



**crisis states programme**

development research centre



Working Paper no.64

**SURVIVING THE 'WAKING NIGHTMARE':  
SECURING STABILITY IN THE FACE OF  
CRISIS IN CUBA (1989-2004)**

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June 2005

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**Crisis States Programme**  
**Working papers series no.1**

ISSN 1740-5807 (print)  
ISSN 1740-5815 (on-line)

Development  
**DESTIN**  
Studies Institute



## Crisis States Research Centre

### **Surviving the “Waking Nightmare”: Securing Stability in the Face of Crisis in Cuba (1989-2004)\***

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In the space of a few months, between 1989 and 1990, the East European socialist bloc collapsed, followed shortly by the demise of the Soviet Union. The impact of this was felt immediately and acutely in Cuba, which had become economically dependent upon a relationship with Comecon that had guaranteed its development and stability since the 1960s.<sup>1</sup> The situation was all the more severe given the intensification of the US blockade with the passing of new measures by Washington aimed at finally crushing the revolutionary upstart.<sup>2</sup> The extremity of the position that the island found itself in led Fidel Castro to declare, “we have no security, and we can have no security.... We do not even know if those products that historically and traditionally have come to us will continue to arrive”. Likening the situation to one of war, the President called on Cubans to prepare themselves “for a special period in peacetime”.<sup>3</sup> There can be no doubting the severity of the economic crisis that ensued. By 1993, GDP had fallen by 35 percent, imports had been reduced by 78 percent, the fiscal deficit reached 33.5 percent of GDP, and fuel consumption was cut in half.<sup>4</sup> Yet the response from the Cuban government was a typically defiant one:

They say euphorically that we are going to be left isolated, that we are going to be left alone, that we are going to have great problems, and they are sure that we will not be able to endure. Not only our enemies say this; there are many friends in the world who are ...sincerely worried by this situation, by the problems that may arise for Cuba.... They wonder how we will be able to endure ...Some even express their condolences, some mourn for us while we are still alive, some think that the revolution could collapse here as other political processes have collapsed in recent months. Our enemies, of course, dream day and night, but every day that

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\* Jonathan Curry-Machado is a research officer with the Crisis States Research Centre, LSE. This paper is partly the result of interviews carried out in Havana in the summer of 2004. However, it also draws on my own experience of life in Cuba, resulting from several years living there as an inhabitant of Alamar (East Havana), and ongoing personal contact with many who still live and work there. My thanks to Jean Stubbs, James Putzel, Dennis Rodgers and Laurie Nathan for their helpful comments; and above all to my Cuban friends, who have helped me in my attempt to achieve a balanced analysis that rings true from below.

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, José Luis Rodríguez, ‘Economic Relations between Cuba and Eastern Europe: Present Situation and Possible Developments’, in H. Michael Erisman & John M. Kirk (eds), *Cuban Foreign Policy Confronts a New International Order*, Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 1991, pp.53-62.

<sup>2</sup> In 1992, the Cuban Democracy Act (named the ‘Torricelli Act’, after its sponsor Senator Robert Torricelli) intensified the embargo (United States Code, Title 22, Chapter 69, Sections 6001-6010, at <http://www.treas.gov/offices/enforcement/ofac/legal/statutes/cda.pdf>); this was further extended in 1996 by the Cuban Liberty and Democratic Solidarity Act (LIBERTAD, or Helms -Burton Act), that laid foreign companies open to US lawsuits if they dealt with Cuba, greatly restricted the possibility of travel by US citizens to the island, and limited the amount of food and medicine that could be sent there (<http://thomas.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/z?c104:H.R.927.ENR:>).

<sup>3</sup> Fidel Castro, closing speech to 16th Congress of the Central de Trabajadores de Cuba (CTC), 29 January 1990, at <http://www1.lanic.utexas.edu/la/cb/cuba/castro/1990/19900129>.

<sup>4</sup> Banco Central de Cuba, *Cuban Economy: The Special Period, 1990-2000*, Havana: Banco Central de Cuba, 2001, at [http://www.bc.gov.cu/boletines/otros/cuban\\_economy.pdf](http://www.bc.gov.cu/boletines/otros/cuban_economy.pdf).

passes, they see that the Cuban revolution continues to exist. It is like a great nightmare when they wake up in the morning – a waking nightmare.<sup>5</sup>

These words quickly came to have an unintended resonance amongst the Cuban population as people experienced the full implications of the economic crisis for their daily lives, and the following description of the experience could be easily generalised:

My personal experience was of a terrible hunger, ...of shortages in every sense of the word. The shortage of clothes, the shortage of food, even the shortage of friends, because every friend had to be struggling for themselves.<sup>6</sup>

Transport became a daily struggle, as fuel supplies became strictly rationed; long power cuts became a daily reality; and sufficient food became harder and harder to come by, leading to malnutrition becoming rife.

Yet, despite the extreme discomfort that most Cubans experienced as a result of the ‘Special Period’, Castro’s defiant assertions that the country would not collapse politically appear to have been well founded. Not that there was a complete absence of popular, and at times vocal, even violent, discontent:

At first with the power cuts, ...people threw bottles from their flats. They took advantage [of the darkness] and put bottles in their balcony and let out their anger at night ...[by] throwing bottles down into the street. The following day, the bicycles got punctured. You had to be very careful going out at night, and after a certain hour you couldn’t go out, because [of the danger of] being hit in the head by a bottle.<sup>7</sup>

In some neighbourhoods, for a time the banging of empty pans by housewives also became a common occurrence.<sup>8</sup> The situation became most serious in the summer of 1994, with the hijacking of a number of boats, and culminating in a riot in the centre of Havana. However, such outbursts were isolated and easily controlled; and though the atmosphere may at times have been tense, at no time has the Cuban regime, led by Fidel Castro, ever appeared even remotely likely to crumble, nor the opposition close to establishing a movement with sufficient popular resonance to force a political change.

Many studies of contemporary Cuba come from one of two polarised, normatively charged perspectives. There are those that see no evil, written from the vantage point of support for the Revolution, and seen through the lens of positive achievements and Cuba’s continued international rhetorical role as an anti-imperialist, anti-capitalist beacon. Such a position characterises much of what is written within Cuba,<sup>9</sup> but also many non-Cuban left-oriented analyses. Opposed to these can be seen those that can see no good, whose analyses feed, and are themselves fed by, the bitterness of Cuban exile. Such approaches tend to begin either from the repressive nature of the Cuban revolutionary state, or its economic inefficiencies, and even seek to downplay the social gains made in the island since 1959.<sup>10</sup> However, the best

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<sup>5</sup> Castro (1990).

<sup>6</sup> Interview #7, Alamar, 20 July 2004.

<sup>7</sup> Interview #7, Alamar, 20 July 2004.

<sup>8</sup> Interview #42, Guanabo, 31 August 2004.

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, Silvia Martínez Puentes, *Cuba: Más allá de los sueños*, Havana: Editorial José Martí, 2003.

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, Eloise Linger & John Cotman (eds), *Cuban Transitions at the Millenium*, Largo, Maryland: International Development Options, 2000; Freedom House (ed.), *Cuba in the Nineties*, New York: Freedom House, 1991; Carmelo Mesa-Lago (ed.), *Cuba after the Cold War*, Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1993.

studies do seek to present a balanced view, giving credit where due yet maintaining a critical distance.<sup>11</sup> Even within Cuba, where critical positions have generally had difficulty in being disseminated, over the last ten years a small vanguard of social researchers has begun to openly criticise certain aspects of the current system and to recommend changes.<sup>12</sup> Such are the intentions of this paper, but with the difference that whereas most such studies often necessarily look down from above, I seek to give voice to the perspective of those who are below, to attempt to grasp the changing popular relationship with the Cuban state over the past fifteen years.

In this paper I examine how the Cuban regime succeeded in maintaining stability despite the problems facing the country and its people, seeking to do so from the perspective of those who continue to experience the everyday realities of life in the Cuban revolution, drawing in particular on interviews with inhabitants of a large working class suburb in Havana. The analysis starts by showing how, before the crisis of the 1990s, the Cuban regime had accumulated very high levels of what Bourdieu labelled “political capital”, with significant popular support for, and involvement in, the revolutionary system.<sup>13</sup> However, there already existed tendencies towards discontent, and these were intensified by the economic crisis. The paper examines the variety of mechanisms (both already existing, and resulting from new measures employed by the Cuban state as a result of the Special Period), through which the regime succeeded in limiting and pacifying such discontent. However, while these were successful in the short term, it will be shown how the long-term effect has been one of growing popular disillusionment, and a distancing between state and society. This has seen the emergence of areas of relatively autonomous popular action, as well as the wielding of what James Scott has characterised as the “weapons of the weak” – hidden forms of resistance that, while not representing an open challenge to the regime, nevertheless enable the powerless to have their presence felt, if not heard.<sup>14</sup>

There is a need for some oppositional political direction for political instability to develop beyond social discontent. The paper continues by looking at the Cuban internal opposition, and how the regime has, until now, successfully neutralised this so as to make it ineffectual and largely incapable of maintaining an organic link with popular discontent. This has been the result of a combination of factors: firstly, the way in which the opposition groups have operated has limited their appeal to most Cubans; secondly, the Cuban state has been effective in manipulating the opposition, and its portrayal, in a manner that has helped strengthen its own position; and thirdly, the uncompromisingly repressive stance of the Cuban state *vis-à-vis* any potential political opposition has prevented such groups from developing openly.

However, while the Cuban state has been remarkably successful in both pacifying discontent and neutralising opposition, the past fifteen years have seen evidence of an erosion of its reserves of political capital. The paper ends by assessing the means by which the state is seeking to reattract popular support and involvement, through a combination of popular

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<sup>11</sup> See, for example, Sandor Halebsky & John M. Kirk (eds), *Transformation and Struggle: Cuba Faces the 1990s*, New York: Praeger, 1990.

<sup>12</sup> Two research centres in Havana have become particularly important in this: the Centro de Investigaciones y Desarrollo de la Cultura Cubana ‘Juan Marinello’ (CIDCC) and the Centro de Investigaciones Psicológicas y Sociológicas (CIPS). The journal *Temas* has enabled the work of people such as Haroldo Dilla, Rafael Hernández and Ovidio D’Angelo to begin to reach a wider audience.

<sup>13</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, ‘Political Representation. Elements for a Theory of the Political Field’, in J. Thompson (ed.), *Language and Symbolic Power*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1991.

<sup>14</sup> James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985.

mobilisation; alternative community schemes aimed at addressing social problems and bridging the gap that has opened up between state and society; and the attempt to reincorporate ‘civil society’, through processes of negotiation, compromise and accommodation, within an inclusive conception of the state that follows the maxim “*con la Revolución, todo; contra la Revolución, nada*”.<sup>15</sup>

Cuba offers an excellent example of a country that appears to have succeeded, despite considerable odds, to remain politically stable. The predictions of the early 1990s that Cuba would quickly go the way of the East European ‘real existing socialist’ systems were clearly ill-founded. The island has also shown itself to be more resilient to the political effects of economic crisis than many other countries facing less precarious circumstances: for example, in Venezuela the economic downturn of the 1990s was nowhere near as extreme as in Cuba, yet it brought the collapse of the existing political order and popular uprisings.<sup>16</sup> Despite the considerable pressures upon it, and criticisms that could be levelled against it, the Cuban state has remained strong and in control. However, the paper concludes by suggesting that there are dangers faced by the Cuban state in the future, and these do not depend entirely upon its ability to continue maintaining control of discontent and opposition, but also on how well it succeeds in readjusting its relationship with society, doing so in such a way as to recuperate the political capital lost (or at least prevent any further haemorrhaging), engage constructively with such new forms of popular organisation as might appear, and prevent the latter from investing their support and involvement in a political opposition that is showing signs of slowly improving its act.

### City of tomorrow’s people

A few miles east along the coast from central Havana sits the suburb of Alamar. This “labyrinth between two rivers”, home to around 100,000 inhabitants,<sup>17</sup> has for thirty years been emblematic of the Cuban revolution, from early promises of a better future, through the despair of the Special Period, to more recent attempts at constructing alternative paths in the face of present-day uncertainties.

It was in Alamar that the first ‘microbrigades’ began to solve the problems of the capital’s working class housing in the early 1970s,<sup>18</sup> with the intention of establishing an ‘ideal’ proletarian community, a city worthy of the ‘*hombre de mañana*’ (‘tomorrow’s man’) who the revolution was forging. It thus became a cultural melting pot, bringing together first workers from all over Havana; then from all over the island, as the initial utopian plans became overwhelmed by the need to provide housing for the thousands of workers arriving in the capital from the interior in search of a better life.<sup>19</sup> From the start, this was combined with a practical demonstration of the internationalist values that the Cuban revolution promoted, with Alamar providing housing first for Russian and East European foreign technicians, and increasingly for the political refugees, mostly from Latin America, who found asylum on the

<sup>15</sup> “Within the Revolution, everything goes; against the Revolution, nothing”. Fidel Castro Ruz, ‘Palabras a los Intelectuales’ (‘Words to the Intellectuals’), Havana, National Cultural Council, 30 June 1961, at <http://lanic.utexas.edu/la/cb/cuba/castro/1961/19610630>.

<sup>16</sup> See, for example, Jonathan DiJohn, ‘The Political Economy of Economic Liberalisation in Venezuela’, *Crisis States Working Papers*, 46, London: Crisis States Research Centre, LSE, 2004.

<sup>17</sup> Miguel Sabater, ‘Alamar: un laberinto entre dos ríos’, *Palabra Nueva*, 125 (December 2003), pp.43-48; Consejo Popular Alamar-Playa, ‘Breve reseña histórica de Alamar’, mimeo.

<sup>18</sup> These microbrigades consisted of workers volunteering from their centres of employment to construct not only their own future apartments, but also the necessary ‘social’ buildings for the establishment of a new community.

<sup>19</sup> See Sabater (2003).

island. One such refugee, still living in Alamar, affirmed that “the Cubans received us like comrades, like brothers”:

The regular ‘Alamaranians’ would offer you everything. You were the guy who had to be helped, you came from outside, far from your country. You had to be offered a hand. And in this the people showed much solidarity.<sup>20</sup>

Alamar thus exemplified the Guevarist notion of the socialist ‘new man’, actively and voluntarily engaged in the construction of a new society, and moved not only by individual need but also by collective consciousness and solidarity.<sup>21</sup> Alamar was to be a showcase of what revolutionary Cuba was capable of, and what her people had become; and the place formed the backdrop for many official state visits, at which Fidel Castro extolled the revolution’s virtues:

...today the Cuban people are distinguished by their close and monolithic unity, a high political consciousness, a solid organization through their mass organizations under the leadership of our Party and great discipline... Our people are characterized by their firmness, their confidence in the future and their joy.<sup>22</sup>

One woman, who moved to Alamar as a young girl in the early 1970s, her father a member of one of the first microbrigades, recalls how:

...seeing Fidel Castro here four times a week was the most normal thing in the world. Sometimes you’d be playing in the entrance to your house, and you’d see him walking by on the pavement or arriving by helicopter, and getting out in the middle of the block; or people would come from many parts of the world. We saw many presidents here in those days, Salvador Allende, ...Yasser Arafat, and all those from all over the world who came to Cuba were brought to see Alamar. And so, without realizing it, we felt ourselves to be very privileged, like chosen people.<sup>23</sup>

At the beginning, the inhabitants of Alamar were literally ‘chosen’, since only those considered sufficiently worthy were entitled to live there. A writer who grew up there, and who has since researched and written about Alamar’s history, recalls how:

Alamar functioned as a new kind of neighbourhood, a communist neighbourhood *par excellence*, where exemplary workers went to live... To be exemplary was to be, firstly, communist; secondly, a good worker; and thirdly, in need of housing. But if you needed housing and weren’t a communist, you couldn’t live in Alamar.<sup>24</sup>

The rules were strictly maintained during the first few years. Many who lived there at that time recall the weekly or fortnightly inspections that were made of each flat, “in which a commission made up of I don’t know who, and elected by I also don’t know who” allegedly ensured that there were no religious symbols nor animals to be found,<sup>25</sup> though ostensibly

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<sup>20</sup> Interview #43, Guanabo, 31 August 2004.

<sup>21</sup> Ernesto ‘Che’ Guevara, ‘Socialism and Man in Cuba’, in John Gerassi (ed.), *Venceremos! The Speeches and Writings of Che Guevara*, London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1968.

<sup>22</sup> Fidel Castro, speech at Cuban-Jamaican Friendship Rally (in presence of Michael Manley, Prime Minister of Jamaica), Alamar, 12 July 1987, at <http://lanic.utexas.edu/la/cb/cuba/castro/1987/19870712>.

<sup>23</sup> Interview #17, Alamar, 31 July 2004.

<sup>24</sup> Interview #26, Alamar, 4 August 2004.

<sup>25</sup> RM, personal communication, 21 October 2004.

they were concerned with checking the “state of conservation of the house, whether you were looking after it, if you were keeping it well painted”.<sup>26</sup>

But such restrictions were easily made up for by the advantages of life in Alamar. The 1970s and 80s were the heydays of the Cuban revolution, and those who lived in Alamar felt themselves fortunate:

There was an abundance of food. I remember, for example, that in the evening after work, at nightfall, sometimes a tank of milk would come by to see if any neighbour wanted some, because there was more than enough; there was no shortage of materials, ...the new buildings went up in three or four months...; and there was a lot of enthusiasm on the part of the people, even if some might feel repressed or frustrated because they had to change their lifestyle. In general the people were content, because almost all of us had come from living conditions that were far worse, and to come here was like discovering there was another way of living.<sup>27</sup>

But this came to an abrupt end with the onset of the Special Period, and Alamar, from having been the model of the Cuban revolution, came to exemplify some of the worst aspects of the new reality facing the island. From having the best public transport connections in the capital, with the drastic reduction in fuel supplies, Alamar became “isolated from the city, converted into an island”.<sup>28</sup>

The community of Alamar is completely working class, and this sector is where crisis always hits most acutely. Because these are the sorts that have fewer resources, ...fewer contacts. It’s where the parameters of a true crisis first appear, here in Alamar. I don’t believe that anywhere else they are felt as acutely as here.<sup>29</sup>

From having been exemplary of the low crime, peaceful conditions of revolutionary Cuba, during the 1990s conditions in Alamar degenerated such that it is now perceived as being one of the areas of greatest “social danger”.<sup>30</sup> As a local poet has put it:

If I was one of the men of the project of the new man, in the city of the new man, and that project failed, then that man has also failed. Therefore I am some kind of creature from a failed project that is missing a finger, or a foot.<sup>31</sup>

Yet fifteen years after the onset of the crisis, and despite being at the raw edge of the shortages that continue to afflict the country, Alamar is no less firmly under the control of the state than is the rest of Cuba. While this has in part been sustained through “the understanding and tolerance ...of giving and remaining ...silent”;<sup>32</sup> Alamar also provides a good vantage point from which to observe the mechanisms by which stability has been secured in Cuba, as well as the development of parallel tensions.

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<sup>26</sup> Interview #26, Alamar, 4 August 2004.

<sup>27</sup> Interview #17, Alamar, 31 July 2004.

<sup>28</sup> Interview #32, Alamar, 11 August 2004.

<sup>29</sup> Interview #7, Alamar, 20 July 2004.

<sup>30</sup> Interview #18, Alamar, 31 July 2004.

<sup>31</sup> Interview, #4, Alamar, 17 July 2004.

<sup>32</sup> Interview #12, Alamar, 23 July 2004.

## Political Capital of the Cuban State

Policies pursued by the revolutionary government since the 1960s served to build up considerable political capital reserves for the regime.<sup>33</sup> Although these policies did lead to important substantive results in terms of the country's development, what is perhaps more significant in considering the political stability of the island is that the form employed for the promotion of these policies was such as to maximise the political support accruing. By the time economic crisis hit in the early 1990s, although economic capital may have been wanting, large reserves of political capital were enjoyed by the Cuban state that it was able to make judicious use of in order to control the internal political situation. What is more, since many Cubans had themselves invested considerable political capital in the revolution, its value would need to deteriorate considerably for them to remove their support.

Nothing has symbolised this more than the priority given to health by the revolutionary government; and so important has been the building and maintaining of a developed world level of medical provision that even in the face of considerable economic shortage in the 1990s, this has continued to be prioritised. In 2001, 6.2 percent of GDP was being spent upon public health, identical to that of the United Kingdom; and with 596 physicians per 100,000 inhabitants, the island is second only to Italy.<sup>34</sup> In areas such as Alamar, this involved building combined living accommodation and consulting rooms for family doctors right next to the residential buildings that they were serving, so embedding them in the community. By 2001, although in Alamar there was "nostalgia for the hospital" that was promised but could not be built before the Special Period began,<sup>35</sup> there were 131 such GP surgeries, serving a population of around 100,000, along with three 'policlinics' providing a wide range of medical services.<sup>36</sup> This has helped the country respond to epidemics impressively fast (the island has the lowest HIV prevalence in the Americas).<sup>37</sup>

The result of this impressive public health service is that Cuba has excellent health indicators, with life expectancy at birth rising from 70.7 in the early 1970s, to 76.7 now; and infant mortality plummeting from 34 per 1,000 live births in 1970, to just 7 in 2002 (identical to that of the United States, but achieved with a tiny fraction of the resources available to the latter).<sup>38</sup> The political effects of this have been important: externally, with Cuban doctors and nurses providing much needed medical cover in many other countries; and internally, with the Cuban people being continually reminded of just how fortunate they are in this respect.

Education stands alongside health as the supporting plank for state legitimacy, and has also been prioritised. Cuba's public spending on education is the sixth highest in the world as a percentage of GDP (8.5 percent).<sup>39</sup> All children have access to entirely free primary and secondary education, and in Alamar this has involved the building of 17 nurseries, 12 primary schools and 5 secondary schools,<sup>40</sup> with the result that adult illiteracy has fallen from nearly a

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<sup>33</sup> "Political capital is a form of symbolic capital, credit founded on credence or belief and recognition or, more precisely, on the innumerable operations of credit by which agents confer on a person (or on an object) the very powers that they recognize in him (or it)" (Bourdieu, 1991, p.192).

<sup>34</sup> UNDP, *Human Development Reports*, at [http://hdr.undp.org/statistics/data/indic/indic\\_50\\_2\\_1.html](http://hdr.undp.org/statistics/data/indic/indic_50_2_1.html); and [http://hdr.undp.org/statistics/data/indic/indic\\_58\\_2\\_1.html](http://hdr.undp.org/statistics/data/indic/indic_58_2_1.html).

<sup>35</sup> Interview #5, Alamar, 17 July 2004.

<sup>36</sup> Sabater (2003), p.47.

<sup>37</sup> UNDP, *Human Development Reports*, at [http://hdr.undp.org/statistics/data/indic/indic\\_69\\_2\\_2.html](http://hdr.undp.org/statistics/data/indic/indic_69_2_2.html).

<sup>38</sup> UNDP, *Human Development Reports*, at [http://hdr.undp.org/statistics/data/cty/cty\\_f\\_CUB.html](http://hdr.undp.org/statistics/data/cty/cty_f_CUB.html); and [http://hdr.undp.org/statistics/data/indic/indic\\_83\\_1\\_1.html](http://hdr.undp.org/statistics/data/indic/indic_83_1_1.html).

<sup>39</sup> UNDP, *Human Development Reports*, at [http://hdr.undp.org/statistics/data/indic/indic\\_181\\_1\\_1.html](http://hdr.undp.org/statistics/data/indic/indic_181_1_1.html).

<sup>40</sup> Sabater (2003), p.47.

quarter of the population in the 1950s,<sup>41</sup> to just 3.1 percent in 2002.<sup>42</sup> Recent social policies aimed at counteracting the problems of youth unemployment and delinquency have also stressed the importance of more generalised education. There are now university centres established in every municipality on the island, and the whole population is being actively encouraged to enrol on courses, and/or make their own skills and knowledge available to others by themselves teaching – often in addition to their existing employment.<sup>43</sup> Not only does this have the intended effect of making the population feel that they have a government whose primary concern is their well-being and development; it has also provided a means of, from a very early age, instilling ‘revolutionary’ values, that has contributed to ensuring that the majority of the Cuban population remains apparently supportive of the regime.<sup>44</sup>

What was perhaps most important about such policies, in terms of the popular political support secured by the regime, was how they were carried out. Simply opening schools and hospitals may please the population in the short term, but in the long term may become more of a political burden as they become taken for granted and need to be maintained. What the Cuban regime succeeded in doing was to make a large proportion of the population feel that these benefits could only be experienced within the present system and with the existing government; and this was made credible by the egalitarian form that such measures took. Everyone was to have equal access and equal rights, regardless of social class, race or gender; and nobody should be able to purchase a better standard of living, or improved access to health or education.<sup>45</sup> In practice, the reality has been somewhat different, with on the one hand position within the system and on the other access to a black market of service provision leading to the existence of *de facto* private mechanisms co-existing with the official public institutions, along with privileges enjoyed by those in official favour. One informant from Alamar recalled:

Many things that were considered a privilege in Cuba would not have been in any other country in the world. The act of buying a house or a car, or simply something as routine ...as travelling abroad, is a possibility (remote or not, but certain) for any body in the world. Not so in Cuba, where if these activities are not approved (authorised) by the state, they are simply unthinkable: impossible.... Nothing compared to being given a house. That, and travelling abroad, were ...the greatest prizes, definitely only for the immortals. To receive any of these ‘prizes’ automatically transformed you into a ‘boss’ [*pincho*], with all the benefits that this ...provided you. From having administrators as friends to secure your necessities, to influence in obtaining a job in a corporation for a family member.<sup>46</sup>

However, for all that this did establish differences within Cuban society, obtaining such privilege was, at least ostensibly, based upon revolutionary merit, and (in particular in a neighbourhood such as Alamar) did not lead to social segregation.

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<sup>41</sup> *Census of the Republic of Cuba*, 1953.

<sup>42</sup> UNDP, *Human Development Report 2002*, at [http://hdr.undp.org/statistics/data/cty/cty\\_f\\_CUB.html](http://hdr.undp.org/statistics/data/cty/cty_f_CUB.html).

<sup>43</sup> Interview #24, Alamar, 3 August 2004 and Interviews #32 & #33, 11 August 2004.

<sup>44</sup> Although this is difficult to quantify, given the caveats that this paper seeks to draw attention to, such superficial indicators as are available do enable the Cuban regime to continue to claim mass support. For example, in the 2003 elections to the National Assembly, although officially participation is voluntary, turn out was 97.6%. Of course these were not competitive elections, but by adding together those who did not vote, who spoil their ballot paper, or who did not vote for the government list in its entirety, only 15% of the entire electorate made some indication of not being in support.

<sup>45</sup> See, for example, Claes Brundenius, ‘Growth with Equity: The Cuban Experience (1959-1980)’, *World Development*, 9:11/12 (1981), pp.1083-1096.

<sup>46</sup> RM, personal communication, 3 March 2005.

In addition to such reward mechanisms, gratitude and debt played an important function in maintaining support. Cubans were told continually how fortunate they were to live in such a benevolent system, in which no one went hungry, or lacked a school to go to, or a doctor to treat their ailments, however insignificant. The comparison was repeatedly made between the present day and life pre-59; and between the ‘socialist’ island and the ‘capitalist’ world beyond. Life might be a struggle, but it was a struggle that all shared in alike; and though the promised land, the achievement of which they were fighting for together, might at times appear to be in an ever-deferred future, they could feel fortunate that they had leaders of vision who could guide them on a steady march towards communism. Much of this gratitude was highly personalised in the almost deified figure of Fidel Castro, with ‘*gracias Fidel*’ replacing ‘*gracias a Dios*’ as a phrase commonly employed in reference to good things that might happen; while negative occurrences could be more readily blamed on the failure of lesser mortals to live up to the high standards set by the *comandante en jefe*. Thus, for all that the Cuban Revolution had been a collective effort on the part of a significant proportion of the Cuban population, many of these same people who had continued to devote their lives anonymously to this revolution ended up believing that their welfare was only secured for them by their leader. As one of the founders of Alamar, participant in one of the first microbrigades and still actively involved in local construction projects, remarked:

I believe that the best armament we have in Cuba is called Fidel Castro, a supernatural intelligence. A man with a very wide vision, of manly courage, exceptionally virile as well, who doesn’t allow himself to be deterred in any arena, and that gives us a powerful weapon. As powerful as an atomic weapon.<sup>47</sup>

This has resulted in a sense of debt that leads many, particularly of the older generation, to continue to support Fidel in spite of all difficulties that they may be personally facing:

For 44 years we have had a slave directing the country. A slave who has come very cheap, because Fidel Castro is a slave of the people. He has not got wealthy, he doesn’t receive any benefits, ...he lives modestly, leading a very austere life, working 18 hours a day for his people. I believe that he doesn’t so much as take a holiday. We consider him to be a loyal slave of the people. That is the man who, even if he didn’t want to continue, the people would elect.<sup>48</sup>

However, the strength of the Cuban state did not just lie in the securing of passive popular support. A culture of inclusive popular mobilisation was also instilled from the early years of the Revolution.<sup>49</sup> In 1961, educated youth from the city were voluntarily organised into brigades, and sent out to rural areas to provide basic schooling, in a drive to make Cuba the first territory entirely free of illiteracy in the Americas. In 1969, the rather less successful desire to produce a record ten million tons of sugar in a single harvest led to a campaign that saw thousands of workers diverted from ‘less essential’ occupations in order to cut cane. Cuban intervention in Angola from the mid-1970s was something that involved the entire nation, with many being mobilised not just to fight but also to work in various support services and as technical advisers. Even with the formal institutionalisation of the Revolution with the ‘socialist’ constitution of 1977, this necessarily improvised form of popular

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<sup>47</sup> Interview #8, Alamar, 21 July 2004.

<sup>48</sup> Interview #8, Alamar, 21 July 2004.

<sup>49</sup> See, for example, William M. LeoGrande, ‘Mass Political Participation in Socialist Cuba’, in John A. Booth & Mitchell A. Seligson (eds), *Political Participation in Latin America: Citizen and State*, New York: Homes & Meier, 1981, pp.114-128.

involvement in state policies continued. By the mid-1980s, the government was pushing a ‘rectification of past errors’, in which popular involvement was sought in order to counteract the bureaucratisation that had occurred in the system.

Every aspect of life was organised by the state, not as a distant master but through the very immediate involvement of the Cuban people at every level. Not only did the state provide for basic food necessities, through the ration book (*libreta*); workers and students were also themselves involved in food production, through annual voluntary participation in the fields in addition to their normal employment or studies.<sup>50</sup> Not only did the state have highly effective policing institutions, these were built up from a community level, at which neighbours organised by their local CDR (*Comité para la Defensa de la Revolución*) were themselves involved in keeping watch for criminal activity and other social problems, and keeping the state informed of subversive elements. The president of the CDR in one housing block in Alamar described how the principal function of the CDR was “to be vigilant against the enemies of the revolution”, but also that “it is an organisation that cooperates with whatever may be necessary for the population, from a social perspective”.<sup>51</sup>

While the country’s armed forces were extremely experienced, civilians were also encouraged to join up to the militia, given civil defence roles to perform in case of invasion, and all workers contributed a portion of their salary to fund this. As one Alamar resident commented, somewhat wryly:

The state is all of us. Because this is a totalitarian state... The state passes through all of us, through our bodies, through our minds... I don’t believe it has ever been in danger.<sup>52</sup>

### **Dealing with Discontent**

The crisis of the 1990s was the deepest that Cubans had experienced since the early years of the Revolution, but the country was not entirely unprepared. “Cuban society has always lived in crisis, ...that is in a state of crisis”,<sup>53</sup> and the problems of the 1990s were but an intensification of already existing pressures. This meant that both State and people were well equipped to cope with the more acute economic difficulties brought by the collapse of the Soviet Union and intensified US blockade. As one inhabitant of Alamar put it:

I see things as a continuity. I won’t talk about improvements or no improvements. I’m a survivor.... In the good periods I’ll be a survivor, and in the bad periods I’ll be a survivor.<sup>54</sup>

The same has been true not just of the Cuban population in general (and there is much in popular Cuban culture that derives from the sense of continual ‘struggle’, or *lucha*); but also of the Cuban state, much of whose rationale, both at governmental and administrative levels, has been to ensure its survival. Since 1959 institutional mechanisms have been developed capable of not simply coping with crisis, but harnessing it to good political effect, even turning apparent weakness into strength.

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<sup>50</sup> I was myself involved in such mobilisations in 1993-1994, on two occasions travelling to the country to work for two weeks in the potato harvest alongside fellow workers from Alamar’s *Casa de Cultura*.

<sup>51</sup> Interview #40, Alamar, 28 August 2004.

<sup>52</sup> Interview#5, Alamar, 17 July 2004.

<sup>53</sup> Interview #5, Alamar, 17 July 2004.

<sup>54</sup> Interview #11, Alamar, 23 July 2004.

The social cost of material shortages was a problem that the Cuban regime was acutely aware of, and particularly concerned it since such shortages most affected precisely those sections of Cuban society upon which the regime depended for its support (workers and peasants), and which it claimed to be representing. Although the already institutionalised practice of rationing ensured a minimum of food was received by all, from the 1990s this was clearly not sufficient to meet their dietary needs. Whereas in 1989, 2,845 Kcal of daily food per capita was distributed, four years later average consumption was just 1,863 Kcal per day, 84 percent of what would be needed to meet basic nutritional needs, and 78 percent of the recommended average.<sup>55</sup> Not surprisingly, problems of malnutrition rapidly began to appear. Although nobody escaped the hunger, the problems were possibly felt most acutely by women, who typically maintained a double burden of employment and keeping the home functioning and their children fed. One woman, who gave birth during Special Period, recalls:

...my son was born in a year in which we had almost 12 hours of power cuts a day, and he ...spent long hours crying when the electricity went. So on one side I had my one-year old son and on the other my sick mother, and the whole night without electricity, the fridge completely defrosted. I personally believe that the majority of people got a lot older in those years, it was such an effort just to maintain a minimal standard of living, to not let your standards drop too far, and it was very exhausting, that is to say an exhaustion that I think became chronic for us. I don't believe that anybody here has recovered from those times...<sup>56</sup>

In such cases, the response of the state was typically not a repressive one, but rather one of monitoring the situation, and responding where possible so as to defuse potential problems of discontent before they could get out of hand. The monitoring took place through a variety of mechanisms. Of central importance were the CDRs – established from 1960 in every locality as the State's eyes and ears on the ground, not as an externally-imposed organisation but as an entity in which the vast majority of neighbours participate in one way or another. These have been particularly effective in not just maintaining 'revolutionary vigilance', but also in helping to ensure timely responses are made to smouldering problems and discontent. Although "in those cases of a counterrevolutionary character the CDR takes the most drastic measures against them," explained the president of one local CDR in Alamar, "in the case of an individual who has a different way of thinking, what the CDR does is talk with them", in order to find an agreeable solution.<sup>57</sup> Often, of course, there is no immediate solution possible to the grievances felt, and in such situations the CDR plays an important role in encouraging the people not to lay the blame on the regime for the shortages. A local functionary explained:

When there is somebody discontented in the street, we have to be educative, and not fight with him, but to explain things to him like this: it isn't the government that wants to make it difficult for you to get a particular product; it is the blockade that does this, so that you don't have that product, so that you feel discontented, so that you will return to a slave-system.<sup>58</sup>

In the workplace, the trade unions (themselves a branch of the state) were given the power to hold the management to account and ensure that Cuba's highly progressive labour legislation

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<sup>55</sup> Angela Ferriol Muruaga, 'La seguridad alimentaria en Cuba', in Angela Ferriol Muruaga *et al*, *Cuba: crisis, ajuste y situación social (1990-1996)*, Havana: Editorial Ciencias Sociales, 1998, p.86.

<sup>56</sup> Interview #17, Alamar, 31 July 2004.

<sup>57</sup> Interview#40, Alamar, 28 August 2004.

<sup>58</sup> Interview #8, Alamar, 21 July 2004.

(which made it very difficult for somebody to be removed from their employment, or even disciplined) was adhered to. They also encouraged the channelling of energies in constructive directions, for example organising voluntary agricultural labour and providing a system of praise and reward for the most outstanding workers. The secretary of the party cell in one Alamar workplace commented:

The people want to be amongst the *destacados* [outstanding], and this makes them work better ...when you receive recognition. Everybody likes to have social recognition, everybody: and so the people make an effort to get this recognition.<sup>59</sup>

This is a system of emulation that goes from the local to the national level, with the regular selection of ‘vanguard’ workers and ‘vanguard’ workplaces, who are entitled to special rewards. These might range from televisions or fridges, or in the face of Special Period transport difficulties, bicycles, which were distributed to those who deserved or needed them most; to access to holiday homes, and even, in better Soviet-sponsored times, vacations on the Black Sea.

The political process in Cuba was conceived as a form of participative ‘democracy’, and with the institutionalisation of the revolution in the 1970s came the development of a system of *Poder Popular* (‘People’s Power’), elected assemblies at municipal, regional and national levels. This system has provided a mechanism by which to a certain extent grievances can be channelled and monitored. Local representatives hold at least annual meetings with their constituents, in which neighbours are encouraged to participate and are given the opportunity to say what their problems are, and where they think things are going wrong. A local party activist remarked:

...you know that Cubans love to argue, and you know that when it is a question of discussing things there we are, because we also always believe that we have the truth on our side, we want to speak our truth. I’m not going to say ...that there are not those who don’t go [to the meetings] and who never go.... But the majority of the people do go. In the important moments there the people are.<sup>60</sup>

Although such meetings did not provide an opportunity to express more generalised criticisms of the political direction of the country, it did enable people to keep the state informed of local problems that needed to be resolved. A local woman, who had become disillusioned with the effectiveness of such processes, explained:

Problems were raised that were very much to do with practical concerns of the community: that it was necessary to mend a street, that the buildings were not being maintained because nobody came to paint or fix them, that there were problems with the water, that in the market they were selling clandestine cigarettes that were no good, that the butcher was not giving the full quota of food.<sup>61</sup>

The regime recognised the importance that the *Poder Popular* system would have in maintaining the state’s ability to respond to the social pressures of the crisis. As a result, during the 1990s more powers were shifted to the various levels of the *Poder Popular*, and direct popular elections to the regional and national levels were introduced (whereas before they had been through nomination and election from the municipal assemblies).<sup>62</sup>

<sup>59</sup> Interview #24, Alamar, 3 August 2004.

<sup>60</sup> Interview #24, Alamar, 3 August 2004.

<sup>61</sup> Interview #17, Alamar, 31 July 2004.

<sup>62</sup> See Jesús P. García Brigos, *Gobernabilidad y democracia: los órganos del poder popular en Cuba*, Havana: Editorial Ciencias Sociales, 1998.

The Communist Party (PCC), and also the Young Communists Union (UJC), continue to play a very important role alongside and within these organisations. The PCC and UJC provide political direction at every level of society; and have an organisation that not only mirrors, but is closely intertwined with, the operation of all other parts of the state. As such, the PCC is both political leader and general watchdog. As somebody particularly active in the PCC in Alamar commented:

The party is a political organ that is present here to preserve the interests of the whole population, from the ideological point of view, from the social point of view, and from the human point of view.<sup>63</sup>

Such institutions have enabled the state to respond quickly when discontent looked like getting out of control. Although open outbursts would be dealt with severely, where possible the state seems to have preferred providing whatever necessary to avoid such an escalation occurring. For example, the state in part relies upon political pressure from the party to make workers feel the unacceptability of striking, and workers are generally conscious that many of their problems are caused by the economic situation of the country, for which there may not be an immediate solution; but at the same time “here in this country there are no strikes because workers demands come from the central organisation, they don’t need to be asked for”:

Here there is a state of opinion that is collected by the party and the various political and social organisations, which reflects the state of feeling of the masses. And if one percent have opinions, concern is shown to this one percent. An attempt is made to see what is happening. So the [trade unions] play a role in which there is no need to reach a general strike.... There is no need to resort to demands. When there is a need to smooth things over, the state of the workers is improved. When it is possible to increase the social security, the state increases it.<sup>64</sup>

Thus it was rumoured that when a group of workers threatened to go on strike during the building of the Villa Panamericana (for the Panamerican Games in 1991), to avoid this spreading (or even becoming common knowledge), the state quietly acceded to their demands and improved their working conditions. There have always been more visible signs of discontent in Havana than elsewhere in the island, and, if anecdotal evidence is to be believed, one of the consequences during the 1990s was that more tended to be provided on the ration books than to those in more ‘loyal’ parts of the country. Similarly, when power shortages brought nocturnal protests to certain parts of the city in the early to mid 1990s, these neighbourhoods would then have several days without the electricity being removed; and when open discontent erupted in Alamar in 1993, as a result of shortages, the very next day extra food began to be served from kiosks.

Such information-gathering mechanisms ensured that the Cuban regime was well aware of the popular discontent that quickly grew as a result of ‘Special Period’, and many of the policies it pursued during the 1990s were aimed either at the direct amelioration of the daily food shortages being experienced, through either material means (though such possibilities were limited) or through ideological exhortations; or were intended to assist (or at least turn a blind eye to) the informal survival mechanisms that developed. Alternative methods of food acquisition appeared. One of the problems was that, with severe fuel shortages, the state’s

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<sup>63</sup> Interview #24, Alamar, 3 August 2004.

<sup>64</sup> Interview #8, Alamar, 21 July 2004.

food distribution infrastructure literally ground to a halt, and proved to be incapable of shifting sufficient quantities of food from the country to the city. Spontaneously, people began to travel out of the city by any means available, taking clothes, soap or any other goods that they could use to barter for food in peasants in the country. Similarly, unused land became turned into allotments, in order to in some way supplement the meagre diet. The state generally stood back and allowed such initiatives to flourish, and this contributed to the country gradually pulling itself back from the brink it had reached in 1993.

It is common in situations of extreme shortage for a black market to develop, and Cuba was no exception, with the Special Period bringing the rapid development of illegal or semi-legal commercial activities. Necessity forced even those who would previously have eschewed any contact with this into complicity, as it only became possible to make ends meet by having some kind of participation in the black market, either by selling things to bolster income or buying those products that could not otherwise be obtained. While there were those who were able to enrich themselves through this, the majority were forced into it out of necessity. One Alamar resident described how:

I often had to see my mother, selling things after having worked [all her life], and supposedly having a pension to make her old age secure: selling without a licence. Selling tubes of toothpaste to earn one Cuban peso for every tube sold, selling boxes of cigarettes, plastic bags. I often saw her hide herself like a rat from the police or from the state inspectors so that they would not fine her.<sup>65</sup>

Such a generalised black market could only exist because of the effective institutionalisation of theft within the Cuban system.<sup>66</sup> Workers tend to feel that they have a right to appropriate some ‘surplus’ from where they work in order to improve their income. Although state authorities do seek to control this, they have tended to do so only intermittently. Thus one week the police might crack down on a particular bakery to stop the illicit sale of bread. But then the same police themselves have needs, and once the immediate political spotlight is removed they are readily bought off (with bread) and begin to turn a blind eye again. The state finds itself in something of a Catch 22 with this. On the one hand, theft and the black market do contribute to the economic difficulties and shortages of produce available for equitable state distribution, and hence are a part of the problem of economic crisis; on the other hand, in the absence of an effective official alternative, these have provided a mechanism whereby the population continues to be able to survive the crisis.

If the state had been content to passively permit informal initiatives to resolve the situation, or had consistently cracked down on such activities while unable to offer anything in their place, it is possible that protests against an apparently ineffectual government and system would have been more acute. However, policies were pursued that were aimed as much at reasserting state dominance as they were at solving the problems of shortages. Thus, rather than simply suppressing the black market, which after all was proving to be quite effective in filling the distributional vacuum (albeit with inflationary and criminal consequences), the state sought to undercut it. Since the state was not in a position to meet the demand for fresh fruit, vegetable and meat, it allowed peasants to trade (generally through intermediaries) in state-organised agricultural markets. Rather than continuing to enforce laws against the use of the dollar, or to forcibly control the currency black market that saw the Cuban peso become

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<sup>65</sup> Interview #4, Alamar, 17 July 2004.

<sup>66</sup> This is a phenomenon that seems to have been shared by other centrally-planned economies, “where theft is not only widespread, but is seen as justified” (Maria Los, *Communist Ideology, Law and Crime: A Comparative View of the USSR and Poland*, Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988, p.205).

devalued from a street price of 5 or 6 to the dollar in 1989 to 120 or more in 1993, the regime simply legalised the dollar. This had a number of benefits: it enabled the reassertion of state control of the national currency; it made it possible for Cubans to receive openly remittances from family and friends outside the island; and it ensured that much of this hard currency found its way into the state's coffers. The regime also permitted people to establish small businesses, providing their services to the public – again, this was happening anyway; the state simply recognised this, and legislated for it, bringing it under control.<sup>67</sup>

Thus the Cuban state had the capacity, and has been capable, of both monitoring and to a certain extent responding to the general grumbling discontent about material conditions. The system contained mechanisms that were already designed for this, and although the economic situation was one in which popular needs could not be met fully, the state was able to operate in such a way as to prevent much of this discontent from ever becoming an open political challenge. While the Cuban regime has a reputation for not broaching criticism, so long as people acted and spoke within the established rules and bounds the state could be very tolerant, and was even able to take advantage of this to stabilise the political situation. As one old loyalist in Alamar remarked:

If you are capable of feeling what you are going to say, in a constructively critical manner, you can express what you want in any arena: whether in the CDR, in the *Poder Popular*, in the meeting of neighbourhood voters, in the Party, in the UJC, wherever. So long as you are capable of being objective, constructively and objectively critical. What we cannot permit, is that you come to a meeting of whatever kind and say that Fidel Castro is to blame for there being no noodles.<sup>68</sup>

### **Distance and Disillusion**

The measures that enabled the Cuban state to retain control of the situation came at a political cost. By the late 1990s, though the acute shortages of the earlier period were no longer being experienced, these had been replaced by a situation in which prices bore little relationship to salaries, with the state itself trading according to dollar values, which has resulted in a considerable rise in the cost of living. This is recognised even by those most loyal to the regime:

What is given on the ration book, ...does not go to satisfy the needs of the home. It satisfies ten, fifteen or twenty percent, the other eighty percent has to be obtained in the parallel market, which has prices that are not in accordance with the economic income of the country.<sup>69</sup>

The result has been an increasing feeling that the state is no longer operating in the best interests of ordinary people, or at least has not proved capable of providing a solution to the everyday problems that they are facing.

This is compounded by growing inequality as a direct result of the economic measures introduced to stabilise the situation in the 1990s. There may have been difficulties before, but at least there was the perception that these were shared, and that by working conscientiously one could not just make ends meet, but aspire to some improvement in living conditions. Legalisation of the dollar, the permitting of small businesses, the influx of foreign capital and

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<sup>67</sup> On economic measures introduced in Cuba in the 1990s, see Julio Carranza Valdés *et al.*, *Cuba: Restructuring the Economy – A Contribution to the Debate*, London: ILAS, 1996.

<sup>68</sup> Interview #9, Alamar, 21 July 2004.

<sup>69</sup> Interview #8, Alamar, 21 July 2004.

the growth of tourism have all contributed to a situation in which those who work honestly for the state are in a worse economic situation than those who opt for alternative forms of employment and income. In 1995, the average wage was worth just US\$6 a month, and even professionals were unlikely to earn more than double this. But a bartender in a tourist hotel was estimated to make \$93 (in tips alone); a prostitute servicing tourists US\$373; and the owner of a small private restaurant anything up to US\$5,000.<sup>70</sup> This apparently extreme difference, showing a 829:1 income differential between the highest income earner and the average wage, is attenuated considerably by the fact that single households combine different forms of income, which (along with subsidised rationing of food, inadequate though this might be, and free healthcare and education) mean that in reality levels of inequality are still not anywhere near those of most other Latin American countries. However, since visible income differences were largely lacking prior to 1989,<sup>71</sup> the perceived change was great and very damaging to the relationship of state to society. It also leads to increased difficulties within the system, as workers, while not going openly on strike, certainly work with considerably less vigour. As the joke goes, “the State pretends to pay me, so I pretend to work” – and such quiet forms of protest, whether employed consciously or otherwise, while not constituting a direct, open and organised challenge to the Cuban state, certainly constitute a weapon in the hands of the otherwise weak.<sup>72</sup>

At the same time people have come to feel that there is little point in complaining through established official channels because state institutions are perceived as being either incapable, or unwilling, to solve their problems. For example, the local delegates to the *Poder Popular* have:

... become very demoralised in the eyes of the people with whom [they have] contact in the district, because somehow the people know that they can't really solve any problems. At times they might sort something out, but the majority of the time it isn't in their hands to do so. They are people who are looked on with some measure of pity, and on the other hand are semi-ignored.<sup>73</sup>

This is deepened by the fact that the state had no alternative but to allow people to develop informal means of survival. Although this helped to get the country through the dark days, it has had the longer-term result of making state institutions appear increasingly irrelevant, or even as obstacles to development. The result has been a growing distance between state and society. As one Alamar resident, actively involved in developing new autonomous community projects, commented:

I think that there is a rung that is missing between the institutions and the wider society ... This institution supposedly was a rung to help draw closer [the state and society], but as time passes or when they don't do things in the best way to achieve this, ...it stops being effective. Instead of drawing closer, it distances further.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Carmelo Mesa-Lago, *Market, socialist, and mixed economies : comparative policy and performance: Chile, Cuba and Costa Rica*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000, p.335.

<sup>71</sup> In 1986, the top decile enjoyed an income less than four times that of the bottom decile. This compares very favourably even with countries such as Costa Rica, regarded as amongst the least unequal in the continent. Even before structural adjustment brought increasing inequality in Costa Rica, the top decile had an income that was more than thirteen times that of the bottom decile (Mesa-Lago, 2000, p.639).

<sup>72</sup> Scott (1985).

<sup>73</sup> Interview #17, 31 July 2004.

<sup>74</sup> Interview #37, Alamar, 18 August 2004.

This can be seen in an increasing lack of involvement, and even trust, in state institutions that were at the heart of the Cuban state's armoury for dealing with discontent and maintaining stability. Indicative of this was that in 2004, very few CDRs organised communal celebrations for 26 July.<sup>75</sup> One resident remarked:

... these days if there is a party, just about the only people going are those in charge of the CDR, who are the same people as always and have to continue doing so, and perhaps some children and three or four others.<sup>76</sup>

It can also be seen in a loss of values by many, which has resulted in lower levels of social solidarity, community participation and voluntary work; and higher levels of individualism and consumerist aspiration.<sup>77</sup> This can be seen visibly in Alamar, simply in terms of the use of space. One of the first impacts of the new insecurities of Special Period was the increasing fear of theft, particularly by those who had slightly more economic possibilities than others. This led to the increasing use of bars covering balconies and doors to prevent access, where before most would have felt little need to use the lock. In recent years communal gardens at the foot of apartment blocks have become increasingly enclosed by individual flat owners, turning them into private garden spaces.

This growing distance can be seen symbolically in the person of Fidel Castro. Whereas in previous years he was given to going unannounced amongst the people, now it is generally well known where he is going to appear because his visits are preceded by quick repairs being made to the road he is to arrive by, and the buildings that he will see are painted, while other roads and buildings continue to fall into disrepair. This gives the impression that far from being aware of the difficulties that the people are facing, the leader is being maintained in a fantasy, and that at every level reports are sent up to superiors that fail to inform of the real problems since this would be displeasing and may lead to blame descending. Recently, this feeling of the government being out of touch has begun to be felt in the arena of health, which had always been a cornerstone of popular support. The new relationship with Venezuela, following the coming to power of Hugo Chávez, has led to many doctors being sent on medical missions there, resulting in a growing popular perception that it has become rather harder to obtain medical attention.

A growing number of people, in particular in the generation that was born in the early years of the revolution and came of age before the onset of Special Period, are demonstrating increasing disillusion not just with the situation, but with the system. Their experience has been somewhat like waking up and finding themselves in a false dream. While the older generation, who retain a memory of the pre-socialist past, are more likely to hold on to their faith in the revolution and its leaders; and the younger generation, coming of age within the new realities of the 1990s and beyond, are more likely to display political apathy: the middle generation were brought up believing in the socialist project and the struggle for a better future. Many of these have had their eyes opened to the negative things done in the name of the revolution, and the contradictions it has displayed in the political and economic compromises of the 1990s.

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<sup>75</sup> 26 July is a national holiday in Cuba, celebrating the assault by Fidel Castro and associates on the Moncada Barracks in Santiago de Cuba in 1953, so marking the start of the Revolution. The *Movimiento 26 de Julio* was the name given to the revolutionary movement that developed during the 1950s, and which came brought Castro to power in 1959.

<sup>76</sup> Interview #17, Alamar, 31 July 2004.

<sup>77</sup> See Ovidio d'Angelo, 'Cuba y los retos de la complejidad. Subjetividad social y desarrollo', *Temas*, 28 (January-March 2002), p.92.

Typically, much of this disillusion has tended to be channelled through cultural manifestations. In the second half of the 1980s, the generation that was coming of age within the revolution found expression through art and music for their discontent with the direction being taken by the revolution (that they had been brought up to believe in).<sup>78</sup> However, their attempt at challenging the state, or shaking it into change, resulted in repression and censorship, resulting in many of the leading figures of this cultural resurgence leaving the country; and began the process of disillusionment that affected many of this generation. Since then, culture has continued to act as a surrogate for political debate, and provides a means, particularly since the liberalisation of culture that occurred in the 1990s, by which some kind of expression can be given, however obliquely, to these feelings. This in part comes of the contradiction of a revolution that has brought extensive education and cultural development, in combination with a demand for popular subordination that inevitably produces tensions. In this sense, “the Cuban revolution is suffering the results of its own successes and virtues”.<sup>79</sup>

Religion has perhaps been of greater importance as a channel for popular disillusion with the revolution.<sup>80</sup> Prior to the early 1990s (when formal limitations against believers were lifted, and they became eligible for membership of the Communist Party), the common experience of those who openly expressed their religious faith was one of discrimination and stigmatisation.<sup>81</sup> However, although the regime was officially atheist, they were never successful in entirely removing religious belief from society and culture.<sup>82</sup> According to surveys even before 1990, only 15 percent consciously defined themselves as atheist, an identical number to those who maintained (despite the problems it implied) a systematic religious affiliation; the vast majority of the population continued to be either passive believers, or had “doubts” about the “supernatural”.<sup>83</sup> In the 1990s, active religious practice greatly increased, as a result of the combination of material shortages and the growing feeling that the revolutionary project no longer had any real purchase, which was producing feelings of spiritual emptiness.<sup>84</sup> During this period, the number of active Catholics doubled, Protestants increased by an estimated 168 percent (179 percent if Jehovah’s Witnesses are included), and there was an undetermined (but at least as spectacular) increase in *santería* and other Afro-Cuban religious practices.<sup>85</sup> The churches themselves expressed their surprise at the rapid increase, and were hard pressed to find means to accommodate their new membership.<sup>86</sup> In Alamar – which had been premised as an exemplary revolutionary

<sup>78</sup> See, for example, Luis Camnitzer, *New Art in Cuba*, Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994.

<sup>79</sup> Haroldo Dilla, ‘Cuba: la compleja coyuntura’, *Encuentro de la Cultura Cubana*, 28/29 (Spring/Summer 2003), p.269 – my translation.

<sup>80</sup> This has some parallels with occurrences in other countries where people face political, social and economic exclusion and difficulties. See, for example, Irena Borowik (ed.), *Church-State Relations in Central and Eastern Europe*, Krakow: Nomos, 1999; and Phillip Berryman, *Liberation Theology*, New York: Pantheon Books, 1987.

<sup>81</sup> Interview #14, Alamar, 25 July 2004; Interview #26, Alamar, 4 August 2004.

<sup>82</sup> Aurelio Alonso Tejada, *Iglesia y política en Cuba*, Havana: Editorial Caminos, 2002. The first Congress of the Cuban Communist Party, in 1975, affirmed its atheist character; however, the relationship between the state and religion was never a straightforward one of mutual antipathy (see Fidel Castro Ruz, *Fidel y la Religión: conversaciones con Frei Betto*, Havana: Consejo del Estado, 1985).

<sup>83</sup> Aurelio Alonso Tejada, ‘Catolicismo, política y cambio en la realidad cubana actual’, *Temas*, 4 (October – December 1995), p.25.

<sup>84</sup> Jorge Ramírez Calzadilla, ‘Religión y cultura: las investigaciones sociorreligiosas’, *Temas*, 1 (January-March 1995), pp.57-68.

<sup>85</sup> Jorge Ramírez Calzadilla, ‘Cultura y reavivamiento religioso en Cuba’, *Temas*, 35 (October-December 2003), p.43, note 21. See also Jorge Ramírez Calzadillo *et al.*, ‘El incremento en el campo religioso cubano en los 90. Reactivamiento y significación social’, unpublished manuscript, Departament de Estudios Sociorreligiosos, CIPS (Havana), 1998.

<sup>86</sup> Rafael Cepeda Clemente *et al.*, ‘Causas y desafíos del crecimiento de las iglesias protestantes en Cuba’, *Temas*, 4 (October-December 1995), p.60.

settlement, where religions could not be practiced openly – many people point to the emergence of religion as possibly the most important cultural phenomenon to occur there in recent years.<sup>87</sup> It has become common for evangelical meetings to occur in people's living rooms, Afro Cuban religions are now openly celebrated,<sup>88</sup> and a small Roman Catholic church has even been established, in semi-secret fashion, in the back yard of a bungalow.<sup>89</sup>

However, while these trends towards distancing and disillusion should be worrying for the Cuban regime, the present situation contains an important control on these manifesting themselves in more open discontent or opposition. Ironically, while continuing shortages tend to increase the distance felt and intensify the disillusion, they also decrease the ability or even desire to participate in any open challenge to the state. As in all poor societies, most people simply do not have the time to do so, life is too focused on the daily grind of finding food, or of washing clothes in the little water that is made available, or of waiting for transport to get to or from work.<sup>90</sup>

Emigration has continually provided a safety valve for the Cuban state. Whether through legal or illegal means, the tendency has been for those who have become disillusioned with the system to seek to leave, to find a new life elsewhere. Between 1985 and 1992, 50,300 emigrated through legal means, and 5791 illegally (by means of *balsas*, or rafts).<sup>91</sup> This intensified following 1989, reaching a climax in the summer of 1994, when the Cuban government removed border controls so leading to a mass exodus on makeshift embarkations, much of which Alamar (situated on the coast) witnessed. In the course of a single month, an estimated 36,000 people left Cuba in this way.<sup>92</sup> Since then, the state has greatly simplified and speeded up the process for legal emigration, and many are finding the means to take advantage of this. Although to have family or friends outside Cuba can bring financial benefits, in the form of remittances, those who remain on the island often express feelings of abandonment. Although emigration is a common phenomenon throughout the world, it has a particularly strong connotation in Cuba, where such an act continues to be viewed in political terms.

### Neutralising Opposition

Although what is generally referred to as the 'internal opposition' has been slowly growing and developing through the 1990s, it appears to have been incapable of making any real headway in terms of gathering popular support, and there are a number of reasons for this. In part, it has been the result of a kind of auto-control, in which a combination of lack of popular engagement, strategic and tactical ineffectuality, and the popularly held impression of the self-serving motivations of many involved in the opposition groups has meant that this movement has not succeeded in presenting itself as relevant to the majority of the Cuban population. The Cuban regime has also played a very intelligent game in manipulating the opposition so as to ensure that there is minimal popular engagement. Combined with repressive practices, this has meant that the Cuban state has, till now, been very successful at maintaining the separation between the opposition and population.

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<sup>87</sup> Interview #32, Alamar, 11 August 2004.

<sup>88</sup> Interview #25, Alamar, 3 August 2004.

<sup>89</sup> Interview #14, Alamar, 25 July 2004.

<sup>90</sup> Interview #20, Alamar, 31 July 2004.

<sup>91</sup> Ernesto Rodríguez Chávez, *Emigración Cubana Actual*, Havana: Editorial Ciencias Sociales, 1996, pp.39-80.

<sup>92</sup> Rodríguez Chávez (1996), p.112.

Although generally referred to in monolithic terms, the 'internal opposition' in fact combines a number of tendencies. There are groups, such as *La Patria es de Todos*, that coalesced around liberal reforming economists such as Vladimiro Roca and Marta Beatriz Roque; others that are more closely aligned with the Catholic church, such as the *Movimiento Cristiano de Liberación* led by Oswaldo Payá. Some look towards closer links with the United States, while others favour a more European-oriented social democracy. Nevertheless, there has been a tendency (despite disagreements amongst participants) towards building a united oppositional front, through such initiatives as the *Movimiento Todos Unidos*, bringing together the several of the most important oppositional groups under a single common agenda; and the Varela Project, seeking to secure a popular referendum on the system by means of a mass petition.<sup>93</sup>

However, although showing some recent signs of improvement, the internal opposition has still to prove itself capable of throwing off the perception, very effectively promoted by the state, that it is anti-popular, individualistic and elitist in orientation. Whatever the truth of such a characterisation, the opposition has not done itself any favours by frequently appearing to be more concerned with appealing to external forces than addressing itself to the Cuban population. Opposition can become a means of earning quite a respectable living in the difficult economic conditions that Cuba finds itself in, and opposition groups are often in receipt of considerable sums of money, either collected from supporters in Europe or the United States, or channelled to them from the US government itself. For many, the prospect of eventually being able to leave Cuba as a result of their oppositional activities is an added attraction. This has led many Cubans, amply prompted by the regime, to perceive those involved in oppositional politics as being driven by mercenary tendencies, simply the continuation of a long history of elite-sponsored counter-revolution.

These groups have also shown themselves to be very naive in the way in which they have organised, particularly in comparison with the very skilful political manoeuvring that they are up against. When Maria Elena Cruz Varela (who lived and worked in Alamar) organised a group, seeking to press for democratisation within the system, this could not last long since (before they had any real base to speak of) they published an open letter to Fidel. They were apparently surprised by the speed of the reaction, with the arrest of those involved and the mobilisation of people in the locality in an act of repudiation. The tendency for many of the opposition groups to align themselves with the openly antagonistic policies of the United States towards Cuba, allowing themselves to become pawns in Washington's baiting of the Castro regime, does the opposition no favours either in a country that is intensely nationalistic. Thus even when dissidents are not openly pro-US, simply receiving the support of the US government (keen to bolster any opposition to the Castro regime) can prove a serious disadvantage.<sup>94</sup>

The actions of the opposition groups play firmly into the hands of the Cuban regime. Through state-control of the media, the regime has been able to selectively present the opposition to the Cuban populace, continually pressing home the message that they are made up entirely of mercenaries intent on annexing Cuba to the United States, and of helping the 'imperialist aggressor' in its attempt to destabilise the revolution. Thus, in 1998 the Cuban state very publicly arrested and put on trial a number of opposition figures, apparently having carefully selected those that really had the most objectionable views (or at least presented

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<sup>93</sup> Interview #1, Havana, 12 July 2004; Interview #16, Havana, 30 July 2004; Interview #29, Havana, 5 August 2004; Interview #42, Guanabo, 31 August 2004.

<sup>94</sup> Richard Gott, *Cuba: A New History*, New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2004, p.316.

them as such). The result is that all could be tarred with the same brush, even those who have made a point of not aligning themselves with the US.<sup>95</sup>

This task has been very easy for the Cuban state, given the level of infiltration that it has managed of the opposition groups, succeeding in getting agents at the highest level, and using these as agents provocateurs, helping ensure that the opposition groups play into the regime's hands. This was starkly brought out in the trials of the 75 opposition figures tried in 2003, at which the state disclosed 12 high ranking members of the opposition as working for state security. They included Manuel David Orrio, President of the Federation of Cuban Journalists, who had played an important role in the decision to hold opposition meetings in the residency of the Head of the US Office of Interests, James Cason. Very effective use was made of these meetings, and their sponsorship by the US, by the Cuban state in its discrediting of the opposition in the eyes of the Cuban population, as well as forming a central plank of the charges brought against the accused.<sup>96</sup> The evidence gathered by these agents has been made very public in the months following the trial, and this has greatly helped the regime embed in the popular psyche that, whatever the grievances they might be feeling, this political opposition is very far from offering a genuine alternative.<sup>97</sup>

Although the elimination from Cuban society of those inclined to opposition could sometimes be achieved by encouraging their emigration, they were often removed internally (particularly in those cases that it would prove awkward for the regime to have talking freely outside the island), and stigmatised for their aberrant behaviour and at times imprisoned. An Alamar-based dissident, critical of both regime and the ineffectual opposition, commented:

If you are a dissident, in order to lock you up, first they have to demonise you. First a small campaign of demonisation and then they lock you up. I lock you up as a process of prophylaxis, and afterwards I can reintegrate you with society if you like, now cleansed once more, purified.<sup>98</sup>

One woman, who was imprisoned for “having contact with people in the opposition and for my way of thinking” recalled her experience behind bars:

they put on the card that they fill out, a red line that means highly dangerous. I did not have the right to work in areas outside the prison. I did not have the right to go to activities that took place in the theatre. I did not have the right to leave the penal building, because I was a highly dangerous prisoner. Nevertheless, there were also women who had killed their children, who had killed their husbands, one who had killed her mother with a baseball bat in order to keep the house for herself, and those women did enjoy those privileges because they weren't dangerous. [But] for thinking differently to them, for trying to leave the country on a raft, putting my life in danger, only my own life in danger, I was now considered dangerous.<sup>99</sup>

The mental health system could also be used to good effect, as one Alamar resident who had experienced this observed:

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<sup>95</sup> For example, this has been the case with *Encuentro de la Cultura Cubana*, published in Spain.

<sup>96</sup> See *Encuentro de la Cultura Cubana*, 28/29, pp.115-212.

<sup>97</sup> See, for example, Rosa Miriam Elizalde & Luis Baez, *Los disidentes: agentes de la seguridad cubana revelan la historia real*, Havana: Editora Política, 2003.

<sup>98</sup> Interview #4, Alamar, 17 July 2004.

<sup>99</sup> Interview #42, Guanabo, 31 August 2004.

Prison is an institution that is a half-relative of the asylum.... The asylum is used to repress, to control and to scandalise the vital impulses of all those so-called sick people.<sup>100</sup>

This is not to suggest that there was a conscious policy on the part of the state to define those with discontented views as insane, in the same way as it would imprison those who were too vociferously outspoken or who acted upon what they felt. This was a much more subtle mechanism of control, in that it relied upon an ongoing process of individuals internalising their feelings of difference and alienation with the system they found themselves living in, being unable to give open expression to this (or when they did, finding themselves either running against a brick wall or becoming publicly stigmatised if not worse), and as a result developing mental disorders that might require hospitalisation, and hence control. Whether through prison or asylum, in Foucauldian fashion “we treat you as someone who is sick, that is we ‘hospitalise’ you, we give you treatment, and then we reincorporate you into society”.<sup>101</sup>

Arguably, this is a form of control that does not simply affect those who are imprisoned or hospitalised. It only needs some individuals to be treated in this way for a more generalised fear to be spread. If those who are not entirely in agreement with the way in which the country is being run can be made to believe that expressing such discontent and criticism could result in them being the next to suffer the attentions of the repressive arm of the state, this goes a long way towards preventing open discontent from occurring. This was always an element of the revolutionary system, and people were encouraged to report the potentially dissident views or activities of their neighbours, workmates, fellow students, even family. However, the 1990s have intensified the tendency towards a more generalised paranoia, in that very few people can consider themselves to be entirely without sin. It is a common saying in Cuba that it is impossible to survive without breaking the law; and though most people are very careful about what they say in official arenas, they are equally free with their views in private. Clearly it would not be desirable, nor remotely practicable, for the state to arrest everyone so doing. Much more effectively, it means that people come to feel that a sword of Damocles is balanced over their necks, and that they could feel it strike at any time.<sup>102</sup>

Thus the State is able to resort to outright repression only when it feels it to be politically necessary. The rest of the time it is content to manipulate, and maintain itself fully informed of what is taking place. In fact, there are considerable advantages in doing so. Not only does this greatly weaken the political opposition, it instils a more general paranoia in which nobody really knows who he or she is talking to, all the more since the passing of a law in 1999 that made it a crime to even possess (let alone distribute) anything that the government might define as ‘subversive’ or to receive funds from any source not authorised by the government.<sup>103</sup> You cannot know whether the person trying to recruit you, or eliciting from you dissident opinions, is actually working for state security; and you are left with the continual doubt as to whether a search of your house or your financial affairs would provide evidence that could be used to convict you: “don’t speak, because all that you say could be

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<sup>100</sup> Interview #4, Alamar, 17 July 2004.

<sup>101</sup> Interview #4, Alamar, 17 July 2004. See Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, London: Tavistock Publications, 1967. On the similar application of the mental health system in the Soviet Union, see Theresa C. Smith, *No Asylum: State Psychiatric Repression in the Former USSR*, London: Macmillan, 1996; and Alexander Podrabinek, *Punitive Medicine*, Ann Arbor: Karoma Publishers, 1980.

<sup>102</sup> See, for example, Human Rights Watch, *Cuba’s Repressive Machinery: Human Rights Forty Years after the Revolution*, New York/Washington/London/Brussels: Human Rights Watch, 1999.

<sup>103</sup> Ley 88 de Protección de la Independencia Nacional y la Economía de Cuba, 16 February 1999. See *Encuentro de la Cultura Cubana*, 28/29, pp.115-212.

used against me”.<sup>104</sup> Much more powerful than automatically arresting anybody involved in such activities is the creation of an atmosphere of fear in which “every Cuban carries a policeman inside their heads”.<sup>105</sup>

### **Regaining Political Capital**

Bourdieu has pointed out that political capital “can be conserved only at the cost of unceasing work which is necessary both to accumulate credit and to avoid discredit”.<sup>106</sup> The Cuban regime appears to have been very aware of this need, continually seeking ways by which popular good will, which was being rapidly sapped by the difficulties of the crisis, could be replenished. However, although the Cuban state was successful in the 1990s in limiting popular discontent, despite the situation, and preventing the development of a political opposition, it came at a cost, with growing levels of disillusion and distance. Talking in terms of political capital, there has been an effective disinvestment on the part of many in Cuban society, perhaps not sufficient to represent an immediate danger to the regime, but certainly a concern that it must address. It will be important for the continuing stability of the country, and the ability of the state to continue to maintain control, for the regime to find ways of both preventing a further haemorrhaging of support, and of recuperating some of the support and involvement lost. The regime seems to have been conscious of this need, and three principal methods by which the regime has been seeking to readjust the situation to counter the negative tendencies can be identified: firstly, the use of campaigns and culture to mobilise the population behind it; secondly, the experiment with new mechanisms for bridging the gap between state and society; and thirdly, the beginnings of a process of negotiation, compromise and accommodation with so-called ‘civil society’ that offers the possibility of the State redefining itself in a constructive way, which may offer some hope for future improvements.

If anything, popular mobilisations and campaigns have become more central to Cuban politics, as it became necessary to find a means of continuing to bind the Cuban people to the state in the face of greatly increased economic difficulties, and structural changes that have eroded trust in the overriding revolutionary vision. There is a tendency in Cuba to paint things as a struggle between Cuban socialist good and US imperialist evil that in times of internal difficulties helps to pull a grumbling population into line, with the ever-present excuse for internal difficulties being the continuing external threat of the US blockade and political hostility. One campaign gives way to another, as the government switches its attention from the refurbishment of schools, to the extension of health clinics, to the protests for the return of Elián González and then of the ‘*Cinco Heroes de la Revolución*’ arrested for spying in the US, to the collection of millions of signatures in support of a change to the constitution that ‘guarantees’ the irrevocably socialist nature of the Cuban state. This apparently improvisatory approach is perhaps consciously reminiscent of the first years of the Revolution, before institutionalisation and the establishment of Soviet-style planning. It has proven to be a very successful means of continuing to mobilise large segments of the Cuban population and to keep them engaged, despite the evident difficulties that they are suffering and the diminished strength of the information-gathering and social-mobilising institutions upon which the state previously depended, helping to galvanise a nationalist spirit that has seen hundreds of thousands taking to the streets. As Robin Blackburn has observed:

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<sup>104</sup> Rafael Rojas, ‘Represión en Cuba’, *El País*, 4 April 2003.

<sup>105</sup> Interview #23, Alamar, 3 August 2004.

<sup>106</sup> Bourdieu (1991), p.193.

The hopes of the sixties may have crumbled like so many of the buildings in old Havana, but something has lodged in the people that will not be easily rooted out. Those who want to defend the best in the revolution are having their day. Young people can be heard saying that for the first time they have a sense of something like the historic confrontations of their parent's generation. At stake are Cuban dignity and sovereignty.<sup>107</sup>

The regime has also more consciously than ever before turned its attention to the use of culture. In part this comes from the recognition that this is contested terrain, where expressions of criticism and dissent have been able to find voice in the disguised language of art, literature and music. But the regime has also recognised the potential power of culture in convincing and binding people to it; or at least of diverting their attention from their problems. Every week, a *Tribuna Abierta* ('Open Tribune') is rotated amongst the island's municipalities, and given national coverage. This provides an opportunity for localities to express their feelings of pride, demonstrate their loyalty to the regime, and provides a showcase for local artistic talent. More generally, popular culture is now made use of as never before, with, for example, public concerts and state sponsorship of popular musical groups (who in return demonstrate their loyalty to the revolution), generalising a practice started in the late-80s and early-90s by the UJC in its bid to increase its relevance amongst young people.<sup>108</sup>

Another means employed by the state has been to seek to address the evident social problems that the country is facing, with the introduction of new institutions aimed at rebridging the gap that has opened up between state and society. Part of this process has been a tendency towards decentralisation, in which not only have municipal and regional governments taken on greater responsibility;<sup>109</sup> but also a new layer of sub-municipal administration was introduced, the *Consejos Populares* (Popular Councils), which were intended to increase the immediate responsiveness of the system to social demands:

...resolved problems are spoken about and all the problems that haven't been resolved, that it is necessary to resolve: whatever point of view about the streets, whatever problem with lighting, whatever social need of the population, whatever public health problem and whatever collective social problem.<sup>110</sup>

More widespread use is now also being made of social workers. Someone involved in the development of such social initiatives in Alamar explained:

Rapidly mechanisms were incremented for the formation of social workers who were more or less prepared to deal with the situation, to get close even to marginal zones of the population, to carry out social investigations, to detect where in the neighbourhoods these people were, to invite them to participate, to include them in projects...<sup>111</sup>

These are related to other initiatives, such as the *Talleres de Transformación Integral* (Workshops of Integrated Transformation) and *Grupos Gestores Comunitarios* (Community

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<sup>107</sup> Blackburn (2000), p.15.

<sup>108</sup> Interview #24, 3 August 2004; Interviews #32 & #33, Alamar, 11 August 2004.

<sup>109</sup> Nelson P. Valdés, 'El estado y la transición en el socialismo: creando nuevos espacios en Cuba', *Temas*, 9 (January-March 1997), pp.102-103.

<sup>110</sup> Interview #41, Alamar, 28 August 2004.

<sup>111</sup> Interview #33, Alamar, 11 August 2004.

Management Groups), which seek to provide a new mechanism by which local needs can be responded to.<sup>112</sup> However, such schemes seem to have had very limited impact in Alamar, and have failed to capture the imagination (or even the knowledge) of the majority. For example, when the president of a local CDR, in a zone where one of the *Talleres* had been operating in Alamar, was asked about this, not only was he unaware of its existence, he became very defensive at the suggestion that such an organisation might exist. Despite these bodies being innovations by the state, he reacted:

Wherever these might exist I am of the opinion that their intention is not to struggle with the Cuban revolution for the well being of the country, rather they are thinking how they might affect the country in one way or another.<sup>113</sup>

This is perhaps partly an indication of how such measures, although aimed at boosting popular engagement, have in fact been introduced in a top-down technocratic manner, rather than coming as a result of state responsiveness to local demands, or even from local initiatives.

A much more promising approach is the embracing of the extension of ‘civil society’ that occurred in the 1990s, with the opening of a “space between the family and the State, that separates the public from the private”.<sup>114</sup> Rather than undermining this tendency, some branches of the state have sought to actively engage with the informal combinations that have emerged, and by so doing effectively include them within a widened conception of the state, tolerating the loss of total control in return for the increased ability to rebind society to the state in new ways:

This refers to the advancement of a ‘social model of human development’ based in the necessities for the positive expression of individual ‘life projects’, and in the articulation of local, institutional and macrosocial projects. This would be a form of development superior to the models of participative societies, based on mechanisms of self-regulated, self-directed and emancipatory social action.<sup>115</sup>

Thus, instead of fighting against the growth of religious activity, the state’s response has been one of dialogue and permissiveness, even allowing the Catholic Church to voice its criticisms (within certain bounds) and assume a role of informal conscience.<sup>116</sup> The church has also been allowed to dispense aid (through Caritas) and provide other social services.<sup>117</sup>

One example of accommodation in Alamar, in the area of culture, is the group of community artists – Omni. Having started out as an alternative movement, Omni has consistently sought to use guerrilla-art tactics to shock a response from state and society, through such actions as staging public discussions on buses; and street performances that are amongst some of the most cutting comments to be found on the reality of life in today’s Cuba. It is a sign of the liberalisation of the cultural sphere that, even though they do get arrested from time to time and clearly displease certain sectors of the state, they are protected by the cultural authorities. The latter have found it more appropriate to accommodate them, even if Omni continues to

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<sup>112</sup> Ovidio D’Angelo Hernández, ‘¿La autogestión local como vía para la transformación social?’, *Temas*, 36 (January-March 2004), p. 56.

<sup>113</sup> Interview #41, Alamar, 28 August 2004.

<sup>114</sup> Rafael Rojas, *El arte de la espera: notas al margen de la política cubana*, Mexico DF: Editorial Colibrí, 1998, p.148. On the emergence of civil society in Cuba, see for example: Rafael Hernández, *Mirar a Cuba: Ensayos sobre cultura y sociedad civil*, Havana: Editorial Letras Cubanas, 1999.

<sup>115</sup> D’Angelo (2002), p.104 – my translation.

<sup>116</sup> See Alonso Tejada (2002).

<sup>117</sup> Interview #14, Alamar, 25 July 2004; interview with Monsignor Polcari, Havana, 22 July 2004.

make them feel uncomfortable. In return for this protection, Omni have likewise shown themselves prepared to compromise, even participating in the *Tribuna Abierta* when it took place in Alamar. The constructive form that this relationship has taken has enabled the regeneration of a utopian impulse, albeit on a small scale, and the belief that there may be a way of rejuvenating the revolution, making it truly of the people once again.<sup>118</sup> One leading member of Omni remarked:

They are looking for a way of perfecting themselves, a way of perfecting the society that surrounds them, a way of changing the existing system of relations so as to try to see if others have better results.<sup>119</sup>

## Conclusion

If “the quality of political action and organisation at the level of the state determines ...the avoidance of collapse”,<sup>120</sup> then Cuba offers an excellent example of the form that such action and organisation can take. Since the 1960s, the Cuban state has been remarkably successful at managing crisis, consciously using this to develop effective state institutions and to accumulate significant levels of political capital. Although the acute crisis of the 1990s led to some reduction in this, the state’s primary attention has never ceased to be a combination of measures aimed at limiting the haemorrhage, maintaining and recuperating popular support and involvement, and preventing the emergence of effective poles of political opposition.

In April 2005, two events coincided. On the 14<sup>th</sup>, the United Nations Human Rights Commission narrowly passed a resolution, promoted by the United States as part of its ongoing determination to portray Cuba as a ‘rogue state’, criticising the Cuban regime for its human rights record: primarily for the country’s alleged lack of democracy and freedom of speech. Three days later, elections were held throughout Cuba for the municipal assemblies, in which almost 97 percent of the electorate participated freely, with candidates requiring more than 50 percent popular support to be elected. These contradictory images of the island and its system reveal what the Cuban regime continues to label the *batalla de ideas* (battle of ideas), being fought on the international arena, in which conflicting conceptions of what constitutes democratic rule and respect for human rights clash. The Cuban regime may have made extensive use of repressive mechanisms to maintain control and does not tolerate dissent. However, it has combined this with a general politicisation of everyday life that seeks to involve the entire population in the ‘struggles’ that the nation is facing; and the Cuban revolution must be praised for its prioritising such basic human rights as health, education and social equality that tend to be demoted to secondary importance by their accusers.

“*Barriga llena, corazón contento*”, goes the popular refrain: a full stomach means a happy heart; and another asserts that “*el amor entra por la cocina*”, love enters through the kitchen. For all that Cuban politics stress the value of sacrifice and national struggle, probably nothing has caused greater strain on the island’s political stability, and popular support for the regime, than the food shortages of the early 90s, and the subsequent rise in the basic cost of living; and no amount of political posturing on the part of the leadership could maintain stability if this fundamental question could not be resolved. Although the Cuban state has till now shown itself to be largely successful at pacifying discontent and neutralising possible opposition, there are considerable dangers for the future of Cuba and the possibility of continuing peace. Although the situation is in some way ameliorated by a combination of remittances with

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<sup>118</sup> Interviews #36 & #37, Alamar, 18 August 2004; Interviews #32 & #33, Alamar, 11 August 2004.

<sup>119</sup> Interview #37, Alamar, 18 August 2004.

<sup>120</sup> Crisis States Research Centre, *Phase II submission to DFID* (February 2005), p.9.

alternative (licit and illicit) sources of income, even die-hard loyalists recognise that the everyday economic situation of the majority of Cubans represents an ongoing crisis, for which no solution has appeared:

If the state doesn't solve the problem, a cyst gets formed. If this cyst isn't cured, then all kinds of pain increase.... Why should I work, if I work for 140 pesos and with that I can't get anything. The state has to balance the selling prices with family income.<sup>121</sup>

Even though the state has been seeking to revitalise its relationship with society, disillusionment now runs very deep, and even though the regime continues to be successful in mobilising a significant section of the population apparently in support of its policies, this support is looking increasingly hollow and simply going through the motions for a variety of motives.

The state is increasingly perceived as distant, all the more since (despite the apparent macro-economic improvements) everyday life continues to be difficult, only now with greater levels of social inequality. The state continues to demand daily sacrifice, in the name of the socialist revolution and defence of the nation, from underpaid workers, while a new economic elite is able to enjoy the fruits of increasing foreign investment and a growing tourist industry. Although the state institutions continue operating as before, they no longer have the same levels of popular participation. Even if the regime is still able to command high levels of popular participation at a national level (when it calls mass demonstrations, or when in 2004 it held a referendum to reaffirm the socialist nature of the revolution), for a system that always had succeeded in institutionalising such participation from the grassroots up, this must be a concern.

Another danger is that, although the political opposition remains largely marginalised, it is showing some signs of improving its popular standing. For perhaps the first time, with the *Proyecto Varela* the opposition has found a campaigning strategy that is succeeding in catching the attention of a growing number of Cubans.<sup>122</sup> That this is so is indicated by the state's response, calling a counter-'referendum' to effectively close off the constitutional 'loophole' that made the *Proyecto Varela* possible and legal. That the leading opposition figure Oswaldo Payá has carefully eschewed possible labelling as a CIA stooge, and seems intent on developing a genuine internal political debate rather than the external-oriented activities of the past, is an indication that in the future the state will not have such an easy time controlling the political opposition. The use of fear to restrict support for the opposition, and of repression to prevent this opposition from organising, may have been effective till now, but its continued use may end up being counterproductive and is clearly contributing to the deepening feeling of disillusion felt by many.

This combination of political disinvestment by many, and an improving opposition, must be a worry for the regime. As Harold Dilla, a leading Cuban social theorist who left the country after the disbandment of the independently minded *Centro de Estudios de las Américas* (CEA), has written:

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<sup>121</sup> Interview #8, Alamar, 21 July 2004.

<sup>122</sup> The *Proyecto Varela* was launched in 2001, and collected signatures in support of a motion to the National Assembly calling for a popular referendum on the changes (in the direction of liberalisation and democratisation) that the opposition was calling for. Four days after the presentation of over 11,000 signatures (the Constitution requires just 10,000 for such motions to be put to the Assembly), former US President James Carter publicly gave his support while on a visit to Havana, much to the regime's discomfort.

The principal concern of the government is not in itself the organised opposition. Its principle anxiety is that the opposition might connect itself to the growing spaces of discontent and demobilisation that today characterise Cuba society.<sup>123</sup>

If it is to succeed in maintaining political stability in the long run, much will depend on the state's ability to take a creative stance, and succeed in widening its scope to permit the inclusion of alternatives. But this will require a significant change of political culture – something that is beginning to be argued by forward-thinking social theorists within Cuba itself, such as Ovidio D'Angelo:

Social life is constructed in two complementary directions: from bottom up, and the reverse. We have known more those paradigms that are established in the second of these directions and, at times, the experiences in the other direction have been carried out in an isolated way, without achieving a real interrelationship between politics and daily life. That should be one of the constructive objectives of the new social order.<sup>124</sup>

But it is not at all clear that there is sufficient political willingness or courage to see this through, at least with the current leadership in the current international climate. However, the recent signing of trade and cooperation pacts with China and Brazil, the very positive relationship with oil-rich Venezuela and its Bolivarian revolution, and the imminent exploitation of previously untapped oil reserves by Cuba itself do give some grounds for hope that future economic improvement may bring with it a political opening. With Fidel Castro now visibly ageing, the question of his succession becomes increasingly prominent in people's minds. On the one hand, there is a sense of waiting and hope that his exit will open up the possibility for change; on the other hand, there are many fears of what will occur, so important has he been for the galvanising of popular support for the revolution.

Meanwhile, in Alamar, the future continues to appear very uncertain. While there can still be found some who cling optimistically to the belief that their government will see them through,<sup>125</sup> the response of others is considerably more sombre:

I believe that whatever happens it's going to be very difficult, and I at least would rather not be here when it happens.<sup>126</sup>

But there are those who, despite living the hard grind of the 'waking nightmare', see the possibility of a brighter future of their own making:

For me, the future of Cuba ...will be to clean the apartment. A mop, a bucket, that is Cuba's future. As I see it, now it's like this: to clean my house.<sup>127</sup>

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<sup>123</sup> Dilla (2003), p.268 – my translation.

<sup>124</sup> D'Angelo (2002), p.104 – my translation. Also D'Angelo (2004).

<sup>125</sup> Interview #24, Alamar, 3 August 2004.

<sup>126</sup> Interview #20, Alamar, 31 July 2004.

<sup>127</sup> Interview #5, Alamar, 17 July 2004.

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### Research Objectives

- We will assess how constellations of power at local, national and global levels drive processes of institutional change, collapse and reconstruction and in doing so will challenge simplistic paradigms about the beneficial effects of economic and political liberalisation.
- We will examine the effects of international interventions promoting democratic reform, human rights and market competition on the 'conflict management capacity' and production and distributional systems of existing polities.
- We will analyse how communities have responded to crisis, and the incentives and moral frameworks that have led either toward violent or non-violent outcomes.
- We will examine what kinds of formal and informal institutional arrangements poor communities have constructed to deal with economic survival and local order.



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