lot of tension. Nothing provokes people more than to be forbidden to do something. The boys tore down the net and rushed over to us. Immediately the supervisors gathered the girls together and made us file out, double-time.

The only men at Kawama were some very cute lifeguards, and we girls kept pretending to drown so we'd be pulled out. We'd talk of boys all day long. One of my roommates—she must have come from a lower-class family—startled me with her dirty jokes. It's true that in a convent school you hear more dirty jokes than anywhere in the world, but in Varadero I heard things I never dreamed of. This girl said her brother had relations with heifers. I was terribly shocked. I'd never heard of bestiality. It hadn't ever occurred to me that a human being would do such a thing.

One day mami came to visit. We were filling in our requests for the place we preferred to be sent. I wanted to put down the Sierra Maestra in Oriente, which was my dream, but mami said no, it was too far for her to visit me and I was too young to be away from home for eight months. Milagros's *mamá* made the same objection. But we didn't want to be too near Havana. What would be the point of leaving home if I was going to have my relatives on top of me as usual? So Milagros and I compromised and put down Las Villas, which was within visiting distance, but far enough away so our families couldn't be there every minute.

We'd been in Varadero only two days when we were taken to Havana in

"Territory free of illiteracy": The Literacy Museum commemorates the campaign (2002). On the wall are photographs of *brigadistas* killed by counterrevolutionaries. Photograph by Aviva Chomsky.

buses for the May Day parade. Arriving in the city I was overcome with emotion, as if I'd been away ten years. Many of us wept. The streets looked so beautiful after our absence! . . .

Our first stop was Santa Clara. Then they took us to Remedios, and from there the commissioner of Remedios took us to a tiny village near Guanabo in Las Villas.

"Is this where we get off?" I asked.

"This is it."

"Oh, but look, I wanted to go to the country—real country, you know what I mean, where there are earthen huts with no electricity. Villages I know; it's the country I want."

"If that's what you want, I can take you. It's no problem."

Milagros, two other brigadiers, and I were driven out into the country in a jeep. First they dropped off the other girls; then they took Milagros and me to houses very near each other.

It was night when I arrived where I was to stay. It felt strange, getting off there and being introduced as "the brigadier who is going to live with you."

"Ah. Very well," the family said.

"Then you're staying?" the commissioner asked.

"Yes." As he drove off in his jeep, I looked at all the people in the house and thought, "Oh, my God!"

There was a little old couple, a girl, Graciela, of about twenty-three, Elías, who was about twenty-one, Pedro, about nineteen, another boy who must have been fifteen or sixteen, a girl of fourteen or so, and a little boy of four or five. It was a fairly good country house, with a porch, a little dining room, and a small parlor with a bedroom on either side, all built of cement. The kitchen had wooden walls and an earthen floor, and was thatched with palm leaves.

It was about bedtime, so I lit my lantern as we had been taught to do. It was a Chinese lantern, something new to me, and when we were first taught to use it, I was surprised at the brilliant light it gave, almost like electricity. They told me I was to share a room with the two girls and they showed me my bed. I lay down at once.

That first night was very long. The house was surrounded by cane fields. I'd never heard the rustle of cane at night. It seemed very loud in the stillness of the country. Next morning I woke up with a bad cold and a fever. Sick on my first day in the country! I didn't know what to do. I was awfully far from civilization, too far to expect any doctor to get to me, and worse still, I was among strangers and didn't know how they'd react. Mami had warned me never, under any circumstances, to allow myself to be treated with home remedies. Above all, I was not to allow anybody to rub my stomach—that's the standard country treatment for indigestion, and if you happen to have appendicitis it can be very dangerous.

On the other hand, at Varadero I had been told to adapt to country customs. Our aim was to educate the people gradually, not directly oppose any of their beliefs. If the people were not revolutionaries I should try to convert them, but tactfully, without startling them.

I was terrified, which made me sicker, and that's when my asthma started, though I didn't know it was asthma. I'd always been subject to a runny nose and allergic sneezing fits. For three days I ran a high fever and could hardly breathe. Now I realize it was psychosomatic; I was reacting emotionally to my situation. . . .

As soon as I went back I took a census of illiterates, as we had been instructed. In the barrio assigned to me there were eight or nine illiterates, and there was also one little house that nobody told me about. I asked the family I was staying with, "Who lives in that little house?"

"Oh, just some blacks."

"Can they read and write?"

"I don't know, they're blacks."

"Well, I'll just drop in and see if they have illiterates in the house."

"No, no, you can't go there! I tell you, they're blacks."

"All right, I heard you, but I'm going."

They tried to stop me, but seeing my mind was made up, the old man said, "Elías will take you on horseback and wait for you outside."

It was then I realized that country people were a lot more prejudiced than city people. They discriminated brutally against blacks. They never visited them and feared for my safety. They hinted that the black boys might molest me and also said they practiced bestiality. Later I learned that this was true. After a time I realized everybody there practiced it. Frankly I was scared, but I said to myself, "Buck up, kid, be brave," and I went to visit them.

I found that nearly every one of the blacks was illiterate, so I decided to give two classes a day, and, wanting to make people go to the blacks' house, I chose that one for the afternoon classes. My hosts, of course, were shocked.

The most difficult part of the Campaign was living with the old couple and their children. As a family they had more schooling than anybody else in the barrio—they must have gone as far as the sixth grade—and had great natural intelligence besides. But the only person in that house who wasn't hostile to me was the old man. At least he was gentle in his ways, though when I tried to persuade him to join a cooperative, we'd argue and he always came out the winner.

He owned four cows and a jeep, as well as a small plot of land where he planted yucca and beans, and although he planted mainly for family consumption, he hired a farmhand. He was a very kindhearted man, quiet and reserved. The family treated him with respect when he was around but he was hardly ever in the house.

His wife was hard to get along with. At first she made a great show of affection for me, but I could tell it was hypocritical, and she soon showed herself for the harpy she was. It was her fault that the rest of the family was so totally evil, each child more difficult than the next. She was the twin sister of the lady of the house where Milagros was staying, but they had completely opposite temperaments. Milagros's hostess was a good, sweet-tempered woman; she had the same number of children but the two families lived in different worlds. It was so pleasant in Milagros's house, I felt welcome and at ease, and went there for lunch as often as I could. In that house there were no illiterates.

My habit of going to Milagros's house made my family even more unfriendly. They quite often remarked that I liked it better over there. In time I realized that their hostility arose from the fact that they were not revolutionaries but small landowners, afraid of what would happen to them.

At least I learned something living there. Everything I saw was new to me—their family structure, the kind of life they led. . . .

By the end of my eight months I had taught almost all the illiterates in my section to read and write. One little lady in her eighties couldn't write because her hand trembled so much, but the others did very well, and the day we finished our work, we hauled up our pink flag, declaring the area free of illiteracy. I often wonder whether our pupils have kept up their reading, or forgotten it all by now.

Note

1. A popular beach and resort in Matanzas Province. (For a broader description of the training program at Varadero and of the campaign itself, see Fagen, *The Transformation of Political Culture in Cuba*, pp. 33–68.)

The "Rehabilitation" of Prostitutes

Oscar Lewis, Ruth M. Lewis, and Susan M. Rigdon

One of the revolution's earliest programs in the area of gender was against prostitution, which was seen as a symbol of Cuba's degradation as a playground for tourists and of women's lack of opportunity under the old order. A 1961 law outlawed prostitution, and a support system of schools, day care, and jobs was put into place to "rehabilitate" former prostitutes. Many Cubans viewed the elimination of prostitution, like the universalization of access to health, food, and education, as a point of pride in the nation's twin goals of social equality at home and dignity in the international sphere. (The return of prostitution in the 1990s is similarly viewed with intense shame and as a major social defeat, even though most Cubans are quick to say that they understand and sympathize with the women who make this choice under the current economic situation.) Here U.S. scholar Oscar Lewis (1914–1970) interviews a woman who had worked as a prostitute before the revolution.

[On the] day the Revolution was triumphant . . . I was too high on pills to know what had happened. But when I heard such enthusiastic crowds out in the street, I got excited too. I thought, "The Revolution can't be so bad when so many people are happy about it." But it was confusing. Madams and pimps spread rumors that the new government would be ruthless with prostitutes. They made a great deal of that kind of propaganda. They said prostitutes would be jailed if they were lucky enough to escape the firing squad. But others thought it was no more than a change of corrupt officials, and life would go on in the same old way. Never did I imagine everything would be so different!

Life in the brothel changed at once. Lots of the owners ran away, and exploitation by those who remained was stopped. We girls started working for ourselves—if I earned ten pesos they were all mine. Of course we had to make a contribution toward the upkeep of the house, servants' wages, and so on, but it wasn't anything like half the take.

Three months, more or less, after the triumph of the Revolution, the police went to each brothel and told the owner that all the women were expected at the station at 5:00 the next evening. Our madam hired a car to take us there,

and the police photographed us full face and profile and took our fingerprints. Then they told us we were required to have periodic medical examinations—a general checkup, a blood test, and a vaginal smear—and carry a kind of health certificate. We had to show our card to the police every week, and if it wasn't up to date we wouldn't be allowed to work.

Some of the prostitutes resented the new rules and had a lot to say about being photographed, too, but like it or not, we all had to do it. The pimps had said we'd be shot, or jailed, or sent somewhere to pick tomatoes, and it all seemed possible.

Homosexuals who owned brothels or worked in them were also rounded up. Practically every brothel had homosexuals to do the cooking and cleaning and sometimes to go to bed with clients. I'm sorry for queers and always got along well with them. There's no excuse for what they are, but at least they're better than lesbians.

It seemed perfectly fair to me to throw brothel owners in jail. They were exploiters, one and all. When you brought them a lot of money they were all smiles, but when you had to fight to defend yourself they didn't stand by you—a scandal in the house was too inconvenient for them.

In my opinion the revolutionary government was taking some very necessary measures to make brothels less disgusting. They put an end to the selling of drinks, they required us to meet the customers fully dressed, and a madam who didn't make sure her girls complied with the medical rule would have had to shut the house down. They made drugs illegal, too, so I hardly ever smoked marijuana or sniffed cocaine anymore. At first some men continued to bring a little, but they were scared to death.

Abortions were more difficult to arrange after the Revolution. To get one you had to go to the doctor accompanied by a friend of his [the doctor's], or he wouldn't have dared take the risk. In 1961 I had an abortion that cost 150 pesos!

There had been a time, near the end of the dictatorship, when hardly anybody came to the brothels, and it was a bad time for us. But right after the Revolution business picked up. Not that lines formed at the door, but everyone earned more and the men began to come back. Of course with our working hours shortened, we could attend to fewer men in a day. We worked from 8:00 to 12:00 at night; we had a heavy workload on Fridays and weekends, but the rest of the time there weren't many clients, and some days I didn't earn a thing.

I still had problems with the police now and again, but they treated me very differently from the way Batista's force did. If I got into a fight they'd ask me to go to the police station, but they wouldn't sentence me or ask for bail, they'd just tell me it wasn't right to make such scenes and let me go. . . .

At the end of 1961, comrades from the ministry in charge of the rehabilitation plan began visiting the brothels, one by one, to offer us a fresh start. They told us the Revolution had decided to put an end to the horrible life we were leading. We were to spend some time at a rehabilitation school, and if we needed it, we'd be trained and given a job. They said if we were willing to study and work, our debt to society would be wiped out.

I couldn't believe it. I thought, "A chance to study? They'll support my daughter while I go to school? Give me money without my earning it? These promises can't be true!"

Of course the pimps campaigned strongly against it. They said the revolutionary government was a monster of hypocrisy—no ministry could possibly be so generous. When had we ever known any government to help anybody? There must be a catch to it. "When they put you to forced labor you'll be sorry!" That was what the pimps said. But to my way of seeing it I had nothing to lose. Anything was better than a brothel. . . .

The school I was sent to had been a rich man's home and was not really suitable for a school building. The ministry planned to remodel it, but so many women were anxious to quit prostitution, it was decided to start school at once and fix it up little by little, so at first there were no workshops, machine shops, or schoolrooms—those things came later.

The school was only for former prostitutes. When I arrived, there were very few women there, but after a couple of weeks there were fifty, and by the time I graduated seven months later there were about three hundred. All who wanted to attend were admitted.

From the very first day I realized that all the things I'd heard against the revolutionary government were lies. Everyone, from the director to the most humble employee, treated us kindly. They were concerned about our children's welfare, they wanted us to have enough clothes and good, well-balanced meals. And we had excellent medical care from a doctor on call and a full-time nurse. When we first enrolled we were given a medical checkup to see if any of us had syphilis. The only thing they found wrong with me was the way my uterus was tipped, so they sent me to another doctor for treatment. They gave me vitamins, too.

One of the girls was found to have the lung sickness. Measures were immediately taken to protect the rest of us. The poor girl was so afraid we'd be repelled by her illness she wouldn't talk to anyone, but in time she was cured and lived a normal life.

Three other girls and I had completed the sixth grade, so we were excused from classes and housework and given the first jobs, at a textile factory. We rose at 5:00 in the morning, made our beds, and went to breakfast. Some days we did exercises and marched around before starting to work. The factory was

quite a distance away, so we were taken in a school car and our lunch was brought to us. Sometimes the lieutenant in charge of us came to fetch us in her own car, and we'd sing all the way home.

We had two different uniforms: blue slacks and pink blouses for school, gray skirts and pink blouses for street wear. The director thought the uniforms set us apart too much from the other comrades at the factory, but I didn't mind. If you go to school, you wear a uniform. That's only proper.

School was a wonderland! The director was a kind, affectionate woman, and our group was so small at first that we could eat out together sometimes, or go to the movies. That was something new to me! For the first time, too, I was free from family worries, and I began to take more of an interest in things, and to read.

Naturally a certain amount of discipline had to be maintained; you couldn't just take off whenever you felt like it. Saturdays and Sundays were our days off, and occasionally we got a weekday pass as a reward for good behavior. If you overslept, came late to the workshop or class, or were disrespectful to a teacher, you lost your pass, but I never broke a rule so I never lost mine.

Lots of the women didn't like getting up early, or going to classes and workshops. One said, "This is all very well, but I can't bear studying."

"Well, then, don't study," I told her. "Tell them you'd rather be assigned to a workshop."

"Oh no! I don't want anybody ordering me around. I want to earn money my own way. Besides, I hate to be shut in here all the time. I need to be out in the street."

Finally, a few of the girls said they wanted to leave. They were perfectly free to go, but first they were asked to talk it over with the rest of us, and we persuaded them to stay. Thanks to that they're now happy women.

All the same, there were some who sneaked out at night to avoid our talks, and some, influenced by pimps, went to the United States, where they're still prostitutes. I know because they write to people here.

The Family Code

Margaret Randall

In 1975, after a year of nationwide discussion in workplace and neighborhood assemblies, the revolutionary government passed a comprehensive "Family Code" that was both revolutionary and, in some ways, traditional. In guaranteeing equality for women, legitimizing consensual unions and the rights of all children (regardless of whether their parents were officially married), and requiring equal responsibility and opportunity of partners inside the home and out, the code fundamentally challenged many traditional Cuban ideas about men's and women's roles. In promoting monogamous, heterosexual marriage as the ideal, it adhered to other traditional values—even though outright repression of homosexuals eased in the 1970s. In both respects, the code coincided with the institutionalization and bureaucratization of the revolution in other spheres and reflected a state project to solidify its dominion.

The Family Code began to be discussed by the Cuban people early in 1974, and the original idea was that it become law in time for the FMC Congress. At the same time, the importance of this code made it imperative that discussions be thorough and far reaching. Blas Roca, now a member of the party's Politburo and president of the National People's Assembly and then member of the party's Secretariat and head of the committee to draft new laws, spoke at the Women's Congress and explained the process of debate and discussion. He noted tendencies, offered anecdotes about ingrained unconscious sexism on the part of leadership, and made a plea for long-term ideological work in this respect. He told us how junior high school students were discussing the law, the first law to be discussed by this age group because of its importance to their future. He brought statistics from the discussions held by Cuban diplomatic delegations overseas, military units, and comrades involved in international missions.

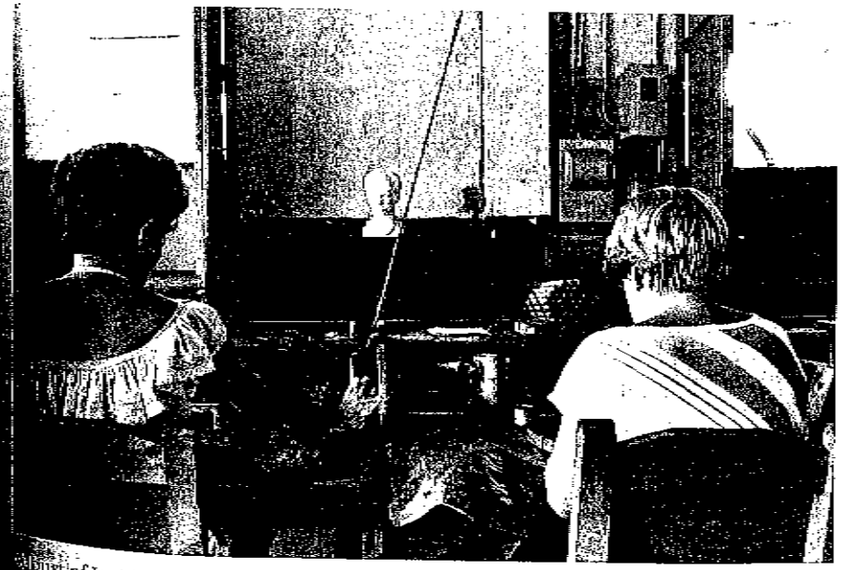
The Code, like all of Cuba's most important laws, had been published in draft form in a cheap tabloid edition so that virtually every man, woman, and young person could have a copy to read and study. In meetings through the trade unions, the CDRs, the FMC, the schools, and the like, people have a

Women in the Territorial Troop Militia, Havana. Photo by Tania Jovanovic.

chance—often more than one chance, as most citizens attend more than one of these meetings—to discuss the Code point by point, ask questions, suggest additions, changes, or deletions. The way this process works is that a record is kept of each meeting, the results are sent through the respective organizations to their highest level, where they are tabulated, computed, and turned over to the original committee (adjacent, at that time, to the party's Central Committee, now adjacent to the National Assembly). The Code is then modified according to the people's attitudes around specific issues and their participation in this process. For example, in the original draft of the Family Code the marriage age for men had been higher than that for women. The people made them the same. The Code was finally returned to the Cuban people on International Women's Day, 8 March 1975.

The Family Code covers marriage, divorce, marital property relationships, recognition of children, obligations for children's care and education, adoption and tutelage. Basically, the Code stipulates a new equality between women and men in their social relationships. Child support is not now automatically expected of the man, but, instead, might be expected of the woman in case

Women rolling cigars. Photo by Tania Jovanovic.



Bust of José Martí overlooks workers in a cigar factory. Photo by Tania Jovanovic.

where the man is studying and the woman working. Custody of children is not given over to one parent or another, but provisions are sought through which both must continue to assume responsibilities in the event of divorce.

The clauses in this Code receiving the most attention and discussion are those stipulating both parents' equal responsibilities for child care and housework. The five clauses (24 through 28) covering this aspect have also been incorporated into the Cuban marriage ceremony and are read by judges performing all civil marriages, the only kind recognized by Cuban law.

Clauses 24, 25, 26, 27, and 28 read as follows—

24. Marriage is constituted on the basis of equal rights and duties of both spouses.

25. The spouses must live together, be faithful to one another, consider and respect each other, and each mutually help the other.

The rights and duties established by this Code will subsist in their entirety as long as the marriage has not been legally terminated, in spite of the fact that for justifiable reasons a common household cannot be maintained.

26. Both spouses are obligated to care for the family they have created and cooperate with each other in the education, formation and guidance of their children in line with the principles of socialist morality. As well, each to the extent of his or her capabilities and possibilities, must participate in governing the home and cooperate toward its best possible care.

27. The spouses are obliged to contribute toward satisfying the needs of the family they have created in their marriage, each according to his or her faculties and economic capacities. Nevertheless, if one of the spouses contributes only through his or her work in the home and child-care, the other spouse must provide full economic support without this meaning that he or she be relieved of the obligations of cooperating with the housework and child-care.

28. Both spouses have the right to exercise their professions or crafts and must lend each other reciprocal cooperation and aid to this effect, as well as in order to carry out studies or perfect their training, but in all cases they will take care to organize their home life so that such activities be coordinated with the fulfillment of the obligations imposed by this Code.

How does this Code work in practice? That's the question asked by most visitors to Cuba, and many seem to imply that, unless an overnight close-to-total change be effected, the Code doesn't work.

The Family Code is a law. It is also an educational tool. At this point, I believe the latter is the most important of the two aspects. The very discussions over the period of eight months when people grappled with these ideas

stimulated an emerging consciousness or gave voice to a series of previously unarticulated concepts. The discussions were not only those officially staged by the political and mass organizations; some of the most intense took place on buses, in waiting rooms, in supermarket lines, and on the streets!

One example of this occurred in the discussion held through the CDR on my block. An elderly male neighbor had this to say: "You know . . . I've always believed in helping my wife. We've been married a long time, and I cook, clean, have taken care of our children and our grandchildren . . . but one thing I never felt right about doing was hanging the clothes on the line. I was afraid people would see me and laugh. Now I guess the time has come to get over these complexes. . . . We're all in this together!" In a second incident, in our local supermarket, one day when Family Code discussions were at their height, a man in the meat line mumbled something about ". . . this really is women's work. . . .Women are so good at this kind of thing . . . !" A woman directly in front of him turned around, and, with her face as close to his as possible, responded: "and some men are good at eating shit!"

The judicial repercussions of the Code, needless to say, depend on women themselves actually taking their husbands to court for violations. How many women are willing to take this step? Not enough. Clearly, many, for a long time to come, will allow themselves to be conned by the dozens of mechanisms men all over the world have developed to keep things the way they have always been. The important thing, at this point, is that women have state and party support in their struggle. A woman can go to the president of her CDR, or to the leadership of her own or her husband's trade union, and she has a legal, and not simply a subjective, basis on which to request help in an unequal home situation. There are no statistics familiar to me of cases actually brought before judges. In close observation of this whole process, I think it is fair to say that in places like the Isle of Youth, where many young couples live and work without the proverbial grandmother or aunt in the house, there is a stronger definition and a more aggressive attitude on the part of the women than, say, in situations where it is easier to fall back on the oppression of older retired, mostly female, family members.

It's also important to note that prevalent attitudes around these issues vary greatly from the older to the younger generations. Cuban young people, provided with a new and more progressive type of education than their parents and grandparents, view sexual equality as a normal, natural part of their lives. Speaking with junior and senior high school students, you won't find many young women who see their futures dependent on marriage or a future husband's career. Their central goal in life is their own development and their potential contribution to society.

Mother and daughter. Photo by Tania Jovanovic.

My own two teenage daughters and their friends expect absolute agreement and support from boyfriends around their logical political participation, and they insist upon full social integration at all levels. One of my daughters attends a special school, the Lenin School, for above-average students going into scientific and technological fields. Of the 4,500 students, slightly more than half are young women. Girls excel in the traditionally male areas such as math, physics, chemistry, and biology. Several years ago at this school, some of the boys in one of the dorms tried to get their girlfriends to wash and iron their uniforms. This was clearly a ploy for status control. It wasn't only the small group of girls approached who resisted and refused, but, within days, a movement had developed through which the vast majority of the school's female students made it clear that this was an issue of principle for them all—a case of spontaneous ideology in action!

Although the law states that Family Code articles 24 through 28 are applicable only in cases where a man's wife works or studies, Vilma Espín, at a press

conference following the official establishment of this Code, took the issue quite a bit further. She emphasized the fact that, although legally the Code only applies in the aforementioned cases, it will be important for all men, whether or not their wives remain in or work outside the home, to share these obligations. This will be the only way, she pointed out, that future generations will grow up with a new morality gleaned from a changed image of how men and women should interact.

Homosexuality, Creativity, Dissidence

Reinaldo Arenas

In this excerpt from the Reinaldo Arenas (1943–1990) memoir Before Night Falls, *upon which Julian Schnabel's 2000 film of the same title was based, Arenas recalls the early 1960s. Those years were, for him, a time of revolution on all levels, unleashing unlimited sexual and creative energies. That was the period in which he received his initiation into the literary world as well as the world of gay sex. As he reminisces, the two pleasures—literary and sexual—seem to meld into one. Later, when the repression began and gays were hauled off to "re-education camps," Arenas came to view homosexuality as "a protest against the regime," a conspiracy, that "began to flourish with ever-increasing defiance." The fevered pitch of his sensual life was matched only by that of his literary production, hammered out on his beloved old mechanical Underwood typewriter.*

My erotic adventures were not limited to beaches and military camps; they also occurred in universities and university dorms where hundreds of students slept. Once I met a student whose name was Fortunato Granada. He was Colombian and had come to Cuba in the hope of studying medicine. In those years the Revolutionary government had invited many young people from all over Latin America to study at Cuban universities. Once enrolled at the universities, they were subjected to political indoctrination and finally they were told that their country had to be liberated, that it was a victim of U.S. imperialism, that they had to return home as guerrillas.

Fortunato told me all this while we were making love on a bunk mattress in the dorm basement. He wanted to be a doctor—his reason for coming to Cuba—not to go back as a guerrilla. When he refused, his passport was taken away, and now they were threatening to expel him from the university. He was trying desperately to figure out what to do in Cuba after being expelled from the university and deprived of any ID.

We continued making love for a year; he finally had to enlist as a guerrilla fighter. I don't know if he got killed, because I never heard from him again.

When I wrote *The Palace of the White Skunks*, I wanted to pay tribute in a small way to this great lover of mine: the hero's name in my novel is Fortunato.

The guerrillas who were lucky returned to Cuba. One of them, Alfonso, had met Fortunato. One day Alfonso knocked at my aunt's door asking for me, and he identified himself as Fortunato's friend. I realized right away what he wanted. We became good friends and excellent lovers. He had belonged to the guerrillas and now worked for the Ministry of the Interior in Cuba. He had an official role at diplomatic affairs attended by Fidel Castro, as part of his security guard. Perhaps his homosexual inclination was forgiven because he was a foreigner; or perhaps the government didn't find out about it. He kept coming to me for years. Of course, he came only now and then and, frankly, behaved in a very masculine way. Then suddenly he disappeared; maybe he was transferred to another country on a special mission. God knows where he is now.

In addition to the pickups during the day, which generally took place at the beaches, there was another powerful homosexual scene in Havana, underground but very visible. There were pickups at night all over La Rampa, at Coppelia, on Prado Boulevard and along the Malecón Shore Drive, and at Coney Island in Marianao. These areas were full of recruits and students, single men who were locked up in barracks or schools and went out at night eager for sex. They were willing to settle for the first thing that came along. I always tried to be one of the first they met in these places. Hundreds of them ended up in my room. Sometimes they did not want to go that far, in which case we had to risk going downtown, to Old Havana, where we would walk up some stairway to the top floor and lower our pants. I think that in Cuba there was never more fucking going on than in those years, the decade of the sixties, which was precisely when all the new laws against homosexuals came into being, when the persecutions started and concentration camps were opened, when the sexual act became taboo while the "new man" was being proclaimed and masculinity exalted. Many of the young men who marched in Revolutionary Square applauding Fidel Castro, and many of the soldiers who marched, rifle in hand and with martial expressions, came to our rooms after the parades to cuddle up naked, and show their real selves, sometimes revealing a tenderness and true enjoyment such as I have not been able to find again anywhere else in the world.

Perhaps deep down they realized they were breaking into the realm of the forbidden, the dangerous, and the damned. Perhaps that is the reason why, when that moment came, they showed such fullness, such radiance, and enjoyed every instant in the awareness that it might be their last, that it could cost

them many years in jail. There was, moreover, no prostitution. It was pleasure for pleasure's sake, the craving of one body for another, the need to find fulfillment. Sexual pleasure between two men was a conspiracy, something that happened in the shadows or in plain daylight, but always forbidden; a look, a wink, a gesture, a sign, was enough to start the sequence that resulted in such full enjoyment. The adventure in itself, even if fulfillment did not come with the desired body, was already a pleasure, a mystery, a surprise. To enter a movie theater was to figure out whom we would sit next to, and whether that young man over there would stretch out his leg toward us. To reach over slowly with one hand and touch his thigh, and then to dare a little more and feel the part of his pants where that penis wanted to break through the fabric; to masturbate him right then and there during an old American movie, to see how he would ejaculate, and then leave before the movie ended; and perhaps I would never see him again, after having seen his face only in profile. What does it matter, he was surely a wonderful guy.

People would really get sexually aroused on interstate trips. If you took one of those buses crowded with young men, you could be sure that some erotic games would take place during the trip. The driver would turn out the lights, and the bus would be moving on those highways full of potholes; with each lurch of the vehicle one had the opportunity for contact, for touching an erect penis, a young thigh, a strong chest; hands could move over a body, feel for the waist, unbuckle the belt, and then, cautious and eager, reach for the spot where that terrific member lay hidden. Those adventures, and the people with whom one had them, were great. Those men enjoyed their roles of active miles; they wanted to be sucked and even to fuck right on the bus.

Later, in exile, I found that sexual relations can be tedious and unrewarding. There are categories or divisions in the homosexual world. The queer gets together with the queer and everybody does everything. One sucks first, and then they reverse roles. How can that bring any satisfaction? What we are really looking for is our opposite. The beauty of our relationships then was that we met our opposites. We would find that man, that powerful recruit who wanted desperately to fuck us. We were fucked under bridges, in the bushes, everywhere, by men who wanted satisfaction while they penetrated us. Either conditions here are different, or it is just difficult to duplicate what we had there. Everything here is so regulated that groups and societies have been created in which it is very difficult for a homosexual to find a man, that is, the real object of his desire.

I do not know what to call the young Cuban men of those days, whether homosexuals who played the male role or bisexuals. The truth is that they had

girlfriends or wives, but when they came to us they enjoyed themselves thoroughly, sometimes more than with their wives, who often would refuse to suck or had inhibitions that made lovemaking less pleasurable.

I remember an extraordinary mulatto, married and with several children, who escaped his family once a week to fuck me on the iron chair in my room. I never saw a man enjoy sex so much. He was, nevertheless, an excellent father and exemplary husband.

I think that the sexual revolution in Cuba actually came about as a result of the existing sexual repression. Perhaps as a protest against the regime, homosexuality began to flourish with ever-increasing defiance. Moreover, since the dictatorship was considered evil, anything it proscribed was seen in a positive light by the nonconformists, who in the sixties were already almost the majority. I honestly believe that the concentration camps for homosexuals, and the police officers disguised as willing young men to entrap and arrest homosexuals, actually resulted in the promotion of homosexual activities.

In Cuba gays were not confined to a specific area of a club or beach. Everybody mingled and there was no division that would place the homosexual on the defensive. This has been lost in more advanced societies, where the homosexual has had to become a sort of sexual recluse and separate himself from the supposedly nonhomosexual society, which undoubtedly also excludes him. Since such divisions did not exist in Cuba, the interesting aspect of homosexuality there was that you did not have to be a homosexual to have a relationship with a man; a man could have intercourse with another man as an ordinary act. In the same way, a real gay who liked another gay could easily go out and live with him. But the gay who liked real macho men could also find one who wanted to live or be friends with him, without in any way interfering with the heterosexual life of that man. It was not the norm for one queer to go to bed with another queer; "she" would look for a man to fuck "her" who would feel as much pleasure as the homosexual being fucked.

Homosexual militancy has gained considerable rights for free-world gays. But what has been lost is the wonderful feeling of meeting heterosexual or bisexual men who would get pleasure from possessing another man and who would not, in turn, have to be possessed.

The ideal in any sexual relationship is finding one's opposite, and therefore the homosexual world is now something sinister and desolate; we almost never get what we most desire.

That world, of course, also had its dangers. Along with other homosexuals, I was robbed and blackmailed a number of times. Once, after I received my monthly pay from the National Library, just ninety pesos, which was not much

but had to cover all of my expenses for the month. I was foolish enough to go straight to the beach. I met a marvelous youth who had caught a crab, tied it to a string, and was walking it on the sand as if it were his dog. I praised the crab while looking at the legs of the youth, who then quickly came with me to my booth. He was wearing a tiny bathing suit. I don't know how he did it, but during his sexual gymnastics, which he handled with practiced skill, he managed to steal all my money from my pants pocket and hide it in his small bathing suit. The truth is that after he left I realized that I had been cleaned out; I did not even have a nickel for the bus fare home. I looked for him all over La Concha Beach. In one of the open booths I found a smashed crab. He was evidently a violent person. The carapace was all that was left of the crab. The beautiful adolescent had disappeared without leaving a witness: not even a crab.

That afternoon I walked home. Once in my room, I continued writing a long poem. I entitled it "Morir en junio y con la lengua afuera" (To Die in June, Gasping for Air). A few days later I had to stop working on the poem because somebody had entered my room through the window and stolen my typewriter. This was a serious theft; to me that typewriter was not only the one object of value in my possession but also the thing I treasured the most. To me, sitting down at the typewriter was, and still is, something extraordinary. I would be inspired (like a pianist) by the rhythm of those keys and they would carry me along. Paragraphs would follow one another like ocean waves, at times more intense, at others less so; sometimes like huge breakers that would engulf page after page, before the next paragraph. My typewriter was an old iron Underwood, but to me it was a magical instrument.

Guillermo Rosales, then a good-looking young writer, lent me his typewriter and I finished the poem.

Some time later a mulatto police officer, rather handsome in fact, showed up at my home. He told me my typewriter was at the police station. The thief had been caught burglarizing another home, and his house had been searched. They found many stolen items, my typewriter among them. Apparently the thief himself told the police that the typewriter was mine. After many bureaucratic formalities, it was returned and I had to carry it home in a bus full of people; it seemed to weigh a ton, but I got it back where it belonged. I was afraid it would be stolen again, and my friend Aurelio Cortés had the bright idea of bolting it to its metal table.

A number of times hoodlums—that is, the boys with whom I had made love—entered my room and tried to steal the typewriter, but to no effect; it was impossible to carry both typewriter and metal table. From then on I felt

safer, better able to continue my love life without endangering the rhythm of my literary production. That rhythm has always been part of me, even during periods of the most intense lovemaking or of the greatest police persecution. Writing crowned or complemented all other pleasures as well as all other calamities.

TRANSLATED BY DOLORES M. KOCH

The Original Sin

Pablo Milanés

Although the revolution did make a conscious commitment to gender equality, there was no parallel drive to end discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation. In fact, the revolutionary government went through periods (especially in the late 1960s and 1970s) of harsh and sometimes violent repression against homosexuals. Tomás Gutiérrez Alea's 1993 film Strawberry and Chocolate *reflects on the contradictions between conformism and liberation in Cuban culture and in the Cuban revolution. Set in 1979, the film critiques both the intellectual restrictions of this period of "Sovietization" and the insistence on sexual conformity. One of the heroes is a dogmatic Young Communist; the other is an intellectual, religious, and sexual nonconformist who insists that the revolution needs to include him too. The film was enormously popular in Cuba in the 1990s when the shift toward Sovietization seemed, in retrospect, to have been a socially and economically costly route to have taken. (The film — and most public discussion in Cuba — nonetheless avoided discussing the period of most intense official repression against homosexuals in the 1960s, which could not be attributed to any "outside" influences.)*

Also in the 1990s, the immensely popular Cuban singer Pablo Milanés (b. 1943) wrote "El pecado original" explicitly celebrating (male) homosexual love and decrying societal and legal repression of homosexuality.

Two souls
two bodies
two men who love each other
are going to be expelled from the paradise
that they lived in.
Neither of them is a warrior
who celebrated his victories with youths.
Neither of them has riches
to calm the wrath of his judges.
Neither of them is president.
Neither of them is a minister.

Neither of them is a censor of his own mutilated desires . . .
and they feel that they can, each morning,
see their tree,
their park,
their sun,
as you and I do;
that they can tear out their hearts
in the sweetest intimacy with love
just as I always sink my flesh
desperately into your belly
also with love.
We are not God.
Let us not make the mistake again.

TRANSLATED BY IAN LUMSDEN

Where the Island Sleeps Like a Wing

Nancy Morejón

In a recent essay, "Race and Inequality in Cuba, 1899–1981," Alejandro de la Fuente outlines some of the complexities in trying to evaluate the impact of the Cuban Revolution on race relations in Cuba. He notes the various schools of thought to which different Cuban and Cuban American scholars have subscribed: "the revolution inherited and solved the racial problem"; "the revolution did inherit a racial problem, but has reinforced it"; "the revolution has had a positive impact on race relations, but . . . pre-revolutionary Cuban society had already opened paths of social advancement for blacks"; "although the revolution has had a strong impact on race relations and has eradicated the most important aspects of inequality, some forms of racism and discrimination still persist."[1]

There are at least three conceptual issues that make the debate about race and racism in contemporary Cuba a complicated one. First, as with virtually everything about contemporary Cuba, the topic is politicized. Evaluations of the condition of blacks in today's Cuba are not unrelated to evaluations of the Cuban Revolution as a whole: in general, observers sympathetic to the revolution tend to argue that there has been improvement in race relations, whereas observers opposed to the revolution highlight examples of racism and racial inequality in Cuba today. Second, as we have learned from biologists and anthropologists, race is a social, cultural, and historical concept, rather than a scientific one. That is, racial categories and identities have different meanings in different societies, and these meanings have changed over time. (The very meaning of progress *in race relations is still subject to debate inside the United States today, as can be seen in the ongoing discussions over the merits of integrated versus separate schools.) Thus Cubans of all skin colors have frequently chided U.S. observers for mechanistically applying categories and ideas from the U.S. context to the Cuban context and thus missing crucial aspects and nuances of Cuban race relations.*

Finally, we must recognize that structural/material and ideological/cultural changes do not always go hand in hand. This, in the end, is de la Fuente's conclusion: the revolution's structural approach to reducing inequality has been quite successful in some areas (particularly in health and education), but "the persistence . . . of a racist mentality should not be underestimated. . . . Still, when someone hears about a robbery in Cuba, the customary comment is: 'It was probably a Negro.'"[2]

The poems of poet, essayist, and literary translator Nancy Morejón (b. 1944) are at once universal and intensely Cuban. In some, she celebrates Havana, her city. In others, the nation's historical figures come alive in a telescoping of time that links past to present and that relates episodes in Cuban history to popular struggles across the globe. "Barely a Hero" revisits Rosa de Castillas, an episode in the struggle against Batista, in an expansive gaze that also takes in Teruel, one of the bloodiest battles of the Spanish Civil War. "Rebirth" and "Madrigal for Runaway Slaves" exhibit the same telescoping of time, and they celebrate collective memory, the oral history that resurrects the lives of unsung heroes. "Black Woman" is a denunciation of colonialism, slavery, and the sugar cycle that carries the reader through the entire trajectory of Cuban history, from the slave trade and arrival through the horrors of the plantation, maroon life, the war for independence from Spain, and, ultimately, the Sierra Maestra, all from the perspective of an Afro-Cuban woman.

REBIRTH

Daughter of ocean waters,
asleep in that womb,
I am reborn out of the gunpowder
sown over the mountain
by a guerrilla rifle
so the world in its turn
might be reborn,
and the vast sea
and all the dust,
all the dust of Cuba.

BARELY A HERO

Still further than the hills
and their jungle thickets
glints the quiet water of a pool.
The soldier, leaning over a book,
lives on where valleys fill with light.

Bullets no longer fly in Rosa de Castillas.
No hymns, no tomb, no battle of Teruel
encircle the earthen shadow

dozing, stretched on the rugged ground,
barely more than a child, dishevelled and slow.

Now, rain falls over the village
through the sheet of aromas and orange trees.
The wet trees shed their drops over the hero.

There he is now.
I see a red hole
embossing his breast.
Let life be born again from his nature!

MADRIGAL FOR RUNAWAY SLAVES

for Miguel Barnet

Head and hands dangling, flaring,
mocking the Slave Tracker's clue.
Their sweating bodies dive into the tangled wet brush.

What a hard beauty their hearts have.
On their machetes as on slender branches
pigeons and tropical mice nest.
And days of suns,
and days of moon,
and days of will
resurrect their lives, and they are like children,
sweet children of a liberty already won.

BLACK WOMAN

I still smell the foam of the sea they made me cross.
The night, I can't remember it.
The ocean itself could not remember that.
But I can't forget the first gull I made out in the distance.
High, the clouds, like innocent eyewitnesses.
Perhaps I haven't forgotten my lost coast,
nor my ancestral language.
They left me here and here I've lived.
And, because I worked like an animal,
here I came to be born.
How many Mandinga[3] epics did I look to for strength.

I rebelled.

His Worship bought me in a public square.
I embroidered His Worship's coat and bore him a male child.
My son had no name.
And His Worship died at the hands of an impeccable English lord.

I walked.

This is the land where I suffered
mouth-in-the-dust and the lash.
I rode the length of all its rivers.
Under its sun I planted seeds, brought in the crops,
but never ate those harvests.
A slave barracks was my house,
built with stones that I hauled myself.
While I sang to the pure beat of native birds.

I rose up.

In this same land I touched the fresh blood
and decayed bones of many others,
brought to this land or not, the same as I.
I no longer dreamt of the road to Guinea.
Was it to Guinea? Benin?
To Madagascar? Or Cape Verde?

I worked on and on.

I strengthened the foundations of my millenary song and of my hope.

I left for the hills.

My real independence was the free slave fort
and I rode with the troops of Maceo.

Only a century later,
together with my descendants,
from a blue mountain

I came down from the Sierra

to put an end to capital and usurer,
to generals and to bourgeois.
Now I exist: only today do we own, do we create.
Nothing is foreign to us.

The land is ours.
Ours the sea and the sky,
the magic and the vision.
Compañeros, here I see you dance
around the tree we are planting for communism.
Its prodigal wood resounds.

TRANSLATED BY KATHLEEN WEAVER

Notes

1. Alejandro de la Fuente, "Race and Inequality in Cuba, 1899–1981," *Journal of Contemporary History* 30 (1995): 132–33.
2. De la Fuente, "Race and Inequality in Cuba," 161–62.
3. From the Mandingo-speaking people of West Africa.

Silence on Black Cuba

Carlos Moore

In 1988 Carlos Moore published a devastating, and widely disseminated, critique of the Cuban Revolution. Unlike the majority of the genre of antirevolutionary literature, Moore's claimed to come from below, from the oppressed black majority of Cuba. Instead of being published by right-wing institutions such as Freedom House or the Cuban American National Foundation, Moore's Castro, the Blacks, and Africa *was published by the University of California, Los Angeles's Center for Afro-American Studies. Nevertheless, Moore himself has in turn been criticized for using a "narrow racialistic framework" in his analysis and being unwilling "to recognize class, nation, and international political economy as equally important agents in history."*[1]

Like many studies of race relations in Latin America, Moore's analysis was based on dissecting the myths of racial harmony that have been used as a weapon to discredit blacks' legitimate struggles for racial justice. Moore argued that Castro's "silence on Black Cuba" continued a longstanding Cuban elite refusal to address racial issues. When Castro repeated José Martí's slogan that "to be Cuban is more than being White, more than being Black" and insisted that "a Cuban is simply someone who belongs to no race in particular." Moore concluded that he was actually "tacitly condon[ing] white supremacy."

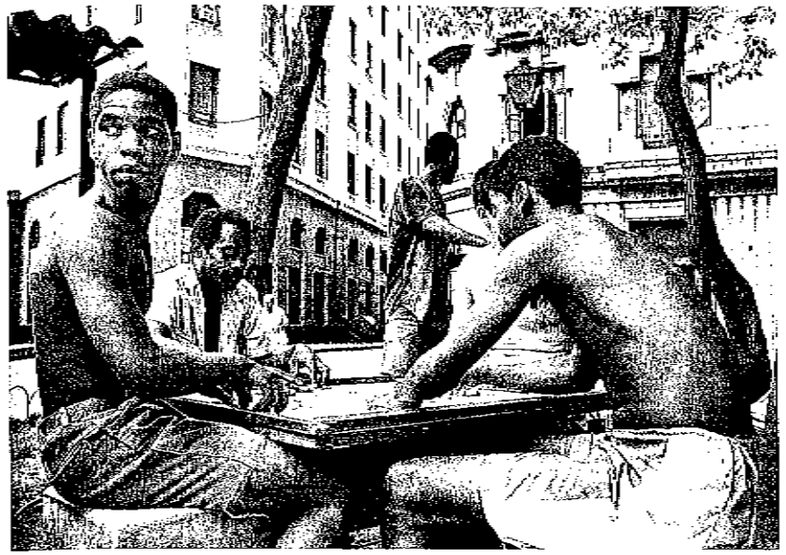
Fidel Castro had assumed mastery over a population estimated at 6.7 million, of which conceivably about 50 percent were of African descent. . . .[2] Racial segregation both in public and private establishments was still pervasive when the Revolution overthrew Batista. Some Afro-Cuban soldiers who had risked their lives alongside Castro encountered discrimination at hotels and restaurants where their white counterparts were welcomed. Castro nonetheless pointedly minimized the racial question in Cuba in those early weeks of euphoria. In answer to a foreign journalist's question during a press conference on 23 January, he even reiterated standard white Cuban platitudes. "In Cuba we do not have the same problem as, for example, in the South of the United States," he said. "There is racial discrimination in Cuba, but to a much lesser degree. We feel that our Revolution will help to eliminate those prejudices and injustices

Men sitting in a doorway. Photo by Tania Jovanovic.

that remain latent. For the time being, we have given proof in our revolutionary struggle of an absolute identification and brotherhood with men of all skin colors. In that sense, ours are the thoughts of [José] Martí and we would be neither revolutionaries nor democrats if we were not free of all types of discrimination."

However, an opinion survey among Blacks conducted independently in late February by *Revolución*, the publication of Castro's Movimiento directed by Carlos Franqui, brutally contradicted Castro's appraisal. Racism in Cuba was not a "latent" phenomenon, but a veritable plague on the black population, according to the survey. One of the interviewees, Irene Fernández, complained: "We colored people have many problems . . . because many things are denied us in Cuba. That's why we are suffering a great deal." The general tone of the sample survey was voiced by Cristobalina Sardinas: "Fidel wants the truth told, since lies are worthless. Well, we want to tell him the truth: The black race has always lived under extreme oppression. It is high time that justice be done. Equal opportunities must be given us to exist. If one goes to rent a home and they see you're Black, they refuse to rent. It's an injustice and *we expect the Revolution to do away with it*" [italics added by Carlos Moore].

Two months after Castro's victory, Black Cuba was still unsure of its status with the regime. The racial question remained perilously unanswered. The predominantly black rural and industrial workers, the unemployed, and the



Sidewalk game in front of the Bacardi Building. Photo by Tania Jovanovic.

Men at work. Photo by Tania Jovanovic.

Cutting cane. Photo by Tania Jovanovic.

white peasantry were the true social base of the regime. But they continued to have no say in the affairs of the exclusively Hispanic Cuban state.[3]

Grassroots and middle-class Blacks were uneasy about the still-unstated intentions of the new white men in power regarding the race question. Fidel Castro's icy silence on anything remotely touching the plight of Black Cuba, both before and immediately after 1959, was not reassuring. In those early months of the Revolution there was widespread fear among Afro-Cubans that, as in the past, *la gente de color* (the people of color) would be subtly marginalized by the political establishment. . . .

Essentially, Castro's speeches reconfirmed two permanent features of his approach to race relations: a commitment to an integrationist stance steeped in white liberal paternalism and a firm refusal to allow the racial question to escape that framework. In other words, it was out of the question for Blacks themselves to define the content of their own oppression, or define the terms of their ethnic emancipation. David Booth seems to have grasped that situation when he wrote that "in those two speeches in the early months of 1959 Fidel Castro not only identified the aspirations of his movement in relation to domestic racial discrimination but also established the limits beyond which it could not go. Henceforth he referred to the color problem in his speeches only in passing and implying that, with the campaign to end discrimination

in workplaces and social centers completed, there was little if anything that remained to be done."

In other words, the government was intent on banning discrimination based on race or color, while racism itself could remain a sort of discretionary ethical question. Implicit in this policy was that Cuba's new white leadership tacitly condoned white supremacy but frowned on racial segregation.

At no time between March 1959 and the Third Congress of the Cuban Communist party in February 1986, *twenty-seven years later*, did Castro or any of his top lieutenants attempt to open Cuba's racial Pandora's box again. Rather, from that point on, the Castro leadership would resist and even repress attempts by black dissenters to force the issue into the open. "When Fidel approached the racial question in 1959," remarked a Haitian Communist, "his words were received enthusiastically. It would have befitted the situation to have pursued that theme further. . . . What made him come to a halt while in such a good position?" An overview of Fidel Castro's racial attitudes before he came to power is in order to give even a tentative answer to this question.

Notes

For complete references and notes, consult the work as cited in the acknowledgment of copyrights section.

1. Lisa Brock and Otis Cunningham, "Race and the Cuban Revolution: A Critique of Carlos Moore's 'Castro, the Blacks, and Africa,'" *Cuban Studies* 21 (1991): 171–86.
2. The question of how many Blacks there are in Cuba remains highly controversial. In his only public statement on this subject, however, Fidel Castro reported to foreign journalists in 1966 that *half* of Cuba's population was of African descent.
3. *Eds. note*: That is, controlled by people of Spanish origin.

Black Man in Red Cuba

John Clytus

Black activists from the United States and elsewhere in the world have frequently looked to the Cuban Revolution as either an example of hope for revolutionary change in their own societies, or, conversely, as an example of the failure of a revolution to effectively address racial issues, because it identified socioeconomic change as its top priority. American black activist John Clytus (b. 1929), in Black Man in Red Cuba, *describes his conversations about race with a Cuban prison guard after Clytus was arrested there for trying to cross into the Guantánamo Naval Base. Clytus had been on the island for two and a half years. Clytus argues that "communism . . . bodes no good for either the 'Negroes' or the blacks. . . . Cuba taught me that a black under communism in a white-oriented society—any society where whites hold or have held power—would find himself in a white society that would persecute him for even intimating that he had a love for black."*

"This is G-2 headquarters, the secret police," he announced, watching for my reaction.

I guess now I'm supposed to jump through the ceiling, I thought. "That doesn't impress me. I haven't done anything," I said.

"You haven't done anything," he mocked. "From the moment they locked you up in Santiago, we've been checking on you—you've been going about with counterrevolutionaries."

Even if he had spoken as though he believed that, I still would have laughed in his face. I explained that I didn't go about with anybody. The counterrevolutionaries hated all foreigners—any foreigners getting along in Cuba were, undoubtedly, rendering services for the government—and the revolutionaries, or so-called revolutionaries, were afraid that anyone from the United States might turn out to be a CIA agent. The only Cubans, I told him, with whom I had even a casual friendship were two or three who identified themselves as Afro-Cubans.

"Why do you say 'Afro-Cubans'?" he asked.

That had been a mistake. Anyone identifying with his blackness was considered a divisionist, a counterrevolutionary.

"Because all black people are of African descent," I answered.

He looked at me for a long moment, then asked, "If you return to the States, what group are you going to join?"

"An all-black group."

"You're a racist," he said.

"Black people are surrounded by racists," I retorted.

"We had that problem in Cuba before the revolution. My wife is Negro, a mulatta." He took out her picture and handed it to me.

I wondered if he were so stupid as to believe that people who had been racists all their lives, had a country with a history of racism, and were still under the culture of the racist Western world, could suddenly stop being racists.

I looked at the woman in the picture, noting the blood of the black race in her full lips and her heavy hair. Her skin was not a pale white, but light enough to put her into the "*mulata avanzada*" class, the group that evolved through women of the black race coupling with men of the white race, generation after generation.

"Before the revolution, I could not accompany her to dances at the black social clubs, and she could not go with me to the white social clubs," he went on.

You're breaking my heart, I thought.

"You should visit the day nurseries here," he continued. "White and black children together, without regard to race."

"I've seen them," I said, "but I don't believe in assimilation. The black man's going to disappear in Cuba. Miscegenation's going to wipe him out."

"What you say is true," he replied dryly, and then started the interrogation.

He began by asking me my place of birth and kept going on the history-of-my-life theme until an hour or so had passed. Then he called a guard and had me taken back to my cell. It was dark, and for a time I lay awake recalling all the officer had said to me. There had been nothing in his conversation or action to make me nervous, but neither had he indicated what I could expect to happen to me. Yet, for having at least talked with the higher-ups, I felt better. If they had turned on the lights in the cell I would have felt better still. But it was only around eight o'clock, and I told myself that perhaps they were conserving electricity. Eventually I was able to fall asleep. . . .

Epilogue

Using Cuba as a yardstick to measure the "delights" of communism, I am convinced that the latter bodes no good for either the "Negroes" or the blacks.

Communism is purported to be a system that will end the exploitation of man by his fellow man. It proposes to accomplish this phenomenon by ending the class society of the capitalist system and by creating a classless society under communism. What it actually does is reverse the direction of the exploitation—and this only when it is convenient.

If under capitalism the "haves" have because they take from the "have nots," under communism the "have nots" have because of what is taken from the "haves." Communism, championing equal treatment for all, would end the exploitation of just the poor and exploit all, rich or poor, who did not dance to the dictatorial tune of its ruling hierarchy.

Cuba taught me that a black under communism in a white-oriented society—any society where whites hold or have held power—would find himself in a white society that would persecute him for even intimating that he had a love for black. Periodicals, books, television, and other media of communication would no longer be permitted to carry his voice of dissent against injustice.

Communism, with its benevolent method of ending the racial problem by condensing all races into one-big-happy-humane-race, would ring down the final curtain on black consciousness. Nor would "Negroes," in spite of their love for integration with whites, find themselves in their expected paradise. The "Negroes" that constitute the "bourgeoisie of color" in white-oriented societies would suddenly find such capitalist "luxuries" as their homes and businesses, paid for with sweat and hard-earned money, taken from them for the "convenience" of the State.

Their protest marches, used so loosely by "Negroes" to publicize their problems in order for whites to solve them, would become their death marches. The only people who "overcome" in protest marches in Communist societies are those in the tanks and with the machine guns.

After three years in Communist Cuba, I am convinced that a "Negro" Communist is an absurdity and a black Communist is an impossibility.

Post-modern Maroon in the Ultimate *Palenque*

Christian Parenti

For other African Americans, Cuba's experiment with socialism—despite its flaws—represented the hope for radical social change that seemed impossible in the United States. Sociologist Christian Parenti dubbed Assata Shakur—former activist in the Black Liberation Army, who escaped from prison in the United States and settled in Cuba—as a "post-modern maroon in the ultimate palenque*"—drawing on the imagery of the times of slavery to depict Cuba as a refuge of freedom outside of U.S. domination. For Shakur, the vibrancy of Afro-Cuban culture in Cuba poses almost as stark a contrast to the United States as do the political and economic differences. This vibrancy is due more to the continuation of the slave trade until late in the nineteenth century, which meant that African culture was constantly renewed, than to the revolution—but it certainly plays an important role in the differences in racial ideologies and racial consciousness between the two countries.*

What happens to old Black Panthers? Some wind up dead like Huey P. Newton. Some join the Moonies and the Republican Party, like Eldridge Cleaver. Some, like Mumia Abu Jamal, languish in prison. But a few, like Assata Shakur, have taken the path of the "maroon," the runaway slave of old who slipped off the plantation to the free jungle communities known as palenques.

Two decades ago Shakur was described as "the soul of the Black Liberation Army (BLA)," an underground, paramilitary group that emerged from the rubble of east coast chapters of the Black Panther Party. Among her closest political comrades was Ahfeni Shakur, Tupac Shakur's mother. Forced underground in 1971, by charges that were later proved false, Assata was accused of being the "bandit queen" of the BLA; the "mother hen who kept them together, kept them moving, kept them shooting." The BLA's alleged actions included assassinating almost ten police officers, kidnapping drug dealers (one of whom turned out to be an FBI agent), and robbing banks from coast to coast.

Throughout 1971 and 1972 "Assata sightings" and wild speculation about her

deeds were a headline mainstay for New York tabloids. Then, in 1973, Shakur and two friends were pulled over by state troopers on the New Jersey Turnpike. During the stop, shooting erupted. A trooper and one alleged BLA member were killed, another trooper was slightly hurt and Assata—or Miss Joanne Chesimard, as authorities preferred to call her—was severely wounded by a blast of police gunfire. Left to die in a paddy wagon, she survived only to be charged for the trooper's death and sentenced to life in prison.

During the next six years (much of it spent in solitary confinement), Shakur beat a half-dozen other indictments. In 1979—after giving birth in prison, only to have her daughter taken away in less than a week—Assata Shakur managed one of the most impressive jailbreaks of the era. On the day of the escape, [a] team of three met in the waiting room at the prison entrance. . . . One member of the team went ahead. . . . Meanwhile . . . one of the [others] drew a gun and took the guard hostage. Simultaneously, the man visiting Shakur . . . ordered the officer to open the . . . door. . . . From there Shakur and "the raiders" took a third guard hostage and made it to [a] parked van. . . . Shakur . . . disappeared without a trace.

For the next five years authorities hunted in vain. Shakur had vanished. Numerous other alleged BLA cadre were busted during those years, including Tupac's uncle, Mutula Shakur. In 1984 word came from ninety miles off the coast of Florida. The FBI's most wanted female fugitive was living in Cuba, working on a masters degree in political science, writing her autobiography, and raising her daughter.

Cut to 1997. It's a stunningly hot summer afternoon in Havana, Cuba—the ultimate palenque—and I am having strong, black coffee with Assata Shakur, who just turned fifty, but looks more like thirty-six. She keeps a low profile; security is still a big concern. She's finishing her second book. Given how much the Feds want this woman locked up, I feel strange being in her house, as if my presence is a breach of security.

Parenti: How did you arrive in Cuba?

Shakur: Well, I couldn't, you know, just write a letter and say "Dear Fidel, I'd like to come to your country." So I had to hoof it—come and wait for the Cubans to respond. Luckily, they had some idea who I was, they'd seen some of the briefs and UN petitions from when I was a political prisoner. So they were somewhat familiar with my case and they gave me the status of being a political refugee. That means I am here in exile as a political person.

How did you feel when you got here?

I was really overwhelmed. Even though I considered myself a socialist, I had these insane, silly notions about Cuba. I mean, I grew up in the 1950s when little kids were hiding under their desks, because "the communists were coming." So even though I was very supportive of the revolution, I expected everyone to go around in green fatigues looking like Fidel, speaking in a very stereotypical way, "the revolution must continue, *compañero*. Let us triumph, comrade." When I got here people were just people, doing what they had where I came from. It's a country with a strong sense of community. Unlike the U.S., folks aren't as isolated. People are really into other people.

Also, I didn't know there were all these black people here and that there was this whole Afro-Cuban culture. My image of Cuba was Che Guevara and Fidel Castro, I hadn't heard of Antonio Maceo [a hero of the Cuban War of Independence] and other Africans who had played a role in Cuban history.

The lack of brand names and consumerism also really hit me. You go into a store and there would be a bag of "rice." It undermined what I had taken for granted in the absurd zone where people are like, "Hey, I only eat uncle so-and-so's brand of rice."

So, how were you greeted by the Cuban state?

They've treated me very well. It was different from what I expected; I thought they might be pushy. But they were more interested in what I wanted to do, in my projects. I told them that the most important things were to unite with my daughter and to write a book. They said, "What do you need to do that?" They were also interested in my vision of the struggle of African people in the United States. I was so impressed by that. Because I grew up—so to speak—in the movement dealing with white leftists who were very bossy and wanted to tell us what to do and thought they knew everything. The Cuban attitude was one of solidarity with respect. It was a profound lesson in cooperation.

Did they introduce you to people or guide you around for a while?

They gave me a dictionary, an apartment, took me to some historical places, and then I was pretty much on my own. My daughter came down, after prolonged harassment and being denied a passport, and she became my number one priority. We discovered Cuban schools together, we did the sixth grade together, explored parks, and the beach.

She was taken from you at birth, right?

Yeah. It's not like Cuba where you get to breast-feed in prison and where they work closely with the family. Some mothers in the U.S. never get to see their newborns. I was with my daughter for a week before they sent me back to the prison. That was one of the most difficult periods of my life, that separation. It's only been recently that I've been able to talk about it. I had to just block it out; otherwise I think I might have gone insane. In 1979, when I escaped, she was only five years old.

You came to Cuba how soon after?

Five years later, in 1984.

I know it's probably out of bounds, but where were you during the intervening years?

I was underground. But I don't talk about that period. To do so would put a lot of people who helped me in jeopardy.

Right, I hear you. You've talked about adjusting to Cuba, but could you talk a bit about adjusting to exile.

Well, for me exile means separation from people I love. I didn't, and don't miss the U.S., per se. But black culture, black life in the U.S., that African American flavor, I definitely miss. The language, the movements, the style, I get nostalgic about that.

Adjusting to exile is coming to grips with the fact that you may never go back to where you come from. The way I dealt with that, psychologically, was thinking about slavery. You know, a slave had to come to grips with the fact that "I may never see Africa again." Then a maroon, a runaway slave, has to—even in the act of freedom—adjust to the fact that being free of struggling for freedom means, "I'll be separated from people I love." So I drew on that and people like Harriet Tubman and all those people who got away from slavery. Because, that's what prison looked like. It looked like slavery. It felt like slavery. It was black people and people of color in chains. And the way I got there was slavery. If you stand up and say, "I don't go for the status quo." Then "we got something for you, it's a whip, a chain, a cell."

Even in being free it was like, "I am free but now what?" There was a lot to get used to. Living in a society committed to social justice, a Third World country with a lot of problems. It took a while to understand all that Cubans are up against and fully appreciate all they are trying to do.

Did the Africanness of Cuba help; did that provide solace?

The first thing that was comforting was the politics. It was such a

You know, in the States you feel overwhelmed by the negative messages that you get and you just feel weird, like you're the only one seeing all this pain and inequality. People are saying, "Forget about that, just try to get rich, dog eat dog, get your own, buy, spend, consume." So living here was an affirmation of myself: it was like "Okay, there are lots of people who get outraged at injustice."

The African culture I discovered later. At first I was learning the politics, about socialism—what it feels like to live in a country where everything is owned by the people, where health care and medicine are free. Then I started to learn about the Afro-Cuban religions, the Santería, Palo Monte, the *abakuá*. I wanted to understand the ceremonies and the philosophy. I really came to grips with how much we—black people in the U.S.—were robbed of. Whether it's the tambours, the drums, or the dances. Here, they still know rituals preserved from slavery times. It was like finding another piece of myself. I had to find an African name. I'm still looking for pieces of that Africa I was torn from. I've found it here in all aspects of the culture. There is a tendency to reduce the Africanness of Cuba to the Santería. But it's in the literature, the language, the politics. . . .

What about race and racism in Cuba?

That's a big question. The revolution has only been around thirty-something years. It would be fantasy to believe that the Cubans could have completely gotten rid of racism in that short a time. Socialism is not a magic wand: wave it and everything changes.

Can you be more specific about the successes and failures along these lines?

I can't think of any area of the country that is segregated. Another example, the Third Congress of the Cuban Communist Party was focused on making party leadership reflect the actual number of people of color and women in the country. Unfortunately by the time the Fourth Congress rolled around the whole focus had to be on the survival of the revolution. When the Soviet Union and the socialist camp collapsed, Cuba lost something like 85 percent of its income. It's a process but I honestly think that there's room for a lot of changes throughout the culture. Some people still talk about "good hair" and "bad hair."

Some people think light skin is good, that if you marry a light person you're advancing the race. There are a lot of contradictions in peoples' consciousness. There still needs to be de-eurocentrizing of the schools, though Cuba is further along with that than most places in the world. In fairness, I think that race relations in Cuba are twenty times better than they are in

the States, and I believe the revolution is committed to eliminating racism completely.

I also feel that the special period has changed conditions in Cuba. It's brought in lots of white tourists, many of whom are racists and expect to be waited on subserviently.

Another thing is the joint venture corporations which bring their racist ideas and racist corporate practices, for example, not hiring enough blacks. All of that means the revolution has to be more vigilant than ever in identifying and dealing with racism.

A charge one hears, even on the Left, is that institutional racism still exists in Cuba. Is that true? Does one find racist patterns in allocation of housing, work, or the junctions of criminal justice?

No. I don't think institutional racism, as such, exists in Cuba. But at the same time, people have their personal prejudices. Obviously these people, with these personal prejudices, must work somewhere, and must have some influence on the institutions they work in. But I think it's superficial to say racism is institutionalized in Cuba.

I believe that there needs to be a constant campaign to educate people, sensitize people, and analyze racism. The fight against racism always has two levels; the level of politics and policy but also the level of individual consciousness. One of the things that influences ideas about race in Cuba is that the revolution happened in 1959, when the world had a very limited understanding of what racism was. During the 1960s, the world saw the black power movement, which I, for one, very much benefited from. You know "black is beautiful," exploring African art, literature, and culture. That process didn't really happen in Cuba. Over the years, the revolution accomplished so much that most people thought that meant the end of racism. For example, I'd say that more than 90 percent of black people with college degrees were able to do so because of the revolution. They were in a different historical place. The emphasis, for very good reasons, was on black-white unity and the survival of the revolution. So it's only now that people in the universities are looking into the politics of identity.

From Utopianism to Institutionalization

Juan Antonio Blanco and Medea Benjamin

If the 1960s were characterized by debate and experimentation, the 1970s saw an increasing shift toward "Sovietization," a return to material incentives, and reliance on the export of sugar to the Eastern bloc. In a series of interviews conducted in 1993, Cuban historian and philosopher Juan Antonio Blanco (b. 1947) talks about the contrast between the 1960s and the 1970s. Blanco is the epitome of a Cuban-style public intellectual. He travels, works with international agencies, and has spoken frequently in the United States, as well as published several books in English. He is a Communist Party member and a strong supporter of the revolution, though he has had frequent disagreements with Cuban government policies over the years and lost his position at the University of Havana in the late 1960s due to his disagreement with the Sovietization of the curriculum. In 1993 he founded the Centro Félix Varela, a nongovernmental organization in Havana. Named after a nineteenth-century priest whose work contributed to Cuba's independence movement, the center conducts research and publishes a journal on politics and ethics.

Can you talk a little more about those different visions and the different stages the revolution has gone through?

In the first stage, during the sixties, it was basically the ideas of Fidel Castro and Che Guevara that prevailed. Che's criticism of the Soviet Union and the socialist camp was that they were obsessed with the economic construction of socialism and that they were disregarding the moral and spiritual factors of socialist societies. Che once said in an interview that he was not interested in economic socialism. If you disregard the spiritual factors and only attempt to deal with economic factors, you are not going to get rid of alienation. For both Che and Fidel, socialism was not simply a matter of developing a new way of distribution. It was a question of freeing people from alienation at the same time.

This was a crucial and very clear distinction between the kind of social-

ism we wanted to build and that which was already in progress in the Soviet Union and the Eastern bloc at that time.

What made it possible for this alternative vision to prevail during the sixties?

The sixties was a time of questioning and upheaval all over the world, giving us more space for experimentation. There was the Vietnam War and the anti-war movement in the United States. It was the time of student insurrections in places like Berkeley and Paris and the time of the Cultural Revolution in China. It was the time of the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia. There were revolutionary struggles being waged throughout Latin America. There was Che Guevara himself and his vision of creating a new person with a new set of values.

The sixties was a time when we attempted to create a totally new way of organizing the economy that would promote solidarity and cooperation between both individuals and economic enterprises instead of competition. It was also a time of discussing freedom—intellectual freedom, individual freedom, the way to secure individuality within the context of a communist society.

You speak with great nostalgia about the sixties.

It was a crucial time for our revolution and for the world as well. I think one of the things we should all do one day is to sit and discuss the sixties and what it all meant—especially as we approach the closing of the century.

Yet you say that the vision of the sixties, even in Cuba, lost out. What happened?

Several things happened to derail this vision. On the one hand, there were internal factors. The Cuban economy became mismanaged after Guevara left Cuba in 1965 for the internationalist mission that he was committed to. His ideas were not discarded after he left, but many of them were actually pushed too fast after his departure. This brought about a degree of mismanagement of the economy that produced a critical situation for Cuba at the end of the sixties.

Could you explain that? What do you mean when you say that his ideas were pushed too fast?

For example, a campaign to reduce bureaucracy—a valid idea—turned into the destruction of the accounting system that Che had left behind. Without accurate and reliable data, no capitalist enterprise could operate, and the lack of data was even more devastating for a socialist centralized economy.

Another issue is that of material versus moral incentives. Che believed

that social consciousness should become the main motivation for production, but after his departure this idea was really carried out by decree and not by long-term policies. It is one thing to try little by little to plant the seed of the new consciousness within the population by education and another to say that starting tomorrow there will be no more extra pay in the factory and everybody will work on the basis of moral incentives. And that's basically what happened. We pushed too fast and the people were not ready for it.

What about the 1968 ofensiva revolucionaria, the revolutionary offensive that banned all private selling? Isn't this another example of pushing too fast? Instead of trying to eliminate the worst excesses of the marketplace, the government eliminated the market itself.

Exactly. In 1968 we wiped out private enterprise, from the woman running a hamburger stand to the guy selling snow cones on the street corner. It was again done by decree, forbidding people from entering into market relations, rather than through a slower process of both educating the population and setting up an alternative to replace the vacuum created by this loss of private enterprise.

I think there was a valid concern that market relations should not run the society, that the society should be run on a more humane basis to guarantee the basics to everyone. I understand the nationalization of the nation's major industries. But in terms of small businesses, I think that instead of eliminating them they could have been regulated in their transactions, making sure that market relations did not become the general trend of the economy. By [the government's] pushing them aside in one fell swoop, the Cuban economy never recovered from that blow. Goods became scarce, inflation resulted because people had a lot of money and not much to buy, and the problem of poor services continues to haunt us today.

Another economic disaster in the late 1960s was the push for the ten-million-ton sugar harvest. This self-imposed goal of producing ten million tons of sugar in 1969–1970 was designed to take advantage of the relatively high price of sugar in the international market at that time and to get Cuba enough money to launch a major development program. The goal was not only too ambitious (representing about three million tons more than Cuba had ever produced) and was not achieved, but it also produced tremendous dislocations in the rest of the economy. This all-out drive for sugar meant that other sectors of the economy, including food production, were neglected. This failure must have been a major factor in the reassessment of the socialist path Cuba had been following.

Yes, it certainly was a major setback. But in addition to these internal factors we've been discussing, there were also a number of international setbacks that forced us to realign our policies. Guevara's death and the defeat of the guerrillas in many parts of Latin America at the end of the sixties left Cuba more isolated. In Vietnam, the replacement of U.S. troops by South Vietnamese troops and by more intensive bombing allowed the United States to end the draft, which led to a demobilization of the antiwar movement in the United States and allowed Washington to focus more on other foreign policy "problems" like Cuba. In general, the more conservative atmosphere that followed the 1960s unrest in many parts of the world was not beneficial to the Cuban process.

So with an international environment that was not exactly supportive of the Cuban revolution, we were obliged to reassess both the situation and the perspectives of the Cuban revolution. During that debate, which took place in the early 1970s, it was said that the only possibility of defending Cuba in that adverse environment was to strengthen our alliance with the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. And with this alliance, throughout the 1970s and the first half of the 1980s, little by little we began to import the Soviet model of socialism into different areas of the Cuban society.

You say you were forced to strengthen your alliance with the Soviet bloc. Relations with the Soviets must have been quite poor after the 1962 Missile Crisis, when Cuba was angry with the Soviets for having negotiated with the United States for a solution to the crisis behind Cuba's back.

Cuban-Soviet relations suffered after the Missile Crisis, but improved afterward when Fidel went to the Soviet Union and spoke to Khrushchev. But this rapprochement was affected by the radical policies Cuba was following internationally, its support for the guerrilla movements in Latin America and in Africa.

Against the will of the Soviets?

Against the wisdom of the Soviets. And internally, our notions about constructing socialism in a different way were creating tensions in the relationship. The worst years were 1964–1967. I remember in 1967 when Premier Kosygin came to Cuba the relations were as cold as could be.

But by the early 1970s, the Cuban revolution was in trouble both because of internal economic problems and a less hospitable international climate, and those who favored closer ties with the Soviets won out. Can you describe this second phase of the revolution, and what elements of the Soviet model were incorporated into the Cuban system?

This second stage of the revolution was characterized not so much by creativity or imagination or the search for a unique Cuban identity but by the political and economic institutionalization of the Cuban revolution under the increasing influence of the Soviet model. Sure, we made adjustments to our reality and came out with some unique institutions such as our legislative body, called People's Power. But basically we copied the essential elements of the Soviet model in its overall conception of the economy, its relationship with politics, and the pervasive view of dogmatic Marxism as universal truths. We also created an unnecessary overdependence on the Soviet Union that was not healthy.

In our economy, we copied an absurd model that was based on a stupid, theoretical concept of creating "values" and on fulfilling your yearly plan to create these values, instead of actually creating useful goods. Let's say that you were the head of a construction company and you were told by the government that this year you had to create values of three million pesos. Fine. They didn't say that you had to construct three bridges and two schools; they said you had to create values of three million pesos. Their concept of creating values was spending that amount in labor and resources. So you could create three million pesos in values by moving land, digging ditches, putting in some columns here and there, but having nothing finished or useful in the end.

It's like in the Soviet Union where they were measuring the productivity of a chair factory not by the number of chairs it made, or how comfortable those chairs were, or how cost-effective they were in producing them, but by the total weight of the chairs. So you go to the Soviet Union and you need a crane to carry a chair, because they would make furniture as heavy as possible to "overfulfill" their yearly plan.

One of the funniest things in Cuba is that you could be driving along a highway and see a bridge built up on one side and on the other side, but nothing connecting them.

And the construction group that did it probably successfully completed its plan.

Oh yes, they probably overfulfilled their plan. They probably even got an award for being good workers, for creating a lot of "value."

Another irony of this Soviet model is that it disregarded social needs. Under this system, things such as child-care centers, schools, and hospitals—social services in general—were listed as unproductive expenditures and the orientation was to spend in productive areas. So construction for social needs was disregarded and we were accumulating more and more

social problems in terms of lack of housing, child-care centers, schools, hospitals, etc.

Another problem we found is that unlike the focus on moral incentives in the 1960s, material incentives had become the motivating force for workers. Not only were people losing the sense of working for the common good, but these material incentives usually had little to do with the final outcome of their work. So people were making a lot of money, but not producing more or more efficiently.

Didn't this mentality of divorcing the work from the final results also affect the education system? I remember during this time that the teachers' main interest was promoting all the students so they could reach their yearly promotion goals. The quality of education suffered because students who should have been left behind were promoted to reach these abstract goals.

Yes, with this Soviet model, quality and concrete results suffered. So this kind of madness existed throughout our system and after some fifteen years it became obvious that something was very wrong.

In fact, I would say that the worst error we committed, the one with the most dramatic and lasting effects, was the decision to follow the Soviet model of socialism. Those fifteen years of "Russification" of our socialism left us with problems in almost every realm of Cuban society.

In the economy, it introduced the notion of state socialism and vertical command based on a primitive and incompetent style of authoritarian central planning. In politics, it promoted the bureaucratization of organizations that were once full of creativity and initiative by transforming them into formal extensions of the Party machinery, while restricting the limits of pluralism in society as a whole. Socially, an attempt to legitimize special privileges for a new managerial bureaucratic strata negatively affected the revolutionary spirit of our process. Culturally, it certainly killed the possibility of using social science—and Marxism for that matter—as a useful tool in the construction of the new society when they were transformed into a religious creed for the apologetic praising of official policies.

Several generations of cadre and professors were inculcated with this adulterated and manipulative version of socialism. The rectification campaign was launched in the mid-1980s to overcome some of these problems that were perverting our process.

This third stage of the Cuban revolution, what you call the rectification process, was talked about in Cuba as Cuba's own form of perestroika. *It took place years before the Soviet Union began its reform process and involved "delinking" from the Soviet model. Did Cuba begin to decouple itself from the Soviet bloc solely because you were looking at problems within Cuba itself, or were you also looking at problems within the Soviet Union when you began the rectification campaign?*

We did not attempt to wean ourselves economically from the Soviet sphere. We were instead concerned that the Eastern European model was not a good model for constructing socialism in Cuba. We distanced ourselves from the idea that what worked for the Soviets would necessarily work for the Cubans, and yes, we also started to realize that this model was not even working that well for the Soviets. I think Fidel himself had the wisdom of seeing what was going to happen in the Soviet bloc before it started. Remember, he launched the rectification process well before perestroika even existed.

When was that?

Officially speaking, the rectification process in Cuba began in April 1986 when Fidel Castro gave a speech calling for a revamping of many of our economic and political policies. But this process really started in 1984 after the U.S. invasion of Grenada, and it started in the military field with a reassessment of the defense doctrine of Cuba.

What happened in Grenada to cause this reassessment? Did the fact that the United States invaded Grenada make Cuba more concerned about a direct invasion? I remember that Alexander Haig, who was Reagan's secretary of state at the time, was making hostile statements about going to the source of revolutionary upheaval in the region, by which he meant Cuba.

Yes, and it was not only the invasion of Grenada that concerned us. The United States was also seriously considering intervening in El Salvador and Nicaragua. So we had to take the threat of a possible invasion very seriously.

In this process of reexamining our defense system, we reached the conclusion that we had wrongly copied the defense model of the Soviet Union and the Eastern bloc of relying on a regular army, which is only a small segment of the population. We decided to revise that approach, going back to our earlier notions of the 1960s when we thought that the defense of the Cuban revolution should be the task of the entire population. . . .

I think that this 1984 reassessment of our defense system was historically very important. It reactivated our original concept of the importance of the people's participation in defending their revolution and stressed our vision of an "armed democracy" as evidence of respect for Cuba's sovereignty.

How did rectification play out in the economy?

After reshaping the island's system of defense, we entered a process of reassessing our economic policies. First, we scrutinized our strategy of development and, second, the manner in which our economy had been structured according to the Soviet model.

For example, we decided to change our concept of state planning, to make sure that planning did not mean—as it used to—a total centralization of decision making at all levels. We were trying to strike a balance between centralized and decentralized decisions in a planned economy and to debureaucratize our planning process.

This is also the time that we geared our development to high technology. This had long been a Cuban position which had always clashed with that of the CMEA [the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance], the socialist trading bloc. A number of countries within that bloc tried to impose a traditional international division of labor that mimicked the division of labor in the capitalist world, with Cuba and other Third World socialist countries producing raw commodities and the more industrialized socialist countries producing manufactured goods. . . .

Starting around 1982, we began to invest heavily in biotechnology, as well as other high-tech areas. By the end of the 1980s, we had already invested the equivalent of several billion dollars in these areas. The three key areas we have been developing are biotechnology, pharmaceuticals, and computerized medical equipment and software.

How did the rectification process address this long-standing controversy of material versus moral incentives?

As part of this process we began to rectify the essence of the economic mechanisms we had been using. We realized that we could not develop an alternative society based on solidarity and feelings of love for your neighbor while using capitalist economic incentives, which foster a dog-eat-dog mentality. So we recaptured the use of moral incentives, which had been set aside for nearly 15 years. We did not discard material incentives; we understood that material incentives were also important to motivate people. But little by little we began to recover the idea that the revolution was not only a matter of a more just distribution of wealth, but also a spiritual project to release people's creativity and give them a greater degree of participation in society. . . .

Getting back to rectification, what effect did it have on the political system?

Rectification led us to a careful review of our political system, with a serious search for ways to get people more involved in the political process. In

early 1991 we opened a national discussion with an open agenda in every single workplace, school, university, and neighborhood, so that people could openly and freely discuss the problems of Cuban society and how they felt those problems should be dealt with. Their criticisms and suggestions were actively solicited. During the several months of this nationwide discussion, more than a million opinions, criticisms, and proposals were recorded.

All these contributions were processed and circulated to delegates of the Communist Party Congress, who also were elected in a more democratic manner than ever before. For the first time there were direct delegates proposed by the rank-and-file party membership rather than a list of possible candidates presented to the rank and file for voting. This time people were selected by their peers to attend the Congress.

The Fourth Party Congress in 1991 was also a peculiar congress if you compare it with any of those previously held. It was a very open, democratic discussion. Normally, the party congress—this was the tradition in the Soviet Union and the Eastern bloc—is opened by the first secretary of the Communist Party (in this case Fidel), who gives his assessment of everything that happened during the past five years. Typically, he also presents his ideas as to how the Congress should proceed. Fidel decided that he was not going to do that, because he didn't want to preempt the discussion. He simply made some opening remarks on the current situation we were facing, and then opened the floor to debate.

For those who have a picture of the Cuban revolution from the outside, especially as it is portrayed in the international media, the notion of democracy within the Cuban party is a very difficult one to accept. They think that a one-party system, per se, precludes the possibility of democracy. Moreover, they think that Fidel Castro decides the outcome of every issue the country faces. But this just isn't so.

During the second stage of the revolution, from the 1970s to the first half of the 1980s, Fidel Castro's views on more than one issue represented, in fact, a minority within the party and he has acknowledged that he was overruled on several political and economic issues. He has always accepted the majority opinion, even if he disagreed with it.

That's not new. During the fight against Batista he also had this style of accepting collective decisions. For instance, he never thought that the idea of calling for a general strike against Batista in April 1958 was a sound one, but he accepted it because it was the criteria of the majority. The strike was a disaster, and the very existence of the revolution was put in jeopardy.

Fidel sometimes criticized what was going on in the 1970s—I remember

one speech in which he said that some things in this revolution were legal but they were not moral. But he didn't try to impose his will, because he knew that democracy and unity were more precious for us than imposing a view even if it was a correct one.

So how did Fidel manage to start the rectification campaign? What was happening in the mid-1980s that allowed his view to prevail?

It had become obvious to many people at that time that the model of development that we imported from the Soviet Union had begun to reach the point of stagnation. Therefore, it was easier for Fidel Castro and those who sympathized with his point of view to present the problems we were facing and to propose a reexamination of our own roots in an effort to put our socialist process back on a more authentic path.

Carlos Puebla Sings about the Economy

Carlos Puebla

In a different vein, singer Carlos Puebla (1917–1989) takes a humorous look at the many inefficiencies in the way society and economy function. This grouping of his works reflects, with humor and compassion, the contradictions of revolutionary society as they were experienced by ordinary men and women and that shaped the texture of their daily lives. A sensitive antenna, Puebla picked up what people were saying on bus lines, at markets, and in front of the television, and through the troubadour's poetic imagination he turned it into a popular art form.

CINEMA ON TELEVISION *(Cine en televisión)*
(A program they stopped showing a few years ago)

Rodriguez Alemán, my friend:
TV seems unpleasant to me
since after listening to your serenade
I don't even get the chance to say "gee."

You take off navigating a river
of technical terms with which you unleash
a well-meaning but long, boring speech
that leaves the viewers cold.

After all that energy's been wasted,
the evening's movie begins
and you depart with neither shame nor glory,

it turns out the film you're offering, we can tell from the start
is so old and has been shown so many times
that we know it by heart.