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LIS 610, Professor Asato
Assignment 6, Revised Paper

Cuba's "Independent" Libraries

Introduction

The arrest of 75 dissidents in Cuba in March 2003 added another chapter to the ongoing debate within ALA concerning the so-called "independent library" movement; among those imprisoned were 14 independent librarians. Supporters of the independent librarians claim they are law-abiding citizens who are being denied free speech; detractors argue they are not librarians but anti-Castro zealots paid by the U.S. government. This paper will examine the history and current status of the issue, look at the many factors involved in the debate, and discuss the differing points of view of the participants.

History of U.S./Cuba relations

In 1959, revolutionary forces led by Fidel Castro brought down the government of Cuban dictator Fulgencio Batista. Castro soon set up a socialist government, with ties to the Soviet Union. This strained relations with the U.S., which retaliated by imposing a trade embargo and restricting travel to and from Cuba. These actions have had a severe impact on the Cuban economy, as did the withdrawal of Soviet support in the early 1990s. As a result, the Cuban people have suffered many privations for decades.

The embargo has affected the flow of information to Cuba. Foreign books are taxed at 40%, paper for book production is expensive, and books that are donated from the U.S. must go through a third country (Hamilton). The travel restrictions hamper the international professional development opportunities for Cuban librarians and impede U.S. librarians from visiting their Cuban counterparts (Hamilton). The nations of the U.N. have overwhelmingly condemned the U.S. for the embargo and the U.S. response has been to further tighten restrictions through the

Torricelli Act of 1992 and the Helms-Burton Act of 1996 (Hamilton). These two acts supply tens of millions of dollars to groups for anti-Castro activities including the dissemination of materials designed to undermine the government; independent libraries are crucial to this endeavor.

Cuba's public library system

Cuba enjoys one of the highest rates of literacy in the world at nearly 100%.¹ This remarkable feat was accomplished through the Great Literacy Campaign, which was instigated by Castro in 1960 (Pateman). With nearly 6 million users borrowing 8 million books per year, Cuba's large public library system has been a key component in the fight against illiteracy (Pateman).

There are over 400 public libraries plus additional school, academic, and special libraries in Cuba (Lubow and Neugebauer). Public libraries contain "a wide variety of reading materials from around the world . . . ranging from the classics to contemporary literature, from Latin American fiction to current and historical works, and including scientific and medical literature" (Lubow and Neugebauer). Each province (14) has a main branch and each of the 169 municipalities has its own public library; larger cities have multiple branches (Hamilton; Lubow and Neugebauer). Founded in 1901, the Biblioteca Nacional José Martí is Cuba's national library as well as the head of the public library service; it houses approximately 3 million items (Hamilton). However, budget constraints have left the books in poor condition and the collections underdeveloped with few new titles (Hamilton). There is very limited Internet access in public libraries due to poor infrastructure and few computers (Hamilton).

¹ "Literacy" is defined as those "age 15 and over [who] can read and write." The CIA World Factbook: Cuba. 9 November 2008 <<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/print/cu.html>>.

While both sides agree that there are few new books and Internet access is limited, they disagree as to why the limitations exist: is it purely because of budget shortfalls or is it due to governmental censorship? Critics contend that public libraries are part of the Castro government's attempt to control the flow of information. Reports of the [suppression](#) of certain titles or authors is disputed by [Eliades Acosta](#), head of the Cuban National Library (Eberhart). As for limited Internet access, [ASCUBI](#), the Cuban Library Association, indicated in 2007 that the situation is improving: the government has increased funding for computers in public libraries, and several other institutions such as clubs and professional organizations are attempting to bridge the digital divide (IFLA/FAIFE). But some young Cubans contend that the government is deliberately restricting Internet access in order to suppress dissent and they are not waiting for more officially sanctioned access. They are using technology in the form of illegal Internet hookups, memory sticks, and digital cameras to download prohibited content, record abuses, and spread their message electronically in an effort to expose repression and thwart the government's control (Mckinley).

Supporters of Cuba's independent libraries

Fidel Castro stated in 1998 that "in Cuba, there are no prohibited books, only those we do not have money to buy" (Hamilton). This sparked the "independent library" movement in order to offer reading materials "that are not available in state-run organizations in Cuba" (Bibliotecas Independientes de Cuba). In 1999, a New York public librarian named Robert Kent announced the formation of the Friends of Cuban Libraries (FCL), an "independent, nonpartisan, nonprofit organization dedicated to promoting intellectual freedom in Cuba, regardless of whatever government may be in office" (Kent). FCL is the leader of this movement; other participants

include the Center for a Free Cuba, the Cuban Democracy Project, and Freedom House, all of which receive funding from the U.S. government through the Torricelli and Helms-Burton acts (Hamilton). FCL also maintains close ties with Radio Marti, a Miami-based radio station that was created by the U.S. government and is supposedly broadcasting “accurate, objective and balanced information to Cuba” but whose impartiality has been called into question by some including the Cuban government (Hamilton). CubaNet, an “organization that fosters free press in Cuba, assists its independent sector develop a civil society and informs the world about Cuba's reality” is another purportedly unbiased group; it acts as a source of information about independent libraries for FCL (CubaNet; Hamilton). However, CubaNet's objectivity is doubtful: its website states that it receives funding from the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) and United States Agency for International Development (USAID), among others. These nongovernmental organizations are allied with the exiled Cuban community in Miami, a group who make no secret of their desire for a peaceful return to a democratic Cuba and who actively seek to turn American sentiment against Castro's regime. Arguments of the wish for an orderly transition aside, this aspiration contains an implied threat of a U.S.-backed war and the Cuban government is understandably critical of such interference in its internal politics.

The independent library movement counts among its supporters many prominent names, including former librarian and cataloger Sandy Berman, former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, and author Andrei Codrescu (McDonald 100). *Village Voice* columnist Nat Hentoff has been particularly vocal in his support. When the ALA refused a motion to petition Cuba to release its imprisoned independent librarians, Hentoff publicly renounced the Immroth Award

for Intellectual Freedom that he received in 1983, calling the ALA leadership “spineless” and hypocritical (Hentoff).

Independent libraries’ detractors

Detractors object to calling those who run Cuba’s independent libraries “librarians” since they are not professionally trained and the “libraries” are simply collections of reading materials—bought with U.S. funds—in their homes. ASCUBI supports this view and states that “no Cuban librarian, no graduate of any of our Cuban library schools, nor any librarian or paraprofessional who currently or ever has [sic] worked in the Cuban library and information system has been detained” (ASCUBI). They argue that independent librarians are supported by the U.S. government and are tools of the extreme right who use “distortion, subjective interpretation, and crude manipulation of the events” in order to further their cause (ASCUBI). According to Lee, independent librarians are “de facto political dissidents.” Librarians Dana Lubow and Rhonda Neugebauer point out that the adjective “independent” is added to the description of many other professions (e.g., journalists and trade’s people) who have been imprisoned by the Cuban government; it acts as a kind of code word for those who take “monies and support from the U.S. in violation of Cuban law.”

Michael Dowling, director of ALA’s international relations office, points out that even with several fact-finding visits to Cuba from different groups, disagreements as to what constitutes the truth still exist (Lee). Mark Rosensweig, director of the Reference Center for Marxist Studies, defends Cuba as having one of the best public library systems among developing nations and characterizes independent librarians as “a ragtag bunch of people who have been involved on the fringes of the dissident movement” (Lee).

Some ALA members accuse a small group of independent library supporters of trying to “hijack the organization to pursue an anti-Castro agenda” when other areas, such as Turkey, South Africa, and Iraq, have much greater censorship problems (Lee). Lubow and Neugebauer describe how the supporters of the independent libraries engage in duplicitous behavior in order to “prove” their censorship claims: U.S.-backed dissident groups in Cuba feed anti-Castro stories to sympathetic news outlets in the U.S. which then broadcast these same stories back to Cuba as evidence of human rights violations. Further, “the American legislation that provided money for the destabilization of the country, thus violating Cuban sovereignty, was matched by Cuban legislation which made it illegal to cooperate with or accept payment from these sorts of U.S.-endowed agencies and groups” (Lubow and Neugebauer).

FCL has angered many ALA members by their tactics. In a recent email to ALA’s Council, Peter McDonald, former ALA officer, recounts a history of harassment that he and others have suffered for opposing the motions of FCL. His allegations cite “viscious and abusive and potentially illegal tactics” including the doctoring of ALA documents and listserv postings, deliberately spreading “propaganda” to new Councilors, and refusing to cease and desist these activities when asked to do so (McDonald, Statement of Concern).

Intellectual freedom in Cuba

Human rights violations in Cuba, including repression of freedom of speech and access to information, have been reported by Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and Pax Christi (Hamilton). Hamilton states that those found guilty of subversive activities are subject to harsh penalties “including short-term detentions, official warnings, removal from jobs, eviction, surveillance (including the tapping of telephones), harassment, intimidation and forced exile.”

The Cuban government has been accused of practicing censorship by imprisoning dissident writers, banning independent news agencies, denying access to foreign radio and television broadcasts, and by limiting Internet access to "entities and institutions most relevant to the country's life and development" (Hamilton). *As a result, out of 11 million Cubans only 1.7% are Internet users (compared to 75% of Americans) and less than 20% of public libraries offer Internet access to users (IFLA/FAIFE; Pew).*

This view of Cuban society as repressive and impoverished is disputed by some. Far from being a brutal dictatorship, they argue, it is "a living example to the rest of Latin American and the Caribbean, and the entire so-called Third World," in spite of the economic war that has been waged by the U.S. (Nahem). Supporters cite Cuba's free health care and education, low rates of infant mortality and high life expectancy rates, and the aforementioned high rate of literacy as evidence that Castro's policies of "solidarity, enlightenment, and social justice" have resulted in "a more just and egalitarian society" (Nahem). Lubow and Neugebauer, who have travelled to Cuba, credit the Revolution for creating a "society rich in educational, intellectual, and cultural opportunities." Ann Sparanese, a librarian at the Englewood (N.J.) Public Library, points out that "Cuba is not a stagnant society . . . What might have been true 15 years ago isn't necessarily true today" (Eberhart 88). She and others have turned the table on those who accuse Cuba of quashing intellectual freedom by pointing out that the U.S. has its own history of repression *and* has a much higher rate of illiteracy: "Why are we holding Cuba up to a standard that is not even observed by most countries in the world, even our own?" (Eberhart 88).

Responses from IFLA/FAIFFE and ALA

The International Federation of Library Associations's (IFLA) Committee on Free Access to Information and Freedom of Expression (FAIFE) was brought into the fray of the independent library issue in 1999 when it received a report of harassment of Cuba's independent librarians (Byrne). Thus began the "longest running and most intensively debated matter addressed by IFLA/FAIFE during the first six years of its operation" (Byrne). After listening to arguments on both sides, IFLA/FAIFE concluded that what was at stake was "the principle of freedom of access to information," regardless of the political ties of the libraries (Byrne). It investigated the allegations and in September 1999, issued a report "confirm(ing) that arrests and harassment had taken place, along with confiscation of books" and urging Cuba to put an end to its abuses of independent librarians (Hamilton). An open letter was dispatched to Castro; though he did not respond, ASCUBI did. They felt that their professionalism and accomplishments had been denigrated and argued that "the major impediment to access to information" was in fact the U.S. embargo and the crippling effect it has on the Cuban economy (Byrne). IFLA/FAIFE has stood by its position, adding statements denouncing the 2003 arrests, but it also adopted a resolution calling for an end to the embargo (Byrne).

ALA has also had a long involvement with the Cuba issue. It has been the target of much criticism from FCL and its supporters for failing to denounce censorship and the imprisonment of Cuban dissidents, and for refusing to support the independent library movement (Dowling). After many hearings, reports, and resolutions, ALA issued a special report in June 2008 outlining its stance: while it opposes both censorship and the embargo, the organization recognizes the complexity of the issue and calls on "both Cuba and the U.S. to break down official barriers and respect human rights" (Dowling). The report notes the hypocrisy in "singl(ing) out Cuba for

condemnation without speaking out in equal measure against the abuses and embargo perpetrated against Cuba by the U.S. government” (Dowling). ALA questions the motives of FCL and does not want to be a pawn in a “hidden political agenda” (Dowling). It believes it has shown “an abiding understanding” of the nuances of this complex issue and characterizes the efforts of groups like FCL as “misguided” and “counterproductive” (Dowling). Both ALA and IFLA/FAIFE have concluded that far too much time and resources have been spent on this issue and that there are other, greater human rights abuses in other countries to consider.

My views

This is a value-laden discussion that poses many questions for me as I articulate the principles that inform my nascent philosophy of librarianship. The ALA’s Library Bill of Rights protects intellectual freedom and access to information, liberties that I think are clearly being violated in Cuba. One of the difficulties I see in this issue is one of cultural imperialism: we, as Americans and librarians, have so internalized the ideals of democracy that it is difficult to imagine that people who are governed under different systems may not be “suffering.” Cubans may not feel oppressed or that they are lacking reading material. Friends of mine who have visited Cuba note that, although the people are poor (by American standards), their lives are rich in culture. They may not want our information superhighway society; they may, in fact, pity our daily attempts to “drink out of a fire hose” of information. But here’s the crucial difference: we can choose to disconnect ourselves but Cubans are not free to choose more access to information. Democracy, in all its imperfection, allows us that choice.

The stances of ALA and IFLA/FAIFE reflect the complexity of this issue: denouncing Cuba’s human rights violations while acknowledging the role the U.S. government has played in

destabilizing the Cuban economy and the Castro government. Those that seek to oversimplify (a tactic that is all too common in today's discourse) do so for their own gain. Whatever merit FCL's arguments might have is overshadowed by their blatant disregard for the ideals that form the basis of librarianship; such hypocrisy alienates possible supporters and is counterproductive in promoting the ideals of democracy. While there remains much to accomplish as far as opening the free flow of information in Cuba, I believe the best way to do so is to respect the efforts of its public librarians and to encourage our government to normalize relations with Castro; lifting the embargo will allow U.S. librarians to strengthen professional ties to their Cuban counterparts. We stand to learn as much from them—on how to do more with less and how to raise literacy rates—as they do from us.

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Revision notes

Peer review comments:

P. 1: **Is this because of the US or Cuba?** I think the previous paragraph and topic sentence immediately before the sentence in question make it clear that the U.S.-led embargo is the cause of all the hardships listed, not Cuba.

P.3: I added text to clarify who is denying claims of censorship.

Instructor's comments:

P.2: **Are there other reasons for this as well, such as political control? It will be interesting to observe this now that Castro's brother vowed to improve electricity as one of his main priorities.**

I couldn't find any information about improvements in electricity, but I added some content from a recent article to the following paragraph to broaden the perspective on technology usage by young dissidents in Cuba.

P. 6: **This is a key point. I think another point that critics raise is that the right also has used such news not only to spark unrest in Cuba, but also as attempts to move the American public towards war with Cuba.** I added a few lines on page 4 about this aspect.

P. 6: **This article is a bit dated. An interesting recent development is Raul Castro's policy of allowing cellular phones to the public. One wonders if this will allow more free flow of ideas.**

I added figures for Internet usage and access from more recent sources on page 7 and briefly discussed the use of cell phones by dissidents on page 2.

P. 9: I rewrote the conclusion to make a more clear connection between the issue and its relation to my philosophy of librarianship.