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Fidel's retirement as seen in the Canadian Media

In this paper I analyze the Canadian media's portrayal of the retirement of Fidel Castro, announced in February, 2008. The coverage reveals---perhaps above all else---the way in which a neo-liberal belief in capitalism, euphemistically called "the free market," or "economic freedom," pervades the belief system of Canadian corporate media. This belief is the unseen hand which guides journalists' evaluations of careers and countries.

Fidel's retirement was long-anticipated in U.S. government circles, and on the right-wing of North American politics. There was much wishful thinking in these quarters that Fidel's departure would mean his "authoritarian regime" would collapse, from a lack of support for his "dictatorship." His retirement was reported as "relinquishing power."[1]

When it didn't, when things carried on largely as before, how did the media fit this reality into their preconceived stereotypes, what the former editor of Le Monde Diplomatique, Ignacio Ramonet, has called, the "censorship of consensus" practiced by corporate media? This consists of lazily repeating the facts in Pavlovian fashion, where for example the mention of the word 'Cuba' elicits a litany of clichés repeated ad nauseam.[2] These clichés are about a dictatorship, one-party rule, democracy and openness, human rights and the poor "dissidents," and a crippling embargo which miraculously doesn't hurt the Cuban economy as much as socialist economics. The first thing to note is that the media did not stop to reflect on the fact that if their cliché about a Castro dictatorship was true, then the dictatorship would likely collapse with his retirement. Doing so would lead them to revise their preconceptions accordingly. Instead, they sought to explain the lack of change in other ways. As Ramonet indicates, "the fact is that the majority of Cubans (although admittedly not all) are loyal to the Revolution."[3] But since this explanation is inconceivable to the North American media, steeped as they are in a doctrinaire, "free market" ideology, they chose instead to parrot the Bush government's labelling of Raul Castro as "Fidel Lite."[4] This enabled them to conclude that 1. Fidel was still in control behind the scenes (as Anita Snow of AP put it, "Fidel stepped down but isn't going away"); 2. Raul differed little in his authoritarian nature from Fidel (Doug Saunders of the Globe and Mail said Raul is "an authoritarian Marxist," who is worse than his brother Fidel); 3. The Cuban people were still obviously under a Castro dictatorship; and 4. There were little or no "signs of a transition to democracy."[5]

The range of Canadian media coverage, judging from about 50 relevant articles studied which were published from December 2007 through March 2008, extends from the far 'left' perspective of *The Toronto Star's* Linda Diebel, to columnist Peter Foster in *the National Post*. Trying to reinvent a tired cliché, as well as insulting all Cubans, Diebel wrote of Fidel's unenviable life "surrounded by flunkies." She wrote, "I realized how awful it must be when nobody ever disagrees with you." Diebel did briefly mention CIA coups in banana republics such as Chile and Guatemala, and Fulgencio Batista's "barbaric rule" over Cuban "serfs." Implicitly, Fidel looks good by comparison.[6]

This is a moderate perspective compared to columnist Peter Foster's radical rant in the *National Post*, which decried Fidel's "total personal dictatorship." Foster wrote that Fidel's Cuba is far worse than that of Batista, who was "merely corrupt," and unlike Fidel didn't demand "mental conformity" under threat of "socialism or death." For Foster, Batista led the "second richest country" in Latin America, whereas "Cuba is now one of the poorest."[7] Of course, columnists need not support their brazen assertions with statistics.

Somewhere in between these extremes was Doug Saunders in the Globe and Mail, who apparently relied on Ignacio Ramonet's conversations with Fidel, in *My Life: Fidel Castro*. Saunders wrote that Fidel missed his "Mandela moment." Instead of following in the footsteps of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, and Nelson Mandela, Saunders said Fidel chose to listen to radical advice, from "authoritarian Marxists" like his brother Raul, and the "Stalinist" Che Guevara. Hence, Fidel's retirement elicited a "cosmic sigh of relief," instead of accolades like those afforded to Nelson Mandela. Saunders wrote glowingly, by comparison, of "a liberal economy that makes South Africa, whatever its flaws, the financial success story of the continent." This contrasts glaringly with the views of Naomi Klein, who has written that the Washington Consensus, the Chicago School boys and their neo-liberal shock therapy have meant that "economically, South Africa has surpassed Brazil as the most unequal society in

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[1] Steven Edwards, "Ailing Castro steps aside; Move may eventually pave way for democracy in Cuba," Calgary Herald, Feb. 20, 2008, p. A3
[2] Ignacio Ramonet, *My Life: Fidel Castro*, Allen Lane, Penguin, Toronto, 2007, p. 18.
[3] Ramonet, *My Life*, p. 11.
[4] Anita Snow, "Castro's retirement brings hope for reforms; Cuban leader steps down, leaving his brother Raul in charge," *Telegraph-Journal*, St. John, New Brunswick, February 20, 2008, p. A3. Note: Snow is the bureau chief for the U.S. Associated Press, in Havana.
[5] Tim Harper, "A broker's role for Canada; Critics of U.S. policy in Cuba say Ottawa could help new administration moderate its stance," *Toronto Star*, February 20, 2008, p.A2.
[6] Linda Diebel, **"**Love or hate him Castro leaves a lasting legacy; Outgoing leader is a complex man whose impact on Latin America is unsurpassed in modern times," *Toronto Star*, February 23, 2008, p.A3.
[7] Peter Foster, "Last gasps of a repressive regime," *National Post*, February 20, 2008 p. A1.

the world."[8] Additionally, of course, the fall of the apartheid regime and Mandela`s release owe much to Castro's Cuban troops in Angola. Ramonet writes, "Mandela never misses an opportunity to remember his friendship with Fidel Castro and the debt he owes the Cuban Revolution."[9] So, while for Saunders and the corporate media, Fidel had no Mandela moment, Mandela himself has had his Fidel Castro moments.

Can the Rich Get Richer?

This reporting exemplifies the way the unseen hand of laissez faire markets and neo-liberalism puts ideological blinders on journalists. Because South Africa opened its markets, Mandela is a hero; because Fidel did not, he must be vilified. No matter the fate of the common people, regardless of the gross inequities: all that matters is whether capital markets and investors can act with impunity. To the corporate media, there is only one question of significance: can the rich get richer? Their preoccupation with this allows them to ignore or dismiss Cuba's unparalleled advances in economic equity, health care, education, employment, environmentalism, and other areas which are vastly more important to meaningful, dignified human existence than is the countenance of greed.

Of course, the Canadian media disguise their bias with the veneer of concern over human rights and democracy. Hence, reference is made to "freeing political prisoners," usually in relation to an end to the U.S. blockade. I have written elsewhere at some length about the fate of so-called Cuban "dissidents," the way in which some of them are on the payroll of the U.S. government in a treasonous attempt to overthrow the Cuban government, and the way that such activities have been treated in Canada. One example is the Front de Liberation du Quebec crisis of 1970, which saw the Liberal government of Pierre Trudeau institute the War Measures Act, and throw more than 400 people in jail, because of a kidnapping and some bombings by a handful of people.[10]

One Party Rule?

The cliché of one-party communist rule was sometimes stated outright, but other times was implied in a more indirect manner. For example, Raul Castro was "installed" rather than "elected," and he then "picked" other leaders, as in this example from the *Toronto Star*: "...brother Raul Castro, Cuba's first new leader in 49 years, was installed and picked old-guard revolutionaries to help him govern. That dashed forecasts of a rapid transition from communism to capitalism and the end to the embargo..."[11] Another example from the Montreal Gazette indicates the direct approach: "Yesterday's events were essentially set in stone by communist elites before they were brought before Cuba's one-party National Assembly."[12] This wording reinforces the cliché of autocracy, whereas the Cuban reality is far more democratic than the Canadian and U.S. systems.[13]

The Canadian media lent authority to their own judgements by quoting Europeans who agreed with them. This gave the impression of a universal condemnation of Fidel. For example, an article in the Calgary Herald stated that "A number of European governments, meanwhile, had nothing good to say about the Cuban leader. 'Fidel Castro's resignation is the end of an era that started with freedom and ended with oppression,' said Sweden's Foreign Minister Carl Bildt. In France, European Affairs Minister Jean-Pierre Jouet said Castro's regime has been a 'symbol of totalitarianism.'"[14]

The members of the Cuban National Assembly are elected, and from these members the Council of State is elected. These in turn elect the Council of Ministers, including the President and Vice Presidents. All of these decisions must be ratified by the National Assembly. For comparison purposes, ask yourself who elects the Canadian Prime Minister? He or she is the leader of a political party who may be elected at a leadership convention, by as few as 3000 delegates. His or her party then receives a plurality (but seldom a majority) of elected seats in parliament. The Prime Minister then singlehandedly decides on the members of the Federal Cabinet and Caucus, as well as Parliamentary Secretaries, committee leaders, new Senators, Supreme Court Justices, et cetera.[15]

The U.S. embargo was absolved of any responsibility for the state of the Cuban economy, which instead was vaguely but effectively attributed to Cuba's "inefficient state-run economy."[16] Yet, earlier in the same newspaper, reporter Linda Diebel made a fleeting, unexplained reference which totally contradicts this, to: "a trade embargo that strangles the Cuban population."[17] Such contradictions are ignored.

Another widely-distributed article indicated that young Cubans, in particular, were unhappy with the "old guard" remaining in power, presumably providing 'hope' for the future.

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[8] Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*, Knopf, Toronto, 2007, p. 238.
[9] Ramonet, *My Life*, p. 8.
[10] See for example, James Winter and Robert Everton, "Jimmy Carter's Trip to Cuba: A Critical Analysis," a chapter in Eloína Miyares Bermúdez and Leonel Ruiz Miyares (eds.) *Linguistics in the twenty-first century,* Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2007, 197-202; and James Winter and Robert Everton, "Fidel Castro, Jimmy Carter and George Bush in the Canadian Media: A Critical Analysis," *The Fifth-Estate-Online*, International Journal of Radical Mass Media Criticism, July, 2006.
[11] Anthony Boadle, "Change slow for Cuban economy; Canadian, European, Mideast firms benefit from the U.S. embargo," *Toronto Star*, March 22, 2008, B.4.
[12] Anthony Boadle, "Turned off in Cuba; New 'old guard' leaves young people out in the cold," The Gazette, Feb 26, 2008, p. A12.
[13] See Isaac Saney, *Cuba: A Revolution in Motion*, Fernwood, Halifax, 2004, especially chapter 2, Governance in Cuba.
[14] Steven Edwards, "Ailing Castro steps aside," Feb 20, 2008, p. A3.
[15] Cf. Donald Savoie, *Governing from the Centre: the Concentration of Power in Canadian Politics*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto, 1999; Donald Savoie, *Court Government and the Collapse of Accountability in Canada and the United Kingdom*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto, 2008; Jeffrey Simpson, *The Friendly Dictatorship*, McLelland and Stewart, Toronto, 2001.
[16] Ibid.
[17] Diebel, "Love or hate..." February 23, 2008.

Young Cubans frustrated by a regimented and austere life see little hope of change under the team of old guard revolutionaries who have taken over following Fidel Castro's retirement as president. Many were disappointed when Raul Castro, a 76-year-old army general, succeeded his ailing brother on Sunday as Cuba's first new leader in almost half a century, and other elderly communists were appointed top key posts.[18]

Note that in the above quote, life is "regimented and austere." The old guard has "taken over," and elderly communists were appointed, rather than being elected. Even Raul "succeeded," rather than being elected. Although the latter is technically correct, it implies a lack of democratic participation. Also, the reporter draws conclusions about "many" young Cubans, based on selected interviews with very few: a handful at most. Would they be allowed to draw the same unsupported conclusions about George Bush or Stephen Harper? Opinions which were supportive of the government were mostly omitted, although in some cases they were inexplicably included, even though the quotes contradicted and undermined the narrow perspective advocated by the reporter. Perhaps these were attempts at the appearance of minimal balance in reporting. For example, The *Montreal Gazette* reported that, "Marlen Quintero, a 51-year-old teacher, said she was happy with Raul's selection. 'There are lots of expectations around the world but Cubans know that changes don't depend on who is in the government but on what we all do to support it.'"[19] If Cubans know changes don't depend on who is in the government, but on what the people want, then this seriously undermines the corporate media's clichéd presuppositions of an authoritarian, if not tyrannical government.

Another example from the same article included a quote about Fidel. "He has charisma and people support him. No matter who is president, Fidel will always be the leader." Of course, if people support him, then this also undermines the notion of authoritarian rule. Yet, this was used to support the idea that Fidel has retired but is lurking in the background, still running things through his brother Raul.

Conclusions

American journalism critic Norman Solomon writes that the U.S. administration is able to spin and promote "absurd" interpretations of what is really going on in the world, because of the American public's deep-seated belief in the mythology of America as a "fair and noble" superpower. That is, the public believes in American exceptionalism. This is "the belief that unlike other great powers, the United States is motivated not by the self-interest of some set of elites but by benevolence."[20] Clearly, this exceptionalism has been applied to U.S. government actions against Cuba, from, for example: the embargo; the financing of traitors, terrorists and others whose aim is to bring down the Cuban government; assassination attempts against Fidel; the bombing of ships, passenger aircraft, a baseball stadium, theatre, et cetera. All of these unacceptable actions are cast in a favourable light, excused and even encouraged by media coverage which is narrowly, relentlessly and inaccurately focused on the clichés about Fidel and Raul and Cuba, illustrated above.

If Cuba is a brutal repressive dictatorship, then any actions are justified, and America is simply trying to help the poor and downtrodden. In this context, the question of why the U.S. *really* opposes Cuba is never addressed.

The real reason the U.S. continues its merciless punishment of Cuba, is because of what Noam Chomsky calls, the "rotten apple theory." When the people of a country take matters into their own hands and revolt against hierarchy and inequality and the abject squalor and poverty to which the American Empire has reduced them, they must be beaten down again, lest their example spread to other countries. The corporatist ideology of Conservative and neo-liberal governments in Canada, and their brethren in the corporate media, has meant that Canada is increasingly falling in step with American dogma, subscribing to the absurd notion of "American exceptionalism," and promoting these ideas in societal discourse and government policies. These are reflected as much in what is not done, as what is. For example, whereas former Canadian PM Pierre Trudeau and even Jean Chretien visited Cuba, while Paul Martin visited Haiti in 2005 and Stephen Harper travelled to Chile in 2007.

[18] Anthony Boadle, "Turned off in Cuba."
[19] Mike Blanchfield, "Another Castro in power; Raul takes over. Communist Party keeps tight rein," The Gazette, February 25, 2008, p. A4.
[20] Solomon, Norman. *War Made Easy: How Presidents and Pundits Keep Spinning Us to Death*, John Wiley & Sons, N.Y., 2005. Cited in a review by Robert Jensen, "It's the Empire, Stupid," ZNet Commentary, July 29, 2005.