

FOR SO MANY, THE IMAGE ASSOCIATED WITH THE CUBAN REVOLUTION is still that wildly romantic portrait of Che Guevara, dark hair windblown under the guerrilla beret, smouldering eyes fixed on a shining vision of the Marxist future. Ah, Che. That photo became an icon of the 1960s counter-culture Che, a leftist's heart-throb, the romantic hero of the revolution that was going to work. In Cuba he still is; huge billboards of Che festoon the country, "*El Hombre Modelo*," they proclaim. "The model man. Be like him."

When thirty-three year old Fidel Castro finally overthrew Fulgencio Batista and took power on 1 January 1959, Che, the Marxist Argentine doctor and revolutionary, was with him. An oft-repeated story has it that as Fidel chose his cabinet he was at a loss who should run the economy, and asked his assembled cohorts, "Is anyone here an economist?" "I

am," said Che, thinking Fidel had asked if anyone was a communist. Che was made Minister of the Economy.

There is more than nastiness or nonsense to the story. Fidel vows that he himself was not a communist or a Marxist then. At his trial for his first failed attempt against Batista in 1953 (an assault on the Moncada barracks), the young middle class lawyer, Castro, talked of reinstating the constitution of 1940 and holding free elections. "I did not lie in the Moncada speech," he later told American journalist Lee Lockwood, author of the fascinating profile, *Castro's Cuba, Cuba's Fidel*. Fidel says he became a Marxist-Leninist later, out of necessity, the only way he saw to achieve everything from land reform to creating the *Hombre Modelo*.

Castro himself said it clearly in 1961. "Inside the revolution, everything; outside the revolution, nothing." When I visited last December, Karl Marx Theatre was presenting Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs for the kiddies. Even Disney and fairy tales were "inside," as are the lavish, erotic stage shows at that ultimate in night club decadence the Tropicana. Latino Marxism can live with it.

This kind of thing created for Che's supporters in North America a reassuring atmosphere of fun and freedom.

Rejecting the Soviet model for economic and political reforms, Cuba struggles on ... almost alone.

BY CAROLE JEROME

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This wasn't drab and deadly Soviet-style socialist realism. But what Inside vs Outside meant was that *real* political dissent was to be crushed. And it was, as in all the other revolutions. Over 20,000 were put in prisons and re-education camps – often peasants who had said an unwise word or signed a paper in ignorance. When they began to question and oppose censorship, intellectuals and liberals of the middle class, who had first supported the revolution, were singled out for some of the most brutal prison treatment anywhere in the world.

The prison memoirs of Jorge Walls, a writer once sympathetic to Castroism, who tried to defend a friend from unfair imprisonment, are some of the most appalling and painful that I have read. In *Twenty Years and*

Forty Days, the time he served, Walls describes ghastly cruelties in a strangely objective manner. He was one of the *plantados* (well dug in) political prisoners who refused to give up a single principle. But the Sixties leftists knew nothing of all this or refused to know. To criticize was to play into the hands of Washington or the ex-Batista crowd in Miami. They saw only the literary crusade, the new schools, the bare-foot doctors, new rural medical clinics and hospitals. All of these were very real; illiteracy has been virtually wiped out. The six year-old Almajeiras hospital in Havana is a gleaming twenty-three story modernity with 950 beds. Wealthy Europeans pay to come here for heart surgery, but any Cuban citizen receives all medical treatment free.

All of this costs money Cuba doesn't have. The economy is a shambles largely attributable to declines in international markets for sugar and oil, Cuba's bread and butter. The US trade embargo imposed in 1962 and still in force, is not the only cause. The Cuban government admits that a lot of the problem is a result of the inefficiencies and irrationalities in its own system. Fidel has gone so far as to call his early Soviet planners "tribal witch doctors."

SO NOW CUBA HAS "RECTIFICATION," FIXING UP ITS OWN MISTAKES, in everything from factory management to bus schedules. The Cubans I met took great pride in blaming themselves for the mess, not the CIA or the Soviets, and they are rectifying all over the place. Still, the buses don't come. There are no eggs from the farms because the transport vehicles are broken down and there's no money to repair them. Ships wait hopelessly to be unloaded. In the shops people line up for scarce items.

Rectification has been dismissed by many foreign analysts and Western diplomats in Cuba as "tinkering" and even then, said one local journalist I met, "comfy officials resist the changes, even though the majority want them." Castro wants to tackle the inertia of an over-centralized system without decentralizing it. Experiments with free markets in the 1970s reduced shortages, but they also produced price gouging, hoarding, and entrepreneurs getting rich – creeping capitalism. So they were closed. An incipient business class would be an intolerable threat to Fidel's philosophy and ultimately his regime. *Perestroika* and *glasnost* open too many such Pandora's boxes for Fidel. While Gorbachev says reform and openness are all justified in Lenin, Fidel will stick to Che, thanks very much. But he has yet to find a spark to adequately replace human greed as a motivator.

In his speeches and on the omnipresent billboards, Fidel keeps calling for "sacrifice," for the people to give up frills like food and clothing to pay for education, hospitals and progress. The cost of the military is never mentioned, though. The faithful heed his call happily: "If it weren't for Fidel, we'd have nothing," said a hospital technician. But others are getting fed up with "Téqué" (literally blah, blah), their nickname for Fidel – making fun of his long-winded speeches and endless talk. "Basta de Téqué" is a phrase gaining popularity; enough talk, the government should fix things and not ask us for more sacrifice.

Cuba is desperate for foreign exchange. Tourist taxis deal in dollars. Tourist stores ring up prices in dollars, selling whisky and other goods Cubans can't hope to find anywhere. The result is a whole new class: people with dollars. I went to one of Havana's most famous watering holes, the Bodeguita del Medio, with an American friend. With our dollars we were jumped over the sizeable queue by the *maitre d'*, just as in the Soviet Union. The Bodeguita is an old Hemingway haunt, a fact used to entice the tourists. Hemingway is as much an industry as Che and ordinary Cubans are beginning to resent it all: we get Hemingway and the good life; they get Che and the sacrifice.

The situation is not good. And whether it gets worse depends in large measure on Moscow. The only reason Cuba is afloat at all is the \$5 billion a year the Kremlin pours in, for a Cuban population of ten million. Moscow pays an artificially high price for sugar as the main form of