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"Revolutionary" Fascism

A Review of Jorge Edwards', *Persona Non Grata*

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No American interested in the state of human rights and welfare in Castro's "revolutionary" Cuba should miss reading *Persona Non Grata*, by Jorge Edwards. It is available in English from Pomerica Press, although I read the Spanish original. 1

Edwards effectively demolishes three myths about Castro's Cuba: First, that it is a humanitarian society; second, that it has improved the welfare of its people; and third, that it is egalitarian. What Edwards found was a ruthless police state at the service of an absolute dictator who rules despotically over an impoverished people.

Edwards was no ordinary visitor. He was the first charge d'affairs appointed by the Chilean government to Cuba when the two countries re-established relations after seven years of hostility following the inauguration of Marxist President Salvador Allende in 1970. Edwards' appointment was a historic event, a symbol of a new relationship between two socialist governments.

Edwards was in Cuba during the first three months of the Allende administration, when the seeds of later conflict were being planted. From Cuba he went to the Chilean embassy in Paris to work for the famous communist poet Pablo Neruda, who encouraged him to tell the story. The book assumes that the reader knows about the tragic death of Allende's *Unidad Popular* administration and the resurrection of fascism in Chile. What Edwards tells us is about the *other* fascism—the "revolutionary" kind.

At the time of his appointment, Edwards was a career diplomat assigned to Chile's embassy in Lima, Peru. A leftist writer and intellectual, Edwards is a poor relative of one of Chile's wealthiest families. Ironically, Edwards' uncle had been Chile's last ambassador to Havana before the break in diplomatic relations in the early sixties. A "liberation socialist," Edwards had publicly supported his friend

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Allende's earlier tries for the presidency. Edwards had also written stories for Cuba's state-controlled literary magazine and had even visited the country in 1968 to serve as one of three judges at a "cultural congress" sponsored by Castro's government. This was a time when Chilean-Cuban relations were at an all time low due to Castro's public attacks on Chile's President Eduardo Frei, under whose administration Edwards worked.

Edwards' appointment as *charge d'affaires* to Cuba was temporary, designed to lay the logistical groundwork until an ambassador was appointed and confirmed by the Chilean Senate, a process that was expected to take only a matter of weeks. After that, he would go to Paris. Given Edwards' "leftist" credentials, his friends assured him that he would be treated very well by the Cuban government. Despite some unexplainable misgivings, he himself expected cordial relations with Cuban officials and pleasant get-togethers with the friends he had made at the "cultural congress" two years earlier. But it did not take Edwards very long to realize how wrong these expectations had been.

From the moment of his arrival at Havana's airport until he departed as a *persona non grata* about three months later, Edwards was subjected to systematic humiliations, surveillance, and harassment by the Foreign Ministry and the secret police. There was no diplomatic reception to greet him, a calculated snub he at first interpreted as an innocent (though painful) oversight. As the days and weeks wore on, however, he came to realize that the government was intent on destroying his career and reputation for reasons that he found difficult to understand.

Throughout his brief tenure as Chile's *charge d'affaires*, Edwards was forced to live and carry out his official duties in two rooms at the Havana Riviera hotel, where the walls contained microphones and the police searched his papers at will. The government assigned him a car chauffeured by three different drivers who Edwards suspected were working for the state police. He was sexually baited with attractive, intelligent women who worked as undercover agents. Even friends and acquaintances whom he had made during the "cultural congress" were used to try to entrap Edwards into doing something that could be branded as "counter-revolutionary." The police monitored Edwards' every move including his "off-duty," private visits to the now disgraced intellectuals and writers who had enjoyed so many official favors only two years before during the "cultural congress."

It finally dawned on Edwards that the very credentials as leftist intellectual which he thought would be an asset in Cuba were a liability in a country where intellectuals were no longer useful. He recalled that at the "cultural congress" he had joined a second judge from Argentina in a vote to award the first prize to a young Cuban journalist and story-teller, Jose N. Fuentes. Fuentes had written a book of sensitive stories about the effect of war on Castro's soldiers and anti-Castro guerrillas who fought in the Escambray mountains in the sixties. The third member of the jury, a representative of the Cuban government, objected vigorously to the decision, but could not deprive Fuentes of the prize.

Unfortunately for Fuentes, this was the end of his literary career. Shortly after the closure of the congress he was denounced in *Verdo Olivo* (Olive Green), the journal of the Armed Forces, and denied any more opportunities to express ideas which the regime regarded as lacking the proper "revolutionary" fervor.

At the time, Edwards had naively interpreted the judge's behavior as reflecting purely literary differences. It wasn't until later that he understood the political ramifications of the event. Upon his return to Cuba as a diplomat he realized that, in the eyes of the government, he had sinned and the "revolution" does not treat sinners lightly. They must burn for their "bourgeois" transgressions.

Edwards soon learned that the "cultural congress" had been Castro's last flirtation with the international "left set" of Marxist and "revolutionary" writers and artists. Shortly after the congress closed, all the country's intellectuals were put on notice to support the "revolution" unconditionally or else. Those who insisted on maintaining an independent posture, even within the narrow parameters of Marxism or "leftism," were branded "bourgeois intellectuals" to be silenced,

intimidated and ostracized by a government which had no use for criticism, however devout and inoffensive. "In Cuba we don't need critics. It is easy to criticize . . . What we need are builders of society." the Chancellor of the University of Havana told Edwards near the end of his stay.

Unaware of the regime's anti-intellectualism at first, Edwards sought out the literary friends and acquaintances he had made in the sixties. He found practically all of them demoralized, fearful, resentful and unhappy. Only Heberto Padilla, the internationally known poet, was still riding high and under the illusion that his friends in the "left set" could protect his independence from the government. While Edwards was still in Cuba, Padilla even read a series of poems mildly critical of Castro's militarism to a small crowd of mostly enthusiastic young listeners. Even the Soviet ambassador was present and offered his congratulations to the poet.

Several weeks later, when Edwards was no longer in Cuba, Padilla was arrested. Shortly after that, Padilla and his friends publicly recanted their "counter-revolutionary" heresies and denounced all those in the "left set" who had protested their arrest from abroad.

Edwards' book is much more than a tale of "revolutionary" oppression, however. It also is a vivid account of hierarchical privilege and elite riches in a country impoverished by "socialism."

Edwards arrived in the midst of the most serious economic crisis in the history of the "revolution." This was the time when the wreckage of the "ten-million ton sugar harvest" that wasn't, had become painfully evident to all. The harvest had been the latest in a long series of economic disasters caused by reckless campaigns to shape the island's economy to the likes of Castro and his government.

The first big disaster was Guevara's failure to industrialize the country in one massive stroke upon coming to power. As Minister of Industry, he wasted preciously scarce resources in large purchases of factories and machinery from the "socialist bloc." It was only later that he discovered that the finished goods could be obtained in the world market at a price which was lower than the cost of the raw materials required to put the factories to work. Cuba could simply not violate the economic law of comparative advantage.

Guevara's failure as an economist may have been the reason why he sought "revolutionary" martyrdom in Bolivia. For his part, Castro wasted no time in reversing his policies. He turned the economy around and with characteristic arrogance launched his preposterous "ten million ton sugar harvest" (the record "pre-revolutionary" harvest had been around 7 million tons.) Advisers and counselors who objected or tried to explain to Castro that it wouldn't work were banished to the cane fields to do penance for their "defeatism."

The harvest was given first economic priority, overriding all other claims to resources by competing lines of production. The country was mobilized as if for war. It didn't work. Unfortunately but predictably, the defeat against nature and economics was not confined to the cane fields. The economic dislocations wrecked Cuba's productive capacities. Characteristically, Castro confessed his "mistakes" and imposed even greater sacrifices on a population already suffering from ten years of "revolutionary" deprivation. Even harsher police state measures were imposed to forestall any possible popular uprisings like the ones that had shaken Poland a short time before. Edwards was unable to find out if the inprudent advisors who had argued against the *zafra* (harvest) had been rehabilitated.

Edwards' book presents additional confirmation (as if any more were needed) that Castro's centralized and personalistic management of the economy has impoverished the Cuban people. Of course, anyone who has any respect for facts would have no trouble interpreting World Bank statistics which show that between 1960 and 1976, Cuba's per capita income actually declined at an average annual rate of .4 per cent, the only country in Latin America to suffer a drop in living standards during the period.² Several communist diplomats from Europe whispered to Edwards that the Cuban economy was a failure and that Chile should avoid copying Castro's "socialist model." Castro and his apologists cannot excuse away the dismal economic record of the "revolution" by blaming it on the U. S. trade "blockade." In the first place, Marxist *dependencia* (dependency) theory, which Castro himself has popularized, holds that American "monopoly capitalism" exploits the third world when it

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exchanges industrial goods for raw materials. Logically, then, the result of the blockade should have been the rapid development of the Cuban economy now that it was free at last from capitalist shackles.

Secondly, French Marxist economist Rene Dumont has carefully documented that most of Cuba's economic failures have domestic causes, primarily Castro's penchant for running the economy as if it were his own personal estate. Dumont visited Cuba five times during the sixties, the last time as Castro's personal guest. In his studies of the Cuban economy, Dumont found an extreme centralization of economic decision-making and the allocation of vast resources to purely arbitrary goals established by Castro himself. Dumont recommended the de-personalization, decentralization, de-bureaucratization and democratization of Cuba's economy. He also urged the adoption of quasi-capitalist measures to improve efficiency, such as the charging of interest and rent to state enterprises, the use of markets to determine commodity prices and the application of material incentives to induce higher productivity among the workers. He did this in reports to government agencies, personal encounters with Castro and in two books, *Cuba: Socialism and Developments* and *Is Cuba Socialist?* The second book was written after the last visit and is much more critical of Castro's policies than the first; it contends that Cuba is not socialist but a personal dictatorship. Castro later denounced Dumont as a CIA agent.

For those who like to romanticize "revolutionary" poverty, Edwards provides vivid imagery of the miseries which the Cuban people have had to endure on account of Castro's economic adventurism. Among them are the tyranny of the ration card, which chains the population to interminable queues in order to obtain a meager subsistence allowance; the empty store shelves; the worthlessness of paper money with which the workers are paid; the forced "voluntary" labor which is not paid but "celebrated"; the deterioration of Havana, once one of Latin America's most modern cities, now a shell of its former self; and the shortages of just about everything, except promises and propaganda.

Edwards, too, blames the economic failure on poor planning, on "giantism," on useless projects with which Castro becomes infatuated, like the making of exotic cheeses and the building of huge parks. Edwards observed expensive rows of rusting agricultural machinery left idle for weeks; the dusty remnants of a "green belt" which was to surround Havana with orchards and farms; and Castro's personal dairy where he blends exquisite milk; and he could not help but contrast this "socialist waste" with the efficiency of capitalist management in rural Chile.

The last myth demolished by Edwards is that Castro's Cuba is an "egalitarian" society. Edwards describes a system in which a ruling military elite headed by the two Castro brothers lives in splendid luxury with seemingly inexhaustible resources at its command, totally unencumbered by ration cards or other economic restrictions under which the rest of the population has to live.

Edwards was able to observe Castro's imperial living style at close range on several occasions. A particularly revealing event was Castro's visit to a Chilean navy ship, the *Esmeralda*, which visited Havana's harbor for a few days while Edwards was still the Chilean representative

in Cuba. From the moment he arrived with great fanfare at the docks and boarded the ship with a contingent of armed bodyguards against the explicit instructions of the Chilean captain, Castro behaved like a spoiled emperor whose every wish must be satisfied and every joke laughingly appreciated. At one time during the visit, Castro lectured the captain about the great historic importance of his life for the survival of the "revolutionary process." This was his way of apologizing for bringing armed men aboard the ship.

Making "revolution" has been more than a mystical experience for its creators. They have actually profited materially from their enterprise. Imported cars, historic buildings, sumptuous accommodations, quality liquor and cigars, exotic delicacies, royal entourages, retinues of obsequious servants and aides, armed guards, a huge personal army . . . these constitute the income which a former flunky from the University of Havana, a petty student gangster, now earns as "messiah of the revolution." Edwards records that when Castro visits a village, dozens of young girls rush to hold his hands. Edwards calls him a Neptune, a god. I would call him Napoleon IV, Emperor of the Third World.

If there is a major flaw in Edwards' book, it is that his conclusions are not comprehensive enough. Despite the "revolutionary" fascism which he found in Castro's Cuba, Edwards still holds out hope for a libertarian socialism, for a "revolution" without the police state.

Edwards fails to realize that socialism on the scale practiced in Cuba is simply incompatible with individual freedom and human rights. Liberty is meaningless without private property. Where most of society's resources are "collectivized," control over them is monopolized by a ruling elite, which uses this power to perpetuate itself in office. Dissent becomes a "counter-revolutionary," "reactionary" or "anti-social" activity.

It is only where resources can be owned by individuals independent of the government that freedom and human rights can be defended. Where individuals own houses and lease apartments, the police cannot enter at will; where individuals own newspapers and other forms of mass communication, intellectual expression cannot be stifled. But wherever government treats everything under its domain as "public property" subject to its control, dissent is impossible. How can a writer, for example, express dissenting views in a country where all the paper, the printing presses, the publishing houses and the media are owned and managed by the government as is true in Cuba under Castro? A "libertarian socialism" is a Utopia. Only private property can safeguard human rights and freedom.

NOTES

1. Jorge Edwards, *Persona Non Grata* (New York: Pomerica Press, 1977). The Spanish version was published in 1976 by Ediciones Grijalbo, S. A., Deu y Mata, 98, Barcelona, 14, Spain. It is available at Libros Espanoles, S. A., 1898 S. W. 8th St., Miami, Florida 33135.
2. *World Development Report* (Washington, D. C.: The World Bank, 1978) pp. 76-77.
3. New York: Grove Press, 1970.
4. New York: Viking Press, 1974.
5. On the relationship between private property and individual freedom see Milton Friedman, *Capitalism and Freedom* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1962) and Murray Rothbard, *For a New Liberty* (New York: Collier Books, 1978). □