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## Cyberspace and the Defense of the Revolution: Cuban Bloggers, Civic Participation, and State Discourse

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LOYOLA UNIVERSITY CHICAGO

CYBERSPACE AND THE DEFENSE OF THE REVOLUTION:  
CUBAN BLOGGERS, CIVIC PARTICIPATION AND STATE DISCOURSE

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO  
THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL  
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF  
MASTER OF ARTS

PROGRAM IN CULTURAL AND EDUCATIONAL POLICY STUDIES

BY

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## INTRODUCTION

It is becoming more apparent with each passing political upheaval that the Internet is playing a continuously more vital role both in the ways in which political confrontations are communicated locally and globally as well as in the outcome and the course of events before, during and after. As the recent situation in Iran poignantly illustrated, the Internet has been and is continuing to develop into a force to be reckoned with. As is the case in many totalitarian countries throughout the world, it is becoming more difficult for the Cuban government to maintain and propagate its dominant discourse model as Cuban citizens are overcoming substantial technological barriers, dialing in, and contributing to a more unbiased understanding of life in Cuba. Cuban bloggers are ignoring the potential ramifications of dissenting against the Cuban government and are writing about life in Cuba today. While a blogger in a liberal democratic country may freely partake in political discussions, bloggers in countries such as China, Iran, and Cuba are extraordinary in their determination to share their lived realities with the world despite limited access to the Internet, government censorship of certain websites, and fear of repercussions. The Cuban bloggers covered in this paper are exceptional because they are part of a very small yet well organized group of individuals with a very clear directive: to fight with words for the freedom of expression. In this paper I will deal specifically with the ways in which Cuban bloggers are contesting state sanctioned modes

of civic participation and censorship. Other questions I address herein include the following: In what ways are the Cuban bloggers contesting the discourse model of liberty and freedom espoused by the government? What role does the Cuban education system play both in perpetuating a “master discourse model” and in influencing or encouraging individuals such as the Cuban bloggers to be cognizant of alternate discourse models? How are Cuban bloggers and their understanding of their own realities being influenced by cyber-activists internationally?

This issue is of great importance in an increasingly internetnetworked world and as of yet there has been very little academic work done on Cuban bloggers specifically. With the recent media and governmental focus on the use of the Internet in people’s movements and with special attention going towards social networking sites like *Twitter*, *Facebook*, and *MySpace*, there is bound to be a surge in research projects around cyberactivism. While Cuba’s A-list blogger Yoani Sánchez is drawing international acclaim through various awards and honors, the Cuban blogging movement has yet to result in or be part of either a national upheaval or a government crackdown - unlike the election fraud protests that sent thousands of Iranians in to the streets. I speculate that this lack of political luster makes this movement less appealing to a drama-craving society. Through this research I have found that one of the most challenging components of writing a research paper on contemporary issues, and specifically on active bloggers, is that every day there is new and pertinent information. I have chosen to use the

aggregator website *Voces Cubanas* as my port of entry into the Cuban blogging world and will discuss the site in more depth below.

The thesis is divided into three parts; 1. Preliminary information including Methodology and Cyberactivism, 2. Discourse Models of the Cuban State, and 3. Discourse Models of the Cuban Bloggers. I will begin the methodology portion of this thesis, with an overview of James Gee's discourse analyses through and examination of dominant and alternative discourse models and their interactions. In this section I will also discuss the Internet in Cuba as a carefully regulated instrument of the State and the ways Cubans are overcoming technological obstacles to dialing in. I follow this with a section on global cyberactivism paying special attention to Iran and China as those governments have enacted similar restrictions and their citizens overcome similar obstacles as those of the government and citizens of Cuba.

In Part 2 I delve into Fidel Castro's use of language in creating a discourse model that, while aligned with his vision of an ideal Cuban society, is increasingly disparate from the lived reality of Cubans. I also provide historical and theoretical foundations of the dominant Cuban discourse models. In Part 3 in sections on participation and education, and the dual economy I look at the ways in which Cuban policy has been driven by and sought to reproduce Castro's master discourse model. Education is an instrumental component of producing civic participation in any country but possibly more so in a country such as Cuba where the education system is praised internationally for its success in achieving 100% literacy and gender parity, among other

accomplishments. Meanwhile there is a growing disparity between the ideas propagated by the state and the actions the state has taken to counter the economic turmoil in which the country finds itself.

Fidel Castro has often referred to ideas as Cuba's most powerful weapon. Language has been one of the primary tools of the regime and it is only natural that a well-organized and overt dissent movement would also utilize the tool of language. In Part 4 of the thesis I will discuss what I have come to think of as the Cuban blogger movement and particularly the way two Cuban bloggers, Yoani Sánchez and Claudia Cadelo, are writing about and responding to the current situation in Cuba. I will use the website *Voces Cubanas* as my primary port of entry to the Cuban blogging world. While this particular website houses only a handful of the growing number of Cuban bloggers it is important in that it is an aggregator site housed off-island which joins many dissenting voices together in a more powerful show of solidarity. Following a discussion of *Voces Cubanas* I will deal in depth with the blogs of Sánchez and Cadelo from the month of June, 2009. I have divided their blogs by topic and organized those discussions to repeat the order of the themes of the preceding section.

## PART I

### SETTING THE STAGE

#### **Methodology**

In carrying out this research I rely on James Gee's *An Introduction to Discourse Analysis* (2005).<sup>1</sup> Gee's discourse analysis deals specifically with the ways that language is "recruited 'on site'". He discusses the importance of discourse models in how we understand the way people are communicating and the ways in which they share their lived experiences. He argues that in order to truly understand a given statement we must also understand the discourse model that has given rise to that statement. Gee writes that "discourse models are 'storylines', families of connected images, or (informal) 'theories' shared by people belonging to specific social or cultural groups"<sup>2</sup>; that language has situated meaning based on local knowledge and experience. For example when someone with little knowledge of Cuba's history hears Castro discussing the evils of imperialism that person will have a very different understanding of what he means than will someone who has been educated in Cuban schools.

Gee discusses language as political and as a process by which "*social goods* are thought about, argued over, and distributed in society"<sup>3</sup>. He distinguishes the particular form of discourse analysis he covers in his book by further describing it as "the analysis

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<sup>1</sup> Gee, J.P. (2005). *An Introduction to discourse analysis* (2<sup>nd</sup> Ed.). New York: Routledge.

<sup>2</sup> Gee, p. 95

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 2



of language-in-use”<sup>4</sup> and as neither “uniquely ‘right’” nor of his creation. This type of discourse analysis focuses on the interactions between the mind, society, interactions, activities, and institutions and is therefore appropriate as a methodology for understanding the ways in which Cuban bloggers are contesting and, perhaps, transforming the rules of civic participation.

Gee identifies three dominant types of discourse models: espoused models, evaluative models, and models-in-(inter)action. The first is something we consciously perpetuate, the second can be unconscious but describes models through which we “judge ourselves or others”, and the third includes those models which guide our actions whether consciously or not. He also describes ‘master models’ which refer to a dominant discourse model that has widespread impacts on social and experiential organization<sup>5</sup> but which could also be any of the three above-mentioned model types. Language has been a powerful tool during the Cuban Revolution<sup>6</sup>. The regime’s use of language is deliberate and strategic and because of the centralized political, social, and economic structure of Cuban society, is pervasive. This language, what Jan Kubik (1994)<sup>7</sup> refers to as the “language of propaganda”, forms an integral component of Cuban curriculum, and of

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 5

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 83

<sup>6</sup> In Cuba the word ‘revolution’ has two meanings. There was the Revolution during which Castro and his guerilleros overthrew the U.S.-backed Batista regime in 1958 and then there is the Revolution that has been ongoing ever since. Throughout the rest of this paper when I use the word “*la revolución*” I am referring to the latter.

<sup>7</sup> Kubik, J. (1994). *The power of symbols against the symbols of power: The rise of solidarity and the fall of state socialism in Poland*. University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press.

sanctioned music, movies and television programs. Although Benigno E. Aguirre (2002)<sup>8</sup> argues that this universal infusion of the language of propaganda has sapped Cubans' ability to form and express critical opinions this paper shows that such a claim is invalid.

Gee lists a number of important and relevant questions to ask when thinking of discourse models as tools of inquiry that prove useful when embarking on the task at hand.

1. What Discourse models are relevant here? What must I, as an analyst, assume that people feel, value, and believe, consciously or not, in order to talk (write), act, and/or interact this way?...
2. ...What other Discourse models are related to the ones most active here? Are there "master models" at work?
3. What sorts of texts, media, experiences, interactions, and/or institutions could have given rise to these Discourse models?
4. How are the relevant Discourse models here helping to reproduce, transform, or create social, cultural, institutional, and/or political relationships? What Discourses and Conversations are these Discourse models helping to reproduce, transform, or create?<sup>9</sup>

These questions directly informed some of my earlier mentioned research questions and others have been useful in constructing a framework from which I might think about and analyze this particular issue. It is important to keep in mind when endeavoring on a task such as this that every model is entangled with others and every

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<sup>8</sup> Aguirre, B.E. (2002). Social control in Cuba. *Latin American Politics and Society*, 44(2),p. 67.

<sup>9</sup> Gee, p. 91.

individual experiences/understands the world through various models. But the value of seeking to understand and define dominant and alternative discourse models remains worthwhile as it aids us in coming closer to an understanding of social and political interactions. As Sujatha Fernandes (2007)<sup>10</sup> writes:

Discursive frameworks are shaped by the broader political and economic orders under which people live, but these frameworks can also be undermined, reworked, and overcome by counterhegemonic movements and orders.

She goes on to write that as Cubans have both the tools necessary for analyzing the disparity between the discursive frameworks, or discourse models, and reality, and the ability (understood as freedom granted by the government) to participate in a process of “reincorporating their alternative and oppositional ideas”.<sup>11</sup>

I will also incorporate research already conducted utilizing blogs with particular focus on cyberactivism. In an increasingly globalizing world, even Cuba cannot completely isolate itself from outside influences. The cyberactivism networks now easily accessible via the Internet have resulted in a trans-issue, trans-national support network for Cuban bloggers and others. Sites such as *YouTube*, *Facebook*, *Twitter*, *Global Voices*, *Voces Cubanas*, and many others provide locations in which activists throughout

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<sup>10</sup> Fernandes, S. (2007). *Cuba Represent! Cuban arts, state power and the making of new revolutionary cultures*. Durham: Duke University Press.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23

the world can share their own situations, mobilize international support and have a voice they may not be free to have locally.<sup>12</sup>

*Global Voices* and *Voces Cubanas* are what Adrienne Russell (2009) refers to as “aggregator sites”<sup>13</sup> where blogs with similar themes, as is the case with *Global Voices*, or with a specific demographic makeup, as is the case with *Voces Cubanas*, can link together in a single domain. Through the website [www.globalvoices.com](http://www.globalvoices.com) viewers can read the posts of bloggers throughout the world, including posts from both Sánchez and Cadelo, in varying degrees of political repression and freedom. The Internet is providing bloggers with a powerful tool in the process of dismantling the master discourse model of the Cuban State. Although the Cuban government is working to thwart the effects of these bloggers by imposing an island-wide ban on *Voces Cubanas* and all associated sites, effective August 28, 2009. Sánchez’ website has been banned since 2008.

I have chosen Sánchez and Cadelo as the protagonists of this thesis because both women are not only actively involved in the political aspects of the blogging world but have been instrumental in the formation of *Voces Cubanas* and *Itinerario Blogger*, a Cuban blogger support / instructional group (with the goal of encouraging and teaching other Cubans to blog) which meets weekly in Havana and monthly in other locations

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<sup>12</sup> I came across a perfect example of this while ‘surfing’ *YouTube* for interviews with Yoani Sánchez (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KeqcZTLWIPE>). She recorded a short video clip asking for assistance from the international blogger community, especially those from countries with similar censorship practices as Cuba. She says that her message is one ‘in a bottle thrown to sea’ and that she hopes for ideas of how to overcome Cuba’s technological constraints and censorship.

<sup>13</sup> Russell, A. & Echchaibi, N. (2009). *International Blogging: Indentity, politics, and networked publics*. New York: Peter Lang. p. 5.

throughout the island. Additionally both have profiles on *Facebook*, *MySpace*, and *Twitter* and are very deliberately and actively working to inform the world of the Cuban government's restrictions on both their lives and their freedom to write about their lives. They are also very good friends and their blogs often reflect their friendship and shared, lived commitments. As both are prolific bloggers I have chosen to limit my use of their blogs for this thesis to the month of June, 2009; Sánchez posted 19 blogs during the month and Cadelo posted 16. I will from time to time mention other bloggers in order to convey a more holistic conception of *Voces Cubanas* but will do so minimally.

### **The Internet and Cuba**

In 2006 French journalist Claire Voeux spent a month in Cuba for Reporters Without Borders (RSF) finding out just how Cuba deals with the Internet. Her account is included in an article written by Julien Pain<sup>14</sup>. Pain writes that only 2% of Cubans have access to the Internet, the lowest rate of Internet usage in all of Latin America. He points out the irony of this given the level of pride Cuba takes in the quality of its educational system. In Voeux's contribution, she writes of the readily available Internet access in hotels available to foreigners yet the long lines, so characteristic of Cuba that they have their own name – *la cola*,<sup>15</sup> which await Cubans in public Internet cafes.

Tourists may have to wait for a few minutes in a soft armchair with a strawberry and chocolate ice-cream at the Hotel Inglaterra, but the Cubans have to spend half an hour

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<sup>14</sup> Pain, J. & Voeux, C. (2006, October). *Going online in Cuba: Internet under surveillance*. Retrieved August 6, 2009, from [http://www.rsf.org/IMG/pdf/rapport\\_gb\\_md\\_1.pdf](http://www.rsf.org/IMG/pdf/rapport_gb_md_1.pdf).

<sup>15</sup> Corbett, B. (2002). *This is Cuba*. Cambridge: Westview Press. p. 15

or 45 minutes jammed against each other in a line at the nearest Correo de Cuba, just 30 metres away at the foot of the Capitol building.<sup>16</sup>

Voeux describes how, at the Capitol, a security guard lords over the line offering the foreigners a fast track to the front of the line. She points out that unlike in the Hotel Inglaterra where she provided her passport number upon check-in, she was only asked for her name and country of origin at the public café.<sup>17</sup> In order to maintain control over the flow of information the Cuban government restricts Internet access to only those Cubans they anticipate really need access such as professors, government representatives, some doctors, etc while foreign diplomats or employees of foreign companies also have full access, the average Cuban is limited to a national email system which allows them to email both domestically and internationally but not to surf the Internet. The government has established an alert system that notifies them if certain “subversive” words are used in an email. Voeux describes a tenuous moment during her stay in Cuba in which she opened an email from RSF with the names of dissident Cubans. She had just enough time to read the names and numbers before a message flashed on the screen which read: “This programme will close down in a few seconds for state security reasons”.<sup>18</sup>

Pain addresses Cuba’s system of “self-censorship”, which I will discuss in greater detail below, by pointing out that “In Cuba, you can get a 20-year prison sentence for

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<sup>16</sup> Voeux, p. 1

<sup>17</sup> When I used the internet in the same café within the Capitol Building in 2008 I was asked for my name and my passport number, and there was no ice cream at the Hotel Inglaterra.

<sup>18</sup> Voeux, p. 2

writing a few ‘counter-revolutionary’ articles for foreign websites, and a five-year one just for connecting with the Internet in an illegal manner.” With consequences as severe as these, “few people dare to defy state censorship”. While this seems to still be the case three years later the number of people defying state censorship and the state approved modes of civic participation is increasing. Though much of the world’s cyber attention has been directed towards Iran and China in recent months, the Cuban bloggers are still writing and contesting official propaganda on life in Cuba today. Cadelo explains in an interview with Radio Martí, that both she and Sánchez have had to rely more and more on their friends abroad to post their blogs onto their sites.<sup>19</sup> In Radio Martí’s interview of Yoani Sánchez on May 11<sup>20</sup>, she asks for the help of tourists to overcome the government’s censorship by buying internet cards for the bloggers as they are no longer able to do so themselves. Given the very limited access to Internet on the island, the bloggers write almost exclusively to an international audience, but their activities have not gone completely unnoticed nor are they thought to be completely innocuous. Just as some authors have argued that the Internet acts as a democratizing tool so too do some authors make the case that increased governmental Internet usage increases that government’s transparency and makes it more difficult for tyrannical regimes to operate

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<sup>19</sup> Radio Martí (2009, May 7). Claudia Cadelo afirma seguirá poniendo sus informaciones en Internet, a pesar de la repression en Cuba (Claudia Cadelo affirms that she will continue posting on the Internet despite repression in Cuba). Retrieved August 10, 2009 from <http://www.martinoticias.com/fullstory.aspx?id=A9E3E5DF-26E6-44CA-93EBAA4965179591>.

<sup>20</sup> Radio Martí (2009, May 11). Valora Yoani Sánchez las limitaciones que enfrentan en Cuba los blogueros (Yoani Sánchez evaluates the limitations bloggers face in Cuba). Retrieved August 10, 2009 from <http://www.martinoticias.com/fullstory.aspx?id=D6B39C80-ECBB-409A-91624B7A986D4A2D>.

with a business-as-usual approach. Shanthi Kalathil (2003)<sup>21</sup> urges international leaders to work with dictators to increase their dependence on the Internet in order to improve efficiency and reduce bureaucracy. She argues that this would be a more effective means of reducing the governments' control on the flow of information than would be supporting cyber-dissidents. She writes that "once strong-arm regimes open the door to technology, they may find it difficult to return to a culture of bureaucratic secrecy, unscrupulous abuse, and unaccountability".<sup>22</sup>

## Cyberactivism

*The rhetoric that surrounds blogging essentially describes the liberating potential of a new (American) cultural product, created and distributed globally through inherently democratizing digital tools and networks. More specifically, a rash of recent works outlines the emergence of a new more horizontal politics and journalism driven by blogs and the networks that blogs seem to engender.*<sup>23</sup>

Cyberactivism, though with less technologically advanced precedents, is a relatively new phenomenon. The development of the Internet into a tool readily available and a daily component of many people's personal and professional lives has necessitated a complete restructuring of social and political interactions. Though rhetorical resistance, or printed dissent, has been around for centuries, the Internet has provided individuals who are formally disenfranchised and censored by their governments a space in which they can make their voices heard. While governments adhering to principles of

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<sup>21</sup> Kalathil, S. (2003). Dot Com for Dictators. *Foreign Policy*, March/April.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 49.

<sup>23</sup> Russel, p. 2.



participatory democracy have pre-Internet modes of communication with the plebian masses, the Internet has facilitated those interactions and where such interactions are limited or non-existent the Internet has provided a public space more embracive than the political landscape on the ground. The Internet has changed the face of social and political dynamics affecting the ways in which hegemonic discourse is constructed and reconstructed. It is another public space where minds can meet, debate, grow, reject, etc. Social networking sites such as *Facebook*, *MySpace*, and *Twitter* are allowing people from all over the world to create a cyber community of allies and advocates. Blogs have also been instrumental in the spread of information not just in countries where government censorship is the norm but in many facets of social and political life.

In the United States blogs have become an increasingly more common way for the average American to access information and to stay connected with local, national, and international events. Arianna Huffington's *the Huffington Post* is an example of a very well respected aggregator blog site that has become a news source that competes with mainstream news outlets. As Russell writes in an introduction to the book *International Blogging: Identity, politics, and networked publics* there are many people who view the spread of the blogging and social networking world as one means of effectively spreading democratic principles and political transparency, a view that is echoed by Lauren Langman (2005)<sup>24</sup> as explained below. Blogs have become an

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<sup>24</sup> Langman, L. (2005). From virtual public spheres to global justice: A critical theory of Internetnetworked Social Movements. *Sociological Theory*, 23(1).

increasingly valuable venue for political discourse and confrontation<sup>25</sup> and while the quality and reliability of the writing has been called into question<sup>26</sup> there is no denying that they are presenting challenges to governments attempting to censor their citizens and restrict the flow of information.

In a fascinating article on “internetworked” social movements, Langman invokes the familiar argument that “domination fosters resistance”<sup>27</sup> and that if people were allowed to consent to authority and withdraw and reassign consent when appropriate, they would have more power in the polity. He contends that the growing sector of cyberactivism requires “new kinds of theorization”<sup>28</sup>. He offers his theory of “internetworked” social movements as a response to this scholarly void. Langman writes:

But what must be noted is that the rise of the Internet, as new communication media, has enabled new means of transmitting information and communication that has in turn enabled new kinds of communities and identities to develop.<sup>29</sup>

Langman argues that given the rise of the Internet and the ways in which it now allows people to express themselves and their situations and to interact with the rest of the world, a new theory needs to be developed to explain the workings of such spaces. He

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<sup>25</sup> Blumenthal, M.M. (2005). Toward an open-source methodology: What we can learn from the blogosphere. *Public Opinion Quarterly* 69(5).

<sup>26</sup> Doostdar, A. (2004). “The vulgar spirit of blogging”: On language, culture, and power in Persian Weblogestan. *American Anthropologist*, 106(4).

<sup>27</sup> Langman, p. 42

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 43

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 44.

seems to settle on new social movements or international social movements theory that tends to combine critical theory, political process theory and others with an understanding of computer mediated communication. Although he mentions several times that these social movements tend to be in direct opposition to capitalism and the ways in which capitalism engenders inequalities, he also describes how the Internet is a democratizing tool and a space in which individuals who may otherwise be silenced become “empowered agents seeking democratic ‘imagined’ political communities...”<sup>30</sup>

Yet, the new economic or political forms of alienation, domination, or episodic crises of legitimacy can now be discussed and critiqued in the ‘virtual public spheres’ where people attempt to interpret and understand crises, injustices, and adversities to envision alternatives and map strategies.<sup>31</sup>

As the current political confrontations in China and Iran have made clear, social networking sites can be a powerful tool in battles over the freedom of expression and freedom of the press. This is most poignantly represented by the fact that the governments of both countries severely limited cell phone and Internet services<sup>32</sup> and by the U.S. government’s direct request to *Twitter* “to delay a scheduled maintenance shutdown” on June 16, 2009 because it would interfere with Iranians using the site to

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 54

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 54

<sup>32</sup> Stone, B. & Cohen, N. (June 15, 2009). *Social Networks Spread Defiance Online*. The New York Times Online. Retrieved June 15, 2009 from <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/16/world/middleeast/16media.html?scp=1&sq=cell%20phone%20block%20iran&st=cse>.

communicate and organize the protests in Tehran.<sup>33</sup> Although there is debate about just how important *Twitter* has been to the Iranians organizing the protests throughout June and July of 2009<sup>34</sup> there is general consensus that this most recent ‘cyberwar’ has served the purpose of mobilizing individuals throughout the world in support of the Iranian opposition and has given those of us outside of Tehran a very personal glimpse of what is occurring in the streets.<sup>35</sup> While the April confrontation in Myanmar was the first confrontation referred to as a “Twitter Revolution”, the same is being said of the protests in Iran. Similarly the Uighurs plight in Xinjiang, China has become an internationally accessible event despite the Chinese government’s attempts to block cell phone and Internet services in the region.

As Cuban bloggers are writing under a more politically repressive regime than most other Latin Americans it is helpful to look at research done on blogs in places such as China and the Middle East, where repressive social control mechanisms are also employed. In a blog posted on the site Arab Media and Society Mark Lynch (2007) proposes that there are three different types of Arab bloggers: the activists, the

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<sup>33</sup> New York Times report dated June 16, 2009, retrieved July 9, 2009.

<http://mediadecoder.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/06/16/report-state-department-urges-twitter-to-delay-shutdown/?scp=1&sq=twitter%20state%20department&st=cse>

<sup>34</sup> Cohen, N. (2009, June 20). *Twitter on the Barricades: Six lessons learned*. The New York Times Online. Retrieved June 20, 2009 from

<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/21/weekinreview/21cohenweb.html?scp=3&sq=twitter%20revolution%20Iran&st=cse>.

<sup>35</sup> A notable example is the video of the death by shooting of a young woman, Neda, now accessible through YouTube; <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZmrB2FOLqiE>. In the text included with the video current.com writes “This YouTube clip has gone viral, resulting in Neda becoming a symbol of rebellion amongst protesters.”

bridgebloggers, and the public sphere bloggers. The activists are those who use the blogs as a political tool organizing political action, disseminating information and rallying support. Bridgebloggers (also referred to as bridge-builders)<sup>36</sup> are those who write to Western audiences, often in English, in an effort to share aspects of their societies or cultures. Public sphere bloggers are those who write about their experiences without any political agenda.<sup>37</sup> Working within this framework the Cuban bloggers examined herein are mainly activist bloggers though I speculate that earlier on in the blog movement some of the bloggers would have claimed that they were public sphere bloggers simply writing about their lived experiences. The difference now is that in addition to writing about daily experiences the bloggers write about how these experiences are direct contradictions to the discourse model that the Cuban government actively attempts to propagate; the disparity between verbal and physical realities.

Although Manuel Castells (2004) focuses on the ways that the Internet and Internet based public spheres are being used by marginal groups in opposition to what he calls the “new global order”, and arguably the Cuban bloggers are doing just the opposite, his discussion is relevant.<sup>38</sup> He writes that the Internet has contributed to the “sudden acceleration of the historical tempo, and the abstraction of power in a web of computers”.

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<sup>36</sup> Russell, p. 5 and MacKinnon, 2007.

<sup>37</sup> Lynch, M. (2007, February). Blogging the new Arab public. *Arab Media & Society, 1*, 1-30. Retrieved June 27, 2009 from <http://www.arabmediasociety.com/?article=10>.

<sup>38</sup> It seems to me that Sánchez and Cadelo’s dissent takes the shape of yearning to have a place in that “new global order” and view the Cuban state as keeping them from being free to do so.

Castells conceives of this “abstraction of power” as part of a broader collapse of social orders brought on by the combination of globalization and “informationalization”. While he concedes that this era of “informationalization” is leading to increased “cultural creativity and communication potential”; he sees this new space as disenfranchising and leading to an increased “sense of disorder”.<sup>39</sup> Fernandes’ interpretation of the effects of the inclusion of dissident or divergent populations into the discursive framework is that it contributes less to disorder than to a continuous reconfiguration of hegemony. She suggests that:

...we conceive of hegemony as a process of partial reincorporation, or the efforts of actors at various levels to assimilate counter-dominant expressions and practices into official discourses and institutions. Hegemony is always being made and remade, but in a moment of crisis when the system faces challenges from a variety of groups, we can see the process of reincorporation much more clearly.<sup>40</sup>

This processual view of hegemony may be accurately conceived of as fragmenting the current, dominant discourse models globally, it can also be applied more specifically to the Cuban situation. Sánchez and Cadelo are offering counterhegemonic interpretations of Cuban reality and seeking the freedom to be part of the “new global order” should they choose to do so, and to have a voice in the creation and recreation of Cuban discourse models. Fundamentally they are hoping to affect lasting change in their government’s policies on the Internet, travel, and freedom of speech, among other things.

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<sup>39</sup> Castells, M. (2004). *The Power of Identity* (2<sup>nd</sup> Ed.). Malden, Ma: Blackwell Publishing. p. 72.

<sup>40</sup> Fernandes, p. 26.

## PART 2

### DISCOURSE MODELS OF THE CUBAN STATE

*Of all forms of symbolism, language is the most highly developed, most subtle, and most complicated.*

*-S.I. Hayakawa*

#### **The Language of Propaganda**

In *The Power of Symbols Against the Symbols of Power* Kubik, analyzes Edward Gierek's (party first secretary in Poland from 1971-1980) use of the language of propaganda. There are some interesting overlaps between the ways in which Gierek and Castro utilize language in supporting not only their ideological quests but their own personal authority and their persona as the symbol of power and as such applying this analysis to Castro and Cuba is appropriate.

Kubik embarks upon a lengthy and somewhat complex discussion of the semiotics of the language of propaganda. He draws out several important components such as the use of dualisms, manipulation, persuasion, and ritual. In the language of propaganda a dualistic orientation is very important in establishing limits on the way in which the recipients of the messages are able to understand their own reality. The language of propaganda is primarily a language of manipulation and control and while one could argue that most of us employ such language more often than we would like to admit there are certainly alternatives. Among the alternatives are semiotics which express a reality seen through a particular lens and therefore as something relative rather than absolute as the language of propaganda insinuates. Through education and state

sponsored propaganda Castro has spread a master discourse model in the hopes of establishing the sort of spiritual transformation Guevara envisioned (as will be discussed below).

An important component of the language of propaganda and of Castro's discourse model is that of a stark dualism. While Castro portrays the United States as the incarnation of all that is abhorrent in the world, Castro portrays Cuba as the victim of its northern, more powerful aggressor. In December, 2008 one could find a in Havana a billboard that read "*Ese absurdo primer mundo* (That absurd first world)"; the image beneath depicted a car with its hood open and someone offering the car a spoonful of corn, implying that ethanol is an "absurd" use of corn as a resource. To think that the first world is anything but absurd in its consumption practices would undermine the very foundation of Castro's regime and his communist-based vision of *Patria* and Revolution. Similarly, the distinction between being a national and being a nationalist is important when trying to perpetuate a strict social order, as Castro is doing. It becomes much easier to distinguish between those who are "for Cuba" and those who are "against Cuba".<sup>41</sup>

Following Castro's very narrow definition of who qualifies as being "for the state" it becomes clear that it is not Cuba as a nation that Cubans are to support but Cuba as a nationalistic creation; to oppose Cuban nationalism is to oppose Cuba. Kubik refers to language as magical in its effectiveness at "creating an artificial reality" and as capable of

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<sup>41</sup> See discussion of Miller's *On Nationality* on page 24.



“establish[ing] social boundaries of the elite”.<sup>42</sup> In a fascinating discussion on the “degree of homology”<sup>43</sup> between the “verbal world” and the “existential world”<sup>44</sup> Kubik ties in both Alfred Korzybski’s discussion of language as a map and S. I. Hayakawa’s extension of the same idea. All three argue that when there is a high ‘degree of homology’ between the map of the verbal world and that of the existential world than an individual’s chance of being a successful member of society is greater. When, on the other hand there is a low degree of homology an individual “will not be adjusted to the world as it is; he may, if the lack of adjustment is serious, end up in a mental hospital”.<sup>45</sup> Hayakawa writes that one of the dangers of this disconnect is that we as individuals can “manufacture at will, with language, ‘maps’ which have no reference to the extensional world”.<sup>46</sup> More readily applicable to the matter at hand is that those in positions of totalitarian power can also “manufacture at will” a map of the verbal world with little to no homology between it and the map of the existential world. This may be one of the tactics employed in an effort to manipulate and persuade people to accept a mythical version of reality.

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., p. 48

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., p. 48-49

<sup>44</sup> Hayakawa, S.I. (1964). *Language in thought and action* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc. p. 31.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., p. 31.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., p. 32.

Kubik distinguishes between the acts of manipulation and persuasion by explaining that as a form of persuasion the language of propaganda is an ineffective marketing mechanism except among a very small percentage of the population. “Whereas persuasion is a technique for constructing authority, manipulation is a direct exercise of power, since, by definition, the person being manipulated is not aware of this fact.” These two tactics form what Kubik refers to as the basic modes of the language of propaganda. Together they serve the important role of clogging “society’s channels of communication” so that all people are exposed to the sounds and images of the propaganda. “The higher the saturation of a society’s channels of communication with the language of propaganda, the greater the probability of the emergence of apathy as a predominant social mode”<sup>47</sup>, Kubik proposes.

### **La Patria, Cuban nationalism and the State**

Much like Gierek’s dualistic distinction between the capitalist West and the communist East, Fidel relies heavily in his speeches and reflections<sup>48</sup> on sustaining the idea of the United States as the *colosal imperio* while perpetuating the notion that Cuba is the victim of its vindictive and much more powerful neighbor to the north. He negates the importance of the human rights violations that do exist in Cuba and the economic crisis by pointing out the moral inferiority of the United States and George W. Bush, whom he refers to as *Bushecito*, a diminutive suffix often used when referring to children

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<sup>47</sup> Kubik, pp. 47-48

<sup>48</sup> Given the alleged frailty of his health, Castro now rarely makes physical appearances but his ‘reflections’ appear regularly in the paper *Granma* and on the website [www.cubadebate.cu](http://www.cubadebate.cu).

or to people for whom you feel some sense of responsibility or superiority, or affection. In this case it is clearly a belittling use of a diminution.

For most of *la revolución* Cuba was financially dependent on the Soviet Union and benefitted from a close relationship with the world's second super power. With the fall of the Soviet Union and the beginning of the "special period" in 1991, Cuba found itself ideologically isolated. Fernandes points to this isolation as the motivation behind the Cuban state's transition from a discursive focus on socialism to a more nationalistic discourse. In the name of *la Patria* all things, all acts are justified. On the internal wall of a semi-abandoned building in Havana Vieja, Cuba someone has meticulously painted a poem, attributed to 'Fidel'<sup>49</sup> entitled "And so we say, *Patria* or Death"<sup>50</sup>. The second line of the poem states that without *Patria* "*no queremos la vida*" (we do not want life). Fernandes writes that prior to the special period the phrase had been "*socialismo o muerte*".<sup>51</sup> Despite this dramatic shift in the dominant discourse, the dualistic nature of the state's discourse model has remained consistent over time. In a speech made in 1953, at the beginning of the revolution against the Batista dictatorship, Castro issued this now famous proclamation; "...the island will first sink to the sea before we consent to being the slaves of anyone".<sup>52</sup> While I will deal primarily with Fidel in particular in this

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<sup>49</sup> I can find no trace of this poem on the internet.

<sup>50</sup> Please see the appendix for a transcribed and translated version of the poem in its entirety.

<sup>51</sup> Fernandes, p. 35.

<sup>52</sup> Tobar, H. (2008, February 23). Castro's legacy: A changed Latin America. *The Los Angeles Times on the web*. Retrieved April 5, 2009, from <http://articles.latimes.com/p/2008/feb/23/world/fg-latin23>.

discussion it is important to understand that Fidel has personally framed the dominant discourse model, the State is still carrying it out and utilizes Fidel's language in the process.

In arguing a case for both this perpetual state of victimization and the consequent perpetual need for *la revolución* he explains to an audience that the damage done to the Cuban people throughout *la revolución* has been done “for no other reason than that we were Cubans, for no other reason than that we wanted independence, for no other reason than that we wanted better luck for our people”.<sup>53</sup> If the problem is no more complicated than that “we were Cubans” and “wanted our independence” it follows that as long as Cubans want those things for themselves there will be some external power, most likely *el imperio*, the United States, waiting to thwart them at every turn. In this way Fidel attempts to place the responsibility of failure squarely onto the shoulders *el imperio* and defers concerns of the possibility of failure onto the processorial nature of *la revolución*.

The Cuban State with Fidel at its helm has spent the last 50 years fighting an ideological battle to bring about the ideal society in Cuba. Their weapons for fighting this battle have been both policies aimed at curbing opposition and silencing dissent and a deliberately contrived grammar, a language of propaganda. In short, the State has done its best to create a society in which its people believe themselves to be revolutionaries by naming and vilifying a near and constant enemy. Fidel draws a world with his words in which the inconveniences of revolutionary existence are nothing compared to both the

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<sup>53</sup> Castro (2005), p. 30

alternative: a semi-colonial, capitalistic country; and to the goal, which is the ‘most just society’. He attempts, at times very successfully, to alter the landscape of the existential world by manipulating the maps of the verbal world. It seems that his goal has been to first create the myth of an ideal Cuban society, and to then diligently and deliberately infuse that myth into the consciousness of Cubans with the hope that they too will see their sacrifices as a national effort toward a national goal. Guevara was an integral figure in establishing what exactly it meant to be Cuban under the Castro regime. He wrote a short essay entitled “Socialism and Man in Cuba” in which he outlines what is now referred to as ‘Ché’s new socialist man’. Guevara writes:

It is clear that work still has coercive aspects, even when it is voluntary; man as yet has not transformed all the coercion surrounding him into conditioned reflexes of a social nature, and in many cases he still produces under the pressure of the environment (Fidel calls this moral compulsion). He still has to achieve complete spiritual re-creation in the presence of his own work, without the direct pressure of the social environment but bound to it by new habits. That will be communism.<sup>54</sup>

What Guevara is calling for in this essay is not the sort of superficial state driven compliance that is currently at work in Cuba but a true internal, spiritual, transformation. He argues that Cubans should be motivated not by material incentives but by moral incentives; such as knowing that personal sacrifice results in the betterment of fellow Cubans life and contributes to the humanistic machinery of the project of Cuban-styled socialism. While he was alive and serving in the Cuban government his economic reforms were based on moral incentives. This turned out to be a relatively ineffectual

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<sup>54</sup> See appendix A for the final several lines of this essay.

method and after his departure and subsequent death the government shifted to a material incentive based economy, not capitalism however (I find the distinction interesting).

In *On Nationality* David Miller (1999) discusses the fictitious nature of nations elaborating on the same notion Benedict Anderson introduces in *Imagined Communities*. Much of his argument revolves around the creation of a national identity. One of the components of this creation is that of national myth making. He begins his chapter entitled ‘National Identity’ by stating that the existence of a nation depends upon people’s belief in that nation and is not something that exists empirically. He describes errors that people make when thinking of the members of a nation; that the “national identity must be monolithic and all-embracing”, “that ‘national character’ consists... of a set of necessary and sufficient conditions”.<sup>55</sup> He goes on to describe how this unification under one “national identity” becomes more important when it is being threatened. “With the activist element added nationality does this for us: ‘the nation’ conveys the idea of a circumscribed body of people bound together by common customs and capable of being represented by a prince or a parliament”.<sup>56</sup> This notion becomes very important when investigating Castro’s Cuba. Though Castro is no prince and what he hopes binds his people together are not common customs but a shared belief in the Revolution, the activist element has been instrumental in Castro’s perpetuation of the ideals of the Revolution for 50 years running.

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<sup>55</sup> Miller, D. (1995). *On Nationality*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. p. 26-27

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 30.

Miller draws an important distinction between being a national and being a nationalist. One could consider oneself Cuban in the national sense but oppose the State and communism and therefore not be a nationalist. In distinguishing between nation and nationalism Miller writes that “nationalism theories” give people not only something to defend, as will be discussed, but provide “distortions of reality which allow men to cope with situations they might otherwise find unbearable”.<sup>57</sup> I would add that such distortions are often engendered by a persuasive leader and manipulated to further the nationalistic cause. He draws this conversation together with a discussion on conservative nationalism and collective autonomy (discussed in more detail below) and points out that “it is... a legitimate task of the state to ensure that national myths are preserved and, to the extent to which this conflicts with liberal commitments such as those to freedom of thought and expression, liberalism must be transcended”.<sup>58</sup> In order to arrive at the just society that Castro envisions, Cuban people must make sacrifices.

The Cuban government is seeking to create what Miller describes as “collective autonomy”. Individuals sacrifice what might be considered self-determination in favor of “collective autonomy” or “national self-determination” in backing something “that is widely shared but far from universal”. In the name of the pursuit of collective autonomy both leaders and participants might find it justifiable to curtail personal liberties. As we have seen with Cuba and the atrocious state of its economy, the entire notion of

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid., p. 31.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., p. 125.

‘collective autonomy’ in a world that functions with a global economy and global transfers of information and goods is a project that is at best incredibly difficult. As Miller writes: “here, then, claims for national self-determination would be claims for a kind of autonomy that cannot, in fact, be achieved”.<sup>59</sup> Miller goes on to argue that in order for national autonomy to coincide with the state, the state itself should be very much influenced by “popular will” and should therefore be democratic.

Fidel is a charismatic and persuasive speaker. He is eloquent and prolific. Though he is no longer the president of Cuba he is a self-constructed symbol of the Cuban Revolution and quite arguably the most important symbol. Throughout 50 years of revolution Fidel has developed an effective and deliberate ‘language of propaganda’. Through his speeches (now very rare) and his reflections<sup>60</sup> he explains away the sorts of contradictions present in the Cuban reality expressed by the likes of Sánchez and Cadelo. Through an artful combination of dualistic discourse, persuasion and manipulation, ritualistic use of limited words and phrases and an interesting effort to attribute agency to *la revolución* he creates a story in which Cuba, and consequently Cubans, are peacefully and willingly walking towards an ideal society.

### **Participation and Apathy**

Civic participation is something that is fundamentally integrated into Cuban socialism. With roots going back to the revolution in the latter 1950s and Guevara

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<sup>59</sup> Miller, p. 89

<sup>60</sup> Still regularly published in the state paper *Granma* and online at [www.cubadebate.cu](http://www.cubadebate.cu).



pushing for an armed population, civic participation has since become highly centralized. Early revolutionary efforts at universal civic inclusion in social society included the mass teaching campaign to campesinos in the Sierra Maestras and later throughout the entire nation. According to Maida Donante-Armada civic participation under the Castro-led Cuban state began in 1959 with the mandatory participation of all university students in the *Brigadas Estudiantiles Universitarias "Jose Antonio Echevarria"*, University Student Brigades, and all youth 14 years and older, and therefore able to bare arms, in los *Milicias Nacionales Revolucionarios*, National Revolutionary Militias. The new government showed particular interest in university students because of the sector's "historical, political prestige" and the students' "higher capacity for reflection".<sup>61</sup> By 1986, she asserts, the Ministerio del Interior (MININT) had achieved "an apparatus of societal control that was nearly absolute". One necessary component of this apparatus was the CDR, the Committees for the Defense of the Revolution.

The Cuban government over the years has created numerous outlets for both mandatory and voluntary participation. Cuban scholar Haroldo Dilla Alfonso<sup>62</sup> has dedicated a major part of his career to discussions of participation and social organization

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<sup>61</sup> Donante-Armada, M. (1996). *Sociedad civil, control social y estructura del poder en Cuba* (Civil society, social control and power structure in Cuba). Retrieved November 10, 2009 from [http://lanic.utexas.edu/la/cb/cuba/asce/cuba6/37Donate\\_fm.pdf](http://lanic.utexas.edu/la/cb/cuba/asce/cuba6/37Donate_fm.pdf). p. 284.

<sup>62</sup> Haroldo Dilla Alfonso is a well-known Cuban intellectual once associated with Cuba's *Centro de Estudios sobre America*, which was disbanded for political reasons in 1996. While once a professor at the University of Havana, Dilla has since left Cuba but remains a prolific writer on themes such as civic participation, social organization, and Cuban socialism.

in Cuba. In an article written in 1999 with Philip Oxhorn,<sup>63</sup> Dilla describes the numerous types of umbrella social organizations in Cuba. The authors explain that there are 2,154 “legal civil associations” in Cuba. These include cultural groups, theater groups, Masonic lodges, associations of pigeon fanciers, etc...

The *Organizaciones Sociales y de Masas*, “Social Organizations and of the Masses” (OSMs); while diverse in focus, share in common their “relationship with the State as “belts of transmission” in the classic, vertical, centralized schema”.<sup>64</sup> The Committees for the Defense of the Revolution (CDRs) and the Federation of Cuban Women (FMC) fall within this category of social organization, as do workers unions. Dilla and Oxhorn stress the importance of recognizing the amount of autonomy that members of these organizations enjoy. They write that individual OSMs have the ability to adopt their own positions on matters that specifically affect their “spheres of action”. Members may also enjoy the benefits of seats in government or in the Party affording their organization greater autonomy. In 1999 when Dilla and Oxhorn published the referenced article, the economic crisis had also resulted in greater autonomy for OSMs and for the aforementioned official associations.

Another sector of social organization is called “Social Community Movements”. “The origin of these movements is diverse, but almost all of them have at their roots

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<sup>63</sup> Dilla-Alfonso, H. & Oxhorn, P. (1999). Cuba: Virtudes e infortunios de la sociedad civil (Cuba: Civil society’s virtues and misfortunes). *Revista Mexicana de Sociología*, 61(4).

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 135.

some state imposed initiative...”<sup>65</sup> While their roots can be found with the state Dilla and Oxborn write that these organizations often find themselves in “contradictions with local authorities” and enjoy the autonomy to make their own decisions because they are not “judicially” associated organizations. These organizations however are distinct from dissident organizations as many of the organizations that fall into the Social Community Movements category function with the approval and cooperation of local authorities. There are no dissident groups that operate with legal consent of the state but many are tolerated as long as their activities are conducted in private. These groups tend to be small and tend to share three dominant characteristics. First, because of their size they have no “influence over national life”. Second, their membership is often composed of individuals who hope or plan to immigrate to the United States and so a high turn over rate has contributed to their ineffectiveness. Lastly, because of many of the groups’ focuses align with the beliefs of the Cuban ex-pat community in the United States, the government “marks them with an antinational stamp”.<sup>66</sup>

While I could certainly embark on an in-depth discussion of each of the categories of social organization, for the purposes of this paper I will focus very specifically on the CDRs with brief treatment of other OSMs. I will, naturally, also discuss dissident groups and, briefly, recent mass responses to public displays of dissent.

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<sup>65</sup> Dilla, p. 139.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., p. 140.

The CDRs were first organized in 1960 and were designed to act as a system of checks and balances for society at large. They were to report any counter-revolutionary activity as well keep the bureaucracy in check. There is a CDR in every neighborhood, or barrio, on the island and over the years participation has waxed and waned, apparently based in part on the country's economic solvency at a given moment. For example in the 1980s, a particularly successful economic decade, participation in the CDRs was at 80%. After the fall of the Soviet Union and the beginning of the "Special Period" in 1989, participation decreased. The CDRs are a component of what Fidel has called *Poder Popular* (Popular Power) and is a form of "participatory democracy" as opposed to "electoral democracy" which does not exist in Cuba.

Donante-Armada writes that CDRs took the place of any pre-existing neighborhood associations and "as an organization of the masses, completed the permanent presence of the system of control that the regime exercises over the bosom of the family". Similarly Armando Fernández Soriano, Haroldo Dilla Alfonso, and Margarita Castro Flores write that barrios have become "political entities", a characteristic which was increasingly formalized until 1998. It is important to remember however that while the barrios enjoyed a certain level of political independence and localized electoral democracy, they were part of a "scheme of paternalistic participation and subordinate to a vertical political order with little decentralization."<sup>67</sup> Soriano et. al

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<sup>67</sup> Soriano, et al. (1999). *Movimientos comunitarios en Cuba: un análisis comparativo (Community movements in Cuba: a comparative analysis)*. Estudios Sociológicos, XVII(51). p. 858.

do mention, in fact it is the focus of this article, that there are nascent barrio associations that are functioning outside the framework of the state. They are, however, few and far between.

CDRs have three main functions; 1. defense of the *la revolución*, 2. vigilance, and 3. “control over civilians in residential areas”.<sup>68</sup> Donante-Armada writes that in order to gain membership into other organizations, such as the FMC, one must first be a member of a CDR. The incipient CDRs were used as points of food distribution and still handle the distribution of the *libretas* (ration books). CDRs have been instrumental in executing widespread health programs such as vaccinations and mass diagnoses. It falls on the shoulder of the CDR to ensure that emigrants do not sell or take their possessions, as material possessions are considered the property of the state. In the 60s and 70s Cuba lost many of its wealthier citizens to emigration. This manner of regulation began both as an attempt at punishing emigrants and at achieving a more balanced distribution of material wealth, it was “an artful method of nourishing ‘the reclamation of a more just social distribution’”.<sup>69</sup>

In each CDR there is a president and a vice president which are each elected by the members of that particular CDR. There is also a position called “*el responsable de vigilancia*” or “he who is responsible for vigilance”. This position is a combination of appointment, MININT approval, and election. The zone assembly, group of neighboring

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<sup>68</sup> Donante-Armada, p. 288.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., p. 289.

CDRs, select a person who then must be found trustworthy by a MININT official.

Donante-Armada writes that while there is an election involved in the selection of this individual, CDR members are often afraid to vote against the MININT official's choice for fear of being thought to be counter-revolutionary.

In addition to *el responsable de vigilancia* there is a group of individuals in each barrio that serve as informants directly to MININT on barrio goings-on. These informants have no official membership to any organization but occasionally refer to themselves as "*Brigadas de Activistas Voluntarios*", "Activist Volunteers Brigade". These individuals tend to be anonymous to the rest of the community and serve not only as an extra pair of eyes, but also serve the purpose of provoking residents in an effort to uncover counter-revolutionaries. The volunteer brigades are related, and potentially a stepping stone, to the more notorious "*Brigadas de Respuesta Rápida*"<sup>70</sup>, "Rapid Response Brigades". The government claims that these brigades are "paramilitary" and a result of the "spontaneity of the masses" but Donante-Armada suspects a more direct connection to the state than such a statement would indicate.<sup>71</sup> Members of these brigades often operate in communities in which they are not familiar. So while the CDRs do contribute to the sustenance of a strong communitarian structure, the brigades infringe on that sense community by imposing strangers whose intentions are known to be

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<sup>70</sup> The BRRs were formed in the early 90s following the collapse of the Soviet Union. The BRRs are largely held responsible for the detention and violence against individuals thought to be counter-revolutionaries or dissidents. [www.arrebatos.com](http://www.arrebatos.com)

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., p. 290.

extreme. Even pro-revolution community members feel a sense of betrayal when “collectivities of strangers... act against members of the neighborhood or the workplace” undermining the solidarity the CDRs had so well established throughout the 70s and 80s.<sup>72</sup>

In a video posted on [www.cubainformacion.tv](http://www.cubainformacion.tv).<sup>73</sup> a Cuban broadcaster explains that the CDRs are a continuation of the internal political structure designed to protect Cubans from the aggression of *el imperio*, the United States. She quotes Fidel as having said: “we are going to establish a system of collective revolutionary vigilance”. During the course of her explanation of the CDRs the video shows Fidel giving a speech to an enormous crowd in what appears to be temporally very close to the revolution. There are also snapshots of planes dropping bombs and of revolutionaries marching through the streets of Havana. Once the broadcaster has sufficiently demonstrated the threat from *el imperio* and the necessity of collective vigilance, there appear photos of happy Cubans working in green houses, fixing pipes, cleaning streets, and generally working together.

The official social structure, as here represented by the CDRs, is just one example of how the government addressed participation. Another very prominent example can be found within the education system; both in the goals of a maintaining a well-educated population and the way in which that education is carried out across the island.

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<sup>72</sup> Aguirre, p. 79

<sup>73</sup> [http://www.cubainformacion.tv/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=1214&Itemid=86](http://www.cubainformacion.tv/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=1214&Itemid=86).

In the wake of the Elian Gonzalez dispute, the Cuban government initiated the “Battle of Ideas”; in fact this was the official response to the conflict.<sup>74</sup> The government capitalized on the popular feelings aroused by the Elian conflict and “rediscovered that youth could be used in the ideological struggle”.<sup>75</sup> The “Battle of Ideas” became an effort to get back to the Guevaristic effort of utilizing moral incentives to motivate students. According to a Ministry of Education official the objective was to provide “full access to the culture of education” in order to compensate for the lack of material and cultural capital.<sup>76</sup> Or perhaps “Castro was trying to ride two horses at the same time, retaining the ideological fervor for the revolution and at the same time allowing a capitalist sector to grow”.<sup>77</sup> Lutjens frames the Battle of Ideas in terms of preparation for “Cuban-style democracy” and adherence to the constitutional imperative that education is a societal responsibility. While education was just one component of the Battle of Ideas, it infused educational policy with a refocusing on the value of labor and cooperation in the creation of the ideal Cuban socialist participant. Again students, en masse, were sent to the countryside to participate in the work of the campesinos.<sup>78</sup> These countryside boarding schools increased a sense of solidarity among pupils in isolation from outside

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<sup>74</sup> Breidlid, p. 623; Lutjens, p. 177.

<sup>75</sup> Breidlid, p. 623.

<sup>76</sup> Lutjens, p. 177.

<sup>77</sup> Breidlid p. 623.

<sup>78</sup> Lutjens, p. 176.



influence, including familial, and immerse students in socialist ideology.<sup>79</sup> Whether the omission is intentional or otherwise, Lutjens never mentions the economic benefits to the government that this combination of work and learning provided.

Christopher Worthman and Lourdes Kaplan discovered that while the Cuban government cited its curricular focus on dialogic exchange, the reality in the classroom was at best a very superficial attempt at true classroom dialogue. While on an unsanctioned visit to a Havana school they observed a teacher asking questions about a piece of literature the students had yet to read based on an included illustration. The answers were embedded within the questions and it seemed obvious to Worthman and Kaplan that there were standard answers for ideologically driven questions, for example in response to the question “How do you know that this story took place in the country?” students began discussing the “rural origins” of the revolution. What struck Worthman and Kaplan most was “the disjunction between educational success and economic and social life”. The literacy pedagogy utilized in Cuban schools gives them the tools to be critical of the Batista regime and the United States but does not give them the tools to “deal with another regime”. Breidlid echoes this concern writing that the education system is designed to promote one discourse to the exclusion of all others. There is “only one truth, only one version of history”.<sup>80</sup> Worthman and Kaplan go on to recommend that literacy be redefined; that

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<sup>79</sup> I remember reading in Breidlid that the government’s motivation for incorporating work into education was also economic, not simply ideologic, but I have been unable to find that reference again.

<sup>80</sup> Breidlid, p. 627.

...literacy... must be used to work the tensions between reality (naming the world) and possibility (redefining the world) and between what we are and what we hope to become as individuals and communities.<sup>81</sup>

Breidlid again concurs with a discussion on the ways the Cuban government utilizes a discourse of inclusion (gender, race) and exclusion (ideological differences). He writes that “one of the most problematic aspects of the Cuban system, is, however, the forceful imposition of the hegemonic discourse, leaving almost no space for alternative discourse”.<sup>82</sup> While the government claims to create an environment of dialogic exchange which would prepare Cuban students for an active role in participatory democracy, these authors argue that such an effort is, at this point, paying lip service to an ideal that is intentionally undermined.

José Martí is viewed as *the* national hero of Cuba: to the Cuban state he is the embodiment of the revolutionary spirit giving his life to the fight against imperialism; to those who oppose the state he is the embodiment of true freedom and liberty which they see the state as having limited severely. Both sides of this particular coin look to the writings of José Martí for guidance, inspiration, and poetic justification for their actions and arguments. For example, on the Internet homepage of *Granma*, the state run newspaper, Martí’s quote “to be educated is the only way to be free” runs across the top of the page next to a picture of Guevara. Similarly on the website *Vitral*, the Cuban Catholic Church’s online journal, Dagoberto Valdéz Hernández quotes Martí as having

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<sup>81</sup> Worthman and Kaplan, p. 655.

<sup>82</sup> Breidlid, p. 627.

written that "... like wings to a bird, like wind to the wings, so is liberty the essence of life".<sup>83</sup> Valdez discusses in depth the ways in which the Castro regime began the revolution with what might be proper notions of liberty and civic participation. The Castros and Guevara and the other members of the party vanguard sought to equalize the social and economic conditions of Cubans with the goal of establishing a more just and liberated society. "The communion of justice and liberty clearly marked the popular character of that change".<sup>84</sup> He contends that though there is honor in such an endeavor the modes of accomplishing this were counter to the desired outcome. How does one increase the liberty of the citizens of the nation by taking social, political, and economic control out of the hands of the masses and instead adopting a paternalistic order involving centralized control of all forms of public (and Valdez argues, private) life and organization of labor and participation? According to Valdez such an effort inevitably results in the gradual loss of personal freedoms.

Benigno Aguirre, in a discussion on forms of social control in Cuba adds his name to a long list of critics of the Cuban government's behavior towards the citizens it claims to protect under a socialist manifesto. According to Aguirre social control in Cuba is enacted by a careful balance of freedom and restraint and by a blurring of the lines between external (or state driven) control and internal (or population driven) control. He writes that "Cuba is an excellent case study of a national political system that

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<sup>83</sup> Valdez, p. 2

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., p. 4

combines formal and informal systems of social control into a hegemonic ideology, a national political culture, and a centrally planned society”.<sup>85</sup> He argues that even the shadow institutions such as the black market, which I will discuss in more depth below, are controlled by the state both directly and indirectly. The presence of prostitution on an island whose government vehemently opposes the practice in rhetoric and operates such tight controls over other aspects of life, is another example of a shadow institution. Though people involved in these processes are participating in elicited behavior, their behavior is sanctioned by the government which may acknowledge the necessity of these ‘subversive’ organizations. The existence of these institutions is the result of “the inherent waste and mismanagement of a centrally managed economy”. They are part of a broader trend of Cuban individuals “enact[ing] alternative subcultures” outside the boundaries of state sanctioned modes or participation.<sup>86</sup> Another interpretation of this trend is that while the Cuban state has, since the late 90s, become more intolerant (again) of “formal political activities” outside the framework of the state, and critical of it, it has become increasingly tolerant of “criticism within the arts where counterhegemonic expressions could be monitored by the state and reincorporated into dominant frameworks”.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> Aguirre, p. 63 (?)

<sup>86</sup> Aguirre, p. 85

<sup>87</sup> Fernandes, p. 38

Regardless of the importance to the state's economy, people who do participate in the black market and shadow institutions are susceptible to the occasional government crackdown in which an individual with illicit employment may lose everything to state officials. Here we have a clear example of the state providing its citizenry with the freedom to participate in illicit activities yet with the fear of the restraining power of the government looming large and at the ready.

Aguirre writes of yet another contradiction in Cuba's manner of dealing with social control; that Cuba is an interesting combination of rigid and open. Cuba is open to participation in "officially approved activities and programs" yet rigid in "its insistence on preserving the principles the government identifies as key elements for maintaining political hegemony".<sup>88</sup>

Valdez analyzes the extent to which Cubans have gone in relinquishing their grasp on liberty writing that through the "paternalism of the State and the hegemonical role of a single ideology" Cubans have become docile and lost the autonomy necessary for any possession of political power.<sup>89</sup> Through an examination of writers such as Fromm, Martí, and Varela he concludes that Cubans have fallen into the oft occurring lethargy attached to autocratic rule with its incipient loss of self-esteem and self-actualization. Guevara warns against complacency within the revolution; against "a comfortable drowsiness which is taken advantage of by our irreconcilable enemy, by

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<sup>88</sup> Aguirre, p. 69.

<sup>89</sup> Valdez, p. 4.

imperialism, which gains ground”.<sup>90</sup> While Valdez and Guevara view the lethargy as resultant of different factors it is apparent that the elder found complacency a threat while the contemporary finds it a reality. Steeped in the debilitating bureaucracy of the Cuban state, the incentives for efficient work are almost non-existent. In Cuba, everyone is paid by the state regardless of how hard they work and often when they attempt to work hard within the structure of the state they are thwarted by others lack of efficiency or the lack of the efficiency of the state as a productive machine.<sup>91</sup> Rafael Hernández and Dilla (write “participation in productive tasks... reflects a new concept of labor and social property”. While this has been the result of consistent mass propaganda, there has been a lack of focus on attitudes towards work, and this has led to a “lack of discipline and low productivity”.<sup>92</sup>

The existence of a civil society<sup>93</sup> within Cuba indicates the government’s diminishing control over the actions of its constituents<sup>94</sup> and at the same time the result of a perceived “break in the contract between state and nation.”<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> Guevara, p. 168.

<sup>91</sup> Corbett, p. 14

<sup>92</sup> Hernández, R. & Dilla, H. (1991). Political culture and popular participation in Cuba. *Latin American Perspectives*, 18(2), p. 41.

<sup>93</sup> Dilla and Oxhorn define civil society as “the social fabric formed by a multiplicity of self-constituted entities (territorial or functional), heterogeneous in their compositions and goals, that coexist in situations of conflict, negotiations and agreements, and collectively resist the subordination of the State, at the same time that they demand inclusion into the existent political structures.” P. 130.

<sup>94</sup> Aguirre, p. 88; Dilla and Oxhorn, p. 131

<sup>95</sup> Aguirre, p. 88.

### PART 3

#### CUBA IN THE POST-SOCIALIST PERIOD

##### **Rhetorical socialism vs. market economics**

At the time of the Revolution, Cuba was divided between a landowning elite and peasant working class. The rebels' first task once in power was to dismantle the entrenched class system. The 1980s were years of financial stability and ideological success. With the support of the Soviet Union Cubans enjoyed consistency and comparatively abundant supplies of food and other resources. In the wake of the fall of the Soviet Union and the subsequent economic collapse in Cuba resulting the "Special Period in a Time of Peace", there has been a dual economy on the island. While Cubans who work for the state (this accounts for most of the white market employment as the Cuban economy is narrowly centralized) are paid in *pesos nacionales*, the tourism sector operates under the currency called *pesos convertibles* or CUCs (which are tied to the value of the dollar - .80\$ per 1 CUC, 25 *nacionales* per 1 CUC. While the CUC has been known as the tourist currency and was, until recently, forbidden for Cubans, it has now become the dominant currency. Most things that are for sale are for sale in CUCs with the exception of food and some services. Yet the Cuban who works for the state has no access to the CUC. In order to access that currency one must a) work in the black market and deal in that currency, 2) work in the tourist industry, or 3) have a relative who does either 1 or 2 or sends money from abroad. It does not take much intellectual yoga to come to the conclusion that the regime has begun to create a class system drawn along different

lines than those in place during Batista's regime. Those who have access to the dollar-tied CUC are better off than those who do not.

Fernandes writes about the government's rhetorical commitment to socialism in opposition to the post-Soviet era focus on an increasingly market based economy. This has led to the dual economy that is now the source of so much contention among Cuban bloggers. The State justifies the resultant dualism by maintaining that the development of a market based economy was and continues to be necessary for the eventual success of *la revolución*. "There are obvious contradictions between the principles of equality, justice, and collectivism professed by the Cuban state and the realities of economic adjustment, which have brought about marked inequalities and unemployment." Fernandes, p. 36. The increase in social ills as a result of the market-based economy, such as prostitution and "class segmentation" are "distortions" related to the incompleteness of the Cuban model of socialism. To the State these challenges are further illustrations of the processorial nature of *la revolución*. To many Cubans, including Sánchez and Cadelo, the economic system in place in Cuba today is another example of the disjuncture between what the State says and what they practice.

### **Cuban Education**

Prior to the revolution, Cuba's dependency on the United States was deeply entrenched. According to Carnoy (1990) "The U.S. virtually controlled the island's economic and political institutions" including "90% of the telephone and electric light



and power services”.<sup>96</sup> He goes on to describe Cuba’s relationship to the United States as a “conditioned dependency” which he explains to be a relationship in which Cuba produced a single crop, sugar cane, for nearly exclusive trade with the United States that, in return, offered Cuba preferential treatment. The trade also involved exporting nickel<sup>97</sup> and importing U.S. tourists and gamblers. The system resulted in severe economic gaps between the urban and rural populations.

One of the earliest incarnations of efforts to achieve this internal transformation was to centralize the education system and spread literacy to the peasantry. During the revolution against Batista, Castro and Guevara framed the importance of education as “the revolution within the revolution”. In one of the first widespread educational reforms, the Castro regime eliminated all private schools, converting them into public, free, equal access schools. In 1961, two years after the triumph of the revolution and shortly after declaring Cuba a socialist country, Castro shut down all schools and mobilized teachers and students alike to take to the countryside. Through the literacy campaign the Castro regime sought to eliminate illiteracy on the island within nine months, teaching “almost one million illiterates how to read”.<sup>98</sup> 1961 was the “Year of Education” and within those nine months the illiteracy rate dropped from 21% to 3.9%,

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<sup>96</sup> Carnoy, M. (1990). Education Reform and Social Transformation in Cuba, 1959-1989. In M. Carnoy & J. Samoff (Eds.), *Education and Social Transition in the Third World* (pp. 153-209). Princeton: Princeton University Press. p. 155.

<sup>97</sup> Cadelo’s June 19, 2009 blog addresses the environmental and health consequences of nickel mining in on Cuban town as one example of the hypocrisy of the state.

<sup>98</sup> Carnoy, 1990, p. 163.

“the lowest in Latin America”.<sup>99</sup> According to Breidlid, in 1964 UNESCO declared Cuba to be a “territory free of illiteracy”.<sup>100</sup>

Another important early reform was bringing urban students in contact both with rural students and with physical work. There were the “schools to the countryside” in which urban students would spend 45 days in rural areas in sugar cane production and other productive employments; and there were the “schools in the countryside”. These latter schools were boarding schools with vocational tendencies.

The literacy campaign not only brought the revolution to the most physically isolated members of Cuban society but also brought the more urban, more educated groups (particularly youth) into contact with the rural poor and illiterate. The campaign was therefore a means to connect elements in Cuban society that had been successfully separated by the Batista government.<sup>101</sup>

In addition to learning about how to become Ché’s ‘new man’ students worked for their keep. The schools were originally intended to be self-sufficient but the government drastically overestimated the students’ production and the program ended up costing the government much more than they had intended. The program eventually fell out of favor but there are still remnants today as will be discussed below.

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<sup>99</sup> Ibid., p. 175.

<sup>100</sup> Breidlid, p. 621.

<sup>101</sup> Carnoy, 1990, p. 177.

Political participation in Cuba is an integral component of the structure of Cuban socialism. It is part of Guevara's call for a new Socialist Man understood as a society of individuals who put the collective good ahead of individual good and who actively and voluntarily participate in the political and social order. Voluntary participation in Cuba is, however, strictly structured and in many cases voluntary only in the sense that there is no material compensation. According to Guevara material motivation is something only an individual formed in a capitalist society would find necessary in order to participate. In Cuba, for Ché's new man, participation was to be rewarded by moral compensation, by an understanding that an individual's participation is part of the machinery of the caring socialist state.

Given a complete overhaul of the economic and political systems, education also required a complete overhaul. The combination of an already highly educated population (comparatively speaking) and a mass movement to balance the societal scales made Cuban schools ripe soil for instilling socialist values and a clear and persistent idea of what the threat the new revolution was up against. During the first decade of *la revolución* the government sought to gain support through schools by using moralistic rather than material incentives. Imperative in this focus was a "trade-off between the goals of developing collective consciousness and increasing production and consumption".<sup>102</sup> Given the capitalistic nature of the country prior to the revolution

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<sup>102</sup> Ibid., p. 159.

altering the collective consciousness was a necessary, and continues to be a necessary, component of schooling and government driven social structures, like the CDRs.

This historical ideological component is something inherent and necessary to the success of the revolution. Schools were the primary mechanism of preparing citizens for participation in a new socialist state. Worthman and Kaplan (2001)<sup>103</sup> argue that this ‘socialist indoctrination’ is the major defect of the Cuban education system. They go on to discuss Freire’s perception that formal schooling “usually” reinforces “existing social orders” and that Cuba’s education system was no different, implying that the pre-revolution gaps in access to education and in achievement remain. Calling into question the value of universal literacy when the curriculum is geared towards teaching students to be critical in the ways the government wants them to be critical; they ask “...at what price is achievement gained?” Similarly Breidlid elaborates on the ways in which the Cuban government is struggling to maintain its educational superiority in the face of a market economy increasingly driven by capitalism, and is not succeeding. What is apparent in Cuban education is a disconnect between what students are taught to believe about their country and what they actually observe; another example of the homologic chasm between the verbal and physical world and between the master discourse model and individuals’ personal models.

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<sup>103</sup> Worthman, C. & Kaplan, L. (2001). Literacy education and dialogical exchange: Impressions of Cuban education in one classroom. *The Reading Teacher*, 54(7), 648-656.

While Lutjens describes Cuba as a ‘caring state’ and contends that educational policies pursued have resulted in a ‘caring classroom’ in which teachers are both “caregivers and embodiments of the new socialist person”. Others, including Cruz-Taura<sup>104</sup> and Hernández, see Cuba as using schools to enact the paternal role of the state. “Since 1959, Cuban educational policy has demonstrated a commitment to preparing citizens, to fairness and egalitarianism, and to norms of responsibility and respect in classrooms, schools, communities and society”.<sup>105</sup> This image of Cuba is exactly what the revolutionary founders hoped to achieve and is what Castro continues to claim to have achieved. The notion of Cuba as a caring society or in Castro’s own words the closest thing to “the most just society of the world”<sup>106</sup>.

Breidlid writes that “The economic crisis in Cuba has led to an educational crisis as well, both in terms of teacher shortages and a decrease in quality and in political/ideological commitment”.<sup>107</sup> Though he still argues that Cuban education is a system worth emulating he takes time to point out the ways in which the government is failing its students, focusing on governmental efforts to confront the teacher shortage

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<sup>104</sup> Cruz-Taura, G. (2003). *Rehabilitating education in Cuba: Assessment of conditions and policy recommendations*. Cuba Transition Project: Institute for Cuban and Cuban-American Studies, University of Miami.

<sup>105</sup> Lutjens, p. 175.

<sup>106</sup> Castro (2005).

<sup>107</sup> Breidlid, p. 617.

crisis. In 1993 Cuba lost 10% of its teachers to the dollar rich tourist industry.<sup>108</sup> From the fall of the Soviet Union to the present Cuban officials have described the country as in the midst of the Special Period. The economic effects of the loss of revenue from the Soviet bloc had severe implications for Cuba's education. In 1993, in an effort to recuperate needed capital, Castro lifted the ban on the dollar and opened the country up to tourism, directing much needed money away from social projects and rations and into the tourist sector. In a telling example, journalist Ben Corbett writes that in 1992 when rice was fifty pesos a pound, the Cuban government sank \$8 million dollars into a golf course in Varadero, a golf course that was (incidentally) off-limits to Cuban citizens.<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> Lutjens, p. 178.

<sup>109</sup> Corbett, p. 95.

## PART 4

### DISCOURSE MODELS IN CUBAN CYBERACTIVISM

*Anecdotal evidence indicates that the forced deviance caused by the failure of official institutions engenders a generalized cynicism in the population and detachment from, if not opposition to, the ideology and programs of the ruling party. It creates marginalized subcultures, such as groups of intellectuals, urban youth, the self-employed (cuentapropistas), and small businesspeople.<sup>110</sup>*

#### Voces Cubanas

*In the Cuban cultural milieu it is understood now that silence is more damaging than nonconformity.*

*Otero Lisandro<sup>111</sup>*

The Cuban blogger movement is becoming increasingly more recognized and followed but on an international comparative scale, it seems to still be very small and marginal. The bloggers are following in the footsteps of Cubans who have fought for free press in the past, notably the “Gang of 4” (year) who faxed a letter to the Cuban government saying, among other things, that “the philosophy of the government is not to serve the people but to be their dictator”<sup>112</sup> and the contributors to the Varela Project (2003) which involved a petition signed by over 10,000 Cubans asking the government for a constitutional amendment allowing for freedom of the press. The government responded to the Varela Project by arresting 75 ‘dissidents’ including independent

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<sup>110</sup> Aguirre, p. 85

<sup>111</sup> Otero, L. (1993). *La utopia cubana desde adentro: ¿adónde va Cuba hoy? (Cuban utopia from within: Where is Cuba heading today?)*. Delegación Coyoacán, México. D.F.: Siglo Veintiuno Editores, S.A. de C.V., p. 81.

<sup>112</sup> Report produced by various entities (August 7, 1998). Digital freedom network starts campaign to free jailed Cuban dissidents. Retrieved January 6, 2010 from <http://www.fiu.edu/~fcf/dfnetworkcampaign8698.html>.

journalists and members of the democratic opposition.<sup>113</sup> Given the extent of the political confrontations in the Middle East and other parts of the world it is not entirely surprising that Cuba's own cyberactivism is minimally recognized in international media outlets as it is a rebellion against ideology and the practical applications and results of that ideology which have not recently resulted in the sort of bloody rebellions which more readily draw media attention.

Although there are many Cuban bloggers currently writing from the island on a variety of topics, I have chosen to focus my research on the bloggers who post through *Voces Cubanas*. The only condition for participation is that the bloggers be Cubans residing in Cuba. When the website was first launched in January, 2009 bloggers were also required to write using their own name rather than a pseudonym as is often the case of bloggers who write their dissent under the watchful eye of politically repressive governments. As of this writing there are 18 bloggers linking their blogs to the site. They include the now world-renowned and award winning aforementioned Yoani Sánchez (*Generación Y*); her husband, an independent journalist who once wrote for the state, Reinaldo Escobar (*Desde aquí*); an imprisoned journalist, Pablo Pacheco (*Voz tras las rejas*); a photographer, Orlando Luis Pardo (Boring Home Utopics)<sup>114</sup>; and Claudia Cadelo (*Octavo Cerco*). As *Voces Cubanas* is a very new creation it has gone through a

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<sup>113</sup> Human Rights First. *The Varela Project*. Retrieved January 6, 2010 from [http://www.humanrightsfirst.org/defenders/hrd\\_cuba/hrd\\_cuba\\_01.htm](http://www.humanrightsfirst.org/defenders/hrd_cuba/hrd_cuba_01.htm)

<sup>114</sup> Pardo's photos are beautiful and poignant and would make a very interesting focal point for research of a more visual nature. Meg McLagan's article (2006) on 'making human rights claims public' through the use of images would tie in nicely.



couple of incarnations already in its young life. Up until the beginning of June 2009, the site served mainly as a link to the blogs with a couple of static and slightly outdated blogs permanently posted on the site. Following this incarnation each bloggers' posts were uploaded onto the homepage of the site as they were written. Since this shift it is now possible to track these blogs daily from one central page. While this feature remains in place there are also now buttons on the bottom of the screen giving the reader the option of translating the blog into English, or linking into Facebook or Twitter. The site's managers have also provided instructions for other Cuban bloggers should they want to add their name to growing list of participating blogs.

The content of the blogs posted on *Voces Cubanas* are all political in that they are trying to share with the world the Cuba that they know and encounter on a daily basis rather than the Cuba described in state discourse. Generally speaking, they recognize the disparity between the Cuba that ideally would be (or as Sánchez says “the Cuba that was promised to me as a girl”) and the Cuba that has come into being. Drawing from Lynch's assessment of the types of blogs in the Arab world; we can say that Sánchez and Cadelo are activist bloggers. Lynch writes that Arab activist bloggers use their blogs to “magnify the impact of contentious politics”.<sup>115</sup> While Sánchez may have begun her blog with the goal of simply communicating her version of her own reality, her blog and her life as a whole are now directed at drawing attention to the severe restrictions of the current regime and to effecting lasting change in the politics of Cuba. Sánchez, in an

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<sup>115</sup> Lynch, p. 135.

interview conducted by La Stampa, an Italian news service, says that had she known that her writing would cause so much ‘noise’ she never would have started in the first place but now that she’s already on the path she is committed to it and feels relieved to be able speak her mind after “30 years of silence.”

Like Lynch’s Arab bloggers Sánchez, Cadelo and their fellow bloggers are utilizing the Internet to engage in a public discourse that is forbidden in other sectors of Cuban society. They are seeking to “extend the boundaries of free speech” and to redefine how appropriate participation can look when real value is attached to the expression of critique and dissent as part of a collaborative approach to a hegemonic discourse. Given the Cuban government’s restrictions on the Internet and the exchange of information coupled with the lack of physical infrastructure very few Cubans have the opportunity to read these blogs. Although Sánchez explains in a Radio Martí interview now when she walks down the street, Cubans recognize her whereas before she was largely unknown on the island.<sup>116</sup>

One of the most appealing aspects of *Voces Cubanas* as a collective is the diverse forms of expression that take shape on the site. For example on June 27, 2009 Orlando Luis Pardo Lazo posted two photographs both of elderly women in Havana; one depicts a woman sleeping on a sidewalk and the other a woman walking through the city. The caption reads, in English, “Walking or lying. Just ladies. Older than the city.” Just below his post is a link to Pacheco’s blog: on this day an audio recording of whom I presume to

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<sup>116</sup> Radio Martí, May 11, 2009.

be Pacheco talking about the health problems he has accumulated while in prison and the treatment he has received as a political prisoner. The next post comes from the blog *Desde la Habana* written by Ívan García in which he comments on the ways in which the black market has changed under the current rule of “Castro II”, Raúl. He writes that in the past the black market was the one thing in Cuba that was never broken but over the last year, Raúl’s increased focus on domestic concerns has resulted in a crackdown on the black market making it less lucrative and safe than it had been in the past. He goes on to criticize the quantity of food Cubans receive with their *libretas* (ration books). Finally Cadelo posts a blog expressing frustration with foreigners who feign to not understand Spanish thereby avoiding having to pay for services rendered and the government that has made grown men and women dependent on “2 CUC” from foreigners because they cannot rely on their government to adequately pay them. She writes:

I can’t help at times to feel a profound sense of shame for all of us: the Cubans ‘mendingandole’<sup>117</sup> to the foreigners who pay for work that they (the Cubans) invent, because the State doesn’t really pay them, and the tourists play the ingenuous victims that don’t understand anything.

In an interview CubaEncuentro posted on YouTube on July 8, 2009<sup>118</sup> Cadelo and Ciro Díaz, a musician in the band ‘Porno para Ricardo’ (a band which the state has officially prohibited) and fellow blogger, they discuss their fear of being arrested. Both

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<sup>117</sup> The word ‘mendinga’ as a noun connotes a person who is a vagabond and/or a person living outside the bounds of social, formal structures. As a reflexive verb, in the above case, it means something like “turning themselves into” such a person.

<sup>118</sup> CubaEncuentra (2009, July 8). La bloguera Claudia Cadelo y el músico Ciro Díaz, voces libres desde La Habana. Retrieved August 5, 2009 from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AF6T8uegvMI>.

maintain that while they feel some fear, it is the sort of fear that is manageable and that within the current political situation anyone could be arrested for some objective charge so there is little point to worrying about being arrested for dissidence rather than some other infraction. “You can’t be sure of what’s going to happen. You don’t know if tomorrow they’re going to take you to jail.”

Although no disciplinary measures had been taken against these bloggers as of June 2009,<sup>119</sup> the state has utilized state-sponsored websites and newspapers ([www.cubadebate.cu](http://www.cubadebate.cu) and [www.granma.cu](http://www.granma.cu)) to publicly discredit Yoani Sánchez. Sánchez has emerged as the most internationally recognized Cuban blogger and therefore the most threatening to the government. In a CubaDebate article<sup>120</sup> the author, Monica Montes Medina, claimed that Yoani Sánchez was receiving money for her blogs from the Miami Mafia.<sup>121</sup> In the past the Cuban government has dealt with dissent in more direct ways. One method has been allowing dissenters to emigrate, as was the case in 1980 when Castro opened up the port of Mariel and over the course of three days over 100,000 Cubans left the country.<sup>122</sup> Another common method employed is that of arrest and intimidation. Cuba is second only to China in the number of independent journalists

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<sup>119</sup> This is, unfortunately, no longer the case.

<sup>120</sup> Montes-Medina, M. (2008, June 19). La conjura globalizada (The globalization conspiracy). Retrieved December 10, 2008 from [www.cubadebate.cu](http://www.cubadebate.cu).

<sup>121</sup> The Miami Mafia is the term used to refer to any Cubans who have immigrated to Miami and in conjunction with the United States government is often referred to in official publications as the culprits of the economic and political situation in Cuba.

<sup>122</sup> Dilla, 2002.

serving prison sentences. According to Reporters without Borders' World Report 2009, 23 independent journalists are imprisoned in Cuba, more than any other country in the region.<sup>123</sup> One such independent journalist is the aforementioned Pacheco, currently blogging from prison. He writes his blog occasionally with the input of other prisoners, passes the paper to someone visiting him who then posts the blog on the *Voces Cubanas* domain. The fact that he is still posting indicates that the Cuban government has decided to allow the bloggers to speak their minds in demonstration of the socialist tendency to blur the lines between freedom and restriction.<sup>124</sup>

### **Voices of Dissent**

While all the bloggers posting through *Voces Cubanas* are certainly worthy of independent study, I will focus on the blogs of Sánchez and Cadelo. As I have mentioned above, Sánchez is the most prominent dissident blogger in Havana. She has been interviewed by journalists throughout the world, has published books in both Italy and Brazil, has interviewed President Barack Obama via email, and has been the recipient of several international awards for journalism. In 2008 she was awarded the Ortega and Gasset prize from the Spanish newspaper *El País* for digital journalism in Spanish. Sánchez made it onto *The Time's* 2008 list of the world's most influential people. She came in under the category of "Heroes and Pioneers" along with such people as Angelina

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<sup>123</sup> ([www.rsf.org](http://www.rsf.org)).

<sup>124</sup> Dilla, 2002.

Jolie and Brad Pitt, Oprah Winfrey, and Tony Blair.<sup>125</sup> On July 27, 2009 she received Columbia University's Maria Moors Cabot prize for outstanding journalism in Latin America and the Caribbean. The prize is awarded to journalists in the Western Hemisphere who have "furthered inter-American understanding" and is the oldest international journalism award in the world. Although Sánchez was not one of the three gold medalists, she was the only additional journalist to be "awarded a special citation". Sánchez responded to the news by saying that an award from the United States will give her added protection ("minimal protection needed which does not mean immunity because in Cuba no one is immune")<sup>126</sup> against retribution from the Cuban government and a '*combustible*' for both her own writing and for her other projects which include expanding the Cuban blogosphere.<sup>127</sup>

Oscar Hijuelos, a Cuban-American write, describes Sánchez as "resourceful and courageous" and in possession of "a feisty dedication to the truth".<sup>128</sup> Phillip Penix-Tadsen, a Spanish professor at Denison University, describes her as "an authorial persona" whose blog "doubtlessly derives its value and interest from a position of

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<sup>125</sup> (<http://www.time.com/time/specials/2007/0,28757,1733748,00.html>, retrieved July 9, 2009).

<sup>126</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mlw2Lw4X060>. I believe it is worth noting here that on November 9, Sánchez was detained and beaten by unknown assailants who seemed to have authority over local police.

<sup>127</sup> (<http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5jkwzdXvSX3NiscOx32uVNB9IfEYw>).

<sup>128</sup> Hijuelos, O. (2008). The Times 2008 100: Yoani Sánchez. *Times online* retrieved July 9, 2009 from [http://www.time.com/time/specials/2007/article/0,28804,1733748\\_1733756\\_1735878,00.html](http://www.time.com/time/specials/2007/article/0,28804,1733748_1733756_1735878,00.html). ([http://www.journalism.columbia.edu/cs/ContentServer/jrn/1165270052298/JRN\\_News\\_C/1212611322343/JRNNewsDetail.htm](http://www.journalism.columbia.edu/cs/ContentServer/jrn/1165270052298/JRN_News_C/1212611322343/JRNNewsDetail.htm)).

persecution and marginality”.<sup>129</sup> He attributes her popularity not only to her forthrightness and skill as a writer but to the ways in which the Cuban government has responded to her writing. She has made enemies with the government; Raúl has blocked her blog from being accessed anywhere on the island and has reinstated restrictions on Cuban nationals’ Internet usage in hotels and cyber cafes. Penix-Tadsen points out that although there were journalists from newspapers all over the world lining up at her door for interviews her actual readership explosion occurred only after the Cuban government actively began censoring her blog on the island. In addition to contributing to an increase in her notoriety, Raúl’s censor has contributed to Sánchez’ commitment to achieving freedom of the press in Cuba. She has been integral in establishing *Voces Cubanas* and is primarily responsible for the creation and growth of *Itinerario Blogger*, a regularly held seminar to trouble shoot starting and maintaining a blog from Cuba. She is also a regular contributor to the Huffington Post. Despite the dangers and frustrations she faces in her chosen path she persists in fighting for what she believes she and all Cubans deserve.

Claudia Cadelo is a much less dominant presence on the international scene but her blogs are poignant and personal. She appeals to me as a writer for her the ways in which she melds heart, wit, cynicism, and weariness. Cadelo is what Marc Masferrar refers to as part of a “second-generation of Cuban bloggers”, those inspired by Sánchez. He describes her writing as “raw and natural and straightforward” and declares her blog a

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<sup>129</sup> Penix-Tadsen, P. (pending). Chapter title *Islanders in the Stream: Cuban bloggers and new media at the margins of globalization*. Columbia University. p, 32.

“must read” for anyone who wants to gain an understanding of Cuban reality today.<sup>130</sup> In an interview with blogger Muchacho Enfermo<sup>131</sup> of the blog My Politicophobia Cadelo responds to the question “Why do you think what you do is important?” by saying that while she is not sure whether what she does is important or not she “only want[s] to say what I have a right to say in a world where freedom of expression is an abstract concept, one might say that it’s a luxury that I afford myself: I have decided to be a free being”.<sup>132</sup> Cadelo is also the 2009 recipient of an island based Cuban blogger award issued by *Itinerario Blogger*.

Both women write on a variety of issues present in Cuba from social control mechanisms such as travel restrictions and state sponsored propaganda to economic issues such as the dual currency and low state salaries. They write of friendships and internal struggles; of walls and breeches. What these writers want is a voice; a voice that can be heard throughout Cuba, a voice that informs the discourse of the State, and a voice that is joined by those of other Cubans.

### **Internet and Cyberactivism**

Although Raúl promised to lift the ban on Cubans entering hotel Internet cafes he has yet to follow through on it and Cubans are still denied access. The execution of this

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<sup>130</sup> Masferrer, M. (2009). [http://marcmassferrer.typepad.com/uncommon\\_sense/2009/10/meet-cuban-blogger-claudia-cadelo-cuba.html](http://marcmassferrer.typepad.com/uncommon_sense/2009/10/meet-cuban-blogger-claudia-cadelo-cuba.html).

<sup>131</sup> Muchacho Enfermo (2009, March 1). Interview with Claudia Cadelo. Retrieved December 20, 2009 from <http://mypoliticophobia.blogspot.com/2009/03/interview-with-claudia-cadelo.html>.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid.



ban is poignantly illustrated in a video Sánchez posted on her blog on May 10, 2009, now available through YouTube<sup>133</sup> in which her husband and fellow blogger Reinaldo Escobar, requests access to a computer in Hotel Melia Cohíba while Sánchez films the conversation from behind a newspaper. He is informed that access is only available to foreigners:

Hotel employee: *No, no I can't sell you an hour of Internet, because the connection here is only for foreigners.*

Reinaldo: *I'm sorry, I don't hear well.*

Employee: *The connection here is only for foreigners.*

Reinaldo: *Since when?*

Employee: *It's been a month.*

Reinaldo: *I came a week ago and was able to connect.*

Employee: *There was a resolution that says that it's only for foreigners. Look here... It's happening in all of the hotels... It's a resolution from MINTUR (the Ministry of Tourism)*

Reinaldo then reminds the employee that the Cuban constitution opposes discrimination on the basis of national origin and points out that no one in Mexico would ever say “this is available to everyone in the world except Mexicans”. In May of 2009 Radio Martí conducted a five part series on Cuban bloggers. These include interviews with Yoani Sánchez, Claudia Cadelo, and Reinaldo Escobar and focus on issues of access to the Internet and the newly re-enforced restrictions on Cuban nationals’ Internet usage. In an interview on May 12, 2009<sup>134</sup> Escobar further explains that to limit the Internet to

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<sup>133</sup> (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0LpSCqfKPeA>),

<sup>134</sup> Radio Martí (2009, May 12). Confirman con un video las restricciones a Internet en Cuba (They confirm the restrictions on Internet in Cuba with a video). Retrieved August 10, 2009 from <http://www.martinoticias.com/fullstory.aspx?id=F04C643D-5239-4AEE-AAC020FBF1A7E40B>.

someone because of their political opinions is a completely different beast than limiting the internet based on national origin.

In June of 2009 Iran held an election widely decried as rigged and therefore invalid. Angry Iranians in support of losing opposition candidates poured into the streets to protest to results. They flooded Twitter with posts of violence, blocked communication, and organizational strategies and blogs revealed the extent of the Iranian populations frustration with the government's methods of social and political control. From Cuba, Sánchez and Cadelo followed the events closely.

Cadelo, June 15, writes that while there are important differences between the blogger communities in Iran and Cuba, namely the disparate levels of available technology, there exist compelling similarities. She writes: "But one thing connects me to those far off bloggers, as if the cable that connects me to the Internet already exists in my head, they, like me, are young and dream of three things: HUMAN RIGHTS, LIBERTY AND CHANGE." She goes on to describe the way Cuban news sources portrayed the election in Iran showing only those crowds who supported President Ahmadinejad. She knew immediately that it was a lie. Cadelo writes that Cuban television is "a game of enigmas, you have to read between the lines, negate concepts, turn around puzzles, doubt in every instant..." She speculates that were Cuban politics ever addressed on Iranian news programs reporters would depict a population in complete support of their 'president' ready to give their lives over for *la revolución*. "But from my

little blog I send my solidarity and my admiration, we are much fewer, but we are also here on the net and they give us strength”.

Sánchez, June 17, echoes Cadelo’s solidarity and voices her frustration at not being able to follow what is happening in Iran on the Internet and displeasure that Cuban news sources said nothing of people’s faces painted green and the mass movement of Iranians utilizing social networking sites to express their own frustration and communicate their situation with the rest of the world. She writes:

I envision a generation sick of old structures that wants change, a people – like me – who have stopped believing in enlightened leaders who guide us like a herd... If there is still time to give my solidarity to the Iranian bloggers, well here is a post to tell them: “Today it is you, tomorrow it could be us”.

### **Language of Propaganda and La Patria**

Given the amount of energy the State and Fidel in particular have placed in creating and perpetuating a discourse which thrives upon a binary world of good (Cuba) and evil (capitalism and its poster child, the United States) it is not surprising that this dualism is a topic upon which both Cadelo and Sánchez have dwelt. Sánchez, June 4, reminisces of when she was 14 years old (1989) and had learned of Poland’s working class rebellion against the USSR. She, her parents, and many other Cubans felt at that moment a profound sense of having been betrayed. Sánchez then felt for the first time that everything “they had instilled in me was perhaps not true”. Now Sánchez’ son is 14 years old. In school he repeats the phrase “pioneers for communism, we will be like Ché” and Sánchez wonders when he will realize that he’s been fed lies as well.

Sánchez, June 20, posted a blog written by Cadelo on Sánchez' Huffington Post blog spot. Cadelo writes of what she thinks is the “most extreme poster” she has seen in which the State pushes its “Battle of Ideas”. In this case the poster is entitled “The Fighting Philosophy of Our People” and is composed of a list of 10 important revolutionary tips including:

- “To cause the greatest possible number of casualties on the active enemy forces is our main goal.”
- and “Keep the fighting spirit, for huge and painful sacrifices are required to win the day.”

Cadelo muses as to who this enemy is with whom Cuba is locked in war, for clearly the poster indicates that Cuba is at war. She asks, “where does it come from, the philosophy that tells me that I, as a citizen, must destroy, kill, annihilate, sacrifice, die, command, direct and obey?” She expresses disappointment in the State's continuing reliance on the tactics of the original regime and the idea of the “New Man” pointing out that these “new” reforms have already been proven to be failures.<sup>135</sup> Cadelo also expresses disappointment in her fellow Cubans who swallow the propaganda and act as if such posters reflect a reality they experience.

Similarly Sánchez writes on June 29 of the ever-agreeing bobbleheads nodding ‘yes’ whenever the car to which they are attached passes over uneven ground. She compares the bobbleheads to Cubans at large writing “the sport of saying ‘yes’ has resulted in too many lost souls of my generation, who are burdened with the weight of the consequences

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<sup>135</sup> [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/yoani-sanchez/claudia-cadelo-is-cuba-at\\_b\\_218473.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/yoani-sanchez/claudia-cadelo-is-cuba-at_b_218473.html)

of assent and the compromises our parents have made”. In typically clear and direct language, Sánchez goes on to write:

We could begin by saying ‘no’ to centralism, bureaucracy, the cult of personality, absurd prohibitions and gerontocracy. Like a fan that rotates from right to left, this is how I would move if someone consulted me on the question of the actual government. ‘No’ is the first word that pops into my head when someone asks me if the Cuba of today is anything like what was promised to me as a girl. My disapprobation will not be transmitted on t.v., nor will the little complacent applause of some boss be worth much to me but at least it is not automatic like the ‘yes’ of the little plastic dog that sticks its head out from behind the windshield.

Her frustration with Castro’s Cuba is apparent but more importantly what she is voicing here is frustration with her fellow Cubans for the apathy, and perhaps the submission, they demonstrate in the face of the existing disparities and injustices.

While many Cubans are looking toward the new Obama administration with hope to advance trade, travel, and communication between the two nations Fidel continues to make reference to Cuba’s constant “resistance ... to the most potent imperialist power in history”<sup>136</sup> and the tension between the Cuban State and Cuban-Americans continues to cause ripples on both sides of the narrow water that divides the two nations.

On June 4, 2009 the Organization of American States convened in San Pedro Sula, Honduras and made the historic announcement that Cuba, despite the objection of the United States<sup>137</sup>, would finally be invited to join the table of OAS. The Cuban journal *Juventud Rebelde* described this as a symbol of the collective rebellion of Latin American

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<sup>136</sup> From a letter Castro wrote to Evo Morales in commemoration of Morales’ 50<sup>th</sup> birthday. <http://www.granma.cu/espanol/2009/octubre/mar27/carta.html> retrieved October 27, 2009.

<sup>137</sup> largely influenced by the Cuban-American lobby who oppose Cuba’s human rights record

states against the power of the United States of America. Fidel admits that this is an important step in the right direction but that Cuba refrains from accepting the offer because, while Cuba desires peace and respects international cooperation, it “has been, is, and will be intransigent in the defense of its principles”.<sup>138</sup> Sánchez, June 5, is quick to offer biting criticism of Cuba’s decision to remain aloof from the OAS. The invitation from the OAS put the Castro regime into what Sánchez sees as a familiar predicament that always ends badly; “to hide between belligerence and harmony”. Harmony “burns them like salt of the skin and drowns them like water in the lungs”. Accepting a position of harmony would directly contradict what Sánchez refers to as “the logic of confrontation” the government has forged and within which it “feels so comfortable”. She sees this as yet another door opening for the people of Cuba and yet another opportunity for the government to demonstrate its unwillingness to accept the help and cooperation of other nations. She writes:

And so it seems that those who control the helm of my country prefer the sticky slogan “With the OAS or without the OAS, we will win the fight” that they yelled in the 60s. Notwithstanding, now no one can see the battle on any side, the enemy has become blurred and the victory... ay the victory... has been reduced to maintaining power all this time.

Sánchez calls the Castro regime out for yet again forfeiting the good of the people in favor of the perpetuation of a myth.

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<sup>138</sup> (Mauricio Vicent, June 4, 2009, ElPaís.com, *Cuba rejects entering the OAS after 47 years*, [http://www.elpais.com/articulo/internacional/Cuba/rechaza/entrar/OEA/despues/47/anos/elpepuint/20090604elpepuint\\_4/Tes](http://www.elpais.com/articulo/internacional/Cuba/rechaza/entrar/OEA/despues/47/anos/elpepuint/20090604elpepuint_4/Tes)).

Zweiland is a play based on the struggle of two people in East Berlin to overcome the obstacles established with the construction of the Berlin wall, to fight in order to buy, to love, to survive. Sánchez attended the play at the Gran Teatro in Havana on June 2. She saw an incredible amount of resonance between the struggles of the people in the play and those of Cubans today. One of the features of the characters in the play that most stood out to her was their ability, or tendency, to forget about the “threatening shadow” hovering over them and to “find refuge in intimacy, to dedicate almost all of oneself to surviving”. She writes:

If only our wall were like theirs: of stone, cement and wire, we could take a hammer and a pick to tear it down. If only we could touch it and say “here it begins, here it ends” I am sure that we would have already brought it down. Nonetheless, this barrier that separates us from so many things is –in our case- intangible and reinforced by the sea. If for one moment this wall of controls and prohibitions that surrounds us materialized, there would be hilarious graffiti all over it. People would bring a ladder in order to see to the other side –just as the dance did Friday night- or they would try to dig a hole in its hard foundation. If none of that worked, they would take an abundant and defiant piss against the cold structure.

In her June 30 blog post Sánchez writes of leadership, thoughts provoked by the events in Honduras at the time. She writes of her evolving awareness of the power dynamics associated with leadership. She had thought that dictators were a dying breed and that democracy was making progress but has since become more skeptical. She opens the blog by referring to democracy as a fragile plant (pictured is a small plant growing out of what appears to be a gutter above a porch roof) that must be tended carefully for its roots are easily unmoored. After musing on the comparative evils of dictatorship over military control she ends the blog by writing the following: “Careful! Within the wide range that

dictators inhabit, the worst combination is when these converge -into one person- the figure of *caudillo* and of armed gorilla.” Her choice of words here is important. I intentionally left the word *caudillo* untranslated because, although it translates as *leader*, it is also a name often used to refer to Franco and therefore implies a more weighty meaning than the simple translation of *leader* would do. *Gorila* means both ‘gorilla’ and ‘bodyguard’ and in both languages invokes an image, when used to refer to a person, of someone with a lot of brute force and a very short fuse.

In her June 10 and 12 posts Cadelo addresses censorship. She notes that MSN (Hotmail) are no longer accessible in Cuba and that Facebook’s Declaration of Rights and Responsibilities states that anyone living in a nation under a U.S. embargo is not to utilize the site.<sup>139</sup> On June 12 she posts an interview she conducted with a Cuban living in China. The individual informs Cadelo that in China the government is blocking more and more sites across the country. He/she thought at first that when he/she could not open YouTube it was simply because YouTube was experiencing difficulties. He/she shortly became aware that MSN/Hotmail had been blocked and that Octavo Cerco, Cadelo’s own blog, was banned from Chinese Internet.

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<sup>139</sup> Perhaps in June this was the case, but as of this writing the pertinent item in Facebook’s Declaration of Rights and Responsibilities (16.2.) reads as follows: “If you are located in a country emgargoed by the United States, or are on the U.S. Department’s list of Specially Designated Nationals you will not engage in commercial activities on Facebook (such as advertising or payments) or operate a Platform application or website.” [www.facebook.com/terms.php](http://www.facebook.com/terms.php)



### **Participation as Social Control**

The State might hope that it has accomplished a certain level of collective autonomy and fraternity, but members of its Young Communist association have taken the calls for civic participation in a new and interesting direction. On June 29, Cadelo writes that a group of youth attempted to break into her friend's car. She admits that car theft and "amputations" are now so common that people rarely leave their car radios inside their cars when they park, whether there is a parking attendant or not. On this particular occasion before the youths had a chance to effectively break into the car, neighbors of the car's owner "raised the alarm" and the perpetrators fled. Only then did these witnesses see that the car had a blue license plate; an indication that it is a State vehicle. Upon reporting the attempted crime Cadelo's friend was informed that the car belonged to the headquarters of the Union of Young Communists, a political youth organization focused on volunteerism and militarization.

The lines between civic participation and social control in Cuba seem blurred at best, if not overlapping. While artists in Cuba may experience less censorship than journalists and bloggers enjoy<sup>140</sup> this "degree of freedom" in the process of discourse development is on occasion tempered by the State's control over social spaces and artistic participation. Cadelo writes of such an experience. On June 9, 2009<sup>141</sup> a famous Mexican band, Café Tacuba, performed in Havana's Plaza de La Revolución in front of the U.S. interests

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<sup>140</sup> Fernandes.

<sup>141</sup> Cadelo (2009, June 17).

building. The concert was an officially organized event and though many people, including Cadelo, felt a bit cheated that rather than have a vantage point which included the band itself, all they could see was the banner which reads “*Todo por la Revolución*”, the black flags lined up behind the banner, and the flashing red letters of the U.S. interest building. On a night when Cadelo did not particularly want to be reminded of the political climate under which she lives, events made a turn for the worse. At the end of the night Cuban police began to clear the plaza by pushing and yelling at attendants. Cadelo tells of standing on a platform refusing to move when she hears “10 whistles at my back”. She turns around and says to the whistle blowers “I am not going to ask for the reasons behind why I have to leave, but since you’re going to kick me out, at least have the decency to not treat me like a cow.” She was then approached by three police officers who informed her that it did not matter how she left, whether “by whistle or by force” but that she had to leave. To these officers she replied “Are they paying you to kick me out? No? Then the time you are passing here is covered by your salary, it is not my fault if this is slow work, if you ask me nicely to leave I will go, if you whistle at me again, I’m staying”.

At the end of the 2008, responding to an increase in the number of assaults on passengers and bus drivers in the middle of the night, the State assigned police officers to bus routes during the most dangerous hours. On June 23, 2009 Cadelo recounts the experiences of her friend, Rolando, one night on a bus with his daughter. Cadelo writes that while her first inclination was to think of this new policy as reassuring she reminded

herself that “what happens is that in Cuba civil order and military discipline are synonymous”. In addition to preventing assaults the police effectively banned playing music as well, as had been the custom. On this particular night in December a group of young people just leaving the clubs boarded a bus and began to play reggaetón music. Little did they know that there were two armed plain-clothes police officers on the bus as well. Without identifying themselves they began fighting with the rebel music players. Cadelo reports that panic ensued, in the full bus, the officers (now identified) ordered the driver to stop the bus but to keep the doors closed. The occupants frantically tried to exit the bus and disappear in to the dark streets but one of the officers “took out his gun and fired inside the bus, several times”. She describes the next moments as follows:

The terror was uncontrollable, people jumped out of the small windows and finally they opened the doors and everyone tried to leave at the same time. Rolando got his daughter out of the bus first and when his feet touched the asphalt he felt a searing pain in his left leg and fainted.

Rolando had been shot through his thigh. The offending officers experienced no negative consequences or penalties for their extreme behavior. Cadelo writes that days later an article published in *Granma* praised the new bus security measures and the officers who were contributing to maintaining civil order. Cadelo concludes her post writing that after Rolando’s experience “he is convince of just on thing: he, and all of us, are unprotected in this country.”

Cadelo, June 6, again recounts the experience of a friend, Ciro, on a bus, this time returning from a camping vacation outside of the city. She reports on the solidarity a group of Cuban passengers displays when two police officers wrongly arrested the bus

driver. Before the police had the chance to drive off with the driver in the car, the passengers descended on the car, removing the driver “under the noses of the officers” who didn’t wait to confront “the beach mob” and did “what was most reasonable: they fled.” With the driver liberated, his story told, and the bus back on the road, every passenger signed a letter of witness with both their full names and their identification numbers. They presented him with both their signatures and pictures of the events should he find use for them in his defense. She concludes the post by writing:

They arrived a little later than planned, but they all felt proud, sure that the driver could say that this was the best trip of his life.

In the absence of a system of civic participation in which citizens feel that truly agentic in the development of hegemonic discourse, some see the emigration as the only viable alternative. In her typical poignant and personal way Cadelo (July 22) makes it clear that she finds it unacceptable that Cubans have the choice of living under totalitarianism or of emigrating and living the life of an invisible immigrant. She writes “I see all around me that to leave the country is the Cuban dream”. In addition to venting her frustration that emigration is perceived not “as an option, but as an exit” she wonders when the Cuban government will begin to take responsibility for dividing Cubans between those who stay on the island and those who jump for the nearest exit. Perhaps Cadelo would agree with Kramer (see below) that the ‘option’ to stay in a totalitarian country or to flee to another is not an element of freedom at all, but rather one of oppression and another symptom of totalitarian rule. Sánchez has also often mentioned her frustration with the limitations placed on Cubans who wish to leave the country. She

has many times been invited to participate in international conferences and to receive awards for her writing yet she has been denied permission to travel outside of the country each time she has petitioned the government.<sup>142</sup>

In an example of what seems possibly a more passive form of censorship and/or surveillance, Cadelo's phone was, all of a sudden, disconnected. On June 4 she writes that employees at Etecsa, the Cuban telephone company, informed her that by some "unknown error someone ordered her phone be disconnected." The phone line was reconnected only to suffer the same fate repeatedly and to finally settle into a temperamental compromise between the extremes of connected and disconnected. She informs her readers, with regret, that each week at Etecsa offices throughout the city, State Security officials take over, giving the employees an out-of-office respite for a couple of hours. She writes; "they (the beings without faces) do their work (no one knows what it is), thank the workers for their collaboration, verbally of course, and then leave".

At a point in her life when she knew less about politics, Cadelo decided to "find out how many opposition parties there were in Cuba... and to become a member of each." She discovered that things were not so simple as she had thought. Even in the opposition parties she found that there was no room for someone as oppositional as she. It is for this reason, more than any other, that she began to write her blog. She wanted "to

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<sup>142</sup> In Sánchez' October 15th post she includes a video of her most recent attempt to convince the government to allow her to leave the country. She engages in quite a debate with the officials present. *Cantarles las cuarenta* (Sing to them the 40s). Retrieved October 17, 2009 from <http://www.desdecuba.com/generaciony/?p=2268>.

be able to be part of All that exists to exact Change in the Cuban government (peacefully, of course). She writes of manifestations put together by opposing groups making demands on the government. These manifestations tend to be ineffective in part because they are inconsistently delivered. She suggests that if the Cuban bloggers are going to present a manifestation that it should be repeated every week, every month until their objectives are met. She concludes by writing that “had anyone asked [her], [her] demands would have been:

- Renounce, in full, the President of States and Ministers [Raúl Castro] and the National Assembly
- Constitution of a State of Rights and preparation for free elections, with all parties participating
- Sour the Secret Services and public burden and government structures related to the communist party.

Liberty and the idea of freedom can be viewed as comparative. An individual or a society compares his/her own freedom and liberty with that of a different individual or society. Matthew H. Kramer (2002)<sup>143</sup> argues that there are no degrees of freedom; that one either is or is not free to do a particular thing. There is no such thing as partial freedom. He distinguishes between particular and overall liberty indicating that the lack of degrees of freedom is something that applies exclusively to particular freedoms rather than an overall sense of liberty. Some theorists contend that when there are bureaucratic hurdles involved in attaining something considered an element of freedom, such as the State’s permission for an individual to leave Cuba, the hassle diminishes the freedom

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<sup>143</sup>Kramer, M.H. (2002). Why freedoms do not exist by degrees. *Political Studies* 50, 230-243.

itself. The author suggests that in fact, such hurdles as bureaucracy and taxes render the desired thing no longer a freedom when the creation of these obstacles was intended to deter individuals from seeking the given objective. In the case of Cubans being restricted from leaving their country without their government's permission, Kramer would respond that leaving the country for Cubans is not an element of their freedom at all, as distinguished from being an element of freedom merely diminished by bureaucracy.

While Kramer, and perhaps Cadelo, views these sorts of physical barriers as limits to freedom, María Caridad Campistrous, proffers an alternate perspective. To Campistrous freedom (liberty) can be viewed as either a physical state or a mental state. When one views oneself as mentally free, or at liberty, then the importance or strength of physical limitations diminishes. While perhaps not entirely in agreement with Campistrous, Sánchez comments that while the Cuban government uses the power of who can and cannot exit or enter the country to imprison certain individuals within the boundaries of the island, either for crimes of the past or for crimes yet to be committed (as is the case in the government's denial of Sánchez' exit visa) freedom is something relative. She writes that "one must not store their resentment against their prison guards for they also are prisoners today of their power, their fear, and nearness of their inevitable demise".<sup>144</sup> Echoing Cadelo's above-mentioned contention, Sánchez notes the ways in which the Cuban government's actions are dividing families and damaging their very souls. The 1,689<sup>th</sup> commenter, Amaraluna, on this particular post points out that while the

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<sup>144</sup> Sánchez (2009, June 14).

government may claim to be socialist and to act in the best interest of all Cubans, there are blatant exceptions that make such claim farce.

### **Dual Economy**

A dominant theme in Cuban alternative discourse is what has been referred to as a system of ‘tourism apartheid’.<sup>145</sup> As discussed in the earlier section on Cuba’s dual economy, economic hardships have presented the State with the need to perform a challenging balancing act of developing a market based tourism sector while perpetuating a local socialist structure. The State’s solution has often been to separate Cubans from tourists and to forbid Cubans from certain privileges such as staying in hotels, visiting certain beaches, and using Internet cafes.

While the government claims to be working towards the most just and equitable society on earth, Cuban bloggers such as Sánchez and Cadelo see priorities that involve catering to tourists while discriminating against Cubans. Sánchez’ June 19<sup>th</sup> blog comments on the now decrepit Calle de San Lazarus pointing out that while buildings in the tourist districts of Havana are being renovated, buildings on streets such as this, lacking the “magic of the Malecón” and with thousands of people hidden behind their “unpainted façades” will be allowed to crumble to the ground.<sup>146</sup>

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<sup>145</sup> Google search results in several blog citations including [http://dir.salon.com/story/people/feature/2002/02/06/cuba\\_apart/](http://dir.salon.com/story/people/feature/2002/02/06/cuba_apart/).

<sup>146</sup> Having seen the “magic” of the Malecón, which includes numerous buildings in various states of decrepitude, I speculate that Sánchez is being a touch dramatic here but the drama helps to illustrate her point, which I believe is valid.



Sánchez, June 3, writes that the state salary is nothing more than a symbol and is “insufficient everywhere”. She contends that what really makes people both apply for custodial and security jobs and continue to work at their jobs once they have been hired is the snack. The snack typically consists of a little sandwich of ham and cheese and a soda. She writes that without the money from reselling the snack many of these workers would have abandoned their posts long ago. This begs the question, what kind of a just society would make the salaries of full-time employees so meager that selling a small sandwich and a soda would make the difference between a job being worth the effort or not?

On June 11, the BBC’s Havana correspondent, Fernando Ravsberg, published a blog on the economic reality of Cuba. He took issue with the claim that Cubans, in general, live in poverty pointing out that 50% of Cubans receive money from abroad or through means beyond their official salaries. He reports that there are Cuban millionaires and that even rural tobacco farmers can make a lot of money if they work within the right markets. Ravsberg writes that “hundreds of thousands of Cubans are middle class citizens”. There is a considerable body of evidence that Cuban classes exist and are increasingly more noticeable but given the ideological proclivities of the Cuban State the existence of a class structure serves perhaps as a slap in the face to those Cubans who abide by the rules in place yet suffer the greatest economic ramifications. But more important is Cadelo’s response (June 14) to Ravsberg’s blog. She will not “enumerate the many cases of absurd misery that I see from my apartment in Vedado every day, of

the numerous friends I have living in poverty, of the dining room of the destitute that I have in the corner of my house and much less of my own needs”. What she will do and does is to ask where these wealthy Cubans are? Where are the Cubans “who do not ride in *guaguas* (buses)”, or in trains, or who able to rent rooms in hotels? Cadelo argues that while poverty is a reality for a majority of Cubans the real poverty is found in the ways in which Cubans’ freedom has been limited. She writes of Cubans as a people who:

...do not have the right to dissent, who do not have free elections, who do not have political rights, who do not have freedom of the press..., who need a “Yuma” (American) to assume/accept economic projects, who are not allowed to move freely throughout national territory..., who cannot change the government of their country, who have only one party, who cannot NOT be pioneers, who cannot, in the end, do with their money as they please.

As if she were not clear enough throughout the body of her blog, she wraps it up saying that really, the impoverished are also foreign correspondents “who live in the paradox of having to write news or of having to give up being journalists”.

One of many ways of tapping into the tourist market is to rent out rooms in one’s house to foreigners. These are called “*casas particulares*” and allow Cubans an opportunity to earn a living from which they receive CUC. Cadelo writes on June 25 that while this is a very easy and effective way of moving beyond “measuring kilos to pay the light bill” the financial security it brings comes at a cost. The Cuban government is uncomfortable with Cubans interacting with foreigners and so in the case of the “*casas particulares*” the state makes sure that they are running as they want. Cadelo explains that inspectors arrive every day to ensure that the names of all of the guests have been

noted, that their identification numbers are recorded, that the number of people allowed per room has not been exceeded, that their stays have not been less than 24 hours, etc. In addition to musing as to the logic behind the unofficial prohibitions of Cubans freely associating with foreigners she explains that when in such situations a visiting tourist is less than honorable, there is no recourse for his offense.

While children sit in school rooms learning how they too can be like the heroes of the Revolution, sacrificing personal gain for the greater good, many of their parents are earning all or part of their money participating in illicit activities. Sánchez, June 20, writes that this sort of behavior is now pervasive in Cuban society. From the person who steals the backpack of a tourist to the customs agent who allows illegal goods past to the police officer who does not issue a fine; Cuban society and the Cuban government is rife with corruption and unofficially sanctioned illicit behavior. “With the resulting profits of these “misdemeanors” the walls of the bubble that protect the discourse are strengthened, but also they dissuade anyone from protesting publicly”.

### **Education**

As I described earlier, Guevara’s concept of the new social man is something that still plays into the Cuban curriculum and influences the way children think of the country itself. Schools are one of the primary settings for broadcasting the State’s master discourse model but while teaching children the value of socialist principles, the ideology of the revolution, and to be vigilant of the constant threat of *el imperio*, children are also learning the value of critical thinking, literacy, and other valuable skills in being able to

understand and formulate their own discourse models some of which run counter to the hegemonic discourse of the State.

Unfortunately what the bloggers and writers such as Hernandez, Aguirre, and Corbett see as Cubans' apathy is an indication both of the ineffectiveness of State officiated modes of participation and school transmitted propaganda as well as the State's effectiveness in eliminating a sense of agency and autonomy within its citizens. While international academics and researchers are busy praising Cuba for its educational achievements Sánchez decries the state of Cuban education in her June 16<sup>th</sup> blog on proper orthography. She notes that several students in secondary school spell the name "Quijote" with a "K" and confuse "s" and "c" when writing. Spanish is a phonetic language and therefore, perhaps, spelling errors are less forgivable. While the misspelling of the name "Quijote" is a grave offense, because a) the letter "k" is so rarely used in Spanish and b) the name itself is "a symbol of our Spanishness" what offends Sánchez less is the misspelling of the word "civil". One student with whom she worked spelled the word "sibir". This student is excused because, as Sánchez writes, "in this case one can understand, because the concept is so little known in this society where citizens are considered soldiers and not beings with rights."

Cadelo, June 8, writes of a 15 year old boy who believes that he has discovered the key to success in Cuba. He serves as the president of the Student Federation of Middle Schools (*Federación Estudiantil de la Enseñanza Media*) despite the fact that he does not care "*un pepino*" about the ideology. His presidency affords him the right to

skip school and exams and is an automatic entrance pass to university. While the system will enable his aloofness from learning until then, and feed his thirst for “the honey of power” Cadelo laments for him. She writes that he will discover in university that he is unprepared for everything. “He has no idea of the sadness and faint-heartedness that can come from Living in Lies.” Although he is “a good boy” one day in “his fragmented path to the top he will forget his true fate and become a fool and an opportunist.”

Sánchez and Cadelo are highly critical of the Cuban government and of the apathy of their fellow Cubans. But I think it is also obvious that they feel a sense of commitment to the future of Cuba and Cubans. They do not reject the idea of *la Patria*, they reject the physical and ideological restrictions the State places on their lives. While the government actively takes measures to limit Sánchez, Cadelo and other bloggers’ circle of influence, the existence and the force of these counterhegemonic discourses are having and will continue to have lasting impacts on State discourse.

## CONCLUSION

### Revolutionary Parallels

*Their impotence came not from their vices but from their servitude; and their vices, on the other hand, were born from their impotence.*

*Sartre*

There are intriguing parallels between the beginnings of the revolution in 1956 and the current blogger movement. In 1956, according to Sartre, the average Cuban peasant was unaware of his/her “reality.” They had grown complacent with a discourse model that involved a rigid hierarchy in which the peasantry were relied on for their agricultural production but were excluded from society not only because of geographic isolation but because they were unaware that life could be different. Sartre writes that the most successful component of the rebels’ earliest efforts was their ability to show the peasants both what it meant to be respected and how disposable they were to the government. Through their actions (which included working side by side with the peasants) the rebels helped the peasantry “become aware of its servitude...” (p. 19).

Similarly, Cuban bloggers are seeking to help other Cubans become more aware of the limitations the government has placed on their freedoms. Although their ability to reach out to an island based Cuban audience is limited it does seem that effecting lasting and liberating change in Cuba is their dominant goal. In a blog posted on July 15, 2009

Miriam Celaya<sup>147</sup> writes to her fellow bloggers on *Voces Cubanas* expressing gratitude that they all have a place in which they can write without being censored. She writes:

This is another space –of those in the blogosphere to which we are permitted total access- where we can discuss everything that has been prohibited to us, that they have hidden from us, that they want us to forget.

She goes on to urge other Cubans to read the blogs posted on *Voces Cubanas* before the government restricts island access to it as it has done with [www.desdecuba.com](http://www.desdecuba.com), the domain for Generación Y. Celaya writes that “there is no virus more contagious than liberty (*No hay virus más contagioso que la libertad*)” a sentiment shared by revolutionaries like Guevara and Castro 50 years ago when they set out to liberate Cubans from Batista’s rigid class structure. She informs her readers that while many of her compatriots do not have access to the liberating influence of the blogs via the Internet, she and other bloggers share their posts through the use of cds and flash drives. 6 weeks after Celaya posted this blog on *Voces Cubanas*, the Cuban government finally (after 8 months of uncensored blogging) restricted access to the aggregator site, and all included sites, on August 28, 2009.

Sartre (1961)<sup>148</sup> asks how men with good intentions can later turn out to be corruptible. He writes:

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<sup>147</sup> Celaya, M. (July 15, 2009). Nota de reconocimiento a los lectores (Note of recognition to the readers) Retrieved July 21, 2009 from [http://vocescubanas.com/sin\\_evasion/2009/07/](http://vocescubanas.com/sin_evasion/2009/07/).

<sup>148</sup> Sartre, J.P. (1961). *Sartre on Cuba*. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, Publishers.

No one asked himself then, why, in 1933 and in 1944, men who had in the beginning been honest and rebellious in the face of the corruption of the rest, had let themselves in turn be corrupted little by little, and ended by betraying the country.

One could easily replace the dates 1933 and 1944 with that of 1959 and wonder aloud when the Castro regime became more concerned with maintaining power than in doing what is best for the people as it seemed sincere, according to Sartre, about accomplishing at the beginning of *la revolución*.

Perhaps the Cuban State should entertain the possibility that these bloggers, rather than being a threat to the established order are a product of an ideology that preaches justice and a history of revolutionaries. They may then see that while Castro and his vanguard used violence to overthrow a violent, repressive regime, these Cuban revolutionaries are using words and ideas to overthrow a regime that maintains its hold through the use of words and ideas. They would perhaps see, that the defiant spirit Sánchez and Cadelo display day in and day out is the same defiant spirit that pushed Castro to force change in the same country half a century ago. Regardless of the consequences, these writers are committed to living free lives and to spreading that freedom throughout their island, altering the face of discourse and participation in the process.



APPENDIX A

AN EXCERPT FROM ERNESTO CHE GUEVARA'S "SOCIALISM AND MAN IN  
CUBA"

An excerpt from Ernesto Ché Guevara's "Socialism and Man in Cuba":

Allow me to attempt to come to some conclusions:

We socialists are more free because we are more fulfilled; we are more fulfilled because we are more free.

The skeleton of our freedom is formed, but it lacks the protein substance and the draperies; we shall create them.

Our freedom and its daily sustenance are the color of blood and are swollen with sacrifice.

Our sacrifice is a conscious one; it is the payment for the freedom we are constructing.

The road is long and unknown in part; we are aware of our limitations. We shall make the twenty-first-century man, we ourselves.

We shall be forged in daily action, creating a new man with a new technology.

The personality plays the role of mobilization and leadership insofar as it incarnates the highest virtues and aspirations of the people and is not detoured.

The road is opened up by the vanguard group, the best among the good, the party.

The fundamental clay of our work is the youth; in it we have deposited our hopes and we are preparing it to take the banner from our hands.

APPENDIX B

POR ESO DECIMOS ¡PATRIA O MUERTE!

***Por eso decimos ¡Patria o Muerte!***<sup>1</sup>

*Podremos morir, si, pero claudicar  
jamás...  
Sin Patria no queremos la vida  
Sin dignidad no queremos la vida...  
Sin justicia no queremos la vida...  
Sin pan para nuestros hijos no queremos  
la vida...  
Sin porvenir no queremos la vida...  
Podremos morir,  
No porque despreciemos la vida,  
No porque despreciemos la obra  
creadora que nuestro pueblo  
realiza,  
No porque no vemos el porvenir  
luminoso a que tenemos derecho  
con nuestro trabajo  
Sino porque la vida de todos nosotros  
esta indisolublemente ligada a  
esa idea y ese porvenir  
Y por eso decimos ¡Patria o Muerte!  
Y por eso,  
Por eso el himno de nuestros luchadores  
por la independencia estableció  
bien claro  
Que vivir en cadenas era vivir en  
oprobios y aprenda sumidas,  
Y que morir por la  
Patria es vivir.*

**And so we say, *Patria* or Death!**

We could die, yes, but never give in...  
Without the *Patria* we don't want life...  
Without dignity we don't want life...  
Without justice we don't want life...  
Without bread for our children we don't  
want life...  
Without a future we don't want life...  
We could die,  
but not because we despise life,  
but not because we despise the formative  
work that our people have  
realized,  
but not because we don't see a luminous  
future to which we have a right  
with our work  
But because the life of all of us is  
indelibly tied to that idea and that  
future

And so we say, *Patria* or Death!

And so,

And so our freedom fighters' hymn  
made very clear

That to live in chains was to live in  
shame and [aprenda sumida],<sup>2</sup>

And that to die for the  
*Patria* is to live

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<sup>1</sup> This poem was painted on an interior wall of a semi-abandoned building I came across in Havana, Cuba

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<sup>2</sup> 'aprenda' means learning or knowledge and 'sumida' means submerged in vice – I can't seem to come up with a good succinct translation for that sentiment

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<sup>1</sup> The word *red* in Spanish means network and is often used to refer to the Internet.

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## VITA

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