

CRUX

Cuban Americans cling to both U.S., Cuban identities

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Camosy: Can you start by sharing with us a little bit about your background, and your family's background, beyond the bio above? Can you say something in particular about why your family fled Cuba and what they found here in the U.S.?

Arriaga: In 1957, Fidel Castro was presumed dead, but a *New York Times* reporter, Hubert Matthews, resurrected him. In a front-page exclusive, Matthews reported he had snuck into Cuba, traveling to a remote rural enclave to interview Fidel, “the rebel leader of Cuba’s youth.” Arguably, this started the world’s love affair with one of the most sadistic rulers in modern history.

My mother, only 19-years-old at the time, was among the hundreds of thousands of Cubans cheering 32-year-old Fidel as he entered Havana on January 8, 1959. That night, Fidel delivered his first televised speech. (At the time, Havana had more television sets per household than any city in the U.S.) He spoke about equality and fairness, promising not a single drop of blood would be shed for the Cuban Revolution. As his hoarse voice reached a feverish pitch, a white dove descended to perch itself on his shoulder. The crowd went crazy with excitement, but Fidel did not acknowledge the dove, which lingered over an hour. Rich in symbolism, the dove has been the subject of much interpretation. Regardless, his regime perpetuated the incident as an anointment. That same week, *Time* featured Fidel on its cover.

After the speech, Castro acted swiftly and took the Cuban people, including my parents, by surprise. With a stable economy (the Cuban peso was equivalent to the dollar), free education, and a good livelihood in most cities, many Cubans never expected the Castro regime to last. However, within the first 30 days he executed 500 government officials who had worked for the regime which preceded him. He also arrested thousands of young men, women, and children, including my mother’s young aunt. Her crime? She was suspected of not supporting Fidel.

Also unjustly detained was my uncle and my father’s best friend and lawyer, Eddie Betancourt. My uncle was released shortly afterward, but Betancourt was tortured and would spend 17 years in prison in Cuba. One of his cellmates, Armando Valladares, a poet, was arrested when he was 23 years old for refusing to put a placard on his desk that said: “I am with Fidel.” Upon his release, 22 years later, Valladares chronicled the horrors of prison life in Castro’s Gulags in his bestselling memoir, *Against All Hope*.

My parents, who were only engaged at the time, each fled separately. First, my mother left. Soon after, she learned her name was included in a list of people who were to be detained. My father, the youngest in his family, waited for his siblings, their spouses, and parents to leave before he drove to the airport and left Cuba with the clothes he was wearing and nothing more.

My family felt fortunate to arrive safely in the States. As more Cubans tried to flee, the Fidel regime tightened its control of the departures. Desperate families began sending their children alone to the States. To assist the unaccompanied minors, Monsignor Bryan O. Walsh of the Miami Catholic Welfare Bureau created a secret program called Operation Peter Pan, through which 14,000 Cuban children were welcomed to the U.S. (In his beautiful memoir, Waiting for Snow in Havana, Carlos Eire, now a professor for Yale, tells the heartbreaking tale of his Operation Peter Pan experience.) Many of those children never saw their families again.

My parents soon got married in Miami. When my father's plan to learn to speak English by watching I Love Lucy failed, he moved us to Puerto Rico, where my aunt and her family had settled. There, he embarked on the long, difficult journey to make a life for all of us. Spoiler alert: he succeeded. Although he battled depression, poverty, and unemployment, he eventually became a successful entrepreneur and put all three of his kids through Catholic school and college. We lived the American dream.

You recently had a piece in the USA Today arguing that we are facing a “cancel culture” here in the U.S. that reminds you of the cancel culture your family fled. What prompted you to write such a piece?

I wrote the piece hoping to instigate a bit of a wake-up call. I never realized I would hit a nerve. Within hours, the piece had over 100,000 impressions on Twitter. I received emails, texts, and social media messages from all over the world. Also surprising, all of the messages were in support of the piece. Then, Twitter tagged the piece as having “sensitive content.” Ironic, I may have been canceled because I wrote a piece raising concerns about cancel culture.

Fidel did not call it “cancel culture,” but that is what his regime did to anyone who dared disagree with him or even make a joke about him. Therefore, my family has never forgotten our good fortune or the debt of gratitude we owe to this country, which granted us asylum. Our freedom is our greatest possession—one that we will not give up easily.

In fact, when my two siblings and I were growing up in Puerto Rico, any complaint of scarcity was met by my parents with: “We are rich, we live in freedom.” In truth, for many years, we were poor. My father, at 32-years-old, was a lawyer with a thriving commercial business in Cuba. In Puerto Rico, he had to work seven days a week to make ends meet. Among his many jobs were a door-to-door vacuum cleaner salesman, a chemical products representative, and realtor. While we were young, my mother was a stay-at-home mom who sewed her clothes and ours.

However, throughout, my parents comported themselves as rich people temporarily without money. With that mindset, my family valued education, hard work, and our freedom, above all. Money and possessions could come and go, but, in this great country, no one could take away what was in our hearts or minds.

Relatedly, we never took our freedom for granted. We knew that freedom could be lost suddenly, but freedom can also be lost in small, barely perceptible increments that are hardly noticeable until it is too late. In short, we were taught to be vigilant.

This is why I have devoted my professional life to defending our freedom of speech and our freedom of religion or belief. This is one of the reasons I was so passionate, in 2016, about defending the rights of a Catholic order of nuns who serve the dying, elderly, poor from

having to comply with the Affordable Care Act, and pay for contraceptives and abortifacients. While our government was threatening the Sisters with thousands of dollars in fines, it exempted the world's largest employer, the U.S. military, and big oil companies like Exxon. Advocating for the sisters was not about politics (many of the Sisters are in favor of universal healthcare), or about the Sisters' unpopular views on contraception. Protecting the sisters was about protecting the right of every single American, from atheist to Zoroastrian, to live according to their peaceful, deeply held religious convictions *even if the beliefs do not conform to societal popularity*. I also fought against the state of Arkansas forcing a Muslim inmate to shave his beard, and for the rights of Native Americans to use the feathers of non-extinct birds in their traditional ceremonies.

However, unjust laws can be fought in court, but culture cannot. It is shortsighted to think that laws alone will protect us. We only have a strong First Amendment because we have a strong culture of free speech. Until recently.

It is worrisome that American universities, once a place where a robust exchange of ideas was fostered, teachers and students alike are now walking on eggshells. Even though I have three grown-up kids and have heard them speak about their teachers, I was genuinely shocked when I read *The Coddling of the American Mind*. First Amendment expert Greg Lukianoff and social psychologist Jonathan Haidt chronicle the suppression of free speech and discourse on campuses. (If there is one book every American should read in 2021, it should be this one.)

Exposures to different ideas strengthen us, educate us, invite us to be better humans. Think of the many ideas which were unpopular in their time which we have come to value as vital to our culture and laws, such as conscientious objection, pacifism, the abolitionist movement, women's suffrage, workers' rights, and civil rights. Imagine if these once-unpopular ideas were being discussed in today's campuses— professors and students might be “triggered.”

Regrettably, in some educational institutions ideas that are different from the prevailing culture are being treated like secondhand smoke and handled as if the ideas themselves are inherently dangerous. Admittedly, some ideas can yield dangerous outcomes, but the only way to eliminate them is to expose them to public discourse. What will become of the next generation if they have to live solely in their own indoctrinated minds without exposure to others' ideas?

My life was enriched because I grew up in a culture and a household where we freely discussed both politics and religion. My family members have very different political views, and arguments were sometimes passionate and heated, but no one ever thought of telling another they were canceled. At the end of most discussions, we just had dinner together. I want that same kind of life for my children and their children.

We need to figure out how to recapture and strengthen our culture of free expression.

Obviously, we just had a major election in the U.S. with the strongest turnout since 1900 — in the middle of a pandemic! Catholics were divided almost right down the middle, and the Cuban community in the US was apparently also very much divided. Many talking heads in the press and folks on social media have opined about this, but from your unique vantage point, can you give us a sense of how to interpret the Cuban vote for president in 2020?

Let me start with a humble disclaimer: I am not a political scientist, nor am I a sociologist. I am just a Cuban American, who has been in Washington, D.C. for over 30 years.

I think that the Cuban vote may have been driven by many different factors.

On one hand, many Cuban Americans had a visceral reaction to some of the Democrats' statements while campaigning, which they associated with a Biden/Harris election. For instance, when Bernie Sanders defended his pro-Fidel statements, Fabiola Santiago, a registered Democrat, and a reporter for the Miami Herald, wrote: "This girl's real-life experience is the antidote to your cheap, propagandist talking points on Cuba's education system and Fidel Castro." On the other hand, some Cuban Americans, also like Santiago, were concerned about Trump becoming a caudillo like Fidel.

The reality is, neither Democrats or Republicans completely won over Cuban voters, and both parties have a lot of work to do in order to reach the Cuban population in 2022 and beyond.

Many of these same talking heads and Twitteratti have tried to dismiss Trump's surprising gains among Latinos or Hispanics as coming solely or mostly from Cubans. What's your reaction to such claims?

First, over the summer, CATO Institute published a poll stating 62 percent of Americans say that they have political views they are afraid to share for fear of offending others. I would venture to say this number of Americans also includes Latino families who do not want to be taunted by co-workers or other families in their neighborhood because they voted for Trump.

Second, I do not think it was only a large group of Cuban Americans who voted for Trump. Since the election, there have been many thoughtful pieces written about what appealed to Latinos. In his piece for *The Atlantic*, Professor Geraldo Cadava writes, and I agree, "Trump understood what motivated his Latino supporters — economic individualism, religious liberty, and law and order — and he made sure they knew he did."

Third, Latinos are the fastest-growing group of business owners. It is natural that many of them would be attracted to a candidate who will not raise taxes for businesses, favors deregulation, and is bringing more jobs to American soil.

One of the wonderful things that may come from taking a hard look at this topic may be that perhaps once and for all, we will stop lumping a very, very diverse group of people all together into single categories like "Hispanic," "Latino," or — in my academic world, mostly — "Latinx." Do you have any suggestions or strategies to offer us in doing this?

Just last September, Pew published an interesting poll on Hispanic versus Latino identities. In short, self-identification varies greatly, for many reasons, among generations.

For instance, after my piece in *USA Today* came out, Elsie Yara, a childhood friend I had not spoken in many years, reached out to me. She was born and raised in Puerto Rico, the daughter of a Cuban family. She said she never self-identified as a Puerto Rican; she always thought of herself as Cuban.

She reminded me of the Cuban poet, Gustavo Perez Firmat, who has a beautiful and haunting way of explaining the self-identity among Cuban exiles. He says:

Refugees are amputees. Someone who goes into exile abandons not just possessions but a part of himself....I feel the loss of that Cuban boy inside me. He's my phantom limb, at times dogging me like a guilty thought, at other times accompanying me like a guardian angel.

Some Cubans of my generation bristle at being called people of color or Latino. Some don't.

For me, one way of thinking about my Cuban American identity is how one of the most famous (and raunchiest) stand-up Cuban comedians of my generation, Guillermo Alvarez Guedes, used to put it. He joked, in colorful language, that Cubans resist the melting pot.

Many of us Cubans live in the hyphen and move comfortably between being Cuban and being American. We do not find it illogical to say that we are proud to be 100 percent American and 100 percent Cuban.

In short, there are numerous perspectives on this, but the world is in need of a robust exchange of ideas about this and every important subject matter, and I would protect and defend anyone's right to their perspective and opinion.