

NEW YORK
AUGUST, 1973

FJM-44: REPORT FROM A CUBAN PRISON XIV
HOMOSEXUALITY IN CUBA



NOT FOR PUBLICATION
WITHOUT WRITER'S CONSENT

I watched Manuel begin to question the defendant. Gentle and polite, he once told me he tried to educate, not intimidate those who came before him. "Is there any reason why any of us should be removed from jurisdiction over your case?"

The defendant, Eduardo, shook his head. "No." "Do you wish to have a lawyer?" Again, "No." "Do you plead guilty or not guilty to the charges brought against you?"

The young man, no more than 22 years of age, wearing dark glasses and a grey workshirt, seemed to be scrutinizing his feet. I saw though that tears were forming in his eyes. I felt his embarrassment and a hush fell over the crowd. There must have been several hundred people from the neighborhood in attendance. Finally, straightening his shoulders, Eduardo looked at the three judges--Jonas on the right, Alonso on the left, Miguel in the center--and in a barely audible voice began to speak. "What Miguel has said is not true. I have not tried to corrupt the young boys in the neighborhood. Nor have I dressed in women's clothing or used bad language. I have not broken the law nor created scandal. It is true, however, that I am a homosexual."

Manuel leaned over to speak in a whisper to Jonas, then said something to Alonso and addressed the defendant. "Are you registered at the Ministry of Labor and in possession of a work card?"

"Yes, I have done both, but I am not working at present."

"Are you a member of the neighborhood's Committee for the Defense of the Revolution?"

"Yes. And I've done voluntary work with the Committee. I also tried to join the Army; but I was rejected because I'm a homosexual."

Manuel asked one or two more questions about the defendant's family, requested a file that was brought to him and then with the other two judges retired to the Judge's chambers, a little store on the corner of the roped-off street.

This was a People's Court, one of 2,125 established throughout Cuba. Unlike the Revolutionary Tribunals or the Military Courts, the People's Courts hear cases involving offenses that cannot be punished by more than six months deprivation of freedom. "Deprivation of freedom" as the judicial code defines it, is applied as follows: Either by confinement to a rehabilitation farm--with or without pay--or confinement at home. In the latter case, the prisoner is allowed to leave his home only for medical attention, work, school, or to buy groceries when there is no one else to do the shopping for him. Other penalties include a public reprimand, enforced schooling and, in a few instances, a prohibition against visiting places where a defendant has committed "an anti-social act." The most common penalty, however, is just a public admonition. With one's neighbors present, the embarrassment of being brought before a People's Court and reprimanded in public is enough of a lesson in itself.

The People's Courts began as an experiment in 1962 when, in a discussion with the University of Havana's law students and professors, Fidel Castro proposed the establishment of a "popular" court of self-discipline that would be run by and for the people. It was experimental until 1968 when the system was implemented nationally.

In a People's Court, there are always three judges, each elected at popular assemblies held at local level. Every individual nominated as a judge must be 21 (18 on the Isle of Pines); have at least a sixth grade education; be respected; be considered a moral example to the community; and be integrated into the Revolutionary process. The elections take place at the Local Committee for the Defense of the Revolution headquarters where nominations are accepted publicly. Usually by the end of an evening, a slate will contain 10 or 15 names. The candidates then attend classes for ten days, taking law examinations to see if they have an aptitude for the job. Later, a People's Court Commission, together with the local party nucleus, selects the judges from among the proposed list of candidates. No pay is offered to these men since it is an honor to be a People's Judge. A Judge must also continue working full time at his regular job.

The particular court I attended each week was in central Havana just off of Avenida Infante. Promptly at 8:00 every Wednesday evening--assuming there was no "apagon" (an electricity blackout), the chief judge Manuel Dominguez called the first case. Each court session was held in the street with a string of lights hung from building to building to provide sufficient illumination. The people of the neighborhood sat on chairs and benches brought from their own apartments.

Usually I stood at the back of the crowd, so as not to be too noticeable. A stranger was conspicuous as everyone in the neighborhood knew each other. Once I'd gotten to know Manuel, however, it was his practice to mention that there was a North American watching the proceedings. There would be a murmur in the crowd, nudges, some pointing in my direction and a few smiles. Manuel would then make a little speech, saying how important it was for the people to demonstrate to the North American how fair justice was conducted in their neighborhood. Only then would the sessions continue.

Eduardo's case was particularly interesting because it was the first time I had seen a homosexual brought before the court as a defendant on a morals charge. Eduardo was obviously the object of great interest in the neighborhood as well because every place in the street was occupied.

Traditionally, Cubans have always scorned the "maricon" (homosexual)--an attitude fostered by their Latin culture, machismo, and Roman Catholicism. Since the Revolution, however, great pressure has been brought against those who are overtly homosexual; the Revolutionary Government has decided that it is anti-social to be a homosexual. Friends who were also members of the Party explained that the Revolution could not depend upon a homosexual to defend the Revolution, since a maricon couldn't be trusted to fight in its defense. Homosexuality, they pointed out, is also an aberration, the result of moral corruption engendered in capitalist societies. In its campaign to repress homosexuality, the Revolution established special UMAP camps (Military Units in Aid of Production). Set up as an experiment in 1965 (they no longer exist because Fidel ordered them closed after a year) the UMAP's indicate how serious some members of the Government were (and are) about stamping out homosexuality. That year, every unemployed homosexual, hippie, "lumpen," vagabond and loiterer was picked up by the National Police, interned in work camps and assigned agricultural labor.

An official description of the camps, as published in Granma in April 1966, is a sanitized version of what really went on inside.

" UMAP, Military Units for Aid in Production. Just four letters, but they embody a deep and vital context unknown to many in our country as well as abroad. Every young man should accept military service as his honourable duty and as his modest contribution to the defense of his country. In the beginning, military service drafted only the best young men. Many young men were not recruited at that time, even though they were not studying, working, or members of military units such as the Militia or the Rebel Army.

There still remained the case of that group of maladjusted youths, drifters, who neither worked nor studied. What could be done with them? The question was a serious one for the leaders of the Revolution.

One day a group of officers met in General Staff Headquarters and talked over these problems. They spoke with Fidel who shared their preoccupation, and they proposed the creation of the "UMAP."

The principal objective of this organization is not to impose punishment, but rather to educate these young men. Its fundamental mission is to alter the attitudes of these youths and to educate them, form them, and save them from becoming future parasites, incapable of producing something useful, or counterevolutionary criminals, or even common delinquents all useless to society.

NOT A PENAL INSTITUTION

The fundamental aim of UMAP is to educate those young men who themselves evade any kind of educational institution. They do not study in technological schools, attend secondary institutions of any kind, nor belong to military units. They are, then, beyond the reach of any organization which might educate them. It is precisely this organization which must take them in so that they might not be lost to society.

Major Ernesto Casillas was named head of UMAP. Casillas, member of the Central Committee of the Party, is a former combatant from the Sierra Maestra and the "Frank Pais" Second Front. He is a man of strong will and fine human qualities, which have served him well since the founding of UMAP.

UMAP is not a penal institution. There, young men who enter service are not looked upon with disrespect; on the contrary, they are well received. Military discipline prevails in all units. Means are sought to aid them in overcoming certain attitudes, to help them learn to become useful members of society. When the first rather difficult groups arrived, they were not easy to handle and some officers, who had neither the necessary patience nor the experience required for the task, frequently lost their tempers. These were summoned before a military council following which some were demoted, and others were discharged from the Armed Forces.

There is strong discipline in the UMAP units, but kind treatment of the men by their superiors is requisite.

OFFICERS SET THE EXAMPLE

The officers work along with the youths in their production tasks. They endure the same difficulties and suffer the same needs. At present all units of "UMAP" are incorporated into the work of cutting and loading sugar cane. When a young man is not putting forth his best effort in this work, he is not reproached by his officer. The officer simply begins to cut cane alongside the youth. This has a strong moral effect.

There are some who are really antagonistic, who only create problems and are troublemakers. But those in charge possess great equanimity and know how to handle them.

They see in their superior someone who sets the example in everything, they see in him a friend, someone with whom they can be frank, to whom they can confide any problem or difficulty.

There are those in the camp who did not join the SMO: (Compulsory Military Service) because they belonged to some religious sect; unfortunately some of those sects were used by the counter-revolution. The Revolution is not hostile towards, nor considers as an enemy anyone who is religious. Unfortunately, reaction and imperialism have used these institutions in their counterrevolutionary campaign.

The young men are taught agriculture, combat preparation and military etiquette.

VISITS ONCE A MONTH

The first Sunday of each month is visiting day. Periodically they are given leave. There is a plan for encouraging work, which consists of giving additional days to those who do their work faultlessly, fulfill the norms and have good conduct records by the time his leave is due.

The young men receive night classes both in general subjects and in revolutionary instruction. During the daytime, they do productive work. They practice sports. After lunch and dinner they have time to relax.

Almost all the young men at UMAP have undergone a remarkable change. When they complete Military Service, they will return to society well prepared."

The idyllic atmosphere that Granma reported wasn't exactly the whole story. As one artist who had been interned in the UMAP explained: "It was a terrible experience to be there. The camps were supposed to re-educate us; but actually they made the problems worse. Can you imagine throwing hundreds of homosexuals together in that kind of dehumanizing atmosphere? There were many, many suicides and many more mental breakdowns. It was so bad that finally the Revolution had to close the camps. Afterward, a more selective approach was taken. They quietly purged homosexuals from all positions of responsibility, especially in the university and the Ministries. For example, I know of at least a dozen professors who were asked to leave the University of Havana, and a handful of lower echelon officials at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs who were "requested" to do the same. This was justified, we were told, "because the Revolution could not leave sensitive responsibilities in the hands of those whose loyalty was weakened by their immoral conduct."

By April 1971, what had once been an official (though not openly declared) position regarding homosexuality was formally expressed as an official policy in the Report drafted by the Congress of Education and Culture.¹

¹The Report was the result of hundreds of meetings and discussions prior to the holding of the Conference itself. Participants, numbering in the thousands, were drawn from every level in Cuba's educational system and from each of the Mass Organizations. Thus the policies contained in the report were not only ratified by the leadership of the Revolution but are firmly supported by the majority of Cuban educators, labor union leaders and members of the Mass Organizations as well.

Two sections from the Report are presented here. The first deals with "Fashion, Customs and Extravagant Behavior"; the second, entitled "Concerning Sex," presents the Revolution's official statement on homosexuality.

FASHIONS, CUSTOMS, AND EXTRAVAGANT BEHAVIOR

"The consensus was that the fundamental aspect to be taken into consideration in evaluating a young person in relation to the Revolution must be of his or her social attitude, that is to say, participation in the collective effort made toward the revolutionary transformation of society. Fashions, customs, etc., were thoroughly examined from a sociological, ideological and political viewpoint.

The opinion was that, although it is true that certain forms of extravagant behavior, exhibitionism, etc., should not constitute a focus of attention for the Revolution, since they are limited to minority and generally marginal groups, yet the necessity of maintaining the monolithic ideological unity of our people and the struggle against all forms of deviation among our young make it imperative to implement a series of measures for their eradication.

Fashion was examined from its social aspect as a form of attire, its natural evolution and the need for the development of fashion guidelines by specialized state agencies. A distinction was established between the foregoing and the extravagances that in some cases spring from an indiscriminate assimilation of fashions displayed by foreign groups and in others from the counterrevolutionary attitude of minigroups that use them as means of identification among themselves and as protest against the Revolution. In both cases, it was decided that direct confrontation and elimination was necessary.

Attention was called to extravagant groups abroad and their role in the rotten bourgeois society where, although they are not necessarily an expression of revolutionary opposition but rather one of escape from the alienating effect of that society, nevertheless, they do contain a germ of protest. Such antagonism against the capitalist system cannot in any way serve as either an example or a stimulus for our youth, who have the possibility of self-fulfillment in building communism.

The following conclusions were drawn from the debate:

1. The Revolution should take into account the social phenomenon of fashion within the framework of our economic, environmental and ideological characteristics.

2. In studying this phenomenon of fashion, customs and extravagant behavior, we reaffirm the need for maintaining the monolithic ideological unity of our people and the battle against any form of deviation among the youth.

3. We find it necessary to take direct action to eliminate extravagant aberrations.

4. The Revolution must promote a policy consistent with fashion which, by positive action, will neutralize or curb the influx of fashion trends originating in highly developed capitalist countries where their economic, business and ideological base must be taken into account, as well as the fact that, if we accept such trends indiscriminately, they can become a factor of cultural dependency.

5. In view of the influence of certain fashions that are considered to represent a manifestation of rebellion by youth, a campaign should be undertaken to explain the origin, development and assimilation of this phenomenon and its exportation by the decadent societies which pass it on, deforming and commercializing it in a final attempt at cultural colonialization."

CONCERNING SEX

"A review was made of the transformation that has taken place in the matter of sexual relations as they existed in the

prerevolutionary society, when such relations were dependent on a system of exploitation, on the profound social inequality and on the violence brought about by the evil of prostitution and the various ways of commercialization of sex, with its sequel of aberrations.

At present, the structural transformation and development of our society have definitively eradicated these manifestations, typical of the exploiting system but--as happens in every revolutionary process--the change has brought about new contradictions which demand a constant effort at creative renovation in behavior, social habits and ideas.

Emphasis was placed on the respect for the feelings and opinions of the young, on how to find out their points of view, on how to give them the possibility of holding discussions and on how to nurture a concept of what love means in the constitution of the human couple and the motives that should unite it, not merely from the biological viewpoint but from the idea of human fulfillment, which includes reciprocal admiration and deep esteem based not only on biological and aesthetic but also--and fundamentally--social, political and moral values.

The social pathological character of homosexual deviations was recognized. It was resolved that all manifestations of homosexual deviations are to be firmly rejected and prevented from spreading. It was pointed out, however, that a study, investigation and analysis of this complex problem should always determine the measures to be adopted.

It was decided that homosexuality should not be considered a central problem or a fundamental one in our society, but that its attention and solution are necessary.

A study was made of the origin and evolution of this phenomenon and of its present-day scope and anti-social character. An in-depth analysis was made of the preventive and educational measures that are to be implemented as well as of the curative measures to be put into effect against existing focuses, including the control and relocation of isolated cases, always with an educational and preventive purpose. It was agreed to differentiate between the various cases, their stages of deterioration and the necessarily different approaches to the different cases and degrees of deterioration.

On the basis of these considerations, it was resolved that it would be convenient to adopt the following measures:

a) Extension of the coeducational system: recognition of its importance in the formation of children and the young.

b) Appropriate sexual education for parents, teachers and pupils. This work must not be treated as a special subject but as one falling into the general teaching syllabus, such as biology, physiology, etc.

c) Stimulation of a proper approach to sex. A campaign of information should be put into effect among adolescents and young people which would contribute to the acquisition of a scientific knowledge of sex and the eradication of prejudices and doubts which in some cases result in the placing of too much importance on sex.

d) It was resolved that it is not to be tolerated for notorious homosexuals to have influence in the formation of our youth on the basis of their "artistic merits."

Consequently, a study is called for to determine how best to tackle the problems of the presence of homosexuals in the various institutions of our cultural sector.

It was proposed that a study should be made to find a way of applying measures with a view to transferring to other organizations those who, as homosexuals, should not have any direct influence on our youth through artistic and cultural activities.

It was resolved that those whose morals do not correspond to the prestige of our Revolution should be barred from any group of performers representing our country abroad."

An incident involving the Venceremos brigade exemplified the attitude of most Cubans regarding homosexuality. A friend teaching in the School of Letters scheduled a meeting between her students and members of the Brigade. A representative of each faction within the Brigade (Blacks, Chicanos, Women's Liberation, S.D.C., and Gay Liberation) was asked to speak about the organizations represented. Each of the Americans stood, spoke, and was politely applauded until the last speaker, a member of the G.L.F. explained what his organization represented. There was a shock of silence, eyebrows lifted and the meeting broke up in an embarrassed hush. After that, my teaching colleague was told by the Director of the English Department that she should never bring any other Gay Liberation spokesmen into the University. The same message was passed along to the Brigade leadership as well.

To make contact and interview homosexuals in Cuba is difficult; although through Lisa, an actress in one of Havana's

theater groups, I came to know one man, an actor, who talked to me about his problems. He was not very hopeful about change, he said, although he considered himself a Revolutionary. "I work hard and love the theater. I'm a comedian and enjoy making people laugh. I perform militia duty and do my fair share of volunteer work just as everyone else does. But I know that I'll never be able to join the Party or become a Director. (I'm not a closet homosexual, as you say.) If I'm able to carry on acting, though, that'll be enough for me. The problem for us is that straight Cubans associate homosexuality with weakness and corruption. The Revolution promoted the image of virility and aggressiveness. We just don't fit. We are associated with the past, with the street-corners, transvestites and all the old corruption that once dominated Havana's night life. To purge us is seen as ridding Cuba of the last vestiges of vice, of all that was connected with prostitution, gambling and drugs. To be a 'maricon' is to be identified with Batista and pre-Revolutionary Cuba, with the trash heap of the underworld."

Lisa's friend, even though a homosexual, represents a group of "Establishment" figures who continue to work, mainly because they are well known and have achieved recognition. Homosexuals who are prominent artists, musicians and film directors still work and are given an opportunity to travel to foreign countries even though it is officially forbidden. Another contradiction between what is said and what is done in Cuba is the case of the homosexual painter who sat on the rostrum of the General Assembly of the National Congress of Education and Culture while the Report on homosexuality was read to the delegates.

Nevertheless, the implementation of the Report, particularly that section on homosexuality, has taken its toll. For example, only six months after the publication of the Congress' Report, four of nine top theater directors were replaced because they were known to be homosexuals.

For homosexuals who don't have position to protect them, however, the situation is very different. They must confront both a society and a government exerting tremendous pressure to conform. As a result, younger homosexuals are totally alienated from the Revolutionary process. According to Lisa's friend, men he knows in this situation hope for change but are pessimistic. "The thing that differentiates them from the older, more established types is the openness of their homosexuality. The younger people refuse to remain closeted and for that they risk expulsion from school, loss of jobs and public embarrassment before large assemblies of their peers. For instance, I know of cases where love letters between homosexuals have been read in public. These young people turn bitter. They even ridicule the

'verdes' (the olive greens) or soldiers in the army. Generally, they retreat, living in constant fear of being rounded up, photographed and sent to work camps where their hair is shorn off. You can imagine how they feel. There isn't much of a future for them here in Cuba."

Indeed, about the only thing worse than being Nixon in Cuba's press (his name is always spelled with a swastika in Granma) or a "gusano" (worm, a Cuban expression for the exiles who leave Cuba for Miami) is to be a "maricon." Every time there is a story about some criminal engaged in black marketing or murder, if he is a homosexual it will always appear. The press also uses every opportunity to ridicule homosexuality in the capitalist societies. For Granma, a story about the legalization of homosexual relationships in Sweden indicates the obvious corruption of capitalist society. Or a story about homosexuals marrying in California carried a cartoon of two men with beards dressed in wedding gowns with it.

Given this sort of environment, I was amazed with Manuel's handling of Eduardo's case. When the judges returned I expected the defendant to be given a tough lecture and then an even tougher sentence. Instead, Manuel called for quiet and began to question Eduardo about his attitude toward the Revolution. Had he really wanted to join the Army? How often did he volunteer for work in the countryside? What were the circumstances under which he lost his job?

Then Manuel made a speech. "I believe this young man is capable of being a good citizen, a good Cuban, and a good Revolutionary." Not a sound came from the crowd. "Furthermore, it has come to our attention that Eduardo is being harassed by the boys in the neighborhood. Does anyone have anything to say about this?" A few moments of silence passed a woman in the crowd spoke up. (She worked as a desk clerk at the Hotel Nacional.) Crossing to the Bench, she took the microphone and in a nervous voice explained that it was very unusual for her to speak publicly but that she felt that the people should be more understanding of Eduardo's situation. Yes, the boys in the neighborhood have called him names, mocked and shouted obscenities. He on the other hand has done nothing to deserve this kind of treatment. On the contrary, she argued, he has tried to integrate himself into society but his 'problem' had prevented him from doing more. As a resident of the neighborhood, she called upon all the parents to instruct their children in tolerance and understanding. When she put the microphone down, the crowd erupted in applause. Eduardo stayed seated, his head lowered. Another hand went up, a black woman this time. She stood, took the microphone and announced that people were ignorant about homosexuality, that it was a sickness that needed

medical attention. She recommended that the court try and arrange counseling for Eduardo. The crowd murmured, little children ran among the benches and I asked those around me what they thought. Every one seemed enlightened and far less hostile to homosexuality than one would have thought reading the document reported out at the National Congress of Education and Culture. (Understandably enough, the women seemed to be more sympathetic than the men.) Finally, Manuel and his two colleagues rose to announce their findings. The crowd hushed and Eduardo was asked to rise and stand before the Bench. "We have listened to what has been said here tonight," Manuel said. "We believe that you are not guilty of corrupting the young people of the neighborhood. We think the Revolution should offer that help to you; and it is our judgment, therefore, that you ^{must} return to the Court next week to receive the name of a doctor who will provide counsel to you. We shall arrange a schedule of appointments to see what can be done. That is, if you agree." (A nod and a small smile.) "Then you are free to go..... Your case is dismissed." Eduardo turned and with his head down, walked off into the crowd and up the street without looking back.

Frank Mc Donald

Received in New York on September 6, 1973.



A People's Court in session

