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*CUBAN COMMUNISM AND
CUBAN STUDIES:
The Political Career of an Anthology*

By Dr. Irving Louis Horowitz

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Irving Louis Horowitz

This discussion on the occasion of the publication of the eleventh edition of *Cuban Communism* is held at the University of Miami for several reasons. It is the home turf of my estimable co-editor, Jaime Suchlicki, and the Institute of Cuban and Cuban American Studies that he has so assiduously directed from its inception. He has adroitly and unflinchingly responded to the vitriol that pours forth from Castro's propaganda mills in Havana, as well as the only slightly less strident assaults from propaganda agencies in Washington. As the Institute of Cuban and Cuban American Studies demonstrates, the schism between honest information and tortured ideology is clearly exemplified in the field of Cuban Studies.

Cuban Communism is now in its eleventh edition: It is often graciously referred to as the "Bible of Cuban Studies." This is less testimony to the virtues of the compendium than the survival and strength of Castro's rule over Cuba for the past 45 years. For that reason, celebration of this 11th edition is a mixed blessing. Longevity is no indicator of virtue—especially in matters of political systems and empires. At forty-five, the communist system in Cuba is one of the oldest surviving relics of the Third International. With the possible exception of North Korea, it is assuredly the only secular dynasty where the original revolutionary leadership—at least those who have lived to tell the tale—remains in power.

The eleven editions of *Cuban Communism* tell the story of this past half-century's odyssey of a movement that started life in 1953. It began as a liberating force from a military dictatorship and progressed to a far more embracing state promoting a variety of the same curse of military dictatorship. There are other projects over time that have attempted to tell the long story of Cuban communism. *Cuba Studies*, the Journal of the University of Pittsburgh, and the earlier *Cuba Annual* at the Radio Martí division of the U.S. Information Agency, are perhaps the most noteworthy. In this connection, the *Cuba Transition Project*, with its optimistic forward look to a Cuba free of the dictatorship may be the most ambitious scenario-building activity.

Cuban Communism began life as a symposium in *Society* magazine. It must be admitted—confessed would be a better word—that at the time it reflected more the hopes and aspirations of the liberal and leftist academic communities than those who early on felt the heavy boot of the Castro regime. Given the plain fact that so many Cubans who left the island in deep despair began life with involvement in the revolution and also with high expectations, one can only hope that my initial positive responses are not viewed too harshly. Whether politically astute or otherwise, Vietnam and Cuba were yoked in the imagination of the sixties, as two watersheds for American foreign policy to overcome.

The conversion of the symposium into a book was similarly less an act of inspiration than of desperation. At the time Transaction needed a solvent commercial basis for survival. We initiated relationships with commercial publishers for a series of “fastbacks” aimed at a college audience. First with Aldine Publishers, then with E.P. Dutton, and later, with several introductory texts with Harper & Row and Van Nostrand, *Society* successfully launched a book program. Indeed, *Cuban Communism* was one of the first twelve titles in our paperback series. From admittedly pedestrian commercial needs, rather than grand ideological schemes, the series and this volume in particular can be traced. By the same token, we can attribute its continuation to the incredible survival of a 45-year-old dictatorship. Material conditions rather than spiritual impulses explain most varieties of human behaviors—high and low.

Cuban Communism underwent various stages of disaffection inspired by the Castro regime. The first edition displayed respect for the guerrilla’s courage, appreciation for the removal of the decadent and ineffective Batista regime, and enthusiasm for the goals of an island society liberated from the colonial ghosts of the 1894-1898 war no less than those of despotic caciques of 1953-1958. But even with the first edition there was an undercurrent of suspicion. Heavy-handed rule from the top down, anti-Americanism as a cornerstone of ideology, unpaid labor time as a critical component of the economy, and active participation in the overthrow and destabilization of other nations in the region were all noted. Over time, optimism sharply receded and pessimism regarding where the Cuban Revolution was heading became transparent. In this, the various editions of the book reflect the movement of people themselves into exile and a new life elsewhere.

As in all such projects, there are personal no less than professional reasons for editing such a volume. My initial involvement with, or better said, interest in, Cuba came about during my second (1958) stay at the University of Buenos Aires. It was a time of stirring against military politics in post-Peron Argentina—a rekindling of socialist theory amongst the students, a revival of sociology as a science rather than a footnote to Peronist ideology. The emergence of the guerrilla movement of Castro, Guevara, and their mountain-based allies, was widely reported. French currents especially influenced the students in the Faculty of Philosophy, where the new sociology was based, especially the rise of a new blend of existentialism and Marxism preached by Jean-Paul Sartre and later Régis Debray. Sartre and Debray provided a *de facto* handbook of insurrectionary politics. Indeed, during the early 1960s, many fine young students—boys and girls really—saw the nascent Cuban Revolution as a prototype of what could take place in Argentina. It is among this group that many of the “disappeared” of later years were drawn. The success of the Cuban Revolution in 1959 sparked all sorts of combinations and permutations among radical internationalists and conservative nationalists, Marxists and Peronists. The intellectual wine was heady, the activist outcome brutally predictable. But that is another story for another time.

I had maintained contact with C. Wright Mills of Columbia University during this early period. By the time of my return home to North America, his manifesto, *Listen Yankee!* had become something of a literary sensation in the United States. Its publication by Ballantine as a mass paperback probably did more than any other single text of the times to introduce Castro and the Revolution to an American audience. Mills had become a literary lion—celebrated among an emerging radical intelligentsia throughout Latin America and Europe—as the true voice of academic sociology. Needless to add, such a characterization inspired as much animus as support within the profession. But Wright thoroughly delighted in the praise and adulation, accepting appointments to lecture far and wide. Much of this is described in my biography, *C. Wright Mills: An American Utopian*.

One consequence of Mills becoming a public figure of note was that he was invited to debates. A particularly attractive event was to be a special NBC television show featuring Adolph A. Berle—longtime ambassador to Latin American countries, as

well as an important figure in the formation of the Liberal Party politics in the United States—debating C. Wright Mills. While the event, at least in the form envisioned, never took place (Mills suffered one of several heart attacks prior to the scheduled broadcast, his place being taken by Robert J. Alexander, a well schooled economic historian at Rutgers University), the Mills’ preliminary research for the broadcast brought us into personal contact. He asked that I research the writings of Ambassador Berle, and in particular locate weaknesses, “soft spots,” that could be hammered in the debate. I did, in fact, research the writings of Berle, but found myself in the presence of a towering and impressive scholar of the region—one who both appreciated the needs of Latin America and did so in the context of American liberal, post-New Deal, interests. I gave Mills my notes on Berle, including a warning that such a debate on Castro’s Cuba would not be a cakewalk. He may not have welcomed the warning, but he was not dismissive. Indeed, Mills never lacked for courage, but neither was he as bombastic in behavior as he was in rhetoric.

I sometimes wonder how Mills would have responded to a serious expert critic and scholar like Berle. In particular, I wondered whether Mills’ position on Cuba would have become modified—with Fidel being one more example and illustration of a Marxist pluralism—or hardened into the sort of ideologue that became all too prevalent in the New Left posturing of the 1960s. Mills’ death in March of 1962 put to a close any such speculations. It also put to an end one of the very few figures in social science with the ability to put a human face on the Castro revolution. Others who followed him were far less interested in creating a myth of Castro as a pragmatic politician, than in constructing a far greater myth of Castro as a democratic socialist who would carry the message of revolution to the entire Third World. It says something about the potency of the founding father of Cuban Communism that both the soft and hard sells remain on the intellectual table 45 years after the guerrillas first seized power.

During the next several years I concentrated on the completion of my own work ranging from *Radicalism and the Revolt against Reason* to *Three Worlds of Development*. But the 1962-1965 period was also one of fermentation in Brazil, where the peasant movement in the Northeast and the political movement in coastal urban regions, were crushed by Brazil’s armed forces with relative ease. To be sure, despite the façade of

civilian rule, the military of Argentina also revealed considerable effectiveness in resisting, and where needed, ruthlessly suppressing, nascent radical movements. During this period, the Cuban regime hardened its control over the island. It became the undisputed outpost of the USSR in the region, and the source of support for insurrectionary movements throughout Latin America. The choice of national consolidation (Castro) versus international agitation (Guevara) took on the “classic” form of the rivalry between the ideologies of the Third and Fourth Internationals—otherwise known as Stalinism and Trotskyism respectively.

It was this internal development in Cuba that provided the basis for my 1964 essay in *New Politics* “The Stalinization of Castro”.¹ It was clear to me that such an article would be perceived as a public break with, indeed a betrayal of, the Millsian legacy. I chose as a place of publication an impeccable left-socialist publication, albeit one that displayed evident roots in Trotskyism. I viewed the piece as a source for possible dialogue within the Left, but in point of fact, it led more to ostracism and assault than anything resembling dialogue. In retrospect, not even the moderate liberal wing of the Democratic Party was prepared for such a strong characterization of the Cuban regime. The Republicans for their part, saw the USSR in such rigid geo-political terms, that the subtleties of Trotskyism vs. Stalinism never entered into their hemispheric thinking.

Even at this point, when a variety of scholars reluctantly now assign the label of Stalinism to Castro’s regime, they often do so in emotive rather than analytic terms. The sheer absence of human rights or voting rights is scarcely some special hallmark of Stalinism. From my own viewpoint, Stalinism was a highly specific variant of totalitarian rule in the twentieth century. It features the fusion of civil and party functions, the militarization of economic activities, the exploitation of human labor and its reduction to a subsistence status, the steady elimination of all political parties other than the Communist Party, hierarchical leadership propensities, dynastic concentration of power in the hands of select families and cronies, and the cult of personality. It is a universe in which the leader can make no mistake and certainly cannot be criticized by others for making any. It became apparent to me, and to anyone who cared to look at the Cuban situation with their eyes wide open and their minds intact, that Castro’s assertion of being a dedicated communist was not an idle boast but a proven fact.

The fact that I took great pains to indicate differences between the Soviet and Cuban styles of totalitarianism, not least of which were the absence of mass murder as a political tool, and a dependant economic status in global terms, spared me from criticism. In the subsequent issue of *New Politics*, a lengthy diatribe was launched with the usual canards: a failure to realize all the good that Castro had done for his people. Everything from crop diversification, mass education, to the morality of free labor dedicated to the nation was trotted out. Perhaps the most incriminating (and also the most typical) argument from my critic, who was a professor of economics at a major Canadian university, was that even should I be proved right in my criticisms, they should be kept to myself. To do otherwise was to aid and abet the cause of the common enemy - American imperialism. I realized then, five years into the regime, that the struggle was on two fronts: against the new totalitarianism in Cuba and, for me at least, against the growing expansion of New Left thinking in the United States. My strong opposition to the US involvement in Vietnam muted some of the concerns of my old friends. However, drawing the line between opposition to military adventurism and support for a despotic regime in North Vietnam only served to remind such critics that I was not to be trusted on Cuba - I had crossed the line from a weak comrade to enemy of the people.

The next effort I made to understand the Cuban Revolution was done on my own terms, and not within those parameters set by Mills and his ardent supporters. It took place three years later, in 1967. I was a visiting professor at the University of Wisconsin for a semester and had the chance to spend what is euphemistically called "quality time" with a friend, Maurice Zeitlin. We shared a deep concern for the Jewish people, for Israel, and for Middle East problems as seen from a left perspective. Indeed, Maurice had written a work on social class in the new Cuba that had been well received. We also shared disquiet that Cuba was clearly becoming a dangerous place for Jews: Nearly ninety percent of the 12,000 or so Jews in Cuba had left within the first eight years of the Revolution and the ten percent who remained were generally too old to form or maintain a viable religious community. The totalitarian dream of substituting scientific socialism for an ancient faith seemed manifest to Castro's followers. That Castro was wrong about Jews, and even more ignorant about the depth of the Catholic tradition, was to become

apparent many years later, when Pope John Paul II came to Cuba and in his very presence stripped away the tattered curtain of secular worship of the state of Cuba.

The Horowitz-Zeitlin article on Castro appeared in *Judaism*, the official publication of Conservative Judaism.² It was written in a measured way, out of deference to Zeitlin, more a plea for justice than a criticism of the regime. To be sure, the article did point out the wide uses of gross anti-Semitic caricatures in official publications like *Granma*, the embrace of the most extreme, fanatic wing of Islamists in the Middle East, and the sharp curbing of freedom of religious practice. But it was all couched with a plea to Castro to take measures to rectify the situation, and to return to the fundamentals of socialism. As a dedicated graduate of *Hashomer Hatzair*, the strong Left Kibbutz movement in Israel, such a view made perfect sense to Zeitlin. It became clear that our appeal would fall on deaf ears when Castro sent active support to Syrians in their campaign against Israel during the Six Day War of 1967.

All that our article achieved was to expose the soft support among the American Left for any change in Cuba. Increasingly, the unity of Middle East dictatorships and their alliance with the Castro regime became a mark of bold pride. Jewish intellectuals in the academy were faced with the terrible *cul-de-sac*: they either offered support to the tyrant in Cuba, and hence to his support for terrorists in the Middle East, or they broke with Castro and the Cuban Revolution. The latter option was an act that few New Age acolytes were prepared to undertake—just as many of their parents doggedly supported Soviet tyranny despite the slaughter and imprisonment of millions of innocent Russians.

Indeed, the Cuban regime, no less than its advocates, had to come to terms with the degree to which Castro had either the will or the capacity to actively engage in insurrectionary movements in the Middle East and Africa, no less than Latin America. The necessity of choice served as the basis for the third article I wrote prior to beginning work on the first edition of *Cuban Communism*.³ The hard truth is that letting go of tyranny, especially tyrants who engaged in acts of perfidy in the name of the people, is a difficult act to perform—now as well as earlier in earlier times.

It is important to appreciate the fact that these three articles appeared several years before the first edition of *Cuban Communism* was even an idea. They were written in the belief that something resembling a social revolution could be still be forged in

Cuba and that it would enhance rather than destroy democratic institutions and individual rights. Increasingly, it became apparent to me that political freedom and economic reorganization could not be brought together without paying a price: that price was the surrender of dictatorial forms of rule. It was a price that Castro, as a nationalist revolutionary, was unwilling then or now to concede and it was a price that his political allies, dedicated to international revolution, were even less willing to pay. It is with the abandonment of my illusions that the birth of this special anthology took place.

What assisted in the birth of the book was encouragement received from people like Carlos Alberto Montaner, Jaime Suchlicki, Frank Calzon, Carmelo Mesa-Lago, and Ernesto Betancourt, in particular. Each in their own special way offered me support, but also a forum to express my opinions. Needless to say, this may reflect less on any achievement or expertise I had in the area than on the paucity of academics willing to take even mildly critical stances. As the community of Cuban exiles evolved, so too did a new generation enriching university life in places ranging from Miami to Pittsburgh, as well as government affairs centered in Washington, DC. It was no small irony that a cadre of well-trained, thoughtful, Cuban social scientists, historians, and policymakers emerged at a time when the ranks of American academia were being depleted by growing ideological agendas operating at the expense of intellectual integrity. While these shifts were often deeply felt by honorable people, the demand of the 1960s was for a choice of allies rather than a choice of research topics.

Over the years, at a formal level, *Cuban Communism* moved from a series of relatively random essays to an integrated text. The book was increasingly aimed at the basic education of young people interested in Latin America in general and Cuban affairs in particular. The division of the book into historical, political, economic, social, military, and policy sections seemed natural enough. They drew upon the ways in which social research was departmentally divided. They made no presumption as to which element in Cuba was more “basic” than the next. Perhaps the most controversial decision was to emphasize events in Cuba as such, and not to deal extensively with the overseas Cuban communities established in places such as Miami, Madrid, and San Juan. When events such as the Mariel boatlift occurred, they were covered as part of the internal situation within Cuba. While one might argue that this was an artificial limitation on the text, I

think it was and remains fully justified. There is a sense in which all books, other than the Bible and H.G. Wells have some kind of constraints built into their execution.

At the ideological level, with each edition *Cuban Communism* became a more potent tool in the struggle of ideas. I early on decided not to allow the book to become an artificial “pro” and “con” series of essays. An anthology is not a manual for electing officials. Nor is it the place where the student simply makes up his or her own mind among a choice of positions. This was to be—and indeed became—a living proof that social science has something to say about the condition of a nation and its system based on hard evidence and clear research designs. There were then and remain now enough texts celebrating Castro, Guevara, and their respective acolytes and apologists and the causes they espouse. I count several new readers and at least two books on Guevara in the year 2003 alone. In its pristine purity, *Cuban Communism*, as a work of social science, laid bare the character of the Castro regime from 1959 to the present. The work does so without bile or guile, and with a minimum of extremist rhetoric. Each selection has been chosen on the basis of its contribution to exact information, reasonable hypothesis, and where appropriate, sensible policy recommendations.

As there was a dwindling amount of available outlets for a growing amount of factual information being generated overseas (that is outside of Cuba), and a paucity of exact information from within Cuba, *Cuban Communism* increasingly provided statistical and historical information that shed light on internal events. With the discontinuance of the Radio Marti Quarterly Reports, and also its annual volumes on events in Cuba on a year-by-year basis, this aspect of the work became critical. Indeed, the Marti Annual Reports between 1985-1989 were crucial and irreplaceable. That said, only very recently with the work of the Institute for Cuban and Cuban-American Studies at the University of Miami and the efforts of the Center for a Free Cuba in Washington, DC has the type of exact data needed by policy community become available. Other agencies have filled in many of the missing pieces. Nonetheless, our anthology in a series of appendices provided data on who’s who in the Cuban political hierarchy, a brief run-down of major events in each year since the founding of the dictatorship, and activities of the regime with respect to such items as terrorism, overseas military engagements, and internal repression. Information of this sort is otherwise difficult, if not impossible, to come by.

In this regard, the active collaboration of Jaime Suchlicki in this enterprise for the past three editions, starting with the ninth, has been a vital force in my own sensitivity to the pedagogic requirements of a living text. The support of his Institute for Cuban and Cuban-American Studies has allowed for the inclusion of greater data-gathering resources than would have been otherwise possible. Without reservation, but with pride, I can point to the incredibly wide variety of people whose contributions have helped make this work central, and whose organizational frameworks have provided the informal base that both keeps up with events and anticipates prospects for future developments.

While *Cuban Communism* largely centers on the specifics of life in Cuba, much of my own writing—by necessity—is focused on American policy toward Cuba. As a result, the evolution of the anthology has been in that direction. Given the interest in the best and the brightest of scholars no less than policy-makers on the restitution of legitimacy and the normalization of development in Cuba, it should be of little wonder that such issues have come to play an increasingly prominent role in successive editions. I did have the great fortune of delivering the Bacardi Lectures in 1992 at the University of Miami.⁴ They provided me with an opportunity for examining in depth, a problem in the sociology of knowledge; in particular, the various strands of people drawn to Cuban Studies, and how in turn, they have impacted the social sciences and humanities of our universities. It should surprise no one that the study of contemporary Cuba provides a microcosm, not only of a society, but also of those who study that society. *Cuban Communism* has not left that double vision of objective system and subjective beliefs out of the reckoning.

I see this anthology as part of the consciousness of the Cuban people in search of mechanisms to move beyond totalitarianism as a unitary phenomenon. It is but one part, one spoke, of the revolt against tyranny. The Cold War may have ended the hub of the big wheel, the Soviet empire, but the phenomena as such did not pass into oblivion. With places like North Korea, Vietnam, China, with military politics of the sort currently practiced in Venezuela, and varieties of cruel dictatorships that repress their own people rife throughout Africa, the dangers of the Castro regime, while modulated by events and a realization of its own limitations, remain in need of steady examination and exploration.

If the Totalitarian Temptation is unitary and global, so too is the Democratic Project. Part of that project is the capacity of social science to go about conducting its business of researching and theorizing without intrusion or interruption. It is within that frame of reference that *Cuban Communism* finds its place. When this unhappy epoch in Cuban affairs comes to an end—as surely it must and will—then too this anthology will have run its course and also come to an end. At that point, the various editions of the book will serve as a warning, rather than an information resource, as to what can befall a people and a nation when one man, one party, one movement, one system, one plan, and one ideology, are granted absolute power.

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