

CUBA

A New 'Cold War'?

by Mónica González



Photo by Mónica González.

“Vintage” refrigerators are loaded onto a truck.

Most families living in Plaza, a neighborhood flanking the epic Plaza de la Revolución in Havana, will remember August 25, 2007, as the day they had to say good-bye to their cherished General Motors, Westinghouse and Minsk refrigerators which arrived on the island from the U.S. in the 1950s and from the U.S.S.R. in the 1970s.

A megaphone woke me, and I went quickly to the door. The entire neighborhood — children, adults and grandparents — was congregated around an old man shouting: “¡Compañeros! ¡Compañeros! We require that all men in the quarter cooperate with the new mission of our Energy Revolution! In a few minutes trucks will be picking up your old refrigerators so you can get new equipment! Social workers will explain how this equipment works and the cost of each piece! Men: please help your neighbors load the old refrigerators on the trucks! Women: please

take care of the children so we can avoid any unnecessary accidents!”

“Who is he?” I asked a woman nearby.

“A delegate of the Communist Party in our district,” she responded.

From that moment on, not a single door closed until late in the evening when the task was done. And everyone was keenly aware of how their friends and acquaintances were responding to the arrival of the new — “Oh, so small!” — Chinese refrigerators. That August Saturday was the end of an era: the spectral presence of the two dominant empires of the 20th century, the U.S. and the U.S.S.R., was pulled out of Havana homes as *chatarra*.

The Energy Revolution

As I watched men of all ages lift the heavy and rusting refrigerators, I was reminded of my previous trip to Cuba in

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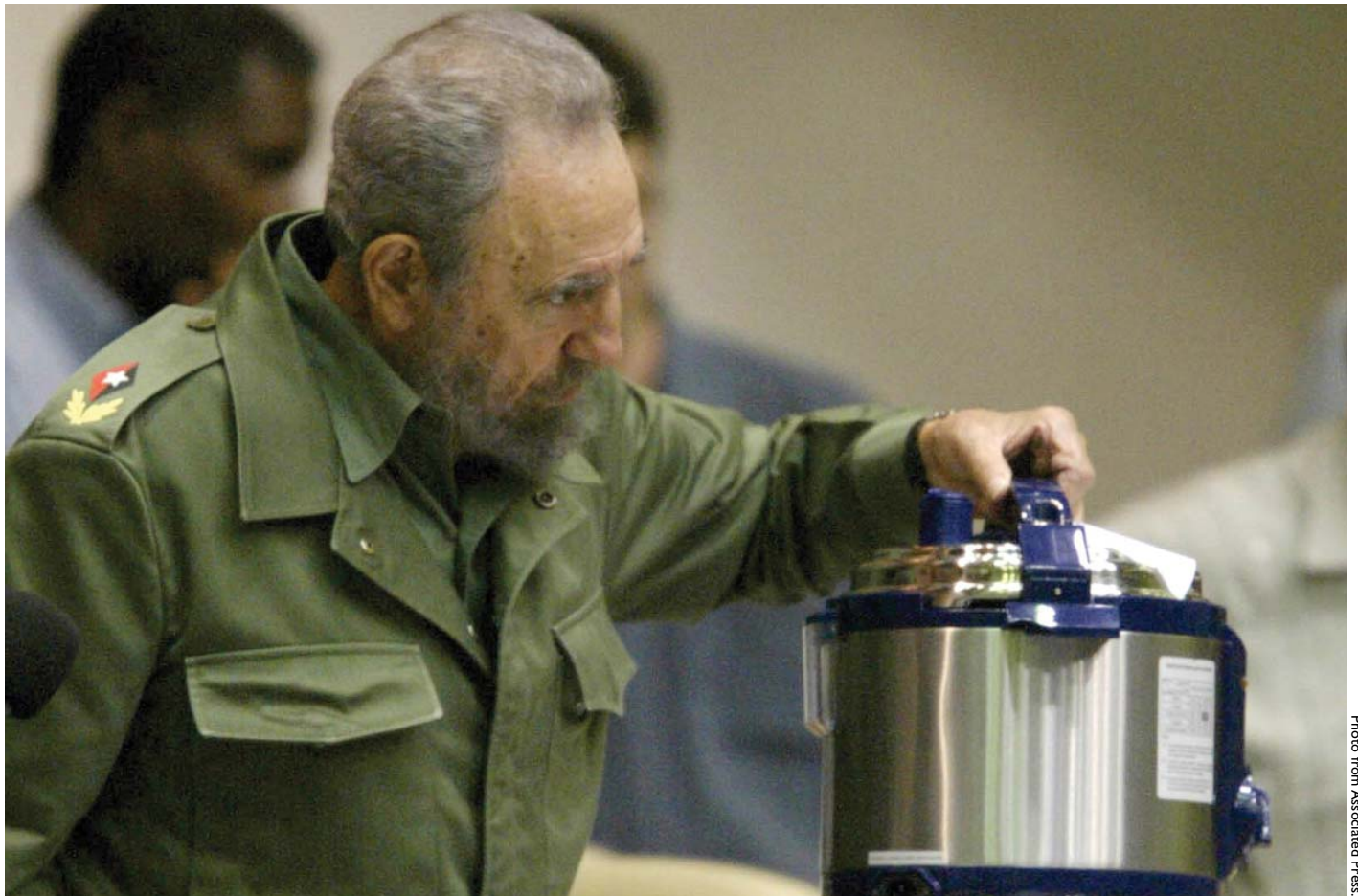


Photo from Associated Press.

Fidel Castro examines a Chinese pressure cooker.

2005. That summer the neighborhood ran out of electricity several times: the country's aged and failing power stations were no longer capable of supplying the whole island with energy. And the ancient electrical devices used by most Cuban families, with their high energy consumption, worsened the problem. The crisis convinced government officials that it would be cheaper, to the tune of \$1 billion a year, to subsidize new appliances than to pay the existing energy tab. Cuba's ambitious plans for energy renewal were formally launched during a ceremony held in the western province of Pinar del Río in January 2006, at which Fidel Castro announced the name of the modernization project: *La revolución energética* (the Energy Revolution). In keeping with the revolutionary tradition of "naming" each year after historic events, he also announced that 2006 would officially be the "Year of the Energy Revolution."

Based on an agreement with China, the Cuban Energy Revolution seeks a more efficient and environmentally friendly use of energy by means of renovating power plants and replacing inefficient electrical equipment. The new policy, which has been accompanied by a sustained propaganda campaign promoting energy conservation, began with the replacement of key national power stations and public streetlights. The government then moved to cut

domestic energy consumption, delivering halogen bulbs, fans, pressure cookers, stoves, rice cookers, TVs and, more recently, new model Chinese refrigerators. While purchasing the new articles isn't officially mandatory, it is a strongly encouraged way of supporting the Revolution. The electric devices are sold near or below cost, and payments are made in small monthly increments. Responding to critics who chafed at the replacement program, Fidel proclaimed that the government's goal was not to collect money but to reach the whole country with the energy conservation plan.

Continuing the tradition of implementing pioneering national policies on the eastern side of the island, in deference to the critical role played by Santiago de Cuba in both the War of Independence and the Cuban Revolution, the Energy Revolution is being executed from east to west. This seemingly peripheral aspect of the plan reveals the extent to which "revolutionary values" continue to shape the daily life of the Cuban population.

A Difficult Technological Leap

When Havana families finally began opening the boxes containing their extremely light new Chinese refrigerators, I realized the Energy Revolution was generating another unique social phenomenon. Leaping forward from 1950s

machinery to 21st century technology was not an easy assignment for an island locked in time. Although modern appliances have been available in dollar stores for many years, they were beyond the means of average citizens. The trucks loaded with “vintage” American and Russian refrigerators were proof that most Plaza families were decades behind in adopting new technology. Nearly 50 years of revolution and isolation had led to the rise of experts knowledgeable in the repair of old fashioned products, such as stoves, blenders and cars. Used to the heavy steel of mid-20th century products, Cubans were deeply suspicious of the quality of their new appliances.

In the week following the transfer, it was common to hear adults saying that they were forbidding children from opening the Chinese refrigerators because they doubted the apparently fragile doors would resist prolonged daily use. People automatically compared them to the old, familiar, and indeed beloved, equipment: “American refrigerators... well, in those days, they were made to last forever. They were built solidly enough to withstand the Cold War! Nowadays, technology breaks down right after you buy it. That’s the way business works: you have to buy a new product every other year,” observed Leonor, a neighbor from Basarrate Street.

Another worry among Plaza families was storage space. Accustomed to a diet based on generous portions of rice and beans, Cubans had adapted their food storage habits to Cold War era refrigerators. Households typically stored several gallons of water and multiple pots and pans in the fridge. “Where am I going to keep my beans?” was a common refrain.

World History in Cuban Private Space

If 1950s era American cars have become the international icon of a quaint and lagging Cuba, old American and Soviet refrigerators were, until August, the major domestic markers of the 20th century’s most paradigmatic imperial clash. More than mere appliances, they were material proof of Cuba’s deep involvement in the main trends of world history during the last century. In this context, I couldn’t help but wonder what the new Chinese domestic devices portend for the century ahead.

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A billboard exhorts Cubans to conserve energy.



Photo by Mónica González.