

THE TRUTH ABOUT CUBA?

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On November 20, 2009, a newspaper editorial entitled “Don’t go to Cuba” appeared in a major English language newspaper. Three days later, another editorial entitled “Unreformed Tyranny” appeared in another national newspaper in the same country. Both editorials condemned Cuba’s record on human rights and suggested measures such as travel bans and economic sanctions. Earlier that year, in September 2009, a business news magazine published an article entitled “Trouble in Socialist Paradise” describing Cuba’s grave economic problems and how they worsened the already difficult business climate of the island. What is most surprising about these editorials/articles is that they all appeared in Canadian publications. Although the Canadian press has often been critical of the Canadian government’s Cuba policy, it has rarely been this consistently harsh. Except for the occasional chill, Canada’s policy towards Cuba has historically been rather amicable. However, Prime Minister Harper has charted a less friendly course towards Cuba than that of previous administrations and one that is comparatively closer to that of the United States.

The critical postures highlighted above raise a number of important questions for Canadian scholars and policy makers:

1. Has Cuba’s human rights record and business environment worsened to the point where we need to re-examine our policy?
2. Has Canada’s “other good neighbour policy” changed at its core?
3. Should we engage more or engage less?
4. How will Canada’s historical relationships with its two good neighbours affect its future relations with them once United States-Cuba relations are normalized?
5. How should Canadians prepare for this normalization?

The papers presented in this issue of *Canadian Foreign Policy* address aspects of these questions from a historical, political, psychological, critical geopolitics, economic, and business strategy point of view.¹ This Policy Commentary explores the individual and collective psychosocial basis that underlies the debates on Cuba and informs the discourses through which we can answer these questions. In particular, we explore what we consider to be the key element in understanding the nature of the Cuba debates: the complex nature of the truth in and about Cuba. We argue that the search for truth in and about Cuba is an elusive and puzzling pursuit primarily affected by: 1) competing narratives of contested events; 2) the emotional distress that accompanies the experience of cognitive dissonance caused by these competing narratives; 3) the Cold War’s exacerbation of the Cuban cultural propensity

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¹ It is the opinion of the authors that the answer to the first two questions posed above is that no, there have not been major changes in either Cuba’s human rights record or business environment, nor in Canada’s fundamental policy keystone of constructive engagement. The answer to question number three is a matter of policy preference. The answers to questions four and five remain to be seen. However, these arguments will not be presented in this work.

towards vehement disagreement; and 4) the syncretic capacity of Cubans to inhabit several worlds at the same time. Lastly, we argue that Canadian Cuba observers are also affected by the above phenomena and that we must strive to develop a more sophisticated understanding of the competing narratives about Cuba we are exposed to, and of the people who tell them, in and out of Cuba.

Cuba's Competing Narratives

Akira Kurosawa's 1950 film *Rashomon* involves the re-telling of four contradictory accounts of a crime. The movie leaves the viewer to determine which one, if any, is "the truth", if there is a "single truth" or if there are "different truths" for each of the characters, or if "all versions of the truth" are actually correct. The film is a meditation on the interplay between contested narratives—the interplay between "the facts" and the psychological and social webs of significance of those who report them. Similarly, the study of Cuba is, by and large, the study of contested events and we must strive to uncover what these versions reveal about the people who tell them (e.g., their positions in the social structure of their communities, and their cultural understanding).

Although Canadians have a fair amount of personal contact with Cubans, we must bear in mind the fact that the Cuban government exercises a substantial measure of control over contacts between any foreign national and Cuban citizens, officials, and academics, both in and out of Cuba. This raises the spectre of the political correctness of the version of events that is reported to us. Less well understood is the fact that there are at least two Cubas—11.2 million individuals residing in Cuba and over one million individuals residing outside. Within these two Cubas, there are many voices. We must question not just the possible bias of the facts we gather, but also our underlying prejudices about those Cubans who we tend to believe and those Cubans who we tend not to believe.

Given these contesting narratives—we must then ask ourselves—how does the experience of these inherent contradictions affect Cubans and Cuba analysts? The theory of cognitive dissonance—the tendency for individuals to seek consistency among their cognitions, beliefs, and opinions—can perhaps shed some light. Dissonance is often experienced as anxiety, guilt, shame, anger, embarrassment, stress, and other negative emotional states. Given the discomfort, individuals strive to eliminate dissonance mainly by reducing the importance of the dissonant beliefs, adding more consonant beliefs that outweigh the dissonant beliefs, or changing the dissonant beliefs so that they are no longer inconsistent. Cognitive dissonance *a la Cubana* manifests itself in the collective milieu in a number of ways, but two responses are salient—vehement disagreement and syncretic thinking.

The word C-u-b-a, like all proverbial four-letter words, elicits in many individuals strong knee-jerk reactions and vehement disagreement. In characteristic Cuban fashion, disagreement is often met with an explicit or implicit Cubanismo: *usted esta completamente equivocado*—you are completely wrong. This Cuban cultural propensity for vehement disagreement was brilliantly captured by MAD Magazine's near wordless comic strip "Spy vs. Spy", authored by Antonio Prohias, a Cuban national who fled to the United States in 1960. According to Prohias, while *Spy vs. Spy* offers a critique of the Cold War, it also provides clues to deeply ingrained aspects of the Cuban psyche that have characterized

United States-Cuba relations for over half a century. For the older hard-line anti-Castro Cubans residing abroad, and for the party-loyal Cubans on the island, vindictive tit-for-tat Spy vs. Spy-like interactions have been a way to get even and settle deeply painful personal and collective scores. However, these strategies have also served as a way to resolve cognitive dissonance, by adding more consonant beliefs that outweigh the dissonant belief. Yet, for the younger generations of Cubans, on and off the island, cognitive dissonance is being diminished progressively by reducing the importance of the dissonant beliefs. It is their parents and grandparent's fight. Time will heal, if not all, perhaps enough wounds to make reconciliation possible in the not-too-distant future. When the time comes, the capacity to calmly accommodate the cognitive dissonance that arises from the narrative of contested events will come in handy.

Cognitive dissonance can also be resolved by changing the dissonant beliefs so that they are no longer inconsistent. In Cuba, this melding of contradictory beliefs into a relatively harmonious whole manifests itself in myriad versions of syncretism—the integration or combination of meanings or selected ideologies or cultural forms from distinct traditions resulting in the creation of new meanings. One of the most traditional ways in which syncretic thinking manifests itself in Caribbean Basin countries is in Santería. However, the most extraordinary and *sui generis* way in which syncretism manifests in Cuba is as economic syncretism—the co-existence of capitalism and socialism.

The most tangible manifestation of this syncretic economy is the circulation of two different currencies: the Cuban peso (CUP) and the convertible peso (CUC). This dual currency system is largely responsible for chronic inefficiencies, corruption, and disparities in income, despite the Cuban authorities' great efforts to tackle these problems. The duality can also be seen in the contrast between sectors of the Cuban economy that still operate under a centralized economic management system and the parallel proto-market sectors that operate under different rules. Moreover, Cuban managers must constantly balance the relationship between the economic and the political imperatives of their decisions. At times, the dominant imperative is the financial bottom line; at other times, the imperative is the party line; yet at other times the dominant imperative is the "lifeline", the priorities of whatever country is subsidizing Cuba at the time (i.e., the Soviet Union or Venezuela).

The motivation to syncretize aspects of socialism and capitalism in the 1990s was a matter of survival. The introduction of market forces in Cuba was not brought about to provide genetic material for a mixed economy, but to act as a vaccine against capitalism itself. Official government discourse has made it very clear that market reforms were, and are being, implemented in order to save socialism, not to replace it. As a sovereign country, Cuba can most certainly decide its economic model. However, in order to return to sustainable rates of growth while defending the *Logros de la Revolución* (the Achievements of the Revolution), it must find better ways to integrate these dual economies into an operable model. Daily life in Cuba is a matter of migrating from one system to the other, trying to get benefits from both, and staying out of trouble with the authorities. The contradictions inherent in the status quo are likely to bring further economic stagnation and, on a personal level, a form of migratory spiritual exhaustion.

What are the implications of the above analysis for our work as policy makers and scholars? First of all, we should understand that the truth about Cuba is multiple and highly contextual. Who is speaking to whom, about what, in front of whom, and for what purpose? There is a very malleable sense of reality that is *coyuntural*—specific to the moment in time and space—even when there has been no intention to deceive. We must also be mindful of the fact that our assumed objectivity might become the first casualty of the cognitive dissonance that is likely to emerge when what we think we know is challenged by emotionally charged, polarized, contradictory, and hyperbolic narratives of the contested events.

The February 2010 death of a jailed Cuban dissident, Orlando Zapata Tamayo, after an extended hunger strike, has re-ignited the debate over Cuba's human rights record. It remains to be seen how the latest developments in Cuba, with all its complexities, will be handled by the Canadian media, policy, and academic circles. Although the Rashomon-like effect is inevitable in the study of a syncretic Cuba, and the discomfort of cognitive dissonance is surely to arise, we must strive to make Canadian analysis comprehensive and tolerant, and our engagement with the truth in and about Cuba truly constructive.
