

# THE CUBAN PROPAGANDA WAR: THE STORY OF ELIÁN GONZÁLEZ

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## Abstract

Elián González, an unknown Cuban boy, became the unfortunate star of one of the greatest media stories of our time, when he appeared floating in the sea after the sinking of the boat in which he, his mother and his stepfather abandoned their country. Between December 1999 and June 2000, international media were full with reports of the dispute for the child between the Cuban exile in the United States and the government of the island, which involved the Clinton Administration and was ultimately decided by the Supreme Court. According to the polls, the story of Elián González had relevance in terms of public attention, similar to other great media stories like the Clinton-Lewinsky affaire.

This article explains why a six-year old boy from a remote Cuban city, who must have had a life like any other child, outside of the world of newspapers and television news, was transformed into a media character, and the hero of a campaign of intensive political propaganda inside Cuba. The author examines the political circumstances surrounding the events and the symbolic components of the story as presented by Cuban media, particularly issues like family, race and nationality.

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In the night of November 23rd 1999, a little boat with thirteen persons aboard sank twenty miles away from the coast of Florida, USA. Save for three of the passengers, all the rest died. Two of the survivors, a man and a woman, managed to keep floating until they were rescued. The third survivor was a five years old boy, whose mother tied to a tyre minutes before she drowned. For two days and two nights, the boy was floating on his tyre, alone, in the silent ocean. Nobody knows yet what happened during those two days, but the fact is that the child survived, and, on Thanksgiving Day, he was finally found and rescued by two fishermen. The legend says that, when he was found, he was surrounded by dolphins.

The name of the child went on to be known in the whole world. But the fame of Elián González grew beyond the legend of his miraculous survival to become the symbol of a national tragedy. Delivered by the two fishermen to the American immigration authorities in Florida, and later to some relatives in Miami, Elián's final destiny immediately provoked a dispute between the community of Cuban exiles in USA, who wanted to keep him in Miami, and the Cuban government, which demanded his return. The dispute lasted eight months. On June 8, 2000, guarded by his father, Elián arrived in Havana aboard of a special plane provided by the US government. He vanished into a privacy carefully protected and administered by Cuban authorities. But his face and his history remain in the memory, the dreams, the sadness and the hopes of a whole people.

## A Boy (and a Country) Floating in the Sea

The history of Elián González had enormous political importance for Cuba. The boy could be just one more among the thousands of Cubans that had illegally immigrated into the USA travelling aboard any kind of improvised boat through the Florida Strait, a 90 miles narrow string of sea between continental America and the north coast of Cuba. It is impossible to determine the number of persons that have tried to cross the Strait, since the statistics from both sides are rather inaccurate and they do not include the dead – hundreds, thousands of dead – people like Elián's mother, drowned, burnt by an implacable sun, starved, killed by sharks, or just disappeared into the ocean. It is an everyday tragedy. Elián González could remain unknown, his fate being not very different from that of other children taken away from their home by their parents, or, in cases like his, by either their mothers or their fathers, with or without the consent of the parent staying in Cuba. Even the extraordinary history of his survival and rescue from the sea, would not have given Elián international attention, if it had not been because he was trapped in the five decades old conflict between USA, the Cuban exiles in that country and the Cuban government installed after the Revolution of 1959. The clash between the González family members, divided in two branches, one in Miami and the other in a little Cuban city, Cárdenas, was seen by both the Cuban exiles and the government as a symbol of their respective causes, and as an opportunity to launch a propagandistic and political offensive against the enemy. It was a battle without casualties, but it consumed the passion and the political and human strengths of all Cubans and left the country exhausted.

It all began long before Elián's ill fated trip. By the spring of 1999, six months before Elián left home, the Cuban government had started a huge ideological offensive inside the island, using the State-owned media to publicise a suit presented

in Cuban courts against the US government for human damages. It coincided with the first signs of a sustained economic recuperation after the collapse in the early Nineties that followed the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the downfall of the Communist regimes in Eastern Europe. The campaign of the so-called “Cuban People’s suit against the US Government” lasted for many months, and the juridical process was broadcast in its entirety by national television in primetime, every evening. It tested the effectiveness of a model of intensive use of media for political propaganda that was later updated and widened for the campaign about Elián, and that is still active, three years after Elián’s return. By that time, Cuban media had started to emerge from the critical situation they faced in the period after 1990, when the daily press almost completely disappeared and the television hours were dramatically cut to six or seven a day in each of the two only national channels. In 1999, *Granma*, the main national daily newspaper and official organ of the Cuban Communist Party, had increased its circulation and *Juventud Rebelde*, the newspaper of the Young Communist League, had again a daily edition. The television had extended its hours and even the studios of the main news show had been refurbished in a modern style, although the news remained the same. There were signs of an increasing attention to media and its political and ideological role by the top hierarchies of the Cuban government. Two weeks before Elián appeared floating in the sea, Fidel Castro explained to a group of Latin American journalists in a congress in Havana “the huge possibilities of media in a revolution and in a socialist revolutionary State” (Castro 1999b).

There were two other political circumstances to consider. By November 1999, it was imminent the end of the Clinton Administration, which had been distant from the hard line factions in the Cuban exile, and had extended towards Cuba an ambiguous policy that included a minor relaxation of the 41 years embargo (in Cuban terms “economic blockade” or “economic war”) against the island. There was already visible the possibility of a new Republican Administration in Washington, controlled by the Christian fundamentalist right wing, and closest to the most radical groups of Cuban exiles, with enormous power in the key electoral state of Florida. The last factor was the death in 1998 of Jorge Mas Canosa, the leader of the most powerful and influential organisation of Cuban exiles, the Cuban American National Foundation. Mas Canosa, who had been very close to the Reagan and Bush Administrations, through which he promoted the strengthening of the economic and political pressure on Cuba, left the exiles without a clear and united leadership. The Cuban government probably saw his death as an opportunity, almost as much as the advanced age of Fidel Castro and his eventual natural death in the next years is foreseen as an opportunity for his enemies. As a matter of fact, much of the battle around Elián was about the reconstitution of the leaderships on both sides, and the renewal of the historical antagonisms in a new generation. Speaking to a crowd in Havana, the president of the Federation of University Students said: “We have learnt a lesson about the unity of our people, we have been educated in the fight... We, the new generations participating in this battle, feel that we have already graduated as revolutionaries” (Granma 1999a, 1).

It is not strange that Elián’s cause had been used as a flag by both sides. The Cuban government reacted to the first news of the shipwrecking and the rescue of Elián with overwhelming toughness, and Fidel Castro famously gave an ultimatum of 72 hours for the kid to be given back. It is not clear whether the Cuban

government underestimated during those first days the magnitude of the case, or if the ultimatum to the Clinton Administration was just a bluff to give the case international relevance and to involve the American government. The latter possibility is the most credible. For the Cuban exiles, apparently, Elián's case was initially business as usual, another refugee used for propagandistic purposes. It is a political routine that South Florida radio stations, which can be listened to in Cuba, and other media in Miami, give wide coverage to any case of Cuban refugees arriving in USA. The Cuban government has denounced for many years that coverage as a stimulus for the people in the island to attempt the extremely risky trip across the sea. Indeed, this is a reasonable accusation, since there are at least 13 radio and TV stations in Florida that broadcast daily more than 300 hours of Cuban-oriented programmes, most of them opposed to the Cuban government, and some regularly call on the people in the island to undertake acts of subversion, civil resistance and even terrorism (Requeijo 2002). Among those stations there is an official radio broadcaster of the US government for Cuba, Radio Martí, named after the Cuban national hero José Martí (1853-1895) and inspired in Radio Free Europe and other similar stations used against Communist regimes during the Cold War. Radio Martí is probably no longer as much listened to in Cuba as it was ten or twelve years ago, but it still has some influence on the Cuban audience. The US government even launched a TV station for Cuba, called TV Martí as well, but its signal was successfully blocked by the Cuban government, and it is practically unwatched in the island. Although most of the stations formally advise people to not attempt the trip through the sea, the Cuban government considers that the coverage indirectly promotes illegal emigration, demonising the Cuban authorities, describing the situation in the island as hell, and remarking on the success of the people who have arrived in USA. On January 20th, 1999, ten months before the tragedy of Elián, Radio Martí announced signs that "the Cuban government had relaxed the control of its frontiers" (in Castro 1999a), and was allowing people to leave the island freely. It proved to be false. During that year 1999, Radio Martí insisted on the opening of the frontier and new advantages for Cuban refugees in USA. The same message went to Cuba through other radio stations. Illegal emigration has become a major political factor of internal destabilisation in Cuba, particularly since 1990. In 1994, at the bottom of the economic crisis, 35 thousand persons abandoned Cuba when the government, exasperated by the continuous incidents between the police and the would-be emigrants, and after a revolt in the streets of Havana, allowed a massive and improvised emigration across the sea. For weeks, the island was shaken by a social and moral cataclysm; everyday hundreds of people literally threw themselves into the sea.

One of the major tasks of the Cuban government in order to gain sympathy for the end of the embargo is to export a favourable and optimistic image of Cuba, its political and social situation, in opposition to what they consider a campaign of lies and misinformation against the island in the international media. The government achieved an enormous propagandistic success with the visit of the Pope, John Paul II, in January 1998. The image of religious opening and tolerance even gained an unexpected victory for Cuba in the UN Commission for Human Rights in Geneva that year, in a forum that had systematically condemned the Cuban government's alleged violations since the late Eighties. For the Cuban government, tradi-

tionally distant from the international media, the huge spectacle of the visit of the Pope was an incredibly rich experience. Not only because it gave Cuba a prominence it had not had since the Missiles Crisis in 1962, or because of the political profits derived from it, but also because Cubans propagandists received a free lesson about the volatility and superficiality of international attention. While the Pope was praying in Cuba, the world heard for the first time the name of Ms Monica Lewinsky, and all the leading international reporters, specially the Americans, flew from Havana to Washington. In 1999 the positive effects of the Pope's visit had vanished. After four leading dissidents were incarcerated and accused of hostile propaganda and collaboration with the enemy, the Cuban government lost the vote in Geneva. The Ibero American Summit of November 1999 in Havana, just a week before the shipwrecking of Elián, was a propagandistic disaster, after some Latin American presidents met the leaders of the internal illegal opposition and publicly lectured Fidel Castro on democracy and human rights. At the end of that month of November 1999, the Cuban government desperately needed a coup de effect. And then, little Elián appeared floating in the sea.

Like the campaign around the "Cuban People's suit against the USA government," the aims of the propaganda around the Elián's case were not only external. During the last years of the Nineties, despite the continuity of a discourse about the "monolithic unity" of the Cubans in favour of the Revolution, there were not few signals of alarm in the Cuban government about what they considered were ideological deviations. In the spring of 1996, one of the academic think tanks associated with the Party, the Centre for the Study of America, which had a team of pro-reform economists and sociologists, was clamped by the Party and the State Security, and the main academics and officials were dismissed and dispersed. The reason for those extreme attitudes was the panic in the official hierarchies about the social and political effects of the economic reforms. The very moderate economic opening of 1993 produced a gap in the previously fairly egalitarian Cuban society, between the groups and individuals associated with the new economy of tourism, the foreign investors, the free farmer's markets, and the little private business, and those who remained tied to the squalid State-run economy. The government feared that the social tension between the two groups could grow, and that the "new rich," the people who benefited from the situation and made little fortunes in the black market or with legal or semi-legal private businesses, would become the agents of a capitalist restoration. The government was also worried because of the scandalous extension of social problems like prostitution, drugs, corruption and criminality, which were mostly ignored by the Party-controlled media. As late as January 1999, eleven months before anyone heard about Elián, Fidel Castro acknowledged that they were serious problems and announced a general offensive of the police against criminality. That speech was also a sign of a correlation of power inside the Central Committee of the Party favourable to the figures considered hard liners or conservatives, although that classification is very speculative, since the internal debates of the Cuban top hierarchies are carefully hidden from the public, and the main figures do not seem to have a proper autonomous political persona beyond their loyalty to the maximum leader.

## New Faces, Same Speeches

Back in the spring of 1999, six months before Elián went to meet international fame, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Roberto Robaina, a young politician widely considered as a reform-inclined, was unexpectedly and inexplicably dismissed. He was replaced by another very young politician, Felipe Pérez Roque, who was until then a sort of political secretary to Fidel Castro and who had, famously, in a moment of political inspiration prior to September 11, defined himself as a “mujaedin.” That change had more profound meaning than the one the analysts could then see, but it was not until the Elián crisis that it was visible. Pérez Roque was just the first of a series of young figures that would ascend to political stardom during the days of the dispute around Elián. Among them was a 21 years old student of the University of Havana, Hassán Pérez Casabona, president of the official Federation of University Students. He was relatively unknown until the shipwrecking of Elián but became overnight the principal spokesman of the “popular movement” organised to press for the return of the boy. The Cuban wits promptly stigmatised Hassán Pérez, and there was a very popular joke about a supposed Cuban offer to the Americans to exchange him for the kid. “Give us Elián back and take Hassán away,” whispered the crowd when Hassán Pérez started one of his ardent speeches in front of the US Interests Office in Havana, next to the Malecón, the famous seawall. “Propaganda inevitably remains,” Splichal says, “regardless of its specific aims, distorted communication, because its intrinsic aim is the universalisation of particularistic interest, i.e., hegemony in historically given relations rather than an autonomous free development of human beings against mass conformity ensured by any integrating ideology.” (Splichal 1993, 8). The prominence the propaganda apparatus gave to Hassán Pérez was not accidental. It was part of a strategy to involve the Cuban youth, considered to be the most vulnerable group to capitalist ideological penetration, in the so called “battle of ideas” against American imperialism and the “Miami mafia,” as the Cuban government labelled the hard line factions in Florida. Other young figures were systematically taking major roles as regular speakers in the public meetings, marches and manifestations protesting against the “kidnapping” of Elián, and in the daily “Round Tables” in primetime television. These were panels of commentators, analysts, and every sort of specialists in childhood psychology, education and health, as well as history, emigration and Cuban-American politics. The appearances of Fidel Castro and other senior officials of the government in the Round Tables and in the streets manifestations were carefully reserved for climatic moments, leaving the leading roles in the everyday propaganda to the young and fresh faces of the new Cuban politics. Fidel Castro himself declared: “I have not appeared in any tribune, and it has not been necessary. There are many young and talented lads speaking. They are all new faces” (Juventud Rebelde 2000b, 3-4).

The Cuban government apparently decided very soon that it was crucial to present the dispute about Elián not as a mere official argument between diplomatic bureaucracies, but as a popular struggle against the “mafia” and imperialism. Someone must have noticed that the crisis around Elián would be long and that the factor that ultimately would decide the case would be American public opinion. The Cuban propaganda apparatus did not have a long experience work-



ing with the American media, save for CNN and AP, which were the first American media to open offices in Havana after 1959, CNN in the mid Nineties and AP just three years ago. But the propaganda masters learnt fast. They scheduled the events in a way that everyday something new, important and dramatic happened, providing the national and international media enough information to keep the Elián case alive for many months. They created the "Round Tables" in television as a way to concentrate and evaluate the huge amount of information arriving in Havana from the USA, and to provide politically positive interpretations of the everyday events. The "Round Tables," still running in Cuban television two years after the return of the boy, were the ultimate expression of the control over the flows of information and the intervention of the political class in the media. Although many of the participants in the "Round Tables" were journalists and well known specialists, all of them were carefully selected for their political correctness. And, notably, the most important "Round Tables" were chaired by some of those young politicians, leaders of the Young Communist League, that in some cases were completely unknown by the public and had never worked for TV cameras before. The "Tables," to be precise, were not round, and neither did they ever present a serious debate, or even a substantial difference of opinion, among the participants. They were the exegesis of unanimity. The imagination of the organisers of the Tables became feverish and they even dared to present a "Round Table" with little children sitting on the floor of the studio, analysing the similarities between Elián's story and some classic stories for children written by the Cuban National Hero José Martí. When the two grandmothers of Elián returned from a frustrated visit to the kid in Miami, the round table itself disappeared and the studio was transformed into the intimate living room of a family house. There, talk-show style, the two old women talked to journalists and politicians. After Elián's return, "Round Tables" have been dedicated to practically every topic of the political imagination, from the war in Afghanistan and the events of September 11, to the corruption of the Olympic movement and the campaign against mosquitoes in Havana. But mostly, they have been used to discuss the case of five Cuban spies captured in Miami. This had been largely ignored by Cuban media until the summer of 2001, when it suddenly became national obsession. The campaign for their liberation reproduced every single aspect of that of Elián's. The propagandists seem delighted with the results of the Round Table, although they often exasperate people, being boring, repetitive, too long and never ever argumentative. After a period in which they became the battlefield of journalists and commentators for political stardom and the favour of the leadership, the Round Tables have stabilised with a cast in which every member has a particular dramatic role. Lázaro Barredo, a journalist from the single trade-union newspaper *Trabajadores*, outspoken and rude, fills the role of some kind of gangster-style street fighter. Eduardo Dimas, a respected international commentator, brings information and reasonable and moderate analysis, and above all, academic legitimacy. Reynaldo Taladrid, who until the Elián crisis was just the presenter of a show in which documentaries from the Discovery or the History Channel were broadcast, and who was suddenly promoted to stardom because he is able to make interviews in English, is like a smart, know-everything and easy-speaking fattish boy. The pre feminist authors of this script included a woman, Arleen Rodríguez, a former director of Juventud Rebelde, to talk about

soft issues, like Elián's family, and later of those of the five spies, or about the international movement for peace after September 11. Chairing the sessions is Randy Alonso, a young journalist with a political career in the Young Communist League, completely unknown before November 1999, and now the principal face of the political institution the Round Table has become.

But the Round Tables were not the only scene of the campaign on Elián. The public acts of protest and popular manifestations started in Havana and were then programmed for each week in a different city or town around the island. This was important to avoid the exhaustion of the same people participating in an infinite number marches and demonstrations where all the speakers said the same things and shouted the same slogans. Most of the participants wore the semi official uniform for those demonstrations: a white T-shirt with the face of a sad Elián. Hundreds of thousands of those T-shirts were bought by the Cuban government and distributed free to the crowds. Naturally, common people used the T-shirts not only for the marches, but for anything, from playing baseball to working in the garden, from attending lectures in the university to staying at home. The cities were covered by posters with the face of Elián and the semi official slogan of the campaign, *Salvemos a nuestro niño* ("Let's save our child"). The Cuban propagandists, and specially Fidel Castro, are experts on *sloganeerism*. During forty years, they have produced hundreds of "sanctioned slogans" (Stewart 1995, 405), for official campaigns, including one semi compulsory national slogan, *¡Patria o Muerte!* ("Motherland or Death!"), without which no speaker can finish a speech. They think that "slogans can unite, or at least create a perception of unity among people with widely varying motives and beliefs, by focusing upon a common characteristic, value, belief, or goal" (Stewart 1995, 405). This slogan for Elián's campaign was a prodigious linguistic construction. It used the imperative mode in the first person plural, making the action compulsory but at the same time creating a sense of solidarity and political community. The verb "to save" indicated both the extreme danger Elián was in, and the nobility of the action Cubans were called to do. It included the sacred word "child," with almost religious connotations like the idea of a "salvation," and constructed a sense of collective father or motherhood. Probably, the propagandists created this phrase carefully. They have an extraordinary idiomatic sensibility, producing nouns, phrases and adjectives that become compulsory for speakers and journalists, giving the official discourse a linguistic rigidity that is proportional of the rigidity of its contents. Elián's retention in the USA was defined as "kidnapping" in the first 72 hours after the boat sank. The right-wing political elite of Miami Cubans was defined as "the counterrevolutionary mafia." The five Cuban agents arrested and condemned in Miami and who were the centre of political propaganda after the return of Elián, have been transformed in "the five heroic prisoners of the Empire." The words "spies" and "agents" have been totally forbidden. The propagandists have a remarkable ability to recognise the negative semantic contents some words have in popular culture, but the normative authority of this political language stifles any autonomous linguistic activity by journalists and other agents of discourse. The slogan of the Elián's campaign did not work very well with the public, and it was transformed into a much more laconic *Salvemos a Elián* ("Let's save Elián"). On the marches, however, people created spontaneously new and more ingenious slogans, among them some



denigrating President Clinton, that were rapidly forbidden. The marches and massive meetings were offered a brand new venue, the Anti Imperialist Tribune “José Martí,” built in front of the US Section of Interest in Havana, and to which the people immediately named *el protestódromo* – the place-to-protest. It was a symbolic shift from the traditional magnetic centre of the great popular acts of the 1959 revolution, the Revolution Square, next to the offices of the Central Committee of the Party and the Council of State. This new place, which had a symbolic proximity of the American offices and the sea that separates Cuba from Florida, was also smaller and easier to fill.

The propaganda found another modern venue: the Internet. There was a multitude of web sites that provided information about Elián during the months the crisis lasted. Two were semi official: “Liberty for Elián” ([www.libertyforelian.org](http://www.libertyforelian.org)), which became the major Miami-based site dedicated to the dispute on the child, and “Elián, Cuba te reclama,” or “Elián, Cuba claims for you” ([www.elian.cu](http://www.elian.cu)), created on Radio Reloj under the direction of the Cuban Communist Party. The campaign on Elián started in the middle of the love affair of the Party propagandists with Internet, which is, however, the centre of a political dilemma. The Cuban government knew perfectly well the cost of keeping the country out of the global network, but was also concerned with the cultural and political impact of the spread of the Internet throughout civil society. They know, as Castells says, that “the diffusion of networking logic substantially modifies the operation and outcomes in processes of production, experience, power and culture” (Castells 1998, 469). The extension of the Internet and the emergence of a network of autonomous producers and consumers of information, is essentially contradictory with a model of communication based on the monopoly of the production of information and interpretations of the social reality. As a result, the Cuban policy on Internet has been notably confused and inconsistent. There is no public service of the Internet for Cubans, not even in libraries. Almost all the Cubans that systematically surf the net do it in their offices, in universities, ministries, major companies, scientific institutes, and so on. A few people, some journalists among them, are allowed to have a private connection at home, for a limited number of hours and through paying a little fee. The restrictions are great. The emails are randomly read by the State Security (or at least everybody seems to think so) and discretion is strongly recommended. Although very few Cubans have access to this technology, in a television Round Table several journalists talked about “the necessity to make online journalism, fast and updated, to bring the world the truth of Cuba” (Union of Cuban Journalists 2001). In the climax of this ridiculous enthusiasm for the new toy-weapon, during the “Round Tables” dedicated to Elián, a computer connected to the Internet was installed in the television studio. Everyday, a journalist from Radio Reloj downloaded in front of the cameras information published in some of the major sites, The New York Times on the Web, CNN, The Washington Post, the Cuban site on Elián and its replica from Miami, and El Nuevo Herald Digital. It was like magic for millions of Cubans who had never touched a computer, let alone surfed the Internet. With an incredible lack of tact, Radio Reloj everyday invited its audience to visit [www.elian.cu](http://www.elian.cu). Tragically for the propagandists, many smart Cubans noticed that Internet was a proof of the existence of a whole new world outside the island.

## The War of Words

The imagination of the propagandists seemed to have no limits. Everything was used to mobilise the nation. "A mobilized society is one in which the major resources of the country are concentrated on few specific objectives defined by the government. In these sectors, private needs are in effect subordinated to the mobilized goals and the role of private decisions is reduced almost to nothing" (Bell 1999, 356). There was a moment when artists, musicians, popular singers, pop and salsa bands, actors, poets, painters and dancers, were incorporated into the script of the demonstrations and "open tribunes." Every kind of person, even deaf and blind men and children, delivered speeches in the "open tribunes." The propagandists achieved notable successes with certain "special" marches, like the ones made up only of women, of teachers and professors, or of children, all of which received wide coverage in American media. But, undoubtedly, the key factor on their final success was the manipulation of the themes of "family" and "nationality." The notion of "family" is central to the common Cuban imaginary and philosophy, and it has roots not only in Catholicism, but also in the *santería*, a widely diffused popular form of syncretism between Catholicism and African cults. The figure of the child, the "holy child," is also common for both pantheons, the Catholic and the Afro Cuban, and, curiously, it is an important symbol of the revolutionary mythology as well. The Miami media reported the religious fever produced by the miraculous salvation of Elián, who was even considered a Messiah. "In the Koran, the holy book of the Muslims, it is written that the messenger of this time would be a child, who would come through the sea and whose name would be Elán," an allegedly sane university professor explained to Miami's El Nuevo Herald (Travieso and Cotayo 2000). On both sides of the Strait there were rumours that the obsession of the Cuban government with Elián was due to the fears of Fidel himself, *santero* extraordinaire, who had allegedly been advised by Elegguá, one of the Afro Cuban gods, guardian of the roads of life, that he should make the child come back in order to retain power. In Miami there were petitions to the Pope to canonise the late mother of the child. Despite their reservations about religion, the Cuban government did not hesitate to play this same card, and organised on Christmas Day a public demonstration where evangelical preachers, Jews, mediums, *abakuás*, *babalawos*, and notably just one single lay Catholic, called for the return of the boy (Agence France Presse 1999). It was the second official Christmas in Cuba, after 28 years when that festivity was not recognised and its symbols forbidden in official institutions. Religion was not, as it can be seen, the strongest point of Cuban propaganda, so they usually preferred to counter attack the religious fervour in Miami and the images of Elián visiting Disney World (Long 1999) exhibiting the attention given to childhood by the Revolution, and the happiness of the *pioneros*, schoolboys and girls, in the island. A song celebrating the love of the children for their country, with the title "Little Prince," was performed ceaselessly in every public meeting by a boy singer (who, according to rumour, was rewarded with a new house, which is the biggest prize for political contributions in Cuba). So, although problematic, the notion of "family" was activated as a symbolic component of the official discourse on Elián. There was a discursive operation to deny the character of "family" to the Miami branch of the González, and to reinforce it for the branch

in Cárdenas. Prestigious psychologists and pedagogues were called to the front line to demonstrate that the Miami González could not be the new family of Elián. Doctor Yamila de Armas declared on television: "Considering its behaviour and structure, the family in Miami seems to work like a commercial company" (Granma 2000a, 5).

On the other hand, the notion of "nationality" was precious for the Cuban government, which has bet all its political future to the popular appreciation of the ideas of independence and national sovereignty. Certainly, Cuban nationalism is very strong, and not only among the supporters of the government. It is a multi ideological mythology. Most Cubans, no matter what they thought about Fidel Castro and his government, rejected the transformation of Elián into an American boy, which was what the propagandists suggested would happen if the kid stayed in Miami. The Cuban television showed endlessly a scene in Miami in which Ileana Ross-Lehtinen, one of the three Cuban American US Congresspersons, covered Elián with an American flag. For many Cubans in the island, it was an insult. About the incident of the flag, a well known journalist, Nicanor León Cotayo, wrote in the Party's newspaper, Granma: "That was a symbol of the future our nation would have if our enemies ever win" (Cotayo 1999, 3). Naturally, the propaganda carefully avoided showing images of nationalistic expressions by Cubans in Miami, and instead, remarked that the child was being "brainwashed" of his memories of the motherland, and his candour bought by the brilliant symbols of a strange culture, Mickey Mouse, Batman, Disneyland. There was even a "Round Table" on television with the extravagant title "How much time is necessary to change the mind of a six year old boy?" Nationalism was definitely a winning card. In the paroxysm of that nationalistic fever, the Cuban government sent Elián, when his grandmothers visited him in Miami, a book with pictures of Elpidio Valdés, an extremely popular cartoon character, a *mambí*, a warrior for the Cuban independence against Spain in the XIX Century. Elpidio Valdés became a symbol of the national pride against Batman and Mickey. The television showed time and again his "call" to fight for the "liberation" of Elián. Interviewed by Juventud Rebelde, the newspaper of the Young Communist League, the creator of Elpidio Valdés, the prestigious filmmaker Juan Padrón declared: "Elpidio Valdés is the favourite character of the children in this island. In other countries the favourite character could be Asterix, Mickey Mouse or Batman, but Elpidio is Cuba's and Elián is Cuba's as well" (Perera 2000, 3). Juventud Rebelde published a comic cartoon featuring Batman standing on the cupola of Capitol Hill, surrounded by bugs that represented the Cuban exiles. The bugs shouted: "Watch out, Batman, Elpidio is coming!" (Juventud Rebelde 2000a, 8-9). A reproduction of a picture of Elpidio sent to Elián was also sent to each primary school of the island. Even in the most remote schools in the mountains of Sierra Maestra, it was possible to find the same picture of an smiling Elpidio Valdés with a phrase dedicated to "our beloved child" Elián. It was probably the most precious possession of those kids of the mountains.

Cuban nationalism was remote for the Americans, but not the appeal to family values. Even though they might be suspicious about the "Cuban family," the government propagandists knew that the family was an important theme in the American popular culture and even a political issue in the 2000 election, dominated by the shadows of the Clinton scandals. This was also a correct assumption. American

public opinion was immediately attracted by the soap-operesque plot of the familiar dispute on the fate of the boy. Gallup found out in February 2000 that eight out of ten Americans were following Elián's story, a figure that matched other major national stories like the Clinton-Lewinsky affair and the death of John F. Kennedy Jr. (Rosenberg 2000). Systematically, polls showed a consistent support by the American public for the return of the child, once the story jumped onto the front pages. In December 1999, Gallup found that public opinion was evenly split: 45 percent supported returning the child and a similar number was in favour of keeping him in the United States. But on January 10th, 57 per cent were in favour of returning Elián to Cuba and, amazingly, two weeks later, on January 26th, the balance was 67-27 per cent in favour of giving the child back to his father. (Rosenberg 2000). There were moments when that support seemed to be falling again. It briefly fell under the 60 per cent, but it rose again to around two thirds. Polls conducted by many different organisations accumulated and appeared symbolically and discursively juxtaposed in media stories every day. What the Cuban government wanted had happened: "an institutionalisation of public opinion through the intensive polling" (Splichal 1997). At the same time this provided political support for the American government's decision to recognise the rights of Elián's father, and restricted the room for manoeuvre of the Cuban exiles and the American right wingers. It was very impressive how a government like Cuba's, which rules in the absence of independent polling or media, made such a precise reading of the political function of public opinion in American society, and particularly in the environment of an Administration obsessed with polls and public opinion like Bill Clinton's.

By the end of the dispute, the impact of the little boy's story was even bigger than anything seen before, considering the time it had lasted. Elián himself was innocently responsible for this high profile. Elián was certainly a beautiful boy, with lovely smiles and touching expressions of sadness. He was spontaneous and vivacious, and always provided good television. He was, besides, a white Latin kid. It is arguable whether he would have become as important if he had been black. The Cuban propagandists, maybe unconsciously in the beginning, but very consciously later, added a racial ingredient to the affair. It gave great prominence to Hanser, the little black kid who shared the table with Elián in the school in Cárdenas. In Cuba, where nearly 35 per cent of the population is black, and another 35 per cent mixed, that was a valuable symbolic factor. Those black and mulatto men and women in Cuba never saw on television any black kids anywhere near Elián in Miami. The Cuban government made sure everybody took notice of this fact, although not directly, since they feared being accused of manipulating racial divisions. Instead, some little girls and boys, talking on television, candidly noticed: "We have not seen any black kids near the house where Elián lives in Miami" (García 2000, 5). Hanser, the charismatic six year old black kid, starred in a frequently broadcast TV clip, in which he responded for the absent Elián when their teacher called out the register of students. In another melodramatic clip, the talented Hanser appeared protecting the abandoned seat of Elián from any intruders. There were widespread rumours that the two boys really cannot stand each other, and were not best friends, as the media said. However, Hanser and a mulatto kid, Rubén, who apparently was the Elián's real best friend, were among

the five children sent by the Cuban government to Washington to accompany Elián during the last days of the dispute. Hanser, Rubén, and the black teacher of all of them in Cárdenas, provided an emotional link with the black and mulatto Cubans. But, undoubtedly, to assure wide American coverage and popular sympathy, it was a crucial factor that Elián was white.

The American public opinion was also enchanted by the other leading character of the script written by Cuban propagandists, Juan Miguel González, Elián's father. Indeed, the Cuban government deserves credit for the enormous risk taken trusting Juan Miguel González. Apparently, they did not trust him very much in the beginning. Fidel Castro famously said that González had notably changed since the start of the crisis. The Commander in Chief himself interviewed Juan Miguel González in order to see if he was the right person for the leading role in the campaign. Later, Fidel Castro told NBC: "We invited him because we wanted to know him, know what he thought, what he wished, his behaviour with the child... I personally asked him all those necessary questions" (Granma 1999b, 4-5). Apparently, Fidel Castro was quite satisfied after that first meeting. But Juan Miguel was not perfect. He was a member of the Communist Party, but this is not, in the current conditions of Cuba, enough guarantee of political reliability. Although most of the González had left the island and established in Miami, Juan Miguel's father had been for years an ardent sympathiser of the Revolution. But Juan Miguel himself was a worker in the major tourist resort of Varadero, a symbol of a new semi-capitalist economy. Besides, he was a notorious womaniser, although his credentials as a good father were beyond dispute. Despite all his weak points, Juan Miguel very soon became a revelation. He, like his child, was good at making television. He was not an intellectual. He spoke, moved and dressed with a kind of macho candour that enchanted both Cubans and Americans. He was maybe not very handsome, but he does have an extraordinary likeness to his own child, a fact that was symbolically and emotionally remarked on in the discourse of the propaganda. The tough, masculine, rough-voiced Juan Miguel was, however, capable of shedding tears in front of a nation that firmly believes that boys should not cry. He cried, but not too much: he could also seem to be made of stone. Luckily for him, and for the propagandists, he had just fathered his second child, from his second wife. Television often showed Juan Miguel with Elián's cute little brother, rhetorically emphasising the tender fatherhood Juan Miguel could give to his oldest child too. With some discretion, to avoid looking manipulative of a baby, the propaganda introduced the character of Elián's brother, and even more carefully, the character of Elián's stepmother, whom the propagandists rarely allowed to speak in public. Probably they considered the negative connotations that the figure of the stepmother has in popular culture and specifically, in the imagination of children educated with stories like Cinderella and Snow White. When Elián finally met his father, he was immediately, unsurprisingly, seen playing with his brother, but his stepmother still kept a low profile role.

Probably no other living Cuban family has ever been so exposed to public scrutiny. There were during those months infinite rumours about Juan Miguel and the other members of the family, even about the dead ones. The Cuban government notably avoided criticising Elizabeth Brotons, the dead mother of Elián, but aggressively attacked Elisabeth's second husband, who also died in the shipwreck,



and charged him with the responsibility for the fatal journey. The official Party newspaper, *Granma*, published a long biographical account of Elizabeth Brotons and declared, carefully: "We have exposed the facts, conclusions are up to you" (*Granma* 2000b, 1). But the title of the article was a posthumous diploma of political sanctity for Elizabeth: "Led to tragedy with threats and violence." Cuban propaganda presented Elisabeth as a victim of deceit or threats by her husband, while the Miami media called her "heroic" for having given her life in order to bring freedom to her child. None of the two versions gained any credibility among Cubans in the island, who found it hard to believe that Elizabeth Brotons took the boat to USA involuntarily, and almost as hard to believe that she attempted the trip in order to bring her six year old child to political freedom. At the same time as the Cuban propagandists were busy cleaning Elián's mother memory, the Miami media tried to discredit Juan Miguel González and Elián's grandmothers as puppets of the Cuban government. This latter responded by presenting the criminal records of the Miami relatives of the child. Playing astutely with underground flows of information and rumours, Fidel Castro even insinuated the truth of a rumour that Lázaro González, the Miami-resident uncle of Elián, a former sports instructor, was a homosexual molestor of male teenagers, which is probably the lowest criminal condition Cuban machos can imagine. Fidel Castro explained the motives for that sudden discretion: "Our press only made a little reference to it because we did not want to look as if we were creating stories" (*Juventud Rebelde* 2000b, 3-4). Although American journalists verified the accuracy of the story, they did not dare to publish it, even though it could have been fatal for the relatives in Miami. In Cuba, however, everybody knew what crimes Fidel Castro was saying Lázaro González committed. Naturally, the flow of rumours and underground information inside Cuba had often a clear starting point: the offices of the Ideological Department of the Central Committee of the Party, in the Square of the Revolution, Havana.

But the principal piece of the game of propaganda was Juan Miguel González, not his uncle. For the Cuban government, he was an unknown, but their whole case was based on the sincerity of his claim to have his child back with him in Cuba. There was a national underground debate about whether Juan Miguel González would decide to stay in the USA if the government allowed him to go there to take his child back. In Miami, the other González declared that Juan Miguel had once said that he was interested in moving to the USA, months before the tragedy of his child. Many Cubans in the island did not doubt it. Easily accepted as a good father, Juan Miguel González found it harder work getting credit as a sincere revolutionary. Obviously, also the propagandists of the exiles and the internal opposition knew how to spread a rumour among the very curious Cubans. For months, Juan Miguel González "refused" to travel to Miami, but there came a moment when his continual refusal were too suspicious. In the place of Juan Miguel González, the government sent Elián's two grandmothers. The move made sense. The propaganda of the exiles in Miami, and even the news in some conservative American mainstream media like the prestigious *The Wall Street Journal*, had been based on the figure of Elián's late mother, Elizabeth Brotons, and what they said was her last desire, that her child stayed in "a land of freedom" (*Associated Press* 1999, *Traverso* 2000). It was a huge mistake, the late Elizabeth Brotons could not



match the impact, the visibility, the mobility and the sympathy of the living Juan Miguel. In the media war, Elizabeth Brotons could not appear, give interviews, cry and beg. In addition to the manipulation of the character of Elizabeth Brotons, the Miami media gave an increasing importance to a “substitute” mother for Elián, his cousin, Marisleysis González. She was a young and nervous girl, who claimed to consider Elián as her own child, and who was quite beautiful too. She wept easily and so also provided very good dramatic television. When the role of Marisleysis González grew to alarming proportions, the fire of the Cuban artillery was concentrated on her. She was called “shameless,” “cynical,” “hysterical,” and even, almost poetically, “prosthetic mother” (Granma 2000c, 1, Granma 2000d, 1). Her most famous nickname was *la lobezna*, the little she-wolf. The big she-wolf was Ileana Ross-Lehtinen, the Cuban American US Congresswoman, who received the nickname of *Loba feroz*, the ferocious she-wolf, from Fidel Castro himself, after the episode of the American flag covering Elián. The propagandists got the clue and delivered a whole list of fabulous nicknames and humoristic TV clips. In one of the latter, the face of Ileana Ross was deformed until it became a wolf’s. Another clip, very much criticised among the public, featured a Catholic nun called Jeanne O’Laughlin, who had an episodic importance during the first months of the crisis, as a demon. O’Laughlin was called “fascist,” “corrupt,” “sold to the mafia,” and, in the climax of a linguistic intemperance, the official newspaper of the Party, Granma, dedicated to her an article with the title “Sinner Nun” (López 2000, 5). That was a moment when the linguistic and political norms of the dispute descended dramatically to the level of a street gang fight. It rose again, slightly, probably because the public openly disliked that style. The improvement, however, was not very big, and until the end of the crisis, Cuban media continued giving nicknames to their enemies, particularly to Marisleysis and her father Lázaro González.

The case entered into an impasse, while the lawyers hired by some of the major factions among the Cuban exiles to represent the Miami branch of the González family, battled in the courts against the USA government, who had decided to take the child away from Miami and to give him back to his father. The complex American judicial system was meticulously explained in the televised “Round Tables” to the common Cubans, who suddenly learned everything about it, from the political composition of the Supreme Court to the responsibilities of the minor local courts. Indeed, on television, Cubans received a whole university degree on the USA. It was risky, but profitable in terms of internal credibility. The amount of information received everyday in the Cuban media from the USA, and from Miami in particular, was so large that it swamped the capacity of the ideological apparatus of the Party to control publication. In the Cuban media, where even the most trivial stories are carefully examined and edited before being published, the crisis around Elián created a completely new situation, and directors, editors and journalists received major responsibilities. Numerous American personalities appeared on Cuban television, most of them, understandably, favourable to the return of the kid. But for the first time, Cubans could see and listen to the leaders of the Cuban exiles, talking to CNN or other American TV channels, whose reports were re-broadcast by Cuban television. It was an extraordinarily clever decision. The leaders of the Cuban exile were unable to present a united leadership, and instead, appeared as a myriad of little factional caciques. Worse for them, they were seen as extremists, and disconnected from the real situation inside the island. In the streets of

Miami, there were revolts and acts of desperation and vandalism that received wide coverage in the Cuban media. As a matter of fact, there was desperation on both sides. After many months fighting the case, losing it was something neither the Cuban government nor the exile factions could afford. In the early spring of 2000, Juan Miguel González finally travelled to Washington and killed any doubts about his sincerity. In the morning of April 22, the Saturday before Easter, the FBI stormed the home of the González in Miami, where Elián had been since December, and took the child away. Then, AP distributed worldwide a photograph of a FBI agent pointing his gun at Elián and a man who had hidden the child in a closet. The man was, coincidentally, one of the fishermen who had rescued the boy from the sea. A cynical analyst could have said that such a coincidence seemed to be staged by an exquisite playwright. The AP photograph caused riots in Miami. In Cuba, it was discretely shown once or twice. Later that afternoon, Elián and his father were seen together on CNN, smiling. It was a little war of photographs. The Miami media continued presenting the photograph of the FBI agent scaring Elián, and the Cubans replied by distributing daily the pieces of what became a whole photographic series about the new happiness of Elián with his father. Every child in the island received free a series of postcards of Elián and his father, smiling. The smiles seemed to be real, sincere. And Cubans believed that, after all, the child would indeed return.

## Aftermaths

In the summer of 2001, Fidel Castro opened the “Museum of the Battle of Ideas,” in Cárdenas, the family town of Elián. Serious, and honestly believing that it was a memorable act, Fidel inspected the exhibits, made up of different objects related to Elián’s ordeal. Poor little Elián was next to him, probably a bit scared of the great old man. As promised by the Cuban government, after the return of Elián, the campaign of intensive political propaganda has not stopped. The main storyline of the propaganda is now the liberation of the five Cuban agents serving long sentences in American prisons. The social and emotional impact of this new campaign is from any point of view inferior of Elián’s, and it has gained relatively little visibility in international media. From a strictly political point of view, the Cuban government must feel satisfied with the results of the dispute around Elián, and not only for the enormous political credibility gained for having been able to bring the child back. The crisis around Elián gave a new impulse to the bipartisan groups in the US Congress lobbying for the relaxing or the ending of the economic embargo against Cuba. In 2001-2002, Cuba managed to open and sustained a trade in food and medicines with American companies, although still with severe financial and legal restrictions. The consequences for the leaders of the Cuban exiles were disastrous. In 2001, the Cuban American National Foundation split between hardliners and so-called modernisers, the latter group taking control of the organisation. However, the support of the Bush Administration and its decision to veto any relaxation of the policy towards Cuba, have brought some room for manoeuvre and reorganisation to the groups in Miami. Besides, in the aftermath of September 11th, Cuba has entered in a new period of great economic difficulties, with the fall in the price of its main exports, sugar and nickel, the stagnation of tourism, and the rise in petrol prices. In the island, people prepare for the worst,

again. Sometimes, Elián makes a brief appearance in public, surrounded by the pity and the care of a whole nation. He is rarely seen smiling. There is still in his eyes the shadow of an unspeakable sadness, something that politicians, propaganda masters, journalists and academics will never understand.

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