

Off The cuff

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Living dangerously in Cuba

MANY GOOD PEOPLE think kindly of Cuba and of Cuban socialism. It's not grey like the kind of communism the Soviet Union imposed on itself and foisted upon Eastern Europe, it's not given to the florid excesses of Mao's China, nor to the paranoid isolation of Kim Jong-il's Democratic People's Republic of Korea; the comrades in Havana have never, so far as we know, sanctioned wholesale massacres like those ordered by Pol Pot or Stalin. Of course, Che Guevara and Fidel Castro shot quite a lot of people fifty years ago, immediately after coming to power, but this process of 'liquidating' the members of the *ancien regime* was deemed necessary, as I am sure any reasonably progressive person would readily concede.

At any rate, Cuba hasn't simply dispensed revolutionary justice; it has near universal literacy, more doctors than you can shake a stick at, and is on track to achieve most of UNICEF's Millennium Development Goals five years ahead of schedule. It has higher life expectancy, and lower infant mortality rates, than the United States. What's more it has a great climate, dazzling coastlines, lots of cool old cars in pastel shades complete with fins and chrome trimmings, right out of the nineteen fifties; it has wonderful architecture (unthreatened by developers or development) crumbling gently away in the most aesthetically pleasing manner. More than all this, it has the whole *Buena Vista Social Club* thing, lots of cool gnarled old musicians, and sexy dancing by voluptuous girls and smoky-eyed boys, not a bit like the old communist days in Warsaw, Bucharest, or Krasnoyarsk.

What is more, unlike all of the old communist dictatorships that had "democratic" and "people's" in their official state titles, the modestly named *Republic of Cuba*, is actually a democracy, despite its rather

unnerving state motto: *Patria o Muerte, Fatherland or Death*, which is nicely echoed in Cuba's National Anthem by the immortal lines: "Do not fear a glorious death, Because to die for the fatherland is to live." If this sounds like an oxymoron to you, you probably won't appreciate the essence of Cuban democracy, which is popular and robust, despite owing nothing at all to the rather parochial notions of Western capitalist societies.

Everybody over 16 years of age has the right to vote by secret ballot for municipal and provincial councils, and for the *Asamblea Nacional de Poder Popular*, the National Assembly of People's Power. Since 1992, apart from easing up on the rather nasty anti-gay repression, the government of Fidel Castro and the official state party, the Communist Party of Cuba, graciously legalised a number of political parties. However, none of these parties, including the Communist Party, are allowed to campaign at elections. Candidates for all elections are nominated on an individual basis and do not have to belong to the Communist Party or to any of its sister organizations.

Given all this, and the historic propensity of left-wing people in Britain, and indeed progressive people everywhere, to support *well-meaning* popular dictatorships on condition that they are enemies of Western governments, and most particularly, enemies of the United States, it is not surprising that many socialists, left social democrats, and those of good liberal instincts should find much that is admirable about Cuba and her jaded revolutionary regime.

This is why so many of my acquaintances and colleagues get so annoyed when I routinely refer to the "dictatorship in Havana". However, I do this because I know that despite having elections and a plurality of legal political parties the gerontocracy which controls the Communist Party and all the institutions of the Cuban state routinely suppresses criticism and prevents the formation of independent trade unions, community associations, charities, religious organizations, single issue campaigns, and

political pressure groups. Indeed this regime appears to have a spontaneous tendency to throw anybody that criticises it into gaol, or at least to beat him or her up, to prevail upon their neighbours to stop talking to critics of the government, and generally to make their lives extremely difficult.

This account of life in Cuba was confirmed by Human Rights Watch last week, when they published a special report called, *New Castro, Same Cuba*. They report that since Raúl Castro ascended to the Presidency in July 2006 on the resignation of his brother, things have if anything got worse. A tight rein is kept on Internet access and bloggers critical of the government are routinely beaten and brutalised. This is, in itself surprising because almost nobody has access to the Internet, not least because connection costs at least one third of the average wage of \$20 a month. People do move information around on memory sticks, but given the numerical insignificance, isolation, and political incoherence (or diversity) of the dissidents, this could only have a limited impact.

However, the dictatorship is clearly worried. For example, Alexander Santos Hernández, a political activist from Gibra reports “[The police] picked me up a 5:30am while I was at home sleeping, and by 8:30 that morning they were already reading me my sentence. . . . They detained me on July 5 but the ruling they gave me had been written on July 3. They didn’t allow me to have a lawyer, and the hearing was conducted behind closed doors, without my family. The trial lasted for 15 or 20 minutes.” This was in 2006 when Alexander was sentenced to four years in prison for “dangerousness”.

Article 62 of the Cuban Constitution prohibits the exercise of any basic right that runs contrary to “the ends of the socialist state”. Anything that is deemed by the dictatorship to be contemptuous or insubordinate towards the Cuban state (and can be said to threaten its independence) automatically becomes the subject of criminal or “*pre-criminal*” charges because “a state of dangerousness” is said to exist.

“The state of dangerousness”, defined and explained in Articles 72-84 of the Criminal Code does not require a crime to have been committed in order to result in arrest and detention. Its broad provisions cover drug addiction, habitual drunkenness, the mentally ill, the unemployed, “social parasites”, or those who practice “socially reprehensible vices”. These naturally include, individuals who present a danger “to the social, economic and political order of the socialist state”.

The law of dangerousness is akin to the Jacobin *Law of Suspects* and it is clear that under it any notion of the rule of law or of due process has evaporated into the thin air of revolutionary socialist jurisprudence. It is by these means that the democratic-dictatorship of the cabal of party officials and state bureaucrats, led by the Castro brothers, exercises its control over a population that has suffered rationing of most goods since 1962 and continues to this day living with shortages of food, housing, and much else.

This state of affairs is, of course, routinely blamed on US sanctions and embargoes. However, it is much more likely that American policy has actually had the paradoxical effect of keeping the Castro brothers in power – because it is highly unlikely that they would be able to sustain their rule without the imposition of rigorous autarky in economic and cultural affairs, because the Leninist ‘state monopoly of foreign trade’ and the denial of hard currency and foreign travel to the mass of the working class, appear to be essential elements of Communist Party rule along with tight government control of wages, the state direction of people into jobs deemed necessary or appropriate, rationing, and the imposition of fixed prices.

Once all this is taken into account it becomes clear why the regime is frightened of “insignificant and isolated” groups of dissidents. The Communist Party leadership is well aware of the disillusion and discontent provoked by the chronic decay of Cuba’s economy. This is why I say: lift the US embargo and the Cuban masses will send the Fidelistas packing.