

ON POLITICAL CHANGE IN CUBA: A COMPARATIVE INTRODUCTION

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Two central interrelated issues concern the panel on politics: the problem of democracy, that is, its absence in Cuba; and the belief that Cuba's present regime, its current form of government, is not institutionalized, that it is transitory (please notice the use of the term "transition" in several of the panels of this meeting).

Indeed, one of the papers¹ directly focuses on Cuba's weak democratic culture that permitted the fascination with and support for undemocratic *caudillos*, and the need to transform Cuban culture to institutionalize democracy in the island. A second paper² focuses on a classical paradigm of the successful prince to interpret Fidel Castro's remarkable maintenance in power, certainly not through democratic means. Finally, a third paper³ relates the issues, reflecting on why the Cuban undemocratic regime—necessarily presumed unstable, transitory—has neither broken down nor disappeared.

I think it is important to stress here the weakness of deterministic theories of democracy. For there is change, innovation, in history. Democracy had never been institutionalized in Germany, for example, prior to 1945. In fact, Hitler argued against it precisely on grounds that it was not a national tradition, not part of the nation's character.⁴ Yet Germany is today

a vital democracy. Predictions of doom notwithstanding, India for decades has kept a relatively democratic regime.

For when we explore the sociology of democracy we find certain cultural and socioeconomic conditions that facilitate its institutionalization and some that hinder its success or present obstacles that must be overcome. But because of the historical exceptions that are found, we can only safely say that ultimately democracy is not institutionalized when there is an inadequate support for its definitional or axiomatic components. That is, democracy cannot exist in the absence of:

- broad support for a competitive electoral system;
- broad support for the rule of law, constitutional rule, constitutionality; and
- political tolerance of opposition.

Unfortunately, obviously, these conditions are still absent in Cuba.

The point is that Cuba's successful democratization does not require a total cultural transformation or a total economic transformation. Cultural change can come about, economic changes as well. Yet if these changes do not include a change within the nation's

1. José Antonio Font, "Organización y Formación Democrática en Cuba," in this volume.

2. Alfred G. Cuzán, "Fidel Castro: A Machiavellian Prince?," in this volume.

3. Juan del Aguila, "Reflections on a Non-Transition in Cuba," in this volume.

4. Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf*.

power structure in support of the very specific components of what is called political democracy, unfortunately, Cuba's democratic project will not succeed.

To give two recent examples from the economic realm—as this association is for the study of the economy—the economic regime of Egypt has changed: increasingly it has become more of a mixed economy with a greater role for the private sector and the market. And China's old, full-blown statist, command, collectivist economy has been liberalized into what the Chinese call a socialist market economy. But both countries retain undemocratic, more or less repressive regimes.

Conversely, the recent post-1990 democratization of Nicaragua—with all its tentativeness and problems—did not take place right after a massive, general cultural or economic transformation. Rather, it occurred when the structure of power decided to accept competitive elections in which opposition electoral victories were recognized.

You might consider trivial this emphasis on the support for democracy, especially from those in control of the state. Several studies have stressed other more remote political factors to consolidate democracy. For example, the development of a “lively civil society.”⁵ It is not that this (among other) characteristics is absent from well-established democracies. But that there are some types of authoritarian regimes with active civil societies, fairly autonomous from government, concretely in economic and cultural sectors, as opposed to the political sectors of civil life that are more tightly controlled. This is precisely why these kinds of authoritarian regime—for example, recall Fulgencio Batista's in Cuba—have been considered to possess a “limited” pluralism.⁶ Indeed, given inadequate democratic support, a very active “civil society” typically tends to result in revolutionary situa-

tions and authoritarian reactions. Obviously, in advising how to establish/consolidate democracy, actors should not be distracted, focusing first on derivative factors or conditions rather than on principal definitional characteristics.

I will leave you with these thoughts. Just a few weeks ago I returned to Cuba. I had not been there in 40 years. And I found a different country than the one I left during the early Castro period. As in the old Soviet Union I did not see indigence in the streets: people have a shirt, a pair of shoes. I was told that these are appearances; that there is hunger. I can tell you that even in the dollar parallel economy there are scarcities, the shortages of the typical mediocrity of socialism. So in a *paladar* (a private-home restaurant) you can get pork and chicken but not black beans and bananas, for example.

Most surprising, the revolutionary fervor, the frenzy of earlier years is gone. Cuba has a dictatorship, of course. State mechanisms of control/coercion are in place. But the enthusiastic support for the revolutionary government is gone. This gives space to the population. For instance: it is obvious that the taxis in the best hotels are driven by privileged individuals with strong ties to the government. Well, taxi drivers are openly critical of the regime: that it does not work, that it must be changed. These opinions were volunteered to me without prompting on my part. It is evident that within theoretically pro-government sectors there is a critical, oppositionist climate of opinion.

Also, there has been an extensive corrupt bureaucratization. You can buy the best cigars for very little with the right contacts—they are stolen. The maid in the hotel delivers hotel property to you as a “gift” to take home, expecting that you will tip her. And so on.

5. Juan Linz and Alfred Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation*, for instance, consider a “lively civil society” the first requirement to consolidate democracies, though the former opined many years earlier (in his 1964 essay “An Authoritarian Regime: Spain”) that the exceptionally long-lived Franco authoritarian regime was characterized by a relatively autonomous active civil society. Alain Rouquie, *Como Renacen las Democracias*, exemplified cogently how in the absence of support for (the definition of) democracy, the presence of the latter can impede democratic institutionalization.

6. These “incongruencies” evidence the great plasticity or indeterminacy of social life, as Clifford Geertz, *After the Fact*, brought to our attention.

Ironically, a “privatization” of the economy—an unprincipled “capitalism,” if you will, or “private enterprise”—has developed through the stealing of state property. This process is uncontrollable because of its massive dimension and impossibility to create the mechanisms of control in the current huge, centralized system.⁷

Individuals break the law not only to provide flexibility, get things done, in otherwise unworkable state structures but also to solve personal economic problems. And the extent of the cheating is such that it is curiously visible. We think of “black markets” as having higher prices than legal ones. This is not entirely the case in Cuba, where you can find lower prices in some of the stolen-goods sectors, as exemplified earlier in the case of cigars. The extensive networks were explained to me. A truck driver, for instance, claims that he has used more gasoline than in reality and sells what he has left in the tank. This involves a chain: up to the supervisor, down to the consumer. In the delivery of chickens to the final customers, short-changing takes place at various points.

A surprising part of the decline in support for the revolutionary project is shown by the reception that the common people give us the exiles in the streets—it is so warm and friendly. In the streets of Havana I was frequently asked “Spaniard?” I said, no I am a Cuban. Amazingly I was never a *gusano* (worm, traitor). Not infrequently the warmth toward me was coupled with some criticisms about conditions in Cuba and the desirability of leaving the country. There is a marked cleavage between the official propaganda and the common people’s beliefs and sentiments.

I do not wish to give a wrong impression. In Cuba there is not an active, large-scale opposition movement. You do not notice in the streets an active opposition ferment ready for collective action, despite

the dissatisfaction. Active oppositionists consist of a minority guided by exceptional moral feelings of duty and self-sacrifice, who have opted for a peaceful route of dissent faced with a state apparatus all too prone to use repressive force against them. Repression is not as intensive and extensive as in the early years. Yet it is selectively recurrent. One gets the feeling that short-lived crowds or riots, sporadic protests, can take place, but that the government would decapitate and impede the development of a sustained movement to bring change. Models of political mobilization/control tell us that such perceptions tend to inhibit the development of movements.⁸

One of the main weaknesses of the opposition is weak internal communications and hence uncoordinated isolation. I felt that outside of Cuba more information is disclosed and made public of events negative to the government than inside Cuba itself. Thus, for example, a protest in town X is reported in the U.S. media while it is not known, or very scarcely so, inside Cuba. And that the foreign media, Radio Martí included, did not have a strong presence. The state-monopolized local media portrays unreal images of a highly mobilized society in the government’s support.

Indeed, in Cuba there is a salient bifurcation between the people, the society, and a state apparatus that forms a misguided force led by *un medio loco*, a capricious, domineering and deliberate absolutist who keeps self-messianic illusions. Not too much reason is left to the state apparatus. Those in power claim that their kind of “democracy” is needed to provide free medical care and free education and a few social services to the population; that the rationing is needed to distribute goods fairly, made scarce by the U.S. “blockade”; that the dollarization of the economy will be transitory; that Cubans are much better off than Latin Americans living under neoliberal capitalism.

7. On corruption see Jorge F. Pérez-López, *Cuba’s Second Economy: From Behind the Scenes to Center Stage*.

8. On what I am calling political mobilization/control models, see among others, David Easton, *A Systems Analysis of Political Life*; Charles Tilly, *From Mobilization to Revolution*; Rasma Karklins and Roger Petersen, “Decision Calculus of Protesters and Regimes: Eastern Europe 1989,” *Journal of Politics* 55 (1993).

Certainly there are people who still believe in the Comandante en Jefe, the Partido Comunista de Cuba, the mass organizations. I spoke with a few members of the Poder Popular, who conveyed they were enthusiastic and faithful believers in the regime, happy in an idealistic sense of social service, of doing good for the community. This was very sad. For what they consider the core positive aspects of the regime, the educational and health systems, appear unviable as conceived. The education with free high school boarding schools—as if universalizing Castro's Belén School for everyone—seemed to me extremely costly; and the report of the scarcities found, and the contributions that people have to make, in the hospitals are explained to the visitor precisely to indicate deficiencies in the system.

What is, of course, unacceptable to democrats is that one cannot freely as groups or organizations, collectively and publicly advocate alternatives.

It is nonetheless striking that in the lifetime of the founder of the revolution, Max Weber's routinization of charisma and the sociology of the conflict between ideals and realities already are operating to bring about regime change. Axiomatically again, dismantling authoritarian regimes in which the leader is unwilling to give up power can only take place "forcefully," that is, imposing on him such solution. Simplifying, two extreme poles of sociological "ideal-types" in some countries have occurred: coup d'état and revolution.

The first, a frequent Latin American phenomenon, is a rebellion principally of the armed forces of the state. Notice that coups entail a break in the chain of command within the state and hence a break in the cohesion or organization of the ruling group replacing its leadership.

The second consists of a rebellion principally by the citizenry. In Latin America these have often taken a violent form: the constitution of an "army" of civilians to overthrow the regime. Although their chance of success is enhanced with a break in the cohesion of

the ruling group, revolutions have taken place against disciplined government civilian and military forces that do not experience defections (e.g., Nicaragua 1979). Given domestic and international conditions, this scenario of military armed development and defeat is foreclosed for Cuba according to several papers presented in this meeting.

There is also another animal: so-called peaceful revolutions, that is, changes in regime that take place precipitated by the growth of unarmed mass protests that get to escape the government's control. In some cases, an overwhelmed ruler abdicates faced with broad escalating rebellion (e.g., Iran 1979); in others the ruling group itself splits and deposes the ruler rather than attempt to massively quell the popular rebellion (e.g., East Germany 1989). The climate of opinion currently in Cuba—I suspect and noted—is that the government would repressively impede its losing control of the situation in the streets (e.g., do as in China, not East Germany, 1989).

Ultimately then we are left with the notion that the regime will remain in place because of its nature: a towering charismatic strongman, no-defector regime. This means that no dissidence or factions develop within the ruling group, the military remaining loyal as well to the dominant *caudillo*. What the ruler wishes prevails even "against reason." Within the highly cohesive ruling group, around the charismatic leader, no viable alternative leadership is considered: such is the perceived difference or gap in personal quality/resources between the leader and the members of his top ruling cadres—they act as minions. Indeed, while I have reported the discontent expressed at lower levels of party, it is as if more vigilance operated at the highest level of the regime. A series of hypothesis have been presented in our panel on this phenomenon.⁹

Allow me some reflections on the last Somoza dictator, for although in contrast to Castro a minor international figure he was viewed charismatically¹⁰ by his followers and retained a tight control over them or attained their subordination. There are various spe-

9. In Juan M. del Aguila's presentation, "Reflections on a Non-Transition in Cuba," in this volume.

cies in the regime family that concern us: ideological social revolutionary as Fidel Castro's; conservative modernizing as Anastasio Somoza Debayle's; and so on. Notice that the leader need not be the regime's founder, for in the latter's case, charisma had been traditionalized in family—a dynasty.

In my mission to democratize Nicaragua I encountered a regime that at its core and highest level possessed archaic qualities posited by Max Weber's typology of a patrimonial regime: a centralized absolute monarchy whose leader rules at his favor and exercises his power in the context of patron-client ties. The state is "his"; he protects and benefits from loyalty; loyalty is paramount, the maintenance of unity of the group; the norm is that obedience results in status and material rewards; it also is proven in practice that disfavor of the ruler can result even in physical extinction. During my tenure I saw this rule's re-enactment: the purge of a party "leader" who went into self-imposed exile incapable of obtaining support from a single person, the accidental death of a military "leader" who had become outspokenly critical. Ruling group sociology consisted of totally isolated "dissidents." Compliance continued, even among the few who responded to my initiatives agreeing that the "rational" course for the ruling group and the nation was an early retirement of General Somoza.

Actually those who still found themselves in the ruling elite were there because of a personal history of loyalty and subordination, otherwise they would not be there. And a self-identity of *somocista* (Somoza follower) at least had been reinforced by the fact that his or her successful career—membership in the political elite—resulted from loyal service.

But Max Weber reminded us that we cannot rest with material payoffs. The bonds of fealty and subordination are rationalized with personalistic-affective

considerations. An ethos of *familismo-amiguismo* is central to the structure of authority: the ruler Father, Big Brother, even *amigo*.¹¹ As more than one top level Nicaraguan official told me: Somoza is like our father, our older brother....

Regime practice results in a peculiar attitude: the leader is indispensable, in his absence we cannot maintain our cohesion, we would divide ourselves—chaos, total loss of power would be inevitable. Such perceptions are reinforced by a form of rulership that foments rivalries among the loyal cadres. We cannot replace him, if we do we will disintegrate—the often-heard theme of impending anarchy. That these concepts be expressed to me throughout an escalating revolutionary situation supported by a national/international coalition proved foolhardy, of course. But as Somoza told me several times: I am irreplaceable, I need time to prepare my succession, my people tell me, you cannot abandon us, if you do our party and army will be lost to the chaos.

It is well to also remember the highly manichean matrix in which this regime type functions: we are surrounded by "enemies" who seek to destroy us and who are much worse than us, Somoza's Evil Incarnate: Communism!; Castro's: Capitalism, Imperialism! A great fear of change prevails within the top elite that suppresses rational considerations that the leader has fulfilled his function and a new period be started. This, of course, is reinforced when there is opposition disorganization and radicalism. These are ideas, sentiments and attitudes that reproduce behaviors in the state's structure of political power for regime maintenance.

In sum, I think that our panel touches on some of the important current hurdles facing democratization in Cuba.

10. My dictionary defines "charisma" as follows: power to inspire or attract others; exceptional charm; divinely conferred power or talent. Luck also can be a charismatic attribute.

11. Such symbolism is common to many regime types—e.g., Eva Perón, *La Razón de Mi Vida*; Peter Burke, "The Fabrication of Louis XIV" (*History Today*, February 1992); Lisa Pine, "Nazism in the Classroom" (*History Today*, April 1997); and recall Haiti's "Papa Doc."