

LIBERATION LITTLE BY LITTLE; SEX AND IDEOLOGY IN CUBA

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FULL TEXT

Many of us have long been aware of reported mistreatment of gays in Cuba, not only because of the so-called machismo and homophobia in the Afro-Latin American culture, but more specifically as a result of the state's targetting and isolation of homosexuals in the UMAP camps. UMAP is an acronym from Military Units to Aid Production and refers to a branch of required military service used from 1965-1967 for draftees perceived to be homosexual and/or antisocial. The release this year of the documentary film *Improper Conduct* has restimulated debate about sexuality in revolutionary Cuba, and refueled anti-Cuban sentiments. *Improper Conduct* is intended to confirm our worst suspicions about Cuba. In this article we will describe some of our experiences in Cuba, and try to show how our interviews concerning sexual ideology and our perceptions of sexual openness are in seeming contradiction to *Improper Conduct*.

During our research in Havana this July we interviewed one of the leaders of the Cuban National Group for Sex Education established in 1977, Monika Krause (an East German who has lived in Cuba for 23 years). We asked her about UMAP and *Improper Conduct*. "There's one thing," she said, "which we consider really a sad thing in Cuban history, and that is the UMAP, those which they are talking about in the film. It was really the expression of ignorance and unreasonable aversion to homosexuality. But that happened twenty years ago, and that picture is taking out of context things which happened and were mistakes. We feel it has been an obligation of our system to change those attitudes which could have created UMAP. Because in a socialist society there can be no discrimination."

While in Cuba, we read the main texts used by the classes on sex education in an effort to determine how sexual ideology was or was not changing. The material was rather mixed -- some of it seeming to us almost cruelly traditional, some of it even discussing the production of s/m desire unjudgmentally. On the whole, however, the texts were far more progressive than the general level of high school discourse we have known in this country. The sex education group is clearly promoting a more tolerant and liberal sexual attitude, without moralism, sexist double standards and compulsory heterosexuality. Women should not be discriminated against for promiscuity; female virginity should not be valorized; masturbation is not shameful; and homosexuality is not immoral or a reason for discrimination.

In the National Library, the sex education books are among the most popular. There we checked out *In Defense of Love*, and found many passages representative of the new, enlightened approach, situated in Marxist philosophy. We quote a few examples:

"Morality changes according to the objectives of a specific society and its classes. No 'natural' moral norms or sentiments are inherent in humanity. The sole natural inclination is sexual desire itself; the specific customs with which people satisfy their desire, and all that transpires between the sexes is the product of a specific culture."

And on homosexuality:

"Homosexuality is a specific sexual preference or orientation. It would be wrong to disqualify a homosexual because of her/his sexual preference or to interpret homosexuality as a debility of character, something that many do, unfortunately, due to ignorance, lack of comprehension and prejudice. As long as someone's sexuality does not

infringe on other people's rights, one should have the option of having relationships in accordance with one's disposition and desire."

(All quotes are our translation.)

These passages, however, are not necessarily indicative of the general outlook on sexuality and homosexuality in Cuba. We found in Cuba both a large number of gay people and a startling degree of open homophobia. Some people said they thought homo-sexuality was "immoral" and not part of Cuban values. People seemed especially frightened by so-called effeminacy in little boys. And indeed the boys (and the men) seemed a bit more "feminine" than in the U.S.; certainly the men seemed more affectionate with each other and with their children.

Furthermore there were many more reactionary quotes than the number of progressive ones we cited above. We asked Monika Krause why the books used for sex education were equivocal, and somewhat contradictory. She answered that the revolution has always been careful not to step too far beyond the consciousness of the people or to alienate them. "We have to be patient, making steps forward little by little; in performing our sex education work, we have already very often broken the tolerance limits of our people."

In sharp contrast to the portrayal of Cuba in *Improper Conduct*, the state, as represented by the National Working Group on Sex Education, seems to be a kind of vanguard of sexual politics vis a vis its population. (Krause incidentally was reading *Powers of Desire, The Politics of Sexuality* at the time of our interview.) The only law still on the books which refers to gay people applies solely to the exclusion of openly gay men and lesbians from teaching in primary schools; sources report that this law was repealed sometime during the last year. There is a law against public sexual intercourse, applying to both gays and straights, which one might assume is used discriminatorily against gays. In this regard, however, we heard about a case of two men caught making love in the bushes. They were found innocent on the grounds that the police had to go out of their way to discover them. While we were told by Krause that there are no laws against homosexuality, we are unclear about the status of public homosexual "extravagance," and about the remains of the 1939 Cuban Social Defense Code.

In general Havana is quite liberal and casual in its dress and sexual openness. Beach denizens show off their sexy, affluent bodies in tiny bikinis and romp around the streets – by day at least – in shorts, attire which is normally circumscribed in Latin American and other developing regions. Michael Jackson, Olivia Newton John, and Lionel Richie blare from loudspeakers, "ghetto blasters," and an occasional walkman. People touch each other with an encouraging ease, and seem generally happy. Even on the overcrowded buses people are courteous, and unlike the New York subways, newspapers are not jammed between your and the other guy's nose.

As journalists and researchers, we were free to go unaccompanied wherever we wanted, to talk freely with people, to use the libraries (though access to the archives takes a quota of time and ingratiation, usually about a week), to rent a car, whatever. While given the red-carpet treatment in lectures and meetings, and shown all the model factories and peasants, we did not find anywhere a great deal of contrast to the showpieces. Nowhere was there desperate poverty or fear on people's faces. Havana is clearly delapidated in parts though, and as one fellow North American joked, "a dump compared with the rest of Cuba."

This picture of Cuba is in stark contrast to the statements in *Improper Conduct* about the narrowly restricted path and tight surveillance of tourists; about the prohibition of American music and loud shirts; and about the low standard of living, "rationing," and poverty. Some of these inconsistencies can be explained by changes over time, others are simply dishonest. In their often personally vindictive responses to criticism of their film, Nestor Almendros and Orlando Jimenez-Leal have continued to make unsupportable statements, refutable by those who have recently been to Cuba. For example they say that international organizations, and particularly the Red Cross and Amnesty International, are not allowed in Cuba. On the contrary, the Red Cross has a society in Cuba, and Amnesty International made a visit to Cuba in 1977 – though we were told by the latter that they are unclear how welcome they are now to return.

These contradictions must tend to discredit the entire film, which relies for its persuasive power, unfortunately, not on documentation, evidence, or explication, but on the fame, photogenic-ness, and possibilities for viewer identification with the witnesses (targeted as much or more for heterosexual liberals as bi- and homosexual ones).

The historical referent that serves as the foundation for the film is UMAP. Without evidence or explanation, however, they say that UMAP was dismantled in 1969, not 1967. Similarly, they claim that though it ended in name, it continued under different guises.

The superficial treatment in the film of weighty historical events, derisive accusations, and tragic personal stories is "justified" by the film's sweeping intent. The filmmakers state revealingly, "The main issue of our film is not the persecution of gays in itself, which has often been an excuse to arrest potential enemies, but that this is only an aspect, perhaps the most absurd, of a greater repression." But the cursory condemning remarks made about racism, social inequality, sexism, elite prostitution, and Castro's narcissism are almost haphazard, unsupported, or cheap shots accepted as comic relief. As for the individual cases, one is left hopelessly confused amidst the sad truths and unfair lies that are indiscernibly jumbled together for the purpose of propaganda. One is left at the end as at the beginning, wondering, in particular, what exactly happened at UMAP and why.

To understand UMAP, one must first look at the changing role of the army in Cuba in 1965. By then, Cuba had successfully defeated the most serious threats of invasion and counterrevolution, and the proportion of national income devoted to military expenditures was the lowest in Cuba's history (4.4 percent). With the agreement of Fidel Castro, the high command of the military intended to begin playing a larger role in service to the nation's production needs. UMAP was designed to provide labor for the sugar harvests of 1965-66 and 1966-67.

In addition, however, the UMAP took on another and invidious function. Persons of military age thought to be counterrevolutionary, lazy, corrupt, or homosexual were drafted into the UMAP in expectation that they would be "rehabilitated" by their role in the productive economy of the nation. Who was responsible for this metamorphosis is unclear, but in addition to individual abuse of power, it must have been situated in the traditional, societal homophobia; the association of gays with U.S.-controlled prostitution and exploitation under Batista; the efforts by the CIA to co-opt gays and use gay bars for subversive purposes (see "Homosexuality, Homophobia and Revolution: Notes toward an understanding of the Cuban lesbian and gay male experience, part 1," by Arguelles, Lourdes and Rich, B. Ruby in *Signs, a Journal of Women and Culture*; Summer, 1984; vol. 9, no. 4; p. 689); and in the reaction to and backlash against the rapid forces of urban-rural integration, the cultural change brought about by the revolution and the social and economic upheaval transpiring worldwide in the sixties.

Many intellectuals and artists were sent to UMAP as alleged homosexuals, and reports of brutal treatment and excesses toward the draftees were widespread. In response, many protested, particularly the Cuban National Union of Writers and Artists, and they enlisted Fidel Castro's support in forcing the army to disband these repressive military units.

Improper Conduct tries to depict UMAP as a symbolic representation of the entire revolutionary process in Cuba in which little has changed for artists, and social and intellectual deviants. UMAP, however, was described to us by Cubans as the most mistaken and shameful policy of the Cuban revolution, comparable perhaps to Nicaragua's early mistakes with the Miskito Indians, or the less regretted internment of Asians by the U.S. in World War II. Furthermore, UMAP occurred during the period of greatest sexual repression in Cuba. Our time in Havana left us with the feeling that things had changed and are still changing for Cuban gays, and with sexuality in general, and that this, in a sense, was part of a larger structure of improvements in economic development, social equality, democratic elections.

During the early years following the revolution, the situation undoubtedly was more conservative socially and more paranoid politically. Capitalist sexual production that flourished under Batista was quickly eliminated (though prostitution was not illegalized for about eight years while alternate jobs and training were provided for prostitutes). Lourdes Arguelles and Ruby Rich note this conservatism in their *Summer Signs, A Journal of Women in Culture and Society* article,

"With the profit motive removed, the superficial tolerance of homosexuality by the strongly homophobic Cuban society quickly eroded. At the same time, the revolutionary leadership railed against the evils of capitalist vice -- which were often associated with homosexuality."

At the climax of this period was UMAP. Subsequently homosexuality began to be seen more in psychoanalytic

terms, i.e., as a psychological pathology rather than as bourgeois decadence and subversion; and not coincidentally this new perception followed the legalization of homosexuality in East Germany in 1968 and the influx into Cuba of U.S. and European progressives. The state, however, still made no efforts to end discrimination; and the 1971 Congress on Education and Culture referred to in *Improper Conduct* reflected both a more psychological and tentative analysis of homosexuality and a continued prejudice against it. Contrary to what is implied in *Improper Conduct*, however, this Congress neither made laws nor represented the government's position. Instead it was a conference of schoolteachers that published its collective opinions. Its statements against homosexuality and against homosexual artists representing the country, however, were an upsetting contribution to Cuban prejudice, paranoia, and discrimination against homosexual artists and intellectuals.

The third and current phase of sexual ideology in revolutionary Cuba can be seen to be ushered in by the establishments of the Ministry of Culture and the Cuban National Group on Sexual Education in the mid-'70s. The Ministry of Culture represented the artists and intellectuals in a way proved painfully necessary by the 1971 Congress of Education and Culture. And the sex education group railed against traditional sexual taboos. Furthermore, the 1975 Family Code, though not so intended, provided a blurring of gender roles and an attempted beginning to the end of sexism correlated with homophobia.

The question about *Improper Conduct* is why has this propagandistic film been so successful. Shouldn't the press have been more skeptical about this capitalization of the arguments of the exiled community of Cuban artists? In addition to its deft appearance as a progressive rather than capitalist critique, the manipulative structure and editing of the film, and the reputation of the filmmakers, there is a fourth major reason why the film has so unfortunately succeeded. As Richard Goldstein wrote in his sensitive review in the *Voice*, "For all that homosexuals have suffered on the silver screen, *Improper Conduct* is the first film to present gay people as social victims. For that reason it's a giant step toward our legitimization."

Although the purpose of this fictionalized documentary is reactionary, its misplaced message is ironically progressive. If Cuba really was the embodiment of statist oppression against gays and social "deviants," then whatever its steps toward social justice in other areas, its self-described socialist and democratic character would have to be questioned.

Working against this progressive facsimile, however, is the fact that the film is about, but not really by or for gay people. Most of the renowned figures testifying in the film are white, male, and either heterosexual, or do not discuss their sexuality. They were mistreated because for amusing, pathetic and stereotypical reasons they were thought to be homosexuals: they were writers, they walked in a certain way, etc. Indeed we would all like to know exactly why the way a person walks is perceived as threatening and dangerous to society.

There are only two black people in the film (out of about 28 witnesses), and not coincidentally they are the only two non-intellectuals and open gays. Luis Lazlo is a hairdresser and Caracol is a transsexual. While Caracol is probably the most moving and honest person in the film, the audience tends to be laughing at, rather than with, him/her. The police unfairly and repeatedly locked Caracol up for displaying his sexuality, not for any counter-revolutionary activity. It is highly doubtful, however, that a film about Caracols would have been as successful as *Improper Conduct* has been.

Caracol now lives in New York and may enjoy more open networks, gay culture, higher rents, isolation and alienation. There is undeniably more privacy in disconnected New York than in the solidarity of Cuba, both for cultural and political reasons. There are also material advantages in the U.S. -- better clothes, better perfumes, and more glamor.

One wonders ultimately about the process of social change in Cuba. Even if the state is progressive, what limitations are present in a society where the state approves and funds all movements, e.g. the women's movement, the Federation of Cuban Women (F.M.C.). A gay movement like we have known in the U.S. and which has brought many of us increased freedom, power and pride would not occur the same way in Cuba. Partially one must realize that for many people sleeping with people of the same sex does not constitute the basis of an alternative identity and culture, but is considered a private and in many ways irrelevant matter. Contradictions

nonetheless exist for homosexuals in Cuba. And the incorporation of all movements into the state, and idea that "we are all for the revolution" both facilitate social change in Cuba and simultaneously produces new social constraints and limitations on minority representation.

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