

# Cuba: Society after half a century of changes, achievements and setbacks

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THE REVOLUTION that came to power in January 1959 would change Cuban society to such an extent that it would have been virtually impossible to envision, in the context of a political program, any reforms – regardless of how deep these could be – such as those contained in the Moncada program (Fidel Castro, “*La historia me absolverá*,” 1953). A change that was unimaginable even to the leader who had led it from the outset and left an unmistakable mark for the future. As he so eloquently put it: “We have made a revolution greater than ourselves.”

The political program never went beyond the statement of the proposals. The real history involves much more: it involves external constraints, internal limitations, frustrations, successes, failures, options and alternatives, acts of heroism, and resistance, all chained together in a kind of spiral that changes the human beings who live in it from generation to generation, from context to context. Through it the entire complex of social relations is weaved alongside its structural dimension, institutionalization, moral standards, militancy, religiosity, popular imagination, creativity and all networks contained in what we more generally characterize as social, never following a linear logic, but rather a future laden with contradictions.

The contradiction lies at the very core, as envisioned by those who gave socialism scientific support and returned unceasingly to this Hegelian dialectic representation of contradiction. The contradiction has always existed and will always exist one way or another, and not as doctrinal principle, but as a reality already discovered and often times confirmed. This is what is shown by the half century of the Cuban process that we propose to outline, fraught with achievements and defeats, successes and failures, joys and sorrows, the establishment of new values and foundations of the world we stand up against.

In Cuba, the Marxist reference was incorporated after the people realized that their claims had come to power; that the nation – which the republican regime born in the shadow of the intervention of the American empire had been unable to give them – not only was a possibility, but a reality that the people had begun to bring to fruition.

The leaders had appealed to the masses from the outset to ensure that their efforts would be more than just elitist decisions. Although the simplicity of the government structure relied on the decree, the social change was not decided without resorting to a broader popular consensus. Cuban society quickly had indisputable evidence of the social extent of the project implemented. The land reform expropriating large estates was signed four months after the victory, and land distribution started a few months later. A massive march of peasants to Havana during the first celebration of the Moncada assault, on July 26, 1959, would crush the hopes of the land oligarchy to fight the decision to distribute the land among the exploited peasants who were dedicated to developing it.

From that moment on, mass mobilization around the leaders became the most persistent mechanism for the manifestation of consensus. Thus, a new type of social relation began to emerge and intervene in changing the class structure of Cuban society. Beyond land reform, other initiatives were taken with the aim of advancing the issues of social justice and equity, eradicating poverty, reducing inequality and mitigating habitat pressures, first by reducing the rents and then by abolishing the excessive profit of the real estate market.

The years between 1959 and 1963 were marked by the nationalization of the banking system and industry and trade, as well as by a change in the currency denomination with limit imposed on accumulation, and a second agrarian law, which also reduced the size of land ownership. The reform of the economic structure also meant a reform of the set of social relations. The socialization of virtually the entire economy through state ownership totally changed the face of society and with it the types of relationship with political bodies, which would no longer respond to private oligarchic interests. The structural transformation of Cuban society occurred very quickly.

That gigantic government structure that entailed the creation of ministries to manage the entire economic spectrum was run by a single and simple structure: the Council of Ministers. However, the country progressed – albeit with some difficulties - to political unification into a party that had not led the revolutionary struggle but rather emerged from the movements and organizations that had done so a result of the victory. And whose mission, in relation to the State, would only be clearly defined ten years later. A new institutionalization emerged concomitantly, which took roots through the strength of consensus in Cuban civil society: new mass organizations such as the Revolution Defense Committees, the Federation of Cuban Women, the National Association of Small Farmers, which did not replace the other, whose legitimacy was revitalized in the social change, but that would give a new meaning to popular participation.

The revolutionary power set the goal of eliminating adult illiteracy in the country by 1961. That same year Cuba was invaded by an armed mercenary army trained in the United States, and faced counterrevolutionary uprisings that spanned many years. A unified, public, secular and free educational system has

been in place since 1962. The same public and free character was agreed for the health system in 1965. Nobody thought about waiting for the system, which had just been created under the economic, diplomatic and even military harassment of the United States, to make the deep social reforms financeable. The reforms were introduced and translated into a permanent consensus that faced almost without respite the shortage of food, clothing and other basic needs that began to be felt in the 1960s.

For the levels of American hegemonic parameterization, this resilience of a society established into a State, which was insignificant in geopolitical terms vis-à-vis the rules of domination and subsistence imposed, was the first of three surprises that Cuban case had in store for Washington. Cubans realized that sovereignty, besides the Constitution, state institutions and national symbols had a tangible nature and needed to be defended in practice when at risk.

From then onwards several factors would erode the scenario of the new social relations. The migratory effect - marked at the beginning of the period in question by the power shift imposed by the revolution - began to change at the end of the decade for reasons linked to the living conditions and lifestyle imposed by an extended austerity, despite the benefits in response to the urgent needs for equity and social justice and the recovery of national sovereignty. Washington wasted no time in manipulating the Cuban migration to promote the image of a divided society. From that moment on, the option to migrate would become a mixture of attraction (for those who had lost hope) and threat (to the stability of the society that was being built on the Island), with a preferential policy that rewarded with privileges Cubans who immigrated through legal channels, as opposed to the policy applied to the rest of Latin American immigrants.

It is therefore impossible to outline a complete picture of Cuban society without taking into account the existence of a migratory enclave, especially in the United States, which soon began to impact on the local economy, and also as an image of difference in welfare, owing to the flow of family remittances (which is similar to the general characterization of the current immigration explosion, but in the Cuban case is manipulated). Nevertheless, the migrant community is a phenomenon that today does not offer uniform opposition, despite the prevalence of groups representing the conflict with the Cuban process. Although we have no room here to further discuss the dynamics, we cannot neglect the fact that this migrant community is a problematic component in the analysis of Cuban society today. It is known that the migratory booms did not stop after the first decade; they were strongly marked by the massive exit through the port of Mariel in 1980, and again by the “rafters’ crisis” in 1994. Nowadays, the Cuban system is far from capable to consolidate a context of incentive to counterbalance migratory motivations.

Nor is it possible to ignore that the demographic growth of the 1960s

increased the Cuban population of just over six million in 1959 to some ten million in 1970. In the next forty years, however, the population grew just another million. So, if in the 1970s and 1980s one could speak of a mostly young society, population aging became stronger between the final decade of the last century and the first decade of this century, owing to the combination of a steady decline in birth rates and increased life expectancy.

At the beginning of the second decade of the socialist experience, Cuban society was faced with the evidence of the macroeconomic failure of the system. Although the mistaken decision to eliminate the small private sector (the “revolutionary offensive” of 1968) sought justification in the revolutionary imagination of the time, the failure of the ten million ton sugar harvest (1970) was an unmistakable sign that the strategies adopted in the previous decade could not be maintained, at least under the embargo. This paper does not aim to study the economy of that time, but it would be frivolous to ignore the weight of the economy in the whole social phenomenon.

The Cuban socialist project had experienced its first major frustration: it could not participate in the world system with the independence it aspired to preserve. Exogenous causes? We must admit that they (did) occur to some extent, since the harassment to prevent survival gave no respite. However, many other things were missing: references of alternative models, professional capital (which we now have in abundance) and imagination, perhaps. I could not say how many things were missing. Certainly many others abounded, such as the confusion around achieving the exercise of the will, regardless of how well-meaning and fair it may have been. The accuracy of the political decision endorsed by consensus cannot always obtrude the requirement and limitation of mechanisms: market mechanisms, for example.

We need to clarify here that the decision to join the Council of Mutual Economic Aid (COMECON) - the so-called “East Bloc” or “Soviet system” (to use terms that allude to various areas of social re-contextualization) – led Cuban society to face a scheme of partially modified values. Their socialism continues to mean the domination of the economy by the State, the partners from overseas are those that since the previous decade had been offering a helping hand and the champions of the socialist project born of the Bolshevik revolution, their external enemies refuse to moderate hostility; the sovereignty achieved is not threatened by the new form of dependency, even if this involves the costs - sometimes lacerating and regrettable in more than one way - of establishing a common thought. Something of a discriminatory, and sometimes repressive nature, was imposed at the ideology level.

We would need to analyze many nuances to detail what was lost and what was gained at that moment, but what is of interest to us now is to see how gains and losses translated into influences on the social relations that the revolutionary adventure of the 1960s had generated. In fact, the Cuban socialist economy

succeeded in finding space and in implementing a development project that led both to improvements in living conditions and growth at the macro scale. Certainly at very high costs that might not have been fully accounted for. The Communist Party of Cuba began the sequence of congresses in the same style as that of the parties of Marxist tradition, and the State administration was institutionalized with the People's Power bodies. Cuban socialism finally created a Constitution, which was voted in a referendum in 1976 after having survived without a Constitution of its own for 17 years.

Cuban society lived more comfortably than in the previous decade, nutrition rates improved, unemployment became negligible, the retailer market for consumer goods increased, the rise of health professionals generated the "medical power" metaphor in reference to the potential for welfare and scientific guarantee that emerged and a range of civil solidarity actions to countries ravaged by natural disasters or simply in need of assistance as the result of a deficient health policy. The proportion of doctors and nurses led to the emergence in the mid-1980s of the "family doctor" as a new level of healthcare more directly linked to the community.

We shall refrain here, again, from passing further judgment on the system and economic integration that enabled this improvement in meeting the basic needs of Cuban society, because it is beyond the purpose of the present paper and in no way because we believe that this improvement occurred in an ideal context. We should stress, however, that in the second half of the 1980s the daily per capita consumption of kilocalories and protein began to exceed the minimum standard set by the World Health Organization (WHO); the income received by the 20% of the country's population was four times that received by the 20% of the country's population with the lowest income, and more than three quarters of those incomes came from state sector salaries, which was virtually ubiquitous in the country's economy.<sup>1</sup>

The articulation of the COMECON Complex Program and the protection the country enjoyed, along with Vietnam and Mongolia, under the "most favored nation" provision, led to a surplus of resources that contributed to create a development pattern and change the living conditions of society, up to the time of the collapse.

Cuban society had reorganized its relations and lifestyle within that context. Fortunately, many circumstances prevented this moderate, well balanced and well deserved state of well-being from becoming, once and for all, a model obstructed by routine. The year 1975 marked the beginning of the most meaningful and costly operation of solidarity in terms of effort and lives ever conducted by Cuban society. In about 12 years some 350,000 Cubans went to Angola, most as fighters, all volunteers. The generation that was in its infancy during the triumph of the revolution was afforded the opportunity to participate in a feat that ended the dominance of the apartheid regime, in addition to ensuring the

independence of Angola and Namibia. That proved to be the most generous and meaningful mission in which the people got involved between 1970 and 1980: to contribute decisively to prevent the dominance of racism from being perpetuated in Africa. We believe that for the experience of that generation, the opportunity of heroism in a just cause also served as an antidote against a model that threatened to generate bureaucracy and routine.

The victory of the Sandinista revolution in Nicaragua also contributed, on another scale, for us Cubans to keep alive the spirit we needed to confirm that our resistance, under such onerous conditions, was not only valid for our own survival but also responded, first and foremost, to a selfless ideal that we had no reason to let die.

We believe that this might have been the second surprise that the “Cuban case” had in store for Washington. When the U.S. believed it had defeated the combative solidarity strategy of the revolutionaries in their backyard after having controlled the revolutionary waves in South America and started an era of military dictatorships with the coup in Chile (1973), Cuba would re-emerge in Sub-Saharan Africa with all the legitimacy it was afforded for having responded to the request of established governments (Angola, Mozambique, Ethiopia). And at that time there was no choice but to recognize its successful participation in the emancipation mission and share with Cubans the negotiating table that was instrumental in bringing the apartheid regime to an end.

The early 1990s brought with it the tragic disintegration of the Soviet socialist system, and with it the international disconnection of the economy and the fall of the Cuban subsystem (if we can call it that) which, without putting all the card on the table had played the cards of its future for its integration into that complex scenario whose collapse Ernesto Guevara had already predicted in the 1960s.<sup>2</sup> Perhaps there was no other option but, in addition, contrary to “Che” Guevara’s suspicions, a more optimistic interpretation of the soviet system prevailed in Cuba until the 1980s.<sup>3</sup> This interpretation trusted that the mistakes of the economy could be remedied, but did not realize that the failure to provide the political transition to the power of the people would stand in the way of such remediation. The dramatic perspective that the final decade of the twentieth century opened up for Cuba - envisioned by Fidel Castro nearly a year before it started - and forebodingly called “special period”, brought with it a series of successive situations in which society would endure the overlapping effects of both the fall and the measures taken to address it, and we recognize that we are among those who believe that the intermittent signs of economic revival from the beginning of the new century still do not indicate that the problem has been solved. This means that of the five decades of revolutionary projects, in the last two Cuban society has been living in a crisis. Next we will attempt to synthesize this still prevailing scenario.



*The National Capitol Building in Havana was built in 1922 along the lines of the U.S. Congress.*

When we talk about the impact of the socialist overthrow in the Cuban process, we refer specifically to a 36% fall in GDP between 1990 and 1993. The import capacity of the national economy fell by 75%, and 65% of cash assets had to be used in oil and food imports. Food purchases in 1992 were reduced to half the amount purchased in 1989.<sup>4</sup> Without going into other aspects of the aforementioned disconnection, we focus our attention on the effects on living conditions: the consumption of kilocalories and proteins fell from 3,000 to 1,900 and from 80 to 50 grams respectively.<sup>5</sup> In the most disadvantaged regions of the country, this reduction led to a situation of malnutrition which, incidentally, was the main reason of health disorders.

Furthermore, long power outages were frequent, public transport and other services were reduced to a minimum, housing construction experienced an almost total interruption - with the housing fund in urgent need of repair - and living conditions became even more precarious; twenty years later, the hospital infrastructure had not yet recovered from the deterioration it had experienced, to mention only the indicators of deteriorating living conditions that we consider to be the most significant.

But the characterization of the social effects would be incomplete if we failed to mention that this crisis also had a spiritual dimension for Cuban society: a crisis of paradigm, of uncertainty, of ability or inability to predict the future (neither in the existential nor in the political sphere), of not knowing for sure whether we would continue to live in a society capable of setting goals and being guided by them, of meeting or failing to meet them, and of correcting paths.<sup>6</sup>

In order to tackle the crisis, reforms introducing market elements were implemented in the early 1990s. Some of these reforms were cyclical while others were structural. Despite their contribution to restrain the fall in the mid of the decade, they proved disconnected from an articulated plan. But it was not possible to speak of economic recovery, despite the beginning of the change in the regional Latin American scenario that would provide Cuba with a new prospect for integration. The regional change, which we will not discuss in detail either, indicates a scenario of hope for Cuban society, which it had been expecting since the 1960s.

The reforms of the 1990s, however, led to a rupture in the equity standard that had prevailed until the 1980s, which minimized differences in household incomes. With the explosion of extra-salary income and the inflow of remittances, it is estimated that in the late 1990s this proportion may have increased 15-fold between higher and lower salaries.<sup>7</sup>

The current scenario places society in an artificial system marked by dual currency circulation, uneven supply, imbalanced salary structure, subsidy of state employment, increased informal economy out of control, and many other irregularities. These distortions we see today in the Cuban socioeconomic scenario summarize the combined chaotic effects of the disconnection and over-





*View of the city of Havana, Cuba*

To conclude, we cannot help but think that the third surprise that the “Cuban case” had in store for Washington is precisely the fact that after the fall of the Eastern bloc, of the system in which the Cuban socialist experience had found its economic lifeline, the enormous material and spiritual effects of the Cuban fall and the intensification of the U.S. embargo through the Torricelli Act (1992) and Helms- Burton Act (1996), and its consequences aimed to accelerate the expected Cuban asphyxia, after all that the asphyxia did not occur. Cuba, its political system (devoid of initiatives that open up space to a more effective participation), its economy (more disorganized and inefficient than ever and truly in need of reform), its society (fraught with hardship, dismay and uncertainty), has neither lost the values that distinguish it nor is willing to abandon the socialist utopia.

Cuban society is not willing to lose what it has achieved, starting from a true sense of sovereignty: in fact, it wants more, because it currently aspires to achieve not only the sovereignty that the resistance against the central empire hegemony placed in its hands, but also the sovereignty that political maturity has given it the right to exercise and which is still limited, although rightly realizing that it can only be achieved within a plausible variant of socialism.

Havana, December 17, 2010

#### Notes

- 1 Andrew Zimballist and Claes Brundenius, *Cuadernos de nuestra América*, n.13, 1989.
- 2 Ernesto Che Guevara, *El socialismo y el hombre en Cuba*, 1966.
- 3 Carlos Rafael Rodríguez, *Cuba socialista*, n. 33, 1988.
- 4 *Cuba en cifras, 1998*, Oficina Nacional de Estadísticas.
- 5 *Investigación sobre desarrollo humano y equidad en Cuba 1999*, CIEM-UNDP.
- 6 Aurelio Alonso, *La sociedad cubana en los años noventa y los retos del comienzo de un nuevo siglo*, 2002.
- 7 Mayra Espina Prieto, *Efectos sociales del reajuste económico: igualdad, desigualdad, procesos de complejización de la sociedad cubana*, 2003.

*Abstract* – The revolutionary victory in 1959 transformed the social and economic structure, as well as the notions and collective imagination of the Cuban people. This episode is already half a century old, during which time the mobile and contradictory nature of the situations, through external and internal factors, gave rise to victories, setbacks and very complex effects in Cuban society today. The resistance of the Cuban project against imperial hegemony over the last fifty-odd years surprised the world’s centers of power, when Cuban society chose a socialist path in the 1960s. The scope of its strategies of solidarity was also cause of surprise, with their prolonged and decisive



struggle against apartheid over the two following decades. Equally surprisingly, Cuba remained standing after the worldwide fall of socialism. During that period, the country showed time and again that resistance is possible and necessary.

*Keywords:* Social change, Cuba, Legitimacy, Participation, Reform, Resistance, Revolution, Socialism, Cuban society, Solidarity, Sustainability.

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The original in Spanish – “Cuba: la sociedad tras medio siglo de cambios, logros y reveses” – is available to readers for reference at the IEA-USP.

Received on 6 January 2011 and accepted on 2 February 2011.