

4-13-1989

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Recommended Citation

Neagle, John. "Editorial: From Platt To Perestroika." (1989). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/notisur/2993>

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Editorial: From Platt To Perestroika

by John Neagle

Category/Department: General

Published: Thursday, April 13, 1989

Valdes* The issue of human rights in Cuba is highly controversial. The exile community and conservative and liberal critics of the Cuban revolution have long asserted that civil and political rights must be expanded. In contrast, Cuban officials stress social and economic rights. To some extent, ideological clashes between supporters and detractors of the revolution can be organized along the axis of human rights priorities civil and political versus social and economic rights. Several organizations have recently emerged in Cuba calling for greater civil and political rights, and have received support from the exile community and from foreign academics and politicians. The existence of these groups and their ability to function inside Cuba suggests that some type of "opening" in the political system has, in fact, taken place. Human rights leaders' ability to communicate with spokespersons abroad by telephone on almost a daily basis is taken for granted. Thus far, no one has attempted to explain why such an opening has occurred, and what the internal political dynamic of this process might be. The Cuban government's apparent consent is not acknowledged, much less praised. Something is indeed different. Changes underway in the USSR have elicited peculiar responses from the exile community and from human rights activists in Cuba. A few months ago the Miami home of Maria Cristina Herrera director of the Instituto de Estudios Cubanos an organization of Cuban exile academics and professionals, was bombed because she helped organize a panel discussion on US-Cuban relations and dared to use the word "perestroika." At the time, few exiles knew what the word meant, and even fewer dared to use it. Now, however, everyone seems to be enamored of the term and of its progenitor, Mikhail Gorbachev. On April 5, the Miami Herald reported that at least 100 rights activists were going to participate in a demonstration in front of the Soviet embassy in Havana to demand that "visiting Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev persuade Fidel Castro to adopt Soviet-style political reforms in Cuba." On the same day, El Nuevo Herald asserted that human rights activists intended to stage a rally outside the Soviet Embassy in order to "solicit" from the USSR "the establishment of perestroika" in Cuba. This type of thinking found resonance among exiles as well. In the same issue of the Herald, Christopher Marquis said that many exiles were pleased because the Soviet reformer would "chasten" Fidel Castro. He added, "Cuban exiles in Miami are relishing the Soviet leader's visit to the island, and the possibility that Fidel Castro may be forced to accept reform." Dispatching messages to a foreign embassy and holding rallies in front of the same, or hoping that the Soviet leader would impose a set of political or economic policies on Cuba are reminiscent of earlier days when the Havana's "answers" originated in Washington, DC. (This tendency to depend on Washington for answers and directives was known as the Plattista mentality, which alluded to the Platt Amendment imposed on Cuba's constitution of 1901 by the US which granted the latter the right to intervene in Cuba's domestic affairs.) The Plattista mentality has been replaced by the Perestroika mentality. In either case, answers to Cuba's problems are supposed to come from outside. Under both "mentalities," the Cuban people's right to self-determination is thrown overboard. Not long ago opponents of the Cuban revolution explained their opposition by asserting that Fidel Castro was a puppet of the Soviets. In brief, exiles proclaimed Cuban nationalism. The Cuban government countered that national sovereignty was asserted on the day the US no longer dictated domestic arrangements. At present, the erstwhile "nationalists" who claim support

for civil and political rights demonstrate a lack of consideration for Cubans' self-determination. Perhaps those who have jumped on the perestroika bandwagon in order to request that a Soviet proconsul dictate to Fidel Castro what he should do in Cuba should become acquainted with Gorbachev's writings. According to the Soviet leader, "Every nation is entitled to choose its own way of development, to dispose of its fate, its territory, and its human and natural resources." If human rights activists in Cuba (or exiles abroad) wish to see a "restructuring" and a real "opening" of Cuban society, they might consider paying more attention to the US economic embargo. Removal of that embargo would likely be the most effective lever in opening Cuban society to real politics. Perhaps the next time human rights activists organize a demonstration in Havana, they should do so in front of the US interests section. It would be interesting to see how the Cuban government would react to such a rally. Human rights activists would be well-advised to link the possibility of perestroika and glasnost to the lifting of US sanctions. Neither superpower should be permitted to decide what happens inside Cuba. Such decisions are the prerogative of Cubans, both at home and abroad. * Associate professor of sociology, University of New Mexico, and director of the LADB. Currently, Prof. Valdes is visiting professor of sociology at Rollins College, Winter Park, Fla.

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