Visiting Raúl Castro's Cuba

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ON JULY 31, 2006, THE CUBAN government announced that due to a serious illness, the nature of which was declared a state secret, Fidel Castro was stepping aside as the head of state. His younger brother Raúl, officially designated as his successor since the early days of the 1959 Revolution, was "temporarily" replacing the commander-in-chief. Raúl is reputed to be more pragmatic and a better organizer and administrator than his older brother. He has favored economic reforms such as those implemented in the mid-nineties, like the expansion of joint ventures with foreign capital, the legalization of the dollar, and the opening of agricultural markets and small family enterprises in the cities (although in recent years, the Cuban government has retreated from some of these concessions to private enterprise and the market.) Raúl is also an open admirer of the current Chinese model of development. He has made the army the most important actor in the Cuban economy, as in the case of the major tourist enterprise Gaviota and hundreds of other enterprises where capitalist-type methods have been introduced through the Sistema de Perfeccionamiento Empresarial (System of Enterprise Perfection). High Army officers have also assumed leadership roles in various sectors of the country's industries such as sugar. Raúl is also known as a political hard-liner, like the Chinese leaders he admires. He played a central role in the execution of Arnaldo Ochoa and other high army officers in 1989 and in the 1996 dissolution of the Center for the Study of the Americas, an unorthodox Communist Party think tank. On the surface, nothing much seems to have changed since Raúl replaced Fidel. The policies of the regime seem to be pretty much the same as they were until July 30, 2006. The commander-in-chief may not be in but neither is he out. Although he is no longer the hands-on chief giving long speeches and moving around the country issuing orders and instructions, he does have access to the telephone and regularly talks to ministers Carlos Lage and Felipe Pérez Roque (see below.) He also receives visitors, most prominently Venezuela's Hugo Chavez, who has come to see him several times during the last months. Chavez' visits with Fidel, parts of which have been televised, and broadcast phone interviews, have become the main channels through which Cubans and people abroad get a glimpse of Fidel Castro's physical condition. Nevertheless, some significant developments have taken place below that surface. Most important of all has been the marginalization of Fidel Castro's staff. His "Grupo de Apoyo" (Support Group) constituted by figures such as his personal secretary Carlos Valenciaga was the principal organizational means through which Fidel intervened in the political and economic life of the country. The Grupo de Apoyo, known as the "Talibanes" because of its ideological orthodoxy, but now also jokingly referred to as "los huerfanitos" or little orphans, has existed for a long time, but recently acquired much greater importance and relative autonomy within the system because of the central role it has played in the Commander in Chief's campaign for the "Battle of Ideas." This "Battle" was not just about ideological and political struggles and the frequent massive demonstrations that went along with those, but also about implementing economic projects,

which often departed from existing plans and usurped the powers and functions of the government's departments and ministries. One such project involved the decision by Fidel and his Grupo de Apoyo, contrary to established construction priorities, to renovate the University of Havana's Law School that the Cuban leader had attended in the late forties. These kinds of interventions have apparently come to an end as Raúl Castro has made the delegation of powers to ministries and other government agencies a central feature of his rule, and has strengthened the role of established government plans. In addition, there has been a reduction in the number of government-sponsored mobilizations at places such as the U.S. interest section building, apparently in order to increase the productivity of labor, while also softening the constant pressure on people to disrupt their lives and show their support for the regime. Thus, it appears that "normal" ruling class bureaucratic rationality has trumped Bonapartist and charismatic chaos and disorder in Round One of the Transition.[1">1] It is hard to predict what will happen in the rounds to come. Raúl Castro, at 75 years of age, may well turn out to be a short-lived transitional figure. Among the people in the next leadership rung there is first, Carlos Lage, a medical doctor in his fifties who has been put in charge of the Cuban economy; he has a reputation as a "moderate." So does Ricardo Alarcòn, in his late sixties or early seventies, former Foreign Minister and the head of Cuba's Parliament, although he appears to be playing a lesser role in the transition that began last July 31.[2] The youngest is Felipe Pérez Roque, the current Foreign Minister, who is in his forties. As former chief of staff of Fidel Castro, he is seen not surprisingly, as close to the "Talibanes" of the Grupo de Apoyo to which he used to belong. None of these people, however, have the power and prestige of the major "historic" leaders of the revolution. That is why there has been a fair amount of talk about a "collegiate" leadership team eventually taking over after Raúl passes from the scene. The record of "collegiate leaderships" has been unimpressive in every type of political system, even more so in Soviet-type systems like the former USSR or China. In the absence of well-established, let alone democratic, mechanisms to resolve important differences that are bound to develop, it is likely that one or another individual leader will inevitably rise to the top. If the army leadership remains united, whether under Raúl or some other general, it is very unlikely that either the "Talibanes," or any other force within the ruling circles, could prevail against them. Thus, Cuba will probably follow a state sponsored capitalist road of development in the manner of Vietnam and China.[3] Meanwhile, a number of Cuban leaders have reported that Fidel Castro's health is improving and that he may even return to office. While unlikely, such an event would greatly complicate and make much harder a prediction of Cuba's future. I ARRIVED IN CUBA during this transitional period on January 23, 2007 and stayed for two weeks. I was born and raised in Cuba and left the island in early 1958 while the Batista dictatorship was still in power. I visited the country for two weeks in January of 2000 and, before then, for one week at the end of 1979, a few months before the exodus from the port of Mariel in the spring of 1980. My impressions of those two trips were published in three different socialist journals.[4] The Havana metropolitan area that I saw this time looked poorer than the impoverished Havana of 1979, although perhaps slightly better off than the Havana of 2000. There was definitely more automobile traffic with its accompanying pollution and smell of burned fuel. The proportion of the ancient North American cars of the forties and fifties had visibly declined. People, particularly women, were better dressed: they wore new looking clothes and shoes. Jeans, in generally good condition, were worn everywhere, whether in the relatively more fashionable area of Vedado or in the various poor, working class districts that I visited. Women of all ages wore makeup and nail polish. There were a handful of beggars here and there, but these were always old people rather than children. Many more elderly people were selling peanuts and the Communist daily newspaper *Granma*, a multifaceted irony that reflects the inadequate level of peso-denominated pensions, one of the many serious problems confronting the country. The Cuban press also recently reported that the authorities were trying to stop, as a threat to public health, the growing activity of people going through garbage bags in search of empty containers to be sold to self- employed traders and for discarded food to feed animals.[5] These expressions of extreme poverty however, are considerably less visible than in the major cities in Mexico, where I have traveled often. Friends told

me that there had been fewer blackouts in recent months, although I experienced a couple of short-lived ones, lasting two minutes or so. Although more dwellings looked freshly painted than in 2000, they frequently had broken window panes, crumbling window frames, and rusty hardware. The overall condition of urban housing in Havana seemed to be getting worse, as the cumulative impact of rain, hurricanes and the sheer impact of time's wear and tear, has gradually destroyed the housing stock. The Cuban government claims that it built 100,000 housing units in the country in 2006, thereby expanding new construction by 30 percent in comparison with 2005. I saw very little if any evidence of this in the poor, working class areas of Old Havana, Cayo Hueso and other neighborhoods of Central Havana, and various *barrios* of my native city of Marianao (near Havana). Urban transport is in the worst condition with the incredibly congested "camellos" (camels — or long buses with humped roofs built on top of flatbed trucks) barely making a dent on people's need to get around, including getting to and from work. This problem has had devastating effects, isolating people in their neighborhoods and seriously affecting work as well as family, leisure and cultural life. Most of the streets in Havana were in a more or less acceptable condition, but sidewalks were generally in a terrible state of disrepair. The poor state of the sidewalks has been worsened by the expansion of the telephone system carried out by ETECSA, the joint Italian-Cuban enterprise, which has left gaping holes and telephone poles lying on the sidewalks without signs or lights to indicate danger. This has become a real problem particularly at night, since, in order to save energy, streets are dimly lit. Only those with access to hard foreign currency are able to afford the best taxi service, and the comfortable bus service connecting Havana with the principal cities of the interior. For example, a round trip bus from Havana to Cuba's best known beach at Varadero — 120 kilometers each way — costs 20 USD, a veritable fortune for Cubans since each dollar is worth around 25 Cuban pesos (according to official figures, the minimum salary is 250 pesos a month while the average salary is 385 pesos). A similar situation exists with respect to food. Walking around various Havana metropolitan neighborhoods, street markets seemed to be better stocked than they were in 2000, but at high prices in Cuban terms. One dollar for a pound of pork is cheap in U.S. terms but out of reach for the majority of Cubans with little or no access to foreign hard currency. The peso-denominated official rationing book only covers about 40 percent of the dietary needs of Cubans. The rest have to be acquired in the parallel and free markets at much higher prices. As it is, Cubans today are spending 57 percent of their income on food. However, in assessing this figure, one has to keep in mind that the very congested and deteriorated housing is practically free. The relatively greater availability of consumer goods but only at high prices is key to understanding the acknowledged growing inequality of Cuban society and one of the things that most impressed me during this visit: an all-encompassing law breaking and corruption. Although it was visible during my visit in 2000, it did not seem as pervasive and intrusive as I found it this time. I was often personally affected by having to informally work out a fare with drivers of state owned taxis whose meters suddenly "broke down" in the middle of a ride, prodding cashiers who were trying to short-change me, or avoiding people offering stolen goods in the street. Everybody I talked to agreed that breaking the law had become a way of life in order to survive in Cuba. No wonder then than in an important speech delivered at the University of Havana in November of 2005, Fidel Castro warned that corruption could destroy the revolution from within. In October of 2006, the Cuban newspaper *Juventud Rebelde* ran an investigative report detailing how customers were systematically cheated in retail establishments such as cafeterias and shoe and watch repair services.[6] More recently, on February 19, 2007, the daily *Granma* published a two-page centerfold on the important social and economic damages caused by the frequent theft of the "angular" sections of high-tension electric towers, notwithstanding the risk to life and increased criminal penalties.[7]

Economic Conditions During the Transition

WHAT ARE THE ECONOMIC CONDITIONS that underlie the kinds of behavior that we just described? How well is the Cuban economy doing? If we are to believe the Cuban government, the

economy is doing very well. They have developed a new method of measuring Cuba's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) that includes the freely provided social services which in other countries are paid for by the public. Based on this new method, Cuba's leaders claim that the economy grew by 12.5 percent in 2006, an even higher rate of growth than China's. An independent-minded economist I interviewed questioned this claim, arguing that there was a great lack of transparency in the calculations that official government economists made to arrive at such a figure. In his own estimation the Cuban economy had grown in 2006 by 6 or 7 percent, a very respectable performance. Notwithstanding some relatively good years, Cuba is probably just about to catch up with the 1989 levels of production, right before the collapse of the Soviet bloc. Aside from nickel, a raw material that in conjunction with other commodities has enjoyed several very good years in the international market, and is produced in a joint venture with Sherritt, a Canadian corporation, Cuba's economy has become rooted primarily in the provision of services. Tourism is the most important of these services, and the principal earner of foreign currency, although it experienced a decline of 3.6 percent in the number of tourists that came to the island in 2006.8 The U.N. Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLA) has estimated that 62 percent of Cubans have access to hard currency [obviously in greatly varying quantities] while 20 percent of the island's urban population is at risk of not covering its minimal basic needs (Cuba is currently 75 percent urban).9 The impact of foreign remittances, the source of hard currency for two thirds of those with access to it, is highly concentrated, however, because a disproportionate number of those receiving them are white Cubans residing in the Havana metropolitan area. The possible benefits of biotechnology and the oil that Cuba has explored and found in the Gulf of Mexico in partnership with various foreign companies mostly lie in the future, although Cuban oil is already covering 48 percent of the country's domestic energy needs. The sugar industry is a shadow of its former self as the majority of sugar mills have been shut down. Cuba produced 1.2 million tons of sugar in 2006, and is facing difficult climactic and organizational problems as it tries to reach its goal of producing 1.6 million tons in 2007. These figures stand in stark contrast with the long-term historic annual averages of 5 to 7 million tons before the onset of crisis of the "special period" after the collapse of the Soviet bloc. The non- sugar agricultural production is not carrying its weight either, as Cuba has been importing 84 percent of the basic foodstuffs destined for the Cuban non-tourist market ("canasta basica") consisting of such items as rice, chicken and canned fish at an annual cost of a billion dollars. Although the Cuban government has placed much hope on Chinese investment, not a lot has happened along these lines as the Chinese have driven a harder bargain than the Cubans expected. Nevertheless, China has become Cuba's second largest trading partner accounting for two billion dollars in 2006, doubling the amount traded in 2005. For example, Cuba has been exporting 400,000 tons of sugar to China, which added to the 700,000 tons it consumes internally, accounts for the lion's share of current sugar production. More significant is the economic exchange with Venezuela, Cuba's principal trading partner, although, to put these matters in perspective, neither Venezuela's nor China's role in the Cuban economy approximate the massive subsidies that the USSR provided from the early sixties until the late eighties. Venezuela provides oil to Cuba in exchange for services, particularly in the medical field, with thousands of Cuban doctors periodically sent to the South American country. This has had a significant negative effect on the Cuban health care system. The number of patients per doctor in the up to recently well-regarded family doctor program has substantially increased, and the number of specialists available to Cubans has been reduced.[10] The lack of medical supplies and provisions, from medicines to bedding, has become seriously aggravated since the collapse of the Soviet bloc in the early nineties. First aid and over the counter remedies from aspirins to Imodium are difficult to get. The Cuban government is unable to purchase large wholesale quantities of medicine from the U.S. because of the criminal blockade that the U.S. has maintained against Cuba since the beginning of the sixties. But this is only part of the problem, the other part being Cuba's relative lack of goods to offer for export and its overall poverty and consequently its inability to purchase whatever non-U.S. medicines and equipment it can afford to purchase from Canada, Latin America, and Western Europe. During the last several years, Cuba

has been allowed to import agricultural and processed goods from the U.S. under a "humanitarian" exception to the blockade established in November 2001, making the United States the main supplier of food to the island. Cuba, however, is not allowed to export anything to the U.S. to pay for these imports. While these imports have amounted to 1.5 billion dollars, they have been a financial drain that would be greatly alleviated if Cuba could sell things to the U.S., or if, more likely, several hundred thousand U.S. tourists could travel to the island. The abolition of the blockade would be welcome for both principled reasons — the right of nations to determine their own destiny against foreign domination — and practical considerations: it would greatly increase economic activity in Cuba[11] and undermine the regime's principal anti-imperialist claim to legitimacy. However, it would not diminish the effect of the other principal source of economic problems in the island, the visibility of which has, in fact, been hidden by the imperialist blockade: the inefficiency and waste inherent in the present bureaucratic administration of the economy. The old maxim attributed to Soviet and East European workers that "they pretend to pay us and we pretend to work," fully applies to Cuba. This became evident in the visible lack of care, attention and maintenance of every type of public sector property, from planes to hotels, restaurants, parks and buildings, no matter how recently they were, often beautifully, renovated. While economic hardship and the U.S. blockade may explain the lack of building materials necessary to carry out certain kinds of upkeep, it does not explain the absence of the simple, labor-intensive activities that have no significant capital components such as cleaning, sweeping and just plain run-of-the-mill neatness. The fundamental problem is the lack of initiative, motivation and of managerial and labor discipline. Over the centuries, capitalism developed bureaucratic, hierarchical systems where workers make no decisions and have no idea of what the overall process of production is for or about. Nevertheless, workers were bound to perform up to a certain level of competence prodded by the sticks — produce or you will get fired — and carrot — the promise, if not the reality, of higher wages and promotions — policy. On the whole, the Soviet type systems have not been able to develop a parallel system of motivation that could at least match the effectiveness of capitalist methods. Workers in this equally, if not more, bureaucratic and hierarchical system, do not grasp any better than in capitalism what the whole process of production is for or about. One of the "sticks" available to the single government employer was removed by the policy of overall security of employment (except for those who get in political trouble with the authorities). The systematic scarcity of goods characteristic of what the Hungarian economist Janos Kornai called "shortage economies" has taken care of removing a good part of the carrots. This provides the context of and helps to explain the preachy, ascetic emphasis on "moral" incentives that people such as Che Guevara advocated as a fundamentally flawed solution to the bureaucratic dilemma I just described. Classical Marxism, besides assuming that socialism would take place in a society with a relatively high level of material abundance and cultural advancement, emphasized not "moral," but what could be called "political incentives" that involved democratic control of the economy, polity and society, including the control of the workplace by the workers. According to this approach, only by participating and controlling their own productive lives would people become interested and responsible for what they do for a living day in and day out; that is, only thus would they get to care and give a damn. In this sense, workers' democracy was seen both as a good in itself — people taking control of their lives — and as a truly productive economic force. Absent an alternative approach, Cuba will witness an inevitable drift towards capitalist ideology and practice. Cubans who are witnessing the small existing private enterprises, whether farms or small urban firms like the tiny restaurants called "paladares" being run better and more efficiently than the larger state enterprises, are already concluding that capitalism can deliver the goods better than the state. Nevertheless, it is highly unlikely that the mass of the population will adopt a neo-liberal version of capitalist ideology. Although they may look towards capitalism as the desirable system to produce goods and services, they will ferociously defend free public health, education and other social services, no matter how much they have deteriorated, particularly under the impact of the "special period" since the collapse of the Soviet bloc. Viewed statically, there seem to be few prospects for a democratic, revolutionary socialist politics in Cuba. However, the ample history of

Communist transitions to capitalism shows that it is highly unlikely for a transition to take even a relatively benign form. Instead, we are highly likely to witness "shock therapies" and sharp reductions of "welfare state" institutions and spending enforced by dictatorial rule, whether in the openly despotic Chinese form or the cosmetically disguised Russian style (these two countries share with Cuba the significant fact that Communism originated in home grown revolutionary upheavals.) Such a neo-liberal course is likely to be accompanied by a substantial U.S. control over the internal affairs of the island, with its IMF-type structural adjustment, privatization and austerity policies. It is in opposition to such a type of transition that the possibilities of a democratic revolutionary politics lie.

Intellectuals Defend Themselves

IT IS IRONIC THAT THE DISASTROUS ECONOMIC breakdown of the Special Period that came about after the collapse of the USSR in the early nineties was a major factor in forcing the Castro regime to allow a religious and cultural liberalization that has continued until now. On the religious front, the Fourth Congress of the Cuban Communist Party that took place in 1991 removed restrictions on religious practitioners and declared the latter eligible for party membership and to hold official positions in the government. (It is interesting to note in this context that in my recent visit I saw half a dozen Cubans, mostly women, openly wearing Christian crosses on their necks, something that I had not seen in the year 2000, much less in 1979.) A similar relaxation took place in the cultural front. The public harassment of homosexuals and other "deviants" significantly diminished, although there was, and continues to be a marked tendency for most homosexuals to "stay in the closet." Since then, more critical views, although well short of political opposition, which would automatically be a one-way ticket to dissident status outside of the system's boundaries and all that implies, have begun to be expressed in a number of small but sophisticated and well-written journals. Among these are *Temas*, *La Gaceta De Cuba* (organ of the UNEAC, or writers' and artists' union) and *Revoluciòn y Cultura.* These journals have on several occasions included contributions on exile writers and academics and read very differently, in style and content, than the turgid, boring and dogmatic *Granma.* Plastic artists and musicians have also been given more leeway including much greater ease to travel abroad, a concession that writers and academics have also obtained. In fact, there are now many artists and professionals who are allowed to work and reside abroad and regularly return to visit their relatives on the island. Needless to add, the Cuban government gets a cut of the action through a substantial taxation of these activities abroad. Given the unavoidable uncertainty of a transition that just started on July 31, 2006, it is no wonder that Cuba's intellectual and artistic worlds were alarmed with the startling events that took place at the beginning of January. Three former high cultural functionaries — Luis Pavòn Tamayo, Armando Quesada and Jorge "Papito" Serguera — reappeared in several television programs and were presented as important contributors to Cuban culture. The three former functionaries had presided over the most culturally repressive period in the history of Cuban Communism, the so-called "Quinquenio Gris," Gray Five Years period, from 1971 to 1976. The sense of alarm was strengthened by the fact that members of this group had, in the past, been closely associated on and off with Raúl Castro. For example, Luis Pavòn Tamayo had worked directly under Raúl as the editor of *Verde Olivo*, the Army's official newspaper, before he became Cuba's cultural czar in the seventies. Writers and intellectuals were also worried about the coming elections in the UNEAC (National Union of Writers and Artists of Cuba) and who would replace the current relatively liberal leadership that was stepping aside.[12] A storm of protest ensued among intellectuals and artists and continued through the remainder of January, during the time when I had coincidentally arrived in Cuba. The protest was politically limited. It was mostly aimed at preventing a return to the darker and more repressive past, and not at abolishing censorship and expanding the concessions that had already been obtained from the state, much less to protest the repression of outright dissident artists and writers. But, the protest was, at least initially, truly spontaneous, a rarity in Castro's Cuba. The artists and intellectuals relied

on the email as the principal means of expressing and organizing the protest. (Computers are relatively scarce in Cuba, and people have access to them usually in the workplace, where access to Internet sites is supervised by the authorities and must be justified in terms of relevance to work duties. Email communication, particularly among people inside Cuba, is less supervised than access to Internet sites.[13]) The regular Party-controlled press essentially ignored what had taken place. A brief communiqué formulated the Party's response that essentially conceded that the appearance of the three former functionaries in television had been an error and tried to reassure the intellectuals and artists that no change in cultural policy was being contemplated. Abel Prieto, the minister of Culture, played a key role as a go between the party and the protesters who were represented, in this context, by the UNEAC. With the support and endorsement of the Party, a big, invitation-only meeting of over 400 people took place on January 30 at Casa de las Americas, one of the most important cultural institutions in Cuba. The meeting was addressed by Ambrosio Fornet, a leading Cuban intellectual associated with the current relatively liberal policies of the regime who in the past has argued that the intellectual and cultural life of Cubans abroad had to be part and parcel of a single Cuban culture. His address was an account and reflection on the Quinquenio Gris — a term which he had originally coined — but with the clear implication that it stood in contrast with an obviously satisfactory present. It goes without saying that Fornet did not address the key question of who gave the orders to the functionaries who presided over the Quinquenio Gris. His speech and the meeting where it took place was an effort, endorsed by the party, to contain and bring the matter to a close. This is possibly why this important party-endorsed event was not even mentioned by *Granma.* Nevertheless, a few days later, on February 9, the poet César Lòpez, in his address to the inaugural crowd at the Havana Book Fair that included Raúl Castro, revindicated several deceased writers who had become prominent exile oppositionists such as Guillermo Cabrera Infante, Heberto Padilla, Reinaldo Arenas and Jesús Díaz . César Lòpez claimed that their work was an important component of Cuban national culture. Although *Granma* reported that Lòpez had spoken at the event, it omitted any reference to this most unusual content of his speech. The emphasis that people such as Ambrosio Fornet and Cesar Lòpez have placed on incorporating exile writers and artists into the national canon poses some interesting questions. To the extent that raising these matters is intended as a blow against the harsh censorship that for many decades has prevented people from even being able to listen to the music of Celia Cruz on the radio, it is welcome news. Beyond that, there is a degree of ideological ambiguity and lack of clarity about the problem of the "divided Cuban family" that has long troubled many Cuban intellectuals, and Cubans in general, both inside and outside the island. In so far as it constitutes an at least implicit demand for removing the travel barriers that have been imposed by both the Cuban and U.S. governments, it is again, good news. But something else is lurking in these discussions that goes beyond these incontrovertibly democratic demands. There might be a tinge of liberalism among some of these thinkers, in the sense that they regard that what is needed is to "split the difference" in order to have the capitalism of South Florida and the Communism of Havana converge with each other. Unfortunately, the regime's censorship and controls have prevented a frank and open discussion of these critical matters. I should note that in my discussion I have described this intellectual and artistic milieu, as predominantly a liberal Communism loyal to the system. In reality, however, it is a more complicated environment that includes people to the right and left of that group. The liberal Communism that prevails in these circles in many ways provides a protective umbrella under which both conservative and revolutionary leftist opponents of the regime that have not become open and public dissidents can take cover and at least survive, if not prosper, politically. During my trip, I had the opportunity to talk with one of an informal group of young revolutionary Cuban intellectuals who function within the broad limits of this milieu[14] and who have been influenced by such figures as Leon Trotsky, Rosa Luxemburg and other leftist libertarian thinkers. This group is interested in what these major thinkers had to say about the relationship of equality, democracy and liberty to socialism. They are also concerned about how they can be politically active and relevant in a way that will help to empower and politicize people in what overwhelms the great majority of Cubans: the daily struggle

to survive. It is revealing that this young revolutionary used the Marxist metaphor of the "Old Mole" to refer to their small group's present role in Cuba. Left pending is the question of why the three former functionaries appeared on Cuban television one after the other within such a short period of time, particularly in the context of a political transition. This was a question I repeatedly raised with a number of people of varying persuasions and could not get a fully satisfactory answer. Responses ranged from its having been instigated by Raúl Castro as the prelude to a crackdown, to the notion that it had just been a coincidence. I heard a third interpretation, somewhere in the middle, which, regardless of its truth-value, was put forward by liberal Communist academics and intellectuals who personally did not know each other, and is thus sociologically revealing. According to this view, repressive elements in the media, formerly associated with Raúl Castro, saw the transition as the right moment to send a signal to the new top leader that they were ready, willing and available to go back to the old days the moment he gave the go ahead. This may be a reasonable and plausible hypothesis. The problem is that the liberals putting forward this interpretation also saw Raúl Castro as a man who was going to maintain and perhaps expand the existing liberalization, and, much more telling, that he was not, in any case, the repressive type he was reputed to be. These liberals claimed that Raúl had just done the dirty work at the behest of his older brother who did not want to be directly involved in those disagreeable tasks. In other words, Fidel Castro had forced him to behave like the "bad cop," although Raúl was in fact a very practical fellow who would improve the economy of the country by introducing more rationality into the system and would also experiment with some additional economic reforms. It may well be that there will be no more "crackdowns" under Raúl's rule if for no other reason than from his standpoint as a "practical leader" fundamentally uninterested in those matters, he may see little danger in allowing intellectuals and artists some elbow room while they play in their "sandboxes." From this perspective, what counts is what appears in the very strictly controlled mass circulation newspapers and television, and not in the little magazines and artistic exhibitions that relatively few Cubans ever see or hear about. Be it as it may, even if the government succeeds in containing and bringing this protest to a close, the fact that artists and intellectuals "flexed their political muscles" independently of the control of the one- party state constitutes an important precedent and contribution to future democratic struggles to the island.[15]

Race and Marginality — The Sleeping Giants?

HAVING ARRIVED IN CUBA in the middle of the artists and intellectuals' protest against the possible return of the darkest days of the revolutionary period, I attended every intellectual and artistic event I heard about that was open to the public. My purpose was to hear what was said and discussed and also to look around to get a feeling of the various audiences involved. I was shocked although not surprised to see that the speakers and audiences were overwhelmingly White. No more than five percent of the people present in the various venues were Black or Mulatto (a term widely used in Cuba to describe people of visibly "mixed" White and Black descent). Interestingly, many of the darker Cubans who did attend these events were rather young: they might have been students or disciples of the White presenters. Compared to my previous trip, the racial situation looked a bit more balanced in the various tourist-related locations that I visited. While the front-line personnel in those kinds of jobs was still predominantly White, there were many more Black Cubans than in the year 2000. This might be due to a change in the government's recruitment policies in response to widespread criticism. In particular, people broadly associated with foreign left and civil rights organizations strongly objected to the blatantly racist policy of excluding darker Cubans from front-line jobs in the tourist industry under the claim that they lacked a "good appearance." Or perhaps the tourist industry is merely reflecting the major demographic changes that have been taking place in Cuba. Historically, the present Cuban government has not been quite open about the racial breakdown of the country, although it did acknowledge that the last 2002 census registered a 24.9 percent increase in the number of people classified as mixed race in comparison to the previous

1981 Census. According to the 1981 census, 66 percent of the Cuban population was White, 12 percent Black and 22 percent mixed-race. This in turn constituted a significant increase in the mixed-race population since the last pre-revolutionary census of 1953 where only 14.5 percent of the population was counted as mixed-race (the proportion of people officially counted as Blacks had not changed significantly from 1953 to 1981).[16] The official figures for the post-revolutionary period almost certainly overestimate the size of the White population in Cuba. While Cuban fertility has been very low for quite some time (raising worries about overall dependency rates in the near future), emigration has continued at a steady clip. The United States has committed itself to accepting 20,000 Cuban emigrants a year (this figure does not include the rafters and others who manage to touch U.S. land and are thus eligible to apply for political asylum under the 1966 Cuban Adjustment Act). Emigration to other countries is also taking place. On various occasions during my trip, I saw long lines at the Spanish Embassy located near the entrance to the port of Havana. Spain has extended immigration and citizenship rights to the numerous Cuban descendants of the more than a million Spaniards who emigrated to the island, one of its last major Western Hemisphere colonies, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As one can imagine, the great majority of the descendants of these emigrants are White, as are those going to the United States. In the case of the U.S., a family tie to those who have already gone to that country is the easiest way of obtaining a visa in Havana, and since the Cuban community in the U.S. is overwhelmingly White, so will be the new emigrants. There are, in addition, educational and work criteria that facilitate entry into the U.S., requirements that are much more likely to be met by White Cubans. The Cuban government has, ever since the early days of the revolution, adhered to a "color-blind" policy that allowed Cuban Blacks and Mulattos to make some progress but fell far short of what an "affirmative action" policy could have accomplished. Under the "color-blind" policy, Cuban style Jim Crow was abolished. While Cuban Jim Crow was historically never as important as in the U.S. prior to the revolution, darker Cubans were barred from most beaches and in many provincial towns were segregated from Whites in public parks. Darker skinned Cubans were also barred from many white-collar jobs, particularly in the private sector. Under the revolutionary "color-blind" policy, darker Cubans, who have been a disproportionately large part of the Cuban poor, have been able to benefit from measures designed to help the poor, particularly in terms of health and access to educational facilities. As a result there are, proportionately speaking, many more Blacks in positions of influence and power than there were before the revolution, but still substantially below any even rough correspondence to their overall proportions in the population as a whole.[17] Most of all, under the one-party system prevailing in Cuba, Blacks (along with any other groups such as workers, women, gays) are not allowed to independently organize to defend their interests. Notwithstanding this ban, there has been an amorphous but growing Black youth protest developing in Cuba today, centered on the issue of police brutality and often expressing itself through a Cuban version of hip-hop music. A friend also mentioned that protests had taken place in the ICRT (Cuban Institute for Radio and Television) objecting to the overwhelming dominance of White faces in Cuban television. The issues of race and class have been more intermingled in Cuba than in the U.S.; consequently, much of White Cuban worries and hostility toward Black Cubans have been so mixed in with the issue of social marginality that it has been very hard to separate one from the other. This historical entanglement was exacerbated by the serious economic effects of the Special Period after the collapse of the USSR that led to the growth of a mass of disproportionately Black unemployed or underemployed people living in highly precarious conditions. So many of them migrated to overcrowded Havana that the government officially restricted movement into the city, although nobody seems to know with what actual practical effect. New terms began to be coined to refer to this increasingly visible marginalized group, like "Palestinos" in the case of the dark-skinned migrants from Oriente, the easternmost part of the island. The Cuban author Pedro Juan Gutiérrez made an international name for himself, with his "dirty trilogy" describing life among the marginalized people of Havana in all its gory and, especially sexual, detail. The sophisticated liberal Communist magazine *Temas* had nothing less than eleven social scientists and writers discuss the

issue of marginality in one of its issues.[18] The foreign press got into the act with, for example, the important Mexican newspaper *El Universal* having recently published an article about "El Fanguito" ("Little Mud"), one of the *favelas* surrounding Havana.[19] In reaction to this phenomenon of marginalization, White Cubans — including those integrated in the ruling system — made many more hostile and open comments directed towards Black Cubans than I heard in 2000. A high housing official trained in the Soviet bloc brought up Oscar Lewis' "culture of poverty" theory to explain what was to her the otherwise inexplicable behavior of many of the poor people who had moved into new housing she had helped to plan for. No sooner than having moved into their new quarters. the poor people had dismantled and disconnected the brand new fixtures in order to sell them in the black market. To her, this was irrational behavior that could only be explained on the basis of the values of a "culture of poverty" passed from generation to generation. Apparently, the official, manual-based "Marxism" that she learned in Cuba and in Eastern Europe had never exposed her to what Marx called "the same old shit," referring to what serious scarcity could bring about in people's behavior. Although it was unfortunate and even tragic that these new tenants would ruin the facilities that they had just been provided by the state, that was not irrational since they needed money, and hard currency, to feed and clothe themselves. In any case, it is not necessary to raise the issue of so-called values, even if we make the highly doubtful assumption that they have any independent explanatory power, to explain why these poor, marginalized people behaved they way they did after they were installed in new houses and apartments. As it turns out, none other than Fidel Castro himself has recently endorsed and put to use the "culture of poverty" theory. In his 2005, and probably last major book-length interview, with Ignacio Ramonet, the Spanish-born editor of *Le Monde Diplomatique*, he alluded to it on a few occasions. Thus, Fidel Castro told Ramonet that "at the beginning [of the Revolution] we eliminated some marginal neighborhoods. But already a culture of marginality had been created, that even if you make new houses for them, the phenomena that took place in those areas, prolong themselves. That is a culture that repeats itself, and then their children . . . " Elsewhere in the interview, Fidel Castro also asserted that "I remember that we discovered that there was a culture of rich people and a culture of poor people. That of the rich, very decent: I buy and I pay. That of poor people: how can I get this? How do I steal from rich people or from whomever? Many good, humble and patriotic families, told their son who works, for example, in the hotel industry: ‘Hey, take away a bedsheet, a pillow, bring me this, bring me that.' Those attitudes are born from the culture of poverty, and when social changes are made to change all that, habits last a much longer time."[20] In that interview, Fidel Castro added a twist to the "culture of poverty" theory that has a special resonance in Soviet-type societies such as Cuba with highly selective institutions such as the famous Lenin School outside of Havana. He indicated to Ramonet that the country's selective and meritocratic education system had created a situation where the children of workers and of Afro-Cubans tended to perpetuate themselves in the lower levels of society. Castro explained that this had happened because "the parental level of schooling, even where there has been a Revolution, continues to have a tremendous influence in the eventual fate of the children. And you see that the children whose parents come from the humblest sectors, or with less knowledge, don't get the necessary grades to enter the best schools. And that tends to perpetuate itself through the decades. And if you leave things as they are, you can predict the children of those people will never be directors of enterprises, managers, or will occupy important positions because today you cannot direct anything without a university education. What they can expect, in the first place, is to go to prison."[21] According to Fidel Castro, the Cuban government had begun to tackle the problem in 2001. At that time, the government began to substantially expand access to higher education through a system of university extensions in a variety of locations such as municipalities, sugar mills, and even prisons. As Castro explained it, this expansion had, on the one hand, turned into state-supported university students people between seventeen to thirty years of age who had not finished their secondary education and who for a variety of causes were neither studying nor working when they were grafted into the program. On the other hand, the expansion made adjunct professors out of laid off personnel from the administrative staff of enterprises such as

those in the sugar industry. According to Castro, there were 500,000 university students in Cuba in 2005 and over 90,000 [or approximately 20 percent of the total] had been recruited through these new means.[22] What Castro left unsaid was the obvious fact that this was a program designed, in great part, to address the issue of unemployment. (I should mention that during my recent visit, one former academic explained that the principal reason for her recent retirement had been her objection to the low educational quality of the new program.) Leaving aside the intrinsic merits or flaws of Fidel Castro's educational innovations, he assigns an excessive weight to education as an explanation for the fate of marginalized people in Cuba. This is Castro's way to change the subject from the state of the Cuban economy since the collapse of the USSR, and particularly the devastating and sharply inequitable effects of the establishment of a two-track economy of pesos on one hand and hard currency on the other. Fidel Castro's talk about educational inequalities, as real as they undoubtedly are, is a way of not talking about class and race as such or about the fundamental economic inequalities mentioned above, let alone the political inequalities of the highly hierarchical one-party state. It remains to be seen what impact these changes in higher education will have first, on the educational system itself, and second, on the composition of the higher circles in Cuba. It will be important to find out the impact that a program not specifically and explicitly oriented to the elimination of racial exclusion may have on the latter. We do not know, in the last analysis, what actual role race and marginality are likely to play in a Cuban transition. For one thing, racial consciousness in Cuba is not likely to develop along the lines it took in the United States, nor we do know at this time what political and organizational forms popular resistance to the likely state sponsored capitalist transition is going to take.

Footnotes

1. I was unaware of these developments previous to my recent visit to Cuba. See "An Interview with Samuel Farber: Cuban Reality Beyond Fidel," *Against the Current*, 126, January/February 2007, 14-15.
2. In an interview with the Argentinian newspaper *Clarín* (March 3, 2007), Alarcòn declared that "the reforms of the *compañero* Deng Xiaoping in China are very positive for the Chinese people. But one has to understand those reforms within the context of the Chinese revolution." In the same interview, Alarcòn also stated that "the world has not changed in a restorationist sense that will bring back the Bolsheviks and the soviet model, nor will it be the bare capitalism of neoliberalism. It will be a diverse world. Why shouldn't we copy something from China or the United States? And why wouldn't the United States adopt some of the good things that Iran, Korea or Argentina may have? There has to be pluralism and to let everyone choose its own road. We will search for ours within our revolution."
3. For a more elaborate analysis of this prospect see my article "Cuba's likely transition and its politics," *International Socialist Review*, Issue 48, July-August 2006, 43-50. This article was published a little over a month before Fidel Castro left office on July 31, 2006.
4. Samuel Farber, "Going Home to Cuba," *Critique* (Glasgow, Scotland), No. 13, 1981, 138-150, "A Look at Cuba Today," *Changes*, July/August 1980, 13-21, and "Cuba Today & Prospects for Change," *New Politics*, VIII, 1, Summer 2000, 164-174.
5. See "Busca Cuba frenar a pepenadores de basura," *La Jornada* (Mexico City), March 26, 2007 reporting on an article that had appeared the same day in the Cuban regional weekly *Tribuna de la Habana.*
6. Yailin Orta Rivera and Norge Martínez Montero, "La Vieja Gran Estafa," *Juventud Rebelde*, October 1, 2006.
7. María Julia Mayoral, " 'Canibaleo' en las Torres," *Granma*, Lunes, 19 de Febrero del 2007, 4-5.
8. Tourism continued to diminish in the early months of 2007 with a decline of 7 percent in January and 13 percent in February compared to the same months in 2006. The high season

for tourism in Cuba starts in January and ends in April. "Turismo en Cuba sigue declinando por precios y embargo," Reuters dispatch of March 14, 2007.

9. Andrea Rodríguez, "Expertos cubanos investigan sobre marginalidad," Associated Press dispatch, December 8, 2006.
10. Thus, for example, the wife of an old friend of mine had a botched colonoscopy that was administered by a technician, rather than by a qualified specialist, and without anesthesia, since there was none available.
11. Pedro Alvarez, the head of Alimport, Cuba's food import agency, has stated that if the U.S. blockade was lifted, bilateral trade in goods and services could total as much as $21 billion in five years. Esteban Israel (Reuters), "Cuba says US rules limiting food trade," *Washington Post*, March 28, 2007.
12. At the time of this writing in late March of 2007, no changes in the leadership of UNEAC had yet taken place.
13. In fact, one of my friends in Havana asked me to locate some research sources on the Internet and to email him what I found there.
14. For an example of an article written from an leftist oppositionist perspective inside Cuba see Manuel Paz Ortega (pseudonym) " 'The Battle of Ideas' and the Capitalist Transformation of the Cuban State," IV Online Magazine: IV386, February 2007.
15. In fact, the ferment among intellectuals and artists that began in January apparently still continued at the time of this writing as shown by a very critical article by the distinguished architect Mario Coyula that was being circulated in Cuba via email in March of this year. Under the title of "El Trinquenio Amargo y la Ciudad Distòpica. Autopsia de una Utopía," Coyula argued that the darkest period of repression of the present regime lasted fifteen, and not five years, as Fornet claimed, and that its consequences have lasted until the present day. Coyula goes well beyond historical matters and presents a very critical perspective of things that need to be corrected in Cuba, with a special emphasis on urban issues.
16. Alejandro de la Fuente, *A Nation for All. Race, Inequality and Politics in Twentieth-Century Cuba*, Chapel Hill, N.C.: The University of North Carolina Press, 308, and "Data from the 2002 Population and Housing Census are officially announced," *Granma Digital Internacional*, November 14, 2005.
17. A recent article by Henley C. Adams in the *Latin American Research Review* (February 2004) painstakingly documents the relatively small proportion of Blacks in the Political Bureau and Central Committee of the Cuban Communist Party, in the Council of Ministers, and among top officers of the Cuban Armed Forces.
18. "Controversia. Entendemos la marginalidad?" *Temas*, 27, Octubre-Diciembre 2001, 69-96.
19. César Gonzàlez-Calero, "Cuba: Memorias del Subdesarrollo," *El Universal*, Monday, November 20, 2006.
20. Ignacio Ramonet, *Fidel Castro. Biografía a Dos Voces*, Barcelona, Spain: Random House Mondadori, S.A., 2006, 211, 323-24. My translation.
21. Ramonet, 365. My translation.
22. Ramonet, 365-67.