

CUBA: An individual perception of a collective drama

Raquel Marrero, Ph.D.

Cuba, the paradisiacal island in the Caribbean, and its regime, still called a "revolution" after nearly a half-century, are a fascinating enigma to many. To those in academia it provides the golden opportunity for earning the traditional badges of honor, through analyses, papers, and varied types of research. For Cubans who have lived the "revolutionary phenomenon" in their own personal experience, no amount of papertrail, be it academic or media-oriented, will ever come near explaining even a portion of what has transpired at all societal levels, for Cubans in or outside the island.

I subscribe to the view that social sciences such as Psychology, my chosen field, ought to be considered "disciplines" rather than "sciences". "Science" implies the use of the scientific method, with the expectation of predictability of results. It is my contention that, in dealing with human behavior, one can never "predict" results, for a variable named "free will", can skew the best-planned scientific research. I, for one, consider humans to be in a category above animals, and as such, capable of exercising their own power of decision-making. This view contradicts deterministic theories, which espouse that, through proper conditioning and reinforcement, human behavior can be manipulated at will. To me, free will can be abdicated by anyone at any given time. It is only then that conditioning and reinforcement will truly become successful tools for the manipulation of human behavior.

Free will and conditioning are useful terms if one is to understand "the Cuban issues". In my opinion, psychological terms and concepts may prove quite valuable in untangling this Gordian knot which seems to baffle many.

At this time I choose to briefly examine some ideas in the areas of perception and cognitive dissonance. I believe that these concepts are helpful in providing a starting point from which to grasp a wider view of the ever-expanding Cuban panorama.

Each individual has his/her own construct of the world. The perceptual world is not the physical world. Though physical energy is an essential feature to an act of perception, the experience in itself is different from physical energy. This is due to the bodily receptors, sensitive to the physical energy, which are able to transform it into electrochemical impulses carried by the nervous system. These impulses are then fed to the brain, which is capable of receiving them, and interprets them in the form of an experience. In a nutshell, that is the scientific explanation of perception. It must be emphasized, however, that the relationship between energy and experience is not at all exact. The qualities of the internal perceptual world are not the same as the qualities of the external physical world. It is as if a kaleidoscope, with the same pieces within, were reflecting different images according to the way the pieces are moved. The eye of the beholder, looking through glasses of different colors, gives way to different "realities".

It is this individual "reality" that motivates one's behavior toward specific goals. Those whose "reality" is seen through another segment of the glass tend then to reject the vision, goals, and reality of others who might not agree with their own appraisal of any given situation.

Sometimes we think of our perceptual experiences as if they were "pictures inside our heads" (our individual version of a kaleidoscopic image). Often these images remain embedded and become part of our memory, and thus, an integral part of ourselves as human beings. Our selection depends on multiple factors at play. Among

them are: the environment in which the stimulus was presented; our chronological age upon presentation; the gender; degree of intelligence; and also the state of our health, both physical and emotional when faced with any range of possible perceptions.

What we "choose to see", our reality, in turn colors our future perceptions. It is a wise person, indeed, who can change a paradigm (the way we see the world) when confronted with other "realities". It is not an easy task, and many prefer to turn a blind eye, for it is "safer" to remain focused on preconceived notions based on earlier individual experiences/perceptions. A shift would ultimately require adjustment, thus bringing forth a sense of insecurity, and in all likelihood internal turmoil; not everyone is ready to pay that price.

It has been proposed that there is a tendency for individuals to seek consistency among their cognitions (i.e. beliefs, opinions.) According to cognitive dissonance theory, when there is an inconsistency between attitudes or behaviors (dissonance), something must change to eliminate the dissonance. In the case of a discrepancy between attitudes and behavior, it is most likely that the attitude will change to accommodate the behavior.

Dissonance occurs most often in situations where an individual must choose between two incompatible beliefs or actions. It can be eliminated by reducing the importance of the conflicting beliefs, acquiring new beliefs that change the balance, or removing the conflicting attitude of behavior. In the phenomenological approach to abnormal psychology, the lack of congruence between thoughts, beliefs and behavior paves the way for continued emotional instability, and eventually an onset of mental problems.

Dissonance theory applies to all situations involving attitude formation and change. It is especially relevant to decision-making and problem-solving. Interestingly enough, the greatest dissonance is created when the two incompatible alternatives are equally attractive. Attitude change is more likely in the direction of less incentive, since this results in lower dissonance. In this respect, dissonance theory is contradictory to most behavioral sciences which would predict greater attitude change with increased incentive (i.e. reinforcement).

I believe that the psychological concepts mentioned above, among others, could go a long way were one to devise programs for what has been termed "the reconstruction of the civil society in Cuba". No "reconstruction" can ever take place unless one understands, from multiple perspectives, the individual and national "constructs" that are at play. The following must be taken into consideration:

1) The Cuban population within Cuba: 46 years of communism and socialism; many historical facts erased; a population that at present continues to be indoctrinated. Ignorance of Cuba's past; destruction of families, religious prosecution, dependence on the state for meager goals. Much-taunted social gains in education; yet Cubans must join the regime's party before being allowed to pursue higher education (education was free for all qualified students when Cuba was a republic). Emphasis on a health care which is excellent for foreigners but denied to the native population (Again, in pre-Castro Cuba the "Casas de Socorro" provided medical care for all). No mention at all of the social gains accomplished by the Cuban workers prior to the present regime; total ignorance of the 1940 Constitution which provided for their protection (In present-day Cuba, workers are at the mercy of the government which gets paid directly by foreign investors for the Cuban labor). A population that lacks the drive to succeed, due to control by the state. "Freedom" is perceived as the opportunity to escape to the U.S., where the government grants better benefits. Recent arrivals to the U.S. share the goal of returning within a very short time to the island to visit and "show-off".

2. The Cuban population that left Cuba during the first 20 years of

the Castro regimen, ("the historic exile") has stood firm on principles, refusing to go back to the island, they fled due to political reasons, with relatives left behind and a dream of returning some day. Many suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder (This is a psychological condition closely related to grief and mourning). Perceived as hard-line, intransigent by many recent arrivals targeted by the leftists through: a) academia; b) media and c) members of political parties whose hidden agenda is that of establishing links with socialist groups in order to advance their own personal goals.

3. The younger generation growing up in the United States, for which Cuba is a stylized picture, vignettes gained through families' recollections. This perception is highly influenced by the many variables within the larger national context. Despite the obvious lack of knowledge about Cuba's past, and mostly deficient Spanish, they are often sought by those in government as "experts" due their spoken skills in English (mainly that they are accent-free).

The above is simply an overview of the many factors at play when analyzing "the Cuban situation". Despite a common heritage and a common language, Cubans perceive issues on widely different terms. It is an accepted fact that, in order to communicate effectively, a common language must be used. Words are a symbolic representation of meaning, but meaning does not necessarily imply a common set of values. Until words evoke the same meaning, no proper communication can occur. Due to the many years of dictatorship and the many divergent personal constructs, words among Cubans can evoke totally different perceptions, based on individual experiences. These perceptions lead to different motivations, which in turn guide their behavior. For those who lived during the Republic and left before 1980, the island is remembered and perceived as it once was; a flourishing nation, a place to return to, a place to fight for. Those who were born during the dictatorship perceive Cuba as a place to flee; in the words of many, "a place to forget". For those Cuban ancestry who grew up in the United States, Cuba is a notion, the root of family customs and traditions a place that sounds a distant call for possible future enterprises, "when the island becomes free". For those with no emotional attachment, Cuba is simply a great opportunity for financial gain. Last, but not least, for those who envy, who do not understand what freedom truly means, Cuba is the weapon with which to attack the powerful giant to the North.

I ask of those who wish to analyze "the Cuban situation" to respond to this question: What is Cuba to you? I know that the answers, based on personal constructs, probably reflect much dissonance. Once again, honesty and introspection are required to dispel myths. The following is my own, very personal answer: "To me, Cuba is the eternal island, blessed by God for its location, flora and fauna, the land that transcends generations. It represents the fight between Light and Darkness, the place to which we converge as actors, each playing our individual role within the larger script. To me, Cuba is the land of lost opportunities, the return to basic and transcendental values; it is the inner search for our human identity. In the last instance, Cuba is the quest for FREEDOM at any price, the final test in our shared humanity. To me, "the Cuban problem" will only be solved when each of us bows our head before the Almighty in recognition that no single human being nor any individual insatiable ego, including our own, can be at the helm of our lives. When each of the participants looks within, and humbly accepts responsibility before God for all individual mistakes, then, and only then, shall we, and Cuba become FREE."

Dra. Raquel Marrero obtained her B.A. and M.A. from in the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Michigan. She studied for her graduate degree at California State University and the Caribbean Center of Post-Graduate Studies in Puerto Rico. She obtained her doctorate degree at the University of Miami, Coral Gables, Florida, with an internship in Clinical Psychology at the Mailman Center for Child Development at the University of Miami School of Medicine.

Her academic experience includes: Assistant Professor, Interamerican University, San Juan, Puerto Rico; Associate Professor (with Tenure), University from Puerto Rico, Adjunct Professor, University from Miami, School of Medicine, Department of Pediatrics, Professor, Caribbean Center of Post-Graduate Studies, Miami, Florida Carlos Albizu University.

On December of 1960 Dr. Marrero and her sister, traveled to the United States as exiles. Her parents, the eminent Cuban historian, Dr. Levi Marrero and his wife Dr. Enriqueta Comas, both educators, left into exile from Venezuela in February of 1961.

Festinger, L. (1957). *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance*. New York: Wiley

Marrero, Levi (1971) *Cuba: La Forja de un Pueblo*. P.Rico. Editorial San Juan

Wolpe, J. and Lazarus, A. *Behavior Therapy Techniques: A guide to the treatment of neuroses*. (1966) New York: Pergamon Press.