
BOOKS IN REVIEW

THE REAL THING?

CUBAN WOMEN NOW: INTERVIEWS WITH CUBAN WOMEN. By MARGARET RANDALL. (Toronto: Canadian Women's Educational Press, 1974. Pp. 375. \$5.50, paper.)

CUBAN WOMEN NOW: AFTERWORD, 1974. By MARGARET RANDALL. (Toronto: Canadian Women's Educational Press, 1974. Pp. 16. \$.25.)

Margaret Randall is a North American poet who, in the early sixties, was coeditor of *El Corno Emplumado* in Mexico City. *El Corno*, a bilingual journal, published some of the best poetry on either side of the Río Grande and did quite well until the day (after the 1968 Olympic Games) it aimed its poetical darts at the Mexican government. The government closed down the magazine and hassled the editors out of the country. Miss Randall went to Cuba, where she has been ever since, working at La Casa de las Américas, the Cuban government publishing firm. Shortly after her arrival in Cuba a friend wrote to ask: What of the status of women in Cuba? The book under review is the belated answer to that question, and the first substantial work on the subject in English.

The book includes a short preface signed by The Women's Press, interviews with numerous Cuban women of every class and station, a glossary of words/terms/concepts, and a chronology. The *Afterword*, written two years after the interviews were done, speaks of current changes and problems and places the book itself in perspective.

For the woman reader, the most striking attribute of the book is its tone of energy, hope, and optimism for the future. Anyone familiar with women's liberation literature in the United States has read her fill of complaint, tribulation, confusion, and despair.¹ On the surface, then, the first difference one notes is the mood. What is happening in Cuba that can explain the sense of elation which fills the pages of this book?

Essentially, the revolution has sought to incorporate women into working society and national life. Before the revolution, Randall says, most Cuban women were housewives, servants, or prostitutes. The last two job categories have been virtually eliminated. Women now work in factories, cut cane, study medicine, teach. To help women work outside the home, day-care centers, boarding schools, laundries, and factory cafeterias were set up. A literacy campaign (reminiscent of the Mexican each-one-teach-one) was undertaken for both men and women, education was extended for women, and unions were prodded to show concern. Doing the prodding was the FMC, the Cuban Federation of Women, active since 1960 at every level of national life. Because the Cuban revolution is a process of constant change, the new facilities are by no means as complete or fully functioning as they should be; Cubans are the first to recognize the deficiencies and the needs. The optimism is based on the vision of a possible future; a future that finds its roots in an older hope.

In 1857, D. José Gómez Colón wrote an encomium to the idea of women's work in Cuba.² He went back to the basics to prove the divine mandate for women's work: First, God created man; then "plúgose al hacedor decir: *No es bueno que el hombre esté solo: hagámosle ayuda semejante á él.* Hé ahí para la muger la institución de ayudar al hombre en su trabajo."³ God proposes, however, and man decomposes, as they say in Spanish, so all was not well. Throughout the Old Testament man consistently refused divine suggestion. Rather, he preferred to keep women at home or to corrupt them as objects of "deleite." The Flood, for example, is just one punishment for the refusal to see the light. Nor did the coming of Christ rectify the situation, because men would no more listen to the Son than they had the Father. The Son indicated that women should do honest work if they were not married; they ought not to become prostitutes: "Así, sola, eran bastantes sus propias fuerzas para el sostenimiento de su única vida. Tan sanos principios [the author adds in sensitive understatement], no los acogió súbito el mundo."⁴ We then have the "contagion of errors," again God's word is ignored, so that even the Church is no defense against the wrath of God, this time incarnated in the barbarian invasions of Rome. The tradition of chivalry and courtly love of the early middle ages was one more excuse for "lujuria" and corruption, nor was the age of reason much more reasonable. However, progress and the idea of the sanctity of work (¡¡HUID DEL OCIO!!, ¡¡EL TIEMPO ES ORO!!) began to change men's views. Work, said Gómez Colón, was good for everyone, and the vices of society were directly linked to the idleness of women. Thus, in a sort of puritan rationalistic ethic he admonishes us: "Trabaja y no necesitarás del hombre. Han dicho los economistas."⁵ If divine revelation went unheeded, economic necessity finally clinched the argument, not only for Gómez Colón, but also for Fidel Castro.

Castro's Cuba has the same combination of economic concern and moral fervor that the work of Gómez Colón displays. If the goals are similar, the ostensible justifications have changed: It is no longer in the name of God that women (and by extension the family) should be strengthened, but in the name of the Revolution. Typical of Castro's thought is a recent speech in which he said that

justice demands equality for women but that also the revolution needs that equality.⁶ The early decision to make women an active part of the revolutionary process may well have been spurred by the work and advice of women such as Vilma Espín and Haydée Santamaría; by the Leninist precept that the social justice prevalent in a society can be gauged by how that society treats its women; and by the simple need for workers.

Further, it was not merely the need for workers, but for enthusiastic workers. Castro and his people saw that revolutionary fervor begins at home, and that the best way to penetrate the home is to get the women involved. Thus the emphasis has been not only on work but on child care, education, housing, and public health. Contrary to what one might suppose, this concern seems to have involved strengthening of the family. Not only are previously unavailable services extended to large segments of the population, but moral support is given to the institution of the family in a variety of ways. Much women's work remains volunteer work, and it is important. For example, there are CDR (Committee for the Defense of the Revolution, an organization that starts at the neighborhood block level) visitors, public health visitors, and a whole host of local arrangements to help women deal with family problems, be it children who are ill, delinquent husbands who create scandals, or neighbors who fight. The new neighborhood mechanisms recall some aspects of European social life in the Renaissance. In the United States such deliberate organization (involving the extended family, friends, and neighbors) is carried on by practitioners of a new psychiatric approach called "family therapy."

It seems as though Castro views a strong family as essential to the success of the revolution, and a strong, working woman as essential to the health of the family itself. In the speech cited earlier, Castro spoke of objective and subjective conditions militating against women's full participation in work and national life. He admitted that severe obstacles remain. The most refractory objective obstacle (mentioned by Randall as well) is the problem of what is there called the "second shift." In other words, the fact is that, all too often, the *ama de casa* is still the *ama de casa* in the full sense of the word. The woman who works, let us say in a paid capacity, must still come home to fix dinner, do the wash, clean the house, and attend to the children and *not* in some dream house with a dishwasher, clothes washer, abundant electricity, and fancy detergents. Cuba is building more laundries, importing more housekeeping gadgets, etc., but this is a slow process; meanwhile the men are expected to help.

The expectation is a societal one, not just a gentle hint; no pictures of Castro fixing his own breakfast. The Cubans are serious. So serious that this new requirement may well be written into law. At the time of this writing (December 1974), a new *Código Familiar*, or Family Code, is under discussion in Cuba.* What modifications will be made is unknown, but the draft circulating since last spring contains some articles that give pause. Chapter II, "Conjugal Relations," Section I, "Rights and Duties between Spouses," begins (Article 24): "Marriage is constituted

*The *Código Familiar* was officially presented and went into effect 8 March 1975.—*Ed.*

on the basis of equality of rights and duties between both spouses." Article 25: "Spouses must live together, be loyal to each other, have due consideration and respect for each other, and aid each other mutually. . . ." Article 26 comes closer to the problem: "Both spouses are obligated to care for the family they have created and to cooperate with each other in the education, upbringing and guidance of their children in accord with principles of socialist morality. Likewise, according to their individual capabilities or means, they should participate in the governance of the home and cooperate in its best development." Most specific is Article 27: "The spouses are obligated to contribute to the fulfillment of the needs of the family which they have created with their marriage, each one according to his own abilities and financial means. Notwithstanding, if one of them only contributes to that sustenance with his work in the home and his care of the children, the other spouse shall himself contribute to that sustenance, without prejudice to his duty to cooperate in housework and child care."

The evil day when men would really have to share housework was perhaps foreseen by a group of unusually prescient Cuban exiles whom Geoffrey Fox interviewed in the U.S. some years ago.⁷ The issue now moves to what Castro would call "subjective factors," about which he has said "Perhaps these . . . may imply even a greater struggle than the objective elements."⁸

The group Fox studied constituted workers who had, materially speaking, everything to gain by staying with the revolution, but because of "the challenge to self-esteem as a result of changing sex roles," they had been "unable or unwilling to integrate themselves into the revolution."⁹ The double standard in prerevolutionary Cuba, says Fox, constituted "an elaborate game played among men for social status, in which the woman [was] expected to play a passive role. The prize [was] not the woman, but the esteem of other men."¹⁰ As women go out to work and depend increasingly on community support institutions, men, Fox says, feel they lose their control over women and children. The eradication of prostitution further undermined a "system which demanded demonstrations of sexual prowess from the males and sexual inaccessibility from the 'good' females."¹¹ Yet another cause of male anxiety was the fear that "the father will lose his power to choose or at least approve his daughter's choice of a sexual partner."¹² Worst, from the men's point of view, was the fact that Cuban women had begun to work in agriculture.¹³

When Fox was writing, Article 27 of the draft Code was only a gleam in the eye of the FMC, but the direction is clear. The reason the Cuban revolution is new and truly revolutionary is that it attempts a radical change and redefinition of the self-image of men and women in regard to themselves and consequently to each other. And its genius is to do this in the higher name of the Revolution so that he who protests is, by definition, counterrevolutionary.¹⁴

Randall's book gives one side of the picture, e.g., what is happening to women. Another way to examine the picture, as Fox understood, is to see how the men are reacting. When one group changes status in a society, strains will be created in contiguous groups, and it is the nature and depth of those strains that can reflect the progress of the more mobile group. More work is needed in this

area. With the exception of Sutherland, typical travel accounts have not really considered the question.¹⁵

The revolution has several things in its favor. The status of men has changed: Material and moral improvements are obvious for large groups. Men once miserably exploited are now less so. Some of the pressure should be off the women simply because it is off the men. But a deeper question is how the cultural definition of manhood in Cuba has changed with the revolution. If social validation of manhood continues to include some proving or testing of one's self, and if women are gradually removed as socially acceptable test objects, then what other target will be created? The generation of the revolution, Fidel and company, proved its manhood in the mountains and in the war against Batista. But what of today's youth? Are cold showers, agricultural work, and *emulaciones* going to be enough? The specter of the foreign enemy, while an effective political rallying point, is ultimately not satisfying, because one comes to grips only with a chimera or with rumors (excepting of course the Playa Girón incident). Cuba will probably export not armed revolution but work and training teams to those countries which request them. Public health and agricultural work do not have quite the glorious connotations that young men might seek.

Much has been made of "moral incentives" in a society where money means little because there are few consumer goods and basic necessities are either free or very inexpensive. Can moral incentives include some element that will reinforce the male self-image at a time that its traditional supports are under attack? Put in another fashion, will it be possible for the women of Cuba and the revolutionary leadership to truly civilize the Cuban men? The question arises now because it is only now that Cuba has reached the difficult stage of this particular game.

Be it said in passing that the greatest favor the United States ever did Cuba was the blockade. Despite shortages, Cuba has had the inestimable advantage of being cut off from old ways and old influences—especially those influences that do not view women's incorporation into society with a kindly eye.

It is unfortunate that in the United States we do not know more about Cuba. Randall's book serves as a good introduction to the changes Cuban women have been experiencing and promoting. The success of the FMC in particular and of Cuban women in general is, nevertheless, due largely to the fact that Castro thought women important for his revolution. The effort of the leadership has obviously been sincere. Three large tests remain: Will the Family Code be adopted (especially Article 27), and if adopted, what of its enforcement? The second test will involve women at work; what will happen as the work force grows numerically and jobs become scarce? And finally, what will happen when Cuba re-establishes diplomatic relations with the U.S.? One waits to see if what Castro calls the "revolution within the Revolution" will survive.

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NOTES

1. A recent example, and a nice parallel to the Randall book, is Jane Howard's *A Different Woman* (New York: Avon, 1973), a series of interviews with U.S. women and a most depressing book.
2. D. José M. Gómez Colón, *Memoria sobre la utilidad del trabajo de la muger pobre en la Isla de Cuba y medios para conseguirlo*, Introducción de Felipe Poey (Habana: Imprenta de D. Manuel Soler y Gelada, 1857).
3. *Ibid.*, p. 9. Italics his.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 24.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 39. The author went on to propose study and job training for women, and listed occupations that might be suitable: The sale of fruit, the manufacture of straw hats, the operation of commercial laundries. With some amplification, this *Memoria* might be seen as a blueprint for current activities.
6. Fidel Castro, Address to the Second Congress of the FMC in Havana, 29 November 1974 (Foreign Broadcast Information Service), 6: 235: Q1-15.
7. Geoffrey E. Fox, "Honor, Shame and Women's Liberation in Cuba: Views of Working-Class Émigré Men," *Female and Male in Latin America: Essays*, ed. Ann Pescatello (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1973).
8. Castro, Address to Second Congress (Foreign Broadcast Information Service), 6: 235: Q-9.
9. Fox, "Honor, Shame and Women's Liberation," p. 275.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 277.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 280.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 287.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 288.
14. See the complaint of a Cuban man (artist) to Elizabeth Sutherland, *The Youngest Revolution: A Personal Report on Cuba*, photography by Leroy Lucas (New York: Pitman Publishing, 1969), p. 175.
15. See for example: Ernesto Cardenal, *In Cuba*, trans. Donald D. Walsh (New York: New Directions, 1974); "Women in Transition," *Cuba Review* 4, no. 2 (September 1974); Victor Franco, *The Morning After*, trans. Ivan Kats and Philip Pendered (New York: Praeger, 1963); Barry Reckord, *Does Fidel Eat More than Your Father?* (New York: Praeger, 1971); and José Yglesias, *In the Fist of the Revolution: Life in a Cuban Country Town* (New York: Random House, 1968).