

ON BECOMING AN AMERICAN POLITICAL SCIENTIST

Alfred G. Cuzán

March 3, 2006

[This is a revised and updated version of “Bridging Two Cultures and Two Disciplines,” published in Howard J. Wiarda (Ed.), *Policy Passages. Career Policies for Policy Wonks*. Westport, CT: Praeger, 2002, pp. 185-193.]

I was a boy when Fidel Castro rode triumphantly into Havana, an event that would eventually lead me to study political science. That January 1959 we went wild about the man whom everyone credited with having driven out Dictator Fulgencio Batista. For several months we listened, enraptured, for hours on end, to Castro’s manly, eloquent voice, as he deceived us into thinking that the revolution was, as one of his early slogans put it, “as green as Cuba’s palm trees.” His image saturated the country. It was an exhilarating time.

The following year ushered in a cataclysmic change in the political climate. In February, Soviet Deputy Premier Anastas Mikoyan arrived. It was as if the specter of communism was stalking the Island, presaging the coming darkness at noon. Joy turned into terror, hope into desperation. Family members and friends who never before would have contemplated emigrating stampeded for the exits, desperate to get out of the country via any avenue available, before the Iron Curtain clamped shut. In April 1961 we (that is, my parents, three younger brothers and I) boarded a Spanish-flag ocean liner bound for Veracruz, Mexico. As the ship sailed out of Havana harbor, half of our extended family, some never to be seen again, waived goodbye with their handkerchiefs. It was only a few days before the Bay of Pigs landing. One of my favorite uncles, my father’s older brother, was a member of the expedition and was taken prisoner. Supported in Mexico City by my mother’s Godfather for several months, we applied

and were granted resident visas to the United States. In September we made our way to Miami, then (as now) the capital of Cuban exiles.

Exile turned into permanent expatriation. My father, a lawyer, had a difficult time of it. He never fully recovered from the loss of his country and his profession. For some time I, too, had difficulty adapting. English did not come easily to me. In Cuba I hated the weekly lessons, telling myself, “Why do I have to study this, I’ll never use it.” (That’s how much a ten-year old boy knows!) In Miami, upon entering the 8th grade, like many of my peers I attended an English-as-a-second language program in the mornings and in the afternoons I went to classes it was believed I could handle, including Math, Music, and Physical Education. However, outside school I continued to resist learning English, obstinately clinging to my native language.¹ It was not until the family relocated to Kansas City (we were there for only seven months, after which we returned to Miami) that I read my first full-length book in English, Melville’s *Billy Bud*. Not until high school did I begin extensively to read English literature. I do not remember there having happened anything dramatic forcing me to make the switch. I think it was a natural evolution arising from necessity. In any case, read I did. *Pride and Prejudice*, *Silas Marner*, *The Caine Mutiny*, *A Summer Place*, *The Citadel*, *Good-Bye Mr. Chips*, *Cheaper by the Dozen*, *Tales of the South Pacific*, and the Dobbie Gillis series are some of the titles of the many novels and collections of short stories I enjoyed.

1. *Hunger of Memory*. *The Education of Richard Rodriguez* is a poignant account of Mr. Rodriguez’s struggles with language and his searching for a niche between the Mexican culture of his childhood and the American culture in which he grew up.

Reading outside of school improved the quality of my composition, so my writing soon outdistanced my verbal skills. It was on the strength of my writing that I was placed in college-prep English in my senior year. The teacher, upon reading one of my essays, a satire, said to me, “I hope you don't take offense, but when I read your essay, I couldn't believe it was you.” Far from offending me, her remark flattered my vanity. But her confusion was understandable. My accent was very thick and orally I made many mistakes. This was because all my friends were Cuban-born and we conversed in Spanish among ourselves. The unevenness between my written and my spoken English continued for many years, indeed, to this day. In college I continued to improve my writing. In every book I read I found many unfamiliar words. I would circle them and enter the definition from the dictionary along the book's margin and on the pages of a notebook I kept for that purpose. Over time my vocabulary improved.

I graduated from high school and earned a B.A. in Government and Economics from the University of Miami, all the while working part-time at various jobs, in grocery stores, restaurants, a bank, and finally at the campus library and as assistant to a member of the faculty in the Department of Government, Bernie Schechterman. As a child I had assumed I would follow my father's footsteps to the law (a path two of my younger brothers took), although in my adolescence I fantasized about becoming a writer, a novelist, playwright, or lyricist.

But no sooner did I arrive on the University of Miami campus that the prospect of spending my life reading, lecturing, and writing on matters of historical import seduced me. Two experiences, in particular, made a deep impression on me. When in a freshman economics course I first beheld a graphical representation of the law of supply and demand, it was as if the proverbial light bulb had been turned on in front of my eyes. I was almost mesmerized by its

beauty and elegance. The other impressionable experience was reading John Locke's *Second Treatise on Government*. To this day I think it contains one of the most insightful discussions of the differences between a despotic regime and one under which the liberties of the citizenry are secure.

In my senior year I debated whether to pursue a doctorate in political science or in economics, finally deciding in favor of the former, for two reasons. One was practical, based on realistic self-knowledge: I did not think I could master the mathematics that was increasingly required to excel in the latter. The other was idealistic: I thought economics had solved its basic problems but political science had not. Nevertheless, I was attracted to both, and envisioned using economic tools to analyze political phenomena. With the help of collaborators I have accomplished that goal, although only time will tell whether this work, unconventional in its assumptions and going against the grain in its conclusions, constitutes a real contribution to the discipline.²

By the time graduate school loomed ahead, I was ready to break out of the Cuban environment. It did not even occur to me to apply to a Florida school, as I wanted to venture deeper into the real America, penetrating its geography and culture. I applied to several schools: Harvard, Wisconsin, North Carolina, Indiana. All accepted me but it was IU that made me an

2. See, *inter alia*, Alfred G. Cuzán and Richard J. Heggen, "A Fiscal Model of Presidential Elections in the United States, 1880-1980," *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, XIV (1), 1984, pp. 98-108 and Alfred G. Cuzán and Charles M. Bundrick, "Deconstructing the 2004 Presidential Election Forecasts: The Fiscal Model and the Campbell Collection Compared," *PS: Political Science and Politics*, 38, 2, April 2005, 255-262. These and other items cited throughout this essay are available at <http://uwf.edu/govt/CuzanPublications.htm>.

offer I could not refuse: a three-year NDEA fellowship. I had picked Indiana because Bernie Schechterman had gone there. Also in my senior year I applied for and became a naturalized citizen of the United States. (Bernie served as one of my character references.) It was my first deliberate step in becoming an American.

In September 1969, one month shy of my 21st birthday, I arrived in Bloomington. This was my first time outside the family hearth and in an all-English environment. I fell in love with the place. That first fall was a wondrous experience—I had never seen leaves turn before. It was at that time, too, that I began dating the woman who became my wife, Linda *née* Cipolla, a native of Baltimore. She was working toward an M.A. in French. Fittingly, we got married in Bloomington, our families meeting for the first time the day before the wedding. To this day we visit our *alma mater* every so often, taking advantage of the many classical music recitals open to the public.

My graduate education, like my interests then and now, was eclectic. In my first interview with the graduate advisor, Alfred Diamant, I told him I was not interested in studying Latin America. Indeed, I was not; neither did I care to be pigeon-holed. Later, though, looking for a third field in which to take my “comps,” I changed my mind. It helped that a new professor, a fresh Ph.D. from the University of Chicago, David Collier, had joined the faculty. Moreover, adding Latin American politics to my repertoire was a sensible choice, since competence in Spanish gave me a comparative advantage. All the while, though, I took courses from several political science professors while minoring in economics, taking courses from Jim Witte, who kindly agreed to serve on my committees. Via the Ostroms, I encountered the work

of Gordon Tullock and other contributors to the public choice school. Years later I would write Gordon, who even as he relentlessly criticizes my work has encouraged me ever since.

Among the books that made a lasting impression in graduate school were Anthony Downs' *An Economic Theory of Democracy*, James Buchanan and Gordon Tullock's *The Calculus of Consent*, Tullock's *The Politics of Bureaucracy*, Friedrich Hayek's *The Road to Serfdom*, Jane Jacobs' *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, Vincent Ostrom's *The Intellectual Crisis in American Public Administration* (which I read in draft form, as it was being written at the time), Charles W. Anderson's *Politics and Economic Change in Latin America*, Alexis de Tocqueville's *The Old Regime and the French Revolution*, and W. Ross Ashby's *Design for a Brain*. The last book, a fascinating discussion on the attributes of a stable system, was in Vincent Ostrom's reading list.

Also at IU, it was with shock and consternation that I discovered that Fidel Castro's stock among Latin Americanists was high and rising. This seemed to confirm the assessment I had made as an undergraduate, that political science had yet to solve its basic problems.³ If

3. At the time I first wrote these words I was reading Robert Conquest, *Reflections on a Ravaged Century* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2000). These ruminations by one of the foremost students of the Soviet Union include some caustic comments on the "mental incapacitation" and moral obtuseness that corrupted the judgment of countless Western intellectuals, including many academics, when it came to assessing the true nature of Stalinism. A similar disability appears to have crippled understanding of Castroism on the part of all too many Latin Americanists. See my "The Latin American Studies Association vs. The United States: The Verdict of History," *Academic Questions*, 7 (3), 1994, pp. 40-55, *Dictatorships and Double-Standards: The Latin American Studies Association on Cuba*, Miami, FL: Endowment for Cuban-American Studies, Paper #13, 1995, and various OP-EDS I wrote for *The Times of the Americas*. For my own interpretation of the Castro regime, see *Is Fidel Castro a Machiavellian Prince?*,

interpretations of the Castro regime could be so wide off the mark, the discipline had a long way to go. In the 1980s, simmering indignation turned to outrage when so many Latin Americanists embraced Nicaragua's Sandinistas with the same fervor many of us had greeted Castro in 1959. I had had enough. In a series of guest columns published over a period of several years in *The Times of the Americas* (now defunct), I challenged their interpretation of the Nicaraguan revolution and the war in El Salvador, ridiculing their sophomoric infatuation with the Sandinistas and their Salvadoran counterparts. Many of these essays were translated into Spanish and distributed throughout Latin America by FIRMAS Press.

When it came time to pick a dissertation topic, my concerns about the state of Latin American studies led me to propose a comparative study of Costa Rica and El Salvador. I had become interested in Costa Rica at UM, when I read a chapter on that country by James L. Busey in Martin Needler's *Latin American Political Systems*. Noting that it was an island of democratic stability in a sea of political storms, I wondered why. Looking for a contrasting case, I settled on El Salvador, about which I had also read a chapter by Charlie Anderson in the Needler reader. However, although intrigued with Costa Rica, and getting to know it became an end in itself, I chose it primarily because I wanted to evaluate a hypothesis I had come up with

Miami, FL: Endowment for Cuban-American Studies, 2000, "Franco's Spain and Castro's Cuba: Parallels and Contrasts," *Cuba in Transition*, Volume 14. Papers and Proceedings of the Fourteenth Annual Meeting of the Association for the Study of the Cuban Economy (ASCE), Miami, Florida, August 5-7, 2004, and "Francisco Franco and Fidel Castro: Loyalist vs. Revolutionary? A Preliminary Exploration," *Cuba in Transition*, Volume 13, Papers and Proceedings of the Fourteenth Annual Meeting of the Association for the Study of the Cuban Economy (ASCE), Coral Gables, Florida, August 7-9, 2003.

about a three-way relation between the structure of government, the scope of government, and its stability. To maintain stability, I thought, there has to be a balance between centralization and scope—if one goes up the other must fall. I fancied that some day this might become known as “the law of centralization and scope,” and conjectured that the key to understanding Costa Rica’s stability was that, unlike its neighbors, it had decentralized as the scope of its government had widened. Long on theoretical speculation, I was rather vague about methodology, but anticipated it would be in the traditions of participant-observation and case studies.

I applied to several standard sources of funding for field research, but I can not remember how I hit upon applying, as well, to the National Institute of Mental Health, a most unconventional sponsor for the type of work I was planning to do. But it was the only one that came through, granting me a two-year fellowship. So in February 1973, in the middle of our winter but their *verano* (summer, by which they designate their dry season) my wife of less than two years and I boarded a LACSA flight out of Miami for San José. We spent a year in Costa Rica and five months in El Salvador, returning to Miami in June 1974 with boxes of books, newspaper clippings, and about a dozen or so thick notebooks recording my observations and interviews with local officials and citizen activists in cities and towns across both countries.

Parenthetically, before leaving for Central America I wrote to both Jim Busey and Charlie Anderson, asking them to comment on my dissertation prospectus. Both kindly answered me. This was the beginning of a long-running correspondence with the Buseys (his wife Marian added observations to his letters now and then). For the next three decades Jim continued to comment on everything I sent him, always generous with praise and encouragement. We met only twice in all these years, although occasionally I telephoned him.

As for Charlie, in the 1990s I found out that, having retired from Wisconsin, he spent the winter in Pensacola Beach (he has since resided permanently in the area) where as well as writing books he was active in the Leisure and Learning Society. For several years I attended his lectures to that group, and over occasional extended lunches we still carry on wide-ranging discussions on anything pertaining to the life of the mind, to borrow a phrase from the title of one of his recent books (*Prescribing the Life of the Mind*).

Rather than return to Bloomington, we decided to stay in Miami while I wrote the dissertation under the long-distance direction of David Collier (now at UC Berkeley). David was extremely helpful and kind to me. On the one hand, he was indulgent, allowing me to develop and evaluate my hypothesis pretty much as I wanted. On the other hand, he was strict in holding me to deadlines for turning in drafts of chapters, as well as the complete product. He would read every line with care, expertly editing the manuscript and critiquing my arguments and evidence, which consisted in a series of case studies. His mentoring was exceptional: to this day I read and evaluate my own students' term papers and theses in the same manner. Although the dissertation did not and could not accomplish anywhere near what I had initially imagined it would do, i.e., establish a "law of centralization and scope," it did make a reasonable case for the proposition that Costa Rica's decentralized political structure had something to do with its superior performance relative to El Salvador's in satisfying public demands, and it was approved. I had yet to find a teaching position, however. The next six months were difficult, full of fears that the job for which I had prepared for so long would never materialize. I even began to entertain the possibility of pursuing alternative careers, interviewing with the Miami-Dade County metropolitan government for a position as an analyst. But life as a local bureaucrat

did not appeal to me, so it was just as well that I was not hired. Fortunately, my anxieties were over in the spring of 1976, when I interviewed and received an offer from New Mexico State University. On the telephone, the chairman told me that I would be expected to contribute to the MPA program and teach the introductory course in American politics, but that there would be no opportunity in the Latin America field, it being already occupied by two other members of the faculty.

I spent four years at NMSU before wearing out my welcome. Several years ago I read a wonderful novel by Bernard Malamud, *A New Life*, about a Jewish man from New York who takes a job teaching composition at an agricultural college in the Northwest. That novel, better than anything else I know, depicts the kind of environment I encountered at NMSU. This is not to say that I bore no responsibility for our parting of the ways. For one thing, about half-way through my stay I became smitten with libertarianism, along the lines of Murray Rothbard's *For a New Liberty*. Theories of anarchism, and the way I expressed them, did not sit well. The libertarian spell was soon broken: in rapid succession, the Sandinista seizure of Nicaragua, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the war in El Salvador, and the crackdown on Solidarity in Poland had the effect of sobering me up. Libertarianism, I concluded, had nothing to offer by way of effective counters to communist threats around the globe.⁴ But the damage had been

4. The libertarian sojourn produced one idea which to this day makes sense to me. That is that while establishing government abolishes anarchy for the people, those who exercise the powers of government remain in anarchy among themselves. I have yet to develop the full implications of this idea. Even so, in the last several years it has been cited in many libertarian discussions on the World Wide Web and made its way into one course syllabus at LSU and a foreign-language edition of the Wikipedia. See "Do We Every Really Get Out of Anarchy?," *Journal of Libertarian Studies*, III (2), 1979, pp. 151-158.

done. An aggravating circumstance was that, 28 years old at the time of arrival, I was a young man in a hurry who did not wish to be subordinated to any hierarchy other than one based on superior knowledge, which in my presumption I fancied was not to be found among those who wrote my annual evaluations.

Nevertheless, my time at NMSU was by no means a net loss. For one thing, being shut out of teaching Latin American politics turned out to be beneficial in unanticipated ways. Drawing on my economics background, I developed a graduate course in budgeting and an undergraduate one in political economy. This enabled—indeed, required—me to read more economics. Also, I became interested in natural resources.⁵ Actually, one of the case studies included I included in my dissertation was an analysis of Costa Rica’s national aqueducts agency. Never having lived in a dry climate before, I began to read about water policies in America’s Southwest. In pursuit of that interest, I attended a Chautauqua workshop held in Austin, Texas. There I met Richard J. Heggen, then an assistant professor of Civil Engineering at the University of New Mexico. On the return flight, we coincidentally happened to sit next to each other. To pass the time I showed him a model I had developed to account for political violence in Central America.⁶ He said it was similar to microeconomic models used in engineering. Subsequently, we pursued the discussion by telephone and letter, eventually

5 See “A Critique of Collectivist Water Resources Planning,” *Western Political Quarterly*, XXXII (3), 1979, pp. 320-326 and “Appropriators vs. Expropriators: The Political Economy of Water in the West,” in *Water Resources: Bureaucracy, Property Rights and the Environment*, edited by Terry Anderson. Ballinger Press, 1983.

6. “Authority, Scope, and Force: An Analysis of Five Central American Countries,” *Public Choice*, 35, 1980, pp. 363-369.

writing two articles based on the initial model.⁷ Then we developed a different, but related model to study American presidential elections. In 2000, after a long hiatus, we resumed our collaboration. Also at NMSU, I met two wonderful people, Cal and Janet Clark (now at Auburn and West Georgia, respectively). An expert on methodology, Cal taught me a lot while collaborating on two conference papers. From him I learned to appreciate the value of statistics in testing political hypotheses, something I had been unreasonably skeptical about in graduate school.

On the strength of my natural resources work I was offered a position at The University of West Florida. In contrast to NMSU, where it seemed as if I could not do anything right, here just about everything fell into place. My chairman, Jim Witt, was in his own way as indulgent with me as David Collier had been. When the department's Latin Americanist left, he allowed me to take over her courses. And when another colleague moved into university administration, a shift of faculty left a hole in political theory, and he allowed me to fill that, too. Also, soon after my arrival at UWF I made a fortunate find: Mike Bundrick, a mathematician and statistician, who has co-authored most of my articles on American presidential elections.

Looking to make new acquaintances, I joined the Florida Political Science Association. At my first meeting, I spotted Bernie, whom I had not seen in many years. With his characteristic enthusiasm he had become founding editor of the association's journal, *The*

7. Richard J. Heggen and Alfred G. Cuzán, "Legitimacy, Coercion, and Scope: An Expansion-Path Analysis Applied to Five Central American Countries and Cuba," *Behavioral Science*, 26 (2), 1981, pp. 143-152, and Alfred G. Cuzán and Richard J. Heggen, "A Micro-Political Explanation of the 1979 Nicaraguan Revolution," *Latin American Research Review*, XVII (2), 1982, pp. 156-170.

Political Chronicle. Ever the mentor, Bernie lost no time inviting me to join the journal's Board of Editors and nominating me for the Executive Council. Eventually, I was elected FPSA President. I still see Bernie (who after retiring from UM found a new career as an expert witness in immigration cases) and his wife Joyce, either at FPSA meetings or on our way to or from Miami.

I am now completing three decades as a faculty member, all but four of those years at UWF, and nearly half as departmental chairman. (I intend some day to write about what chairing was like.) Reflecting on my academic career, I have a few words of advice to offer to would-be political scientists. First, pursue your interests. Be inner-, not other-directed. Let your researches be guided by what intrigues you, not necessarily by what others think is important. Find mentors who will assist in the exploration of ideas that excite you. Second, never compromise your intellectual integrity. Neither should you fear going against the grain, nor playing role of the Socratic gadfly, if that's where your reason takes you. That's what academic freedom is for—use it. Also, at every stage of your career, write to scholars whose work you admire. Ask them to comment on your latest paper or article. Do not hesitate to criticize their work where warranted, although of course this has to be done tactfully. Although you will not hear from a few, most will respond, and out of these several long-term relationships, and even friendships, may grow. These are extremely valuable. I do not mean in the narrow careerist sense, although it is true that such contacts can ease your way to forums where your ideas can receive a hearing, write letters of recommendation, and otherwise help promote your work. All this is important, but the critical thing is that communication with like-minded academics is indispensable, like oxygen to a diver. It is a fact of university life that faculty are

so distributed across space that most of your colleagues, even your friends, will not share your interests. They are busy in their own fields. Most of the time, then, you will be working alone. For intellectual feedback and fellowship born of shared assumptions, the *sine qua non* of a true meeting of minds, you need a lifeline from without.

Finally, for the foreign-born would-be political scientist I have an additional piece of advice. Do not allow yourself to be stereotyped or pigeonholed. Whatever your country of origin, it will always be with you. Because you were born there, you have a comparative advantage when it comes to comprehending it or the broader cultural region to which it belongs. Moreover, you may have a strong sense of duty to your former compatriots, and may thus wish to foster a better grasp of their politics and society among U.S. policy-makers or the public at large, or even to try to influence political developments there for the better. At the same time, you need to pursue broader comparative interests. Above all, you need to study the United States. Bear in mind that some of the most insightful commentaries about this country have been made by foreigners, Alexis de Tocqueville justly being the most renowned. But note that, in *Democracy in America*, de Tocqueville analyzes the United States through implicit and explicit comparisons to France as well as England. It was by bridging the two cultures that he was able to improve his understanding of both. Being *in* the United States but not entirely *of* it has its liabilities, to be sure. But it also affords you a valuable vantage point that those who were born of second or later generations of Americans do not have. Make the most of it.