

Who are the Five?

They are five Cubans who were trying to stop the ultra-right terrorist groups in Miami from carrying out violent actions against the people of Cuba.

Since 1959, these organizations have conducted bombings, assassinations and other sabotage, killing hundreds of innocent Cuban civilians. Groups like Alpha 66, Omega 7, Brothers to the Rescue, and Cuban American National Foundation have terrorized the Cuban people for years with impunity.

The Cuban people have been targets of U.S. policy, including a 43-year economic blockade designed to punish a whole people who have chosen a different road for building their society. They have been victims of terror attacks by the Miami-based mafia, many of whom came from the wealthy class that left Cuba after the popular overthrow of dictator Fulgencio Batista. Others of the ultra-right in Miami were police thugs for the Batista regime.

Gerardo Hernández, Antonio Guerrero, Ramón Labaño, René González and Fernando González, acting in defense of their people, were living in Miami, monitoring these terrorist groups to prevent future violence. But because the U.S. government - through the CIA - has played the principal role in funding, training and arming the ultra-right Miami mafia, **the FBI targeted the five Cubans instead of arresting the terrorists.**

This is the only reason that the five Cubans are in prison. They were framed up in a political witchhunt and railroaded by the U.S. in a 7-month trial in Miami, where it was impossible for them to have an impartial and fair trial. Falsely charged with espionage on the U.S., in reality, the five brothers' mission was to follow the activities of the right-wing to prevent harm to innocent people.

After their arrest by the FBI on **September 12, 1998**, they were convicted June 8, 2001 and sentenced December 2001. The months-long struggle to free Elián Gonzalez from the Miami right-wing showed the U.S. people the true nature of these Mafia-type groups in Miami, who so cruelly tried to deny a father and his son their right to live together in their own country, simply because that country is Cuba.

Terrorists like José Basulto and Ramón Sal Sanchez, who have been convicted of criminal acts, actually became "spokesmen" for the Miami family. They vowed never to let Elián return home and put him at tremendous risk for their political aims. To all justice-loving people in the U.S. and around the world, we appeal to you to join the struggle to free Fernando, René, Antonio, Ramón and Gerardo. Help us in outreach, education and organizing, because once people know the facts of the case, we are sure they will call for their freedom as well. **Towards an Investigative Peoples Tribunal for Truth and Justice!**

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Understanding Cuba:

Revolution and Misinformation

Cuba: A revolution in motion

by Isaac Saney

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Reviewed by Dru Oja Jay



Saney's Cuba questions accepted "facts" about the island by providing a compelling overview of its history, context, and society. Cuba. A small island nation. Cigars that Americans have to smuggle into their own country; sublime music played by old men; Caribbean vacations; quaint old buildings. They had a revolution, years ago. Some guys named Che Guevara and Fidel Castro were involved. There were others, but what were their names again? They overthrew Batista, the guy with the solid gold telephone in *The Godfather: part II*. They seemed to have good ideals at the beginning, but eventually turned into yet another corrupt communist dictatorship. Castro the despot rules with an iron fist, jailing those who dare to defy him. The country remains poor due to outdated, inefficient socialist policies. The US and others are biding their time, waiting for Castro to die so that democracy can be restored, and the Cuban people freed from his authoritarian grip.

Aside from the cigars and music, these are a few of the well-worn images of Cuba that Isaac Saney, a history professor at Dalhousie, would like you to reconsider. In *Cuba: A revolution in motion* Saney sets out not only to take apart popular disinformation about Cuba, but to put forward a very different image altogether. Cuba, he argues in the face of almost everything we know about the country, is in many ways an inspiration, and represents an alternative model of development for most of the nations of the world. If this wasn't outlandish enough, Saney manages to argue--convincingly--that Cuba is more democratic than most developed western countries.

Throughout Cuba, Saney insists that the reader consider the Cuban situation in its proper context. After the revolution of 1959, the United States (Cuba's largest trading partner at the time) severed economic ties and pulled out all of its assets, imposing a comprehensive economic blockade on the island. US firms, and companies dealing directly with the US were (and are) effectively prohibited from doing business with Cuba, effectively shutting off huge portions of the western market to Cuban industry. Ships that land in Cuban ports are not allowed to dock in the US for six months, making the transport of goods to and from Cuba quite expensive. Thanks to US dominance of the global pharmaceutical trade, many drugs are not available at any price in Cuba; others are prohibitively expensive.

"The poor and the underprivileged, stimulated by the example of Cuba, are now demanding opportunities for a decent living." Such was the appraisal of the Kennedy administration, which decided that the "threat of a good example" could threaten American dominance in the western hemisphere. Subsequent American policy towards Cuba has focused singularly and explicitly on dismantling the revolutionary government.

In addition to the economic embargo, the US funded a decades-long campaign of terrorism and harassment against the Cuban revolutionary government. Saney offers a number of well-documented examples, including the failed Bay of Pigs invasion, a number of terrorist bombings committed by US-funded operatives, astonishing uses of biological warfare by the CIA, numerous plane hijackings, and a bizarre CIA operation involving "futuristic weather modification technology". Kennedy in particular instituted a massive program of financial aid to Latin American countries, granted on the condition that the participating countries sever economic ties with Cuba.

Under these conditions, and with a socialist program of land and wealth redistribution in place, Cuba's economy grew at a rate of six per cent annually between 1971 and 1989. At the same time, the central American regional growth rate was 3.6 per cent. In order to keep its economy going, Cuba developed a close trading relationship with the Soviet Union and the associated Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (CMEA). Due to the blockade, Cuba's international trade and economic development was heavily dependent on its relationship with CMEA countries.

When the governments of many CMEA countries-including the Soviet Union-collapsed, Cuba experienced an economic disaster of colossal proportions. In 1992, the value of trade with CMEA countries had fallen to less than 7 per cent of its 1989 value. In the same period, Cuba's Gross

The book's shortcomings are not a major focus of this review. Worth mentioning, however, is the total lack of analysis of Canadian policy towards Cuba, and Saney's reliance on secondary sources (his Spanish is, by his own account, "idiosyncratic").

The latter can be seen as not so much a weakness as a particular area of focus. Where other books might convey one shocking (and Saney might argue, decontextualized) instance of the authoritarian tendencies of socialism or another, Cuba: A revolution in motion keeps the eye on Cuba's overall accomplishments in the face of adversity as a compelling alternative to the dominant ideology of the free market. Beyond arguing against various criticisms, Saney makes the case that Cuba is in many ways an inspiration to those from who value social justice worldwide.

In a global order where--according to the World Bank--the poor bear the most significant brunt of economic fluctuations, it seems fitting to end with the same line that Saney chose to conclude Cuba (uttered by Cuban Vice President Carlos Lage): "Each day in the world 200 million children sleep in the streets. Not one is Cuban."

[Non-text portions of this message have been removed]

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Perhaps all 72 of the "dissidents" charged and convicted earlier this year were similar cases. And perhaps not. Saney does not set out to portray Cuba as perfect, but rather to take a sustained look at the country's current realities. Does the concentration of power in Cuba tend towards authoritarianism in some cases? Does Cuban society believe a set of myths that in some cases do not reflect the realities of the day? These are possibilities-in Cuba as in any other country-but Saney's work serves as a powerful injunction to those who would judge an entire country offhandedly.

Indeed, it is nearly impossible to speak of Cuba accurately without addressing the supernaturally effective campaign of disinformation about the country. The Globe and Mail's Margaret Wente offers a typical, if exaggerated example:

The Cuban government, of course, blames the U.S. for the crackdown. It says the senior U.S. diplomat in Cuba illegally funneled money and support to the dissidents. Some commentators also blame the U.S. for being deliberately provocative. (Among other illegal activities, the diplomat ran a small lending library and gave Cuban journalists access to the Internet.) Others fault the U.S. for not lifting the embargo, a move that might have encouraged El Jefe to be nicer.

Mr. Suchlicki blames Fidel. "Fidel doesn't like opposition. He doesn't like dissidents. He's a tyrant," he says. And what's on his mind is his own mortality. At 76, the clock is running down. "He's getting rid of all the opposition to clear the road for his brother Raoul."

The intellectual infrastructure that has been erected in order to consistently contradict the most basic facts and distort the motivations of the Cuban government is an enormous achievement in and of itself, and certainly worthy of study.

No book can offer a rebuttal to all criticisms of Cuba, and it's reasonable to say that no book should. What Saney has done, with his tone and deeply researched evidence, is to furnish a book-length challenge to the reader to understand Cuba. To ask, each time the country is condemned, about the context of the actions taken. To consider, given the impressive precedent, the possibility that seemingly factual information about Cuba might need to be checked and re-checked.

Sections of the book not addressed by this review include appraisals of various aspects of Cuba's social revolution, including race and gender relations in the context of the transformation of Cuban society, Cuba's judicial system, Cuba's involvement in fighting apartheid in South Africa, and the country's continued principled and solitary stand against imperialism.

National Product fell by over 35 per cent, per capita income declined by 39 per cent, and import capacity fell from \$8.1 billion of goods to \$2.2 billion. Lacking fuel and basic equipment, Cuban agriculture was decimated; blackouts were frequent, starvation and malnutrition widespread. Meanwhile, the US increased funding for anti-Castro terrorists and insurgents, while seeking to deliver the final blow to the Cuban economy by stepping up the embargo. According to US Congressman Robert Toricelli, author of the "Cuban Democracy Act", the aim of US policy was to "wreak havoc on that island." Under the Helms-Burton Act passed during the same period, foreign businesspeople found to associate with Cuba were denied US visas.

Faced with such an all-consuming crisis, Cuba was forced to reorganize its entire economy with a view to its lack of resources and urgent need for new trading partners. Saney argues that, in the face of a major crisis that might have plunged other countries into reactionary totalitarianism or chaos, Cuba actually became more democratic.

Saney points to the public meetings and consultations held by the government on a scale unheard of in Canada or the US, the decentralization of power, and the cutbacks to centralized bureaucracy as evidence of this trend. In response to the "special period" following the economic collapse, Cuba has radically transformed many of its industries. Notably, agriculture has transitioned from pesticide-dependent industrial monocultures to intensive, localized organic farms run by small teams that rotate duties in an egalitarian fashion. By necessity, the country has greatly reduced its dependence on expensive imported oil by encouraging wide use of bicycles and other low-power technologies. By adopting a variety of innovative responses and expanding the tourism industry, Cuba has managed to facilitate the beginnings of an economic recovery.

To claim that Cuba is democratic is to elicit a sneer from many Americans and Canadians. It is well known, after all, that the country is a dictatorship. When prominent leftist intellectuals, the Canadian Government, Human Rights Watch, the BBC, the Globe and Mail and countless ideologically diverse sources agree that Cuba is a fundamentally undemocratic place, the task of explaining that they're all mistaken in serious ways is a difficult one at best.

Saney approaches these overwhelming assumptions deftly. While maintaining a calm, explanatory tone overall, he punctuates each chapter with challenges aimed at provoking understanding rather than partisanship. He opens his chapter on governance thus: "The central task for Cuba-watchers

and specialists of all hues is to account for the resilience of the Cuban revolution in the face of the economic collapse of the early 1990s, a 'collapse which could have sunk almost any system without a trace'. In other words, if Castro is this horrible despot, then why does he still have the support of the majority of the population?

Saney points to the last three elections--in 1993, 1998, and 2003--which were open to observation by foreign and domestic journalists. These three national elections ended up being plebiscites for the revolution. Over 90 per cent of the Cuban electorate--who cast their vote in secret and are not required to vote--turned out in each election, and each time over 90 per cent voted all 601 national candidates "up", in a gesture of solidarity with the government and revolutionary constitution (explanation of the process follows). This, while US-funded radio stations in Miami (broadcasting illegally into Cuba) were exhorting Cubans round the clock to spoil their ballots or boycott the election. After each election, prominent dissidents conceded that the Cuban revolution had a renewed mandate from the people of Cuba.

Cuban governance is founded on a rejection of conventional electoral politics, on the grounds that it creates a "class of politicians" and "divorces economics from politics." Instead, the ruling Communist party plays the role of guide, "channeling the plurality" of views and interests. While influential, the Communist party does not wield direct administrative power. Each time the party holds a congress, massive nation-wide discussions are held, providing a venue for people to voice concerns and discuss a variety of issues and giving substance to the party's guiding role.

Saney writes: "The 1991 congress [immediately after the economic collapse] was preceded by discussions involving 3.5 million Cubans... more than a million people in 89,000 meetings directly raised more than 500 issues and concerns," ranging from the structure of the party to foreign policy.

The Cuban electorate is divided into 14,946 circumscriptions, each consisting of a few hundred people. In street meetings that typically see a high degree of participation, each circumscription elects a representative. These delegates, along with representatives of a variety of "mass organizations"--civil groups, student associations, and unions--form commissions which spend over a year selecting from thousands of candidates to ensure that all of Cuban society is represented in the provincial and national assemblies. The Communist party is prohibited from participating in the selection process.

These recommendations are then submitted to municipal assemblies for approval. Each Cuban citizen is presented with a list of 601 candidates which they can vote either for or against. To be a representative in the national assembly, each candidate--including Fidel Castro--must receive at least 50 per cent of the vote in her constituency.

Critics must at least concede, argues Saney, that the current system is more democratic than any other in Cuba's history. Fidel Castro has said that this movement towards the "parliamentarization of society" sidesteps the divisiveness of the "dominant model" of western governance, creating "a democracy that really unites people and gives viability to what is most important and essential, which is public participation in fundamental issues." Saney, it seems, agrees. He ends the chapter with an observation that must read as truly bizarre to Canadians and Americans: "those who have the most money do not have political power, as they have no support among the masses and, thus, do not offer up candidates in the elections."

It is perhaps the "fundamental issues" that Castro speaks of that have set Cuba's critics against it. In the Cuban constitution, certain things are non-negotiable; among them are universal access to health care, wealth redistribution through socialism, and free education.

In order to preserve these fundamental values of the revolution, the Cuban government has sometimes used extreme measures against US-funded terrorists and other operatives, including capital punishment and imprisonment for decades. Some recent trials have been unusually short, lasting as little as one day.

Unsurprisingly, Saney asks the reader to consider the context of unrelenting US-funded terrorism, economic strangulation, and occasional military attacks. A context which has led Cubans, he says, into a "siege mentality". This mentality, however, is "based on a very real and constant threat;" it is a kind of "rational paranoia". The long list of documented US aggression includes assassination attempts (including a CIA attempt to hire Mafia hitmen to kill Castro), terrorist bombings, a major "propaganda and disinformation campaign" and the blockade.

Under Cuba's "law 88" (passed in 1996) people who collaborate with US efforts to overthrow the Cuban revolution can be sentenced to prison. Similar US and Canadian laws are arguably more strict. Some of the most high-profile "dissidents" accused did not dispute the charges, but instead argued that it was their right to be paid by the United States government to work to overthrow the Cuban government. In 2002, the US government provided over \$8.99 billion in funding to groups working against the Cuban government.