

CHAPTER 17

A Contribution to the Assessment of a Changing Cuba

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Abstract: This paper examines Cuba in the context of broader global realities affecting the lives of the vast majorities. Using the UN Millennium Development Goals data as a base, the study traces the historical and ideological underpinnings which determine the indicators displayed by Cuba in terms of material well being. It also applies a comparative approach with other Latin American countries to contrast overall direction and impact of policies taken during times of crisis, as a measure of the actual orientation of a given government and the guiding vision for the practices it pursues and implements.

A Changing Cuba in a Changing World, the title for this conference, provides the only accurate framework for assessing Cuba's complex and often contradictory realities. It is in the context of those defining the world at large, that the realities specific to Cuba can become ultimately significant. What are the most salient features of the changing world and of a changing Cuba? What are some determining factors shaping them? In the case of Cuba, the supporting evidence for my assessment stems from a two-fold empirical base: 1) Indicators and statistics provided by major international organizations, and 2) direct observations and tracking of data made possible by years of leading a program of cross-disciplinary research conducted in Cuba by Tufts graduate students in fields ranging from health, education and the environment to culture and governance. This work has allowed me broad exposure to multiple spheres of Cuban society as well as to specialized scholarly and technical literature combined with and tested against direct observation of actual practices *in situ*. Although I have also compiled a wealth of incidental evidence, I rely, for my assessment, only on data with enough prevalence as to constitute distinctly significant patterns.

As for the broad and overarching state of the changing world, I base the assessment on the most reliable and far reaching corpus of demonstra-

ble data available today: The one compiled by the UN under the Millennium Development Goals initiative. Articulated in 2000 and adhered to by the UN signatory countries, the MDG initiative has undertaken the most comprehensive tracking of key aspects of human development and well-being starting with 1990 data periodically updated, and with targets set to be reached by 2015.¹ All UN derived international programs (i.e. United Nations Development Program and Human Development Index) and organizations (i.e. UNESCO and World Health Organization) as well as a myriad of NGOs and national and local official agencies, ministries and institutions currently feed the data base for the MDG's broad set of statistics and indicators. Even acknowledging the potential distortions and insufficiencies inherent in the compiled results -and their interpretation through filters not exempt from partisan readings- the body of evidence amassed so far comprises one of the most revealing pictures of the state of the world, its inhabitants, and its environment, and points to realities hard to ignore.

What are the most salient features of today's changing world as projected through that evidence? Representative sample facts from the MDG: 80% of the world's population lives in the "developing" world. 46% of the world's population lives in *extreme* poverty (income of \$1.08 p/day). Half of the world's population in the "developing" world lacks access to basic sanitation. 200 square kilometers (equivalent to the size of Paris) of forested areas in the "developing" world are lost every day to logging and other economic activities. 1 in 3 of the world's urban dwellers lives in slum conditions (inadequate sanitation, clean water supply, living space). 98% of those severely affected by natural disasters between 2000 and 2006 live in the "developing" regions.²

What are the most salient features in today's changing Cuba? Representative sample facts: In 1998 the *WHO* awards Cuba "Health For All" medal for topping the "Healthy Life Expectations" index among non

1. The 8 areas under scrutiny are: eradication of extreme poverty and hunger; achievement of universal primary education; promotion of gender equality and empowerment of women; reduction of infant mortality; fight against HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases; reduction of maternal mortality; ensuring environmental sustainability; developing global partnerships for development (<http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/>)

2. www.un.org/docs/summit/2005/MDGBook.pdf

industrialized nations. In 2001 The *World Bank* praises Cuba for topping most poor countries in outstanding welfare benefiting the population. In 2003 the *Food and Agriculture Organization* praises Cuba as one of the few countries seriously pursuing the fight against urban and rural poverty. In 2006 the *World Wild Life Fund* cites Cuba as the only country in the world demonstrating significant achievement in sustainable environmental development. In 2007 the UN *MDG* shows that the infant mortality index of 5.3 p/1000 live births places Cuba among 30 countries in the world with best indicators, and second in the Americas after Canada. The latest UN *Human Development Index Report* (2007-2008) places Cuba in the highest of the three human development categories, a rank it now shares with the industrialized countries (51st among 70 nations in that category). The report also places Cuba as first in the world in the category measuring relationships between economic means and capacity for human development.

What is Cuba, and what in its evolving process can account for the achievements that are in such marked contrast with more generalized world conditions? The question is inevitable, and some key pointers to sharpen the focus and to place Cuba in proper context will admittedly simplify—yet not distort—complex realities. Cuba is a poor and underdeveloped country in Latin America, a region which, after Sub-Saharan Africa, displays the world's widest gap between wealth and poverty. The underlying conditions generating such gap are not new but have been fixed, in their primary form, by the realities of its colonial past and the resulting rigid, hierarchical and quasi-pyramidal social structure allowing the exercise of economic, cultural, and socio-political power from a narrow top of select minority rule over a broad base of marginalized majorities. The end of colonial rule in the 19th century signaled, for all Latin American countries—Cuba included—little change in that overarching social structure beyond a transfer of guard for the sector exercising control at the top. The historic siphonage of the region's wealth towards the development of hegemonic countries, accomplished first via direct colonial domination and later with the mediation of local ruling elites profiting from the arrangement, proved to be effectively served by this vertical social configuration. It is only in the 20th century that this historic status quo becomes significantly challenged through social revolutions (Mexico, Bolivia, Cuba, Nicaragua), national liberation movements in many coun-

tries, and the ballot (Guatemala, Chile, and most recently, Venezuela, Brazil, Ecuador, Bolivia). Cuba's 1959 revolution is the only one which has succeeded in consolidating and, so far, sustaining a different status quo. Far from being imported from abroad, its foundational thrust lies deep in Cuba's own history and its long and uniquely radical struggle for national independence, emancipation, and social justice going back to the 19th century, and to Jose Marti's vision of a "Cuba Libre."

What were, from the start, the Revolution's most salient features? The course over the past 48 years has been mixed, and the retreats as numerous as the advances, yet two foundational pillars remain evident:

1) The Revolution is fiercely **nationalist**. That means that at every turn and critical juncture it has placed Cuba's interests above those of other countries, thus radically subverting the colonial and neo-colonial status quo by which the national wealth serviced predominantly the growth and development of more powerful countries with direct or indirect hegemony over the region. Clear evidence of this is the impossibility for foreign owned enterprises and interests to operate in Cuba except under contract with and strict control of the Cuban state. This characterized the terms under which Soviet and Eastern European enterprises were present in Cuba before 1990, as well as all foreign investment ventures starting with the Special Period until the present, in spite of the marked differences in the nature of the relationship in each of these two phases. Cuba's Foreign Investment Law mandates that all foreign ventures operate in partnership with the Cuban state, and be barred from owning Cuba's national resources, including land. It also gives national institutions and organizations (spanning the Confederation of Cuban Workers to the Ministry of Environmental Policy) control over terms and practices of production, profit allocation, salaries and work conditions. A very different picture, indeed, from the way in which foreign interests operate in most of Latin American countries, where the recently revived historic struggle for asserting a measure of sovereignty over national resources in several of them (Bolivia and Ecuador, the latest ones) points to centuries-old unresolved problems of dependence and subservience, in spite of (or, perhaps, because of) current globalization and "free-trade" agreements.

2) The Revolution is also radically oriented towards the **defense and preservation of the interests of the majorities over the minorities** thus

effectively turning the historic pyramidal structure on its head. It placed at the front the interests of the broad masses of peasants and workers, historically at the bottom, through massive campaigns of empowerment to educate, provide health, culture, housing, civic space for action, and employment. All available data pertaining to material conditions of Cuba's broad majorities demonstrate this.³ Abolishing centuries-old practices of privilege produced a highly egalitarian society in which -from 1959 to 1990- 99% of earnings came from salaries, with only a 1 to 5 differential between the highest and the lowest ones, something unheard of anywhere else, not just in Latin America, but the world. Indicators relating to culture and education also point to profound transformations, which have Cuba sustaining highest rates of literacy and scholarly performance in Latin America (UNESCO, 2007), and producing 11% of scientists in a region where Cubans account for only 2% of the total population.

It could be argued that the goal of preserving and advancing national interests in tandem with the interest of the majorities is a feature also figuring in the agenda of populist governments such as Peron's in Argentina or Vargas' in Brazil. The difference, however, is radical. While those governments may have introduced reforms oriented towards boosting national interests and the welfare of workers and farmers, none actually changed the prevailing capitalist system of property and the set of social relations built upon it. At the heart of the radical thrust of the Cuban Revolution (and undoubtedly also at the heart of the intractable opposition by those affected by it) lies the principle of *social ownership* of the country's wealth, and modes of production and distribution. This socialization of property, as a principle enshrined in the Cuban Constitution (Art. 14) and orienting the country's policies and practices, marks the most profound distinction between the Cuban Revolution and attempts at reform elsewhere.

These two features have shaped a course not always even yet clearly discernible to this day; and still not qualitatively subverted even by the glaring inequalities and disparities arising under the stress of the crisis unleashed by the post Soviet-block collapse in 1990. Since 1959 the sys-

3. Glazer, H., "The Building Industry in Cuba," in Chaffee W. and Prevost, G. (eds.) *Cuba: A Different America*, New York: Monthly Review Press, 1989, pp 75-8

tem has gone through prolonged periods where power, sucked out from the base, concentrated at the top of bureaucratic cliques and commissar-like administrators savvy in the exercise of privilege. The infamous “quinquenio gris”⁴ of the 1970s can be attributed to Cuba’s adoption of a Soviet-style organization of society and orientation of politics; the problems of the latter years of the post-Soviet Special period have the markings of home-grown versions of those persistent ills. What is uniquely distinct about Cuba, however, is how each problematic period has, so far, always given way to a process of questioning of root causes of corruption, deficiencies and abuse of power, with broad engagement at the social base in the articulation of adequate responses and solutions to the identified ills. The Rectification process of the late 1980s,⁵ the broad popular consultation assemblies of 1994,⁶ and the current nation-wide debate about a range of questions from the practical to the ideological are a test of the real degree of empowerment of the social base. Furthermore, the recent electoral process culminating this past February, attest as well to the degree of active popular engagement in the practices of national governance.⁷

Other relevant variables become significant when Cuba is examined in the context of Latin America; the region sharing Cuba’s formative character. If until 1959, Cuba had fundamentally the same terms of relations with the international centers of historical control of the region as did the rest of the Latin American countries, the repercussion brought to Cuba by the revolution signified a dramatic change of course. The radical process of 1959 (as radical as the French, the American and the Russian revolutions before it) met the full force of opposition from the powerful

4. 1971-1976; the height of the period of Cuba’s appropriation of Soviet style policies for all spheres of national life, marked by retreats from the original revolutionary thrust, and a curtailment of artistic and intellectual freedoms, and gay rights.

5. Conceived as an effort to “revolutionize the revolution,” it was launched in 1986 to fight –with a re empowered citizenry- pervasive corruption, stagnation and social differentiation brought by policies in place since the late 1960s (i.e. while only 20 badly needed day-care centers had been built in 5 years in Havana, 100 new ones were completed in 2 years by micro-brigades of volunteers).

6. See footnote #12.

7. Koppel, M and O’Shaughnessy, B., “National Assembly Elects Cuban Leadership,” in *The Militant*, March 10, Vol. 72, No. 10.

economic and political forces dominating the traditional status quo. The clash with the old guard so radically dislodged from power was as inevitable for the Cuban revolutionaries as for the revolutionaries of 1776 in the thirteen colonies, which was also placing a new class and system of ownership at the helm. No imperial power has, after all, ever yielded control by choice. Yet the context was profoundly different in the two revolutions. While the thirteen colonies had already succeeded in building a strong independent economic base of manufactures and trade to stand on, no Latin American country was ever born with that privilege, and neither was the 1959 Cuban Revolution. The handicap of dependency, inherited from the particular terms of Latin America's colonial condition was unequivocally exposed already in 1891 by Jose Marti (*Nuestra América*). He also understood how radical the struggle would need to be in order to change that course, and prophetically outlined the inevitable hostility from the U.S. to be faced by any Latin American country seeking an independent path towards political and economic sovereignty.

Indeed, since 1959, that hostility, its form, and its impact, constitute the most significant **external factor** the Cuban process has had to contend with to this day. Aside from armed invasion, and well documented various forms of warfare, assassination attempts, and forced isolation in the international arena, the imposition of the longest and strictest embargo of a country in modern history—and perhaps in all of history—has affected the way Cuba has been forced to function in every sphere of national life. If the embargo shaped in major ways Cuba's early need for allies in the Soviet block, it also defined the apocalyptic nature of the crisis engulfing the country in the aftermath of the 1990 collapse of the Soviet block as a whole. "It was as if the sun had not come up at 6 am, nor at 9 am, nor at noon. And in the midst of the darkness we had to look for solutions," is the aptly poignant description by Fidel Castro himself. The nature of the crisis is revealed in figures such as the loss, overnight of 85% of sources of trade and energy acquisition; a shrinking of the economy to 65% of its size in two years; the decline of Cubans' caloric intake by 40%; and the almost total paralysis of industrial and agricultural production, and transportation capacity. The Torricelli and the Helms-Burton Acts passed by the US Congress under the Clinton administration in 1992 and 1996 further tightened the embargo in the hopes of providing the last catastrophic push.

Tell-Tale Crises

Unlike times of calm and prosperity, crises are economic, political and social “tipping points” exposing the real anatomy of a system and the underlying character of its social relations. Perhaps no other period, since 1959, has provided a better vantage point to accurately assess the overarching character of the Cuban system as the apocalyptic meltdown of the early 90s and its aftermath. But the most superficial review of MDG charts would indicate that crisis is a present reality most everywhere else in the world and, as of this writing, unequivocally also finding expression even in the wealthy and advanced United State. The global crisis, in fact, yields the most accurate (albeit unfortunate) framework for comparative assessment of the underlying nature of every existent socio-economic and political system. In the Latin American region alone, the last two decades have seen a number of countries at the “tipping point” besides Cuba (Mexico, Brazil, Uruguay, Argentina Bolivia and Venezuela, to list a few). Yet the crisis’ impact on Cubans and on the various other Latin American populations and their environment becomes dramatically differentiated when surveying the MDG charts for the entire region. As an example: By the early 2000s, in contrast with the rest of the region, Cuba registers the smallest number of slum dwellers, of HIV/AIDS cases, of infant deaths (the only country to have already achieved the MDG mortality reduction target set for 2015), and the largest number of regained forested areas and of women serving in legislative positions. It is also the country whose annual expenditure in social services per year tops that of Japan, Australia and USA, and twice the amount of all of Latin America combined.⁸

What else but the particular character of the Revolution itself --its defense of national interests at the service of the interests of the majority, as a constitutionally guaranteed priority and right—can convincingly explain such indicators? A quick comparative contrast with another Latin America country with its own “tipping point” experience, can clearly illustrate systemic differences in objectives and modalities. I will use

8. *A Latin American and Caribbean Perspective* (<http://www.eclac.cl/egibin/get-Prod.asp?xml=/publicaciones/xml/0/21540/P21540.xml&xsl=/tpl/p9f.xsl&base=/tpl/top-bottom.xsl>) Chapter IV, figs. IV.7 and IV.26; chapter V, figs. V.1, V.2, V.10 and V.15; chapter VI, fig. VI.1; chapter VIII, fig. VIII.7.

Argentina, my country of origin, and one I am deeply familiar with in broad and personal ways.

In *economic* terms, the 2001 crisis which plunged Argentina into near meltdown revealed with glaring clarity the extent to which resources, production, trade, financing and profits have been and continue to be mostly arranged to serve the interests of select national dominant sectors and of foreign enterprises and investors. Not much else could explain how it is that one of the richest countries in the region, as favored in financial, investment and trade terms as a “developing” country could be; in fact, the one so often cited, at the time, as virtual poster child for economic “reform” in the “new global economy—could end up with 54% of its population falling below the poverty line by 2002 while still some privileged local sectors and a host of foreign investors prospered even further in the midst of the catastrophe. A country which despite being for some time the world’s third largest exporter of soy beans and despite possessing roughly twice as many head of cattle as inhabitants, has today more malnourished people than ever before in its history (BBC report, August 2007), and has close to 50% of children between 13 and 15 leaving school because of economic reasons (UNESCO 2003/Universidad Catolica Argentina report, 2007). While the evidence shows that Argentina’s economy registers high rates of growth today compared to 2001 and, thus, is ostensibly on the path to recovery, with a government that is more careful in the management of popular discontent, a closer look reveals the extent to which the systemic problems which reached a point of explosion in 2001 are still very much alive and boiling under the surface. They go on, in fact, thoroughly unaffected and clearly unresolved by “growth” rates, as they are habitually measured. The recovery, in turn, continues expanding selected pockets and waist-lines, to be sure; but not exactly those of a shaky middle class or the growing ranks of the poor, further victimized these days by an inevitably encroaching inflation.

In Cuba, meantime, all economic measures taken to survive the crisis (development of the tourism and biotechnology sectors, opening the country to foreign investment, restructuring of the sugar industry and the system of state farms, etc.) were implemented without ever surrendering control of the overall direction and aim of the economy. Furthermore, it is precisely with profits from the new ventures (be it in biotechnology, tourism, or international cooperation missions) that Cuba has been able to

ensure the sustainability of social programs and the economic infrastructure of the nation in the midst of the crisis. In my experience, this direct funneling of gains from foreign investment ventures not into the private pockets of a few but into the coffers of the state where it could be directed to the welfare of the general population is the palpable manifestation of real *social ownership* of the country's wealth.⁹ This has been one of the most challenging features for our students to come to terms with in their work in Cuba, since it invariably turns all learned logical assumptions about the "natural" course of business and the economic practices on its head. It is not "profitable" after all, in common business logic, to have the maternity homes as well as the community centers, the grandparents' circles, and the schools of Old Havana be supported and serviced by the luxury tourist facilities proliferating in that historic neighborhood, just as the profits from tourist facilities all across the island service their immediate communities –or to have revenues from health tourism and biotechnology ventures financing the free health care of all Cubans.

In *social* terms, the Argentine crisis has revealed the extent to which it is the vast majorities of workers and peasants who are the ones to bear the brutalizing brunt of policies of economic "rescue;" whether austerity measures or structural reform packages. The near total dismantling of the public health system, the system of public education, and social security network has resulted in millions of people left to fend for themselves. The unending practice of road blockages, a daily occurrence across the country, would appear to be, in fact, one of the sole means still available at the grass-roots to gain a minimum of visibility within the system.

In Cuba under crisis, in contrast, there is ample evidence of how in the midst of scarcity the state has sought measures that equalize as much as possible the life conditions of the population, and evenly spread out resources both in the urban and rural sectors,¹⁰ and that measures be implemented to equalize as much as possible the life conditions of the

9. See Sinclair, M, and Thompson, M., *Cuba: Going Against the Grain*, Washington: Oxfam America, 2000.

10. This conscious emphasis on urban/rural equality is something unheard of in the rest of Latin America and has been a remarkable hallmark from the Cuban revolution from the start. Saney, Issac, *Cuba: A Revolution in Motion*, Canada: Fernwood Publishing, 2004, pp.35-6.

population. Demonstrable evidence of this: while cut off from all main sources of international financial aid and loans, with trade made tremendously difficult and costly as the result of the embargo, Cuba did not close schools nor hospitals during the 1990s. Instead, between 1990 and 2003, the number of doctors serving the population increased by 96%, the number of maternity homes grew by 86%, and that of elderly care centers by 107.8%. By 2001, the average caloric intake went up to normal, and life expectancy has increased to 76 for men and 78 for women; one of the highest in the Americas. The inequities brought about by the measures enforced to withstand the storm have severely affected the equalizing thrust of the revolution, to be sure. The glaringly growing disparities between those with and without access to hard currency, the all pervasive old and new forms of corruption and individual dishonesty, the crippling effect of functional inefficiencies, are all very much in evidence. So are the increasing signs of recurrent ills from the past, like racism and sexism. The evidence of an emerging privileged sector of smooth operators milking the system both at the production and the managerial levels is there for anyone to see.

The picture may appear the same as in Argentina. There is a fundamental contrast, however, that stems from the systemic differences shaping the reaction *against* those ills in the two countries. In Cuba, over the course of the Special period and beyond, the system has refused to “naturalize” the inequalities and has, in fact, continually sought to regulate and control them through various measures and policies. The rounds of public consultation and debate currently taking place across the country are a self-regulating prophylactic measure organized and encouraged by the state itself. Nothing remotely similar has never taken place in Argentina. Quite the opposite: “¡Qué se vayan todos!” (“Out, all of them!”), the angry slogan against the Argentine government and the entire political class during the 2001 crisis and its aftermath, reveals a keen popular awareness of the fundamentally intractable nature of corruption in the exercise of power in that country.

In Cuba, the measures to combat corruption have varied in scope and in effectiveness of implementation, yet they have been and continue to be comprehensive efforts in which the system re-empowers itself by legitimizing and upholding the thrust against corruption and abuse coming as well from the broad base of the workers and peasants themselves. They

seek to actively involve the population in the fight against and the control of corruption and abuse, placing the fight back in people's hands and thus reclaiming for the popular base its centrality within the system. It is an army of young social workers, organized and empowered by the state, which has dealt with control of theft at the gas pumps in Havana, and workers in the assemblies the ones responsible for the house cleaning in work places.¹¹ The process is far from perfect in its concrete results, to be sure. Yet in social and political terms it goes a long way to deepening the power, symbolically and concretely of the base. Corruption and abuse, *quantitatively* present as they are in Cuba, have not succeeded in *qualitatively* transforming the overall nature and character of the system itself. The case of Argentina, in turn, shows how *qualitatively* unaffected the system remains by protests and measures against corruption and abuse – however *quantitatively* present they may be.

In *political* terms, the comparison between the two countries also attests to potential and the means available for popular participation and representation within each system. No measure implemented in Argentina before or after the crisis (privatizations, dismantling of social services, closures of work places, etc) underwent at any point a process of citizens' consultation or in-put. The overwhelming majority of the population remains, in fact, shut-off from any form of effective control, other than the periodic elections where a myriad of political parties participate, and only 2 or 3 of the traditional ones effectively compete for power. It is well known that even the Peronista party, under the banner of defender of the working majority's interests, can also morph into the party responsible for implementing policies most detrimental to that social sector. As a political phenomenon, the vast organizing drive generated at the grass-roots to weather the 2001 crisis (neighborhood assemblies, soup kitchens, barter clubs, etc) functioned, while it lasted, either on the margins or in direct confrontation with the government and its agencies. In Cuba, in contrast, all measures taken to weather the crisis were presented for citizens' evaluation and discussion in a broad and deep consultation process encompassing over 80,000 public assemblies in work places across the country (January-March 1994).¹² The population had an in-put in decisions rang-

11. Examples of measures through which corruption and abuse stemming from the crisis in the Special Period were dealt with in 2006.

ing from opening the country to foreign investment to allowing small private business practices. Far from being merely formulaic, the consensus reached in the assemblies affected the fate and character of measures originally favored by the government at the national level—for instance a proposed tax on wages which was rejected in the consultation process and subsequently dropped by the government in response. Moreover, the implementation of measures taken continues to involve a high degree of volunteering and organizing at the grass-roots level, operating in concert with the formal structures of power. The innumerable self-generated initiatives undertaken by neighborhood groups to improve housing, street lighting, food distribution and production, elderly and child care, cultural outreach, etc., can be easily verified by any observant visitor to the Island nation.

In political terms, furthermore, it is axiomatic that governments without a base of legitimacy are vulnerable to collapse in times of crisis. The prevailing view of the Cuban government in the U.S. as lacking legitimacy and broad popular support fails to account for the fact that it has been able to survive, endure, and even organize a leadership transition without recourse to states of emergency or harsh measures of containment of popular discontent even in the face of the most severe and precipitous decline of living standards across all sectors of the population. It has not only survived but also its high degree of legitimacy is evident in all the rounds of elections held since the start of the crisis in 1990, each registering the highest degree of participation (around 98%) in a process which is not obligatory, as it is in Argentina and so many other countries, and where voting is secret.¹³ No amount of campaigning from the inside or from abroad for a protest vote against the system has ever produced more than utterly insignificant results in the ballot box, as attested in the most recent elections where only 5% of ballots were spoiled or left blank. In

12. During the first month of 1994, over 80,000 assemblies were held in factories, farms, and other work places across Cuba, where people discussed and made recommendations on measures to best survive the crisis post-Soviet collapse. Also see Lopez Vigil, *Cuba: Neither Heaven nor Hell*, Washington: Epica Press, 1999, and Waters, M-A., "Defending Cuba's Socialist Revolution" in *New Internationalist*, No. 10, 1994.

13. See Azicri, M. *Cuba Toda and Tomorrow: Reinventing Socialism*. Miami: University of Florida Press, 2000, and August, A. *Democracy in Cuba in the 1997-1998 Elections*, Havana: Editorial Jose Marti, 1999.

contrast, in the thick of the crisis, Argentina saw five different presidents come and go in the course of two weeks, forced out by popular protests which went as far as to defy and defeat, for the first time in the country's history, even the terms of a state of emergency and curfews imposed by the government desperate to restore order. There are few other examples as glaring as those, of what lack of legitimacy truly looks like for the representatives of a system.

And finally *in accordance with what set of guiding principles is the changing world (Argentina, a case in point) actually changing?* Against what *vision*, what notion of what the course *should* be, is the present evidence to be measured? That is the ultimate conceptual question on the one hand but also, on the other, the one that unavoidably separates rhetoric from substantive action and practice. The UN holds up the MDG's vision of what must constitute the necessary foundation for human development and progress. An identical vision informs in one way or another the normative principles embodied in codes, charters and emblematic symbols in nations across the planet; Argentina included. The substantive body of **evidence** provided by the MDG underscores, on the other hand, the degree to which stated principle is rendered mostly inoperative in the actual configuration of concrete, material realities affecting the lives of the majorities; certainly of the bulk of Argentines and those in the rest of the "developing" regions today. That gap constitutes, in the end, the real litmus test for any society. The terrible realities prevailing for most of the world's peoples appear, in fact, shaped by principles at best indifferent and at worst inimical to any aspiration to collective human well-being.

And what would constitute, for Cuba, an equivalent body of principles within which to frame the litmus test for its own set of changing realities? The 1956 *Program Manifesto of the July 26 Movement* synthesizing the Revolution's own vision for the desired shape of society, draws directly from the set of ideas and norms already articulated by Jose Marti (*Manifesto of Montecristo, 1895*), and projects 100 years later, into the country's present Constitution and body of laws: Cuba will be independent and sovereign; it will safeguard the interests of the majority of peasants and workers over those of the few through a radical conception of social ownership of property, land, capital, industry and production; it will orient development towards social welfare as opposed to individual

profit, and it will pursue a socially just course by upholding the right to education, work, housing, culture, health, and civic participation.

Measured against the substantive body of evidence in the data available, one can conclude that the country's present course, mixed and contradictory as it is, is consistent with the orientation of its foundational vision, and clearly also with the one shaping the MDG initiative as well. It is the social realities resulting from that course what compels the recognition of not just the UN (HDI Report, 2007-08) but also of an institution like the World Bank, hardly sympathetic to Cuba. Furthermore, Cuba challenges to the very core the accepted norms and standards by which *development* and *economic growth* are routinely measured. On the one hand, there is the model implemented in most "developing" countries where development means an economy expanding, but **in tandem** with growing social inequalities and environmental degradation (China); or where access to the expansion's benefits is mostly blocked to close to half of the country's population (i.e. the Dalits of India's lowest caste) by the strictures of tradition; or, most dramatically, the case of Sub-Saharan Africa; a region which according to the World Bank (2007) has registered a 5.4% average GDP growth in the last decade (even better than the US economy), yet where its inhabitants live in conditions ranked the worst in all comparative indicators for well being. At the opposite end of the spectrum is the paradigm represented by Cuba.

What is the ultimate function of development? Development for what? Development for whom? The answers as they arise from the empirical evidence reviewed would be obvious, I believe, to someone surveying the scene with unadulterated eyes. They must be obvious as well to those shaping the relentlessly hostile and isolating policy towards Cuba. The course pursued by the country since 1959, uneven as it is, still represents an exceptional break from a generalized status quo that clearly does not benefit the majorities' interests. With increasing challenges and unrest, **still**, most of the world continues to be "business as usual" for the sectors controlling the mechanisms for major economic and political decision making, regardless of nuance, with Cuba clearly **still** remaining outside the realm of the usual "business." Thus, terms like *regime change* and *transition*, as commonly used, are most often euphemisms referring to the need to redress that exception; and embargoes, travel bans, and all other means of isolating and weakening Cuba, far from being capricious have a

sound logic: in the context of a status quo prevailing most everywhere, the example set by a lone dissenter is problematic in itself. It is doubly intolerable, moreover, when it not only ends up displaying some remarkable capacities to succeed, but it does it precisely in those areas that are of fundamental urgency to the majority of the world's population: health, education, and the opportunity for a decent life.

So, the question of what, in the end, makes possible for Cuba the achievements so glaringly lacking in other regions is too fundamental to be merely rhetorical. It is, in fact, the only one worth placing at the core of this comparative assessment. Its answer contains, after all, the key to the potential for addressing the most pressing issues facing the changing world, as it presently is. What enables Cuba to perform as it does, clearly does not stem from an economic advantage. Cuba's per capita GDP is *one fifth* that of Mexico (a sister country **not** embargoed, **not** cut-off from access to standard lending sources, and **not** facing the crippling strictures to its international trade flow), yet the country registers today quality of life indicators not only above those of Mexico but on par, in many cases, with the first world. And while in the United States, the richest country in the planet, 65% of black male school drop-outs are not working, and 59% of them are in prison,¹⁴ Cuba, embargoed and poor, is unfolding programs that successfully target the almost totality of youth neither studying nor working, and actually paying them a salary while training them as social workers at the same time as they prepare to pursue a career of their choice in exchange.¹⁵ What enables Cuba to do for its citizens what more developed countries with stronger economies fail to do for their own, stems firstly from the very conditions made possible by a radical revolution in power, and secondly with the persistence of an active political will to continue upholding the principles of national sovereignty and egalitarianism at every critical turn and in every sphere. That is what sets Cuba apart from Argentina and most any other place in the changing world, what determines all responses to the crisis of the 1990s, what makes possible the programs that yield indicators outside of the norm for a poor, non -

14. Western, B., *Punishment and Inequality in America*, New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2004, pp. 60 and 99.

15. The School of Social Work is one of the several programs comprising the *Battle of Ideas* initiative.

industrialized country, and defines the special character of its struggle against corruption and privilege. Guiding political wills are not written in stone, neither in Cuba nor anywhere else, to be sure. The most one can say at this stage is that; with advances and retreats, with plenty of mistakes, and blurred by the weight of deviations and weaknesses both individual and systemic; the political will that guided the principles for which the revolution was fought in 1959 has so far prevailed in a qualitative way at each difficult juncture of Cuba`s changing process.

This is a useful axis, I suggest, even for spinning the inevitable questions of “What will happen after Fidel dies? What will change under Raul?” Here again, the answer will have to be grounded in the orientation of the *politics* that organize the course of the material, social, and cultural life of the country, and the underlying economic and social realities. What has happened in Cuba since 1959, and particularly since 1990, can only be understood by focusing on the degree of correspondence between stated **principles** for what society should be, and the nature and character of the actual **policies and practices** put into place in the course of both long time organizing and insuring survival in the short term: Who do they benefit; whose interests do they seek to uphold, put forth, and protect. That interplay, fundamentally political and in constant state of flux and tension, will be what determines in the end the shape of things to come, after Fidel, after Raul, after lifted embargoes...

