

COMMENTS ON

“Inside Civil Society: An Empirical Study in Cuba of Opinions Among Members of Independent Groups on Problems and Prospects for Democratization,” by the Center for the Study of a National Option (CEON)

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This is an important paper. Drawing on data obtained through focus group research undertaken inside Cuba, the authors attempt to shed light on the present status or “state of health,” so to speak, of both the Castro regime and its civic opposition. They consider what can be done, from within and without, peacefully to bring about a transition to democracy in the Island. Particular attention is paid to certain states of mind in the population which may be helping to sustain the regime, such as fear of repression, scarcity of political efficacy, paucity of knowledge about opposition activities and leaders, and concerns about what a change of regime will mean for their everyday lives. The authors conclude with a number of sensible proposals for assisting the civic opposition to the dictatorship.

Before commenting, “full disclosure” requires that I state my association with CEON and its advisor on this project, Professor Juan J. López. To date, my contacts with the Center have consisted in participating, via a long-distance telephone call, in a democracy

workshop held in Miami in the summer of 2000 to which I had previously submitted a paper. My contribution was translated into Spanish by CEON’s Executive Director, Rafael Artigas, and published in their journal (Cuzán 2000). I have met Mr. Artigas twice, at the 2000 and 2001 ASCE conferences. As for Prof. López, it was he who invited me to participate at the CEON democracy workshop. We have participated at previous ASCE panels and have carried on a professional correspondence.

That said, I have two sets of comments, one methodological, the other substantive.¹ Taking up the former first, the authors are correct in anticipating that “the study presented here will be criticized on methodological grounds.” Be it noted that, although there is considerable variation in research designs, it is common for focus groups studies to include between one and six groups of from half to an even dozen individuals each, who are compensated for their time. Usually, although not always, as it depends on the research question, participants do not

1. The philosopher Sir Karl Popper theorized that scientific knowledge grows by disputation, through the interplay of conjectures and refutations (Popper 1982). In his view, criticism plays a key, indeed an indispensable part in the pursuit of truth. No hypothesis is accepted as true (and only then provisionally, as long as new evidence does not disprove it) unless its proponents are able to refute or take into account all plausibly valid objections, and show that it fits the facts better than any of the alternatives. It is in a Popperian spirit that I offer the following critique, looking forward to a rigorous and robust rebuttal.

know each other. The group meets from one to two hours to discuss, in a more or less free-flowing fashion, a number of topics organized into an instrument pre-tested beforehand, either a standardized questionnaire or a more flexible discussion guide. The role of the moderator is crucial, particularly if the goal of the research is to inquire into the feelings, beliefs, and thoughts of participants. In that case, the moderator needs to be active but neutral, listening carefully and empathetically, drawing out groups members' thoughts while avoiding giving cues as to what the desired responses may be. He has to establish a climate in which all participants have the opportunity to speak and express their views, even asking direct questions of the more reticent and soliciting opinions that are different from those already heard, all the while probing for details or greater depth of response. This counteracts any tendency toward conformity to peer pressure or reaching a premature consensus. Richness in the variety of opinions and candid exchange of views among participants is sought. Given the limited time, the number of topics taken up cannot be large. If more than one group is assembled, they may meet serially, so that results from the first groups may be used to modify the discussion guide with subsequent groups. The sessions are taped and transcribed. The transcripts constitute the raw data that are analyzed with ethnographic or content-analysis procedures (Morgan 1988, 1996; Stewart and Shamdasani 1990).

According to the authors of this paper, "a very comprehensive, open-ended questionnaire was constructed by CEON with expert advice and distributed among leaders of seven civil society groups in different parts of Cuba. Each leader conducted a focus group with members of his/her organization to collectively answer the questionnaire." Members of two more groups joined the discussions. That so many groups were included increases confidence in the reliability of the results. On the other hand, no data on group size, demographic and socio-economic composition, purpose and activities, or affiliation or lack thereof with CEON are provided. Nor are we informed whether the participants were paid. The questionnaire is indeed extensive, consisting of over 50 items. We are not told whether it was pre-tested,

either inside Cuba or among recent arrivals from the Island. Neither do we know whether the instrument was completed in one or more sessions, or how long each session lasted. If in one session, given the length of the questionnaire, one wonders how much time was devoted to each item. If in more than one meeting, one needs to consider what effect individual reflection and private conversations in-between sessions among two or more members of the group may have had on the discussion. Perhaps the most doubtful aspect of the method employed is that group leaders conducted the meetings. Such a procedure is not likely to elicit the widest possible range of opinions held by the group, especially on controversial topics. On the contrary, it is probable that it would strengthen the tendency toward conformity to peer or leader pressure on the part of less assertive members. Moreover, the fact that the sessions produced a "collective response" to the questionnaire means that data on the heterogeneity of individual opinions, the nature and extent of within-group agreements and disagreements, and the interactions among participants, all usual features of focus group research, were lost. Also, we are not told just how much data were generated, e.g., pages of text or number of words produced, or which questions elicited the lengthiest answers. Finally, there is no discussion of how the answers were analyzed, i.e., coded and categorized.

None of this is to deny the pioneering nature of this study, or to belittle the tremendous difficulties and risks of doing research with or about Cuban dissidents. But more information can be provided on the methods employed and analytical procedures followed so that readers may decide for themselves on the amount of salt with which to take the reported findings. One way for the authors to forestall criticism of their methodology is to describe it in greater detail, acknowledging all its limitations up front.

Turning to substance, a "fundamental question" which the authors seek to answer is whether "fear of repression" or "feeling of political inefficacy" is "the most important cause" accounting for "the low level of popular participation in public acts of opposition." On the basis of group responses to items 7-10 of the questionnaire, the authors conclude that "Al-

though fear of repression is certainly a factor ... the main reason is that a sense of political efficacy is not widespread among citizens.”

In the first place, I cannot help but wonder if, at least in the context of a communist dictatorship, these sentiments are really distinct. After several unsuccessful efforts at bringing about a change of policy in an area they care about (e.g., school prayer), it is very possible for average citizens in a democracy to lose faith that individually or collectively they can make a substantial difference on an issue where either the governing elites have reached a consensus that is not in line with what a large minority or even a majority of the public believes, or which has been removed from the political arena to the courts. The old adage, “You can’t fight city hall,” encapsulates the feeling of political inefficacy shared by many ordinary people in the United States. However, such a sentiment is not associated with fear of government sanctions when the desired change does not take place. Under a communist dictatorship such as Castro’s, on the other hand, where what is at stake is not the content of this or that policy but the very existence of the regime, feelings of helplessness and fear of repression are not so easily untangled. That this is the case is suggested in the following observation made by one of the groups: “A lot of people believe that nothing is going to change [by their participation], only that they will get into trouble with the government.”

Nevertheless, let us assume that, even in Cuba, the feeling of political inefficacy and fear of repression constitute different, unrelated sentiments. What evidence do the authors provide for the conclusion that it is the sense of inefficacy rather than fear that best accounts for the lack of mass participation in opposition activities? It is summarized in the following sen-

tences: “From the perspective of the activists, there are three fundamental reasons for the low level of popular participation in public acts of opposition: (1) insufficient communication between civil society groups and the population, (2) fear of repression, and (3) a sense of political inefficacy among citizens, that is, people do not think that their participation in these activities will lead to political changes. ... The responses propose that a lack of belief in political efficacy among the vast majority of the population is somewhat more important than fear of repression in explaining the low level of popular participation in public acts of opposition.”

How did the authors arrive at the estimate that the sense of inefficacy is “somewhat” more important than fear of repression? Unlike other items in the questionnaire (e.g., #37, on whether focus group participants believe that the public fears a massacre were mass demonstrations against the regime to materialize), we are not told how many groups believed one or the other factor was more important. How were responses coded and counted to arrive at the authors’ assessment of the relative weights of the two factors? What *were* the verbatim responses, particularly to item #7? This was the most open-ended, neutrally-worded question on this topic, whereas items 8, 9, and 10, taken jointly, contain enough of a cue about what the preferred answer is (political efficacy) as to cast doubt on the genuineness of the elicited responses. Given that the authors’ prescriptions for peacefully toppling the Castro regime rest on the proposition that it is the lack of political efficacy and not fear of repression that is inhibiting the mass demonstrations by which they expect to cause the dictatorship to abdicate without firing a shot, as in Czechoslovakia, the truth of the matter has practical as well as theoretical significance.²

2. CEON’s analysis and prescriptions parallel those of their advisor on this project, whose forthcoming book on the subject is cited throughout. Prof. López is a serious scholar, a systematic thinker and researcher, one who combines the careful study of transitions to democracy in Eastern Europe with concerns about how to bring one about in Cuba. All too few academics are willing to risk ostracism or worse by challenging the Castro regime on intellectual grounds, let alone by investigating how, as a practical matter, one could go about toppling it. Elsewhere he has presented an intriguing hypothesis on “the non-transition in Cuba” (López 1999). I hope I do not over-simplify too much when I summarize it thus: a transition to democracy has not occurred in the Island because there have been no mass anti-regime demonstrations. These have been lacking not so much because people are afraid, although that’s part of it, but because they have a low level of political efficacy. This deficiency can be remedied if Radio Martí were given the resources to overcome jamming, if it diligently reported on the various outbreaks of discontent that periodically occur in the Island, and if dissidents were given

In conclusion, although I believe that, as with almost any research product, there is room for raising questions about its methodology or disagreeing with its interpretations, "Inside Civil Society" is, in the characterization of its authors, a "path-breaking" piece of work. Surreptitiously gathering data inside the Island among "protagonists of the civic resistance to the Castro regime" constitutes a significant achievement in and of itself. Also, I want to make it clear that I

concur with the authors' recommendations for Radio Martí and for providing material assistance to Cuba's dissidents. Finally, in the interest of advancing the field of Cubanology and social science more generally, I recommend that CEON make available to all bona fide scholars copies of the completed questionnaires, suitably redacted to avoid compromising the security of the participants, for additional analysis.

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the wherewithal to coordinate their activities and more effectively communicate with the public. Upon being better informed about the opposition and sporadic acts of protests, the people would acquire a greater sense of political efficacy. Given an appropriate catalyst, large numbers of them would turn out to demonstrate against the dictatorship. Faced with mass protests, the armed forces would probably not shoot on the crowds, and Castro's dictatorship would collapse. I have doubts about the theorized chain of causality up to and including the hypothesized final scenario, but it would be beyond the scope of this comment to discuss them.