

The Conscience of Worms and the Cowardice of Lions



Cuban Politics
and Culture in
an American
Context

Irving Louis Horowitz

THE
CONSCIENCE OF WORMS
AND THE
COWARDICE OF LIONS

*Cuban Politics and Culture
in an American Context*

THE 1992 EMILIO BACARDI-MOREAU LECTURES
Delivered at the University of Miami by

IRVING LOUIS HOROWITZ



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*To the memory of
Carlos Rangel*

Who dared say
in print
what others
preferred whispering
in private

THE CONSCIENCE OF WORMS AND THE COWARDICE OF LIONS

PREFACE

I have been asked on a number of occasions just what the title of this book means. The subtitle seems sufficiently straightforward: *Cuban Politics and Culture in an American Context*. But the title seems disturbing. After all, the favorite term of derision for Cubans in exile is *gusanos* or worms. And is it not also the case that, exclusive of the elephant, the lion is a solid king of the jungle? Yes, both statements are true. So an explanation seems to be in order.

The Conscience of Worms derives from a basic Spanish idiom in which *gusanos* are attached to *gusanos de conciencia*, or those small creatures that burrow through the mind in search of what is true and ethically appropriate. It is this special breed of worm that represents the heroes and heroines of this small effort. There is another meaning to the title. An ancient Jewish legend tells of a small worm that was used by King Solomon to break up large rocks for the construction of the Temple. And so it comes to be that a tiny, practically invisible worm has become an inexorable force in the life of Cuban people — at home and in exile.

The Cowardice of Lions is equally in need of explication. For the lion is one of the most powerful beasts in the jungle. Its roar is taken seriously by aardvarks and apes. But the lion I had in mind derives from *The Wizard of Oz*. Lyman Frank Baum's lion is singularly lacking in courage, and as we find out in book and film alike, this is not due to a lack of physical strength but to a lack of

moral courage. The lion of *The Wizard* was able to get by for a long while on appearance. But when even a slip of a girl would not back down, the cowardly lion crumbled. As Dorothy was able to restore a sense of dignity to the cowardly lion, so too one must hold out hope for those Castrologists who roared their collective disapproval of critics of Cuban communism.

Beyond metaphor, once it is recognized that real courage is a function of conscience and strength, the order of nature — and ideology — holds out prospects for better proportion if not total restoration in our sense of what the struggle about Cuba has meant. This is no ordinary country, and this is no ordinary people. In any event, I do hope that this slight literary eccentricity taken in naming these lectures now is seen in a context of broader social and intellectual significance. I do not intend to disparage jungle beasts nor unduly celebrate ordinary creatures used as bait to catch fish at sea. But in the case of the people in this set of lectures, it is the ordinary experience of surviving that gave the large edge in insight and outlook to Cuban Americans, while reducing the otherwise intimidating roar of ideological lions to a deep and nearly cataleptic silence.

These Bacardi lectures are focused on what I know best, leaving to others what I know only secondhand. I live in a world of American intellectuals, ideologists, academics, some of whom have seen fit to speak on Fidel Castro's Cuba over the years. Since I too fall into that category, it is natural that these lectures center on this special breed of person. It is the unyielding hubris of intellectuals to celebrate their own kind, elevating them to a position often quite beyond their worth.

This is a good time to summarize the confrontation and comportment of two cultures. For a side benefit of the Castro Revolution has been a huge migration involving exiles from the island. The United States has never been made more aware of the Latin impact. Even though we long have had a Southwest that was influenced powerfully by the Chicanos, and a Northeast by Puerto Ricans, the Cuban migration has been unique in its acceptance and advancement of the free market and the free expression of ideas. This is now well known.

Less well known is the impact of the same Cuban factor in shaping North American notions of democracy. For it is one group in a long line of migrants to these shores that has viewed America not only as an economic opportunity but as a political blessing. To be sure, over the years, the exile has become the migrant, a force to be reckoned with in the conduct of American life and letters. How this complex triad plays out in the context of ideas, in the struggle between ideologies, is the essential fulcrum of this set of lectures.

I should like to express my appreciation first and foremost to the director and executive director of the North-South Center, Ambler H. Moss, Jr. and Jaime Suchlicki respectively, for granting me the opportunity to serve as the Bacardi Professor for 1992. They not only put up with me but accommodated my needs in every detail. I never have felt more at home or more welcomed anywhere. The warm glow of this experience will be with me for years to come — of that I am sure. I have worked with Professor Suchlicki in a variety of contexts over the past decade, and each of them has been a learning experience and a human experience as well.

At the same time, I must acknowledge the staff members at the Center who worked closely with me and provided the sort of professional support one dreams of but rarely receives in everyday affairs. The efforts in this connection of Maria Urizar, Gina Koch, Mary Mapes, Stephanie True Moss, and especially Kathleen A. Hamman and Jayne Weisblatt, are appreciated. Despite work loads that could bury most people, they managed to take the time and provide me with all sorts of support that made feasible the conversion of these lectures into a finished unitary product.

Many people involved in these lectures are also friends and associates. But two individuals in particular deserve to be acknowledged: Carmelo Mesa-Lago was kind enough to take time out of his own work to read the manuscript and preserve me from at least some egregious errors. Ernesto Betancourt gave me continuing support and at critical junctures information on Cuba that at times made it appear as if he had just disembarked from Havana.

Finally, to the officials at Bacardi International goes my appreciation for the fiscal support that made the lecture series

possible in the first place. Although I do not drink, I have learned at least the difference between saying “rum” and “Bacardi.” Being addicted to Coca Cola, the Coke part neither had to be learned nor unlearned. But the serious point of this is that the Bacardi directors never have forgotten their roots in Cuban life — but simply expanded those roots so that their products spread to the rest of the world, proving that multinationalism is not restricted to one nation or a special kind of product.

It speaks wonders to the meshing of Cuban and American gears that the creative energy of the former and the experimental character of the latter made possible levels of achievement unheard of — or at least unimagined — prior to the Castro Revolution of 1959. As with the case of tyrants elsewhere who expelled their leading people out of fear and ignorance, those very expulsions and flights help to explain how and why the democratic vistas can survive conflicts while adding to the wealth of free peoples. This lesson I have learned well, since I too am the proud product of immigrant parents. This lesson I hope I have imparted, by indirection at least, in these lectures.

Irving Louis Horowitz
Princeton, New Jersey
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AMERICAN FOREIGN POLICY TOWARD CASTRO'S CUBA: PARADOX, PROCRASTINATION, AND PARALYSIS

LECTURE ONE

Reviewing the range of academic and policy literature on Cuba as written by those who have played a role in creating United States policy is a fascinating exercise. It helps to explain, or at least place in focus, the immobility of the United States' responses to the final stage of Fidel Castro's regime. In recent years, policy analysts have focused so exclusively on meaningless questions, for example, trying to predict when Castro will die, vanish, or relinquish power, that far more practical questions of United States foreign policy have been allowed to languish in the thick cloud of Cubanology.

Remembering the fate of Kremlinologists, who focused exclusively on matters such as where members of the Soviet Politburo stood on the May Day podium so that they could not make even rudimentary predictions of the actual state of Soviet affairs, should remind those of us who discourse readily on Cuban affairs not to presume too much or disdain the common wisdom too easily. One might even argue that there has been such a fixation on when Castro's regime would dissolve that his continued ability to hang on has contributed to a policy paralysis. For in the argument by analogy (announced by President George Bush at the end of 1991 and again by Defense Secretary Dick Cheney at the start of February 1992) that Cuban communism will go the way of Eastern Europe, we await events rather than take the initiative to forge policies. Waiting for Castro to step — or fall

— down has turned out to be like waiting for Godot.

At the most general policy level, one sees a familiar pattern: The United States prefers to deal with established, stable powers and figures, even if they are venal and totalitarian. The extraordinary events in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe took place despite U.S. policies, not because of them. Our sentiments were in tune with the demands of the people for democracy, but our policies remained attuned to traditional State Department patterns of realpolitik. In the Baltics, the independence movement was a *fait accompli* before we granted diplomatic recognition; in Yugoslavia, we upheld the principle of national self-determination long after it became evident that Croatia was not going to remain a part of Yugoslavia. And in the USSR, the American policy apparatus supported Mikhail Gorbachev against Boris Yeltsin — long after it was clear that Gorbachev lacked the support of his own people. Indeed, the encomiums heaped upon Gorbachev were far more pronounced in American policy circles than among Soviet experts.

Given the recent U.S. record, it is not surprising that the United States continues to maintain a cool but correct relationship with Castro's Cuba. This regime does, after all, present stability and continuity — elements which the Bush administration prizes above anything else except electoral votes. In an effort to preserve the status quo, that is to say, Castro in power, even such stalwart Cold Warriors as Ray Cline are said to be urging the president to lift the economic embargo and pursue a meliorative policy toward Castro. To be sure, we have it on the authority of J. Anthony Lukas, writing in *The New York Times* (January 20, 1992), that the Bush administration is said to be only an election away from pursuing a policy of consensus and perhaps even rapprochement with Castro. This predicted turnabout in U.S. policy comes at a time when leading Russian politicians have announced that each republic will strike its own trade deals with Cuba and that Castro no longer will receive petroleum on a favorable basis. Russian deliveries to Cuba of lumber, foodstuffs, and spare machine parts will have all but ceased with the start of 1992. Russia, rather than the United States, has become the

implacable foe of Castro's regime.

There are deeper elements to the paradox of quiescent support for Castro's continuation. They reside in the character of hemispheric relations and the unspoken belief that the United States, because of imperialist pretensions and colonialist behavior at the end of the nineteenth century, lacks legitimacy to take action at the end of the twentieth century. A lingering feeling of historic guilt, rather than a theory of foreign policy, seems to prevail at the present. Monroeism has been replaced by Bolívarism. The idea that European powers would not be welcomed in the Western Hemisphere translated into the tacit assumption that regime change itself would be determined largely by American global interests. The new view, so well captured by David Scott Palmer in *Setting the North-South Agenda*, is that the United States' role is "reduced," and by so doing, "the way is opened to creating a new relationship of partnership in which the parties come together as equals, each seeking to derive some benefit from the relationship" (Palmer 1991, 86). The further evolution of such a view was expounded in a recent statement by Kenneth N. Waltz at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association (APSA), at which he noted, "We cannot take America or any other country as a model for the world.... I believe that America is better than most nations; I fear that it is not as much better as many Americans believe" (Waltz 1991, 667-70). However one responds to such a statement, and I confess to astonishment that such remarks can be offered casually in 1992, it clearly signals commitment to a foreign policy of stasis and quiescence rather than activism.

It is almost as if the United States is bogged down in its own history, an inertia based on guilt as well as ignorance. George Quester, speaking at the same APSA forum on "America as Model for the World," noted that the 1960s produced a "major American disenchantment with foreign policy" (Quester 1991, 658-59). As premature as this disenchantment may have been, it was not simply a consequence of radical opposition from outside but a result of liberal self-doubt within the establishment. Such doubt can only be reinforced by Fidel Castro's announcement at the

January 1992 conference in Havana, sponsored by Brown University's Center for Foreign Policy Development: "Times have changed. We have changed.... Military aid outside our borders is a thing of the past."¹

That such pronouncements came at a time when military adventures would not be tolerated by any nation in the hemisphere does not alter the soothing balm of the message to those Americans, in both the Democratic and Republican parties, for whom isolationism has become not just a moral goal but an instrument of American foreign policy.

In addition to an overall foreign policy of *laissez-faire* toward Cuba, one must factor in ambiguities of the big power settlement after the so-called Cuban missile crisis. Castro's pride may have been wounded because of his exclusion from resolution of the crisis, but both President John F. Kennedy and Premier Nikita Khrushchev arrived at a trade-off. Soviet nuclear-tipped warheads in Cuba were eliminated in exchange for a firm policy of nonintervention by the United States. While its juridical outlines may be contested, this arrangement has been honored for more than thirty years. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, the policy haunts the United States, leaving the former Soviet Union indifferent, even embarrassed.

United States policy toward Cuba for the past thirty-one of thirty-three years of the Castro regime reveals paradox followed by procrastination, ending in paralysis.

- Should we invade or not invade?
- Should we support exiled guerrilla troops or punish them for violating the neutrality pact?
- Should we isolate Cuba diplomatically or open windows of diplomatic opportunity?
- Should we welcome refugees from Cuba as political freedom fighters or return them, or some of them, as criminal elements?
- Should we seal off the island from commercial activity or send commercial missions and diplomatic attachés to

explore trade and aid?

Our Cuba policy papers offer a serious set of rifts that have plagued the Departments of State and Defense for more than thirty years and have produced ramifications in the executive office for the same length of time. When the heavenly book finally is closed on Castro, it will be seen that America stood fast at the ideological level but was in stasis at the policy level.

Castro's dogmatic posture has frustrated even his most ardent followers in the United States, as they attempt to influence U.S. policy. Such unbending admirers of Castro as Saul Landau have had to acknowledge a Cuban political climate of deepening repression, but, of course, this would all come to a magical end if the United States lifted its embargo and ended its "cold war hostility toward Cuba" (Landau 1992, 225-27). According to such experts, the United States has passed mysteriously from being an impotent force unable to contain the mighty tide of socialism to the only power in the world capable of preserving Cuba's socialist system.

Castro has offered enough tidbits along the way to prevent all-out hostility or a unified critical posture. At various times we have had hints of a private market, promises of a multi-party system, considerations for religious groups, vague declarations of free and unfettered elections, denials of drug involvement and offers of punishment, and willingness to consider reuniting family members. All of these "balloons" occurred as backroom gossip or in private, nonofficial, off-the-record meetings. But they were enough to stave off the hand of retribution. Flattery of vain and pompous minor government officials, pampering of wealthy businessmen, and cajoling of potential critics — all contributed to paralysis in American foreign policy toward Cuba. At this level, Castro's continuing political adroitness cannot be denied.

We see three distinct levels of U.S. political life that led to policy paralysis: 1) general U.S. disdain for intervention, especially in light of the Vietnam experience; 2) a hemispheric turn to Bolívarism and rejection of Monroeism, specifically, the belief that Latin American countries are in control of their own destinies

and would solve the Cuban problem by cauterization; and finally, 3) an *entente cordiale* after the Cuban missile crisis, defining with great precision the limits of policy for the United States, along with the limits of arms dumping for the Soviet Union.

There is a fourth and final factor in the paradox of American foreign policy toward Castro's Cuba: the demise of Eastern European and Russian communism. Cuba is no longer the central cockpit for world communism. As a result, calls for an activist foreign policy toward Cuba, few as they had been, came to a crashing halt in 1991. The sense of urgency and the need for any sort of policy seemed to go by the boards. With the end of totalitarian rule in Europe came a widespread belief that Cuba would be forced to reject Castro if only because of shortages of fuel, food, or technology. The closest anyone came to an activist posture are statements by former National Security Council member, José Sorzano, "The beast is wounded." and "It's time to go in for the kill" (Sorzano 1991, 146-52). But metaphor is hardly a substitute for policy at this point in the endgame called Castroism.

It well might be that such calculated non-gambles provide the best opportunity for change without bloodshed in Cuba. Indeed, the emergence of independent states in the Baltic Republics, the liberation of Eastern Europe from the Soviet yoke, and finally, the collapse of the Soviet empire — all took place in the environment of an unambiguous United States policy of military neutrality, coupled with broad displays of ideological support for those seeking freedom in these areas. Talk is cheap, but it bought victories for the democratic camp at virtually no cost in American lives and precious little in economic aid.

Perhaps Castro's Cuba will be different. Perhaps policy paradox, followed by political paralysis, will have different results from those we have been observing in Latvia, Lithuania, or Estonia. After all, post-Tiananmen Square China indicates that a noninterventionist approach does not always yield favorable results. Nor does it seem to have worked with respect to North Korea and Vietnam. American political leaders talk as if Cuba is an extension of European communism, with barely a nod to the

possibility that it might take the road of what the late Karl Wittfogel called “oriental despotism” (Wittfogel [1956] 1981). Still, one must reckon that the Cuban people and the Latin culture will not be led easily down such a dangerous path.

As I have said and written often, Castro is perfectly able to initiate the Cambodianization of Cuba and force the populace to accept economic retreat and a variety of hardships in the name of communism. The so-called zero option is a mechanism for Castro’s survival. The zero option reduces Cuba’s threat abroad and increases repression at home. That, at any rate, is the theory behind the practice. The consequence of return to a preindustrial economy and a horse-and-buggy technology makes Cuba a nonfactor in world affairs. It also justifies nonintervention or nonaction as a style. While this may result in hardship for the Cuban population, it does not result in hardship for the American people. In this way, the absence of a Soviet threat actually may prolong rather than terminate Castro’s rule, at least in the short term.

Increasingly, the United States sees itself as a power broker rather than a player in the post-Castro future. Bush has pronounced the end of Castro but was careful not to set forth how that anticipated demise was to be brought about, other than by the collapse of Castro’s regime through economic self-strangulation. But that, too, depends on the viability of the European communist analogy, something that remains open to question.

At the subjective level, United States policy turns on the meaning of democracy, on employing a less pleasant rhetoric, or on the weakness of the American society. Who are we to tell anyone else what sort of society to have? This diffident attitude can be labeled anti-interventionist. However, it reveals at its roots a fear of the employment of power under any circumstances. The passive response to Cuba is thus best seen as a microcosm of overall American foreign policy ambiguity. Such sentiments often are followed by insistence that quiescence or silence is the only correct posture when it comes to revolutionary regimes like Castro’s. This, in turn, is followed by insistence on active support for Cuban totalitarianism or at least for the normalization of