

Lies and Facts in the Media War Against Cuba

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The current media war against Cuba, which seems to be heading for yet another episode these days, is based on four fundamental lies:

- a) The prisoners in Cuba who are the object of controversy are in jail for their political views.
- b) Cuban prisoner Orlando Zapata Tamayo who recently died following a self-imposed hunger strike was in prison for political reasons.
- c) Tamayo died resulting from a lack of concern or even deliberate actions by Cuban medical prison and political authorities.
- d) The Damas de Blanco were physically harassed by citizens and then violently detained by Cuban authorities during their demonstration in Havana on March 18.

Much of the corporate-controlled mass media in North America and Europe and the European Union itself give themselves the right to lie about Cuba or other countries which do not fit into the northern paradigm of "acceptable states". Even worse, the monopoly media do not even feel that they have to answer to this most important accusation. Striving to tell the truth as opposed to deliberately spreading lies in the media is no minor issue and should therefore receive the maximum attention.

What follows is the partial transcript of the TV interview held on March 8, 2010 by Bill Maher on HBO with Hollywood actor and producer Sean Penn. This portion of the transcript deals with the topic of the lies being spread by media. The subject matter in this case, Hugo Chávez, applies to all other themes victimized by lies:

MAHER: His [Chávez] image in the media is just a buffoon. You have been there. You know him. You've talked to him. That's all I really know about Hugo Chávez, is what I read in the media. A dictator, took over a lot of the branches of government, wants to be president for life. What do you know that I don't know that I should not have such a harsh feeling about this guy?

PENN: I think that if you're happier with 20 percent of a population having the access to dreams, access to the feeling they have an identity and a voice. If it's okay with the 20 percent, versus the 80 percent he gave it to, then you can criticize Hugo Chávez. You know, there are a lot of complicated issues that comes simply out of perspective. We in the United States have a difficult time putting ourselves in the shoes of what has been the history of Venezuela, the history of Latin America, and many other places. We're very mono-cultural. And then we are hypnotized by the media. For example, Hugo Chávez. Who do you know here who's gone through fourteen of the most transparent elections on the globe, and has

been elected democratically, as Hugo Chávez?...The collaborative opportunity in Haiti [with Cuba and Venezuela], when you talk about Hugo Chávez, and some of the other people who are demonized....Because every day, this elected leader is called a dictator here, and we just accept it! And accept it. And this is mainstream media, who should - truly, there should be a bar by which one goes to prison for these kinds of lies.

MAHER: I got to move - to the panel.

PENN: Sorry,

MAHER: No, someday we will have you back on whether Chávez is a dictator or not."

Watching this TV program, it was obvious by the body language that Maher was quite disturbed by Penn's remark. Sometimes an image is worth a thousand words. In this case the words are just as important as the image. Maher changed the subject by saying that he has to move on to a panel participant. However, this was not true. Maher just changed the topic and made some jokes with Penn. Maher said that he will have Penn back on TV "on whether Chávez is a dictator or not." However, that was not the issue raised by Penn, who repudiated the accusation against Chávez by simply stating the facts according to the very criteria applied by the US ruling circles themselves, that is electoral victories. The issue was and is: how come there is no accountability in the monopoly media? Why is it that the latter can just repeat lies and get away with it while there are no measures to be brought to bear against those who carry out what is commonly known as yellow journalism? Media deliberately collaborating with government circles and telling lies is a very serious business which can even contribute towards wars of aggression. The peoples of the world have learned this bitter experience from the time of the Nazis to the Bush-led involvement in the Iraqi war.oavermH

In this context of the self-proclaimed de facto right to lie, let us examine the four points outlined above.

Firstly, the Cuban prisoners who are the object of attention were not tried and later convicted for holding political views contrary to the political system in Cuba. This country, like most countries in the north, has legislation which makes it illegal for individuals to collaborate with a foreign power against their own people. Let us take the US as an example. One illustration is the following: The Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) is an agency of the United States Department of Treasury and derives its authority from (amongst other sources) the Trading with the Enemy Act. Every year the US president signs a memorandum in favor of continuing for one additional year the Trading with the Enemy Act as it applies to the US blockade against Cuba. For example Obama did so on September 11, 2009. Not only technically but for all intents and purposes the US is waging an undeclared war against Cuba in order to change its political system. Now according to the U.S. Penal Code, under Chapter 115 entitled Treason, Sedition, and Subversion, Section 2381 stipulates that any US citizen that "adheres to their [U.S] enemies, giving them aid and comfort within the United States or elsewhere, is guilty of treason and shall suffer death, or shall be imprisoned not less than five years and fined under this title but not less than \$10,000; and shall be incapable of holding any office under the United States." In other words, a US citizen who collaborates with a country with which the US considers to be at war in order to assist this foreign power can be condemned to death.

Cuba, like so many other countries has similar legislation. In 2003, a few Cuban citizens

were tried, found guilty and jailed for working hand in glove with the US Interest Section in Havana which provided them with funds or materials in order to subvert the constitutional order on the island. These facts have been published and thus can be verified by anyone.

Secondly, Zapata was not at all tried and convicted for anything approaching political issues. The mass media just repeat what they want to be swallowed by public opinion. In fact Zapata since 1988 has been involved in all kinds of criminal activities, but nothing at all political. He has been arrested and convicted on several occasions for disturbing the peace, two counts of fraud, public exhibitionism, injury and possession of non-firearm weapons. In 2000 he fractured the skull of a Cuban citizen and while in jail he had shown a long history of violence against prison authorities. He was granted parole in March 2003, eleven days before the arrest and trials of the so-called political dissidents had been initiated. He committed another crime on March 20th 2003 and he was returned to prison. Even though this latest event in March 2003 coincided with the same month when the trials of the so-called dissidents took place, his return behind bars had nothing to do with it, but was rather a coincidence which was used by the “dissidents” and the US in order to present Zapata after the fact as a political prisoner. The very few times the mass media make even a vague reference to Cuba’s claim regarding Zapata’s real judicial record, it is invariably couched in terms that ridicule the credibility of the Cuban position, while not providing the public with the facts mentioned above, all of which are available in the Cuban press.

Thirdly, Tamayo did not die resulting from a lack of concern nor deliberate actions by Cuban medical, prison and other authorities. A special March 1 portion of the Cuban daily TV news explained the details leading up to his eventual death, a video which is still available on internet for those foreign journalists interested in the truth. In the video we can see and hear Cuban doctors, nutritionists and other specialists testifying as to how they had tried everything to save his life. It was explained with a great deal of scientific rigor how he was kept alive through intravenous serum and other techniques, but when an individual refuses to digest food the body’s organs begin to deteriorate in an irreversible process which invariably leads to the person’s death despite all the efforts to save his life. One psychologist even testified to how she tried to convince him to give up the hunger strike and rather to adopt other means in order to make his grievances felt. The video also shows his mother saying that her son had the best Cuban doctors at his bed side and she thanked them for their assistance. And a very important detail to take into account: The mother’s statements were recorded and filmed in the context of a spontaneous discussion, without her knowing about the filming; this eliminated any suspicion that what she was saying was carried out under pressure of the authorities. The fact that his mother later blamed the Cubans for his death is more of a testimony as to how Zapata and his mother are manipulated by those forces who have a political goal, rather consisting of a condemnation of the prisoner’s treatment.

Who to believe? Why not show the video and allow the public to reach its own conclusions rather than repeating the lie in best style of Goebbels? Watching the original TV news and later the video on internet on several occasions, the words, it is clear that the explanations and style of the Cuban specialists simply constitute an extension of one of the most outstanding feature of Cuban society and political culture. Any non-Cuban researcher or journalist who spends time on the island and is seriously interested in Cuba knows that Cuba is a profoundly humanitarian society in which the human being and life itself is placed on a pedestal. Humanity is untouchable, and its values are applicable to all human beings on the

island, irrespective of any other considerations. The comments and the sincerity exhibited by the Cuban specialists is part of everyday life in Cuba; for those of us who are familiar with it, the testimony seen on TV is perfectly normal and to be expected of Cuba — in all circumstances.

However, it is important that the corporate mass media keep this feature of Cuban society away from public opinion in order to manipulate the situation in their favour when the circumstances so require. While the entire planet was focused on Haiti after the January 12 earthquake, the US media who was on the spot twenty-four hours a day for a period of many weeks, still found a way to hide from the public that Cuban health workers and other specialists had been in Haiti working selflessly for eleven years; on January 12 they not only continued but increased their assistance. Sean Penn had the courage to mention it in the interview. However, it is difficult to imagine that despite the high technology state-of-the-art tools available to US journalists who spent all that time in Haiti that these reporters never came across a Cuban doctor or other health worker or bumped into any of the thousands upon thousands of Haitians who had been treated by the Cuban medical missions over the last eleven years and in the weeks following the quake. This black-out is very deliberate because when the occasion arises such as the current issue of the Zapata death and the events emerging out of this, it is deemed easier for public opinion to buy the lie that Cuban health officials and Cuban health system can be heartless. Of course there is no denying that the situation such as Zapata is not the same as examples given above regarding Haiti. However, when an entire society and a profession such as the medical one are based on humanity and the preservation of life of human beings, this principle applies to all cases. There is no distinction based on any consideration.

Cuba is a society which is trained for more than five decades in patience and education in order to strive to right wrongs of any sort, or solve problems. Whether it is at the level of the neighbourhood CDRs (Comités de Defensa de la Revolución), in the municipal assembly and people's council deliberations, in the governmental organs most directly and closely linked to citizens in the neighbourhoods and the centers of production and services, or accountability sessions between the elected and the electors, or the discussions and consultations in the parliamentary commissions, or its permanent working commissions, at the work places, all problems in society are dealt with on the basis of patience, understanding and education. This is a fundamental part of the very self-criticism carried out by the system itself. Whether the problem is solving day-to-day problems, or even the breach of law on a low level or a relatively serious manner such as felony involving individuals or small groups, it is very remarkable to directly witness the patience with which Cubans apply themselves, always using education as the main instrument to change behaviour which affects society. And so it was very plausible and normal to watch the Cuban video in which the health professionals testified as to how they tried everything to save Zapata's life. This is the way it is in Cuba.

It is not an accident that at one point the Bush Administration abruptly ended most educational visits by US citizens to Cuba; the youth and their professors in their overwhelming majority invariably saw through the mass media lies about Cuba and were able to appreciate at least this one point: Cuba is a peaceful society based on the value of human beings and that this value transcends every other consideration; it is applicable in all circumstances. Students came back to the US with a vision of Cuban society that is the very opposite as to what is spread by the mass media.

The fourth lie being circulated is regards to the Damas de Blanco, the claim being that they

were physically harassed by citizens and then violently aggressed by Cuban authorities during their March 18 demonstration in Havana. Who are the Damas de Blanco and what is their importance? Since 1960, the US government has been officially supporting the implantation of “opposition groups” in Cuba with close links to the US. More recently in the July 2006 US Document entitled Commission for Assistance to a Free Cuba, it is once again specifically stated that these groups need “well-funded programs designed to empower them” and points out the need to “build an international consensus in support of these groups” (page16). There are several groups and individuals who are mentioned in the US Report: one is the Damas de Blanco. An individual who also explicitly gets the stamp of approval close to four years ago is Guillermo Fariñas who according to the US document at the time was “engaged in a sustained hunger strike (page 19). Today as these lines are being written, he is once again on a hunger strike and is being manipulated in the same manner which Zapata was and is today.

The mass media includes YouTube videos and reports on the recent Damas de Blanco incidents. This YouTube is reflective of the biased reporting based on lies, consisting of a montage of some film footage, still photographs which may or may not have anything to do with that day’s events, verbal description of confrontation, all this being edited together to give the impression of violence. However, one can look at the original unedited full video that was shown world-wide on television while ignoring the audio portion which states on several occasions that violence was used by pro-Cuban supporters against the Damas and that the police violently took them into custody. The facts as seen in the video show that while the opponents of the Damas were extremely upset and shouting their support for the Revolution, at no time did they use violence. In the same manner, the female police officers who took the Damas into city buses and then to their home did not use violence against the Damas who were not arrested. Even though the Damas are officially recognized and promoted by the US as a bona fide “opposition group” and their ties to the US are evident for everyone to see, violence was not used against them. To claim the contrary is a lie, and the goal is obviously to repeat it with the hope that people will eventually accept it as a fact. It is the type of lie which Sean Penn objected to when applied to the mass media repeatedly describing Hugo Chávez as a dictator.

Those arrested, tried and imprisoned in March 2003 and their defenders such as the Damas de Blanco are not in conflict with the Cuban government or the people in the streets who invariably come out to oppose these tiny groups and defend the Revolution because of the “dissidents’” political views and political opinions. Their problem is that they are collaborating with a foreign power (the US) against their own people and country. In Cuba, more than ever before, there is wide-scale and profound discussion and debate going on in the media, families, neighbourhoods, mass organizations and different levels of people’s power. There are conflicting opinions which are openly debated on what measures to take in order to improve the socio-economic system in Cuba, for example to provide more strength and authority to the elected representatives as well as political officials in the state and government instances in order to deal with problems of corruption (which in no way can be compared, either in terms of the extent or the type of acts which have to be confronted in any capitalist country), production and distribution of food and materials necessary for the population. But these deliberations do not have as a goal to change the current socialist system for the capitalist system nor to convert Cuba once again into a satellite of the US, a situation which existed before the Revolution. The “opposition groups” have voluntarily disqualified themselves from this important debate which is not directed against the current system or the constitutionally-established order. On the contrary, these discussions are

even encouraged by the historical revolutionary leadership because of its sincere desire to get the people increasingly involved in perfecting their own system. Therefore the fact that the “opposition” or so-called “dissidents” are completely on the margins of mainstream Cuban society is not the fault of the Cuban system or an indication of one of its flaws which has to be corrected. The “opposition groups” have only themselves to blame for their own complete isolation. If it was not for the media campaigns and US funds and other means of support, any time spent on writing about the “dissidents” would be a complete waste of time because of their total irrelevance in day-to-day Cuban political life at all levels.

The so-called dissidents in Cuba, completely isolated, irrelevant and marginal in Cuba society and political life, are traitors to the nation just as their counter-parts in Miami. Traitors are like wild cards. They follow self-serving, opportunistic methods of thinking and acting. They can be on anyone’s payroll as this is how they earn their living. Traitors by their very nature can sell their souls. The peoples of Europe and the USA, who only have an interest in improving relations with Cuba, have to think as to whether Washington and Brussels and the corporate media in their service, have created a monster that is out of control. These “opposition” figures earn their living based on the sole and unique goal which consists of creating tensions between Cuba on the one hand and on the other hand Europe and the USA, conflicts which by their very nature inhibit normal state-to-state relations. President Obama for his part should use his intelligence to see through these intentions of the extreme right to sabotage his program to improve relations between the two countries. Given this situation, should not serious professional journalists, sincere and open-minded parliamentarians, political figures, trade union leaders and intellectuals be aware of the trap?

Why is Cuba the victim today of yet another media campaign and pressures from Washington and Brussels? There are several reasons. Perhaps one is the fact that the February 22-23, 2010 meeting of all states in the hemisphere except the USA and Canada agreed to establish a regional organisation to promote economic, political, and cultural integration. This is an historical event. It is no secret to anyone that Cuba led the charge way back in 1959 and persisted all this time in the most difficult conditions as a political and moral base for regional cooperation. The US and the old Europe never forgave Cuba for taking this first step over fifty years ago. They never accepted the Cuban refusal to follow the steps of capitulation to the west as happened in the former USSR and Eastern Europe. To defend Cuba today and its Revolution is to defend all of the Latin America and the Caribbean and its noble project of integration. The death of Zapata came at a most opportune moment, and its manipulation by the European Union and the mass media there and in North America serves most conveniently to try and upset the new tendency in the region by hitting at its initial and most prestigious inspiration: Cuba. In the same 2006 US document quoted above, the US at that time was worried about the Cuba-Venezuela “axis” in this way: “Together, these countries are advancing an alternative retrograde and anti-American agenda for the hemisphere’s future and they are finding some resonance...in the region....” (page 24). In this context the US spells out its program of organizing, sustaining and promoting its own opposition groups and individuals in Cuba.

But Cuba is not alone. On the contrary, despite all the attempts at isolation for more than fifty years, never before has Cuba been at the center stage of regional and world politics to the extent that it is now. The latest media campaign based on lies and distortions is only serving to raise the political consciousness of the peoples of the world about how the corporate mass media operate through lies and manipulation.

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