

# **“The Battle of Ideas” and the Capitalist Transformation of the Cuban State**

Saturday 10 February 2007, by [ORTEGA Manuel Paz](#) (Date first published: January 2007).

**The present state of Cuban society is critical. [1] This is only palpable after having lived for a certain time in Cuba and in any case it is very difficult to come to this conclusion without possessing a level of information to which the average Cuban does not have access. In other words, to construct a reasonably serious picture of what is happening in Cuba at present is an extremely delicate process of social analysis, because of the lack of information and its manipulation by the state.**

## Contents

- [From the Defense of the \(...\)](#)
- [... to the Battle of Ideas](#)
- [Modernizing the Means of \(...\)](#)
- [The Illusion of Culture](#)
- [Ideological Recruitment \(...\)](#)
- [Preserving the Elites](#)

To try and construct this picture Cubans have no alternative other than generalization. However, the mechanisms by which Cubans can obtain statistical information are extremely primitive and difficult to apply: it is a question of personal experience (fairly inoffensive without the necessary link with other practices); of the detailed analysis of the information which appears in the mass media (extremely reduced and controlled); of free comments, which have a real basis in fact, which travel from mouth to mouth, are born of collective or individual experiences; and finally of jokes, another kind of comment which may or may not have a basis in reality and whose verification is hypothetical, but which always provokes, on certain topical subjects, the most dissimilar reactions among the population, going from disinterest to fear.

The Cuban people does not possess many valuable tools to resist the rubbishy information, recycled and recyclable, that the state “offers it”. One could reply to that by saying that the different political regimes that exist do the same thing, and that it is not a reason to treat the Cubans differently from the other citizens of the world. But there exist two powerful reasons for opposing these two phenomena:

- First of all, citizens must fight to have alternative means of information which enable their experiences to be listened to by others, within their society or in the world, in order to counter the hegemonic action of states.
- Secondly, the Cuban state has historically proclaimed itself to be socialist. But socialism without plurality of criteria and without freedom of discussion, without the freedom to organize debates, not only theoretical (the freedom which comes from tolerance for the concepts and the ideas of the other

and not the abstract freedom of liberal theoreticians), is only a hollow term. Such a socialism does not even deserve to be looked at, so much is its organization so rigid, this rigidity that the hegemonic “socialist” sectors have taken the responsibility of producing.

To revalorize this last criteria, manifestly forgotten by those who proclaim themselves “Friends of the Cuban people”, we propose to briefly reflect on one aspect of present-day Cuba, an aspect that is indispensable in order to produce this picture that we were talking about. This is the “Battle of Ideas”, which has already broadly affected Cuban society and which is viewed positively by many people in the world.

### **From the Defense of the Rights of a Child...**

Five years after it started, the Battle of Ideas is a political operation of the Cuban state which aimed, in December 1999, to maintain in power the historic bureaucracy of the “revolution” through a deepening of the cultural and media struggle against American imperialism, and whose principal object is the Cuban people.

Like any political operation, the Battle of Ideas began to function with a real fact: the defense of the rights of a Cuban child to continue to live with his family in Cuba. What interests us here is not the detailed examination of the saga of Elian nor how it was finally possible to win. We just want to underline some points.

- First of all, the case of Elian, independently of its real humanitarian basis, is an example of a family quarrel into which both international law and the particular law of the states concerned had to intervene.
- Secondly, both the American state, through the intransigent voluntary Cuban exiles in Miami, and the Cuban state ignored the preceding idea and engage in a struggle that was mediatized and quasi-legal - in fact, the adventure ended by the entry of the forces of the FBI and by the personal decision of President Bill Clinton to resolve the conflict. It should be noted that the marches and the protests of the Cuban people would have been useless if instead of Clinton we had been faced with Bush.
- Thirdly, the Elian case signified for the Cuban state a victory without precedent on the international level, which reinforced the legitimacy of the regime and helped it to find a way to deepen the ideological struggle against Yankee imperialism and to create new methods of politico-cultural indoctrination, by reinforcing in the consciousness of the Cuban population the necessity of the existence of an apostolic Welfare State.
- Finally, the battle for Elian came at the time of a complicated political situation for the Cuban state. It could no longer manage to mobilize the people (for a long time already the principal personalities of the establishment had appealed in the first instance to the confidence of the people in its leaders as the main arm of legitimacy of the system) while immigration, legal or illegal, aiming for an improvement in personal well-being, was becoming a social project because of the increase of the number of immigrants. The case of Elian played an important role in changing the discourse of the Cuban state on immigration: it had to recognize that the Cuban emigrants were leaving the country in search of material improvements.

## **... to the Battle of Ideas**

After the outcome of the Elian case, the Cuban state and its Commander-in-chief Fidel Castro began to formulate “propositions” (impositions) of cultural, social and economic development in order to define the future of the nation. However it also became obvious that it was just a question of attempting to justify a struggle that had been undertaken a long time ago and which had only one objective: the maintaining in power of the “revolutionary” bureaucratic elite and of the new managers and the recycling of the methods of state manipulation and repression, now covered by material and cultural novelties proper to a patriarchal Welfare State.

It is then that the Battle of Ideas was born. This political operation produced the whole army - that is the term - of political cadres and an ideology aimed at carrying out a project which, if we take seriously the declaration of the main leaders of the state, is the regime’s last card. If the Battle of Ideas fails - the regime knows this and so that it will not happen it uses all its strength to proclaim daily the invincible nature of the attempt- it is Cuban socialism which will fail.

In order to understand the importance of this last effort of the historic Cuban bureaucracy it is necessary to study its principles, its postulates and the means for accomplishing them.

### **Modernizing the Means of Communication**

In order to popularize the Battle of Ideas it was necessary to create a logistical basis for an optimal functioning. It was necessary to adopt the political offensive to the new technologies of the period and the Cuban state recognized that the number of units who were receiving existing political signals was insufficient. So it was indispensable to make television available to the largest possible number of people.

That is how the idea of Panda televisions emerged. The Cuban government started from an agreement signed with the Peoples Republic of China, which undertook to sell at reasonable prices a million television sets of a high technological level. In order to distribute them’, the Cuban state again used the distribution mechanism of the 1970s and the 1980s: the delivery of household electrical appliances to deserving workers. In addition, by using the monopoly that it had over the majority of services, it withdrew TV sets from sale in the shops operating with foreign currency and replaced them by Pandas at a high price (around US\$450). Now it is impossible to find a million vanguard workers, and the shops selling goods for foreign currency quickly had to lower the price of television sets by 50 per cent, because of the refusal of the population to invest so much money in an apparatus which they did not have a guarantee (many people justified their refusal by the logical pretext of distrust towards an unknown brand, which reflects the existence of consumerist reflexes).

The Internet has also played a fundamental role over recent years in the activity of the Cuban state. Its use in the “battle” for Elian was indispensable and after that the Cuban government became conscious of the possibilities of exploiting it by creating its own numerical arms and by controlling its use by citizens. At present Internet can only be used by enterprises and by people designated by the state. However the population gets round these rules and connects itself clandestinely to telephone lines, and people obtain computers thanks to travel abroad for their work or as a present from state functionaries.

## **The Illusion of Culture**

The access of the population to what is called “integral general culture” is one of the essential components of the Battle of Ideas. According to the Cuban government and the social and mass organizations, this term defines the average level of culture that citizens must possess.

Obviously it is useless to say that all the political and mass organizations, like all the institutions in the country, must try to attain these objectives at any price, without thinking about the ideological and cultural price that this campaign could imply for Cubans. The latter, without saying so, do not forget that the other campaigns of the same kind were a complete failure (the media campaign for the harvest of ten million tons of sugar; the educational campaign for a complete identification of the Cuban population with real Soviet socialism, just to quote two examples). In order to obtain the final objective of integral general culture the Cuban state has put in place a series of cultural and scientific mechanisms which, while surpassing it by their advanced logistics, do not constitute a substantial break with the modern philosophy of progress, and at the end of the day in no way contribute to creating the New Man which has been the objective of the Cuban political leadership since the 1960s.

In 2004, in underdeveloped Cuba, there were only 4 television channels. Up until the last years of the last century we only had two. The television programmes have essentially been kept as they were, except for one important aspect; if they have increased in number, but not yet in quality, it is thanks to the Battle of Ideas.

## **Ideological Recruitment of Youth**

The new “emergentes” projects [2] of training “professionals” in health and education have as their objective the improvement of the situation of these indispensable services in Cuban society, something which has become complicated since the beginning of the 1990s.

During those years there began a process of desertion of the sectors of health and education by professionals, which provoked a big crisis. In the case of health, the solution was guaranteed; given the acceptance that this profession has always had in Cuban society it was enough to increase the number of places in the first year of studies in order to rapidly resolve the problem.

However, the decision was well thought out politically, because it began by a campaign to get young people to study general medicine. Thus we saw the appearance of Family Doctors, a positive attempt which obtained success in preventive medicine, But in the last few years the population has complained greatly of the low quality of the services of these students who were trained in massive numbers, without the same demanding criteria as in previous decades. That is also the case for nurses and health technicians (therapists, physiotherapists, etc.). Thousands of young people coming from the horde of those who did not attain the level necessary for university studies form armies of “emergentes” specialists in medicine who are helping the government to make up for the lost time.

In the case of education the problem is more serious. The same phenomenon is taking place but in other forms: the creation of “emergentes teachers” in several disciplines with the implicit aim of stopping the process of pauperization of teachers and of the educational system.

According to the government, the “emergentes teachers” have been established to enable young people from every social level to have access to university-type careers and thus to make society benefit from the new socio-cultural projects and progress of the revolution. At the present time the

basis of this idea is becoming palpable: the crisis of the education and health services in Cuba; and another no less important reason, the existence of hundred of thousands of young people who do not find their place in the present society, neither in the education system nor in the labour market.

This is a result of two factors. First of all, of the logic of the creation of elites who were to be the scientific vanguard of society. So the universities produced elite citizens and all pupils could not enter them, whereas they could be trained through a socialized and general education system.

Secondly, in present-day Cuban society there are no attractive jobs on offer for young people because the state refuses to increase the salaries for a big majority of jobs (through fear of inflation).

Because of this, young people increasingly turn to jobs which bring them benefits and access to a higher standard of living; in tourism and small private activities in services and the production of consumer articles, both industrial and agricultural. So since the end of the 1990s thousands of young people had been excluded from work and from the Cuban educational system. This is "normal" in any society but in Cuban socialism, where we can suppose that modern (capitalist) rationality does not operate because it is a new society, or a society which is fighting to become new, the idea that thousands of young people find themselves in the streets with nothing to do and that it is the state's fault is inconceivable.

So the state is creating formulas to keep them occupied: the urgency of new educational and work projects, which enable it to control the young people's exuberance and temporarily resolve the problem of the lack of available professional people.

But the most extraordinarily absurd idea of these plans is the creation of a new kind of teachers and social workers over the last three or four years. Young people of 18 and 19 years old are transformed into social workers with only one year of preparation beforehand in sociology, psychology, history, and... a lot of politics. On the other hand, "integral" teachers in the colleges - that is teachers of Spanish, natural sciences, history and geography, in one single person - are produced in thousands to "educate" Cuban children and adolescents in the best Cuban socialist tradition.

The new social workers, these "doctors of the spirit", as the government has christened them, are responsible for identifying and transmitting to the appropriate institutions the cases of families or individuals who need immediate and reliable social assistance. However there are very many complaints about the uselessness of these badly prepared young people, who are entrusted with responsibilities that even the best professionals have difficulty in discharging.

Once again, we are not denying that there exist young people with enough of a vocation to take on the big responsibilities that they are being given, nor that many of them sincerely believe in what they are doing. But taking account of all factors we can come to the conclusion that this manoeuvre by the Cuban state is playing with the negative consequences brought about by the opening of the Cuban society to the outside. The idea is to co-opt these young people, who could represent a potential threat to the regime, by keeping them busy, which makes it possible to control them thanks to their subsequent insertion into the mass organizations in their place of work.

### **Preserving the Elites**

What is involved is a long term project whose aim is to maintain the new political elites, the new leaders, the consolidation of Cuban "socialist power", the new leading figures in all the political practices on the island. The present political operation of the Cuban state is a thorough manipulation

of the people - fundamentally of young people - so that they will accept without resistance the successors of the regime. This system teaches them to become careerist and to take more or less cynically what the state offers them, which enables the old nomenklatura to maintain a certain equilibrium and to guarantee the future. We can imagine that the young people trained in this context will later on support the initiatives of the Cuban state, because it will guarantee them a minimum of satisfaction, by working on their interests, their preoccupations, and their aspirations. And those who will have got into the train without thinking, unconsciously, will have to follow them because they have no other way out.

These are the most important postulates and the mechanisms of the Battle of Ideas. Perhaps some of the international friends of Cuba should become conscious of these reflections before giving their unconditional support to this project.

The Battle of Ideas is a mechanism of the Cuban government to dominate its citizens. We do not consider that we should submit uncritically to the hegemonic practices of the bureaucracy and the new managers in Cuba, while both the former and the latter consider politics as a tool of careerism in order to maintain their jobs and their privileges at the price of the labour of the millions of citizens. We also consider that these state practices are trying to win the support of citizens by any means.

In the Cuban case the government is relying on the manipulation of humanist ideals and of the most elementary conceptions of justice in order to carry through its plans. Let us say it clearly: every state does it. The problem for Cuba is that the state is doing it from positions that seem to be on the left, whereas they are not.

For many people the Battle of Ideas is one more form of the fight against imperialism, by creating an alternative way of thinking. Nothing could be more mistaken: if it is a new form of struggle against North American imperialism, it has no other class objective than that of the state bureaucracy and the new managers. It is in no way creating a way of thinking that is alternative to capitalism; on the contrary it is completing and developing it by using the same mechanisms of domination as capitalism in the framework of a totalizing and alienating nationalism.

## NOTES

[1] This document, "circulating among friends", was written before the illness of Fidel Castro and the passage of power to his brother Raul. We publish here a shortened translation of the original document.

[2] The term "emergente" (urgent) has an ambiguous double meaning which creates confusion. On the one hand, the state uses it to indicate urgency, that is, the birth of a new kind of professionals thanks to the project of the revolution to create a new society. But we can also understand by urgency the imperative need to create new specialists in order to satisfy the social needs for services as important as health and education, which are historic pillars of the practice and the ideology of the Cuban state.

---

## P.S.

\* From International Viewpoint Online magazine : IV n° 386 - February 2007.

\* Manuel Paz Ortega is an intellectual in Cuba, writing under a pseudonym, who defines himself in terms of "libertarian socialism".