TRUMPISM, CUBAN AMERICANS, AND THE FETISHISM OF POLITICS

Rodney A. González Maestrey

Rodney A. González Maestrey is Counsellor with the US Affairs General Directorate in the Cuban Foreign Ministry. He also collaborates with the Cuban Higher Institute of Foreign Relations “Raúl Roa García”, and is a member of the Academic Committee for the Postgraduate Course on Foreign Service. He has published on the US–Cuba relations, US immigration policy, and Cuban Americans. Has a PhD in Political Sciences from the University of Havana.

Abstract

This article analyses the transfigured way in which President Trump and the Cuban-American far right exercised their power. It assesses both the underlying social relations behind this in both US society as a whole and in particular in its subset of the Cuban-American community in Miami, and the construction of what Michel Foucault called a truth regime which serves to hide the social actors’ true power-related goals. Theoretical perspectives about the nature of power in international relations, and society as a whole, are employed in this endeavour. It is concluded that beyond the predominant Cold War politics and narrative, Trump and the Cuban-American far right's goal was to maintain the local and national power structure they have benefited from, given the perceived harmful impact of Barack Obama's policies.

Keywords: US–Cuba policy, Cuban Americans, identity politics, American “truth regime” about Cuba, power relations

Introduction

US–Cuba policy under the Donald Trump administration has been one of the most aggressive since the triumph of the Cuban Revolution in 1959. Trump broke with Barack Obama’s approach of attempting to influence
events on the island through increased exchanges in multiple areas between the two countries. From a dialogue that occurred from 2014 to 2017 aimed at normalising bilateral relations and the predominance of the use of tools associated with “soft power”, the US once again turned to confrontation. “Hard power” instruments prevailed with the open goal of promoting “regime change”.

In this process, the Cuban-American far right played a fundamental role, based on its usefulness for a segment of the US power elite and their ability to exchange domestic politics for foreign policy.¹ One of the most shocking consequences of the return to confrontation has been the support by large sections of Cuban émigrés for the “maximum pressure campaign” announced in 2019. This policy is aimed at squeezing the Cuban economy by cutting all possible foreign income sources, expanding funds for opposition groups, and modernising propaganda methods. According to a 2020 Florida International University survey, 73 per cent favoured such an approach, including 59 per cent of those who immigrated after 1995 (Grenier and Lai 2020: 11). The stated goal of supporting the Cuban people pointedly symbolises the deceptive nature of the underlying power relations between the Trump administration and Cuban Americans in South Florida.

As per the Oxford Dictionary, a fetish is an idol or cult object to which primitive peoples attribute supernatural powers. Referring to political economy, Karl Marx (1867) conceptualised mercantile fetishism. His definition establishes a clear difference between the essential – the real – and the phenomenal – its expression in the field of perceptions. Marx exposed the transfigured way in which the exploitation and appropriation of surplus value appears under capitalism. In a productive cycle, the capitalist advances means of production, hires labour, and apparently “creates” profit, which hides the worker’s unique quality of creating wealth through his labour, which the capitalist appropriates.

By using the term “fetishism of politics” in the title, the intention is to stress the ability of elites and dominant groups to hide complex relations vis a vis other groups over whom power is wielded through politics. As in political economy,

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¹ Cuban researcher Jesús Arboleya Cervera has termed the “Cuban American far right” as: “a current of political thought within the Cuban American community defined by its hostility towards the Cuban Revolution that promotes US intervention to overthrow it. It is opposed to any type of contact between the two countries, and from an ideological point of view it is intertwined with the most aggressive US foreign policy positions with regards to Cuba” (González 2021: 10–11).
these are rarely presented in an explicit and open way. Perhaps like no other US politician, Donald Trump embodies fetishism in US politics. The metamorphosed way in which he conducted politics was distinctive.

This article aims to analyse mechanisms used to mask those underlying power relations, considering the Cuba policy as a particular case. The president’s veiled behaviour to consolidate a popular base of support for his administration is evaluated in a context of growing social tensions, discontent with traditional politics and politicians, and challenges to US hegemony internationally.

This is not an exhaustive evaluation of the Trump administration’s actions against Cuba. Rather, it is an attempt to articulate a framework for understanding the Cuban-American far right’s features and expressions, its interconnections with the national power elites, and the actions it carries out in order to preserve the power structure that it has benefited from.

Some Notes on Power

Joseph Nye (2004) sees power as the capacity to influence the behaviour of others to obtain desired results. Hans Morgenthau, one of the fathers of political realism, adds that power can comprise any social relations that establish and maintain the control of some men over others. “Power embraces all social relations that serve that end, from physical violence to the subtlest bond by which one mind controls another” (Morgenthau 1948: 20). Morgenthau admits that the objective of the struggle for power can assume multiple forms, such as: freedom, security, prosperity, or power itself; it can be defined in religious, philosophical, economic, or social terms; and it can materialise through its own force or through other non-political means, such as bilateral technical cooperation or international organisations (1948: 41).

Nye distinguishes three ways in which power can be exercised: coercion, inducement through payments, or attraction to get the target audience to do what is desired. Coercion is associated with “hard power” (examples: military action, economic sanctions), while attraction is linked to “soft power” (examples: culture, appreciation of the legitimacy of policies, and institutions). Both are related in that they are aspects of the ability to achieve the purpose of affecting others’ behaviour.

The term “power elites” is frequently used throughout the body of this article. This is done in the sense of Charles W. Mills’ interpretation of the power structure in the US. Mills stresses the existence of high circles in the political, corporate, and military sectors that make up a structural power triangle, with superior capacity to influence the fundamental decision-making process both domestically and in foreign policy, which makes up the power elite. Its unity of action is
materialised through the social psychological affinity of its members which comes from the similarity of their interests, origin, education, and lifestyles, and which facilitates extensive mobility among the three branches. It is structured through hierarchical institutions, consists of members of these circles, and evidences a coordination of their actions to a greater or lesser extent (Mills 1987).

G. William Domhoff draws on linkages among individuals, institutions, money flows, and policy issues, to generalise that there are four relatively distinct but overlapping processes through which the corporate community, and more generally the power elite, control the public agenda, and then win on most issues that are taken up by the federal government. They are the special-interest, policy-planning, opinion-shaping, and candidate-selection processes, with the last term referring to the individually oriented and relatively issueless political campaigns that predominate in the American two-party system (Domhoff 2007).

This approach helps to understand not only the oversized power and influence of the Cuban-American far right in US politics, but also their reaction to Obama’s politics and policies, which undermined their participation in all four processes.

Along the same lines, sociologist Floyd Hunter, in analysing power structures in the US both nationally and at the community level, observes that power is a relatively constant factor in social relations with politics being a variable. Wealth, social status, and prestige are factors of this constant. Power is socially structured in a dual relationship between governmental and economic authorities. These authorities may have subsidiary functional, social, and institutional units of power – middle and lower levels of distribution and reproduction. Significantly, Hunter observes that variations in the strength of the power units, or a change in policy within these units, affect the entire structure (Hunter 1953).

It is also appropriate to consider postulates related to social power. Michel Foucault (2002, 1999) emphasised the subtle manifestations of power throughout the social fabric (universities, prisons, schools, family, hospitals). He delves into social phenomena to uncover complex subsumed power relations. For Foucault, power persists in every relationship where there is imbalance, inequality, or asymmetry. A particularly significant distinction of this author is that each society possesses its “truth regime”, understood as

the set of rules according to which the true is discriminated from the false and linked to the real political effects of power ... It is not a fight in favour of truth, but around the status of truth and the economic-political role it plays. (Foucault 2002: 54)

According to Foucault, the political economy of truth is characterised by five historically important features: “truth” is centred on the form of scientific
discourse and on the institutions that produce it; it is subject to constant eco-
nomic and political incitement (need for truth both for economic production and
for political power); it is the object, in various forms, of immense dissemination
and consumption (it circulates in educational or informational apparatuses
whose extension is relatively wide in the social body, despite certain strict limita-
tions); it is produced and transmitted under the control, not exclusive but
dominant, of certain large political or economic institutions (university, army,
writing, media); and it constitutes the core of a whole political debate and series
of social confrontations (2002: 55). Truth is produced thanks to multiple impos-
sitions, and produces regulated effects of power.

The “general politics of truth” defines the types of discourse that it accepts
and causes to function as true; the mechanisms and instances that make it pos-
sible to distinguish between true and false statements; the way to sanction what
it does not accept and hence causes to function as false; the techniques and pro-
cedures that are valued in order to obtain the truth; and the status of those who
are in charge of saying what functions as true.

**Trump and the Fetishisation of Politics**

Donald Trump became president on the widespread weariness of the American
electorate and society with traditional politicians and the unfulfilled promises of
his predecessor. Barack Obama had caused many people to dream of the possi-
bility of overcoming racism and other political, economic, and social structural
problems. His campaign and his administration were based on the failure of the
pre-emptive war doctrine and the global war on terrorism that was promulgated
by George W. Bush and the neoconservatives.

The questioning of US exceptionalism grew as a result of the financial and
economic crisis, and the increasing economic and social inequalities with wide
gender and ethnic gaps (women, Blacks, and Latinos carry the heaviest burden).
In testimony before the US Congress, Elise Gould, chief economist at the
Economic Policy Institute, pointed to income inequality as one of the nation’s
greatest economic challenges. She demonstrated how since 1980 productivity
gains went primarily to the economic pyramid’s top 1 per cent (Gould 2017).
Comparing it to other G7 countries, the US has the highest Gini coefficient of
inequality. Not surprisingly, in 2015 48 per cent of so-called “millennials”, in
the age range of 18–29, considered the “American dream” to be dead (Bump
2015). In *Requiem for the American Dream* (Chomsky 2017), intellectual Noam
Chomsky points out that the concentration of wealth in the US is deeply related
to the concentration of power, which has led to a political paralysis that prevents
paying attention to the real problems that afflict American society.
Obama was unable to achieve an ambitious agenda that responded to the need to adjust an essentially unjust system, thus guaranteeing its reproduction and survival in the long term.² It is irrelevant whether part of this failure was due to the Republicans’ obstructionist strategy and the Democrats’ lack of resolve to act more radically. The electorate wanted to hold someone accountable in the face of their frustrations and uncertainty. The alternative, Hillary Clinton, associated with a political dynasty, was the objectification of the elitist democratic model rejected by large segments of the society.

At the antipodes of these groups are more traditional capitals linked to agriculture, industry, hydrocarbons, and finance, among others. Their voting base has been white, more fervently religious, relatively less educated, and from rural and suburban areas. More conservative, nativist, racist, and xenophobic behaviours, which can be traced back to the very beginning of the nation, are found within these groups.

This is the population that candidate Donald Trump tried to attract. They were people marginalised by Obama’s Democratic policies and international liberalism. They were suspicious of Hollywood elitism, city glamour, modernity associated with social media, and ethnic diversity in the context of urban transformations. They strongly resented the predominance of financial services over agricultural and industrial work, and jobs being outsourced to Latin America and Asia to find better profit rates, as capital requires.

Political incorrectness, simple vocabulary, and skin colour were superficial aspects that contrasted Trump with the sophistication and intellectuality of Obama, whose pigmentation, or the rejection of it, was at the centre of political opposition. Trump himself was a key promoter in 2012 of the idea that Obama should not be president because he was not born in the continental US, the concept that went on to give rise to the Birther Movement. In public appearances, Trump boasted of his “German genes”, which not only attested to his racist convictions, but also to his interest in exacerbating resentments about a future of lesser white representation.

Trump fuelled the cultural wars: rural versus urban, white versus Black, immigrant versus “native”, poorly educated versus highly educated. He attempted to redefine the American creed as “success”, rather than shared values such as democracy, freedom, and the American dream. This was intended to obscure the increasingly elusive nature of this dream for most Americans, the

² Part of Obama’s agenda was reforming the financial, health, and immigration systems; transforming the energy matrix; addressing climate change; and reducing the income gaps faced by various groups of so-called minorities.
fundamental contradiction of capital versus working class oppression, and the continual growth of the endemic, structural social, economic, and political inequalities. In that endeavour, Trump relied not on leaders of moral stature, but rather on wealthy religious figures, politicians, and minority representatives such as Black celebrities Lil Wayne, Ice Cube, 50 Cent, and Kanye West, who attempted to legitimise the new creed.

The Republican hopeful ran his election campaign around the slogan “Make America Great Again”. The phrase was used for the first time in the 1980 election campaign by the Republican candidate Ronald Reagan, who went on to lead the first phase of the conservative and neoliberal movement that would dominate American politics for the next four decades. This emerged from the dissatisfaction of a segment of the power elites with the democratisation of the political process from the 1950s through the 1970s as a result of the strong progressive and anti-war social movements, whose achievements include the Civil Rights Act, the Voting Rights Act, Medicaid, and Medicare. In addition, they vociferously opposed the increased participation of the state in the American economy and society since Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal, even though contrary to this asserted concern the same elements today have dramatically increased the use of the state by weaponising the Supreme Court to impose their political agenda, bypassing the citizens’ constitutional right to have Congress make their laws.

The Republican political elites find it effective to use Reagan as a cohesive figure for conservatism today, which includes concealing his role in the creation of the objective conditions for today’s social dissatisfaction. The neoliberal model promoted by the actor-president advocated free markets, economic privatisation, and deregulation under the premises of the supply-side economy and the spillover effect, to the detriment of the social and regulatory functions of the state. Entities such as the Stanford Center for Poverty and Inequality (2011) have pointed out the consequences of neoliberal policies in the US, in terms of the deterioration of parameters such as income levels, labour unionisation, health care access, racial discrimination, school performance, incarceration rates, poverty, residential segregation, and social mobility.

The rules of the game no longer worked for some of the elites, whose positions of power, both domestically and internationally, were threatened. These groups, associated in recent decades with the Republican Party, have been horrified by the growth of Latino, Asian, African, and Middle Eastern immigration into the US. Focusing on the Hispanic case, the conservative sociologist Samuel Huntington (2004) has argued this poses a danger to the US identity, in terms of the erosion of the ethno-cultural values established by the founding fathers. In this respect, Trump’s constant and diffuse allusions to “the good old days” was
code for a desired system where a clear class and power structure prevails in favour of rich whites, and in which the so-called minorities, the poor, and women, have their rights limited and subordinated to the former.

Key actors in the socialisation of conservative values, such as, for example, the digital media Town Hall and radio host Rush Limbaugh, came to believe and promote the idea that the eventual legalisation of millions of irregular immigrants would cement liberal ideology, and mean the end of conservatism and the Republican Party. More clearly, James Gimpel (2014) of the conservative think tank the Center for Immigration Studies (CIS) concluded that the legal immigration system has already reshaped the electorate uniformly in favour of the Democratic Party. He argued therefore for reducing it in the future in order to reduce the decline in the Republican vote.

Trump sold himself to the electorate as an outsider who stood opposed to the instituted powers, as a representative of the common man whom Hillary Clinton so unfortunately called the “deplorables” in the 2016 election campaign. He made frequent accusations about the existence of a “deep state” that opposed him. He repeatedly talked of his mission to “drain the swamp” in order to evoke the need to transform traditional politics in Washington DC, which were perceived by the masses as inefficient, intrusive, distant from social needs, fundamentally corrupt, and disproportionately influenced by special interests. This is perhaps one of the aspects of Trump’s language that best expresses the fetishism in US politics.

In reality, Trump attempted to hide the deep class differences between himself and the base of support that he intended to appeal to, in order to gain access to power, and from there to support those who are truly his own: the elites who lost out from institutional liberalism. In his proselytism, he uttered phrases like “I love the poor”. While the phrase is essentially empty, it was nevertheless full of meaning for workers whose jobs depended on hydrocarbon extraction and who were therefore fearful of imminent changes in energy production patterns in favour of less environmentally damaging sources, or workers in industries whose operations had been, or were being, outsourced.

In practice, nothing changed in Washington DC under Trump, except that it arguably became a swamper place. As effected by Trump, draining the swamp actually meant stripping away the intermediary role that politicians have played since the nation’s inception, so that corporate power could exercise political power directly and unambiguously. To this end, the president surrounded himself with his peers, he allowed lobbying activity directed at the presidency to flourish, and corruption became the hallmark of his administration (Center for American Progress 2018).
Advisors close to the president came to qualify his administration as “the friendliest with CEOs” (The Economist 2019: 13). This reinforces the idea of his natural class affiliation with the members of the best-positioned 1 per cent of the economic pyramid, as referred to earlier in this article. This is consistent with one of the principles of the concentration of wealth and power discussed by Chomsky (2017), the ability of these actors to control regulatory agencies to determine the rules of the game in their favour.

Trump’s ability to articulate an apparent community of interests between the elites he represents and the electoral base that ended up voting for him in 2016 cannot be explained only on the basis of their frustration with traditional politics in that country. This was only possible also because of the susceptibility of a critical mass to being convinced by the arguments presented by Trump. To this end, Trump shaped what Foucault describes as a “truth regime”.

First, from the beginning of his electoral campaign, Trump launched a pitched war against the existing regime. He declared the press the “enemy of the people”. He did not do this because of its anti-democratic behaviour in acting to please financiers and sponsors. Nor did he do so because of the media’s class commonality with other corporations that make up the power elites in the US, which explains its active role in the manufacture of consensus, as Herman and Chomsky demonstrate (1988). Rather he did so to exacerbate distrust of anything that represents the dominant groups in order to cement his own truth regime.

Then, like almost everything else in his administration, the new truth regime centred on the president himself. Accusations of fake, or false, news, and hyper-criticism of reporters from emporiums such as CNN, MSNBC, The Washington Post, and The New York Times, attempted to discredit liberal opinion leaders. Also, tirades against the boards of the most widely used digital social media platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, for censoring what they held to be violent or misleading content from pro-Trump groups, were frequent.

Some media called Trump the “tweeter-in-chief”, alluding to the intensive way in which he used Twitter to (mis)inform his followers and to feed parts of the traditional press (e.g. Fox News), the alternative press (Breitbart News, NewsMax TV), and a network of users of digital platforms, all aimed at reproducing his “truth”. The Washington Post counted more than 30,000 false or misleading statements by Trump during his four years in office, including 189 in a single day. The term “post-truth” began to be used in political and popular jargon to typify the way in which facts are replaced by “alternative facts”, feelings are given more weight than evidence in social attitudes, and science is abandoned for personal beliefs. These phenomena did not emerge with Trump,
but proliferated during his administration, and were intentionally promoted for political purposes.

However, the president’s unconventional style cannot hide that in practice his administration advanced the traditional conservative agenda of Republican elites, without having to go through the usual process of bipartisan negotiations, which although legitimising, is cumbersome for driving significant change. Trump actively employed his prerogatives to nominate judges to the Supreme Court and appellate courts, restricted the entry of immigrants of undesirable nationalities, reduced taxes on the wealthiest, adopted policies to deregulate the hydrocarbon industry to the detriment of renewable energy sources, permitted the increased privatisation of education and other social sectors, and led the Republicans’ efforts to restrict minorities’ political rights.

This helps to explain to a large extent the alignment of the Republican political elites with Trump, after having worked to avoid his nomination as a candidate in 2016. Another factor is Trump’s tangible capacity to energise and mobilise the conservative base. To do this, he used an apocalyptic rhetoric about the existence of internal and external threats to the nation, including socialism. There is an objective basis for such a strategy, since in recent years signs of greater social awareness about the nature and causes of problems afflicting that nation have been visible. Though dispersed and inconsistent, the Occupy Wall Street, Black Lives Matter, and Antifa movements are evidence of this. The modest increase in membership and representation at the federal, state, and local levels of political groupings such as Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), spurred by Senator Bernie Sanders’ presidential candidacies in 2016 and 2020, attests to the possibilities for organisation and political participation by these groups, even when it is within the confines of the prevailing system.3

Anti-socialism was another of the features of the Trump administration that irrefutably illustrates fetishism in US politics. Its dual use in domestic and foreign policy can be understood by considering the warning by Zbigniew Brzezinski in “The Dilemma of the Last Sovereign” (2005). There is an imminent danger, he argues, of changes in the power structure in multiple countries, and therefore in international relations, as a result of the marginalisation of large majority

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3 In the 2016 elections, 15 DSA members were elected to state and local offices, a number that increased in 2018 (40) and 2020 (36). In 2018, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Rashida Tlaib, members of DSA who ran as candidates from the Democratic Party, were elected as representatives to the federal Congress from New York and Michigan. In the following cycle Cori Bush and Jamal Bowman joined them, from Texas and New York. Significantly, in 2021 DSA members assumed a majority in the Democratic party structure in the swing state of Nevada, once dominated by the political machine of establishment Senator Harry Reid.
from the benefits promised by predominant neoliberalism. Brzezinski calls for action to face the reality of what he calls the “global political awakening” by large masses worldwide, mainly made up of young people, who are susceptible to being politically mobilised in the era of new information technologies and rapid telecommunications.

According to G. William Domhoff, members of power elites have the ability to work together towards common goals, and “there is nothing like a common enemy to bring people together” (2007: n.p.). Trump used anti-socialism to unite the conservative base, which included white supremacist and far-right groups, as well as to divide the Democratic Party’s support base, exploiting prejudices about socialism and communism, which are deeply rooted in that society from the McCarthyism and the longer Cold War periods. In addition, he tried to prevent citizens from using appropriate ideological, epistemological, and methodological tools to analyse problems in a structural and systemic way, and consequently to prevent them from proposing alternative courses. The accusations against critics of the US political system of wanting to wage class warfare sought to prevent the realisation that, in fact, such a war exists, and is waged by the elites against 99 per cent of the population. This war seeks to keep society fragmented, in order to preserve the economic, social, and power structures.

The reversal of the US–Cuba policy occurred in two stages. The first step came out of Trump’s desire to promote himself to his base as the opposite of everything and anything Obama represented or enacted. In this case, his position also was in opposition to the consensus among national security agencies at that time that US interests were better served with a policy of rapprochement with Cuba than one of permanent confrontation. Trump’s reversed approach was incorporated into a June 2017 Presidential Memorandum. The document stated that the new position was based on the goal of protecting the US’s national security, and explicitly denied the contribution to that goal of Obama’s Directive from October 2016, which had recognised the ongoing process of the normalisation of relations. Instead, hard power instruments such as the threat of the use of force, unilateral coercive measures, and human rights propaganda were prioritised.

A second qualitatively more aggressive stage of the reversal of the US–Cuba policy began in late 2018. Following the coming to power of a wave of right-wing governments in Latin America, particularly in Chile, Brazil, Colombia, and Argentina, US policies were aimed at stopping progressive movements throughout the continent, reaffirming once again the US’s continued belief in its Monroe Doctrine. The promotion of John Bolton to National Security Adviser and Mauricio Claver-Carone as his deputy for Latin America further reflected this increased aggression. Bolton is known for both his ultra-conservatism and his sympathy for
the Cuban-American far right. During his tenure, he integrated the dichotomous approach of George W. Bush with the ideological obsession of Ronald Reagan, two presidents under whose governments he had worked. Bolton articulated a Cold War rhetoric to promote the idea that Cuba represented a pernicious influence regionally, based on purely ideological precepts. Claver-Carone had been the founder of the US–Cuba Democracy PAC in 2003, a pressure group whose sole objective was to lobby Congress and the White House to keep the blockade in place.

From then on, the US avoided any actions or policies that would indicate Cuban government recognition. It suspended almost all bilateral dialogue. At the same time, US security agencies were assigned an openly interventionist and subversive role. The US brazenly adopted a regime change policy, for which it developed a “maximum pressure campaign” which was equivalent to a multifaceted war. While it stopped short of open military intervention, the campaign aimed to artificially elevate Cuba’s place on the US security agenda, cut off all sources possible of foreign income, and subvert the domestic order, among many other facets of its aggression. The extent of the obsession of the Trump government with this “maximum pressure campaign” is indicated by its adoption of more than 240 additional unilateral coercive measures. Among these was the activation of Helms-Burton Act Title III to discourage foreign investment, the restriction of travel categories to Cuba, the disruption of Cuban oil shipments including sanctions against insurance companies, the creation of blacklists of Cuban companies, and the relisting Cuba as a State Sponsor of International Terrorism. It cannot be emphasised enough that all these measures were taken unilaterally, and without credible justification.

The US policy towards the region, and particularly the policy towards Cuba just indicated, were objectifications of the Trump government’s general anti-socialist policy, and further served to try to promote that worldview in the US public.

The Cuban-American Far Right and the Fetishism of Cuba Policy

There is no evidence that Trump valued Cuban immigrants more than Mexicans. His position in favour of total assimilation actually stands opposed to the dynamics exercise in their Miami enclave, where they do not need to integrate into US society to pursue their life projects. As a candidate, he questioned the dual ethnicity of contending Cuban-American Senators Marco Rubio and Ted Cruz, and he agreed with the January 2017 Joint Declaration on migration relations which ended the preferential treatment received by Cuban migrants by eliminating the “dry foot-we foot policy”.

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But while Cuban émigrés are part of the total Latino immigration that conservatives considered as harmful to the national social fabric as per Samuel Huntington (2004), their fundamental value to those social forces is the guarantee of opposition to the Cuban government that they provide. In addition, this group has always known how to attract a weak presidential candidate. Trump had been rejected by the traditional political elites of both parties in 2016, and so he was eager to prove them wrong and demonstrate his worthiness. Equally significant, he was willing to govern for a minority. There can be no doubt that his personality contributed as well: transactional, vengeful, delusions of grandeur, and valuing personal loyalty over either virtue or competence. All these traits made him more susceptible to the petitions of the Cuban-American far right.

This group came to become a natural ally of President Trump based on their broad common interests, including their similar class origin going beyond party affiliation. Both shared a sense of defeat, betrayal, and resentment toward the Obama administration whose actions they perceived as having been dangerous to their relevance as a class. Both shared a sense of the need to act urgently to counter this danger. Both promoted a bow to a supposedly glorious past that was associated with the regime of privileges that they enjoy. And both justified the use of violent and coercive methods to achieve their objectives, based on a similar (a)morality.

Due to the access and influence he leveraged during the Trump years, Senator Marco Rubio, a Republican from Florida and one of the leading voices of the Cuban-American far right in Congress, came to be considered the acting Secretary of State for Latin America. The degree to which this was true was indicated by Trump himself who tersely summed up his whole policy towards the region and towards Cuba in particular: “make Rubio happy”.

At the end of 2018, the pact that the Cuban-American far right had made with Trump, to obtain an additional 100,000 votes in South Florida in exchange for more leeway in Cuba policymaking, was an open secret in Washington. This would have been a very attractive pact to a president who had won Florida in 2016 by just 120,000 votes, after Obama had won the previous two election cycles in a row. In the 2018 gubernatorial election, which is considered a measure of the party’s performance at the state level, Republican candidate Ron DeSantis surpassed his Democratic opponent Andrew Gillum by only 32,000 votes. Possibly more significant, the pact occurred in the context of two important defeats for Republican Cuban Americans: Congressman Carlos Curbelo and candidate María Elvira Salazar. The latter lost the run for the symbolic seat left available upon retirement by hardliner Ileana Ros-Lehtinen.
Their defeats confirmed the trends since 2008 in Cuban Americans’ political behaviour. Before that, this ethnic group was pretty much a monolithic bloc in favour of the Republican Party. After all, the most important pressure group on Cuban issues until the late 1990s, the Cuban-American National Foundation (CANF), which had been created at the initiative of the Central Intelligence Agency in order to bring together politically and economically powerful conservative elements within the Cuban-American community, was affiliated with the Republican Party from its origins. The CANF served as a spearhead for aggressive policies, not only against Cuba, but also against other progressive forces in Latin America and Africa (Arboleya 2013: 178–192).

Sociologist Susan Eckstein (2009) has noted the well-defined class structure in Cuban emigration in correlation with the different migratory waves, which determined aspects of their processes of adaptation. Those who arrived during the 1960s, self-recognised as “exiles”, have greater political participation than those who arrived during the Mariel surge and onwards. Going back to the four expressions of power by G. William Domhoff in Who Rules America? (2006), this first group is who lobbies in the federal Congress to maintain the policy of hostility against Cuba, participates in the policy-planning process, and has a decisive influence on public opinion formation as well as on the selection process of political candidates, at the local, state, and federal levels.

After confirming the greater Black and Brown presence and the closer ties to their country of origin compared to previous waves, Antonio Aja concludes that the newer émigrés constitute an “element of social heterogeneity and class polarisation inside the Cuban community in the US” (Aja 2000: 21). Portes and Puhrman (2015) explain that their lesser social adaptation is not only because of their lower educational levels and occupational skills, but also because they received less support from the enclave (less co-ethnic solidarity). They also describe a structural trend to behave transnationally.

In the 2008 electoral cycle, these demographic changes began to translate into changes in political behaviour. They were expressed mainly in a desire to resume travel and remittances to the Island, in opposition to the restrictions imposed by George W. Bush – in accord with the counselling of Republican Cuban-American legislators such as Mario Díaz-Balart and Ileana Ros-Lehtinen. These behavioural changes deepened during the Obama administration. They were one important reason why subsequently the Democratic president went on to propose a policy that would reflect these variations, and at the same time would capitalise in terms of electoral dynamics in Miami and the state of Florida (González 2021).

In 2016 support among Cuban Americans in Miami for the reestablishment of diplomatic ties rose compared to 2008, from 65 per cent to 69 per cent (Grenier and Gladwin 2008, 2016). The rejection of the US blockade grew from
55 per cent to 63 per cent. Opposition was greatest among those between ages 19 and 59, 72 per cent, again reflecting the differences in attitudes by generation and year of arrival. Support for increased business relationships was 57 per cent, with 90 per cent among new arrivals.

The approach proposed by Obama produced electoral benefits. He obtained 35 per cent of the Cuban-American vote in 2008 – the highest ever achieved by a Democratic candidate since 1980 when this began to be measured – and 48 per cent in 2012 (Allen 2016). Joe Garcia’s 2012 victory over Republican David Rivera, a conservative Cuban-American, highlighted the possibility that a moderate candidate vis-a-vis Cuba policy could win a federal elected office in South Florida. In 2016, the Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton did better than Trump in districts with a strong Cuban presence such as Miami Dade, Westchester, and Hialeah. She did even better than Obama had done four years earlier (Sopo 2016). Researchers Darío Moreno and James Wyatt even raised the possibility of a “secular realignment” of the Cuban-American vote in favour of the Democrats, referring to the possible long-term impact of the voting patterns and political affiliation of this ethnic group, thus affecting the state and national electoral map (Moreno and Wyatt 2016).

It is against this backdrop that the Cuban-American far right’s aggressive advocacy of a hard-line Cuba policy must be understood. In line with Morgenthau’s understanding of the struggle for power as discussed above, the issues of human rights, the alleged influence of the Cuban military over the economy, Cuba’s ties with third countries such as Venezuela and Nicaragua, and the health symptoms reported by US diplomatic and consular personnel in Havana, constituted facades behind which the real struggle for power was hidden.

The expanded interactions at all levels between US and Cuban societies as promoted by the Obama policies tended to erode the power structure built by the “historical exiles” as the dominant group in the Cuban-American community. The anti-socialism objectified in the policy towards Cuba and the labelling of Democratic candidates as socialists were a convenient loan from Trumpism. But the essence of the behaviour of the Cuban-American far right is best explained by power relations.

The concept of transnationalism is not acceptable for these dominant groups, as it undermines the story that they have promoted for decades that all Cubans are “refugees”, and that they “flee a dictatorship” that must be overthrown. Along the same lines, cooperative government relations; family remittances, business relations, or even trips; and cultural exchanges and free travel of all Americans to Cuba are not acceptable to these groups. A cooperative government-to-government relationship, including in areas of national
security, dilutes the false perception that Cuba is a threat to the United States. Family remittances, that frequently operated as indirect investments, grew during the Obama years. These, together with new possibilities of limited interactions in certain areas of the Cuban economy, created an incipient community of interests, and new capital disassociated from traditional politics. Family trips that maintain memory, especially in the more recent émigrés, and cultural exchanges and free travel to the Island for all Americans, which would allow them to have an informed opinion on Cuba, are an effective antidote against the industry of hatred that hardliners have profited from. Perceiving the functioning of the Cuban society as stable and harmonious would make the myth of the failure of the Revolution collapse. It is ironic that while these groups publicly advocate breaking ties between Cubans on the Island and their government, they do not want Cuban Americans to break their ties with the governmental power structures that they enjoy in Miami and Washington.

The White House rhetoric has served as a cover for the imposition of a truth regime on Cuba, of the nature described by Michel Foucault. That regime’s fundamental target audience was the Cuban-American community. This explains why Miami was chosen as the venue to present the Memorandum with which Trump reversed Obama’s policy in June 2017 (Trump 2017), as well as the subsequent updates announced in 2018 and 2019 to make this policy still more aggressive. Both Trump and his National Security Adviser, John Bolton, revered the 2506 Assault Brigade, which led the Bay of Pigs invasion in April 1961 as part of a larger CIA-conceived plan to overthrow the Cuban Revolution.

Given the strong transnational tendencies among more recent Cuban émigrés discussed, the Cuban-American far right has campaigned to limit Cuban immigration to protect their power structure in Miami and the US. The goal is to reduce the potential critical mass of Cubans who could behave in said transnational manner. To illustrate this point, note that from 2009 to 2016 the US granted permanent legal residence to more than 340,000 Cubans (Department of Homeland Security 2017: Table 3). In particular, they supported the elimination of the “wet foot–dry foot” policy, which allowed Cubans arriving irregularly in US territory to avoid deportation and be eligible for the Cuban Adjustment Act. David Rivera tried to strip new émigrés of their green cards if they travelled to Cuba within a five-year period after receiving it. Cuban-American far-right representatives questioned the legality of these immigrants’ transnational behaviour and openly emphasised their intention to stop the interaction. They did not, however, advocate the elimination of the Cuban Adjustment Act. Their veiled purpose was to preserve it as both an ideological instrument against Cuba and as a tool of control over Miami Cubans’ political behaviour (González 2021).
Nor did this group use their clout over the White House to restore the Cuban Families Reunification Parole Program, suspended by Trump in 2017. Through this programme, created in 2007, the US Government used to issue more than 70 per cent of all travel documents granted to Cubans, as per its commitment under the US–Cuba migration accords to guarantee yearly legal migration from the Island for no less than 20,000 people. Senator Marco Rubio and Representative Mario Díaz-Balart did not support bill H.R. 4884 by then-Congresswoman Debbie Mucarsel-Powell, a Democrat from Florida, to restart the programme. With this action, the group prevented the legal entry of some 100,000 Cubans, who after five years would have been eligible to vote, and therefore, potentially be capable of impacting local, state, and federal politics.

Once the entry of new Cuban émigrés was limited, the Cuban-American far right took on the task of building a truth regime, in which two broad, interrelated features can be distinguished. The first is the demonisation of information sources from the Island, in order to consolidate the (mis)information architecture that they controlled. They led a campaign to discredit Cuban information sources, such as government digital websites, media, and opinion leaders (e.g. artists, broadcasters, television hosts and shows, other digital media), based in either Cuba or in Miami, who were favourable to the revolutionary process, to relations of respect between the two countries, or simply who disagreed with the narrative imposed by the truth regime. If Obama was interested in facilitating the flow of information “from, to, and within Cuba”, Trump and the Cuban-American far right were interested in generating a propaganda-style flow to the Island and its reproduction within Miami and the US.

In general, the digital space was turned into a battlefield of an information war waged against Cuba. The Trump administration built on the media architecture funded by the US Congress under Section 109 of the neocolonial Helms-Burton Act, which during the Obama administration had been used within a broader range of “soft power” tools. Examples of these new media platforms are Ciber Cuba, Cubanos por el Mundo, ADN Cuba, Diario de Cuba, and CubaNet, just to name a few, which were assigned new functions to rationalise and promote a hardline policy.

These were integrated into a larger network made up of “influencers”, users of social media like Facebook, YouTube, WhatsApp, and Twitter. These include, among many others, NGOs that bring together the political, economic, and social elites of the Cuban-American community, like Inspire America and CANF; traditional media aimed at Latino audiences in Florida under the influence of said elites (Diario de las Américas, Univisión, América TeVé); and recipients of US Congress-allocated funds to subvert Cuba’s domestic order. In practice, these
monies have functioned as the Florida Republican Party’s electoral campaign funds.

This truth regime fulfilled Foucault’s five elements almost literally (Foucault 2002). Cuba-related content was widely disseminated throughout the social body. These then constituted the core of political debates and ideological struggles. Elected officials (congressmen, the Miami mayor, commissioners) legitimised these instruments by giving them news scoops and interviews, and at the same time legitimised themselves to the Cuban-American community through them. And both governmental and “historical exile”-linked financing reaffirmed the truth regime’s political orientation.

The second feature of the truth regime is the attempt to reduce the generation gap in Cuban-American attitudes. Increasing their voting base among Cubans who arrived after 1980 is crucial for hardliners, since this cohort has the potential to alter the traditional power structure in Miami with the process of the gradual extinction of its original base due to natural causes. Hence, the Cuban-American far right uses young people of recent arrival as rationalisers for its truth regime for its policy of perpetual hostility.

Later, as Trump promoted the US cultural wars, the Cuban-American far right exploited every historical tension and contradiction within Cuban society. Their goal was to open as many wounds as possible, and not let the old ones heal. The possibility to radicalise and politically mobilise Cubans through emotions reduced Cuba’s long-time goal of social cohesion to a second-order factor.

The phrase “Make Cuba Great Again”, promoted in the 2020 electoral cycle, illustrates the fetishism of politics in the Cuban space, as it descends directly from “Make America Great Again”, a synthesis of Trumpism. Both seek to politically mobilise by invoking a past of supposed greatness. Most Cubans learn history in Cuba from a class perspective. The working class and sectors marginalised by the US-supported Batista regime are revalued, as well as their struggles for a new, sovereign, independent Cuba. The truth regime created in Miami fiercely revisits this history in a permanent campaign to destroy all symbols of the Revolution, and to erode the ethical, ideological, cultural, and social referents of new émigrés. Among the historical and social distortions of this truth regime are: the alleged betrayal by the Revolution and its historical leader, Fidel Castro, of their founding “democratic” ideals; the denial of the bloody nature of the regime of Batista and his associates; econometric and social data which they present to show Cuba was no less than a paradise before 1959 so there was no reason for revolution; the reconstruction of the resumes of well-known Cuban-American terrorists to portray them as heroic freedom fighters; and overemphasis on the contribution of endogenous factors to Cuban migration, masking the
importance of US responsibility. Their attacks on the popular understanding of important and often sensitive events in the history of Cuba’s Revolution are also a critical part of this campaign. Through their created truth regime the hardliners try to qualify: the clandestine struggle against Batista as terrorism; the departure of Che from Cuba and the death of Camilo Cienfuegos as ordered by Fidel Castro; the conviction of General Arnaldo Ochoa for international drug trafficking in 1989 as a frameup; Cuba’s participation in Africa’s liberation struggles as materially motivated; and the literacy campaign in 1961 as an indoctrination operation.

An important part of the Cuban-American far right’s truth regime is their use of a dichotomous discourse; ambiguous positions are not accepted. Against those who defy the power structure, a range of coercive measures are used to curb discussion and behaviour. In *Vigilar y castigar* (*Discipline and Punish*), Foucault approaches punishment as an instrument to correct deviations. A simple division of what is prohibited is not established, but rather a distribution between negative and positive poles, between gratification and sanction. Behaviours and qualities are qualified based on two opposing concepts of good and evil (2002: 167). This approach is useful due to the visibly hierarchical structure of the Cuban enclave in Miami.

Psychological, verbal, and physical denigration of, and threats against, Cuban Americans who advocate a respectful relationship with Cuba were common. These included threats of being stripped of their green card, disclosure of potentially harmful personal information, threats of being fired, sabotage of concerts and spaces for artistic expression (in the case of artists), public burning of Cuban passports, and much more.

One of the most notorious measures of this type was the suspension and firing of Miami Police Chief Art Acevedo in 2021 after he expressed his view, informed by his job, that the city was run by the “Cuban mafia”. According to Max Weber (1946), organised domination requires conditioning obedience to the masters who claim to be bearers of legitimate power, and it requires material control (institutions, personnel, and material means) for the use of violence. One of the most important of the institutions that participate in the organised domination of one social group over another is the police. Acevedo’s conduct was undoubtedly considered by the Cuban-American far right as a challenge to their power and prestige.

Another example is the controversy triggered by the presentation of the book *Cuban Privilege: The Making of Immigrant Inequality in America* by its author Boston University sociologist Susan E. Eckstein (2022) at Florida International University (FIU) in December 2022. The book’s central theme is the US preferential treatment toward Cuban immigrants since 1959. That theme should not
be at all controversial, Cuban privilege is a very broadly accepted fact. It has been addressed before by other authors, including from FIU, the University of Miami, Cuba, and third countries. It has been the subject of multiple congressional hearings, and has been contrasted with the treatment of Haitian and Central American immigrants. It has been recognised by leading voices on immigration in the US Congress since the 1980s, such as Alan Simpson, Ted Kennedy, Romano Mazzoli, Jose Serrano, and Charles Rangel, who tried to eliminate the Cuban Adjustment Act to make the US immigration system more homogenous and fairer. In fact, between 2015 and 2017 representatives of the far right such as Marco Rubio, Carlos Curbelo, and Ileana Ros-Lehtinen sought to modify this system of privileges, due to the increasingly transnational behaviour of Cuban migrants.

Nevertheless, Cuban-American far-right pressure led to a change of venue, disruption of the presentation, and personal offences to the author. For this group, said preferential treatment is a right, period. Its justification comes from the socialist character of the Cuban political system, without any further discussion about endogenous and exogenous causes of Cuban emigration based on facts and scientific evidence. To accept that Cuban immigrants have been treated exceptionally strictly by virtue of US policy would challenge the narrative that all Cubans emigrate for political reasons. This narrative in turn has served these groups to mobilise politically, to justify their social benefits and other perks, and to legitimise their oversized role in US–Cuba policymaking, and therefore to keep their power structure intact.

There are no moral limits on what actions can be carried out to show new émigrés that they must recognise and respect this structure. In exchange for accepting that they must live within it, they are allowed to live within it, and some power can be shared with those who commit to working to reproduce it.

Conclusion

The US social and power elites are going through a complex process of searching for alternatives in order to face the consequences of the neoliberal model implemented since the 1980s. The partisan, electoral, ethnic-identity, and cultural implications for that nation turn this process into a real struggle for power, with a high cost for the social cohesion of a society already divided and polarised.

Class affiliation between the Cuban-American far right and the Trump government allowed the former to have an unprecedented weight in US–Cuba policy making. This group managed to sell once again its oversized influence as functional to the Republican Party’s interests, locally and nationally.
Obama’s policy of rapprochement with Cuba threatened the Cuban-American far right’s power structure and their sources of legitimacy, historically built around opposing the Cuban Revolution. Hence, they sought to reverse course. Socio-demographic changes within the Cuban-American community after 1980 brought the potential to transform power relations in that community, based on the increasing transnational behaviour of the new émigrés.

Under what can be summed up as “Trumpism”, the US Government and the Cuban-American far right used similar methods to politically mobilise their bases and to divide the opposition. As an important part of this, they built what Michel Foucault called a “truth regime” aimed at perpetuating the ideology of exile and preserving the current power structure. Among the techniques used by Trump and the far right to influence their respective target audiences are: undermining public confidence in the perceived threatening power, developing a complex architecture of actors willing to reproduce the new “truth regime”, obfuscating the class gaps, disciplining those who dare to challenge the power structure, and encouraging those who legitimise and reproduce it.

There are strong reasons for this false “truth regime” to continue in the post-Trump era: its continued service for traditional US–Cuba policy, the class identification of elements in both parties with the Cuban-American far right, and the fact that the US Government significantly funds it. Thus, while the continuity of said regime will depend on US–Cuba policy, a particularly important determinant of that in the future will be the willingness and ability of the new émigrés to build a different truth regime and power structure that reflects their real interests.

References


