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## PUTTING THE HAMMER DOWN ON CUBA

A DECADE AFTER THE 'fall of communism', the universal triumph of capitalism—widely taken for granted as an accomplished fact—has yet to become a literal reality. The collapse of the Soviet Union and Eastern European regimes has so far not been followed by the sudden demise of China, Vietnam, North Korea or Cuba. The conventional view would be that this is still only a matter of time. Meanwhile, these societies have not disappeared, and their different experiences call for analytic attention. Among them, the record of post-revolutionary Cuba is distinct. Unlike the PRC, Cuba has not embraced the stock market or *Titanic*, or benefited, like Vietnam, from Japanese loans and investment. Nor, like the DRPK till this year, has it gone into deep hibernation. The traumatic shock to its economy, with the erasure of the Soviet bloc, was greater than that to East Germany or North Korea, yet it has got through the decade without mass unemployment or famine. This is not to say that the 'special period in time of peace'—the official euphemism for the state of life-and-death emergency declared by Fidel Castro in 1991—has not left deep wounds in Cuban society, from which ultimate recovery is as uncertain as ever. But to understand the situation of the island today, it is essential to look north, at the imperial power that has waged unremitting hostilities against it for forty years. The fate of the revolution will be determined as much by developments in the United States as in Cuba itself. Already, the frontiers between the two have been reconfigured in a striking new pattern. After a long period in which Cuba drifted to the margins of international interest, the psycho-drama of one custody case has suddenly riveted world attention back onto it. The Elián González affair,

which mesmerized US media for half a year, offers a timely prism for looking at the realities of the relationship across the Florida Straits.

### *Elián*

On 25 November last year an American fisherman found a six-year-old boy, Elián González, floating on a tyre off the coast of Florida. His mother had taken him with her lover on a raft from Cuba, which had capsized, with twelve people onboard, in high seas. Elián's father, Juan Miguel, separated from the mother, had been unaware of her flight. He was reached by the staff of the hospital in Miami to which Elián was taken; the boy had given them his name and telephone number. Juan Miguel asked that his son be sent back to Cuba. Instead, the hospital authorities allowed Elián to be carried off by Lázaro González, a great uncle he had never previously met. Almost immediately the boy was adopted as a symbol by a powerful section of the exile community in Florida. As early as November 30, posters demanding that Elián be given asylum in the United States appeared at the WTO conference in Seattle. In early December, a Florida court entrusted Elián to the great uncle, who refused to return the boy to his father on the grounds that it would be persecution to send Elián back to a Communist tyranny. It was later revealed that the Cuban-American judge who made the custody award had political and business links to Lázaro. Elián was taken on highly publicized tours of Disneyland, photographed draped in the US flag, and an appeal lodged in his name for asylum in the United States.

Juan Miguel's request for the return of his son to Cuba had meanwhile been passed to the Immigration and Naturalization Service which, in accordance with its standard procedures, was prepared to award him custody so long as he could prove paternity and that he was not likely to be an abusive parent. A representative of the Service met Juan Miguel on 16 December and in early January the INS ruled that he was the father, and a good parent, and that Elián should be sent back to Cuba. But Lázaro, equipped with the Florida court's decision, now had possession of Elián and refused to arrange for his return. He did not claim Juan Miguel was a bad father, simply that it would be better for Elián to grow up as a free citizen in a free country. In Miami, the boy was converted into a miraculous icon of political salvation. In Cuba, the detention of Elián aroused widespread incredulity and anger: how could

the US authorities countenance the kidnapping of the boy by distant relatives he had never met? There were mass demonstrations of protest.

In February, Elián's two grandmothers—both appealing for his return—were granted visas to visit the United States and meet him, in conditions of tight security, for just over an hour. One of them carried a mobile phone which rang while they were with Elián. This was pre-arranged to allow his father to speak with the boy, but the phone was swiftly confiscated. When the grandmothers returned to Cuba, they were greeted by demonstrations even larger than those of January. Declaring that he would come to the US as soon he could bring his son back to Cuba, Juan Miguel argued that it was the duty of the US government to hand back Elián without forcing him to enter into a lengthy legal process on foreign soil. But in March he had to acquire a new US lawyer—a former State Department planner and Clinton counsel—who secured American visas for Juan Miguel, his new wife Nersey and their infant son, Hianny. After a session with Fidel Castro, this photogenic trio—the father cradling his younger son in his arms—arrived in Washington on April 7. There, Juan Miguel delivered a brief dignified address, thanking those Americans who had supported his case, and looking forward to a reunion with Elián. At this point, US media coverage of the affair went into high gear. Juan Miguel, a well-dressed and athletic member of the Cuban Communist Party working in the tourism complex, was the subject of profiles in *Newsweek* and *Time* that made it clear he had been very close to his son, who slept at his father's house more often than his mother's. A growing span of American opinion came round to the view that Elián should be allowed to go home. But the exile community in Miami, and its allies in the *Wall Street Journal* and elsewhere, clamorously rejected any idea that he could be returned to a Communist tyranny.

Early in the morning of Easter Saturday, April 22, the stand-off between the INS and the Florida courts was broken, when Federal Marshals entered Lázaro's home in Miami at gun-point, removed Elián from a cupboard in which he had been hidden, and bore him away to an air-base near Washington, where his father was allowed to rejoin him. The reaction of the Cuban-American community in Florida was massive and immediate. A general strike brought Little Havana to a halt on April 25, with demonstrations denouncing Attorney-General Reno's forcible abduction of Elián. High levels of emotional mobilization were kept

up in the succeeding weeks. But now latent antagonisms between the Cuban-American and Anglo—not to speak of Black—communities in Florida were coming to the surface, while national opinion in the US swung behind the Justice Department. For the next two months, while Lázaro's lawyers pressed appeals through the US courts, Juan Miguel and Elián were held in or near Washington, joined by four of the boy's classmates and his teacher from Cuba, to help him catch up with his schooling. Finally, after weeks of saturation coverage exceeding even the Diana fixation in the US media, the Supreme Court dismissed Lázaro's case and, on June 29th, father and son were allowed to fly in a chartered plane back to Cuba—a departure transmitted to the American public in hours of live television coverage.

### *Miami*

Suddenly throwing into high resolution a field of forces that is normally more shadowy, the Oprah Winfrey-style incident—understandably arousing warm emotions—also calls for a cool look at the realities of the triangular relationship between Washington, Miami and Havana. Critical to these is the unique nature of the Cuban community within the United States. All revolutions have produced colonies of exiles abroad, from Saint-Germain to Koblenz, Harbin to Dharmasala. None, however, has produced a counter-revolutionary concentration of such wealth and power as Miami. The Cuban emigration to the US numbers 1.37 million—scarcely 4 per cent of the total Hispanic population in the States. But with an average household income of over \$40,000 a year, it has the equivalent of a GDP of about \$14 billion—over half the size of the Cuban economy itself, whose GDP is currently calculated at \$23 billion—with a tenth of the population.<sup>1</sup> Economically, this may be the most successful immigrant group in US history, with assets accumulated over four decades which dwarf those of any previous immigration of comparable scale. The foundations of this fortune were laid by pre-revolutionary investments in the US by the Cuban rich, by the high level of middle-class professional qualifications of the first post-revolutionary wave of

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<sup>1</sup> Adjusting the 1993 figures, the average household income of the Miami community must be well over \$50,000 today, above the national Anglo average. See Max J. Castro, 'De Agentes à Arquitectos', *Encuentro de la cultura cubana*, no. 15, Winter 1999–2000. This journal, published from Madrid, reflects the cultural standpoint of the liberal emigrés.

exiles (some 215,000) and—last but not least—substantial clandestine subsidies from the CIA to businesses set up by the new anti-communist arrivals. But entrepreneurial dynamism was also assisted by intense ideological mobilization, as exiles lent money to one another on easy terms, developed cooperative business networks, and used ethnic solidarity to bypass unionization.<sup>2</sup> The regional setting was, furthermore, highly favourable for the two-thirds of the community concentrated in Florida, where the Reagan boom yielded one of the highest growth rates of any state in the Union. The result is a flourishing landscape of small and medium businesses, with a layer of very big wealth in real estate, banking and construction. By the nineties, Miami had crossed Koblenz with Klondike.

The spectacular rise of the Cuban economy in Florida helped the exile community, in turn, to preserve its cultural identity in a way that no other immigrant group has done in recent memory. Far from readily assimilating to all-American—ie: Anglo—norms, the Cuban population in Miami not only continued to speak Spanish, but made it the dominant language in Miami, as it became the largest electoral bloc and eventually took control of the city itself. The Cuban ascendancy has, to all intents and purposes, made Miami a major Latin American metropolis more than an urban area of North America. Naturally, the growth of this exotic enclave was far from welcome to local white power-holders in Southern Florida—the *Miami Herald* for many years giving voice to resentment of the upstarts. In 1980, a backlash referendum blocked bi-lingual education in the city. It was at this point that the economic power of the Cuban community was transformed into a political force on a national scale. It was a Democratic President—Kennedy—who had organized and armed Cuban exiles for a reconquest of their homeland. But after the failure of the Bay of Pigs, and the stand-off of the Missile Crisis, US support for active counter-revolution was limited to connivance at low-level sabotage, and efforts to assassinate Fidel. The election of Reagan marked a new approach. In 1980, the Cuban-American Foundation (CANF) was set up with the help of the new Administration, under the leadership of the millionaire developer and construction tycoon, Jorge Mas Canosa, a veteran of the Bay of Pigs.

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<sup>2</sup> For a description, see Alejandro Portes and Alex Stepick, *City on the Edge: the Transformation of Miami*, Berkeley 1993, pp. 139–44.

## *The Foundation*

Within a short space of time the Foundation established a solid hegemony over the Cuban community in the United States, acting in effect as its national political leadership. Mas Canosa, an autocrat of boundless energy and ambition, brooked no opposition within the organization, which was lavishly funded by exile businesses. His objective remained the overthrow of the revolutionary government in Cuba, for which he had personally fought, by other means. ‘We had to take the struggle out of the Calle Ocho and the Miami Stadium and into the centre of power. We had to stop the commando raids and concentrate on influencing public opinion and governments’.<sup>3</sup> The model he took for the operations of CANF was the most powerful foreign-policy lobby: the American-Israeli Political Action Committee. As Mas Canosa forthrightly put it: ‘We realized pretty soon that to influence the US political system we must copy the Jewish model, and we became very closely allied with the Jewish lobby and the Jewish movement in Washington.’<sup>4</sup> If AIPAC was famously entrenched in the ranks of the Democrats, while never overlooking the need for support from Republicans, too, CANF could be equally bipartisan—relying on Republican backers, without forgoing links to Democrats. Competition for its favours could only benefit the cause.

When the Communist regimes in Eastern Europe fell in 1989, the Foundation concluded that the moment to topple Castro had arrived. But pressing for US legislation to stop remittances being sent to relatives in Cuba, and to render the assets of anyone trafficking with Cuba liable to seizure, it ran into opposition from the White House. Bush did not want to provoke allies involved in trade with Cuba, who would certainly question the legality of sanctions infringing their sovereign rights—the Canadian government even threatening to expel any American firm that sought to make use of the proposed legislation. Undeterred, CANF secured the services of a Democratic Congressman to push through the bill it had drafted—the reptilian figure of Robert Torricelli from New Jersey, where the second-largest Cuban community is located in Union City: appropriately also a zealot for the Israeli lobby. In April 1992

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<sup>3</sup> See María Cristina García, *Havana USA: Cuban Exiles and Cuban Americans in South Florida, 1959–1994*, Berkeley 1996, p. 147.

<sup>4</sup> See Miguel Gonzalez-Pando, *The Cuban Americans*, Westport 1998, p. 158.

Clinton, bellowing that ‘the Administration has missed a big opportunity to put the hammer down on Fidel Castro and Cuba’, acclaimed Torricelli’s bill, helping him to push it through Congress as the Cuba Democracy Act in September.<sup>5</sup> Bush’s signature on the Act did not save him from further attacks by Clinton that he was too weak towards Cuba. In 1994, over-ruling his advisers, Clinton cut off family remittances to Cuba at the behest of CANF.<sup>6</sup> Two years later, the Foundation manoeuvred a second punitive act through Congress, this time sponsored by the Republicans Jesse Helms and Dan Burton, designated the Cuba Liberty and Solidarity Act, tightening the embargo on Cuba, and reprisals against foreign companies trading with it, yet further—a package approved by Clinton, amidst a stream of venal distractions in his drive for re-election. ‘The Libertad Act’, as he put it, ‘reasserts our resolve to help carry the tide of democracy to the shores of Cuba.’

These were impressive achievements for the Foundation. But they did not yield the fruits expected of them. Fidel Castro did not fall. The Cuban economy began to recover. In 1997 Mas Canosa, who had hoped to return in triumph to Havana, died. The following year the Pope’s visit to Cuba threw Catholic opinion in the Florida community into disarray. By now, this had in any case become more variegated: the émigrés of the eighties and nineties were not so well-off, or business-oriented, as their predecessors. They retained more links to the island, and came to include

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<sup>5</sup> For Clinton’s speech, see Christopher Hitchens, ‘Minority Report’, *The Nation*, 8 June 1992. For Torricelli, see *Miami Herald*, 28 September 1992: “It’s a bad day in Havana”, exulted author Rep. Robert Torricelli, a hawkish Democrat who relished attacking the Bush Administration from the right’.

<sup>6</sup> ‘The decision to punish Castro directly—by cutting off the flow of dollars brought in by families and by limiting the number of charter flights, among other steps—came straight from Clinton. Indeed the president all but discarded a set of milder options prepared by his advisers in favour of a tougher plan advocated by many exile hard-liners, including Jorge Mas Canosa. That decision was taken at a late-night White House meeting attended by several Cuban-American leaders in Miami. When one remarked how impressed they were with Clinton’s understanding of the entire situation, he explained he had been engaged in a personal, concerted study of Cuba and the exile community since 1990. During visits to South Florida, the Arkansas governor—guided by his Cuban-exile sister-in-law—would walk the streets of Little Havana . . . Clinton did more to squeeze the Cuban dictator in a few days than either Republican [President] accomplished during the 1980s’: Tom Fiedler, ‘A Look behind Bill Clinton’s Cuba Stance’, *Miami Herald*, 28 August 1994.

a number of talented artists and writers who helped to make Miami a cultural centre, with a Book Fair and an International Film Festival attracting participation from all over Spain and Latin America. Although the great majority of the Cuban community remained staunchly revanchist—two-thirds would support a full-scale American invasion of Cuba, according to opinion polls—a basis for more liberal, or apolitical, eddies of feeling was emerging within it. Leadership of CANF, meanwhile, had passed—after the fashion of Trujillo or Duvalier—to Mas Canosa’s son, Jorge Mas Santos. Appearing ineffective compared with his father, he failed to make his mark.

It was in this context that the discovery of Elián came as manna to the Foundation. Mas Santos immediately realized the potential in the case, and acted quickly. The Foundation furnished ample expenses and legal advice to Lázaro González as he prepared an asylum application for Elián. In December, it assigned its Chief of Security, Mario Miranda, to organize a permanent guard round Lázaro’s house. Opposite, a shrine was erected depicting the rescue of *el niño Elián* by dolphins and the Virgin Mary. Ruffians from a street gang called the Latin Kings mustered in the environs. Lincoln Diaz-Balart, Republican representative from South Florida, started to line up fellow Congressmen for an order inviting Elián to testify to the House. Amidst all this activity, the Foundation was able to reassert its moral authority in the exile community and once again rally Cuban-American opinion behind its standard. Passions were soon running so high that when the INS opposed asylum, several thousand demonstrators paraded through the streets of the city chanting: ‘We built Miami, and we’ll burn it down, if they take Elián from this town.’

### *Backlash*

At a national level, the Foundation’s pressure proved equally formidable. On the Republican side, both Bush brothers—Jeb had been campaign manager for one of CANF’s congressional candidates, before becoming governor of Florida—backed the demand for asylum. On the Democratic side, Gore lost no time in calling for Elián to be given US citizenship. His campaign manager, Tony Coelho—a politician forced to resign from Congress, a very rare event, under a financial cloud—was in close touch with Mas Santos; while his ally, Jon Corzine, a former Chairman of Goldman Sachs running as multi-millionaire Democratic candidate for



the other Senatorial seat in New Jersey, matched Torricelli on Cuba. Notching up high-profile sponsors was one matter, however; winning public opinion at large proved to be another. Here the Foundation's drive ran into two significant obstacles. Ideologically, the demand that a six-year-old be separated from his only parent as a political refugee brought two of the most cherished items of the American value-system into direct contradiction with one another—'freedom' (escape from Communist tyranny), and 'family' (foundation of morality). Anglo support for sequestration was vociferously expressed by hard-core anti-Communist pundits like George Will and Amity Shlaes. But the INS custody decision was clear-cut, and conformed to commonsense intuitions of Juan Miguel's right to reclaim his child. Even many commentators otherwise impeccably hostile to Cuba were left uneasy at the prospect of flouting family values too openly.<sup>7</sup>

A further difficulty was more self-created. The meteoric success of the Cuban-American community in Florida, and the commanding role of the Foundation at large, had long grated on groups exposed to contact with them—local Anglos, Blacks and other Hispanics. The refusal of Little Havana to truckle to conventional pressures for assimilation to English-speaking America, its combative retention of Spanish and proud cultural identity, were always a potential affront to chauvinist sentiment in the US. Once the community was locked in conflict with Federal authorities, showing itself quite willing to defy the majesty of the Justice Department, latent hostility to this un-American intruder burst forth on a national scale—reactions ironically not dissimilar to American outrage at the Cuban revolution's defiance of Washington in the first place. Vitriolic denunciations of Miami by the likes of Thomas Friedman, Western triumphalist and jingo number one in the columns of the *New York Times*, speak for themselves. Media coverage of the battle over Elián, spotlighting much that had been obscure in the operations of the Cuban enclave in Florida, brought mainstream dislike of any extraneous cyst in the nation to the surface. The Foundation could appear to be challenging both family values and patriotic totems, a hard combination to beat. By April, public opinion was clearly moving against asylum.

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<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Kenneth Anderson, 'A Great Betrayal: how American conservatives have abandoned parental rights in the case of Elián González', *Times Literary Supplement*, 12 May 2000.

A further ingredient in a growing backlash against CANF came from restive business interests. The National Association of Manufacturers and the US Chamber of Commerce had for some time been sending exploratory delegations to Havana and querying the wisdom of the blockade. Major corporations backing such efforts have included Caterpillar, Ingersoll-Rand, General Electric, Citibank, Boeing and the Radisson hotel empire. Mid-Western farmers had also been complaining for some time that the embargo was denying them a natural market for foodstuffs worth a billion dollars a year. In April, a Republican Representative from Texas, Charles Stenham, returned from a visit to Cuba to urge a relaxation of the restrictions on trade and, in mid-May, the House Appropriations Committee unexpectedly voted to attach an amendment to a Farm Bill allowing certain categories of food and medicine to be exported to Cuba. Simmering anti-embargo sentiment did not help the ultra cause in Miami.

Clinton, meanwhile, no longer concerned with re-election, faced a different set of calculations. His ties to the Cuban-American lobby were long-standing and intimate; as late as 1997, Lewinsky recounts phone calls to the Bebe Rebozo of the incumbency, the sugar magnate Fanjul whose family has controlled vast plantations in the South since pre-revolutionary days. But it was now Gore's turn to take up this role, with Corzine in tow. Clinton's wife, on the other hand, was running for Senator in New York, where the Puerto Rican electorate, a much more significant bloc than the Cuban-American, and leant strongly in favour of Elián's speedy reunion with his father. House Representative José Serrano, indeed, was active in helping to arrange Juan Miguel's arrival in the States, and has long called for the blockade of Cuba to be lifted. If Hillary at first failed to grasp these dynamics, and with typically crass opportunism spoke of Elián becoming an American, her husband no doubt brought them sharply to her attention. Legal considerations pointed in the same direction. Counsel inside the Justice Department would have made it clear from the start that there was no chance of a custody case going against Juan Miguel. Respect for the law has scarcely been a prime mover for either President or Attorney-General. But in early 2000, neither had strong reason to bend the course of the law against the tide of public opinion. Clinton no longer needed campaign finance, while Reno—once chief law officer in her native Miami—may well have shared the antipathy of her fellow Anglos to Little Havana. The issue could safely be passed to the judiciary, and the predictable

outcome left for the media to applaud, without the President having to pronounce on the matter.

### *Armageddon and after*

While this American folk tale was unfolding, a very different set of scenes could be observed in Cuba. For anyone familiar with the tumultuous revolutionary assemblies of the sixties, the demonstration of Cuban women along the Malecón on 15 January 2000 could only seem, at first, intensely poignant. Their call for the return of the child was certainly also an impressive expression of loyalty to Cuba's social arrangements. But even if Elián were returned, could the distinctive way of life which his loss dramatized survive? The desolate final shot of *Buena Vista Social Club*, panning along a tattered poster of 'Socialismo o Muerte' was filmed just here, on this wind-swept seafront (naturally contrasted with the rubicund opulence of Carnegie Hall, the mecca of Wenders's finale). Its message leaves no ambiguity. Could such a march be anything more than a brave but doomed attempt to defy the inevitable?

Yet resignation was not on view along the Malecón. Havana has seen not a few grimly dutiful demonstrations in the past. But for all the obvious organization, the spirit of this one was notably spontaneous, and the numbers—200,000—exceeded any expectation. Waving little national flags, and giving their own tilt to the slogans, the river of women floods past the building that houses 'US interests', with a mixture of anger and good humour. Speeches, though not from Fidel, and music follow: the solemn strains of the Internationale, the jaunty lilt of the anthem of the 26th July Movement, the Song of the Heroic Guerrilla. Memories inevitably crowd in. The hopes of the sixties may have crumbled like so many of the buildings in old Havana, but something has lodged in the people that will not be easily rooted out. Those who want to defend the best in the revolution are having their day. Young people can be heard saying that for the first time they have a sense of something like the historic confrontations of their parent's generation. At stake are Cuban dignity and sovereignty.

Something close to penury has been the common lot otherwise. Between 1989 and 1993—the years of 'Armageddon', as the locals call it—Cuba lost 70 per cent of its exports and 75 percent of its imports, with the dis-

appearance of the Soviet bloc.<sup>8</sup> GDP fell by over a third. The currency collapsed. Food became extremely scarce. Power cuts were frequent. Essential medicines went lacking. Although there has been a gradual economic recovery since the mid-nineties which has picked up in the last couple of years, overall output and per capita income have still not regained their levels of the mid-eighties. Food rations allow only for basic survival. Everyday life is a permanent struggle, against a background of continual shortages. The peso has been stabilized against the dollar since 1995, but at the cost of a dual currency. For any supplement to their diet, city-dwellers need dollars. Cubans can acquire these from relatives in the United States or employment in tourist-related activities, inevitably a source of frustration and demoralization to anyone who falls into neither category. Those who are dedicated to serving their own people as producers, teachers or doctors have to make do with the meagre official rations. Even the most honest and law-abiding are often forced to make free with public property, ignoring regulations.

In the countryside the government has dismantled most of the old state farms for various types of cooperatives or private plots. Peasants can market whatever they produce above and beyond the quotas assigned them for delivery, at fixed rates, to the state. Prices are high, but supply has become more flexible. In some sectors, notably tobacco, production has rebounded. In others, above all the key crop, sugar, where lack of fuel and new equipment has shut down a third of the mills, output is still basically flat—annual harvests running not much above three million tons, where twenty years ago the country produced eight million. On the other hand, the area devoted to food crops—citrus, bananas, melons, vegetables, beans, rice—is growing. During the ‘special period’, Cuban agriculture has been obliged to resort to ‘organic’ and ‘sustainable’ methods of cultivation, since industrial fertilizers and sprays have become expensive and rare. In a sort of pastoral echo of the rediscovery of forties Cuban *son*, peasants of advanced years are persuaded to explain how everything was done five or six decades ago, before pesticides and chemicals had really taken hold.

The relative recovery of the Cuban economy since it plumbed the depths, around 1992–3, reflects diversification, the persistence of barter

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<sup>8</sup> See the excellent ‘Survey of Cuba, Heroic Illusions’, by Anne Wroe, *Economist*, 6 April 1996, p. 6.

arrangements with Russia and China, and a rise in domestic oil production. Sugar is still Cuba's main export, earning some \$600 million in 1998—about two million tons still going to Russia, and another 200,000 tons to China, in exchange for supplies of oil and rice. The cost of oil imports in 1998 was around \$1 billion—larger than the food bill—but Venezuela is now helping Cuba to increase its own output annually, to the point where domestic production should cover 70 per cent of needs this year. Underlining its critical importance for the whole economy, Cuba's national accounts now embody a measure of *intensidad energética* (roughly equivalent to fuel efficiency) for each sector and enterprise. Nickel, mined by the state at Nícaro, and in a joint venture with the Canadian firm Sherritt at Moa Bay, is the country's second export; with a small increase in output and a 60 per cent increase in the world price over the last eighteen months, earnings from this source could reach \$500 million this year. Tobacco products come third, at a value of \$184 million in 1998. Here, a new Spanish-French company, Altados, now handles overseas marketing of Cuban cigars, whose output has increased considerably in recent years.

The pattern of Cuban trade reflects historic inertias—Russia remaining the country's most important customer, taking 26 per cent of its exports, followed by the Netherlands (12 per cent), Canada and Spain (7 per cent each). The EU looms larger on the import side, accounting for nearly half its supplies, with Spain in the lead at 21 per cent, France at 10 and Italy at 8 per cent. The balance of trade, massively unfavourable, is a reminder of how precarious the country's position continues to be. Exports, running at \$1.4 billion in 1998, covered only half the import bill of \$2.8 billion.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, Cuba is still encumbered with a foreign debt of \$13 billion, and past lapses in servicing it mean that Cuban enterprises now have to pay very high rates—15 per cent or so—for credits. These are the conditions that have put a premium on the development of tourism, which alone can cover the trade gap. The gross earnings of the tourist industry are reckoned to have been around \$1.4 billion in 1998, and rising. Most arrivals are from Canada, Spain, Italy, Germany and other EU states. Officials claim half of inputs are now locally supplied, and tourists do seem to have been eating much more Cuban food, but linkages between the tourism complex and local manufacturing remain

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<sup>9</sup> For these figures, see the Economist Intelligence Unit report for Cuba, Annual Country Profile 1999.

weak, with most hardware—refrigerators, televisions and so on—coming from abroad, cutting net income from the sector even if there is some spin-off in handicrafts and luxury products.

### *Two economies*

The coexistence of two currencies; of state, and modest, private enterprises; above all, of the tourist industry—on which national solvency now depends—and widespread privation, inevitably creates acute social tensions. Small private restaurants or *paladares* cater to foreigners or Cubans with dollars. There, in often pleasant semi-domestic settings, crab and pork are on the menu while outside, ‘camels’—juggernaut lorries converted into huge articulated buses—thunder past, crammed with Cubans heading down-town to collect rations of rice and beans. Jealous officials try to make sure that lobster is not available in the *paladares*, and a maximum number of customers is not exceeded; establishments that are too successful may be closed down.<sup>10</sup> But if small producers attract such control and suspicion, the result is petty corruption to evade it. The visitor has no need to fear physical hassle in Cuba. But there is still hustle, which for many city-dwellers is almost obligatory as their rations are so low. The tourist is stopped by men offering cigars, or the address of a flat to rent, or of a good restaurant. Even the great majority who disdain such activity still need to make ends meet by informal trading, or borrowing their work equipment to earn some extra on their own account. In these conditions, the more principled and patriotic often lose out. It is they who must often ask themselves: after so many sacrifices, what does the future hold—is Cuba in danger of losing its distinctive civic egalitarianism and acquiring the huge social problems of Mexico or Brazil, without their turbines of capitalist development?

Still, it is plain that the Cuban regime is not just passively administering the austerities of globalization, like so many governments in Latin America. Flouting the reigning neo-liberal orthodoxy, state bodies increasingly play an energetic entrepreneurial role. Visitors arriving on a Cubana flight will be regaled with a lively commercial for the Gaviota tour company—a video portraying a crowd of casually attired young men

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<sup>10</sup> For the role of the *paladares*, and much else besides, see the fine study of the capital by Roberto Segre, Mario Coyula and Joseph Scarpaci, *Havana: Two Faces of the Antillean Metropolis*, Chichester 1998, pp. 226, 230–238.

and women clambering on a truck and dancing to a pulsating soundtrack of Cuban *son* and salsa, with a black youth supplying a vigorous rap-style invitation, as the vehicle careers through the streets of a Cuban town and out into the country. Once in Havana, they will be offered trips in air-conditioned Mercedes buses to coastal resorts, flights in a helicopter and power-boat fishing in the Gulf Stream. The company is owned by the Cuban armed forces. Public enterprises of this kind seek to beguile those with dollars, so the implications are mixed. Packaging and advertising of cigars, coffee and rum are slick, CDs of Cuban music over-priced (\$16 a disc). But sooner or later all this convertible currency returns to the state, which uses its commercial revenues to fund other activities. In a world where governments find it increasingly difficult to tax, the profits of well-run public enterprise can be a vital element in state revenues. In the sixties, few people on the Left believed tourism was good for economic development, but the evidence from Italy and Spain has shown the growth it can stimulate.

The evils it can also bring are less contested. In the early and mid-nineties the combination of tourism and semi-dollarization led to the appearance of hard-currency prostitution in Cuban hotels and their environs. This is now very much discouraged. Petty theft and violence are absent. In striking contrast to so many other American cities—Bogotá, or Caracas, Rio or Mexico City, Washington or Los Angeles—Havana is now very safe, no doubt in part due to the vigilance of neighbourhood committees, but also to a certain sense of orderliness and responsibility. In Quito or Bogotá, there is a guard with a rifle on every building, and you soon learn to read every street scene for signs of danger. In Havana even the police do not seem to be heavily armed. In the large cities of Latin America, abandoned children are a common sight—in Rio or Mexico City thousands of them living by their wits, many destined for abuse, exploitation or an early death. In Cuba, all of Elián's age are safe and well-cared for.

Health-care has always been a priority of the regime and here, too, state enterprises have proved effective, sponsoring breakthroughs in medical research and bio-technology. Cuba's public laboratories have developed a vaccine for meningitis B, which they are now working with Smith-Klein-Beecham to market internationally. Here, the US blockade increases the risks of unnecessary death and illness in countries that have been pressured to ban the vaccine, and lack any equivalent to

Cuba's impressive public health services. Notwithstanding the harmful effects of the embargo on Cuban medicine, the island's vital statistics are comparable to those of the United States, far above the Latin American average. During the nineties, foreign observers often predicted a 'melt-down' of the regime. Few think that is in prospect today. The reality is that, even in circumstances of great hardship, many Cubans still feel they have something to defend. This is certainly a sentiment with deep roots in the politics, history and culture of the country. But the regime's ability to hold the line has also been a function of a modest economic climb out of the pit of the worst years of the 'special period'.

### *Havana*

In the West, most people's image of Havana today comes from Wenders's *Buena Vista Social Club*—a wash of leprous surfaces and deliquescent pastels, a city of melancholy ruins. How far does this correspond to reality? Certainly enough to disturb anyone who knew Havana in the first flush of the revolution.<sup>11</sup> In 1962 La Rampa, which sweeps down from a park past the Hotel Nacional to the Malecón and the sea, was handsomely repaved and a vast ice cream palace, Coppelía, claiming to serve more varieties than Baskin Robbins, erected at its summit: an exuberantly cantilevered building, symbolizing the right of ordinary Cubans to pleasures previously reserved for an elite. Today La Rampa is woefully dilapidated, its inlaid pavements, so bright in recollection, uncared for and broken. Coppelía itself still serves decent ice cream—great efforts have evidently been made to keep it going; a mission statement now offers a strange echo of US establishments: customers have a right to expect the highest quality, clean utensils, friendly staff, etc., and the duty not to clamber on the tables or disturb others in their enjoyment. Over the years it has remained a magnet for informal socializing, as viewers of Tomás Gutiérrez Alea's film *Fresas y Chocolate*—which explored the formerly taboo topic of whether revolutionaries could be gay—may remember.<sup>12</sup> The architecture of the sixties had proclaimed a

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<sup>11</sup> I was then working at the university, and researching the island's history: see 'Prologue to the Cuban Revolution', *New Left Review* 1/21, October 1963, pp. 52–91.

<sup>12</sup> There was deplorable official homophobia in the late Sixties, but private conversation was more uninhibited: in the late sixties Alejo Carpentier could jovially suggest that homoeroticism was integral to the culture of the Revolutionary Armed Forces, to general amusement.



new set of social values. The delicate, modernist structures of Havana's School of Art furnished an appropriate Caribbean setting for a new generation of students, while the palatial barracks of Batista's army at Campo Colombia were attractively converted into a huge school for the children of workers and peasants from the interior. In East Havana, volunteer 'micro-brigades' were given the tools and materials to build their own four-storey apartment blocks along the coast.

This changed in the seventies and eighties when, in the name of balanced development, the state channelled nearly all infrastructural investment into the countryside and the provinces, rather than a capital held to have enjoyed too much privilege. The result was a long period of deliberate neglect. Havana's turn was supposed to come in the nineties, but by then it was too late. Caught in the vice of the post-1989 emergency, Havana is visibly decaying, most buildings unpainted, some semi-derelict. Here and there is a building that has been repaired by its owner or rescued by the municipal authorities; but most exceptions to the general decrepitude are due to the imperatives of tourism, from the gleaming airport or beachside hotels in Varadero, to some impressive restorations in the old Havana. There the 'historian of the city' Eusebio Leal, working with UNESCO, has sensitively directed the preservation of a number of sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth-century buildings, leaving them the patina of the past that too-even sand-blasting typically strips away.

But elsewhere, the parlous condition of Havana speaks of a deeper problem than lack of official attention or resources—the seeping away of social initiative. The Committees for the Defence of the Revolution on every block make the task of any would-be opposition very difficult. But if they are so good at security, why can't they work out home-made solutions to the tasks of redecorating and maintaining the housing stock? The answer usually to be heard is that people wait for the government to sort out the problem. Amidst the decay one is, indeed, continually made aware of a paternalist yet, in its own way, highly effective government. There are schools, nurseries and clinics everywhere. Dining on the verandah of a *paladar*, looking out on an elegant twenties residence that is now a primary school, who would not be touched by the sight of one crocodile of happily chattering youngsters returning from a trip, while another group of eight or nine-year-olds practice their ballet steps?

The regime is best at looking after children. Paternalism is less productive with adults.

## *Memories*

It is only gradually that I realize why today's Havana is such a potent *lieu de mémoire* for anyone who lived here in the sixties, or visited it in the eighties. The reason is that almost everything is still here, but visibly aged. Other Latin American capitals combine glittering downtowns and reflector glass skyscrapers, with swollen *villas misérias* or shanty towns. Havana has neither. Its downtown and tourist district reflects some fifties real-estate development. But the city's basic structure is still dominated by the construction booms of the early twentieth century, with proliferating suburbs spreading out from the colonial core of Old Havana. Popular housing is in bad shape but there are no *favelas*. There are a few dour Soviet-style housing estates away from the shoreline, and 1991 saw the completion of a mildly postmodern complex in the east of the city, Villa Panamericana. But all in all, little has been added to the built environment since the sixties. Some visitors suppose that the ornate Martí monument and Central Committee building in the Plaza de la Revolución are products of the *Fidelato*. In fact, like most of the patriotic statuary in Havana, they predate it. Cuba's state bureaucracy has done little to glorify itself in stone, inhabiting offices built by earlier regimes, or abandoned by corporations ejected in 1961–2.<sup>13</sup>

Nowadays, the European tourist willing to travel by Cubana Airways can stay for about \$40 a day at the splendidly restored Hotel Nacional overlooking the Malecón, a *de luxe* establishment which first opened in 1930 and now displays trophies of visits by Winston Churchill, Ava Gardner, Frank Sinatra and María López. Once cocooned in the Hotel with its park, decent-sized swimming pool and passable restaurant, it would be possible—though absurd—to ignore the life around one. My bedroom window actually made that impossible for me. It overlooked a chunk of the Havana skyline familiar from another age. Directly opposite is the so-called Indochina building, a once-elegant twenty-five storey block

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<sup>13</sup> Roberto Segre and his colleagues offer a rich overview of the city's architectural history in their study, *Havana*. For a highly critical but acute recent account of the urban scene, see Samuel Farber, 'Cuba Today and the Prospects for Change', *New Politics*, Summer 2000, pp. 164–174.

with distinctive red panels, the paint now peeling and half washed away. There I visited Guillermo Cabrera Infante—now a flamboyant novelist of the exile right—when he edited *Lunes de Revolución*, the avant-garde arts supplement of what was then Cuba's main daily. Just up the street was the Polynesian restaurant where I remember asking Guevara a bit later about the paper shortage that had officially led to the closure of *Lunes*.

At the time Che was known to be one of the most intransigent leaders of the revolution, but also as someone who was personally tolerant, giving shelter in his Ministry of Industry to those of non-conformist bent; the avant-garde enthusiasms of *Lunes* would not have been much to his taste, but nevertheless he had got on well with Jean-Paul Sartre, who had much featured in it. In answer to my question, he launched into a lengthy account of the success of his Ministry in making paper from husks of sugarcane, then looked at me and smiled ruefully, adding: 'Now I come to think of it, the sort of paper you are talking about is indeed scarce'. Thereafter most of the writers for *Lunes* could still get published, at least for a while, but in more specialist literary journals, not in a newspaper with a circulation of a quarter of a million. It was the beginning of the end of the cultural ebullience of post-revolutionary Cuba.

### *Life and letters*

Forty years later, the price is palpable in the abysmal quality of the Cuban press. Asked why he publishes so little in Cuba, an intellectual whose penetrating essays appear elsewhere in Latin America explains that newspaper editors abhor critical Marxists and universities remain encrusted with dogmatism. US blockade, CIA plots and exile raids have created a siege atmosphere which perpetuates a semi-rational paranoia. At some deeper level, the resulting repression has not stanchied the creativity of younger generations of writers and artists. But lacking outlets for expression on the island, many of these now work abroad, though not as political exiles. Perhaps alarmed at this haemorrhage of talent, Fidel has appointed one of the better remaining writers, Abel Prieto, to be Minister of Culture. Prieto's novel *El Vuelo del Gato*, just published, tells the story of three boys growing up in the late sixties and early seventies, and their contrasting fates in the nineties. Reading a bit like a Cuban version of the great American novel, it strikes a note somewhat reminiscent of Tom Wolfe's *A Man in Full*, both books conveying the stoic message that character can overcome social structure.

Theoretical debates are, of course, more tightly controlled than literary discussion. Lecturing an institute charged with maintaining cultural and political awareness, I am reminded of the run-down premises of the Institute of Marxism-Leninism in Beijing, dwarfed by neighbouring skyscrapers erected by Taiwanese property developers. Here the contrast is with the tourist complex. The Cuban centre, obviously short of resources, is for the more dedicated and idealistic. Staff members are enthusiasts for Gramsci, who talk of the difficulties of fostering a lively civil society in Cuba, and the resistance of dogmatists to the more creative strands in Marxism. On a grass bank opposite, a dozen young people are going through the rituals of a complicated new collective dance that is all the rage just now. In my lecture, I report a finding I have made in the National Library—a handsomely produced journal published in Havana in 1848–9 called *El Artista*, illustrated with portraits of Byron, Verdi, Alexandre Dumas and Richard Cobden, whose editorial for 7 January 1849 is entitled ‘Everything is Revolution’. A column below lays out the episodes of world history that demonstrate the unfolding of this principle:

Decadence of the Roman Empire  
The Crusades (Batillon)  
Gun Powder (Schwartz)  
Witchcraft (Gioja)  
Printing Press (Gutenberg)  
Luther  
England in the 17th Century  
France in the 18th Century  
The Encyclopaedia  
Vaccination (Jenner)  
Political Economy (Smith, Say)  
Washington  
Magnetism  
The Steam Engine (Watt)  
Phrenology (Gall)  
Napoleon!!!

The editorial concludes: ‘revolution, revolution and the grave, that is the life of man. The age of reason, different in each one, is the root of this revolution.’ Notwithstanding its confidence in the march of progress, *El Artista* was closed down soon thereafter by the colonial authorities. The exclamation marks with which it had greeted Louis Napoleon’s

electoral triumph in France proved a more ambiguous omen than it had imagined.

### *Opposition*

The Cuban government today faces an internal opposition. If this is denied a legal voice on the island, there can be few Cubans unaware of it, since a wide range of overseas broadcasts—not least Radio Martí, funded by Washington and run by CANF—hammer home its existence. There is little doubt that its key slogans—democracy, rule of law, market freedom—have considerable appeal among much of the urban population. But their resonance is inevitably qualified by fear of the social power pulsing behind them in Florida. The prospect of the return of carpet-bagging exiles, the ending of social entitlements and a global Platt Amendment—of the kind the US has already awarded itself in the Balkans and Middle East—is welcome to few. Bitter domestic strife would be unleashed by any variant of this future. All Cubans would like to see the end of the US blockade, but not at that price.

Talking with an economic adviser to the dissident groups, once active in the PSP, who had served in the middle levels of the state apparatus, upset some conventional assumptions. He had been detained and interrogated, though not physically maltreated; in fact, he said that he had relished the opportunity to explain his ideas to the young security men grilling him. Disenchanted with the economic romanticism of the sixties—Che was an admirable human being, he remarks, but a disastrous policy influence—he had been attracted to the reforms proposed by Soviet economists like Liberman. What chance of them today? He is looking to an unexpected quarter. The Cuban armed forces undoubtedly represent a formidable military organization. But he had always found Raul Castro more interested in results than in ideology. The army was notable for its pragmatism; he was confident it would opt for further and decisive instalments of market reform. What was valuable in the social order—above all, its educational and health achievements—should be kept; but the priority was to embrace free enterprise and democracy.

The group that calls itself social democratic has a somewhat similar perspective. Several of its leaders are in jail, including Vladimiro Roca, a former air-force pilot who is the son of the general-secretary of the PSP of the fifties, Blas Roca—subsequently a member of the Politburo of

the Cuban Communist Party in the sixties and seventies. One of the so-called Group of Four coordinating internal dissidence, Vladimiro's antecedents probably mean he is reckoned a real threat—others are less well-known. The imprisonment of several hundred dissidents, many jailed simply for their opinions, and their frequent maltreatment in prison, is a stain on the revolutionary regime which cannot be justified by external circumstances.<sup>14</sup> While it may be reasonable for the Cuban authorities to prevent Miami from buying influence in the island, the intimidation of all opposition saps any hope of giving life to the political assemblies that are supposed to express the popular will. Well aware of this, a devoted revolutionary remarks that Cuba no longer aspires to offer any kind of a model, conditions are too difficult for that. But it does represent a hold-out against US hegemony and the neo-liberal order, and can still offer modest help to others to break loose—the Venezuela of Hugo Chávez, for example. Fidel's rule is an autocracy that both guarantees certain social equalities and stifles political ones. 'We have a monarch who protects the people, but once he goes the gangsters and carpet-baggers will take over.' Many Cubans know what has happened in Russia and have no desire to follow suit.

### *Blockade*

The critical background to the impasse of the Cuban Revolution lies today, as it has done for four decades, in the American siege of the island. The outcome of the Elián affair has for a moment brought a change of atmosphere in the United States. For the first time in many years, the wisdom of blockading Cuba has started to be seriously questioned in the American media. What are the prospects for lifting the siege? The condition of a realistic assessment is to distinguish between the ostensible and actual grounds for the blockade in the first place. The US broke off diplomatic relations and imposed a far-reaching embargo

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<sup>14</sup> An Amnesty International press release of 31 January 2000 noted that 260 dissidents had been detained without charges during the November 1999 Ibero-American Summit in Havana, and that eleven of these people remained in prison without trial two months later. In mid-May there was to be a sign of a slight relaxation, with the release of Felix Bonne, one of the four leaders of the Internal Dissidence Working Group, leading Elizardo Sánchez, a Havana-based human rights observer, to declare that he hoped that this would lead 'to the release of scores of prisoners of conscience'. See 'Cuba Frees Prominent Critic', *Miami Herald*, 13 May 2000.

on Cuba in 1961, when Havana took over three hundred foreign, mainly American, firms. The expropriations were carried through by a government recognized by Washington, under powers enshrined in the Cuban Constitution of 1940 that authorized the state to take over properties in private hands, if it was in the public interest. The agrarian reforms of the revolutionary regime did not single out US or foreign companies but applied to all large estates. The Cuban government has long offered compensation to former owners, in bonds tied to revenues from sales of Cuban sugar to the United States. As recently as June 2 of this year, the Vice-President of the US Chamber of Commerce confirmed that Fidel Castro had reiterated Havana's willingness to discuss measures of compensation for American businesses that had lost property in Cuba.

Washington has always rejected Havana's proposals out of hand. The original embargo, imposed by Kennedy in retaliation for the take-overs of 1961, has since been intensified under Clinton. The 'Cuba Democracy Act', introduced by Torricelli in 1992, banned US subsidiaries abroad from any trade with Cuba. The 'Cuba Liberty and Solidarity Act', sponsored by Helms and Burton in 1996, targets Cuban participation in any international financial organization; threatens foreign companies with seizure of their assets in the US if they trade with Cuba; prohibits Washington from diplomatic relations with any government that includes Fidel or Raul Castro, and any government, even without them, that has not made full restitution or provided US-defined compensation for property taken over by Cuba.<sup>15</sup> In addition to this vindictive arsenal the Cuba Adjustment Act, originally passed under Johnson in 1966 but updated and expanded by Clinton in 1999, incites flight from Cuba by a virtual guarantee of free entry into the US, while Haitians, Mexicans or Dominicans are sent back in their thousands.

It is sometimes maintained that the embargo is actually welcomed by the revolutionary government in Cuba as a pretext for enforcing repressive conditions in the country, which would be lost with any relax-

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<sup>15</sup> For a capable exposition of the logic of Helms–Burton by an advocate of the blockade, see Juan J. López, 'Implications of the US Economic Embargo for a Political Transition in Cuba', *Cuban Studies* 28, 1999, who explains that it 'increases the economic pressures that foment discontent among regime cadres and in the general population', adding 'the maintenance of the embargo is conducive to an internal coup': pp. 58–59.

ation. Liberals like to say that the US policy of unremitting hostility is counter-productive and that the Cuban regime would be in deep trouble but for the excuses it affords. The evidence suggests otherwise. Havana has never ceased to call for a lifting of the blockade, and has made continual attempts to engage US opinion to this end. Business and civic delegations from the North—Republican Governor George Ryan of Illinois with a large entourage, or a group from the Black Caucus among the House Democrats, being recent cases in point—are assured a warm reception in Cuba. Havana hotels are currently crowded with Americans, some on quasi-official missions for a research institute, professional association or city council, but many more—like the yachtsmen crowding the Hemingway Marina—enjoying a holiday-with-a-difference in defiance of the law. Under the Helms–Burton Act, no US citizen is supposed to spend money in Cuba unless authorized as a cultural or humanitarian mission. The reality is that no fewer than 174,000 Americans visited the island in 1999, about a fifth of them with Treasury authorization.

Those who believe that a lifting of the blockade would doom the regime underestimate Fidel Castro, a consummate guerrilla politician who is never more skilful than when wrong-footing conventional expectations. What tangible benefits would an end to the embargo bring to Cuba? According to one estimate, even a partial lifting would double Cuban import capacity and generate a 25 per cent increase in national income.<sup>16</sup> A critical gain too would be Cuban access to credits from the World Bank, or even the IMF, and unimpeded trade with third countries. The American talons have not stopped Cuba from selling sugar, coffee, citrus, cigars and biotechnical products in Europe and elsewhere. But they have raised costs and enabled enterprises doing business with Cuba to demand premium terms. Last but not least, if Cuba could freely sell its products—Havana Club rum, Partagas and Cojiba cigars, *Son* CDs, Havana Gold coffee—in US markets, it would finally be in a position to correct its trade balance. These would all be economic benefits. But socially and politically, too, Cuba is most likely to salvage what is best in the revolution if it can escape the brutal claws of the blockade and open up a lively dialogue with the less reactionary forces in American society and neighbouring states.

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<sup>16</sup> See Manuel Pastor Jr. and Andrew Zimbalist, 'Has Cuba Turned the Corner?', *Cuban Studies* 27, 1998, p. 15.



## *Reconciliation*

What are the chances of Cuban overtures finding an echo in the United States, in the wake of Elián's return? Polls show that the mood of the American public has moved against the blockade. But this is costless sentiment, without electoral significance—no voting behaviour will alter because of it. Shifts in business opinion are of greater moment. Two powerful lobbies, the pharmaceutical industry and Mid-Western agribusiness, each hoping to mop up Cuban markets, have actively pushed for a relaxation of the embargo. Other banks and corporations—Boeing, General Electric, Citibank—have expressed more cautious support. Some have sponsored an organization called USA\*Engage with a modest budget (\$1 million a year) for pressure against the blockade. The Institute for International Economics, a Washington think-tank which opposes all trade sanctions, claims that politically imposed restraints on trade with twenty-six nations have lost US producers \$15 billion since 1995, at a cost of 200,000 jobs.<sup>17</sup> These are arguments of material self-interest, appealing across party lines, which find a sympathetic reception in the media.

Religious and ethnic opposition to the blockade is much more longstanding. Here, a generous sense of compassion and solidarity with ordinary Cubans, and hostility to official US arrogance, have inspired tenacious and principled campaigns against the embargo. The National Council of Churches, the Black Caucus and Puerto Rican congressmen have all fought for a lifting of the sanctions. Representative José Serrano of New York—singled out for attack by the establishment press for unacceptable tolerance of the revolution—has even formally introduced a Cuba Reconciliation Act to Congress, cancelling all punitive legislation against the island. Even in the Cuban-American community itself, voices questioning the wisdom of continuing to try to strangle the revolutionary regime have begun to be heard. At the height of the mobilizations over Elián in Miami, a small counter-demonstration sallied forth in support of his return to Cuba, crying 'Down with the Banana Republic' and pelting City Hall with the ridiculed fruit. Max Castro, columnist for the *Miami Herald*, told his compatriots on June 21: 'The road of confrontation has not worked with Cuba for forty years' and warned

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<sup>17</sup> See Juan O. Tamayo, 'Big Business Eyes Sales to Cuba', *Miami Herald*, 24 June 2000.

against simply waiting for Fidel's death—Balaguer, he pointed out, was still alive at the age of ninety-four in the Dominican Republic, while Vietnam, North Korea and China had weathered the death of the top leader without a political collapse. 'The best road is that which leads to negotiations and reconciliation on all sides, starting now.'

Such cross-currents form part of a wider tide of opinion. The reception given the fine recent work on Cuban identity by the distinguished US-based historian Louis Pérez Jr, *On Becoming Cuban*, could be taken as a straw in the wind.<sup>18</sup> Pérez's thesis is that American domination of Cuba prior to the revolution of 1959 should be seen not so much as a crude regime of coercion—blatant and violent though US bullying and meddling persistently were—as a deeper system of hegemony, moulding the values and saturating the images of Cuban middle-class culture itself, over a span of a century. With great wealth and subtlety of documentation, he also shows the ways in which elements of Cuban popular culture were adventitiously appropriated and utilized in North America, and sometimes even reimported back to Cuba in gringoized form. Though respectful of such episodes, Pérez is clear and implacable on the unequal relationship between the two cultures—an inequality that was one of the detonators of the national revolt of 1959. Strikingly, however, the message of his book has been transformed into a sentimental drama, as if the intimacy of the two nations were that of star-crossed lovers, waiting to fall into each others' arms. The image is in the air—*vide* Wenders, agape at the Carnegie. Its appeal to the American capacity for self-pity and self-absolution (Hollywood on Vietnam; the monument in Washington) is plain.<sup>19</sup> Historically, of course, the theme of 'reconciliation' is quite inappropriate. What the United States owes Cuba is

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<sup>18</sup> *On Becoming Cuban—Identity, Nationality and Culture*, Chapel Hill 1999.

<sup>19</sup> See, for example, Steve Wasserman, 'America's Last Frontier', *Times Literary Supplement*, 24 March 2000, at the Wiltern Theatre: 'The audience began to sing, wistfully at first and then with gathering conviction, the lyrics of one of America's best-known tunes. Whatever else may be said about Cuba and the United States, one thing is certain: it is not yet the end of the affair': etc. Gilberto Perez, 'So Close to the Monster', *London Review of Books*, 22 June 2000, is a little more astringent, rightly pointing to the European elements in Cuban culture, if also tip-toeing round the blockade. In a class by themselves for lachrymose posturing are the contributions of Alma Guillermoprieto to the *New York Review of Books*: see 'A Visit to Havana', 'Love and Misery in Cuba', 'Fidel in the Evening', 'Cuban Hit Parade', 26 March, 11 June and 22 October 1998; 14 January 1999.

reparations. But in present circumstances, its emergence could even be considered hopeful.

To say this is not to give way to illusions. There has been a visible shift in American attitudes towards Cuba in the past half year. Nevertheless, on any cool reading, the balance of political forces remains unfavourable to any proximate lifting of the blockade. There are two reasons why a long overdue campaign to end a blockade that should never have been imposed will be exceptionally hard fought. The first lies in the continuing power of the Cuban-American community, under the determined leadership of the Foundation. The Elián affair has been a sharp setback for CANF, which over-reached itself in pursuit of what was, at best, no more than a symbol. But the Foundation, and its base in the community, has proved capable of learning lessons in the past. It is flexible and resourceful, and has already shown its resilience. The first Congressional deal to allow food and medicine to be sent to Cuba, brokered by the House Republican leadership in the last week of June, has already been deftly neutered by the Foundation, with the attachment of provisions denying any credits for Cuban purchases of US goods, and actually tightening the restrictions on US travel to Cuba. Anglo willingness to envisage new arrangements for Cuba may be broad, but it is also shallow, intermittent and diffuse, without political focus. By contrast, the Cuban-American lobby's commitment to its cause is passionate, profound and permanent. Equipped with ample funds and inside connexions, its impact is always likely to be more concentrated and purposeful. Miami has no reason to relinquish its goals. It has seen regimes that long predated the Cuban swept away in a trice, and *ci-devant* properties restored to owners virtually overnight in Eastern Europe. Why should the Bacardis settle for less than the Schwarzenbergs? Pre-revolutionary survey maps and title-deeds in hand, the leaders of the exile community are ready to pounce on Havana when the moment of counter-revolution comes, confident that the one principle all Americans understand is the sacrosanctity of private property.

There is a second and even more formidable obstacle to any relaxation of the blockade. It is often asked why the US state should persist in refusing normal diplomatic and commercial relations with Cuba, allegedly because of the oppressive nature of its government, when it has long had no compunction about maintaining close ties with China, whose 'human rights' record—according to its own showing—is much worse.

The question, of course, points up the hypocrisy of Washington's official stance, but is otherwise naive. There is nothing irrational about the continuing vendetta against Cuba. The regime in Beijing was for many years a strategic partner of the US against the USSR, helped prop up key American allies—Mobutu or Zia—round the world, and has since welcomed big US corporations into its markets, to ringing applause from local Hayekian think-tanks. Cuba, on the other hand, so far from bending the knee to Washington, was sending a stream of its soldiers, doctors and teachers to assist revolutionary and national liberation movements in Africa and Latin America, and continues to resist the US imperium and attack the ideology of free markets and globalization—a far cry from margin calls on the stock market in Shanghai. This, moreover, is a place the United States has historically always tended to regard as an offshore annex: the occasion for the original Monroe Doctrine itself—declaimed to preempt French designs on Cuba in the 1820s; the object of attempted purchase from Spain in the 1850s; the scene of armed occupation in the 1890s, and repeated invasions thereafter. American imperial legitimacy, in both geopolitical and ideological senses, is at stake in the future of the island.

To grasp the logic of the blockade, it is enough to consult the candid pronouncements of the highest authorities in the land. Two documents say everything: the Clinton Administration's Report to Congress of 28 January 1997, *Support for a Democratic Transition in Cuba* (complete with an ineffable preface by the President himself), and the blue-ribbon *Task Force Report on US–Cuban Relations in the 21st Century*, co-chaired by Nixon's Secretary of State William Rogers, released in January 1999 by the Council on Foreign Relations. The *Task Force Report* goes straight to the point. 'Too often, discussions of US policy towards Cuba start from the position that the policy over the last four decades has been a failure', we read—whereas in fact, the Task Force reports with satisfaction, 'US policy towards Cuba, including the embargo, has enjoyed real, though not total, success', since 'the dominant goal of US policy toward Cuba during the Cold War was to prevent the advance of Cuban-supported communism in this hemisphere' at a time when 'many young people, academics and intellectuals looked to Cuba as a political and economic model'. But, thanks to firm US counter-measures that have 'frustrated Cuba's ambitions to extend its economic model and political influence', it can be said that today 'Cuban communism is dead as a potent political force'.

What next? ‘With this success in hand, the United States can now turn to the second stage of its long-term policy on Cuba’—namely, securing the downfall of the Cuban regime itself. Here, the Report points out, important lessons are to be learnt from Eastern Europe. Indeed, this is an ‘experience that allows the United States to approach Cuba today with more flexibility than in the past’, since it ‘has learned something’ about how to manage transitions to democracy there. What has it learnt? The Task Force does not beat about the bush. ‘Some who formerly served the old regimes, whether through conviction, opportunism or necessity, have become credible and constructive members of the newly emerging democratic governments and societies. The Polish armed forces—which enforced martial law against Solidarity in the early 1980s—are now a trusted NATO partner.’ Likewise, ‘some who today serve the Cuban government as officials may well form part of a democratic transition tomorrow’. Should anyone miss the hint, Clinton’s Report spells it out even more clearly. ‘Today, freedom’s reach is broader than ever’, intones the President. ‘Although the Cuban armed forces constitute one of the most important pillars of the present regime in Cuba, they could potentially play a positive role in Cuba’s transition. The militaries in other former communist countries have acquiesced or actually assisted in democratic transitions.’ Such an about-face would not go unrewarded. ‘A professional military that is sized to Cuba’s needs, supportive of a civilian democratic government, and respectful of human rights can expect to participate in the Inter-American Defense Board, be welcomed to participate in international peace-keeping efforts and benefit from an array of military-to-military cooperation arrangements, including with the United States’ (*sic*). What officer could hope for more?

### *Trust*

The centrality of the Cuban military to American game-planning of the overthrow of the revolutionary government is no doubt fed by hopeful reports from exiles and the internal opposition.<sup>20</sup> It also, of course, speaks of the seriousness of Washington’s determination to finish off its opponent in Havana, since so long as the Cuban armed forces are not suitable plywood for an ‘Inter-American Defense Board’, they represent

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<sup>20</sup> Thus Don Bohning, ‘Cuban Army Seen as Key to Ouster of Castro’, *Miami Herald*, 16 April 2000.

a daunting obstacle to a US recovery of the island. The Cuban Army, still at least 100,000 strong, was never a satellite force like the Polish or Hungarian, and has not suffered any Afghan-style defeat like the Soviet military. Whether it can be turned quite so easily by the Pentagon must be a source of some doubts even in the White House. An alternative tack would be to try and undermine the revolution by a strategy of commercial and cultural penetration—dangling consumer enticements to the population at large rather than simply suborning the officer corps. This would require a milder overt line towards Cuba, loosening the blockade. There are signs that functionaries favouring this approach have been given some leeway in recent months, as the number of Treasury permits for travel to Cuba went up, and Juan Miguel's sojourn was accorded protection. Reluctance to envisage another sudden wave of mass flights from Cuba is a further consideration for those who advocate a liquefaction rather than decapitation of the regime. For the moment, however, the barrage of legislation blocking even tactical 'normalization' remains in place. Gore and Bush are unlikely candidates for removing it.

Traditionally—this is part of the legacy Louis Pérez has explored so well—Americans have known much less about Cuba than Cubans about America. It is unlikely the range of speculations in Washington is not studied with care in Havana. Cuban officials are generally very well-informed about the US. In the spring of 1968 some SDS leaders, meeting with Castro, started to explain the tactics they intended to adopt at the forthcoming Democratic National Convention; within a moment a map of Chicago was brought out, and Fidel was making knowledgeable and detailed interjections. As the US enters another Presidential campaign, let us hope the current worthy sequel to Hubert Humphrey, fresh from his contribution to the Elián affair, gets a no less spirited reception in Los Angeles. If the blockade is to be broken, it will not happen soon if the maze of corruption and reaction that lies within the Beltway is left to its own devices. What is needed now is broad, direct mobilization against the embargo—a much more precise target than vague apparitions of 'globalization': and not just pressure through established channels, but fresh breezes of imaginative civic protest.

In the last week of June, the Cuban President released an extensive interview with a former Director-General of UNESCO, surveying the ordeal of the nineties. "There were times when we were swimming in a sea of circulating money. Our national currency experienced an extraor-

dinary devaluation, and the budget deficit reached 35 per cent of our Gross Domestic Product. I could see intelligent visitors almost faint from shock. Our peso, the national currency, dropped to a value of 150 to the dollar in 1994. In spite of this we did not close down a single health-care centre, a single school or daycare center, a single university, or a single sports facility . . . what little was available we distributed as equitably as possible.' If recovery had proved possible, it was because Cuba had not been forced to follow IMF prescriptions.

During these critical years, the number of doctors doubled and the quality of education improved. The value of the Cuban peso increased sevenfold, between 1994 and 1998, and has since remained consistently stable. Not a single dollar fled the country. We acquired experience and efficiency on a par with the immense challenge facing us. Although we have still not reached the production and consumption levels we had before the demise of socialism in Europe, we have gradually recovered at a steady and visible pace . . . The great hero in this feat has been the people, who have contributed tremendous sacrifices and immense trust. It was the fruit of justice and of the ideas sowed over 30 years of revolution. This genuine miracle would have been impossible without unity and without socialism.<sup>21</sup>

The Cuban leader's understandable pride in the survival of his nation involves no doctrine of revolutionary autarky or diplomatic immobility. On the contrary, it is clear from the interview, as from repeated public statements of recent years, that the government in Havana would welcome any true chance of the country emerging from the quarantine to which it has been subjected, without prejudice to its independence. The revolutionary regime remains flexible and open, capable of swift initiatives in the international field. At home, the test is different—whether it can return the 'immense trust', in Fidel's phrase, extended it by the Cuban people. It is clear that for the health and future of the revolution, political prisoners should be freed, and those who have supposedly defected, but often simply wanted to see a bit of the world, without waiting to be barred from reentry, should be allowed to return. There is no reason why cultural life on the island should not be closer to the Cuba of the early sixties, or Russia of the mid-twenties, rather than the USSR of the late seventies. The Popular Assemblies need alternative candidates and divided votes. Exhaustion and isolation are bad conditions for any civic vigour; everything would be easier if the siege were lifted. But the

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<sup>21</sup> *Granma International*, 23 June 2000.

American pretension to dictate Cuba's future, while inflicting decades of unnecessary suffering on its people, is obscene. The US would do better to attend to the two million prisoners in its own jails, its weekly executions and multiplying teenage slaughters, its desperate ghettos and decamping voters, not to speak of its terminal money politics. A glance at Amnesty International's blistering report on human rights in the United States is enough to put White House cant in perspective. Cuba needs an egalitarian democracy of its own making. Few prospects would be so alarming to the fly-blown plutocracy in Washington.