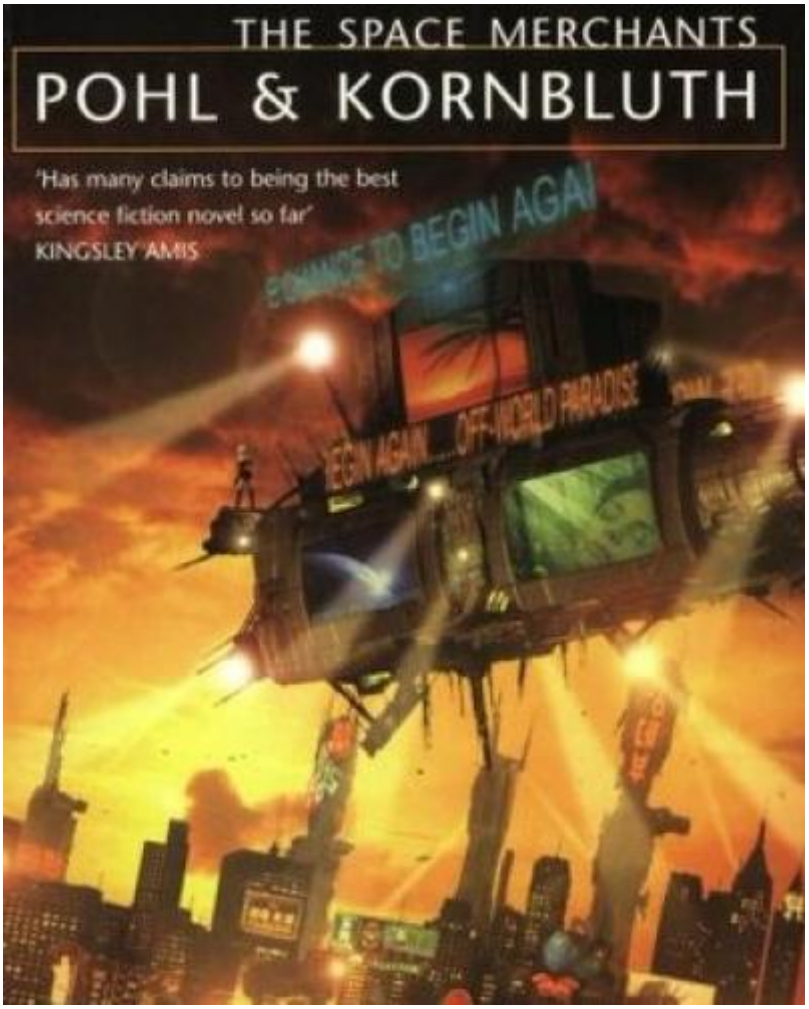
This week in Cuba February 16 to February 22, 2020



This week in Cuba

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By Charles McKelvey

In today's "This week in Cuba," we review, first, a dialogue in Havana on digital colonialism; secondly, an article by a Cuban journalist on technophobia; thirdly, the take of a Cuban journalist on John F. Kennedy and the 1996 Helms-Burton Law; and fourthly, an editorial on Cuban television concerning the presidential candidacy of Bernie Sanders.

(1) Digital colonialism and the need for technological decolonization

The Association Hermanos Saíz sponsored on February 19 a dialogue entitled "Colonialism 2.0 and the challenges of the Left, what to do?" Rosa M. Elizalde, First Vice-President of the Cuban Union of Journalists and Writers, made a presentation on digital colonialism, a new form of colonialism that has emerged in the last forty years. Whereas political and economic colonialism is visible, digital colonialism in an invisible colonialism, pertaining to the realm of culture and ideology, which seeks to convince you that impotence is your nature, that you cannot act to change political, economic, and social structures in accordance with proclaimed values.

The technology of digital colonialism has been constructed during the last forty years. Initially created as a network of rapid communication within the U.S. government, and then enlarged to facilitate communication among academic institutions, it rapidly expanded in the 1990s as a result of the policy of the Clinton administration to universalize the Internet as an infrastructure of capitalism, an infrastructure that increasingly invaded daily life, an infrastructure for marketing and for transforming citizens into consumers.

The technology of digital colonialism has invaded the countries of Latin America. Latin America is entirely dependent on the United States with respect to digital technology, inasmuch as Internet traffic passes

through platforms in the United States.

Elizalde observed that in the late 1990s, Fidel began to speak of the need to confront this new technological colonialism and the hegemonic capitalist values that it disseminates. We have to develop a knowledge and technology that is decolonized. For the Spanish intellectual Ignacio Ramonet, one of the panelists, we have to develop the technology of the great powers to defend ourselves, to develop the digital technology that is the base for the dissemination of our own values and that is necessary for technological decolonization.

(2) Technophobia and socialist principles

An article by Ernesto Estévez Rams, “Los mercaderes” (The Merchants), appeared in the February 20 edition of the Cuban daily newspaper Granma. It begins with commentary on the 1953 science fiction novel, The Space Merchants, by Frederick Pohl and Cyril M. Kornbluth. The Space Merchants did not become an icon, like a similar novel published four years earlier, 1984 by George Orwell, for ideological reasons. Orwell had written a literary spear against socialism, describing a dark world of abrasive and alienating social control, reinforcing Cold War totalitarian depictions of the Soviet Union. In contrast, The Space Merchants draws a portrait of a dystopic, alienating, and oppressive world, but a world clearly capitalist.

In the world of The Space Merchants, the society is dominated by great transnational corporations, which in turn are dominated by advertising companies. Governments are caricatures, nearly dispensable. The corporations have private armies to settle their business disputes, while the police have the function of maintaining order among the consumers, who themselves are psychologically and physiologically manipulated by advertising techniques. Societal memory has been erased, substituted by a consumerist culture of the masses, the only culture that prevails, created by advertising. The world is an ecological disaster. Estévez asks, does this sound alarmingly familiar?

The article turns to another work of art, the 1982 film Blade Runner, considered a classic of science fiction, which also describes a fictitious world that is alarmingly familiar. In the world of the Blade Runner, the earth has become an ecological disaster; human beings have conquered other planets, from which resources are extracted, utilizing genetically modified beings that have been sent to the colonies to work as slaves. The slaves sometimes acquire consciousness and rebel against the role to which they have been assigned, returning to the earth, where they are viewed as enemies to be hunted down as animals. To justify the assassination of the immigrants, they are portrayed as beings lacking in empathy, threats to the earthly order.

Beyond the world of science fiction, Estévez notes tendencies in the same direction with respect to technological developments. Patents have been approved in the last twenty years for inventions that are capable of detecting emotions and manipulating the nervous impulses of the brain; and for robots with pseudo-emotions.

Estében notes that these artistic and technical developments have given rise to a technophobic reaction. He writes, “There are those who see in the present world a technoscientific dictatorship over the cultural, humanistic, literary, and artistic aspects of life, and therefore, we ought to rebel against the technoscientific.” There thus emerge cultural wars between false dilemmas, presented as a choice between the technological development of transgenic plants and a moratorium on its development, or between the technological capacity of cloning genetic coding and its prohibition. He writes that in such cases “the dilemma is presented as a battle between an attained scientific capacity and a cultural insufficiency for its responsible use by the society.”

When we present the dilemma in this way, Estében maintains, we do not grasp what Marx would say: “We do not live in the dictatorship of science, but in the dictatorship of capital.” Estében writes, “The unbraked ambition for profit conditions the rest of our social impulses. The solution does not lie in

stopping science, which is impossible, but in changing the social order of the planet."

In accordance with this view, Cuba seeks to develop a socialist society, a society that is not ruled by capital or the market, but by values and principles. In Cuba, the people experience the possibility of influencing the productive process in accordance with historically and socially proclaimed principles and values.

(3) JFK and Helms-Burton

An article on the 1996 Helms-Burton Law, by Elier Ramírez, appeared in the February 18 issue of the Granma. It begins with an extensive quotation of the young Democratic Senator John F. Kennedy during the presidential campaign of 1960. Kennedy declared that the United States prior to 1959 used its influence over the Cuban government to benefit its interests and to increase profits for U.S. companies, while the Cuban people endured hunger wages and high levels of unemployment. United States companies, he noted, were the principal owners of the sugar lands, cattle ranches, mines, and petroleum industry; and two/thirds of the imported goods in Cuba were supplied by the United States. He criticized the Eisenhower Administration for praising Batista as a reliable ally and good friend, whom Kennedy described as "one of the bloodiest and most repressive dictators in the long history of Latin American repression," who "murdered thousands of citizens, destroyed the last vestiges of freedom, and robbed hundreds of millions of dollars from the Cuban people."

Yet that same Kennedy, Ramírez reports, compelled to adapt to the logic of the system, authorized as president the Bay of Pigs invasion, a series of interventionist and terrorist activities known as Operation Mongoose, and emitted the first executive order that initiated the blockade of Cuba. Nonetheless, Ramírez observes, Kennedy was secretly exploring rapprochement with Cuba at the time of his assassination. Other sources confirm a peace initiative by Kennedy during 1963 with respect to Vietnam, the Soviet Union, and Cuba, to some extent carried out secretly, because most members of the government were opposed to it.

Ramírez reviews the four sections of the Helms-Burton Law of 1996. Title I codifies the blockade, converting all the previous regulations, measures, and executive orders into Law. Title II authorizes the ending of economic sanctions when a government of transition in Cuba compensates for or returns properties confiscated by the Cuban government after January 1, 1959.

Title III of the Helms-Burton Act of 1996 allows any U.S. citizen or entity, whose property was expropriated by the government of Cuba, to present civil demands in U.S. courts against companies of any nation that are engaging in commercial activities related to the expropriated property. Prior to Trump, Title III had not been implemented, as all presidents from Clinton to Obama exercised their authority to suspend implementation of Title III for reasons of national security. The implementation of Title III is one of the ways that the Trump administration has intensified the blockade.

Ramírez declared that Helms-Burton is not only illegal and illegitimate, but also not viable politically, because of the force of resistance of the Cuban people.

(4) Bernie Sanders and democratic socialism

In an editorial on Cuban Television on February 20, Jorge Legañoa commented on Presidential candidate Bernie Sanders. Noting that Sanders has described himself as a socialist, Legañoa observed that Sanders does not use the word in the Cuban sense, but more in the sense of democratic socialism or social democracy. However, he observed, Sanders does represent an effort to return to the social democracy of the period 1932 to 1979 in the United States, and therefore his candidacy is significant. He referred to Sanders' position on various issues, such as affordable health care and education, elimination of student debts, and action on climate change.

Indeed, the Sanders campaign Website puts forth the Sanders position on a number of domestic issue that are in the tradition of democratic socialism, including: Free comprehensive health care coverage through a national health insurance plan; U.S. leadership in the global fight against climate change; tuition-free public colleges and universities; cancellation of student debt; increasing union membership; affordable housing; increased taxes on the wealthy; and replacement of corporate funding of election campaigns with public and small-donor funding.

With respect to foreign policy, the democratic socialism of the Sanders campaign has a definite “Made in the USA” stamp. The Website declares that “The U.S. must lead the world in improving international cooperation in the fight against . . . militarism, authoritarianism, and global inequality,” and accordingly, the United States should “implement a foreign policy which focuses on democracy, human rights, diplomacy, and peace, and economic fairness.” These declarations are full of ambiguity. For decades, the United States has politicized the issues of democracy and human rights, using its own superficial definitions and its inclination to distortion in the fabrication of pretexts for interventions in the affairs of nations; one does not find on the Website any denunciation of this long-standing foreign policy practice. At the same time, by “economic fairness,” the campaign possibly means seeking to develop mutually beneficial trade with nations, rupturing neocolonial relations in accordance with the long-standing demand of governments of the Third World. But this is not necessary so.

The Sanders campaign calls for stopping the endless wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria; but it offers no plan for the Middle East, no alternative perspective for defending U.S. interests in the Middle East in a form that respects the sovereignty of the nations in the region. At the same time, the campaign makes no mention of Latin America and the Caribbean. In has no comment with respect to the unconventional war that the United States is waging against Cuba, Venezuela, Nicaragua, and Bolivia.

This is Charles McKelvey. We will be back next Sunday with “This week in Cuba,” reviewing the news emerging during the week from revolutionary Cuba.

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