

Scientists, Universities, Professional Associations  
and Human Rights in Cuba, After 1960.

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March 1989

Synopsis.

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The Revolution of January 1959 represented a triumph for the Liberal aspirations of the Cuban people. Its professed aim was to provide the material and spiritual renovation our nation had searched for a long time. The delivery of this revolutionary movement to Marxism-Leninism constituted, for many of Fidel Castro's original comrades-in-arms and supporters, a deliberate act of treason. It alienated a large section of the population which originally fought for and supported the Revolution, many of which had come from the ranks of the professional classes.

This paper studies the process of how the majority of the existing professional class was pushed into exile or incarcerated, due to their non-allegiance to the new and unexpected detour of the revolutionary philosophy. And through this process, how the Cuban nation was deprived of many tens of thousands of its better trained sons and daughters, preventing them to contribute to the welfare and development of the National entity, which is not the property of one political or ideological group, but of the Nation as a whole.

## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

The Revolution of January 1959 represented a triumph for the Liberal aspirations of the Cuban people. Its professed aim was to provide the material and spiritual renovation our nation had searched for a long time. The delivery of this revolutionary movement to Marxism-Leninism constituted a deliberate act of treason and deceit by the leadership and alienated Fidel Castro from a large part of his original comrades-in-arms and followers. Many of these had come from the ranks of the professional classes and had fought and died to bring this Revolution into power.

With this ideological turn and the scientific policy that followed it, the Cuban authorities violated the fundamental human right of each citizen to contribute freely his talents to the advancement of the society that gave him birth. In addition, the Cuban Government violated the whole Cuban Society's collective right to benefit from their children's contributions, independently of their political, philosophical or religious beliefs.

This paper presents an overview of how the majority of the existing professional class, among them many scientists and engineers, was pushed into exile or incarcerated, due to their non-allegiance to the new and unexpected official philosophy, and of how a new class has emerged to substitute it.

## 2.0 BACKGROUND

Often, scientists are jailed by their governments for requesting their human rights. The reader may question if, in fact, these human rights are really violated in Cuba, since no such situations have arisen there, yet. The answer may be obtained by analyzing the three paths followed by Cuban scientists and university students in the sixties.

Once it was clear, early in 1960, that a totalitarian Marxist dictatorship was the end product sought by the new government in Cuba, scientists, professionals and university students followed one of three paths: exile, overt opposition or incorporation into the Marxist government. All three of

these paths led to the disappearance of the Cuban scientific community as it had existed and functioned up to 1959.

The first of these paths, exile, constituted the greatest single material loss Cuba can account for in the 20th Century. Well over one million exiles, one tenth of the total Cuban population, are presently scattered around the world, mostly in the USA. Of these, a disproportionately large percentage are professors, physicians, engineers and researchers. Their patriotism should not be questioned. Many of them contributed to the rise of the revolution by risking their lives and social positions and pursuing no other reward than the re-establishment of a democratic and pluralistic republican system. However, for their non-allegiance with the new Marxist official philosophy most of them were relegated to lesser social positions, harassed, expelled from their jobs and compelled to leave the country. Consequently, the Cuban nation was deprived of thousands of valuable scientific contributions, the measure of which can be estimated by the professional achievements attained by Cuban exiles during the past 20 years.

In addition, many university students, potential scientists, also went into exile with or were sent abroad by their parents during this time; their talents permanently lost to Cuban society.

The second path, overt opposition, led a large part of this professional community to political prison and in some cases to death. Examples are too abundant (1). The Cuban Constitution of 1940 states that "the people have the right to rebel and revolt against the central government whenever they are oppressed." Castro has sent hundreds of professionals and Cubans of all walks of life to long prison terms, of 20 and 30 years and even to death squads for acts that range from overt revolts from guerrilla warfare to simply requesting a passport in order to leave the country, as occurred with thousands of youngsters who were sent to the UMAP labor camps during 1966-68 (2).

The third path was followed by many Cuban scientists who freely chose to support the Marxist regime. It is regrettable that these Marxist professionals have not allowed their fellow scientists of other political creeds to exercise their same human right to choose. This is especially sad when, during the

previous dictatorship so many non-Marxist Cubans generously shed their blood so all political parties, including the Communist party, could freely participate in our political life.

The university students, by the same token described in the previous paragraph took sides with or against the Marxist government and clashed during our ideological and civil war of the early sixties (3), (4). The losing side, ours, not only confronted political defeat, but also either intellectual annihilation or moral exhaustion, due to political oppression.

This leads to the main topic of the present paper: the fate of the Cuban universities and professional societies after 1960, when these young students joined them.

### 3.0 UNIVERSITIES AND SCIENTIFIC INSTITUTIONS AFTER 1960

#### 3.1 Cuban Universities After 1960

In the summer of 1959 the Cuban universities were reopened after a closure of over two years by the Batista government. There were essentially three public universities and a Catholic one. The University of Havana, founded in 1728, had 18,000 students in 1956. It was highly respected in the American continent, north and south. In turn, the Universities of Oriente in Santiago and Central in Santa Clara had been established during the 20th Century by the republican governments. Though smaller in student body and in career paths, they were also very competent, especially in the sciences and engineering. Our universities were open to all, independent of creed, race or social and economic origin. Tuition, for those who paid it, was always under \$100.00 per year. The large number of professionals of all races and social origin, included many Communist militants, today members of the Politburo and the Central Committee, attest to the fact that, during the republican era, no one was turned away from the university.

Autonomy of our universities, mandated by the Constitution of 1940, included the right to manage their own funds, to elect their own government and to define their own curriculae. In addition, they had a long tradition of

political and social involvement in national affairs and also as centers for the diffusion of all new political and social doctrines. Our three previous presidents, Batista, Grau and Prio, were all products of the political struggles generated by the university during the thirties. Fidel Castro himself had been a student leader. He knew well of the active participation of the student body in the struggles against the two previous dictatorships of Machado in 1933 and Batista, in 1958. Hence, he sought the control or suppression of the university students from the very moment the universities were reopened.

This process of gaining control of the universities was well designed and orchestrated. Some students were first accused of complicity with Batista's government; very few indeed could honestly be accused of this. Then, others were accused of not having participated in the struggle against Batista. Immediately, new accusations of anti-communism appeared against other groups of students. After that, pro-government students openly accused opponent groups of having anti-revolutionary attitudes. Finally, even the lack of revolutionary zeal became a reason for expulsion. In short, a very large segment of the student body was expelled from universities during those early years of 1959 to 1962 and were deprived of their human right to pursue a university career and thus contribute to their society.

The fate of the university professors was no better. Government sponsored committees of professors and students created courts that evaluated the political trajectory of faculty members. In the same order as with the students, faculty was also expelled and thus deprived from their human and scientific right to educate the country's youth in a spirit of scientific freedom and tolerance. These very experienced professors were substituted by improvised but more amenable faculty body who taught all subjects, including pure science subjects, from a strictly "Marxist" philosophical point of view.

### 3.2 Catholics in the Universities

Several factors, however, prevented swift and complete take-over of the student movement by the governmental faction.

Catholicism, the religion of the majority in Cuba, was overtly practiced by over 90% of the population. Several Catholic organizations had functioned freely up to 1959. We will mention only those three which dealt with the young and are thus related to the present subject: the JAC (Juventud de Accion Catolica) comprised of secondary students; the JOC (Juventud Obrera Catolica) comprised of young workers and the JUC (Juventud Universitaria Catolica) comprised of university students.

After all other political and civic organizations (up to the Boy Scouts) were banned and driven underground by the government, the catholic movement became the only legal operating group one could relate to. By inertia, besides their original membership they were strengthened by many independent students and soon became target of government attacks. The government reacted violently to the fact that a large mass of the student body escaped its control by joining these still-operating catholic organizations. Finally, they were violently disbanded like their predecessors until they also disappeared completely. Today, after 25 years, they have not reappeared yet.

Finally, many other student groups were organized, operated and opposed the take-over of the universities by the pro-government and Marxist groups. Special mention deserves the Directorio Revolucionario Estudiantil, with a long and beautiful tradition that goes back to 1930. Since these organizations disappeared prior to my time I will send the interested reader to other sources (3), (4).

### 3.3 Professional Societies

Early in 1960 the professional societies which had flourished in Cuba up to that date suffered heavy pressure from government groups. As with the student bodies the professional societies were targets of the government effort to control all forms of organizations. In this case, it was extremely difficult since Marxist professionals could not outvote their peers and gain control democratically. The exodus of professionals solved this inconvenience. The new professionals that were being formed in the universities were not instructed to revive the organizations and, for all practical purposes, they disappeared. After 15 years, in 1975 a movement of

Institutionalization started. Whole new institutions were created presenting the appearance of normality. A new constitution was drafted and the government was duly "elected" in a one-party election. Among other changes, the Academy of Sciences was revitalized.

In 1976, a plan for the evaluation of professors and scientists was implemented. It had little, if any, effect on the scientific body. However, non-committed scientists remained in their subordinate positions and political allegiance remained the only way to obtain a promotion. The Academy, with its subsections of different professional interests, is a vertical organization. Its leaders have been appointed by the government and ratified by the members. Its function, as occurs with the labor unions, is to direct and control rather than to serve their members.

#### 4.0 A CASE STUDY

I have been asked to present myself as a case study to illustrate the process and its social and human consequences described in the previous pages. What follows is an overview of my student and professional life from the mid 60s to 1980. It represents the situation faced by any student who did not align himself with the government, even when he did not follow the path of overt armed revolt: non-conformism with the establishment was enough. It is with the hope that the disclosure of such events may provoke an improvement in the present living conditions and moral expectations of similarly minded people in Cuba that this paper is written. To these men and women who deserve a much better fate it is sincerely dedicated.

I arrived at the University of Havana in 1964 after graduating in arts and sciences from the already-socialist public school system and in French language from the Language School. I obtained two successive scholarships from the French Government to study economics, the first one for the University of Paris in 1963 and for Bordeaux the following year. On both occasions, the Cuban government refused me a student exit visa, in spite of the fact that hundreds of other students were being sent to the socialist countries to pursue similar careers. Consequently, I registered at the School of Engineering of the University of Havana. After the course was over and I

had successfully completed all exams, a "voluntary" labor session was organized and students were compelled to register and participate. I refused to sign up and was questioned in a public student meeting about my refusal. I was expelled from the University "with a special motion to be sent to the military service". During that year, the previous mass expulsions of 1960 and 1961 were re-enacted and dozens of students were expelled in public meetings. When the following semester started, hundreds more found their names on a black list when they convened to register. Prevented by the university authorities to renew their registration, they also were not able to pursue their university careers any further.

At this stage, the main objective seemed to have been to consolidate the control gained during the previous mass expulsions by way of terror. Any student that appeared to exert any type of influence on the student body, a natural leader, good sportsman, gifted in sciences, etc., was given an opportunity to become a member of the pro-governmental group. A refusal was considered an act of anti-revolutionary spirit. Additionally, these type of students posed a long term threat to the authority and leadership of the governmental group. Hence, when allegiance to the regime was refused, the student was violently expelled. Those students who underwent the more moderate procedure of the blacklistings were not considered leaders. However, since they were considered to have been influenced by those undesirables at some point in time, and hence contaminated, they were expelled, too.

Two years later, there was a second chance for these latter ones. Some of them received telegrams summoning them to the Chancellor's offices. There, they were interviewed by a political committee. If they repented and admitted their guilt and their ideological weaknesses they were readmitted. To assess this situation in its real perspective, the reader must understand the choice presented to these students: at age twenty, they had to face humiliation or the absolute impossibility of pursuing their careers any further; no other alternative.

These mass expulsions had become so widely known that UNESCO compelled the Cuban government to stop the procedure and provide proof that the situation was being corrected. The revision took the form of these "second

opportunities". Some individuals accepted this second chance, other refused. Others yet were never summoned nor presented with any alternative whatsoever. All of us will always remain as a living testimony of the violation of the students' human rights by the Cuban government.

For other of us, expelled students, the alternative was the labor camps. All sorts of young people could be found in these camps. Besides students there were also political dissidents, religious seminarians of every denomination, visa requestors, independent farmers and homosexuals. A lot of emphasis was placed in advertising the presence of homosexuals to project the image of some sort of quarantine ward for untouchables. Life in these labor camps was extremely hard. After photographs of such places were shown in a UNO session and the Cuban delegate was confronted with these facts, our conditions improved and the government was ultimately forced to dismantle these places. International pressure was too strong.

After the scandal of the mass expulsions and the labor camps the government tactics changed. It was no longer convenient to weed people out of the universities. Instead, a strict screening mechanism was established. Henceforth, secondary students would have to fill large questionnaires and would have to submit themselves to thorough interviews during their senior year in high school. Answering all sorts of personal questions was required. For example, was the student Catholic or practicing any other religion, or simply a believer in God? Was any member of his immediate family out of the country or in prison? Career options were allocated according to the evaluation performed by the government officials on the grounds of the students' answers and records. Careers leading to managerial positions were restricted to the politically pure. Whole social sectors were excluded from many career paths. For example, Catholic students were banned from managerial careers and today still face many problems due to their "religious beliefs". This fact is easily verifiable by contrasting the current percentages of catholic professors, engineers, doctors, journalists or managers, for example, and comparing them to the percentage of self confessed catholics in 1959.

Under the above conditions I re-entered the university. Engineering was out of the question so I registered in Mathematics and Statistics, and

deceived my way to graduation. In exchange for our hypocrisy, we obtained a university degree. Integrity is indeed a high price to pay, but there was little choice. Our humiliation is the Cuban government's shame. A "new man", as a government slogan runs, was indeed created: the social hypocrite.

After completing our degree we discovered that we had worked and suffered for very little (5). There was a double standard in the graduate placement services policy, too. Independent of proficiency, political allegiance and orthodoxy was again the main factor. I was one of the last placed for promotion and had to change employment on several occasions due to restrictions in handling data and other political considerations. I managed to publish several papers but was, again, refused a student visa for another scholarship I had obtained in Spain: another was sent in my place. My possibility to contribute to the advancement of my society was determined by my political allegiance to the government.

This description represents the state of the scientific world as seen by a non-Marxist professional in Cuba up to 1980, when I left the country. Leaving was my only way to, for once in my life, express my dissent and disagreement with the political regime and their way of conducting business. A sad way to express dissent, this one, for Cuban society. However, not everyone willing to choose this option will use it.

Many professionals who suffer similar frustrations and who would like to leave Cuba do not request an exit visa. They can lose their professional, social and economic status and still remain in Cuba. I requested an exit visa in 1978 and, in spite of having immigrant visas from the US, Venezuela and Colombia, was not allowed to leave until May 1980, and this was only because during the Mariel Boatlift, when almost 120,000 Cubans were evacuated by fishing boats to Florida by their friends and relatives, my family came for me in a shrimp trawler. During these two years of uncertainty when I was waiting for an emigration permit, I was demoted and my salary greatly reduced. My wife, a school teacher, was fired. Finally, when the moment came to leave the country, all our personal and private belongings were confiscated. Even my degree stayed behind. Not too many people are willing to risk their whole future without minimal guarantees of an exit permit.

The reader may think, and this is a valid assumption, that I am another social misfit who suffers from his persecution and superiority complexes. He may also think that what I have described here as political discrimination was nothing else than just retribution for my real lack of proficiency and professional qualifications. I myself wanted to find out if this hypothesis was true, and this was one of my motives to leave my homeland.

I wanted to work in an environment where not being a Marxist was not a limitation. I wanted to be evaluated on the grounds of what I could do as a human being and a scientist and not on what I represented to the political hierarchy or on how I related to the Communist Party. I offer the reader my small achievements in less than four years in a foreign land which are far more than what I was ever able to obtain among my own people.

Succinctly, I have obtained a Masters and finished all requirements towards a Ph. Degree. I am currently preparing my doctoral Proposal. I have presented several papers in international symposiums and workshops. I have been elected Fellow of my professional society and also promoted to Research Engineer in the institute where I currently work. I have also published a short story book on Cuba. Always holding at least two jobs, I have supported my wife and three children without any intervention or allowance from any organization. I do not claim to have achieved a tremendous success nor to be an extraordinary individual. On the contrary, I firmly state that any other Cuban professional of my ability and fate could have performed at least as well if not better. The secret lies in the fact that many years of hard work and little recognition have prepared us to be achievers and we are just yearning for a fair opportunity.

## 7.0 CONCLUSIONS

Throughout this paper the reader may have felt the flavor of life in a totalitarian society as perceived from the wrong side of the tracks. This sad situation is unproductive both to the individual and to society at large, whether it comes from a right or a left wing dictatorship. To denounce one and condone the other is nothing less than an act of hypocrisy.

Totalitarianism, from right or left, is always the same. Some, however, state that, since there are no longer human rights violations in Cuba (e.g. no more mass expulsions of professors and students, no more labor camps) it is useless and harmful to bring up this case before the Human Rights Workshop. Stating this is equivalent to encouraging totalitarian governments to completely suppress human rights, since on the long run they are better off.

· Finally, those living under the described conditions will silently, but surely appreciate any help in improving their living conditions, as we appreciated those in UNO whose protest led to stopping the mass expulsions and dismantling the labor camp.

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