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Source: *Oral History*, Vol. 40, No. 1, JOURNEYS (SPRING 2012), pp. 35-46
Published by: Oral History Society
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/41806579
Accessed: 27-05-2015 18:31 UTC

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Cubans' life stories: the pains and pleasures of living in a communist society

by Elizabeth Dore

Abstract: It is widely believed that in communist countries oral history is fatally flawed because people fear talking about their lives. Luisa Passerini proposed that 'memory seems to have a flattening effect on the concept of totalitarianism'. The oral history project I directed in Cuba from 2004 to 2010 found that Cubans frequently defied the official narrative of the Revolution. Despite initial apprehension, most people told their life story with considerable candour, describing the pleasures and the difficulties of life in communist Cuba. I explore how two Cubans, from opposite sides of the political spectrum, wove into their narratives the most contentious issue in contemporary Cuba: increasing class disparity. In deliberate defiance of official policy they described the egalitarian pleasures of their youth and the stings of inequality.

Keywords: Cuba, life history, communism, inequality, egalitarianism

There is a consensus that in communist countries oral history is fatally flawed because people fear talking about their lives. Substantial evidence from the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe supports this view. Research demonstrates that people feared that if they did not parrot the official history when talking to interviewers they would end up in the Gulag or a cemetery.[1] Predictably, oral history research was rare behind what was called the 'iron curtain' before the decline and fall of communism. Afterwards it flourished as people clamoured to tell the story of their lives.[2]

A central thread in post-Soviet narratives about communist life was that fear permeated society. The remarkable similarities of these stories prompted Luisa Passerini to suggest that 'memory seems to have a flattening effect on the concept of totalitarianism, especially in as far as it recalls different experiences in very similar ways'.[3] I propose, by extension, that some oral historians seem to have replicated the flattening effect, and in the process have diminished our understanding of life under communism.[4] Three prize-winning books come to mind: Orlando Figes's *The Whisperers: Private Life in Soviet Russia*, Anna Funder's *Stasiland: True Stories from Behind the Berlin Wall*, and Barbara Demick's *Nothing to Envy: Real Lives in North Korea*.[5] Notwithstanding their many merits, I suspect that these books owe their prizes, in part, to the stories they tell of relentless fear and brutality under communism.

In a provocative essay, 'Success stories from the margins: Soviet women's autobiographical sketches from the late Soviet period', Marianne Liljestrom cautions against the flattening effect, though not in those words.[6] She argues that there was a mass cleansing of collective memory in post-Soviet societies where only stories of suffering, repression and dissidence under communist rule were regarded as authentic.

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Memories of a different order, of professional fulfilment, of friendships and pleasures, were denounced as false, ideologically driven, and were expunged from the historical narrative. What we are left with, Liljestrom warned, is an incomplete understanding of life in the late Soviet period.

Twenty years after Passerini's observation, a new wave of oral history is deepening our understanding of life in communist societies. Oral historians working in Russia and countries of the former Soviet bloc are discovering that some people have been reassessing their past, unearthing memories that were submerged in the fervour of post-communism. As Natalya Pronina, an economist from Saratov in Russia, told Donald Raleigh, 'the Soviet period...[had] its positive qualities. There was a lot wrong with it, but there was a lot that was right. It's like today – there are some good things, and some bad'.[7]

Cubans speak against the grain

The collection of 110 life history interviews that my co-researchers and I recorded in Cuba from 2004 to 2010 does not fit the flattened mould. It does not demonstrate that in communist Cuba fear invalidated oral history. Most Cubans, despite initial apprehension, told the story of their life with considerable candour, even, or especially, when it contradicted the official narrative of the Revolution. Rather than ironing out the complexities of the present and the past, these interviews complicate outsiders' and insiders' understanding of the Cuban Revolution. So far as I know, Cuba is the only communist country where people have been willing to speak with a certain openness to interviewers. Other oral history research about communist life has been conducted after-the-fact, or with exiles.

Before our project was approved doing oral history in Cuba was taboo. In 1968, just a decade after the Revolution came to power, Fidel Castro invited Oscar Lewis, the renowned US anthropologist, to interview Cubans about their lives. 'It would be an important contribution to Cuban history to have an objective record of what people feel and think...This is a socialist country. We have nothing to hide; there are no complaints or grievances I haven't already heard', Castro told Lewis.[8] Despite this inspirational beginning, eighteen months later top officials abruptly closed the project. The leadership declared that Oscar Lewis was a CIA agent, though few people outside Cuba believed it was true. Probably the real reason the government terminated the project was that Cubans acted exactly how Fidel predicted they would. They complained; they talked about their grievances; they described the accomplishments and the failures of the Revolution. (In local shorthand, the Revolution means Cuba post-1959). Explaining Cubans' openness, Ruth Lewis, the project co-director, wrote, 'was it possible to record an honest, believable life history in socialist Cuba? ... We believe the life histories ... are as honest and revealing as those we have collected elsewhere....The advantages of a long autobiography [is that it] allows the basic personality and outlook of the informant to emerge'.[9]

The next oral history endeavour authorised by the leadership also came to an untimely end because Cubans spoke openly about their lives. In 1975, Gabriel García Márquez, the Nobel laureate and Fidel Castro's close friend, interviewed Cubans throughout the island for a book he wanted to write about the Revolution. A year later García Márquez abandoned his plans because, as he told friends, what people said did not fit the book he had in mind.[10] Following these debacles the Cuban government refused to authorize a large oral history project again – until ours.[11] Evidently top officials decided they did not want a record of Cubans' thoughts and feelings.

Despite warnings that the Cuban government would quash any attempt to do oral history on the island, in 2003 I brought together Cuban and British scholars to plan a project we called Cuban Voices. Although most of the Cubans on the team were well connected in official circles, we failed to secure government approval after almost two years of trying. As a last resort we pitched our proposal to Mariela Castro Espín, a charismatic member of the ruling clan who had a reputation for breaking taboos. Like her Uncle Fidel, Mariela Castro immediately grasped the importance of recording the life histories of ordinary Cubans and she set about getting the necessary approvals. Despite her intimate access to the cupola of power – she is daughter of Raúl Castro, then Minister of Defence and heir apparent to his brother Fidel, and of Vilma Espín, then the President of the Cuban Women's Federation (FMC) – permission was not forthcoming. Fortuitously, just when the team was about to call it quits, our project was approved.

Cuban Voices was officially launched with considerable fanfare in the Great Hall of the University of Havana in 2005.[12] After this glamorous beginning the project proceeded unevenly, surviving one bureaucratic entanglement after another. Our first hurdle was the tricky business of how to select interviewees. Cubans on the team tended to choose people via official channels. My two British colleagues and I adopted a more haphazard approach. We asked diverse acquaintances to recommend people to interview and they in turn suggested others. One could say that both sides used the snowball method, though each quite deliberately started the balls rolling in different places. In the end, the majority of interviewees were chosen rather

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randomly, not in the sense of a verifiably, quantifiably random sample, but through networking among people of decidedly different ages, occupations, social circles and political views. Over the course of the project the team conducted life history interviews in cities and rural towns in the provinces of Havana, Santiago, Holguín, Bayamo, Matanzas, and Sanctí Spiritus.[13]

Many people predicted that the project was doomed to failure because women and men living on the island would be afraid to talk about their lives. They warned me to expect double-speak: Cubans would say what they did not think, and would be thinking what they did not say. The big surprise was not how much Cubans left out of their life stories for fear of reprisals, but how much they left in. We discovered early on that by and large narrators were forthcoming, if not at the start of the interviews, almost always by the end. In the beginning most interviewees appeared nervous. Their voices, faces, gestures and silences betrayed trepidation. When we explained that to preserve anonymity we changed everyone's name, some asked how, on a small island with a large security apparatus, we could really camouflage their identity. However, despite initial unease most narrators overcame their apprehension. There is a defining moment, a before and after, in many of the life stories. One woman said straight out, 'Ignore what I told you yesterday. Last night I couldn't sleep; I thought it all over, and today I want tell you what really happened in my life'.[14]

By the end of one, two, sometimes three or more interviews spanning several months or years, most narrators revealed, intentionally and unintentionally, what they liked and disliked about life in Cuba. Openness, honesty, call it what you will, emerged over time as narrators and interviewers got to know one another and developed in tandem a sense of trust. Paradoxically, Cubans' willingness to speak candidly in recorded interviews surprised everyone involved: government officials, project researchers, the narrators themselves. When it became clear that even those selected via government channels told us about the Revolution's failures, as well as its achievements, the project was suspended. After I became *persona non grata*, most of my Cuban teammates avoided me. Several quit the project fearing it would endanger their careers. I feared that what had happened to Oscar Lewis might happen to me. Fortunately, after several months we were allowed to continue, though in a less official capacity.

Paternalism

By that time we all knew that most Cubans would tell us their life story with a considerable degree of openness. Why, you might ask, if oral history was fatally flawed in other communist countries, was it not in Cuba? Cubans' willingness to talk derived from a variety of factors, most importantly, as I learned from the interviews, Fidel Castro ruled with a considerable degree of popular consent – consent strengthened by the coercive apparatus. Like in other countries, government by consent meant that the state resorted occasionally, rather than routinely, to harsh forms of repression. As a consequence, fear of reprisals did little to deter most interviewees from telling the story of their lives more or less the way they wanted to, or how they remembered it. Narrators displayed caution nonetheless, especially in the project's early years. Some chose their words exceedingly carefully. Others resorted to hand motions to 'tell us' what they did not want on the recording.

From the life histories I learned that support for the Revolution had rested in part on patriotism and a desire to defend national sovereignty; in part on the sense of having participated in one of the world's great utopian experiments; and in part on the ethos and the everyday practices of egalitarianism. But the life stories also revealed that paternalism, possibly more than any other factor, accounted for the ability of the Cuban government to rule by and large with the consent of the governed. I came to understand that a belief in Fidel's benevolence underpinned Cubans' willingness to talk more or less openly.

Many Cubans, mostly older people, told us they had Fidel to thank for their education, their health care, housing, food, in short for their general wellbeing. And they owed him a debt of gratitude. To say that the state encouraged paternalism would be an understatement. As the project got underway billboards throughout the island exhorted Cubans to be thankful to Fidel. *'Gracias a Fidel, Gracias a la Revolución'* (Thank you Fidel, Thanks to the Revolution) was plastered everywhere.

When two British members of the team interviewed María, a sixty-something year-old woman, in a small rural town east of Havana, she told them:

> I thank the Revolution for [everything I have], I am so grateful to the Revolution that I want to die before El Comandante [Fidel]. Before I had nothing; I lived miserably in the countryside. Now I have a roof over my head, I have this house that was given to me, well, in fact my husband and I built it ourselves but the state gave us a title. I am guaranteed work. Although I didn't study when I was young, I can now if I want to. For all of these reasons I thank El Comandante, who has been the one and only, who has done so much for our people. He would have done more, but he wasn't able to...He always wanted to do whatever

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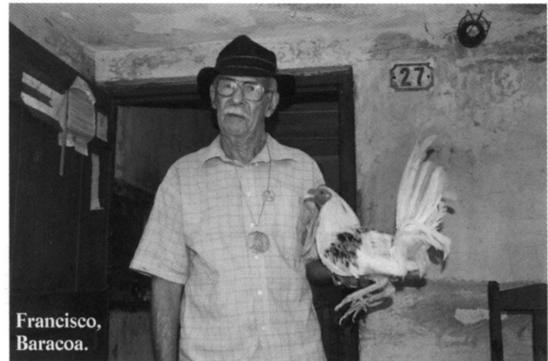
Patria Montes de Oca, retired rural worker, Barrio Toledo, Marianao, Havana.



Francisco, Baracoa.

Yoandy, Santiago de Cuba.

Diosdany, Havana.

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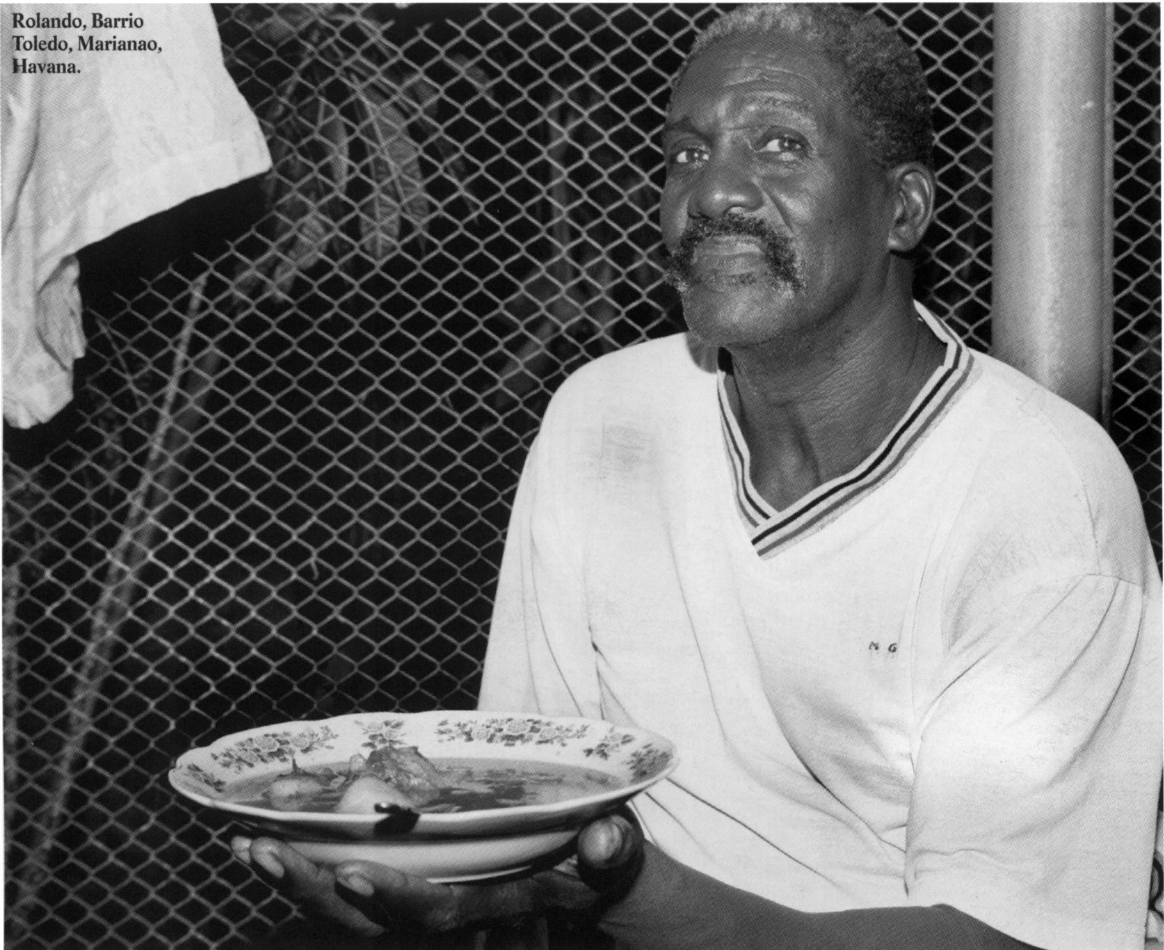

Rolando, Barrio Toledo, Marianao, Havana.

Photographs by Olga Lidia Saavedra Montes de Oca, olisam@olisam.com

To preserve the interviewees' anonymity we did not take their photographs. The Cubans in these photos were not interviewed for the Cuban Voices project.

Fidel Castro's birthday, Matanzas.

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> he could for the people. At least, that's what I think.[15]

Paternalism is embedded in many of the life stories; here it jumps out. Yet María's paean to El Comandante struck me as suspicious. She told us that she is grateful to Fidel for the house she and her husband built themselves, which she subsequently embellished with cash sent by her children in Miami. She is thankful for guaranteed work, though she earns her living as a self-employed seamstress, and probably practices her trade illicitly. Listening to the interview with Cuban colleagues, I asked why María thanked Fidel so effusively for benefits that had so little bearing on her life. Had she decided it would be prudent to echo the Party line? Was she instinctively parroting slogans she heard nightly on TV? Was she speaking from the heart? Reflecting on the context and the style of her story, we concluded it was likely that her words were motivated by a combination of all three: prudence, parroting, and passion for Fidel.

Younger Cubans frequently denounced paternalism for breeding passivity. Haydée, a student at the University of Havana said:

> It hurts to see your parents standing in line, begging for more, putting up with all of this shit. They have been made to be dependent, submissive, docile. I'm ashamed to see my own parents, my grandparents, and the older people in my neighbourhood accept with gratitude the crumbs they are given...It's embarrassing to see your own parents acting so docile, so subservient. I feel ashamed for them. It's degrading.[16]

Mario, a disenchanted Communist Party member in his thirties, stated outright that Cuba's political system rested on paternalism and he deplored it. To his way of thinking paternalism depoliticized the entire Cuban people, young and old. Cubans' grievances are focussed on food, clothes and mobile phones, not politics and democracy, he told me with evident exasperation. Mario predicted that so long as the leadership was confident that Cubans by-and-large would remain politically passive, they would not clamp down.[17] I concluded from what Mario said that so long as Cubans eschewed action, the government would let them talk.

Speaking candidly: past and present in a single breath

One of the aims of the project was to understand the ways that social memory changed over the course of the Revolution's fifty-some years. Keeping in mind Jan Vansina's famous phrase that 'oral tradition is past and present in a single breath', we sought to understand how Cubans' memories of the past were influenced by the present, and how the present influenced Cubans' willingness to talk about the past.[18]

The state's diminished capacity to satisfy the population's basic needs contributed to Cubans' outspokenness, which increased over the lifetime of the project. The dissolution of the USSR set in motion a major economic crisis in Cuba that carries on. Prior to 1990, Cubans' livelihoods depended directly and almost exclusively on the state, which provided everyone with jobs, food, housing, education and health care, made possible in large part by Soviet subsidies. After the crisis took hold the state lacked the resources to ensure the living standard to which Cubans had grown accustomed. After 1990, state provision declined significantly. In 2004, the year we began fieldwork, real wages were a fraction of what they had been in the 1980s. As the link between household consumption and state provision weakened, Cubans invented ways to sustain their standard of living: *inventar* is the word they routinely used. They engaged in legal and illegal forms of non-state employment. They stole from the state to greater or lesser degree. They sought work in the tourist sector. They befriended foreigners. A lucky minority, comprised mostly of white Cubans, received remittances from relatives abroad.[19]

As Cubans' reliance on the state shrank, their willingness to air grievances grew. Many interviewees told us that because their salary, or their pension, was negligible, they did not care all that much if it was taken away because of something they said during the interview. They explained that the economic crisis of the state had freed them up, 'liberated' is the word they used, to talk more openly. Proud of their own resourcefulness, a number of narrators described just how they earned their illicit income.[20]

In the project's latter years many interviewees said that surveillance diminished on a par with the state's economic capacity. The punch line of jokes making the rounds was that now you could say pretty much anything at all in your own home because the Interior Ministry simply could not afford the electricity, not to mention the recording devices, they used before. Estéban, a thirty-one-year- old who twice had tried to flee to Miami, whose sole employment was in black market activities, joked several times that he was lucky not to be in jail.[21] Estéban was exceptionally forthright; other narrators implied the same thing.

Towards the end of our fieldwork many people told us they believed that Raúl Castro, who had inherited his brother's mantle, was trying to avoid being seen as heavy handed. Consequently, they and everyone else talked all the more openly about their grievances.[22] The relaxing atmosphere was evident in the last interviews we recorded in late 2010.

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Catharsis

> I used to think that, that I loved the Revolution. I always thought that. But it wasn't true. I was hypnotised by collective hysteria... because they make you believe certain things. I don't know if psychology, if such a thing as manipulative collective psychology exists. I don't know, but it should because they can make you believe certain things [nervous titter], things like that you love the Revolution. They can make you believe that ...you are jumping with joy. They can make you believe that you are happy and, I just don't know. They repeat things so many times they end up making you believe...Politically I am now, how should I put this, I don't believe in politics. Politicians are driven by their own interests, all of them. There are no honest politicians. They all hide things. They all have secrets, they all do. I think they all tell lies and manipulate ...Who is going to listen to this?[23]

This is Carlos speaking in 2005, when two Cubans interviewed him in a rural town. 'Small town, big hell', [*pueblo chico, infierno grande*] he joked bitterly. The moment Carlos confessed that he had fallen out of love with the Revolution he became very uneasy. 'Who is going to listen to this'? He had asked the same question at the start of the interview but this was the moment of truth. Yet just a few minutes later, when the interviewers drew the session to a close so they could catch the bus back to Havana, Carlos urged them to return soon. He longed to tell them more.

> So when are you going to come again? I like talking about these things. I don't think I've ever spoken to anyone about them. I think it's the first time that I am talking about my life, and with such freedom, because, because, [long pause] it's anonymous.[24]

Carlos spoke so openly because he discovered that divulging his secret life was cathartic. Over the course of two long interviews Carlos broke many taboos. Under cover of a pseudonym he poured out his heart, and his subversive views. Talking out loud gave Carlos a sense of release, freedom was the word he used, and he wanted to feel the rush of release again, and again, and again. Others told us that delving into their past was exhilarating, liberating and disturbing.[25] Several used the word catharsis to describe the feeling.

There is ample evidence that in the Soviet Union, the German Democratic Republic, North Korea and other highly repressive societies, fear reins in the cathartic impulse. Not in Cuba where, by the early twenty-first century, fear, such as it was, had greatly diminished. Catharsis impelled Cubans to talk openly about their lives.

Subversive memories of egalitarianism

In the first decade of the twenty-first century one way to defy authority was to extol egalitarianism and deplore inequality. In telling their life story the vast majority of narrators did just this. Cubans' elegies to egalitarianism, the founding principle of the Revolution, represented a perverse and potentially dangerous form of opposition. It demonstrated rejection of the government's economic policy.

For more than three decades the Cuban Revolution successfully promoted class equality. From the late 1960s to the late 1980s, Cuban society was more equal than almost any other in the world according to many measures: wage and income differentials, distribution of food, clothing, transport, education, health care and household goods. By the 1980s class differences were minimal. All that began to change in the 1990s as the government introduced measures that fostered inequality. Over the lifetime of our project Cuban society grew progressively, or regressively, more unequal.[26] Almost all of the narrators, regardless of age, social position or political views, spoke disapprovingly about the change.

A recurring theme in the life stories is that egalitarianism was a source of pleasure and rising inequality a source of pain. Cubans across the board related happy memories of living in an egalitarian milieu. They expressed the contentment that came with having the same food, clothes, treats, even deprivations as almost everyone else. They also talked about the injustices, sense of exclusion, even the shame they felt as some neighbours flaunted their wealth while others descended into poverty. Many Cubans very deliberately, I felt, contrasted one set of memories against the other. In this fashion they wove into their life stories a criticism of the leadership. At a time when the government was explicitly calling for an end to egalitarianism, life stories extolling equality were subversive narratives.[27]

Estéban: a dissident

A young British woman interviewed Estéban at his home in a far-flung Havana suburb. Estéban's income derived from selling assorted merchandise – clothes, jewellery, tools, auto parts – on the black market. Twice he had tried to flee. Warned by the police that if he did not get a state job he would be charged with vagrancy and sent to jail, Estéban found work in a factory assembling Chinese TVs. Shortly before the interview he had been fired, not for incompetence, but for insubordination, he boasted.

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Lucía, Matanzas.

Lidia Limonta Mineto (left) and her friend Eva, both retired seamstresses who live in Barrio Maceo, Santiago de Cuba.

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Estéban said outright that he opposed the government. Many of his relatives lived in Miami and they never so much as sent him a letter, much less money, he complained. Estéban insisted that he wasn't appealing for sympathy: 'It's not my tragedy, it's the national tragedy. Cuba is a country in mourning, a nation traumatized by separation'.[28]

Estéban portrayed himself as the voice of a generation. Naming a legion of absent friends, he remarked bitterly:

> They bit the apple of oblivion. They have forgotten all about us, about our friendship, our good times together. They have forgotten all about me...Here we spend a lot of time thinking about friends who left. Now all we have are memories; that is our destiny. Our lives here are empty. Everyone is gone. I am suffocating here. I need to breathe a different air. I need a change of scene. Let me tell you, migration is a highly contagious disease. Many Cubans are constantly plotting ways to leave. It drives them crazy. It gets so extreme they can't function.

Estéban vividly recounted his participation in a raucous anti-government demonstration. He talked about a dissident organisation he had been involved with, whose leaders had been imprisoned. After repeating several times that he is lucky to have avoided prison, he said:

> But now my years of political activism are over. I've lost some of my fervour to speak the truth. I realised that it didn't solve anything. I've lost hope that people here will decide to take a stand against this, attempt to change this. To tell the truth, I've lost my idealism. I'm more realistic. Now I prefer to find another way to transform my life: a personal solution. I decided not to dedicate so much time to playing a big role in history, to being someone who makes history. Naw, that's not for me anymore.

This sounds like more bravado. In any event, Estéban's account of life in Cuba is not what one might expect from a communist dissident. Alongside stories about trying to flee, anti-government demonstrations, the loneliness of being left behind, Estéban fondly remembered growing up without fancy clothes but with something far more important: social equality.

> When I was an adolescent Cubans had enough money. Of course, we received lots of aid from the socialist countries. But life wasn't a great hassle. We had none of the brand labels that now you can buy here if you have the money: no Adidas, no Nikes. Then came Perestroika, the influence of the capitalist world and its values. That destroyed young people psychologically. My generation, we lived through all of that. Now young Cubans are caught in the middle of two political systems, between the capitalist system and the socialist system. My generation, we're paying the consequences. You'd better believe it. But we know that the capitalist world is a monster. We know that it is crude, very crude.

After this broadside against capitalism, Estéban went on to deplore rising class and race inequality.

> To top it all off, what with recent social changes, now some people have more money than others. Yes that's what's happening. The blacks that we see around us, they are the poor. They are the people who have less money, and now they are being pushed aside by people who have a little bit more. Are you following me? I don't know if you've noticed, but already you can see that people who have more money look down on you. I mean those people who have a car or who live a little bit better than you do, they look down their noses at you. You can already see and feel it happening. It's amazing, but that's what's going on around here. That's what life is like now in Cuba. Can you imagine!

Estéban described himself as *mulato*, meaning brown-skinned or mixed race. Pointing out that the people being pushed aside are black, he linked class inequality with racial discrimination. Estéban condemned the racism he said was mirrored in the racial composition of the leadership and in his everyday life. He got particularly annoyed when his white friend, sitting in on the interview, told him that he was exaggerating the extent of racism in Cuba.[29]

Barbara: party militant-to-be

As Barbara began to tell her life story her tone was courteous but decidedly distant. 'I'm from a black, working-class background. My family was very humble but very respectable. Everybody did whatever they could for the common good'.[30] Recalling her childhood in the 1970s as the best time of her life, Barbara had happy memories of neighbourhood solidarity, voluntary work brigades and youth camps.

> I had a very happy childhood. I took advantage of everything the Revolution gave us, like the camps for the Pioneers [the official children's organisation]. At that time we were still in the socialist bloc, and we enjoyed all kinds of things that Cuban children don't have today because of all the problems this country has endured... Back

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> then we had lots of fun. We enjoyed all of the outings organized for the Pioneers. As a young girl I participated in everything, especially in local activities. I was active in all of the campaigns to tidy up our neighbourhood. I did every kind of volunteer work. Yes, I had a very good childhood.

Reminiscing about her youth, Barbara remarked that she used to take for granted that everyone had pretty much the same food, clothing and furniture. It was comforting to know that whenever there were shortages all of her friends were in the same boat.

As Barbara talked, her reserve and caution wore off. She confided that in the last couple of years her life has been terribly difficult. She confessed that she feels desperately lonely and unable to cope with the demands of her job, her son, her housework, political work – which she would like to do, but simply does not have time for it. 'There isn't anyone I can turn to for help. No, at this moment everyone is preoccupied with their own problems...I feel like, like I'm drowning'. Barbara stopped in mid-sentence. She seemed stunned that her control slipped, that she broke down, that she was talking about her loneliness and despair to strangers. Barbara was silent for what felt like a long time. Then she said:

> Well then, you two might know that at this very moment the [Communist] Party is considering my application for membership. They are visiting every place I ever worked, asking all kinds of questions. So, uumm: now I am finished. I told you the story of my life. It isn't a long story. It hasn't been an unhappy life, but neither has it been full of great events.

Barbara probably feared that the interview was part of the Party's process of vetting applicants, and she had already complained too much. Paradoxically, instead of ending the interview and politely shooing out the two women with the tiny new-fangled recorder, she continued talking and more openly than before. Talking about her problems to sympathetic listeners was cathartic. Barbara's voice grew louder, her tone bolder.

> In this little slice of life here in Regla, most people's standard of living has risen year by year because they have family abroad. A lot of young men from Regla left the country. To tell the truth, come to think of it I might just as well tell the truth because everyone knows about it anyway. People in this neighbourhood don't support the Revolution. You won't find a Party militant here. What I mean is, if you need a Party member to do this or that, you'd consider yourself lucky if you came across two, or at the most three, in this entire neighbourhood. This barrio just isn't like that. That explains why so many people from Regla left in 1994. Now they help their relatives by sending money back and the quality of life of those families has gradually improved. Today those people have nice cars, new video players, large colour TVs, fancy clothes, the whole lot.

Barbara stopped pretending that her life was okay, that the Revolution was on course. Barbara decided to tell the truth. At this moment the truth that was important to her was that neighbours who opposed the Revolution had 'the whole lot', while she who supported the Revolution and worked long hours in a government office had very little. Barbara complained that her only luxury, if you could call it that, was a small fan she managed to buy on her tiny salary by scrimping.

Barbara did not come right out with it, the way Estéban did, but her meaning was clear. She deeply resented rising inequality. Continuing in the spirit of truth-telling, Barbara described her family's longstanding battle with the authorities. Going back to her grandmother's day they had been petitioning the government for assistance so they could repair their house.

> This house is on the verge of falling down. That's my biggest problem. We have been trying to resolve this situation for a very long time. My grandmother, when she was alive, then my mother, until her death, now I've taken over. We've gone to the Housing Ministry over and over again asking why our house isn't covered by the Housing Law. One time they explained to my mother that we would be entitled to benefits, but only if the house is officially registered as fit for habitation. Imagine that: it would have to be in a habitable state before we would be entitled to receive, before they could give us construction materials to repair the property. It has to be fit for habitation, that's the pre- requisite for making it habitable. Otherwise, they won't give us materials to repair. Let's just say it's, it's...

Barbara couldn't find the right word to describe the perversity of the law. One of the interviewers suggested, 'It's a contradiction. You mean to say it's a contradiction'. 'Yes', Barbara repeated, 'It's a, what's that word you used, contradiction? It's a contradiction, or something like that'.

Cuban exceptionalism

Notwithstanding the orthodoxy that oral history in communist countries is fatally flawed, again

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and again over the course of the Revolution Cubans revealed some of their innermost feelings to interviewers. First during the Lewis project in the late 1960s. Next when García Márquez criss-crossed the island in the middle 1970s. Lastly in our project in the early twenty-first century. These three endeavours demonstrate one aspect of Cuban exceptionalism: Cubans did not fear, or not very much, that talking about their lives would result in reprisals. Another aspect of Cuban exceptionalism is that Cubans' life stories emphasise the pleasures, as well as the aggravations, of living in a communist society. I pay scant attention here to narratives of pleasure for the simple reason that my aim is to demonstrate that Cubans, in contrast to their counterparts in other communist societies, openly criticised the state and society.[31]

Cubans' willingness to air grievances raises the question of whether the fear factor might have been overstated, the flattening effect overdone, in some oral history research about communist countries. While I think that Cuba is an exceptional case in so far as social control was achieved with relatively little heavy handedness, I suggest it would be useful to revisit oral history research about and wherever possible within communist countries. I am not calling for a wholesale revision of the oral history literature about life under communism, nor do I mean to minimize the ways that fear shaped everyday life in the Soviet Union, the GDR, North Korea, and the like. My purpose is to restore fear and the flattening effect to the research agenda; to explore the ways that narrators' memories and oral historians' interpretations did and did not flatten out historical narratives.

Perhaps a useful way for the community of oral historians to commemorate the twenty-fifth anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall would be to revisit studies of life behind the various iron curtains. Comparative analysis might reveal whether, where, and how, memory and oral history contributed to ironing out historical narratives, or the reverse. Through a re-examination of the oral history literature we might develop a more textured analysis of memory and by extension of life under communism.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Cuban Voices project was carried out via a partnership between the University of Southampton, UK, where I am Professor Emeritus of Latin American Studies, and the Centro Nacional de Educación Sexual, in Havana, where Mariela Castro Espín is Director. The Ford Foundation and the Swedish International Development Agency (Sida) provided major funding for the project. I received grants from the British Academy, The Leverhulme Trust, and the Arts and Humanities Research Council to facilitate this research. The project team comprised Cuban and British-based scholars who conducted in-depth life history interviews. Paul Thompson and Elizabeth Jelin advised the research team. I am deeply grateful to everyone who participated in the project, and to Cristina Eguizábal, then at the Ford Foundation in Mexico. I thank Ana Vera Estrada, Susan Rigdon, John Weeks and the editors of *Oral History* for their comments on an earlier draft.

NOTES

1. For recent examples see, among others, Anna Funder, *Stasiland: True Stories from Behind the Berlin Wall*, London: Granta Books, 2003; and Orlando Figes, *The Whisperers: Private Life in Stalin's Russia*, London: Penguin Books, 2008.
2. Daniel Bertaux, Anna Rotkirch, Paul Thompson (eds), *On Living Through Soviet Russia*, London and New York: Routledge, 2004; Luisa Passerini (ed), *Memory and Totalitarianism*, New Brunswick New Jersey and London: Transaction Publishers, 2005, first published, Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1992.
3. Passerini, 2005, p 10.
4. Memory and oral history are inter-related but not the same thing. Put simply, oral history is a methodology to gather evidence about how individuals and social groups remember the past and understand the present. The flattening effect can derive from what narrators say and do not say, and/or it can derive from how oral historians hear and interpret, or are deaf to, what people tell them.
5. Barbara Demick, *Nothing to Envy: Real Lives in North Korea*, London: Granta Books, 2010; Figes, 2008; Funder, 2003.
6. Marianne Liljestrom, 'Success stories from the margins: Soviet women's autobiographical sketches from the late Soviet Period', in Bertaux, Thompson, and Rotkirch, 2004, pp 235-251.
7. Donald J Raleigh, *Soviet Baby Boomers: An Oral History of Russia's Cold War Generation*, Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2012, p 15. See also, Alexander Freund, 'Interview with Miroslav Vanêk, Guadalajara, Mexico, 26 September 2008', *Oral History Forum d'histoire orale* 28 (2008); and Dagmar Herzog, *Sex After Fascism: Memory and Morality in Twentieth-Century Germany*, Princeton New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2005, pp 216-19.
8. Ruth M Lewis, 'Forward', in Oscar Lewis, Ruth M. Lewis, and Susan M. Rigdon, *Four Men, Living the Revolution: An Oral History of Contemporary Cuba*, Urbana and Chicago Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1977, pp viii-xi. The three other books based on the project are, Lewis, Lewis, and Rigdon, *Four Women; Neighbors*; and Douglas S Butterworth, *The People of Buena Ventura: Relocation of Slum Dwellers in Postrevolutionary Cuba*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1980.
9. Lewis, 'Forward', in Lewis, Lewis and Rigdon, *Four Men*, 1977, p xxviii.
10. Gerald Martin, talk at University of Southampton, 26 April, 2010. See his book *Gabriel García Márquez: A Life*, London and New York: Bloomsbury and Alfred A Knopf, 2009; and Jon Lee Anderson, 'The Power of Gabriel García Márquez', *The New Yorker*, 27 September 1999, pp 56-71.
11. Ana Vera Estrada, Sub Director of the Instituto de Estudios Culturales Juan Marinello in Havana, is completing a book based on oral history interviews in the Cuban countryside, 'Guajiros del Siglo XXI'. Eugenia Meyer interviewed eight women in 1979. See her book *El futuro era nuestro: Ocho cubanas narran sus historias de vida*, México D.F.: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2007. Other books in the testimonial/oral history genre include: María de los Reyes Castillo Bueno, *Reyita: The Life of a Black*

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Cuban Woman in the Twentieth Century, as told to her Daughter Daisy Rubiera Castillo, Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2000; Yohanka Valdés Jiménez and Yuliet Cruz Martínez, *50 voces y rostros de líderes campesinas cubanas*, La Habana: Editorial Caminos, 2009; Margaret Randall, *Cuban Women Now*, Toronto: The Women's Press, 1974; Marjorie Moore and Adrienne Hunter, *Siete mujeres y la revolución cubana*, La Habana: Editorial de Ciencias Sociales, 2003; Julio César González Pajés, *Las hijas de Galicia: Emigración de mujeres gallegas a Cuba*, Vigo, Spain: Ayuntamiento de Vigo, 2003. The Centro Cultural Pablo de la Torriente Brau in Havana publishes books in the testimonial genre. See www.centropablo.cult.cu, accessed 20 November 2011. Ethnographies include Mona Rosendahl, *Inside the Revolution. Everyday Life in Socialist Cuba*, Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1997; Amelia Rosenberg Weinreb, *Cuba in the Shadow of Change: Daily Life in the Twilight of the Revolution*, Tallahassee, Florida: University Press of Florida, 2009; Nadine Fernández, *Revolutionizing Romance: Interracial Couples in Contemporary Cuba*, Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2010; Silje Lundgren, *Heterosexual Havana: Ideals and Hierarchies of Gender and Sexuality in Contemporary Cuba*, Uppsala, Sweden: Uppsala Universitet, 2011; and Henry Louis Taylor Jr, *Inside El Barrio: A Bottom-Up View of Neighborhood Life in Castro's Cuba*, Sterling, Virginia: Kumarian Press, 2009.

12. See the project website, www.soton.ac.uk/cuban-oral-history, accessed 23 November 2011, for video clips of the inaugural ceremony, including speeches by Mariela Castro Espín and Paul Thompson.

13. For books based on the Cuban Voices project see Carrie Hamilton, *Sexual Revolutions in Cuba: Passion, Politics, and Memory*, Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 2012, forthcoming; Daisy Rubiera Castillo, Antonio Moreno Stincer, Mercedes López Ventura and Pedro Jorge Peraza Santos, *Aires de la Memoria*, La Habana: Editorial CENESEX, 2010; Niurka Pérez Rojas, compiladora, *Historia Oral: Debates y análisis sobre temas afrocubanos, religiosos, sexuales y rurales*, La Habana: Editorial CENESEX, 2012, forthcoming; and my own book in progress.

14. Interview in Havana suburb with Olga, born in Santiago, 1948, school teacher; recorded by the author, March 2005.

15. Interview in San Mateo with María, born late 1940s, seamstress; recorded by two British researchers, September 2005.

16. Interview in Havana suburb with Haydée, born 1983, university student; recorded by a British researcher, March 2006.

17. Interviews in Habana Vieja, with Mario, born 1975, communications specialist, state employee; recorded by the author and a Cuban researcher, December 2010.

18. Jan Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History*, Madison Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985, p xii.

19. For racial inequalitites since the 1990s see, Alejandro de la Fuente, 'Race and income inequality in contemporary Cuba', *NACLA Report on the Americas*, vol 44, no 4, 2011, pp 30-33.

20. Interviews in Habana Vieja and Guanabo with Caridad, born 1952, unemployed, recorded by the author and a Cuban researcher in November 2006 and December 2010.

21. Interviews in Havana suburb with Estéban, born 1974, self-employed; recorded by a British researcher, September- October 2005, and March 2006.

22. Interviews with Mario, Caridad, and with Yadira, in Habana Vieja, born 1983, office manager, state employee, recorded by the author and a Cuban researcher, November 2010.

23. Interview with Carlos, in San Mateo, born 1954, security guard, state employee, recorded by two Cuban researchers, March 2005.

24. Interview with Carlos.

25. See my article, 'Cubans' memories of the 1960s: the ecstasies and the agonies', *ReVista: Harvard Review of Latin America*, vol VIII, no 2, Winter 2009, pp 34-37.

26. Mayra Espina Prieto, 'Changes in the economic model and social policies in Cuba', *NACLA Report on the Americas*, vol 44, no 4, 2011, pp 13-15.

27. 'In the economic policy that is proposed, socialism is equality of rights and opportunities for the citizens, not egalitarianism', *Draft Guidelines for Economic and Social Policy*, La Habana, November 2010. Translated by Archibald Ritter, from his paper 'Cuba's Economic Reform Process', presented at the Conference: Cuba Futures, The Graduate Center, CUNY, 31 March 2011.

28. Interview with Estéban.

29. For debates within Cuba on race and racism, see Tomás Fernández Robaina, *Cuba: Personalidades en el Debate Racial*, La Habana: Editorial de Ciencias Sociales, 2007, and Pedro Pérez Sarduy and Jean Stubbs (eds), *Afro-Cuban Voices: On Race and Identity in Contemporary Cuba*, Gainsville Florida: University Press of Florida, 2000.

30. Interview with Barbara, in Regla, born 1971, office manager, state employee, recorded by two Cuban researchers, April 2005.

31. The book I am writing, tentatively entitled 'Cuba: Lives in the Revolution', explores narratives about the pleasures and miseries of life in communist Cuba.

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