

Fighting the Pen: The Curtailing of Written Expression in Cuba Since 1959

Avik Jain

Avik Jain holds a BA in History and Hispanic Literature from McGill University, and is currently pursuing a Master's degree in Latin American Studies at the Pardee School. His thesis is titled *From Prose to Politics in Peru: Mario Vargas Llosa and the Bank Nationalization of 1987*.

Abstract

When the 26th of July Movement took power in Cuba by force in 1959, there was widespread hope that a free society would emerge from the repression of the Batista regime (1952-58). Instead, Fidel Castro developed the most repressive society in Latin America – it still exists today. Although the Cuban communist system finds many admirers in intellectual circles abroad, the suppression of intellectual freedom on the island is rampant. The censorship and persecution of writers has been a key pillar of Cuba's authoritarianism. Castro, upon establishing his regime, was determined to reinforce his utopic revolutionary ideas and squash any form of criticism. This paper analyzes the development of this oppression and how it has marked Cuban society.

Introduction

When the 26th of July Movement took power in Cuba by force in 1959, there was widespread hope that a free society would emerge from the repression of the Batista regime (1952-58). Many intellectuals, domestic and foreign, supported the Cuban Revolution. Exiled Cuban writers, like Alejo Carpentier, returned to the island after Fidel Castro took power, and the novelist Mario Vargas Llosa expressed his “enthusiasm and solidarity with the Revolution” upon visiting the island in 1959.¹ These great expectations were quickly shattered as Fidel Castro’s regime proved to be far more repressive than Batista’s. From 1959 onward, Castro-communism targeted writers and their publications, instituted censorial bans, and used exile and imprisonment to silence dissenting words.²

In June of 1963, Castro addressed a crowd of intellectuals at the National Library in Havana, stating, “What are the rights of writers? Within the Revolution, every right; against the Revolution, no right.”³ This would prove, overall, to be a guiding principle of his rule. As Cuba made its transition to a communist society, the repression of anti-regime writers and the censorship of written expression would surge to draconian and inhumane levels. This repression would be paired with the elevation of pro-regime writers and the creation of propagandistic texts, resulting in widespread intellectual impoverishment and the stifling of critical faculties.

Hope and Disillusion

The revolutionary government began its tenure on a seemingly enlightened note. In 1959, the first Festival of the Cuban Book was organized under the direction of Alejo Carpentier and financed by the new government.⁴ Hundreds of thousands of copies of books were printed or purchased to be sold cheaply or given away for free.⁵ The revolutionary government also founded *La Casa de las Américas*, a publishing house that increased book publishing and started competitions for poetry, theatre, novels, short stories, and essays, offering prizes of 1,000 pesos to the winner of each category.⁶ By providing a platform for written expression and incentivizing new authors, the government signaled that freedom of expression was not only permitted – it was respected and supported by the state. The literate citizens that remained in Cuba following Batista’s departure initially received a level of literary access that they had never previously enjoyed.

The revolutionary government was not content with merely tending to those already enamored with the written word. To combat the high rate of illiteracy in the rural, eastern sections of Cuba, the Literacy Campaign of 1961 was enacted in January of that year. The government recruited 271,000 teachers, many of them youth from the cities, to go into the countryside and teach the peasantry how to read.⁷ The result would be the near-annihilation of illiteracy in Cuba, with the percentage of illiterate people falling from 23.6 percent to 3.1 percent.⁸ This was a rare occurrence in Latin America. The popular policy gave the most marginalized

¹ Vargas Llosa, “La muerte de Fidel,” December 11, 2016.

² *Ibid.*

³ Black, “The Limits of Expression,” 107.

⁴ Ripoll, *Harnessing the Intellectuals*, 22.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*, 22-23.

⁷ Martínez-Fernández, *Revolutionary Cuba: A History*, 65.

⁸ The Center for Democracy in the Americas, *Women’s Work*, 30.

segments of society a basic level of education and intellectual empowerment. Cuba truly looked as if it were on its way to becoming an enlightened and introspective society, a nation of readers: the dream of Latin America's cultural elite.

The idealism that accompanied Castro's assumption of political power was snuffed out following the failed Bay of Pigs invasion of April 1961. After the Revolutionary Armed Forces killed and captured the invading CIA-trained Cuban exile paramilitaries, Castro became increasingly paranoid at the prospect of being toppled by the American government. He was aware of the common fate of progressive leaders in Latin America being removed from office by an American foreign policy that saw all events and policies through an anti-communist Cold War lens. To solidify his hold on power, Castro realized that he needed to stifle domestic dissent, prevent hostile foreign influences, and ensure that a large plurality of his people would align with his rule.

To accomplish the goals related to his consolidation of power, Castro initiated the banning and censorship of publications to solidify his control over public discourse. He also utilized literary materials to diffuse governmental propaganda. The first example of this blatant use of propaganda actually appeared during the otherwise highly positive Literacy Campaign. Armando Valladares, a poet and writer who spent 22 years in Castro's jails as a political prisoner, noted that an aspect of Castro's literacy policy was "massive indoctrination," in which non-politically aware peoples like "campesinos, workers, and soldiers" were flooded with works of fiction and nonfiction that were either implicitly or explicitly Marxist.⁹ *Alfabetizadores*, or literacy teachers, utilized ideologically charged teaching supplements like *Cumpliremos* to combine phonics with praise for the accomplishments of the regime and criticism of "Yankee imperialism."¹⁰ In the process of giving the lower classes the power to read and easy access to reading material, Castro, while increasing the literacy rate, also managed to create a new stream of propaganda that would legitimize the Revolution.

Upon his seizure of power, Castro already showed a rash and ruthless tendency for media suppression. He shut down or confiscated all Batista-linked or aligned media outlets, mostly newspapers and magazines.¹¹ Following this initial targeting of written support for the previous regime, a period of freedom of expression came about. Dr. Carlos Ripoll, a Cuban exile and professor of Romance languages at the City University of New York, notes that Castro, in his quest for political supremacy, did not allow this period of intellectual freedom to last for even five years. He writes, "The first victim of censorship is almost always the press, because no totalitarian government can withstand criticism . . . the next is always the creative writer, because his mission is also to question dogma."¹²

Consolidation and Repression

In the years immediately following the Bay of Pigs, any dissent in Cuba, from any perspective, even from those who had supported the Revolution, was not to be tolerated. The revolutionary government began shuttering and confiscating more newspapers and publishing houses, and by 1965, the last independent scholarly publishing house, *El Puente*, was ordered closed.¹³ That same year, the official newspaper of the Cuban Communist Party, *Granma*, was

⁹ Valladares, *Against All Hope*, 91.

¹⁰ Martínez-Fernández, *Revolutionary Cuba: A History*, 65.

¹¹ Ripoll, *Harnessing the Intellectuals*, 7.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Martínez-Fernández, *Revolutionary Cuba: A History*, 108.

established, and, with nearly no non-governmental competition, it became the dominant periodical on the island.¹⁴ John Clytus, the author of *Black Man in Red Cuba*, worked as a translator at *Granma* in 1965. In his memoir, he recalls that *Granma* was “a propaganda pamphlet called a newspaper,” and he felt bored by the fact that he seemed to be translating variations of the same anti-American and pro-Soviet articles every week.¹⁵ The revolutionary government’s newspaper contained no criticism and no original content. Though it was readily available, it was a poor example of quality in written media. The propaganda mouthpiece was given a near-monopoly in the field of journalism, and post-1965, it still remains the sole source of (doctored) news and opinion for the vast majority of the Cuban people.¹⁶

After the 1968 Prague Spring, Fidel Castro feared for the survival of his regime. He had held no elections since his seizure of power, and festering dissatisfaction with his government could potentially lead to protests in favor of political and economic liberalization. To temper written opposition in the form of fiction and nonfiction, Castro began the systematic persecution of members of the literary elite who were not submissive to the party line. In 1968, the poet and novelist Reinaldo Arenas took part in a public protest in Havana against the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia.¹⁷ In the aftermath, he and other writers were placed under state surveillance and began to be harassed by the secret police.¹⁸ The arrest and torture of the poet Herberto Padilla and his partner, Belkis Cuza Malé, began what would be known as the *quinquenio gris*, the gray period, in which intellectual repression reached new heights in Cuba.¹⁹ Padilla had penned a collection of critical poems about the Cuban government, *Fuera del juego*, and submitted it to an official literary competition.²⁰ His imprisonment was met with international condemnation from European governments and writers including Mario Vargas Llosa, Octavio Paz, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Juan Rulfo. He was released after two months of torture and forced to publicly name other subversive writers and confess that he had committed crimes against the Revolution.²¹ Despite the notoriety that the Padilla case generated, the Castro regime was unwilling to backtrack on its revitalized policy of crushing written criticism.

Quinquenio Gris

The *quinquenio gris* lasted from 1971 to 1976 and saw a Stalinist purging of nonconformist artists, intellectuals, religious Cubans, homosexuals, and political dissenters.²² Along with the Padilla affair, Castro’s speech at Cuba’s First Congress of Education and Culture (1971) set the tone for what he thought of writers and how he planned on dealing with them. Fidel called writers a “privileged minority,” and accused them of wasting their time writing “useless, decadent books” and not doing anything “useful” for Cuba.²³ Following the Congress, “subversive” writers with official employment or teaching positions were dismissed and reassigned to manual labor – agricultural labor or gravedigger jobs were the kinds of work offered to “parametrized” intellectuals.²⁴ Certain spaces of thought, like the Department of Philosophy at the University of

¹⁴ Clytus and Rieker, *Black Man in Red Cuba*, 54.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 56-57.

¹⁶ Lugo, *The Media in Latin America*, 122.

¹⁷ Arenas, *Before Night Falls*, 119, 126.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 126.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 136-137.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 136.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 136-137.

²² Martínez-Fernández, *Revolutionary Cuba: A History*, 141.

²³ Castro, “Speech to the Congress on Education,” 1971.

²⁴ Arenas, *Before Night Falls*, 138.

Havana, and the remaining independent journals, like *Pensamiento Crítico*, were ordered shut.²⁵ By forcing writers to earn their living at exhausting jobs that crippled their bodies, and by creating a society in which the only space for crafting language was government-controlled, the regime worked to eliminate criticism and certain forms of expression from the public domain.

In addition to censorship, closures, and employment restrictions, the revolutionary government put ideological reeducation and imprisonment of writers at the center of its counter-subversive strategy. The Military Units to Aid Production (UMAP) received writers discredited by the regime and in need of revolutionary reeducation. These penal labor camps, created in 1965 to discipline antisocial elements and utilize them for government work projects, were notoriously abusive.²⁶ One UMAP camp displayed the motto, “Work will turn you into men,” a gruesome reminder of the Nazi death camps.²⁷ Writers were overrepresented in these camps, including authors like Virgilio Piñera, Walterio Carbonell, and Reinaldo Arenas.²⁸ These writers wrote about things like the uselessness of the Cuban Revolution (through veiled analogies), the history of Afro-Cuban culture, and homosexuality, topics that were irreverent toward the state’s literary and cultural guidelines.²⁹ The intention of the camps was to break their individualism with collectivism and their creativity and free will with mind-numbing, torturous rural work. Arenas was sent to a camp located on a sugar plantation in 1970, and he described his experience cutting cane in his autobiography, *Before Night Falls*:

To get up at four in the morning and, with a machete and a water bottle, to be taken by cart to the fields to work all day under a blistering sun, among the sharp leaves of sugarcane, which causes the skin to itch unbearably. To be sent to one of those places was like entering the last circle of hell.³⁰

The act of writing was incompatible with the labor-heavy duties of sugarcane cutting, and with no time or tools to write, some of Cuba’s most renowned fiction and nonfiction writers lost the ability to produce written work. The camp system became a threat to any Cubans who would dare write against the regime or attempt to publish stories that did not adhere to socialist realism. Jail was also utilized freely by the regime, and strikingly long sentences were handed down to make examples out of writers who pushed the boundaries established by the Cuban Ministry of Culture. In the 1970s, Reinaldo Arenas was imprisoned for three years, and René Ariza and José Lorenzo Fuentes received sentences of eight and 30 years respectively.³¹ The poet Martha Vignier, disillusioned by her publishing bans and wary of receiving an interminable jail sentence, opted to take her own life.³² A culture of fear rather than a culture of free expression arose in Cuba, and both published and aspiring authors were forced to read Borges and recite Octavio Paz in secret, making use of empty parks or each other’s houses.³³

In the aftermath of the Cuban Revolution, carrots, not just sticks, were utilized by the Communist regime to prod intellectuals toward the party line. Writers were just one group in the *intelligentsia* incentivized for avoiding explicit or implicit criticism of the Revolution, or for taking an actively pro-regime stance. Writing from exile, Reinaldo Arenas bitterly criticized Cuban

²⁵ Martínez-Fernández, *Revolutionary Cuba: A History*, 141.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 107.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 108.

²⁹ Arenas, *Before Night Falls*, 118-119, 274.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 129.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 139-140.

³² *Ibid.*, 140.

³³ Arenas, *Before Night Falls*, 88.

writers who were given positions or monetary awards from the regime despite the decline in their craft, saying, “Dictators and authoritarian regimes can destroy writers in two ways: by persecuting them or showering them with official favors.”³⁴ His disdain for novelists and poets like Alejo Carpentier, Nicolás Guillén, and Eliseo Diego is visceral; while these gentlemen were awarded with ambassadorships and awards from the Union of Cuban Writers and Artists (UNEAC), the Presidency, and the Ministry of Culture, many of their fellow writers were executed, living in poverty, serving jail sentences, or being forced into exile.³⁵ The aforementioned authors, despite rarely having used their written work to explicitly praise communism or the Castro dictatorship, were absolutely compliant to the will of the regime. They allowed themselves to be held up by the regime as examples of Cuban literary talent, legitimizing the destruction of free thought on the island. The fact that these writers were allowed to flourish and did not stand up for freedom of expression further degraded respect for literature as a whole in the new Cuba.

Literature from Above

By the 1970s, the revolutionary government was not simply satisfied with the persecution of dissenting writers and the support for apolitical ones. There was a revamped desire to reach all segments of Cuban society through culture – a form of control that had been the policy of the regime since its seizure of power in 1959.³⁶ Government officials began to favor socialist realism more by 1971; the minister of education, Belarmino Castilla, criticized the introduction of ideas that were “alien and opposed to revolutionary conceptions,” and advocated for the publication of overtly pro-revolutionary works to counter “imperialist narratives.”³⁷ Georgina Dopico Black, a professor of Hispanic literature at New York University, noted that there was a governmental effort made to utilize literature as a tool for mass indoctrination during the institutionalization of the Cuban Revolution.³⁸ Rather than simply rely on already-existing works of prose and nonfiction that would bolster the revolutionary narrative, Castro’s government wanted to *create* new narratives from scratch. One of the first literary works to be commissioned by the revolutionary government was in 1970, during the ten million ton sugarcane harvest. The book was titled *Sacchario*, by Miguel Cossío Woodward, and it narrates the life of a volunteer cane worker who sacrifices his worldly possessions and romantic endeavors to devote himself to the revolutionary cause.³⁹ It was widely printed by *La Casa de la Américas*, and given awards by the UNEAC for “improving...combative discipline and disposition.”⁴⁰ Cofiño López was another government writer encouraged to portray the Cuban Revolution in a positive light via fiction in the early 1970s, and he did so in works like *La última mujer y el próximo combate*, a novel that follows the day-to-day activities of the protagonist, Bruno, a land reform director.⁴¹ Works of socialist realism portraying an idealized Cuban society made up of the new men and women that Ernesto “Che” Guevara had envisioned were ceaselessly churned out by government printing presses as the Cuban economy faltered.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 90.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 90-91.

³⁶ Martínez-Fernández, *Revolutionary Cuba: A History*, 109.

³⁷ Domínguez, *Cuba: Order and Revolution*, 393-394.

³⁸ Black, “The Limits of Expression,” 109.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 112-113.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 113.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

The blatantly idealized rural narratives that were ordered produced by government initiative were also accompanied by several series of mystery novels. The arrival of the “revolutionary detective novel” had much input from the state authorities; the plots typically revolved around efficient state security policemen making honest efforts to defeat CIA agents, imperialist spies, or counterrevolutionaries at home and abroad.⁴² This genre was not only promoted by the Ministry of Culture and the UNEAC, but also by the Cuban Ministry of the Interior, for the detective novels aided in “the prevention of and vigilance against all acts that are antisocial or against the people’s power.”⁴³ Not only were these mass-produced novellas propagandistic in favor of the regime, but they also acted as suppressive tools, giving readers insight into how to detect and report speech and acts that were considered ideologically subversive. Like the aforementioned rural narratives about societal reorganization, the authors of these detective novels deliberately made them incredibly simplistic to curry favor with their government sponsors. An official literary critic José Antonio Portuondo praised the detective novels in a 1973 column for their simple structure, for not having “labyrinths or traps to throw the reader off.”⁴⁴ This is a damning statement from a literary standpoint – what is the point of a mystery novel if no mystery is permitted?

The poverty of literature in post-1959 Cuba was exacerbated by the government-sanctioned literary products of the early 1970s. Dopico Black notes that these propagandistic works were flat in characterization, very repetitive, loaded with sentences as short as one or two words, and maintained a very limited vocabulary.⁴⁵ While this strategy was adopted to make the works accessible to the non-literary masses, it also, inevitably, resulted in boredom among the readership, as well as a non-existent demand for them outside of Cuba.⁴⁶ There are no statistics available regarding the amount of copies sold, and even if such data were available, its believability would be questioned like all statistics provided by the Cuban government. Hence, there is no way of deducing the actual popularity of these novels, but there are other telling factors that provide an indication of their failure. These books went unnoticed abroad, the ministries had to vigorously promote them and include them in curriculums, and the state police continued cracking down on anti-revolutionary books that were still being written and read. The works were ordered and manufactured with calculation rather than organically conceived and created with passion. Any form of creative imagination in literature was placed “at the service of a clear and definitely political purpose,” which was to make communism ubiquitous.⁴⁷ The basic notion of art for the sake of art was severely marginalized by the hardline policies and writerly endeavors that the revolutionary government undertook during the 1970s.

The *quiquenio gris* was punctuated by the promulgation of the Constitution of 1976. The Soviet-influenced document (that still governs Cuba today) officially codified the necessity of socialist realism and restrictions on freedom of expression. In the Resolution on Artistic and Literary Creation, it states:

Artistic creation should reflect the problems of social and individual life and the tensions inherent in the process. The Revolution . . . has the duty to reject any effort to use the work of art as an instrument or pretext for spreading or legitimizing ideological positions adverse to socialism.⁴⁸

⁴² Black, “The Limits of Expression,” 116.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 113-114.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 114.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 115.

⁴⁸ Ripoll, *Harnessing the Intellectuals*, 34.

Ironically, this resolution was drafted when the revolutionary government was doing all that was possible to silence anyone from speaking out about legitimate problems in Cuba. By imposing an ideological duty on professionals like writers, the government essentially made Cuba a state that would not tolerate true literary creativity.

With the 1976 constitution, Cuba formally made its transition from an authoritarian state to a totalitarian one in terms of the curtailing of written expression and criticism. Writing what one wanted to write was no longer simply at odds with a statement by Fidel Castro or the arbitrary application of a law – it was in direct violation of the country’s guiding principles. There would be no mercy extended to dissenters. This was a point of no return for independent-minded Cuban writers, many of who were serving prisons sentences at the time of the drafting of the constitution.

Writing in Exile

By the end of the 1970s, the promise of a society that would embrace free speech, literary art, and journalistic integrity was in shambles, devastated by censorship, purges, and propaganda. The hope that most intellectuals had had in 1959 was long extinguished. Conditions became so intolerable on the island for writers that, come 1980, they were overrepresented during the Mariel Boatlift, a massive exodus of 125,000 Cubans on rafts and small boats.⁴⁹ Reinaldo Arenas, Roberto Valero, and Andrés Reynaldo were just some of the many writers who opted to leave a society that had tortured them, impoverished them, and silenced them.⁵⁰ While some Mariel exiles made attempts to start journals, like *Mariel, revista de literatura y de arte*, or tried fundraising for the purpose of setting up independent Cuban publishing houses in exile, many of the exiled writers were only able to find work as low-wage menial laborers.⁵¹ Intellectual circles beyond Cuba were oftentimes sympathetic toward Fidel Castro, as the novelist Reinaldo Arenas discovered upon his arrival to the United States:

When I left Cuba, my novels were being used as assigned texts at New York University, and when I adopted a radical position against the Castro dictatorship, Haydée Vitale, professor of literature, started to drop my books from the curriculum until not one of them remained. She did the same with all the other Cuban writers in exile. In the end, the program only included a few of Alejo Carpentier’s novels.⁵²

By the 1980s, the Cuban government had forged many international relationships through cultural exchanges and medical missions. This hindered the acceptance of the work done by anti-revolutionary writers in exile. While a handful of exile writers *did* manage to earn broad recognition abroad – Arenas and Valladares, for instance – they were eviscerated from Cuba’s literary scene. Just like after the 1959-62 exodus, the revolutionary government was left with a more pliable writer population after so many had left the island, most to countries where they would have no voice. This deprived Cuba of original thinking and literary talent; the clandestine circulation of manuscripts that had taken place for so long became harder still. Intellectual poverty was fortified on and beyond the island.

⁴⁹ Martínez-Fernández, *Revolutionary Cuba*, 160.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 160-161; Arenas, *Before Night Falls*, 290.

⁵² Arenas, *Before Night Falls*, 301.

The Special Period

The Special Period in Cuba (1989-93) came about as a result of the loss of Soviet subsidies and aid. The dissolution of the Soviet bloc devastated Cuba's economy, which contracted by more than 30 percent.⁵³ Food and medicinal scarcities became the norm, and Castro began to face large riots, perhaps the beginning of an insurrection in an era in which global communism was on the decline. Many Cubans emigrated legally or illegally during this four-year period, including numerous novelists, journalists, and historians, further impoverishing the island intellectually.⁵⁴ Castro desperately wanted to avoid a Tiananmen-like confrontation that could topple his flailing regime, and so he began a process of tepid economic liberalization.⁵⁵ Alongside the lifting of socialist economic restrictions inevitably came a level of social and cultural liberalization. The procurement of food for the population to prevent insurrection was a priority for the revolutionary government during the Special Period, and this prioritization resulted in less of a focus on curtailing critical written expression. Fidel Castro wanted to be loved by his people and did not want to risk aggravating protestors. He famously spoke to rioters in the early 1990s and ordered his security forces to not prevent hungry people from fleeing Cuba, trying to pacify his impoverished base of support and shrink his number of domestic opponents.⁵⁶ He had no intention of increasing his unpopularity by going on witch-hunts for writers when his people were starving.⁵⁷ This allowed for a modest creative boom throughout the 1990s, in which new authors like Zoé Valdés and Pedro Juan Gutiérrez fictionalized the Special Period without facing consequences as significant as those faced by their literary predecessors.⁵⁸ For instance, in *El rey de la Habana* (1999), Juan Gutiérrez tackles the taboo topics of masturbation, hunger, and police corruption in Havana, apparently without official reprimand.⁵⁹ Previously, this would have been grounds for arrest, or worse.

The Special Period, the result of the unsustainable socialist economic policies of the revolutionary government, led to a further decline in the presence of writers and luxury goods like books. On a positive note, the years of hunger that brought about great suffering also inspired raw literature and fearlessness in the face of the authorities. The Cuban people, although preoccupied with attaining tangible foodstuffs and medicines, wanted to see their reality portrayed in stories, and Castro was not in a position to deny them this literary freedom – propagandistic pieces would not fulfill their yearning. Fortunately for Cuban writers and readers, censorship laws, though never officially removed, would never again be as vigorously enforced as during the pre-liberalization period (1959-89). Castro needed to make new friends, and countries like Canada, Spain, and the UK would only cede to the aging dictator providing that he made concessions when it came to human rights issues like freedom of expression.⁶⁰ The economic need to open up to the world and Cubans living abroad allowed for the easier transfer of information, documents, and, of course, books. Original Cuban writers were able to emerge en masse and disseminate their work throughout their nation and abroad.

⁵³ Eckstein and Krull, "From Building Barriers to Bridges," 326.

⁵⁴ Martínez-Fernández, *Revolutionary Cuba: A History*, 213.

⁵⁵ Ratliff, *China's "Lessons" for Cuba's Transition?*, 35.

⁵⁶ Martínez-Fernández, *Revolutionary Cuba: A History*, 217.

⁵⁷ Freedom House, "Cuba," 2015.

⁵⁸ Martínez-Fernández, *Revolutionary Cuba: A History*, 213.

⁵⁹ Gutiérrez, *El Rey de La Habana*, 48-51.

⁶⁰ Hare, *The Odd Couple*, 2008.

Progress and Continued Repression

The liberalization measures taken to counteract the devastation of the Special Period did not last forever. Cuba is still very much a communist state, and although Fidel Castro is dead, Raul Castro and the apparatus of the old revolutionary guard remain. The regime is still motivated by fear: the fear that its uninterrupted rule since 1959 will be irreparably weakened by dissent. Free speech and writers are still viewed with great suspicion, and while mass arrests of journalists and other writers have not been the norm since the 2003 crackdowns, there is still an active governmental strategy to impede unfiltered written expression. In contrast to the early years of the Revolution, when the government had made attempts to create literary spaces and diffuse reading, the revolutionary government has deliberately limited accessibility to books and news sources. Cuba's independent library movement now operates 135 non-governmental libraries with hundreds of books in each.⁶¹ The movement was founded to give Cuban readers access to authors that are never printed by the monopolistic state publishing houses, including Latin American liberals like Jorge Luis Borges and Octavio Paz, or writers like Milan Kundera who participated in the Velvet Revolution, the popular demonstrations that overthrew communism in Czechoslovakia.⁶² Although the flow of books is made easier by the growth of tourism, family visits, and cultural and academic exchanges, the government makes no attempt to grow the selection of literature in Cuba. The same can be said when it comes to news sources; the only legal newspapers are put out by the government or the Communist Party of Cuba, and internet services are limited and expensive so as to prevent access to online news. Seventy-five percent of Cubans are still completely dependent on government news, making it difficult for independent Cuban journalists to carve out a market for themselves.⁶³

By continuing to block and hinder literary and journalistic infrastructure, the revolutionary government still exerts much control over what the Cuban people read. At a talk given at Boston University in 2017, Leonardo Padura responded to a question regarding the lack of variety of books in Cuba: "*A veces uno lee lo que se puede, no lo que quiere* (Sometimes, one reads what one can, not what one wants)."⁶⁴ In addition to this statement about the frank reality of readerly limitations in Cuba, he also noted that at Cuban booths in international book fairs, 80 percent of the books displayed are either by or about Fidel Castro or Ernesto Guevara.⁶⁵ Though not persecuted, Padura is "politely ignored" by the Cuban media despite his literary accomplishments. Sadly, he is better known in the Dominican Republic than in Cuba.⁶⁶ The lack of governmental acknowledgement of many writers and books that are considered to be anti-revolutionary is harmful to Cuban literacy, but persecution is not as intense as in the first 30 years of the Revolution. This is not to say that harassment does not occur. Arrests of journalists, bloggers, and writers are a reality in Cuba to this day, and some of Cuba's greatest literary and journalistic minds have been forced into exile. The eminent poet, Raúl Rivero, and young Cuban bloggers, like Elaine Díaz, are just some contemporary Cuban writers who have faced arrest and jail time.⁶⁷ An anti-intellectual attitude is still alive and well in the apparatus of the Cuban state.

⁶¹ Erikson, *The Cuba Wars*, 72.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Freedom House, "Cuba," 2015.

⁶⁴ Padura, "A Conversation and Reading," October 17, 2017.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Erikson, *The Cuba Wars*, 47; In Cuba Today Staff, "Cuban journalists detained," October 3, 2016.

Conclusion

In an *Atlantic* article about the state of Cuban education, Dr. Andy Gomez and Ambassador Paul Hare note that, “a government can reduce sophistication by emphasizing the collective wellbeing of the state – not the individual.”⁶⁸ Since 1959, the revolutionary government has progressively reduced the rights of Cuban writers and readers by curtailing the right to publish and read literature and articles considered to be of an individualistic or anti-revolutionary nature. In addition to impoverishing Cuba on a socio-economic level, the revolutionary government has overseen the intellectual and spiritual impoverishment of the Cuban people since it began accelerating the control over ideas to preserve power. Although the Castro dictatorship no longer enforces *quinquenio*-like policing over its writers, the transition from encouraging openness, artistic creation and literacy in society to instead being vehemently opposed to freedom of expression has been shameful: a stain on the island nation and Latin America as a whole. Storytelling and exercising critical faculties have long been key activities in human culture and development, and to oppose them is a crime against humanity. It is clear that the communist regime, since implanting itself, has never ceased from perpetuating this crime and diminishing the process and benefits of written expression in Cuba.

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