

## *Summary*

This paper aims to demonstrate that Cuba's historically high suicide rate is a by-product of a lack or absence of political and individual freedoms and under various guises, this is due to five centuries of dictatorships (1500-2000). This argument is supported by this paper/review article of Professor Pérez's seminal work *To Die in Cuba* (2005). While this paper does not argue that higher than average suicide rates are typical of dictatorial countries (counter-evidence of this is provided by the list of countries according to suicide rate per 100,000 inhabitants at the end of the paper), it argues that this is absolutely the case with Cuba. Suicide has become a sort of common element in Cuban culture and it is now deeply rooted in their social consciousness. It is likely, however, that globalization and Cuba's historical turn will improve this unfortunate situation.

Keywords: Suicide, Cuba, Dictatorship, Desperation, Suicidal Mentality, Suicidal Culture.

## *Riassunto*

Lo scopo di questo articolo è di dimostrare che l'alto tasso di suicidi storicamente presente a Cuba (uno dei più alti del mondo e senz'altro il più alto delle Americhe) è un prodotto secondario dell'assenza o carenza di libertà e diritti politici ed individuali. Cuba infatti, a partire dalla conquista spagnola all'inizio del Cinquecento, è stata sempre sottoposta a regimi dittatoriali, in forme differenti e spesso ambigue. Questa interpretazione viene portata avanti nella forma di una lunga discussione sul libro di Pérez, *To Die in Cuba* (2005), un lavoro fondamentale sul tema. Questo articolo non sostiene che un tasso di suicidi più alto della media mondiale sia tipico di regimi dittatoriali (come dimostra la classifica alla fine dell'articolo, vi sono molti paesi liberi e democratici che superano Cuba nel tasso annuale di suicidi per 100.000 abitanti, ad esempio Austria e Svizzera), ma sostiene piuttosto che nel caso di Cuba ci troviamo proprio in questa situazione. Il suicidio è diventato un elemento radicato nei costumi sociali e nella mentalità cubana, in modo alquanto peculiare. Sperabilmente, la svolta democratica cubana e la globalizzazione porranno termine a questa secolare "cultura del suicidio" a Cuba.

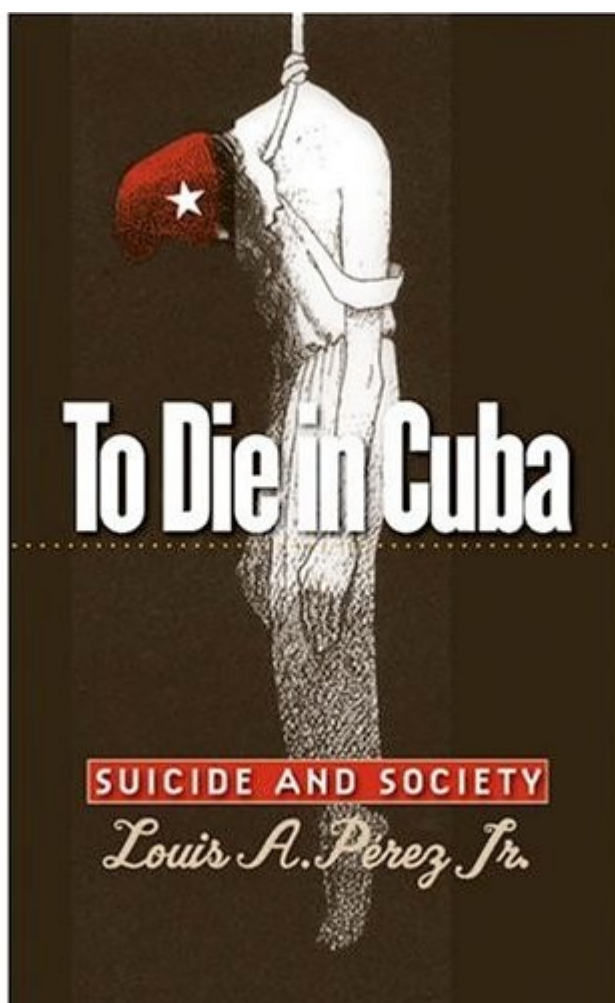
Parole chiave: suicidio, Cuba, dittatura, disperazione, mentalità suicidale, cultura del suicidio.

*Per corrispondenza*

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# SUICIDE IN CUBA AND THE ABSENCE OF POLITICAL AND INDIVIDUAL FREEDOMS

Paolo Bernardini



Cover of the book under review

“It is sufficient simply to glance at any of the pages of our daily newspapers to realize that among us suicide possesses an endemic character. “

Jorge Mañach, *Un pueblo suicida*, 1931 (Pérez, 2005, 131)

In his latest book, Professor C. G. Prado argues that the choice to die, i.e. to commit suicide, is deeply influenced not only by one's personal situation, but also by culture, religion, as well as other social-cultural factors (Prado 2008). His book offers an insightful approach to suicide from the viewpoints of cultural and multicultural studies. Historically, this view became a common notion beginning from early modern times (Bernardini 2009). Montesquieu's relativism played a fundamental role in maintaining that some habits – including those related to death and suicide – are strongly determined by culture, religion and laws, in a mutual dependence with climate and geography. Apparently, all over the early modern centuries, from roughly 1500 to 1800, just before the sociological-statistical study of suicide became widespread as a consequence of positivism, geography and nationality played a leading role in suicide studies. Some European areas became the suicide “hot spot.” This is the case with Northern Europe, Scandinavia in particular, and England. Before Goethe's *Werther*, which provoked a suicidal fever all over Germany and made suicide almost fashionable, England was normally considered the homeland of suicide. In the absence of reliable statistical data (contrary to the nineteenth-century) it is difficult to argue that the percentage of suicides was higher in England than in Germany or elsewhere. As it was made clear, however, in a pioneering study 16 years ago, England certainly saw a high number of suicides in all of her social classes, apparently, higher than elsewhere in Europe. Why? According to most interpreters, what was at a certain point even labeled as “the English malady” or “the English disease” was due almost exclusively to its climate. This makes clear why Scandinavia, Germany, in particular the Northern states, such as Schleswig-Holstein (Lind 1999) were included in this unhappy category of countries where suicide flourished. The well-known Chatterton case connected England even more with suicide (Kaplan 1988). In the second half of the eighteenth century this young poet killed himself to enhance his fame for posterity, or better, to make a name for himself in the afterlife since he felt unable to reach a solid reputation in this life (he was only 17!). Was this true, or was this just an example of “anglophobia”? While indeed “anglomania” blossomed, thanks to Voltaire, in the early decades of the eighteenth century (the *Lettres philosophiques* were published in 1734), (Buruma 1998), a contrary intellectual movement, which we might call “anglophobia”, flourished as well in Europe. This happened especially in those parts of Europe in which subjects enjoyed much less political freedom than British citizens. In Europe, among other things, the official intellectuals were strongly against the British parliamentary regime, something completely or almost completely unknown in continental Europe in the eighteenth century. Voltaire himself contributed to this myth,

for he praised British political freedom on the one hand, while on the other he frequently spoke of the British as people who did not value human life, including their own, even reaching the point of killing themselves in a sporting activity simply because they were idle and bored. It was also quite common, among the eighteenth-century philosophers, to deny that in countries such as Italy and Spain, both Catholic and with a much better climate than England and Denmark, suicides were common. Hot, moderate, and Mediterranean climates played a fundamental role in the common view of “Southern happiness.” In a more aggressive way this was certainly related to the idea of the Southerners as “sensual” people, certainly not inclined to give up life except in the most extreme circumstances. While on the one hand the eighteenth-century advanced the idea of “man” as a universal entity, on the other hand it was powerfully relativist, and this is certainly true for suicide, the object of endless discussions all over the *siècle des Lumières* (Bernardini 1996). Recent scholarship has demonstrated that suicides were numerous, and suicide was a legal issue of the first rank, also in countries normally considered the “happy South,” such as Spain, and/or not treated as suicidal landscapes in the past, such as Hungary (Watts 2004). Thus, it is clear that in the absence of comparative research and the absence of reliable statistics (at least until the second half of the nineteenth century) this geographical point is not easily sustainable, at least for early modern times. This applies also to what we might call the “ethnic” model of the eighteenth century, according to which, entire peoples, nations, or ethnic groups are more prone to suicide than others, because they were constitutionally feeble, gloomy, or too proud to suffer from anything. It is worth noting that this view was widely accepted throughout the nineteenth century, even by Cuban philosophers, such as José de la Luz y Caballero, in a writing dated 1847.

If we wanted to generate some alternative models, provided they are valid for empirical research (and maybe suicide prevention), we might propose a “political” model. Suicide rates are higher in countries where individuals enjoy very low degrees of freedom: dictatorships, for instance. It is interesting to note that Britain was possibly the “freest” country in eighteenth-century Europe, at least from the point of view of personal rights. At the same time, she was accused of being the place with most suicides. The political model is, by the way, well present and discussed. Evidence is strong about higher than world average suicide rates in Russia, where the relative lack of political freedom is parallel with widespread poverty. At the same time, suicide rates are quite higher than the world average in Japan, the second (GDP, national) richest country in the world. Data for many third-world countries is unreliable.

This is a review-article of a major case study about suicide in Cuba from the sixteenth century to the present (Pérez 2005). Before entering into the book’s details, it is worth noting that this book terminates with Fidel Castro’s long regime. It does not take into account Cuba’s most recent

developments. Since early 2008, the aging and ill Fidel left all power to his brother Raul. Raul, well into the 1970s, implemented some gradual reforms so as to construct a modern, market-oriented, and more “liberal” Cuba. This included free use of internet and cell phones, plus some other minor modernizations. It is difficult to judge the outcome of these reforms for they have been implemented over the last months of 2007 and in 2008, but it is clear that Cuba is entering, quite slowly, into the global world. Will this have an effect on her suicide rate? Probably so. For, as Pérez demonstrates, Cuba’s suicide rate, at least for the periods which we have statistics and comparisons with other countries, was not only the highest all over the American continent, but also all over the world. Certainly, no nasty weather and/or London fog can be blamed in this case. Pérez gives an incredibly detailed account of suicide in Cuba, which makes this book a unique example of scholarship. Its uniqueness is related to its scope, for it encompasses five centuries of Cuban history and its methodology: for it combines social and economic history, sociology, literary criticism, as well as other social sciences, to offer a deep view of the evolution of suicide in one of the most suicidal places in the world, a sort of island of Keos in the middle of the Caribbean Sea (Keos was the almost mythical island just off the Attic coast south of Athens, where suicide was a legal instrument fully decriminalized and even encouraged by the government). Pérez, who is a professor of history, has brought to scholarly and public attention the appalling fact that Cuba developed, over the centuries, a real “culture of suicide,” historically unprecedented and unknown in the contemporary world. The book is divided into six chapters. 1. “Dying to be Free: Suicide on the Plantation”; 2. “To Die for the *Patria*: the Logic of Exemplary Death and the Formation of Nation”; 3. “Life Through Suicide”. 4. “A Way of Life, a Way of Death”. 5. “An Ambience of Suicide”. 6. “*Patria o Muerte*: Living and Dying the Revolution”. Tables and pictures are abundant and very poignant.



Girolamo Benzoni, *Storia del Nuovo Mondo*. Engraving depicting the suicide of Indios to escape the Spanish, from the English edition, London 1857. (Pérez, 4).

The first chapter of the book deals with the situation of African slaves and Chinese workers in the eighteenth, and respectively, nineteenth century. While the Africans were slaves *stricto sensu*, the imported Chinese workers in the nineteenth century were in many cases socially, if not legally, close to slave status. Unfortunately, the book does not deal extensively with the suicide of the Indios in the early sixteenth century, when the *Conquistadores* first took control of the islands. This is still a relatively unknown chapter in colonial history. However, there is firm evidence that mass suicides took place among the Indios quite often, including those of Cuba. This was probably the very beginning, not only of the high percentage of suicides in Cuba, but of the “culture of suicide” which later developed. Obviously, there is much stronger evidence about suicide among the African community of slaves of Cuba in the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries, and later, among the Chinese workers. Both nations and cultures were alien on Cuban soil and have totally different cultural origins. It might be true, as testified even by travelers from China, that suicide played a different but stronger role in their local culture (than in Western culture) and was a much more common practice. In fact, the original inhabitants of Cuba, later on the Africans, and then the Chinese, were in a situation of strongly limited personal freedom, or in the case of the Indios, were faced a life of slavery unknown to them. The response to this was suicide in a mass Stoicism far away from Cato’s philosophy and relates to a combination of nostalgia, horrible living conditions and absence of prospects for a better future. From the very beginning, the unusually high rate of suicide in Cuba relates to a lack of freedom and its dire individual, social, economic, and psychological consequences.

The second chapter, devoted to the Cuban revolutions of the nineteenth century, analyses a new form of suicide that relates to the death for the homeland, that of patriotism and heroism of those who are willingly to sacrifice their lives to free Cuba from the long lasting domination of the Spanish. In this case, suicide is a sort of metaphor for martyrdom, to die in a fight is different from a suicide. It is interesting to note that the centuries of Spanish control were commonly considered by the Cuban freedom fighters as centuries of “slavery”, albeit, technically speaking, the Spanish were free men, and the very ancestors of those nineteenth-century patriots.

The third chapter is A powerful sociological analysis of suicide in nineteenth and early twentieth-century Cuba with appalling numbers and percentages. Cuba became a real cradle of future suicides. Once again, the political-economical explanation is at work: the highest rates of suicides apply to the worst economical crises, even though for a relatively long period Cuba enjoyed some political freedom, or, at least, some attempts to create a “democratic,” open society. However in the fourth chapter it stated that even when Cuba was free, from 1902 and after a long and bloody war of independence, the transition from a rural economy to an export, market oriented

one provoked such change in Cuban society that suicide was as common as it was in previous the previous century of Spanish domination.

The fifth chapter offers a clear and disturbing view about the presence of suicide in the press, in literature and in newspapers and cartoons. Thus suicide became a sort of daily bread in Cuba from the middle of the late nineteenth century until the Castro revolution. The fact that Cuba has a solid Catholic foundation did not prevent suicide. The overwhelming presence of suicide in vignettes, cartoons, even in comic books, can be seen both as a sign of the importance of suicide in Cuban society and as an attempt to “exorcise” this weird presence. In the end, Cuban society has developed several cultural attitudes towards suicide, which have been accept as a common or quasi-common element and part of the local culture. Eventually, it was once again, as in the second part of the nineteenth century, associated with revolution.

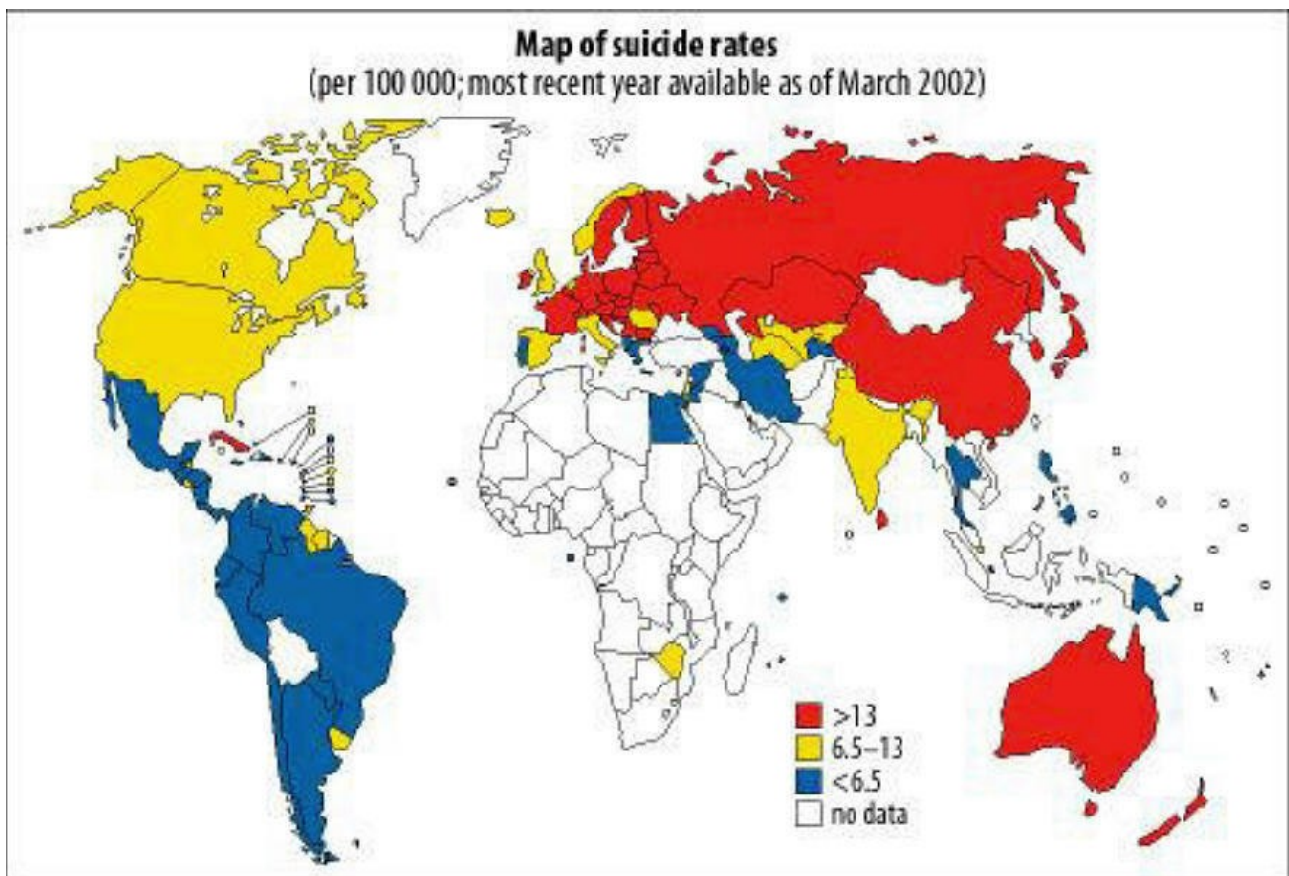
“Patria o muerte”, the object of the last (sixth) chapter, became the icon of the Cuban revolution. While suicides were extremely common during the previous regimes, including Batista’s, overthrown by Castro in 1959, there is evidence that the 1960s was a decade with much less suicide than in the past half century. Why? There was an enthusiasm for the revolution, and finally, prospects for a bright individual future. However, this Communist dream did not last long. Suicide rates were already on the rise in the late Seventies, and more so after that (if we assume that the data filtered by the Communist government is correct). The conclusions of Pérez and his look onto the beginning of the third millennium are worth quoting in full: “Life in the final years of the twentieth century and into the early years of the twentieth-first century has continued to weigh heavily on Cubans, as individuals and as families, as a people and a nation. Most men and women choose to persist as best they can; some determine to die. In both cases the decision implicates moral stamina and individual will, where and how people place their faith in the future. It often takes as much courage to live as it does to die. There are not unfamiliar historical conditions. But also familiar and no less historical is the determination of men and women in Cuba to live life under the circumstances of their choosing and to accept the choice of death as a means toward that end” (Pérez 2000, 389-90).

While this book is a powerful piece of scholarship, shedding light on three centuries of Cuban history, full of details and graphics, its arguments deserve some criticism, from classical-liberal or libertarian perspective (inasmuch as this perspective can be applied to this subject). Suicide, as a final act of life, putting a voluntary end to any future, goes against nature. This is the case for an individual and a fortiori for an entire population. A nation cannot be naturally inclined to suicide, but it can be disputed that a population like the Cubans have historically developed a more favorable perception of, or attitude to, suicide. As the author has amply and convincingly

demonstrated, suicide is really part of Cuban history and culture but it is likely, should Cuba become a free, rich, market-oriented island, that this association will also disappear. Over the course of 400 pages Pérez never clearly states, what is clear and proven throughout the book, that the lack of political freedom, of a real democratic, market-oriented government, has accompanied the entire history of Cuba, from 1500 until the present, half a millennium of the lack of individual freedoms, protection of life and property, never granted to Cubans in the a high, although not complete, level of perfection, typical of liberal democracies such as the USA.

So, there are some questions that need answers. For instance: was Cuba, at any stage of this island's history, 1902-1959, from independence until Castro, ever really democratically governed? Suicide became a model of social, more than individual, emancipation. Of course, it would not be correct to relate suicide exclusively to a national situation of the lack of political freedom. For instance, the suicide rate is very high in Switzerland, a country whose political situation is certainly not comparable to that of Cuba. However, the situation in Cuba demonstrates that suicide can become an important element of the local culture, which is not the case in Europe, where it rarely reflects a lack of economic means or is related to the form of government. Only in cases where dictatorships, in one or another guise, rule, suicide as a real social disease emerges. When Pérez writes: "From the late colonial period into the early republic, under capitalism as well as socialism, men and women in Cuba killed themselves at a higher rate than people in almost all other countries" (Pérez 2000, 5), what does it mean with regards to "capitalism?" Capitalism in free Cuba, from 1902 until the crisis of 1924 and the subsequent decade, was comparable to what capitalism is in Russia in the Putin era. An affair dealt by government agents and politicians in a corrupt, underdeveloped world, and this was far from the fair (to a certain degree) game of capitalism as it is being played and was played in the USA and Europe. It was capitalism in a closed world, the contrary of any open society. It involved such a degree of corruption that it is understandable why a huge portion of the Cuban population did not take part in the Cuban economic boom and was left to ponder about the best way to kill themselves. Cuba has never been a truly free country, not even when she conquered her independence after decades of war. Possibly, the only five years of relative openness came with the much contested presidency of Alfredo Zayas y Alonso (1921-1925), a distinguished poet, who became president when the country entered one of its worst economic crises. His follower, Gerardo Machado, president until 1933, was initially close to modernizing Cuba, which he wanted to transform into the "Switzerland of the Americas," but he soon turned into another shrew despot. After that, we have the first appearance of Batista and a growing presence of Communism, as well as the influence of the USSR on Cuba. Castro has been her dictator for half a century.

It is predictable that globalization will create a new, pro-market, modern regime in Cuba. Will this change bring about a decline in the suicide rate? Or is suicide part of the Cuban culture to such a degree that the rate will remain uncommonly high even in a free-market, open society? I tend to endorse the first situation. The suicide rate will probably decline dramatically. As the following table illustrates, in 2002 Cuba retained the second strongest suicide rate on the American continent. As it clearly appears from this map, those percentages are shared by many open societies as well; but in those societies, including most of Western Europe, it cannot be seen as a response to poverty and lack of future, but more as the personal response to individual, rather than, social problems.



Source: [www.suicide.org](http://www.suicide.org) --- World Health Organization

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Individual rank (to Cuba, number 29)

1. Lithuania

2. Belarus
3. Russia
4. Kazakhstan
5. Hungary
6. Guyana
7. Slovenia
8. Latvia
9. Japan
10. South Korea
11. Ukraine
12. People's Republic of China  
(selected rural areas)
13. Sri Lanka
14. Belgium
15. Estonia
16. Finland
17. Croatia
18. Serbia and Montenegro
19. Hong Kong
20. France
21. Switzerland
22. Austria
23. Moldova
24. Poland
25. Czech Republic
26. Uruguay
27. Luxembourg
28. Denmark
- 29. Cuba**

**Source: World Health Organization. Data for different years from 1997 to 2005. Suicide rate for 100,000. Complete rank in [www.suicide.org](http://www.suicide.org)**

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