

My arrival at Havana's international airport in the middle of a work week was greeted by a handful of bored-looking customs officials. I could have brought in bags of cocaine and nobody would have noticed. I expected a more thorough examination. I had read that, from the late 1990s, officials searched the bags of incoming foreigners at the airport to note the serial numbers of laptops to ensure they all left the country.¹⁰ A friend told me before I arrived that Cuban doctors in Venezuela were buying TVs, toasters and other electrical equipment there and had no trouble bringing them home.

One day I went to the Iranian embassy in Havana, seeking some documents. I failed miserably, my only gain a mountain of paperwork. But when the heavens opened and the muggy heat was briefly 'cooled' by warm rain, I started talking to one of the guards working at the embassy. Felix was in his fifties, with slicked back hair, and had spent most of his life teaching English at a local university. He left a few years ago because the pay was poor—he said the Iranians, with no hint of irony, paid him more than his former employer, principally because it was in US dollars—and he needed to better support his family.¹¹ Felix lamented the lack of a free press in his country and the ways in which the internet—something he had seen a few times with former university friends—was routinely blocked and restricted. 'Life for us is very tough,' he told me. He resented the ruling elite who dictated policy to the masses while enjoying complete personal freedom themselves.

Felix said that freedom in Cuba was illusory and a change in the system was long overdue. He lamented that he would never have the opportunity to see the world, the cost being simply out of his reach. His eyes lit up at the chance to speak English. 'I never really have the opportunity,' he said mournfully. Cautious signs of openness heralded the late 2007 screening in Havana of the acclaimed German film *The Lives of Others*, about the former East German Stasi, or secret police. Cubans waited in line for hours to enter the packed cinemas.¹² I wondered if Felix would have seen Cuba reflected in the failed Stasi methods of repressing an entire society.

The sex, colour, faded glamour, determination and creaking Cadillacs showed a Cuba that thrived in an earlier age but today struggles to enter the modern era, not helped by the collapse of the Soviet Union, a key former backer. Hugo Chavez's Venezuela is trying to fill

the gap (along with China), both financially and ideologically, with Castro even becoming a father figure to Chavez. Both Castro and Chavez started out as anti-imperialist nationalists, writes Venezuelan expert Gregory Wilpert, 'and only once in power did [they] move towards socialism'.¹³

An open and free democracy has been Castro's Achilles heel since the beginning of his rule and continues to this day, including the limited availability of computers, the internet and a robust media, even if the former leader was known to surf the unfiltered web.¹⁴ Blogging is not universally utilised and modern communications remain a plaything of the elite in many countries, including Cuba. Castro's regime wants to keep it that way, though this will inevitably fail. I was consistently told in bars, in interviews and even on the street that the regime was fearful of any kind of Western influence, including new technology.¹⁵ A number of young Cubans wanted me to tell them why and how I blogged and whether I truly believed my voice made a difference. I expressed cautious optimism. Even the concept of self-expression in a medium that could reach anybody in the world was an idea that remained foreign to many Cubans.

The 1959 Cuban Revolution saw the overthrow of US-backed military dictator General Fulgencio Batista by Castro's guerrilla revolutionaries.¹⁶ Batista ruled for Washington and the Mafia, who owned hotels and casinos on the island. Castro and a small group of armed men had failed to seize a barracks in 1953 and during his trial, where he defended himself, he uttered the immortal words: 'Condemn me. It does not matter. History will absolve me.'¹⁷ Although ridding Cuba of Batista was a major goal of Castro's, the Cold War almost inevitably pushed him into resisting American domination and subversion. The newly born country needed support and the Soviets were willing partners. Socialism, in conjunction with the Soviet Union, was the desired goal, even if Castro too liberally borrowed many of Moscow's authoritarian ways. Chile's first envoy to Cuba in 1970–71, Jorge Edwards, has written that Castro's repression was largely ignored or forgiven by the world's global left.¹⁸

Fidel Castro ruled Cuba for nearly fifty years, passed partial power to his brother Raul after sickness in 2006¹⁹ and resigned formally in early 2008. Although Fidel has not been seen in public again—he appears irregularly on TV in a colourful tracksuit meeting sympathetic leaders such as

Brazil's President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva and Chavez—during my visit Cuban state media irregularly insisted on parading a clearly shaky and sick Fidel in front of the cameras.²⁰ It was a pitiful sight, akin to imagining an embalmed Stalin or Mao performing in public. Although elements of the global left have become fierce critics of the Cuban Revolution, many were slow to recognise the brutality of Castro, Mao and Stalin.

A Cuban-born, left-wing American writer, Saul Landau, who travelled with Castro in the early years of the revolution, visited Havana in 1960 and wrote that he immediately saw the desperation and poverty of the Cuban population and was told by his guide in one shantytown that 'under the old regimes no one cared to do anything about such conditions. This is why we're showing it to you, so you'll understand why we had to make a revolution.'²¹ Massive strides in public education and health care remain one of the great legacies of the revolution, though services have started to deteriorate in recent years.²²

Cuba's political development was a constant struggle under American siege. The continuing US embargo was imposed in 1962 and the US State Department's senior advisor for Latin American affairs argued in 2007—after the United Nations, for the seventeenth year in a row, condemned Washington's immoral stance—that 'the embargo was caused by Cuba in its denial of freedoms of its people'. Subsequent presidents in Washington feared that Cuba would be a 'contagious example' and inspire other nations around the world to subvert America's imperial designs.²³ Cuba was added to the official list of Washington's terrorist states in 1982, replacing Saddam so that he could be given US aid.²⁴ This obsession with opposing Castro was revealed as late as 2004, when a body tasked to investigate financial transfers in the 'War on Terror', the Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Assets Control, revealed that of its 120 employees, four were tracking Osama bin Laden and Saddam Hussein but nearly two dozen were enforcing the embargo.²⁵

The fall of the Soviet Union brought Cuba to the brink of collapse as desperately needed aid suddenly disappeared. Liberal Democrats in Washington even urged further punishment of the island.²⁶ The so-called 'Special Period' of economic crisis (1990–2000) forced the regime to re-orientate its priorities due to necessity and by the end of the 1990s had brought closer relationships with the European Union and Latin America. Food and services were initially sparse at a time when the failure of the

Soviet-led socialist revolution forced the leaders to liberalise the economy and appease angry citizens. Ideology would often come second to getting food on the table. Cuba regularly sends doctors to various countries around the world, including Venezuela, in exchange for much-needed oil.

The elevation of Raul Castro to the presidency in early 2008 heralded small but significant reforms designed to 'liberalise' the economy and society but maintain the path of socialism. The campaign has been compared with the reforms instituted by Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev in his 1980s Glasnost program. The European Union lifted its diplomatic sanctions against Cuba in June 2008 but pledged to monitor the ongoing human rights abuses on the island. The agriculture sector was decentralised to allow farmers more freedom in land use and resource allocation.²⁷ Virtually all death sentences were commuted to terms ranging between thirty years and life.²⁸ People were allowed to acquire titles to houses they rent from the state. Wage restraints that had kept surgeons and taxie drivers on similar salaries were dropped. A 24-hour television channel with foreign content was available. Citizens were finally able to purchase prescription drugs from pharmacies not owned by the state, and electrical goods such as home appliances, computers and DVD players became more widely available (though officials cited improvements in electricity supply as the reason).²⁹ The restriction on mobile phones was lifted, reversing a policy that allowed them to be owned only by employees of foreign firms or senior members in the Communist Party.³⁰ The vast majority of Cubans, however, were financially incapable of taking advantage of the changes.

The Cuban Revolution is likely to survive the eventual death of Fidel Castro. Eugene Robinson of the *Washington Post* has written that the regime's repression is not the only way it has held on to power for so long. 'In my visits to the island,' he argues, 'I've been struck by how Cubans can be bitterly critical of the hard-line restrictions the regime imposes on speech, assembly, movement, commerce and other activities, and in the next breath speak with pride of the government's achievements in providing free health care and education.' Riding the bus across Havana or on longer distance travels revealed similar sentiments. Perhaps some people were afraid to share their thoughts with a stranger, but Fidel Castro seemed mostly liked, if not sometimes tolerated. However, criticisms of his methods, rather than of the man

himself, were openly made. I remember one man in Havana asking me what I thought of Australia's then prime minister, John Howard, and his decision to join Washington in the invasion of Iraq. He was amazed to hear that I had expressed public opposition for years and suffered no personal consequences as a result. Wasn't I scared, he asked?

As I walked around Havana's outskirts, smelling the burning corn, people would sometimes stare and point at the Westerner with the dark beard. I wanted to engage with them, and some were more forthcoming than others. Women popped their heads out of small windows as they tied up washing to wispy ropes while muscly, shirtless men stood around talking to friends on uneven concrete paths. Children played baseball with balls made out of plastic refuse. Neighbourhood after neighbourhood looked and felt decrepit, with faded, coloured revolutionary murals on large and small walls. Many of these areas shared one telephone in a hallway. An entire floor of people had to make do (though I noticed modern landline and mobile phones for sale in a Havana communications centre).

Not unlike Wim Wenders, with his Cuban love letter, film-maker Oliver Stone made a 2003 documentary about the island. *Comandante* was a glowing portrait of Fidel Castro. It made for fascinating viewing but avoided the daily realities of Castro's Cuba. As I walked around the dirty but lively neighbourhoods, I wondered how the residents would honestly view a film that admired Castro primarily for his defiance of Washington. Stone was too smitten to see past his admiration.

Confused communism

When I travelled around the country away from Havana, it soon became clear that the countryside was no less vibrant. The landscape often reminded me of Sri Lanka, with lush greens enveloping wooden houses, ramshackle highway general stores and horse-driven ploughs on massive farms. I remember speaking to a man in the small northern town of Varadero who told me that he rarely travelled more than a few kilometres from his home, but he felt he knew about everything that transpired in Havana from the state-run newspaper. For him, Fidel Castro was the best thing that had ever happened to Cuba. This man was seventy years old.