

Public Lives

November 24, 2002

Randy David

Two heroes, two nations

Cuba's deputy foreign minister, Jose Guerra, came to the University of the Philippines the other day to give a lecture on Cuba's relation to the world. The point of his lecture was to show that despite the blockade by which the United States has tried to strangle his tiny country for the last 40 years, Cuba is far from being an isolated nation. It maintains embassies in almost every major capital except the US, sends thousands of its engineers and doctors to assist poor nations, and regularly receives large numbers of young people from all over the world to study in its universities.

If there is a nation in Asia, Guerra said, with whom Cuba feels a strong affinity, it is the Philippines. Our national heroes were both named Jose – Jose Marti and Jose Rizal. They both imagined their evolving nations from the perspective of exile. They were both great writers. They died within a year of one another, Marti at 42, and Rizal at 35. Marti was killed in 1895 in the Cuban War of Independence against Spain, and Rizal was executed in 1896 after he became, against his own wish, the soul of the 1896 Philippine Revolution.

But more than the coincidences in the lives of these two heroes, it is the historical parallelisms of the two nations that are a source of enduring fascination. Minister Guerra was naturally too diplomatic to mention the divergent paths our countries took at the moment of revolution. For, despite their similar beginnings, no two countries are perhaps more different today both in social composition and in their concept of nationhood than the Philippines and Cuba.

Cuba remains staunchly socialist in its vision, while the Philippines cannot see a future beyond that of a dependent market economy. Despite its problems, Cuba is bent on creating an egalitarian society, whereas the Philippines seems content to leave the gaps in wealth and opportunity among its people to the vagaries of the market. Education is a responsibility of the state and is free in Cuba at all levels, but the Philippines would rather treat education as an arena

for private enterprise. Cuba, a small nation of 11.5 million people, tries very hard to be self-sufficient in food and basic medicines, while we, with a population of 80 million, are content to import basic necessities and export people. My point is not to argue that Cuban socialism may be good for us, but simply to say there has got to be a better system than what we have today.

Some may argue that Cuba, with its obsolete cars and rundown buildings, is a lot poorer than the Philippines. That may be true if we measure wealth in terms of modern malls, fast cars, cable television, cellular phones, and interconnected computers. But half of our people who have no access to these amenities, not to mention their chronic lack of more basic things, will surely disagree. We don't know of course how many Filipinos would prefer to live in Cuba, with its strong emphasis on national discipline, but I am sure their idea of Filipino citizenship does not include being treated as social and economic outcasts in their homeland.

I am aware that concepts of a desirable life vary from culture to culture, and that it is often pointless to make comparisons simply because the historical contingencies that attend the birth of nations vary greatly. Even so, it is good for the national soul to imagine that Cuba could have been our country.

Because of its geographical proximity to the US, Cuban revolutionaries found a refuge in America in which to prepare their country's liberation from Spain. Jose Marti, exiled from Cuba, spent 15 years of his life in New York, organizing fellow exiles and winning political sympathy among Americans for the Cuban revolution. The rebellion to free Cuba was launched in 1895. By early 1896, the rebels were in every province. Marti's revolutionary program meant not only to secure national independence, but also to create a social revolution. By 1898, Spain was on the verge of defeat. American sugar barons in Cuba became convinced that an independent Cuba in the hands of social rebels would be injurious to their interests, and started to promote annexation. They prodded President McKinley to intervene. When McKinley requested for a mandate from Congress, he did not mention Cuban independence. But Congress supporters for Cuban freedom pushed for a provision that disavowed US sovereignty over Cuba.

When the US entered the war, Cuban rebels were pushed to the margins, and the war became a Spanish-American War. At the Paris Peace Conference of Dec. 10, 1898, the US dictated the terms under which the new Cuba would take shape. In May 1902, the Cuban Republic was installed, led by people handpicked by the US. It was a neo-colony in every sense. Four years later, the US seized control over the country once again to stop a civil war that was destroying US business holdings. The occupation ended in 1909, but American control continued through a succession of US-sponsored dictatorships.

Rebels led by Fidel Castro ended the dictatorship of Fulgencio Batista in 1959, and launched a republic that was not only free from America but also faithful to the social vision of Jose Marti. In 1961, the US imposed a blockade that sought to isolate a socialist Cuba from the rest of the world. Cuba has paid dearly for its stubborn insistence to remain a truly independent nation. Cubans today have little by way of conventional wealth, but they are rich in what they call “orgullo nacional” – national pride. Some Filipinos, of course, will say you cannot eat that. That’s where values differ.

-----oOo-----

Comments to <rdavid@pacific.net.ph>