

Cuban Reality Beyond Fidel

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Against the Current: Your book was written, as you explain there, as part of a discussion on the impending post-Castro future of Cuba. We'll get to that; but first I wanted to ask how you perceived the glee of the U.S. right wing and Bush administration when they thought Fidel was on his deathbed or had already died. It was rather grotesque, wasn't it?

Samuel Farber: In fact this was totally to be expected. They had been salivating about the possible restoration of capitalism - especially the rightwing Cuban exiles - and felt that without Fidel Castro this prospect would be more viable. All the more interest, then, in the U.S. government "transition" plans and commissions and discussion among right-wing Cuban economists about what they're going to do in Cuba.

ATC: The attitude was what I would call "vulturistic."

SF: Yes, there was this grotesque spectacle of people honking their horns on the streets in Miami. But that's not important; what matters are these U.S. government commissions propelled by certain elite Cuban-American and U.S. circles.

They aren't really interested in building a popular movement of the right wing - that's not where it's at in 2006. The exiles' focus is on making money in Miami. But of course, right-wing exile organizations will do everything they can to shape the transition in Cuba...

ATC: You mean, through U.S.-promoted schemes that have been publicized recently for massive privatization and economic neoliberalism?

SF: That obviously sounds like fantasy in the absence of an (unlikely) U.S. military occupation of Cuba. But not when you see it in the context of how the people on this side of the Gulf of Mexico might ally with circles in Cuba, especially people today in the Cuban government who are closet neo-liberals and who may surface in the transition. Such a likely alliance would create a new political map that would be unprecedented in the almost 50 years of U.S. attempts to overthrow the Cuban government.

The *Wall Street Journal* had an article a couple of weeks ago (November 15, 2006) on a number of Cuban exile economists working as functionaries for the International Monetary Fund, who were working on Cuba on their own time. One of them, Ernesto Hernández Catá, was quoted as saying he would be happy to work for a "Cuban Deng," referring of course to Deng Xiaoping's capitalist program in China.

ATC: In other words, democracy and political freedom don't have much to do with it.

SF: Of course not. The bottom line for them is a turn to capitalism and the market.

Rewriting History?

ATC: Where does the argument in your book about the Cuban Revolution come in?

SF: My book is only oriented to one aspect of the transition, the political and ideological components. In the context of a transition in Cuba, the interpretation of the revolution will involve a rewriting of history.

In the case of Russia, there were always people who were critical of Russian Communism all the way back to the 1917 Revolution itself. This became very strengthened by the collapse of the Soviet Union; it became the fashion to rewrite the entire history. So I'm not engaging in rocket science to suggest that there will be similar efforts around Cuba.

For example, there will be arguments that the pre-1959 Cuban economy was sufficiently developed not to require a revolution; or that the confrontation with the United States could have been resolved through negotiation. [Farber argues in *The Origins of the Cuban Revolution Reconsidered* that the conflict was not based on misunderstandings or anti-Communist paranoia, but fundamentally rooted in the structures of U.S. imperialism in Latin America - ed.]

This concept (of reconciliation) was very much suggested by Philip Bonsal, the U.S. ambassador to Cuba immediately after the Revolution. He had literally moved from La Paz, Bolivia to Havana, having successfully helped to contain the Bolivian Revolution of the 1950s.

Bonsal was a very smooth and respectful professional diplomat. His whole approach was precisely to come to terms with the liberal right-wing of the Cuban revolutionary government, which did exist although it wasn't nearly as strong as it had been in Bolivia. So I expect, in the context of a Cuban transition, that a lot of history will be rewritten; and the analysis in my book might be useful to people who will try to build a revolutionary and democratic alternative.

ATC: What do you mean by a revolutionary and democratic alternative?

SF: Essentially you have a Soviet-type system in Cuba, a one-party state without workers' control, freedom to organize trade unions or any other independent organization of blacks and women for example, or free speech and other democratic gains.

The pattern of post-Communist transition is the introduction of capitalism into this undemocratic setup. This is the only way I can foresee capitalism being introduced into Cuba, whether in the outright dictatorial form of China, or in the Russian style; i.e. some cosmetic democratic trappings but very little of the substance of democracy. It would take some form of authoritarian suppression of trade union and political rights.

The revolutionary and democratic alternative would mean organizing people from below in Cuba, first to protect themselves, then to build on that to reshape Cuban society in a collective but democratic form. I'm well aware that the elements for that alternative are not strong in Cuba right now. But I hope to make a contribution to the struggle to win over people to the view that this is the only truly progressive way to go in a transitional situation.

ATC: What kind of reception have you been getting for the book and your analysis?

SF: The book has been out about nine months now. Except in several socialist journals, mostly in our

anti-Stalinist sector of the left, it hasn't been mentioned or reviewed at all in the general media. The only exception was the chance I got to make a full presentation in the book review channel of CSPAN. This was a nationwide broadcast that was repeated several times. As for academic journals, it's perhaps early to say since they operate on a much longer schedule But I hope there will be an echo beyond our corner of the left.

ATC: There's a term you use in the book without explanation, "elective affinity," which you apply to the attraction between Castro's early populist caudillo politics and his eventual adoption of Soviet-style Communism. Can you say a little about this?

SF: Yes, I should have explained this terminology for an audience outside the social sciences. "Elective affinity" means a kind of inherent mutual attraction of people or forces from different origins that are compatible, and may eventually join with each other. It may seem more profound than it really is. I took it directly from Max Weber [the 19th century German "father of sociology" - ed.], who got it from Goethe [German classical poet and dramatist].

Differing ideologies may have areas of compatibility that facilitate somebody moving from one to the next. Weber uses that notion a lot. [The most famous example is the "elective affinity" between Puritan ethics and rising capitalist business practices in 17th century England - ed.]

What's After Fidel?

ATC: Let's get back to the actual Cuban situation. What are your thoughts on Fidel Castro's condition and what can be observed from the Cuban leadership's behavior during this uncertain period?

SF: First, I refuse to speculate on what's physically wrong with Fidel Castro; I've learned from hard experience that you don't talk about things you know nothing about. But there will be an early test by the end of this week, marking the 50th anniversary of the Granma landing [1] and a belated celebration of his 80th birthday.

If he doesn't show up at all, it would suggest that his condition has deteriorated, whether because his life is in danger or because he looks even worse than during his last appearance. He'd already said that he's lost 40 pounds. [2]

Right now, however, the situation is most unclear because Fidel is neither in nor out. He's passed the running of the country to Raúl Castro, but he's been receiving visitors and on the phone. So whatever plans Raúl might have for a departure from Fidel's strategy will not take place while his older brother is still around.

The country went on a high state of alert in the days subsequent to July 31. A couple of ministers have been fired but that can't necessarily be attributed to Raúl as such, so there's really no news so far.

There are many indications, however, of Raúl Castro's outright support for China's direction. Visiting Shanghai in April 2005, Raúl said: There are people who are worried about the Chinese model - I'm not; China today proves another world is possible.

I find this comment obscene, in appropriating the slogan from Seattle and the global justice movement to promote the Chinese model. But it's more than statements alone: there's the role of the Cuban army, Raúl's stronghold, as a big player in joint enterprises, including the tourism industry.

You have a number of army officers who are businessmen in uniform, deeply involved in transactions with international capitalism through the Cuban armed forces. The military has also been involved in what they call “enterprise improvement” [3], i.e. organizational efficiency, the kind of economic experimentation that would be consistent with the Chinese model.

Raúl of course will not move a finger so long as Fidel is active. The question will be what kind of forces will exist in Cuba both for and against this kind of direction. I believe those forces exist in embryo. So the whole relation with Washington and Miami will be entangled with the emergence of that kind of “party.”

ATC: In short, you see the impetus for this kind of capitalism coming from the existing institutions, especially the military, rather than from existing small enterprise?

SF: The existing small enterprise sector in Cuba has been sharply reduced since the concessions of the 1990s. It was never that important; at one point there were up to 150,000 people licensed to operate very small independent enterprises (e.g. beauty parlors, small family restaurants, the so-called “paladares”), but now fewer.

I see it [the impetus toward authoritarian capitalism] coming from people in the army and outside civilians who are engaged in joint-venture capitalism. It’s interesting here to contrast what Raul Castro said in Shanghai in April 2005 (cited above) with an interview with Fidel Castro by Ignacio Ramonet, Spanish-born editor of *Le Monde Diplomatique*. When the topic of China came up, Fidel’s answer was pure evasion.

Politically of course Fidel wasn’t about to openly criticize China, but he certainly didn’t praise it. So within the Cuban regime there’s clearly this difference over the Chinese model. But in pointing to tendencies, one can’t predict events that will be brought about by a combination of internal and external forces.

There will be people in the apparatus who will resist these changes, people who are called “Talibanes” (i.e. ideological fundamentalists) such as Felipe Perez Roque, the foreign minister, who was essentially Fidel Castro’s chief of staff and became foreign minister when the previous one got into trouble. He’s young, in his forties.

But I must caution that there are elements of speculation in all these things.

ATC: On a possibly related subject - though I can’t really say whether they’re connected - some recent writings of Celia Hart have attracted the attention of the left because of her favorable references to Trotsky. Do you see her work as part of the internal debate on Cuba’s future, or what else should we make of it?

SF: First, what Celia Hart Santamaria has written is overwhelmingly for the foreign left. Very few people in Cuba know about it. That aside, her “Trotskyism” is a peculiar sort that says nothing about workers’ democracy. It’s a “Trotskyism” that worships Fidel Castro and talks about the expansion of the revolution without talking about the question of democracy in the revolution.

There’s nothing in her writing about the post-1933 Trotsky, who emphasized the importance of workers’ democracy and moved away from the theory of the one-party state. I would submit that Trotskyism minus workers’ democracy is very, very close to Third-Period, left-wing Stalinism. In other words, she’s projecting the line of a more militant Stalinism as opposed to the Popular Front kind.

Celia Hart clearly opposes any kind of capitalist transformation in Cuba. So she would line up with

the hardliners in the context of the existing regime. She has talked about the dangers of capitalist restoration in Cuba, without mentioning names.

But there's another interesting group of people in Cuba who aren't well known, whose parents aren't famous like Celia Hart's (Haydee Santamaria and Armando Hart), who are more seriously interested in Trotsky, who have written in journals such as Temas which circulates among intellectuals and academics.

These are journals that have developed as critical a voice as you can get in Cuba without touching a number of sacred cows such as Fidel Castro and the single-party state. In this milieu there are writers like Ariel Dacal, who have written about Trotsky - and they don't say a word about Cuba.

That's the irony: They can say a lot about why the Soviet Union collapsed, and in that connection they can bring up Trotsky and questions about bureaucracy and the democratic alternatives to it. But you can tell they're really writing about Cuba although they don't mention it. Paradoxically, that's what shows they're serious and far more relevant to our democratic revolutionary point of view.

NOTES

[1] the beginning of the guerilla struggle in Cuba - ed.

[2] The day following this interview, Cuban media announced that Fidel Castro would not be attending the celebrations - ed.

[3] perfeccionamiento empresarial

P.S.

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