Letter from Havana

Evan Daniel

Visiting Havana is like travelling in a time machine to a film-noir inspired past. From the classic American cars to the sunglass-wearing secret police and the city's crumbling visage, Havana looks and feels stuck in the Cold War. Disembarking from the plane and walking through the airport, there is no commercial advertising or any newsstands. No newspapers, no magazines, no monitors displaying the latest CNN headlines.

I was in Havana for five weeks conducting historical research for my dissertation on nineteenth century cigar makers. My priority was spending as much time in the archives as possible but I did manage to get around to most of the city's neighbourhoods, speak to a variety of Cubans, and get their interpretations of capitalism, socialism, the embargo and even the 'bearded one.' I was interested in what the future held for Cuba. What sort of government will emerge after Fidel Castro's death?

As my cab exited Jose Martí Airport and headed into the city, we passed by the ubiquitous posters and billboards praising the 1959 Revolution and Fidel Castro's eightieth birthday. As my cab rolled into the Vedado neighbourhood of Havana there were young people on the streets hanging out well after midnight. As I grabbed a beer at a sidewalk stand I began to understand that change is in the tropical air of Havana, lurking in the spaces people occupy away from work, the fruit and vegetable market, the café, the bar.

When I first visited the island in 1995, Cuba was in the midst of its 'Special Period in a Time of Peace,' or, dealing with the reality of the Soviet Union's collapse. The Soviets provided an extremely generous rate of exchange for a variety of commodities, most importantly petroleum, in trade for Cuban agricultural products, primarily sugar. This relationship served both governments well for decades. Castro's communist regime was able to point to the advantages of being part of the Soviet Bloc – in contrast to the harsh realities of Latin American capitalism – while a succession of Soviet leaders pointed to their support of Cuba as a shining example of international proletarian solidarity rather than Soviet imperialism. So when the Soviet Union collapsed, Cuba's economy was devastated. While statistics vary,

academics and analysts on the left and right agree the impact was immense. Robin Blackburn, writing in *New Left Review*, estimated that between 1989 and 1993 Cuba's exports dropped by 70 percent and imports 75 percent, while the Hoover Institution's William Ratliff calculated that the volume of Soviet support had been between a quarter and a third of Cuban GDP. [1]

Since the fall of world communism change has been happening in Cuba from above and from below. The regime was swayed to implement a number of economic reforms during the 'Special Period,' including allowing farmers to sell their surplus in local markets after providing a quota to the state, devolving government-controlled state farms into cooperatives and setting up other small cooperative enterprises. The government also began a process of *cuentapropism*, or self-employment, permitting the sales of arts and crafts, allowing licensed individuals to rent rooms to tourists in *casas particulares* or starting small restaurants, called *paladares*, in their homes. The government also expanded its organic farms and biotech capabilities as petrochemicals were in extremely short supply. In 1993 the use of the U.S. dollar was openly permitted by Castro to allow needed hard currency to enter the country. In 1994 a second currency, the convertible peso or C.U.C., was introduced to combat the growing black market trade in dollars. [2]

In addition to state-initiated efforts there was also pressure from below. Campesinos started farming uncultivated land without government permission, and food riots occurred in Havana. [3] Lastly, and most crucial for the regime's economic stability, it slowly began to allow foreign investment in the tourism sector. When I visited in 1995, these developments were at the beginning stages. Today, while certainly not on the scale one finds in other Caribbean islands such as Puerto Rico and Jamaica, the difference is plainly visible to any traveller as well as the Cuban people.

For instance, during the 1990s it was next to impossible to find anything on store shelves. One didn't even find the long lines associated with commodity rationing in the Warsaw Pact states. There simply wasn't anything to buy. Today, Cubans are shopping and spending and selling at local markets and stores, cafes, restaurants, bars and nightclubs. And there is a noticeable increase in automobile traffic. Russian-made Ladas still dominate Havana's streets, but European models like Peugeot and Mercedes are not that uncommon. Many of the classic American cars that were rusted out and immobile have been restored or at least repainted. Most serve as collective taxis. And there must be four different bus systems operating. In the past there were the *camelos* (camels), lorries hauling dozens of crammed riders in huge

extended trailers. Today there are busses from Canada, Italy, and the Netherlands along with the Metrobus system moving Havana commuters. The quintessential Cuban export product, the cigar, is still being produced in government-run factories. But the export and marketing of cigars is handled by a Spanish-French partnership, Altados. [4]

There have been important developments at the level of civil society since the 1990s as well. Independent organizations of agriculturalists and professionals including lawyers, economists, journalists, doctors and librarians have emerged outside the purview of the state. [5] While an independent organization of librarians may seem mundane or even unnecessary in a state like Cuba that prides itself on its public education system, it is an important development in a country lacking freedom of speech protections and where the press is not just rigidly controlled but close to non-existent. In this context, individuals have established libraries inside their homes at great risk to themselves. In March 2003, after coming under increasing scrutiny, seventy-five independent journalists, pro-democracy activists and independent libraries were imprisoned, books were seized and libraries were shut down. [6]

My wife and I attempted to pay a visit to one of the independent libraries. We were staying in a neighbourhood that was a short walk away and decided to show up unannounced. We rang the doorbell a few times and looked around. I thought, 'Were we followed? Is the apartment being watched?' We considered leaving the books we brought on the doorstep but thought that might not be the best idea. We returned twice but nobody ever answered the door. I found out after I returned to the U.S. that the librarian's husband had recently been released from jail and she was caring for him.

At the state level, the most unpredictable political development is the impending death of *El Jefe*, Fidel Castro. When Dr. Jose Luis Garcia Sabrido first reported in Spain's *El Pais* (January 2007) that Castro was suffering from gastrointestinitis and that his condition was deteriorating, many Cubans in Miami's expatriate community flocked to the streets in celebration. However, after the initial euphoria, the celebrations subsided in recognition that Fidel's brother, Raul, would be serving as head of state and that Fidel could possibly hang on for a few more years. Regardless, most of the world's people – including Cubans on the Island – know that it is a matter of years, possibly months, before Fidel Castro is dead.

What will this mean for Cuba and the Cuban people? As is the case in most countries and with most political leaders, it depends on who you ask. Many employees in the tourism sector are desirous of greater economic liberalization on the island. They are beginning to see the benefits of this in their own lives. The class that correctly perceives it has the most to lose are the functionaries of the state. Their pay checks and standard of living depend on maintaining the status quo. Professionals whom I spoke with, primarily teachers, were less uniform in their expectations. Average earnings are about $20 CUCs per month (about $22 U.S.), which means they make less money than many workers in the tourism sector, and some are afraid that their salaries will further decline if the state weakens its control of the economy and the island is subjected to neo-liberal economic policies. This is not an unrealistic expectation given what happened to many professionals in Russia after the collapse of U.S.S.R., although it is not shared by all. Some teachers I spoke with felt that the situation could only get better, and a few confided that eventually free-trade with the United States would help facilitate the return of a real Cuban middle-class rather than a class of government functionaries that exists in its lieu. There is some historical precedent for this. While standard leftist narratives – both endogenous and exogenous – describe Cuba as yet another peripheral banana republic under the thumb of Spanish and Yanqui imperialism, the island's history is far more complex. Prior to the 1959 revolution, while poverty was certainly a visible aspect of rural life, there was a sizable middle-class on the island, especially in the cities.

I see three options, although the historian in me is always loathe to make predictions. But at the risk of being wrong I will. The first two scenarios are the least hopeful. In the short term, an autarkic authoritarian regime under the control of Raul Castro could continue to lumber along, buoyed by cash injections and ideological support from Hugo Chavez' 'Bolivarian Revolution.' [7] Another possibility is that the state manages to maintain strict political control while allowing increasing foreign investment opportunities. This may generically be termed the China model. [8] The third option, and one that I truly hope is implemented in Cuba, is democratic political opening that parallels increasing investment, a process similar to the transition from authoritarian political rule to democracy that occurred in Spain after Francisco Franco's death. [9] The international community can play a positive role in this transition but the U.S. needs to take the first step.

A practical and symbolic first step would be lifting the U.S. blockade and embargo. A second step would be supporting the development of civil society and religious freedom on the Island. As Carlos Alberto Montaner writes, 'The emergence of

Cuban civil society must be accelerated, cooperation with external dissidents fomented, a pact between internal and foreign democratic elements established, the occupation of any political space ceded by the government attained, and compromise with the reformists within the Castro regime negotiated.' [10] A final step would be encouraging educational and professional exchanges, rather than preventing them, as occurred during the 2006 meeting of the Latin American Studies Association in San Juan, Puerto Rico.

In order to accomplish these goals it may be necessary to marginalize the ultra-conservative expatriate voices that long for a violent overthrow of the Castro regime. I realize this is a position many Republicans are reluctant to take for domestic political reasons. Yet the Bush administration has been under increasing pressure from the agricultural and travel sectors as they see European competitors entering the Cuban market. Conservative think-tanks from the libertarian CATO Institute to the hawkish Hoover Institution have made consistent calls for ending the embargo. [11] And a younger and more moderate Cuban voice is emerging in the émigré community, one that is for political and economic détente between Cuba and the U.S. while still remaining highly critical of the Castro regime. While Ratliff argues that the crackdowns of 2003 effectively 'decapitated' the democracy movement, Montaner counters, 'It is possible to state that no other communist nation, with the possible exception of Poland, has ever counted on such a well-nurtured and varied opposition as that which today exists in Cuba. When the moment arrives, the pressure applied by civil society will break open the dams.' [12] Changes are indeed coming to the island, voices from the outside can play a positive role, but the political direction Cuba chooses is ultimately the decision of the Cuban people.

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Notes

[1] Blackburn 2000 and Ratliff, 2003.

[2] In November 2004 the U.S. dollar ceased to be circulated. Castro said this was done in response to the increasing economic and political pressures placed on Cuba by the United States under President George W. Bush.

[3] Herlihy 2006, p. 76.

[4] Blackburn 2000.

[5] Montaner 2002, p. 12.

[6] As of March 2007, sixteen have been released on medical parole. Robert Kent, director of The Friends of Cuban Libraries, is in touch with independent librarians on the island and distributes an electronic newsletter with information about government crackdowns. For more information see: http://www.friendsofcubanlibraries.org.

[7] Cuba receives $2 billion each year in subsidized oil from Venezuela and provides Chavez with doctors and technical advisors for his health and social programs. See Sweig 2007.

[8] See Latell 2006 and Ratliff 2004.

[9] See Montaner 2002 and Halliday 2006.

[10] Montaner 2002, p. 18.

[11] Ratliff 2003. For CATO's critique of the embargo see: http://www.freetrade.org/issues/cuba.html

[12] Ratliff 2003 and Montaner 2002, p. 21.