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# Freedom and Exchange in Communist Cuba

by Yoani Sánchez

## *Executive Summary*

Fidel Castro's socialist revolution promised to satisfy the basic needs of the Cuban people, but the price demanded was the surrender of freedoms. The unthinking enthusiasm that greeted the beginning of the revolution helped pave the way for the disappearance of civil, political, and economic rights within a short period of time. Instead of a brighter future, misery in Cuba is widespread and the individual is vilified.

With the help of Soviet subsidies, state paternalism stripped citizens of their individual and community responsibilities, and established a sort of barter system between freedom and privileges. The state gave out job promotions, electrical appliances, housing, vacations, and other material goods and perks as rewards for obedience and in recognition of support of the government's priorities—including participation in political rallies, membership in the Communist Party, adherence to atheism, and so on.

Cuban socialism has produced frustrated idealists and opportunists who support the system only out of a search for personal gain.

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the government has been buying time with the introduction in the 1990s of limited and short-lived reforms, whose reversals accelerated with the help of the Venezuelan government of Hugo Chávez. Raúl Castro, who replaced his brother Fidel as president, has only introduced cosmetic reform. An increasing number of Cubans are disillusioned with socialism and are demanding change. One of the tools that Cubans are now using to recover their freedom of expression and association is the Internet, which has quickly given rise to a community of cyber-dissidents, despite the Cuban government's efforts to make Internet use difficult. Now that the state is out of money and there are no more rights to exchange for benefits, the demand for freedom is on the rise.

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**How and when  
did freedom  
begin to be an  
obscene word?**

## **How to Pawn Freedom**

Know this well: our ignorance, our underdevelopment, is paid for with freedom.

—Fidel Castro, speaking with students at the University of Havana, September 1970

The theoretical acrobatics of Marxist dialectics sought to persuade us that only through the construction of a communist society would it be possible to make what Engels called “the leap from the kingdom of necessity to the kingdom of freedom.”<sup>1</sup> The history of the end of the 20th century shows us, however, that the only consequence of the suspension of fundamental freedoms, imposed on a nation with the declared purpose of satisfying its needs, is the persistence of misery and the vilification of the individual.

The proposal to use freedom as a form of payment in exchange for material advantages transcends social structures and is part of a psychological process to dominate the will of others. The loss of freedom is expressed in different degrees and at different levels. At one extreme is the example of an individual bound and gagged by kidnappers, or a nation occupied by a foreign invader. In such cases the resistance can be equally extreme. At a lesser extreme, we see those freedoms that we cede voluntarily in the name of social convention, such as the freedom to walk around naked or to smoke in a public place.

Acceptance of the lack of freedom also occurs to varying degrees and on various planes. The first moment happens in the physical plane when the individual suppresses his resistance to oppression; it is the moment when the body stops fighting against the bonds, when one stops shaking the bars of the prison and tires of shouting, “Get me out of here!” Then, the person begins to adjust to his condition, and in extreme cases, ends up feeling comfortable in prison, or establishing complicity with his jailers.

Although freedom is usually discussed in philosophical terms, it is from the political perspective that it reverberates most strongly. A slight tilt toward one or another tendency can change the destiny of a country and affect several generations. The right of free expression and free association, firmly based on a solid legal foundation, bolsters the probability that remaining rights will be respected. There is no value in having laws that guarantee the freedom to work, to education, to health care, and to equality, if it is not possible to protest the failure to uphold these laws and if people are not allowed to organize in a civilized way to demand that they be respected. The ability to complain, to point a finger at what we do not like, is inseparable from an environment in which the individual does not have to barter his freedom in exchange for benefits and privileges.

Dictatorships cannot survive where these rights are fully observed. Indeed, by definition, where these rights hold it is not appropriate to speak of dictatorship. To eliminate or diminish these fundamental freedoms, dictatorial governments resort to the force of arms or police persecution; they invoke national security, establish permanent states of emergency, and through control of the mass media, they discredit these freedoms as if they were diseases or perversions. Perhaps the most sophisticated method an oppressor uses to mask the effects of repression is to paint the relationship with the oppressed as a kind of love pact, so that submission—achieved through pain or fear—wears the respectable face of a generous offer made to the other person through affection, faith in religion, or conviction in a political cause.

## **Freedom and Socialism in Cuba**

The real socialism that disappeared in Eastern Europe has been maintained in Cuba, though with severe spending cuts and some variation. Although, in the opinion of some, fresh air was introduced to the suffocating

Stalinist model, what is certain is that the same totalitarian way of thinking that existed in faraway allied countries has been replicated on the Caribbean island. The most obvious difference with Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Bulgaria, for example, is that socialism was not imposed on Cuba by an imperialist power; in fact, just the opposite happened. Cuban socialism has always tried to present itself in the garb of sovereignty, and as the only way to achieve independence from the United States.

Despite this veneer of liberation, Cuba is a case study of how the abolition of the aforementioned freedoms is put into practice. In January 1959, a troop of young men—armed and bearded—came down from the mountains. There they had organized the guerilla war, brought about the defeat of the Batista dictatorship (1952–1958), and proclaimed that 1959 would be called, “The Year of the Liberation.” In their first speeches they hoisted the banner of “Bread and Freedom,” and everything indicated that, finally, Cuba would become a democratic nation where the progressive constitution approved in 1940 would be respected. How this group of irreverent revolutionaries ended up founding a gerontocracy, under the last-ditch slogan “Socialism or Death,” would become the subject of detailed historical studies. But it is worthwhile to respond to at least one question: What happened to freedom?

At what point did the liberation process mutate into a process that oppresses? At what point were the civil liberties that had allowed the emergence of the revolutionary groups dynamited? How and when did freedom begin to be an obscene word, mentioned in whispers and longed for in the privacy of one’s home? In exchange for what did Cuban citizens surrender their individual sovereignty and allow themselves to be locked up in the cage of paternalism, control, and authoritarianism? Answering these questions leads to the dismantling of the cage, and prompts further questioning about whether the crumbs offered in exchange for that freedom have been sufficient and extended to all.

## Citizenship Sold Off

At the beginning of the revolution, the abolition of freedoms found a favorable climate in the unthinking enthusiasm that engulfed almost the whole nation and led it to sign a blank check payable to one person only: Fidel Castro. In the name of that vote of confidence, used ad nauseum by the “Maximum Leader,” within a short time political parties and all the institutions of civil society were swept away. Newspapers, radio, and television ended up under the control of the state. The same fate befell the theaters, art galleries, movie houses, libraries, bookstores, and any entity that might have an opportunity to generate information or opinion. The people offered up—on the altar of a process still not declared to be communist—their civic institutions and the level of freedom they had reached after throwing off the Spanish colonial government.

Along with the disappearance of civil and political rights, economic rights vanished. Two years after it triumphed, the Revolution had completed the confiscation of the most important factories, businesses, and banks. In March of 1968, what sadly became known as the Revolutionary Offensive left not even the smallest kiosk, workshop, or store in private hands. Even the boxes of the shoeshine boys were seized, in what seemed like a desire to remake the nation without any commercial or economic ties inherited from the capitalist past.

It might be said, although it would seem paradoxical, that the Cuban people agreed to repay the debt of gratitude they owed to their liberators with their rights. In exchange for the possessions and rights confiscated by the new government, they received promises of a bright future; payment in advance, however, was required.

As it is much easier to redistribute wealth than to create it, the government in the early years of the Revolution aimed to improve the living standards of the poor, not by an increase in production, but by doling out what it expropriated from wealthy property owners.

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These were the years in which it was calculated that the benefits obtained would be spectacular and immediate. The citizens' naïveté was the fruit, in part, of an ignorance exceeded only by the enormous irresponsibility with which laws and decrees were dictated to "put the patrimony of the nation into the hands of the people." The potential beneficiaries did not experience the results with the immediacy or the magnificence they expected, but those whose property had been expropriated or nationalized felt the effects immediately.

The frequent and numerous executions, the failure of several guerilla actions and invasions, and the long prison sentences for conspirators deterred protestors, who later found a bitter exit in exile. Many Cubans opted to remain silent, including some intellectuals who realized, without being negatively affected in the process, that mistakes were being made. To criticize had become inopportune and it was made clear that any gap in the ranks could be used by the enemy. It became common to cite the metaphor of little David against the great Goliath of the north, but the slings of the people were not permitted to launch a single stone at the cyclopean state.

The opponent was real and gigantic, nothing less than the all-powerful North American imperialism, some of whose citizens were among the hardest hit by the nationalizations. The existence of this enemy—some would say the creation of this enemy—fostered a sense of siege where, in the words of St. Ignatius of Loyola, dissent is treason. The history of the dispute is well known and excessively complicated. The Cuban government blamed the Americans for diplomatic pressures, military actions, espionage, a trade embargo, economic warfare, and sabotage. The Cuban government received blame for destabilizing the region through the creation and support of insurgent groups in almost all Latin American countries. The confrontation with the Cuban government also provided the U.S. government with an excuse to strengthen its Cold War policies and to intervene in Latin American societies.

What was least expected to come to fruition could, in the end, be considered the fundamental achievement of the Cuban Revolution: achieving national sovereignty in the face of a neighbor's voracious appetite. But national security was imposed at the price of renouncing the sovereignty of the people, wherein reside precisely those rights that citizens exercise whenever the state displays authoritarian leanings. To explore whether there was a real or fictitious dilemma between the two versions of sovereignty, it would have been necessary to establish a broad, pluralistic and public debate, but that was not possible.

As was widely said then by party and government officials: "In this historic moment that our country is living through" people need to close ranks and swallow their differences. Officials established priorities that stressed the longed-for national liberation while condemning individual freedoms to last place. To demand such freedoms was to loudly declare one's selfishness, like a spoilsport who is bothered by loud music while others, to all appearances, are having fun.

### **The Establishment of State Paternalism**

Over the course of time, and thanks to a substantial subsidy from the Soviet Union, state paternalism was established. The government provided the population with necessities through a system of rationing for food and industrial products. In a short time this, along with the extension of free education and health care, plus subsidized transportation and communications, turned Cuba into a country where it was not necessary to work to support a family at a minimum level of survival. The crumbs were assured, and with every passing day the bars of the cage were harder to break.

Paternalism stripped citizens of their civic, family, and work responsibilities, as well as the responsibilities each person has to himself. From that point on, the barter trade between freedoms and privileges was institutionalized. Everything you received above and beyond the norm was not due to your own efforts or talent; rather it was a perk, a reward for obedience. A telling example was the emergence of regula-

tions for the distribution of household appliances. These could only be bought through certificates or vouchers given out at mass rallies, after commissions analyzed the work and social merits of each applicant. Workers would earn points depending on their unconditional ideological support, the number of “voluntary” hours they worked, and attendance at political events. The purchasing permits needed to obtain a fan or a refrigerator even took into account participation in the wars in Angola and Ethiopia. Outside this system it was impossible to buy anything. The same method was used to assign housing and the chance to enjoy tourist facilities. Everything had to be paid for twice; once in real money at a subsidized price, and again with freedom, whether offered sincerely or not.

Those who did not jump through the hoops had to continue living with their in-laws and were forbidden to own a refrigerator, television, or washing machine. Even prostitution was practiced by young women willing to give their bodies to ministers and senior military officers in exchange for privileges—never cash. These were the courtesans of socialism who, years later with the arrival of the convertible currency, were transformed into prostitutes in the traditional sense.

### **The Impact on Personal Freedoms**

But the infringement of rights did not stop there. *Real socialism* had an ardor for atheism, and among the questions you had to answer to get a job, enroll in the university, or receive new housing, would be whether you had religious beliefs, which creed you preferred, and how you practiced it. The questions were not a formality, nor a statistical curiosity, because the answers concealed an easy-to-guess password to admission.

While homophobia is not the exclusive patrimony of communists, it is worth remembering that homosexuals could be expelled from any school or workplace. In addition, in the 1970s, many homosexuals were interned in reeducation centers under a regimen of forced labor.

Renouncing the practice of the religion

you believed in, or of acting on your sexual preference, was equivalent to giving up gems of freedom. They were the currency of exchange required, and those who agreed to the exchange had the impression that it was a small sacrifice for the sake of the future they were promised. They paid with images of the virgin, rosaries, and scapulars for a hypothetical future that seemed, incredibly, just like the celestial kingdom the sacred books spoke of.

Lowering self-esteem seems to be an essential condition to produce at least a minimum level of acceptance of the loss of freedom. In the peculiar case of Cuba, since the 1970s there has been an attempt to shape a kind of person whose aspirations would not exceed the ceiling that the state had set for him: individuals who would have a self-perception that they could not compete, men and women who should feel satisfied, and even grateful, with what little could be given to everyone equally. Mediocrity began to be called modesty, while self-confidence was branded as arrogance. Amid a widespread lack of material things, the true revolutionary embraced the austerity that labeled the slightest weakness for fashionable clothing as extravagance, while consumerism and any desire for the new was considered as unpardonable. Listening to foreign music, reading literature by authors not in the socialist Parnassus, wearing your hair in a certain way—these manifestations were condemned as ideological deviations which sooner or later would have to be analyzed, and for which one would have to repent through public self-criticism.

In the midst of this forced austerity and a growing effort to standardize Cuban society, art was given the task of shaping “new ideological values,” thus discrediting its function as a vehicle of expression for the artist. Ernesto Guevara had already had the arrogance to enunciate the original sin of the intellectuals; referring to their poor participation in the fight against Batista, he said they had not been revolutionaries. Earning the revolutionary “diploma” became an obsession for writers and artists who, caught between fear and complacency, accepted the maxim that governed,

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and still governs, the political culture of the country: “Within the Revolution, everything; against the Revolution, nothing.”

Freedom of expression came to be considered “freedom of the bourgeois press,” and freedom of association an illegal act to overthrow the Revolution. Civil society found itself restricted to revolutionary organizations which were mere transmitters of official views. The unions did not represent the interests of the workers against management, but functioned as extensions of state power to instruct the workers in socialist planning directives to meet production goals. Student associations ceased to be a tool for the young to stand up to school authorities, and evolved into an instrument of the Ministry of Education to enforce disciplinary rules. Nor were women’s organizations a platform to demand women’s rights, but rather a bureaucratic structure to incorporate women into production. The same occurred with the other institutions, including the peasants’ association, the journalists’ union, the writers’ and artists’ union, the college of architects, and even stamp collecting clubs.

Belonging to these organizations, which function in effect as neo-governmental organizations rather than non-governmental organizations, became obligatory. Still today, on any form, whether to register for a language class, ask permission to leave the country, or apply for a new job, the same question always appears: Are you an active member of any of these organizations? On occasion, the organizations are listed and you need only to check the boxes, as if it is illogical that there might be other organizations, or because there are no others. For anything involving the slightest privilege, you must bring a letter, on letterhead with a signature and a stamp, that guarantees, “the bearer is a comrade in the Revolution who participates in all its activities.” But for a higher-level request these trifles are not enough. For something truly important, one must be a member of the Party or its youth organization, and for this, surrendering a small amount of freedom is not sufficient.

## **The Candid Surrender of the Idealist**

In all these years, now totaling half a century, many dreamers have believed that the best way to solve the country’s problems, the right path, the appropriate place to correct flaws, was found only within the Communist Party. Of course, becoming a party militant is a voluntary act, but the law establishes that other political organizations cannot be founded, and as a result, it is illegal to belong to any party other than the Cuban Communist Party. All those with political concerns—or simply a sense of civic responsibility—who are interested in promoting initiatives to improve life in their country, will only find a legal space to do so within the party.

To be admitted into the ranks of this select fraternity is accepted as proof, by any examiners, that an applicant is genuine and his intention is not to criticize, but to help. If you express yourself you cannot enter, and if you do not enter you cannot express yourself. This is the conflict that snares those who wish to improve the system through their observations and opinions. Once in the party, they learn that at the entry level they will not be heard, and that in order to climb the ladder, where they supposedly might be able to exercise influence, they have to swallow their criticisms. In the long run they are either domesticated by the machinery or expelled from it as an undesirable excrescence.

The approach of temporarily surrendering freedoms to gain access to a place from where you might reclaim them ends—for those who believe in this dangerous equation—in a well-calculated swindle. During the long silence that supposedly guarantees a platform to eventually speak from, idealists end up confusing faces with masks, the feigned for the felt. No one is going to return the freedoms pawned in this chameleonic act, which leaves idealists trapped between frustration and opportunism.

## The Hoarding of the Opportunists

Others have understood that the party card is a key that opens doors, giving access not only to the higher echelons of command, from where they can influence decisionmaking, but also to something much more attractive: the tempting accouterments of power. In any other social system these people would have been successful entrepreneurs, but in socialism they have to settle for being leaders of the process. To pass through the filters, they adapt the text of their biography, including living the biography asked of them, as a prerequisite.

Wearing the correct mask, they put a high price on the freedom they scorn, unable to find any sense in it because they don't know what to do with it. So, they barter it in exchange for a position, a house, a car, or a trip abroad that lets them bring home material goods—technological trinkets or brand-name clothes—unavailable in the domestic market. A trip that, ultimately, allows them to succumb to the temptation to desert.

At the end of the day, their final objective is not to change things in their country but rather to improve their own life, and for this they must ascend. To get there, to climb to the positions from where the helm is controlled, they must show irreproachable discipline and loyalty. Invariably they vote in favor of the proposals that come down from above, never admitting even the slightest deviation from what is directed, making life impossible for the idealists. They accuse the rare honest party members of being pessimistic and hypercritical and sneer at their lack of faith and arrogance; they dismiss them as irrelevant.

Each in their own way—the idealist who waits for the opportune moment to influence the course of events, and the opportunist who lies in wait only for possible benefits—ends up forfeiting their freedom. They give it away, receiving almost nothing in return; only the long wait for the one and the tiny material sinecures for the other.

## Small Crumbs

Even to its supporters, the revolutionary program is hopeful, but slow. Every step involves an enormous sacrifice for everyone, with minimal gain for each person. From the point of view of the leaders of the process, the mass is a conglomeration of individuals who have neither elevated ideals nor pretentious ambitions. If they do not plan to propose a political program or open a business, why do these people want freedom? They must be given their bread, instructions to make them productive, and medical services to keep them healthy.

The most commonly repeated argument in socialist-authoritarian regimes is that freedom puts all the social advances enjoyed by the masses at risk. In one sense, this is entirely true. If everyone could say what they like, the first thing they would talk about is the need to introduce market mechanisms and the associated right to ownership. If, in addition to this, they are given the opportunity to organize themselves, they would have money to pay for a promotional campaign and would convince the majority that socialism is a brake on prosperity.

It is very curious that the sellers of the socialist Utopia only accept payment in freedom, and even more curious that they are the ones with the least faith in the human condition. It goes without saying that a society without social classes, where people work driven neither by need nor by the obscene lust for profit, would have to be populated by an angelic species, noble and altruistic by nature; were it otherwise the theory would be full of holes. In Cuba, this rare specimen of human being was given the name, “The New Man” (“El Hombre Nuevo”). He was going to be a species fundamentally incapable of demanding freedom, but satisfied with the paternalistic crumbs that fell his way from above.

To construct this man—a being alien to unfair economic exchange and the temptations of the market—education, the arts, and propaganda all contributed steady doses of

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ideology and indoctrination. But the final result was indifference or discontent. People raised outside a framework of social, economic, and political freedoms did not become “New Men.” They yearned for the freedoms they didn’t have.

In the market of utopias there are no exchanges or returns, and the freedom that pays your way into paradise is never refunded. Rarely do citizens have the option to choose; freedom is suppressed, a system is imposed on them, and then, when citizens get frustrated and begin to think about introducing changes, they feel as if they must perform a Herculean task.

## **Buying Time**

When the socialist bloc collapsed, the Cuban government found itself trapped in a real conflict between trying to maintain socialism without the Soviet subsidy or beginning to take into account the economic laws of the market. The first would have led the country to a fate similar to that of Cambodia in the appalling times of Pol Pot. The authorities even flirted with the possibility of a project called “Option Zero,” which included a massive shift of people from the cities to the countryside.

But relative sanity prevailed, along with the desire to stay in power, and the so-called “Special Period” was decreed, in which some concessions would be made to “save the gains of the Revolution.” They accepted that there would be small private restaurants, authorized the holding of dollars—which, until that time, had been penalized with years in prison—and welcomed remittances from Cubans living abroad. They permitted self-employment, and as a consequence of the increasing importance of tourism, prostitution reappeared with a vengeance, with the obvious tolerance of the authorities. The Fourth Communist Party Congress, held a couple of years earlier, had made the unexpected concession of allowing people with religious beliefs to become Party members, and everything pointed the way to

an opening for the proposals of the reformist sectors.

Another currency appeared on the scene (initially it was the U.S. dollar; later it was the Cuban Convertible Peso), one that allowed citizens to obtain material goods without continuing to pay in freedom and support for the government. The dual monetary system changed the face of a country that, for decades, had established rationing or favoritism as the path to goods and services. The overprotective and authoritarian father that the Cuban state had become did not look kindly on its children’s ability to thrive outside its protection, but it could do little to stop them. Legal and law enforcement mechanisms were created to ensure that the misguided entrepreneurs did not accumulate too many material goods, which might lead to independence.

As an indirect result of this “slacking off” in vigilance, anti-government activity increased significantly. Some 120 opposition organizations across the country decided to coordinate and celebrate an event called the “Cuban Council” or “Cuban Assembly” (Concilio Cubano). Hours before February 24, 1996, the event’s promoters were imprisoned, an unequivocal signal that tolerance had its limits. To make matters worse, on the same day the Cuban military shot down two small planes from Florida, crewed by exiles supposedly trying to drop leaflets over Havana. In response, U.S. president Bill Clinton, pressured by the Cuban-American lobby, felt compelled to sign the Helms-Burton Act, strengthening the trade embargo. As a result, the “court reformists” lost what little ground they had gained.

The reversal accelerated with Hugo Chávez’s rise to power in Venezuela and the considerable financial and energy resources he put into the hands of the Cuban government. With no one able to prevent a reversal, the small openings began to shrink. There would be no new licenses for self-employment, and a pack of inspectors fell on the private restaurants, forcing the majority of them to close.

The news of Fidel Castro’s retirement for health reasons offered a ray of hope. His brother, Raúl Castro, declared the need for

structural changes and even mentioned the possibility of offering an olive branch to the United States. But by the end of his first year in office as president of the Council of State, his measures were only cosmetic, such as allowing Cubans to have cell phones, stay in tourist hotels, and purchase DVD players and computers. These openings were so ridiculous that they only served to alert the rest of the world to the absurd limitations faced by Cuban citizens in their own country.

The showcase of the “Raúl reforms” was the land grants announced for anyone who wanted to cultivate them. In practice, there were no title deeds, but rather 10-year terms of usufruct. Agricultural development remains an unfinished business, because of the ineptitude of the large state companies and their lack of enthusiasm with regards to giving land to private farmers. This announced process of returning certain usurped freedoms only strengthened the evidence that the greedy state rarely gives back what it takes for itself, to the detriment of its citizens.

In the area of political freedom, the most significant step has been the signing of the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights, and the Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, key instruments of the United Nations that are backed by the majority of democratic governments. These covenants, however, have not yet been ratified, nor has a single law been modified to make the Cuban legal system reflect the commitments within them. More than two hundred people now serving prison sentences were convicted for political reasons, even though officially this category does not exist and these prisoners are considered “mercenaries of imperialism.”

Material poverty and the inability of citizens to finance their own political projects have launched many on a new form of dependency. Faced with the impossibility of legally justifying the allocation of resources they desire, all civil action parallel to the state is marked by the same level of informality as the black market. Those people inspired to develop programs and create organizations at the edges of the restrictive laws are viewed as

criminals of opinion and traffickers in their own ideas.

## The Sheep Who Escapes

The only threat that can be made against a sheep who wants to escape is that it will be returned to the pen. But it will no longer be part of the herd because, while the pen has fences, bolts, and physical boundaries, the herd is a mathematical abstraction, a number that falls apart once the participants who make up the sum decide to exercise their free will. As soon as a citizen stops paying with his freedom for other rights that ought to be respected, the confiscator of his sovereignty must change his tactics; now, instead of stealing his freedom from him, he must buy it. He must promise him better food, a roof that won't go flying off in a hurricane, or more lucrative subsidies. But little can be done if your coffers are empty and you have not learned how to create the wealth you must offer in exchange for freedom.

Every day there are more people in Cuba who are disenchanted with the socialist system, or the scam that goes by that name. Conversely, no conversions occur in the other direction and, now, to wear that mask is becoming a bad choice. Even the opportunists, with their sensitive noses, begin to flirt with real criticism and sing in the chorus of those demanding change. People are beginning to be conscious of having been cheated; this leads to signs of discontent and, lamentably, the country bleeds through growing migration. Just by boarding an airplane, many believe they can begin to recover all the freedoms ceded and stolen, while few dare—from inside our country—to push the limits of what is permitted.

One of the tools that has helped people recover the opportunity to air their opinions is the Internet. Although a common citizen cannot contract for Internet at home, and the price of an hour's connection in a public place exceeds two weeks' wages, a web of networks has emerged as the only means by which a per-

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son on the island can make his opinions known to the rest of the world. Today, this virtual space is like a training camp where Cubans go to relearn forgotten freedoms. The right of association can be found on Facebook, Twitter, and the other social networks, in a sort of compensation for the crime of “unlawful assembly” established by the Cuban penal code.

In a printed newspaper or magazine, on the radio or television, it is still impossible to publicize opinions that stray from the trite official script, but once connected to the Internet, many possibilities open up. Up until now, the most used are the independent blogs that have begun to appear. Most of the “direct readers” are abroad, and from there they e-mail the articles and posts they like to their friends and family in Cuba, who copy and multiply them. The bloggers, for their part, put copies of their work on CDs and even distribute them on flash drives. Television stations received by illegal satellite report on the contents of the blogs and conduct interviews, showing the faces of the bloggers. In this way, in less than a year, a community of cyber-dissidents was created—a *blogostroika*, as it is also called. Spaces such as Voces Cubanas or Desde Cuba, and the digital magazine *Convivencia*, are vivid examples of this.<sup>2</sup> They don’t need authorized spaces to exist; rather, in lieu of recovering these parcels of freedom, they have created them.

## **The Loan Shark Declares Bankruptcy**

The methods used by the government to kidnap the freedom of Cuban citizens over these 50 years have had at least three elements: law enforcement, ideology, and economics. These three methods of reducing and dismantling rights have not followed each other in chronological order, but rather have coexisted and intermingled. In the case of Cuba, they began to manifest themselves during the first years of the triumph of the Revolution, though the dominance of one

relative to the others has shifted back and forth.

The curbing of freedom for economic benefit had its strongest period when the support coming from the Kremlin allowed the state to offer its unconditional supporters something material in exchange for their loyalty. This buying and selling plummeted as the socialist camp fell apart, demonstrating the dependence and weakness of the Cuban economy. The trading of material benefits to those who ceded their freedom did not revive once money again had value as a medium of exchange; the convertible peso bankrupted the system of political and work-related merit as the path to material possessions. To buy the appliances that now reappeared in store windows it was no longer necessary to do volunteer work or to applaud a political speech, it was sufficient simply to have money. But this money was almost always obtained in ways contrary to those still being promulgated from the political dais.

The same thing happened with ideology. Disbelief spread among those who had once bet on the Marxist path to achieve a future of prosperity and equality. It became more difficult to find people who would yield their dwindling share of civil rights under the influence of an ideology that demanded it from them. This left, then, a single possible type of exchange: imposition. One hands over freedom without thinking, however, for material perks or for ideologies one believes in, but rights are not given as voluntarily to a repressive apparatus.

When coercion becomes the only way to make a person yield his freedom, it is easy to recognize the uneven exchange that has been imposed. Discovering yourself to be a victim, you tend to react immediately and vehemently. Although the interior freedom of a person is inexhaustible, what you yourself paid for a privilege cannot be recovered. There is always the opportunity, however, to break the contract and choose to pay the price.

Meanwhile, the loan shark is bankrupt. The same one to whom you pawned civic

action, the rights of free association, of which religion in which to raise your children, of freely leaving and entering the country, of freedom to buy a house or rent a room. The same one who held captive, through prohibitions, the creative and economic potential of an entire nation. This is what has happened in today's Cuba; where there are no longer rights to surrender as a currency of exchange, nor benefits to obtain through that purchase and sale. This is the time to fall into the hands of another moneylender, or to stop, once and for all, handling freedom as if it were money.

## Notes

This text was translated from the Spanish by M. J. Porter. The original can be found at the Cato Institute's Spanish language website at [http://www.elcato.org/pdf\\_files/ens-2009-11-11.pdf](http://www.elcato.org/pdf_files/ens-2009-11-11.pdf). The essay won a prize in the 2009 essay contest "Caminos de la libertad," organized by TV Azteca.

1. Friedrich Engels, "Anti-Dühring," in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Collected Works* 25 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1987), p. 270.

2. Voces Cubanas, <http://vocescubanas.com/>; Desde Cuba, <http://www.desdecuba.com/>; and Convivencia, <http://www.convivenciacuba.es/>.

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