

CUBAN CULTURE AND DEMOCRACY: THEORY AND RESEARCH AGENDA

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We have been able to strengthen our democracy, eliminate tyrants and develop the Republic by ways of progress...The Constitution of 1940 has been the historic solution. All ignominy has gradually disappeared and the Cuban Republic has been developing by way of true democratic sustenance.

— Ernesto Ardura, 1951

Elecciones ¿para qué?

— Fidel Castro, 1960

Cuban dictator Fidel Castro's obvious physical and mental decline has triggered numerous analyses of a post-Castro Cuba, including the various paths to the foundation of a new democratic republic. However, political optimism is often at odds with the historical realities of Cuba's republican era. Cuban elections, as in many Latin American democratic republics, were fraught with ballot tampering and fraud, as early as 1906, during the re-election of Cuba's first President, Tomás Estrada Palma. The response of the losing candidate's party quickly escalated from public protest to armed insurrection. So began a political trend wherein political corruption and political violence fed into each other, in a cycle that continued into the 1950s. Powerful incumbents fought (by whatever means necessary, including assassination of opponents) to remain in power, while opposition groups responded in kind, devolving into the politi-

cal gangsterism of the 1940s from which a young Fidel Castro sprang.

Many alternative explanations and theories have been propounded by generations of Cubans as to how and why democracy eventually died in Cuba in the aftermath of the Batista coup of 1952 and the advent of the Castro-led revolution. Latin American scholars, such as Venezuelan writer Carlos Rangel, have long pointed to the authoritarianism and nepotism that was the basis of the Spanish Empire in her Latin American colonies, which projected forward into the resulting republics of the Wars for Liberation in the early 19th century.¹ More recently, Carlos Alberto Montaner and others have emphasized the role of Latin American elites in failing to lead their countries.² The consistent thread through numerous analyses of Latin American democracy is the glaring fact that the North American continent has produced arguably the most stable and thriving democratic nation in modern history, while her southern neighbors struggle with establishing and maintaining civic institutions in the shadow of caudillismo and political violence.

As policy makers and theorists attempt to predict the likelihood of the establishment of a free and democratic republic in Cuba, an increasingly influential

1. Carlos Rangel, *The Latin Americans—Their Love-Hate Relationship with the United States* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1977). See also Claudio Véliz, *The New World of the Gothic Fox—Culture and Economy in English and Spanish America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).

2. Plinio Apuleyo, Carlos Alberto Montaner, and Alvaro Vargas Llosa, *Fabricantes de Miseria* (Barcelona: Plaza y Janés Editores, 1998).

body of cultural study has developed that may provide analysts and policy makers with a useful tool for analysis. In 1999, leading theorists in cultural studies participated in a Harvard symposium entitled "Culture Values and Human Progress," that analyzed the cultural values and attitudes that shape political, economic and social performance. The symposium included presentations by such cultural theorists as Ronald Inglehart, who propose that modern, free and democratic societies share cultural values that are associated with the maintenance and longevity of democracy. Although such cultural research is in its earliest phases, this paper discusses current cultural theory and attempts to identify the basic research that should be performed to explore any links between current Cuban attitudes and values and an incipient civil society in Cuba and the likelihood of the creation of a free and democratic Cuban nation.

CURRENT CULTURAL THEORIES AND THE WORLD VALUES SURVEY

Competing traditions of cultural theories have developed in the attempt to explain and describe the development of modern societies. From the Weberian school, theorists argue that cultural traditions endure for generations and impact the political behavior of societies today.³ Thus, societies that are historically Protestant, Catholic, Islamic or Confucian may result in cultural "zones" with distinctive values and beliefs that tend to persist over time. According to Huntington, the world may be divided into eight or nine civilizations that have existed for centuries.⁴ Similarly, Putnam argues that strongly democratic regions of Italy are those where civil society has endured for centuries.⁵

Modernization theorists, on the other hand, claim that increasing industrialization shifts cultures away

from traditional value systems.⁶ As economic development occurs, culture is driven away from local systems and beliefs, and leads to a decline in cultural differences among societies that participate in the world economy.⁷ Recent studies by Inglehart and other investigators suggest that both schools of thought are in part correct: culture is impacted by both the forces of inherent cultural values and economic development.

In attempting to identify, let alone predict, the cultural and economic forces that will impact a future Cuban democratic republic, comparative analysis with other countries that have undergone the transition from totalitarianism to representative democracy will be useful.

In generating comparative analyses, however, cultural values must be measured objectively. A potential source of objective comparison among cultures is the World Values Survey (WVS). The WVS is based on European Values Surveys that were developed in 1981, and have since been expanded to global use in a series of surveys (1990-1991, 1995-1996, 1999-2001) to measure basic values and beliefs. The surveys have been carried out in more than 65 societies on all six continents, containing almost 80% of the world's population. According to the principal investigators that have developed the Survey, the investigations have yielded demonstrative evidence of gradual changes of what people want out of life, and the basic direction is, to some extent, predictable.⁸

Respondents to WVS questionnaires are asked questions that measure one or more cultural traits (e.g., favored family size, beliefs about the role of the state, etc.). Responses are then coded, compiled and averaged; the resulting data are then categorized and identified within broad conceptual types such as "tra-

3. Ronald Inglehart, "Culture and Democracy," Chapter 7 in *Culture Matters: How Values Shape Human Progress* (New York: Basic Books, 2000).

4. Id.

5. Id.

6. Id.

7. Id.

8. Id.

ditional” and “secular.”⁹ Based on survey results, societies that are “traditional” tend to:

- emphasize religion;
- possess absolute standards;
- favor large families;
- emphasize social conformity rather than individualistic achievement;
- favor consensus rather than open political conflict;
- support deference to authority;
- tolerate military rule; and
- have high levels of national pride and a nationalistic outlook.

Secular societies meanwhile tend to have the reverse outlook and:

- emphasize secularism/humanism;
- have flexible standards;
- favor small families;
- promote individualism;
- accept political debate;
- tend to question authority; and
- favor civil rule of law.

Of course, societies cannot be neatly collapsed into these two “black and white” categories. Rather, individual societies have differing degrees of emphasis on each of the components that make up the traditional or secular value system, resulting in a scattering of cultures along a continuum that extends from the traditional to the secular.

According to recent World Values Surveys (1995-1998), countries in Latin America, such as Argentina, Peru, Chile, Mexico, Dominican Republic, Brazil, Colombia, Venezuela, and Puerto Rico, have a strong tendency to be “traditional” societies. The tendencies do not imply uniformity: Argentina and Uruguay edge closer to secular societies, while Venezuela and Puerto Rico are among the most tradition-

al. Regions within each country also vary in cultural tendencies, with urban areas possessing traits that approach secular beliefs, while rural areas remain strongly traditional.

Cuba presents an interesting paradox for any theorist who would attempt to place Cuba in a specific cultural zone. On the basis of language and political culture, Cuba probably falls into the “Latin American” culture zone, with a cultural predisposition toward authoritarian rule coupled with a tendency toward social conformity. Fidel Castro can easily be compared to any one of several Latin American charismatic and messianic dictators, often relying on populist rhetoric to seek support for policy goals. However, Cuba has also inhabited the Marxist-Leninist world for over forty years, creating a unique system of “Cuban Communism” that blends nationalism, dependency and *caudillismo*.

The blending of national symbols and cultural icons with imported totalitarian techniques results in a national double vision of competing traditions that co-exist in modern Cuba. In an attempt to eradicate pre-existing cultural beliefs that did not conform to the Castro regime’s communist system, Cuba’s people have been indoctrinated for over 40 years in Marxist-Leninist ideology. The results have not been definitive as evidenced by the increasing numbers of Cubans who openly practice religion, which was essentially outlawed by the regime through the 1980s. Cubans may therefore exhibit cultural traits common to both Latin American cultures as well as societies that endured totalitarian regimes for the major part of this century, such as Russia. With a blending of “Latin American” and “totalitarian” cultural trends and values, Cuba may exist on a fault line between the two cultural zones. Assuming this is true, the democratic experience of societies (both Latin American and ex-communist) that share these zones with Cuba may provide insight into the strategies necessary for development of democracy in a post-Castro Cuba.

9. Id.

Although the Cuban government has never participated in the World Values Survey, trends evident in these Latin American neighbors are probably present in Cuba, but are difficult to predict. The Castro regime encourages such “traditional” values as emphasis on conformity, suppression of dissent (significant political debate), deference to authority, and state-organized demonstrations of nationalistic fervor. In the 1960s, non-conformists, such as homosexuals and longhaired “roqueros,” were actively persecuted by state authorities in an effort to maintain ideological commitment to the official socialist image of the “New Man.” Although the regime has relaxed its reins on personal appearance and personal behavior, political behavior is heavily scrutinized and controlled. The vanguard of the Revolution may therefore ironically be the champion of “traditional” Cuban traits, as defined by the World Value Survey.

Nonetheless, the Castro regime has selectively attempted to eliminate other traditional values, such as religious belief, although tolerance of religious practice has substantially increased in recent years. Replacement of traditional religious belief with secular dialectical materialism, a staple of Marxist belief, has been an official policy of the Castro regime for decades, in emulation of the former Soviet Union and its satellites. Perhaps due to this emphasis on secularism, most ex-communist societies that participate in the World Values Survey—such as Russia, Czech Republic, and Poland—demonstrate cultural beliefs that are more consistent with “secular” societies. Cuba may therefore possess a blend of traditional and secular values, with a state-sponsored tendency toward “traditional” values.

Another set of values that have been charted for comparative analysis in the World Values Survey are “Survival” versus “Self-Expression” values.¹⁰ Societies

with strong survival values center on economic and physical security, as continuous focus on daily survival subsumes any higher order of thought. “Survival” cultures tend to demonstrate:

- low levels of subjective well-being;
- reports of relatively poor health;
- low interpersonal trust;
- relative intolerance toward outgroups;
- low support for gender equality;
- emphasis on materialist values;
- high levels of faith in science and technology;
- low support for environmental activism; and
- are relatively favorable to authoritarian government.¹¹

Virtually all societies that emphasize survival values have authoritarian forms of government.¹²

On the opposite pole, self expression values emphasize self-expression, subjective well-being, and quality of life.¹³ Self expression values tend to arise in those cultures where survival is taken for granted.¹⁴ With basic necessities met, individuals are free to focus on higher-order and more communal concerns. As a result, Self Expression societies tend to have opposite preferences than those of survival societies.

According to the most recent World Values Survey data, virtually all societies that rank high on self expression values are stable democracies, such as the United States, Sweden, Netherlands, Australia, Switzerland, Norway, Canada, and Britain,¹⁵ suggesting a link between these cultural preferences and the stability of democracy. The experiences of Latin America and Eastern Europe during the twentieth century also strongly suggest that these cultural factors (traditional/secular and survival/self expression) play a key

10. Id.

11. Id.

12. Id.

13. Id.

14. Id.

15. Id.

role in promoting or hindering democratization.¹⁶ Despite the adoption of laws that mirror those in stable democratic societies, the success and stability of democracy in those cultural zones that tend towards “traditional” and “survival” values has been relatively weak. Mexico, for example, adopted a federal system and Constitution that was strongly influenced by the U.S. Constitution. Despite these efforts to establish a legal framework for the guarantee of civil and political rights, Mexico was essentially a single-party dictatorship that only recently was interrupted with the election of President Fox. The recent change in Mexico is reflected by a subtle shift in values away from “traditional” values toward “secular” values and from “survival” values to “self expression” values.

The correlation between cultural values and democratization presents the key question of causation, which remains undetermined. The data can be interpreted to mean that adoption of democratic systems with expansive civil liberties and political rights promotes self expression values of interpersonal trust and well-being. The above-described experience in Latin America and Eastern Europe does not support this potential explanation. Inglehart proposes that economic development results in cultural changes that favor democracy, which would explain why mass democracy emerges relatively recently in world political history and why it is more prevalent in countries that are economically more-developed.¹⁷ According to Inglehart, rapid globalization accelerates economic development which may result in more countries emerging into true mass democracies in a shorter period of time, such as Mexico, where economic development has been correlated with a trend toward multi-party democracy. Unfortunately, this theory remains untested and the general focus of the re-

search thus far has been to collect information on cultural values for later analysis.

Although causation is as yet unclear, interpersonal trust is a specific component on the survival/self expression scale that is essential for building civic institutions upon which democracy is based.¹⁸ As stated above, societies that score strongly on the survival battery of values tend to have low levels of interpersonal trust. According to World Values Survey studies of former communist countries, such as East Germany and Latvia, interpersonal trust ranks very low in such societies. According to Putnam, large, hierarchical, centralized bureaucracies tend to erode interpersonal trust over time.¹⁹ In contrast, locally-controlled organizations tend to be conducive to development of interpersonal trust.²⁰ Interpersonal trust is also required in order for people to freely join together and work cooperatively to promote common societal goals.²¹ The data therefore suggests that low levels of interpersonal trust may persist in nations that were formerly communist, which may frustrate the development of civic institutions necessary for democratic society.

Interpersonal trust probably ranks low in Cuba. A bulwark of societal control in Cuba has been the presence of a Committee for the Defense of the Revolution (CDR) on every block. The CDR assists the government in evaluating the ideological integrity of the citizen through monitoring and informing on activities. The result is that neighbors are often distrustful of each other, as any comment or activity in the presence of a committee member may be reported to the authorities. Lack of interpersonal trust may also contribute to splintering and in-fighting among opposition groups, which may have contributed in part to the eventual collapse of Concilio Cubano, the first opposition umbrella organization in Cuba that

16. Id.

17. Id.

18. Id.

19. Id.

20. Id.

21. Robert A. Dahl, *Polyarchy* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1971).

existed briefly from 1995-1997.²² Such trends may persist in Cuba upon the collapse or removal of the Castro regime from power, and may hinder democratization of society, at least on a short-term basis.

The World Values Survey also indicates that nations with strong self expression values (and correspondingly higher levels of interpersonal trust) tend to have higher levels of democratic functioning, as measured by the Freedom House ratings for civil liberties and political liberties.²³ These democratic nations favor civil and political liberties that are established and protected by law:

- Representative government, starting with one person, one vote;
- Freedom of religion;
- Freedom of speech;
- Freedom of assembly;
- Respect and protection for privacy rights;
- Protection of safety and property;
- Right of association;
- System of justice beginning with due process and presumption of innocence;
- Free press;
- Universal public education;
- Free enterprise; and
- Social security and other public support programs.²⁴

However, it must be emphasized that existence of these laws alone does not suggest that true mass democracy is in place. Rather, the cultural norms of these societies support and complement these laws; the existence of democratic values are not merely espoused in rhetoric but are evident in everyday life, and include:

- a civic space where citizens with similar interests and concerns can find one another and are free to pursue what is in their (and the public's) best interest;
- freedom of speech, including criticism of those in power;
- right of association and exercise of collective action;
- citizen impact on public policies and programs and on public attitudes and behavior; and
- effective and responsive government, including officials who respect and encourage citizen influence and participation.²⁵

The Freedom House rankings measure the presence and actual use of these rights in ranking societies. Cuba has continuously been classified as "Not Free" by the Freedom House rankings since their inception in 1972. Although the Cuban Constitution purportedly provides guarantees for such rights as freedom of speech, assembly, press and assembly, such guarantees are conditioned on adherence to Cuba's Communist tenets and practices. Reports from Amnesty International and Freedom House support the contention that Cuban legislation that guarantees political right and civil liberties is an empty shell, as current Cuban culture, controlled and manipulated by the Castro regime, is apparently bereft of the cultural values that favor democratization. Citizens who seek to create a civic space are persecuted and critics of the government are denied access to mass media and/or denied their freedom. However, the degree to which Cuban culture is inculcated with anti-democratic values has never been objectively measured, as the Castro regime has forbidden ethnographic fieldwork on the island since the 1960s. Other than anecdotal evidence and testimonials of dissidents and members of the opposition, there is no reliable data that objec-

22. Infiltration by government agents/informants, arbitrary detentions, and harassment are seen to be the major factors in the destruction of the coalition.

23. Ronald Inglehart, "Culture and Democracy," Chapter 7, in *Culture Matters: How Values Shape Human Progress* (New York: Basic Books, 2000).

24. Brian O'Connell, *Civil Society: The Underpinnings of American Democracy* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1999).

25. Id.

tively measures the true beliefs of the majority of Cuba's 11.1 million inhabitants.

TOWARD A CUBAN CULTURAL RESEARCH AGENDA

Based on the paucity of reliable data, a great deal of cultural value data must be collected before objective comparisons between Cuba and other Latin American nations and/or former communist countries can be conducted. Inglehart and other researchers have developed a research agenda for use with the World Values system,²⁶ which may be adapted to create a general Cuban cultural research agenda as follows:

- Identify those Cuban attitudes and values that are linked to political behavior;
- Establish which values/attitudes positively and negatively influence the evolution of democratic political institutions, economic development and social justice;
- Explore the relationship between culture and economic development;
- Assess the extent to which policies and institutions (both official and in the opposition) reflect values and attitudes;
- Establish to what extent such policies and institutions can change prevailing values and attitudes;
- Research the role of cultural transmission of values between Cubans who live abroad and those who remain on the island;
- Assess cultural change initiatives already underway, such as independent civic organizations on the island.

Ideally, the agenda would be greatly advanced through the use of World Values Survey questionnaires in Cuba. However, the Cuban government does not participate in the World Values Survey, perhaps because data obtained therein would be critical of the regime and/or damaging to its international image. The World Values Survey questionnaire includes questions that would undoubtedly cause much consternation among governmental authorities: attitudes toward human rights, critiques of the government, and political activism. Essentially, the questions themselves are contrary to the Cuban government's interest in tolerating no dissent. Aguirre identifies several factors that limit the effectiveness of large-scale research in Cuba, such as an inability to conduct independent interviews and guarantee the safety of respondents to surveys, who are subject to vigilance and repression by state security.²⁷ These factors continue to make large scale investigation of Cuban society a daunting task.

However, several alternatives exist in measuring cultural values of Cubans on the island. First, members of the political opposition, with frequent contacts with the outside world, may be a source of information, although the values measured would be those of a small sector of Cuban society that, at least in its actions, constitutes a minority of the Cuban populace. However, beliefs of political activists are important in tracking the key stages of cultural change where support for a form of government is in flux.²⁸ Political activists also tend to have more elaborate systems of political beliefs and values than an apathetic populace, and tend to be guided in their actions by political belief.²⁹ The result is an increased ability to influence political events that may affect the stability or

26. Ronald Inglehart, "Culture and Democracy," Chapter 7 in *Culture Matters: How Values Shape Human Progress* (New York: Basic Books, 2000).

27. Benigno Aguirre, "Culture of Opposition," in *Cuba in Cuba in Transition—Volume 8* (Washington: Association for the Study of Cuban Economy, 1998).

28. Robert A. Dahl, *Polyarchy* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1971).

29. Id.

transformation of regimes.³⁰ Therefore, intensive study of the Cuban political opposition may provide a glimpse of the undercurrents of the evolving Cuban political picture, from political actors who may play a role in its transformation. Early research adopting this strategy is underway, as demonstrated in Prof. Aguirre's research findings, also collected in this volume.³¹

Cultural research based on the Cuban opposition, however, has significant limitations. First, the views collected do not provide a complete picture of general Cuban cultural traits and trends. A great number of Cuban opposition groups are in close contact with outside entities, such as foreign embassy staff, foreign press, and support groups in Miami and elsewhere. Members of such opposition groups may therefore express a greater knowledge of democratic ideals than "typical" Cuban citizens, as these ideals are essentially "imported" into Cuba due to its closed totalitarian government. Therefore, the end result of research on the opposition may yield values and trends that are not commonly held. However, research on opposition groups is valuable in that it can provide an insight into emerging trends and views.

Secondly, use of the World Values Survey results may not be 100% reliable because they may actually measure expressions of goals and ideals, rather than reflect actual practices. Generation of survey results from the Cuban opposition may therefore measure their democratic aspirations and future goals and hopes, rather than provide a true picture of how such organizations function. Therefore, an objective analysis of opposition group function is required as well, and measure such democratic traits as use of voting in decision-making, tolerance of competing viewpoints, and change in leadership. These results may be contrasted with self-reported values by the opposition to measure reliability of reporting.

Another source of respondents for cultural surveys may be recent arrivals from Cuba. Other investigators have relied upon new Cuban immigrants to

measure values and attitudes, especially with the large influx of Cuban migrants during the Mariel boatlift in 1980. Although smaller cohorts of immigrants continue to arrive, their cultural beliefs and attitudes will be useful in compiling an unofficial Value Survey. The degree of "traditional vs. secular" and "survival vs. self expression" values in these groups of recent arrivals will allow more reliable comparisons of Cuba with other societies of the world. Such research should be contacted as soon as possible upon arrival, before the cohorts begin integration into U.S. culture.

Lastly, as with all research, the impact of political or ideological agendas of funding sources should be kept in mind when evaluating findings of Cuban cultural studies. Depending on the political bent of the research sponsor, democratic values may be over- or under-emphasized. Valid cultural research can be conducted by privately or publicly funded scholars, but the inherent biases of research centers may color the results of cultural inquiries, especially when interpreting open-ended questions.

It is possible that a true picture of Cuban cultural beliefs and trends may not emerge until the Castro regime (or any totalitarian successor government) is removed from (or relinquishes) power. When candid expression of belief is supported by Cuban laws and institutions, the complex and oftentimes contradictory nature of Cuban cultural beliefs may be fully identified and explored. Current research efforts, however, will be valuable in providing a basis for comparative analysis of Cuba's emergence into democracy with the experience of other nations. Such analysis may help shape policies in a free Cuba to strengthen inherent cultural values consistent with democracy, while striving to change factors that prevent democratic stability and creation of a civic society.

30. Id.

31. See, Benigno Aguirre, "Culture of Opposition Power Grid," in this volume.