


DEBATES

## “We Are Happy Here”: Creating Communist Cuba and the Mariel Crisis of 1980

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### Abstract

At a time when Cuban immigrants are seeking political asylum at historically unprecedented rates, most press and scholarly accounts consistently mirror earlier portrayals of Cubans' mass exodus from the island in one key aspect: they ascribe to refugees a primarily economic reason for their decision to leave and offer little discussion of political factors. To illuminate the need for such analysis, this article examines the Mariel Boatlift of 1980, when approximately 125,000 Cubans, most of them thirty years old or younger, left Cuba. No other exodus of Cubans was more demonized than the Mariel, both by Cuba's supporters and leadership and by exile opponents of the communist state. Exploring how the intensification of ideological criteria for inclusion in the Cuban Revolution undermined the quality of Cubans' liberation under socialism prior to Mariel, this article explores state policies and the deep politicization of everyday life and identity. Key political factors explain many young people's alienation and the degree to which the Cuban state sanctioned and directed extreme measures of repression to discredit those who wanted to leave as lazy, sexually degenerate *escoria* (human trash).

**Keywords:** revolution; communism; immigration; refugees; race

### Resumen

En un momento en el que los inmigrantes cubanos están solicitando asilo político a un ritmo sin precedentes, la mayoría de los relatos de la prensa y los estudiosos reflejan sistemáticamente las anteriores descripciones del éxodo masivo de cubanos de la isla en un aspecto clave: atribuyen a los refugiados una razón principalmente económica para su decisión de marcharse, con escasa discusión de los factores políticos. Para iluminar la necesidad de tal análisis, este artículo examina el Éxodo del Mariel de 1980, cuando aproximadamente 125.000 cubanos, la mayoría de ellos de treinta años o menos, abandonaron Cuba. Ningún otro éxodo de cubanos fue más demonizado que el del Mariel, tanto por los partidarios y dirigentes de Cuba como por los opositores al Estado comunista en el exilio. Explorando cómo la intensificación de los criterios ideológicos para la inclusión en la Revolución minó la calidad de la liberación de los cubanos bajo el socialismo en los años setenta, se analiza las políticas estatales y la profunda politización de la vida cotidiana y la identidad. Factores claves políticos explican la alienación de muchos jóvenes, así como el grado en que el Estado cubano sancionó y dirigió medidas extremas de represión para desacreditar a los que querían marcharse como vagos, degenerados sexuales y *escoria* “antisocial”.

**Palabras clave:** revolución; comunismo; inmigración; refugiados; raza

In the nearly six decades that the Communist Party has governed Cuba, no other year produced as great an exodus from the island to the United States as 2022 did.<sup>1</sup> According to US Customs and Border Control, in eleven months, 306,612 Cubans, or 2.8 percent of the island's total population of just over 11 million crossed the United States' southern border seeking political asylum. For anyone familiar with the history of Cuban immigration to the United States since 1961, when Fidel Castro formally transformed the character of the 1959 Cuban Revolution to adopt Communist Party rule, this figure is astounding. Its meaning and origins require not only explanation but also historical contextualization in earlier moments of exodus in which the internal political culture and reality of Cuba were largely unknown or dismissed by much of the world.

Although Cuban officials have been quick to blame the pandemic, the collapse of tourism, and, of course, the US embargo for provoking the exodus rather than their own economic policies and repression, citizens' sense of powerlessness and desire to control their own destinies have clear political and ideological implications: as many scholars before have shown, exodus has long been a means for exporting dissent and discontent in Cuba (Pedraza 2007). But there is far more to the story.

Thirty years ago, the fall of the Soviet bloc resulted in the legalization of self-employment and the creation of multiple state corporations charged with competing both against one another and with small-time citizen-entrepreneurs. Since then, ironically, Cuba has come to mimic its pre-1993 political economy for the simple reason that the state, not private enterprise, dominates the same percentage of the economy as it did before the post-Soviet pro-capitalist reforms and has recovered its monopolistic control over the distribution of resources, especially since the formal transfer of power from Fidel Castro to Raúl in 2009. If by 1983 the communist state controlled 82 percent of the island's economy through direct government ownership of land, industry, and businesses, today Raúl Castro and Miguel Díaz-Canel have achieved similar degrees of control through capitalist means, especially through the rise of GAESA, a massive, monopolist state-owned umbrella corporation run by generals of the Revolutionary Armed Forces: GAESA is the primary reason the state controls 80 percent of the island economy across all sectors today. Cuba's 2019 Constitution, like that of 1976, ascribes exclusive rights to the Communist Party to define what "socialism" can and should mean. Importantly, Cuba's one-party (*partido único*) approach to policy making has never divorced the nature of the economy from the ideological legitimization of its rule. Arguably, this same logic must also apply to how citizens' reactions and degree of agency are understood. This is especially the case when, for different but equally political reasons, one generation after another of citizens raised and educated in Cuba has not only chosen to leave but also has done so collectively, in a kind of periodic mass protest.

In terms of sheer numbers, only two previous moments can compare to that of Cuba today: 1968–1971 and the Mariel Boatlift of 1980. The political conditions that propelled an exodus in those moments, as in 2022, were intimately related to catastrophic economic policies and self-serving political justifications launched from the top of the Cuban state. The combination catalyzed discontent, a sense of betrayal, outrage, and just plain exhaustion from below. In looking back at these policies, recent scholarship reveals just how inextricable economic factors were and remain from the political system that created them: it also leaves little doubt that citizens' disgust with their lack of control over policy making, increasing ability to gain knowledge of the outside world independently of the state, and government demands for ideological homogeneity went hand in hand with the

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<sup>1</sup> Although the Cuban state nationalized the economy in fall 1960 and Fidel Castro famously announced he was a "Marxist Leninist" in December 1961, the Communist Party did not officially govern Cuba until 1965 when all structural and ideological remnants of Fidel Castro's own 26th of July Movement were dissolved.

decision to flee (Sierra Madero 2019; Sierra Madero 2022, 431–486; Bustamante and Lambe 2019, 244–274; Bustamante and Manzor 2021).

The first of these moments occurred in 1968–1972 in the wake of La Ofensiva Revolucionaria. Announced by Fidel Castro in March 1968, the Ofensiva Revolucionaria's policies entailed the seizure of fifty-two thousand remaining privately held small businesses (many of whose services the state was never able to replace), the abandonment of salary differentials in favor of a flat structure in which custodians and doctors received virtually the same rate of pay, and a societywide volunteer labor campaign for a “Ten Million Ton” harvest in 1969–1970 that ultimately failed to reach its goal. Not only did these policies combine to paralyze and deeply impoverish the economy; Fidel Castro's subsequent efforts to shift responsibility for the crisis to Cuba's emotionally drained citizens brought Cuba to an unprecedented brink politically (Bengelsdorf 1994, 89–104; Guerra 2012, 290–316; Pérez-Stable 1993, 110–122). In 1971, absenteeism from the workplace skyrocketed to more than 20 percent a day on any given day across all sectors—a rate that, as the Harvard scholar Jorge Domínguez (1978, 275–276) asserts, could best be equated with a national strike. Although the corresponding exodus of 297,318 Cubans (most of whom traveled by plane from Varadero to the United States) began in 1966, it peaked with the flight of thousands of previously loyal small business owners, disaffected rural peasants, and more working-class Cubans, starting in 1968 until Cuban leaders ended these “Freedom Flights” in 1972 (Bustamante 2021, 121, 129, 132, 183, 185; García 1996, 43–44; Torres 2001, 72, table 3).

However, today's exodus might best be understood in relation to the Mariel Boatlift of 1980 in terms of the latter's numeric intensity as well as the political threat that Cuban leaders identified in the unexpected urgency expressed by those who desired to leave. Bringing the second decade of the Cuban Revolution to a close, few events proved as far-reaching in their effects as the Mariel Boatlift of 1980. For many of those who either left Cuba through Mariel or participated in state-organized collective acts of violence against them before their departure, the experience left a traumatizing legacy (Sierra Madero 2019; García 2012; Triay 2019). Perhaps more importantly, El Mariel opened highly policed and previously closed windows onto the quality of citizens' liberation under socialism and their affinity for the goal of constructing the New Man. While the Cuban state's official discourse, feverishly launched by Fidel Castro, blamed “greed” among those who wanted to leave, many *marielitos* and their detractors alike explained the desire to flee on the unprecedented visits of more than a hundred thousand Cuban exiles in the previous two years. Whether their politically divergent views or the material evidence of their financial success in the United States caused islanders to rethink and often reject the communist government's version of reality remains in dispute, as Michael Bustamante argues. Still, the myriad ways the return of exiles broke with expectations that the Cuban government had promoted about the exiles themselves and life in the United States undeniably shook the faith of thousands (Bustamante 2021, 179–214).

The return of those once condemned as *gusanos* (worms) and officially relabeled as *la comunidad en el exterior* (the community abroad) sent shock waves through society as relatives and neighbors encountered memories and views of “another Cuba” in person, heard about them, or watched Jesús Díaz's wildly popular documentary, *55 Hermanos*, an emotional film about the December 1977 visit of the first Antonio Maceo Brigade, an organization of young diasporic Cubans who espoused politically pluralistic beliefs, including socialism (Bustamante 2021, 188–193). The impact of these visits makes even more sense, however, when one considers not only the context of islanders' ideological isolation in the years prior to Mariel but also the deep discursive saturation to which all Cubans, especially younger ones, had recently endured.

Indeed, the decade leading up to Mariel was the most economically prosperous that Cubans had experienced to date under state socialism, thanks to Cuba's formal entry into

the Soviet trading bloc in 1972, the consequential mass expansion of Soviet subsidies, stabilization of prices, and increased incentives to work after Soviet advisers insisted on a return to wage differentials based on skills, knowledge, and productivity (Mesa-Lago 1981). Perhaps for this very reason, Cuban leaders found the story of *marielitos*' alleged immorality and shallow, self-centered motivations for leaving so important to tell. From April to October of that year, 124,779 Cubans crossed the Florida Straits to seek refuge in the United States—86,488 during the month of May alone (Clark, Lasaga, and Reque 1981, 5, table 1). Within a matter of days, Cuban citizens from all walks of life and from across the island responded to the possibility of flight in a way that no government official expected. The foreign media soon declared that Cuba's "New Man" had abandoned socialism: in protest of Fidel Castro's one-man, one-party system of rule, Cubans were voting with their feet (Dupes Hawk, Villella, and Leyva de Varona 2014, 31). Who were the *marielitos*, as they came to be called? In what terms did Cuban officials characterize them and their reasons for leaving—and why? What lessons can be learned from the kind of society and political culture Cuba developed in the decade before the Mariel that explain the drama and the trauma that defined El Mariel, as it is known, and subsequent moments of exodus like that of 2022?

### Origins and scope of El Mariel

The crisis that led to the Mariel exodus began when six asylum seekers commandeered and drove a government bus through the gates of the Peruvian embassy in Havana on the afternoon of April 1, 1980, provoking the death of one of the Cuban guards. In retribution for Peru's refusal to turn back the refugees, Fidel Castro lifted the armed guard at the embassy gates on April 4. Symbolic of the broad spectrum of asylum seekers who eventually left through Mariel, the group that crashed the gates included a lesbian couple, one of whom was accused of being a "common delinquent" for taking naked pictures of herself. The Peruvian ambassador Ernesto Pinto Bazurco Rittler refused to surrender any of them despite Cuban officials' demands, citing the fact that the two women were, like all Cubans, subject to overt political discrimination and that their acts did not constitute crimes. Three days later, when Fidel Castro withdrew the guards, the very first Cuban to walk through the gates and ask for asylum was a black man. According to Ambassador Pinto, "Given the uncertain climate, he had a valiant attitude and said to me, 'I hope that many follow my example'" (Pinto Bazurco Rittler 2023, 412).

Within the first twenty-four hours after the withdrawal of embassy guards, 10,800 Cubans invaded and occupied embassy grounds; their goal was political asylum, not in Peru but in the United States (Clark, Lasaga, and Reque 1981, 2–3; Dupes Hawk, Villella, and Leyva de Varona 2014, 29–30; Ojito 2005, 75–93). Cubans of African descent figured prominently among the growing tide of refugees seeking political asylum at the Peruvian embassy, to the shock of much of the world, who believed Fidel's claim that socialist Cuba had achieved an unparalleled elimination of racism. Their numbers also shocked fellow Cubans raised to think that the civil rights movement in the United States failed because it had never adopted class warfare and socialism as Cuba had. "By contrast [to the many black asylees]," attests Ambassador Pinto, "among the group of police, military, informers and elements of the so-called State Security that gathered around the Embassy, I could not distinguish even one Afro-Cuban" (Pinto Bazurco Rittler 2023, 412).

To accommodate the migrant flood and simultaneously implement a campaign of damage control, state authorities not only opened the port of Mariel to exiles willing to bring their relatives to the United States but also forced every arriving vessel to bring back tens of thousands of other Cubans to Miami. By making their departure dependent on *gusanos* ("worms," the term the government developed to condemn Cubans who left in and

after 1960), Fidel Castro smeared their reasons for leaving. He reduced motives to the same half-truths about selfishness, neocolonial values, greed, and admiration for the Yankee way of life. Fidel also famously stacked the ships with thousands of “undesirables.” In addition to mentally ill people and elderly dependents, these ultimately included at least twenty thousand people who had spent at least some time in Cuban prisons. However, most were not perpetrators of violent crimes such as burglary or murder but were citizens with proven “immunity” to political indoctrination and rehabilitation, as well as many who participated in the black market, refusing to confine themselves to rations and the state-controlled economy (Stephens 2021, 2–4). While the group of common prisoners, aged, and disabled constituted a small but visible minority, the overall character of the exodus demonstrated how effectively the hand of the state replaced spontaneity and asylees’ individual acts of valor. As the world watched, tens of thousands applied for release papers to go to the United States. Contrary to expectations, less than 40 percent of refugees were actually picked up by relatives. The rest were either forced to leave by the regime or came on their own initiative by “proving” their counterrevolutionary credentials to police (Clark, Lasaga, and Reque 1981, 7). The majority resorted to false or exaggerated confessions of promiscuity, homosexuality, prostitution, pimping, black marketeering, and other “antisocial” behavior anathema to revolutionary morality and sanctioned in Communist law (Pérez-Rey 2004). In this way, the refugees’ own self-accounts inadvertently came to reflect “the truth” behind Fidel Castro’s contention that the vast majority of *marielitos* were nothing but criminals, lumpen [meaning “lazy social parasites”], and *escoria* (scum).

Without precedent, Mariel was also transformative for all involved and deeply traumatizing for many. Not since the US-backed exile invasion at Playa Girón in 1961 did the tone of official public discourse aspire to such radical extremes. This was initially truer in South Florida than Cuba: there exiles exploded with anti-Castro fever. Miami Cubans who had shunned politics and extremists’ plans to “take back” the island suddenly began fundraising and buying combat gear. Shouts of “War! War! War!” could be heard on street corners as groups of Cuban demonstrators, both young and old, began to appear (Ojito 2005, 139–140). The first boats arrived in Mariel harbor on April 19, 1980, the very anniversary of Cuba’s victory at Playa Girón. Consequently, overt comparisons between the two “battles against imperialism” abounded on the island. Historical timing also served to justify uncompromising, violent rejections of citizens who dared to contest the Revolution as *escoria*, literally, human trash.

Why did the Mariel crisis so radicalize Cubans on the island and abroad? One reason was the position taken by Fidel Castro. In the paradoxical fashion that came to typify the Cuban government’s explanation of Mariel, Fidel used his Labor Day speech of May 1, 1980, to simultaneously blame the United States for inciting citizens to leave the island and claim responsibility for the Mariel exodus itself, depicting it as a retaliatory policy he had announced months earlier, on International Women’s Day in March 1980, before the crisis at the Peruvian embassy (Smith 1987, 199–202). According to Fidel Castro, the United States enticed citizens to leave by hailing arrivals as imperial heroes and by conducting direct operations with the Central Intelligence Agency (Castro 1980, 52–53).

To thunderous applause and choruses of “¡Qué se vayan! ¡Qué se vaya la escoria!” Fidel proclaimed that true political loyalty was both “voluntary” and rooted in “revolutionary” biology: “The policy of the Revolution was clearly stated, an idea very central to us, and that is that the work of a revolution and the construction of socialism is the task of absolutely free and absolutely willing men and women. The person who does not have revolutionary genes, who does not have revolutionary blood, who does not have a mind adapted to the idea of a revolution, who does not have the heart to adapt to the effort and heroism of a revolution—we do not need that person in this country” (Castro 1980, 53–54; Álvarez 1980). In other words, a willingness to follow the dictates of the state defined the

only valid form of agency that citizens could enjoy. Those who lacked the genes, mind, and heart that the state required to ensure the Cuban Revolution's success represented a lower form of humanity that was not just unwelcome but despised in socialist Cuba. By implication, the New Man was *un ser superior*, a superior form of human being. Not surprisingly, such words legitimated tactics of intimidation and repression that dehumanized victims and perpetrators alike.

To explain the extremes of action and discourse of Mariel, Cuban officials and many American observers—including Wayne Smith, head of the then recently opened US Interests Section in Havana—mostly concurred, citing “economic” reasons rather than political discontent (Castro 1980, 52; Smith 1987, 195–196; Bohning 1980, 1A, 14A; Dupes Hawk, Villeda, and Leyva de Varona 2014, 32–33). Yet in 1980, Cuba was deep into what islanders have famously called *la época de las vacas gordas* (the time of the fat cows). Children of the revolution, most Cuban refugees of Mariel had been shaped by institutions of the twenty-year-old communist state, particularly those whose ideological rigidity had been ramped up after in 1972 Cuba joined the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance, or COMECON, the Soviet bloc, as a way out of economic chaos. At the time and until the collapse of the Soviet Union, Cuba's Communist Party was and remained the proportionally smallest Communist Party in the contemporary communist world (LeoGrande 1980, 399–400). Beyond many others, the fact alone that most *marielitos* had been loyal citizens, revolutionaries, or *militantes* may explain both why they left and the degree of animosity other citizens expressed toward them.<sup>2</sup> In many ways, the Sovietization of pedagogy, national holidays, the reach of the military into everyday life and methods of political evaluation for promotion in jobs and schools ended what may be called a sort of “grassroots dictatorship” of the Cuban Revolution in the 1960s and replaced it with a Fidelist-Leninist totalitarianizing state (Guerra 2012, 13, 23, 200–201, 226, 256).

In contrast, the age, class, and color of those who left were also signs that many of the most pervasive myths of the Cuban Revolution about the absolute loyalty and gratitude of Blacks, proletarians, and youth were rooted far more in official discourse than in facts on the ground. The socioeconomic and cultural profile of those who came to the United States through Mariel broke sharply with all previous waves of Cuban refugees, most of whom had been middle or upper class, at least 50 percent female and nearly 97 percent white. By contrast, *marielitos* were 70 percent male, 92 percent working class, and up to 40 percent mixed race or Black. They were also about ten years younger, averaging only thirty years of age. They reflected a wider geographic distribution, despite the fact that getting to Mariel in Havana province often proved as challenging as leaving Cuba (Clark, Lasaga, and Reque 1981, 7–8; García 1996, 68; Benson and Clealand 2021, 1–17).<sup>3</sup> In other words, they had grown up under the revolution. Many of them, younger than thirty, had known no other Cuba.

<sup>2</sup> Soviet money reversed a negative per capita rate of growth that had averaged 1.3 percent from 1966 to 1970 and increased it, at least temporarily, to double digits. The move not only flooded Cuba with US\$4.4 billion in unfettered Soviet aid per year but also further committed Cuba to Leninist vanguardism as a model for the state. The aid, together with a renewed, legally charged drive to collectivize remaining private land in state hands and an undiversified sugar economy, guaranteed Cuba's dependence on the Soviet Union. It reached what economist Carmelo Mesa-Lago then called “the point of no return” (Mesa-Lago 1981, 30–31, 90, 99, 182–183; Mesa-Lago 2019; Mesa-Lago 1974, 106; del Aguila 1985, 23) At the time, the Cuban government admitted to receiving only \$1.5 million per year (Morgan 1974).

<sup>3</sup> The claim that 40 percent of *marielitos* were nonwhite is disputed, often because US Census figures did not reflect that data. Then, the Census did not allow “Hispanics” to also identify their race or ethnicity. Recent scholarship shows that black Cubans faced a double silencing: white exiles not only discriminated against them but also denied their numbers and existence over time.

Beginning in the 1960s, young people experienced increasing pressure from the government to excel at school and in their working life. Having become a formal part of the Soviet trading bloc in 1972, Cuba, and its political and print culture, had also become increasingly “Sovietized.” Million-person mass rallies featuring *la masa compacta* of haphazardly organized citizens in regular dress evolved into massive military parades with tens of thousands of uniformed, armed young people marching in time behind giant tanks and Stalin-red banners that recalled their Soviet counterparts. On a giant billboard, Marx, Engels, and Lenin flanked visages of José Martí, Antonio Maceo, and Máximo Gómez in the Plaza of the Revolution; a whimsical Che Guevara stared off into the magical future from the Ministry of the Interior building, head of state security (“Un pueblo entero” 1974, 6–7). To the established state holidays in January and July, the state added October 17, the triumph of the Russian Revolution, the birthday of Karl Marx, and in 1974, invited Soviet premier Leonid Brezhnev to participate. As seen in Figure 1, Cuban-Soviet bonds were complete: “Who doubts that one day the ties of all true revolutionaries and all liberated peoples will be as fraternal as those that today unite Cuba and the Soviet Union?” asked Fidel Castro (“Cuba-URSS Internacionalismo Militante” 1974, 2–3).

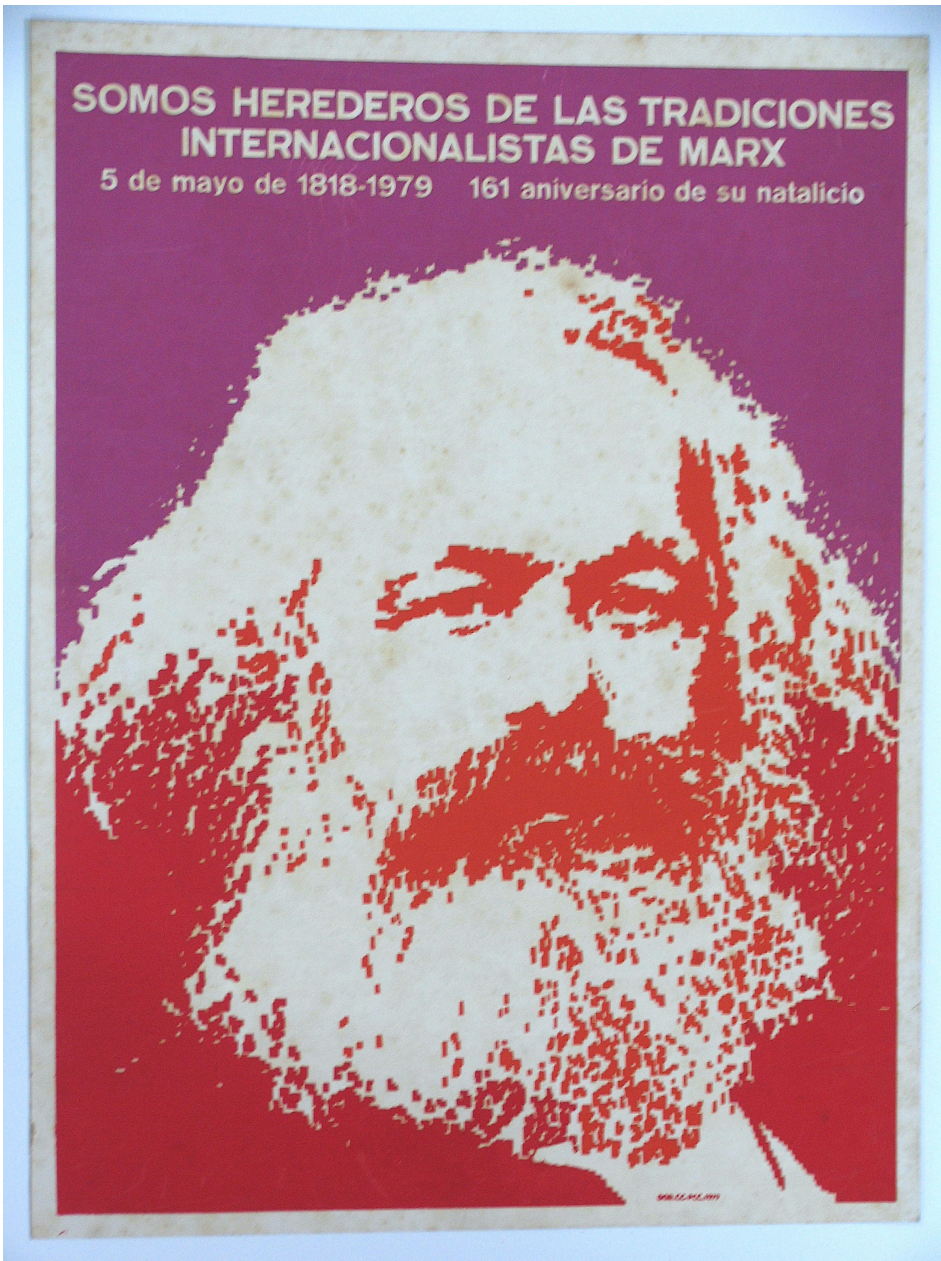
In the 1970s, omnipresent messaging through revolutionary curriculum spread to encompass the visual landscape of schools and neighborhood murals maintained by the Committees for the Defense of the Revolution (CDRs), that is, neighborhood surveillance groups that, as of 1968, all Cubans were required to join. The mass printing of propaganda posters specifically geared at young people proved central. First printed as an official slogan of the 1971 Congress of Education and Culture, the phrase “The Revolution has placed its most profound hopes in the youth and confides the future in it” (*La Revolución ha puesto en la juventud sus más profundas esperanzas y confía a ella su futuro*) appeared repeatedly on posters featuring smiling, studying, and saluting children dressed in the uniform of the Communist Pioneers, especially from 1975 to 1978 (Figure 2)

Through the inescapability of revolutionary “advertisements” like billboards as well as slogans painted on walls and posters, students learned that studying, particularly in the science and technical fields (as opposed to the humanities and social sciences), “propelled the Revolution forward” (Figure 3). Diligent study represented a daily tribute to the dead revolutionaries Comandantes Camilo Cienfuegos and Ernesto “Che” Guevara, the two martyrs emphasized across curricula for children as young as three in government day cares all the way through teenagers in high school (Figure 4) To study in socialist Cuba was as much a historical extension of Cuba’s victory over imperialism as proof of the revolution’s future triumph over underdevelopment, the primary legacy of imperialism. According to a poster printed for schools in the mid-1970s that featured the voice and face of Fidel, the task for students was sacred: “This generation must consecrate its efforts to [the goal of economic] development.”<sup>4</sup>

By its own account, there were also no limits to the Communist Party’s reach or importance. In the 1970s, the party was the pinnacle of the revolution. According to Fidel Castro (1976, 2), the Communist Party was its “soul.” Party statutes attested that members’ embodiment of the “cardinal principles” of Marxist-Leninism reflected “the apex and highest evolutionary achievement of economic, political, social, and philosophical thought in the history of humanity” (“Política ideológica” 1977, inside cover).

Similar messages directed at younger citizens resounded across the visual landscape of schools. In the first poster of a series, Fidel Castro reminded students from the walls of classrooms and hallways that “all the attention paid to the Party and to the Communist Youth can *never* be considered excessive” (poster 1 of *Porque ellos son el futuro*, ca. 1977).

<sup>4</sup> Jorge Macle, then head of the map collection at the Archivo Nacional de Cuba, rescued this and a large collection of related posters from destruction when the archive director ordered them sent to *materia prima* (recycling). I photographed the collection in summer 2004.



**Figure 1.** After Cuba's formal integration into the Soviet bloc in 1972, the state launched a campaign to incorporate Soviet-style icons, heroes, and holidays into the popular consciousness. In celebrating Karl Marx's birthday, Cubans were supposed to see themselves as "heirs" of his "internationalism" and their revolution as a fulfillment of Soviet-led historical teleology. (1979) Sección de Mapas y Planos, Archivo Nacional de Cuba. Photographed in 2004.

Greeting students in the breezeway of the newly established Lenin School as well as billboards and signs "blanket[ing] Havana" was also a new slogan: *Donde nace un Comunista, mueren las dificultades* (Where a communist is born, all difficulties die) (Morgan 1974; Flores Uribe 1974, 60).





**Figure 2.** Originally the slogan of Cuba's 1971 Congress of Education and Culture, Fidel Castro's declaration—"The Revolution has placed its most profound hopes in the youth and confides the future in it"—became an inescapable part of the educational system's visual landscape in middle and upper schools for a more than a decade (1978). Sección de Mapas y Planos, Archivo Nacional de Cuba. Photographed in 2004.

Students also were subject to a higher standard than any other Cuban, literally called by Fidel and the Unión de Jóvenes Comunistas to be "everyday heroes" not "heroes for a day" (Figure 5). Indeed, even the standard of perfection was never too high for Cuban youth: "The cleanest, the purest, the most honest must be the student, because they are the workers of tomorrow; they are called to develop, to a maximum point of perfection, socialist society and advance deliberately along the paths of communism" (Figure 6).

In schools themselves, all-or-nothing messages concerning the ultimate objective of a communist education invariably accompanied larger-than-life images of revolutionary figures. These were also almost always male, even when hung in hallways like that of the Ana Betancourt School for peasant girls, expanded in the 1970s into a complex of former private mansions in Miramar. Watching over the girls much like a giant portrait of the ubiquitous Sacred Heart of Jesus might once have done in prerevolutionary Catholic schools, the pensive, macho, cigar-smoking Che, a ghostly but still sexy embodiment of the New Man, reminded girls that the highest privilege was not to live in socialist Cuba but to die for socialism (Salado 1972, 13).

Another poster in the series titled *Porque ellos son el futuro* (Because They Are the Future) explained that joining the Communist Pioneers was a required initial step "to forming the revolutionary man . . . the communist man. All the attention paid to the Party and to the [Communist] Youth can *never* be considered excessive" (Figure 7). Part of a different series, another poster aimed at boys was more concise in defining expectations. "And a Pioneer Should Be Like This" described the ideal revolutionary child as compliant and, above all, well mannered. Whether at the table, standing at attention, interacting with teachers, adults, parents, or girls, "[every] child should be a little proletarian gentleman, that respectful man [who is] courteous and considerate of the woman" ("Y un pionero debe ser así" 1977). Ideally, schools were supposed to be no more than "an extension of the home," and vice versa ("Y en el aula cada día ¡Presente!" 1977).



**Figure 3.** In addition to echoing the slogan of the 1971 Congress of Education and Culture, other posters in this series contend, “To study is to propel the Revolution forward.” Recruiting students to specialize in “polytechnical” studies that would allow them to guarantee “the advance of the fatherland,” it portrayed Cuba’s national development as dependent on them (1978) Sección de Mapas y Planos, Archivo Nacional de Cuba. Photographed in 2004.

On this score, the visual landscapes of political propaganda surrounding Cuban kids in schools fused easily into a panorama of related messages meant for the public at large. While posters declared all survivors of the Assault on the Moncada Barracks already “absolved by history,” every man and woman looked forward to either “living with the Revolution or dying by her side” (“Absueltos por la historia” 1972; “El Pueblo Cubano vivirá” 1981). Other than this, responsibilities seemed few. Cubans had become, by implication, politically passive, perpetual heroes-in-training: *La Revolución marcha bien* (The Revolution marches on well), a smiling poster of Fidel, told the virtual and real crowds before him on July 26, 1975: “Struggle, work, advance. Keep going!” (Figure 8).

Rarely did the coherence of public discourse break down in the Revolution’s second decade. One after another, Cuban magazines and media created an echo chamber, repeating how utterly “happy” work made Cubans. Titled “How the New Man Is Formed,” a typical article explored state boarding schools in El Escambray: “[Here] students are happy because they work, because they are useful, because they become men and women through work which educates,” declared the writer (Oramas 1976, 8).<sup>5</sup> “With the [state] plan of combining study with work, Cuban youth acquires the right to become the New Man like Che,” echoed sixteen-year-old Unión de Jóvenes Comunistas or UJC militant Jorge Patricio Castillo (Oramas 1976, 10).

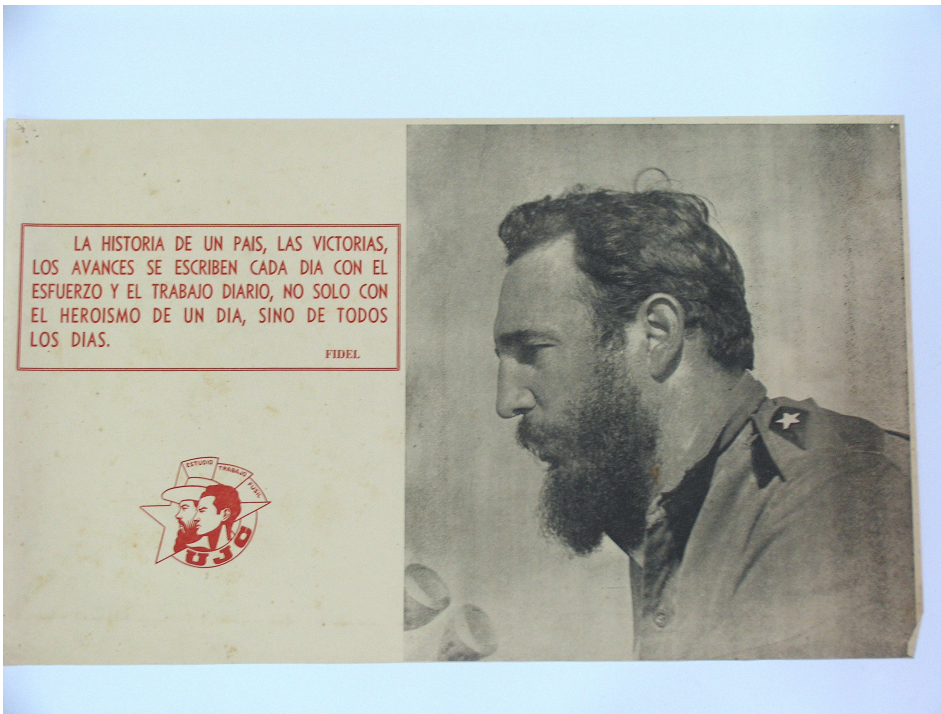
<sup>5</sup> Ironically, the mountainous tobacco area was best known on the island for a “secret” rural uprising of smallholding peasants against the communist state from 1961 to 1966 and, in the early 1970s, for the forcible translocation of tens of thousands of all male peasants aged fourteen and older whose “political rehabilitation” officials came to consider a lost cause.



**Figure 4.** “The best homage: the daily fulfillment of one’s duty” declares this poster announcing a newly instituted annual *jornada* (two-week period) commemorating the martyrdom of Comandantes Ernesto “Che” Guevara and Camilo Cienfuegos. During that week, citizens were to double or even triple the number of hours of unpaid labor, guard duty or other activities to benefit the state. As this poster shows, young people were urged to make such standards a daily practice (1977) Sección de Mapas y Planos, Archivo Nacional de Cuba. Photographed in 2004.

Using the testimonies of real-life tobacco workers, new, Soviet-funded magazines like *Cuba Tabaco* and *Educación* also taught that Cubans’ expressions of personal happiness should be seen as a barometer of their fidelity to the state and evidence of communism’s triumph. “Today, we are happy” (*Hoy, somos felices*), summed up Cristobalina Vergara, a tobacco stripper, party militant, and mother of three in Havana in a typical press account. “The only way we could be happier is if [the Revolution] had come earlier” (Oramas 1975, 47). Repetition of the same positive messages about their reality was essential to sustaining belief. Happiness became an equally important theme of articles intended for national and international readers in the late 1970s and early 1980s. For example, in a story on sleepaway camps at the national Palacio de los Pioneros (Pioneer Palace), a *Bohemia* reporter lamented that children whose parents had “dragged them away” to the United States were missing out on this “little bit of paradise.” At the Palacio de los Pioneros, the kids “even when they sleep, are smiling” (Valdés Pérez 1976, 4, 7). Smiling itself was an act of revolutionary solidarity for children who attended Smiles of the Future Day Care in the city of Palma Soriano, Oriente (Coronado 1978, 7).

Only offstage—that is, in private and out of the view of their academic peers, teachers, coworkers, and all other citizens charged with “defending the Revolution” against internal critics and doubters—did the coherence of Cuba’s artfully directed theater of revolutionary utopia break down. The problem was that Cubans were rarely offstage. Illustrating this is the case of a Havana psychologist who ran his own private clinic until the late 1980s. So often did patients complain about the myriad pressures exerted on them by revolutionary life that the psychologist, apparently worried about possible political



**Figure 5.** A constant theme echoed Fidel Castro's speeches and government propaganda across the decade of the 1970s focused on the idea that citizens owed socialism a daily debt: what was required was "not the heroism of one day, but that of every day" (1973). Sección de Mapas y Planos, Archivo Nacional de Cuba. Photographed in 2004.

ramifications, decided to place the following sign on his door: *Prohibido hablar de eso* (It is forbidden to talk about *that*).<sup>6</sup> In multiple ways, the psychologist's sign attests to citizens' consciousness of the need to self-censor. More importantly, it points to the anxiety that living in an opposition-free zone could produce.

Incredibly perhaps, Cuba's intelligence agents at the Ministry of Interior not only managed public and private spaces in accordance with the officially stated goals of stamping out pluralistic ways of thinking and speaking but also ensured that leaders' real-life encounters with average members of Cuban society reflected those values. One of three chiefs of the Ministry of Interior's Batallón de Seguridad charged with the personal security of Fidel Castro from 1978 through the 1980s, Dariel Alarcón Ramírez (better known as "Benigno" for the time he served with Che in Bolivia) explained how this worked. When a factory or office was selected for a potential visit, "[T]he first thing that the Counterintelligence unit had to do was consult the files and see what personnel, in that particular place, was not addicted to the revolutionary process: that day, those people were free from their job and received their day's pay but they were not required to work." The absence of such workers allowed thorough searches to be conducted of their workstations for any counterrevolutionary material or "instrument of sabotage." If they found out on their own that Fidel had planned a visit, the "nonaddicts" called their managers to determine whether they should come to work at all on that day. Inevitably, managers said no. "In other cases," continued Alarcón Rodríguez, "[Fidel's] personal Security unit, that is, Counterintelligence, brought together all the workers who were not addicted to the revolutionary process and they were told: "Well, look, gentlemen, don't get

<sup>6</sup> Personal communication with Alejandro de la Fuente, a close relative of the psychologist, October 3, 2014, New Haven, CT.



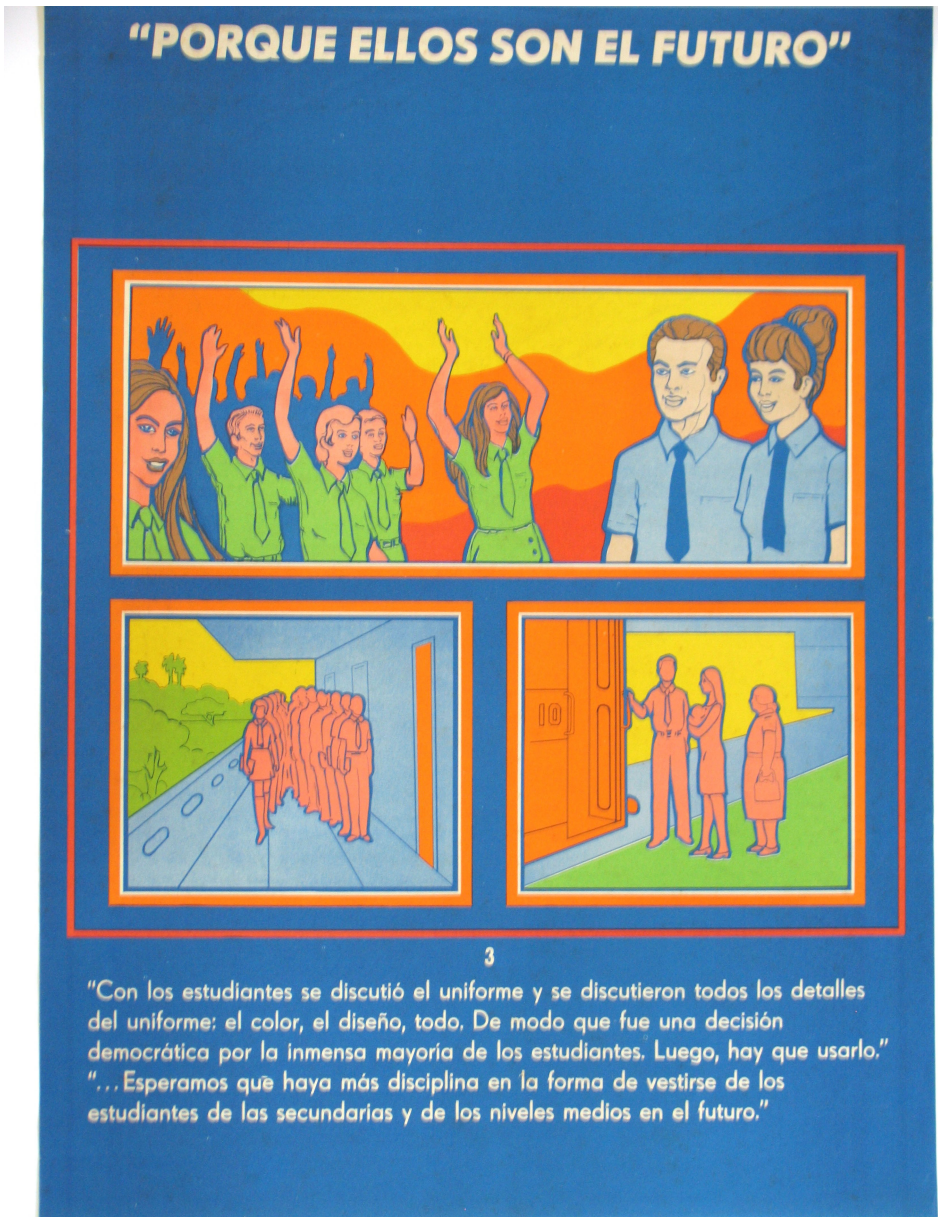
**Figure 6.** Here children laboring in agriculture, saluting leaders and wearing emblems of socialism are coupled with images of kids acting like adults: giving speeches, driving a tractor, parading with a baton and marching up a hill in imitation of Fidel Castro (who climbed the Sierra Maestra in the war against Fulgencio Batista in the 1950s). The text describes the Communist Pioneers, the mass organization that all children between six and fourteen years old were required to join, and recites the slogan they repeated every day before classes: “Pioneers for Communism! We will be like El Che!” (1978). Sección de Mapas y Planos, Archivo Nacional de Cuba. Photographed in 2004.

mad but really the situation makes it impossible for you to attend work tomorrow, because the Comandante is coming and you really shouldn't be here. We ask for absolute discretion regarding all of this; don't go explaining to anyone the reason for why you are not going to work; no-one else besides you should know. They received their day's wage and nothing happened; they would take care of things at home and they were happy!” (Alarcón Ramírez and Burgos-Debray 1997, 254–255). Ostensibly a measure taken to protect the life of Fidel Castro, the process of clearing out any potential naysayers of the Revolution (“nonaddicts”) also freed such spaces of criticism and created an echo chamber for El Comandante en Jefe to voice his views.

Not surprisingly, perhaps, for tens of thousands of Cubans, the only way to honor the validity of the events taking place offstage and avoid a scripted role in the great drama of socialist triumph in Cuba was to get out altogether. When the chance to escape presented itself in April to October 1980, political saturation, exhaustion, and frustration had already reached their peak.

### Leaving the opposition-free zone: National security as a way of life and the Mariel crisis of 1980

From January 1980 through the following year, Committees for the Defense of the Revolution ramped up the degree to which participation in their activities constituted the primary means for demonstrating not only one's loyalty as a citizen but also one's value to



**Figure 7.** At the 1971 Congress of Education and Culture, students were allowed to vote for different color tones and styles of school uniforms. The poster, dating from the late 1970s, quotes Fidel celebrating that (apparently unique) electoral experience while also noting its goal: that young people “would exercise greater discipline in their choice of dress” now and in the future as a consequence of having had more say in the style of their day-to-day uniform. Although seemingly mild in its message, the state’s political policing of young people for wearing “ideologically diversionary” hairstyles and hippie clothes in this decade makes the poster a subtle warning about the need for self-monitoring and style correction (1978). Sección de Mapas y Planos, Archivo Nacional de Cuba. Photographed in 2004.



**Figure 8.** Few other slogans of the 1970s better reflect the passive role that the revolutionary state ascribed to citizens: “The Revolution marches on well. Struggle, work, advance. Keep going!” (1975) Sección de Mapas y Planos, Archivo Nacional de Cuba. Photographed in 2004.

socialist society as a human being. Since 1968, membership in one’s CDR was a mandatory condition of citizenship because one’s educational promotion, employment, and freedom from ideological suspicion depended on it. However, in 1980, a year the state designated *La Época de la Victoria*, CDRs sought to validate the linking of personal identity with mandates of national security and self-surveillance. New strategies included

establishing programs of permanent political reeducation at the neighborhood level and new ceremonies to reaffirm the individual's bond with the Cuban Revolution. Key milestones in life—birth, an adolescent's coming of age, and marriage—were steps on a prescribed path to greater spiritual fusion with the socialist state.

Beginning in January 1980 (four months before Mariel), the CDR's national directorate began to heavily promote a new ceremony to be held at the local CDR upon the birth of every child (Velasco Bouzada 1980, 50–51). Highly mimetic of Catholic baptism, the ceremony required parents to publicly register their newborns as active members of their CDR in the presence of neighbors, FMC activists, and Communist Pioneers who dressed in their school uniforms for the occasion. Ceremonies began with the singing of the national anthem before the Cuban flag and the CDR president's reading of a document authored by the CDRs' national directors. The text reminded listeners that according to the 1976 Constitution, it was the legal obligation of every state agency, school, and mass organization to ensure the *formación integral* of every child into socialist society (Segura García 1980, 18–19). The message was clear: if in other countries, it took a village to raise a child, in Cuba, it mostly took one's CDR.

The published report on a newborn registration ceremony in Bayamo also indicated how participants should think and feel at such an event: “Se escuchan las notas vibrantes del Himno Nacional y uno medita: *Solo con la Revolución esto es posible, y se le hace un nudo en la garganta* (One hears the vibrant notes of the National Anthem and meditates: Only with the Revolution is this possible, and a knot forms in one's throat)” (Velasco Bouzada 1980, 50–51). After the parents presented their baby to participants and signed their child's name into the CDR registry, they received an official certificate “to consolidate our new tradition (Segura García 1980, 19). Then, the ceremony closed with a scripted speech by a young Pioneer who congratulated parents for officially incorporating “new citizens into our socialist society” and exhorted all others to “forge their children to be like Che” (Velasco Bouzada 1980, 51). The Pioneer also personally wished that the newborn be “educated in the principles of the Revolution and happy like us [*felices como nosotros*], the other Pioneers (“Tradiciones revolucionarias” 1981, 33). At the height of the Mariel crisis, Pioneers went so far as to tie a *pañoleta* around the infant's neck as a sign of their future commitment to being first like them and second like Che (L.C. 1980, 30). Thus, CDRs no longer simply congratulated parents for the birth of a child but also for making that child a revolutionary citizen engaged in the most revolutionary of tasks, *vigilancia*, surveillance.

In the coming months, the national directorate of CDRs would promote additional ceremonies to mark milestones in each person's life as political events connected to the Patria (L.C. 1980, 32).<sup>7</sup> After couples were married at the local government “Wedding Palace,” CDRs also accompanied the bridal party to nearby historical monuments to revolutionary martyrs. Still dressed in wedding finery, the brides and grooms deposited the bride's bouquet as an offering (“Tradiciones revolucionarias” 1981, 33).<sup>8</sup> This tradition proved so popular that newlyweds often included a photograph of the act of leaving the bridal bouquet in their own personal wedding albums.<sup>9</sup>

Arguably, CDRs' overt politicization of birth and subsequent intrusion into the private emotional life of citizens from adolescence through adulthood went well beyond normalizing a

<sup>7</sup> From June 6 to June 10 every year, CDRs celebrated the conferring of an official state identification card on all sixteen-year-olds before a local monument or plaque honoring a martyred revolutionary. CDRs held similar, individualized ceremonies whenever a young person got their first job and received their first state employment card.

<sup>8</sup> Sixty-thousand couples were married in Havana's Palacio de Matrimonios from 1966 to 1973 alone (“Palacio de Matrimonios” 1973, 54–60).

<sup>9</sup> The personal collection of the Cuban historian Abel Sierra Madero contains an example of this, depicting his cousins on their wedding day as they deposited flowers at the monument honoring the martyrs of a 1975 assault on Fort Goicurfa.



national security culture; their actions also surpassed the necessity of making all Cubans complicit in national security structures to shore up the state from within. These activities scripted one's life and thoughts in particular ideological terms. They indicated the degree to which privacy of the most intimate kind—spaces dominated by family, friends, and loved ones—were increasingly disavowed.

Moreover, by 1980, being fully revolutionary and therefore fully Cuban, happy, and even fully human, meant constantly letting the state in—to one's private life, private conversations, and private thoughts. For many of those who invaded the Peruvian embassy grounds or left through Mariel, recognizing this catalyzed a fateful decision.

Between 1980 and 1982, Dr. Mercedes Cros Sandoval interviewed 439 Cubans who had entered Florida through Mariel. At the time, she directed the Cuban and Puerto Rican Units of Catchment Area IV Community Mental Health Program in the Allapatah and Wynwood neighborhoods of Miami, considered “buffer zones” between the exile community to the south and African Americans to the north (Cros Sandoval 1985, 13). Lasting hours at a time, Dr. Cros's taped interviews revealed a common pattern: refugee after refugee said that living in Cuba required one to wear “a mask” (Cros Sandoval 1985, 39–42). Less precise and more revealing were the anecdotes of teenage refugees who described having experienced “ah-ha” moments that shook their trust in the system. Some, like a nineteen-year-old male student, reflected an upbringing as a secret Catholic in a nonrevolutionary family. This led him to question the contradictions in Marxist teaching. “One day at school,” he said, “the teacher was urging us to join a Domingo Rojo (Red Sunday) and do extra volunteer work in memory of Marx and Lenin. I still don't know why I told the teacher: ‘Why should I do anything for them? They are gone. You told us humans are only matter. If that is the case, they are disintegrated matter. Their spirits don't exist. Why should I honor them?’ I was very lucky, because the teacher took me aside and said: ‘Are you crazy? Are you going to argue with the Revolution? Please keep quiet. You are too young to rot in jail.’ I realized it all, nodded, asked to go to the bathroom and cried” (Cros Sandoval 1985, 19–20).

For kids born to otherwise loyalist families and raised in the values of the state, “arguing with the Revolution” could be an unintended, unconscious act whose repercussions awakened fear and doubt. For example, one *marielita* named María recalled how she used to love eating shellfish, especially lobster, and fish, a highly prized native delicacy that the government reserved exclusively for export to increase hard currency reserves.<sup>10</sup> One day, at the age of fourteen, María was reading a book on Cuba's natural resources that mentioned the abundance of crustaceans in island waters. “That day in class, I asked the teacher why it was that in Cuba crustaceans were not available for consumption. The classroom suddenly went silent. The teacher, obviously in distress, hesitated, as if taken by surprise.” Although the teacher quickly explained to the class that the sale of shellfish was necessary for Cuba to buy “industrial equipment” and provide aid to the still-unliberated Third World, she took María aside once the class ended. “Please, María, why do you ask such silly and dangerous questions? Don't you know any better? Don't be foolish and don't ever ask any questions which could embarrass the government unless you want to get in big trouble” (Cros Sandoval 1985, 30–31).

Not surprisingly, Cubans who later became Mariel refugees explained their reasons for leaving in terms of a dual trauma of having discovered that many of the people they most

<sup>10</sup> Juan Vivés (pseudonym for Andrés Alfaya Torrado) estimated that Cuba began to produce ten thousand tons of lobsters for export per year after 1967. After 1968, when the state outlawed all private enterprise, shrimp and good-quality fish disappeared from the market and were absent from the ration and state-owned stores (Vives 1982, 161). Alfaya Torrado was the nephew of Dr. Osvaldo Dorticós, a longtime communist and president of Cuba under Fidel Castro from July 1959 to 1974, and the personal assistant of Ramiro Valdés, the Soviet-trained founder of state security, from the age of fourteen. His concern with crustacean exports confirms the unexpected importance of citizens' discontent over their inaccessibility to Cuban intelligence and the taboo nature of complaints.

trusted were wearing a “mask” when it came to what they said about the Revolution. They also consciously denied that they were doing so: supposedly, no alternative truths existed. For example, one woman described how her husband, a communist militant, invented a story about his own humble class origins before the Revolution that collapsed in the eyes of his children once their exiled family came to visit. “That night I heard my oldest son arguing with my husband: ‘You dirty bastard, you had nice clothes and a nice life when you were young. You are denying this to me because of the power and glory of your Revolution.’ Two years later, when the Peruvian Embassy incident occurred, my son and his wife (a young woman whose family was integrated into the Revolution) walked into the Embassy. When I found out, my youngest son and I followed” (Cros Sandoval 1985, 22–23).

Examples like these demonstrate how the events at the Peruvian embassy or Mariel itself were not necessarily the trigger that led many young Cubans to lift the curtain on their own reality. For some, the trigger was the sudden realization that they formed part of a national security state that dictated particularly acceptable narratives about the past and present while erasing and denying others. For others, like the fourteen-year-old who inadvertently asked a dangerous question about crustaceans, the trigger was the recognition that a national security state actually existed and all that this implied for her internal, personal freedom.

### Enforcing the revolutionary script: The “heroic” role of CDRs during Mariel

By the time of thousands of Cubans spontaneously invaded the grounds of the Peruvian embassy on April 1, 1980, Cuba’s political culture demanded a high degree of personal connection between the system and the individual: one’s identity, power, and legitimacy depended and derived from the other. Articulated through three *Marchas del Pueblo* Combatiente (Marches of the Fighting People) of one-million-plus supporters organized by schools, Committees for the Defense of the Revolution CDRs, and mass organizations on April 19, May 1, and May 17, the dehumanization of discontented citizens reached dizzying new heights. Marching alongside “el pueblo” at these key events were revolutionary celebrities like Che Guevara’s dad, if not Fidel Castro himself. *Granma*, the national Communist Party newspaper, featured massive, full-page coverage of all the marches, beginning with that of April 19. Photographs of Havana’s empty streets attested to the unanimity of Cubans’ response (*Granma* 1980, 1–7). Daytime rallies also emptied classrooms and workplaces for the “unanimous repulsion of *vendepatrias* (traitors) and *lumpens*” (“Dispuesto nuestro pueblo” 1980, 1). After national CDR directors held a hundred-thousand-person repudiation meeting on Carlos III, Havana’s main thoroughfare, *mitines de repudio* (repudiation meetings) took place across the island on a near nightly basis (“Cerca de 100 mil cederistas” 1980, 1–2). At first, demonstrators gathered before the packed grounds of the Peruvian embassy; however, when the government began issuing safe conduct passes to the asylum seekers at the embassy and the boatlift began in earnest, CDRs “protested” the presence of any citizen or family on their block who requested authorization to leave, often repeatedly until the day of departure itself.

Because they were led by CDR activists, most of whom were either housewives or retirees, as well as teachers who could mobilize whole classrooms of participants, *mitines de repudio* featured a predominance of women and children.<sup>11</sup> Effectively, the two groups with the least power in Cuban politics temporarily and symbolically enjoyed the most. At night, mobs spray-painted the fronts of houses with the words “Traidores, Vagos, Ratas (Traitors, Bums and Rats),” “Aquí vive un traidor (A Traitor Lives Here),” and “Viva la Revolución”

<sup>11</sup> For examples, see photographs and articles on *mitines de repudio* (“Prosiguen masivas muestras de pleno apoyo” 1980; “Los Comités de Primera Línea” 1980, 1, 3; Pupo Garcell 1980, 26; González and Rodiles 2013).

while shouting “Qué se vayan (Get out!)” along with other insults.<sup>12</sup> More personalized, offensive signs were apparently reserved for citizens who had once been communists themselves, such as Olga Alujas: a handwritten sign posted on her door by the CDR read “Olga Alujas, Traidora a la UJC y a el [sic] Pueblo (Traitor to the Communist Youth and the People).” Through photographs, other members of the family were denounced for having joined Olga at the Peruvian embassy (Clark, de Fana, and Sánchez 1991, 25).

Sensitive citizens who objected to such dehumanizing acts often paid a much heavier price for intervening than the victims of *repudios* themselves. For example, authorities sent Ariel Hidalgo, a university professor of Marxist philosophy and author of a seminal book on the labor movement in Cuba, to an insane asylum for “treatment.” This occurred after Hidalgo defended one of his students targeted by a mob and apparently stopped a *mítin de repudio* in progress with a spontaneous speech to participants. Subsequent to Hidalgo’s release, state security searched his home. Upon finding an unpublished manuscript criticizing the creation of a “new class” of oligarchs under Cuban socialism, authorities arrested, tried, and imprisoned him. Hidalgo began his eight-year sentence on April 19, 1981, the dual anniversary of both the Mariel boatlift and Playa Girón. He spent the first fourteen months of his sentence in solitary confinement (Simeón 1988; Almendros and Ulla 1989; Farber 1984). Ironically, according to *Granma*, the goal behind *mítines de repudio* was to show that revolutionaries had nothing to fear from the alleged threat that dissenting neighbors represented. Participants in such acts constituted “el verdadero pueblo (the true people)” (“Dice el pueblo” 1980, 2, 4).

Because the arrival of the first boats from Florida coincided with the anniversary of Cuba’s victory over US forces at Playa Girón, orchestrated rallies and mob-style attacks on the homes and persons of people identified as wanting to leave Cuba became points of individual and national pride, “another victory, like in Girón.” They were an opportunity for older Cubans to relive the euphoria of those days and a chance for young kids to experience it for the first time (“En multitudinarios actos” 1980; “Con el espíritu de Girón” 1980, 1, 3, 4; “Ya marcha el pueblo combatiente,” “¡Como en Girón!” and “1961–1980 19 de abril” 1980, 1, 3–5, back page).<sup>13</sup> From April 10–20, 1980, whole editions of *Granma*, Cuba’s national newspaper and organ of the Communist Party, celebrated the fusion of the contemporary moment with the past “spirit of Girón” and featured chorus after chorus of “talking head”-style interviews with Cubans of all ages who parroted the government line that all *marielitos* were lazy, good-for-nothing thieves, criminals, and human “trash.” A chorus of voices also emphasized the “voluntary” nature of all political participation in Cuba and that the lumpen who wanted to leave were simply not true Cubans (“Una sola posición” 1980, 2–3). As proof of this, one man insisted on the stubbornness of Cubans: “Con nuestro pueblo no son posibles las presiones (Social pressure doesn’t work with our people)” (“Así piensan los Cubanos” 1980, 2). To substantiate the idea that would-be refugees were hardened criminals, the National Revolutionary Police issued statistics showing that while they had invaded the grounds of the Peruvian embassy, robberies of homes in Havana had dropped precipitously from twenty per day to fewer than five (“Las cifras también hablan” 1980, 2).

By the summer, the literal equation of dissenters and doubters with garbage was explicit. Not only had the boatlift become “a bridge of trash” and Mariel’s port “a center for the distribution of trash” in official media, but the outflow of the alleged human trash in the area necessitated the cleaning and beautification of streets by the local CDR. Neighborhood residents of Mariel also received the CDR founders’ national award of

<sup>12</sup> Lázaro Saavedra used photographs he himself made of *mítines de repudio* in 1980 for a parodic piece of art titled *Historia del Arte I* and *Historia del Arte II* posted in 2007 at an electronic Listserv called *Galería Imeil*.

<sup>13</sup> Photo essays defined the entire edition of *Granma* the day after these first continuous thematic articles appeared.

distinction for service and ideological merit (Gil H. 1980, 6–8). The Cuban press emphasized the crucial role of CDRs as substitute families for those with counterrevolutionary parents or life partners. In one case, *Granma* celebrated a boy who abandoned his parents at the Peruvian embassy and fled to the sanctuary of his CDR: living amid *la escoria* for three days had convinced him that he was a true revolutionary (“Estuve asilado” 1980, 4).

In creating larger-than-life visual displays of mass solidarity and ideological unanimity behind the state during Mariel, leaders relied on carefully designed and publicly announced scripts for citizen participation. These accounted for virtually every detail. In this process, *mítines de repudio*, like the mass rallies of Las Marchas del Pueblo Combatiente, became daily patriotic dramas of democracy in which all citizens could adopt heroic roles.

The scripting and staging of the three *marchas* involved a surprising degree of transparency. In preparing for the giant march of April 19 in front of the Peruvian embassy as well as the May 1 *marcha* followed by the rally at the Plaza of the Revolution, at which Fidel was to speak, *Granma* provided a map showing where to meet and instructions on which placards to make, which organizational symbols to bring, and what to wear (“Orientaciones” 1980, 1, back page). Inspired by the propaganda coup that images of Havana’s empty streets provided after the first *marcha*, state organizers promised that government buses would provide transportation so that “not a single *habanero*” would be left unable to “occupy his place” at the Plaza (“Una prueba de los que desfilaron” 1980, back page). The most original of signs might have been one that rebuked the high numbers of black Cubans leaving through Mariel. Described by editors as being very close to the speakers’ dais, the sign read: “Los negros que se van, los coge el Ku Klux Klan” (Rodríguez 1980, 47). For their participation in Havana’s *marchas*, many *cederistas* received autographed certificates of thanks from Fidel Castro himself (“La Marcha del Pueblo Combatiente” 1980, 9). In July, CDRs held emotional meetings to vote on which members should receive the homes of neighbors who had left; selected because their former homes were in worse shape than those of other members, winners were immediately taken to their new house and photographed inserting the key into the door (L.C.W. 1980, 6–7).

Indeed, so meticulously state-directed and coordinated were the hundreds of demonstrations, repudiations, and mass rallies to denounce Mariel that *Granma* seemingly attempted to refute criticisms of this phenomena through co-optation. In late April, it published a cartoon of the typical Cuban, Almirante Liborio, holding the script of approved slogans in one hand while he painted *Todos a la Plaza* on one of a huge stack of wooden signs with the other (“*Todos a la Plaza*” 1980, 2). Even more to the point, the weekly English-language edition of *Granma* printed the headline “*Granma* Never Lies.” The article covered recent violence at the US Interests Section after government buses unloaded revolutionary activists who proceeded to beat and disperse hundreds of former political prisoners and their families as they stood in line for visas. First, editors claimed to possess a videotape for worldwide distribution showing that US officials had “provoked” the conflict; then they admitted to the fury revolutionaries unleashed against asylum seekers, depicting it as heroic. Only the efforts of authorities and leaders of mass organizations had “prevent[ed] the people from storming the building and wiping out the lumpen elements. And that was only a beginning. Without revolutionary self-control, the incident would have led to bloodshed” (“*Granma* Never Lies” 1980, 1). In reality, it did: more than four hundred Cubans with their families sought refuge in the US Interests Section, where staff improvised medical attention to multiple victims, including one who was critically wounded with a punctured lung (Smith 1987, 217–231).

Perhaps the insistence of Cuba’s national newspaper and organ of the Communist Party on its truth-telling serves as a metaphor for the crisis of confidence that Mariel represented for the tens of thousands of Cubans who left Cuba and the many more thousands who might have left had government-sponsored mobs and marches not intimidated them into staying. At the most basic level, *Granma* did, in fact, lie. Never was

the astounding figure of 10,800 Cubans at the Peruvian embassy ever released to the island public, either by government leaders like Fidel or by the Communist Party organ. According to the story in *Granma*, the total number was only 1,470. For those who knew better and preferred doubt over blind adhesion to script, it was easy to draw conclusions.

### Lessons and prophecies from immigration, the continuing parable of the Latin American Cold War

Carlos Franqui, Fidel Castro's minister of propaganda in the Sierra Maestra during the 26th of July Movement's war against Batista and his subsequent adviser until his defection in 1973, once made an astonishing claim to me when discussing the importance of 1980: if there had been a port of Mariel in every Cuban province, Franqui said, more than a million Cubans would have left in the same six months of 1980. Politically saturated, ideologically exhausted, and surrounded by a visual landscape punctuated by the voice of Cuba's Communist Party in the 1970s, the 124,779 Cubans who left from the port of Mariel were not the *antisociales* and criminals that Fidel Castro, his supporters, and eventually, Cuban exiles and the United States media made them out to be. They were also not propelled by "bourgeois greed." They were primarily survivors of a system that they could not reform, alter, or legally contest: Cuba's communist government—literally called *El Sistema* in Cuban parlance since at least 1968—unapologetically relied on legally prescribed political discrimination as well as an official culture that defined personal happiness in terms of passive obedience to the state. To call the *marielitos* economic refugees obviously misses the point.

Today, the reality of rising poverty, increased repression (most recently sanctioned by the new Code of Social Defense in May 2022) and despair currently continues to propel an unprecedented exodus from Cuba. For some, it remains convenient to dismiss the crushing lack of opportunities that Cuban citizens face as merely the universal experience of a majority of Latin American countries. All current mass migration on the scale to the United States, especially from Central America and the Caribbean, is, at root, political: refugees from countries like Haiti, Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala are the products of economies long distorted by right-wing military dictatorships and terror states backed by the United States as well as the corrupt, violent, mostly undemocratic regimes that have replaced them since the 1990s. What makes Cuban refugees' experience different, then and now, is simply how most of us have cared to investigate that experience and how often assumptions have prevailed in the general public, rather than scholarship, to explain the links between the internal political realities of Cuba and their fate. Perhaps the primary lesson to be learned from the story of Mariel lies in the inconvenient facts of its mostly forgotten, if not hidden, history and the shadow it continues to cast over Cuban refugees and immigration today.

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