

## *Critical Perspectives on Civil Society*

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Civil society is the new buzzword of the eighties and nineties, and given its theoretical primacy in explaining transitions to democracy across Asia, Europe, and Latin America in both academia and political life, not surprisingly it has come to dominate discussions about politics, citizenship, participation, and transition in Cuba as well. People from opposed ends of the political spectrum use the term – from an article in the notoriously anti-Castro *Miami Herald* titled, “In solidarity with Cuba’s civil society,” to a Marxist website that emphatically proclaims, “Civil Society in Cuba? Indeed, and Socialist!” Clearly these articles have divergent notions of what they mean by civil society. Like the older debates about democracy in Cuba, where both anti-Castro exiles in Miami and supporters of the revolution would claim that they were promoting democracy, the concept of civil society has come to be appropriated in different ways by actors with distinct political agendas. The concept of civil society itself has a long and complex genealogy, which I cannot hope to cover in this paper. Rather, I propose to look at how civil society is being used by various actors in the context of contemporary Cuba, including the Cuban socialist state, the Cuban exile community, US-funded institutions such as USAID and critical intellectuals within Cuba.

The concept of civil society, which extends back into the work of nineteenth and twentieth century European thinkers such as Marx, Hegel, and Tocqueville, has been resurrected in recent years and has also been expanded beyond the western context in which it originated to encompass diverse non-western experiences. Scholars theorizing the collapse of communism in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe spearheaded this revival by promoting civil society as the harbinger of new liberal democracies. Beginning with analysis of the Polish opposition movements in the early 1980s (Arato 1981) and gaining momentum in the 1990s, social scientists invoked the concept of civil

society to explain the transitions to democracy in a range of different contexts. These scholars argued that civil society, as a broad set of activities consisting of public communication, associations, and social movements, was instrumental in the development of political alternatives that could oppose and ultimately replace authoritarian regimes.<sup>1</sup> Given the historical linkages between Soviet communism and Cuban socialism, a range of scholars, dissidents, actors such as the Catholic Church and US government bodies began to search for similar signs of civil society in Cuba, as the basis for a possible future transition.

But in some ways, it seems like an oxymoron to talk of civil society in Cuba. Especially given the historic associations of civil society with the market and market economies, it seems impractical to apply it to Cuba where market openings have been extremely limited. Theorists in other non-European contexts have also asked whether we can usefully consider the concept of civil society as a transhistorical empirical category. According to Jean and John Comaroff (1999), the liberal concepts at the core of civil society, including “the nation-state, the individual, civil rights, contract, ‘the’ law, private property, democracy,” presume a series of exclusions and separations that rule out the participation of certain sectors. Moreover, they argue that interactions between public and private are culturally specific; non-European contexts produce their own forms of accountability, public spheres and associations that may not be reducible to the Euro-specific concept of civil society (Comaroffs 1999). The term civil society itself has come to be such a polyvalent concept that it is hard to apply usefully in an empirical sense.

I argue that part of the problem lies in the normative underpinnings of the concept of civil society that is prevalent in the transitions to democracy literature. Civil society is seen as an ideal-typical model based on European-derived notions that Cuba must attain. In contrast to this normative conception, I propose an historical, strategic and empirical concept of civil society. An historical or genealogical understanding of civil society means that we analyze the narratives of a range of actors to understand the ways in which civil society has entered the local lexicon in a context such as Cuba. A strategic notion of civil society looks at how the term may provide local actors with the basis for action and contestation. An empirical sense of civil society seeks to use the term to describe the actual features of emerging spaces of public life. Rather than employing a vague and nebulous concept of civil society, I propose that we give depth and form to the concept through the

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1. This definition is taken from the exhaustive and influential text by Cohen and Arato (1992), but I refer here to a more general, though geographically and theoretically diverse, range of work within comparative politics and political theory, including O’Donnell and Schmitter 1986; Przeworski 1991; Linz and Stepan 1996; Keane 1998; Bernhard 1993; Weigle and Butterfield 1992.

Gramscian notion of civil society as hegemony and the Habermasian notion of public space as a specific structure within civil society.

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### *The History of the Civil Society Concept in Cuba*

For many years, Cuban officials and academics have claimed that civil society is not a Marxist concept and therefore it has no relevance to Cuba. In January 1996, the official Cuban daily newspaper *Granma* published an article entitled, “Sociedad civil o gato por liebre?” According to the author of the article, Raúl Valdés, civil society was an instrument for “promoting the internal fragmentation of Third World countries and for resisting any progressive role the state may play in social development.” NGOs were represented as a tool of US interests that were aimed at “undermining socialist society from within.” This article was followed by an official statement by the Central Committee of the Communist Party (the CCP), which lambasted important academic institutions, critical publications, and many NGOs (Dilla and Oxhorn 2002:24). Haroldo Dilla and Philip Oxhorn (2002:25) report that this political offensive was followed by the dismantling of the Center for Studies on the Americas (CEA), increased control over NGOs and refusal to give legal recognition to other various new organizations.

Although the Cuban state had overreacted greatly, there was some basis for its fears of US geopolitical maneuvering and intervention. The US government had begun to aggressively promote the idea of a transition in Cuba with the Cuban Democracy Act of 1992 (the Torricelli-Graham bill) and the Cuban Liberty and Democratic Solidarity Act of 1996 (the Helms-Burton bill), which included among other aspects a tightening of the embargo and the travel ban. In 1996, a USAID Mission was established to “develop civil society on the island.” According to the Mission co-ordinators:

Successful implementation of this objective will result in the development of a Cuban civil society increasingly knowledgeable of their civil and legal rights and responsibilities under a freely elected Cuban government. It will provide understanding of the function and benefits of a free market enterprise system. It will help to alleviate the suffering of political prisoners and their families. It also will strengthen the role and delivery capacity of independent Cuban NGOs and provide transition scenarios on the development of economic, financial, and legal institutions required in a post-Castro democratic and free-market Cuban society.

This kind of connection between civil society and a free market economy is made even more strongly in US policy statements than in the academic literature, although it is clear that a notion of the market underlies both conceptions of transition.

Following an initial negative reaction to the concept of civil society, Cuban officials, ideologues and some academics began to incorporate it into their lexicon. In an article in *Granma* entitled, “Civil Society and Non-Governmental Organizations,” former Minister of Culture, Armando Hart argued that civil society should be seen as more than the market, it should be seen as the kinds of spheres of public debate and discussion which he claims do exist in Cuban society. The Main Report of the Fifth Congress of the CCP in 1997 stated that the socialist nature of Cuban civil society emerged from the nature of its social system and the state. State officials and political leaders claimed that long-standing mass organizations such as the Central Trade Union of Cuba, the Federation of University Students, the Committees for the Defense of the Revolution, the Federation of Cuban Women, the Small Farmers Association, the Union of Writers and Artists, and a host of state institutions and associations constituted Cuban civil society.

Some Cuban intellectuals began to criticize this official notion of socialist civil society and a series of debates were published in Cuban academic journals such as *Temas*. “Rereading Gramsci: Hegemony and Civil Society” was published in 1997, and “Civil Society in the 90s: The Cuban Debate,” was published in 1999. Haroldo Dilla (1999:163) contended that the concept of civil society was not at all applicable to Cuba prior to 1989. Dilla makes the point that prior to 1989, “The Cuban system was organized in a highly centralized schema when it came to the assignment of resources in a centrally planned economy, with an omnipresent state in all and every aspect of daily life.” Dilla argues that given the entrenched nature of the Communist Party in Cuban political life, the utopic notion of socialist civil society was never applicable to Cuba. Moreover, Dilla (1999:165) argues that the notion of the state withering away is absurd, and is compatible with a neo-liberal vision of politics, where society is left to carry out the social welfare tasks that have been abandoned by the state. For Dilla and other scholars in the debate such as Jorge Luis Acanda, the notion of a constrained state, responsible only for guaranteeing public order, is as dangerous as the idea of an all-powerful state.

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### *Civil Society as the Organization of Hegemony*

In contrast to the versions of civil society put forth by US and Cuban government representatives and officials, critical Cuban scholars have been developing alternative notions of civil society, that draw on the kinds of frameworks developed by social theorists such as Gramsci. Gramsci conceptualized civil society as a series of trenches or fortifications within society that serve as a means for the organization of hegemony or counter-hegemony. In contrast to the opposition between state and society that we find in the transitions to democracy/US policy literature, Gramsci saw civil society as

both distinct from and coterminous with the state. For Gramsci, state and civil society do not exist as bounded categories but as a set of power relations that make sense only when situated in a specific historical and ethnographic problem.

Dilla and Luis Acanda follow a Gramscian approach to the study of civil society. They have pointed to what they call a “redimensionalizing” of the state-society relationship in Cuba in the decade of the nineties, whereby the state has withdrawn from various channels of civil society, giving the latter greater space to function. Dilla and Luis Acanda accord this greater role of civil society to a number of factors, including the opening up of Cuba to a global market economy, the scarcity of resources which has reduced the economic power held by state institutions over their members, and the political crisis of the special period which has forced the Cuban government to concede space to other social actors, while establishing new forms of control over emerging social groups and institutions. Adopting a Gramscian framework, critical Cuban scholars show the ways in which the state operates through civil society, but by retaining a methodological distinction between the two levels they are also able to trace historical shifts in state power as the state withdraws from an omnipotent role in civil society, but brings newly emerging critical movements and activities under its purview.

In addition to analyzing the changing empirical contours of state-civil society relations, Dilla and Luis Acanda also deploy Gramscian notions of hegemony in a strategic way. Luis Acanda compares the current conjuncture in Cuba to the crisis of the bourgeois state as analyzed by Gramsci. According to Luis Acanda, Gramsci saw that the bourgeois state entered into crisis in 1970 after the Paris Commune and he analyzes the ways in which the bourgeoisie reorganized their hegemony following that crisis. Gramsci speaks of a molecular diffusion of the state in civil society, whereby the state infiltrates the pores of civil society, a range of institutions that used to be private were made public and began to play a role in reproducing hegemony. Drawing on Gramsci’s analysis, Luis Acanda (1999:160) argues that in Cuba there needs to be a renewal of the hegemonic project of the state. He says that civil society should not be rejected as “the market,” nor should it be identified as “the people,” because this ends up being everything that is not the state.

Dilla also suggests that in order to rebuild its hegemony, the Cuban socialist state needs to identify with emerging and alternative forces. In an article, entitled “Cuba: la crisis y la rearticulación del consenso político (notas para un debate socialista),” Dilla (1993) called for the rearticulation of political consensus, which would require:

...the capacity of the system to produce a new discourse and a new liberatory practical politics of subjectivities, in a way that the call to resist will not be an invitation to holocaust or immobility, but rather a launching point for a new articulation of national consensus built on a participative and pluralistic basis.

Dilla suggests in his 1993 article that it is possible for Cuban society to rearticulate consensus on a more plural basis, and in a 2002 article entitled, "The Virtues and Misfortunes of Civil Society in Cuba," he suggests that civil society is the ideal instrument to achieve this reorganization of consent. But in contrast to a normative, western liberal notion of civil society, Dilla seeks to recalibrate the concept for use in the context of contemporary post-Soviet Cuba. Rather than promoting a more liberal notion of civil society, which has prioritized individual over collective rights, Dilla argues that a powerful civil society lies in "collective rights and collective action in pursuit of the goals of sociopolitical inclusion shared by its principal actors (Dilla and Oxhorn 2002:13)." Moreover, civil society according to Dilla and Oxhorn (2002:13) should not be characterized so much by autonomy and differentiation from the state, as by a fluid and mutually reinforcing relationship with the state. Dilla and Oxhorn (2002:13) suggest that, "the state can build civil society." According to both Luis Acanda and Dilla, the conditions in contemporary Cuba exist for both empowering new social forces and enhancing state power, as a prominent scholar has claimed in the context of post-Mao China (Shue 1994). State power can be maintained and extended in the contemporary period by decentralizing tasks and strategies of governance.

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### *Public Spheres as a Specific Arena of Civil Society*

While Gramsci has been useful for understanding the cultural forms by which the Cuban state continues to organize consent and hegemony in the post-Soviet period, Habermas may help us to locate the specific activities and institutions through which public life is renewed and expressed in this moment. Public spheres are an arena of deliberation within civil society that emphasize plurality and rational-critical discourse. For Habermas, the public sphere has its origins in the literary-cultural public sphere as a space where citizens, through intimate discussions and reflections on questions of humanity and personal identity, gained a sense of themselves as a community.

Dilla describes the emergence of these new kinds of public spheres in contemporary Cuba. Given shifts in state-society relations, the community has begun to assume new roles and develop representative organizations (Dilla 1999:164). Dilla (1999) argues that previously existing institutions, such as workers unions, have begun to take a critical distance from the state, as they become more actively involved in determining their role in the new

situation. Processes of economic change and crisis have produced the conditions for a “certain autonomous dynamic at the grassroots level, especially where conditions are right for leadership and collective action” (Dilla 1999:164). But Dilla (1999:164) also describes the ways in which the new roles and different representative organizations of civil society have been penetrated and sanctioned by the state. Unlike Habermas’ example, where critical public debate and reflection were generated by the imperatives of an external market economy against the state, public spheres in Cuba are for the most part funded by the state and exist in collaboration with the state, rather than in opposition to it.

In contrast to Habermas’ construct of a unified, singular public sphere in eighteenth century Europe, in contemporary Cuba we see the existence of public spheres in the plural, or what Nancy Fraser (1992:123) calls alternative or subaltern counterpublics, in addition to dominant public spheres. Similarly, in Cuba today we find multiple spheres of public discussion, some of which exist in mainstream institutions and others that are more marginal. The new local and foreign entrepreneurial sector is an important emerging group in Cuban society that may lead to the development of professional associations. The self-employed and informal sector also constitutes a growing group, and one that is garnering increasing economic power in society. While these sectors may still be somewhat unstable, they do represent new ideologies and are pushing for reforms of the traditional socialist system, but are not yet working entirely outside of this system. International feminist exchanges have produced new associations and projects between Cuban and foreign women, which have sparked new debates around questions such as sexuality and domestic violence, which were not addressed by the FMC.

Artists also constitute a vibrant and openly critical voice within Cuban cultural politics. Movements such as rap music and visual arts have an increasing presence in society and have been successful in raising certain issues into public discourse such as race and racism in Cuban society. This latter manifestation of public spheres in Cuba specifically questions the emphasis of Habermas on discourse as speech-acts and as rational. In Cuba, we can see a range of contestation taking place within society in performance, music, imagery, and other non-verbal forms. The emphasis on identity politics of race, gender, and sexuality within these public spaces further suggests that differences may not just come from the validity of one point of view versus another as Habermas suggests, but from the cultural heritage, experiences and orientations of individuals (Warnke 1995). Moreover, public spheres in Cuba are not simply shaped by the political and cultural milieu of the nation as in Habermas’ account; they are generally spaces that are linked to forces, discursive spheres, and forms of cultural expression beyond the

nation as theorists of transnationalism and globalization have argued.<sup>2</sup> But while globalization theorists such as Arjun Appadurai (1990:14) argue that global cultural flows constitute a danger to the project of the nation-state, I suggest instead that transnational public spaces may also work to reinforce the hegemony of the Cuban socialist state.

Drawing on an example from my own research – that of Cuban rap – can help illustrate this point. While Cuban rappers build networks with US rappers based on race and marginality that transcend affiliations of nation, they simultaneously generate a critique of global capitalism that allows them to collaborate in some ways with the Cuban socialist state. In a speech following the September 11th attacks on the World Trade Center in New York, Fidel Castro argued that the global economic crisis was “a consequence of the resounding and irreversible failure of an economic and political conception imposed on the world: neoliberalism and neoliberal globalization.” Taking a stance of moral authority, Fidel claimed that it is the path being forged by the Cuban nation that will provide a solution to the crisis: “The fundamental role has been played and will continue to be played by the immense human capital of our people.” Cuban rappers identify strongly with these ideas of Cuba as a rebel nation, forging a more just alternative to neoliberal capitalism. In their song “Pa’ Mis Negros, Cien Por ciento,” Original propose, “Let us help one another for a nation of blacks more sensible, for a nation of blacks more stable.” Rappers associate the Cuban nation with the condition of “underground,” and its connotations of political awareness and rebellion. In their song “Juventud Rebelde,” the name of the official youth newspaper, rappers Alto Voltaje claim that “Like a cross I go, raising the ‘underground’ banner for the whole nation,” and in “Mi Patria Caray!,” Explosión Suprema state, “We are the Cuban ‘underground,’ almost without possibilities, but with the little that we have we are not gusanos (dissenters).” Rappers identify their movement with statements by the political leadership about justice between nations in the international arena. In recent years, the Cuban state has issued several statements condemning the incarceration of five Cubans imprisoned in Miami because of their intelligence work for the Cuban government in the United States and the state has founded a Cuban solidarity campaign to “Free the Cuban Five.” In the song “Asere” (Cuban slang for friend, or “homie”), a collaboration between Cuban rappers Obsesion and Anonimo Consejo and Puerto Rican rapper Tony Touch, the rappers link the campaign of the “Cuban Five” to the struggles of Puerto Ricans on the small island of Vieques against US nuclear testing, and they criticize US hegemony in the region.

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2. The concept of transnational cultural spaces draws from the literature on transnational cultural studies as it has evolved through the journal *Public Culture* and in the work of scholars such as Arjun Appadurai (1990) and Susanne Rudolph (1997).

Local actors comply with and reinforce official narratives in strategic and self-conscious ways.

To summarize my argument here, I suggest that what we see in Cuba today are emerging spaces of public debate, discussion – and contestation – that exist in creative tension and collaboration with the Cuban socialist state. Changes in post-Soviet Cuban political economy have produced a range of new actors with critical, often competing ideas and demands. But given the relatively closed nature of the Cuban economy and the continuing identification of various sectors with some aspects of the socialist project, the state is able to retain a degree of hegemony over these public spheres. I suggest that we shift attention away from the broader question of does civil society exist in Cuba, to explore the ways in which civil society is used discursively by a range of actors and to analyze specific institutions of civil society such as the public sphere that give us a more grounded, empirical sense of what “Cuban civil society” might look like.

I would like to conclude by posing some questions: Can concepts of civil society and public spheres, developed in a western capitalist context, be used to describe Cuba, that is, is it an oxymoron to say that public spheres of civil society exist in Cuba? What does it mean that public spheres and institutions of civil society remain within the purview of the state? What is the relationship between this emerging sphere of associational activity and the market? How do public spheres or contentious politics in Cuba look different to their counterparts in other comparative contexts such as China and the Soviet Union? I propose that delving into these questions can give us better idea of the kinds of governance and contestation emerging in contemporary Cuban society that require new methods of analysis and serious study.

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