

The Return of C. Wright Mills at the Dawn of a New Era

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“What planet are you from, anyway?” responded the Guantnamero to the insistent question posed by someone who apparently did not believe there were schools, libraries, teachers, doctors, and nurses there who offered their services to everyone free of charge, as they have been doing for several decades in Cuba. This anecdote, mentioned in *Sicko*, Michael Moore’s latest documentary, describes what many, in one way or another, have experienced in the course of nearly half a century of encounters—positive and not—between beings that inhabit worlds that are at once close to and cut off from one another. In 1960, hoping to bridge the enormous gap through the noble and generous voice of C. Wright Mills, Cubans had noted: “We are so far apart that there are two Cubas—ours, and the one you picture to yourselves.” By the way, Cuba is not a nation about which few things have been written or published.

Over the course of several years publishing houses in the United States have printed texts essential to understanding our history, which have analyzed Cuban society and its revolution profoundly: true, must-read classics. Avoiding many barriers erected between our two countries in their prolonged struggle and overcoming the specific challenges I will address later, the U.S. academia has given us highly valuable works worthy of praise. Its efforts, however, have been severely limited by the structures within which it must operate.

The mass media has devoted more attention to Cuba than to most other Latin American and Caribbean countries. It has created another, unrecognizable Cuba through massive errors, distortions, and inaccuracies that often reach grotesque proportions.

Voicing superficial opinions about Cuba, assuming stances against its

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revolution in and even boasting of expert knowledge on the subject is something that is not only natural and easy but also lucrative for some. In the introduction to an extensive study published in 1997, the UN Economic Commission on Latin America and the Caribbean underscored the paradoxical fact that Cuba's was "one of Latin America's most interpreted, but least studied, economies."

Superficiality, lack of analytical rigor, and even dishonesty often characterize the treatment of the Cuban issue. Many were trained to react with reflexive mechanisms and without thinking. The mere mention of Cuba or Castro prompts an instantaneous and automatic reaction before the brain can even pass judgement. Prejudice, in short, is sown through modern instruments of information and a culture industry that, more and more, divests thought of true content and encourages banality everywhere. Zbigniew Brzezinski put it frankly: with new technologies they could "manipulate emotions and control reason."

The commotion stirred up by recently divulged declassified documents that describe attempts by the CIA and the mafia to assassinate Fidel Castro is quite revealing. The plans were known, in detail, and acknowledged by the U.S. Senate more than thirty years ago. Books on the subject were published and box-office hits were made. Nothing new has come to light. What is revealing is how frivolously the mass media treated the idea of assassination and other crimes and the passiveness with which the public took in the news.

In a world in which information has become a form of entertainment, you can tell the people that their government has been involved in all sorts of sordid actions without facing a scandal. Some, parroting the CIA chiefs, pointed out that these things happened so long ago that no one even remembers them. Obligated to speak about the Iraq war, Abu Ghraib, Guantánamo, and other current realities, they will again avoid any connection with the past; they will treat them as isolated events, outside of history, present them as the inexplicable images of a stupefying spectacle.

This is also how it has been possible, for over two years now, to provide safe haven to Luis Posada Carriles, prevent the resumption of a trial begun in Venezuela for the midair bombing of a commercial airliner and the holding of a trial in the United States—in flagrant violation of international antiterrorist conventions—while perpetuating the incarceration of the Cu-

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ban Five, young men whose only crime was the peaceful struggle against Carriles and other terrorists harbored by Washington. These two incidents have been mentioned once or twice in some of the U.S. media, always in biased reports full of errors, and have immediately been buried beneath an unrelenting avalanche of misinformation and rubbish, dumped upon a captive and defenseless public day in and day out. The result: the cases of Posada Carriles and our Five Heroes are known around the world, voices of condemnation, protest, and solidarity are being heard more and more, while ignorance and silence are forced upon the people in the United States. All the while, thousands of young Americans go to Iraq to kill and die in the name of a supposed war against terrorism.

I invoke Mills again because this year, the forty-fifth anniversary of his physical disappearance, Cubans ought to remember with gratitude and to pay tribute to this North American writer who, in difficult and decisive times, struggled for friendship and understanding between our nations as very few did. To this cause he devoted his exceptional talent and all of his energies; for this cause, put simply, he gave his life.

From the time of *Listen, Yankee*'s publication in 1960, Mills had to struggle against all sides, thrown into an uneven match with the powers that be and the owners of the mass media. The FBI and pro-Batista gangs based in Miami employed all the instruments of persuasion, including threats and pressures against him.

A paradigm of the intellectual committed to truth and justice, an independent, lucid, and creative thinker, he met his death before his time, leaving an admirable oeuvre unfinished, an oeuvre that was the inspiration of those young people who, in that unique moment in U.S. history, sought to storm heaven. His indefatigable struggle on behalf of Cuba had, for him, more than a present significance as part of a debate; it was decisive for the future relations of the United States with the world and for the well being of the nation in general.

As a prelude of things to come, he wrote: "I'm afraid there is going to come about a very bad time in my country for people who think as I do. . . . What bothers me is whether or not the damned heart will stand up to what must then be done."

We have, indeed, faced difficult times, bereft of his irreplaceable rebelliousness.

In its policy towards the Cuban revolution, the United States has traced an unbroken, unwavering line that takes us all the way back to the Eisenhower administration and already spans across half a century. It is the policy of misinformation and lies. While other elements of U.S. policy have varied over time, this, its fundamental component, has not experi-

enced the slightest change since the now-remote times when Washington worked hard to perpetuate Batista's dictatorship and prevent the revolutionary triumph.

On this battleground, the U.S. government has employed financial, material, and human resources impossible to quantify. Those who have sought to delve into the issue of Cuba have had to do so over a boggy and mined terrain, to face a single and singular obstacle: the most powerful government on the planet that has done everything in its power, made use of all available means, in order to lie, falsify reality, and deceive. Such premeditated efforts to conceal the truth and divulge falsehoods, such consistency over so long a period of time, are without precedent.

It is not only a question of prejudice, ignorance, or moral cowardice. Many who have opposed the Cuban revolution have been the object of deliberate and systematic intellectual and emotional manipulation, victims of an operation designed at the highest levels of U.S. power, an operation in which an immense governmental bureaucracy and its many public and secret agencies, reliant on the conscious and unconscious complicity of politicians, academics, journalists, and other intellectuals, has been involved.

Though little was known about this operation in Mills's time, he was able to imagine that something of this nature was taking shape and alluded to this more than once. Today, we have access to all its details, from the time of its inception, through its development, to the present day.

In the 1990s, a good many official documents till then kept secret came to light. In 1991, the U.S. Department of State published a thick volume titled *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1958–1960, Volume 6, Cuba*, which contains hundreds of documents, reports, and internal departmental analyses; the minutes of the National Security Council and other governmental agency meetings; messages exchanged with the U.S. embassy in Havana and other diplomatic missions and allied countries; and other materials that cover the last years of the Batista regime and the first two years of Cuba-U.S. conflict up to the breaking of diplomatic relations.

1958 was a crucial year that holds the key to understanding what was to happen later. The volume contains irrefutable proof of Washington's close alliance with the bloody dictatorship that scourged the island. Collaboration existed in the most diverse spheres, even the nuclear energy sector. Military aid was unlimited, extending beyond the supply of weapons, munitions, equipment, and assistance at all levels. All officers in Cuba's air force, nearly all army, navy, and police officials, and complete units of the troops that fought against the rebels in the Sierra Maestra were trained in U.S. military schools.

Batista found support not only in Cuba but also in the United States.

The FBI and the Department of Justice kept a tight rein on exiles and anti-Batista émigrés and worked to thwart all of their efforts to aid those who struggle for freedom at home. The two governments exchanged information and coordinated actions as part of these efforts. In this regard, the actions undertaken against then ex-president Carlos Prío Socarras are worthy of note.

As the Batista regime's exhaustion became more and more evident, concealing the aid that his government continued to receive became a priority for the Eisenhower administration, as did the obstinate and fruitless efforts aimed at preventing the people's victory. "We must prevent a Castro victory" was the conclusion often repeated at White House meetings.

The declassified documents reveal more than a political, military, and economic commitment between the authorities of two governments that, at times, appear to merge into a single body. We come across anxious and perplexed characters, actors in a drama they are unable to understand. In the course of 1958, more and more meetings see Eisenhower, Nixon, Dulles, and the generals draw up desperate plans looking for a magic formula to save the old regime and prevent its complete collapse. As with soap operas, there is intrigue and melodrama, like the scene in which the president, in a grave and solemn tone, asks everyone present to promise they will deny, without exception, having heard what was discussed there. Or his precise and unquestionable instruction that "the hand of the United States remain hidden." And, as if this were not enough, as though suspicious of his closest advisors, he personally instructed the CIA director to stop discussing plans against Cuba at National Security Council meetings.

They were forced to interrupt or postpone dinners and revelries. In the last hours of 31 December, from his office Secretary Herter sends Havana his last message of 1958. It is a bitter and sorrowful letter that summarizes everything Washington had done to support the despot until the last moment.

Before dawn broke that first morning of 1959, Washington was already receiving reports from its ambassador in Havana. The gentleman had not slept a wink; he had been busy trying to prop up the military junta, which was scrambling to organize itself, and coordinating the departure from the country of those leaders and collaborators who had not fled with Batista. In those first early hours, already Cuba was to receive one of the toughest blows of the United States's economic war against the island. The fugitives had literally plundered the treasury of the republic, creating what the Department of State itself described as a situation no administration could bear. Not one cent was returned. Neither were any loans granted the provisional government, in spite of its discrete and friendly appeals. Therein

lies the origin of the many fortunes that arose, later to be swelled by privileges, tax exemptions, and other benefits no one else has ever enjoyed in the history of the United States, fortunes that the official propaganda extols as the success stories of a community of enterprising émigrés.

Washington never let its loyal friend down. One of the longest sections of the aforementioned volume describes the steps diplomats and U.S. officials took to secure a pleasant and safe retirement for the defeated tyrant. Since the “hand had to remain hidden,” Batista’s haven had to be outside U.S. territory, so it was the good will of the then-ruling governments of Spain and Portugal, with the United States’s approval, that came to his aid. The dictator’s wife, children, and other relatives and close friends settled comfortably in the homes they had purchased, using stolen money, in south Florida. There, they joined other fugitives and created an artificial Cuba, with all of the characteristics of the Cuba that had forever disappeared. The government of the United States gave them the resources to become, in a short time, a force to be reckoned with, which the U.S. people were obliged to accept as representative of fictitious values that had hitherto never been theirs.

The first counterrevolutionary organization, La Rosa Blanca, was founded in Miami by Rafael Díaz Balart, one of Batista’s main ministers and ex-chief of his political apparatus. Former torturers, veteran gangsters, drug traffickers, and thieves came to control media spaces and were received at congressional meetings and in the offices of politicians, both Democratic and Republican. They were allowed to pocket hundreds of millions of dollars—more than \$400 million, according to calculations by experts from the National Bank and *New York Times* editorialists—and, later, incalculable sums taken from U.S. taxpayers, as tax exemptions for the supposed loss of properties left behind in Cuba, and other, equally exorbitant sums through diverse anti-Castro programs that have been generously financed with money from the federal budget for nearly half a century.

Batista’s lot was to die in Europe, but his memory lives on in the United States. Every March 10th, the day he took power through a coup d’état in Cuba when he liquidated its governmental institutions in one fell swoop, is celebrated in Miami. Batista’s relatives, and those of his close friends, live in the United States, hold positions in the judiciary, the executive, and the legislature, at the federal, state, and local levels. They are accorded honors and paid tributes at public squares, universities, and even in the United States Congress. Today, in the twenty-first century, a strange cult of Batista’s regime survives in the United States, the pathetic token of unconditional devotion.

As the recently declassified documents tell us, 1959 and 1960 were years

in which the powerful hand that sought to remain invisible wrestled with a small country that sought to ward it off. New acts of economic aggression soon followed the brutal sacking of the public treasury. Given Cuba's then almost complete dependence on U.S. financing and markets, Washington strategists were confident that a few blows to the country would suffice to make Cuba collapse and come again under U.S. domination. With the passing of time, they coined phrases that proved useful in concealing the meaning of their actions. The learned refer to these actions as "sanctions" that are part of an "embargo." Now it is possible for us to read that, as early as 1959, one of the first measures, the suppression of the sugar quota, was described by Secretary Herter as "economic warfare."

We know, also, that, in those early days, U.S. authorities had a very precise idea of what they were doing, of the moral implications of their actions and the political ends they were pursuing. Few times were they as sincere as when they wrote: "The majority of Cubans support Castro. . . . The only foreseeable means of alienating internal support is through disenchantment and disaffection based on economic dissatisfaction and hardship. . . . Every possible means should be undertaken promptly to weaken the economic life of Cuba. . . . a line of action which, while as adroit and inconspicuous as possible, makes the greatest inroads in denying money and supplies to Cuba, to decrease monetary and real wages, to bring about hunger, desperation and overthrow of government." When this policy was designed and applied, it had already been many years since the Nuremberg tribunal had handed down its final verdict and the United Nations made its conventions on the crime of genocide a universal law. Those in Washington who coldly decided to apply a policy that spelled genocide for the Cuban people were fully conscious of these facts. Note that they sought to make the people suffer and to destroy them, to ignore and ultimately crush their will, deny them the exercise of their democratic rights. More recently, when these documents came to light, making a mockery of decency and common sense, U.S. diplomats and their academic and journalistic coryphaei went as far as attempting to justify the policy of genocide in the name of democracy.

In 1997, the Central Intelligence Agency declassified another document it had zealously kept secret for over thirty years, with the pertinent omissions and finishing touches. It is the report of General Lyman B. Kirkpatrick, CIA inspector general for the actions undertaken in 1959, which, in essence, describes the policy the United States has continued to apply to this day. The program consisted in:

- a. Formation of a Cuban exile organization to attract Cuban loyalties, to direct opposition activities, and to provide cover for Agency operations.

- b. A propaganda offensive in the name of the opposition.
- c. Creation inside Cuba of a clandestine intelligence collection and action apparatus to be responsive to the direction of the exile organization.
- d. Development outside Cuba of a small paramilitary force to be introduced into Cuba to organize, train and lead resistance groups.

One finds surprising the importance accorded to propaganda and political work, which according to Kirkpatrick was allotted a greater part of the assigned budget than intelligence and military operations. The one aim of the organization in exile was to cover up agency operations to guarantee, of course, that "the hand of the U.S. Government would not appear."

"Anti-Castro propaganda operations were intensified throughout Latin America." To sustain these operations, the initially assigned budget was constantly being increased, and the clandestine CIA body in charge of these came to have more staff and resources than any other the Agency had during the cold war. The hidden hand was generous indeed. It handed out no less than \$35,000 a week for the publication of *Bohemia Libre* magazine, whose circulation reached that of 126,000 copies, second only, in the U.S., to *Reader's Digest*; the reprinting in exile of the daily newspaper *Avance*, financed years before by Batista; Radio Swan broadcasts, television programs, and other publications, including comic strips; not to mention the travel expenses of lecturers, deployed to divulge propaganda across Latin America. At the time, the CIA paid Cuban leaders in exile \$131,000 in salaries each month.

The Bay of Pigs fiasco did not put an end to these activities; rather, these became broader and more intense. Clandestine radio broadcasts, which have not ceased, were later expanded and became special Voice of America programs, today's Radio and TV Martí. Since then and up to today, the CIA has financed newspapers, journals, and other publications and continues to have lecturers, academicians, and journalists on its payroll.

In addition to covert operations, the U.S. currently undertakes other, more visible actions. The Cuba Program is still in effect, though it enjoys a larger budget today, and, in addition to the CIA's original program, there are now AID and NED ones. Nothing has changed, not even the name. With the passing of the Helms-Burton Act and the reports of the so-called Commission for Assistance to a Free Cuba, approved by President Bush, U.S. foreign policy has become interventionist and arrogant as never before. There wouldn't be enough time to go into an in-depth analysis. I will limit myself to saying that, were the recommendations of these documents followed to the letter, Cuba would cease to exist as a sovereign nation. But this

is an irrational and anachronistic policy. The real world has not moved in the direction longed for by the vindictive supporters of Batista and their friends in Washington.

The collapse of the Soviet Union and the failure of what came to be known as “real socialism” dazzled many in the capitalist world, who became intoxicated with a simple-minded and disproportionate optimism. Absorbed with talk of the fall of the Berlin Wall, they were completely oblivious to the Caracazo. Painstakingly, and not without ups and downs, the world would in fact move in the direction Mills wisely predicted. Rather than the end of history, we witness the end of an era and the beginning of a new one that recalls his theory, the same one Mills had long searched for.

Latin America and the Caribbean witness the dawn of a new era. National revolutionary processes are consolidating themselves, grassroots movements are growing stronger, indigenous peoples and other marginalized sectors have ever greater participation in these, and real and efficacious alternatives are making progress, impelling true unity and independence in the region. New alliances and pursuits emerge as the region moves towards the construction of socialist projects, which, in their diversity, will make up the socialism of the twenty-first century, a form of socialism that is wholly ours and that will not be a carbon copy of previous systems but a “heroic creation,” as Mariategui advocated—the work of people capable of independent thought, the type of people Mella dreamt of when Cuban Marxism was coming into its own. As all creations it will be unique, it will shatter templates, and it will be impervious to dogma. It will be the rainbow already heralded by the Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas.

Intellectuals on both sides of the Rio Grande shoulder great responsibility and are duty-bound to make this new age one of peace and friendship among our peoples. With the cold war behind us, we now face new possibilities to establish new relations, which will only be possible when all hegemonic designs are abandoned. Mills has finally returned. Let us take heed of his words: “What I have been trying to say to intellectuals, preachers, scientists—as well as more generally to publics—can be put into one sentence: Drop the liberal rhetoric and the conservative default, they are now parts of one and the same official line; transcend that line.”