

## Cuban Youth and Revolutionary Values

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**Reviewer:** Jerone Stephens

Denise Blum spent 15 months in Cuba in 1998–9 researching the question of how socialist ideology is taught, and how young people react to the teaching. Her research was focused primarily on a 9th-grade class in a poor neighborhood that was mostly black. When the Cuban officials learned the identity of the school when she was briefing them before leaving Cuba, they were surprised to discover the name and neighborhood of the school, and consequently gave her access to an experimental school in an educational complex so she could make comparisons.

The framework for her research on ideology and young people in Cuba was focused on the conception of the new man (*el hombre nuevo*) that was to be the product created by socialism, and maintained by commitment to the revolution. The new man, in the eyes of Che Guevara, was to put the interest of society above that of individual gain. The new man was to act on the basis of morality in all things, including the motivation for work. The values of the new man were to be transmitted through the schools and associated Pioneer clubs.

Young people were exhorted to be patriotic, nationalistic, anti-imperialist and cooperative, and to avoid the consumer culture of capitalism. Behavior was to be action-oriented, that is, associated with the idea of the work-study model that combined work and study, not just passive learning. The goal was to produce a citizen devoted to fulfilling the needs of the economy and the maintenance of the revolution.

The inspiration for the new man was the guerrilla fighter of the Sierra Maestra, and the workers in the literacy campaign that began immediately after the triumph of the revolution. Tens of thousands of young people went into the countryside to teach the populace. The admonishment is to be like Che (*seremos como el Che*). The author points out that in recent years the power of the image of Che has been diminished by his commodification, even though he is still being put forward as the model of the new man. There is a disconnect between reality and ideology.

The author takes one of Che's central ideas, that of *consciencia*. We would translate the term in English as consciousness, and the process as raising consciousness about something. But the author does not want to translate the term because it means more than what the corresponding English translation conveys. For me, I envision it as a process that teaches the young the political culture of Cuban society in general, including the ambiguities and contradictions of that culture. Later on, she discusses the *doble consciencia* that permits the citizen to operate with both socialist and capitalist realities at the same time.

The author's methodology consists of observations in schools, and in the work-study part of the process. In keeping with this methodology, she constructs periods of development and changes in the *consciencia*. The first period is seen to last from 1953 until 1970, and is when the conception and implementation of the values of the new man were developed. With the triumph of the revolution in 1959, the school became the institution for the transmitting of revolutionary values. Since about half of Cuba's teachers left following the revolution, the way was opened to introduce curriculum changes and procedures for teaching the values the new man should have. Leaders were developed who could effectively transmit these values and develop new ideas for teaching and learning. The emphasis on education that has been the earmark of Cuban socialism was implemented, and the immediate goal was to begin to bring everyone up to the sixth-grade level.

A second stage began in 1970 and lasted until 1985. The emphasis in this period was in developing the work-study model that would send students to the countryside to live at boarding schools, and spend part of their time working and the other part studying. The purpose was to teach students the value of work, how to cooperate to achieve group goals, to gain independence from the family and to break down class, gender and race prejudices. The emphasis on inculcating the principle of being motivated by moral reasons to work, and for teaching that work should be for societal benefits rather than for material gain was stressed. The creation of the action involved in the process demonstrated the young had a dual obligation to society. That is, studying was not to be taught as a passive process, but one that involved all of life. Fidel's idea of society as a school was developed further by this program.

The disparity between urban and rural life was also breached by sending urban children into the countryside, and to simulate the experience of the revolution for those who had not lived it. The author also points out that the work in the classrooms had prepared the students for work by providing real life problems in mathematics, for example, and civic education classes had tried to instill the love of work in the students by showing photos of Che cutting sugar cane, while other photos showed young people actively working in the fields.

A third stage was from 1986 until 2000. The period began when the USSR started cutting its support of Cuba as Gorbachev's *glasnost* and *perestroika* programs began, and continued through the period of austerity and the Special Period that occurred after the collapse of the Soviet Union. This period was marked by Castro's initial criticisms of Gorbachev's market-led reforms, but ended up with Cuban introducing some private businesses.

The Cuban practice of opening up farmers markets and other types of private enterprises led to social dislocations by enriching some and creating class differences. The fear was that a bourgeois mentality would develop, and there were ebbs and flows as to the amount of market freedom allowed; at times, tighter restrictions would be introduced and then relaxed again.

Che's emphasis on volunteerism and putting people over profits began to be emphasized again; production brigades were resurrected, and mass participation in the economy was stressed. The problem for Castro, the author points out, was how to maintain *consciencia* with centralized planning. The solution was to use stricter labor laws to discipline workers, but also to point out to workers the benefits of hard work and sacrifices needed to maintain the revolution.

Unlike Che's original formulation, however, this period also saw the opening up of external investments and

a reliance on tourism to revive the economy. This created the problem of workers in the tourism industry earning significantly more money than state workers, increasing the possibility of creating a capitalist class; Fidel had welcomed capital, but not capitalism.

A fourth period developed after 2000 directed toward creating the even-newer man, (*el hombre novísimo*), to cope with the new reality in the economy. The even-newer man version is based on a combination of blending past and present images to create a person who incorporates urban values along with the traditional ones that focused on the virtues of the rural life in creating the ideal person. The *hombre novísimo* demonstrates humility in all matters, is self sacrificing and has an appreciation for hard work and also for culture.

Professor Blum finds that the development of *dobles consciencias* seems to have been a success in bringing about change while maintaining stability. There has also been success in reorienting the mentality of the populace to accept the relaxed attitude toward private businesses; in the past, there was a stigma associated with such enterprises as being detrimental to revolutionary values. In recent years, however, we see articles extolling the virtues of private business as contributing to the good of society by reviving the economy, and filling a societal need by employing those who are losing their jobs in the public sector.

The author also refers to the problem of incorporating capitalist enterprises into the society while maintaining a revolutionary and socialist state as creating the *dobles consciencias*, that is, of reconciling two different versions of society that can be contradictory. How can the citizen accept that one can serve society while working for personal gain after so many years of believing the two were contradictory? Her conclusion is that it is likely the Cubans will have to live with a double vision of society for some time to come.

This conclusion points up one of the strengths of her book; she is not trying to make sweeping predictions about the direction the Cuban economy and society will take after the Castros are no longer on the scene. Most of the people making predictions about what will occur in Cuba have been almost totally wrong. In actuality, the Cubans themselves do not and cannot know (and neither can anyone else) the direction the economy and society will take with certainty. We can formulate and eventually test hypotheses about a future without the Castros, but not much else.

Professor Blum identifies the problems of Cuba as a society undergoing change, and discusses them in an informative and straight forward manner. A continuing problem is the two different currencies in use, the Cuban peso and the CUC or convertible currency that is based on the value of the dollar. While the Cuban working in one of the state enterprises is paid in pesos, those working in the tourism industry have the possibility of earning CUCs which can then be used to buy consumer products whose prices are beyond the means of the state worker. For a time, the American dollar was used as the currency of choice, but that practice is now outlawed.

The development of a single currency has been discussed many times, but the two currencies still exist, and this fact creates a class difference between those who have access to money from abroad, and those who do not. Since there are fewer blacks who have emigrated, there are fewer remittances for their families, creating a racial imbalance in income.

One method that has been developed to reconcile differing incomes is that private enterprises must charge prices in pesos, with these prices being fixed by the government. However, this has also caused problems, because ingredients for products must often be bought in CUCs, and this drives up the cost of production.

The low wages paid by the state versus those that can be earned in private enterprises also raises the problem of how to recruit workers that fulfill the needs of the economy and society. There is a shortage of teachers because it is difficult to get people to enter a profession that is hard work for little pay. A taxi driver, under the right circumstances, can earn more in a day than a teacher earns in a month. Moral motivations do not

always work in the desired way, but it is also worth pointing out that millions of Cubans do work effectively and efficiently based on motivations that are not related to material gain. And the nature and importance of work, as anyone following the developments in Cuba realizes, is still in the forefront of discussions about the economy and society.

Another problem that is paramount is how to direct the career paths of the young to choose those jobs needed for the economy, and to reduce the cost of training workers. While university education for all who qualify has been the goal of the government from the outset, the need now is for students to choose vocational education over university education. Plumbers, electricians, and carpenters are needed more than those trained in the traditional curriculum of the universities, and it is much cheaper to produce those with these skills than, say, an art historian or a literary critic.

Along with the school as a institution for teaching values, the Pioneer clubs students belong to are also important in teaching and maintaining revolutionary values. The Pioneer clubs in Cuba were modeled on those of the USSR, and in 1968, became mass organizations for children between the ages of six and 14. While membership is optional, Professor Blum found that all children except those of Jehovah's Witness parents belong to the organization because they do not want to stand out from the crowd, and because parents have found the organization's activities beneficial for children. Before the demise of the Soviet Union there was an international competition that allowed for collective competition, but now there is competition among school subgroups with a focus on completing a given task, not defeating another subgroup.

This methodology is thought to engender collective action, and to encourage rewarding moral effort alone because no prizes are given for performances. After the Mariel boat exodus, an explorer branch was developed for older children to try to correct the malfunctioning of the socialization process that had led to so many people wanting to leave the country. The Pioneer clubs develop leaders within the organization that will go on to become members and leaders of the Communist Party.

The author also reports on a work-study project she participated in with her school to determine how the process worked to socialize students. While the students said they did not want to go the country to work, they did learn how get to along with each other, and to learn other social skills. While the original intent of the work-study program was to aid the economy, it is now designed as socialization for the inculcation of values. As mentioned previously, the programs were to break down the barriers between urban and rural life, to teach cooperation, and to bring together students of different races, gender and classes to reduce prejudices and stereotypes. While the students still go to boarding schools, the time spent away from the family is reduced to a few weeks.

Professor Blum has written a sound, balanced and informative book. It is well organized, comprehensive in the treatment of the new man ideology, and clearly written. It is jargon free, and the conclusions are reasonable and well grounded in either her observations or the literature. She does not overreach in her claims, noting that she cannot extrapolate from her two schools to others based on her experiences. Because the Cuban officials did not believe personal observations could be scientific, they asked her to administer a survey, and she did so, but notes she does not have much faith in the use of such instruments.

The book should be required reading for academics and others studying Cuba. Policy makers and journalists should also be readers if they want to gain more than a superficial understanding of Cuba, its educational history and developments. General readers will also find it is a valuable book for learning about Cuba. With so much hysteria, misinformation and downright distortions of the country, the citizen needs to have objective appraisals of Cuban life and practices. In my home town newspaper, a sports writer went to Cuba to report on Cuban baseball players, and came back to write that a person who killed a cow received a harsher sentence than if one killed a human. She also contended that any Cuban talking to a tourist would be arrested. It is, perhaps, not unusual that a sports writer would write such distortions, but, unfortunately, an [article](#) [2] in the 26 May 2011 issue of the *New York Review of Books* was more nuanced, but no less grossly inaccurate about Cuban society and behavior. Readers of the Blum book will have a counter weight to such

nonsense. I recommend the book without reservation.

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