

Cuba Through Mexico's Mirror

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The Revolutionary Tradition

Cuba and Mexico have a long history of excellent diplomatic relations.¹ Over the course of almost half a century this close relationship was borne out of the “revolutionary” tradition both countries shared. The Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) has its roots in the Revolution of 1910 in which landed elites, the Church, and foreign businesses all came under attack by a government that claimed to be a proxy for “the people” (*el pueblo*). The state gradually established ownership over a broad list of “strategic” industries as well as a system of corporatist rule involving quotas for peasant, worker, and, initially, military sectors to have top-down representation in the government. The system proved remarkably effective at establishing central government control over the population and blended well with the deep-seated traditions of personalism, patron-clientelism, patronage politics, and authoritarianism characterizing Mexican politics throughout its history. It was a system that put control over efficiency, but one that was efficient enough to maintain elite consensus, at least until the 1960s. Up until then bouts of unrest were frequent at the local level, but in the late 1960s they bubbled up to the national level and signaled the need to implement changes to address the efficiency issue. Despite its relative success at industrializing Mexico, the PRI political system was corrupt and its extreme centralization and lack of mechanisms of

1. To comply with submission requirements I had to divide my paper in two: one on the evolution of Cuba-Mexico relations and how it reveals the effects of Mexico's shifting benchmark of legitimacy from the Revolution to Democracy, and this one on the emergence of an illusionary alternative to Liberal Democracy: Cuba's Revolutionary Democracy. Therefore, there will be references to Mexico-Cuba relations but these will not be covered in depth in this paper. This paper is based on fieldwork conducted in Cuba in the summer of 2004 and in Mexico from 1995 to 2001.

accountability led to the exponential growth of corruption and the inability to generate resources to satisfy an increasingly demanding urban population or to target funds in the most rational way.

In Mexico, the Revolution was not just an event; it represented an entire package of symbols, rhetoric, and values providing the benchmark of legitimacy for the regime. The Cuban Revolution embodies an almost identical package of values and Mexico's strong relationship with Cuba and its defiant opposition to fall into line with positions recommended by the U. S. was long considered critical to its political stability. The United States permitted Mexico to maintain this "independent" and contrarian foreign policy because stability was the most critical issue to the U. S., and, as recent evidence reveals, because the Johnson Administration made a deal with President Adolfo López Mateos in 1964 to permit this apparent foreign policy independence in return for Mexico using its embassy in Havana to spy on Cuba for the United States.²

The key component of revolutionary ideology was the idea that the state or national government was equivalent to "the people," a term which referred not to all the people but to the lower-middle and lower classes- the workers and peasants in opposition to businessmen, large landowners, the clergy, and foreigners." The people" came to include state dependent professionals – doctors, lawyers, the media, teachers, and informal workers, all encapsulated in a corporatist sector known as the "Popular" sector of the PRI.

Cuban Revolutionary ideology is almost identical: it embodies the same rhetoric, the same values, the same legitimizing myths. The systems are different in that Mexico created a strong executive, ending the perpetuation in power of any one charismatic individual. Second, unlike the Cuban system which emulated the Soviet Leninist model, the Mexican political party was always a tool of the government, and not vice-versa. Finally, the government established civilian control of the military, unlike the Cuba. However, both systems are formulas for a powerful central government that rules in the name of "the people" and essentially legitimizes authoritarian, paternalistic rule and a highly interventionist state with extremely low levels of transparency.

Between 1988 and 2000 Mexico began a transition away from its revolutionary bedrock of legitimacy and shifted it toward liberal democratic ideology, encompassing a more modern set of values that privilege efficiency over political control. The Mexican debt crisis of 1982 had made it painfully clear that Mexico could not afford a "revolutionary" regime focusing on providing

2. "Mexico offered base for Bay of Pigs invasion: Report," *Agence France Presse*, June 15, 1998. See also "New report reveals spy plot in Cuba," *United Press International*, March 6, 2003. A full summary of Cuba-Mexico relations was edited out of this paper to comply with submission guidelines.

jobs and funding social programs but generating only a fraction of what these cost, particularly since the number of people entering the workforce was increasing by leaps and bounds. Unemployment was reaching intolerable levels throughout the country. New funding could only be secured from international lending agencies by agreeing to control public spending and this prevented the PRI machine from being "greased" as it had to be to work appropriately.³

President Carlos Salinas de Gortari shattered the myth that the state equals the people with several different measures. First, opposition party victories at the state and municipal levels were recognized for the first time since the PRI had come to power (but only those of the liberal PAN, the leftist and revolutionary PRD was repressed and its victories went largely unrecognized).⁴ Second, the constitution was changed to end the prohibition against the private ownership and sale of state-owned agrarian cooperative (*ejido*) properties. Most significantly, he built on president Miguel de la Madrid's (1982-1988) policies to encourage free trade and foreign investment, after decades of protectionism and Import Substitution Industrialization (ISI), ending tired government rhetoric that any relationship with the rich and the U. S. only results in further impoverishment.⁵ Furthermore, Salinas reestablished relations with the Catholic Church, a former "enemy" of the Revolution. The details of these reforms have been covered extensively in other articles but the shift in the benchmark of legitimacy from the Revolution to liberal democracy is vital to understanding the evolution of Cuba-Mexico relations in the last two decades and the difference in their political paths.

The Revolution put the majority above the individual, equality above freedom, and made the state a proxy for "the people." The private sector and free trade were both condemned in the class perspective of this worldview: those whose object was to make money could only do so at the expense of the poor. There was no such concept as the generation of wealth that all could profit from, however disproportionately. As talk about democracy started to

3. Judith Adler Hellman. *Mexico in Crisis*. New York and London: Holmer Meier Publishers, 1983.

4. The PAN victories in Baja California and Chihuahua were recognized by Salinas while the PRD victory in Michoacan and many of its municipal victories in Guerrero and elsewhere were not. These electoral battles have been documented in books by Rodriguez and Ward, Chand, Bruhn, Crespo, and several others, but most of my evidence about local Mexican politics comes from fieldwork conducted between 1995-2001 in 62 municipalities contesting PRI hegemony since 1949.

5. Many still argue that this is the case, as inequality has increased since the Salinas reforms, but I would argue that Mexico's problems have far more to do with the immense corruption of the regime and economic mismanagement than with the free market policies themselves. See, for example, Ernesto Lopez-Cordova and Fernando Borraz, "Has Globalization Deepened Income Inequality in Mexico?" paper presented at Seventh Annual Conference on Global Economic Analysis, Washington D.C., April 28, 2004.

replace talk about the Revolution, the individual became paramount, freedom started to compete with equality as a goal, and the state ceased to be a proxy for the people. While social concerns and equality continued to be valued by most citizens more than freedom, a new issue served to redirect social sensitivity from “the people” to the individual- human rights.⁶

Democracy became an acceptable benchmark of legitimacy partly because principles of majority rule became the key to populist survival and partly because the myth of the state equals the people came tumbling down in the face of cases of state repression against them. An increasing number of small businessmen, mostly forced into their professions due to high levels of unemployment and the inability of the state-driven economy to absorb them, began to see a limited state and genuine rule of law as imperative to their interests. This sector of the population was slowly emerging as a rival to the substantial segment of the state-dependent population that desperately wanted an interventionist state able to provide the levels of security they had grown accustomed to.

In their analysis of Revolutionary One-Party systems, Huntington and Moore observed that eventually efficiency became more important to political control than ideology and technocrats started to win out over populists in the state bureaucracy.⁷ Mexico was able to postpone this shift through debt financing. Cuba has been able to postpone it through a deft administration of what Corrales refers to as the “Gatekeeper” state⁸ – a selective application of free market principles that create pockets of efficiency but are meticulously managed to prevent the development of a less state dependent sector of the population (at least inside Cuba) that is necessary for the kind of economic shift Huntington refers to, and one that seems to be a prerequisite for establishing a democracy based on classic liberal principles.

In Mexico, the lesson was evident at the local level for several decades: the less society is active in politics and economics, the less its real interests are served and the more deformed its governments become.⁹ This lesson is less evident in Cuba, where the two visions of the ideal social order – Revolutionary and Liberal – compete in a far more complicated way because Cuba

6. Charges against former president Luis Echeverria for the repression of workers and students during his administration is indicative of the primacy of human rights over the Revolution as a new benchmark of legitimacy. Echeverria was previously regarded as one of the most “revolutionary” presidents and supported by the same leftist critics who now condemn him.

7. Samuel Huntington and Clement Moore. *Authoritarian Politics in Modern Society. The Dynamics of Established One-Party Systems*, New York and London: Basic Books, 1970, pp. 33-48.

8. Javier Corrales. “The Gatekeeper State. Limited Economic Reforms and Regime Survival in Cuba 1989-2002,” *Latin American Research Review*, Summer 2004.

9. These observations are based on the conclusions of fieldwork that are now part of a manuscript I am preparing for publication: “Deceptive Democracy: Fifty Years of Local Politics in Mexico.”

is both better at providing higher levels of security to the population and at preventing higher levels of transparency.

The revolutionary vision in Cuba boasts some very tangible benefits and its appeals to the hearts of Cubans and non-Cubans are very strong. Cuba not only provides all Cubans with access to excellent health care and education, but it also extends these services and opportunities to foreigners. Over 10,000 foreigners have graduated from Cuban medical schools, many of them on government scholarships. Currently there are 100 American students in Cuban medical schools, most of them African Americans from Harlem, on full scholarships sponsored by the Cuban government. Cuba sends doctors and teachers throughout the developing world, particularly Africa and the Caribbean.¹⁰ The effects of the propaganda victory these efforts represent cannot be underestimated in a world that increasingly endorses the idea of democracy as majority rule. Poor majorities everywhere as well as urban elites throughout the world could not help but be impressed by the "human face" of Cuban socialism. Organ transplants are allegedly as available to a 70-year-old peasant woman as they are to a 40 year old neurosurgeon. Cuban second graders can solve algebraic problems that many of my university students would be unable to tackle.

The Cuban experiment appeals to the tendency toward magical thinking in less developed countries as well as to the yearnings of urban middle classes for a more civilized and humanitarian social order. Furthermore, some middle class professionals who still reside in Cuba demonstrate a strong commitment to a regime that demands that the middle classes subsidize the extensive social safety net for the poor. In Cuba, the peso earning middle class (doctors, professionals, people in the arts) struggles just as much as the poor majority. The absence of a service sector means household emergencies and home improvements must be undertaken by neighborhood "brigades." Clothes are inaccessible to anyone who does not have dollars, as are many other basic goods. Meanwhile, those with access to dollars, either because they are in the tourism industry or have friends or family abroad, almost always have to engage in illegal practices and live in fear of arrest, insuring that everybody stay on their best behavior.

What is emerging in Cuba is the dangerous mirage of an alternative to liberal democracy: revolutionary democracy. It is a system that appeals to yearnings for social justice but one that cannot afford itself- its productive apparatus is inefficient, requiring outside supplementation. Revolutionary democracy is revolution without violence and democracy without neoliberalism. It is the "dream" regime for Latin America and could become its worst

10. Interview with Dr. Luis Ceruto Santander of the Cuban Health Ministry, Havana, June 4, 2004. Information about citizens in this section is based on informal interviews conducted with Cubans over the Summer of 2004.

nightmare. The Mexican mirror, of which Cuba-U. S. relations are a telling surface phenomenon, illustrates the difference between the ways they have chosen to deal with the obsolescence of the One-Party Revolutionary system. Mexico has taken baby steps toward creating a system that can afford itself, although it may take decades to root out the corruption the PRI-state or revolutionary system institutionalized. Cuba has taken further steps to make corruption the system, and is providing the illusion of the possibility of an effective system for the vast majority of citizens in developing world without the painful price tag exacted by neoliberal formulas.

The PRI's failure in Mexico to provide employment for the middle class, a safety net for the poor and the absence of state services in most of the country, made it more difficult to defend the revolutionary system against the backdrop of economic realities. The Cuban system has been far more successful at providing its population with security that most would not want to give up lightly. Cuba fuels the dreams of those in Mexico who want democracy to defend the Revolution and of those elsewhere who hear the siren's song of revolutionary promises.

The deterioration of Mexico-Cuba relations reflect an intense domestic, international, and regional struggle between Revolutionary Populism and Liberal Democracy as ordering principles of society. It is emblematic of an intense political and ideological struggle between the two types of political elites Huntington and many others have referred to, the populists and the technocrats, whose goals and survival needs are fundamentally incompatible. However, instead of technocrats and liberal democracy phasing out its populist, revolutionary predecessors, the old elites are hanging on and creating a dangerous illusionary alternative: Revolutionary democracy.

The Creation of a Dangerous Mirage: Revolutionary Democracy

According to major theorists, Revolutionary One Party regimes pave the way to their own demise by successfully accomplishing their goal: modernization. They create an independent private sector that sustains the economy and a middle class that demands opportunities and increasing standards of living. The lower classes may still be poor but those who mobilize them have been dramatically weakened and no longer have a monopoly over opportunities. In addition, risk takers among the poor can theoretically aspire to upward mobility, reducing the need for ideology to maintain elite consensus and political control. Or so the theory goes.¹¹

Cuba has managed to subvert this process with a three-pronged formula. First, it engineered an economy that appears "revolutionary" but is really

capitalism with intermittent access, preventing both independence from the state and consensus for rule of law. Cuba further distracts the population from focusing on the economy's inefficiency by maintaining a permanent state of siege mentality. Finally, it provides the population with high levels of security by safeguarding what are seen to be the pillars of the Cuban Revolution: the health care and education systems.

The first part of this strategy involves an extremely complicated shell game that Corrales masterfully describes in "The Gatekeeper State." It is designed to produce the resources to keep the government in power without leading to the economic independence of those who participate in it. The minimum wage in Cuba amounts to about \$5 per month with \$13 per month at the high end of the salary range. While housing, health care, and education are covered by the state, and food rations are heavily subsidized, almost all Cubans are involved in a daily struggle for survival. In fact, Cubans admit that they cannot survive anymore on their rations — they literally have to "cheat" to survive. Housing was shelved for higher priority projects creating a crisis that discourages Cubans from having more than one child. The housing crisis is also allegedly behind the high rates of divorce (the inability to escape one's mother-in-law or any other problem relative). Divorced couples inevitably must continue to live in the same household.

Maintenance crises, increasingly frequent as the infrastructure and dwellings get older, must be addressed by neighborhood "brigades." Citizens must purchase the materials needed for repairs and additions with the little they make — it can take ten years or more to earn enough to finance a small addition to a home, something that also requires official permission, and months to years to solve relatively minor plumbing or electrical problems. Each Cuban household receives a bar of body soap one month and a bar of laundry detergent on alternate months. I offered a standard bath towel to a Cuban professor who exclaimed: "My wife would kill me if I brought this home! I would have to cut it in half because it would require too much detergent." Public transportation is affordable but hard to come by and extremely inconvenient because of the energy crisis Cuba has faced since the end of the Cold War. Clothes cannot be purchased in pesos at all, and this is true of most consumer products as well. In all these respects, post-*Periodo Especial* Cuba is not that much easier to survive in than when things hit bottom in 1993.

If Cubans cannot even buy clothes, an arguably important part of survival, why don't they rebel? Despite the desperate situation the figures above reveal, there are a million ways to cheat in Cuba and almost everyone has access

11. See, for example, Joseph LaPalombara and Myron Weiner, *The Origin and Development of Political Parties*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966, Huntington and Moore (see footnote 7), Immanuel Wallerstein, "The Decline of the Party in Single-Party African States," in Huntington and Moore, 1970.

to one of them. While most Cubans barely survive on a daily basis, most also thrive on an occasional basis. A booming black market makes dollar goods available to people who cannot afford them. The lucrative tourism industry provides a select group of individuals with access to dollars, raising their standards of living to levels most Cubans can only dream of. Yet these income disparities do not seem to produce explosive tensions, partly because there are other escape valves. Organizations in all of the economic sectors give employees “bonuses” or “incentives” not calculated into the salary information. Some get bags of dollar goods including items like toothbrushes and toothpaste at the end of the month. Others receive a ten-dollar bill, resulting in salaries above the salary cap.

However, what give most Cubans a break from the drudgery of daily survival are their international connections, either through their employment or through friends and relatives abroad. Almost every Cuban I encountered either had “*Fe*” (familia en el extranjero) or “American Express” (amigos en el extranjero). In addition, middle class professionals who maintain good revolutionary credentials are allowed to spend time abroad working or going to conferences. Therefore, despite the fact that their survival is directly related to the introduction of free market principles in Cuba, this ghost economy of cheaters allows the regime to perpetuate the myth that the Revolutionary system is a real alternative.

Although they never turned down an opportunity to eat at a restaurant or spend time abroad, most Cubans I spoke with insisted that every place had strengths and weaknesses and that the U. S. was “el mismo perro con otro collar” (same dog with another collar). In other words, all systems are equal, a trick the PRI in Mexico also used to discredit the opposition. By extension, as in “revolutionary” Mexico, the economic system is not a determining factor in their eyes, and neither is the legality of the system: whether or not there is an effective rule of law.

Yet, the economy is definitely the Achilles’ heel of the revolutionary regime and much effort is devoted to the search of external sources of funding because it is not a self-supporting regime type. This is one reason why ideology is important. “The prevalence and intensity of propaganda is inversely proportional to the government’s economic success,” one well-known movie director told me. “Right now we have no freedom to produce anything but propaganda because the economy is in shambles. There is more freedom for people in the arts to address social problems but no one can touch Fidel or the economy.”¹²

One of the architects of the new economic strategy, Hiram Marquetti,¹³ was more optimistic. “In 1989 we imported over 95 percent of our oil, today

12. Interview with a well-known Cuban cinematographer, June 3, 2004.

we import less than 10 percent. Our goal is to reach 100 percent self-sufficiency in oil. We have hired international experts to help us locate and extract new oil deposits in the Gulf of Mexico. Already we have made great strides in all areas of the economy compared to the *Periodo Especial*.” He claims the post Cold War economy is not yet a “model,” just pragmatic adaptations to post Cold War challenges, but he implied it had that potential.

The approach consists of a state led process in which the state still controls 90 percent of the wealth and is “omnipresent in all sectors of the economy.” He notes that while tourism now contributes about 10 percent of the country's GDP, Cuba is currently in the process of taking over the management of many of the hotels. Second, its priority is political, in particular, preventing adverse political consequences to economic changes. It is therefore highly selective and pragmatic based, in part, on trial and error.”There is a highly selective and complex redistribution of wealth at all levels that are never recorded in official economic data.”

The economic “approach” relies heavily on managing “the factors preserving internal consensus” – the prevention of ungovernability. Marquetti accepts that the system failed and says that is why they are replacing it, but he stridently denies that the introduction of foreign investment, a tax and banking system, and of private business activities indicates a shift towards free market economic principles. “This is not privatization, nor is there really a private sector due to the “omnipresence of the government.” In fact, he indicates that the Cuban economy has recovered to the point that anything suggesting neoliberalism is being phased out. The convertible peso is aimed at “dedollarizing” the economy, he notes, and already foreign investors must conduct all transactions in Cuba in convertible pesos.” He admits that it is a complicated juggling act but argues that progress in biotechnology, plans to dramatically expand the tourism sector, the discovery of new oil deposits, and the successful management of “factors of internal consensus” will likely give the system a new lease on life.¹⁴

Meanwhile, ordinary Cubans are legally required to conduct all transactions in Cuban pesos, not convertible pesos. Therefore, the regime is constantly increasing activities that permit it to capture dollars, but through the convertible peso, it retains the illusion of a peso-economy and perpetuates the myth of a Revolutionary model. Together with the complex system of selective rewards and punishments, the Cuban regime has avoided the normal repercussions of such a shift- technocratic dominance. In fact, as Corrales

13. All information on the Cuban economy is based on several interviews with Hiram Marquetti from the Centro de Estudios Economicos, June 1-5, 2004. Marquetti has access to the annual reports on the Cuban economy and is one of the architects of its economic policy.

14. Interview with Hiram Marquetti, Havana, Cuba, June 4, 2004.

demonstrates, the technocrats have been consistently losing ground to the revolutionary elites and the sector that is being given the most access to the free market is the military, definitely not the Huntingtonian route to transition from a Revolutionary to a democratic system.

The second pillar of Revolutionary democracy is a permanent state of siege mentality. The regime reminds citizens of Cuba's daily struggle against the evil American empire in hundreds of ways. Propaganda is especially targeted toward the newer generations who never experienced the Revolution directly. Students have "bomb drills" in which they drop to the floor and huddle under their desks. There are numerous competitions for students and young writers encouraging patriotic speeches glorifying the Revolution in the face of "Yankee adversity." School children recite poems and sing songs that tell the tales of the Bay of Pigs invasion, the CIA's role in the death of the beloved "Che" Guevara, and the effects of the cruel U. S. embargo (or "blockade" as it is known in Cuba). After the fourth grade, children wear red handkerchiefs as part of their uniform to symbolize all the blood Cubans have spilled in their struggle against enemies, mainly the Americans.

There are reminders everywhere of the heavy hand of U. S. ambassadors and a huge monument to Elián González, with signs proclaiming that Cuba will never waver in its struggle against Yankee capitalist imperialists. George Bush posters depicting him with a Hitler-like mustache, military uniform and swastikas adorn the walls in parts of Havana and neighboring cities. There are huge protests organized by Fidel against Bush's Cuba policy, like U. S. refusal to release five Cuban "political prisoners" in the U.S. As mentioned in the opening section of this paper, these were Cubans convicted on charges of spying by infiltrating Cuban-American organizations. The Cubans claim these were heroic efforts to stop terrorism because the Cuban-American organizations are nothing but terrorist groups plotting to assassinate Castro and invade Cuba. The campaign to release these five prisoners is probably meant to counter the European and American condemnation of Cuba's arrest and imprisonment of 78 Cuban dissidents.

It is not unusual to hear people defend the state of siege policy as completely appropriate: after all, if Bush invaded Iraq with no real justification, a country with far more resources and military might than Cuba, one can only imagine how easily the U. S. could target Cuba next. One professor told me: "three bombs is all it would take. It is a very real danger." While the U.S. is vilified, Venezuela, the newest revolutionary sister, is glorified. Posters of Fidel and Hugo Chávez pictured in a "Revolutionary embrace" are displayed prominently in the halls of schools in both Havana and the countryside. Cubans still glorify Mexico and its revolutionary heritage, but it is no longer

the “revolutionary sister” it once was: pictures of Fidel with Salinas, Zedillo, or Fox are nowhere to be found.

The solution proposed in this state of siege policy is the same Mexico supported for almost 70 years: Unity. Anything but an unwavering allegiance to Fidel and his objectives is considered treason. Even the schizophrenic economy has been linked to the state of siege. “This hotel has produced one million dollars for the Revolution,” a sign reads in an entrance of the luxurious *Hotel Nacional*. It has been suggested that Castro deliberately acts in a way to prevent the U. S. Congress from overturning the embargo by undertaking such actions as shooting down Brothers to the Rescue planes or arresting close to 80 dissidents right before Congress is scheduled to deliberate on the embargo issue and is leaning in the direction of ending it. However, there is also evidence that he is using tourism to turn Americans against the embargo, a measure that is estimated to have cost Cuba over \$2 billion dollars since it was imposed. Either way, Castro has manipulated the embargo issue very effectively to maintain the illusion that Cuba is always on the brink of a U.S. invasion.

In July 2004, Castro closed all the dollar stores so prices could be increased by 40 percent in response to Bush's announcement of tighter restrictions. “We will not leave the children and poor without milk...the tourists, those who have the most, must sacrifice the most.” By letting the tourists bear the brunt of his economic measures, he managed to strengthen opposition to the U.S. embargo. In fact, Cuban measures have forged an unlikely alliance of supporters: a large number of international NGOs, sister city programs that include a partnership of Seattle and Cienfuegos, and governments of poor countries that are recipients of Cuba's generous humanitarian aid programs – a representative of the Cuban Health system, Dr. Luis Ceruto Santander, could not give me exact numbers of the doctors posted abroad but he suggested that they were probably in the tens of thousands.

The Humanitarian aid program links up to the third pillar of Revolutionary Democracy: maintaining the social safety net seen as the legacy of the Cuban Revolution. This is the pillar that keeps the population state dependent and makes the Revolutionary myth possible. Disguised as a “gift” from the government it is actually subsidized by the effective high tax rates hidden underneath the obsolete salary structure. A bellboy can make in one day more than most university professors and medical doctors make in one month. A taxi driver can make that much in a couple of hours.

Yet, both urban and rural residents said the health and education systems are good (though not excellent). The Cubans boasted of universal computer access for school children (although not internet access, and any “.com” domain name is usually blocked from places with access), including a solar

powered computer for a child in a mountainous rural area with no electricity. Ironically, by adhering so strictly to a “no child left behind” policy, the regime may be neglecting the poor majority that badly needs some of these resources redirected towards housing or quality food.

There are currently 64 university campuses (2004 data) up from 28 in 1976 and three in 1960. Since 1959, 700,000 have graduated from college with 42 percent going into education, 16 percent into medicine, 37 percent going into other professions and 7 percent into graduate programs. All graduates receive a job along with their degree.¹⁵ The system is calculated to produce the specialties needed in each region, making universal employment easier. Military service is done within the academic program. At the end of their careers, students select five job possibilities, in order of preference, and the decision is made on a competitive basis based on grades, “citizenship,” and other such criteria. Grade school education is first rate but is centrally controlled and comes with a heavy dose of propaganda. The same is true in higher education. When I asked one professor what would happen if he wanted to teach his class in a different way he said the process was very collegial and that it was easy to get alternatives approved. He said, “Of course, nothing counterrevolutionary would ever be approved but none of us are destructive and unpatriotic!”

Grade school classrooms were surprisingly relaxed – students were encouraged but never obligated to participate. They were given one very nutritious meal at school at a highly subsidized rate, one pencil per month, and a few other supplies. They borrow their textbooks as well as books from small libraries. Numerous contests and activities rewarded the most revolutionary students and revolutionary values are drilled in at every opportunity.

University education seemed highly effective and modern and many departments actively collaborated with foreign researchers from all over the world. Every student donates two years of mandatory social service but has considerable freedom in selecting their post and can keep it afterwards, if they so choose.

While the education system seemed excellent, students in the street would beg for a pen and university graduates complained to me that they can’t win – either they are the fortunate few who can join the tourist sector and make some real money but not use any of their education, like a waitress-economist and chamber maid-medical technician I met, or they obtain a satisfying job in which they can use their skills but have to live a miserable life just scraping

15. Information about the education system comes from several sources: an interview with and lecture by Dr. Francisco Martínez from the Ministerio de Educacion Superior, June 3, 2004, conversations with the directors of two grade schools in Havana, a conversation with a historian in Cienfuegos, a visit to the university of Havana, and conversations with students, teachers, and professors. I am deliberately withholding the names of many of my interviewees.

by. Frustration levels among recent college graduates appeared to be only slightly lower than those among taxi drivers.

There is considerable evidence that the health system also lives up to its reputation, but the former health minister I spoke with, Dr. Luis Ceruto Santander, was not as candid and generous with details as other experts I spoke with. He said the formal medical system had a complimentary informal system encouraging preventive medicine. Informal older citizens groups, *Circulos de Abuelos*, have been set up across the country to help older citizens cope with the loneliness of old age that often leads to depression. There are also temporary and permanent medical initiatives. When a serious problem arises like an epidemic affecting people in a particular community, there are medical "campaigns" that are dissolved when the problem is controlled. The structure of the Cuban medical system and education requirements for physicians at different levels, as well as requirements for continual education, seemed to set high standards. Cuban medical schools have students from all over the world, many on Cuban government scholarships, all need-based. Some medicines are free, others are subsidized, but he said great effort went into securing the right medicine for patients who needed it.

Cuban citizens had few complaints about the medical system but disagreed about whether health products and medications were readily accessible. One professional told me she cleaned her hard contact lenses with saliva and had terrible problems with her eyes. Contact lens solution is only available in dollar stores and costs the equivalent of several months of her salary. Other Cubans said it was common for them to have to move to take care of a loved one because many services were only available in Havana and that the government did not provide the spouse with a new job.

The real evidence of how important this pillar is to Revolutionary Democracy is the amount of the budget it absorbs. While no exact figures were available, approximately one fifth of the annual budget goes to social expenditures.¹⁶ Since doctors and teachers receive well under \$30 per month, Cuba may have the least expensive skilled labor force in the world, permitting it to keep an extensive safety net in place without bankrupting the country.

The new "perfeccionamiento" phase of economic restructuring the economy is succeeding at laying a misleading foundation for the myth of Revolutionary Democracy. Together with the permanent state of siege and the maintenance of excellent education and health care systems, the Cuban regime has produced an "alternative" regime type that could capture the imagination of revolutionary idealists throughout the developing world.

16. This figure is from the 2004 issue of an annual report on the Cuban economy only available in Cuba. I purchased the most recent issue from Hiram Marquetti but it disappeared from my office upon arrival.

Conclusion

If one observes Cuba through Mexico's mirror, it is apparent that Cuba is experiencing the effects of the obsolescence of the ideologically driven Revolutionary system, a system that has never been able to pay for itself and therefore cannot effectively provide for its poor majority, let alone its middle classes. It is also a system that rests on illegality. Corruption is the system, and any introduction of transparency requirements, necessary for rule of law can bring it down. The PRI in Mexico rotted from within but opposition movements at the local level were able to gain enough strength in their struggles against the PRI to reveal the corruption that impeded real progress toward development. Two alternative but weak parties now compete with the PRI in an incipient party system that will struggle with the legacy of Revolutionary rule for at least a couple of decades.

The PRD, representing the revolutionary faction of the former PRI as well as outside revolutionary components previously locked out by the system, is advocating the return to a state-driven Revolutionary program providing extensive social benefits instead of privileging economic growth, and competitive individualism. The PAN, a party with deep roots and a diverse heritage but largely liberal democratic values, has been leading a transition to a new benchmark of legitimacy that started at least since 1988. Mexico is slowly shifting from the Revolutionary values depicting the U. S. and business classes as the enemy and stressing equality and state largesse over individual freedom and free association, toward liberal democratic ones stressing respect for human rights, individual freedoms, and particularly rule of law. This shift has been reflected in the evolution of Cuba-Mexico relations since Salinas took over in 1988.

The Cuban regime has been far more effective than Mexico's PRI-regime not only at providing social services for the population but also at establishing effective control over the territory. The democratic opposition in Mexico evolved over a period of fifty years at the local level where the PRI ruled only indirectly through local strongmen. The Cuban Communist Party has control even in the most remote localities. Furthermore, Cuba has been far more effective at rooting out elite divisions and those in the middle classes, through a combination of immigration and repression. While Mexico co-opted dissidents, Cuba imprisoned, executed, or sent them into exile. Mexico was able to repress pockets of dissent but eventually there were so many that they were impossible to keep track of. Also, the gap between policy formulation and implementation was much greater in Mexico than it is in Cuba. The Mexican government was centralized and authoritarian, but never had the control over territory and population that the Cuban government has.

However, the two countries also have much in common. Both have oil and were at some point banking on oil keeping the political system alive. Both also have immigration as an escape valve for popular discontent. Both also have a population socialized to embrace Revolutionary values, although the new generations in Mexico are being socialized into liberal-democratic practices and values.

In Mexico, it was small businessmen who led opposition movements at the local level that eventually had a national level impact. In Cuba, it is also small businessmen who harbor the most resentment against the regime. In Mexico, the process was unstoppable – as people became aware of the entrepreneurial route to social mobility and the effects of the almost total lack of transparency inherent in the political and economic systems; they were unwilling to settle for the minimal security afforded by the revolutionary regime. While the Cuban government may be able to continue to use access to pockets of free market economies as a system of rewards and punishments, it seems unlikely that it can stop the growing tide of those who have tasted free market realities that shatter the mirage of a Revolutionary economy. How long will professors and architects be willing to spend months or even years walking buckets of water up five flights of stairs to deal with plumbing problems or figuring out what to do with food rations that include only sugar, oil, peas, rice, and a pound of chicken a month? It is very possible that Fidel Castro will survive all of these challenges, particularly since even some of the taxi drivers proclaimed that they were Fidelistas though not at all *comunistas*. Regardless of the possibilities for regime change in Cuba, the advent of Revolutionary Democracy represents a threat to the region that could set countries back economically by decades and encourage the coming to power of populist autocrats with non-transparent regimes- rife with corruption and secrets, the effects of which we can only imagine.

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