

## CHAPTER 2

# Ideology and Power in the Cuban State

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*Abstract: This paper explores how and why Cuba resists “transition” and introduces ideas for an alternative theoretical approach.*

### Introduction

When examining the nature of the Cuban revolutionary state ideological obstacles impede us. Limitations inherent in the approaches taken to answer questions prevent us from arriving at adequate solutions. Take for example the fundamental question: “How was it possible for the Cuban state to survive the collapse of the Soviet Union?” We find a variety of analyses corresponding to different traditional political tendencies all of which, in their different ways, fail to adequately convince. On the one hand there are left-Marxists who view Cuba as being “state-capitalist” with a political structure approximating “Stalinism.” (Gonzalez 1992: 85) Such a view sees a repressive apparatus holding a largely non-compliant population in check. But this begs the question as to why, if other Stalinist regimes collapsed at least in part because they were Stalinist, has Cuba's system survived? On the other hand, there is a more sympathetic left analysis that sees Cuba as a “workers state” and therefore the opposite of Stalinist, arguing that it has survived because it represents the overwhelming popular will (Hansen 1994:130). This view ignores, or dismisses as propaganda, the charge that there is political repression in Cuba that might be a factor in keeping the state alive. The western liberal analysis, like the left Marxist, tends to the view that Cuba, as a one party state, is ipso facto “undemocratic.” By controlling the media and strictly limiting the freedom of association, the government maintains its grip (Domínguez: 1997). This liberal view sees Cuba in need of reform and western liberal democratic states generally base their policies on this

interpretation. But this analysis fails to adequately explain why there is such a small opposition movement within Cuba, a factor that was present in all the regimes of the former socialist countries of Eastern Europe. The far right view is similar but more extreme. Whereas the liberals view Cuba as “authoritarian” and therefore capable of reform, the far right defines the “Castro regime” as “totalitarian” and therefore must be overthrown and replaced. In common with the liberals, the far right tends to overlook Fidel Castro’s popularity and fails to adequately explain how the government manages to gather such large crowds for ritual events such as demonstrations (1.4 million in Havana in January 2006), and such large numbers to participate in elections (98.34 per cent turnout in 1998).

These different approaches create a field of debate in which the participants tug endlessly from their ideological perspectives without ever arriving at an adequate explanation of why and how the Cuban revolutionary state has not only survived the collapse of the Soviet Union but is now continuing to successfully vex political scientists by resisting a hitherto thought inevitable “transition” to the free market economy. This phenomenon is something to which scholars are now turning their attention. Hoffmann and Whitehead (2006) have addressed directly the question of Cuba’s political and economic exceptionalism and have made a valuable contribution to the understanding of the historical and social processes that have enabled the revolutionary state to survive. There is clearly something exceptional in the nature of the Cuban state that makes it so durable.

The problem is that there is much emphasis on the questions of who wields power and what are the institutions of power (or lack of them) but relatively little on how and what type of power is wielded. Might it be that there is something unique in the way that power is structured in Cuba that could explain the efficacy of the Cuban state?

### **Power and Ideology**

One theorist of power, Joseph S. Nye, differentiates types of state power. He talks of “hard” and “soft” power: *Power is the ability to alter the behavior of others to get what you want. There are basically three ways to do that: coercion (sticks), payments (carrots), and attraction (soft power)* (Nye 2006).

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Nye is talking here about the exercise of power by states in the international arena, but it is possible to transfer these categories to the behaviour of governments towards the populations they govern. The use of the law and control of the economy are the hard power tools at a government's disposal, whereas soft power would arise from the ethos and attraction of the government to the populace. Thus ideological matters are hugely important in the efficacy of any state. How effective a state's 'soft power' is will logically determine how much "hard power" it needs to exercise in order to keep order and advance its goals. In Cuba's case, the first observation to make is that the state has had remarkably little need to resort to violence to maintain order, even during the economic meltdown of the early 1990s when it had no carrots at all. This implies that the Cuban state has tremendous soft power leverage.

Similarly, Michel Foucault (1982) made the observation in his analysis of the nature of power that by focusing on the degrees of repression or consensus within society, political scientists tend to overlook the question of how power operates. Foucault argues that repression and consent, while being aspects of power, are not the constituents of power itself. Like Nye, he defines the exercise of power as 'actions upon the actions of others' (1982:221). While this may involve the use of repression and imply consent, power is neither of these two in itself. In the exercise of power therefore, ideology has a paramount role, because it enables persuasion by argument, seduction and moral exhortation. In the spectrum of actions that the powerful can exert in order to affect the behaviour of the subjects of their power, the threat of violence and violence itself are last resorts. Again, Foucault's argument would suggest that by not having to use the "last resort" something else must be compelling mass behaviour in Cuba.

In studying the structure of power in feudal Europe Foucault produced a remarkably innovative model that Thomas C. Dalton (1993) argued can be applied to revolutionary Cuba. This paper explores and builds upon Dalton's idea of applying Foucault's model of what he called "pastoral power" to the Cuban context. The result I believe is a convincing explanation of how the Cuban revolution has succeeded in building a cohesive and durable power structure in which ideology and state power works to support each other in such a way as to make it almost indestructible. In order to explain how this works let us first take a brief look at the

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ideology of the Cuban revolutionary government and how it is manifested.

### **Cuban Ideology, Some Thoughts**

As Jean Paul Sartre (1960) noted on his visit to Cuba in 1960, the newly installed regime was characterised at first by lack of an overtly socialist ideology. It was, as he put it, forging its ideology in “praxis.” Valdés (1975) has pointed out that the ideology of the 26th July Movement was decidedly home grown and predominantly “Martiano.” Thus the Cuban revolution has an ideology with an organic quality. It has the ability to morph and change as circumstances change without, it seems, affecting its legitimacy. At times it has exhibited more overtly Communist characteristics than others, but there have always been three constants:

The first of these is a predilection to see its task as one of salvation. The 1959 revolution had the purpose of saving the nation, or *Patria*, and this remains the primary goal today. Sovereignty and independence as the guiding principles of the revolution connect it directly to the 19th century struggles of independence and mentors such as Martí and Maceo. As Kapcia (1997) argues it was onto this idea of national salvation that the revolution's socialist aims were bolted. The socialist goals of 'saving lives' in the form of free at the point-of-delivery medical care and education remain the primary objectives of the Cuban state.

The concept of salvation is also very evident in the current 'rebranding' of the revolution as Bolivarian in partnership with Venezuela. Saving the “*patria*” has now morphed into saving America Latina, principally from the USA, as evidenced by the statue of Martí at the Tribuna Anti-imperialista in Havana. This was erected after the Elián crisis in 1999/2000. On the plinth, the first signs of what has become a widely diffused identification of Martí and Bolívar. Now we are seeing billboards like this on the main boulevards in which the shadows of the present leaders of Cuba and Venezuela are depicted as being the bearers of a historical duty. Other historical figures have been called up also to serve in this continental struggle against the North. This poster is in Old Havana. Even children's comic books are now being distributed throughout the island.

Latterly, with the global environmental crisis, Fidel has also successfully added the task of saving the “species” to the list of redemption proj-

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ects. Cuba and Venezuela have recently eschewed ethanol as a solution to the energy problem and have attacked the US plan to increase production which will come at the expense, they claim, of consigning billions in the developing world to starvation, thus combining the tasks of saving America Latina from the yanqui and saving the species into one and the same.

This preoccupation with salvation would be less potent if it were not accompanied by a tremendous moral obligation. As Valdés (1992) has explained, the Cuban revolution has a deeply sacrificial tradition that again goes back the 19th century independence wars and the martyrdom of very many heroes in the name of saving the nation, including the seminal figures of Martí and Maceo. Blackburn (1963) explained that the venal politics of the first republic meant that the tradition was carried over into the 20th century, not least with the murders of figures such as José Antonio Mella and Antonio Guiteras, among many others. In Castro's own movement, there were significant martyrdoms such as the murders in custody of the Moncada assailants, the death of Frank País. Martí coined the phrase *Patria o Muerte* to which Guevara (yet another martyr) added *Socialismo o Muerte* a century later. Guevara, whose ideas endure as the billboards affirm, was particularly adamant that the ability to sacrifice one's own life was essential to the true socialist combatant. Guevara was tapping a deep historical vein.

Of course being ready to die for one's country is not a uniquely Cuban trait but what I believe is unique in the case of Cuba is that the way this has come to form a part of the national identity. So for example take the national anthem. "To die for the fatherland is to live." Echoed in these lines from Martí, and repeated in these from Fidel Castro's famous "History Will Absolve Me" speech.

As Valdés (1992) has explained this "cult of death," for want of a better phrase, predicates upon the notion that by giving one's life for the struggle, one becomes immortal, and you will be remembered and glorified by those who remain. This, it seems to me, is a most remarkable secularisation of the Christian idea of everlasting salvation. It is the most constant theme in Cuban revolutionary ideology and one that enables Castro to refer to assassination attempts against him as attempts to "eliminarlo físicamente" in the knowledge that in all other ways he is immortal (Cannell 2006).

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Remembrance of the fallen is ritualised in national events and media with at times macabre effect. One such ritual took place in the spring of 2006 outside the US interest section. In response to the erection of an electronic ticker board on the US Interests Section displaying anti-government messages, the Cubans erected 138 flagpoles upon which they flew black flags to commemorate victims of terrorist attacks that have emanated from US territory in the four-decade plus stand-off. For three days a televised vigil took place whereby participants from all walks of Cuban society took turns to stand in front of the section holding up pictures of the victims.

Salvation, obligation and sacrifice, do these sound familiar? That the Cuban revolution might be more akin to Christian religious faith than a political ideology is not something that has gone unnoticed in Cuba itself as this installation by the young Cuban artist Lazaro Saavedra illustrates. This is a drawing for an installation that the artist produced for an exhibition at London's Barbican Centre in 1999. The juxtaposition of the gospel of St Matthew and the Cuban national anthem is an extremely evocative representation of the point.

How does all this help us to explain the durability of the Cuban state following the collapse of the Soviet Union? It is clearly not credible to say that everyone in Cuba, much less the majority perhaps, buy into this completely and would be prepared to die before surrendering (although comparisons with Numancia were made during the worst times of the special period when Cubans did literally begin to starve). So how does this ideology work to produce behaviours that support the government? It is here where I believe that Foucault's model of power is helpful.

### **Foucault's Model**

Foucault, in his essay "The Subject and Power" (1982: 208-26) starts by categorising struggles against power that have taken place in the history of developed societies and identifies three distinct forms. I have expressed these as a diagram. These are struggles against forms of domination (ethnic, social and religious); forms of exploitation (that separate individuals from what they produce); and forms of subjection (against subjectivity and categorisation). Foucault noted that all three forms of struggle are present in any given society and at any time to differing degrees of quantity and intensity. However, at different epochs and at dif-

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ferent stages of development some were more prevalent than others. Ethnic and religious struggles against domination were more common in the feudal period in Europe for example, while struggles against exploitation were more common in the industrial era. In late twentieth century developed capitalist states, however, struggles against subjection are more typical. Why should this be? According to Foucault it has to do with the nature of the state and the way in which power is structured in modern welfare states, which, since the reformation onwards, have taken on more and more characteristics of what he calls 'pastoral power.'

Pastoral power is a technique of control that originated in the Catholic Church and was its basis of power throughout the middle ages. The Church occupied a space alongside and sometimes in competition with the sovereign, but the difference between the Church's power and the king's rested in the fact that the Church:

... postulates the principle that certain individuals can, by their religious quality, serve others not as princes, magistrates, prophets, fortune tellers, benefactors, educationalists and so on, but as pastors. However this word designates a very special form of power (Slide 182: 214).

The basic unit of this power was the local village priest. How this structure of power worked can be represented as a diagram. Unlike the sovereign (whose subjects were supposed to die for him) the pastor was expected to die for his flock if necessary. The pastor was also concerned with the project of salvation, of souls for the next world. In addition, through the confessional and by living among his congregation, the Pastor was privy to their personal lives. This combination of close surveillance, personal knowledge of the individual and the ethic of sacrifice was so powerful that it maintained the Church's influence sometimes in opposition to the crown through centuries.

Foucault argues that the Reformation was a huge struggle against this form of power and that since the Enlightenment he suggests that the modern state has developed in such a way as to slowly incorporate and adapt the characteristics of pastoral power. The main difference is that in the modern state, the aim of salvation has shifted from the next life to this: in the form of health care and the protection of a "standard of living." The basic unit of the modern system of pastoral power has switched from the parish priest to state officials that have grown in number alongside public

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institutions. Modern “pastors” are teachers, doctors, social workers and policemen, who while not exactly hearing confession, do nevertheless gather enormous amounts of information about the intimate lives of the population, with the added potency of applying modern science and technology to the process. The modern state is therefore characterised by a huge increase in the application of subjectivising power, which is as individualising as it is totalising.

### **Applying Foucault's model of Pastoral Power to Cuba**

Foucault's model of Pastoral Power offers a theoretical means of a better understanding of the nature of the Cuban state as it can be argued that the Cuban revolution has developed a system of power that closely resembles the feudal system of pastoral power that Foucault identified.

Let us consider the family doctor programme for example and the fact that there is one doctor and two nurses for every 120 families. These are agents of state power who live within the community and whose mission is preventive health care, a task that requires them to make careful and precise observations about the lifestyles of each and every individual in their care. Professor Theodore Macdonald, a comparative health specialist at Brunel University actually uses a priest analogy to describe the family doctors:

“No citizen in Cuba is without access to a doctor, either geographically or for financial reason. At the operational level, every GP lives in the community he serves and in a city such a community would be no more than two or three city blocks! This means that people are always in contact with their doctor. He/she in fact, often spends a part of each day making unsolicited calls on his/her patients, rather like the old-style parish priest doing his rounds.”(MacDonald 1995: 21)

Now that Cuban doctors are being sent abroad in such vast numbers (68,000 in 2006) they may be seen as acting as “missionaries.” Of course all of them are schooled in the Cuban revolutionary tradition. It is worth, I think taking into account the words of Guevara again here. All Cuban schoolchildren are brought up chanting daily that there are to be like Che and of course, Che was a doctor before he was a revolutionary. Castro himself once said: “[...] all the qualities that make a priest are qualities needed in a good revolutionary.” (cited in Kirk 1989: 122).

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I have represented what I see as Cuba's structure of power following Foucault as a diagram. We have seen how the objective of salvation is intensely a part Cuba ideology. To this we must add the obligatory nature of the Cuban struggle, its concern for the individual as expressed through free health an education services and finally the knowledge of the individual as maintained by the family doctor and other participatory organs of the state.

If, as Foucault argues, the exercise of power is an inducement upon others to act in a certain way, then this diagram helps us to understand why Cubans seem to act paradoxically, in what they call the *doble moral*, by participating in the system while at the same time perhaps indulging in petty crime or activities that otherwise undermine it. What this structure implies is that the individual is morally compelled to conform by participating because consequences for visibly not doing so will quickly lead to stigmatisation and possible social exclusion. It is hardly credible to oppose a state system that has such overtly altruistic aims and a record of fulfilling them. Violence and repression are unnecessary when exemplary moral force such as being ready to die for the cause is brought to bear. In Cuba, one is categorised as “bien integrado” or “mal integrado” depending on one's level of visible commitment. To actively object to the system runs the risk of the individual being labelled as a traitor, a coward or as an ‘auto-suficiente.’

So long as the system continues to keep up fulfilling its stated aims of providing free health care, education and social welfare and as long as the leadership avoids being perceived as a corrupt elite living at the expense of the rest of society, then this structure will be extremely durable. The fact that the Cuban leadership has not failed in either of these respects is the primary reason why the system has survived and will continue to be able to resist any outside attempts to force it to change.

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