

Cuba is Changing in the Global Era; Official Ideology is Not

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As the Aerocaribe DC 9 began to descend into Havana, 45 minutes after it took off from Cancun, Mexico, I read that Fidel was preparing to leave Cuba for Venezuela to attend the inauguration of President Hugo Chavez. Almost 39 years since my first visit to revolutionary Cuba, I felt almost dizzy when I encountered the new, European-looking airport, replete with decorative plastic bars criss-crossed under the ceiling, a newly tiled floor and vast spaces for people. *Deja vu* set in when the bored immigration official yawned at me, just as others had two, three, many years ago when I routinely visited. He slowly scanned the information on my passport and stamped the separate piece of paper containing my visa.

Neither the Cuban government nor Mexican travel agencies stamp U.S. passports. They understand that the U.S. government forbids its citizens to enter the forbidden isle without a license issued by the Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Assets Control. Yes, the citizen can lie when he reenters his own country and thus avoid the hassles of U.S. officials who will tell you that going to Cuba without a license, without U.S. government permission, is illegal: it has been for almost four decades. A U.S. tourist who can't resist a fun filled weekend packaged tour to Cuba from Cancun — Varadero beach, the Tropicana night club, good rum and cigars — may be subject to a fine of up to \$100,000.

The immigration official says "tee-ket." I show him my return ticket to Mexico, proving, I suppose, that I won't stay beyond the length of my visa, camp out forever in Cuba like some old time hippie who still thinks of the socialist island as a pure peoples' paradise. He nods, returns the passport and says "Welcome to Cuba. Have a nice stay." I am awash in memories as the taxi takes a road that doesn't pass the Insane Asylum, a landmark of the trip to and from the old airport, a place where I filmed but never used the Cuban equivalent of the Titicut Follies (A Fred Weisman documentary about crazy people putting on a show in the asylum).

The young, rash and absolutely zany revolution that I first knew in 1960 has turned forty. The cab driver, after five guarded minutes in which he decided I was not a fanatic Fidelista or a government informant, talks freely. An economist for more than 20 years, he now drives a tourist taxi because "it pays better. I have three kids, you know". We stop at a light in front of an ad for foreign products: something new in the last few years, although the road still contains revolutionary slogans as well.

"Nothing changes here," he declares. "Very peculiar to live in a revolutionary society that stays the same year after year." How about the road signs? I ask. "Yes, they tell the tourists about things they can buy." And how's the tourist business. "They say we had a million point seven last year. Must be good. Who knows? They say it brings in much more revenue than sugar. But I don't have to tell you that with tourism comes a lot of unpleasantness that we Cubans would rather not have to deal with. The jineteras of course, the foreigners who come in and enjoy the hotels we built and were supposed to be for us. But, we're in a special period, which Fidel announced almost ten years ago and we may stay in that special period until I die and then some." He laughed.

He referred to the speech Fidel made after the Soviet Union collapsed and Cuba lost its multi-billion dollar a year subsidy. Since 1990, the Cuban Revolution, without outside support, has fought just to stay afloat, to retain basic medical and social services, its vast education complex and to provide some subsidized food and other goods to the population. The U.S. government hit Cuba with two brutal laws, Torricelli in 1993 —tightening the embargo, track

one and attempting to destabilize Cuba by supporting dissidents, track two — and Helms-Burton in 1996 — designed to prevent foreign investment by opening U.S. courts to law suits against foreign companies doing business in Cuba.

And Fidel, I ask. “Cono, Fidel is wise beyond belief, but between you and me you shouldn’t put people in jail because they disagree with you. It’s not natural for anyone to stay in power for more than 40 years.” He shrugs, as if resigned. *Que sera, sera* and all that. I see more traffic each year, I comment. Cars new and of rare vintages, fume-spitting trucks, “Camels” (two humped buses pulled by truck cabs), bicycles, horse-drawn carts fill the road. He agrees that the number of cars has increased. “But there’s economic stagnation,” he adds. Last year Cuba claimed it had a 1.2% economic growth. “That’s like no growth,” he said. “But the U.S. wants it that way. They don’t want change here or else they would lift the embargo. Without the embargo you would see Cuba transformed in six months, no three months, no tomorrow. And, *caramba*, we need to change desperately.”

In 1960 change occurred at a breathtaking pace. Each morning the newspaper, *evolucion*, would announce that the government had intervened (the step before nationalizing) another U.S. company. Fidel would explain in long speeches why the government undertook urban and agrarian reforms, why it had to form a popular militia to resist U.S. aggression, which was visible as terrorist teams would conduct raids on Cuban targets. The propertied classes had by and large had fled by mid 1960 and most of the professionals had also decided that the revolution, which they had supported as long as it didn’t touch their property and privilege, had gone communist—which meant that it did touch their property and privilege. And it kept grabbing private property for almost ten years, driving the *timbiriches* — small peddlers — off the street in 1968.

Fidel had talked about building a communist society in 1965, bypassing socialism. After the government stopped all small business, it became difficult to find a place, outside the hotels, to have a cup of coffee in Havana, or even a glass of water. That has changed now — thanks largely to tourism and the dollarizing of the economy in the early 1990s. The cab driver says that he would choose Carlos Lage to succeed Fidel. The vice president who manages the economy, is a humble man in his forties, a medical doctor known for patiently explaining the logic of government economic policy on TV and radio. “Lage wouldn’t put people in prison for opening their mouths or printing a newsletter. He wouldn’t destroy our chance to watch HBO movies like those “*malvados*” (villains) do.” He was referring to the decision to eliminate the ingenious devices Cuba citizens invented to get satellite TV — something other than their own two channels.

In the hotel bar, a trio of retired but still very professional musicians play songs from The Buena Vista Social Club, Compay Segundo’s Grammy winning album. The musician confesses he has never been to Mayari or Macane, (towns mentioned in the lead song).. I boast to one of the musicians that I’m one of the few Americans that has been to those towns. It seems like a million years ago that summer of 1968 when I traveled with Fidel to remote parts of Oriente Province. Fidel had just written the introduction to Che’s Bolivia Diary, the late summer when he reluctantly supported the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia and lost the support of left European intellectuals.

The bartender stares at the TV, which shows Fidel expounding at the January 18-22, 1999 international conference on globalization in Havana. on the evils of US imperialism and its connection with neo-liberalism. “The Security Council is a dictatorship in the United Nations. And the United States has the role of dictator in the Security Council. When the United States invaded Panama, it did not consult the Security Council. When it invaded Grenada, it did not consult a Security Council ... When it invaded the Playa Giron (Bay of Pigs) it did not

consult anyone.” He referred to the April 1961 CIA-backed invasion of Cuba. Castro had predicted that the global financial crisis would spread from Asia into Latin America. The camera panned to show the economists listening. It held on a Brazilian. Last August investors began withdrawing money from Brazil because they thought the government would default on its loans. Castro explains how “neo-liberalism exploits mercilessly third world people, how it places poor governments in impossible financial situations, how the crisis has hit most Latin American countries, which have suffered a drop in their export earnings to Asia —something they can ill afford. “Neo-liberalism intensifies exploitation worldwide and polarizes the world’s wealth. neo-liberalism is the highest form of capitalism and imperialism, but it doesn’t have to last forever. “It’s not sustainable because it produces increased unemployment, deterioration and reduction of public services and the destruction of Nature and the environment.”

Fidel warned about “the loss of national currencies, which will lead to the loss of sovereignty,” about “the impending calamities that cause insecurity in the lives of poor people in poor countries, “who can see their reserves, accumulated over decades, liquidated in days.” I ask the musician if he agrees with Fidel. “Always,” he says. “I never disagree with Fidel. He is a genius.” The musician adds. “It’s what he doesn’t say that concerns me,” he laughs. Fidel is correct about the toll taken on Cuba by the US blockade — yes, it’s more than an embargo — and how Cuba will resist and how socialism is superior to capitalism. He is correct. But so is the musician.

Fidel, arguably the world’s leading statesman, doesn’t explain about how ideology helps Cubans to deal with the grinding erosive impact of daily life — which is not a result of the Asian crisis. Cuba’s exports to Asia and most other areas are limited because Cubans produce sugar, nickel, coffee, tobacco, and a few other products. He doesn’t explain, although Cubans understand anyway and resent, why some have dollars without working and eat in fancy restaurants and those who have no dollars — no beneficent relatives abroad — have to work hard and have little to show for it. The salary structure hurts the working population since the dollar trades at roughly 20 pesos and non ration book prices for goods mean that a worker earning 200 pesos a month makes about \$10, which doesn’t buy much. Unless you can get a job in the tourist sector, which has replaced sugar as Cuba’s leading foreign exchange earner – a troublesome fact for Fidel and most Cubans.

I talk to a friend of my daughter’s who earns the equivalent of \$12 a month and has to support herself and her eight year old son. She works as a professional by day and does typing at night for foreigners —for dollars. “Without the *libreta* (ration book),” she says, life would be much worse. With 6 pounds of rice and two pounds of beans we can stretch my salary. But when the shower head breaks and I need \$40 to fix it.” Some women began to turn tricks to make extra money. Others became part of a more organized prostitution racket. Over the last decade I would see increasing numbers of beautiful and young women and men (boys). Imagine, when an Alitalia or Lufthansa 747 arrives in Havana and most of the passengers are middle aged men, without their wives.

In early February, I note that most of the ubiquitous *jineteras* (hookers) have disappeared from the hotel zones. A lone, scantily clad woman ambles coyly on 5th Avenue, near a traffic light, making eye contact with drivers of rented cars – presumably tourists. But the recently declared Cuban war on crime is also proceeding apace. Thieves, muggers and hookers have been arrested and sent away for “social rehabilitation” said Cuban Attorney General Juan Escalona. Crime was beginning to cause concern among those running the tourist industry. So, Fidel announced the new crack down policy in January as he commemorated the 40th anniversary of the revolutionary police force. Castro attributed the growth in crime directly to the growth of foreign tourism and the presence of foreign business people - over the last ten years. I’ve never seen so many cops on the streets of Havana. Although I admit, I felt more

secure with them out there. In 1992, thieves had broken into a rented beach bungalow near Havana and stolen various items from me. In 1994, I helped lead a delegation of 130 Americans to Cuba; twelve were mugged in a week.

The TV set shows short clips from other economists. The bartender remains transfixed on the critique of globalization. And he and the musician discuss the subject intelligently with others seated at the bar - Cubans and foreigners. How informed and educated Cubans are for people without a free press. How can Cuba have a free press when no press exists? Sure *Revolucion*, *Trabajadores*, *Juventud Rebelde*, *Bohemia* call themselves papers and magazines, but they are no more than organs of government information. Yet, people on the street, in the bus, in the barber shop, at the hotel and university can and do discuss a wide range of current issues with knowledge and insight. I also note as I have in the past how little work Cubans do in offices or administrative positions, compared to U.S. workers. Not so with workers in cigar factories or other areas where they must meet quotas. Yet life "*no es facil*," a common complaint. Since the Soviet Union stopped subsidizing the Cuban economy, daily life in Cuba amounts to people "resolving" basic problems of food, housing, repairs to the aging machines in the house, problems of transportation. Yet, most Cubans wear clean clothes and have shined shoes without holes, despite the fact that their wages don't allow them to buy much on the dollar market.

Some of course are lucky enough to have beneficent relatives abroad who send them remittances. Ever since Sugar Daddy imploded, almost ten years ago, Cubans have had to fend for themselves - as a nation alone, on the one hand, and as individuals and families on the other. No more dependency on Spain (until 1898), on the US, (until 1959), the USSR (until 1990). Alone at last! No other nation to depend on. But what a time to be free, when dependency is writ large on the map of the world, when resources have been monopolized by the rich, at a time when, without outside support, the Cuban state can no longer act the role of beneficent father - giving education, medical care, jobs (even to those who didn't work), transportation, subsidized food and other necessities. It had to unload its bloated state bureaucracy.

The state did not, however, empower the society to replace it. The Party and the State possess the resources. A neighborhood can't start a Little League team or a Theater group without authorization. And, over the years, people have lost the sense of initiative. They wait and the state eventually comes around. Often, the expression of that endless waiting looks like a Cuban version of Munch's *Silent Scream*. A middle aged woman waiting for the bus, or on line to buy a product that has disappeared from the market. In the 1990s, Cuba's economy went into free fall. Sugar production dropped by as much as 3 million tons in a year. Until 1990, Cuba conducted more than 75% of her trade with the socialist bloc. Then, there was no bloc; no socialism remained in eastern Europe. State revenues plunged. The government by necessity stopped subsidizing everything. For thirty years Cubans had paid little or no rent. They enjoyed free or virtually free education, medical care, electricity, entertainment, transportation. They paid no taxes. What a deal! The Soviets had paid, while Cubans consumed, enjoyed the security of free public services. For about thirty years, Cubans danced on the center of the world stage, literally. Alicia Alonso and the Cuban National Ballet toured the world's cultural capitals. Cuban artists, writers, athletes, film directors and scientists achieved preeminence in their fields. Thanks to the Soviet Union Cuba could also play a vital role in world affairs. From the 1960s through the late 1980s, Cuba spread anti-imperialist influence throughout Latin America, Africa and other parts of the world as well. The Cuban Revolution forced a drastic change in US-Latin American relations. The United States spent untold billions to stop the spread of Cuban communism and had to give up its time honored tradition of supporting dictators in favor of supposed democrats.

Few Americans have knowledge of Cuba's role in the destiny of southern Africa. At his inauguration, Nelson Mandela shook the hands of the world's leaders, but hugged Fidel Castro in a tearful embrace. He understood the part played by Cuban troops in dealing a mortal blow to apartheid in the 1987-88 battles of Cuito Cuanavale in southeastern Angola. Cuban troops had slipped inside the circle South African forces had drawn, surrounding the main units of the Angolan Army. Cuban special forces then opened a hole in the circle, allowing the besieged Angolans to slip out. Then, using Cuban MIGS and ground forces, the Angolans pounded the apartheid army mercilessly, inflicting losses so heavy that South Africa's military strategy became non-viable and President De Klerk had to lead his racist cabinet and party in a political retreat. Mandela was freed from prison. The ANC won the elections. Namibia received her independence. All made possible by Cuba's revolutionary forces.

Cuba also helped keep Angola from falling first to South Africa in 1975 and subsequently to the CIA-backed UNITA forces, also allied with South Africa. From the late 1970s through the mid 1980s, Cuba kept Somalia from seizing a piece of Ethiopia. Cuba sent 1500 troops to fight alongside Syria in the 1973 war against Israel - perhaps, not the most wonderful move Fidel made, but one that nevertheless showed how Cuba had become a world player. Do these facts help explain why when Fidel appears at an international conference in Europe, Turkey, Latin America, New York (at the U.N.), he receives a standing ovation, while the more powerful U.S. officials gather mild applause? Above and beyond his proven ability to resist the efforts of nine successive U.S. presidents to remove him, Fidel also elaborates a vital agenda for the world — on social issues, environment, disarmament — while U.S. leaders prattle on about the scourge of terrorism and narco-traffic.

With King Hussein gone, Fidel holds the record for longest living head of state. He also holds the Guinness record place for disobedience. I attended rallies in the 1960s, 1970s, 1980s where people chanted: "*Fidel, seguro, a los yanquis da les duro.*" (Fidel for sure, give it to the Yankees.) And Cuba did give it to the United States, or perhaps the United States gave it to itself. Imagine, attempting to assassinate a foreign lead repeatedly (Castro claims 126 times) - and failing! Imagine launching an invasion at the Bay of Pigs, using anti-Castro exiles as a surrogate force! Imagine almost forty years of waging terrorism against a country Washington accused of being terrorist! No wonder the older Cubans feel a sense of pride. Cuba stood up to Yankee imperialism and exported its ideology to millions of third world people. Cuba played the role of world anti imperialist leader. Cuba built a socialist system that for all its flaws third world people could emulate. Cuba took a heavy body blow when the socialist Sugar Daddy collapsed. Yet, under Fidel Cuba, after 1959, had forged a nation out of what had been an informal appendage to the U.S. economy. Under Fidel, Cubans had erected institutions that functioned, but also had the effect of weakening the society. The State and the Communist Party that directed its policies had assumed all initiatives, controlled resources, made the decisions about world and national economic policies — and about the more mundane issues of everyday life.

By the 1990s, the State and the Party, faced with the downward spiral of the economy, had to make concessions - to the logic of its weakened position. This meant more than yielding to the temptation of becoming a tourist Mecca, of dollarizing by necessity the currency, of inviting foreign investors to exploit Cuba's labor and resources, with controls, however, that other nations lacked the will to impose. Fidel stopped far short of bringing back capitalism. And he did not return state power to the society. But the State could no longer maintain the vast bureaucracy that Cuban socialism supported. The government began to fire the middle levels of its ministries. I met an old friend, a former official who had attained high rank and who had also lived what I considered a noble life. As a Major in 1973, he faced complicated child care arrangements, because he refused to consider using his rank to place his kid in a day care center. His wife cooked on a two burner stove and lived in a crumbling working class neighborhood in Havana. While with me, he never used his rank to crash a line at a restaurant,

as others did. In the early 1990s, his Ministry like many others “retired” thousands of people - not based on years of worthy service or value to the Ministry. It was a wholesale dumping.

Unlike my friend, many of those let go had enjoyed the traditional perquisites and privileges of office - state cars, special stores, vacation resorts — found themselves reduced to the standards of the majority. But these former middle or high middle level officials, many members of the Communist Party, didn't lose their connections, their knowledge of how the system works; nor did they lose the resources they had acquired during service in the bureaucracy. As the Special Period — read hardship — developed, they gained an edge in making the change between secure civil servant status and the risky world of the job market. Some of the former civil servants reemerged as members of the newly propertied — small in size — class. Some have opened *Paladares* (small, private restaurants) or pizza parlors with delivery, B&Bs with chauffeur service. Others rented rooms or apartments, made out of their garages, to foreigners who are working or doing long-term research projects in Cuba. Because Fidel has always opposed the emergence of a propertied and privileged class, the government has cracked down on those working on *cuenta propia*, has taxed them and regulated them. But still their presence dramatizes the rise of civil society in Cuba. (Recall, that by civil society Rousseau meant the bourgeoisie.)

These petty entrepreneurs are joined by private repair services, cars, TVs, appliances, computers; by tailors, shoemakers, seamstresses. Graphic artists design menus and other items for hotels. Other Cubans who learned skills from their revolutionary education now sell them for dollars to enterprises operating in the dollar economy. Cuba has become a nascent class society over the last decade as a result of necessity, not Castro's desire. Fidel has always eschewed consumerism precisely because it excludes the working classes. The man or woman who makes paper boxes, or loads cargo and has no close relatives in Florida to send him dollars might be pissed off. My retired friend cannot live comfortably on his pension and his wife's salary combined; so he got another job. He can buy a few things beyond what the government insures him on his ration book, but some of his lazy neighbors sate themselves on restaurant food, fresh vegetables and frozen meat at the dollar market and a new VCR. He, like many Havana residents, suffers from an unpredictable water supply, periodic *apagones* (blackouts) and deteriorating housing. His kids' future, once bright and secure, have become somewhat dimmer.

Cuba has produced 60,000 doctors - more than it can use. Some now drive cabs. The government must pay part of their salary in dollars to keep them. Scientists, engineers, architects, lawyers, professors and so on - they abound in Cuba. But Cuba's economy cannot absorb them. The dream has faded. But if Cubans compared their situation their neighbors in the Caribbean and Central America they would celebrate their good fortune. But Cubans tend to compare their plight to that of their relatives in Florida - albeit not all of them have done well in the United States. A young man I know well shined in Cuba, then moved to the United States without ever adjusting to the competitive and harsh ambiance. He returned to Cuba. “I'm happier here, poorer but happier. People aren't out to con me and screw me in my daily transactions.”

I meet with Culture Minister Abel Prieto, a man in his early forties with shoulder length hair and immense intensity. He was elected president of the artists and writers union, served on the Politburo (the command center of the Party) and now directs cultural affairs. He speaks directly and honestly and has earned the respect of most of Cuba's intellectuals by standing up for their rights - not their privileges. He discussed race and religion at the end of a two day joint U.S.-Cuban conference sponsored by Harvard's Rockefeller Institute for Latin American Studies and the Juan Marinello Center in Cuba. Race, gender, and religion, three taboo subjects for almost 40 years, became the topic for academics.

Cuba in 1999 looks much different than it did in 1959. I first went there in 1960, when the Revolution appeared to border on creative chaos. It was the year Fidel had chosen to send enthusiastic teenagers from the cities into the countryside to teach illiterate peasants to read and write. Imagine, middle class girls who had never gone out with members of the opposite sex without the presence of a chaperone traveling to remote areas of the island by themselves. The parents freaked. For some the alphabetization campaign was the last straw: communism. Communism, socialism, statism — call it whatever you want, but it's indelibly Cuban. Cuban culture in 1999 goes way beyond salsa and black beans and rice. Thanks to the revolution, Cuban culture now includes dramatically reduced infant mortality — far lower than the District of Columbia — and increased life expectancy. The Cubans who came to the United States in rafts had perfect teeth, good general health, and high level of education — compared to other Caribbean and Latin American refugees seeking entry to the United States. A surprise to U.S. officials, but taken for granted by the Cubans because they assumed the presence of doctors and dentists in their lives — and suffer shock that a routine office visit or a trip to the emergency room will set them back hundreds of dollars.

Another culture flourished alongside the official one, a culture the government did not exactly promote. And when economic and political institutions declined in the post Soviet era and the government failed to meet the public's expectations to deliver food, services, and security, this counter culture grew. People turned to religion perhaps because State sponsored Marxism did not offer them a satisfactory spiritual life. The churches began to fill, not only the Catholic and Protestant but, more importantly, the *santeria* meeting places; the religion that existed in Cuba since the slave times and had gone semi underground in the first three decades of the revolution. *Santeria* not only spread in Cuba, but all over the world. What irony! Fidel and Che had hoped to spread anti-imperialism and socialism.

Cuba was the model for third world revolutionaries — until the larger model on which it depended fell apart. Yet, the energy generated in Cuba by revolution also led to the proliferation of rituals that, while not deviating exactly from anti-imperialist or anti-capitalist discourse, certainly diverges from state ideology on basic values — loyalty to the state or to your religious "socio" (buddy). Hard work for low pay for the patria, or partying and dancing all night with hallucinogens? The materialist world of Marxism-Leninism or the magic of Elegua and Chango? For much of the Cuban revolution frank discussion the subjects of race, gender and religion remained buried — because they are so potentially explosive. Fidel had proclaimed unity as the necessary cement for revolutionary survival — and he was undoubtedly right. But for how long? The independence wars of 1868 and 1895, the revolutions of the early 1900s and 1932 went down because of disunity. Forty years after this revolution, the hot themes slowly emerge.

At a joint seminar held between U.S. and Cuban scholars, sponsored by Harvard University's Rockefeller School for Latin American Studies and the Juan Marinelo Center in Havana, January 29-30, these themes received an airing and some hot debate. Professor Randy James of Harvard offered his research about the spread of *santeria* in the post revolutionary era. A Cuban writer sitting next to me whispered: "Wouldn't it be ironic if history remembers the Cuban revolution because it successfully exported *santeria* instead of revolution?" Jones also went on to develop his thesis about how the complex race theme got buried after the revolution. I recall how Fidel announced the dramatic end to discrimination shortly after he led his guerrillas into Havana. Segregation had existed in the Havana Yacht Club — indeed, the rumor was that Batista himself was excluded because of his mulatto complexion — and a variety of public places. Some militant blacks thought that this would mark the beginning of a true rendering of grievances for Cuban blacks, something that had not happened since the end of slavery in the 1870s. Quite the contrary, as Carlos Moore bitterly notes in his book.

Santería in its various forms, once Black religion, has become racially diverse. The revolution recognizes it, made a museum for and boasts about Afro-Cuban culture. It does not boast about blood rituals and the use of hallucinogenics, or about the world view where capricious Gods and imps wage jealous conflicts. The revolution accepts *Santería* in 1999 because it has no choice. This is also, like Christian religions, part of the emerging civil society - and not necessarily bourgeois. At the end of the two day encounter Culture Minister Abel Prieto meets the U.S. and Cuban scholars and declares assertively that Cuba has achieved *mestizaje* (race-culture mixture. "I don't deny there's racism here," he says. "To deny this would be to deny reality, painful reality. But it makes no sense to talk about Afro-Cuban or Anglo Cuban or Hispano-Cuban. We've all absorbed African and European culture. A black Cuban is a Cuban, not an African."

Prieto also asks for more cultural exchange with the United States, something to break down the stupidities of the U.S. policy. Pablo Armando Fernandez, a Cuban poet who has lived for fourteen years in the United States before returning to Cuba in 1960, said he didn't want to see McDonalds and Walmarts all over Cuba. Prieto laughed and agreed. The latest policy "opening" of the Clinton Administration went down in Havana like Legionnaire's Disease. Instead of seeing the moves to expand legal remittances, increase charter flights from Miami and open direct postal service as steps forward, Cuba took these moves as yet another aggression. Secretary of State Albright announced also that she would permit the Baltimore Orioles to play two exhibition games against a Cuban team, one in Havana and the other at Camden Yards — with the money going to Catholic Charity. "They don't get it," said a high foreign ministry official. "Cuba will not fold because of pressure; nor will we make concessions. We have nothing to concede." "Imagine," said Vice President Ricardo Alarcon, "if we would seriously accept importing the U.S. political model here! We would start political parties, and of course PACs to influence them. Each campaign would involve candidates spending millions of dollars to insult each other on TV in order to win about 18% of the eligible vote. That's the US model. Or, should we bring back capitalism, with high unemployment, gross exploitation, homelessness, hunger, people without access to medical care?"

Alarcon is right. The U.S. business elite understands that Cuba is the world's last virgin - from an investment standpoint. The multinational investors want it. The political class still bickers about not wanting to accept Cuba until Castro is properly punished for his four decades of disobedience. Thus, an embargo to castigate him. But, of course, he does not suffer the deprivation caused by the virtual blockade.

February 1, 1999. The day before I depart I lunch with a group of young scholars at a Paladar. The fish is fresh, the Moors and Christians (black beans and white rice) tremble with garlic, the beer is cold. "Civil society has emerged," says a political scientist. "The official ideology and the ideology of the street have diverged. It's not that most Cubans want the return of capitalism. No sir. We don't want a consumer society with all the stupidities and stress that you have in the States. But we want more freedom to read a real newspaper, watch a real TV new show. We deserve to be trusted, and we must tolerate people who express their disagreement - even by publishing a newsletter or trying to organize a political group. We have matured as revolutionaries. Official ideology is paternalistic, limited, the decision of the people who have run the revolution forever. They have done wonderful things, they deserve our esteem, but we merit their confidence as well. When? I ask. "Quien sabe," they all chime in. I'm an optimist, I declare. In 1968, I traveled with Fidel in a jeep throughout Oriente province. Fidel played baseball with local peasants, but couldn't hit the ball. So, he put on a uniform and cleats, took the mound, pitched and finally, an hour later, he connected and drove it out of the park. Then he took off the uniform and we continued our travels.

A message to the U.S. government about his tenacity? About dropping the embargo and seeing Fidel quickly retire? The U.S. will relent and lift the embargo in 2080. In 2081, Fidel will retire.