

MICHAEL RIVAS

Cuba's refugees are both economic and political

WRITING ABOUT THE CUBAN Revolution has long been a risky business. Uncritical supporters tend to romanticize the process to the point of perfection. Uncritical opponents will cling to any excuse to avoid acknowledging the accomplishments. And both will jump at a minute's notice on people who, like this



writer, prefer to see ourselves as critical supporters who are ready to both admit the shortcomings and praise the accomplishments. I do not intend to deal here with the whole multifaceted process of the Cuban Revolution. Rather, at this point, I will attempt to shed some light on the matter of the new wave of refugees that has brought some perplexity to people on the left in the U.S.

However many political angles there may be to explore in the story of the current exodus—and there are many, not least of which is the exploitation by both the right-wing press and the White House—I think it more useful to focus on the background to the current situation. Two basic facts are clear beyond discussion: the Cuban government has decided to allow to let go all those who want to leave, and tens of thousands are availing themselves of that opportunity.

It will take time before we have meaningful data on the social composition of this new wave of Cubans, but an informal look at the crowd discovers a lot of elderly people, women, quite a few young people, and even a sprinkling of blacks. Hearing their own descriptions of their life in Cuba it is also obvious that blue collar workers are well represented. It would therefore be foolish to ignore the reality and attempt to explain away this new group of refugees as members of a "privileged class," as was done too indiscriminately with previous refugees. So, what is the source of this discontent and why is it happening now?

To answer these questions requires a look at the government's performance in recent years. The government's economic strategy has been geared, first of all, to building up a basic infrastructure for development (ports, airports, highways, railroads, merchant marine, transportation equipment, communications, construction materials) and to educating the technical corps that will run the economy. Another thrust has been increased mechanization of sugar cane harvesting and the development or expansion of export items, such as seafood, agricultural products and even cement. This emphasis on export over internal consumption is designed to create world markets for Cuban products and to accumulate capital necessary for development. Eventually, the plan contemplates a gradual shift of resources toward the satisfaction of internal resources toward the satisfaction of internal demands at reasonable prices.

Under the well known disruptive conditions imposed by the U.S. economic embargo and the documented CIA attacks of the past, the success of this strategy depends on various factors. These include the continuation of Soviet aid at reasonable terms, the management ability of those involved in planning and implementation at all levels of production, and the willingness of the population to endure sacrifices as well as the inconveniences of shortages, ration books, long lines, and simply improvising or doing without a lot of things. This last factor acquires even more importance because the pay-off for all that effort still seems to be years away. Last, but not necessarily least, luck is also a factor on a short-term basis, because of such unpredictable elements as weather, agri-

culture and animal diseases, and the fluctuations of world market prices.

Although that strategy has been fairly successful in some areas, economic conditions in Cuba in the last year and a half have been especially difficult because of a combination of some of the above factors. Cuba, as we know, was hit hard last fall by hurricane David, and the sugar crop this year was one of the worst in recent years after a period of very low prices for sugar in the world market. The tobacco leaf was also greatly affected by disease. The Cuban economy was therefore struck precisely where it could least afford it since sugar and tobacco remain its two main sources of foreign exchange.

Cuba's economic woes do not end there though. Even after allowing for the disruption created by the U.S. embargo, management of the economy has not been very successful as pointed out by various observers of the revolution through the years and more recently by Cuban government officials themselves. In fact, earlier this year President Fidel Castro replaced the heads of several ministries for that reason. More recently, armed forces minister Raul Castro in a well-publicized speech chastized bad management at all levels and deliberately pointed out that Cubans cannot continue blaming every economic mishap on the U.S. embargo.

After 20 years of revolution, some Cubans, hearing renewed calls to sacrifice for the sake of a better future, have lost patience. Several things have contributed to this. One is that an economy geared for export tends in the long run to create a feeling of alienation among those without access to the fruits of their labor. (Marxists should not be surprised by this, right?) The visits to Cuba of over 120,000 former refugees has also had a big impact. These visitors have advertised their well-being not only by spending a good sum for travel, but also by showering relatives and friends with gifts, and by their sometimes exaggerated descriptions of the life of abundance in the U.S.

The Cuban government has been aware of these problems and has recently moved to alleviate some shortages, particularly of food. They have now developed "free stores" where consumers can buy groceries and other items at higher prices than regular stores but on a first-come-first-served basis. When a given industry surpasses the level of production needed to satisfy the minimum quotas guaranteed to every family, the surplus is made available to the free stores. Another new program allows farmers who still own their land to sell freely in the open market whatever agricultural products they produce over and above their official quotas, which must be sold to government-run enterprises at a set price.

Measures such as these, as well as the recent administrative shake-up will probably be helpful in the long run. However, they are not sufficient in and of themselves to deal with the immediate dissatisfaction of those less committed to the revolution. The expression of that dissatisfaction is often interpreted as counter-revolutionary behavior and thus becomes

a political problem (that, by the way, is not always and probably not even often, official policy, but rather the pressure of fellow workers and neighbors). It should also be pointed out in this regard, that because of ideological or other reasons, the Cuban leadership has not yet allowed room for a political way to channel dissatisfaction and dissent.

To the degree that this is true, and given the fact that political and economic questions cannot be neatly separated, those new refugees can probably make a case for considering themselves political exiles. It is indeed sad that this is happening at a time when the Cuban political system has been involved in a process of political consolidation that is also reducing its level of authoritarianism. This process has included the creation of constitutional structures; delegation of authority from the central government to municipal and provincial levels including the election of many functionaries; the freeing of most political prisoners; and the very act of allowing Cubans from the U.S. to visit the island. Indicative of that better atmosphere, and a real irony at that, was the fact that over 80 percent of those who sought asylum at the Peruvian embassy several weeks ago felt they could trust the government's promises enough to return to their homes safely and wait there till it was time to leave the country.

To do full justice to the situation one must also realize that if the U.S. were to open its doors to the people of any Central or South American country, proceeded to welcome those who came as heroes and then organized all kinds of support mechanisms to help them start their new life here, millions of people would surely

be here overnight. This would be a tempting offer even to poor people of this country as told in jest by Alan Arkin's poignant film of the '60s, *Papi*, about a Puerto Rican father with two children who tried to pass them as Cuban refugees to give them the benefits he couldn't provide.

Regardless of their motivation, the new Cuban refugees will surely miss some very basic human services that no poor Latin American (or North American, for that matter) can take for granted: child care, free universal education, complete health care, full employment, and a virtually crime and drug free society.

In closing I would like to remind the readers that these troubles in Cuban society that help explain the new wave of refugees have been freely and candidly pointed out by Cuban officials themselves. In light of those facts, the task for the left in the U.S. is to avoid spending any kind of energy in animosity toward the refugees but rather to renew efforts, in what has to be an extremely difficult political year, to end the U.S. embargo as well as other acts of hostility against Cuba. One would hope that if such policies that still so significantly distort the Cuban economic and political system are ended, the Cuban government will be able substantially to improve the economic situation and eventually allow the political system to deal with dissatisfaction in a more creative, less divisive manner.

■ *Michael Germinal Rivas emigrated from Cuba in the 1960s. He is coordinator of the Hispanic Affairs commission of the DSOC and a national vice-chair. He has visited Cuba frequently in recent years.*

CALENDAR

Use the calendar to announce conferences, lectures, films, events, etc. The cost is \$20.00 for two insertions and \$10.00 for each additional insert, for copy of 40 words or less (additional words are 35¢ each). Payment must accompany your announcement, and should be sent to the attention of Bill Rehm.

May 30/Gary, IN

The Citizens Party invites you to an evening with vice-presidential candidate **LaDonna Harris** and chairman of State of Illinois' Citizens Party **Quentin Young**. Friday at 8:30 p.m. at Susse Chalte on U.S. Highway 20. Admission is free. For more information call: (219) 938-0429.

May 31/Chicago, IL

Erwin Knoll, editor of *The Progressive*, and **John H.F. Shattuck**, ACLU Director/ Washington DC, will speak on "The Civil Liberties Connection in the 80's: Nuclear Power, the Draft and the CIA," at the Annual Spring Supper of the Chicago Committee to Defend the Bill of Rights, at De Paul University, 2324 N. Seminary. Admission is \$10.00. For more information call (312) 939-0675.

June 1/Santa Monica, CA

A book party will be held for **Derek Shearer**, co-author of *Economic Democracy—The Challenge of the 1980s*, from 2 p.m. to 5 p.m. at the Bookshop in Ocean Park, 212 Pier Ave. For information or directions call: 396-3659.

June 3/Long Island, NY

Jack Everett Defense Fund Benefit Concert. Formerly a construction worker at the Shoreham nuke, Jack lost his job for publicly testifying to defects. **Guy Davis, Kate Rotolo, and Pete Seeger** will make music to raise funds for Jack's court battle for a worker's right to speak out. 7:30 p.m. Tuesday, Suffolk Theater, Riverhead. \$5.00. Tickets and information: Shoreham Defense Committee, 3 Highland Road, Glen Cove, NY 11542.

June 7/Philadelphia, PA

The Caribbean: U.S. Policy and Self-Determination. Workshops on Jamaica, Puerto Rico and Vieques,

Haiti, Cuba and Grenada and U.S. military and economic strategy. A public seminar co-sponsored by Friends Peace Committee and American Friends Service Committee. From 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. at Fourth and Arch Streets. Call (215) 241-7230.

June 8/San Francisco, CA

Modern Times Bookstore sponsors a forum on "Politics and the Media" by authors **Laurence Shoup** and **Todd Gitlin**. They will speak on "The Establishment Media and the 1980 Elections: The Case of John B. Anderson" and "The Media and the Left." Sunday at New College, 777 Valencia St., 7:30 p.m. Admission free. Information: (415) 621-2675.

June 11/Chicago, IL

Economic Democracy. A book party and reception for **Derek Shearer**, co-author of *Economic Democracy—The Challenge of the 1980s*, will be held from 5:30 to 8:00 p.m. at the Midwest Academy, 600 W. Fullerton, (Tel. 975-3670). Copies of the book will be available and the author will give a short talk. Co-hosted by the Midwest Academy and IN THESE TIMES.

June 13-15/Stephentown, NY

Berkshire Forum presents: "Nutrition: Science, Myth, Politics," with **Marcella Katz** and **Patricia Wolman**. For full schedule of weekend vacation workshops, call or write: Berkshire Forum, Stepentown, NY 12168, (518) 733-5497.

June 19-21/New York, NY

Intellectual Labor and Class Struggle, will be the theme of the **Marxist Union Conference** at New York University. The conference will have many speakers and workshops of interest to Marxists. Registration begins at 7:30 p.m. at Schimmel Auditorium in the Tisch Building, 40 W. 4th Street.

July 19-26/Lake Winnepesaukee, NH

Avon Institute—a gathering focused on the issues of the '80s, sponsored by American Friends Service Committee. Resource persons include: civil rights activist **Bob Moses**, labor lawyer **Staughton Lynd**, South African woman exile **Motlalepula Chabaku** and artist **Fritz Eichenberg**. Special children's program. Brochure from: A.F.S.C., 2161 Massachusetts Ave., Cambridge, MA 02140.

ROBERTA LYNCH

Women writers are taking today's rare creative risks

AT THE RISK OF REVEALING my carefully suppressed streak of female chauvinism, I have to say that I am increasingly convinced that much of our most important contemporary fiction is being produced by women writers. It is in their ranks that one finds a sense of moral purpose combined with a willingness to take creative risks that is all too rare today. It is not surprising, then, that a small but growing number of female authors are taking on the challenge of writing what may be one of the most suspect genres in the literary canon—the political novel. (In some ways I believe that all fiction is “political” to one degree or another, but some is more deliberately so in its intent.)

There are few artistic feats more difficult to pull off than this conscious merger of political ideas and fictional form. Beyond the perennial threat of the scorn of the critical establishment, there is the far greater jeopardy of compromising one's own aesthetic or ideological integrity by sacrificing one aspect to the other.

Yet three women have recently published political novels that are receiving considerable popular and critical acclaim: *Vida* by Marge Piercy; *The Bleeding Heart* by Marilyn French; *Burger's Daughter* by Nadine Gordimer.

Each of these books in its own way represents a courageous attempt to strip away the lies and half-truths that gird an oppressive social order. Yet to praise the bravery of the undertakings should not require uncritical applause for the results. Just as the authors have to be willing to mine their own experiences in order to shape such stories, so we have to be able to speak of the ways in which their ef-



forts succeed or fail in illuminating our own lives. For it is only through such a process that we can begin to create a body of political fiction that is rooted in personal and social truth.

Vida is a rich and industrious book. It describes the development of Vida Asch, '60s political activist and '70s underground radical in intricate and intimate detail. By interweaving a focus on the process of her political growth with an exploration of her personal relationships, the book traces the emergence of a feminist consciousness in all its complex and intense moments.

As with much of Piercy's work, *Vida* is immensely readable. In its attempt sympathetically to unravel the tangled strands that led privileged young people to choose the lives of social outcasts, it provides a valuable social chronicle. And in its diligent concern for the values of collectivity and connectedness, it offers a critique of the fierce individualism that dominates our culture.

But ultimately there is an emptiness at the center of this book—a failure fully to integrate the political ideas or to create characters that have a vitality in their own right. One critic comments: “Her lovers represent the various attitudes and factions of the movement itself.”

They do. In fact, everyone in this book

seemed to represent something. And for me that's the problem. I couldn't care very much about these characters. Only in occasional flashes do they engage. Mostly they drift from page to page, carriers of ideas, but lacking some essential spark.

Piercy's portrayal of “the movement”—meant to be a frank depiction of its weaknesses and its strengths, I'm sure—ends up being disturbingly narrow in its political grasp. She seems to suggest that the only roads taken in the last decade were either the moderated extremism of neo-Weatherman politics or the pseudo-radicalism of those who sold out to careers or comfort.

To those who weren't there the book will seem as much history as novel—and the result is that in *Vida* a partial truth comes dangerously close to being presented as the whole picture. Or in the words of the *New York Times* critic Elinor Langer: “Marge Piercy tells us exactly how it was in the lofts of the left as the '60s turned into the '70s... This is the way everybody sounded... This is the way everybody behaved...” (emphasis mine).

The Bleeding Heart is the story of Dolores and Victor, Americans who meet in England and become entangled in a year-long odyssey of emotional discovery. Dolores is a college professor; Victor, a businessman. Both are in their forties and both are the scarred survivors of bad marriages. Their involvement is shaped by Dolores' attempt to understand female history—the sources and the depth of the differences and divisions between men and women.

It is hard not to feel a certain admiration for the risks that French takes in this work.

Heart dares to expose what happens when women refuse to play games any longer or rely on traditional female wiles to get their way in relationships. (And in so doing it exposes how many relationships still operate on those terms.)

Dolores insists on knowing her own needs and asserting them—even at the cost of appearing those worst of female pejoratives: a bitch or a nag. And by portraying Victor as a sensitive and caring man who still simply assumes his own power and uses it, *Heart* presents a vivid picture of the radically different concerns and expectations that men and women bring to relationships.

Despite my respect for French's determination to lay bare these underlying realities, whatever the price, I still felt that in the end *The Bleeding Heart* leaves us too narrow a sense not of men, but of women and their potential for change. French recognizes that it is women who live much more directly inside the relationship. Yet she seems only to want men to join them in that intensity. She never seriously looks at the possibility that part of the transformation of these inequalities might involve women shifting their energies more into the world.

It is this intensely inward focus that makes *The Bleeding Heart* a bleak book. There is no women's movement, no network of friends, no concrete sense of the ways in which Dolores is part of something larger than herself. Without this, it is more about pessimism than about possibilities. In essence, a novel that was supposed to start where *The Women's Room* left off also ends where it left off—with a solitary woman—one with little human connection—facing down history.

Burger's Daughter, on the other hand, is thick with insight into the nature of lives lived in acute awareness of this connection. Rosa Burger is the daughter of the most prominent white Communist in South Africa. At his death she begins to question the political commitment that shaped their lives. Locked within her family history—and the consequent oppression by the state and assumptions by political comrades—Rosa attempts to live a “normal” life. Eventually she goes to Europe seeking some final escape from the claims of the past—only to discover that the present has claims of its own.

I have to confess that I am in awe of writing about this book. It is such a remarkable achievement that the standard words of praise seem simply to graze its surface.

Gordimer is an author of rare gifts.

Her style is at once intensely poetic and brilliantly incisive. It is difficult to open to a single page without falling upon a sentence that strikes to the heart of an idea or an emotion. (Take for instance her description of political clichés: “They are an attempt to habituate ordinary communication to overwhelming meanings in human existence.... They become enormous lies incarcerating enormous truths, still extant, somewhere.”)

Gordimer never lectures or harangues. Yet she manages to evoke with immense power the reality of a poisoned social order. She calls up its pain and its terror through incidents and images that can chill the soul.

Although *Burger's Daughter* is the story of deeply political people, it is not the accounts of their activities or ideological struggles that place this book in the ranks of the truly great political novels. It is rather its willingness to hold their most basic beliefs and their underlying motivations up to careful scrutiny and by this route to arrive at an awareness of the essential impulse that must be at the source of any genuinely liberatory political philosophy—the lived recognition that each of us is a social being, bound to each other by a complex web of history, custom and destiny.

This is not the story then of how a woman becomes “political” but of how she becomes a fuller human being.

I know it is often unfair to make comparisons, but I read these three novels on the heels of one another and it was impossible to avoid seeing the weaknesses of the first two in the light of the strengths of the third.

Vida and *The Bleeding Heart* each clearly has as its intent the creation of a feminist character who can illustrate the changing role and potential of women. *Burger's Daughter* does not offer this kind of direct identification with feminist issues at all. Yet there is a sense in which the latter is a much more radically feminist work.

For, in essence, both *Vida* and *Bleeding Heart* are locked within traditional female concerns. The overriding element in these books is precisely what has always dominated women's fiction—the obsession with love. To the extent that *Vida* and Dolores seek freedom, it is not so much an active projection into the world as it is an attempt to escape from the bonds of emotional attachment. Whatever other elements may be present—and in *Vida* there are several—this is the primary tension at the center of these works.

For Rosa, the issues are much larger. In fact, they are the ones that literature has traditionally defined as the profound questions of human existence—and then reserved for men in their actualization. They have to do with understanding one's place in the world, one's connection with others, and the meaning of selfhood.

It is the tension produced by this search for meaning that enlivens *Burger's Daughter* and that allows Rosa to emerge as a distinctly complex and autonomous female character.

Finally, the differing qualities of these books illustrate that the political novel cannot be judged on whether it presents the “right” ideas. It is rather a matter of the extent to which it touches the reader in a way that reaches the core at which we are all political beings.

In *Vida* and *The Bleeding Heart*, the politics still seem strangely extraneous to the essence of the characters and the story. Though there is no doubting the authors' passion or commitment to their ideals, they remain unable to communicate them in a way that helps to shape a collective vision.

Burger's Daughter is such an extraordinary work because it does just that: it offers us a new way of seeing, a gift of lucidity and compassion. It approaches *One Hundred Years of Solitude* in that rare ability to so merge politics and art that they no longer seem dual elements, but an altogether different form—one that ineluctably takes the part of our humanity and affirms our potential to re-make our lives.

Robert Lynch is a member of the New American Movement, a democratic socialist organization.

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