

# **Rainbow Cuba**

**The sexual revolution within  
the revolution**

**Rachel Evans**

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# Introduction

The revolution in Cuba bought hope for people suffering from a legacy of colonial and imperialist domination. A wave of people's power against the dictator, Fulgencio Batista, culminated in a general strike on January 1, 1959. A new chapter in dignity opened up for the small Caribbean island. Landless peasants were granted soil to till and city dwelling toilers granted homes, almost rent free. Copper mines, agricultural, telecommunication and electricity firms run by foreign companies were nationalised by the new Cuban government. With resources returned to the country, wages increased for many workers, and health care and education were provided free. The revolution lifted the mass of Cubans out of poverty and gave them a political voice. Decisions previously made in homes and parlours of the rich were now made in mass assemblies of workers and peasants in city plazas.

After the revolution, women and Afro-Cubans were granted equality in law and measures to advance their status were implemented by the new state. Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) people did not fare so well in this anti-imperialist renaissance. While the uprising benefited the vast majority of Cubans, some early revolutionary government policies reflected the weight of Spanish and US colonial baggage, and discriminated against LGBTI people. These practices and laws began to be removed from the 1970s onwards. Today, Cuba is more advanced in LGBTI rights than many global South nations and, I contend, than many global North countries. In a comparative study in this pamphlet Australia and the US fall behind Cuba's LGBTI record on many fronts.

Cuba's revolution took place 145 kilometres off the US coast of Miami. The nationalisation by Cuba of industrial and agrarian enterprises owned by US citizens drew the ire of the world's most powerful and militarised nation. The US government attacked the revolution militarily, economically and through a disinformation campaign.

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Claims that the Cuban government is undemocratic, repressive and homophobic continue to be propagated by opponents of the socialist government.

This essay will examine claims that the Cuban Revolution was extremely homophobic and remains so. It will do so first by exploring the history of Cuban LGBTI life. It will examine the conditions for the community before the revolution — during the Spanish colonial occupation of Cuba — and the subsequent US ‘sexploitation’ from the early 1900s. Secondly, the research will assess the nature of the Cuban Revolution and the homophobic pressures on it from the US and the United Soviet Socialist Republic (USSR). Three specific phases of Cuban government policy identified as homophobic will be examined. These are the incarceration of homosexuals in “military units to aid production” (UMAPs) between 1965 and 1968, the alleged mass exodus of homosexuals from Cuba in the 1981 Mariel boatlift and the alleged targeting of homosexuals for involuntary treatment for HIV care in health sanatoriums. A study of Cuba’s homophobic laws will also feature.

Finally, this essay will explore the way in which changes in Cuba have led to its very good international position in terms of transgender rights, same-sex sex education, HIV treatment, cultural LGBTI expression and formal legal equality. This study reveals there is no reference to homosexuality in Cuba’s criminal codes, but that two institutional barriers remain for LGBTI Cubans — access to the military and same-sex marriage rights. As a leading Cuban sexual rights organization, the Centre for Sexual Education (CENESEX) says, work still remains to be done to eliminate homophobic and transphobic ideas and barriers for the LGBTI community in Cuba.

This research is a study of same-sex attracted and gender variant/sex and gender diverse peoples. “LGBTI” and “sex and gender diverse” are the accepted terms to describe this group in Australia. In the US, “gender variant” is used to describe transgender, transsexual, cross-dressing and intersex people. Within Cuba, this community is referred to as “LGBT”. In this report I will use LGBTI people, gender variant, and sex and gender diverse interchangeably.

# 1. Cuba's Colonial History

## Feudal Spain's homophobia & transphobia

As a class-divided system, feudalism was the first state structure to actively and voraciously repress sexual nonconformists. State repression of gender variance and homosexuality developed in conjunction with class society. Class society promoted private property, the state and the monogamous family unit, and criminalised the LGBTI community and subjugated women.<sup>1</sup> Feudal Spain's homophobia was codified in 13th century Castile law, which punished same-sex sexual practices with castration and stoning.<sup>2</sup>

Spain's anti-gay stance hardened with the Spanish Inquisition, launched by Pope Sixtus IV in October 1483. The Inquisition was born out of the war to drive the Moors off the Iberian Peninsula.<sup>3</sup>

[It] targeted nonconformists with savagery. Since the Moors tolerated a greater degree of homosexual expression, anal sex came to be seen as a Moorish perversion that needed to be expunged from Spanish society. "Sodomites" were burned to death for their sins.<sup>4</sup>

The Inquisition prosecuted thousands.

Records from three cities — Barcelona, Valencia and Sargossa — show 1600 convictions between 1560 and 1640. A fourth city, Seville, burned 70 people for sodomy between 1567-1616.<sup>5</sup>

The Spanish occupation of Latin America and the Caribbean included a war against the sexual nonconformists in that region. Before Spanish invasion, Indigenous Latin America and the Caribbean were sexually diverse, and tolerant of same-sex relationships and cross-dressing. According to the *Queer Heritage* timeline:

In 1551, Portuguese missionary Father Pero Correia, writing from Brazil, asserts that same-sex eroticism among indigenous women is quite common, in fact as widespread as in Africa, where he was previously stationed. Native Brazilian women, he observes, carry weapons and even form same-sex marriages.<sup>6</sup>

Cuba was invaded and claimed as a Spanish colony in 1492.<sup>7</sup> Its inhabitants suffered

the same punishment for sodomy as the Spaniards did themselves. Latin sexuality writer Max Mejía notes:

The conquerors treated “sodomy” as a special Indian sin and hunted it down and punished it as such on a grand scale. They orchestrated crusades like the Holy Inquisition, which began burning sodomites at the stake as a special occasion, as in the memorable auto-da-fé of San Lázaro in Mexico City.<sup>8</sup>

*Queer Heritage*’s timeline comments:

During Vasco Núñez de Balboa’s colonial expedition across Panama he saw men dressed like women; Balboa learnt that they were sodomites and threw the king and 40 others to be eaten by his dogs, a fine action of an honourable and Catholic Spaniard.<sup>9</sup>

## Cuba under Spanish rule

In Cuba, the Indigenous people were massacred by the Spanish and forced into slavery. Over a period of a few hundred years, the majority of Cuba’s Indigenous people were wiped out.<sup>10</sup> Colonial Spain targeted Cuba’s sexual nonconformists for particularly vile punishment. Spanish colonial authorities in Cuba castrated those they considered sodomites and forced them to eat their own testicles coated with dirt.<sup>11</sup> Inspired by José Martí, the second war of independence in 1895 broke Spanish rule. A different colonial power stepped into its place. In 1898, the US intervened under the guise of helping the independence fighters. A year later, a military government was established headed by a US general.<sup>12</sup>

## US control of Cuba

From 1898 to 1959, Cuba was a US neo-colony:

US corporations controlled 40% of sugar production, 75% of arable land ... they owned 50% of the railways, 100% of the oil refineries and 90% of cattle ranchers. US banks held more than a quarter of bank deposits.<sup>13</sup>

In addition to providing cheap natural resources to the US, Cuba was also a holiday resort for the rich and powerful in the US. As a US playground, the Cuban prostitution industry — both heterosexual and gay — expanded. The nature of US exploitation of the island developed into an explicitly sexual one. Throughout the neo-colonial period, homosexuality remained illegal in Cuba. The 1938 Penal Code was based on Spanish laws and remained in force until 1979. It penalised “habitual homosexual acts, homosexual molestation, scandalous, indecent behaviour, [and] ostentatious displays of homosexuality in public”.<sup>14</sup> The legal prohibition on homosexuality did not suppress the homosexual prostitution industry, but it did criminalise sex workers.

Lourdes Arguelles, a Cuban who regularly travels to Cuba from the US, in

collaboration with B. Ruby Rich, conducted research on the experiences of lesbians and gay men within Cuban émigré enclaves in the US, Puerto Rico, Mexico and Spain between 1979 and 1984.<sup>15</sup> They note:

The only occupational sector (prior to the 1959 revolution) showing substantial growth was that connected to tourism, drug distribution, gambling and prostitution. This sector was mostly controlled by American organised crime and members of an indigenous bourgeoisie directly linked to Batista's political apparatus.<sup>16</sup>

This industry employed more than 200,000 workers as petty traders, casino operators, entertainers, servants and prostitutes. Leonardo Hechavarría and Marcel Hatch, in a 2001 movie review of *Before Night Falls*, note that, before 1959:

Life for lesbians and gays was one of extreme isolation and repression, enforced by civil law, augmented by Catholic dogma. Patriarchal attitudes made lesbians invisible. If discovered, they'd often suffer sexual abuse, disgrace in the community and job loss. Havana's gay male underground — some 200,000 — was a purgatory of prostitution to American tourists, domestic servitude and constant threats of violence and blackmail. The closet was the operative image. Survival often meant engaging in fake heterosexual marriage, or banishment to the gay slum. Existence for queers in Cuba paralleled that of other countries.<sup>17</sup>

Arguelles and Rich elaborate:

Havana of the 1950 ... was not easy for the working-class or petty-bourgeois homosexual. Unemployment was high and had been steadily increasing throughout the decade. The scarcity of productive occupations demanded a strictly closeted occupational life. For all women and especially for lesbians, employment almost invariably entailed continual sexual harassment.<sup>18</sup>

Under US domination, machismo “an arrogance towards the needs of women and a celebration of male virility” exacerbated anti-gay sentiment.

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## Notes

1. Brewer, 2008, p. 5. 2. *Encyclopaedia of GLBTQ Culture*, 2004, paragraph 2. 3. Cline, 2004, paragraph 1. 4. Lumsden, 1991, p. 16. 5. Baird, 2001, p. 58. 6. *Queer Heritage*, paragraph 6. 7. Slee, 2008, p. 4. 8. Feinberg, 2007b, paragraph 4. 9. *Queer Heritage*, paragraph 8. 10. Slee, p. 4. 11. Feinberg, paragraph 6. 12. Slee, p. 5. 13. Saney, 2004, p. 9. 14. Bjorklund, 2000, paragraph 7. 15. Arguelles & Rich, 1984, p.1. 16. *Ibid.*, p. 688. 17. Hechavarría & Hatch, 2001, paragraph 12. 18. Arguelles & Rich, p. 688.

## 2. The Cuban Revolution

### Cuba throws out US domination

Cuban subservience to the US was broken with a mass uprising on the January 1, 1959, against President Fulgencio Batista. Batista, who seized power in a military coup on March 10, 1952, operated as the “steward of sugar barons, banks, gambling syndicates and the great corporate interests of North America”.<sup>1</sup> Batista was brutal and answered any opposition with assassination, breaking strikes with machine-gun fire and using repression against the Cuban people to maintain the massive exploitation of sugar workers, farmers and women.<sup>2</sup>

Batista’s regime killed an estimated 20,000 Cubans.<sup>3</sup> The general strike that unseated the dictator had its origins in 1953, when the July 26 Movement (J26M) — a small group of revolutionary guerrillas — attacked the Moncada Barracks in Santiago, the eastern headquarters of the military dictatorship.<sup>4</sup>

Fidel Castro was one of few who survived the failed attack and was put on trial. He delivered his now famous “History will absolve me” speech in the courtroom and inspired the nation to fight its neocolonial oppressors. From 1954 to 1959, in liberated areas where imperialist class interests and national capitalists subservient to US interests had been expelled by the J26M and their supporters, democratic institutions flourished. There were aims to eradicate illiteracy in these areas. August Arnold, author of *Democracy in Cuba and the 1997-98 Elections*, noted:

The liberated areas, known as Territorio Libre de Cuba, were not liberated only in the sense that it pushed the neo-colonial army out. They were liberated because they started to adopt new laws and to build new political, economic and social/political structures in place of the old ones ... objectives were to assure the economic, social, and other rights of the citizen, working out the orientation and stimulation of industry, farming, and road improvement as well as the construction of offices and schools.<sup>5</sup>

LGBTI Cubans were involved in the fight against Batista. Transsexuals fought alongside other guerrilla fighters.<sup>6</sup>

The revolution consolidated political and economic power in the hands of Cuban



toilers, and took it away from the US. “Lands larger than 1,000 acres ... were nationalised with compensation,” noted author August Arnold.

Between August and October 1960, 41% of land was expropriated, 95% of industry was nationalised, 98% of construction, 95% of transport, 75% of retail and 100% of wholesale trade.<sup>7</sup>

With wealth in the hands of the Cuban people, the social wage increased dramatically. The revolution instituted free education, free health care, and cheap housing and public transport. A summary of advances from the revolution until 1999 is recounted in *The Cuban Revolution: Defying Imperialism, Building the Alternative*:

Infant mortality has fallen from over 60 to 6.4% for every 1000 live births, life expectancy has increased by over 20 years to reach 74 years for men and 76 years for women, illiteracy has fallen from more than 40% to 3.8% ... Housing rents, which used to absorb over 50% of income, have disappeared with most homes now being owned by their occupants, unemployment has fallen to below 5%.<sup>8</sup>

Mass participation, contrary to myths about the Cuban Revolution propagated by the Western media, was a key feature of the revolution. After the revolution mass assemblies of up to a million and a half people, were held in Cuban town plazas and made decisions on the revolution.

At one point in the mass meetings, Fidel Castro himself introduced the possibility of holding elections, and the proposal was actually booed down by the people attending the mass rally.<sup>9</sup>

Arnold explains: “In the minds of the people, elections were associated with the neocolonial regime’s multi-party system or the even more fraudulent elections under the open dictatorship, the last of which took place in 1958”.<sup>10</sup> At a million-strong Havana Declaration Assembly in 1960, “according to the University of Texas Castro Speech Data Base ... the people spontaneously chanted for over seven minutes against the holding of elections”.<sup>11</sup>

Democratic structures in Cuba were consolidated and formalised, shifting from general assemblies and “committees in defence of the revolution” (CDRs) into “organs of people’s power” between 1974 and 1976:

Representative institutions of workers democracy were created on the local, provincial and national levels ... These are not legislative bodies on the parliamentary model, but working bodies that combine legislative and administrative functions.<sup>12</sup>

This flowering of democracy within the revolutionary process included an expansion of civil and democratic rights that benefited black Cubans and women. Before the revolution, at least a one-third of Cuba’s population was of African descent, yet blacks were banned from many clubs, bars, restaurants, movie theatres and beaches. After

the revolution, all laws discriminating against blacks were removed.<sup>13</sup> Women's rights were enshrined from January 1959. Women won near full equality under the law, including pay equity, the right to child care, abortion and to do military service. A number of lesbians benefited from these programs.<sup>14</sup> Many LGBTI people, on the bottom of the economic and social strata under Batista, benefited from the revolution's redistribution of wealth. The mafia-controlled prostitution trade was broken. A massive productive period for the Cuban economy began, democratic participation for the mass of Cubans thrived, and the rights of Afro-Cubans and women flourished.

But civil rights for LGBTI people were not expanded at the beginning of the revolution, as were women's rights and those of Afro-Cubans. Arguelles and Rich note:

The revolution of 1959 eradicated the Havana underworld and initiated the development of a productive economy ... At the same time, the revolutionary leadership rallied against the evils of capitalist "vice" which were often associated with homosexuality.<sup>15</sup>

## Material basis for homophobia & bigotry towards gender variance

Raising children — the next generation of workers — is an expensive business. If capitalists were forced to pay for raising children, including childcare, food halls and cleaning, this expense would eat into their profits. Capitalists, and the state that supports them, avoid this responsibility by perpetuating the idea that individual men, and particularly individual women, have a "natural" responsibility for raising their children within individual family units. This is the material basis for women's oppression in capitalist society.

Class society distorts all human relationships by transforming social interaction into relationships between property owners. Children become primarily heirs and property.

Women are reduced to the status of breeding machines and domestic slaves.<sup>16</sup>

Analogous to the sexist idea of women's "natural" and primary role as child-bearers and carers is the homophobic idea of fixed ("natural") male and female reproductive roles. Men who have sex with men and women who have sex with women challenge this ideology and suffer from the homophobic idea that such sexual and emotional relations are unnatural, deviant and/or immoral. As author Sherry Wolf explains, LGBTI oppression, like women's oppression:

... is tied to the centrality of the nuclear family as one of capitalism's means to both inculcate gender norms and outsource care for the current and future generations of workers at little cost to the state. In addition, the oppression of LGBT people under capitalism, like racism and sexism, serves to divide working-class people from one

another, especially in their battles for economic and social justice.<sup>17</sup>

Furthermore, “the persecution of homosexual behaviour arose as a by-product of oppression of women, as a result of the need to portray the family as ‘natural’ and inevitable”.<sup>18</sup>

LGBTI oppression in Cuba has to be contextualised. The island endured 500 years of Spanish subjugation and half a century of US pillaging. Guaranteeing economic independence for women — with the flow-on benefits for the LGBTI community — was not an easy task. Resources were diverted into surviving imperialist attacks,<sup>19</sup> including the Playa Giron (Bay of Pigs) invasion in 1961, the nuclear threat against the island in the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis, at least 634 assassination attempts on President Fidel Castro<sup>20</sup> and the world’s harshest economic blockade. The US commercial, economic and financial embargo against the Cuban government, established in February 1962, has inflicted an estimated cost of more than US\$79 billion for Cuba.<sup>21</sup> The new revolutionary state’s inability to rapidly socialise women’s work within the home (raising children, cooking, cleaning, caring for the elderly) meant that the structural basis of women’s oppression and homophobia remained.

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## Notes

1. Hickson, 1996, paragraph 2. 2. *Ibid.*, paragraph 3. 3. Revolutionary Museum, Havana, 2009.
4. Hickson, paragraph 4. 5. Arnold, 1999, pp. 164-165. 6. Motley, 2005, paragraph 5. 7. Arnold, p. 174. 8. Democratic Socialist Party, 2005, p. 37. 9. Arnold, p. 184. 10. *Ibid.*, p. 185.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 197. 12. Lorimer, 2000, p. 39. 13. Spencer, 2000, p. 15. 14. Hechavarria & Hatch, 2001, paragraph 14. 15. Arguelles & Rich, 1984, p. 690. 16. Brewer, 2008, p. 6. 17. Wolf, 2009, pp.19-20. 18. Brewer, 2008, p. 6. 19. Harnecker, 1979, p. xvi. 20. Butler, 2008, paragraph 1. 21. DSP, p. 4.

## 3. Vehemently Homophobic?

In 1999, the United States Bureau of Citizenship and Immigration Services produced a report titled *Cuba: Status of Homosexuals*, which argued:

Freedom for Cuban gays and lesbians continued to be limited. Gay social life remained discreetly centred around private parties in people's homes and there are no openly gay bars ... Moreover, social intolerance remains widespread, particularly outside the capital of Havana, stemming from the strong strain of machismo in Cuban cultural which had reinforced by decades of government persecution. As a result, many gays and lesbians continue to fear being identified as openly gay either at home or in the workplace.<sup>1</sup>

The US government's critique of gay rights in Cuba is hypocritical. Before 2003, 14 states in the US held that sodomy was a crime. Until 2003, the felony of sodomy in Michigan was punishable by 15 years in jail for the first conviction and life imprisonment for the second conviction.<sup>2</sup> In comparison Cuba removed homosexual acts from the Penal Code in 1979, while keeping "ostentatious displays of homosexuality" on the books and "homosexual acts in public places".<sup>3</sup> Homosexual behavior still suffered minor legal restrictions until the 1990s,<sup>4</sup> with public scandal laws remaining on the books until 1997.<sup>5</sup> As of 2010, there was no reference to the homosexuality in the Cuban Penal Code.

US government criticism of Cuba's treatment of its LGBTI community is parroted by some LGBTI commentators, including some socialists. Gay activist Peter Tatchell incorrectly condemns Cuba in a 2002 article, stating, "in the name of the new socialist morality, homosexuality was declared illegal in Cuba and typically punishable by four years imprisonment".<sup>6</sup> Cuba's new revolutionary government did not institute new anti-homosexual laws; it inherited the 1938 Penal Code from the Spanish. What was introduced by the First National Congress of Education and Culture in 1971 was a "policy of parameters", which people were to meet to gain employment.<sup>7</sup> This, and a decree at the congress that "no homosexual shall represent Cuba",<sup>8</sup> discriminated against LGBTI Cubans. The decree was rescinded two years later in court.<sup>9</sup>

"The Castro regime has been ferociously anti-gay", exclaims Dale Carpenter in

*Outright*, an online gay magazine. Agustin Blazquez compares the Cuban government's treatment of gay and lesbians to life under fascism:

Many naïve gay[s] and lesbians, as well as members of the US media ... return praising the open gay life on the island. I marvel at their "observations". It reminds me of the many American tourists and reporters who visited Hitler's Germany and failed to see the horrible reality of the Nazis.<sup>10</sup>

In *International Socialist Review (ISR)*, Paul D'Amato argues that homosexuals were better off under the US-backed dictatorship of Batista. "While there was terrible anti-gay discrimination in Cuban society before the revolution, homosexuality was never an issue (positively or negatively) of government policy. Only after the revolution did it become a matter of state policy — for the worse."<sup>11</sup> Moreover, argues Hector Reyes, also in *ISR*, anti-gay laws indicate that Cuba's revolution is not socialist:

If socialism is about the liberation of all humanity, why did it take the PCC [Cuban Communist Party — Spanish spelling] until 1987 — nearly 30 years after the revolution — to remove the law penalising public homosexual behaviour, which had been in effect since 1938 when Batista ruled the country? The answer again is that the Cuban regime has nothing to do with socialism. A nationalist armed uprising is not a socialist revolution.<sup>12</sup>

The Cuban government did send homosexuals, Jehovah's Witnesses and Seventh Day Adventists to "military units to assist production" (UMAPs), or labour camps<sup>13</sup> from 1963-1968, but in a context of militarisation against a feared US invasion. This will be discussed in the next chapter. The other charges against Cuba have no basis. Opponents of the Cuban Revolution do not balance their analysis with an acknowledgement of significant rectifications that took place from the late 1970s. The International Lesbian and Gay Association's Latin American representatives' March 2003 report on Cuba states: "Sexual minorities seem to be living better times now in Cuba. In the medium term, even better than the rest of Latin America."<sup>14</sup>

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## Notes

1. United States Bureau of Citizenship and Immigration Services, 1999, paragraph 4
2. Wikimedia Foundation, 2010, paragraph 6
3. Bjorklund, 2000, paragraph 10
4. Arreola, 2006, paragraph 11
5. López-Trigo, 2011
6. Tatchell, 2002, paragraph 5
7. Arguelles & Rich, 1984, p. 695
8. Hechavarría & Hatch, 2001, paragraph 17
9. *Ibid.*, paragraph 17
10. Blazquez & Sutton, 2007, paragraph 12
11. D'Amato 2007, paragraph 54
12. Reyes, 2000, paragraph 6
13. Carpenter, 2001, paragraph 3
14. Sanchez, 2004, paragraph 12

## 4. Militarism & Homophobia

The US tried to undermine the Cuban Revolution. The economic blockade was one tactic, but the US also trained an invasion force of right-wing Cuban exiles. The exiles were taken to the Cuban coast with US ships where, in April 1961, they tried to invade Cuba at Playa Giron.<sup>1</sup>

Arguelles and Rich note that, after the 1961 invasion:

Realistic fears and objective dangers gave rise to paranoia and (as in the McCarthy years here) anyone who was “different” fell under suspicion. Homosexual bars and La Rampa cruising areas were perceived, in some cases correctly, as centers of counter-revolutionary activities and began to be systematically treated as such ... In this climate of post-invasion paranoia, private space was invaded as never before. Not surprisingly, deep suspicion came to dominate the everyday life of Cuban lesbians and male homosexuals — a feeling exacerbated by the fact that legal migration to the United States had been halted by new American immigration limitations and quotas.<sup>2</sup>

Military training and conscription became part of Cuban life in this period because, while the US failed at Playa Giron, it launched many more attempts to invade, assassinate leaders and undermine the revolution throughout the 1960s.<sup>3</sup> In light of the increased military threat, the Cuban government introduced military conscription for young men. Some young men, who were considered unreliable and/or unsuited to life in the army, were assigned to civilian work under military discipline. They were put in “military units to assist production” (UMAPs).

### The UMAPs

Between 1965 and 1968, homosexual men were among those incarcerated in UMAPs. José Yglesias, the author of a book about the early years of the Cuban Revolution, noted that UMAPs were:

... to take care of young men of military age whose incorporation into the Army for military training was considered unfeasible. Young men known to avoid work and study were candidates; so were known counter-revolutionaries; and also immoralists, a

category that included homosexuals.<sup>4</sup>

Ian Lumsden, author of *Machos, Maricones and Gays: Cuba and Homosexuality*, notes:

Homosexuals were among those most affected by the UMAP camps, but there is no evidence that these were created with homosexuals exclusively in mind. Together with homosexuals the camps contained such sexually incompatible companions as Jehovah Witnesses and Seventh Day Adventists, conscientious objectors to military service whose religious faiths are notoriously homophobic.<sup>5</sup>

Lumsden notes that these were terrifying times for many homosexuals, particularly those in entertainment, culture and education. As one leading designer recalled, they carried within them the “ever-present fear that at any moment there might be a knock on the door to report for an interrogation, or simply to be perfunctorily shipped out by truckload to the countryside”.<sup>6</sup>

Prominent Cubans were incarcerated in the UMAPs. The most famous was Pablo Milanes, Cuba’s well-known singer and songwriter. Milanes remains in Cuba and, in 1996 dedicated a song about gay men to all Cuban homosexuals. UMAP conscripts were paid seven pesos a month and had to work in Cuba’s countryside, mostly in the province of Camaguey. In this period there was a huge shortage of labour in the province. Seven pesos was much less than normal wages and draftees could leave the camps only under military escort.<sup>7</sup> Ernesto Cardenal, who would become minister of culture in Nicaragua’s revolutionary Sandinista government, interviewed a former UMAP inmate in his book *En Cuba*. The interviewee said, “work is hard because it’s nearly always in the sun. We work 11 hours a day (cutting marble in a quarry) from seven in the morning to seven at night, with one hour’s lunch break”.<sup>8</sup> While these are certainly harsh working conditions, on the basis of this testimony, it is unfair to compare these work camps to Nazi concentration camps.

In an interview with Ignacio Ramonet, Fidel Castro said:

We were involved in a mobilisation of almost the whole country ... we created compulsory military service and we faced three problems — education for those joining the army — groups of religious people who refused to serve in the army — and homosexuals who were not called up for military service. You faced problems of strong resistance against homosexuals [because] the macho element was very strong in our society and ideas prevailed against the presence of homosexuals in military units.

With those three categories of those who for one reason or another were excluded, the Military Units in Support of Production (UMAP) were created, where people of those categories could participate. These units were created in the whole country and carried out work, mainly in support of agriculture. That is, it didn’t only affect those who were homosexual, although there were certainly a group of those, who were called

to compulsory military service, an obligation in which everyone participated.

They weren't units of internment or punishment ... However, after a visit I discovered the distortion in some places, of the original idea, because you can't deny that there were prejudices against homosexuals. I personally started a review of this matter. Those units only lasted three years.<sup>9</sup>

The UMAPs were closed down in 1968 following protests to the government by the Cuban Union of Writers and Artists Federation (UNEAC) and Raquel Revuelta who had been a prominent Cuban Communist Party member before the 1959 victory.<sup>10</sup> Arguelles and Rich comment: "While short-lived and denounced extensively within and outside Cuba ever since their abolition, the camps remain a damnable episode in revolutionary history".<sup>11</sup>

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## Notes

1. Slee, 2008, p. 31. 2. Arguelles & Rich, 1984, p. 692. 3. Saney, 2004, p. 164. 4. Lumsden, 1991, pp. 65-66. 5. *Ibid.*, p. 66. 6. *Ibid.*, p. 70. 7. *Ibid.*, p. 66. 8. *Ibid.*, p. 68. 9. Ramonet, 2006, pp. 253-55. 10. Roques, 2004, paragraph 2. 11. Arguelles & Rich, 1984, p. 694.



## 5. The Effect of Stalinism on the Cuban Revolution

Historically, the socialist, Bolshevik-led Russian Revolution was very pro-LGBTI. Stalinism, the political counter-revolution within the Russian Revolution, was not. Under attack from its powerful neighbour, the Cuban government reached out for help from the Stalinist USSR. The 1917 Bolshevik-led revolution in Russia was a mass uprising of peasants and workers against capitalist war and hunger. But, from mid-1925, Stalin's regime led a political backlash against the revolution and its leaders.

[It] had to imprison or kill literally millions of workers, party members and officials, including the majority of party members of 1917. Purges, imprisonments, exiles, secret trials and executions without trial were constant features of Soviet life from the late 1920s.<sup>1</sup>

The 1917 revolution in Russia opened up a new era of rights for women and LGBTI people. The Bolsheviks were heavily influenced by the German sexologists who had established the exceptional German Scientific Humanitarian Committee (GSHC). Under the leadership of Marcus Hirschfeld, the GSHC organised four world congresses of the World League for Sexual Reform, which Bolshevik leaders attended.<sup>2</sup> Germany's influence, combined with other factors, resulted in the Bolshevik revolution being profoundly pro-homosexual.

Within two months of taking power, the Bolsheviks began the process of abolishing all laws against homosexual acts. Homosexuality was completely decriminalised in the new Soviet criminal code of 1922 and treated "no differently than heterosexuality in the clauses dealing with minors or assault".<sup>3</sup> Soviet courts approved of marriage between homosexuals and there are also records of sex change operations in the 1920s.<sup>4</sup> Similar to the Cuban revolutionary experience, cross-dressing women who served in the Red Army were "given positions of authority".<sup>5</sup>

The Stalinist bureaucracy:

... betrayed the political program of the Bolsheviks in order to protect and improve the

privileges it had secured for itself. Thus soviet democracy was replaced by bureaucratic tyranny; revolutionary internationalism was replaced by the conservative theory of “socialism in one country”; and the communist movement abroad was directed to become a prop for the foreign policy of the Soviet elite.<sup>6</sup>

Homophobia was formally embraced by the USSR leadership in 1928, at the International Congress of World League for Sexual Reform.

A USSR delegate referred to homosexuality as “potential social peril” and to abortion as “evil”. In January 1934 the Stalinist state conducted mass arrests of gay men in several Soviet cities. In March the same year all Soviet states were required to adopt a statute punishing homosexual acts with imprisonment. The Soviet press denounced homosexuality as the “degeneracy of the fascist bourgeoisie”.<sup>7</sup>

The Stalinist USSR assisted, albeit in a self-serving manner, the Cuban Revolution. The Cubans, in turn, reached out to the USSR for their help to repel the United States. Although wary of an alliance, the Cubans were looking for assistance against the nearby superpower with a demonstrated willingness to use nuclear weapons. The relationship developed an exchange where “they traded ‘sugar for oil’ for almost 30 years in what the Cubans called a form of ‘fair trade’”.<sup>8</sup>

Stalinism compounded homophobia in Cuba and magnified the ideological influence of the Catholicism. Lumsden writes:

Stalinist ideological tenet was that homosexuality was a decadent bourgeois phenomenon ... Much of the public image of homosexuality in pre-revolutionary Cuba, as perceived by its new leaders, would have supported the Soviet belief that it represented “moral degeneration”, a legacy of capitalism that could not be “tolerated in a socialist society”.<sup>9</sup>

Arguelles and Rich point to the negative influence Stalinist homophobia had on the Cuban leadership:

Major ideological changes (in 1960) also were taking place. The influential Popular Socialist Party (PSP) moved to fill an analytical vacuum on homosexuality by lending “scientific” credibility to the anti-homosexual harangues of the revolutionary leadership and to the homophobia of the Cuban people. The leaders of the PSP, with an attitude resembling that of Soviet society in the thirties and forties, saw homosexuality as a product of bourgeois decadence. Further, the PSP leaders considered expression of sexuality not a private affair or a personal freedom but a fulfilment of obligation to society.<sup>10</sup>

From 1968, changes in the Soviet Union foreshadowed a more progressive LGBTI policy. Flowing on from Germany’s sexually progressive history, East Germany legalised homosexual acts between adults.<sup>11</sup> Combined with the rise of the LGBTI

rights movement elsewhere in Europe and the historic Stonewall riots in the US, this had a positive effect on the Cuban leadership's understanding of homosexuality. From the late 1960s, everyday life for gays and lesbians began to significantly improve.<sup>12</sup>

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## Notes

1. Bainbridge, 2000, paragraph 6. 2. Brewer, 2008, p. 20. 3. *Ibid.*, p. 19. 4. Wolf, 2009, p. 89. 5. *Ibid.*, p. 97. 6. Bainbridge, paragraph 9. 7. Brewer, p. 22. 8. Anderson, 2012. 9. Lumsden, 1991, p. 64. 10. Arguelles & Rich, 1984, p. 693. 11. *Ibid.*, p. 11. 12. *Ibid.*, p. 12.

## 6. The 1970s: ‘Positive Changes’

Three events marked the “gradual but continual improvement of life conditions of gay men and lesbians in Cuba during the seventies”.<sup>1</sup> These included the First National Congress on Education and Culture, the promulgation of the Family Code and the creation of a national group on sexual education.

In 1971, the First National Congress of Education and Culture suggested a change of attitude. For the first time in an official document, homosexuality was referred to in medical and psychological, rather than criminal, terms. Transgender issues began to be discussed.<sup>2</sup> Customary denunciations of homosexuals as decadent were gone; homosexuality was no longer seen by the revolutionary leadership as a fundamental problem in Cuban society, “but instead [as] a form of sexual behavior requiring study”.<sup>3</sup>

Despite these advances, as previously outlined, the congress launched a policy of “parameters”, which required people to meet specific parameters to have access to certain jobs and public positions. The parameters discriminated against homosexuals.<sup>4</sup> Another declaration by the congress stated that “no homosexual shall represent Cuba”. However, two years later, the decree was challenged in court by a theatre group, and rescinded.<sup>5</sup>

Arguelles and Rich interview a lesbian photographer, Mayra, about these years:

You were not totally accepted by the revolution and there were positions you could not get if you were open about [being gay] unless you were in the arts. Still ... there was no persecution unless you were involved in counterrevolutionary activities. Then you were in trouble, and usually it was blamed on the weakness of being a homosexual.<sup>6</sup>

In 1976, the celebrated Family Code, which called for equal participation by men in child-raising and household work, was passed. In 1977, the Cuban National Group for Sexual Education was established, headed by Cuban physician Celestino Lajonchere and East German sexologist Monika Krause. The new Cuban National Group for Sexual Education worked primarily with those involved in health and education.<sup>7</sup>

In 1979, homosexual acts were removed from the Penal Code, and homosexual acts became formally legal for consenting adults. While homosexuality became formally

legal, contradictions within the law remained. According to Eva Bjorklund:

... ‘ostentatious displays of homosexuality’ were still against the law, as were ‘homosexual acts in public places’. And male homosexual acts with minors were more severely penalised than heterosexual acts of the same kind. Those articles, however, were removed from the Penal Code in 1987, and persons convicted under these laws were released.<sup>8</sup>

These contradictions provided a “rationale for gay paranoia”.<sup>9</sup>

Homosexual behavior still suffered minor legal restrictions until the 1990s.<sup>10</sup> In email correspondence with Cuba’s Dr. Camilo García López-Trigo, Head of Department, Social Communication and Public Relations, CENESEX he clarified that:

We began the process of decriminalization of homosexuality in Cuba in 1979, but public scandal laws were maintained until 1997. Last year we also equalized the penalty for child sexual assault which was previously more severe when victim and perpetrator were of the same sex. Since then there is no reference to the homosexuality in the Penal Cuban Code.<sup>11</sup>

Cuba’s criminal code has no reference to homosexuality and as future chapters will reveal, the government is leading ground-breaking campaigns to remove prejudice towards LGBTI people among the Cuban population. Two last remaining institutional barriers for same-sex attracted and sex and gender diverse peoples remain — access to the military and marriage.

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## Notes

1. Arguelles & Rich, 1984, p. 693. 2. Arreola, 2006, paragraph 13. 3. *Ibid.*, p. 12. 4. *Ibid.*, paragraph 9. 5. Hechavarria & Hatch, 2001, paragraph 17. 6. Arguelles & Rich, p. 693. 7. *Ibid.*, p. 695. 8. Bjorklund, 2000, paragraph 10. 9. Arguelles & Rich, p. 696. 10. Arreola, paragraph 11. 11. López-Trigo, 2011.

## 7. The Mariel Boatlift & CIA Extortion of the LGBTI Community

Commentators cite the Mariel boatlift as evidence of institutionalised homophobia in Cuba. Tim Anderson provides background to this event.

Cuban migration to the US (which has remained steady at about 20-30,000 per year over the last two decades) was stronger before the revolution. Almost every family in Cuba has relatives in the US. It has been said that Cuba had the highest Latin American rate of emigration to the US before 1958 — now it is about 8th highest. Now the US both encourages and restricts this migration. The US Cuban Adjustment Law of 1966 ... provides a path to residence for any Cuban who arrives — a privilege not given to any other nationality. There were Cuban-US immigration agreements in the 1980s (with Reagan, and when Cuba began to liberalise emigration) and in the 1990s (with Clinton), but the main pattern since 1980 has been that the US keeps “normal” immigration very restrictive (despite the privileges bestowed by the 1966 law, and agreed “minimum quotas”) and therefore keeps inciting the “boat people” to risk their lives. This is the “wet foot, dry foot” policy — Cubans get a “green card” if they set foot on US soil ...<sup>1</sup>

Surveys show that almost all Cuban emigrants who arrive in the US are economic migrants,<sup>2</sup> but “the Cuban Adjustment Act is set up to receive “victims of communism”; so when they arrive their Green Card depends on them supporting this idea. Those in Cuba denied a visa (and those without relatives who will pay their fares for a visit) know that, if they touch foot on dry land, a special US law will give them access to residence.<sup>3</sup>

In the spring of 1980, Fidel Castro threw open the port of Mariel to unlimited emigration to the US. The Cuban government claimed to be ridding the country of criminals and counter-revolutionaries. Amongst the 120,000 people who left the island

were a large number of homosexuals.

There is evidence to suggest that the Cuban immigration department did facilitate male homosexuals leaving for the US. In an article by Susana Peña, “Obvious gays’ and the state gaze: Cuban gay visibility and US immigration policy during the 1980 Mariel boatlift”, she quotes an assessment drawn by Margarita Garcia from 180 interviews with Mariel entrants. Garcia concluded, anyone “who went to the police station and declared him or herself to be a homosexual could get an exit permit”.<sup>4</sup> The US government used the comparatively large number of LGBT Cubans leaving as a basis to allege homophobia by the Cuban state. However, the US exaggerated the number of homosexuals who left the island.

Reporting for the publication *Paris Match*, Nina Sutton cited a “non-official State Department source” as saying, “at least 10,000 Cuban homosexuals had emigrated at Mariel”.<sup>5</sup> A more realistic assessment was provided by Julia Preston of the *New York Village Voice* on December 10, 1980, who stated: “As many as 3000 gay Cubans passed through refugee camps this summer. Now about 350 are left, almost all men, the others having been sponsored out mainly to gay communities throughout the country.”<sup>6</sup> Three thousand is still a significant number, but Arguelles and Rich reflect, “for all the gay men and the few lesbians who left, there were many more who chose to stay. Their lives had been constantly improving.”<sup>7</sup>

It is also important to note that, in order to accept Cuban homosexuals, the US unofficially lifted part of the 1952 US Immigration and Naturalisation Act, which had previously been used to bar and deport those it labeled “sexually deviant”. An exemption to this homophobic legislation was granted only to gay Cubans.<sup>8</sup>

Before 1980, it had allowed Cuban immigrants to travel to and from their old country freely, because, “the visits of ‘the American cousins’ increased consumer envy and added to the effectiveness of counter-revolutionary propaganda”.<sup>9</sup>

Arguelles and Rich document other methods employed by the US to use the LGBTI community against the Cuban government:

Lesbians and gay men were particularly vulnerable ... The CIA targeted the homosexual intelligentsia and worked to persuade its members to defect, promising generous academic grants and publishing contracts.<sup>10</sup>

Blackmail was also used, especially against those gays less willing to leave, in the hope that political anxiety would force victims into exile. Carlos Alberto Montaner, a Madrid-based anti-Castro writer, for example, published two full pages listing names of homosexuals inside Cuba in an attempt to discredit them and encourage them to migrate. Such cynical “assistance” in coming out continues to be a favoured weapon against lesbians and gay men who are well integrated into the revolution.<sup>11</sup>

Even taking into account exaggeration and the machinations of the CIA, the Mariel boatlift did indicate that there were several factors pushing Cuban homosexuals to emigrate. The boats carried many who had waited years for a visa from the US. These included gays, mostly male, opting for the comparatively more open gay life promised in the US.<sup>12</sup> There was another “uniquely gay reason for leaving”: the age-old, pre-revolutionary tradition in which families encouraged gay offspring to emigrate in order to avoid family stigma.<sup>13</sup>

“Significantly, there were few lesbians in the Mariel exodus”, report Arguelles and Rich.<sup>14</sup> They argue that the smaller number of lesbians compared to gay men who left, points to the fuller integration of women into Cuban society. The increased status and freedom enjoyed by lesbians, as women, under the revolution, meant that fewer lesbians chose to leave.

In an interview with Ignacio Ramonet, Fidel Castro acknowledges this history of discrimination that led to gay and lesbian emigration.

The revolution promoted the struggle against distinct types of prejudices. In relation to women there were prejudices and very strong ones and also in relation to homosexuals ... that society emanating from injustice was saturated with prejudices. Certainly homosexuals were victims of discrimination. In other places much more than here, but in Cuba, yes there was discrimination.<sup>15</sup>

However, Fidel Castro also noted: “In the more cultured sectors there was less prejudice against homosexuals. In the same way, discrimination and machismo are today inversely proportional to the level of culture and knowledge of our compatriots.”<sup>16</sup>

At the end of Arguelles and Rich’s research period (1984), they concluded: Homosexuals are nonetheless a visible feature of the Cuban social landscape. They appear at every level of the hierarchy in Cuban society, in government and of course in the arts. They are no longer confined to an underworld economy or alienated from the mainstream of social life as they were in the pre-revolutionary era. Particular individuals are well known and pointed to with pride as evidence of revolutionary nondiscrimination.<sup>17</sup>

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## Notes

1. Anderson, 2012. 2. Rodríguez Chavez, 1999. 3. Anderson, personal communication Feb 18, 2012. 4. Peña, 2007, paragraph 12. 5. Feinberg, 2007a, paragraph 7. 6. *Ibid.*, paragraph 24. 7. Arguelles & Rich, 1984, p. 697. 8. Feinberg, 2007a, paragraph 17. 9. Arguelles & Rich, p. 696. 10. *Ibid.*, p. 696. 11. *Ibid.*, p. 696. 12. *Ibid.*, p. 14. 13. *Ibid.*, p. 696. 14. *Ibid.*, p. 697. 15. Ramonet, 2006, p. 256. 16. *Ibid.*, p. 256. 17. Arguelles & Rich, p. 699.



## 8. Sex Education & HIV Treatment

The revolution saw a flowering of democratic organisations for women, youth, culture, Afro-Cubans and defence organisations. The Federation of Cuban Women (FMC) established the Centre for Sexual Education (CNES) in 1977. Dr Celestino Alvarez Lajonchere, then director of the National Institute of Sex Education in Havana, said: “In 1974, the Federation of Cuban Women has already insisted that sex education had to be done. They had been working on this since the early 1960s.” He continued:

The First Party Congress of 1975 agreed on the declaration of the complete and absolute equality of women. The elaboration of that declaration included the need to organise a system of sex education.<sup>1</sup>

Before CNES started its work, “sexual education was a practically unknown phenomenon in Cuba, as in the rest of Latin America ... In this light, Cuba’s sexual education is ground-breaking.”<sup>2</sup>

The first sex education book published by CNES, in 1979, was Sigfried Schnabl’s *The Intimate Life of Males and Females*. The book was first published in East Germany in 1978. Bjorklund records that *Intimate Life* “clearly stated that homosexuals should be granted equal rights, respect and recognition and that any kind of social discrimination is reprehensible.”<sup>3</sup> This book served as guidance for the work of the CNES and at pedagogical colleges. It was hugely popular. Alvarez remembers: “We sold it at about five pesos but in addition the buyer had to have a paper signed by me saying he or she had the right to sell the book. Otherwise the books would have disappeared from the bookstores within two hours.”<sup>4</sup>

In 1981, the Cuban Ministry of Culture produced *In Defense of Love*, which stated that homosexuality was a variant of human sexuality.<sup>5</sup> However, another government publication from 1981, titled *Are you beginning to think about Love?*, was more ambivalent. It was intended for a broader audience and argued that homosexuals have the same ability to function in society as other people, but “can never be as happy as married people”.<sup>6</sup>

In an article titled “Homosexuality is not illegal in Cuba, but like elsewhere,

homophobia persists”, Eva Bjorklund adds that a second edition of Schnabl’s book published in 1989 declared:

There is no cure for homosexuality and it is no kind of sickness. Therefore, nobody should be criticised for his orientation, nor pressured to change. On the contrary, they should get the support they need to be able to live happily.<sup>7</sup>

Bjorklund continues, noting that “Schnabl also points out that the removal of penal sanctions against homosexual acts/behaviour remains a formality as long as homosexuals are subject to social prejudice and institutionalised discrimination.”<sup>8</sup>

A national program for “sex education with a gender focus ... was finally accepted in 1996 and now its taught throughout the country; since then it has reduced school dropouts from early marriages and childbirth by one half”.<sup>9</sup>

Anderson writes:

A scientific, open approach to human sexuality assisted in Cuba dealing with the HIV-AIDS crisis. Under the Cuban constitution the state guarantees “that every sick person will have medical attention” and that “[a]ll have the right to attention and protection of their health [including] free medical and hospital attention”.<sup>10</sup>

Auto Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) was first diagnosed in the US in 1981. Cuba diagnosed its first case in 1985 when “soldiers, doctors and others helping the South Africans cast off the yoke of apartheid bought HIV back home”.<sup>11</sup> Two years before the disease appeared in Cuba, health workers had begun to prepare for it with the establishment, in 1983, of a National Commission on AIDS to educate the population about the disease.<sup>12</sup>

When the first cases presented the Cubans embarked on a “mandatory quarantine period in health resorts (called sanatorios, or sanatoria) for the first persons infected with HIV.”<sup>13</sup> This mandatory (involuntary) period lasted three years – from 1983 till 1986.

[The Cuban government] treated HIV/AIDS as a public health emergency: HIV patients were quarantined indefinitely and their sexual partners traced and tested; Cubans who had visited Africa were tested, as were pregnant women; HIV positive women were given drugs to prevent transmission to their unborn children, their babies were delivered by caesarian section.<sup>14</sup>

Opponents of Cuba charged the revolution with violating human rights and individual freedom. In a November 1988 *Los Angeles Times* article, New York city health commissioner, Dr Stephen C. Joseph, lambasted the program, stating it “can only be termed totalitarian. They test people involuntarily. They lock up people who test positive. They take away their employment. And they do so knowing that these people will be locked up for life.”<sup>15</sup>

The 2005 UNAIDS executive director, Peter Piot, disagreed. He praised Cuba as, “one of the first countries to take AIDS seriously as a problem and provide a comprehensive response combining both prevention and care”.<sup>16</sup> Cuba enjoys status as a world leader in HIV-AIDS prevention because there has been “no dramatic increase in HIV transmission since the first case was diagnosed in 1986 and the country’s HIV infection rate — 0.05% — is one of the lowest in the world and exceptional in a region with some of the highest infection rates in the world”.<sup>17</sup> By comparison, throughout the English-speaking Caribbean that borders Cuba, AIDS is the largest cause of death among men between the ages of 15 and 44.<sup>18</sup>

As to critiques from the US, this is the country that allowed thousands to die and demonised its victims.

During the early days of the epidemic Ronald Reagan was president [and] he managed not to utter the word AIDS for six of his eight years in office. The media used the word GRID — Gay Related Immune Deficiency (GRID) — further demonising gays, even after the Centre for Disease Control coined the term AIDS in 1982.<sup>19</sup>

US blood banks used their existing supplies and refused to screen their blood until 1985. Thousands of hemophiliacs became infected and many died through contaminated blood clotting agents between 1982 and 1987.<sup>20</sup> It is no surprise that a 2003 report revealed, “Cuba had an HIV infection rate nearly 11 times lower than [that of] the United States”.<sup>21</sup> This achievement was realised largely without access to the modern AIDS drugs, which were available in the global North countries from 1996, but unavailable in Cuba until 2001. Journalist Edwin Krales notes, “even today, the criminal US embargo prevents Cuba from buying any kind of medications anywhere on the world market”.<sup>22</sup>

Media criticism of Cuba’s quarantine program was even more hypocritical given that US states practiced the policy themselves. Tim Anderson notes in his paper, “HIV/AIDS in Cuba: A rights-based analysis”, that “between 1987 and 1990 ... more than a dozen [US] states brought AIDS within the scope of state quarantine statutes”.<sup>23</sup>

Cuban patients began to come and go from sanatoria in 1989 and, in 1993, an alternate non-sanatoria based day-care program was introduced.<sup>24</sup> Since 2001, Cuba has produced its own generic HIV medication.<sup>25</sup> Currently, Cuban practice is to ... maintain a comprehensive database of those infected and their chain of sexual partners; and although patients are still required to attend an 8-week course in a sanatorium, HIV testing is no longer compulsory — though it is strongly recommended for pregnant women and those in high-risk groups.<sup>26</sup>

Anderson refers to Cuban doctor J. Pérez, who states in the book *AIDS: Confessions of a Doctor* that, “early quarantine practice followed a strong political directive to protect

public health and was the result of uncertainty over the nature of the disease ... fear of the disease, including among professionals, may have unnecessarily prolonged this quarantine period.”<sup>27</sup> Anderson concludes, “This extension was an unreasonable deprivation of liberty”, but adds that it was not a homophobic policy. “The early period and its privations do not appear to have been directed at gay and bisexual men, who formed a minority of the HIV-positive cohort at that time.”<sup>28</sup>

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## Notes

1. Feinberg, 2009, p. 41. 2. *Ibid.*, p. 41. 3. Bjorklund, 2000, paragraph 14. 4. Feinberg, p. 41. 5. *Ibid.*, p. 43. 6. Bjorklund, paragraph 15. 7. *Ibid.*, paragraph 10. 8. *Ibid.*, paragraph 10. 9. Reed, 2006, paragraph 10. 10. Anderson 2009, paragraph 37. 11. Krales, 2005, paragraph 32. 12. Fawthrop, 2003, paragraph 5. 13. Anderson, paragraph 6. 14. *Ibid.*, paragraph 4. 15. Zonana, 1988, paragraph 18. 16. Krales, paragraph 5. 17. Fawthrop, paragraph 3. 18. Bauza & Collie, 2001, paragraph 6. 19. Krales, paragraph 34. 20. *Ibid.*, paragraph 34. 21. Hansen & Groce, 2003, paragraph 3. 22. Krales, paragraph 24. 23. Anderson, paragraph 7. 24. *Ibid.*, paragraph 7. 25. Krales, paragraph 31. 26. Fawthrop, paragraph 9. 27. Anderson, paragraph 38. 28. *Ibid.*, paragraph 39.

## 9. Developments in the 1990s & the New Century

The 1990s and the new century produced public education campaigns, queer films, rallies for LGBTI rights and sex-change operations for transgender Cubans. In 1993, *Strawberry and Chocolate*, a film criticising Cubans' intolerance of homosexuality, was produced by the government-run Cuban film industry. It was the only film that the state produced in 1993. The film played simultaneously at 10 to 12 theatres in Havana for months, with queues to see it several blocks long.<sup>1</sup>

In 1995, Cuban drag queens led the annual May Day procession, joined by two queer delegations from the US. Together with members of Cuba's Action Group for the Liberation of Sexual Choice and Expression, they carried a 10-metre rainbow flag at the front of the May Day march.<sup>2</sup> In the same year, the documentary *Gay Cuba* was produced by Sonia de Vries. This series of interviews with gay and lesbian Cubans was shown at the Havana International Festival of Latin America Cinema to public and critical acclaim. In December 2000, at the film festival in Havana, at least half of the Latin American films selected had gay themes.<sup>3</sup> In 2007, Cuba commemorated for the first time the International Day of Action Against Homophobia with the Centre for Sexual Education (CENESEX) leading a discussion about sexual diversity, with film screenings.<sup>4</sup>

### LGBTI organisation

The International Lesbian and Gay Association (ILGA) is an international homosexual advocacy organisation founded in 1978. It has close to 700 member groups in 110 countries. Carlos Sanchez, the 2004 ILGA representative for Latin American and the Caribbean, noted in March 2004 that there were five Cuban organisations working on LGBTI issues. Two were state institutions: CENESEX and the Federation of Cuban Women. A third was the Protestant church-affiliated Martin Luther King Centre, and a other two were non-government organisations, the Centre for HIV/Aids Prevention

and the Felix Varela Centre.<sup>5</sup> Sanchez met with lesbians and gays at CENESEX and, after talking with them, concluded that, “neither institutional nor penal repression exists against lesbians and homosexuals” and, “there are no legal sanctions against LGBT people and *transformismo* [transitioning from one sex to another], is well accepted by the majority of Cubans”.<sup>6</sup> His study also revealed that, while this was the case, “people are afraid of meeting and organising themselves”. He commented:

... this is mainly based on their experience in previous years, but one can assume that this feeling will disappear in the future if lesbians and gays start to work and keep working and eventually get support from the government.<sup>7</sup>

Sanchez concluded: “Sexual minorities seem to be living better times now in Cuba. In the medium term, even better than the rest of Latin America.”<sup>8</sup>

### The pivotal role of CENESEX & Mariela Castro Espin

CENESEX is the Cuban government organisation that combats prejudice towards LGBTI people, carries out HIV/AIDS awareness programs, oversees education programs in schools, in the community and on television, coordinates rallies, marches and film festivals, and provides a space for LGBTI people to meet and organise.

CENESEX director, 48-year-old Mariela Castro Espin, is internationally renowned. A sexologist by training, she is the daughter of President Raul Castro and late revolutionary feminist Vilma Espin, long-time president of the Cuban Women’s Federation. Mariela Castro also edits *Sexology and Society*, a medical journal published in Cuba. Espin says that CENESEX’s goals are to contribute towards, “the development of a culture of sexuality that is full, pleasurable and responsible, as well as to promote the full exercise of sexual rights”.<sup>9</sup>

CENESEX includes a gender educative approach. Castro explains to Gail Reed in an interview published in the journal *Health and Medical News of Cuba*:

We have to include a gender perspective — promotion of new constructs of masculinity and femininity — and not just take an epidemiological approach. For example, an epidemiologist might simply say: prevent HIV use a condom. But we have to take into consideration how condoms are viewed in the “macho” framework “as a barrier to full sexual enjoyment, to which the “macho” is entitled at all costs, in a relation in which he’s exerting his power. So, for him to use a condom, he has to begin to construct and define his masculinity in a different way, that doesn’t put a premium only on his own pleasure. In the end, this stereotype is very dangerous to his own health as well as his partner’s — and this can be true for homosexual as well as heterosexual couples, whenever a relationship defines that one partner has hegemony over the other. So, you need to combine both an epidemiological and a gender approach to these very intimate

issues. This is why, for example, our posters and other materials emphasise that protection of your partner against HIV and STIs in general is a sign of caring and that means it's a responsibility of both partners in a relationship.<sup>10</sup>

In the interview, Castro comments on necessary steps forward:

The country now has policies that legitimise sexual orientations and has brought laws in line with a gender perspective. But on the legislative front, there is still a lot to be done. For example, homosexuals now live within the law in consensual relationships, but gay marriage is not recognised, so you have many issues such as inheritance that aren't fully resolved.<sup>11</sup>

### **Advances: transgender rights, reproductive technologies, civil unions & marriage equality**

At the 5th International Culture and Development Congress, held in Havana on June 11-14, 2007, the Communist Party of Cuba welcomed an update of the revolutionary Family Code to include same-sex and transgender rights.<sup>12</sup>

Within the 2007 changes to the Family Code, CENESEX worked with the public health ministry to help three lesbian couples gain access to assisted reproduction services. The reform, "would also recognise the right of any woman to assisted reproduction services, which are currently limited to married couples".<sup>13</sup> On transgender rights, Cuba leads the world. The first sex change operation to take place in Cuba was on May 22, 1988.<sup>14</sup> Sex reassignment surgery, as part of public health care in Cuba, "began in 2007 as a pilot program and was institutionalised on a larger scale in 2008. Like all medical procedures in Cuba, it is free."<sup>15</sup> Changing identity documents is an easy process. The CENESEX trans rights campaign, "has helped to get transvestites and transsexuals accepted into secondary school or institutions of higher learning and has involved awareness-raising efforts among the police"<sup>16</sup>

The CENESEX sexual diversity program operates year-round, but concentrates on the month of May with special attention to May 17, which is the International Day of Action Against Homophobia. The month features, "conferences and debates in different sectors of society, film and video screenings, performance galas including drag artists and a conga against homophobia in Havana".<sup>17</sup> Mariela Castro comments: "Although our activities take place year-round, [May] is the time of greatest visibility."<sup>18</sup> She also noted, "The Communist Party has specifically expressed the intention to involve the media in the effort against homophobia."<sup>19</sup>

A further reform of the Family Code to recognise the family's responsibility and duty to accept and care for all of its members, regardless of their gender identity or sexual orientation, and a recognition of same-sex marriage, is soon to be introduced

in parliament.<sup>20</sup>

The Cuban government opened up one gay establishment 25 years ago — El Mejunje — in Cuba’s “gayest city”, Santa Clara (a four-hour drive southwest of Havana).

The small open-air venue is an entertaining paradise for the LGBT community. [It is] famous for its outlandishly flamboyant drag shows and party atmosphere.<sup>21</sup>

According to a June 2011 article by Peter Orsi, “Report from Cuba: living out, proud, loud (at last)”, there are now three well-known gay hangouts in Havana. These include

... two gay bars, the Bim Bom and Piropo ... the Bim Bom is swarmed on Friday and Saturday nights with hundreds of mostly gay men and transsexuals. A block away, the more intimate Piropo is a popular smoke-filled hang out that has the feel of a café. The closest thing to a gay club in Havana is the “fiesta” which is held every Saturday night starting around 11pm ... In recent years, indicating a remarkable shift in attitudes toward homosexuals, “the fiesta” has settled in either of two open-air parks.<sup>22</sup>

## Outstanding issues for LGBTI Cubans

Four outstanding issues remain for LGBTI Cubans. One is police harassment. Police are known to harass transgender people and same-sex couples who are kissing. Journalist Delia Acosta notes in an article, “Cuba: sexual diversity in a sexist city”, that while

... such displays of affection do not constitute a crime they are still considered offences under decree-law 141 of the Council of Ministers, which imposes a fine of 40 pesos (less than two dollars) on persons whose “indecent exhibitions” offend the public.<sup>23</sup>

However, in the same article, lawyer Alexis Batista, an expert with the provincial justice authority, states:

A police officer who sees two homosexuals kissing, or dressed as women and puts them in jail is breaking the law, because those are not crimes.<sup>24</sup>

Batista acknowledges that the decree-law “should be changed”.<sup>25</sup> CENESEX has been working with the police, the supreme court and the education ministry to move towards the design and implementation of policies and strategies that would help reduce this harassment.<sup>26</sup>

Another outstanding issue is that gays in the Cuban military have to be in the closet. No military person can be openly gay.<sup>27</sup> Third, statutes in the Communist Party of Cuba need to be clearer about there being no tolerance towards homophobia, and ban sex and gender discrimination, said Alberto Guerra in the opening of a panel on “The family and society” during World Anti-Homophobia Day in Cuba in 2010. Guerra said:

Despite a number of appropriate and positive changes along these lines that we have seen in this political organisation, some of its members still believe that homosexuality



is a remnant of the bourgeoisie and contrary to socialist morals ... Failure to address this issue in the statutes surely paves the way for discrimination.<sup>28</sup>

The fourth issue is marriage equality. There have been positive statements about removing exclusion for LGBTI Cubans by government leaders. In 2007, Ricardo Alarcón, president of Cuba's National Assembly, stated, "We have to abolish any form of discrimination against homosexuality ... Socialism should be a society that does not exclude anybody."<sup>29</sup> Currently the institution of marriage does exclude LGBTI Cubans but steps are underway to rectify this. CENESEX is campaigning for marriage equality. Mariela Castro comments:

The country now has policies that legitimize sexual orientations and has brought laws in line with a gender perspective. But on the legislative front, there is still a lot to be done. For example, homosexuals now live within the law in consensual relationships, but gay marriage is not recognized, so you have many issues such as inheritance that aren't fully resolved.<sup>30</sup>

Positively, same-sex marriage is being debated in various government bodies. In an article titled *Cuba: Government considers supporting same-sex marriage*, by UniVision News Mariela Castro was "confident that the Party Conference (to be held January 2012) will help explicitly define a policy that prohibits discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity, which in turn will help dismantle prejudices that hinder its adoption."<sup>31</sup> The article quoted Castro as saying "there's a proposal to modify Cuba's Family Code, which is "under review of specialists from the Ministry of Justice and professionals affiliated to Cuba's National Jurists Association."

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## Notes

1. Oberg, 1997-2000, paragraph 7. 2. Spencer, 2000, p. 35. 3. Roques, 2004, paragraph 16. 4. Feinberg, 2007, paragraph 10. 5. Sanchez, 2004, paragraph 16. 6. *Ibid.*, paragraph 19. 7. *Ibid.*, paragraph 17. 8. *Ibid.*, paragraph 23. 9. Reed, 2006, paragraph 1. 10. *Ibid.*, paragraph 6. 11. *Ibid.*, paragraph 3. 12. Feinberg, paragraph 6. 13. *Ibid.*, paragraph 7. 14. Motley, 2005, paragraph 11. 15. Orsi, 2011, paragraph 6. 16. Feinberg, paragraph 9. 17. Acosta, 2011a, paragraph 14. 18. *Ibid.*, paragraph 15. 19. *Ibid.*, paragraph 14. 20. *Ibid.*, paragraph 12. 21. Orsi, paragraph 13. 22. *Ibid.*, paragraph 10. 23. Acosta, 2011b, paragraph 13. 24. *Ibid.*, paragraph 14. 25. *Ibid.*, paragraph 10. 26. Acosta, 2011a, paragraph 12. 27. Haydulina, 2009, paragraph 4. 28. Guerra, 2010, paragraph 7. 29. Feinberg, paragraph 10. 30. Reed, 2006, paragraph 3. 31. UniVision News, 2012, paragraph 4. 32. *Ibid.*, paragraph 4.

# 10. Comparing Cuba with Other Countries

## Cuba, the Caribbean & other Latin American countries

Cuba is a leader on LGBTI rights in its region. In Latin America and the Caribbean, significant laws enabling gay marriage and civil unions have been approved only in Mexico, Argentina and Brazil. Draft laws are under consideration in Colombia, Costa Rica, Chile and Uruguay. The other Caribbean countries, including Jamaica, still have laws that severely punish homosexual relations.<sup>1</sup>

## Cuba, the United States & Australia

Cuba surpasses the US on LGBTI rights. It was only in June 2003 that the US Supreme Court struck down Texas' same-sex sodomy law. The supreme court ruling "Lawrence v. Texas" made other US states' sodomy laws unconstitutional, in regards to private acts between consenting civilian adults.<sup>2</sup> Currently, there are still 36 states in the US where it is legal to fire a person for being lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender.<sup>3</sup>

The Australian government is also an international pariah on LGBTI rights. It amended the Marriage Act on August 13, 2004, barring same-sex couples from getting married.<sup>4</sup> Comparatively, Cuba repealed its homophobic laws in 1979 and removed public scandal laws in 1997. There is no reference to homosexuality in the Cuban Penal Code and there is much talk in Cuba's national parliament about legalising same-sex marriage.

Sex change operations in Cuba are free. In Australia, male-to-female transitions can cost up to \$30,000.<sup>5</sup> In the US, the costs can be as high as \$50,000 for a "mid-range transition".<sup>6</sup>

Because of the high levels of education and awareness about human rights, gay bashings in Cuba have been absent since 1959, argue journalists Hechavarria and Hatch.<sup>7</sup> Comparatively, hate crimes in the US and Australia remain disturbingly numerous. In the US, "hate crimes directed at people because of their sexual

orientation have risen over the past two years: 1017 were reported in 2005, 1195 in 2006 and 1265 in 2007”.<sup>8</sup> In Australia, statistics are not readily available, but individual instances are documented, such as the documentation of the brutal bashing of “Craig” and “Shane” in Sydney’s gay strip, Oxford Street, in 2007.<sup>9</sup> There are high rates of internal homophobic violence in Australia, a result of growing up in a homophobic culture. One study estimates that 30% of Australian LGBTI youth attempt suicide.<sup>10</sup> In comparison, Cuba is promoting internal pride with positive “sexual diversity is natural” advertising on state television.<sup>11</sup> The US and Australian governments have not funded an equivalent program.

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## Notes

1. Acosta, 2007, paragraph 12. 2. Gay and Lesbian Archives of the Pacific Northwest, 2007, paragraph 1. 3. Kroles, 2005, paragraph 39. 4. Iqbal, 2009, paragraph 2. 5. Evans, 2006, paragraph 3. 6. *Cost Helper*, 2009, paragraph 3. 7. Hechavarria & Hatch, 2001, paragraph 13. 8. Hansen-Weaver, 2009, paragraph 5. 9. Stanford & Wilkinson, 2009, paragraph 2. 10. Nicholas & Howard, 1998, paragraph 33. 11. Evans, 2009, paragraph 4.

# 11. Conclusion

The 1959 Cuban Revolution nationalised agribusiness, telecommunications and petrol, and ended the pillage of the island by foreigners. Previously, Cuba was a US “pleasure island”: mafias made money out of prostitution (gay and straight) and gambling. The revolution threw off this interference and guaranteed free education, health care and food for its population. LGBTI people benefited from those measures. Democratic and civil liberties flourished, with women and Afro-Cubans given legal equality early on in the revolution. But Spanish Catholic influence, machismo, US support of the sex industry, Stalinist ideological pressure and general cultural backwardness meant that LGBTI people did not gain civil rights at the same time as other marginalised sectors.

Cuba’s critics have alleged institutional homophobia by the Cuban state, even comparing the island to a concentration camp.<sup>1</sup> Three instances singled out by these critics are the UMAP camps, the Mariel boatlift and the involuntary treatment of HIV cases.

Incarceration of homosexuals in UMAPs occurred between 1965 and 1968. This was a “terrifying time” for Cuba’s homosexuals.<sup>2</sup> However, the camps lasted for only a short time.

The Mariel boatlift did not see a mass of LGBTI Cubans flee the island because of institutionalised homophobia, as claimed by Cuba’s critics. A large number did leave due to factors including pressure from the US government, cultural factors and a desire for adventure. Many more, especially lesbians, stayed, rather than leaving.

From 1986-1989 there were three years of HIV treatment involving quarantine while the island developed its approach to managing the disease. As a result, Cuba has the lowest rate of HIV infection in the region, which is of enormous benefit to the LGBTI community. The current approach allows people to enter and leave sanatoria freely.

Positively, sex change operations are free, there are nationwide LGBTI rights festivals and marches every May, sexual diversity rights are on television and there are limited hate crimes against LGBTI people. Problems continue with police harassment

of LGBTI couples in public, but there are measures being undertaken by CENESEX to combat this discrimination.

All references to homosexuals on Cuba's criminal codes have been removed. Two institutional barriers for LGBTI Cubans are access to the military and marriage. However as of early 2012, there is a review by Ministry of Justice and professionals affiliated to Cuba's National Jurists Association about modifying Cuba's Family Code to include marriage rights. With marriage rights clearly on the horizon, access to the military should follow. There is substantial evidence that the extent of homophobia in Cuba, in state policy and popular culture, is low compared to the rest of Latin America, Australia and the US. Indeed, today Cuba is more advanced in LGBTI rights than most countries in the global South and, on the evidence presented, the US and Australia.

As in all other countries, individual discrimination against LGBTI people existed and persists in Cuba. However, formal equality is on its way, and the further measures being undertaken by the government and civil society are overwhelmingly positive.

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## Notes

1. Blazquez & Sutton, 2007, paragraph 12. 2. Lumsden, 1991, p. 70.

# Rainbow Cuba: A Timeline

- 1939 Cuban Social Defence Code — anti-gay laws.
- 1959 July 26 revolution.
- 1965-68 Military Units to Aid Production (UMAP) program.
- 1971 The first National Congress of Education and Culture.
- 1975 The limits on employment of homosexuals in the arts and education were overturned by the Cuban Supreme Court.
- 1974 Federation of Cuban Women demanded sex education in the state curriculum.
- 1975 New ministry of culture was established, as well as a commission to study homosexuality.
- 1975 First congress of the Cuban Communist Party agreed on the complete and absolute equality of women, which included sex education.
- 1976 Inauguration of the Family Code which called for equal participation by men in child-raising and household work.
- 1977 The Cuban National Group for Sexual Education (precursor to CENESEX) was established, headed by a Cuban physician Celestino Lajonchere and East German sexologist Monika Krause.
- 1979 Homosexual acts decriminalised, but failed to legalise homosexual behaviour in the public sphere — leaving intact anti-gay laws dating to the Cuban Social Defence Code of 1939.
- 1979 Transgender issues began to be discussed.
- 1979 *The Life of Males and Females* had been first published in the German Democratic Republic. “Homosexuals should be granted equal rights, respect and recognition, and that any kind of social discrimination is reprehensible.”
- 1979 24 transsexual Cubans won support from CENESEX.
- 1980 With economic sanctions biting, more than 120,000 Cubans fled Cuba under the “Mariel boatlift”.
- 1981 *Are you beginning to think about love* publication was more ambivalent about

- homosexuality.
- 1981 Ministry of Culture produced a publication titled *In Defence of Love* that described homosexuality as a variant of human sexuality.
- 1981 AIDS in the US first diagnosed.
- 1985 First AIDS case diagnosed in Cuba — a Cuban man who had returned from defending the people of Mozambique.
- 1985 Cuba screened the island's entire blood supply and spent \$3 million to buy reactive agents and equipment to set up labs in blood banks, hygiene and epidemiology centres around the country.
- 1986 Cuba opened 13 sanatoria that provided care for 99 people — 20% of whom were thought to have contracted HIV through same-sex loving. Involuntarily quarantined.
- 1987 Offence of homosexual acts in public places was removed from Cuba's penal code and people charged under the law were released from jail.
- 1989 First transgender surgery performed.
- 1993 The age of consent for homosexuals in Cuba became 16 years, equalling heterosexuals.
- 1993 Homosexuals able to join the Communist Party for the first time.
- 1993 *Strawberry and Chocolate*, a film criticising Cubans' intolerance of homosexuality.
- 1995 Cuban drag queens lead the annual May Day procession.
- 1995 *Gay Cuba* produced by Sonia de Vries, a series of interviews with gay and lesbian Cubans and shown at the Havana International Festival of Latin America Cinema to public and critical acclaim.
- 1996 Pablo Milanes, a popular Cuban singer who had been incarcerated in a UMAP in the 1960s, dedicated a song about gay men to all Cuban homosexuals.
- 1996 National program for sex education with gender focus accepted and implemented.
- 2000 At the film festival in Havana, half the Latin American films shown had gay themes.
- 2001 Four local young males, ranging in ages from 17-22, held a double same-sex marriage ceremony outdoors, in front of loved ones and neighbours, in south-east Havana.
- 2003 16th World Congress of Sexology met in Havana.
- 2003 CENESEX created its own website, [www.cenesex.sld.cu](http://www.cenesex.sld.cu).
- 2004 Ricardo Alarcón, president of Cuba's National Assembly: "We are trying to

- see how to do that, whether it should be to grant them the right to marry or to have same-sex unions. We have to redefine the concept of marriage. Socialism should be a society that does not exclude anybody.”
- 2004 FMC-CENESEX law reform proposals: assisted reproduction services to single mothers and lesbians.
- 2004 FMC-CENESEX national strategy for of transvestites, transsexuals and transgender persons — transvestites and transsexuals accepted into secondary school and institutions of higher learning and has involved awareness-raising efforts among the police.
- 2004 Free gender reassignment operations begin to be carried out on a greater scale.
- 2006 Popular soap opera *The Hidden Face of the Moon* includes bi-sexual character.
- 2007 Cuba commemorated International Day of Action Against Homophobia with CENESEX leading a debate around sexual diversity with film screenings. Rallies have been held every years since.
- 2007 Sex-reassignment surgery as part of public health care in Cuba as a pilot program.
- 2007 Ricardo Alarcón, president of Cuba’s National Assembly: “We have to abolish any form of discrimination against homosexuality.”
- 2008 Sex-reassignment surgery institutionalised on a larger scale.



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## Museums

Revolutionary Museum, Havana.

*Rachel Evans:* 'When I was 16, I went to a Cuba solidarity event in my home town. At the end of inspiring speeches about Cuba's health record, education standards, and the revolution's policy of sending doctors and teachers to impoverished countries, a rousing chant of 'Cuba si! Yankee no!' erupted. It was electric. Much better than the fake feeling, singing and dancing we'd experienced in the church hall on Sunday. I was impressed and resolved to visit the country and see the revolution for myself. Years later and having come out of the closet, I decided my trip to Cuba could help prove or dispel the oft-uttered line of Cuba being homophobic.

'I hope this work will help put to bed the lies and distortions propagated by the powerful Washington propaganda machine: that the Cuban Revolution is undemocratic, homophobic and tyrannical. My visit to and study of Cuba finds that there is no basis to these claims.'

*Resistance books*