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## **Cuban Exceptionalism Revisited**

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## Cuban Exceptionalism Revisited

### Abstract

The end of Cuban exceptionalism has been much announced since 1989, but a decade and a half later state socialism on the island is still enduring. Transition studies have been criticized for focusing on success stories. Exploring the deviant case of Cuba's "non-transition" from a comparative social science perspective can shed light on the peculiarities of this case and, more importantly, test the general assumptions underlying post-1989 expectations of regime change in Cuba. Theories of path dependence and cumulative causation are particularly helpful when attempting to link Cuban current political exceptionalism with a more long-term historic perspective. Moreover, they suggest that interpretations of Cuba as simply a "belated" case of "third wave" democratization may prove erroneous, even when the health of Fidel Castro finally falters.

Key words: Cuba, comparative politics, exceptionalism, socialism, transition

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## **Zusammenfassung**

### **Der Sonderfall Kuba in vergleichender Perspektive**

Nach 1989 ist das Ende des kubanischen „Sonderfalls“ oft beschworen worden. Doch mehr als anderthalb Jahrzehnte nach dem Ende des Kalten Krieges behauptet sich der kubanische Staatssozialismus noch immer. Wo die Transitionsforschung für ihre Konzentration auf Erfolgsfälle kritisiert worden ist, kann aus komparativer Perspektive die Analyse der kubanischen „Nicht-Transition“ nicht nur den Fall selbst erhellen, sondern – und wichtiger noch – jene Annahmen untersuchen, die den Erwartungen eines Systemwechsels in Kuba nach 1989 zu Grunde lagen. Theorieansätze zu Pfadabhängigkeit und sich selbst verstärkender Ursachenketten („cumulative causation“) können Kubas gegenwärtigen politischen Exzeptionalismus im Rahmen einer längerfristigen historischen Perspektive analysieren. Zudem legen sie nahe, dass auch im Falle des Todes von Fidel Castro Sichtweisen wenig adäquat sein werden, die Kuba lediglich als „Nachzügler“ der „dritten Demokratisierungswelle“ verstehen interpretieren.

## **Article Outline**

1. Introduction
2. Cuban Exceptionalism
3. A New International Patron
4. The Exceptionalism of Cuban Regime Change

### **1. Introduction**

What are the social laws or “rules” to which twentieth century Cuba appears such a flagrant exception? Those who believed that the fall of the Berlin Wall had inaugurated “the end of history” will need to concede that at least in this corner of the Caribbean history seems to be taking another generation to extinguish itself. It is still just about possible to counter that triumphalist claim with Castro’s equally resonant slogan “history will absolve me.” Those who believe that state intervention to control the entire economy and marginalize the price system had been proven unviable and doomed to collapse will have to cope with the evidence that, compared to other post-Soviet economies, after the initial slump between 1989 and 1993 Cuba’s economic performance has been at least average, or perhaps even slightly better than most. Those who have argued that there is not only one hegemonic “super-power”, and that U.S. military, economic, political, and cultural supremacy is now such that outright resistance to it had become futile, must face the fact that the Castro regime, as tiny as the Cuban economy may be in a global perspective, still continues to flaunt its resistance, and even to attract occasional new allies to its cause. Those who would argue that no single autocrat can remain sane and politically effective after exercising virtually unlimited power

over his home territory for up to half a century, have still not come to terms with the secrets of Fidel Castro's psychology and his personal authority. Those who believe that the unquestionable yearnings of ordinary Cuban citizens for personal freedom, economic opportunity, the right to travel and access information, must be sufficient to overwhelm all the artificial props used to sustain a "closed" system of communist party control, have not yet grasped either the offsetting power of the regime's "David v. Goliath" imagery, or the density of its formal and informal social controls beyond the security apparatus. In all these, as in other related respects, contemporary Cuba is an outlier, a challenge to conventional assumptions, a demonstration that there are "more things in heaven and earth" than are dreamt of in what passes for philosophy inside the Washington beltway.<sup>1</sup>

Many announced the end of Cuban exceptionalism after 1989<sup>2</sup>. Cuban state socialism was seen as an offshoot of the bipolar Cold War era, bound to disappear with the dissolution of its potent overseas allies. According to widespread expectations, the Caribbean "domino" had to fall sooner rather than later. The forces of globalization would not allow an island just 90 miles off the U.S. coastline to maintain a state-socialist economic order and one-party-rule, and defy its powerful Northern neighbor. Cuba would become part of the "third wave" of democratization that swept away socialist regimes from Berlin to Vladivostok. Whatever the scenario and outcome of a Cuban transition, in the 1990s many saw it as only a matter of time before Cuban exceptionalism gave way, and the island joined the ranks of other "really existing democracies" in Latin America. But what has happened instead is that Cuban state socialism not only survived the end of the Cold War and the demise of the Soviet Union, but has actually managed to consolidate its position in new and unexpected ways.

Exploring the persistence of Cuban exceptionalism tells us about the particularities of the Cuban case and, what is more important, about the general assumptions underlying post-1989 expectations of regime change in Cuba. Transition studies have been criticized for focusing on success stories. By studying Cuba this balance can be partially redressed, and light can be shed on the conditions for "non-transition."

## 2. Cuban Exceptionalism

Cuban exceptionalism does not preclude the considerations of comparative analyses relevant to the Cuban case. Exercises in comparison are as much about specifying and explaining contrasts as identifying similarities. From a comparative social scientific perspective, it is

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<sup>1</sup> Hamlet: "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy" (*Hamlet*, Act I, Scene V).

<sup>2</sup> The most recent example is: Centeno (2004).

necessary to pay attention to “exceptions” and “deviant cases” as well as to average and exemplary examples. Such non-standard or deviant experiences help us to specify the scope and limits of the normal outcomes that can be explained by a generally applicable theory. Thus, for example, studying Cuba as (so far) a case of “non-transition” can sharpen up our theories of democratic transition, and counter the bias towards “successful outcomes” that can easily distort our retrospective theory building.

But it is not just with regard to theories of democratic transition that the Cuban case has proved so challenging and intractable. Twentieth century Cuba has appeared thus far to falsify the predictions of a long list of cherished social science theories. According to “modernization” theory the Cuba of the 1950s was the most unlikely setting for a socialist revolution. Its high levels of urbanization, literacy, income per capita, and exposure to the U.S. market and culture should have favored irreversible democratization, not the installation of a highly personalist one party regime. Traditional Marxism was equally confounded. The “stage theory” embraced by (among others) the pre-Castro Cuba Communist Party (then called the PSP) was that further development of capitalism was necessary before socialism could become a reality. But the Cuban Revolution both defied modernization theory and skipped stages. Similarly, the realist school of thought in international relations would have predicted that of all the subordinate allies of the U.S., Cuba was virtually the one that was most securely “locked into” the so-called Free World. But the Cuban Revolution achieved the unthinkable: it defied Washington, survived, and successfully reversed alliances. Once that shocking result had been absorbed, standard realism would then predict that an isolated and vulnerable Castro regime, only able to survive thanks to Soviet support, would become a pliable “proxy” for Moscow foreign policy objectives. Instead, Havana provided the “small motor” that drove the Soviet bloc as a whole to adopt policies (especially in Africa) that were much more active and radical than those envisaged by the sclerotic bureaucrats in the Kremlin. So realism has been twice falsified. Cuba has also defied Fukuyama’s “End of History” thesis, an overarching frame of interpretation it seemed to work for the rest of Latin America – and indeed much of the world – at least in the 1990s. Again, Cuba proved to be the exception throughout that decade, and the Castro regime has now lasted long enough to witness a “return of history” both globally and in its own region. This list of standard theories that have all spectacularly failed to work in the Cuban context is illustrative rather than exhaustive. But it is long enough to raise a fundamental question of method. What more would have to happen in Cuba that falsifies macro-historical social science predictions, before the island’s historical trajectory can be acknowledged as distinctively “exceptional”? Or is “exceptionalism” a taboo category, which should never be used whatever the evidence, for fear of subverting the commitment of modern social science to universalism?

A focus on the Cuban case also draws attention to the multi-dimensionality of key concepts in the theoretical literature. Thus, for example, if democracy is understood to refer to the ideal of popular sovereignty, this has, at least, two components – self-determination, and rule by the people. Facing massive and sustained external pressure the Cuban revolutionary regime has made resistance to foreign domination its central claim to democratic legitimacy. But the internal dimension (the sovereign struggle of the citizenry to choose and control its government) is an equally indispensable component of popular sovereignty that has been severely relegated in revolutionary Cuba.

Contemporary Cuban exceptionalism is both political and economic. Not only did Cuba not undergo the standard post-Soviet transition to a market economy via collapse and privatization, but it also resisted the more gradualist – or a “social democratic” – variant of a managed transition as envisaged by many European advisors. Indeed, despite the continuing and even tightened U.S. embargo and in spite of the failure of *acercamientos* with Canada, Mexico, and the EU, the Cuban economy, although weak and distorted, is displaying unexpected signs of resilience and even of partial recovery. In addition in its management of the economic crisis the government has shown an uncanny ability to blend politics and economics in such a way as to ensure economic survival and purchase a new generation of political loyalties.

It is said that Castro is better at politics than at economics. The statement is hard to refute when one considers the fact that he has remained in power for more than 47 years, and when one notes the material shortcomings suffered by his subject population over this nearly half century. But this statement overlooks something that is a key to understanding the survival of the Cuban regime: that the political trumps the economic logic in Cuba, or in official parlance: “Our political system, which enshrines the people’s power, is the foremost accomplishment that we must safeguard, because all others depend on it” (Partido Comunista de Cuba 1997). If potential economic benefits mean compromising on political essentials, Fidel Castro will renounce those benefits, even when this entails such extraordinarily high economic costs that it leaves foreign observers baffled. This is what European leaders had to deal with in 2003 when Castro fell out with the European Union, shunning development cooperation and disrupting commercial relations over the European attempt to impose “political conditionality.” This is even clearer in the case of U.S. Cuba policy: all sanctions and embargo measures imposed by Washington since 1959 have manifestly failed to elicit political compliance. This is so not only because the Cuban leadership found an ally in Moscow, but also – as the post 1989 years show – because Havana was willing to absorb enormously high costs and adopt “virtually a war economy” (Castro 1991: 57) to cope with the quasi-collapse of the island’s trade, production, and monetary systems.



However, this is only one part of the story. There has not only been austerity but also more liberalization than either Cuban policy-makers or their detractors like to admit. The survival of a socialist state at the heart of the Americas rests as much on the Cuban propensity to respond to change as on its insistence on pursuing a separate path. Recent changes in economic management, such as the replacement of U.S. dollar circulation by a “convertible peso,” have been widely interpreted as a reversal of prior reforms and as likely to compound existing difficulties. Increases in salaries, consumer spending and public investment have been made possible by changing external conditions. The always politicized external economic relations of the Cuban Revolution have been profoundly altered again by the arrival of two new saviors: a political partner and economic benefactor in the form of Venezuela’s Hugo Chávez; and Communist China, a new source of commercial credit given that country’s increased outreach activities in Latin America in general and in Cuba in particular. Both changes appear to be reinforcing a statist, centrally directed model of economic management. And yet, as with earlier reforms, appearances can be deceptive: above all, the Cuban model of “defiance” is one of creative adaptation to circumstances. There is no reason to expect this to change.

In the 1990s the impact of the economic crisis led to the erosion of the state’s economic capacity and to the emergence of new inequalities which Centeno has taken as an indication of Cuba’s “return to Latin America:” “The great Cuban exceptionalism in health and education may be wearing thin” (Centeno 2004: 404). While the quality of health and educational services on the island have suffered severely compared to the 1980s, the universality and gratuity of these services has remained untouched. Illustrating the argument of cumulative causation, what started out as exceptional social coverage for the domestic population has now translated into an at least as exceptional transformation of such “revolutionary accomplishments” into non-traditional exports that generate hard currency income as well as important political benefits as key elements of Cuba’s current foreign policy. Similarly, the inequalities that emerged in the 1990s have not led to ever-growing social polarization but, quite to the contrary, have come under attack from the state’s drive to re-centralize and re-ideologize the economy, which has been striking out emphatically against the “nouveaux riches” and (legal or illegal) market actors. Informality, although always present in socialist Cuba (as in other socialist states), peaked in the mid-1990s but has since experienced a gradual decline. And while the “Chávez bonanza” may arguably be based on shaky economic grounds, it is difficult to see the island as being currently “just as much involved in the infamous ‘race to the bottom’ as its neighbors”(Centeno 2004: 408).

If Cuba’s economic policy can be subordinated to the logic of survival of the political system, a reverse feedback is equally possible: an economic policy like Cuba’s is viable only in a

vertical political system that is able to administer a dramatic decline in living standards without being “disturbed” by public protest or subjected to the negotiating capacity of independent social actors. If theories of path dependence have any merit then Cuba’s current political exceptionalism can be linked to its historic origins, to the special role that the country played in the Spanish Empire, to its belated independence and to its subordinate position to the U.S. during the first half of the twentieth century. This historical perspective contrasts with the understanding of Cuban exceptionalism as being limited to the “revolutionary epoch” after 1959. This is Centeno’s perspective, for instance,<sup>3</sup> and leads him to argue that the current “return to Latin America” he diagnoses translates into the “end of Cuban exceptionalism.” Such a long-term perspective highlights the role of geo-politics, and the discursive power of revolutionary nationalism, and suggests that theories of cumulative causation can explain much of the political course taken since 1959. This is a product both of structure and of choice. At the structural level, the concentration of economic and political power at the apex of the revolutionary system made possible the authoritarian implantation of a project of social transformation, which has now lasted for almost half a century, and has systematically deepened the gulf separating the Cuban people from most of the major tendencies at work in the rest of the western hemisphere. This objective parting the ways has also created a subjective and discursive divide, which makes continuing “exceptionalist” choices not only possible, but probable. Strategic options that would be almost unthinkable in most Latin American countries become logical first preferences in Cuban conditions.

“History will absolve me,” reads the title of Fidel Castro’s famous defense in the trials after the attack on the Moncada barracks in 1953. When state socialism in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe collapsed after 1989, history seemed to have turned against the Cuban leader who had tied Cuba’s political and economic destiny closely to those powerful overseas allies. In the official rhetoric of the early 1990s history no longer signaled a bright future on the horizon but became the legitimizing framework for a stubborn defense of the duty to *resistir!*, in the name of the century-old struggles for Cuban independence, first against Spanish colonial rule and then U.S. neo-colonial tutelage. This has changed. Cuban state socialism managed to survive the painful decade of the 1990s and in the first decade of the new millennium Cuba’s leadership no longer sees itself as the last bulwark of the just cause holding out against all odds but, once again, as the vanguard of the epic struggles of the Latin American continent.

In the second half of the 1990s, a gradual economic recovery began, led by tourism earnings and the high level of remittances from Cuban emigrants. Living conditions still are precari-

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<sup>3</sup> “Prior to 1959, Cuba exemplified many of these issues, but for the past four decades, it has represented the great exception to the Latin American trend” (Centeno 2004: 404).

ous in many ways but they are a far cry from the “this-ship-is-sinking” atmosphere of 1993-1994 when the crisis hit bottom. While the world of the regular Cuban peso certainly illustrates all too well what Kornai (1980) had called “the economics of shortage,” it is routine, not despair that marks daily life in Cuba today.

In terms of political economy, this recovery has led to a virtual halt of reform measures. Introduced under the pressure of crisis, such reforms are increasingly seen as concessions or as erroneous, and as no longer necessary, and so ought to be corrected. While in the mid-1990s foreign observers discussed the “when” and “how,” rather than the “if” of Cuban reform towards more market driven mechanisms, a full-scale roll-back in the form of a *perfeccionamiento del socialismo* (the perfecting of socialism) is now under way. If the legalization of the U.S. dollar in 1993 was a highly symbolic step, so is the ban of U.S. dollar circulation and its substitution with the Convertible Cuban Peso in 2004. In fact, the government has declared the end of the *período especial* (special period), understood as the phase when Cuban socialism was forced to resort to what Fidel Castro referred to as “measures we do not like” in his 1993 speech legalizing the U.S. currency (Castro 1993). In May 2005 Fidel Castro announced an overnight hike of minimum wages by 225 percent and a 300 percent rise in minimum pensions. As the government was quick to point out, this spectacular increase involves dedicating an additional 2.25 billion Cuban pesos to the annual budget – roughly US\$ 100 million at the rate of the official Cuban exchange houses. With this act of largesse, that to many observers is reminiscent of the voluntarism of the early years of the Revolution, Havana signals what it claims to be the light at the end of the tunnel of daily hardship.

The measure has led some economists to warn against the potentially negative inflationary consequences and, indeed, the material base for such a spending increase cannot possibly be found in Cuban domestic production. In the very short run the ban of the U.S. dollar has filled the state coffers with a considerable amount of cash as Cubans rushed to exchange their greenbacks for convertible pesos before the announced 10 percent surcharge came into force. But the new economic confidence displayed by the Cuban authorities is based on a more long term reason: the ever closer alliance with the Venezuelan government and the apparent consolidation and radicalization of Chávez’ “Bolivarian Revolution.” This is just the most recent in the long line of external patrons or sponsors that has characterized Cuban politics since the nineteenth century. And it signals that Cuba is not only “returning to Latin America” as argued by Centeno, but also that important emerging actors in Latin America are “returning to Cuba” with rather unexpected enthusiasm, with Chávez and Bolivia’s Evo Morales being the most prominent cases.

### 3. A New International Patron

At the rhetorical level Hugo Chávez emphatically embraces the revolutionary legacy of Fidel Castro, and has willingly played on the father-son imagery, presenting himself as the only successor that is ready to carry the historic relay baton of the continent's epic anti-imperialist struggle. Although the "Bolivarian Revolution" has shied away from clear ideological definition, Chávez now seems to have embraced the rhetoric of "Socialism of the twenty-first century" (this could still mean many disparate things, but it does have the virtue, from a Cuban point of view, of opting for the term "socialist" and of clearly rhyming with *Cuba Socialista*). This political affinity is accompanied by no less important economic support. In the streets in Havana the news that the country has *nuevos rusos* is already making the rounds. This is obviously an exaggeration, but Venezuelan oil revenues mean that this is an ally with great economic potential, all the more so at current world market oil prices. In 2004, the Venezuelan state-owned oil company PdVSA officially handed over a record US\$ 11.9 billion to the Caracas government, 60 percent more than the government had budgeted; and the oil bonanza continues unabated in 2006. While most of this is absorbed by domestic priorities, Caracas has diverted major sums to further its international priorities.

Cuba has been tapping these resources successfully through a series of cooperation agreements, the most prominent of which is a barter arrangement allowing Cuba to pay for Venezuelan oil shipments by sending thousands of medical doctors and sports trainers to work in Chávez' social programs. The precise terms of the agreements and the dimension of de facto Venezuelan subsidies to Cuba are open to speculation, and one can only guess what credit lines Venezuela is or will be willing to grant Cuba. So while current oil prices allow for much generosity, the question remains how sustainable this lifeline will be. Oil prices and political conditions in Venezuela may change, and Venezuelan support for Cuba may not prove to be such a blank cheque as some currently assume. For the time being, however, relations between both countries are more intense than ever. In October 2005, Cuban politburo member Carlos Lage declared in Caracas that the destinies of both countries are now so closely bound that "Cuba now has two presidents, Fidel and Chávez" (cited by AFP, October 7, 2005). Since then, the launch of the ALBA integration scheme, however unclear its substance, the use of health and educational service exports as foreign policy vehicles, and the prominently displayed new bonds of friendship with the government of Evo Morales in Bolivia have underscored Havana's renewed internationalist appeal and ambitions.

Thus, if in the mid-1990s the achievement of the Cuban leadership was to steer a process of limited economic opening while maintaining its political control – well described as the

“gatekeeper state” by Javier Corrales (2004) – what we have witnessed since about 2000, is not just the persistence of a centrally planned economy long abandoned elsewhere, but even the re-imposition of a degree of state direction and management that faltered during the most acute phase of the crisis. This has been possible not just because of tourism and remittances, important though they have been in cushioning the dollar shortage, but also because of the continued ability of the Cuban regime to engage with external benefactors seeking a counterweight to U.S. hegemony. This recurring logic is now being played out with Chavez's Venezuela and China, a new source of commercial credit. For Chávez, the main incentive to subsidize Cuba is the symbolic importance of Fidel Castro and of Cuban socialism as a bulwark against the dominance of the U.S. and neo-liberal economics; and for China there is some geopolitical advantage in moderately supporting a regime so strategically located at the centre of the Caribbean and so persistently in confrontation with the U.S. And so once again, as argued by the thesis of cumulative causation, it is the survival of exceptionalism in itself that creates the conditions allowing for the perpetuation of that exceptionalism.

The recent announcements that “good times are coming” may also reflect a serious concern of the Cuban leadership: that the patience of its people is not an infinite resource. The relative economic stabilization the regime has achieved does not automatically translate into a parallel recovery of political prestige. The government has launched a massive “ideological offensive,” kicked off by the infamous 1996 “Report of the Politburo” that frontally attacked the intellectual reform debate then underway. This campaign reached a first climax with the mass mobilizations over the Elián case in 2000 and is by now firmly entrenched in the emphatic rhetoric of the “battle of ideas.” But the *mesas redondas* and *tribunas abiertas* that flood the official media play to a largely passive audience. The calls for heroic causes and self-disinterested commitment contrast sharply with the realities of everyday life, deeply marked by what the Cubans call the need to *resolver* their daily needs by resorting to a wide array of formal and informal means, from networks of relatives or friends, to black or grey market activities, to contacts with foreigners or with *socios* (buddies) somewhere in the bureaucratic structure. The ritualized mass mobilizations of today are a far cry from the enthusiasm of the early 1960s which they pretend to emulate. The younger generation that has known nothing but the hardships and retreats of the special period is particularly alienated.

The gap between private and public attitudes has become so wide that it hardly seems sustainable over time. While open political defiance remains limited to a small minority of the population, there is a very blurred line between what some call “passive consensus”, and resigned acceptance or quiet obedience. There are no reliable ways to measure just how severe this popular dissatisfaction has become. Nevertheless, the income and pensions hike

and similar measures can be read as a signal that the Cuban leadership is well aware of the need to regain some of its eroding social base, that heroic rhetoric alone will not do, and that quite ordinary material underpinnings are necessary. At the same time, however, the path of “perfecting socialism” does not necessarily mean a full return to the orthodox economic model of the defunct bureaucratic socialism with central planning and Moscow-style five-year plans. The “gatekeeper state” – which incorporates quasi-capitalist structures under state control – seems to be here to stay. When Fidel Castro personally goes on television to explain the benefits of a new Chinese rice cooker that is to be massively distributed to the population, these kinds of distributive measures may have less to do with orthodox socialism than with older populist traditions that are so resilient in much of Latin America.

There is a similar process at work at the political level. Hidden beneath the overwhelming continuity of the political system as embodied by the sustained leadership of Fidel Castro, are the significant changes undergone by the regime. Perhaps the most stunning of these is the ongoing process of de-institutionalization. Although the official structures of Party and State apparatus have remained very much untouched, it is notable that the next Party Congress is long overdue (it is ostensibly held every five years and is formally the highest body of authority of what is the back-bone institution of classic Communist rule). And nobody is bothering (or daring) to ask when it may take place. The office of the “battle of ideas” has evolved into a parallel super-ministry with a wide array of programs covering the most diverse fields, and has effectively sidelined the competencies of the respective ministries or other established government authorities. And, while the country’s leader is visibly ageing, the personalist nature of the regime has been accentuated in multiple domains, from the recruitment of cadres for top positions to the ideological discourse of the “battle of ideas.”

#### **4. The Exceptionalism of Cuban Regime Change**

Various arguments and theories have been developed in the study of democratization processes that, when applied to Cuba, seem to lose their explanatory power, or at least to become sufficiently subverted that they end up re-emphasizing the thesis of Cuban exceptionalism. Let us now look at some of the challenges that the Cuban case presents to the comparative study of transition or democratization.

A first example of how Cuba subverts expectations that seem reasonable elsewhere is apparent when looking at the role of the Internet in political change (Hoffmann 2004). A key argument in the thesis of globalization as a force of democratization is that new digital communication technologies, particularly the Internet, cannot be controlled by states be-

cause of their intrinsic border-crossing and decentralized nature and that free access to information will eventually make it very difficult if not impossible to contain freedom. In the words of former U.S. President Bill Clinton (2000), "in the new century liberty will spread by cell phones and cable modem!"

The Cuban government was initially highly cautious. The so-called Torricelli law enacted by the U.S. Congress in 1992 promoted intensified communication with Cuba as a strategy to undermine the political system. Cuba only decided to establish an IP connection to the Internet in 1996 – the last country in the hemisphere to do so – when it felt sufficiently assured that political risks could be minimized. It did so after the "Report of the Politburo," which attacked the reform debate in the harshest terms, decried the concept of civil society (used by Cuban scholars as means to introduce a more pluralist approach within the socialist framework) as a "Trojan Horse of Imperialism", in the words of Raúl Castro (1996). It also did so only after keenly observing how the Peking government made Internet use compatible with one-party rule. Cuba not only imports most of the technological hardware of its networks but also know-how in security and administration matters from China. So although Cuba is now online, the government keeps close watch on access to international networks by ensuring that computer and network density remains low, and that most connected computers only have access to closed domestic networks (what the government calls "Cubernet") rather than the World Wide Web. Access to computers that are connected to the latter is generally only possible from within institutions or in public spaces (both subject to social control mechanisms that are reinforced by the technical controls, which the quasi-state monopoly on provider services make possible). Domestic residential access is prohibited and in 2002 the government launched an effective campaign against unauthorized Internet access, squeezing the limited black market for passwords and Internet access even further.

Thus, articles by dissident journalists, which are transmitted by phone to supporters outside the island and put online abroad, or the homepage of the U.S. Department of State, nor indeed any other web-based media, reach a broad audience on the island on a regular basis. Cuba has not experienced the transnationalization of its domestic public sphere, as proponents of the thesis that the Internet is a force for democratization have argued. The backdrop to these restrictions on Internet access is that they not only minimize the political impact of the new communication technologies, but that they also severely limit their potential developmental benefits. So here too, the economic logic remains subordinated to the political logic. The government is ready to assume the high economic costs implicit in manifold restrictions on Internet access if in this way the Internet will not pose any immediate threat to the state monopoly over mass media or to regime stability.

A second example of Cuba's exceptionalism is related to the expected role of civil society in processes of political change. Studies of democratization have often highlighted the key role played by civil society in such processes. In Cuba, there has been a revitalization of civic and other organizations not dominated by the government in recent years. This has contributed to an expanding public sphere through the development of various "mini-spheres" of discourse throughout Cuba, contradicting the expectation that the circulation of discourse is essentially determined from the commanding heights of the state. The reaction of the Cuban political class has been to restrict the debate about civil society and to limit the broadening of the public sphere by denouncing "civil society" as "fifth column" operating on behalf of U.S. interests. As a consequence, although there is widespread societal discontent and although the everyday experience of state-society and citizen-citizen interactions has been reshaped, this has not translated into civil society mobilization. At some local levels and in various discrete social domains (as in cinema, music, and some areas of science) there have been significant manifestations of pluralism and outreach to the external world but the state continues to maintain ideological and political hegemony on the core issues of revolutionary continuity and defiance of Washington. There is a notable variety of counter-discourses that have no more than a limited social impact, in part because collective action outside the state is too costly, but also because dissent from within must always guard against identification with subversion from without.

A third illustration of the difficulties of extrapolation lies in the logic of Latin American transition studies. Ever since the onset of crisis in Cuba in the late 1980s observers have been keen to identify individual political figures as "hardliners" or "softliners." But there has been a lot more speculation than evidence. People identified by foreign observers as potential leaders of a "reformist" or "perestroika-minded" wing within the party have been ousted at too early a stage for one to know whether such claims were well-founded (this was the case with General Arnaldo Ochoa, the highest-ranking military man after Raúl Castro, who was executed following a show trial on drug and conspiracy charges in 1989; or of Carlos Aldana, who at the peak of his career in 1992 was the highest-ranking member of the Politburo after the Castro brothers and who was dismissed after being publicly charged with corruption, obliged to undertake a "self-criticism" and then stripped of all influence). The most sustained "reformer thesis" was based on generational change, and embodied by three Politburo members who are a generation younger than Fidel and Raúl Castro: Carlos Lage who was born in 1951 and is usually credited as the architect of the economic reforms of the mid-1990s, former foreign minister Roberto Robaina, who was born in 1956, and Abel Prieto, the long-haired President of the writers' and artists' association (UNEAC) born in 1950. The fate of these "potential reformists" has been more complex and varied. Robaina



was dismissed in 1999 under corruption charges much like Aldana, but Prieto remains Minister of Culture and member of the Politburo despite some moments of isolation, and Carlos Lage is still Vice-President of the Council of State and a member of the politburo. This may look a lot like continuity, but their status and the popular perception of their influence has changed. Lage embodied hopes for economic reform but was then a loyal servant when the reversal came; Prieto embodied the hope for greater cultural and intellectual heterodoxy and autonomy, but he also closed ranks with the party line when the tide turned back to the crude ideological campaigns, narrowing the room for intellectual debate. In the process, both lost popular credibility as potential exponents of a reform option from above.

Time has taken its toll on their standing within the party as well. They were once regarded as the people who would replace the "old guard," but the leadership of this generation is being eclipsed by that of a younger generation of party cadres who are not identified with any reformist attitudes of any kind. First among these is Felipe Pérez Roque, who replaced Robaina as foreign minister and who was presented in the National Assembly session of December 2005 in a way that fell just short of declaring him as Fidel Castro's designated successor; Otto Rivero, who heads the "office for the battle of ideas", is another prime example.<sup>4</sup> Neither the reformers nor the intransigents possess sufficient security of tenure to open up a sustained competition over the scope and limits of liberalization. The Castro regime remains so verticalist that only the very highest levels of leadership can exercise that degree of strategic choice. The *Comandante* has observed how democratization emerged in other post-revolutionary and post-communist regimes, and he retains the discretion to block or manipulate any such developments on his island.

A fourth – perhaps one of the most familiar – illustration of Cuban exceptionalism is the unique role played by its emigrant population since 1959. Certainly, having roughly a tenth of one's population abroad is hardly exceptional for the region, but the characteristics of that emigration as its implications for the sending country are indeed exceptional. The economic success story of Cuban *émigrés*, embodied by the transformation of Miami from a secondary tourist resort into a dynamic business metropolis, is singular (see Portes/Stepick 1993). No other Latin American migrant group in the U.S. has a parallel history or political impact. Providing almost five decades of staunch political opposition to the Castro regime has been crucial for the social cohesion and identity of a community that ceased to be one of "exiles" and took on the "hyphen identity" of today's Cuban-Americans. And it was precisely the blocked

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<sup>4</sup> In May 2005 Wilfredo López Rodríguez who had been head of the *Grupo de Apoyo y Coordinación del Comandante en Jefe* since 1995, was dismissed and as far as we can tell has not yet been replaced. His ouster was not reported publicly until August 2005, and so gave rise to much speculation.

option of return to the island that led exiled Cubans to acquire U.S. citizenship, and this in turn laid the foundation for their extraordinarily successful involvement in U.S. politics.

The attitude of the Cuban *diaspora* to their homeland differs significantly from attitudes of other migrant groups. The Chinese *diaspora* (including conservative businessmen) may be politically opposed to the Peking government, but a resurgent China does appeal to their nationalist sentiments and opens up highly attractive business and professional opportunities for the community abroad – albeit under the watchful eye of the Communist Party. Mexican-Americans, Irish-Americans and Jewish-Americans all wish to see their home countries doing better, if only to enhance their prestige and influence within the U.S. By contrast, the social, political and economic success of the Cuban-American community in the U.S. has been closely linked to its ability to capitalize by opposition on the “symbolic capital” of the Cuban Revolution embodied by Fidel Castro. This particular cold war has outlived the Cold War even a decade and a half after the demise of the Soviet Union and with it the oversized symbolic importance of Fidel Castro that is so essential a facet of the high-profile political standing of the exile in the U.S. Cuban community. This is bound to change in any pos-Castro transition scenario. Cuban-American identity and the Cuban-American insertion in U.S. politics will face a serious challenge if Cuba is “re-sized” to its “true” dimensions (a rather small and poor Caribbean island again dependent on the goodwill of the U.S.).

The specificities of Cuban emigration have contributed to the longevity of the Castro regime. Unlike the Eastern Europe state-socialist regimes, Cuba’s tended to keep the emigration door open. This served an important safety-valve function along the lines described by Hirschman (1970) in his “exit and voice” scheme, but has also helped stabilize the regime in other ways. The explicit political alliance between the dominant exile groups and Washington’s foreign policy-making elite has always nourished a key element of regime survival: the melding of the Cuban “political question” and its “national question.” And emigration is far from being such a dichotomous “exit” category as per the Hirschman model. Despite sharp political polarization, Cuban emigrants have maintained strong transnational ties with those living on the island. These surfaced in a particularly spectacular form during the crisis years of the 1990s, when the massive inflow of U.S. dollar remittances not only helped many Cuban families to make ends meet. Again, the increasing importance of family remittances from emigrants is a feature of many Latin American countries and hardly exceptional; however, it is certainly exceptional that those who emigrate provide a crucial financial lifeline for the regime even though the majority define themselves explicitly in opposition to the government in their home country. So the exceptional story of Cuban emigration and the ambiguities of Cuba’s “exiles” are part and parcel of explaining the country’s political exceptionalism.

A final and perhaps the most striking feature of most contemporary analysis of Cuban politics is the way it so closely identifies any political change with the death of Fidel Castro. Of course there can be no doubt that the "Castro regime" will enter into a profound period of change when that inevitable biological event finally occurs. But we may need to differentiate between the physical death of the *Comandante* and the "demise of authoritarian rule" to use the catchphrase of the transitology literature. The Yugoslav regime survived for a considerable period after the death of Tito, as did Salazarism after the death of Salazar. Spain, where the death of Franco cleared the path to a rapid democratic transition, represents an extreme rather than a dominant pattern. Arguably conditions in Spain were "over-ripe" and it was only the survival of the dictator that disguised underlying changes. This was not the case in Vietnam after Ho Chi Minh or in China after Mao either. The aim here is not to engage in futurology but to explore the impact of future *expectations* on the present. The excessive focus on the mortality of Fidel Castro distorts current analysis and Cuban politics dynamics. The oft-heard phrase "once Castro dies..." may often be intended to raise expectations, but what it also does is imply that as long he remains alive nothing of interest will or can change in Havana.

It is misguided to imagine that ruling groups in Havana are simply waiting passively for an endgame that they can neither foretell nor control. On the contrary, rival factions (and different generational cohorts) compete with one another for control of strategic positions that are likely to prove decisive in the struggle for power that they foresee arising when the unifying leader is gone. And that old ruler himself is equally active in promoting and demoting these succession competitors so as to prolong his ascendancy as long as possible and also as a way to steer the course of his regime in the direction he judges most conducive to its long-term survival. A generation of young "reformists" came to the fore in the 1990s, who believed they would be in the pole position to capitalize on any "normalization" of relations with the rest of the world. But now there is an even younger generation of hard-line militants being promoted, who are persuaded by the idea that it will be the *pure et dure* who may prove to be the true heirs of Castroism. It is unclear whether either of these two groups will be the final beneficiaries of Fidel's patronage when the balance of his rule is eventually made. Indeed, the personal power of Fidel is served at home and abroad by analyses that focus on a death that still take some time to come.

Broader questions about the real inheritance of the regime and the best options for preserving its achievements and correcting its deficiencies should be debated in the interim. During the 1990s the prevailing conventional wisdom about Cuba among Western social scientists was broadly a liberal internationalist one. The assumption has been that democratization and convergence on a standard template of liberal politics and open market economies was

inevitable and that the only question was how quickly and painlessly individual nations undertook these linked transitions. According to this “end of history” and “third wave” framework of analysis the future of post-Castro Cuba was predetermined, leaving room only for debate about whether the “ever faithful isle” would take that step very much later than the rest of the western hemisphere, or how much international pressure and guidance might be required, or how far behind Cuban economy and society would have to fall before it could be turned around. Since the (questionable) election of George W. Bush to the U.S. presidency in 2000 this kind of liberal triumphalism has suffered a series of setbacks, but as far as Cuba is concerned the dominant interpretation has remained largely intact. As Fidel Castro grows older and visibly frailer and as Havana passes up successive opportunities to soften its course, the predetermined denouement is assumed to be drawing ever nearer. It was in that spirit that US Secretary of State Rice appointed a “Cuba transition coordinator” in July 2005, and that the US National Intelligence Council reportedly added Cuba to its secret watch-list of countries in which instability might require U.S. intervention.<sup>5</sup> But the re-consideration of Cuban exceptionalism casts doubt on the reliability of such an interpretative framework. So much time has elapsed since the dismantling of the Berlin Wall, and so many developments have occurred that make sense of events within an “exceptionalism” framework that are anomalous according to the orthodox view, that intellectual honesty demands some re-analysis.

The image of a Cuba that is politically paralyzed and waiting for an act of God is both erroneous and politically convenient for those who are not interested in seriously preparing for the future. A more positive variant of the exceptionalism thesis would point to a different conclusion. To think constructively about the scope for regime change and the dynamics of a potential transition requires breaking with the stalemate over Castro’s personalism and focusing instead on the distinctive collective structures and memories that drive island politics (and make them differ from standard templates). If it falls to the Cuban people to decide their own future they will have an unusually rich array of precedents to draw upon, and an exceptionally large number of foundational issues to resolve. For example, they could in principle base an eventual post-Castro political settlement on the 1976 Socialist Constitution (with Varela-type modifications). Or they could revert to the 1940 precedent. Indeed, if Washington’s will were to prevail, the Helms Burton Law would take them back to the semi-sovereign electoral system of 1902-1933. In addition to this unusual variety of constitutional starting points, they would have to define who could be included in a democratic settlement (one in which emigrés could take part) and on what terms (with wholesale property restitution, or on the basis of the current socialized distribution of assets?) Deeply entangled

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<sup>5</sup> As reported by *The Financial Times*, November 1, 2005.

with these basic choices about the “rules of the game” would be the question of how to negotiate their relations with the rest of the world (not only with Washington and Miami) but also with Madrid, Caracas, Beijing, and others.

After all, the U.S. is most unlikely to envisage annexation of the island, so any post-Castro settlement will have to be on the basis of an international reaffirmation of its formal sovereignty. All this means that Cuba’s exceptional political trajectory leaves their eventual future extraordinarily under-determined and potentially open to choice and institutional innovation.

However, to capitalize on this potential the Cuban people would need an extended space for collective reflection and deliberation, something that may not be easy to attain in the most likely transition scenarios. If they could secure that opportunity for autonomous political construction they might freely conclude that the costs of continuing to deviate so far from standard models of economic and political liberalization were too high. They might therefore choose to terminate their record of exceptionalism. But they could also conclude that after all the sacrifices they have made and all the costs they have borne, they were not willing to relinquish all aspects of their past half-century’s political legacy, however contrary to prevailing international prescriptions that choice might seem. This more positive variant of the exceptionalism thesis would invoke the liberating potential of continuing to be different, of understanding why, and choosing a suitable course, regardless of external requirements and expectations.

One of the impediments to fresh thinking about the course of Cuban development is the pressure to pass quickly from analysis to prescription. Our focus here is less on the standard prescriptive questions of what Washington policy should be or how Europe should react or how the transition might be shaped, but rather on a prior, and easily underestimated, task: that of understanding and explaining where Cuba has been heading. The “third wave” metaphor – open to some severe criticism on more general grounds – has been particularly unhelpful here.<sup>6</sup> Whatever the trajectory of the Cuban revolution, it is radically out of sync with such loosely postulated tendencies. It follows a dynamic of its own, one much more driven by the island’s distinctive socio-political experience and geopolitical predicament than by any imagined oceanic rhythms. Equally, it would be superficial to attribute the unforeseen survival of the Castro regime to purely accidental factors, such as the temporary ascendancy of a generous ally in Caracas. Our longer term historical perspective highlights the recurrent features of the island’s relationship with external benefactors, both predating and providing the key to explaining the otherwise improbable circumstances of today’s Chávez-Castro partnership. (More generally, the combined influences of the Bush admini-

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<sup>6</sup> See Laurence Whitehead (2005).

stration and the Chávez regime are shifting the axis of political alignment in a large number of Latin American countries, potentially redirecting their energies away from the course foreseen by liberal international teleology. But if this turns out to be the case it will reflect unresolved tensions and neglected tendencies within the various countries concerned, rather than simply being the product of external pressures and interventions).

Viewed from this perspective a mistaken and inflexible external orthodoxy about what must (and therefore will) transpire in Cuba when Castro dies becomes a critical feature of the situation to be explained, rather than an article of faith beyond empirical verification. Any future demise of the Castro regime may precipitate yet a further round of unsuspected outcomes and deviant responses, not just because of the momentum derived from a past history of exceptionalism, but also because opportunities to support conventional liberalization will be missed, owing to the preconceptions and analytical failings of various actors in contention. The risk is high that ill-informed and unreflective policymakers in Miami and Washington (or indeed in Brussels, London, Madrid or Berlin) will be caught by surprise and react sub-optimally when developments in Cuba fail to correspond to their expectations and requirements. Advance planning based on a sober and realistic appreciation of the distinctive features of the Cuban issue could perhaps reduce the chance of a dangerously unexpected outcome, but on present evidence it would be more plausible to forecast that a refusal to analyze the implications of Cuban exceptionalism will increase the chances of its perpetuation.

The exceptionalism experienced by Cubans means that their future is open to choice and innovation, but at the same time, if they are to capitalize on that possibility they need space for unconstrained reflection, something that both Havana and Washington have always denied them. As noted above, if they could reflect on their exceptional past, Cubans might either decide that the costs of continuing to deviate so much from prevailing international patterns is too high; *or* they may conclude that after all the sacrifices they have made and the costs they have borne, they deserve the fruits of their efforts, or they might devise some intermediate path. On this basis, we can distinguish between a negative kind of exceptionalism, which we aim to criticize and try to change – the exceptionalism that keeps Cubans in a state of polarization and unable to initiate a comprehensive evaluation of their predicament – from an exceptionalism with positive connotations – the liberating potential of being different, understanding why, and choosing one's own course accordingly, regardless of external impositions. In social science terms our use of exceptionalism runs counter to the dominant tendency to break up complex realities into more short time periods or into partial fragments, to separate economics from politics or social structure, or to seek out universal covering laws or generalizations to explain patterns in each separate sphere. Our perspec-

tive is long-term, holistic, combining features from across different disciplines, relying on broad gauge historical comparisons and contrasts to shed light on how different features combine together in a particular context. Collective memories serve to bind together these complexities into distinctive patterns. That is why non-Cubans have difficulty making sense of what the Cubans are really talking about. It is why simple moral messages are inappropriately extracted from their embedded contexts. It is why Cubans may find it helpful to see their problems from a more detached and comparative perspective in order to get a handle on the real choices available to them.

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