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POLITICAL PILGRIMAGE
TO CUBA, 1959-1996

by Irving Louis Horowitz

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I

Political pilgrims have been a special part of the Cuban landscape ever since Fidel Castro came to power in January 1959. It started with Herbert L. Matthews' dispatches from the Sierra Maestra and is epitomized by the March 8th, 1959, interview published in The New York Times Magazine in which Matthews declares that "no one ever calls him anything else [but Fidel] in Cuba" since he "obviously arouses all the maternal instincts in women" — a subject on which Mr. Matthews presumes to have been well-versed. In the years since then, the iconography has hardened into dogmatism, while the idolatry has gone from bad to worse. How can it be that professional people of ostensibly sound mind and firm moral principles are able to tender their support for the longest running dictatorship in the world? I have in mind those political pilgrims, who still manage to sing paeans of praise for Fidel Castro and his Cuban regime after 37 years of demonstrated tyranny, while bemoaning the fate of militarism and the loss of civil liberties in other nations of the region. That such individuals are able to do so, not only in the face of overwhelming empirical evidence of a singularly failed government, but a century of turmoil and tyranny identified with communism throughout the world, is for me at least, less a matter of failure to face facts than an embrace of fantasy-psychological and sociological illusions that persist despite evidence to the contrary.

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Based on a lecture delivered on April 15, 1996 at the Graduate School of International Studies of the University of Miami. All rights to this statement are reserved by the author. Any publication use must be solicited and approved by the author in writing.
In late March of 1996, the Central Committee of the Communist Party endorsed a hard political line. It declared that the limited opening of the economy had created a class of “Trojan horses, parasites and fifth columnists” in its midst. Raúl Castro, in his plenary report to the Politburo of the Cuban Communist Party argued that Cuba, must avoid reforms of the type that undermined the Soviet Union and other socialist countries at all costs.

Deviations from Communist Party norms were assaulted at every level -- from demands for wage increases by labor unions to cautious statements about further openings of the economic system to reforms by research institutes. The tightening of the Party grip came along with the usual calls for vigilance against the “diversionary roles” of class enemies and “those falling into the spider's web spun by Cuba experts abroad.” But renewed evidence of the Stalinist persuasion of Cuba's maximum leaders make little impression on apologists for the regime.

Apocalyptic and prophetic movements of all sorts demonstrate this deep gap between lofty utopian ambitions and desultory actual performances. There is a rich literature created over time by those who study religious and political movements. Indeed, the singularly monumental efforts of Paul Hollander in *Political Pilgrims* and *Anti-Americanism* give us just the sort of analysis that makes “sense” of human attachments to political extremisms, as did Sigmund Freud nearly a century ago in studying the enormous power of illusion in the conduct of our private affairs. In this sense, utopian longings function as the equivalent of sexual fantasy. It matters not a whit that dictatorial rule has been in effect in Cuba since 1959. The survival of the totalitarian regime is considered *prima facie* evidence of the moral worth of the regime, while any of its weakness are attributed to foreign interference or external enemies.
The political pilgrim is not your ordinary, garden variety tourist seeking fun in the Cuban sun. Rather, he or she is an individual identified and singled out by the totalitarian host regime as pliable enough in convictions and sufficiently influential in connections to warrant the costs of an all expenses paid short-term excursion; one in which the great dictator (or his representative) speaks intimately and lovingly of the regime's deep and abiding affection for the American people - - - always making clear that they differ from the American system. The political pilgrim does not have to be either Left or Right. He or she can be drawn from the ranks of labor leaders or captains of industry. Party identification is not required; the lack of affiliation may be an asset, since the search is for those articulate enough to identify with the regime while giving the appearance of remaining a "mainstream" voice. Once the regime eliminates from consideration those still willing to join a brigade for a summer outing in sugar cane cutting, the actual selection of the political pilgrim becomes an art of no small merit for the regime.

My purpose is not to re-examine what has been ably done by others in a European context. Nor is it my aim to study the fascination of democratically-minded people with specific types of dictatorial regimes and leaders. Rather, I would like to examine the specific dynamics of support for Fidel Castro as it persists in the present climate of American elite opinion. Let me preface these remarks with some brief references to personal history, and then move on to variations on an old theme: the social-psychological sources of support for tyrants.

My first personal contact with a political pilgrim was the late C. Wright Mills. He took a one month tour of Cuba during the first year of the Castro Revolution. With more than modest guidance from Carlos Franqui and the staff of Revolución², 

² A newspaper published in the early days of the Cuban Revolution.
Mills produced in *Listen Yanqui!* - - - perhaps the best selling book on Cuba immediately after the revolution, and certainly one that solidified Mills’ image as a man of the Political Left. Having examined this phase of Mills in my intellectual biography of him published in 1983 - - - *C. Wright Mills: An American Utopian* - - - I will spare you further analysis of this scholar and his successful efforts to bring the Revolution to the forefront of the North American consciousness.

When I read *Listen Yankee* in manuscript form, I raised many questions and concerns—from the superficial sense of Cuba’s pre-1959 history to its strange, cleansed pragmatic view of Castro. Few of my concerns were taken seriously. But after publication, when a debate on the book was scheduled with another scholar and politician, the late A.A. Berle, Mills asked me to assist him in researching the background of Cuba. In truth, he was far less interested in studying Cuba, than in finding the weak spots in Berle’s career that he, Mills, could use in the television debate. *The dedicated pilgrim is less concerned about the truth of his own formulas than finding error in the ways of his opponents.*

The 1961 debate itself never took place. Mills perhaps felicitously suffered a heart attack days before the scheduled television debate. (Mills himself died of another heart attack in March 1962). But lesson number one became evident; those dedicated to a cause or a movement see criticism not as evidence of regime weakness, but of shortcomings in the character of those in opposition. The tendency to see opponents as enemies is an essential, permanent characteristic of those who remain dedicated to the cause of Cuban Communism.

The next phase in my learning process took place with the 1964 publication of my essay “The Stalinization of Castro.” Knowing full well that people on the Left viewed me as heir apparent to Mills, and wishing to minimize any hostility from
those who might view me as betraying that legacy, I published the paper in New Politics, Julius Jacobson's successor journal to Dwight Macdonald's Politics—a publication for which Mills wrote and had great affection. But the critical character of my assessment—clear enough from the title—could not spare me furies that come with a political break. The article was a subdued but detailed account of how events in Cuba indicated a morphology common to communist regimes the world over. I remain very proud of the characterizations made in that article, and in retrospect would not change that early essay one jot or little.

Once more I experienced the phenomenon of the political pilgrim. A Canadian political scientist, Ian Lumsden, took it upon himself to expose my errors. Those “errors” included my observations that in Castro's Cuba as in Stalin's Russia there was already (1) subordination of society to Party and State; (2) leadership purges that made Castro and a small coterie the exclusive voice of party and regime; (3) the communist curse of inner party struggle replaced and substituted for class struggle; (4) Cuba was subjected to civics, not politics, i.e., demand for regime loyalty; (5) Castro had halted discussion about alternative paths to development, settling on single-crop communism; and (6) Castro had sealed off Cuba from the rest of the hemisphere and the world, a task made relatively simple in an island economy and special geography. I must add that I was still writing from inside a strong Left commitment—or so I thought. But this did not help. Indeed, it may well have exacerbated my problems, since cries of “Trotskyism” and “treason” were raised not just by my Canadian critic but by the Moscow-based World Marxist Review, the Comintern organ which saw fit to excoriate me.

The most revealing aspect of Professor Lumsden's attack is not his illusion, still widely held, that “Cuba continues to make progress toward a socialist democracy,”
but the insidious belief that in the face of disquieting truths one must maintain disciplined silence. The retreat to silence about regime shortcomings has become a theme of fanatics in this century. It was held that my article offers "more to aid the enemies of the Revolution than to facilitate its comprehension." And that "in the face of inadequate information one would have expected Horowitz to have given Castro the benefit of the doubt rather than subject it to an analysis which draws parallels with the most savage regimes known to mankind." Here we come to a second characteristic of the new political pilgrim: when in doubt say nothing, or give reality a special spin that will save the regime from criticism. This is a corollary to the first characteristic mentioned earlier if shortcomings are raised and cannot be avoided, describe them as transitional features of a revolution in exceptional circumstances, negative aspects which will dissolve over time.

I shall pass over the next thirty years rather quickly. The second of the Bacardi lectures which I delivered at the University of Miami in 1992, which were published under the title of The Conscience of Worms and the Cowardice of Lions was devoted exclusively to critical examination of "The Conscience of Castrologists." I therein describe a sad story of repetition of pattern of apologetics for dictatorship found among Nazi supporters of the Hitler regime in the "America First" Days, and among supporters of the Soviet regime during the halcyon days of the Stalinist epoch. It is a pattern marked by a tragic confusion of anti-Americanism with intoxication with the rhetorical claims of communism.

What became clear is how much more susceptible intellectuals are to demagoguery—both receiving and extending it—than are ordinary mortals. In part this results from their unique sense of "history" or in truth meta-history, claims about the future that rivaled and exceeded theological claims as to the wondrous state of
paradise that awaits all true believers in the next world. I summarized this intellectual long trek to nowhere in quite the same terms that Walter Laqueur and Richard Pipes later defined the pseudo-science of Sovietology. What I wrote in summary in The Conscience of Worms and Cowardice of Lions does warrant repetition. It is a prelude to the strange present ideological moment, which will occupy the remainder of these remarks.

"What all is said and done, error and truth and both part of human nature."
And in the case of the history of social scientific prognostication, error is perhaps the greater part of human nature. As a result, error can, and within a democratic society must, be forgiven explained rather than punished. What cannot be forgiven, and what characterizes 'Castrologists,' the step children of Kremlinologists, as a group, is the sin of pride, the hubris of self-righteousness, and the animosity toward those with whom they disagree. Their motto inheres in their methodology: Deny all wrongdoing, attack those who have raised objections with *ad hominem* assault on their motives; demand levels of evidence beyond even the proverbial smoking gun; and as a last resort, when the intellectual game is up, lapse into permanent, sullen silence. To the best end, and perhaps after the end, we are faced by a group of self-declared experts daring to use the work 'science,' for whom the only issue is Right or Left instead of right or wrong.

**II**

We turn now to three examples of political pilgrims turned apologists, these are a mere handful of those who fit the profile herein described. They suggest a disturbing trend in which the dictator defines the policy goals of the regime, while
political pilgrim is to miss the nuances in the role of apologist for totalitarian rule. The diplomat as apologist is like the anthropologist turned native—a phenomenon of over identification obviously strikes policy people no less than social scientists.

A second type of political pilgrim who has his counterpart in apologists for Stalinism is the religious personage. In the case of Cuba, there is Edward T. Walsh writing about “the devastating impact on Higher Education in Cuba” of the dictatorship, (but you guessed it:) the Embargo! The Reverend Walsh, a self-described former chaplain at North Carolina State University and a member of the Ecumenical Project for International Cooperation and of the Baptist Peace Fellowship of North America, puts to shame the Very Reverend Hewlett Johnson—the most extreme clerical apologist for Stalinism during the Nazi-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact period of 1939-1941.

Walsh tells us through the pages of The Chronicle of Higher Education, that “although the current situation is difficult, it in no way compares with the poverty of the past.” Citing high college enrollment, but ignoring what is being taught, the Reverend concludes that the sole source of the problem is “our insane embargo.” Waxing philosophical, he instructs that “human experience should have taught us that contact and dialogue with ‘the enemy’ break down barriers and false stereotypes among all parties to dispute.” It turns out that the enemy is really at home. “It is about politicians from both parties, accepting campaign donations from extremely well-organized and well-financed Cuban-American political action groups.” It never dawns on Reverend Walsh that the source of the devastating situation in Cuba’s higher educational system is the dictatorship as such. As it turns out, the voice may be the Reverend Mr. Walsh, but the vituperation is that of the maximum leader, Fidel Castro.
Finally, there is the voice of policy-maker turned academic. Cole Blasier, well-known from Pittsburgh to Miami, but once again, a Beltway insider. He spoke after, not before, the downing of the private aircraft from Florida. Blasier offers not an ounce of solace about the murder of innocents, who were condemned directly from the office of Fidel Castro. Instead, we are told that “Most Americans know and care little about Cuba” (needless to say this statement is made without evidence from public opinion surveys). However, Blasier is certain that a policy based on Castro's overthrow “is not an appropriate basis for United States policy.” What then should be the basis for such a policy? It turns out to be the “the United States has had economic interest in Cuba. Some United States traders want to trade, and investors want to invest.” Cultural exchange interests should not be ignored, either. The debate on Cuba needs to be recast. But how one might ask. Blasier’s answer is simple: “Let's think first of what's good for the United States, not what's bad for Mr. Castro.”

The clear implication is that there is a disjunctive between what is good for America and bad for Cuba. It never dawns on him that the parallel might be authentic. That what is good for the United States is precisely what moves toward the termination of the Castro dictatorship. Even the use of such language as dictatorship or tyranny is disallowed by Blasier. The clever juxtaposition of the United States and Cuba is so utterly transparent, that one is led to conclude that anything short of the bombing of Miami would not command even a mild rebuke of the Castro regime much less a strong censoring, by Blasier.
The movement by a political pilgrim from scholar to ideologist becomes a natural evolution; one reinforced by the character of area studies organizations to the composition of university departments in history and the social sciences. In part, the longevity of the Castro regime gives it a legitimacy, a strength in the minds and hearts of people like Smith, Walsh and Blasier. The political pilgrims of an earlier period started with a profound belief that social betterment for the masses can be brought about by revolution. The political pilgrims of the present era reveal few such illusions about the regimes they support. They know full well the despotic character of the leadership they support. In this sense, the collapse of the Soviet empire has had a transforming impact on political pilgrims —— subjecting their aims to more confined purposes.

The new, hard-nosed pilgrims have big fish to fry: starting with the American commitment to democratic government. Of the three principles on which both parties are in full agreement—free elections, free parties, and free economic choice --- the one deemed most vulnerable is the last; since it is interpreted that the embargo inhibits just such economic expansion. The political pilgrims do not, in short, collapse in the face of simple policy imperatives. They merely reinterpret them into useable parts. But when the dictatorship itself finally expires, we can be certain of one thing: these same self-serving clarions of the people will either find new despotisms to support, or lapse into a permanent silence. The choice is not enviable, but then again the type with which we are dealing is not admirable.

Ultimately, but often unstated, the illusion of socialism unsullied by communist power still serves to sustain the political pilgrims. The myth of that
system is at the heart and soul of the inability of good people to come to terms with dictatorship and tyranny. This was brought home to me in the Festschrift honoring my work. In “The Democratic Imagination,” Carmelo Mesa-Lago employs an entire group of students to survey all of my writings to minute and detailed scrutiny. I will not burden this with either the commentary or response, both are readily enough available, and I should add, entirely courteous. Nonetheless, I was struck by how the language, the rhetoric used to describe the regime differs sharply amongst scholars with the best intentions.

For me, and I suppose, severe critics of the regime, we see in Cuba a communist dictatorship. Indeed eight editions of Cuban Communism repeatedly attests to the centrality of this belief. But for the new political pilgrim, the reference is never or rarely to communism. It is rather to socialism and democracy. Indeed, to simply repeat what Castro has stated on innumerable occasions, his allegiance to communism as a political practice and a moral faith is enough to cast suspicion on one daring to repeat the obvious. For most political pilgrims, Cuba under Castro is not quite a full-bodied socialism, not quite on the high road to democracy, but close enough to warrant support and bask in the warm glow of pleasant touristic rhetoric. The Church Historic can make mistakes, the Church Triumphant can never err. So after all the encomiums are passed out, and all of the criticisms passed forth, the chasm remains between those who see totalitarianism as a function of communism, and those who see communism as some sort of dim and distant consequence of socialism.

The source of the new political pilgrimages is located precisely in this chasm, in the polarity between those who see the history of communism as a twentieth century catastrophe ending up logically, and even necessarily, in the triumvirate of
Stalin, Mao and Castro; and those who see this same history as a long, tortuous road to a higher democracy and an end to the evils of capitalism as a system in which the United States serves as an exemplar of world leadership.

Paul Hollander came close to making this discovery on his own and as a general axiom. But he was writing on the subject before the final decade of the century, and assumed that the fall of European communism would result in a possible low-point in Anti-Americanism. He could hardly be faulted for failing to appreciate that political pilgrimage reaches its desultory abyss only with the last remaining pure case of communism, Castro's Cuba.

The nature of 'revelation' is to both announce the arrival of the savior and outline the characteristics in the search for perfection. And as Leo Gershoy and Frank Manuel long ago pointed out in terms of the makers of the French Revolution, it is in the nature of revolutionary leaders to do likewise; and in the process, cast out and destroy what is held to be old or imperfect. Fortunately, the empirical basis of politics, unlike the spiritual basis of theology, makes it far more difficult for tyrants to sustain terrible illusions of post-modernity. The loss of innocence is quickly followed by the end of legitimacy - - - sadly, at a terrible price in terms of human life and collective well being. The Cuba lobby of the past has been transformed into the Cuba support network of the present.
The singular task of our social science and the honest study of international policy is to make sure that such illusions are exposed, and correspondingly the tasks of democracy are aided and abetted, not undermined by honest research. Political pilgrimage is with us, probably for the duration of the modern epoch in which demi-gods have at their disposal the capacity to define the collective vision of the good. But so too is social science, which subjects propagandistic notions of the good to the test of the right.

Bibliography


About the Author . . .

Irving Louis Horowitz is Hannah Arendt distinguished professor of sociology and political science at Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey. He is the editor of Cuban Communism, going into its ninth edition in 1997, along with many writings of his own on Cuba and Latin America. His most recent book is The Decomposition of Sociology, published by Oxford University Press.

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