

**CUBA TOWARDS THE END OF THE CENTURY:  
MODELS OF CHANGE**

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**Prepared for delivery at the 1997 Meeting of the Latin American Studies  
Association, Continental Plaza Hotel, Guadalajara, Mexico, April 17-19, 1997**

## CUBA TOWARDS THE END OF THE CENTURY: MODELS OF CHANGE

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That the Cuban Revolution faces major challenges and important changes in the next decade may scarcely be doubted by even its most devoted supporters. The challenge of adapting to a new and unfriendly global economic order is complicated by the uncertainties of an inevitable generational transition in the political leadership. Where these economic and political changes may lead is the subject of much debate.

Predictions of the future of the Cuban Revolution depend first on analysts' conceptions of the nature of that regime, and second, on analysts' expectations for the evolution of conditions and policies external to Cuba. This paper will accordingly begin by briefly reviewing some alternative models of the Cuban revolutionary regime, and alternative predictions of Cuba's external environment. The paper will then conclude with the author's own analysis and predictions.<sup>1</sup>

### Models of the Cuban Revolution

*Supporters of the Revolution*, whether within Cuba or outside, tend to depict it as an *organic popular revolution* oriented by a *Marxist-Leninist vanguard*. This dialectical perspective tends to see the revolutionary people as producing their own leadership, while the leadership is seen as the class-conscious vanguard of the proletariat, embodying the true interests of the workers and progressively aiding the self-constitution of the revolutionary people by helping them raise their consciousness and create the objective conditions for revolutionary transformation.

For example, Smaldone (1996) begins his concluding paragraph with this sentence: "That Cuba has survived the crisis of the last five years is a testimony to the strength of its people and the tenacity of its leadership." Smaldone sees the Cuban crisis as caused in large part by the heritage of Soviet-style centralization of decision-making, but he views the Cuban leadership as capable of making the "tough choices" that will keep open the possibility of "rectifying the mistakes made in the period of Soviet influence without abandoning the revolution wholesale" (20).

Grace Lee Boggs (1996) reports her sense that "the Cuban people, by recommitting themselves to the struggle for socialism, are beginning to recover from the crisis caused by the loss of Soviet aid" (1). At the same time, she acknowledges the

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<sup>1</sup> I am not a Cuban specialist, and so approach this paper with considerable humility. I have been working for more than twenty years on issues of democracy and democratization in Latin America. Though sympathetic to the aspirations of the Cuban Revolution, I have not made it a focus of my scholarship until recently, when it has become apparent that a significant transition is in process which may bear comparison with transitions elsewhere in the region, and elsewhere in the world.

centrality of Fidel's leadership, and reports with great affection and respect his speech to the 17th Cuban Trade Union Congress.

Joel Edelstein (1995) acknowledges the importance of the Leninist model of revolutionary leadership for bringing about a revolutionary transformation in the face of external threats, and also argues the inadequacy of that model in the present circumstance. He argues that a markedly decentralized and participatory socialism is the best means of avoiding both the reemergence of authoritarian dependent capitalism and decline into social and political chaos.

The feasibility of a decentralized paradigm depends first upon whether the leadership and the party would pursue that course with strength, unity, and determination and second upon whether Cuban revolutionary popular political culture, infused with the inspiration of Martí and developed over 35 years of struggle and sacrifice, is capable of confronting the challenges of such an undertaking. Only the Cuban nation and its leadership can make that judgment. (24)

Peter Roman (1993, 1995), in studying representative institutions in Cuba, emphasizes that these assemblies at various levels are forums for the articulation of grievances, and that the authorities do respond to those grievances. In effect, he argues for the absence of fundamental contradictions between the leadership and the population:

A socialist parliamentary system can be effective and representative without oppositional politics and a multiparty system and without electoral campaigns of the type known in capitalist democracies. This ultimately depends on popular support for a socialist economic and social system and the perception that the representative system works to ensure its fair and effective implementation. It also depends on a vanguard party that has earned the respect of the people whose purpose is to help fulfill these goals. (Roman, 1993, 27)

For supporters of the Revolution, in short, it is an authentically popular work-in-progress, beset, to be sure, by contradictions, but nevertheless fundamentally viable as a project for social transformation. Without exception, Fidel and the revolutionary leadership enjoy immense legitimacy in the eyes of supporters; policies of the government or the party may be roundly, explicitly criticised, but Fidel and the top leadership are almost never attacked personally.<sup>2</sup> It is implicitly assumed that they continue to be the natural leaders of the Revolution, that all true revolutionaries support them, and that the vast majority of Cubans continue to be true revolutionaries. For the survival and progress of the Revolution, solidarity behind the leadership is seen as far more important than the fraudulent or illusory pluralism and individual rights of "bourgeois" democracy.

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<sup>2</sup> For a careful, deeply sympathetic analysis of Fidel's political thought, see Liss (1994).

From this perspective, the generational transition in the leadership is not fundamentally problematic, because the Revolution, left to itself, will produce appropriate revolutionary leadership. It is external economic and political pressures that are deeply problematic, because they threaten to force the leadership off the revolutionary track, or to undermine the revolutionary commitments of the mass of Cubans. The fate of Russia and eastern Europe is a specter haunting Cuban revolutionaries and their supporters. They are determined that Cuba avoid the precipitate abandonment of socialism, and keep its tactical concessions to private enterprise and foreign investment from undermining the socialist project. There is as yet only incomplete consensus on the appropriate course for Cuba to take: some, including Fidel, seem attracted by the Chinese (and Vietnamese) approach of economic liberalization under the aegis of a continuing commitment to the exclusive leadership of the revolutionary vanguard party.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, the regime and many of its supporters seem inclined, cautiously, to open the political system to elements of civil society independent of the party but committed to the Revolution.<sup>4</sup>

These strong supporters of the Revolution are correct in emphasizing the fundamentally popular character of the Revolution, and the importance of preserving and advancing its social and economic achievements. At the same time, they are either insensitive to, or avoid dealing with aspects of the regime that make it less *sui generis* and more comparable to other polities. For example, Fidel's 37 year incumbency begs comparison with long-lived *caudillos* of Latin America. Cuba's single-party system is certainly comparable with those of other communist and former communist countries. This is not to say that Fidel is merely a *caudillo*, or that Cuba must necessarily recapitulate the evolution of Russia; rather, it is to affirm that Cuba is probably subject to the same well-known tendencies (e.g., the difficulty of passing on charismatic authority, the tendency of ruling parties to bureaucratize) as other societies. Domination still exists even under revolutionary socialism, even in revolutionary Cuba.

*Counterrevolutionaries* are at the opposite end of the spectrum from strong supporters of the Revolution. Constituting the majority (but by no means all) politically active exiles, and at least a plurality of the U.S. political elite, counterrevolutionaries tend to see the Cuban regime either as a personal tyranny under Fidel, or as a communist dictatorship. Either way, they accord absolutely no legitimacy to the regime, and admit to no significant popular support. Counterrevolutionaries have worked tirelessly to undermine the Revolution, both by subversion within Cuba, and more importantly by cultivating political support from the U.S. government. The latter strategem has borne such fruit as the trade embargo, the "Cuban Democracy Act" of Congressman Torricelli, and the Helms-Burton Act, all of which have been aimed at bleeding Cuba's economy.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Leticia Campos Aragón (1992) articulates an argument for North Korean-style Marxist-Leninist orthodoxy in the economy as well as the polity.

<sup>4</sup> For a particularly provocative example, see Blanco (1995).

<sup>5</sup> In the United States, examples of counterrevolutionary thought are easy to find, indeed, difficult to avoid. See, for example, the consistently antirevolutionary reports posted on ElCubano@aol.com.

Counterrevolutionaries have been predicting the imminent fall of the revolutionary regime since 1959, and tend to explain its continued survival largely in terms of naked coercion and intimidation. Thus it follows that as they look to the future in the late 1990s, they see the prospect of the long-suffering Cuban people finally rising up and overwhelming their oppressors. They say all they want for Cuba is democracy, but as the Helms-Burton Act makes clear, many also want the return of property seized after 1959. Certain leaders, such as Jorge Mas Canosa of the Cuban American National Foundation, may hope to be President of Cuba someday. In any case, the Cuba envisioned by the counterrevolutionaries would seemingly be strongly capitalistic in its economy, while its polity would either be openly authoritarian or, more likely, “democratic” with a tightly restricted political spectrum and limited liberties.

Between these two mutually exclusive models of the Revolution we find the majority of Latin Americanists and foreign policy scholars in the United States, Canada, and Europe, and a growing minority among social scientists in Latin America.<sup>6</sup> The spectrum ranges from what we may call *critical support* on the left, to an *anti-interventionism* that sees the regime as likely to fall of its own weight if the U.S. were to change its hostile policy toward the revolutionary regime. The former persuasion is exemplified by Carolee Bengelsdorf (1994, 1996), and Marifeli Pérez-Stable (1993, 1996), both of whom explicitly support the ideals of the Revolution while criticizing the leadership for repeatedly undercutting those ideals by its contradictory actions. Bengelsdorf (1994) argues, for example, that repeated attempts to decentralize and democratize policy-making have been undercut by the unwillingness of the central leadership to really surrender authority.<sup>7</sup>

The place of women in the Revolution has long posed complex challenges to analysts. On one hand, the revolutionary regime has pushed more consistently and explicitly for equality for women than any regime holding power for a substantial time anywhere in the world. On the other hand, women’s equality is acknowledged to be very far from reality even in Cuba. Smith and Padula (1996, 185), for example, observe that

There were many disappointments in Cuban women’s struggle for equality. A central dilemma was the failure of revolutionary ideologues and policy makers to consider adequately the cultural and economic implications of women’s domestic responsibilities....The lack of safe forums for public debate and the dearth of independently functioning institutions with clear powers complicated efforts to address and redress issues of particular interest to women in Cuba.

Yet at the same time Smith and Padula express grave concern that the economic crisis of the 1990s threatens many of the gains made by women in Cuba.

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<sup>6</sup> The Latin Americans have tended to be more supportive of the Revolution, but many former leftists have made their accommodation with capitalism and liberal democracy in the 1980s and 1990s.

<sup>7</sup> See also Lutjens (1992).

Similarly, Marisela Fleites-Lear (1996, 55) notes that “Cuban women, who have been strengthened by the Revolution as never before, now face the challenge of the advent of a new society for which, yet again, they were not prepared.” And from within Cuba, Mirta Rodríguez Calderón (1996, 3):

We women, the pillars of a resistance in which the milimeters of growth and hours of every day presuppose massive sacrifices and anguish, continue supporting the costs of the new changes.

We may conclude that the critical supporters sincerely hope that somehow the Revolution may survive this latest crisis as it has survived so many before, that it will continue to be a beacon for social justice in the barren wilderness of injustice that is Latin America. The critical supporters are distinguished from the more whole-hearted supporters by their greater willingness to directly criticise Fidel and the top leadership, and especially by their greater emphasis on the importance of decentralization and democracy. The critical supporters are not advocates of conventional liberal democracy, which in its debased form, found in the press and U.S. government pronouncements, becomes electoral fetishism. But they do believe that the future vitality (and perhaps survival) of the revolutionary regime will depend on a much more extensive and authentic opening than has taken place heretofore.

A somewhat more jaundiced view of the Revolution, and a more conventional view of democracy, is expressed by Susan Eva Eckstein (1994, 218):

Cuba needs to adapt to the “new world order” in a manner that strengthens its economic base, respects democratic principles, and preserves the social gains of the revolution. This is no easy task. But no anti-Communist or anti-Castro sentiment should allow Cuba’s health welfare accomplishments, its reduction of rural/urban and class inequities, and the gains of women and dark-skinned islanders to become a matter of history. These are the Cuban Revolution’s contribution to the art of the possible, and future generations should be allowed to enjoy them.

What is implicit in this concluding paragraph of Eckstein’s book is not only appreciation for these accomplishments, but also that the longer-term, not yet realized revolutionary project, is really not possible. But that, for Eckstein, is no reason to undo the good that has been accomplished.<sup>8</sup>

One of the best known writers on Cuban themes is Wayne Smith, former head of the U.S. interest section in Havana, and a consistent advocate for a political opening to Cuba.<sup>9</sup> However, though he is emphatically anti-interventionist, Smith is not at all a supporter of the revolutionary regime; he simply thinks that the best way to bring about liberalization and possibly democratization is through contact, rather than through isolation and punishment. In the cited article, he argues that Fidel may most fruitfully be

<sup>8</sup> del Aguila (1994) expresses a similar viewpoint.

<sup>9</sup> Among his many writings on Cuba, see, for example, “Cuba’s Long Reform” (1996).

compared not with Ceausescu or Gorbachev, but with Francisco Franco. Thus, he is characterizing Castro as an aged dictator presiding over the twilight of an authoritarian regime that is outmoded by history. But Franco was able to exercise partial control over the transition (unlike his Portuguese colleagues Salazar and Caetano). It is Smith's contention that Cuban reforms since the mid-1980s represent an attempt to prepare the society gradually for a transition to a new regime. The United States, he argues, may best facilitate this transition by engaging Cuba.<sup>10</sup>

Eric Selbin's *Modern Latin American Revolutions* (1993) place the Cuban Revolution in the comparative context of other post-World War II Latin American revolutions (i.e., Bolivia, Nicaragua, and Grenada). The four revolutions are analyzed in terms of two variables, institutionalization and consolidation. Institutionalization is defined in terms of the creation of enduring structures to govern the processes of social transformation. "Central to this project are questions about succession and limitations on personal power" (14). Consolidation involves getting the population to embrace the social revolutionary project; it is a question (in marxist terms) of consciousness, or (in social scientific terms) of culture. Selbin argues that Bolivia represented institutionalization without consolidation, Grenada neither institutionalization nor consolidation, Nicaragua both institutionalization and consolidation, and Cuba consolidation without institutionalization.

What is interesting for our purposes is that Cuba is being incorporated in a comparative social scientific analysis. Selbin is acknowledging the consolidation of the Cuban Revolution. He was manifestly wrong on both counts about Nicaragua, and probably underrated the amount of insitutionalization in the Cuban case. But it is a study done in the analytical spirit of the social sciences, eschewing both marxism and right-wing anticonmmunism. Selbin is clearly sympathetic to the basic ideal of the revolutionary transformation of society, but, like Marx's philosophers, he is rather more interested in understanding the world than in changing it. He does have a prescription, though: clearly, Cuba's revolutionary leadership should institutionalize itself and reduce Fidel's autonomy.

Much recent discussion of Cuba has taken place within the theoretical framework of transitions from authoritarian or communist rule. A basic question has been whether the transitions from authoritarian regimes to democracy that took place in southern Europe and Latin America in the 1970s and 1980s are comparable to the transitions from communism in the former Soviet Union and eastern Europe in the 1980s and 1990s. Di Palma (1995) acknowledges that there are similarities, but insists that the distinction between authoritarian and totalitarian regimes is still relevant, and that communist regimes are totalitarian, at least in aspiration. Hence, transitions from communism are different because

...what is facing demise is not an authoritarian coalition of convenience but a gigantic monopoly anchored to a discredited ideology and a dilapidated economy,

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<sup>10</sup> For a contrasting analysis, see the response to Smith by Purcell (1996). See also Purcell, et al. (1995); and Rieff (1996).

a monopoly assaulted in desperation by none other than its core leadership. They differ because the purpose of the assault is to reconstitute an authoritarian system revamped by a more successful economic performance and a more open public sphere. There is therefore a loss of information in portraying such leadership as comfortably occupying a reformist middle ground and inching toward democracy. Nobody occupies that ground. Between a monopolistic apparatus willing at best to give up ideologies and a public opinion fully conscious of communism's devastating ideological lie but fully disorganized, there is little space for a *reforma pactada* of the type reached in democratic Spain. If exit comes, it can only take the form of a declaration of failure, an abdication, a *ruptura*.

In short, there can be no negotiated transition from communism to democracy (Wayne Smith notwithstanding).

On the other hand Adam Przeworski (1991) makes an explicit and extended argument that the two sets of transitions may be fruitfully compared through formal theory. He suggests that any transition may be analyzed in terms of the capabilities, goals, and interactions of four collective actors: regime hardliners and regime reformers; opposition moderates and opposition radicals. Under circumstances where the reformers and moderates gain the upper hand in their respective coalitions, a negotiated transition may occur. If the opposition is too weak, no transition takes place. If the radicals are too strong, the reformers will not be able to demand concessions or guarantees in the transition.

A good window on what may be going through the minds of U.S. policy makers is provided by González and Ronfeldt (1994), a RAND Corporation report to the Department of Defense. Rather in the spirit of Przeworski, they assume that a transition is in process in Cuba, and that several outcomes are possible, depending on such variables as the relative strength of civil society. The study projects five possible endgames, ranging from the survival of the regime in approximately its present form, to violent change from below leading to civil war, the downfall of the regime, and seizure of power by a new set of leaders, either democratic or dictatorial. One of the five scenarios would involve a Przeworski-type negotiated settlement leading to a conventional liberal democracy. The study concludes with a review of contingencies for U.S. policy toward a Cuban transition, including contingency planning for military intervention (though this is emphatically not advocated).

So, how we understand the Cuban revolutionary regime profoundly affects what we think will happen to it. The Revolution's strongest supporters expect it to continue to evolve and deepen, moving dialectically toward the achievement of socialism and communism. Only outside constraints and pressures could force it off track. The leadership and the people are seen as organically united. Critical supporters hope the Revolution may survive and progress, but advocate important steps toward decentralization and political opening as essential means to that end. More detached observers may acknowledge the achievements of the Revolution, but see the leadership as



authoritarian and rigid, likely candidates for being phased out in the course of a transition to a new regime. And of course counterrevolutionaries see only a repressive communist dictatorship held up by naked repression, immune to internal resistance, waiting for external intervention. What insights can each of these perspectives bring to us?

### **Transition...To What?**

All but its most militant adversaries would grant that the Cuban Revolution has had real and widespread popular support rooted in the fact that it has provided tangible material benefits and opportunities to the majority. Moreover, for the first time in Cuba's long and sad history, it has had a government that has given Cubans reason to be proud of their country. Thus, in spite of the evident difficulties of the present crisis, supporters of the Revolution are not unreasonable to expect that it will continue to evolve and deepen. If Cuba were by some magic to be left to itself, it would still have to solve the problem of what is to be done after Fidel, but there is little doubt that the Revolution in some recognizable form would continue.

The Revolution has survived this long against incredible odds; more than anything, it is the product of an iron political will, a commitment to defy the overwhelming, overweening power of imperialism no matter the cost. This spirit still animates the leadership, some significant portion of the party membership, and substantial numbers of other citizens. These people will not yield easily or gracefully to that which they have spent a lifetime struggling against. We may expect, then, that the inner core of dedicated revolutionaries (some tens of thousands at least) will defend the regime and resist its transformation. In terms of Przeworski's analysis, these would be the hard-liners. There is no doubt that they are still thoroughly in control, as attested by the renewal of political repression in the wake of the downing of the exile planes in January 1996 (Rohter, 1996). If the uncompromising revolutionaries retain control, there will be no transition to a new regime, merely an evolution of the Revolution in response to internal changes (most notably the demise of Fidel) or changes in the global political-economic conjuncture.

Unfortunately for the Revolution, it will not be left to itself. There is nothing to indicate that the long-standing obsession of a succession of U.S. administrations toward Cuba will change as long as the island continues to resist American hegemony. Thus in one form or another Cubans may expect a continuation of various sorts of economic and political pressures that will drag them down and drain the country of human resources. Even if U.S. hostility were to end, Cuba is no less dependent than ever on sugar and other agricultural and mineral exports: economically, it is just another Third World exporter of raw materials. It needs to insert itself in the global capitalist economy on terms over which it has little or no control. Cuba has consistent difficulty in generating enough exports to pay for its imports, and enough revenue to pay for its government. Under these circumstances, Cuba will have little choice but to continue eroding the social conquests of the Revolution as it makes steadily more concessions to both global capitalism and local, small scale free enterprise.

The impossibility of isolation applies to political as well as economic affairs. The Cuban people cannot be isolated from the increasing integration of global communications, and the rising tide of messages inevitably carries the hegemonic ideas of liberal democracy and liberal capitalism that prevail in the countries that dominate the global information system. It may be possible for China still to keep its population insulated from these influences, because of the country's continental size and the poverty of its people, but that is not an option for Cuba. We may expect, instead, to see a steady erosion of the proportion of the population deeply committed to the revolutionary project as defined by the leadership, and growth in the numbers of those who, at least privately, wish for "bourgeois" liberties, both economic and political. And since the regime will be steadily less able to preserve egalitarian social benefits, its ability to retain popular loyalty will erode. The majority of the people, even if they reject the counterrevolution, are just tired, and disillusioned. In short, the revolutionary regime will be hard put to resist the global hegemony of both capitalism and liberal democracy. These external changes are likely to undermine the power of the revolutionaries.

Changes are also taking place within Cuban society that will be ever harder for the revolutionary leadership to control. The economic opening has become increasingly indispensable to the survival strategy of the regime. As steadily more opportunities are made available for foreign capital to earn profits in Cuba, the regime will have to continue expanding private enterprise opportunities for Cubans in order to confront the manifest inequality between those who operate in the dollar economy and their compatriots in the peso economy, and in order simply to allow those laid off from state enterprises to support themselves. The paradox is that, to preserve its legitimacy in the eyes of its supporters, the regime must encourage them to relearn the ways of capitalist society. And the more people who earn their livings independently of the socialist state, the stronger the economic foundation of an autonomous civil society.

The regime has indeed been deliberately fostering the growth of civil society by its opening to the Catholic Church and other religious organizations, and by sanctioning autonomous, but prorevolutionary organizations such as the Centro Félix Varela. The intent is to enhance support for the Revolution by fostering more pluralism and debate *within the Revolution*, without sanctioning any break in the Party's political monopoly. There is no question of tolerating organizations critical of the Revolution, although it is clear that such organizations do exist in spite of government repression. The scope of their support is impossible to verify. In short, politically oriented civil society is segmented into an encouraged revolutionary sector and a repressed opposition sector. The regime cannot fully repress the latter without risking the loss of essential investments and tourism from Canada and Europe.

In terms of Przeworski's framework, the emerging organizations of revolutionary civil society might become equivalents of reformers within the regime, while the opposition sector might become differentiated into moderate and radical sectors, the latter closely linked to Cuban-American counterrevolutionaries. An interesting difference from the Przeworski model is that the boundary between regime reformers and opposition

moderates would be ill-defined: none are actually regime insiders, and all would see themselves as working for a more or less sweeping renovation of the Revolution, rather than its negation. Such a line of evolution remains speculative, but there are reasons to consider it plausible.

In addition to the forces just cited that are promoting the emergence of civil society and retarding attempts by the regime to control it, the proximate transition from Fidel to post-Fidel is likely to promote an opening, at least for a time. Implicit in this prediction is the judgment that Fidel, as a uniquely central figure in the Revolution, cannot leave the scene without causing major dislocation. The strongest supporters of the Revolution believe the contrary, that the Revolution is strong enough to adapt with relative ease to life without Fidel. The historical record is mixed. If we consider only Marxist-Leninist regimes founded by autonomous revolutionary movements, the set includes the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia, China, Vietnam, and North Korea. All had a dominant founding leader who ruled until death. The death of the leader led to significant instability and conflict in all cases except Vietnam and (perhaps) North Korea, but only in Yugoslavia did communist rule itself (along with a united Yugoslavia) ultimately break down.<sup>11</sup> The communist cases, in short, suggest the likelihood of instability and conflict after Fidel, but also the very real possibility that the regime could restabilize under new leadership. However, the interregnum could provide an opening for a blossoming of civil society and even an openly organized opposition. How a communist leadership in disarray would handle such an eventuality is a major contingency. The Yugoslav case is highly relevant here, since Yugoslavia in the 1980s, like Cuba today, was relatively open to the influence of the capitalist and liberal spirit of the times; the League of Communists could not, finally, maintain the legitimacy of its political monopoly. When it yielded that monopoly, caught up in the wave of changes of 1989, Slovenian and Croatian nationalists, in the name of democracy and self-determination, amputated the extremities of the Yugoslav state (Denitch, 1994). Similarly, it is conceivable that a Cuban regime in economic and political crisis and bereft of its leader might make concessions that would send it into the sort of irretrievable spiral of breakdown that we saw in eastern Europe in 1989. It is conceivable, but not likely.

If we view Fidel through the lense of charismatic leadership, we have a larger set of comparable cases, and a more developed theory. The principal theoretical source, of course, is Max Weber. His sociological interpretation of charismatic leadership postulates a personal leader whose authority is grounded in the perception of unique qualities and powers, and whose authority, like that of ancient prophets, could be used to transform the established order. Clearly, Fidel fits the model as well as any twentieth century leader in the world. The central problem of charismatic authority is that it cannot be passed on in any routine or ordered way. The lieutenants must, like Christ's apostles, claim authority by reflection of the great leader, and the followers may or may not recognize that claim. The lieutenants may well make competing claims to inherit the leader's authority, like the heirs of Muhammad, and war among them may ensue. In the twentieth century, many of

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<sup>11</sup> The breakdown of communism in the Soviet Union of course came long after the death of Lenin.

the leaders of African and Asian independence movements (such as Nehru, Nkrumah, Kenyatta, Nyerere, or Houphouet-Boigny) approximate the model. The record of their succession is, again, mixed. In India, Nehru's death was followed by decades in which a series of his descendants either held or aspired to power much of the time, and no other leader or party was able to forge a stable government. In Ghana, Nkrumah's overthrow was the gateway to an era of praetorian instability. In Kenya, Kenyatta's death led directly to the corrupt dictatorship of his lieutenant Daniel arap Moi. In Ivory Coast, the death of Houphouet-Boigny seems to have led to an orderly transition toward democracy, while the voluntary resignation of Nyerere in Tanzania has produced a reduction in ideological intensity, but no loss of political stability. In sum, in cases where a charismatic leader had support from across the society, his departure posed a major short-term crisis, but not necessarily either a breakdown or a long-term tyranny. An important difference here is that the Cuban population is much more educated and organized than was true in any of these cited cases. Thus, any instability in the interregnum would be more likely in Cuba to lead to mass mobilization.

Another important issue posed by charismatic leadership is that it is necessary to ask, "Charisma for whom?" Juan Perón, for example, or Evita, has even today an almost mystical power to evoke devotion from *peronistas*, but both are despised by many other Argentines. Fidel may be seen by revolutionaries as a uniquely potent leader, but to counterrevolutionaries he is a despicable tyrant. In part, his longevity may be attributable to exporting the counterrevolutionaries to Miami.

Finally, a leader who came to power with charismatic authority in the eyes of many may, in the course of time, see that charisma decay, eroded by the steady drip of mundane problems not solved. The claim of charisma and its outward appearance may remain, but when the leader dies or is removed, there may be fewer repercussions than one might expect. There may well be celebrations. Francisco Franco, seen by his followers as a savior in 1938, had become an irrelevancy to most Spaniards by the time of his death in 1975. Charles deGaulle was seemingly surprised in 1969 when his sudden resignation did not elicit passionate pleas for his return. In Cuba, there has certainly been some decay of Fidel's authority, but we cannot know now how much. It is perhaps indicative that Fidel has not recently resorted to the massive rallies in the Plaza de la Revolución, which have always been his trademark. Is this because he fears a low turnout? Loss of control? Or is it merely austerity, the desire to avoid diverting resources to spectacles in hard times?

There is, in short, reason to expect that Fidel's death or departure would occasion a significant crisis, but not necessarily the breakdown of the regime. There would certainly be an attempt to bring about an orderly succession, most likely with Raúl Castro succeeding his brother. Raúl's command of the Army and the Party would assure him the means to get and keep control in the short run. However, the new rulers would have less ability than Fidel to resist the external pressures and internal changes detailed above. To enhance his own legitimacy, Raúl might well mandate further liberalization, thereby enhancing the risk that he would ultimately lose control of civil society. Any attempt on his part to tighten the screws would have very high costs in terms of investment and

tourism, and might also push reform-oriented party members and their allies in the pro-revolutionary sector of civil society toward an alliance with opposition moderates.

What is in prospect in Cuba, then, would not seem to be a *ruptura*, or violent upheaval leading to the overthrow of the regime. Only in the tragic and highly unlikely event of a direct military intervention by the United States would *ruptura* be plausible. Because the costs to the U.S., in lives and treasure, would be very high and the chances of a clear success not good, one could only expect such an action if order had already completely broken down on the island. If the U.S. did not directly invade Nicaragua in the 1980s, it is not likely to invade Cuba either.

It is more likely that the ongoing political-economic crisis would be further exacerbated, as by some scandal or blunder by the government that undermines its credibility and provokes popular protests. Fidel himself would be under pressure and would have to choose between repression and conciliation. If the unrest were perceived to have counterrevolutionary implications, repression would be a temptation, but it would further undermine the legitimacy of the regime. The effect might actually be to broaden and deepen protest and worsen the crisis. Unlike China, Cuba is not important enough on a global scale to be able to engage in highly public repression without serious adverse consequences. At a minimum, the strategy of attracting investment and tourism would be imperilled. At worst, something like the endgame of Ceausescu in Romania might result. Such a disastrous outcome, however conceivable, is most unlikely because the leadership is both more in touch with its own population than Ceausescu, and more in touch with external realities.

More probably, the choice would be conciliatory, taking public action to rectify the immediate grievance, and opening the political arena another notch in order to reduce the pressure. This would probably alleviate the immediate crisis, but also further legitimate at least the revolutionary sector of civil society. Moderates within the opposition sector of civil society might also gain visibility and credibility in such a crisis by publicly defending the protesters. The counterrevolutionary opposition would use the crisis to trumpet the bankruptcy of the regime, through its access to U.S.-based media. Civil society organizations would evolve toward more openly political action; they would become de facto political parties.

At some point in such a conciliatory, liberalizing scenario, Fidel and the revolutionary leadership would realize that they could no longer unilaterally control a deteriorating situation. The revolutionary sector of civil society, and perhaps important voices within the party itself would be advocating further opening as a means of regaining the initiative and recapturing popular support. Revolutionary civil society would also be in touch with the moderate elements of the opposition civil society, which would be making much the same demands for *abertura*. Radicalization of the protests would hold the danger that the counterrevolutionary opposition could be strengthened. To the rest of the political spectrum, from the moderate opposition to the hard core revolutionaries, that would be the least desirable of possible outcomes. The potential would thus exist of

broadening the revolutionary coalition to include the moderate opposition, as a means to block the counterrevolutionary opposition.

The moderate opposition, however, would join such an expanded revolutionary coalition only if the leadership agreed to some substantial *abertura*, some further movement towards opening the political process to contestation. They might even insist on toleration for the counterrevolutionary opposition, though this would be hard for the leadership to accept. But the leadership might finally have to accept it as a way of reducing pressure in a crisis that favors the growth of the counterrevolutionary cause.

Fidel's personal authority could be cast in question in the course of such a crisis. It might prove easier to bring the moderate opposition on board without Fidel's polarizing figure at the head of the regime. He himself might come to realize that, or his lieutenants might. Moreover, Fidel or his lieutenants might perceive that U.S. hostility could be mitigated without Fidel in the picture. In a context of political-economic crisis, the prospect of normalization of relations with the U.S. would be extraordinarily attractive if it could be done while preserving the revolutionary regime through the sort of expanded coalition and *abertura* described in the previous paragraph. The leadership might well split over the desirability of pursuing normalization under such conditions; Fidel, even if he were unwilling to leave, could find himself forced out.

Transition...to what? Speculation like the foregoing has little point unless it pushes us to see more clearly the grand structure of the situation, and the range of possible choices. While there is little likelihood that events will develop in exactly the way that has been suggested here, the grand structure we have depicted also makes clear that there is little likelihood of the revolutionary regime persisting without fundamental changes. There are many actors, and many choices, but most of the contingencies lead in directions unattractive to the revolutionary leadership.

## **Conclusion**

Understanding Cuba's situation at the present time requires us to grasp something Marx understood very well a century and a half ago: humans make their own history, but not with elements of their own choosing. The Cuban revolutionary leadership and the vast majority of the Cuban people have made a radically new revolutionary society over the last 38 years, and they have done it against the steepest odds. The project is still far from complete, and beset by internal contradictions, but it still constitutes a principal alternative model for Third World societies, a model that is committed (whatever its tactical compromises) to transcending capitalism and building socialism. The Revolution is a monument to revolutionary political will.

Yet the analysis in this paper suggests that revolutionary political will may have its limits. The international conjuncture that confronts Cuba in the late 1990s leaves Cuban revolutionary leaders with few and unsatisfactory options. Essentially, they may either

defend the integrity of the revolutionary project as they define it, thereby foregoing access to resources they need, or they can make varying levels of compromises that will generate resources but will also vitiate the revolutionary project. The external conundrum has its internal reflections: if they hold to revolutionary orthodoxy regardless of the cost, they will increasingly lack the means to provide the extensive benefits which undergird the legitimacy of the regime. To the extent that they compromise with global capitalism, they can generate resources, but also produce inequality and injustice, undermine socialist consciousness, and promote social and political tension. In turn, as they deal with the tension by means of *abertura*, they more and more lose control of civil society. Thus some sort of significant transition or transformation of the revolutionary regime seems to me to be inevitable.

Still, those who know the history of the Cuban Revolution would be foolish indeed to predict its demise. The political will to defend it may have frayed around the edges, but it is still strong at the center. Mirta Rodríguez Calderón (1995, 19) eloquently speaks for the many Cubans who remain committed to the revolutionary project: “With all the good and all the bad, this Cuba is ours. It belongs to no one else as long as we can preserve it.”

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