

*Generations of the Cuban Presidio*  
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When Carlos Aguirre made a call for papers having to do with the political penitentiary in Latin America, I thought it would be a good opportunity to consolidate some ideas about the case of Cuba's political prisoners, a subject I had begun to investigate in the mid-1990s. For many, the history of the post-1959 Cuban political penitentiary has been a case of received wisdom. That is, the nature and extent of post-1959 political incarceration and repression have been "heard about" in passing more often than they have been studied in academic circles. Unlike the field of Cuban immigration where a series of chronological waves of immigrants have been set out, a confirmed demography has been accepted, and a series of simultaneously plausible and even mutually reinforcing, explanatory variables have accounted for the politics, sociology & economics of the case; the Cuban political penitentiary does not come with a familiar, well-documented conceptual frame and a verified demography that is known to most experts.

To be sure, there are polemics in the study of Cuban immigration but they draw upon the interpretation of events and data that are accepted by analysts from different perspectives. Interestingly, while Cuban migration has frequently been placed in comparative perspective [Portes, 1995 #64;Portes, 1992 #66;Pedraza, 1985 #62] the Cuban penitentiary has generally not been included in regional comparisons (But see: [Gostindie, 1999 #76] ). Indeed, as is discussed below, violations that are clear and heart-wrenching in Guatemala or Chile have been subject to dismissal in the Cuban context. Often, observers and potential students of Cuba are simply worn down by the heat of the polemic. This leaves uneven intellectual terrain with some subjects receiving massive attention (e.g., U.S./Cuba relations, immigration, revolutionary social policy) and others scarcely covered.

This is not to say that work has not been done or that primary and secondary sources are unavailable regarding political prisoners. Particularly within human rights organizations there are reports, studies and case files carefully documenting general conditions and specific situations over time. Although they do not analyze the historical factors or the political processes that produced and maintain the penitentiary, they do leave a valuable data trail. In addition, more archives on this subject are being opened in the U.S., Eastern Europe and the former USSR, making studies more likely and providing new points for triangulating data.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Increasingly, primary materials from former political prisoners are being donated to research archives located in the major population sites of the Cuban diaspora as families realize the value of their primary documents and the need for preservation. Simultaneously, although Cuban archives on the political penitentiary are not yet available, previously classified Cuban archives on sensitive topics are opening on a selective basis. See Glijeses 2002 and [Sweig, 2002 #391]. Also, more diaries, testimonies and

The prisoners themselves have produced a large and rich body of literature including organizational reports and magazines, autobiographies, diaries, prison letters and the like [Bryant, 1984 #75]; Almendros 1984, 1989; Fibla González 1993; Golendorf 1977; González 1987; Hidalgo 1994; Instituto Internacional de Cooperación y Solidaridad Cubana and Central Latinoamericana de Trabajadores (IICSD-CLAT – hereafter ICOSOCV) 1982; Muller 1984, 2002; Orihuela 1991; Pardo 1992; Pombo Matamoros 1997; Rodríguez & Garvin 1995; Sales 1976; Sánchez 1999; Valls 1986).

Drawing on these sources, what academic literature there is and my prior work [Ackerman, 1998 #84; Ackerman, 1998 #83; Ackerman, 1998 #82], in this paper I describe the entire sweep of the post-revolutionary period from 1959 to the present, dividing the prison population into four broad eras of the political penitentiary. This offers a basis for discussion and provides the reader with sources for more detailed study. Then, factors that have informed the policy of the Cuban government in creating and maintaining a forty four year presidio are presented.<sup>2</sup>

A few broad assumptions about common characteristics underlie the analysis. The first assumption is that many countries have horrifying conditions within their prison systems. Prisoners (often both common criminals and political prisoners) are malnourished, raped, beaten, tormented, tortured and subjected to isolation and sensory deprivation routinely, particularly in authoritarian and dictatorial states. This is a truth that is seldom acknowledged in the media and, when covered, the horror of prison is generally presented as aberrant. When prison conditions are reported, those who break the story are seen as particularly gifted in investigative technique. Yet, despite exceptions, prison horror occurs frequently throughout the world. The unstated rule is that those who threaten the state - even through nonviolent means - can expect this type of treatment. Because they present an extraordinary threat they will be severely and perversely punished and extraordinary efforts will be necessary to stop the process once started. In the simplest terms this is a unifying factor in all cases. Indeed the regularity of resort to state terror is such that human rights organizations are now shifting their programs from after-the-fact monitoring and redress to the creation of early warning programs and crisis prevention.<sup>3</sup> The nurture of

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autobiographies are being produced by participants from all levels and perspectives. (Levine 2001) . Additionally, the recent opening of a new Cuban Heritage Collection Pavilion at the University of Miami and its expanded capacity for digitalization have made processed collections more accessible and previously unprocessed materials more likely to be available soon.

<sup>2</sup>Excluded from the paper is a discussion of Brigade 2506 - the 1961 (Bay of Pigs/Playa Girón) invasionary brigade financed by the United States. This group was held separate from the rest of the political penitentiary while captive in Cuba and was traded for money, equipment and supplies within twenty months of capture. Unlike the main body of Cuban political prisoners, the Brigade members have been the subject of much investigation and a rich literature exists on their role, treatment and fate ( Alonso 1981; Blight & Kornbluh 1998; Ferrer 1982; Johnson 1964; Kornbluh 1998; Kornbluh, Taylor and others 2000; Ros 1994; Trest and Dood 2001; Wyden 1979). Consequently, they will not be included here.

<sup>3</sup> Organizations such as Amnesty International have begun to alter their approach to human rights monitoring in two significant ways. First, where formerly the focus was on documenting violations and advocating for fundamental political freedoms, the definition of human rights has recently been expanded to include social and economic freedoms. Thus, the mandate is being enlarged to acknowledge a wider group

authoritarian politics may result in the worst and most numerous incidents but the nature of the human animal seems to play a significant part as well.

Like human rights organizations, reconciliation and truth commissions that resulted following democratic transitions have grown sophisticated in identifying common factors and continuities as well as distinct features of state systems of terror and punishment. In the process, various actors have grappled with the contradictions between human rights as political freedom and human rights as equal access to social and economic benefits. As a result, practical approaches to balancing and including both definitions are now the focus of human rights activists. The optimistic aspect of the Cuban case is that the balance between human rights, national reconciliation and truth is being recalibrated at a time when political, social and intellectual instruments for understanding and resolution are more nuanced and informed by prior cases.

If this assumption of a common human tendency is accurate, it raises a question as to why the content of each national drama is treated as an anomaly. Also, it calls into question our surprise and revulsion as we discover successive political penitentiaries at the epicenter of state terror. It seems more accurate to say that the context of each political penitentiary is unique but the instruments of the *presidio político* are fairly generic.

That is, the “fit” between the needs of the state that creates the penitentiary and the reaction of domestic and international actors that witness or refuse to witness the political penitentiary must be carefully monitored if the state wishes to retain its prerogatives over the use of force. The tension between the two is so compelling, complex and individual that the discovery and resolution of each political penitentiary appears, as it emerges, to be a separate entity rather than simply an iteration of a near universal human pattern. What makes each political penitentiary distinct is the unique way repressive elements are assembled, applied and explained away. The dynamic between the structure and process of the political penitentiary and the domestic and international needs of the State creates a unique strategy and a singular scandal.

This paper explores the case of the post-revolutionary Cuban political penitentiary noting through case examples that the general techniques of terror are remarkably standard while state policies for conducting and simultaneously explaining &/or denying the terror are distinct. Further, it is assumed that the political penitentiary serves universally as a means to control active political opponents by setting very high stakes on regime critical political expression. Finally, it is assumed that each *presidio* initially serves to silence the general population as the horror of what goes on in prison first enters into public awareness.

As will be discussed below, a case specific cover story, what Campbell and Brenner (2000) have called plausible deniability of state violence against dissenters, is required. The cover story must be easy to accept and often is couched in patriotic terms. The Cuban cover story operates on both a macro level,

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of causal factors. Second, the organizational structure of the is evolving into a consultative panel including volunteers and professional staff composed of several national chapters rather than a “spokes on a wheel” approach where a central staff deals with several individual countries in bi-lateral efforts to monitor and reduce human rights violations (AI 2001, 2002).

using a David and Goliath image, and on a micro level, centering around the *logros* and benevolent intent of the revolution.

The macro cover story assumes a winner take all arrangement where censure of Cuba's human rights record is pitted against censure of the U.S. trade embargo, as if the two are inseparable and the existence of one cancels the other. The logic of this position is that a large share of problems in Cuba is attributable to the embargo. So long as the embargo exists, the Cuban state must limit basic political freedom both to assure a set of social and economic rights and to build the Socialist man in a sovereign state. Beyond that, the revolution is reported to be so financially strapped by the embargo that one should not object to a Spartan prison life for enemies of the state. What is more, political dissenters are all demonized as agents of the CIA making dissent an act sponsored by foreign powers. The *presidio politico*, its long history and conditions, is generally lost in the smoke of this cross-fire.

Asserting that a political penitentiary exists and functions intentionally can cause political censure and professional banishment both at domestic and international levels in Cuba but, to a lesser extent, within academic circles in general. In a state where "democratic solidarity" is tightly enforced, collective problems only exist publicly when the highest state authorities broadcast them. To strengthen the cover story, the main strategy of the Cuban state has been to make diversity within the political penitentiary disappear figuratively. Indeed, the predominant image of the Cuban *presidio* calls up a group whether they are being vilified as worms, counterrevolutionaries, banditos or respected as *plantados* or patriots. Whereas, mothers in the Southern Cone had to fight to recover the memory of the disappeared as children and family members – part of a social group rather than vague enemies of the state; the Cuban prisoners have always had a group identity as political activists. As we shall see, the Cuban state initially contributed to that image but quickly saw the strategic error of this approach and, by 1963, began actively to try to disaggregate the group and their public image.

Between 1959 and 2003, four eras can be defined in the Cuban case based on the type of persons imprisoned, the crimes they were alleged to have committed, their length of sentence, degree and type of violence imposed on them, threat they posed to the state before, during and after their incarceration and the unique policy that was applied by the Cuban state to explain or deny their existence and circumstance. It is impossible within the confines of this paper to provide an exhaustive history and sociology of each stage of the continuing *presidio* but a general overview is presented, followed by an analysis of the evolution of the Cuban political prisons and their contemporary meaning.

The four eras (See Appendix I for a summary of the eras & the entry and exit of groups from prison)

1. Associates of the old regime that entered prison in 1959 immediately following the triumph of the Revolution:

Contrary to popular belief those in the first era were not primarily high level officials of the Batista regime. Rather, they were mid and low level military or police personnel and government bureaucrats who had been involved in pre-1959 violence. They were joined by conservative elites who had organized immediate violent resistance after January 1959 (e.g., the members of the Tujillista<sup>4</sup>). Most old regime associates were adults when they entered prison and those who are living today are in their 70s, 80s or 90s. Their fate within the penitentiary was to be among those who were most often executed (Arango, 1996; Ovares, 1996).

Ironically, it was survivors in this group who accepted the first and most humiliating government plan of political rehabilitation and early release. They were characterized by their opposition to revolution in any form yet many of them accepted ideological re-education, public confession, apology & self-criticism as an expedient to exit prison as quickly as possible. Their values and beliefs were formed prior to the insurrection and they participated in a system that used violence as a principal means to maintain dictatorial control. Their arrest, punishment and eventual self-confession provided public examples of the revolutionary state's effectiveness at rounding up and punishing the Batistianos. As the second era of prisoners came into prison in 1961, the notoriety and negative image of the first era also provided a cover for mass execution or incarceration of the democratic left that had dissented from the rapidly consolidated revolutionary regime.

2. The revolutionary resistance who entered prison between 1961-1967:

The name and political orientation of this group is problematic. They are persons who advocated and fought for sweeping political and social change but did not want a break with Democracy (Ameringer, 1974; Arboleya, 2000). Most were members of anti-Batista revolutionary groups particularly the 26<sup>th</sup> of July Movement and the Directorio Revolucionario Estudiantil.<sup>5</sup>

As Fidel Castro consolidated control, this group was identified as involved in counter-government plots or counter-government beliefs. Some were involved in violent attempts to re-ignite an insurrection and others were simply suspected and were swept up in mass arrests, primarily in the city but also in the countryside (Gonzalez 1987). These prisoners have been variously called the revolutionary resistance, the democratic left, counterrevolutionaries or bandits. When they entered prison most were in their late teens or twenties and are now in their 50s and 60s.

Many in this era were executed (Beruvides, 1993; Beruvides, 1994; Werlau, 2002; Corzo, 2002; Corzo, 2001). Most of the surviving members had long sentences and they frequently served ten to thirty years before being offered unconditional exit or accepting a rehabilitation plan that shortened their sentence. This group was the main (though not exclusive) source of the *plantados* (those who refused to stop struggling, if only symbolically) continuing their dissent by nonviolent resistance, e.g.,

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<sup>4</sup> The Trujillista took place in 1959 and was the first invasionary attempt to overthrow the revolution. The invasionary party was funded and trained by Dominican dictator Rafael Leonidas Trujillo Molina, hence the name.

<sup>5</sup> For a more detailed description of the individuals and groups comprising this cohort see (Ackerman, 1998).

refusing to dissolve into the general prison population, wear the uniform of common criminals or accept political rehabilitation).

These prisoners were tortured in a manner similar to that used in the Southern Cone regimes with use of electro-shock, casket like isolation chambers (called *celdas tapiadas* or *celdas de castigo* or, in Boniato Prison in Santiago, *gavetas*), forced immersion in a river of human sewage, stabbing with bayonets and *machetes*. Illustrative case examples are presented below.

As executions continued into the 1960's, international support for the revolutionary government eroded among high profile supporters reaching its nadir in 1971 (Jouffroy 1971). The Cuban government was faced on the one hand with a desire to eliminate opponents and to signal a demand for political conformity to the population and, on the other hand, to maintain a vision of the humanitarian revolution as green as the palms. The fact that most prisoners were leftists with social networks among like-minded activists/institutions in Latin America and Europe, made it increasingly hard to deny or justify executions among supporters. It also threatened international financial support. More importantly, the moral authority of Cuban leaders rested on the achievements of the regime in education, health and national self-determination. Ill-treatment within the political presidio demonstrated the perversion of this authority. Reducing the death toll and presenting model institutions that conformed to revolutionary ideals was imperative.

The regime had originally used a two part strategy of consolidation of all prisoners and stimulation of inter-group animosity. Step one involved collecting them into a network of houses in Vedado, processing them through the prisons in Havana and then sending "*cordilleras*" of prisoners to the Isle of Pines<sup>6</sup>. This put the large mass of the most serious dissidents in an out of the way but traditionally acceptable place where they could be controlled and removed from public consciousness and view.

The second part of the strategy was to use the Batistiano prisoners, who had arrived between 1959-1960, as prison "trustees" to assault and torment the revolutionaries. It seemed that this approach would divide the prisoners among themselves and preclude any continuing struggle against the government.

For a few years, the collective strategy served the state well. For example, having the bulk of the political prisoners in one place during the Cuban Missile Crisis, allowed the government to employ a simple tactic to signal its intent if an invasion were to transpire. The bases of the four *circulares* (circular buildings that hold the prisoners) at Isla de Pinos were dynamited and prisoners were told that they would be blown up if there was an invasion either by the U.S. or by brigades of exiles. The stress and trauma of living in these dangerous conditions for the year that the facility was dynamited produced psychological problems for many prisoners. [Various, August 30, 1997 #71;Muller, 2003 #70].

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<sup>6</sup> A similar process took place in other urban areas throughout the island.

As often happens, however, the common danger eventually united prisoners regardless of their divergent political beliefs and prior antagonisms. By 1963, the pitting of *Batistianos* against *Revolucionarios* was no longer effective as prisoners had made common cause against the prison officials in order to survive. Indeed, there was a heightened demand by prisoners and their families for improved treatment and international pressure for a reduction of repression. In response, regime then sought to *desaparecerles* (make the prisoners disappear) figuratively. That is the government tried to mix the political prisoners into the general population in order to deny the existence of sizable numbers of prisoners.

The government used violence and torture to try to break the spirit of the prisoners requiring actions that had not traditionally been required of Cuban political prisoners. Involuntarily imposing forced labor was the first of these, followed by dispersion of the prisoners and refusal to permit them the use of distinctive clothing and symbols. Each of the atrocities committed in the effort bore the characteristic mark of State terror in the Cuban penitentiary during this era. It was an ordinary activity turned mad. By perverting ordinary activities, in this case prison work, the government had both a means of punishment and a plausible rationale if questions persisted.

Case Example: Forcing forced labor

The Model Prison at the Isle of Pines (completed in 1931) was constructed to hold approximately 3,500 prisoners but by the early sixties contained at least 6,000 prisoners and a prison guard of 1,000. Guards and prisoners had come to an expedient informal accord whereby the prisoners did limited work in and around the prison to maintain the prison building and grounds. Forced labor had not been strictly imposed until an incident that became known as the “mojonera.”<sup>7</sup>

The sewage of the entire facility was canalized through a ditch of varying height (being over the heads or at shoulder length depending on height of the prisoner) and up to 10 meters wide where it emerged near the sea into which it was discharged. Mario Morfi and Reinol González relate the first use of the *Mojonera* for purposes of torture during an eight hour period with a group of 70 political prisoners.

Testimonio de Mario Morfi (ICOSOCV 1982, pg. 328)

“Estabamos todos fuera de la circular, mas de 70 hombres, descalzos, en chancletas y algunos enfermos y llegó Juan Rivero, [ supervisory guard subsequently promoted to Jefe de Orden en Isla de Pinos], y al rato se apareció una tropita pequeña con unos cajones llenos de machetes.....pero tras el primer groupito de guardias apareció un pelotón mayor, y ya aquello era diferente..... Nos sacaron fuera del penal .....cerca de Bibijagua, entramos en un senderito estrecho y, de repente, apareció un pelotón de guardias, bien armados, que nos rodeó en cordón y seguimos andando. Primero pasamos un arroyo pequeno de agua muy, pero muy frío y saliendo al ratico, apareció una cerca de alambre que limitaba ya la zona en si de la “mojonera,” aunque no sabíamos nada de eso en aquellos momentos. Cada vez que un preso iba a cruzar la

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<sup>7</sup> Mojonera is a Cubanism for a ditch filled with sewage. It is taken from the word “mojon” a cement road marker that looks like a pile of organic material and used as a slang word for turd.

cerca, le pegaban para que la brincara y no para que la pasara por abajo, entre los pelos, porque del otro lado había roca viva, áspera y puntiaguda y querían que uno cayera sobre ellas con el impulse del salto, pues estábamos descalzos. Yo trate de cruzar por debajo y me dieron la primera “encendí a” y ya al caer en el campo de rocas nos hicieron correr, a “pasodoble” correr para agotarnos hasta que apareció aquella laguna de mierda, repleta de excrementos de mas de 7000 personas.

La intención era obvia, terriblemente obvia y desagradable, muy terrible. ....los Cabos empezaron a empujar con bayonetas y empellones a los presos para meternos en aquella zanja inmundada, infestada.”

#### TESTIMONIO DE REINOL GONZALEZ (ICOSOCV pg. 330)

“Un terrible cavario fue la “mojonera,” .... al llegar a su orilla los guardias nos empujaron obligandonos a entrar en la zanja con la misión de sacar del fondo los objetos duros que pudieran obstruir la corriente hacia el mar. Algunas partes de la zanja eran muy estrechas y el guardia podía alcanzarte con la bayoneta, cosa que hacían cuando veían que un preso no sacaba nada del fondo de aquélla. ... el caso es que le dieron duro para que se soltar, .....no daba pie en las aguas fangosas y podridas del la mojonera.....hay que destacar que los guardias disfrutaron aquel espectáculo con una morbosidad increíble.....golpeaban, pinchaban con la punta de la bayoneta, daban patadas en la cabeza de los presos cerca de la orilla, burlándose de todo .....hay que apuntar que al entrar los presos en la zanja de excrementos se hundían y la marea crecía momentáneamente hasta que se estabilizaba a la altura de las tetillas, los hombros o el cuello, según la altura del recluso y el desnivel del fondo...las botas de los militares quedaban en la ribera, a nivel de la cabeza de los presos, sumergidos en la ribera de mierda.”

#### TESTIMONIO DE MORFI

“Ademas, la mayoría entro en la zanja con cortaduras en los pies por la caída en las rocas puntiagudas y el pasodoble previo, y estas heridas, siempre sumergidas, paponadas por la mierda del fondo, se infestaron. Hubo varios presos que estuvieron sangrando toda la session de tortura... alrededor de las seis de la tarde, se les seco por el camino la sangre con la mierda y , y comenzo e proceso de cicatrización con llagas cubiertas por pequeños pedazos solidos de excrementos humanos y animals; y las mucosas de la boca, nariz y los ojos se banaron repetidamente en este liquido y las infecciones fueron sin cuento.”

#### TESTIMONIO DE REINOL GONZALEZ

“Nuestra permanencia en la “mojonera” duraría entre siete y ocho horas, con un breve descanso para pasar despues el castigo a una laguna circular de excrementos semiduros – una tembladera. Una vez que nos sacaron de la zanja nos pusieron en fila de dos en fondo.....Embarrados de todo aquello de la cabeza a los pies: muchos con verdugones



y cortadas de las bayonetas otros con las piernas hinchadas; sedientos, jadeando .... Todos sin hablar. Sin decir una palabra. En este estado fuimos caminando hasta pararnos frente a una fuente de agua fresca. El Jefe, Juan Rivero, nos comunica que podemos tomar agua. Silencio. ....el mismo trae agua en un cubo. Silencio. Repite la oferta y el mismo trae agua en un cubo. .... Sin ponernos de acuerdo, sin haber mediado ni una sola palabra, ni una sena, sin haber establecido compromiso alguno no hubo ni un solo preso que se moviera Este momento fue emocionante, yo diría que triunfal. .... se le ocurrió (a Juan Rivero) anunciar que iban a traer un emparedado para cada uno de nosotros. No había terminado su anuncio cuando una voz de nuestras filas le gritó: “Juan Rivero, me cago en tu madre.”

The “*mojonera*” continued for over a year causing eleven deaths and massive casualties (Muller 2003, Perez Castro 1999, ICOSOCV 1982). Many prisoners suffered irreversible hearing loss, voice and eye impairment, muscle atrophy and chronic orthopedic problems due to infection of feet and legs. Former Black Panther Tony Bryant, himself a prisoner [Bryant, 1984 #73], acknowledged the Cuban cultural significance of human feces in physical conflict. “In the Cuban super macho society, throwing feces on a man is a deadly offense. Blood has to be drawn by the assailed if his honor is to be redeemed.” At the Isle of Pines prisoners could not be avenged but they could close ranks against their torturers and they did.

Like the immersion of Chilean prisoners in tanks of their collective excrement, the Cuban government submerged the prisoners of the revolutionary resistance, causing cases of septic shock and death as well as terror and humiliation among the prisoners. Unlike the Chilean case, however, individual immersion was replaced by group immersion. The incident marked the failure of a strategy to break group will. The “*mojonera*” was the “go for broke” attempt of the state to convert the presidio to docility without resorting again to mass execution. It was an effort that continued through rounds of group torment until 1968 when the prisoners were physically divided and the Isle of Pines Prison was closed. As “*cordilleras*”(groups of prisoners in a line, literally a chain of mountains) of prisoners left the Isle of Pines, before physically entering the doors of the new facilities, each individual was given the choice of wearing the blue uniform of criminal inmates.

Pedro Perez Castro describes the process at Taco Taco Prison in Pinar del Río where a “*cordillera*” of arriving prisoners was assembled outside the administrative building in the prison yard,

“Por la tarde, apareció el personal de mando del penal y nos informó que fuéramos pasando a las oficinas y a los almacenes para el cambio de uniforme. Y habíamos podido ponernos de acuerdo y habíamos decidido no vestirnos, y se lo comunicamos a las autoridades. Nos dejaron aparte y al rato nos hicieron entrar en unos salones en los que nos esperaban aparentes soldados vestidos de verde oliva, formados en hileras que teníamos que recorrer. Al pasar nos agarraban y entre dos o tres de ellos nos desvestían, es decir, rompían la ropa, halaban el preso y le daban vueltas y zancadillas.....Y el preso desnudo o en lo que le quedara de ropa interior, lo tiraban

con fuerza contra la pared. .... La proporción de compañeros que se vistió fue alta.”  
(ICOSOCV pg. 396)

The second era of the presidio ended with the scattering of prisoners into a new constellation of three groups; those who refused any concessions; those who wore the blue uniform but refused political education and those who entered into a rehabilitation plan. Holdouts were subsequently offered a series of successively less demanding rehabilitation programs. The first, the Plan Camilo Cienfuegos, required forced labor, confession and political rehabilitation. The second, the Plan Progresivo, required no political rehabilitation and prisoners were paid for their work. Prisoners in rehabilitation lived in improved conditions while the *plantados* continued to be tormented and tortured.

### ERA 3. Prisoner Release and the Rise of Human Rights organizations

The Isle of Pines prison closed in 1968 at a critical historical juncture. In 1968, the Cuban government backed the USSR in its invasion of Czechoslovakia and sent an invasionary foco to Venezuela causing further disaffection of revolutionary support internationally and within the ranks of Cuban Communists. At the same time, the “old” Communists (those who had belonged to the Cuban communist party (*Partido Socialista Popular or PSP*) prior to 1959 had tried to influence Moscow in its relationship to the new government. The resulting purges brought a third generation of political prisoners to the newly scattered presidio. The members of this third group may or may not have participated in the insurrection but they all became active participants in the regime after 1959 and they were people with high ideological commitment. In the 1980s these groups were joined by intellectuals who had formed the first human rights organization in Cuba. The new groups former the presidio at a time when human rights organizations were forming and moving from local actions (for example, Amnesty International occupied itself primarily with European matters and Americas Watch did not form until the 1980’s) to a worldwide focus by the mid-1980s. Prior to this, the prisoners were dependent upon their families and their friends in exile to draw attention to their plight.

Once again there were clashes among prisoners. Some members of the revolutionary resistance groups (era two) had been betrayed, arrested or denounced by the prisoners entering in the late 60s and 1970s. The leader of the purged PSP “Microfaction,” Anibel Escalante, is said to have been jeered and threatened upon first entering the cellblock and to have shouted at the other prisoners declaring himself to be inalterably committed to Communist beliefs and more aligned with Fidel Catro than his fellow prisoners.<sup>8</sup>

Within the reorganized penitentiary, torture continued in the form of electroshock and confinement in small steel boxes for protracted periods as long as several years. Those continuing *plantado* prisoners who refused to take the uniform of a common criminal were particularly likely to be tortured as were newly arrived prisoners who spontaneously joined the *plantados*. The type of torture box varied from one prison to another but the majority were steel boxes too small for a man to stand erect and without

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<sup>8</sup> Conservation with Hilda Felipe, Escalante’s wife, Miami, August 1998.

toilet facilities except for a hole in the floor. A small slot was open at the base of the door of these boxes so that food could be passed to the prisoners. The slots faced windowless walls so that prisoners had no natural light. Those who were *tapiado* (sealed up) in these cells for lengthy periods have significant loss of sight and multiple ruptured discs. Many suffered psychological damage from the sensory deprivation. (Neier 1986, 1988, 1989 Rodriguez 2001). The celdas are called disciplinary units by the Cuban government rather than torture chambers and they are described as specially designed cells where belligerent social misfits can be prevented from hurting themselves. They continue in use.

The use of electroshock provides another demonstration of the inter-relation of the style of torture - a normal activity gone mad - and the cover story. Electroshock was administered to *plantado* prisoners in the main psychiatric hospital in Havana known traditionally as *La Mazorra*. The government has rationalized the use of shock as a psychiatric treatment administered to mentally ill prisoners by a generous revolution that protects the health even of state enemies. Prisoners, however, relate being threatened with shock and then taken to the Carbó Serviá unit of *La Mazorra* run by State Security and reserved exclusively for political prisoners (Cancio Isla 2002). Prisoners report electrodes being applied to their genitals. As with the *mojonera*, the use of electrical shock was done in groups, on bare concrete floors under deplorable conditions without use of the traditional rubber retainers and padding that prevent injury (Alfonso 1992; Ojito 1992; Yanez 2002). The continued element of group witness served to frighten some prisoners into accepting rehabilitation but, for the most part, produced group solidarity and the dissolution of difference among the prison groups.

It was not just leaders within the presidio who were tortured. Rank and file members were also targeted. The case of Ezekiel Marino (a pseudonym) is illustrative. Ezekiel had been censured repeatedly since primary school and was urged from the time he entered school to denounce his parents who were devout Catholics and forbid him to become a Pioneer or to accept the bandana worn by Cuban school children. Throughout his elementary and secondary education he was the subject of efforts at political rehabilitation as he avoided political involvement and participation in mass organizations. He compensated for his fear and discomfort in school by making an effort to excel in sports. Although denied entrance to the University for political reasons, Ezekiel went to a technical school and was a part of the rowing team, eventually becoming Captain of the Cuban national rowing team. His team excelled and was selected in the mid-1980s to take part in international games held in East Germany. Because he was not “politically reliable” Ezekiel was not allowed to go. “Imagine,” he says “A crew without its captain. Naturally we lost and I was blamed for it due to my lack of integration.” It was then that Ezekiel joined the human rights movement and was jailed. Within the prison he became a *plantado* and was *tapiado* for much of his three year prison term (Marino 1994). In the 1990s he escaped Cuba on a raft shortly after leaving prison after a second incarceration and arrived in the United States in 1994 (Marino 1994).

Although participants in the human rights movement were jailed and tortured throughout this period, they also experienced the dramatic amnesty and prisoner exchange that occurred at the close of the 1970’s with release and emigration continuing into the mid to late 1980’s. The amnesty was a concession made by the Cuban government in “dialogue” with leaders of the Cuban exile in 1978. For the first time in 1978 politically active exiles were invited to visit the island for talks with Fidel Castro (Benes 1994).

The effort resulted in a softening of the U.S. embargo so that travel and direct flights from the U.S. were reestablished allowing non-political Cuban-Americans to send money and/or to visit their homeland. Academic, journalistic and cultural exchanges were also permitted for professional purposes (Levine 2001). Over 3,600 political prisoners or former political prisoners still living in Cuba and their family members were released to emigrate to the U.S. or to Venezuela (García Mouré 1998; Perez 1999). Most of these were members of the second era of political prisoners. After reestablishing their lives outside of Cuba (a lag of about ten years), several of these ex-prisoners were founders of support groups for dissidents and political prisoners still in Cuba. In this way the solidarity of the prisoners continued beyond the gates of the prison. It is interesting to note that “solidarity didn’t extend beyond the prison when it came to political viewpoints.” (Baloyra 1997) That is, support from the community in the exterior seemed to organize along political lines with more conservative former prisoners supporting parallel dissident organizations and more progressive former prisoners supporting like minded dissidents in Cuba.

By the late 1980s the Cuban government was promoting the U.N. High Commission on Human Rights’ censure of the U.S. embargo and defending itself against accusations of human rights violation in the same body. As a sign of good faith, the government allowed the inspection of its political penitentiaries by experienced observers. The results confirmed the anecdotal evidence and testimony that had preceded it – conditions were revealed publicly and the regime faced international censure. This, together with the collapse of the USSR closed the very hopeful opening that occurred during the prison exchange and multi-national inspection. International inspection has not been permitted in Cuban prisons since then.

There is an additional large group of thousands of political prisoners that have served time in Cuban prisons (mostly during Era Three but cutting across all eras) that can only be discussed briefly due to space limits. These are individuals who are caught trying to leave the country and are jailed on charges of *Salida Ilegal del Pais* (SIP) - some NGO’s have referred to them as the Cuban *desaparacidos*. In addition to thousands of persons apprehended by the Cuban Border Patrol, they include significant numbers who leave the country and wash up in the Cayman Islands, Jamaica, Bahamas, or along the Western coast of Central America and Mexico. Unlike U.S./Cuban migration accords, most of these countries have agreements whereby rafters are returned to Cuba without guarantee that they will not be prosecuted for SIP. These returnees are often jailed upon return (Navarette 2003, 1995; Bahamas Foreign Ministry 2000; Cayman Islands Immigration Department 1995) typically serving terms of 1-3 years for first offenders.

In summary, the prisoners of the third era were a mixed lot in a quickly changing and contradictory environment. Torture continued but was denied or explained away by the government as normal and even beneficent activity..... Not electrical shock torture but mental health treatment..... Not steel torture chambers but isolation cells to protect the general prison population from their dangerous behavior. Deaths in prison and executions remained at all time lows making the trivialization of the presidio a fairly easy task among supporters. The exchange of prisoners and examination of facilities gave hope to critics.

The prisoners themselves displayed a new diversity including purged members of the regime, founders of the Cuban human rights movement, many ordinary citizens whose only “crime” was their failure to integrate with the mass organizations of the revolution and the continuing prisoners from prior eras. They once again coalesced in prison with the issue of human rights as their focus. More important, their central objective had shifted from violent overthrow of the government and stubborn political opposition within the penitentiary. The objective now was to educate the Cuban population about human rights, to inform the outside world about the nature of the regime and, using the power of world attention, to demand reform of the government and an opening for civil society. In response, the government negotiated not with the prisoners but with their colleagues in exile and international human rights bodies.

#### Era Four: Post-1990 - Diverse methods in a new context

The fall of the USSR and its disastrous consequences for the Cuban economy, together with the surge of conservative politics in the U.S., blocked a continued opening. Since the Special Period in a Time of Peace occasioned by the loss of Soviet support, the Cuban leadership has had to make varied concessions in multiple areas of public life including the penitentiary. It has been difficult for observers to decipher why and how the state is using political repression in this chaotic time.

Dissidents are jailed in roundups and held without charges individually or in groups numbering in the hundreds (AI 2003a & b; EFE 1998; Payne 1998, 1999). Others, such as Osvaldo Paya, the leader of Proyecto Varela, are allowed to gather signatures and file a petition calling for consideration of constitutional change. The country’s best known dissidents (e.g., Elizardo Sanchez, Manuel Cuesta Morua, Osvaldo Paya) travel with the permission of the government to receive awards and to plan expansion of their dissident programs. Simultaneously, ten persons who broke into the Mexican embassy in 2002 seeking asylum (usually a sure route to exit) are taken away by officials of State Security and months later their whereabouts is still unknown (AI 2003). Contradictions abound.

World dignitaries like the Pope and former U.S. President Jimmy Carter are invited by Fidel Castro. “Trophy” prisoners are released at the Pope’s request. President Carter lunches with a group of dissidents and talks about their project on Cuban TV. Online campaigns for release of prisoners of conscience succeed today (e.g., the case of Dr. Oscar Elias Biscet) but the same individuals are re-arrested and jailed within the week. While long prisoner sentences are given to some people who seem to be nothing more than community organizers or local historians, short sentences of one to three years become the norm. A frustrated housewife who shouts “Abajo Fidel” may go to jail for three years even as internationally known opponents of the regime are allowed press conferences where they indict the entire regime as administratively incompetent. What is the current spectrum and how can we understand these contradictory indicators? What does it mean for the style and size of the *presidio político*?

The situation of Francisco Chaviano certainly sounds like a case from the 1960s. Francisco Chaviano, age 47, founded and was President of the Cuban Rafter’s Council and a successor organization with an expanded mandate called the National Council for Civic Rights in Cuba. Chaviano was dedicated to investigating the fate of rafters who left home and have never been heard

from again. Some have called the missing rafters Cuba's *desaparecidos*. Like many of the independent citizen groups in Cuba, this one was aimed at opening up information, discussion and expanding political and civil rights. Like most it was a non-violent group with a small membership.

On March 7, 1994 Chaviano's home was invaded and he was severely beaten by four State Security agents. The house was thoroughly searched and most of his data were destroyed. He was incarcerated at Villa Marista, State Security Headquarters in Havana. Subsequently he was released but was rearrested on May 7, 1994 and accused of "endangering state security" through his work. He was sentenced to fifteen years and is currently in his ninth year in prison despite sustained efforts by his family, local and international human rights organizations to free him (Amnesty December 2002; Aguililla 2002).

Within the last year Chaviano developed a lump under the skin on his shoulder. This was an alarming sign since several generations of the men in his family have died of an aggressive cancer that begins with lumps beneath the skin. Since that time the growth has spread and remains untreated despite repeated requests from the prisoner, his family and human rights organizations for appropriate testing and treatment.

Although the prisons have general medical doctors, political prisoners like Chaviano are told that these prison physicians can only treat minor illnesses and emergencies, not special needs. Prisoners and their families are told that specialty treatments are reserved for those who are integrated with the revolution. Prisoners are not allowed to seek or receive private treatment.

Despite the lack of "special expertise" prison doctors often confirm a diagnosis. Medicines brought by family members have been refused or are never given to prisoners. Chaviano, for example, has been told that his condition seems malignant and that early treatment is essential [Aguililla, 2003 #74]. In this case, the contemporary strategy of the State uses the same cover story - the revolution is generous giving health care to all not withholding it. Only U.S. aggression prevents treatment. The perverse withholding of care and its use as psychological torture is easily denied. Cases of this sort confirm the continuation of old patterns.

These two hundred "traditional" prisoners notwithstanding, a new pattern of handling political dissenters has evolved in the 1990's. Hundreds more dissidents are outside the penitentiary walls in a revolving pattern of brief incarceration, release and intense community harassment (AI 2002; HRW 2002; Espinosa 2001; Payne 1998; Payne 1996). In this system dissidents are first warned to stop their activity, then subjected to job loss and acts of repudiation in their neighborhoods. If the identified dissident continues his/her activism, arrest and detention follow with the activists held for short periods lasting from a day to a year or two (Cuesta Morua 2001; Leon 1998; Lugo 2002)

During this time, sanctions may be applied to the prisoner's family. In several recent cases, for example the case of Maritza Lugo, the now exiled leader of the Partido 30 de Noviembre Frank País and the situation of Rafael Leon, President of the Proyecto Democrata Cubano [Leon, 2003 #75], homes have been confiscated leaving dissident leaders and their dependents homeless. In Lugo's case, both she and

her husband were incarcerated when their farm was confiscated, leaving two young children, their frail elderly grandmother without housing in a country where shelter is assigned by the state. Simultaneous to these events acts of repudiation take place against members of the organization and enormous pressure is brought to bear by local Committee for the Defense of the Revolution. (AI 2003)

On July 18, 2001, Rafael Leon, President of Proyecto Demócrata Cubano, was served, in his apartment, with a notice that the apartment would be confiscated because he had abandoned the country illegally and was living in Canada. Leon, who had never been in Canada, accepted the notice and attended the hearing bringing all of his papers with him. Despite being present at the hearing, he was declared to be in Canada and his home was taken, leaving him, his wife and children on the street. Additionally Leon was fired from his job as “politically untrustworthy” and urged by local officials to desist from his political work. Leon has remained on the island living with relatives while Lugo was eventually forced into exile. Her husband is serving a long prison term.

Since 1990 at least 500 independent civic organizations have been formed in Cuba [del Castillo, 2002 #76]. Most have applied for recognition by the government as required under Cuban law but receive no responses to their applications. The mere fact of filing, however, permits the government to identify new groups as they arise and to surveil them closely. Some authors have described a regular cycle of state opening and crackdown in the post-1990 period together with variables that cause the opening and clamping down (Espinosa 2001; Payne 1997, 1998). There is general agreement that the size of dissident populations within the prisons seems about the same at the close of each cycle - some leave and others enter. But, the numbers affected in the society are growing steadily.

The 200-300 “traditional” political prisoners that stay on in Cuban prisons symbolically represent the capacity of the state to invoke terror should it choose. The demonstration value of a small but constantly rotating presidio may serve to control civil unrest while held at its present level. Conversely, potential international rebuke and its effect on investment when there are large numbers may be too costly. The small presidio demonstrates the state’s access to the tools of capture and torture. There is every reason to think the government would use massive repression again if it suited the needs of the historical leadership.

On the bright side, the ability to exercise political freedom seems to roll forward as well as shrink and expand. Individual groups have gained sufficient ground to hold meetings and even to expand to multiple chapters in Havana. Organizations have also expanded by the development of chapters in several cities. The ability of dissidents to acquire and keep computers, printers and electronic access has improved, though dissidents are still blackballed from buying these items themselves in Cuba or from purchasing supplies. Equipment and supplies must be brought from the outside or purchased by “non-dissident” sympathizers inside Cuba. Four coalitions (Cambio Cubano, La Mesa Interna de Reflexion de la Oposicion Moderada, Todos Unidos and The Assembly to Promote Civil Society) have formed despite chronic leadership squabbles. Independent journalists and news agencies are able to operate from more stable headquarters which allows the quality of their investigation and reporting to improve between 1998 and the present. The government toolbox clearly contains instruments for cooptation and restraint as well as repression. The possibility that former political prisoners could have published

independently or left the country to stomp NGO crowds is unthinkable. Even government loyalists could not do so.

The objective of these dissident groups has also evolved. Like those in the third era, their primary goal is to reform the government nonviolently rather than displace it through force of arms as those in the first two eras did. The price of that activity is currently a life of constant harassment and intermittent incarceration accompanied by threats of long term incarceration and resumption of state terror within the penitentiary. As recently as the last week (March 18, 2003), the government has begun a new crackdown (CLADEHLT 2003; EFE 2003; Granma Internacional 2003). Indicators point toward the very serious possibility that 60 or more dissident activists may be tried under Law 88.<sup>9</sup> This would mean the resumption of show trials and long prison sentences. The government seems to be taking advantage of the current world focus on war in Iraq as an opportunity to eliminate grassroots dissent.

#### Conclusions:

The post-revolutionary pattern of Cuban state terror is a unique one grounded in the state's desire to punish its domestic challengers while maintaining an international reputation as a nearly universally supported regime with a defensible human rights record. Since the early sixties this has meant limiting and rationalizing, though never eliminating, torture. It has included an end to extrajudicial executions. Methods of torture are not unlike those of other authoritarian states during the 1980s but they are always accompanied by a cover story extolling the social benefits of the revolution and explaining away the state's behavior in terms of the U.S. embargo and/or presumed U.S. payment to dissidents. The lock and key nature of a cover story that excuses the actual realities of prison life forms a meta-frame that has characterized most cases (Brysk 2003). The two work together to assure domestic control while causing the least turbulence in international relations.

Unlike some cases, the Cuban prisoners were always a group and they enjoyed a group identity that they saw as positive. Whereas, prisoners in the Southern Cone were atomized and endured ordeals alone leading to certain death, the Cuban presidio was able to provide each other support during the worst tortures they endured. They were literally in it together. Except for those who were tapiado, they had group spaces where they organized mutual aid, education, worship and discussion. Because execution was nearly eliminated by the mid-sixties, they had to endure horror and limited numbers of deaths via torture but there was still a high chance that they would survive.

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<sup>9</sup> In February 1999 Cuba's National Assembly passed tough legislation (Law 88), called the Ley de Protección de la Independencia Nacional y la Economía de Cuba, Law for the Protection of the National Independence and Economy of Cuba. The law calls for 7 to 15 years imprisonment for passing information to the United States that could be used to bolster anti-Cuban measures such as the US economic blockade. This would rise to 20 years if the information is acquired surreptitiously. The legislation also bans the ownership, distribution or reproduction of subversive materials from the US government, and proposes terms of imprisonment of up to five years for collaborating with radio and TV stations and publications deemed to be assisting US policy.



From the regime point of view, terror has had the unwelcome side effect, in all eras, of uniting prisoners rather than defeating them resulting in growth and expansion of dissident groups. Many of the groups are headed by or supported by former political prisoners and the government has devised an assortment of new approaches to try to contain them. Tactics have included forcing opponents to leave in exchange for their release, periodic prisoner exchanges, displaying openness to criticism by world leaders, releasing celebrated prisoners at the request of world leaders, jailing rank and file members of dissident groups as well as leaders, maintaining constant harassment of dissidents as well as co-opting a few key figures and permitting them to travel. The government seems currently to be swinging back toward a round of mass incarcerations and possibly long incarcerations. It is clear from the duration and extent of the presidio that the state objective is to avoid political diversity on the island rather than to incrementally permit political voice.

During the Special Period reformers within the Communist Party have been frustrated with the slow pace of economic recovery and have become more open in their criticisms. This is particularly true in regard to maladministration of government programs and insufficient economic opening. Growing diversity and less restraint within the regime presents an interesting possible variant on the strict separation between regime loyalty and absolute exclusion of dissent. In the past, political criticism by insiders has led to a fall from grace and expulsion from official life (e.g., members of the microfaction, intellectuals in the 1970-80 period). The tactical repertoire for managing internal criticism has paralleled that applied to prisoners – people can travel and meet more freely, more criticism is tolerated. This presents the real possibility that there may be an eventual alliance between disgruntled regime loyalists and dissidents who favor gradual change. That is, there could soon be a time where there are advantages for regime reformers to ally with moderate dissidents rather than try to endure the frustration delay of regime change. It is small steps that expand civil society that will cause this possibility to emerge. If it occurs it will be a breakthrough in political transition and the eventual dismantling of the *presidio politico*.

No matter what the pace of political change, it is clear that a transition of government will occur in the next 5-15 years as the historic leadership becomes incapacitated by age. Four interrelated issues of transition, reconciliation, truth and justice will be simultaneously advocated by different segments of Cuban society both on the island and in the diaspora. Indeed, organizations and workgroups advocating each of these issues already exist (Perez-Stable 2003; Corzo 2002; Werlau 2002; Lago Forthcoming). The balance of each activity will be essential to achieving national peace and to protecting citizens against further iterations of a political penitentiary.

Appendix A: Table 1 and 2 (Updated from Ackerman 1998b)

Political Affiliation	Entry into Prison
Assoc. of old regime - oppositionists Ex-Militares, M officials and civil servants of Batista administration, Conspirators who actively opposed revolutionary change (e.g., La Trujillista)	1959-1960
Dozens of revolutionary resistance groups who broke the government (Including but not limited to: DRE, FND-AAA, MDC, MRR, M-30-NOV, OA, RESCATE, UR) *	1960-1967
El Presidio Popular - Generalized Girón roundup	1961-1962
Brigade 2506	1961
UMAP	1965
Regime Participants - Human Rights Advocates	1975- Present
Salida Ilegal del País (SIP)	1965-Present
New Civil Society	1990-Present

\*Major revolutionary resistance groups:

DRE = Directorio Revolucionario Estudiantil

FND - AAA = Frente Nacional Democrático AAA

MDC = Movimiento Democrata Cristiano

MRP = Movimiento Revolucionario del Pueblo

MRR = Movimiento de Recuperación Revolucionaria

M-30-Nov. = Movimiento Revolucionario 30 de Noviembre Frank Pais

OA = Organización Auténtica

RESCATE = Movimiento de Rescate Democrático Revolucionario

UR = Unidad Revolucionaria

Table 2: Chronology of Events Leading to Exit		
Events	Description	Date Initiated
Informal plans of forced labor	Prisoners and guards negotiated informal work arrangements as needed to run prison	1959
Rise of “ <i>Los Plantados</i> ”	Total refusal of govt. plans of political rehabilitation, forced labor. Insistence on recognition of political status	1962
Political Rehabilitation Plan	By attending political re-education classes, confessing their political crimes, and giving up the uniform of political prisoners, prisoners could shorten sentences, improve living conditions and receive early release.	1962
<i>Plan Camilo Cienfuegos</i>	Political prisoners forced to work despite Cuban tradition of political prisoners being exempt from hard labor.	1964
<i>Plan Progresivo</i>	Without political confession, or feigned “rehabilitation,” prisoners could request status as political prisoners and be eligible for early release and improved conditions, if they agreed to work.	1971
<i>El Dialogo - Prisoner Exchange</i>	Cuban government agrees to release 3,600 political prisoners into exile as a goodwill gesture to returned exiles who dialogue with Fidel Castro. 138 political prisoners sign a declaration in opposition to negotiated release	1978
Stop and Go Release	Prisoners are released based on need of government to appease international allies or to quell criticism.	1990 - Present

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