

THE ROLE OF FAKE NEWS IN THE GENESIS OF THE CUBAN REVOLUTION: A COMPARISON OF CUBA, FLORIDA AND FRANCE AROUND 1950

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“In 1954, only 8 percent of French households had a refrigerator or a washing machine.” Jeremy D. Popkin, *A History of Modern France*, 2nd Edition. NJ: Prentice Hall, 2001, p. 255.

We think of “fake news” as an answer to a question that has a more accurate response, and the answer is dispersed widely. The concept arose during the 2016 US presidential election. The question was “Can Mr. Trump win the election?” The fake news response was “no, because there is no conceivable way that he can reach 170 electoral college votes.” This response was constantly repeated by TV commentators prior to Mr. Trump’s victory. Its importance was that it could have influenced the election, since people do not like to be on the losing side of political campaigns.

Most Cubans in exile wonder why Fidel Castro was able to place Cuba under an autocratic regime after the success of the 1950s revolution. One simple answer is that he lied about his political goals and once he achieved power it was too late to change the course of history. But Castro revealed his goals soon after taking power (and even demonstrated his willingness to use violence to achieve those goals) and yet retained widespread support among Cubans in the early 1960s. Why, then, did the vast majority of the population support Fidel Castro in the 1960s and some decades later?

The argument is often made that, for a period of 30 years (from about 1928 to 1958), Cuba experienced disastrous political events and the population was ready for policies that curbed those experiences. It seemed to be the case that political scandals overwhelmed economic progress. Machado had been a successful president in the economic sphere during his first three years in office, but used violence to eliminate anarchists and communists. Batista was equally successful when freely elected president in 1940, but the people could not forgive his political transgressions during the 1930s. Grau and Prio governed for eight years during prosperous times, but Grau did not control the extensive graft of his own ministers, and Prio did not abide by the recommendations of his generally honest cabinet. Batista was not the progressive revolutionary that he pretended to be (obtaining the support of the communist party in his 1940 campaign and during his presidential term) and became a dictator in 1952. The overthrow of Batista did not lead to elections after 1959. Democracy in Cuba had failed miserably for 30 years and the people were ready for revolutionary change.

That is the story that most Cubans, whether in Cuba or in exile, tell themselves in response to the question “Why did Castro gain the support of the Cuban people?” But these historical explanations are accepted

1. This is a condensed version of the original paper; to obtain a full version, contact nsanchez@holycross.edu. The authors thank M. Strauss and R. Stusser for their comments.

by people who have been disoriented by fake news, including fake historical interpretations on a grand scale. Fake news had an overwhelming influence over the political events leading up to the 1960s. For that reason, we refuse to repeat the standard attacks on the “failed” regimes from 1928 to 1958. Our basic argument is going to be that fake news misled the Cuban people into holding beliefs that were contrary to their own interests, and ultimately created the environment in which the autocratic regime of the Castro brothers could thrive.

People who lived through the events mentioned above were often misled by their experiences, and for that reason we challenge from the get-go the readers’ most basic perceptions by means of an example. “Seeing” is not sufficient for “believing.” The color brown is not a natural color, and that is easy to prove. Has the reader ever seen the color brown in the rainbow? Of course not. The color brown is the result of a combination of natural colors that are seen in the rainbow. The color brown is how our brain interprets a front of light waves of different wavelengths which are absorbed by our eyes. It can be generated by different combinations of light waves! There is no light wave for brown: it is all in our imagination, or in other words, it is an optical illusion. We also know that the color white results from the combination of all natural and visible light waves. Neither is purple a natural color, yet we see it in the rainbow. Why is this important?

Most of the concepts that we use in the social sciences are not concepts based on natural components (like the wavelength of light), but rather on the workings of our imagination. (And let us not forget that some wavelengths are unobservable directly by humans, yet they exist.²) For instance, most of us believe that there are income disparities everywhere,

but should that idea be measured by the Gini coefficient or by anthropometric measures, in order to gain a better understanding of those disparities? In Cuba there are significant disparities in the heights and weights of people in the various provinces. Also, it is known that the Cuban *urban* male population is now significantly lower in height than the combined *urban-rural* male populations of Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Mexico, and the Hispanic and/or the Mexican-American populations in the US.³ Cuban disparities in wellbeing therefore exist, even if the income concept is difficult to define. As this analysis proceeds, we shall concentrate on several concepts which were highly relevant in creating Cubans’ opinions about the society in which they lived: latifundia, income and inequality, rural housing quality, and political democracy. The point we stress is that for these concepts to be meaningful (whether consisting of natural measures or generated on theoretical grounds) they must be contrasted with the situations existing elsewhere. Cubans failed to do that.

LATIFUNDIA

Latifundia (a plural noun) is defined as large landed estates in the ancient world under Roman control; most of these estates produced export goods, but at some moment in history a number of them became self-sufficient. The *haciendas* of Latin America were large self-sufficient latifundia, but the *latifundios* of Cuba were geared towards the export of commodities, especially sugar. There was widespread criticism in Cuba (even before the 1940 Constitution) of such estates; and the political class, regardless of persuasion, was especially critical of them, yet did not try to eliminate these estates when its members’ turn to power came and went. The one exception was the Fidel Castro regime of 1959 and beyond.

2. Hence, some of our social science concepts may involve characteristics that we are unable to observe directly. Such may be the case for “intelligence,” which has recently been tied to genes in the genome.

3. This information is available in the article “List of average human height worldwide.” See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_average_human_height_worldwide, consulted on April 28, 2018. The information about Cuba can be accessed under footnote 43 in that same article.

It is worthwhile quoting a review of two books⁴ that appeared in 1950, and which were representative of the prevailing view of agricultural problems in Cuba: “Both authors credit the poverty of the great majority of Cuba’s rural population in the first instance to the sugar industry, which has made the country a land of latifundia in which the small owner or operator is limited to a small percentage of the cultivated land; secondly, to the insecurity of an economy geared to a single crop; and finally, to the foreign dominance of the sugar estates.”⁵ Article 90 of the 1940 Cuban Constitution prescribed *latifundios*, and to bring about their disappearance it stated that a law would be approved by a future Congress. Also, the future law would restrict the acquisition and possession of land by foreigners and foreign companies.⁶ The Constitution was ratified (by a freely elected assembly) under the Batista puppet regime of Federico Laredo Bru, and was approved by political leaders (male and female) of all persuasions.⁷ The people of Cuba, in 1940, truly believed that latifundia was a problem and that foreign (read American) companies needed to be restrained, but politicians never dared to implement size restrictions on farms or take on American interests.

What did the statistics say? According to Antonio Gayoso, who had access to the 1946 *Cuban Agricultural Census*, there were 159,958 agricultural farms in Cuba covering an area of 9,077,155 hectares. Almost 3% of the farms (precisely 2.8%), with more than 402.6 hectares in size [the equivalent of almost 995 acres], covered 57% of the total farmland; at the oth-

er extreme, 89% of the farms, with less than 67.1 hectares each, covered only 24% of the farmland. The mid-size farms covered about 8% (8.2%) of the total farmland. He also noted that fewer than a third of land operators were farm owners.⁸ The data presented by Gayoso is similar, but not identical, to that in Nelson’s *Rural Cuba* (see footnote 4); we mention this fact because the work by Nelson was sponsored by President Grau, was well known in Cuba, and will be used in this paper.⁹ In subsequent discussions, it will be convenient to adopt the rule that if about 3% of the larger farms cover 60% or more of the farmland, latifundia exists in a country, state or region.

The implicit basis for criticizing latifundia was that they could result in huge income differentials in the rural sector, which needed to be remedied by legislation. But was (or is) this true, or even significant, in the economic life of a country? Possibly not. We proceed with three arguments below, labeled **A**, **B** and **C**, conveying different reasons for our doubts:

A. The numbers above are not enough to evaluate the consequences of latifundia, at least when we consider other numbers presented by Nelson in Tables 19 and 20 of his book. There were about 4,500 farms that qualified as “latifundia;” yet when we look at wage workers in all farms, we discovered that 96,630 were employed by owners; 76,561 were employed by managers; 176,653 were employed by “cash renters;” 15,873 were employed by subrenters; 49,076 were employed by sharecroppers; 3,644 were employed by squatters; and 5,253 were employed by “others.”¹⁰ Why does this matter? It is strange indeed that even

4. These were *Rural Cuba*, by Lowry Nelson (The University of Minnesota Press, 1950) and *Geografía de Cuba*, by Leví Marrero (Talleres Tipográficos Alfa, 1950).

5. Review by R. R. P., *Geographical Review*, Vol. 42, No. 1 (January 1952), pp. 171–172.

6. Art. 90- Se proscriben el latifundio y a los efectos de su desaparición, la Ley señalará el máximo de extensión de la propiedad que cada persona o entidad pueda poseer para cada tipo de explotación a que la tierra se dedique y tomando en cuenta las respectivas peculiaridades. La Ley limitará restrictivamente la adquisición y posesión de la tierra por personas y compañías extranjeras, y adoptará medidas que tiendan a revertir la tierra al cubano.

7. The Constitution can be read here: <http://pdba.georgetown.edu/Constitutions/Cuba/cuba1940.html>.

8. Antonio Gayoso, “Land Reform in Cuba,” Country Papers (V.7). Agency for International Development (June, 1970). It can be read here: https://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PNAAD947.pdf.

9. Professor Nelson was using the preliminary release of the 1946 Census, and his research and publication were contemporaneous with the political events that were taking place in the island.

10. Nelson, *Rural Cuba*, *op. cit.*, Table 20.

sharecroppers and squatters were hiring labor! There were 48,792 owners (but only 4,500 latifundia) demonstrating widespread ownership of farms. The so-called cash renters added up to 46,048, who in turn were hiring 176,653 wage employees. The sub-renters (at 6,987) were employing over twice that number of wage laborers. If conditions were dire in the agricultural sector, how come hiring other workers was so widespread? The huge demand for rural wage labor would suggest reduced income differentials, as would the presence of large numbers of owners, managers, and even “cash renters.” Nelson mentioned in his book that when the sugar mills bought farmers’ lands in the early century (as a result of dramatic changes in technology), they turned around and rented them back to the farmers, creating the modern version of the farmers known as “colonos.”¹¹ But Nelson also argued in his book that there were only two social classes in Cuba, and in the “upper class” he counted the colonos in all subsections of that class, which also included small landowners.¹² The colonos counted in the thousands, and had one of the most powerful political associations in the country; they also made up the bulk of the “cash renters.” Income disparities were not derived from latifundia alone!

B. We now turn to the relevance of latifundia. One who takes seriously the comparative nature of the scientific method would immediately raise the question: What was happening elsewhere? Looking and reporting on one country is not enough. Even Nelson noted in his book that in Haiti there was no land concentration problem, and yet the Haitians were migrating to Cuba in large numbers. While it is our intention to compare rural Cuba to rural Florida and

rural France, we will skip France this time (with a different type of agriculture¹³) and compare rural Cuba with two farming areas in the US, both sugar producers: Hawaii and Florida.¹⁴

We initially present two data points for Hawaii, covering 1940 and 1950. The census of 1940 showed that if we concentrate on farms larger than 500 hectares, making up 2.7% of all farms, they held 96.5% of the total farmland. If the number is not shocking to the reader, it can be expressed differently: the smaller farms (holding 500 hectares or less), which made up 97.3% of all farms, held only 3.5% of the total farmland. If latifundia was a “problem” in Cuba, the situation in Hawaii was far more extreme. The census of 1950 was similar, although the available data had farms larger than 250 hectares only; these farms made up 3.2% of the total farms and held 96.6% of the total farmland. If latifundia gave rise to a revolution in Cuba, it must have created a bloody revolt in Hawaii—which it did not.

We now turn to Florida, where the data is equally ample as a result of the US Agricultural Census. In 1945, 3.9% of the farms (with 500 hectares or more) held 71.7% of all the farmland; in 1950, 5.7% of the farms (with 500 hectares or more) held 76.9% of all the farmland. While the 1945 data are comparable to the Cuban data and demonstrate an even greater presence of latifundia in Florida, the data for 1950 are more difficult to interpret, since they double the percentage of farms in the upper extreme of the distribution. Yet the data show the widespread existence of latifundia, with the larger farms controlling almost 77% of the Florida farmland. The broad conclusion to be drawn is that if latifundia was an economic or

11. Colonos existed in the sugar industry long before the mentioned technological change, but they played then a different role in the sugar industry. Due to the Cuban wars of independence, major technological changes were introduced relatively late in Cuba (in the early part of the XX Century) and the story told by Nelson is basically correct. A far more complex story is told by Alan Dye in his excellent book *Cuban Sugar in the Age of Mass Production; Technology and the Economics of the Sugar Central, 1899–1929*. Stanford University Press, 1998.

12. Nelson, *Rural Cuba*, *op. cit.*, p. 160.

13. However, was there latifundia in the French wine country? A different definition would be required.

14. The data for Hawaii comes from the *Statistical Abstract of the United States*, 1955 and can be found here: <https://www2.census.gov/library/publications/1955/compendia/statab/76ed/1955-08.pdf>; the data for Florida comes from the 1954 *USDA Agricultural Census*, which can be found here: <http://usda.mannlib.cornell.edu/usda/AgCensusImages/1954/01/29/979/Table-02.pdf>.

even a social problem for Cuba, somehow it did not impact the political life of Hawaii and Florida.

C. Given that latifundia in Cuba arose as the natural response to technological change, as explained by Nelson,¹⁵ we can now raise a more important question: Did technological trends favor the establishment of smaller farms in Cuba (and elsewhere)? The answer is a resounding no, not only for environments similar to Cuba in Hawaii and Florida, but throughout the United States. Let us look at Hawaii and Florida in 2012.¹⁶ The most recent and available agricultural census demonstrates that large farms in Hawaii (of 500 acres or more), comprising 2.27% of the farms, controlled 86.9% of the farmland. In Florida, large farms (of 500 acres or more), comprising 5.4% of the farms, controlled 72.3% of the farmland. Latifundia is alive and well in both states. Hence it is time to draw one conclusion and introduce (on theoretical grounds) a hypothesis that would explain what took place in Cuba. The hatred of latifundia was embedded in the minds of both the intellectual and political classes, which served Fidel Castro well when he enacted the Agrarian Reform of 1959. This conclusion is supported both by Article 90 of the 1940 Constitution and the widespread support that this Constitution still retains among Cubans. But we can now assert that almost all Cubans betted on fake information because latifundia was not a unique Cuban phenomenon nor was it a restraint to economic growth. What saved the viability of the Cuban economy over many years was that political payoffs prevented the elimination of latifundia! For it was a system of payoffs (as corruption was then exercised) that prevented the early Batista, Grau, Prio and the later Batista regimes from implementing laws that would have destroyed the Cuban sugar sector.

Fidel Castro was different because he believed (like most intellectuals) the fake news that latifundia was a problem for the Cuban economy, and he could not be bribed. His policies toward sugar, and agriculture in general, were a fiasco in the long-run.¹⁷

INCOME AND INEQUALITY

There is no doubt that one can find income inequality everywhere, including in Republican Cuba and in post-revolutionary Cuba.¹⁸ Claes Brundenius argued in 1984 that the top ten percent of income earners in Cuba received 38.8% of the income in 1953, but this percentage fell to 19.4% in 1973 and 18.1% in 1978. The Gini coefficients also fell dramatically from 0.55 to 0.28 and 0.27 respectively.¹⁹ Although these data have been challenged, we will take them as correct but not likely meaningful, for several reasons. First and foremost is that the population for which the measurement is taken is obviously quite different—since over one million people had left the island and gone abroad by the time that the later measurements were made. Why is this important? Let us suppose that an income dispersion measure had been taken for the Ukraine in 1928, yielding a high Gini coefficient. Then in 1930 and 1931, over two million wealthy families and their relatives (known as the kulaks) were deported to labor camps in Siberia and Central Asia. If this were followed by the calculation of another income dispersion measure in 1938, one would observe a drop in the Gini coefficient for those left in the country. Does it make sense to ignore the change in the size and structure of the population under consideration? Or even worse, ignore how greater income equality was achieved? We suggest that any and all income dispersion measures for Cubans born in Cuba prior to the revolution, and alive during the 1960–1990 period, are seriously dis-

15. See Chapter V, “The Evolution of the Cuban Land System,” in Nelson, *Rural Cuba, op. cit.*

16. The information can be found here: https://www.agcensus.usda.gov/Publications/2012/Full_Report/Volume_1,_Chapter_2_US_State_Level/st99_2_008_008.pdf.

17. This can be observed in Table 8 (Sugar Industry Performance, 1951–1987) of the book by Jorge Pérez-López, *The Economics of Cuban Sugar*. University of Pittsburgh Press, 1991. The reader should pay attention to the industrial yields.

18. For reasons to be argued later, the best names should be the First and the Second Cuban Republics.

19. Quoted in Ruben Berrios, “Comparative Development Outcomes: Cuba and Costa Rica (1960–1990).” *Social and Economic Studies*, No. 2 (June 2003), p. 116.

torted; but not so in the way that it would have been distorted for the Ukraine, where the productivity of the kulaks was destroyed by their relocation. In the Cuban case, where a larger percentage of the (wealthier) population left Cuba than left the Ukraine as kulaks, the expatriates' productivity and earnings *rose* over the long term because they moved mainly to the United States! Hence, the Gini coefficient for the Cuban *population* likely increased rather than decreased during the regime's first 30 years in power. Besides, national comparisons are in order.

No one has done a more detailed analysis of income inequality in France over the XX Century than Thomas Piketty in his recent 2018 book.²⁰ We have used this source because of the meticulous treatment of the data and because French intellectual and political history has always been influential among the intellectual and political classes in Cuba. While there is no doubt that France had better data about incomes than Cuba, what is important to consider is how researchers would have reacted if they had bothered to compare the Cuban and the French data. Let us recall that, following Brundenius, 38.8% of the total income in Cuba was going to the top decile of income earners, for the year 1953. It turns out that in France, between 1922 and 1938, the percentage of income going to the top deciles exceeded what was happening in Cuba in 1953, reaching such high values as 45.5% in 1934, 46.0% in 1935 and 43.3% in 1936. Inequality then decreased dramatically during the Second World War, from 38.4% in 1940 and going down to 28.7% in 1945. It then began climbing to 31.5% in 1953.²¹ Is the difference between 31.5% for France and 38.8% for Cuba truly significant? How was greater equality in France achieved?

One simple factor can explain the trends in France, which exhibited large decreases in income inequality after both world wars. Wealthier people everywhere have higher incomes because they hold a larger share of the physical and financial capital, and both the

First and the Second World Wars destroyed both types of capital—with the Second World War having a much greater impact than the First. In other words, if Cuba had gone through the Second World War experience of the 1940s, income inequality would have been much lower in Cuba. The point we make, then, is that there is no reason to believe that Cuba and France were any different in terms of income inequality in 1953, once we exclude the impact of the world war. Yet the “problem” of income inequality was an obsession among the Cuban people—while France was held in the highest esteem.

So far, we have avoided any discussion of the income *levels* that people received in Cuba. Before we address this issue, it is important to understand how income is generated. People acquire income through their work, but that income can be enhanced or diminished via voluntary gifts and involuntary transfers (such as taxes and theft). The best way of thinking about income is as a means to the acquisition of resources, goods and services. If those resources are obtained without payments, that is the equivalent of receiving income. For instance, housing expenditures (in most developed countries) amount to 20–25 percent of income earned, and if somehow those expenditures were diminished, it would represent a rise in the income of large sectors of the population—as long as ample housing remained available.²² Fidel Castro understood the issues quite well, and one of the earliest revolutionary changes in Cuba occurred with the 1960 Urban Reform Law, which both led to the confiscation of housing units and the lowering of rents to 50 percent of prior rents. This was a masterful political achievement, since the vast majority of the population benefited, in the short run, and most of the lower rents to be paid which formerly went to the landlords (property owners) now accrued to the government. If politicians had tried to do so in the Republican period, they would have been bought off

20. Thomas Piketty, *Top Incomes in France in the Twentieth Century: Inequality and Redistribution, 1901–1998*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA. 2018.

21. See Piketty, *Top Incomes in France, op. cit.*, pp. 731–32.

22. The increase in income to many would be matched by the decrease in income to a few.

by the owners of rental properties and the income redistribution prevented. Corruption again would have saved Cuba from economic disaster.

In our estimate, the best measures of income levels in Cuba before the revolution have been produced by Marianne Ward and John Devereux.²³ Using the best methodological tools, and collecting the best studies available on Cuba, their Table 4 (p. 115) showed that Cuba in the mid- 1950s had an income per capita that was equal to a bit more than one quarter of that which prevailed in the United States, more than half of that which obtained in Western Europe, and almost double that which existed in Latin America as a whole. Cuba was not a poor country. Excluded from these estimates, and thinking of income as a means of acquiring resources, goods and services, we must remember that Cubans enjoyed good weather for free, beautiful beaches for short travel expenditures, a spectacular night sky in the rural areas, and happy neighbors almost anywhere they lived. What were the values of those goods and services? Two other points need attention. In 1955 there were 1,641 labor unions in Cuba, with a membership of over 1.234 million workers, making up 62% of the active Cuban labor force; the percentage for France was 32.6% in 1950, and it declined over the next 45 years.²⁴ Hence Cuban workers were well represented in the workplace. In the period 1934 to 1938, Cuban consumption levels per capita ranked just below those of France and Argentina, but above those of Japan, Italy, the Union of South Africa, Spain and Brazil.²⁵

RURAL HOUSING QUALITY

Few factors better explain the grounds behind the Cuban revolution than the inequality of housing

conditions between the urban and rural sectors, which were visible to all. In 1953, the Cuban census gave conclusive evidence for this inequality: only 5% of urban dwellings lacked toilet or privy, while 54.1% of rural dwellings lacked those basic facilities; 35% of urban dwellings were without bathroom or shower, while 90.5% of rural dwellings lacked those facilities; 87.0% of urban dwellings had electricity, while 8.1% of rural dwellings had electricity. Regarding construction dates, only 8.1% of urban dwellings were built before 1920, but 36.8% of rural dwellings were built before that date; 46.6% of urban dwellings were built during 1920–1945, while only 35.8% of rural dwellings were built in that period; then, 45.3% of urban dwellings were built between 1945–1953, but only 28.1% of rural dwellings were built during that period. No one, including these authors, can deny the existence of such housing inequality. The Nelson study, previously mentioned, went beyond the census data for 1946 because it had acquired independent surveys for nine rural areas. He was critical, like all scholars, of the conditions of the Cuban *bohíos*, the houses with thatched roofs, but his general findings were even more remarkable, and are worth quoting in full: “In 377 or *about half the houses* [emphasis added] in the areas surveyed, *the floors were earthen*; in 223, cement; 48 were tiles; 81 were lumber; and 13 unspecified.” Yet, there was much variation among the areas surveyed. In San Antonio de las Vegas [near Havana], a dairy section, only 15 percent of the houses had dirt floors, compared with 80 percent in Florencia, a diversified farming area [in the now province of Ciego de Avila].”²⁶ These statistics must be shocking to the readers—unless, of course, they are *compared* to those for France, which are

23. M. Ward and J. Devereux, “Pre-revolutionary Cuba Living Standards,” *Journal of Economic History*, Vol. 22 (March 2012), pp.104–133.

24. Susan Schroeder, *Cuba: A Handbook of Historical Statistics*. G.K Hall publisher, 1982, pp. 210–211; B. Ebbinghaus and J. Visser, “Union Growth and Decline in Western Europe, 1950–1995,” *European Sociological Review*, Vol. 15, No. 2 (June 1999), pp. 146–7.

25. M. K. Bennett, “International Disparities in Consumption Levels,” *The American Economic Review*, Vol. 41, No. 4 (September 1951), p. 635.

26. It is worth pointing out that the town of Florencia came into existence in the 1920s as a result of the construction of a railroad that broke the isolation of the valley. The town had several industrial plants that canned tomatoes for export to the United States, briefly mentioned by Nelson in his study. The town itself was considered quite prosperous; Nelson’s study is for a rural area somewhere near the town.

most likely unknown to current readers and the old Cuban elites of the 1950s. “Madame Donon reported [in March 1946] that recent studies of housing in the department of Ille-et-Vilaines showed that 65% of the farm houses had only one habitable room, 30% had but two, and only 5% three or more. Furthermore, 70% of these rooms had earthen floors, and only 30% floors of concrete, wood or stone. Running water was absolutely unknown on farms and small holdings in the district... Nor was this situation unique. In some of the rural communes of Normandy it was discovered that only one farm in forty five possessed a supply of water fit for drinking and free from contamination.”²⁷ So, rural housing conditions in France right after the war were in fact worse than those in Cuba.

Was the situation any better in urban France? At the end of the war, “eighty-five per cent of dwellings in Paris dated from before 1914, and the figures for the larger towns was no better. Rents had been frozen since 1914 [and hence the lack of new housing could not be attributed to the war] which made private or corporate investment in housing unattractive...By 1953, new constructions were running at only 100,000 annually, whereas the need was for the buildings of at least 300,000 houses a year for twenty years.²⁸ According to Dr. Cicely Watson, “The average age of urban dwellings in 1945 was 57 years and that of rural houses 114 [for cities above 50,000 people across France]...[according to a different report] among the eighteen cities with a population of more than 100,000, Nancy and Clermont-Ferrand have the largest number of building with baths (56%). In France as a whole only some 36.9% of the dwellings have running water in the flat or house (that is, a private tap), 3.8% had it on the floor and 11.5 in the building [these set of numbers excluded Paris, Le Havre, Strasbourg and Nantes]... Similarly, a [1947] housing conference reported that an estimated 42%

of the population of Paris, 45% in Marseille, 55% in Lyons, and 66% in Saint Etienne, lived in insalubrious dwellings.”²⁹ This information was published in English in 1953, well within the time period when the Cuban revolution was gaining followers.

We now turn to an explanation of Cuban housing conditions. First, Cubans in general, but especially rural Cubans, did not have to possess sturdy or sophisticated housing. They did not have to air-condition their homes, or install heating systems for their survival. They did not need hot water to take baths. Sturdy homes could survive hurricanes, but these would have had to be sturdy indeed, and therefore were costly. It is truly surprising to see the small amount that farmers paid for housing—less than 10% of their expenditures in the 1940s. The Nelson study showed³⁰ that for 10 rural communities, only one spent (on average) more than 10% of their income on housing, four spent less than 5% of their income, and two paid “nothing,” which is of course an absurdity. What Nelson confirmed was that rural Cubans were acting in a rational fashion. Other things (like travel?) were more important. Nelson also indicated that two of the rural communities he surveyed were entirely housed by the companies that employed them. This is quite important because the sugar mills had large buildings to house seasonal workers, and small homes to house permanent workers. The buildings were not perfect, of course, but they were sturdy because they were there for the long-run housing of the seasonal employees. The mills subsidized housing for the permanent employees, and these, in the late 1940s and early 1950s, were not living in the *bohíos* that everyone criticized.

We now turn to the largest income transfers (in terms of cheaper goods) that the rural populations received in Cuba, and that the vast majority of people have missed. It was the case that Cuba imported many “luxury goods” from the United States and

27. “La femme et les difficultés de la vie rural,” *Pour la Vie*, January-March 1946, pp. 117–123,124.

28. Frank Giles, *The Locust Years: The Story of the Fourth French Republic, 1946–1958*. New York: Carroll & Graf Publishers, 1991, p. 231.

29. “Housing Policy and Population Problems in France,” *Population Studies*, Vol 7, July 1953, pp 15–16.

30. Nelson, *Rural Cuba, op. cit.*, Table 41,

other countries. Nelson, in fact, mentioned how much rural people in Cuba enjoyed listening to the radio and attending movies (Table 40); he noted that rural families owned musical instruments, radios, and sewing machines (Table 36); he was even surprised that a large number of wage laborers claimed ownership of a windmill (which he said was not owned by them but rather by a company town, and he refused to include the figures in the final tabulation of Table 36!) These radios, movies, musical instruments, sewing machines, etc. would be falling in price and/or improving in quality over time, and hence the farmers' access to resources, goods and services would have been rising by the fact that Cuba was tied to foreign markets. This allowed Cuban rural workers to have access to one of the most important technologies that were developed in the 1800s; namely, the railroads.

The first railroad in France became operational in 1828, linking Saint Etienne and Andrezieux; the first one in Austria was also operational in 1828. Cuba inaugurated its first railroad in 1837, between Havana and Bejucal (a highly productive agricultural area 16 miles away from the capital), and it was extended to Güines the next year, another important agricultural area 31 miles away from Havana.³¹ By the 1940s, all of Cuba was linked by railroads. Two of the companies (FC Consolidados and FC Unidos) carried 4.6 and 4.4 million passengers, respectively, in the fiscal year 1943–1944. This figure was greater than the total population of Cuba at the time. For FC Unidos, its income rose from 6.3 million dollars in 1940 to 18.5 million dollars in 1948; and for FC Consolidados, its income rose from 6.5 million dollars in 1940 to 27.4 million dollars in 1948.³² And these two

companies competed against several other local carriers! Yet the findings reported in *Rural Cuba*, which were so influential in Cuba, did not have even an entry for “railroads” or for “rail transportation” in the index, nor did it include the significant gains in public use, price and/or quality changes.

POLITICAL DEMOCRACY

We entitle this section political democracy to differentiate it from economic democracy, which is the argument that many socialist and communist governments use to justify redistributive policies not widely supported by the populations they rule. We now argue that the evidence is overwhelming that the Cuban population supported the Castro revolution, at least for several decades, because it practiced the social justice and the redistributive policies which people believed in. In other words, if the Castro brothers had engaged in free and fair elections, the Castro brothers would have won most of them in post-revolutionary Cuba; they would have had many problems governing, but they would have won anyway. This follows from three arguments: (1) the freely-elected Batista, Grau and Prio regimes were all redistributive in character, empowering and enhancing the monopolistic powers of the labor unions³³ and imposing income constraints on both small and large businesses; (2) the 1940 Constitution had almost universal approval when adopted and has retained it to the present day, still getting accolades among Cuban exiles; and (3) the Castro regime literally delivered what it promised (greater income equality), which led to the unexpected destruction of the sugar industry *because* it could only be sustained with massive income

31. See Oscar Zanetti and Alejandro García, *Sugar & Railroads, A Cuban History, 1837–1959*. The University of North Carolina Press, 1987.

32. Zanetti and García, *Sugar & Railroads, op. cit.* pp. 350–52. It is interesting, but not surprising, that the authors make reference to pesos at a time when the Cuban currency was equal in value to the dollar.

33. Cuba was one of the most unionized countries in the world, far more than France! See footnote 24.

inequalities—for the payment of new technologies and the elimination of wasteful jobs.³⁴

Yet the so-called Republican period, which we propose to call the First Cuban Republic, was a democracy in three important senses: Elections were held, different interest groups gained temporary power, and when one man or one group refused to yield that power, it was overthrown. The people had the opportunity to govern themselves. The incredible thing was that economic progress lasted for almost sixty years, despite the interventionist and egalitarian proclivities of the Cuban people. Progress was attained because those entrepreneurs and investors who were the engines of economic progress could buy off the politicians, and prevent the full implementation of policies which would have driven the economy into the ground. Widespread corruption saved the First Cuban Republic from economic collapse. The Americans—who had a very different view of economic regulations and returns to investment—played a role in all of that, by both selling advanced technologies to Cuba (the railroads, the modern sugar mills, modern agricultural practices, transnational networks, modern information systems, tourism based on gambling, etc.) and supporting the regimes that could be bought off by the most productive sectors of the economy. This was all over after 1959, when the Castro brothers gained power and became determined to implement what the Cuban people really believed in: redistributive policies.

Elections were history: the time had come to implement what the people wanted. Cubans inaugurated their Second Republic in 1960, which of course has crashed—without their understanding of why it has crashed! While the First Republic failed because of its core internal contradiction—corruption was hated yet necessary to keep economic progress alive—the Second Republic crashed because economic progress was unattainable with policies that prevented income inequalities to continue or to arise. The Castros had

the opportunity to introduce the Chinese model and retain political power, but that required the acceptance of billionaires and income inequalities, and neither the Cuban people nor the political class could accept that change. The recent Cuban emigrants leave the country for economic reason, yet are deeply conflicted, still believing that economic progress (that requires both foreign and domestic capital, and highly specialized labor) and economic equality are compatible.

The difference between France and Cuba at the end of the 1930s was not that the people differed greatly in terms of consumption per capita,³⁵ but that France was still running a colonial empire that covered about 70 million people outside of France, and the Popular Front did nothing to get rid of this empire, which included: French Indochina, French concessions in Shanghai, countries now known as Mauritania, Senegal, Guinea, Mali, the Ivory Coast, Benin, Niger, Chad, the Central African Republic, the Republic of the Congo, Gabon, Togo, Cameroon, the island of Madagascar, Algeria, Morocco, plus mandates over Syria and Lebanon, control over New Caledonia and French Polynesia in the Pacific, and French Guiana in South America. The consumption of the French people in France was just above that of Argentina and Cuba, but the French people were almost as proud of the English for their empire—which controlled five times as many people around the world as the French did. The Cuban government was never oppressive of other countries.

CONCLUSIONS

We began this work by defining fake news as answers to questions which had more accurate responses. To the question, “Why, then, did the vast majority of the population support Fidel Castro in the 1960s?” we have an answer that differs from the historical account given in the introduction; namely, that Fidel Castro began implementing policies of redistribution after the revolution that were widely shared by the

34. Carrying sugar to ships using bags has been for too long an absurd labor practice that has survived only because of the tremendous political power of labor itself. Cuban leaders had even thought of producing the bags that were imported from India—making the practice even more costly!

35. As discussed at the end of the section on “Income and Inequality”; see also footnote 25.

Cuban people and had been enshrined in the 1940 Constitution. The genesis of those beliefs supporting redistributive policies emerged from fake news about the economic and social conditions in Cuba: in fact these were either better (or no worse) than in most other countries or states, particularly in France. After 1959, a good percentage of the population left the island for two valid reasons: their personal income and wealth were diminished (redistributive policies have that effect on some families!) and/or took seriously their beliefs in the right to free speech and free elections. Most of those who stayed behind benefited by the redistributive policies and/or cared faintly, at best, for their own civil rights: especially for freedom of the press and religion.

It is our hope to have demonstrated that many of the issues in Cuba that precipitated the 1950s revolution (such as the pattern of land tenure, income levels and income inequality, the quality of rural housing, and a poorly run democracy that depended on extensive corruption to be successful) were misrepresented in social and political discussions—in the sense that they were not addressed in comparative contexts. We have used France in our comparative analysis because many Cuban cultural idols that were important to

the revolution had lived in France and/or were educated there. Cubans lacked a comparative methodology, even when they had studied the sciences, for these were applied narrowly. We must understand that human experience springs from two very different sources: the *external* world and our *internal* perception and understanding of what is seen. We are slaves to our conceptual frameworks, which we tend to accept erroneously as “obviously” valid. *Latifundia* is just a word which may or may not prove useful; income levels give us a biased assessment of what is a complex phenomenon; income inequality requires strict measures of comparison, especially with foreign countries, which are difficult to make; housing quality can only be evaluated relative to the goals of the people using the housing and the climatic conditions in which they live; corruption can save a society from policies which would cripple it, even when it also imposes other costs on the population; and democracy (defined exclusively in terms of elections) is a mirage of idealistic persons. In our opinion, economic conditions in Cuba will only change for the better when the Cuban people find acceptable the inequalities that arise with free markets.