

GERMANY'S UNIFICATION: IMPLICATIONS FOR CUBA

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This intellectual effort adds to the already long list of efforts to draw the lessons of various transitions for Cuba, most of which have been published by the Institute for Cuban and Cuban American Studies (IC-CAS) at the University of Miami and others at previous conferences of the Association for the Study of the Cuban Economy (ASCE). They are:

- “Cuba y Polonia: Semejanzas, Diferencias” by Raúl Fernández García (ASCE 1998).
- “Macroeconomic Policy Implementation in Early Transition: Lessons for Cuba from Poland and Romania” by Jennifer Gauck (ASCE 2003).
- “China’s Lessons for Cuba’s Transition?” by William Ratliff (2004).
- “Nicaragua: Political Processes and Democratic Transition: Lessons for Cuba’s Future” by Alvaro Taboada Terán (2003).
- “The Cuban Transition: Lessons from the Romanian Experience” by Michael Radu (2003).
- “The Czech Republic’s Transition Experiences: Lessons for a Cuba in Transition,” Seminar Summary (2005).
- “The Role of Education in Promoting Cuba’s Integration into International Society: Lessons from the Central and Eastern European States” by Andy S. Gómez (2003).
- “The Spanish Transition and the Case of Cuba” by Carlos Alberto Montaner (2002).

- “What Can Countries Embarking on Post-Socialist Transformations Learn from the Experiences So Far?” by Janos Kornai (2005).

These are excellent efforts to distil the lessons from various experiences; but, as you can see, the lessons from Germany are missing! This is all the more troubling because it is an excellent—I would argue the best—analogy, due to the many parallels between the German and Cuban experiences.

PARALLELS BETWEEN GERMANY AND CUBA

What are the parallels between Germany and Cuba?

1. Both countries were divided between East and West, between communism and democracy: East Germany (the German Democratic Republic, GDR) vs. West Germany and Cuba vs. Cubans in exile (particularly Cuban-Americans).
2. In both countries there was a constant availability of the *exit* option from the communist side to another very near place (from East to West Berlin, from Cuba to Miami), where a measurably easier life, political liberty, and the availability of family exerted a strong “pull.” The result was a massive exodus in both cases.¹
3. As Albert O. Hirschman argued in his *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty* and subsequent writings (1970, 1993), the government was quite conscious of the basic seesaw relationship between

1. The Cuban exodus has not been not only to Miami but is a widespread diaspora to all 50 states of the U.S. and many other countries. The other leading countries in receiving Cubans are Spain, Puerto Rico, Venezuela, Costa Rica, and Canada. However, in this paper I use “Miami” for ease, meaning the exodus of Cubans to any foreign location, where the largest concentration is in Miami (about 62% of Cubans in the United States live in Miami) and where most of the institutional development has taken place.

exit and *voice*. In both cases, the governments chose to consciously manipulate the *exit* option to undermine the *voice* of dissent (see Pedraza 2007).

4. In both countries, civil society was weak. East Germans and Cubans in the island had no strong, autonomous institutions like the Catholic church of Poland to sustain them in a struggle against the all-powerful communist state.
5. Many East Germans, as well as Cubans, initially embraced the ideology of the communist state due to the historical events they had just lived through—the Nazi dominion in Germany, Batista’s dictatorship in Cuba.
6. Both countries assisted the Soviet Union during the years of the Cold War; in both countries there was a presence of Soviet missiles, both countries engaged in exporting communism. In exchange, the Soviet Union subsidized the GDR, as well as Cuba, generously and gave them military support.

DIFFERENCES BETWEEN GERMANY AND CUBA

Nonetheless, there were real differences between Germany and Cuba. What were these?

1. West Germany was an independent nation, which Miami is not (though it often acts like it is!).
2. In the German case, the demographic weight was on the side of democratic Germany: at the end of the 1980s, the West German population was about 63 million; the East German population was about 17 million (about 27% of the West German population). In Cuba, it is the opposite: at present, Cubans in the island are about 11.2 million; Cubans in exile are around 2 to 2.5 million—18% of the island’s population.
3. In Cuba, there was a revolution “from below,” where many people initially believed in the promises of the revolution incarnated in the person of Fidel Castro and followed his lead as he progressively channeled the revolution down a communist path. In East Germany, communism was more imposed “from above,” as a result of the aftermath of World War II. In both cases,

however, many East Germans as well as island Cubans fervently came to believe in communism as a route to a better world.

My own inspiration for this comparison began with my trip to Berlin to attend the European Social Science History Conference in April 2006, at Humboldt University, in the former GDR. Being a faculty member at the University of Michigan, where Eastern European Studies have always been very strong, for many years I have attended all the many excellent lectures that had “transition” in their title. After I saw the recent PBS documentary “After the Wall: A World Reunited” by Eric Stange (2010), I began thinking about going down the path of this adventure. This documentary clearly delivers the message that—contrary to everyone’s expectations—it took less than a year (actually only 11 months), for the German people to reinvent their nation, although it took a great deal of political courage and personal sacrifice.

FALL OF THE BERLIN WALL

The focus of Stange’s documentary was on the fall of the Berlin wall and the rapid reunification of the people in the two Germanys (West and East) that had been separated for 29 years. Through a bureaucratic mistake, on the previous day the wall had been opened, and on November 9, 1989, the wall fell. People from the GDR rushed to West Germany: a stampede of 9 million in the first week, who cried: “Let’s go to West Berlin!” (Kraushaar and Riedel 1989).

Many European leaders at the time—particularly François Mitterand (France) and Margaret Thatcher (England)—were afraid of a reunited Germany (80 million people!), especially given the role Germany had played during World War II, but Mikhail Gorbachev (Soviet Union) stood by in support. Indeed, the European political order was about to change, led by the German people, so there was reason to be afraid (cf. Stange 2010). However, West Germany’s Chancellor, Helmut Kohl, of the Christian Democratic Party had dreamed of reunifying his nation. He became personally identified with unification. One month later, he issued a 10–point program to carry it out. This 10–point program involved: direct

negotiations with the GDR; free and democratic elections in the GDR; a German economic and monetary union; and membership in the European Union and the European Common Market (Kohl 1989). As Kristina Spohr (2000) put it, “The Ten Point Programme gave justification ‘from above’ to the unification process ‘from below.’”

Moreover, Helmut Kohl behaved very generously towards the people of East Germany—e.g., their currency was completely devalued, but they were allowed to exchange it 1 for 1 for West German marks. At the time of *die Wende* (the Spanish translation is better than the English—*la Vuelta*), this was a generous political gesture, the economic implications of which no one new. **Implication for Cuba:** Is there a Helmut Kohl figure in Miami/United States that, despite a conservative ideology, will be able to behave generously towards the people who lived under communism for so long? In the past there was—certainly Jorge Mas-Canosa, who founded the Cuban American National Foundation (CANF), perhaps Tony Varona, of the *Junta Patriótica Cubana*; but both died long ago. At present, the exile community suffers from a vacuum of leadership.

As in all social movements, symbols were very important. People were forbidden to pick the wall, but they did it anyway! The wall became a symbol of the two ways of life, the two worlds that had dominated the globe during the Cold War. Another symbol of the Cold War was “Checkpoint Charlie”—the American checkpoint through which people could pass from East to West Berlin, one of four checkpoints that controlled access to other sectors (others were the English, French, and Russian checkpoints). It is estimated that between 1961 and 1989 around 5,000 people attempted to escape over the wall, with the death toll being between 100 and 200 (“Berlin Wall,” Wikipedia 2011). An immortal novel and film captured these moments: by John Le Carré, which was turned into a film featuring Richard Burton and Claire Bloom. Thus, in the initial moments of the stampede, people tore “Checkpoint Charlie” down. After some years, it was brought back to life as a museum, to teach people about the past. **Implication for Cuba:** Is there a symbol like the Wall that

will be torn down? Like “Checkpoint Charlie” that was torn down? During the revolution, most buildings, schools, hospitals in Cuba were named after the heroes of the War of Independence in the 19th century, so those will stand. Will Cubans rush to tear something down to symbolize the end of the dictatorship? Might something not happen to Ché Guevara’s statue in Santa Clara? To the many billboards scattered all over the Cuban highways, proclaiming the will of the government?

What did the German people actually do when the wall finally fell? People walked throughout the city, exploring the streets they had been forbidden to walk through for so long, for 30 years. East Germans went to West Germany to shop, to bars: looking for goods, candy, porno (Stange 2010). **Implication for Cuba:** One can imagine this same rush of people from Cuba to Miami, from Miami to Cuba—to see the forbidden. Cuban Americans will return to Cuba to search for their past, their childhoods. Island Cuban will go to Miami to shop. But not for porno, as there is much of that in Cuba today!

Clearly in Germany both sides underwent changes, but the biggest changes were in the GDR. Overnight the police state disappeared, where everything was regulated but also where cradle to grave security was guaranteed. Suddenly, former East Germans could lose their jobs, their housing. Old people, in particular, began to feel nostalgia for the security of the past (*Der Spiegel* 1990). **Implication for Cuba:** In this respect, the situation will not be the same, as Cubans have already begun to lose their jobs, their food, their medicine. Thus, one can expect little nostalgia for the past.

ROLE OF THE UNITED STATES

While Chancellor Helmut Kohl expected reunification to take 8 to 10 years, in fact it took 11 months! Nonetheless, the litigation over property took many more years. While Kohl acted independently, he had the support (total, although low key) of the United States. As one can see in the documentary “After the Wall,” George H. W. Bush insisted that it be “a German moment” (In Stange 2010). **Implication for Cuba:** It seems important to me that it should also be “a Cuban moment,” though with U.S. support.

THE ROUNDTABLE AND ELECTIONS

An alliance of East German dissidents and West German activists developed, along with German leaders of both sides, to share power in a “Roundtable” to achieve the task of ushering in free elections, which took place four months later. Some East German dissidents wanted a new Germany—a “Third Way,” a more human socialism. However, their expectations were crushed by the overwhelming desire of the East Germans for the way of life available in the West; and by their desire for the stability that the Christian Democratic Party and Helmut Kohl’s leadership could provide (Stange 2010). **Implication for Cuba:** I predict that a similar alliance will develop in Cuba, to usher in free elections. Interestingly, when the dissident movement in Cuba first began to develop in the late 1980s, a similar thrust developed, as evident in the group called “*La Tercera Opción*”—the third option—that meant not communism and not capitalism but something different, more humane; and not just the leadership in Havana and Miami but also the dissidents in Cuba.

In East Germany, the grip of the *Stasi* (the secret police) came to an end in 1990 when an angry mob protested against its headquarters. As a result, all their files of detailed records collected by 90,000 agents and hundreds of thousands of informers—came to the light. Painful revelations ensued, when people found out that those they were close friends with, even married to, had informed on them. The question became: to remember or to forget? To open the files up and remember, or to close them, realizing that was a characteristic of the society where they had lived, as Vaclav Havel argued. In Germany, people chose not to forget. **Implication for Cuba:** In the future, Cubans will face the same choice: to remember or to forget those who betrayed them. Being human, they will most likely choose to know.

UNIFICATION ACHIEVED

The election results surprised many. After more than 40 years under a socialist system, West Germans expected the socialists or at least the social democrats to

be elected; they also expected the dissidents to do well, since they had sparked the revolution. However, the results ushered in the Christian Democrats. They stood for food, for jobs, for stability, for dependable leadership.

The unification of East and West Germany was not a marriage of equals. East Germany was broken down, dirty, polluted, poor, the infrastructure was run down, the industry was obsolete, people took early retirements. Those who saw it for the first time found it shocking. It was clear that turning it around would be difficult and expensive. **Implication for Cuba:** The social conditions in the island are the same: poverty is the order of the day for all Cubans, industry is obsolete and rundown, housing is unavailable and in dire condition. However, in my view the resources of many Cuban Americans (capital, talent, and know how) can be brought to bear, as well as the economic assistance of the U.S.

In October 1990, 11 months after the Wall fell, the four victorious powers of World War II formally gave up their rights to Germany and the two Germanys became one—faster than anyone had expected. Unification began as part of the Eastern European transformation process, but it became an independent process which, in turn, accelerated European integration; it also became a key factor in ending the Cold War (Spohr 2000).

Both sets of people had to change, but especially those from East Germany. Now people realize that their different experiences have left the two peoples with different habits, different attitudes; it will take one or two more generations before they really are one people. **Implication for Cuba:** The same. We have become two different peoples given the disparate experiences we have lived; the very different cultural contexts in which we have developed; the different attitudes that have resulted. It will also take time before distrust among different political generations can be overcome (cf. Pedraza 2007). But overall, German unification was a huge success. **Implication for Cuba:** We hope for the same.

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