

## COMMENTS ON

### “Are Cuba’s Educational Statistics Reliable?” by Aguirre and Vichot

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I like this paper very much and for many reasons, too many to discuss in the time available in this forum. I wish therefore to limit my focus to two of these reasons. First, the paper furnishes the kind of analysis that reduces the opportunities for others with less than scholarly motives to issue wild claims about socioeconomic currents in Cuba. Second, its comparative approach gives us a reasonable standard by which to judge education in that country. In the brief time available, let me quickly go over these points, beginning with how this paper reduces the prospect for egregiously erroneous claims about life and conditions in Cuba.

We all know that it is easy to justify a political argument when data are lacking. Life must go on and policy must be formulated to guide social and economic behavior whether or not pertinent information exists. People must be governed, and in the absence of objective information, policy makers have only their subjective judgment—or coercive powers—with which to justify their actions. Hence, when information is absent, policy makers are prone to resort to some mix of public emotional appeal and naked physical compulsion to gain their objectives.

In countries with very low levels of education and with concomitantly low levels of political sophistication, or where societies have experienced collective trauma due to war, revolution, economic depression, or such, the public will more likely be responsive to emotional appeals bereft of objective substance, and political leaders may find the absence of data conve-

nient in garnering public support. As aggregate educational levels rise, however, purely emotional appeals carry incrementally less influence. When that happens, political leaders are likely to feel compelled to use data—even if manufactured—as a base for their claims. Moreover, those who furnish leaders with such data and those who sympathize with the leaders’ political objectives may be more interested in effecting that political agenda than getting the facts straight.

The main point here is that leaders and the researchers who supply them with manufactured data can act with substantial impunity when those data remain inaccessible and unexplored. Aguirre and Vichot discuss the use that Samuel Bowles makes of Cuban Central Board of Planning statistics that show an impossibly low students-per-teacher ratio at the tertiary educational level for 1968-69, but many other examples can be given. Jonathan Kozol, the popular education writer who inspired a strong reformist movement with his book *Death at an Early Age* plays fast and loose with information on Cuban education another book, *Children of the Revolution*. Kozol’s book on Cuba is, in fact, a good example of what reporters can get away with when scholars like Aguirre and Vichot are not around to set the parameters of objective information. Let’s take a look at what Kozol did.

*Children of the Revolution* is about Kozol’s visits to Cuba in 1976 for 6 weeks and in 1977 “for even fewer weeks.” His first visit was absorbed in recording memories of a few individuals who led or otherwise

took part in the “Great Campaign” of 1961—the “battle” to eliminate illiteracy—and in touring some schools. The intent of his second visit was “to go to the children, to go into their dorms, into their classroom and . . . into their trust and confidence as well,” and to do so unaccompanied by “the experts.” Kozol made his visits with little knowledge of Spanish and in the constant company of a government-furnished translator.

Kozol's praise of Cuba's schools is effusive. But even if we grant his claim that the achievements of Cuban education are extraordinary, his report is seriously flawed. It is not simply that he was never without a government functionary to act as his translator—who, if she did not actively distort communication with informants, plausibly had the effect of stifling candor. It is also that his methods incorporated virtually no provision for controlling bias. Much of what he learned about the Great Campaign came from highly placed education officials: his other sources were individuals who were evidently beneficiaries of the program and apparently selected for interview by the government. The schools that Kozol visited during his first tour were chosen “at random”—by the minister of education, no less, in whose company the visit was conducted. Despite the claim of randomness, Kozol makes quite clear that these schools were not ordinary, but “splendid” and “modernistic” models of their kind.

Although the main purpose of his second tour was to observe secondary schools on his own, unimpeded by officials, he failed to conduct his inquiry in a way that would yield an objective picture. Kozol stresses that the schools visited during this tour were those of his own choice. But the sole criterion he used for selection of the school in which he collected his most useful information was his “sentimental fascination” with its name—Che Guevara. Besides the obvious importance the government would attach to a school carrying the name of its most illustrious fallen hero, Kozol describes the school as having been “intended to be the first of all the schools *en campo*—a model for the rest.” Later we learn that the students are special, having been admitted by examination and evaluated for appropriate “character”. As if it were not

enough that the schools Kozol chose to visit could not conceivably be viewed as representative, the students he interviewed were unrepresentative of the children even in those schools. When Kozol wished to converse directly with students, with minimal reliance on his translator (although she remained to assist on “complex” thoughts), he resorted to interviewing students competent in English, who were plausibly (we are not told for certain) chosen by the teacher or principal and quite likely paragons of committed learners and dedicated young socialists.

In the light of Aguirre and Vichot's work, Kozol's book could impress only the most gullible of readers. Clearly, if Kozol's account of Cuba is accurate, we can now see that the result is wholly fortuitous. Indeed, Kozol's clumsy approach casts a shadow of suspicion on what might in fact be real accomplishments. To readers with a knowledge of the nature of Cuban data, *Children of the Revolution* will be seen as fatuous, as orchestrated to a predictable conclusion. Kozol used no sources of information—including documentation—critical of the revolution for balance. When he describes the activities of Cuban revolutionaries, it is entirely in altruistic terms, despite evidence that suggests the ample presence of self-interested motivation. Most important, Kozol fails to consider some potentially profound implications, especially the Orwellian consequences of isolating children from their parents for long periods of time, socially as well as physically, by placing them in country boarding schools and subjecting them to intense politicization. When Kozol lauds the intensity of the children's revolutionary commitment, he fails to acknowledge another picture that he paints—the formation of young minds bereft of spontaneity, a sense of critical judgment, and natural childhood frivolity. Indeed, the submission of will and blind allegiance to Castro displayed by many of these children smacks of cultism.

The kind of analysis done by Aguirre and Vichot is the antidote to Kozol and those like him. It is Aguirre and Vichot's use of comparison that yields a standard by which we can make judgments about data generated by Kozol and others. The authors construct that standard by showing where Cuba fits edu-

cationally in the framework of international tendencies. International comparison is an ingenious device to reveal whether Cuban data are “reasonable.”

I have nothing but good words to say about this work. Yet there is more that the authors can do using a comparative approach. Comparison, especially when done historically, can plausibly yield important insights in judging Cuban educational accomplishments overall. To make that judgment requires going back to the condition of Cuba just before the revolution. What can comparisons with prerevolutionary data tell us about current conditions? In 1955 the proportion of primary-school-aged children enrolled in school was 51 percent, only 6 percent higher than a half-century earlier when American military forces governed the island, and lower than that claimed by all but three Latin American countries and well under the 64 percent average for Latin America as a

whole. In little more than a decade Castro’s government managed to enroll almost 100 percent of 8-year-old children and over 90 percent of all children of primary-school age. And what about efficiency of investments? Aguirre and Vichot discuss bureaucratic disabilities of the current government, but they don’t do enough to put those disabilities in their proper context. For example, how do current deficiencies compare to the prerevolutionary period, when Cuba spent nearly one-fifth of the total state expenditure on public education—placing Cuba among the Latin American countries making the largest investment of its resources in schools—but ranked close to last in the proportion of school-age children being educated? In short, Aguirre and Vichot have started us down the right road to having an accurate grasp of Cuban education, but there is much more that needs to be done.