

## THE SPANISH CARIBBEAN AND ITS INFLUENCE ON A TRANSITION IN CUBA

Jorge Luis Romeu<sup>1</sup>

When Fidel Castro came to power in 1959, Cubans on both sides of the political differend committed a costly strategic error. We allowed our internal struggle to become a football in the Cold War game. Castro sided with the Soviet Union, at a time when a nuclear war could destroy everything. The Cuban opposition sided with the United States, who sought to prevent the establishment of a Soviet foothold, 90 miles from its shores. We Cubans have never learned that old American saying: “politics ends at the water’s edge.” Nor have we learned from the Mexican lesson of Maximilian and the French intervention of the 1860s, when the conservatives, after losing the civil war against Juárez and the Liberals, requested their help.

In the case of Cuba, the United States launched its economic embargo, which Castro adroitly used to bring together the country around him to face of a foreign enemy, as well as to play little David, both very old strategies for such situation. And the Cuban opposition distanced itself from Latin America and the Spanish Caribbean, because the region supported Fidel Castro and his government for practical political, economic, strategic and demagogic reasons. This was yet another costly miscalculation, one that alienated the Cuban opposition from its natural Latin American milieu. We failed to understand the real causes behind their behavior, and to finesse a response adequately.

The Spanish Caribbean countries took advantage of the Cuban situation in at least three ways. First, we all produce similar goods: sugar cane, tobacco, coffee, fruits and seafood. Our sister nations obtained the Cuban quotas in the U.S. market, and also inherited the American tourism and economic investment. But historically, this was no different from Cuba’s policy during the 1790s, under Governor Luis de Las Casas and his Economic Adviser, don Francisco de Arango y Parreño. For, after the Africans revolted in Haiti destroying that island’s slave-based economy, Cuba seized the opportunity to launch its sugar and coffee industries that, until then, had languished due to the intense competition of this French colony. Shady as such policy may seem, it constitutes a frequent procedure in international relations.

Secondly, as the political attention of the United States focused on Castro’s Cuba, it eased on the other Spanish Caribbean countries, giving them greater latitude. Their governments, thence, had an added interest in maintaining Castro’s regime, from which they scored excellent points both, economically as well as politically.

Finally, several of our sister republics were far from democratic, and could not provide a better life for their citizens. Hence, they found it convenient to nominally support the government in Havana, while maintaining the privileges of their upper classes at

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home. For, such political posturing is appealing to their poverty-stricken masses and diverts the attention away from their own lack of civil and political liberties, goods, and government services. Some people refer to such procedures as demagoguery.

We can summarize the above discussion into three main reasons that have helped sustain the present Cuban regime for the past 46 years. They are: (1) President Castro's political shrewdness and ability to survive; (2) the Cold War and the U.S. policy toward Cuba; and (3) the economic and political interests of the Ibero-American countries, as well as of other foreign countries, vis-à-vis the Cuban regime.

However, in the past few years several significant events have occurred, directly affecting the above three circumstances and opening a unique window of opportunity that facilitates a transition to a pluralistic system and a normalization of the Cuban situation.

First, President Castro is close to 80 years old now, nearing the end of his natural life. His brother Raul, the official heir to Cuba's Presidency, has a slim chance of becoming his successor. There have been already two entire generations of capable leaders lost to the absolute control of the Castro clique. The deteriorated socioeconomic and political conditions inside the island encourage the possibility for negotiations between Castro's younger successors and Cuba's internal and external opposition.

Second, the end of the Cold War more than a decade ago, has left the United States as the only world superpower, thus diminishing the danger of a nuclear confrontation. This allows the possibility of implementing a change in the 45-year-old American policy toward Cuba, without the U.S. losing face or endangering its security.

Finally, Ibero America has advanced politically and economically in the last half century, and its interests are now broader. Today, it can prosper without having to prey on the Cuban economy. And they need a stable and pluralistic Cuba if they really want to foster their own economic development and political pluralism that will bring even more support from the

European Union, the United States and other First World governments.

The implementation of a peaceful transition, in Cuba or anywhere else, however, requires a negotiation process between the opposition and those at the helm. But such negotiations need the presence of a mutually acceptable arbiter or facilitator, to help negotiate the differences and to guarantee the terms of the agreements. Such arbiter could naturally come from Ibero America and the Spanish Caribbean, as occurred for example, during the bloody civil wars in Central America in the 1980s.

But, at the present time, such facilitators or arbiters are not likely to materialize, due to the lack of trust and even dislike, between the Spanish Caribbean countries and the Cuban opposition. For, in addition to the elements discussed above, there are other historical and more subjective reasons.

We Cubans have considered ourselves whiter, richer, and more sophisticated, than most other Ibero American countries, due to our longer colonial status under Spain first, and to the proximity and special status with the United States, later. This has made us feel superior, many times putting down our own and looking northward instead, like the statue of Diana Cazadora situated in Paseo de la Reforma, in Mexico City. This attitude has not won many friends in Ibero America, and adds a dimension of resentment to the above-mentioned political and economic reasons for them to remain aloof.

It is, however, imperative to show how much all the above reasons are passé and wrong, and lead to nowhere. It is imperative that Cubans recognize how we are a Spanish Caribbean nation and, hence, part of Ibero America. And it is imperative to show the Spanish Caribbean nations how we will all gain, and not lose, if Cuba resolves its internal problems peacefully, through a process of negotiations facilitated by our own, and not by others, farther away. This is what we try to do here.

Therefore, these are the two objectives of our paper: to show how the Spanish Caribbean is Cuba's political habitat, to which it belongs geographically and culturally, and to show how such habitat can play a

major role in Cuba's transition to pluralism, after President Castro's natural and inevitable disappearance, providing the badly needed facilitators and increasing the possibilities of successful occurrence, in minimum time and at the minimum cost.

In the rest of this paper we discuss the origins, development, and fragmentation into isolated countries, of the peoples and nations integrating the Spanish Caribbean. Then, we discuss some implications of the participation of such nations in facilitating the process of a peaceful transition to an open society in Cuba.

### COMMON HISTORICAL ROOTS

We spouse the hypothesis that the Spanish Caribbean is one, a homogeneous region, with specific characteristics in each country but with a common identity. One could then legitimately ask why it is that today such Caribbean is not united, but fragmented into a host of isolated, small, and poor countries.

To provide some answers to this challenging question we must first define what we understand by the Spanish Caribbean: the socioeconomic and cultural collection of islands and coastal areas of the Caribbean Basin proper, as well as selected coastal areas of the Gulf of Mexico, which were colonized and held by Spain throughout the XVI to the XVIII Centuries and struggled through independence wars and nation building in the XIX and XX Centuries.

Consequently, we do not include in the Spanish Caribbean the islands colonized by the French, English, or other Europeans, nor the parts of the Caribbean coast of Central America populated by the Black Caribs or Garifuna. We mean Puerto Rico, Dominican Republic, Cuba, plus the Caribbean coasts of Venezuela, Colombia, and Panama, the Gulf coast of the Mexican states of Veracruz, Yucatán and Campeche, and to a lesser extent, selected areas of the Caribbean coast of Honduras (e.g., San Pedro Sula) and Costa Rica.

Their common characteristics are visible and evident, even to the weekend tourist. They include speaking the same language, practicing the same religion, playing the same music, dancing to the same rhythms, having similar ethnic mix, eating the same food and

fruits, and having a common colonial history, including suffering the same Spanish neglect during the XVI to the XVIII centuries. We name our rhythms (e.g., son, merengue, cumbia), our roots (e.g., cassava, yuca), our fruits (e.g., lechosa, papaya, platano, banano), our fish (e.g., pargo, guachinango, chillo), etc. with different names, when they are essentially the same. There may well be less African blood in the mainland, and more in the islands of the Spanish Caribbean. But we all are, at least culturally, a mixture of white and black with American Indian.

Our main colonial cities and towns (San Juan, Santo Domingo, La Habana, Santiago, Porto Bello, Santa Marta, Cartagena, Barranquilla, Maracaibo, Veracruz, Campeche, Mérida, etc.) were founded in the same century and look very much alike. Their traditional old sections are so similar, that often movies about one country are made in another. We wear the same guayaberas, use similar straw hats, smoke large cigars, and play equally romantic and slow boleros in our Spanish guitars. But most important, we share this huge mass of water, with its beautiful beaches, that some times unites us and other times separates us.

Spanish colonialism formed our souls, giving us its laws, political traditions, good and bad customs, and inventing the Creole and the mestizo. Similar military authorities, absentee landowners, and corrupt and incompetent administrators, governed us, and similarly independent-minded Creoles practiced extensive and illicit commerce with the buccaneers. These American-born Spaniards lived side by side with Africans, both slaves and free, frequently mixing with them, and thus fusing into this semi-magic combination of European, Amerindian and African that is our Spanish Caribbean ethnicity and culture. If you doubt it, go back and reread *Cien Años de Soledad*.

Historical examples of such common policies and customs also abound. In Santo Domingo, the Spanish governor burned cities and haciendas in the eastern part of the island (Haiti) in the XVII century, to eradicate the illicit commerce of its inhabitants, forcing them to relocate to the eastern side (now, Dominican Republic). This facilitated the take-over of

the western part of Hispaniola by the French. In Cuba, the Spanish governors could never deter similar commerce in the eastern part of the island, where cities like Bayamo amassed their great wealth based on contraband.

The peoples of the Spanish Caribbean became homogeneous because they were formed in a slow process that took 300 years. The discovery of gold and silver in Mexico and Peru during the mid-1500s, where the conquistadors could become rich very quickly, helped empty the Spanish Caribbean. Most Spaniards who initially had settled in the islands left, taking their slaves, their Amerindian servants, and even their animals. Those few who stayed, languished and mixed with the remaining slaves and Indians for the next three centuries. As a result, Eastern Hispaniola (Santo Domingo), Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the other parts of the region were, at the end of the XVI-II Century, approximately 1/3 white (Spaniards and Creoles), 1/3 mixed race and free, and 1/3 black or Amerindian, mostly slaves and indentured servants. However, the majority of these slaves had been born in the Spanish Caribbean, spoke Spanish as their first language, and had acquired many customs of the other two ethnic groups.

By contrast, in the French and English colonies, Europeans were very few (less than 10%) and most of them were transient employees of commercial plantations that stayed for only a fixed period of time. The slaves (the remaining 90%) were so badly treated, that thousands had to be imported every year to replace the dying. As a result, the majority of the population was integrated by slaves recently brought from Africa, with no common language and no bonds, either with the people or with the land itself. Finally, there were few mixed-race or free blacks that could serve as an ethnic or social buffer between races, or between the socioeconomic classes.

This situation worsened in the XIX Century, when Chinese and East Indian indentured servants (read, slaves) were brought in large quantities to work in the fields, once African slavery was formally abolished. As a consequence, islands like Trinidad, Tobago, and Curacao, and nations like Suriname and Guyana, live under great social and racial tensions

from the different racial, religious, and linguistic groups that populate them and who have never integrated.

The explosive economic, social and ethnic composition in the French and English colonies led, for example, to the bloody and violent slave rebellion of 1794 in Haiti, and the subsequent massacre of the white population. The proof that in the Spanish Caribbean social conditions were different is that, after the 1822 Haitian invasion and subsequent occupation of Santo Domingo (which lasted for 22 years), no massacres of whites ever occurred. Slavery was indeed abolished by Haitian President Boyer, and a land reform among the former slaves, at the expense of the property of the church and the state, was implemented. But white Hateros and merchants kept their properties and wealth. And when in 1844, the war for independence started, white, black, and mixed race Dominicans equally fought to expel the Haitian invader. For, it was not the color of the skin, but the language, religion, culture, and customs that defined the inhabitants of Santo Domingo—as well as what defines the people from the Spanish Caribbean.

Another salient characteristic of the region, and one which greatly facilitated its homogeneity, was ease of communication. Hundreds of sailboats crisscrossed the Caribbean during the XV to XIX Centuries, carrying goods and products, people, news, etc. Its inhabitants constantly moved from one place to another. Examples of well-known military, political, and cultural leaders, who moved around in these areas during the XIX Century include Bolivar (in Haiti), Duarte (in Puerto Rico), Maceo and Máximo Gómez (in Honduras, Costa Rica), Martí (in Mexico and Venezuela), Henriquez Ureñas (in Cuba), and Hostos (in the Dominican Republic).

During the XX Century, Rómulo Betancourt and Juan Bosch lived in Cuba, A. Sánchez Arango in Venezuela, and Castro in Mexico. World-renown artists Rafael Hernández, Agustín Lara, Armando Manzanero, and Celia Cruz lived and worked everywhere in the region. This author's own family came from Spain to Santo Domingo during the XVIII Century, where our first American ancestor was

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born. In the following 250 years, the family moved to Puerto Rico and finally to Cuba, leaving many collateral family members all over the region.

Such movements of peoples and goods were possible because, for over 300 years, these areas were part of Spain, and all its inhabitants held a common nationality. There was no currency to exchange, no new language to learn, no passports or visas to apply for, no work permits to request, all of which facilitated frequent exchanges. Even in the coastal areas of the mainland colonies, such as Colombia or Mexico, with richer and stronger governments, people still preferred maritime travel along the Caribbean to avoid the perils and difficulties of the slower and less comfortable land travel. For this reason the Spanish Caribbean people remained closer to each other than to their own political and administrative colonial kindred.

For example, peoples from Veracruz, Campeche, and Mérida, preferred to travel to Havana by schooners (*goletas*) for health, educational, or business reasons, than to Mexico City by land. And in Venezuela, which up to the XVIII Century was administratively dependent from Santo Domingo, people traveled from Caracas to Ciudad Primada (Santo Domingo), as well as from Cartagena and Barranquilla, via La Guaira. This situation persisted even after the region's independence, and well into the XX Century, when finally good roads and railroads were built and the airplane appeared.

### THE WINDS OF CHANGE

Such was the situation up to the start of the Latin American independence movement, in the early XIX Century, when most Spanish colonies became separate nations. Then, the first legal and economic impediments to free interaction within the Spanish Caribbean appeared. Local caudillos and dictators, such as Páez in Venezuela and Santa Anna in Mexico, and those who followed them during the XIX and XX Century, as well as the Spanish colonial authorities in Cuba and Puerto Rico, were not interested in having their subjects move freely, escaping their control and exploitation.

In spite of this, the Caribbean still provided the fastest, most economical, and technically feasible means of transportation, making any policy of isolationism very difficult to enforce. Thus, for economic reasons, the Spanish Caribbean remained a homogeneous entity, even when it started showing the first signs of differentiation.

The region started separating ideologically. For example, Cuba and Puerto Rico remained Spanish colonies, and Santo Domingo became first a Haitian and later a Spanish domain. It was not until the second half of the XIX Century that the Dominican Republic obtained its total independence, only to become a poor, weak, and unstable republic, like many of the other Spanish Caribbean countries.

Then, a new factor appeared in the region. Since the 1820s, the United States, an emerging regional power, had become increasingly noticeable in the Caribbean, its southern and natural border. With its growing military, economic, and industrial power, and its stable republican system that included the possibility of maintaining slavery, the United States became a very attractive option for the landed classes and the aristocrats of the Spanish Caribbean. Hence, in many of these countries, the prospect of Annexation to the American Union was not only strongly considered, but actively pursued.

In Cuba, for example, the Annexation movement had a strong following between 1810 and 1865 among large plantation owners, such as Madan and Aldama. The Narciso López expedition that landed in Cárdenas in 1853, displaying our Cuban flag for the first time, was part of the annexation movement. Only after José A. Saco, political leader and scholar, openly opposed such ideology and proposed the autonomy option as one more appropriate for Cuba, did the annexation idea begin to dwindle.

In Santo Domingo, Presidents Santana and Baez were also annexionists. Pedro Santana re-established the Spanish suzerainty in the island during 1860–64, while Buenaventura Baez sought first annexation to France and then to the United States without much success. During the Mexican-American war of 1846–48, and later during the War of the Castes (1848–

1852), Yucatán (which at the time included today's states of Mérida, Yucatán, and Quintana Roo) toyed with the thought of incorporation into the United States.

When the American Civil War put an end to slavery, Spanish Caribbean aristocrat interest in joining the United States waned. However, a sentiment of inferiority persisted among some, who longed for political and economic stability at all costs and believed that our nations were unable to govern themselves. Such individuals entertained the idea of a limited national sovereignty, under foreign tutelage, fueling the frequent interventions that we have suffered in the last two centuries. Examples are too numerous to cite.

### **CUBAN INDEPENDENCE AND THE XX CENTURY**

Cuba fought several wars for its independence, starting in 1868. These armed struggles did not succeed because of internal political and economic differences in the island. In the eastern part, conditions were similar to those previously described for other regions of the Spanish Caribbean. The western part, with its huge sugar plantations and constant importation of slaves, had become a small-scale version of the model that the French had developed in Haiti. And Cubans still remembered what had happened there in 1794.

However, the first independence war (1868–78), even when lost, produced large effects. Slavery was officially abolished, and a free press, a pro-autonomy political party, and very defective and unfair, but regular, elections were finally allowed.

Cuban independence was finally obtained in 1898, but only after the plantation system in the Western provinces had been destroyed by the war and a coalition, known as Partido Revolucionario Cubano, was forged by Jose Martí. The war was won with the military aid of the United States, which acquired Puerto Rico and the Philippines from Spain. As a result of this war, the United States emerged as a world power, thus increasing yet further its economic and political influence in the Spanish Caribbean.

The rest of the Caribbean territories (e.g., Jamaica, the Lesser Antilles, Curacao) remained in the hands of powerful European nations, thus minimizing U.S.

influence. But the small, poor, and disorganized Spanish Caribbean republics became an object of American foreign policy in the region. American military intervention and political manipulation of leaders and governments were frequent, generating a sentiment of ill will against the United States. Such sentiment was later exploited by unscrupulous political leaders, contributing to increase social and political instability in our countries, and providing support for several XX Century nationalist and anti-American movements.

Summarizing, the Spanish Caribbean, which under Spain and until the early XIX Century was united and homogeneous, slowly began separating into several weak and disorganized nations. Frequent government incompetence and corruption increased their poverty as well as their political instability, bringing about dictatorial regimes.

We can establish a parallel between the current state of the Spanish Caribbean and that of the Roman provinces in the Mediterranean, after the fall of Rome in 425. These provinces were invaded by barbarians, who established weak and unstable kingdoms that brought 1,000 years of backwardness and chaos, known in European history as the Dark or Middle Ages. After centuries of struggle, Spain, France, and Italy joined several other nations to integrate the European Union, through which these Mediterranean countries have again achieved world influence and clout.

### **THE SPANISH CARIBBEAN IN A POSSIBLE TRANSITION**

This brings us to our main topic: how can the Spanish Caribbean and Ibero America help a peaceful transition in Cuba? There are two parties to this negotiation: the government in Havana and the opposition (internal and abroad), and we need to pose some hard questions. What can both of these parties offer each other? How can they guarantee their promises? Who can facilitate and mediate these conversations?

Cuba is economically and politically exhausted. The opposition can offer the government, in exchange for a transition to political and economic pluralism, much needed economic aid, technical know-how, in-

ternational business connections, and internal stability. Economic aid would rapidly increase the wealth of the nation, as well as the socioeconomic level of the individuals, thus bringing internal peace.

To guarantee these promises, as well as the safety and integrity of the government officials, the negotiations need arbiters other than the Cuban government, the internal and external opposition, or the United States. As interested parties, neither the United States nor the Cuban opposition will be trusted by the Cuban officials, or vice-versa. However, such trusted arbiters can come from Ibero America and Western Europe, especially from the Spanish Caribbean nations, who have a strong interest in the economic and political stability of the region to which we all belong.

Furthermore, all parts to this negotiation are today in a better position to work toward a negotiated transition. The United States is the sole, remaining superpower and no longer needs to monitor a region so strategically situated near its border. Spanish Caribbean nations have raised their educational and socioeconomic standards, and many of them even enjoy democratic forms of government. They no longer need to fear or neutralize Cuba to survive. Conditions leading to the U.S. economic embargo have disappeared, or changed considerably. Hence, an American change of policy in Cuba, and its acceptance by Castro's successors, can be now implemented without any party "losing face."

There is one historical fact, however, that conspires against the development and implementation of negotiations for a transition. Cuba has traditionally been a country of "single minded" leaders, dubious virtue that has only brought disaster to our nation.

Spain, our "mother country," let us bleed to annihilation during the 30 years of wars that culminated with our independence. Spain's motto: "hasta el último hombre y la última peseta" was much more than just a rhetorical phrase. Spain systematically ignored the multiple plans for peaceful transitions to autonomy developed during the XIX Century by Fathers José Agustín Caballero (1808) and Félix Varela (1821), José A. Saco (1848), and Maura and the Partido Liberal Autonomista (1893). And when Cu-

ba's separation finally occurred, as the result of the Spanish-Cuban-American War of 1898, it was Spain and not the United States who prevented Cubans from participating in the Paris negotiations: Spain preferred to deliver Cuba to the United States, rather than to set us free.

During the republic things were no better. Presidents Estrada Palma and García Menocal called in (or threatened to do so) the U.S. marines, before negotiating with their internal opposition. Presidents Machado and Batista also refused mediation efforts of the American ambassador, and don Cosme de la Torriente preferred revolutionary chaos and further dictatorship than holding a rational dialogue with the opposition.

We hope that this time, just as it occurred in Spain after Franco's death, Cubans on both sides of the differend will have the talent and patriotism to put the interests of the Nation before those of their political groups. We hope Cubans will finally be willing to reach a negotiated solution of our internal problems.

The model for the solution of the Cuban differend is undoubtedly not in Eastern Europe, but in Ibero America. Consider, for example, what occurred with other life-long caudillos who died in office after long years of absolute rule: Dr. Rodríguez de Francia and Carlos A. López in Paraguay, Juan Vicente Gómez in Venezuela, Dr. Salazar and Marcelo Caetano in Portugal. Those are the models we have to study carefully, to devise a solution.

Summarizing, Castro's natural disappearance, and a change in U.S. policy toward Cuba will provide the "face saving" conditions for Castro's successors to participate in negotiations, as long as all participating parties can feel safe about their fate after the transition. This situation is not much different to what occurred in Brazil, Argentina, and Chile, after the military returned the governments to civilian rule during the 1980s.

The current window of opportunity is open, but it will not remain so, indefinitely. And, if we do not take advantage of this opportunity, the window will close again, returning us into the quagmire in which we have remained for the past half century.

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