



WHEN REPRESSION MASQUERADES AS SOCIAL JUSTICE: CONFESSIONS OF A CUBAN BOY

By Carlos Eire

Carlos Eire is the Riggs Professor of History and Religious Studies at Yale University and author of [Waiting for Snow in Havana](#) (2003), the One Book/One Philadelphia selection for 2007. This essay is based on his presentation at Living Without Freedom, a History Institute for Teachers sponsored by FPRI's Marvin Wachman Fund for International Education, May 5-6, 2007, held at and co-sponsored by the National Constitution Center and the National Liberty Museum in Philadelphia. FPRI's History Institute program is chaired by David Eisenhower and Walter A. McDougall and receives core support from the Annenberg Foundation. The program on Living without Freedom was supported by a grant from the Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation. See www.fpri.org for videocasts and texts of this and other lectures.

As Elie Wiesel reminds us, there is no more eloquent witness against injustice and evil than eyewitness memory. A colleague of mine at Yale, the theologian Miroslav Volf, who spent time in prison in Croatia simply because his father was a Protestant minister, has argued that evil can triumph multiple times: first when an injustice is committed, and over and over if the record of that injustice is wiped out and the memory of it denied.¹

In 1959, when Fidel Castro took power, the population of Cuba was only 6 million. But except for the scale, life there was much like it was in the Soviet Union. Imagine having lived in a repressive state, and then from the moment you reach the United States constantly being told what a wonderful place you came from and how wonderful the Castro revolution has been to your people. Imagine being told constantly--sometimes directly, sometimes insinuated--that you are simply selfish, you didn't want to share your property with other people, and that's why you are here. That's my story and why I wrote my memoir. I face this every day still, even recently at the UN, because I come not from Europe but from the "third world."

CUBAN HISTORY

Cuba was a Spanish colony until 1898, when the Spanish-

American war freed Cuba from Spain. In 1898, the population of Cuba was 2 million; slavery had existed until 1888. Cubans had been fighting against Spain unsuccessfully for forty years, but in 1898 the U.S. marched in and took over. In 1902, the U.S. granted independence to Cuba (which it did not do for the Philippines and Puerto Rico, the other two colonies it won from Spain). Cuba got its own constitution, but under the Platt amendment, the U.S. had the right to intervene in Cuban affairs any time it felt its interests were threatened.

Cuba's first president, Tomas Estrada Palma, had spent most of his adult life in the U.S., teaching at Hobart and William Smith Colleges in New York state. Between 1902-52, the U.S. intervened directly and indirectly numerous times, removing presidents and ensuring that other presidents were installed.

Between 1900-30, one million European immigrants arrived in Cuba, completely changing the island. Contrary to prevailing myths, the country was not quite a third world country in 1959. In fact, at that time, it had more college-educated women than the U.S. per capita. It had more TV sets than all of Italy. It had a very prosperous economy and a huge middle class. Yes, there was poverty, but the country also had a high literacy rate and a liberal 1940 constitution. But unfortunately, the country was politically immature, subjected to one dictatorship after another and a great deal of corruption.

In 1952, an army coup brought to power Fulgencio Batista, who ruled with an iron fist. He made sure that the opposition met its end very quickly. But there was a degree of press freedom. Cuba had several TV stations, more than 80 radio stations, and more than 60 newspapers. There was censorship, but it was not extreme. You simply could not say anything contrary to Batista's regime. Castro took on Batista, beat him, and succeeded him, but his was only one of 17 different revolutionary groups fighting against Batista. The first thing Castro did when he marched into Havana was to ensure that these other revolutionaries quickly disappeared. By 1960, he was expropriating American property and foreign investments and also beginning to

¹ Volf, *The End of Memory: Remembering Rightly in a Violent World* (2006)

abolish private property. Before long he had declared Cuba a Marxist-Leninist state.

From the beginning there were opponents of the regime, even among men close to Castro who had fought with him. But promised elections were never held, and people kept disappearing. There were already exiles in 1960, and the CIA decided to help them invade Cuba. While the vast majority of the men who landed in the Bay of Pigs invasion had fought against Batista, they were not there to reinstate Batista, but to fight what they had been fighting against since the mid 1950s. Castro had coopted the revolution, and from day one spoke for the entire Cuban people. Anyone who did not agree with him was no longer part of the Cuban people. They were worms, *gusanos*. Many of the Cubans who were concerned with the way the revolution was going assumed that it wouldn't last long, given the long history of U.S. involvement in Cuba.

By 1961, there was a Committee for the Defense of the Revolution (CDR) on every city block--citizens who would spy on their neighbors, distribute ration cards, and handle petitions for promotion or for higher education. CDR members got the most rations. All school-aged children were "requested" to perform "volunteer labor" for six weeks each summer, laboring in the countryside for no pay, in living conditions worse than those of any sweat shop in the Western world, with terrible food and no contact with their parents. (This continues today.) Beginning around 1960, many parents became concerned about their children's future. Men and women who opposed the Castro regime wanted desperately to get their children out of Cuba. So the State Department and the CIA devised a plan to grant the children visa waivers, since children did not need security clearances. The State Department gave carte blanche to three Cubans in Havana to print up visa waivers on a mimeograph machine in a house that was directly across the street from the G2, Castro's secret police.

But Cubans are very neighborly. Mothers began to share this information, and before you knew it, purely by word of mouth, news of the program had spread like wildfire. Women--it was only the mother--were flocking to this house. The G2 inquired why so many people were visiting the house and was told it was a canasta tournament. Between 1960-62, 14,600 children were airlifted to the U.S. I was one of them. My parents put me on a plane with my brother and sent us to the U.S. We had no family here, and my parents didn't know where we'd end up or if we would ever see each other again. But they were willing to do that. As it turned out, I never saw my father again after April 6, 1962. The regime would not allow him to leave. Families were separated continually. If the family applied for an exit permit, the father would be fired from his job and sent to perform slave labor in the countryside for an indefinite period of time, "until you've paid off your debt to the revolution."

When the missile crisis almost brought the world to an end in October 1962, Cuba sealed its borders. This meant that the parents of over 10,000 of us children were stranded in Cuba. And yet years later, in November 1999, when five-year-old Elian Gonzales was rescued from the waters off of Florida, the Cuban government insisted that he be returned to Cuba because "every boy deserves to be with his father."

Between 1962 and 1976, when my father died, the longest conversation I ever had with him was three minutes, the limit on the length of calls, with someone else listening in on the Cuban end, laughing, making snide remarks, and calling us worms.

My brother and I were separated once we got to the U.S. Eventually we found our way back together in a home for juvenile delinquents and spent nine months there, not because we had done anything wrong but because that was the only place for us. Three and a half years later our mother was able to leave through Mexico. She knew someone who knew someone who knew someone at the embassy there. But twice before that, she had her exit permit, made it to the airport, and was sent back home, told to reapply, because her seat was needed for someone more important.

The Gonzales case moved me to write my memoir. Over decades I had written on my Yale University stationery to practically every major publication in the U.S. asking them to do a story on the airlift and the way the Cuban government had split families up, and got not one acknowledgment. So for four months in the summer of 2000 every night I wrote at my life story. Simon & Schuster agreed to publish it, but not as a novel, as I had submitted it. They found it out as true and insisted that it be published as a memoir.

Man does not live by bread alone; truth is more important than bread. I wrote the book because of the countless times even highly educated people tell me that in the third world "human rights" means something completely different, that there it is a full plate of food. One college honor student who had been to Bangladesh and Cuba found the two places the same, telling me with welled-up eyes that "You don't understand. In the third world what really matters is getting food. It doesn't matter what kind of restrictions they live under."

Cuba remains like the pre-Gorbachev Soviet Union. My memoir has been banned there, and I've been declared an enemy of the revolution. Government permission is required to travel abroad, change jobs or residence, own a computer, access the Internet, sell products or services, gain access to a boat, retain a lawyer, organize activities or performances, or form a business. One cannot receive religious instruction, watch independent TV stations, read anything not approved or published by the government, earn more than the government-controlled rate (\$17 per month for most jobs, \$34 per month for professionals), refuse to participate in mass rallies organized by the Party, or criticize the laws, the regime, or the Party.

Sugar is no longer the chief source of income; last year, the regime closed down half the sugar mills. Much of the countryside now is fallow. An invasive plant has taken over much of these formerly rich producing sugar fields. Tourism, mostly European and Canadian, is now the main source of income. Since the 1950s, the only construction that has taken place in Cuba is that which the Soviets did, which is very little. The population is nearly double what it was in 1959, but there is no new housing. There are cases where a couple divorces, each remarries, and all four live together. European firms, mostly Spanish, Italian, and French, invest in hotels in Cuba because they make good money. They put

up all the capital, Cuba provides only the land, which it leases. The laborers are paid European union wages. But the workers don't receive this; the government skims it.

It requires special government approval to work in one of these highly coveted hotel jobs. The only Cubans allowed to set foot in these hotels and restaurants or use their beaches are those who work there. So the best beaches, hotels, and stores are off-limits to Cubans. If I weren't an enemy of the people and was allowed to visit, my 81-year-old uncle wouldn't be allowed to meet me in the hotel or join me for a swim. Last year, a thick book of laws came out regulating contacts between Cubans and foreigners. It is now illegal for any Cuban to accept a tip or gift from a foreigner.

My uncle has revealed to me two very sad things about Cuba today. First, the verb "to steal," *robar*, no longer exists in Cuba. No one steals; they just solve their problems. And if there is no private property, can you have any theft? Second, there is no trust. Everyone knows that everyone else is looking to get something from them.

And so it is very difficult for me to read things like the following, from an August 2003 article in *The Guardian* by then Labour MP Brian Wilson entitled "Revolution revisited: Cuba isn't perfect, but it is living proof that it is possible for a third world country to combat poverty, disease, and illiteracy": "Cuba's primary service to the world has been to provide living proof that it is possible to conquer poverty, disease and illiteracy in a country that was grossly over-familiar with all three. . . . The fact that it has been delivered in the face of sustained hostility from an obsessive neighbor [the U.S.] makes it all the more stunning." Here's a response to a 2004 PBS documentary on Fidel Castro from a man in Texas, posted at the PBS website: "Everyone below the age of 50 don't know about the conditions of Cuba before Fidel. When a revolution is successful there is a reason and the reason in Cuba was poverty. . . . Without the strength of Castro, Cuba will fall into decline searching for a direction and will come under the fold of the United States just as it was in the 40s and 50s."

What's behind this? Bigotry of the worst sort. It is pure ignorance based on the assumption that unless they have a strong leader like Fidel Castro, Cubans can't take care of themselves. I call it the Mussolini principle. In the 1930s many Americans and British praised Mussolini because he

made the trains run on time, he made those unruly Italians mindful of time and efficient.

Travel writers do Cuba great disservice. As an exception, Thomas Swick of the South Florida *Sun-Sentinel* wrote a beautiful piece, recording the inane comments his fellow travel writers made on their trip ("Our Gang in Havana," Mar. 24, 2002). The comments sound like they are discussing Rousseau's noble savage or Kipling's White Man's Burden. Sarah Shuckburg, a travel writer for the UK's *Telegraph*, writes as follows:

"I sit on a bench in a tiny park, and the colour, music and exuberance of old Havana engulf me. . . . An intoxicating blend of Spanish guitars and African drumbeats drifts from a nearby bar, where an elderly couple is performing an afternoon salsa. . . . Three barefoot boys in tattered shorts kick a dented can over the cobbles. Bare-chested men exchange jokes as they push barrows of rubble. A grizzled, toothless man approaches me and holds out his hand. I give him a few tiny coins." ("A little local colour," Mar. 5, 2006)

She thinks of this as praise for the revolution. But where are the sports programs? And the old man is grizzled and toothless because Cubans don't have any razors or toothpaste. They have awful dental and medical care. Even Castro had to call for a Spanish surgeon to come and save his life.

I'll conclude by letting you think about how Shuckburg summarized her experience in Cuba, based on what we've discussed:

"Cubans are lucky, with several giants to worship - principled, visionary reformers. Fidel Castro is one of them. There are few photographs of him, and no statues, but for most Cubans, Castro is a living legend who has maintained his communist ideals despite the collapse of communism elsewhere, and despite sanctions and embargoes from the 'enemy' to the north. The Cubans I speak to all share Castro's patriotism and his distrust of democracy, and are intensely proud of Cuba's egalitarianism, education, health care and sporting achievements. None of them mention human rights or freedom of expression."