

Letters to the Editor

Castro's Effect on Life in Cuba

The Journal's front page article Nov. 16 on conditions in Cuba states: "The average Cuban lives very well these days by Third World standards." Most readers would be forced to infer that Cuba was a Third World nation that Castro has brought to a higher standard of living.

Pre-Castro Cuba was most definitely not a typical Third World nation in the commonly accepted sense. Neither was it a typical Caribbean nation. By whatever measure, whether it is the number of students in higher and secondary education, the number of physicians per capita, infant mortality, per capita gross national product, per capita number of telephones, television sets, refrigerators, cars, etc., the Cuba of the late 1950s was far ahead of any other nation in the Caribbean and any nation in the Third World.

Many articles about Cuba have been extremely enthusiastic about supposed advances in reducing infant mortality. For example, the German weekly *Stern* of Feb. 21, 1980, states that the infant mortality rate during the Castro regime has been reduced from 60 per thousand to 23 per thousand.

However, the rate before Castro was not 60 but 32 per thousand. This rate of 32 when Castro took over in 1959 was already one of the best in the world, better for example than that of Germany, Italy and Spain. It had been reduced in the 20-year pre-Castro period from 99 per thousand to 32. Through most of the Castro period, even as late as 1971-72, the Cuban rate was worse than it had been before his taking power.

Factual errors in reports about Cuba abound, apparently because many persons accept without checking further statistics given them from questionable sources. Thus, *Stern* mentions that "the average life expectancy has risen from 58 . . ." since Castro took over. In fact, life expectancy in pre-Castro Cuba was 62, and the Cuban 62 compared with 52 in Latin America as a whole.

However, it is not merely the popular journals that make such errors. In 1977, a

U.S. congressional committee reported that before Castro there were "about 187,000 students" in Cuba and "the literacy rate has risen (under Castro) from 25% to 99%."

If one accepts without question such outlandish figures, as the committee apparently did, it becomes very easy to excuse almost all excesses and inadequacies of the Castro regime and to ascribe many undeserved virtues to it.

However, in pre-Castro Cuba there were not 187,000 students, but about 1,000,000. The literacy rate was about 78%, not 25%. (*Britannica*, 1959, and UN Statistical Abstract, 1960 and 1962.)

At the time Castro took power, Cuba had almost seven times as many physicians as the Dominican Republic; it had more TV sets than Costa Rica, Guatemala, Puerto Rico, Panama, Nicaragua and the Dominican Republic combined; it also had more telephones than all those Caribbean states combined.

A major misconception is that American capitalists were increasingly gaining a stranglehold on the economic life of pre-Castro Cuba. In actuality, Cuban capital was increasing to such an extent in the 20 years before Castro that Cubans were assuming control and ownership over many enterprises that had once been dominated by North Americans and other outsiders. For example, by 1958 the overwhelming majority of the sugar mills on the island were already Cuban owned.

After 22 years of Castroism, and despite large-scale infusions of Soviet bloc technology and aid, the real gross national product per capita in Cuba is below what it was more than 20 years ago.

Indeed, despite the expropriation without compensation of all Yanqui holdings and the expropriation of the possessions of the one million Cuban exiles, presumably the most prosperous 10% of the population, it is only massive Soviet bloc aid of perhaps \$4 billion a year that keeps the sputtering Cuban economy alive.

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