

## REVISITING THE SEVEN THREADS IN THE LABYRINTH OF THE CUBAN REVOLUTION

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Attempting to understand the complex phenomenon of the Cuban Revolution is no easy task; it is akin to entering a labyrinth and then seeking to find one's way out. During nearly a decade of research, reflection, and writing for the book *Revolutionary Cuba: A History*, I unwound and later rewound seven guiding threads to help me navigate the tortuous passages of Cuba's revolutionary labyrinth. I named these threads: "the pendular revolution," "the longest ninety miles," "the art of triangulation," "the revolution's third man," "an island on horseback," "the persistent plantation," and "many Cubas."

While making predictions about Cuba's future has proven to be a treacherous endeavor, the historian's perspective and a long-term view of the revolution allowed me to turn toward the future the same telescope that I normally point to the past. Cuba's history and the seven threads enumerated above not only provided organizing tools for the understanding of this complex, multifaceted historical process but also tentative answers to questions such as the future of Cuba-U.S. relations; potential ideological shifts; possibilities for a civilian or combined civilian-military rule; the likelihood of the end of "the persistent plantation," both as the island's historical economic anchor and a metaphor for Cuban society; and future

relations among different cohorts of the Cuban diaspora in South Florida.

Within two months of my book's publication, Presidents Barack Obama and Raúl Castro surprised the world on December 17, 2014, announcing that their respective countries would begin normalizing relations. Just hours before the momentous announcement, the United States and Cuba finalized a prisoner exchange: the release of the last three of the incarcerated spies known as the Cuban Five and the release of USAID contractor Allan Gross and an unnamed U.S. spy of Cuban origin. In their statements both mandataries committed themselves to reestablishing diplomatic relations, to working to facilitate trade, travel, and communications, and to pursue a dialogue to discuss matters of mutual concern.<sup>2</sup> This marked the beginning of the most dramatic shift in U.S.-Cuba relations since the break of diplomatic relations in January 1961.

Since then, both nations have restored diplomatic relations and allowed the opening of embassies in their respective capitals. The United States also removed Cuba from the infamous list of state sponsors of terrorism. Private talks continue, addressing issues of democracy and human rights, the reestablishment of normal postal relations, and collaboration in fighting

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1. The bulk of this essay is drawn from my book *Revolutionary Cuba: A History* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2014).

2. Videos of the December 17, 2014 messages by Barack Obama and Raúl Castro in <http://www.c-span.org/video/?323375-3/president-obama-statement-cubaend> and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jj3tazsVHtY>, both accessed August 29, 2015. Also see, White House, Office of the Press Secretary, "Fact Sheet: Charting a New Course on Cuba," <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/12/17/fact-sheet-charting-new-course-cuba>, accessed September 2, 2015.

international terrorism. The Cuban government insists of the return of Guantanamo Base to Cuban hands.

The body of this essay explains the seven threads in the labyrinth and discusses how they shed light on multiple aspects of the revolution's trajectory from the late 1950s until early 2014. The closing section, meanwhile, is the result of a necessary revisit of those threads to understand the economic, social, demographic, cultural, political, and geopolitical factors behind the recently-initiated rapprochement between the United States and its former nemesis.

### FIRST THREAD: THE PENDULAR REVOLUTION

As far back as 1978, Cuba expert Carmelo Mesa-Lago recognized pendular shifts, cycles of alternating socioeconomic-political formulas, and since then many other students of the revolution have resorted to pendular swings between idealism and pragmatism to periodize Cuba's revolutionary trajectory.<sup>3</sup> It started with a phase of heroic idealism, emblemized by Che Guevara, a period, of grand social and economic programs and feverish adventures. Toward the mid-1960s, the revolution entered a transitional period toward pragmatism, known in Cuba as the Great Debate, which culminated in the latter third of the decade in a form of compromised idealism or what I call "Sino-Guevarism without China and without Guevara," a hybrid formula that allowed Cuba to hold on to its core revolutionary pillars of socialism, egalitarianism, and internationalism while yielding in areas such as industrialization, economic diversification, and full autonomy in international affairs.

Since those early ideological shifts, Cuba has continued to alternate between idealist and pragmatist cycles. Following the failure of the Ten Million Ton Harvest of 1970, the island became even more dependent on producing sugar for the Soviet and East European markets. This marked the beginning of an extended period of institutionalized pragmatism that

lasted until 1985. As dependence on the Soviet Union increased, Cuba's leadership had no option but to embrace Soviet reformist practices such as paying higher wages and bonuses to its most productive workers, something diametrically opposed to Guevarist egalitarianism.

In 1986, the revolution swung back to idealism but not to the early 1960s Guevarist brand; those who had inhabited the paradise of innocent idealism had since tasted the forbidden fruits of sugarcane and material incentives and had consequently been expelled from Eden. Rather, this was a period of institutionalized idealism, officially christened the Rectification of Errors and Negative Tendencies Process. This cycle brought about the elimination of private employment and small private economic activities such as privately owned fruit-and-vegetable markets.

In 1990, Cuba turned to survivalist pragmatism, an about-face from the socialist orthodoxy of 1986–89. This was in response to the profound crisis known as the Special Period, when the GDP plunged 35 percent in three years, foreign trade fell by over 70 percent, and the specters of malnutrition and famine raised their ugly heads.<sup>4</sup> The Cuban government applied extreme austerity measures and fostered capitalist investments from abroad and reauthorized peasant markets and numerous private business and forms of self-employment, from twelve-chair restaurants to dog groomers to disposable lighter refillers. Once the Cuban economy rebounded toward the latter part of the 1990s, the revolution began to swing toward idealism again. Beginning in 2002, Cuba entered yet another pendular swing from the pragmatism of the Special Period to a renewed idealism—survivalist idealism—under the banner of what Castro called "the Battle of Ideas." This new shift was an ideological and policy reversal of a previous reversal of yet another reversal that had reversed the revolution's original idealistic course.

3. See, for example, Mesa-Lago, *Cuba in the 1970s*.

4. Mesa-Lago, *Economía y bienestar social en Cuba*, 32; Halperin, *Return to Cuba*, 179; Alonso and Lago, "A First Approximation Model of the Balance of Payments, Output, Employment and Foreign Aid Requirements of a Democratic Cuba."

Since Fidel Castro yielded power in 2006, his brother Raúl has shepherd in yet another swing back toward pragmatism. He announced this ideological reversal in a 2008 speech: “Socialism,” he remarked, “means social justice and equality, but equality of rights and opportunities, not of income.” He even denounced egalitarianism, one of the revolution’s most hallowed goals, saying that “it is in itself a form of exploitation of good workers by those who are less productive, or worse yet, lazy.”<sup>5</sup> Raúl Castro’s rule has brought on the gradual reduction of the state sector and its services and the rapid expansion of market capitalism and private ventures.

The historical trajectory of the revolution has demonstrated that it is hard to forecast the next cycle or pendular shift. Pointing my inverted telescope makes it difficult even to envision yet another shift. In the past, such ideological swings occurred in contexts of profound economic failure; and were directed, even if reluctantly, by Fidel Castro. His retirement from power marked the passing of the last of the “idealists”—those who were able to impose another swing toward idealism—and it is hard to conceive of his younger brother or anyone else leading another swing back to an idealist cycle. Ideologically fatigued Cubans seem unlikely to re-embrace idealism anytime soon. Guevara’s idealism will certainly be remembered, but no high priest is likely to resurrect its cult anytime soon.

## SECOND THREAD: THE LONGEST NINETY MILES

With his characteristically rhythmic prose, Carlos Franqui, an early revolutionary leader who later broke with the regime, remarked that both nations were so close “yet so remote and different in everything else. . . . One is a continent, the other is an island. One is Anglo-Saxon Protestant in character and based on the industrial revolution, power, and wealth. The other is Latin, Spanish, Black and Chinese.”<sup>6</sup>

These and other differences and the tensions resulting from them have been exacerbated by decades of U.S. interventionism and neocolonial domination and by a stubborn unwillingness to understand and respect the extraordinary Cuban sense of honor. The fact that U.S. military, political, religious, business, and—why not say it—intellectual leaders have generally viewed Cubans as inferior and treated them condescendingly and paternalistically has fueled Cuban nationalism, a major factor in the victory, consolidation, and survival of the revolution. Early in the revolution, both countries broke economic ties and diplomatic relations, and they remained enemies for decades to come.

The longest ninety miles help understand the roles successive U.S. governments played as they sought to sabotage, decapitate, isolate, “blockade,” and otherwise annihilate the Cuban state and its economy. This thread also explains Cuba’s trenchant defiance of U.S. designs through the buildup of its military, UN resolutions against the embargo, propaganda, espionage, and even the downing of two Brothers to the Rescue planes in 1996.

Over the past two decades, the main obstacles to a U.S.-Cuba rapprochement were posed by a small but powerful caucus of Cuban and Cuban-American Congress people, who represent a forceful, predominantly Republican and conservative constituency from South Florida. Because the Cuban and Cuban-American vote had been so crucial to Republican presidential and congressional victories since the 1980 election that elevated Reagan to the presidency, Republican candidates have made every effort to retain and not alienate that voting bloc. This has been clearly demonstrated by Republican politicians who advocated and maintained a harsh Cuba policy with an expanded embargo as its centerpiece. This continued to be the case even if such position hurt the interests of big business, which lobbied hard to end the embargo not out of humanitarian or political con-

5. Raúl Castro’s speech to the National Assembly, July 11, 2008, *CubaEncuentro* Web site, <http://www.cubaencuentro.com/documentos/texto-completo-del-discurso-de-raul-castro-ante-la-asamblea-nacional-del-poder-popular-96879>, accessed August 28, 2015.

6. Franqui, *Diary of the Cuban Revolution*, vii.

cerns but rather with the goal of opening the Cuban market for U.S. products and services.

Ironically, those mostly Republican, pro-big-business voices shared an anti-embargo position with progressives and the liberal wing of the Democratic Party. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, a major push for the termination of the embargo paired a number of unlikely individuals and organizations: Democratic congressional representative Maxine Waters and Republican House Majority Leader Dick Armey; agribusiness tycoon Dewayne Andreas and Dr. Benjamin Spock; and most surprisingly the American Chamber of Commerce and the AFL-CIO. Strange bedfellows, to say the least.

The combined efforts of these unholy alliances proved effective in 1990, when George H. W. Bush pocket-vetoed a bill passed by Congress that included the controversial Mack Amendment, which banned all trade between foreign-based subsidiaries of U.S. corporations and Cuba.

In 2008–2009, factors lined up to create the most propitious juncture in half a century for the thawing of the last remnant of the Cold War: the historically acrimonious relations between Havana, Washington, and Miami. In 2008, Raúl Castro, far more pragmatic than his brother Fidel, assumed the presidency, and soon began to signal a willingness to improve relations with the United States. A few months later, American voters elected Barack Obama, who ran on a platform of international bilateralism, retrenchment from militarism, and a softer Cuba policy. In South Florida, meanwhile, a series of demographic transformations continued to move in the direction of an electoral turning point marked by the erosion of the Cuban-American Republican voting block and the neutralization of what was left of that block by the dramatic increase of the Democratic-leaning Puerto Rican population of Florida, which surpassed one million. Also in 2008, for the first time in recent

memory, more Florida Hispanic residents registered as Democrats than Republicans.

In spite of these auspicious circumstances, the opportunity was missed. The Obama administration lacked the political capital—perhaps the willingness—to make significant changes in the decades-old harsh-on-Cuba policy. During Obama’s first term, the United States retained the most basic elements of its long-term Cuba policy: the Helms-Burton law-enhanced trade embargo, the occupation of Guantanamo Bay Naval Base, broadcasts over Radio and TV Martí, and the “wet foot/dry foot” refugee policy. Much to Cuba’s indignation, the administration also kept the island on its list of state sponsors of terrorism, and in January 2010, included it in a list of nations that posed security risks to air travel along with thirteen other countries, all with majority Muslim populations.

Because Republican legislators denied funding for the closing of the Taliban and Al-Qaeda detention center at Guantanamo and the transfer of its inmates to the United States, Obama was not able to keep his campaign promise of shutting down the notorious detention facility.<sup>7</sup>

Among the modest policy changes brought on during Obama’s first presidential term were the lifting of Bush-era expanded restrictions on Cuban and Cuban-American visits and the relaxation of remittances. The Obama administration also allowed U.S. telecommunications companies to operate on the island and renewed migration negotiations with Cuba. Because of less restrictive travel provisions, the number of family visits surged to over 350,000 in 2010. In 2011, the U.S. increased limits on money transfers and expanded the list of U.S. airports allowed to schedule flights to Cuba.

In *Revolutionary Cuba*, I highlighted a most crucial requisite for the normalization of U.S.-Cuba relation. “The long ninety miles are likely to be shortened,” I wrote, “if and when the U.S. government

7. Jeremy Herb, “Obama Promise to Close Guantanamo Prison Unfulfilled,” *The Hill*, January 11, 2012, <http://thehill.com/home-news/administration/203727-obama-promise-to-close-prison-at-guantanamo-still-unfulfilled>, accessed August 31, 2015; Carol Rosenberg, “How Congress Helped Thwart Obama’s Plan to Close Guantanamo,” *McClatchy Newspapers*, <http://www.mcclatchydc.com/news/special-reports/article24608635.html>, January 22, 2011, accessed September 2, 2015.

stops its centuries-long treatment of Cubans as inferior, incapable of self-rule, and undeserving of full sovereignty and territorial integrity.”<sup>8</sup> When the book came out, there were no visible indications of a new, more respectful attitude vis-à-vis the Cuban government. Unbeknownst to the world, however, a few months before my book’s publication, Cuban and U.S. diplomats began seemingly respectful negotiations, which yielded the accords announced in December 2014.

### THIRD THREAD: THE ART OF TRIANGULATION

A major explanation for the Castros’ regime’s longevity and its many political and diplomatic successes over more than half a century is Fidel Castro’s extraordinary ability to recognize and apply triangulation strategies to gain, consolidate, and expand power. Castro effectively applied triangulation strategies during the struggle against Fulgencio Batista, and throughout his long dictatorship. When he saw opportunities for triangulation, he exploited them; if they were not there, he fostered them. He successfully pitted island residents against exiles, exiles against other exiles, nations against nations, and, incredibly, even superpowers against other superpowers.

Once in power, Castro pursued triangulation strategies to divide the various remaining political and revolutionary organizations. When the communist Popular Socialist Party remained as the only standing political organization, Castro pitted its different factions against each other until the only survivors were communist Fidelistas. Since then, he has pitted various communist factions against one another, be it idealists against pragmatists, civilians against the military, or reformists against hard-liners, and with the help of infiltrators, has pitted dissidents against dissidents and exiles against exiles.

In the international arena, Castro first manipulated Cold-War rivalries between the United States and the Soviet Union; and once the United States ceased to be a viable patron state, Castro and other revolu-

tionary leaders pitted the Soviets against the Chinese until 1966, when the only viable superpower ally was the Soviet Union.

Fidel Castro’s legacy of triangulation strategies has survived his rule and may have well become part of the island’s political and geopolitical arsenal. Raúl Castro’s regime has carried out internal triangulations of its own but on a much smaller scale, creating counter-bloggers to battle independent bloggers and supporting pro-government rappers to counterbalance the acerbic criticism of independent rappers.

In recent times, Cuba has benefitted from the substantial support and influence of the United States’ military and commercial rivals (China and Russia) and even some of its enemies (Venezuela and Iran); on the other hand, the United States has been hurt by its embarrassing hemispheric isolation with regards to its Cuba policy. Long gone are the 1960s, when the United States led a successful campaign to isolate Cuba from its hemispheric neighbors. In fact, the United States’ trenchant policy of isolating Cuba within the Americas backfired to the point of self-isolation, which became embarrassingly evident during the 2012 Summit of the Americas, held in Cartagena, Colombia. On that occasion, thirty-three member nations supported Cuba’s participation in future Summits; only the United States and Canada opposed that proposition.

In the Epilogue to *Revolutionary Cuba* I stated the obvious, that “Venezuela’s ruling Chavista movement [was] gradually losing popular support and its economy began spiraling into ruin in 2013.”<sup>9</sup> In spite of this, Nicolás Maduro’s Chavista government has continued to subsidize Cuba, selling it oil at under-market prices with generous financing arrangements.

In the intervening months, Venezuela’s already dire economic, social, and political situations have taken a turn for the worse. Basic consumer goods and services from milk and beer to toilet paper and x-ray film are chronically scarce. Violence, crime, and corruption have shot up dramatically. In early 2014,

8. Martínez-Fernández, *Revolutionary Cuba*, 282.

9. Martínez-Fernández, *Revolutionary Cuba*, 282.

someone was murdered in Caracas every 21 minutes, making it the most violent capital city and one of the most unsafe cities in the world. Government corruption has skyrocketed as well.<sup>10</sup>

Popular unrest exploded in February 2014, when students began mass protests. The political opposition joined the demonstrations, which were, and continue to be repressed harshly by state forces. The number of protests fell during the second half of 2014 but increased again towards the end of the year and in 2015, as the price of oil spiraled downward.

#### **FOURTH THREAD: THE REVOLUTION'S THIRD MAN**

The thread of the revolution's "third man"—whoever has been next in line to power behind the Castro brothers—is yet another valuable window onto ideological and political shifts taking (or about to take) place throughout the revolution's trajectory. Indeed, the ascension or demotion of Cuba's third men proved to be a reliable barometer of shifting ideological winds; they have signaled or confirmed new ideological trends.

Between 1959 and 2015, Cuba has had six third men, some of whom earned that position on the battlefields, like Guevara, and others who earned it behind desks. Some have held that distinction *de jure*, as Ramiro Valdés since 2008, and those who served before 1976 were all *de facto* third men. Some were long lasting, Carlos Rafael Rodríguez being the most enduring, while Carlos Aldana was just a flash in the pan. There have also been numerous pretenders and third men in waiting: Soviet Union-aligned Aníbal Escalante in the 1960s; diplomat-legislator Ricardo Alarcón during the 1970s; and two extraordinarily popular ones during the 1980s—one civilian, Secretary of Foreign Affairs Roberto Robaina, the other, "man on horseback" General Arnaldo Ochoa.

When the senior Castro fully stepped down from power in 2008, Raúl Castro became the official first man and he selected 77-year-old General José Ramón Machado Ventura as second in command; Ramiro Valdés retained the third man position. In February 2013, to the surprise of many, Raúl Castro selected as vice-president 52-year-old engineer Miguel Díaz-Canel, a former minister of higher education who had been a member of the Communist Party Politburo since 2003. Upon Díaz-Canel's selection, President Castro stated that this was "a definitive step in the configuration of the future leadership of the nation through the gradual and orderly transfer of key roles to new generations." He also promised to step down from power in 2018.

Díaz-Canel was not a second man in waiting or even third; actually he was not even in the radar of Cuba analysts around the world. He is not the strong, bigger-than-life leader that Cubans have become accustomed to follow and obey. His selection as second-in-command is significant on many counts, first, because he is relatively young, and second, because he is a civilian, the first to reach such position since 1959. Also, despite the fact that he was a relatively obscure figure within the party and government hierarchy, those who know him speak well of his loyalty, pragmatism, effectiveness, and likeable character. He will not cast a shadow over Raúl Castro, historically the kiss of death for any rising leader, much less be a threat to the military brass.

While constitutionally second in command, Díaz-Canel is not second in power. He lacks influence within the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias (FAR), having served only the three obligatory years of military service. Valdés, as czar of the government's control of internet and social media, wields far more power and can be classified as Cuba's *de facto* second in command. Moreover, dynastic winds are blowing in Havana. Alejandro Castro Espín, Raúl and Vilma

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10. Mary Murray, "Seven Things To Know About the Venezuela Crisis," February 25, 2014, NBC News, <http://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/venezuela-crisis/seven-things-know-about-venezuela-crisis-n38556>; Corina Pons and Eyanir China, "Venezuela Inflation Seen Hitting Triple-digit Levels as Crisis Deepens," Reuters, July 8, 2015, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/07/08/venezuela-inflation-idUSL1N0ZOINF20150708>, accessed August 29, 2015; Roger F. Noriega, "Poll Reveals Implosion in Venezuela," August 26, 2015, InterAmerican Security Watch, <http://interamericansecuritywatch.com/poll-reveals-implosion-in-venezuela/>, accessed August 29, 2015.

Espín's only child and colonel in the dreaded Interior Ministry, is being groomed as dauphin. In 2015, he began to play an active role in foreign diplomacy. Besides his lineage, Castro Espín is also playing the critical role of coordinating policy between the intelligence and military leadership. This is an extremely valuable position, important because the Interior Ministry and FAR historically have not had the best of relations yet their combined forces are essential to the preservation of communist-party rule as well as international and domestic peace. This raises Castro's son to the level of second man in waiting.<sup>11</sup>

### **FIFTH THREAD: AN ISLAND ON HORSEBACK**

Cuba, historically, has been “an island on horseback,” to borrow Belkis Cuza Malé's poetic metaphor: the prevalence of militarism, violence, and caudilloism throughout its troubled history.<sup>12</sup> Cuba's colonial heritage as a key military stronghold, its decades-long armed struggles for independence from Spain, the political-military caudilloism that characterized much of the first half of the twentieth century, and revolutionary militarism since the late 1950s, have produced and maintained a culture that venerates strong leaders and rule by military men.

Since its independence from Spain in 1898, Cuba has been ruled under U.S. military occupation in 1898–1902, 1906–1909, and 1912; and by home-grown dictators from 1928 to 1933 (Gerardo Machado), from 1934 to 1940 (Batista), from 1952 to 1958 (Batista again), from 1959 to 2007 (Fidel Castro) and since then (Raúl Castro). That is eighty-two years of military and/or authoritarian rule out of 117 years for the period 1898–2015.

Up until 2013, when civilian and party loyalist Díaz-Canel became vice-president, Cuba's top three leaders—President Raúl Castro and Vice-Presidents Machado Ventura and Valdés—were octogenarian, career military men, and leaders in the original rebel army.

As long-time head of FAR and currently its commander-in-chief, Raúl Castro appears to be the only one capable of maintaining unchallenged political control for an extended period. His leadership over the armed forces provides strong assurances that the military will not move to depose him. There is too much at stake for the military brass and loyalty to Raúl Castro appears to offer the best guarantees for the preservation of the social and economic privileges of the highest-ranking military officers. He also offers the best possibility for a peaceful, gradual transition that is controlled from above, and by the same token, the best insurance against a chaotic, violent, and unpredictable transition. His December 17, 2014, announcement begins to point in that direction. The demilitarization of Cuba's government, however, is not even on the horizon. Military rule may well be one of the revolution's most enduring legacy, in spite of a coexisting tradition of civilianism, most loudly expressed by José Martí and fallen rebel leader Frank País.

### **SIXTH THREAD: THE PERSISTENT PLANTATION**

The thread of the persistent plantation was most useful as I navigated in and out of the labyrinth of revolutionary Cuba. A view of the island's history, social organization, and culture as profoundly shaped by the sugar agroindustrial complex and its concomitants: coercion of labor, rigid social hierarchy, land concentration, militarism, and foreign dependence. The revolution originally set out to free the island and its people from the grip of the sugar plantation and its insatiable demand for vast extensions of land, cheap labor, and expensive imported technology. After a failed attempt to rid Cuba of the sugar virus, the revolution relapsed to it, first as a temporary generator of capital and later as the economy's long-term strategy. In the early 1970s, on the wake of the failed Ten-Million-Ton Harvest, it became evident that Cuba would indefinitely remain trapped by the sugar

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11. Brian Latell, “Another Castro in the Wings,” Selous Foundation Web site, March 24, 2015, <http://sfppr.org/2015/03/another-castro-in-the-wings/>, accessed August 31, 2015.

12. Cuza Malé, “The Photogenic Ones,” 64–65.

plantation and its people would continue to taste its bitter by-products.

The evil concomitants of the plantation, evident since the early 1600s, manifested themselves during the revolutionary era: concentration of land (sugar estates were not broken down but were turned into state-controlled latifundia); coerced forms of labor (the use of so-called volunteers and military conscripts and the establishment of forced labor camps); dependence on outside markets (the Soviet Union, Venezuela, and China); dependence on expensive, imported technology (Hungarian buses and Chinese trains); a reliance on imported food (Soviet grain, Vietnamese rice, and U.S. beans); ecological degradation; the formation of a sugar oligarchy that combines economic and political power (the ruling elite); and an authoritarian regime to maintain order, with the Castros as supreme planters and a string of replaceable overseers—third men—under them.

Somewhat unexpectedly, in 2002, Fidel Castro ordered the dismantling of the sugar industry, shutting down in just two years 71 out of 156 functioning mills and downgrading another 14 to the production of molasses. In 2005, Castro wrote sugar's epitaph: "Sugar will never return to this country; it belongs to the time of slavery."<sup>13</sup> Production fell every year from 2002 to 2007; in 2010 the harvest reached only 1.1 million tons, the smallest harvest since 1908. Since then, output has hovered at around 1.3 million tons.

In spite of five and a half decades of profound revolutionary change, King Sugar reigns supreme long after most grinding mills have gone silent and the seductive aroma of molasses no longer permeates the countryside. Indeed, the echoes of authoritarian captains-general, aristocratic powdered wigs, colonial militia rifles, and cracking whips from a bygone era continue to haunt history's most splendid sugar island.

In South Florida, meanwhile, some continue to dream about reestablishing sugar as an important

economic sector. Members of the Miami-based Asociación Nacional de Hacendados de Cuba (National Association of Sugar Mill Owners of Cuba) have made plans to reestablish themselves as the sugar aristocracy of post-socialist Cuba and even negotiated a labor contract with an exile union that prescribed paltry daily wages of \$7.46 for cane cutters and \$12.88 for industrial workers—a masquerade of grown men dressed up as planters, without plantations and union bosses, without workers to represent.<sup>14</sup>

That the Florida-based Fanjul family is preparing to re-sugarize Cuba is not a secret. Likewise, others who lost their sugar mills and cane-growing lands (*colonias*) express their desire to recover their lands and resume their roles as planters and *colonos*.

### SEVENTH THREAD: MANY CUBAS

When revolutionary leaders assumed power in 1959, they found two Cubas: a Cuba of the past and a Cuba of the future, one prosperous, the other impoverished. Soon, two other Cubas formed: one insular and one that floated away into exile; two Cubas that like cells eventually split into two more Cubas, two on the island and two (later three) others in exile. The revolution drew much of its energy from differences and tensions between two Cubas: a predominantly white, more affluent Cuba and a multiracial, poorer Cuba. The revolution that strove to eradicate differences between those Cubas succeeded at this task, in part, by pushing one of them away, toward exile in South Florida and beyond. Earlier cohorts of U.S. Cuban immigrants, generally speaking, have subordinated subsequent cohorts economically and socially, thus recreating a highly hierarchical Cuba outside the island. Indeed, first-cohort exiles and their descendants presently constitute Cuban South Florida's upper, middle-upper, and middle classes; Mariel cohort exiles (1980) make up the middle and lower-middle class; and *balseiro*-generation immi-

13. Álvarez and Pérez-López, "The Restructuring of the Cuban Sugar Agroindustry," 163–93. Castro quoted in Patricia Grogg, "Sugar: Former Lifeblood of Cuban Economy Reduced to Mere Trickle," Inter Press Service News Agency, January 11, 2006, [http://havanajournal.com/business/entry/sugar\\_former\\_lifeblood\\_of\\_cuban\\_economy\\_reduced\\_to\\_mere\\_trickle/](http://havanajournal.com/business/entry/sugar_former_lifeblood_of_cuban_economy_reduced_to_mere_trickle/), accessed August 31, 2015;

14. Pablo A. Carreño, "Action Plan for the Reconstruction of the Cuban Sugar Industry," *Cuba in Transition* 12 (2002), 431–34, <http://www.ascecuba.org/c/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/v12-carreno.pdf>, accessed August 31, 2015.



grants (since the nineties) generally constitute the lower classes, with socio-economic indicators that resemble those of their Haitian and Salvadorian counterparts.

The ideological and political-cultural distance between island Cuba and exile Cuba expanded over the decades. This is evident in South Florida, where the values, ethics, and worldviews of recent immigrants clash with those of older waves of immigrants and their Cuban American descendants.

There are rays of hope in the horizon, nonetheless, as evidenced by the transnational character of the *balse-ro* cohort, whose members regularly fly between the insula and the peninsula, and by glimpses of conciliatory attitudes among Miami's exile groups, who set their differences aside to jointly welcome dissident Yoani Sánchez in April 2013. At Miami's Freedom Tower, she closed her speech with a call for all Cubans from all Cubas to unify: "In the Cuba that many of us dream about," she said, "there will be no need to clarify what kind of Cubans we are. We will be Cubans, plain and simple. Cubans. Period. Cubans."<sup>15</sup>

### THE RAPPROCHEMENT OF 2014–2015

Challenged by dramatic changes since December 17, 2014, I returned to the seven threads of *Revolutionary Cuba*, unwinding them once again to test them against new foreign policy developments and rapidly changing realities on both sides of the Florida Straits.

As stated above, the revolutionary pendulum seems to have stopped swinging; it remains stuck at a point of extreme pragmatism. Given the exhaustion of idealism—even the belief in socialism—Cuba is not likely to return to socialist idealism in the foreseeable future.

This said, the proposed trajectory of enclave capitalist authoritarianism is contrary to Cuban civilian po-

litical culture, to the ideological foundations exposed by Martí, Eduardo Chibás, País, and many other progressive thinkers, and even the ideas of Che Guevara and other idealists. Extreme capitalism and authoritarian, one-party rule, may work in a China or Vietnam with their millenarian traditions of despotism but Cuba is neither China nor Vietnam. Neither country had a Martí as founding father. What is likely to occur in a distant future is a pendular movement away from the current pragmatism, characterized by authoritarian rule, increasingly unbridled foreign investment, and labor exploitation, toward a more democratic government that protects workers and national sovereignty. Ideas still matter.

As far as the longest ninety miles are concerned, the current rapprochement should be seen more as situational than structural, a moment of confluence of progressive U.S. voices calling for the end of hostile policies against Cuba and the pressures of big business to create conditions favorable to the penetration of U.S. capital in the thus-far-forbidden island.

Internal U.S. demographic and political realignments during the 2010s improved the likelihood of successful negotiations between Havana and Washington. By 2011, the proportion of Cuban and Cuban-American voters registered as Republicans had fallen to approximately 56 percent. Most surprising of all, in 2012, Barack Obama received more Cuban and Cuban-American votes (49 percent) than his Republican contender Mitt Romney (47 percent).<sup>16</sup> Trends had been moving in that direction, but no one anticipated that the tipping point would happen as early as 2012. This has dramatically reduced the political clout of conservative South Florida Cubans. Their relative numbers are dwindling and they no longer hold the key to winning Florida, and by extension, the White House.

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15. "Yoani Sánchez Speaks at Freedom Tower in Miami," YouTube video of Yoani Sánchez speech and interview by Myriam Márquez, April 1, 2013, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zytHDGg1WjY>, accessed September 2, 2015.

16. Mark Hugo López and Paul Taylor, "Latino Voters in the 2012 Election," Pew Research Hispanic Trends Project Web site, November 7, 2012, <http://www.pewhispanic.org/2012/11/07/latino-voters-in-the-2012-election/>, accessed August 31, 2015; Cuba Research Institute, Florida International University, "2011 Cuba Poll," 21, <http://cri.fiu.edu/research/cuba-poll/2011-cuba-poll.pdf>, accessed September 2, 2015.

On the heels of the Democratic Party's 2014 mid-term election disaster, Obama was able to push for the biggest shift in Cuba policy in over fifty years, precisely, because he packaged it to satisfy both the right and the left, just as he had done the previous week when he agreed to a seemingly schizophrenic Congressional spending bill that made concessions to the right by reducing government oversight of financial institutions and the left, by protecting funding for the assailed social safety net.

While the recent shift in U.S. policy toward Cuba is, indeed, dramatic, it does not erase the historical mutual suspicion that has existed between the two countries, and certainly does not negate the enduring geopolitical reality of a large country seeking to dominate a small neighbor, nearly 1/100th its size; nor does it erase fundamental historical, cultural, social differences between both countries, nor the fact that anti-Americanism, has deep roots in Cuba and has served the revolutionary government as a primary ideological weapon. Fidel Castro reminded the world of this, when on the eve of the opening of the U.S. Embassy in Havana in August 2015, he met with Nicolás Maduro and Evo Morales and emphatically restated his claim for reparations to compensate the trillion-dollar economic losses he attributes to the U.S. embargo.<sup>17</sup>

The negotiations that led to the 2014 agreement to begin normalizing relations were apparently carried out with a level of mutual respect, not seen since the brief window of the first years of the Jimmy Carter administration. It is telling that in his December 17 declarations, Raúl Castro stressed the fact that for a long time Cuba had been calling for a respectful dialogue. This period of increased respect for Cuba's leadership, however, remains sharply partisan and it is not clear whether it will continue if and when Republicans regain the White House.

Current circumstances also explain why Cuba has been calling for normalization of relations in the past few years. First, its economy has remained flat in

spite of the economic reforms enacted by Raúl Castro since 2008, the GDP standing at about the level of 1985. More important is the clear fact that Venezuela will not be able to continue subsidizing Cuba because of the profound crisis it is facing in a context of plummeting oil prices and the parallel plummeting of support for Chavista President Nicolás Maduro. Cuba is bracing for the imminent end of a political alliance of patronage not unlike the one it had with the Soviet Union, whose end thrust Cuba into a deep depression in the early 1990s.

Under present circumstances, neither China nor Russia (both with serious economic troubles spiking in 2015) can bail out the island like the Soviets did during the 1960s-1980s and Venezuelan revolutionaries have done since 2000. This looming scenario pushes the geopolitical clock back to 1959 and leaves Cuba with no option but to look to the United States as a market and source of investments.

Men on horseback give no signs of dismounting. They are the guarantors of stability. Their interests have become so deeply intertwined with the economy that they are now, more than ever, the strongest pillar of the status quo. Recent estimates show that they control 70 percent of the economy. The repressive forces of the Interior Ministry, meanwhile, are vital to the preservation of social peace and political uniformity.

One of the saddest ironies of the unfolding rapprochement, so festively received by the American and international left, is that the success of the gathering wave of U.S. investments will depend on the continuation of a repressive regime that forbids workers from striking and pays them only 5 percent of what foreign corporations pay the Cuban state for the right to hire them. If the geopolitical clock is back to 1959, the social and economic clocks are being reset further back, to 1898.

The Seven Threads not only remain vital but prove helpful in understanding current changes and foreseeable scenarios. The success of U.S. business enter-

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17. Nelson Acosta, "Fidel Castro Celebrates 89th Birthday with Leftist Allies," Reuters, August 14, 2015, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/08/14/us-cuba-usa-castro-idUSKCN0QI2GN20150814>, accessed, September 2, 2015.

prises in Cuba depends on the freezing of the *revolutionary pendulum* in its current pragmatist pole. U.S. business success also depends on the continuation of authoritarian rule, while the retention of power by Cuba's revolutionary elites hinges on the anticipated U.S.-capital-driven economic growth.

The *long ninety miles* have been temporarily shortened and are likely to continue moving in that direction as reflection of a new symbiosis between U.S. capital and the Cuban regime. Raúl Castro's replacement, the future *first man*, even if Díaz-Canel is selected president, will possibly be a *men-on-horseback* junta composed of officers from the armed forces and the intelligence sector. Martí's civilianist and national sovereignty principles will not be erased but it may take decades before they ratoon and bear fruit.

The fact that the alliance with Venezuela is likely implode in the near future spells economic woes for Cuba; the growing Venezuelan opposition has vowed to

end all subsidies for Cuba and to repatriate Cuban medical workers and intelligence officers, whose services have become one of Cuba's largest sources of revenue. These likely scenarios spell the end of *triangulation* strategies which have long pitted the United States against Venezuela. A debilitated China and Russia are unlikely to pull Cuba into their orbits any time soon.

The *persistent plantation* has proven that its social, cultural, and political ramifications outlived the demise of the sugar industry. However, the restoration of King Sugar should not be dismissed, particularly if the exile sugar aristocracy has its way.

Lastly, looming economic and foreign relations realities promise to expand the distance between the *two Cubas*, which coexist on the island, one sustained by profits from partnerships of an enclave economy, the other barely subsisting from the crumbs of an economy of kiosks. Cuba is back to square one.

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