
The Politics of Reality Avoidance: Pilgrimage to Cuba 1959-1996

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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's dispatches from the Sierra Maestra, and came to fruition with his March 8, 1959, interview published in *The New York Times Magazine*, in which Matthews declared 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 presumed to have been well versed. In thirty-seven 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 thirty-seven years of demonstrated tyranny, while bemoaning militarism and the loss of civil liberties in other nations of the region. That individuals are able to do so, not only in the face of overwhelming empirical evidence of a singularly failed government but also a century of turmoil and tyranny identified with communism throughout the world, is, in my view, less a failure of intelligence, perception, or knowledge-gathering

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than of fantasy—psychological and sociological illusions that persist despite dramatic evidence to the contrary.

In late March of 1996, the Central Committee of the Cuban 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. Raul Castro, in his plenary report, argued that Cuba must at all costs avoid reforms of the type that undermined the Soviet Union and other socialist countries. Deviations from Communist Party norms were assaulted at every level—from demands for wage increases by labor unions to cautious statements by research institutes about further economic reforms. The tightening of the Party grip came along with the usual pathological 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 makes little impression on apologists for the regime.

Apocalyptic and prophetic movements of all sorts demonstrate the deep gap between lofty utopian ambitions and desultory actual performances. A rich literature has been created over the years by those who study religious and political movements. Indeed, the 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. Nearly a century ago Sigmund Freud studied the enormous power of illusion in the conduct of our private affairs. 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 weaknesses are attributed to foreign interference or external enemies.

*The power
of fantasy.*

The political pilgrim is not your ordinary, garden-variety tourist seeking fun in the Cuban sun. Rather, he or she has been 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 during 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 promote the regime while appearing to remain “mainstream.” Once the regime eliminates from consideration those shriveled ranks 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 reexamine what has been ably done by others in a European context. Nor, for that matter, 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 my 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.

I

*C. Wright Mills
dedicated
pilgrim.*

The first political pilgrim with whom I came into personal contact was the late C. Wright Mills. In the first year of the Castro Revolution of 1959, he took a one-month tour of Cuba. With more than modest guidance from Carlos Franqui and the staff of *Revolución*, he produced in one more month *Listen Yankee!*—perhaps the best-selling book on Cuba available immediately after the revolution and certainly one that solidified Mills’s 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 forego 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 its 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 modern Cuba. In truth, he was far less interested in studying Cuba than in finding 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 suffered a heart attack days before the scheduled television debate. (He died of another heart attack in March 1962.) But lesson number one became evident: those dedicated to a cause or a movement see criticism of it not as evidence of its weakness, but as evidence 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 the fury that comes 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 proud of the characterizations made in that article and in retrospect would not change that early essay one jot or tittle.

Evading criticism.

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) subjection to civics, not politics, i.e., demand for regime loyalty; (5) a ban on discussion of alternative paths to development, settling on single-crop communism; and (6) the sealing off of 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 a Canadian critic but

the Moscow-based *World Marxist Review*, the Comintern organ, which saw fit to excoriate me.

The most revealing aspect of Professor Lumsden's attack was 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 a regime's 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 his rule 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.

Idealization and denial. 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 repetition of the pattern of apologetics for dictatorship found among Nazi supporters of the Hitler regime in the American 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 fusion of anti-Americanism and 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 rival and exceed theological claims regarding 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 employed in exposing the pseudo-science of Sovietology. The summary I wrote in *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 this article.

When all is said and done, error and truth are 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 and 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 assaults 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 word “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, 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 preparing the pilgrims to serve as point guards for such policies. It is clear enough that Castro has made the lifting of the U.S. embargo and the defeat all efforts to increase Cuban economic isolation cardinal goals. Today’s political pilgrims are front-line troops in this effort. They no longer confine their remarks to the lofty purposes of the regime but enter the policy discussion overtly and unabashedly. Indeed, were it not for the fatal blunder by the Cuban regime in shooting down two civil aircraft that flew near Cuba, this campaign might well have succeeded—in forestalling the passage of the Helms-Burton Bill, if not toppling the earlier Torricelli-sponsored effort at legislative isolation of Cuba from the rest of the hemisphere. Indeed, even with the shoot-down, the campaign to topple American foreign policy aims in the region has not abated. If political pilgrims are not easily dissuaded by thirty-seven years of dictatorship, they are even less likely to be disabused by a single incident.

*Pilgrims
as policy
advocates.*

My first example is Wayne Smith, the former diplomat to Havana during the Carter Administration. Here we have a public ser-

vant turned advocate. His writings have become synonymous with support for Castro in Washington, D.C., circles. In a recent utterance in *Foreign Affairs*, Smith goes beyond even his former sycophantic self. He depicts Cuba as a nation moving gradually toward social democracy under the guidance of Fidel Castro. The "Supreme Leader" period now approaching its fortieth anniversary is viewed as a mere interregnum. Grudgingly, we are informed that Castro is still not quite ready for social democracy. But if the embargo were to be lifted, he would become more likely to follow the path of reform.

Wayne Smith has an early counterpart in the late Joseph E. Davies, who reported on the Moscow Trials of 1938. In the face of overwhelming evidence of a fraudulent series of trials and purges, he reported back in *Mission to Moscow* that the trials were fair. In the words of Freda Kirchwey, then editor of *The Nation*, such issues as fake trials and purges of innocents followed by their execution after abject confession were secondary to the moral stance of combatting the evils of fascism. As TRB shrewdly observed in *The New Republic*, "Wayne Smith has emerged as a moralist against America, but a relativist toward Cuba."

Smith is certain that "Castro is not on the way out anytime soon. In fact, he may be the best guarantor of Cuba's peaceful transition to a market-oriented economy and more democratic government." This at a time when Castro is closing down small enterprises as rapidly as they open for business and imprisoning political opponents as quickly as they surface. The real enemy for Ambassador Smith is America, specifically the Cuban exile community. We are assured that Castro will survive such "obviously flawed instruments as the Helms-Burton bill. The new Cuba will be a society based on Cuban realities." But the idea that such "realities" might exclude Castro, or, for that matter, include the overseas and exiled Cubans, is not entertained. The new political pilgrims have grown sharp teeth and fight with jagged razors.

Smith's autobiography-cum-travelogue, *The Closest of Enemies*, reveals the vanity of the diplomat, his proximity to power abroad and his relative remoteness from a power base at home. His puerile account of his service in the U.S. Embassy in Havana between 1958 and 1961, and again as chief of the U.S. Interests section there from 1979 to 1982, in which position he seemed preoccupied with being photographed with the great dictator or in front of monuments of past dictators, and with family-album photos—all of this reveals a

special sort of political pilgrim, under the influence of the heady wine that comes with being a force overseas far greater than at home. I am reluctant to take recourse in psychological examination, but to avoid this aspect of the new political pilgrim is to miss nuances in the role of apologist for totalitarian rule. The diplomat as an apologist is like the anthropologist turned native; the phenomenon of over-identification obviously affects 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, we find the Reverend Edward T. Walsh writing about “the devastating impact on Higher Education in Cuba”—not the impact of the dictatorship, but (you guessed it) the Embargo! Walsh, a former chaplain at North Carolina State University and a member of both the Ecumenical Project for International Cooperation and 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 in 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, Walsh concludes that the sole source of the problem in higher education is “our insane embargo.” Waxing philosophical, he instructs his readers 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, in the United States. “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 the 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 that of the Reverend Mr. Walsh, but the vituperation is that of the maximum leader, Fidel Castro.

Finally, there is the voice of the policymaker-turned-academic. Cole Blasier, well known from Pittsburgh to Miami, is, once again, a Beltway insider. Writing after the downing of the private aircraft from Florida, Blasier offers not an ounce of concern about the murder of innocents, who were condemned directly from the office of

Fidel Castro. Instead, we are told that “[m]ost Americans know and care little about Cuba.” (Needless to say this statement is made without evidence from public opinion surveys.) Blasier, however, 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 that “the United States has had economic interests 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.” According to Blasier’s simplistic prescription, U.S. policymakers should “. . . 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 disjunction between what is good for America and bad for Cuba. It never occurs to him that the two circumstances might coincide, 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 evoke even a mild rebuke of the Castro regime, much less a strong censoring, from Blasier.

III

The movement by a political pilgrim from scholar to ideologist appears to be a natural evolution, one reinforced by everything from the character of area studies organizations to the composition of university departments in history and the social sciences. 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 defend. In this regard, the collapse of the Soviet empire has had a transforming impact on political pilgrims, limiting their aims.

The new, hard-nosed pilgrims have big fish to fry, starting with the American commitment to democratic government. Of three major principles on which both major U.S. political parties are in full

*Movement
from scholar
to ideologist
encouraged by
contemporary
intellectual
environment.*

agreement—free elections, free parties, and free economic choice—the one deemed most vulnerable to Castroite exploitation is the last, since the embargo is interpreted as inhibiting just such economic free choice. The political pilgrims do not, in short, collapse in the face of simple policy imperatives; they merely reinterpret them to suit their ideological needs. 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, the often unstated 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 a group of students to subject all of my writings to minute and detailed scrutiny. This is not the place to recount either the commentary or response, both of which are entirely courteous, since they are readily available elsewhere. Nonetheless, I was struck by how the language, the rhetoric used to describe the Cuban regime, differs sharply amongst scholars with the best intentions.

A stubborn illusion.

I and other severe critics of the regime perceive Cuba as a communist dictatorship. Indeed eight editions of *Cuban Communism* repeatedly attest to the centrality of this belief. But the new political pilgrims never or rarely refer to communism but, rather, to socialism and democracy. Indeed, simply to repeat Castro's many explicit public statements regarding his allegiance to communism as both a political practice and a moral faith is to become suspect—for 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 and all of the criticisms have been passed out, the chasm remains between seeing totalitarianism as a function of communism, or 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, 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 both to announce the arrival of the savior and outline the characteristics of the search for perfection. And as Leo Gershoy and Frank Manuel long ago pointed out with regard to 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 makes it difficult for tyrants to sustain the terrible illusions of postmodernity. The loss of innocence is quickly followed by the end of legitimacy—sadly, at a terrible price in human life and collective suffering. 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 ensure that such illusions are exposed and that the tasks of the free society are aided and abetted, not undermined, by research. Political pilgrimage is still with us and probably will remain a phenomenon for the duration of the modern epoch, or so long as demigods maintain the power 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 truth.

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