

Introduction

Editors

This volume includes papers originally discussed at the symposium, “A Changing Cuba in a Changing World” (The Graduate Center, City University of New York, March, 2008). The conference featured a wide range of scholars and panelists working on contemporary Cuba (Appendix). The essays in this collection explore various aspects of change in today’s Cuba, including politics and economics, history, culture and the arts, and race and ethnicity.¹

Fidel Castro’s incapacitation in July 2006 gave a special significance to this conference. Initially declared temporary, the health problems of the older Castro led to the official transfer of the presidency to Raúl Castro on February 2008. Many expected that the younger Castro’s ascension to the presidency would bring about an acceleration of the reform process or even a transition. Indeed, some measured changes were announced in early 2008. The new head of state has implemented a few relatively modest reforms—such as allowing more cultivation by private farmers and the general population’s access to mobile phones and personal computers.

But Raúl Castro moved cautiously. A bill to replace the pay scale from one based on egalitarianism toward another based on productivity and merit moved slowly. In July, the new president seemed to lower expectations of change. Three hurricanes caused billions of dollars in damages to crops, buildings, and infrastructure in the weeks that followed, exposing in new light the shortcomings of the Cuban economy. By November, the government had replaced three ministers—education, for-

1. Conference material from a few panels will appear in separate volumes.

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eign investment, and agriculture. General Ulises del Toro, who had presided over the consolidation of the sugar sector, was appointed as head of agriculture, as his deputy became head of the sugar industry. Placing this sector in the hands of a general signaled its significance as a national priority. Changes are surely needed, as Cuba imports over half the food it consumes while only 45 percent of arable land is being farmed.

Economists have often framed the discussion of reform in Cuba in terms of prescriptive issues posed by post-Communist societies, such as sequencing and scope of a transition strategy. Two paradigms for structuring economic changes in post-communist societies have stood out in this regard. One camp emphasizes the need for a speedy transition to a competitive market economy, privatization, the free flow of goods, and greatly reduced government intervention. Citing some successful Eastern European transitions, the claim is that these examples offer Cuba a viable template for a “big-bang” strategy. Another prominent paradigm emphasizes a gradual approach that would combine measured liberalization with a significant role for the state and efforts to prevent systemic collapses that would threaten jobs, pensions, and policy-making stability. China and Vietnam are seen as key cases to support the most extreme version of this line of reasoning. Among economists, Ernesto Hernández Catá exemplifies the first approach, while Carmelo Mesa-Lago has explored opportunities for sustained change that assumes an incremental approach within Cuba’s current political context.²

In addition to substantive discussion of policy-driven debates about the political economy of reform in Cuba, other economists have conducted research on the changing dimensions of economic life. Such work deserves praise and attention. As noted by several journalists participating

2. The conference presentations by Hernandez-Catá, Carmelo Mesa-Lago and Archibald Ritter at the Cuba conference drew from a series of papers previously discussed since the early 1990s at the Association for the Study of the Cuban Economy (ASCE). See Hernández Catá, Ernesto (1991) “Long-Term Objectives and Transitional Policies: A Reflection on Pazos” (Vol 1); Hernández Catá, Ernesto (1993) “Economic Policy in Cuba’s Transition to a Market Economy: Lessons From the Russian Experience (Vol 3); Hernández-Catá, Ernesto (1999) “Globalization, Transition and the Outlook for the Cuban Economy” (ASCE’s Eighth Annual Meeting). Mesa-Lago, Carmelo, (2000) *Market, Socialist and Mixed Economies, Comparative Policy and Performance: Chile, Cuba and Costa Rica*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University.

in the conference, it is extremely difficult to gain access to reliable data about economic and political processes in Cuba. Emma Phillips explores the significance of the transformation of work in Cuba from the perspective of Cuban workers and asks what broader implications these changes might have for Cubans' evolving ideas about work, citizenship, and models of political governance. Orlando Pérez and Angela T. Haddad analyze Cuba's trade agreements with Venezuela and present data on the economic, sociopolitical, and other consequences of that trade. Mario A. González Corzo and Scott Larson examine the U.S. based Cuban remittances forwarding agencies. Archibald Ritter's work on small-scale entrepreneurship provides compelling evidence on the rise and significance of this sector in contemporary Cuba, as well as a glimpse into the paradoxical relationship between official policy governing private enterprise and economic reality. Hilary Becker discusses the development of tourism in Cuba, its current status and its prospects, paying particular attention to recent projects toward sustainability. Emily Morris discussed the current state of the Cuban economy in a comparative context, exploring the economic recovery and growth since 2004-2005. She finds that while growth may be sustainable in the short and medium-term, external factors such as tourism and trade relations with countries like Venezuela will likely determine the trajectory of the economy in years to come.

The conference revisited in often new light some of the pivotal structural arguments informing the debate regarding a transition in Cuba today. Political and economic issues were scrutinized and intensely debated. A significant number of the papers focus on the thesis of stability of the regime under the one-party system, in some cases viewing great expectations of change under Raúl Castro as exaggerated. However, not always does the emphasis on the mechanisms inhibiting reform make change under the current regime unlikely.

Stephen Wilkinson discusses some of the motives behind Cuba's resistance to a democratic "transition" following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989. Marie Laure Geoffray analyzes why the socialist regime in Havana has managed to survive despite the fall of the USSR and the economic crisis of the 1990s, calling attention to its ability to generate a homogeneous pattern of socialization. According to Geoffray, however, the cultural realm remains dialectical. Groups of young artists often seek emancipation from traditional revolutionary norms, recalling a

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political, historical, and artistic heritage distinct from that which is promoted by the leaders of the country. These actors probe and promote diversity and the plurality of thought and social experience among artists.

David Strug explores another reason: the Cuban Revolution's meaning among older Cubans. Strug suggests that older Cubans still appear to identify with the revolution's accomplishments due to a perception of positive change in their lives, even within the context of notable failures to provide for their basic needs. Further exploring the links between culture and power, Enrique Pumar considers how non-democratic regimes employ primary frames to justify their rule and maintain popular support. These frames manipulate symbols and meanings to legitimize regime leaders, depict optimism, glorify collective sacrifices, and foster a common enemy and state of siege mentality, even if they deviate from the historical record. However, these tactics could be counterproductive as they raise expectations about the future and exacerbate tensions within the ruling elite. Salomon Berman describes the efforts by the leaders of the Cuban Revolution to instill in new generations of Cubans values and beliefs consistent with the perpetuation of the Cuban Revolution and a socialist system of production.³ Brenden Carbonell explores the Cuban military's economic and political ties, analyzing the prospects for some form of state corporatism as a possible political path.

Deepening the analysis of political culture, several papers discuss Fidel Castro's "Battle of Ideas" and its role in Cuba's internal political dynamics and prospects for change. Rather than dismissing the post-2000 Battle of Ideas as empty rhetoric or a desperate attempt to stave off the inevitable, Antoni Kapcia argues that the phenomenon needs to be analyzed within a wider historical context. He explores the continuity of ideological themes since 1959, internal "debate," and the alternation between participation through active mobilization and through structures. Anthony Maingot argues that significant groups of Cuban organic intellectuals are challenging the hegemony of orthodox Marxism, particularly with regard

3. In the Conference panel "Cubans in the US: Generational Differences among Cubans," presenters Lisandro Pérez, María Cristina García, Catherine Krull, Silvia Pedraza, and Yolanda Prieto examined Cuban generational groups on the island and abroad, to understand their divergent experiences and corresponding political attitudes. Their papers appear in a separate volume.

to economic strategy. Pragmatists question the reigning ideas based on “laws of development.” They are likely to remain faithful to Cuban nationalism and the goal of self-determination as they continue to address fundamental questions about Cuba’s insertion into the global market economy. Mauricio Font explores the logic, causes and priorities of the Battle of Ideas in part through a content analysis of Fidel Castro’s speeches after 1992 and the published statements in *Reflexiones* since his partial recovery in early 2007. His paper suggests that this campaign harkens back to past efforts of the regime to reinforce ideological orthodoxy and revolutionary renewal through the regime’s fundamental belief in the power of ideology to consolidate political power.

When it comes to the subject of Cuba and the World, few topics attract more attention than US-Cuba relations. Several presentations at the conference share a broad consensus emphasizing the centrality of Cuba’s relations with its neighbor to the north. The most heavily attended session of the conference was the panel on US-Cuba relations, moderated by Margaret E. Crahan. Ambassador Vicky Huddleston, Philip Brenner, Dan Erikson, and William LeoGrande presented informed analysis based on extensive personal and professional acquaintance with Cuba over many years. The panel discussed new expectations and reforms under president Raúl Castro, US-Cuban negotiations, the future of trade restrictions, and current Washington-Havana relations.

Andreas Pickel’s paper on mechanisms of change further explores US-Cuba relations as a system within which transformation processes are able to take place. Comparing post-Castro Cuba dynamics with change processes in Eastern Europe, two contradictory change mechanisms widely misunderstood in the literature are identified as central: US interventionism and Cuban nationalism. Gary Maybarduk argues that the US is not well prepared to ensure an orderly transition in the event that Cuba embraces a democratic transition—mass migration, drug trafficking, and other problems will follow a transition if US policies toward the island are not reevaluated. Sara Cooper explores political cartoons from the middle of the twentieth century until today, using humor to gain insights into the balance between continuity and change in Cuba-US relations.

However, Cuba’s relations with countries other than the US are at least as important to many authors. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the island has been developing relations with a significant number of

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countries in Europe, the Americas, Asia, and Africa, with significant success in some cases. In the recent past, Venezuela, China, and Russia stand out. Brazil has gained ground. All of the above extend various forms of aid or preferential credits, something Cuba desperately needs, as it has a very large debts with the Paris Club of creditor nations (Cuba is this organization's second highest debtor) and other countries. Denis Baresch concentrates on Cuba's relations with Europe. He discusses the European Union's policy towards Cuba as well as the European Commission's recent engagement with Cuba in developing a structured dialogue, including political and economic questions. Julie Feinsilver discusses why and how Cuba has conducted medical diplomacy, providing examples of Cuba's external reach in the twenty-first century, converting human capital into much needed oil and other forms of material capital. Sociologist Ted Goertzel explores contemporary Latin-American socialist models and their significance. Claudia Kaiser-Lenoir examines Cuba's responses to changing international contexts, comparing them to approaches that other Latin American countries have taken during times of crisis.

Outside the realm of economics and politics narrowly defined, the symposium brought together specialists from diverse disciplines focused on empirical work on diverse facets of change taking place in contemporary Cuban society through official channels as well as from individuals and loosely-connected groups in an increasingly diverse intellectual sector. Based on these efforts, it is difficult to escape the conclusion that variegated forms of change outside formal structures are increasingly vital to any discussion of transformation in contemporary Cuba. As argued in diverse papers in the humanities and social sciences, these alternative processes and forms of change, unregulated by officialdom and often at odds with party doctrine, can be observed in the discussions of race and ethnic diversity, culture and art that took place during the symposium.

Several papers point to dialectical dynamics at odds with official views, as writers, artists, youth, race and ethnic formations, and various other groups contest values and conventions traditionally espoused by official doctrine. These processes take place in spaces outside the reach of party ideology and can in fact threaten the status quo through informal but sustained progression. The state finds itself unable to encapsulate these spaces. These changes do not necessarily represent deliberate collective action for reform or the elimination of official institutions. What is inter-

esting is that they represent a departure from the high-profile attempts at political reform that are so often the focus of interest and support outside of Cuba. This underbelly of change is seen in the way that artists interact with the global art market. It is also present in the changing attitudes towards race, gender, sexuality, or even the market for intimate favors.

Artists and their works received a great deal of attention at the symposium and in this volume. Natania Remba examines the work of four Cuban artists of the nineties generation, illustrating how they and their works debate and engage in today's evolving globalized art world. Darrel Couturier's notes address the issue of the contemporary Cuban Art Market between 1997 and 2003, the peak of a vibrant artistic period. Rafael Ocasio revisits how Cuban writer Reinaldo Arenas became one of the most vocal figures among the political activists opposed to the Castro regime. Especially with the publication of his posthumously-published autobiography, *Antes que anochezca* (1992); [*Before Night Falls* (1993)], Arenas explored his own life as an outlaw engaged in sexual activities that were anathema to the Revolution, and as a gay activist who transformed his life into a case study. The paper by Yael Prizant explores how two plays, *Carlotta Corday* by Nara Mansur and *Charenton* by Raquel Carrió and Flora Lauten, examine recent and ongoing transformations on the island. Alfredo A. Fernandez compares the films *Guantanamera* (1995) of Tomás Gutiérrez Alea and *Lista de espera* (2000) of Juan Carlos Tabío, highlighting how both films approach some of Cuba's social and political challenges with the help of black humor.

Lauren Shaw focuses on the level of involvement of cultural institutions with the second generation of nueva trova musicians referred to as 'los novísimos.' She argues that the novísimos have achieved substantial success in finding ways to subvert institutional control while taking advantage of the support offered by cultural institutions. Laura García Freyre explores the punk-rock group Porno Para Ricardo, probing their differences with the regime through their music and the contextualization of their performances.

Cultural institutions and intellectual history continue to attract considerable scholarship. Carlos Riobó's paper traces the history of the Cuban National Library and smaller public libraries while asking the universal question of how the culturally marginal learn to reify and to exhibit their culture—gaining or lose political agency and cultural authenticity.

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The essay by Rafael Rojas explores the reception of Walter Benjamin in socialist Cuba, discussing this Marxist thinker's trip to Havana in the summer of 1940 prior to his meeting with Theodor W. Adorno in New York. Judith Salerno Izquierdo underlines the value of Fernando Ortiz's works, what they represent for the development and maturity of the social sciences in Cuba, especially sociology, emphasizing his role as founder of institutions, lecturer, editor and director of important publications, as well as ambassador of his own culture. Ilan Ehrlich presents a personal view of Eduardo Chibás, a unique Cuban political figure in pre-revolutionary Cuba. His somewhat polemical opinions and appeals for integrity and honesty in public life brought him support from the island.

Alejandro Campos-Garcia analyzes the Cuban state's agenda and policies against racism in the periods of 1959-1985 and after, including the new challenges that the Cuban state faces in its most recent approaches to racism. Ryan Masaaki Yokota considers the complex history of the Japanese and Okinawan migrants to Cuba, beginning with their secondary migration to Cuba, often as an attempt to circumvent restrictive immigration laws in the United States. Marianne Samayoa examines how nineteenth-century Cuban medical institutions underwent dramatic modernization with autonomous local boards, drawing some comparisons with Mexico and Guatemala.

In summary, the presentations at this conference, in this volume and other publications document and explore cultural, economic, and societal changes, particularly since the 1990s. While some authors see them as adaptive measures that help maintain the current system, others found the cumulative effect of these changes on Cuban society to be significant. The papers hence sharpen the debate about continuity versus change, offering evidence of both and often clarifying policy issues. Above all, they reflect the richness of Cuban studies as a vibrant field of academic and intellectual inquiry.