

POST-D-17 AND PROCESSES OF CUBAN NATIONAL RECONCILIATION

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The announcements by Presidents Castro and Obama on December 17 (D17) produced a torrent of media coverage and academic analysis that, understandably, centered on diplomatic negotiations. This article examines a less discussed, but equally important, theme: reconciliation among Cubans. Looking at the processes of Cuban national reconciliation from the individual and societal levels, both within Cuba and between the island and diaspora, the article identifies likely facilitators and lingering obstacles to processes of accommodation. It complicates the conceptualization of “exile” and “island” by challenging both common stereotypes of a sharply divided nation with an intractably vengeful exile and of a unified socialist island. It also acknowledges that, while the pace of national reunification is accelerating, it is a process that has been in play for almost forty years.

Reconciliation at the Individual Level: A Longstanding Phenomenon between Island and Diaspora

In 1977, President Jimmy Carter ended the travel ban imposed through the U.S. embargo in 1963, thereby stimulating a process of re-encounter and reconciliation among Cuban families. Despite continued Cuban government stigmatization of those who emigrated and notwithstanding travel restrictions imposed by the Reagan Administration in 1982, continued

under President Clinton in 1996, and made even more severe under George W. Bush, the process of re-encounter continued fitfully, with relaxed terms during Clinton's final years. In 2009, the Obama Administration significantly boosted individual contact by allowing unlimited family travel and remittances and authorizing direct flights to Cuba from an increased number of U.S. airports. Cuban Americans could visit relatives more easily and support them more generously. In 2013, over 400,000 family visits took place, and US\$2.7 billion was sent as cash remittances from Cuban Americans to loved ones in Cuba (Morales 2014a, 2014b).

From the other side of the Florida Straits, Cuban citizens were empowered by changes in Cuban government travel regulations implemented in January 2013 (Haq 2013). For the first time since the mid-1960s, most citizens can travel to the United States if they obtain a visa, and, more importantly, they can be gone for up to two years without losing their property in Cuba, with the option of requesting an additional two-year extension. Under the Cuban Adjustment Act, these travelers can obtain a green card in the U.S. after one year and can leave the U.S. for up to a year, making it possible for them to have legal status in two places. Consequently, increased numbers of Cubans are multiplying their life chances while simultaneously creating a civic stake in both communities and deepening relationships with family and friends in the exterior. Equally important, diaspora realities can be personally experienced and analyzed by islanders, allowing them to independently formulate opinions without relying on second-hand accounts or government filters. U.S. authorities report a 79 percent increase in visas granted to Cubans during the first six months of 2013, a total of 16,767 visas (eTN 2013).

This sort of personal connection might be categorized as “informal” or “popular” reconciliation since it is not guided by any ordered process. It simply represents popular will. Given the chance, Cubans have demonstrated over almost forty years that they support contact

between those who left and those who stayed. They have made their own way forward. A 2014 poll of Cuban-Americans in southern Florida quantifies the pervasiveness of public support: 68 percent favor normalized diplomatic relations; 69 percent want an end to travel restrictions; and 52 percent support an end to the embargo (Grenier and Gladwin 2014).

Structured individual and small group reconciliation is also taking place in southern Florida as a theoretically informed practice through the pioneering work of Sister Ondina Cortés at St. Thomas University. Sr. Cortés organizes what she calls “Circles of Reconciliation,” which include several weekly meetings among voluntary participants who arrived in different waves of migration. Each participant initially tells the story of his or her exit from Cuba, attempting to find forgiveness and reconciliation with themselves in the process—i.e., identifying and letting go of trauma, grudges, and rancor. The group then focuses on societal reconciliation by sharing ideas on how to heal divisions within the Cuban nation. Most participants evaluate the experience positively (Cortés 2013).

A variation on this process transpired between 2001 and 2003 in the Cuban National Reconciliation Task Force on Memory, Truth, and Justice, a project sponsored by the Ford Foundation and convened by Marifeli Pérez-Stable at Florida International University (Pérez-Stable 2003). The task force was comprised of exile activists with varying political views, scholars, and persons with expertise in other cases of national reconciliation. Political dissidents in Cuba commented on the process as it evolved. Although the task force focused primarily on seeking truth about human rights violations in Cuba, one main conclusion was similar to the Circles of Reconciliation. The Task Force concluded, if reconciliation is to succeed at a national and institutional level, it must begin within each individual and then extend to families and social

networks. It bodes well for post-D17 Cuban national reconciliation that individual levels of understanding are well developed both formally and informally.

It should be noted that no parallel process of informal or formal reconciliation at the individual level has taken place within Cuba despite evidence that citizens are deeply alienated from each other as a result of decades of restrictive policies: overzealous monitoring by Committees for the Defense of the Revolution (CDRs) and other mass organizations; violent acts of repudiation taken by CDRs during the Mariel boatlift in 1980; assaults by Rapid Response Brigades at alternative cultural events; and routine aggression against persons deemed to be politically unreliable (Ackerman and Clark 1995; Aguirre 2002; Estado de SATS 2014).

National Reconciliation at the Societal Level

At a recent conference at Florida International University, two well-known Cuba scholars asserted that the present level of alienation of Cuban citizens from their government is broad and deep. They differed sharply, however, on whether the government is aware of the extent of the rift, with one scholar saying, “No one knows better than the Cuban government how deep and wide the discontent of the people is” (Jardines Chacón 2015). Just three hours later, a second scholar asserted, “At this point, the Cuban government itself has no idea how massive the dissent is” (Perez-Stable 2015). The contrast illustrates how scarce reliable data are that measure both public opinion and internal government process inside Cuba. Hence, pronouncements on the level of discontent and need for reconciliation should be considered advisedly.

Supporters of the regime point to systematic public consultations, such as the 2010 meetings held nationwide to critique President Raúl Castro’s proposed economic plan, as evidence of active debate and continued civic commitment to a national social pact led by the

Communist Party (Bobes 2013). They point out that the 2010 consultations resulted in 68 percent of the plan's specifics being altered, thus confirming that the consultations are effective as well as popular. An independent and individualistic set of non-governmental organizations is viewed as divisive as well as unnecessary (Hernandez 2003). The system is viewed as capable of its own reform, and national reconciliation is defined as an intrinsic process organic to the present system.

Nevertheless, since the 1990s, hundreds of non-governmental organizations (NGO's) have developed, attempting to mediate between the people and the state or to contest state power and offer alternative political and social projects. However, even sympathetic observers assert that, despite 25 years of organizing, these groups remain almost unknown within Cuba, even though they have won international prizes for their work (Ortega and Gasset 2008; Sakahrov 2002, 2005, 2010); have leaders named among the world's most influential people (Hijuelos 2008); and receive frequent coverage in the world press. Their impact remains largely outside the national borders. They raise foreign awareness, but not the Cuban dissent or reconciliation that is their avowed purpose.

It is illegal in Cuba to form an organizational association without first receiving government authorization (Dupuy and Vierucci 2008; Human Rights Watch 1999). Groups contesting the regime are denied recognition or their applications are simply ignored. NGO's that form in defiance of the law (what I will call "unauthorized civil society") are branded as "*grupúsculos contrarevolucionarios*" ("counterrevolutionary splinter groups"). Quite simply, government limits on civil society development are the principal obstacle facing independent citizen-initiated consultation on reform and reconciliation. With the exception of conciliatory

accommodations made with the Catholic Church (discussed below), the government continues to insist upon state-defined and state-led unity.

Despite being unknown to their countrymen, over the last 25 years, Cuba's unauthorized civil society has become nonviolent, numerous, diverse, sophisticated in developing and managing support from diaspora and foreign partners, and connected through national and international networks and coalitions, while simultaneously remaining divided both within and among individual groups. Throughout, some have viewed themselves as the protagonists of a future reconciliation among Cubans both on the island and in diaspora.

Rise of Nonviolence

Until the late 1970s, dissident groups inside Cuba continued to use the violent tactics that had characterized revolutionary armed struggle against the Batista dictatorship. Violence continued in exile into the late 1970s and early 1980s as groups advocating dialogue with the Cuban regime were bombed and socially shunned, and Cuban embassies and passenger aircrafts attacked. By the early 1990s, however, a new strategy of nonviolence arose in response to the following factors: the apparent futility of armed struggle; the death of older, more belligerent exiles; families' renewed ties with their island relatives; and the arrival of a less politicized, post-1980 generation through the Mariel boatlift, the 1994 rafter crisis, and subsequent legal and unauthorized immigration. The post-1980 arrivals wanted to see change in Cuba, but not via violent tactics that might endanger relatives and friends. They were also exhausted by the political mobilization required in Cuba, and most avoided activism of any sort. In response, established activists turned to nonviolent tactics rather than abandoning their hope of a democratic restoration. With few exceptions, an adversarial stance replaced a belligerent one.

Little Growth in Exile: Rising Numbers and Diversity in Cuba

Within the diaspora, political activism has not expanded greatly since the 1990s. Observers can identify a small group of active organizations dominated by aging leaders of longstanding. There are sharp divisions among these groups based on which of two types of national reconciliation they seek at the societal level. The first are those who are united through opposition to any reconciliation with the Cuban government. They view reconciliation as an accounting or truth-telling process that will document the human rights violations of the Castro government. They support the U.S. embargo and any non-violent tactic that hastens collapse of the Cuban regime, viewing reform as tantamount to support of the regime. Three main groups within this camp include The Cuban American National Foundation and its related Foundation for Human Rights in Cuba; the Cuban Democratic Directorate; and M.A.R. por Cuba.

A second type includes moderates who focus their work on common goals, seeking consensus while tolerating differences and avoiding debates about issues that divide them. For example, the *Proyecto Demócrata Cubano* (Cuban Democratic Project), the *Partido Socialdemócrata Cubano* (Cuban Social Democratic Party) and the *Arco Progresista* (Progressive Arch) have met both inside and outside Cuba since the 1990s, finding points of agreement. Just prior to D17, under the auspices of the Konrad Adenauer Foundation and the Christian Democratic Organization of the Americas, these groups met in Mexico City and attempted to expand their consultation to include a wider range of political views by including oppositionist activists from southern Florida and Cuba. Although the expanded group was able to agree on the need for a transition to democracy, they disagreed sharply on issues such as support

for the U.S. embargo. In subsequent meetings held in Miami, oppositionists withdrew their participation. Clearly the two camps have different implications for post-D17 reconciliation.

It is in Cuba that there has been an explosion of new activists and a dizzying proliferation of unauthorized NGOs. A directory prepared in 1996 listed over 360 new organizations (del Castillo, et al 1996; FOCAL 2004), and hundreds more have organized since then. These groups include political parties, legal reform projects, human rights activists, independent groups of professionals, environmental activists, women's groups, advocates for racial equality, and artists of every sort. During the 1990s, the regime replaced arrest of dissidents and long prison sentences with a combination of harassment, sporadic mob violence, and short-term detention combined with periodic offers to let dissidents emigrate. The 1990s also saw selected dissident leaders given permission for short-term travel, allowing island groups to solicit support and organizational ties with counterparts in the U.S., Europe, and Latin America.

As dissidents expanded their organizing to develop nationwide chapters and began to form coalitions of local and national groups, the government cracked down on the so-called "Black Spring of 2003," returning to a process of show trials lacking due process, which were followed by long prison sentences for 75 principal leaders. An international outcry followed and the Cuban government eventually accepted mediation from the Catholic Church as a means for releasing the "group of 75" (Amnesty 2003; HRW 2009). All but twelve of the group chose to leave the country, with most settling in Spain and then moving on to the U.S.

Scandal and Sophistication

Any dissident in Cuba can count on being fired from government employment and denied permits for independent work. Consequently, dissidents must rely on outside funding and

resources. Salaries, supplies, equipment, and travel costs are generally paid by outside groups. A key debate surrounds whether the dissidents are persecuted patriots worthy of leadership in a process of reconciliation or simply opportunistic creatures of those who give them aid.

In 1996, the United States authorized USAID funds to support such groups (Muse 1996). Similar programs followed in the Department of State and the National Endowment for Democracy (a quasi-independent organization which acts as a conduit for U.S. government funds). During the early years of these programs, the names and funding of grantees were not publically revealed, adding credibility to the Cuban government's insistence that all dissidents were secret agents of the U.S. Although names of grantees are now published, their partners in Cuba remain undeclared.

U.S. journalists eventually gained access to information on these grants, and, by 2006, concerned members of Congress forced audits showing that “[n]early all of the \$74 million a federal agency has spent on contracts to promote democracy in Cuba over the past decade has been distributed without competitive bidding or oversight in a program that opened the door to waste and fraud, according to a report released yesterday by the Government Accountability Office” (De Young 2006). The fact that many groups operated on a shoestring budget supplied by likeminded individual supporters, relatives in the diaspora, and European political foundations was lost in the larger scandal.

An additional outcome of these initial years is that dissident leaders traveled widely, establishing relationships with a variety of potential supporters without mediating their requests through exile organizations. Opening of Cuban travel has accelerated this trend. Essentially, island groups now have wider latitude to assess the position of outside groups and to align themselves according to their own preferences rather than immediate need. It appears that, for

the first time, island personalities such as Manuel Cuesta Morua and Leonardo Calvo are taking leadership of the overall movement, which speaks well for the evolution of reconciliation.

Divisions within and among Groups

In 2013, as he announced the formation of a new coalition of groups including fourteen victims of the “Black Spring” roundup, Guillermo Fariñas admitted that “this marked the twelfth time he has participated in launching a ‘new opposition’ group” (Tengri 2013). Both the persistence and the failings of the dissident movement are embodied in his comment.

Coalitions seem to falter for two reasons. First, leadership struggles break up national groups and coalitions. Most recently, just a day before D17, leadership struggles among the Ladies in White (a celebrated group of women who conducted silent marches in protest against the imprisonment of their loved ones in the Black Spring of 2003) ended with an act of repudiation staged by one founder against another. Organizational control and distribution of scarce funds were blamed. Video recording of the repudiation show it to be the equal of any government mob attacking democracy advocates (García de la Riva 2013; Yanes 2015). Clearly in-group reconciliation is an issue, as is the relative stability of commitment to nonviolence.

A second limiting factor is the continual division between oppositionist and moderate strategies. Groups make repeated attempts to focus on common goals, but seem inevitably to come to cross-purposes. The most conservative groups are those receiving U.S. funding. They have pledged to launch a public relations and lobbying campaign to maintain the U.S. embargo. Hence, the expansion of the D17 process and the reconciliation of U.S. and Cuban differences at the state level will be primarily opposed using U.S. government money. The more moderate groups that support normalization were never willing to risk the taint of receiving U.S. funds,

but, consequently, have fewer resources to advance their position in support of the Castro or Obama initiatives.

The only group that has emerged with incremental accomplishments and expanding leverage with the state is the Catholic Church. In the 1990s, the Church negotiated reopening of Caritas to deliver social services such as disaster relief, daycare programs, and feeding programs for the elderly, at exactly the same time that the Cuban social system was in need of support following loss of Soviet subsidy. They also published and widely circulated magazines from lay intellectuals (*Vitral* from 1994-2007; *Espacio Laical* and *Palabra Nueva* presently) that stimulate debate and provide a forum for citizens to reconcile their individual values if not their political allegiance.

In 2010, the Ladies in White approached Cardinal Jaime Ortega, head of the Cuban Catholic Church, to attempt mediation with Raúl Castro. The process resulted in the release of a total of 126 prisoners, most of whom chose to accept an invitation from the Spanish government to leave the country together with their family members. Since then, weekly visits to the prisons are a regular part of the Church's pastoral work. Most recently, construction began on the first new church built since the triumph of the revolution, and the Church estimates that over 80 percent of Cuban children born each year are now baptized in the Catholic Church (Ortega 2012). Oppositionists accuse the Church of accepting small concessions offered by President Castro rather than aggressively advocating for their brand of reconciliation—an accounting of past events and a democratic opening.

Conclusion

In the 1990s, Jonathan Fox introduced the idea of “thickening” as an analytic tool in evaluating social movements. Groups achieve their goals or “thicken” their influence, by scaling up their activities, taking advantage of political opportunities, and harnessing social energy through repeated iterations of interaction with internal and external actors (Fox 1996). This does seem to describe the process the Church has enacted, and it may serve as a model for achieving reconciliation. The loss of Soviet aid in the 1990s literally left many Cubans “dispirited,” and the Church had the organizational resources needed to promote values clarification as well as social services.

The bedrock process of informal personal and small group reconciliation that has advanced within the diaspora and between diasporans and the island has been fostered among islanders within the Church. In a parallel move, one of the largest island organizations, UNPACU, announced in 2015 that, having established a network of 5,000 members, it will shift its emphasis from political organizing to providing social support (DeYoung 2015; Tamayo 2013). This is an encouraging sign.

The taint of U.S. funds and manipulation is a continuing impediment that needs to be addressed in the process of normalizing relations. If U.S. funds are decreased or eliminated, it would level the playing field between moderate and oppositionist influence. Moving from polarization to pluralism is a slow process, but the repeated attempts to form coalitions show good will. Former belligerents are becoming competitors, if not colleagues.

Perhaps the best that can be said for attempts by island and exile dissidents to move toward a national reconciliation at the societal level is that things are slowly “thickening,” with external recognition and support expanding and island and exile alliances being solidified on

terms that favor island leadership. A cadre of younger intellectuals, organizers, and artists is gaining confidence and building social networks. It is a process still in its early stages.

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