

**A new youth vanguard in Cuba?:  
Los hijos del Che**

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**Prepared for delivery at the 2001 meeting of the Latin American  
Studies Association, Washington DC, September 6-8, 2001**

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The process of discovery and reassessment which characterised the mid-1980s in Cuba, when the leadership and the Communist Party formally recognised a number of the deep-seated ills and problems of the Revolution and tried to address them singly and collectively, covered a wide range of issues. Economic policy (in the face of the evident and deep economic crisis that became evident after 1982-4) was addressed by a number of measures of reform, streamlining, mobilisation and exhortation. The continuing marginalisation of social groups such as women and Afro-Cubans was addressed in measures that focussed on their inclusion in the Party, in the National Assembly and in greater attention in the media and the arts. The Party and the vexed question of ideology were addressed above all in the wide-ranging process of 'Rectification' which began formally in 1986 but which had really been under way since 1984. This general phenomenon of reappraisal may not have been effected deeply or with great success in some of these areas, but it was certainly sufficient for observers to consider that the Revolution was going through one of its apparently periodic bouts of redefinition, soul-searching or purging, and there are many who would argue that the process which had been under way for at least three years when the crisis of 1989-1991 hit the island helped create something of a basis for a successful survival strategy to adjust to the frightening new world which challenged all the preconceptions on which the system had been based since 1961.

However, one problem which had indeed become evident to many observers by the mid-1980s (and had indeed been observed as early as the late 1960s) was noticeably not addressed: the problem posed by Cuba's youth within the Revolution. One of the difficulties of course about identifying any attempt or non-attempt to address the problem is a lack of clarity on what precisely 'the problem' actually was by then. A number of writers had written before and were to write subsequently of the 'problem' of alienation, of an increasing tendency for significant sectors of Cuba's youth (especially in Havana) to seem visibly disaffected and to behave in a somewhat dissident and challenging way towards the system. There was evidence of an evolving 'counter-culture', a penchant for imported material goods and fashions, even a Cuban 'punkism' in dress and behaviour, sufficient for some journalists to see this as characteristic and significant. Whether this was in fact so representative is open to debate, since all students of Cuba are well aware of the dangers of casual journalistic attention to Havana both seeing what the visitor expects to see (or being told what the subject judges the journalist is seeking) and assuming that what is visible in Havana near the tourist areas is necessarily true or typical of either the

rest of the city or the rest of the country. However, what did seem to be true to many more hardened observers of the Cuban system was that Cuban youth (those between, say 16 and 28) did seem increasingly to be speaking a different language and responding to a different set of stimuli from their elders and from the governing generation, and that the once apparently solid activism of the organisations such as the Unión de Jóvenes Comunistas (UJC) had tended (not unlike the Party itself) to become a formulaic and rather lifeless commitment by most members, or, alternatively, a means for self-serving opportunism.

The reasons for such an 'alienation' were not difficult to grasp then. In the first place the Revolution's very success over the previous two decades in building an impressive education system and focussing attention and investment on educational opportunity and achievement, and also in providing guaranteed, if often somewhat uneconomic, employment for the system's secondary and higher graduates, created an in-built problem of unrealistic expectation in a generation which had, by 1985, not really experienced the hardship and the shared suffering of the 1959-1976 period. Those expectations (of what we might call a 'Second World' standard of living) were unrealistic because, simply, Cuba was still – as the external causes of the 1980s economic crisis demonstrated eloquently – a Third World economy. Impressive though the Revolution's achievements may have been in terms of educational provision and employment, they were fragile in the face of Cuba's continuing dependence on sugar, on world prices and on an economic trading and cooperation system (Comecon) which was itself running aground.

Secondly, the same processes of 'institutionalisation' which characterised the post-1972 years and saw a consolidation of reform, a slowing-down of change and a more orthodox political structure and economic system also, as had become clear to many (Cubans and non-Cubans alike), produced a process of 'bureaucratisation', with its inherent problems of inertia and exclusiveness. This process in turn proceeded to frustrate Cuban youth in both their ambitions to progress upwards through an administrative or political system, and in their predictable desire to proceed rapidly with development, change and adaptation to the world outside Cuba with which they were starting to become familiar.

Thirdly, there was a growing and inevitable tension between the Revolution's official ethos of what we might call 'youthism' – long an integral part of the broad ideology from the 1950s, long something which drove both the vanguard and the thousands who volunteered to be mobilised in the early campaigns of the Revolution, and long an idea which linked the post-1959 imperatives to the struggles and ambitions of the past – and the reality that the once young leaders of 1959, whose youth had been one of their more attractive hallmarks, had aged in the saddle, were now in their forties and fifties but still considering themselves as young and still presuming to speak for Cuba's young. While Fidel Castro might himself be young in comparison with other political leaders outside Cuba, he was in the mid-1980s increasingly seen by young Cubans as *el caballo*, as someone who had been there in power all their lives and was no longer young or even perhaps relevant to their ambitions and discourse.

While it is perhaps an exaggeration to see this tendency as 'alienation', it was none the less true that the mid-1980s saw growing evidence that it could indeed grow into 'a problem'. However, one of the difficulties related to this tendency was that Cuba's leaders did not necessarily show an awareness of there being 'a problem', to the same extent as they were publicly prepared to admit faults regarding women, the Party and a myriad of other failings. There are, of course, several reasons why this should be so.

Firstly, many aspects of the main youth political organisation (the UJC) ran the obvious risk of making it easily unresponsive, unattractive and inert. The age range alone – between 18 and 35 – was so out of kilter with what many Cubans increasingly thought was 'youth' that 'young' leaders aged, say, 32 or 34 simply were not taken too seriously by many young Cubans (between 16 and 25) as representing their desires and ideas. Moreover, the UJC was so obviously a 'rite of passage' for progression upwards into the ranks of the by now more bureaucratised and unresponsive 'adult' Party, that few politically active or imaginative young Cubans were attracted by the idea of active membership or involvement. By 1985, the UJC was not seen as a 'fun' organisation and membership declined.

Secondly, the youth concerns of the 1960s, which had so preoccupied the Revolution's vanguard, were not the same ones which now characterised Cuban youth, yet the formative years for the vanguard in this respect had been the 1960s, and they continued to perceive of youth in somewhat unchanged terms.

In this respect the problem of an inert and unresponsive political system and bureaucracy aggravated the lack of awareness; the messages being passed upwards were largely ones designed not to affect the *status quo* or to reflect what the 'messengers' presumed was safe and advisable. It must be remembered that the nature of the Cuban system by then was such that it took shocks and crises – such as Mariel or economic crisis - to shake the leadership out of its policies and presumptions.

Thirdly, the problem in the 1980s – as ever – was that the answer to the question 'What is youth?' was difficult if not impossible to give. Were Cubans in their 30s young? If so, did they think the same, have the same concerns, respond to the same stimuli as those in their teens or their twenties? Hence, it was difficult to quantify 'the problem', which had no easily visible manifestation (apart from the groups of young males gathered on the Malecón or around the small but growing tourist trade). In the Cuba of the 1980s, the inertia was such that a problem that was unquantifiable was not seen as a problem, since there was no formal mechanism for noticing it.

Finally, related to this, was the underlying difficulty that the Revolution had never, since the first days of the Revolution, had what could be called a definable and recognisable 'youth policy'. At one level this was strange, given that 'youth' was, as we have seen, always a key element in the Revolution's platform, appeal and ideology, always implicit in the constant discourse of 'renewal' and 'generations', in the importance given to education, and always explicit in the 1950s manifestos, the nature of the 26 July Movement and the language and behaviour of the early rebels. However, besides the difficulty of identifying what 'youth' actually was (which, in the heady days of the 1960s 'youth culture' in the West, few specialists, advertisers or policy-makers could agree on either), the Revolution of the 1960s laid great emphasis on the need to avoid categorising social groups as 'different'. Thus the same attitude which refused to contemplate the notion of 'Black Power' or 'Women's Liberation' (as those ideas were propagated in the United States or Western Europe) also tended to reject the idea that 'youth' was something separate from 'Cuban society', to be treated differently, given special attention or privileged.

In this respect, the issue was complicated still further by the fact that one evident characteristic of the early years of the Revolution was that young Cubans were themselves, in large numbers, actually the

active vanguard of the processes of participation, change and mobilisation. Besides the youth of the rebel leaders and the Rebel Army (as opposed, for example, to the older PSP), it was clear that the majority of Cubans who volunteered for, or were mobilised into, the early campaigns and organisations – the militias, the Literacy Campaign, the CDRs – were young, often in their teens. Young Cubans were simply the protagonists of a process which absorbed them rapidly, matured them at a stroke, gave them a critical and responsible role – and perhaps, in the process, helped miss out any adolescence that their contemporaries in the West were enduring and indeed being feted for by a consumerist culture. These same young people – who might be said to have aged rapidly and missed out their potentially ‘wayward’ years – were the ones staffing the system by the mid-1980s, and unable to respond easily to the different experience and different concerns of a new young generation which had had a more ‘normal’ experience.

Hence, it was perhaps not so surprising after all that the revolutionary vanguard did not respond positively to address what it did not see as a recognisable ‘problem’ in the 1980s. However, that failure came back to haunt the system in two ways in particular in the next decade, and, indeed, in the next months and years.

The first manifestation of this came in young responses after 1985 to the ‘Gorbachev phenomenon’. For it became clear as Gorbachev proceeded to reform the Soviet Union so dramatically and so totally, with *perestroika* and *glasnost*, that younger Cubans who were perhaps active in the political system (in the Party or the UJC) and also many not so involved, began to see in the Soviet process that was unfolding something of a model for their own system. Not perhaps having yet experienced the Soviet (or Eastern European) systems, they were unable to perceive how much more inert and unresponsive those countries’ structures and bureaucracies were than Cuba’s, and tended to exaggerate the problems which Cuba, and they, faced, and to see Gorbachev as an instrument for reforming the Cuban system. This had two visible effects – something of a haemorrhage from the UJC, and a tendency for young Cubans to become avid readers of the material emanating from the Soviet Union. Suddenly, *Soviet Weekly* and *Moscow News* became hot property on the streets, being sold out within minutes – the same papers which many Cubans had ignored and left unsold before. Indeed, identifying yourself with Gorbachev became in itself something of a statement, a badge of dissent from, but still officially

within, the system, with the actual knowledge of what was happening in the Soviet Union or what the problem had been being less important, or evident, than the need to identify. This was especially true among younger intellectual and artistic circles, where Gorbachev seemed to represent a way out of the memories of the *quinquenio gris* (1971-6), personally experienced or recounted, and the safer but none the less stultifying years since then. Indeed, there is little evidence that this 'Gorbachevmania' extended much beyond such educated circles to the average young Cuban on the street, but in itself it signalled something.

Of course, these hopes were then dashed by what happened in the Soviet Union after 1990, leading to a double frustration for the adherents of the new 'faith' – the end of a possible Soviet-style reformism in Cuba and, with the resulting economic crisis, the end of any more possibilities of personal advancement.

The second way in which the unresolved youth problem manifested itself came, indeed, in responses to this new crisis. For the 'dark days' of 1990-1994 saw a more visible and sharper alienation among a younger generation that was unused to real hardship (unlike their more loyal parents or grandparents who had experienced both the poverty of the pre-1959 Cuba and the austerity of the 1960s) and thus less able to tolerate it or even understand it. It was also a generation that, unlike its parents, had not been 'steeled' by study in, contacts with or the general familiarity with the Socialist Bloc; while many of those in their thirties and forties perhaps responded to the crisis by calling on reserves of commitment and ideological schooling (although devastated by the disappearance of the world which they had come to see as their protective shield and ideological fortress), the young were less negatively affected by the collapse of the Communist world (and many perhaps even greeting it with a sense of liberation) and simply frustrated by the sudden shortages, the battening-down of the political and economic hatches, and puzzled by the new doom-laden panorama. This generation, therefore, perhaps more than their elders (who clung to a declining hope as an ideological life-raft), had a greater tendency to react by abandoning hope in the Cuban system and shifting their hopes and expectations northwards, towards the 'victor' in the Cold War and the always attractive source of wealth and opportunity. As the new crisis meant that many of the young figured highly among the suddenly, and

unprecedented, pool of unemployed, both the less educated (and thus more susceptible) and the more educated (and thus more angry and alienated).

This generation's reactions to the crisis were thus varied but evident. Firstly, there evolved a visible rejectionist 'counter-culture' among groups of urban youth, not so much expressing itself against the system as opting out of it – the rise of an obsessive interest in Western rock music, rap music, Rastafarianism and, at its extreme, the 'friquis'. Secondly, many young Cubans (especially in the cities) responded by adopting the burgeoning black economy (or more precisely the black market) as their milieu, engaging in petty crime and hustling (the ubiquitous *jinetismo*); this especially seems to have affected some poorer *barrios* of Havana. More typically, however, the rejectionism was more negative and disillusioned – manifested in a growing and visible apathy, in abstention from political activity and involvement, and in an exodus from, or refusal to join, organisations such as the FEU, the FEEM or the UJC. Finally, one other manifestation of this whole alienation was seen in the attraction of more and more young people towards religion, especially *santería*, but also the Catholic and some evangelical churches, whose congregations (hitherto the preserve of the old) now became remarkably rejuvenated.

Thus, when the street disturbances of August 1994 erupted, especially in the more alienated parts of Centro Habana, the episode – for all that it remained isolated socially and limited geographically – did reflect a deeper and wider malaise in the Cuban political system and political culture. That fact seemed also to be recognised by the Cuban leadership and the Communist Party cadres, who now responded at last to a problem of which they had only just apparently become aware.

The first response was what we might call institutional, in the drive to rejuvenate the Party, at all levels – local, provincial and, above all, national. In particular, two younger politicians were now catapulted into the Central Committee and, soon after, into high profile Ministerial posts – Roberto Robaina, former popular and charismatic leader of the UJC, named to the prestigious and influential post of Foreign Minister, and Carlos Lage, his less flamboyant former colleague, given overall responsibility for the programme of economic reforms which were under way from 1993. Lage, indeed, soon became the effective prime minister of the Cuban government, as vice-president and secretary to the Consejo

de Ministros. These promotions were evidently designed both to bring into the decision-making circles young talent and imaginative thinking, beyond the confines of perhaps more orthodox and conservative assumptions, but also to send a public signal to youth. Although neither was any longer young – in the sense of the alienated generation now being addressed – their rise did seem to many, seeking signs of a change and an awareness of their problems and concerns, to offer some degree of hope. As a gesture it was not lost, and the continuing importance of these two evidently influential leaders in the second half of the 1990s gave some credence to both aspirations that had engendered the move. Even when, in 1999, Robaina was suddenly relieved of his post, his place was taken by someone even younger, Castro's aide, the former student leader, Felipe Pérez Roque. Around these prominent politicians, moreover, a new generation of leaders was evidently, if more gradually and less noticeably, moved in to replace Ministers and Party leaders of the old, guerrilla or 1970s generation. By the end of the 1990s, few survivors from the early years remained in significant government or Party posts.

Further down the system, too, the rejuvenation message was spread, as administrative, academic and political posts steadily changed hands, relieving the older generation and replacing them with younger place-holders, in their thirties and forties.

The second response by the Cuban system was the visible revival of the UJC, perhaps reflecting the influence of Robaina who now seemed to have Castro's ear. Steadily, the organisation began to broaden its role and to raise its profile, above all striving to appear more relevant to young people's daily concerns and more concerned with social or recreational questions. In other words, the system seemed to recognise a gap between the formal rhetoric of 'official' culture and the different interests of younger people, whose cultural and social ideas and preferences were now incorporated more into the UJC's thinking. It was almost as if the UJC were trying to set itself up as the purveyor of a 'safe' 'counter-culture', and thus monitor and even control the earlier and perhaps dangerous tendencies among youth. One effect of this was a noticeable rise in UJC membership, which, while the number of Party members were falling, seemed to rise against all expectations (to its present level of 450,000).

After this, however, the changes seemed to slow down and even stagnate, with the focus of political change and the growing drive to reinvigorate the Party and even redefine the Revolution shifting away

from youth to other areas. There were, from 1998, four mechanisms adopted or campaigns launched which seemed to reflect this shift.

In 1998, for example, the Party launched its campaign against corruption, 'economic crime' and 'social indiscipline' – a broad campaign directed at a range of problems which had grown out of both pre-1991 tendencies, attitudes and structures and post-1993 reforms. The targets of this drive were problems such as pilfering, absenteeism, non-participation in CDR activities or voluntary labour, but also the more serious problems of privilege, favouritism and opportunism in the Party and the administrative system, not to mention illegal trading, tax evasion, breach of *cuenta propia* legislation and, of course, *jineterismo*.

Another such campaign was a visible tendency from 2000 to rely for active political support and involvement on the older generation. This took, and continues to take, two forms. On the one hand, the system seems to have given a much enhanced role to the Asociación de Combatientes de la Revolución, now strengthened by the enrolment of thousands of Armed Forces officers demobilised in the necessary down-scaling of the military from 1991. Schooled in service to the Revolution, trained in loyalty and discipline, these cadres have rapidly become the new political 'foot-soldiers' of the process of reinvigoration and redefinition, not least reviving the flagging CDRs in many areas, especially the system of nightly *guardia*, an important instrument against petty crime and in favour of neighbourhood identity and solidarity. The second such mechanism has been the role given to retired employees – of whom there are ever more as the economic contraction from 1991 forced enterprises and organisations to adopt early retirement measures – in the local, zonal, cells of the usually work-based Party.

A third campaign was the 1998 mobilisation around the visit of the Pope, which, for all its inherent dangers, was evidently a gamble that paid off, uniting Cubans in a moment of national celebration, bringing the hesitant Catholic Church into the national fold (and thus away from its erstwhile assumed role as protector of the dissident), and dividing the émigré community in Florida.

Finally, of course, between November 1999 and June 2000, there was the all-absorbing national campaign for the return of Elián González, which seemed to distract Cuba's media, leadership,

organisations and public from almost every other concern, with daily television broadcasts on the subject, national and local rallies and marches, and a publicity campaign that bombarded the senses on every corner and from every hoarding.

However, all four campaigns did not in fact exclude or move away from youth at all, but, rather, had – and continue to have - their significance for the drive to reinsert, and revive commitment among, the younger generation. The moral campaign against crime, indiscipline and petty corruption visibly enlisted the youth organisation in its ranks, with the UJC and the FEU being ascribed a major role in the Party-led drive to strengthen ideological commitment among members and among Cubans in general, recognising and attempting to counter the perhaps inevitably individualising and anti-solidarity tendencies of the economic reforms, ‘dollarisation’ and the whole *cuenta propia* experience. The familiar and well-worn linkage of youth with ‘purity’ and idealism has resurfaced as never before since the early 1970s, with public attention being devoted to the activities of the FEU and also the FEEM. The drive from 2000 to create the Escuelas de Trabajadores Sociales, in league with the UJC and the FEU, has also been an integral part of this campaign.

Equally, youth organisations were conscripted into the whole campaign around the Papal visit, and, since then, have been used openly and repeatedly in the drive to redefine and reinvigorate the political system, and thus the Revolution, on a broader range of fundamental issues, with youth being linked with commitment and voluntarism – not least the revived mechanisms of *trabajo voluntario*, through the Brigadas Estudiantiles de Trabajo and the mass mobilisations of, and by, the FEEM.

It was, however, through the Elián campaign that the question of youth really found its really valuable role. This happened in three ways. Firstly the whole focus of the campaign was, from the outset, concentrated on youth, childhood, purity and family, with all slogans, posters and marches emphasising these values; the whole process of depiction of Elián as *nuestro hijo* was a clever, and effective, move to identify him with the Cubans’ valuing of the family institution, and also to identify young Cubans, of all ages, with someone who was presented as *su hermano*. Secondly, the campaign revived memories – naturally in many Cubans of a certain age and formally in the media – of the early 1960s, when thousands of Cuban children were separated from one parent by being taken, against that

parent's wishes or with their knowledge, to the United States, and also, most publicly, of the whole *Pedro Pan* campaign organised by the Church, the émigré leaders and the United States government. Thirdly, youth organisations, and their leaders, were explicitly given the main role in the operation, leading the marches and rallies, speaking at the daily and weekly Mesas Redondas and Tribunas Abiertas, and visibly being the groups seen to be running the campaign. In particular, three organisations stood out in this respect throughout. The first was the Pioneros, often the driving force of the regular and repeated mobilisation of schoolchildren which characterised the whole campaign, projecting its members into the national spotlight as never before. It was they who were asked to organise, for example, the famous mounting of the guard outside the US Interests Section; when the American authorities complained about inadequate protection of the building against public rallies at the nearby Tribuna Antimperialista José Martí, Fidel Castro simply responded by removing the Cuban military guards and stationing in their place a line of schoolchildren around the building. The publicity gain was for the Cuban leadership, and the Pioneros were seen to be in the vanguard of the campaign. The second organisation was the secondary school students' body, the FEEM whose profile was raised in an unprecedented way. The third was the FEU, which organised the majority of the rallies and marches, and whose charismatic young leader 22-year old Hassan Pérez Casabona shared most of the regular platforms with Fidel Castro, speaking publicly almost daily and throughout the country. Indeed, if the Elián campaign changed things in Cuba, which it evidently did – not least creating the new mobilisation mechanism of the Tribunas Abiertas -, then one way was in bringing Pérez Casabona, and the UJC leader, Otto Rivero (who also shared the platform on most occasions), into national prominence, even creating something of a juvenile 'fan club' among younger Cubans, but clearly identifying Pérez above all as a significant player of the immediate and short-term future in Cuba.

This raised profile for the youth organisations, however, did not end with the closing of the Elián campaign, any more than did the Tribunas Abiertas or the Mesas Redondas, whose anniversary was celebrated with much publicity in January 2001 and whose birth was linked publicly with the voluntary aspirations of schoolchildren, anxious to do something to get Elian returned. For the subsequent year has seen two of those organisations in particular – the FEEM and the FEU – retain their visibility in the media, and retain their new role in mobilisation. The new and continuing profile accorded to both is significant in each case.

The FEEM – normally, before 1999, something of a neglected and largely functional organisation – has been publicised in an unprecedented way, presumably because of its role as a channel between the system and youth under the age of eighteen, the very generation whose aspirations and concerns the system might be said to have been neglecting hitherto in all ways (other than education) and the potential seedbed of future youth dissidence. FEEM congresses have been given a greater media coverage and FEEM leaders become more familiar to the public, while the organisation itself seems to have been afforded some degree of relative autonomy to operate, organise and campaign, although obviously within parameters.

As for the 76,000-strong FEU, the profile and importance of its leader evidently giving it a significance in itself, it seems to have assumed something of the political role previously reserved for the UJC, oddly moving in the opposite direction from the latter body – i.e. away from the social and recreational towards the political and mobilisational. Moreover, its hand in recent policies is all too evident – the new Escuelas and the Joven Club, above all.

However, the question of course remains of how effective this all may be in actually bringing potentially alienated youth back into the fold and in actually reviving the level of political commitment of the younger generations. Just because a mass organisation, or its leader, has a raised profile, or enjoys relative power, autonomy or influence, it does not of course mean that this is necessarily effective in involving any more than the active, and perhaps ambitious, activists in the organisation. Just because thousands of schoolchildren marched regularly in the Elián campaign and were visibly identified with the whole mobilisation, it does not mean that it brought them, or the older, adolescent, youth, into the system, any more than participation in May Day parades, for example, changes the average Cuban's thinking. Of course, the nature of the Cuban system is such that one should not ignore the effectiveness of such 'ritualising' mobilisations in cementing personal identification with the collective; the May Day rallies or the formulaic Tribunas Abiertas may seem little more than rhetorical participation in events that are the result of official and peer-group pressure, but they evidently do play a valuable role in allowing thousands of Cubans to regularly 'ritualise' their 'belonging' to the collective – the *barrio*, the union, the *nación* and the *Revolución*. Equally, the nature of the system is

such that all Cubans are schooled and skilled in interpreting gesture politics, reading the signs offered by this or that person's presence on a platform or perhaps the raised profile of this or that organisation. Nonetheless, a question-mark must still remain over the effectiveness of all this on the ground.

This therefore leads on to two issues: recent mechanisms introduced to combat particular social problems and the role and nature of myth within the Cuban system. The former is a very recent phenomenon, and refers to the announcement in 1999-2000 and introduction in 2001 of three developments that are obviously driven by the FEU and FEEM's ideas and obviously designed to tackle several recognised problems simultaneously. The three are the Escuelas de Trabajadores Sociales, the Escuelas Intensivas de Maestros and the Joven Club.

The latter is a relatively simple device with a simple purpose. It is designed to take bored and potentially wayward youth off the streets and get them actively involved and interested in information technology, computer games and the internet in places that, currently in their infancy and few in number, resemble the British youth clubs of the 1950s and 1960s – earnest, organised and possibly of limited value if left as the only 'solution'. In fact, however, they are likely to be a plank in a much wider policy.

The other two, the Escuelas, have a much more ambitious and characteristic purpose – to tackle the social problems which have been identified and may have grown in Cuban society in recent years (of social exclusion and of delinquency), to address the admitted problem of wasted talent implicit in the highly selective Cuban higher education system, and to find ways of converting potentially alienated youth into active 'stake-holders' in the reinvigorated system. In character and overall design, the mechanisms bear the hallmarks more of the 1960s voluntarism and improvisation than the modern professionalism which elsewhere in the system Cubans are being urged to aspire to. For the Escuelas de Trabajadores Sociales take young students from the *pre-universitario* who, because of their grades, have missed out in the highly competitive race for on entry into the selective ranks of higher education, and, once identified as potentially problem youth by organisations such as the UJC, FEEM or CDRs, offer them the opportunity to undertake three months of intensive training as social workers, going out into the community in specified problem *barrios* to interview young people and identify their

difficulties, after which they have the right of entry to the University on a part-time basis in any course in the social sciences, basic sciences or humanities, while continuing to do their 'field-work' placing each Saturday. The plan is clearly already successful in changing the thinking of those who are participating, reinserting those potential 'troublemakers' into the system, coopting them into the social programmes now clearly in need, and thus giving them not just a new opportunity and thus a prospect of career and personal advancement but also a significant role in 'spreading the Revolution', defending its gains and tackling the problems thrown up by the changes since 1991. As with so many of the Revolution's mechanisms, the Escuelas seem likely to go some way towards integrating the otherwise unintegrated at two levels – the social workers and the socially excluded – not unlike the effects of the 1961 Literacy Campaign. To date, 1800 secondary school students have gone through the system, and, in the Brigadas Universitarias de Trabajo Social, have spent 26 Saturdays contacting some 76,000 under-16s in Havana alone.

The Escuelas Intensivas work on similar principles, taking 'problem' youth and giving them the opportunity to become primary teachers, thus filling a social need and giving them a job and a role. With both types of Escuela, their significance is heightened by the formal identification with the UJC and the FEU, who have been given authority to contribute to their organisation and even their construction, thus reinforcing their legitimacy in much-needed social experiments and mobilisations. As with other campaigns of the 1960s, while one may justifiably have doubts about the technical efficacy of such projects in effectively training social workers or teachers in such a short space of time, their political goals, usefulness and effect are likely to be far more significant.

This brings us on necessarily to the question of commitment, and, thus, to the question of ideology, for it is in the realm of ideology – and, within that, of political myth – that one must seek to identify the normal mechanisms for inculcating beliefs, commitment and a sense of belonging, the processes of mobilisation and personal involvement in, and identification with, any system's beliefs and values. For all political systems must at least in part depend for their legitimacy *vis à vis* their own citizens on the willingness of a sufficient proportion of the politically active and aware citizenry to believe in, accept or at least tolerate the system's hegemonic ideology. This is equally true of Britain, the United States or revolutionary Cuba, although, in the latter case – as befits a post-colonial polity, struggling for decades

(if not centuries) to define itself and mark its collective national identity against, and within the ambit of, economic and cultural dependency – the processes of ideological identification are necessarily more patent, active and contested.

Of course, these processes of identification, socialisation and legitimation – whether in Britain, the United States or Cuba – are made all the more complex and contradictory by the essential complexity of any ideology. For an ideology is an evolving system of beliefs, values, codes and myths which expresses a defined (and self-perceiving) group's collective 'world view', itself encapsulating that group's preferred 'narrative' – the 'world' as it has been, as it is and as it should be in the future. Given this amalgam of constituent elements and this process of evolution, an ideology – and especially one which is either hegemonic and, challenged (from within or without), needs to define and defend itself actively, or one which is actively counter-hegemonic in posing alternatives to the dominant system – must be seen as complex, conflictive and by definition never standing still. Yet this same evolution – essential to adaptation, survival and redefinition in the face of new circumstances – presents dilemmas for any ideology, most clearly the need to define, and defend (more or less unchanged), the perceived and agreed 'essence' of the belief-system, so that evolution does not lead to ideological disorientation.

Here there are many factors that can provide an ideology with its route to definition of the 'essence'. One is a shared view of history (of struggle, of domination, of conquest, of superiority, and so on), usually cemented by education practices and consensus, by 'banal nationalism' (Billig, 1995), by ritual and celebration, and so on. Another is collective experience that is seen to reflect a shared self-perception – Britain at war, for example, after 1940, or Israel between 1949 and 1967 -, where external forces are seen by a majority of citizens as bent on destroying a national 'way of life' and underlying national principles, forcing the collectivity to come to terms (perhaps for the first time in years) with what that 'way of life' and those principles actually are.

A third mechanism is provided by the underlying codes which constitute the building-blocks of any ideology. A code is seen here as a set of related and cognate beliefs and principles that can be grouped together to make a coherent belief in a single, given, value, the latter seen collectively as 'essential' to the group's ideology and 'narrative'. Codes thus both express the component parts of an ideology but

also challenge notions or experiences which are seen as counter to the group's (the nation's) interests and self-expression. Thus we can argue convincingly that the ideology that evolved in Cuba over the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as counter-hegemonic and increasingly revolutionary – *cubanía* (or the collective belief in the potential, sanctity, and correctness of *cubanidad*) – consisted of a number of basic codes that became fixtures in that ideology as it evolved. These included, for example, activism (a belief in the value of, and need for, active commitment and struggle), moralism (a complex belief in the value of integrity, self-sacrifice, purity renewal, and so on), or agrarianism (a belief in the 'soul' of Cuba found in the *campo*, the peasant, the *guajiro*). These not only constituted what we might call 'mini-belief systems', nodes of beliefs and values fused together in a coherent belief with which a sufficient number of Cubans could, at any time, identify themselves, but also countered a shared view of the 'problems' which had beset Cuba historically, had created the current difficulties, had contributed to enslavement, and so on – accommodationism or annexationism, corruption and 'betrayal', or the growth of a problematic, white, Spanish urban Cuba.

It is in fact relatively easy to trace the evolution of these codes over that period, identifying the ways in which they changed, added, dropped or downgraded elements, but also how new codes arose at certain points – such as statism and revolutionism. It is also relatively easy – and illustrative – to trace their collective evolution through the insurrectionary period of the 1950s, into the radicalisation of the 1960s, and further, into the 1970s and beyond, to become the defining ideology of a revolution which sought to see itself as internally hegemonic but externally counter-hegemonic. Indeed, it can be argued that those codes – and the whole ideology which they expressed – were fundamental mechanisms in the processes of radicalisation, socialisation and legitimation which the Revolution experienced and directed after 1959.

Yet, however powerful and however convincing an ideology or a code, no political system – however well educated its people and however politically aware (and few can challenge Cuba since 1961 in those respects) – can expect all its citizens to appreciate, understand or, indeed, want to understand the whole ideology. While education or political commitment can inculcate certain tenets in citizens at a certain level – these cannot deal with anything other than the visible, comprehensible and written forms of the ideology – what we might call the 'intellectual-theoretical' level of ideology, identified, codified

and taught by 'specialists'. At the grass-roots what all citizens need is a mechanism for 'plugging into' the overall ideology without thought, without confronting the underlying contradictions and challenges which undoubtedly lie at the heart of the ideology. That is, fundamentally, the role of political myth (or, better, politico-historical myth) in any system.

Here, what is meant by myth is the cohesive set of values seen to be expressed in an accepted symbol or figure which is perceived by a given collectivity to articulate the 'essence' of all, or a significant component part, of the ideology, and to express it comprehensibly in simple, symbolic or human, form. A myth is thus the mechanism by which the 'message' of an ideological code is conveyed across time and across classes or other social groups, making it comprehensible at the individual level by converting the code into a metaphor, a symbol into a 'narrative'. Myths thus must possess an essential and largely unchanging story-line, which is seen by the collective to reflect the group's (the nation's) 'story-line' (real or imagined, past, present or future, or all three) in one form or another, but which is capable of different interpretations at different times. A myth distils an ideology into comprehensible form (or forms), and does so all the more effectively the more 'organic' it is – that quality being determined largely by the existence of a believable and legitimate 'story-line', by its perceived relevance to the group's own experience, and by the existence, and role, of a 'caste' of accepted, honoured and identified 'interpreters' of the myth, who are accepted as the 'guardians' of the myth's 'essence', of its canon. Yet one essential quality of an organic myth in any society and any ideology must be its capacity to be internalised by the individual, or by certain sub-groups, by a process of what we can call 'customisation', the adaptation of the myth to suit personal, or sub-group, needs, definitions and circumstances, but always within the security of the collective – 'belonging' to the overall group while still asserting a different – individual or sub-group – interpretation. This can be especially significant in circumstances where the hegemonic ideology – as most do at any one time - displays two alternative versions of itself, two 'competing discourses', not necessarily – or usually - in conflict with each other but, rather, sharing the same ideology while offering different versions of it. The existence of such competing versions is indeed essential also to adaptability, but also to allow the 'outs' of any one time to become the 'ins' when fashion changes, circumstances determine or sub-groups emerge or decline.

This then is broadly the theoretical basis for one perspective which can be adopted for the Cuban case, both generally and historically – taking the twentieth century in its entirety or taking the Revolution as a whole – and also specifically for the post-1990 period. For one characteristic of that period, as has often been observed, has been the need felt by both leadership and led to assess, confront, re-examine and possibly redefine certain hitherto unquestioned basics of the hegemonic belief-system in Cuba. The collapse of the Socialist Bloc (and, with it, the necessary questioning of the ideological bases of that Bloc, and also of Cuba's relationship with it), the crisis and the necessary, if ideologically unpalatable, reforms from 1993, have all engendered a process of reappraisal which has gone to the heart of the Revolution, forcing Cubans at all levels to question what the 'essence' of the post-1959 process has really been – not least since one consensus which seems to have emerged is an awareness of the need to defend the 'essence' while still adapting to the new world and economic situation. Therefore, alongside economic and even political debates – about the best mechanisms for survival – has developed a parallel debate and process of questioning about the underlying ideology, the 'soul' of the Revolution, and the average Cuban's commitment to that. Indeed, as we have seen, since 1998, two related campaigns have been underway within the ruling Communist Party – one, against 'economic crime' and corruption, headed by Carlos Lage, the other, designed to strengthen the ideological commitment and level of Party members, directed by Jose Ramón Machado Ventura, but both clearly being overseen by Fidel and Raúl Castro.

This process of questioning has been inevitable, perhaps, given the fundamental shock to Cuban preconceptions and suppositions about the bases of their ideological beliefs, their protective international community, and their economic system, but it has also been appropriate in another sense. For it can be argued that, in the face of the greatest crisis the Cuban Revolution had known after 1990, one of the critical factors in the Cuban political system that has acted strongly and decisively against a mass desertion of socialism and the Revolution (perhaps on the Eastern European 'model') on the part of the suffering and demoralised Cubans has been the depth of the underlying ideological commitment to the 'bases' of the system. Sometimes those 'bases' have been material issues such as social benefits or property title, both perceived as threatened by any genuine economic liberalisation, the return of the émigrés or fundamental political change; at other times, they have been the more indeterminate, intangible, but genuinely 'felt' values to which at least three generations of Cubans have become

accustomed over four decades – such as solidarity, a benevolent state, voluntarism, equality, and so on – values which have long constituted a coherent and persuasive network of beliefs for the average Cuban, sufficient to maintain a largely unquestioning level of commitment and identification over the decades.

It was therefore in order to test this level of commitment that, in 1997-8, a research project was undertaken by a colleague and me in Havana, over several visits. The specific purpose was to test my hypothesis about the role and nature of politico-historical myth in the Cuban system, and also to see whether any of the politico-historical myths which had evolved during the preceding thirty or forty years had been, or were being, used – by the ‘system’ or by ordinary Cubans – to guarantee survival, adaptation and the balance between continuity and change.

Our ideas were underpinned by a number of things. Firstly, we were guided by the notions of ideology, code and myth in Cuba which I had evolved over a number of years. Secondly, we were keen to make use of the ideas expounded by the sociolinguist Frederick Erickson, specifically his notion of ‘utterings’ (official, hegemonic, discourse) and ‘mutterings’, seen as more informal, popular discourse. In his view, those who belong to a society with a hegemonic discourse are obliged, or at least tend, to adopt one of two strategies. Most simply, they can adopt the discourse of ‘mutterings’, thus reflecting the ‘utterings’ of official discourse, using the ‘voice’ of the sanctioned interpreters, and ritualising their willing acquiescence in the internalisation of official discourse. Alternatively, however, they may choose to ‘mutter’, to use their own ‘voice’, and, by appropriating the ‘utterings’, become subjects rather than objects of the ideological process. In between, however, is the interesting and challenging area, where citizens will use both ‘utterings’ and ‘mutterings’, a strategy which may indicate either the existence of underlying tensions or, alternatively, an astute awareness of what we might call areas of ‘competence’, acknowledging that there are those areas of life and belief which are best left to ‘authority’ – perhaps because they are too complex, too delicate or too ‘hallowed’ to be the property of anyone other than the ‘high priests’ of the discourse – and those areas that, inherently, offer a greater freedom for autonomous interpretation by the uninitiated. If the ‘mutterings’ out-shout the ‘utterings’ then one must question the validity, legitimacy and efficacy of the supposedly hegemonic ideology; if there are no ‘mutterings’ then we may be looking at a strictly controlled and totalitarian system of

ideological repression. If, however, there is a constant flow, an exchange, a dialectic, between the two forms of discourse, then we are probably looking at a thriving, evolving and complex dynamic, in which, rather than 'space' being 'contested', it is being sought, appropriated and customised.

This theoretical position also was easily squared with another awareness underlying our approach – that the trajectory of the Revolution since 1959 shows the recurrence of significant periods of open 'debate' between 'competing discourses' within the overall, shared and evolving ideology of revolutionary *cubanía*, debates usually becoming more evident in the spaces between periods of 'certainty' over ideology, policy, external relations, etc. but always present and identifiable within the ideological and political edifice. At the top – within the leadership and within the wider vanguard of the Party – these debates have been periodically encouraged (1962-66, 1970-75, 1986-89) but have never been totally eliminated once the result of the 'debate' is settled. Instead, one lasting characteristic of the Cuban system has been its ability to incorporate both 'winners' and 'losers' successfully once a formal 'debate' is over, with the latter not being rejected, marginalised or repressed (as one might argue was often the case in pre-1989 Eastern Europe or the Soviet Union) but, rather, given secondary roles within the 'family' of the Revolution. The Cuban Revolution has, after all, rarely if ever been characterised by schisms, major purges or deep-seated factions; indeed, those who choose to portray its trajectory in these terms often fall foul of moments of contradiction, where the 'losers' of one debate suddenly appear on the 'winning' side of another, parallel, one, where 'factions' are often categories assumed by outsiders rather than clear-cut reflections of genuine internal battles, tensions or disagreements.

Very largely reflecting the apparently unhelpful but actually revealing words of Castro in 1961 – *dentro de la Revolución todo, fuera de la Revolución, nada* – the Cuban system has largely – although not always – tended to adopt a policy of allowing often fierce debate, either open and encouraged or deeper and continuous, *within* the parameters of the accepted ideology and defined revolutionary, Cuban, community. The point about this is that the permanent existence of 'debates' and 'competing discourses' within the accepted parameters actually allows a vital space for most Cubans to find their own position, to 'mutter' creatively and also repeat the necessary 'utterings', and, above all, to 'dissent' from the current orthodoxy but from a position *within* the Revolution.

In this context, even the 'official version' is subject to individual modification as citizens 'customise' the separate myths that distil the overall ideology, matching it to their own experience, needs and preferences. This means that dynamism and the consequent force of any myth in the Cuban ideological process has often lain in the interaction between 'official' and 'customised', between 'utterings' and 'mutterings', the former influencing the latter's development but in turn being influenced by empirical modifications introduced at the grass-roots, on the basis of lived experience. As Eckstein has demonstrated eloquently (Eckstein, 1994), the Cuban system, far from being uniform and monolithic, is in fact a complex of 'contested spaces'; the same applies ideologically, with the 'spaces' and 'overlap' constantly offered by the many organisations, structures and discourses within the same system making a rich soil for daily 'customisation' and, thus, evolution and survival.

With this set of notions, the project involved undertaking and audio-recording a series of semi-structured interviews with selected groups (of widely differing ages and social background) of Cubans in Havana. The basic structure of each interview (each of which which lasted up to two hours) was to pose a series of questions to which we elicited responses, all focussing on reactions to, and images of, two key figures within the Cuban political culture – Jose Martí and Che Guevara – each of whom enjoyed a different status within that culture, evidently likely to produce different responses. Our expectation was that Martí, as the consensual '*héroe nacional*' (pre-1959 and post-1959) was likely to be the subject of greater consensus and that reactions to questions on him were likely to be expressed with greater uniformity, while Guevara, as both a more recent (and personally remembered) figure and the subject of more controversy since 1967, was perhaps likely to produce more divergent responses.

The choice of these two figures was not of course accidental or casual – I had already presented a paper in a conference in Santiago de Cuba in 1995 proposing that Che Guevara had to some extent substituted for Martí at some points after 1967 in the role of political myth, and we were aware that these were the two historical figures associated with the Revolution about which every Cuban would know something.

We were also aware that the myth which had been created around each of the figures had passed through an interesting trajectory after their respective deaths, reflecting the changing circumstances at each given moment in Cuban history. Martí, for example, had been largely ignored in official discourse between 1902 and the 1920s, one example of which was the lack of consensus about the idea of erecting a statue to his memory (one finally being erected through public subscription rather than government grant in 1915); however, aspects of his memory had been preserved at popular level, in *décimas*, folklore and the collective memory of the *ex-mambises*. Interestingly, it was the Tampa tobacco workers who, after his death, coined the epithet *apóstol* for Martí. Then, after 1923, his memory had been revived formally by the activities and efforts of the new militant student generation that emerged, giving form to the inchoate myth around Martí, but also providing the necessary caste of ‘interpreters’. However, after 1934, his memory had then become a tool in the hands of successive politicians who sought legitimacy through it, not least the Auténticos, who appropriated his party’s name and who engaged in a campaign of open manipulation of the myth, through a drive to establish ubiquitous statues and busts, and also through repeated reminders, references and sanctioned hagiographies. As a result, the dynamism of the myth – whose ‘story-line’ (of life, struggle, death and betrayal) had been seen increasingly to reflect Cuba’s ‘story-line’ – was partly lost, the myth becoming a static ‘model for being’ rather than a ‘model for action’. However, it was in 1952-3 that the myth was again rescued, by another student generation and by the fortuitous coincidence of celebrated or lamented anniversaries, plus, of course, by the specific identification between Martí and the evolving insurrectionary action after 26 July 1953. After 1959, the myth then underwent a number of changes, predictably – being sometimes extolled as the progenitor and inspiration of the ‘national’ Revolution, sometimes held up as the guiding light of the radicalising process, but sometimes somewhat marginalised, sitting uncomfortably within the increasingly Soviet-influenced perspectives and pictures of the Revolution’s origins, being at times relegated to the role of ‘progressive bourgeois’ in the ‘pre-history’ of the socialist revolution. However, there was growing evidence that, after 1989, the myth had again come to the fore during the drive to find new autochthonous roots to the Revolution in its time of crisis and redefinition. Thus our choice of Martí was apposite and likely to be revealing.

The myth of Che too had undergone a much shorter process of change since 1967. For some three to eight years or so, it began with an explicit, and organically popular, public identification between Che’s

image of *guerrillero heroico* (and the underlying 'story-line' of his myth – of struggle, self-sacrifice, international solidarity and commitment and the selfless championing of the downtrodden even to the extent of martyrdom) and the defiant radical stance and increasing international isolation of the late 1960s. Then, during the 'institutionalisation' of the 1970s (especially after 1975), the myth underwent something of a process of iconisation, as, with his ideas on all fronts by and large rejected and with his adversaries in the key debates of the 1960s being now in positions of authority, his 'story-line' – essential to the organicity and dynamism of the myth – tended to be downgraded as inappropriate to the new ethos and priorities of a more stolid and 'safe', more manageable and rational, system; however, because of his significance historically and politically, but even symbolically, for most Cubans, it was important that his image be increasingly used to provide some evidence of the continuing 'revolutionary' nature of the process as bureaucratisation and consumerism held increasing sway. Then, after 1986, as his ideas and image were again revived as part of the growing debate about Cuba's nature and future, the myth again became active and began to assume greater and more significant proportions, with its underlying 'story-line' of selfless commitment, self-sacrifice, voluntarism and youthfulness again being seen as relevant both to the new needs of the reappraised system but also to those Cubans who lamented the decline of those values which he represented. This latest process perhaps could indeed be seen as culminating with the ceremonial and evidently emotional return of his bones to Cuba in 1997. Once again, therefore, the choice of Che in our interviews was likely to be apposite and revealing.

Our methodology was to relax the respondents and establish some sort of rapport from the outset by posing a series of questions which were bound to elicit 'standard' responses, 'utterings' rather than 'mutterings', asking the respondents to give their impressions about issues such as the *imagen mas típica* of each of the figures – to which we received the predictable litany of standard phrases (many repeated from interview to interview) -, and also about which aspect of each figure's life or character would they focus on if they were able to make a television documentary. These questions, as anticipated, produced not only standard responses but also something of a group dynamic in each case, as there was an evident effort by those participating to ensure that no significant 'standard' aspect of Martí or Che was omitted, with even those participants with some degree of evident authority in the group acting the role of 'sweeping up' at the end, to ensure that the official discourse remained intact.

Once the group's relative relaxation and openness was thus assured, we then posed a series of hypothetical questions, designed to allow for individual variation and to probe for evidence of 'customisation', particularly the one which elicited the most energetic and revealing responses – *Si Martí/Che regresara hoy vivo, ¿cuales son los aspectos de la Cuba de hoy que mas le llamaría la atención, por bien o por mal?*

Without going into the detail of the specific responses of the different groups to the different questions (many of which were, anyway, rhetorical questions) – all of which is expounded elsewhere (Kapcia, 2000) and will be outlined in detail in due course elsewhere -, the study of the 12 hours of tapes and pages of notes revealed some interesting findings that, we believe, tell us much about the mechanism of myth-making and myth-usage in Cuba and also about the particular evolving political culture of the Cuba in the late 1990s.

For the purposes of this paper, I have decided to focus on two specific sets of interviews as a 'marker' – that with a Party cell (of varied ages, but all over 40) and that with one group of university students. This choice has been made firstly because of the quality of the recordings in each case (some other recordings proved more difficult to make and thus hear), the extent and eloquence of the responses, the greater likelihood and evidence of a relatively advanced level of political knowledge and understanding and thus some measure of comparability, and, above all, the clear difference in ages, each group by definition excluding anyone of the age of the other group, thus again ensuring some sort of comparability. That choice was also appropriate, since our findings revealed substantial differences between the two groups and also between the respective images, and use, of the myths of Martí and Che by each of them.

The older respondents' approach to Martí was somewhat unremarkable in many respects, largely confirming expectations. Having encountered some difficulties in coming to terms with any single attribute to focus on, most seemed to find comfort in the standard phrases, stressing above all an overwhelmingly moral and emotional image, expressed in references to *amor*, *amigo*, childhood, and so on. Interestingly, although there were few if any attempts to relate Martí to the question of

socialism, several older people admitted that Martí had been instrumental in changing their politics after 1959, that the Revolution had shown them a different Martí, perhaps feeling a valid parallel between their journeys of emotional identification with both Martí and the Revolution. This was also interesting since it was in these more personal responses that less confident and more informal ‘mutterings’ were clearly used to ‘customise’ the myth, in contrast to the confident ‘utterings’ of the majority of responses.

The younger respondents’ approach differed notably. Starting with the (now) familiar ‘litany’ of ‘utterings’, largely repeating the other groups’ responses, the students engaged personally in ‘mutterings’ much earlier in the interview, personalising their discourse with greater confidence than their elders. In doing this, they also encouraged the others, who then entered into the spirit of ‘customisation’ more energetically, as though seeking ‘space’ to express their own version of an inherited discourse. In contrast to their elders’ general focus on a human, emotive, loving Martí, the young group tended to stress a less human figure, focussing instead on images of Martí as *crítico*, as political actor and activist (rather than poet), and, most revealingly, being more prepared to identify contradictions in him. Throughout, in their responses to the deliberately unprovocative ‘standard’ questions, the young were far more prepared to use their own discourse, to engage in ‘mutterings’ with great confidence, and it became clear that they, much more than their elders (who perhaps felt more constrained by years of political experience and Marxist-Leninist education within the Party), saw Martí as relevant to the the current political process – perhaps unsurprisingly, given the post-1989 reassessment of, and re-emphasis on, Martí, to which they would have been exposed during their formative years.

Similar differences became evident in the responses to the more provocative hypothetical questions, the older respondents tending to use ‘utterings’ to talk of Martí’s overall satisfaction with Cuba’s current situation and approach to problems, and even an expected sympathy for the evident failings and social difficulties then being encountered by all. Overall, there was a perhaps unsurprising lack of imagination regarding Martí’s current relevance, few making an obvious connection between someone clearly seen as a historical figure (nationally or personally) and the unusual and challenging circumstances of the late 1990s. It was almost as though his direct relevance, and thus perhaps the

dynamism of the myth, had ended some time before, not least in driving and influencing Fidel Castro, as many acknowledged.

The students, on the other hand, responded with surprising unease to the hypothetical questions, beginning their reactions almost collectively, sheltering in a shared reproduction of familiar ‘utterings’. However, that initial unease then gave way to a growing willingness to engage with the subject more personally, increasingly being prepared to use Martí’s hypothetical return as an opportunity and a politically ‘safe’ instrument to criticise the things about which they themselves felt some unease generally. However, this discourse was entirely expressed in ‘mutterings’, hesitant, informal, personal and mumbled, interspersed with periodic returns to the ‘utterings’ (as if to orient or re-legitimise themselves). What then were those criticisms which they seemed to feel the myth of Martí allowed them to voice indirectly? They were, perhaps understandably, aspects such as the lack of youth in the leadership until the mid-1990s, the processes of official ‘sanctification’, the crisis of ‘values’ among youth (perhaps something of an ‘uttering’ here, as official discourse also repeatedly focussed on this problem in the media), the leadership’s tendency occasionally to be less than aware of grass-roots problems, a possible institutional complacency, the willingness to commercialise *símbolos patrios*, the neglect of Martí at times in the past, and so on – often fundamental and significant criticisms, disguised as Martí’s supposedly astonished responses. Throughout this exercise, the young were significantly often expressing their ‘criticisms’ in borrowed language, using quotes from authorities such as Castro, Martí, Vitier, and also generally using the ‘alternative’ discourse on Martí which had been somewhat marginalised in more obviously ‘Sovietised’ times but which had clearly come to the fore since 1989. In other words, they were using the ‘space’ offered by the ‘competing discourses’ to ally themselves with a ‘new’ Cuba, with the ‘historic’ leadership of Fidel, but also to state their own personal and sub-group’s position. In doing this, they mixed ‘utterings’ and ‘mutterings’ throughout, comfortably.

With Che, the two sets of responses differed somewhat. The older group felt nothing of the compunction they had felt with Martí about identifying one single attribute, perhaps, we felt, the result either of their own personal memories of Che (remembering one single moment or image) or of the lack of a solid body of discourse on which to draw, unlike with Martí. The younger respondents, however, showed the same compunction with Che which their elders had shown with Martí, this being

linked evidently in their minds with their general shared feeling that Che was relevant to them and to present day Cuba even more than Martí was – as someone closer to their generation. Two respondents indeed referred explicitly to themselves as a *generación mucho más guevariana que martiana* and *más marcada por el Che que por Martí*. Another difference was that the older Party members referred more willingly to Che's fallibly human qualities – his demanding nature, his valour, for example - while the younger students saw these same qualities as political, rather than human, stressing the practicality of Che's ideas and example. However, the differences evident over the hypothetical questions were repeated in the same set of questions focussing on Che. When asked what questions would they pose to a returned Che, the older group's caution and focus on a hypothetical request for Che's advice on defeating imperialism was countered by the students' more direct questions – such as 'Where next?', 'What do you think of Fidel?'

Throughout, it became clear that the younger group in these interviews was using both myths in the same way – to find 'space' within the accepted ideology, and within the Revolution, to express their own, different, perspectives, and doing so by 'customising' the myths, not least in the language they used to distinguish between the 'canon' and their own versions. Yet it also became clear, throughout, that they did this with even greater feeling towards, commitment to, and identification with the myth, and figure, of Che than with Martí – a difference confirmed in the other sets of interviews where Cubans of mixed ages were involved, and also in other evidence that came to our attention - not least an encounter with a small group of highly committed activists in the University who went by the name of *Che Vive*, and who dedicated themselves to reading, analysing and spreading his works, with almost missionary zeal and with a clear sense both of their distinctness as a younger generation and of their 'special' link with the essentially 'young' Che.

How then do we explain this greater attachment to, and willingness to use the myth of, Che? And what conclusions can one draw from this? The most obvious explanation lies in the post-1986 revival of the works of, and focus on, Che in academic literature (available in the bookshops), the media, the public language of the streets and public discourse, a revival which had affected old and young alike – but in different ways. Older Cubans (many of whom remember him personally) and middle-aged Cubans (most of whom grew up with some formal and celebrated memory of Che) seemed to have responded

with enthusiasm to this revival, not only buying up the increased number of books (as if eager at last, or again, to be able to read about this somewhat mythical figure who they knew had played such a critical part in the history of the Revolution) but also being prepared to buy, wear and use the commercial objects bearing Che's countenance as a means of identifying themselves with Che the hero. It is almost as though, in the midst of the demoralisation, confusion and fear of the crisis, they were clinging to some vestige, a consensual symbol, of the decade which, in contrast to the 1990s, offered a shared collective vision and identity, and a high level of certainty. 'Wearing Che', thus, was seen by many of them as a means of identifying with something still called *la Revolución*, whose 'basics' they wished to preserve in some form and of which Che was seen as some sort of accepted manifestation – not least notions such as solidarity, equality, self-sacrifice, commitment.

However, younger Cubans, too, have – to the surprise of many – responded to this revival with a similar enthusiasm, although, almost certainly, with different motivations. For them, identifying themselves with Che can be, variously – a fashion statement (in Cuba as in Britain), an identification with someone who, dying young, preserved his youthful image and attractiveness (thus being distinguished from his contemporaries who have grown visibly and perhaps frustratingly old in power), with someone who can be less easily blamed for the failings of the past – certainly of the 1970s and 1980s. In this way, young Cubans can parade both their 'belonging' – both to make them feel secure and to keep authority off their backs – and their 'differentness', can be both 'revolutionary' and dissenting. This also links up with another feature of the Cuba of today – the romanticisation of the 1960s, both by an older generation who hark back to the decade as a moment of perceived certainty, collective commitment and heroism, inherently 'better' than the 'problematic' and decidedly un-heroic present, and by younger Cubans who are intrigued by aspects of that forgotten decade – including the 'forbidden' music and youth culture of the non-Cuban world – or who see it as a heroic age with which they can more easily identify. Thus there is something of a consensus among young Cubans – critics of the present seeing, and using, Che as their symbol of 'rebellion', and more committed, but also critical, supporters of the system taking Che as their example, their guide and their symbol of an 'alternative' discourse in their version of Revolution. This of course is the generation that has indeed grown up with no memory of Che and very little written about him until recently, but who throughout their schooldays ritually committed themselves at the start of each day to follow Che's example. Che is thus inherently a

part of their ideological universe, a part of their 'banal nationalism', as much as Martí is, but perhaps more so than with their elders. Yet what emerged with our 1997-8 research was that both old and young tended to distinguish between Martí and Che in similar ways – seeing the former as a symbol (rather than as a living and active myth) of *cubanidad* and as a historical figure, but seeing the latter as an essentially revolutionary figure. The former seemed – especially to the young – to represent *Cuba* while the latter represented *revolución*, both being complementary in their mythic universe and arsenal, both being weapons to be used against the outside, against problems and in their search for 'space' and a definition which gives them a role.

Interestingly, this research project was carried out a year or two before the Elian González affair transformed the political system and culture, not least by bringing organised youth to the fore. It was thus no great surprise when, after January 2000 as the campaign around Elian evolved, young Cubans should, through their different organisations and following their various leaders, respond to the call to march, to organise, to demonstrate, to rally. In a political culture where mass rallies and demonstrations have again returned to the agenda (after some year of relative absence during the crisis), and where their ability to mobilise has been revived – covering disagreements and disenchantments in the ritualisation of collective 'belonging' which every mass Cuban political manifestation always is -, the role of this experience in empowering youth should not be overlooked. Moreover, we should not forget that the one young leader to whom Fidel seemed, throughout the Elián campaign and even since, to give special credence, prominence and attention was not Otto Rivero, the leader of the UJC – which would have been more expected before 1995, in what one might describe as the customary means in the Cuban system to acknowledge 'youth' formally - but, rather, the much younger FEU leader, Hassan Pérez Casabona, whose profile has, as we have seen, since risen dramatically. Certainly, Pérez is evidently a remarkable leader, with an evident and unusual propensity for unscripted speechmaking, but also still clearly close to Fidel and with an unusual capacity to command his attention, and also apparently with some responsibility for recent decisions and current tendencies and policies. Moreover, curiously, Pérez's own academic background is exactly that milieu which we examined in 1997-8; the students of our interview group were mostly second and third year history and philosophy students, and Pérez is a second-year philosophy student at the same University. Thus, the same environment which seemed to drive those students in 1997-8 to find 'space' through a judicious use of the accepted

politico-historic myths of a Revolution - at a time when they still had not been given formal acknowledgement that their different perspectives might be as valid as those of their elders and when their confidence was still tempered by an understandable caution – is the one which evidently also created Pérez, now prominent in a Cuba that is quite different from that before November 1999.

That, fundamentally, is one can now say with some certainty that the young ‘vanguard’ which Pérez seems to represent (and even, if to a lesser extent, Felipe Pérez Roque) and which the new attention accorded to the FEU (rather than the UJC) and, even more, the younger FEEM, seems to acknowledge is indeed a *generación guevariana* in several senses. For the evidence seems to be that this is a generation formed in an ideology in which a critical myth has become that around Che and formed in a political culture which has ritualised their identification with Che, but also seemingly adopting Che as a symbol of, and means towards, a definition of themselves as both different and belonging. Anecdotally, but perhaps significantly, during a visit to one of the Escuelas de Trabajadores Sociales in 2000 and a discussion with a group of impending graduates from that Escuela, the gift which the students decided to present me was an inscribed second-hand copy of Che’s *Pasajes de la Guerra Revolucionaria*. Perhaps they had been encouraged by their elders to make that choice; perhaps it was their own natural choice. Either way, it reflected an ethos – official and informal, ‘uttering’ and ‘muttering’ – which seems currently to drive at least a part of the campaign to reinvigorate, reincorporate and perhaps empower youth in Cuba, and also seems to inspire at least a part of that younger generation itself.

In the same way as the 1960s mobilisations could be said to have made young Cubans into active participants in the evolving *vanguardia* of the Revolution, by empowering them, giving them an acknowledged leading role and a significant responsibility in the process, and making them (to use current language) into ‘stakeholders’ in the emerging political system, then one can see current processes playing a similar role - in intention at least. After all, if the experiment of the Escuelas is successful in one of its aims – of reintegrating potentially disaffected youth into the system – then one can justifiably say that the products of that experiment have been made into ‘stakeholders’, and thus, again, part of an emerging *vanguardia* of a still inchoate version of Revolution which is evidently being explored in Cuba. If so, then it is a *vanguardia* led by the FEU and FEEM leaders, the likes of which were the very subject of our research project in 1997-8, making their responses all the more

revealing. If there is indeed a new *vanguardia* evident or emerging in the Cuba of 2001, then it may not be too far-fetched to see them justifiably as ideological *hijos del Che* in ways that few expected even ten years ago.

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