

## SOCIAL MEDIA IN CONTEMPORARY CUBA

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I have been invited by the organizers of the 2012 Annual Meeting of the Association for the Study of the Cuban Economy to participate in a roundtable to discuss the impact of social media in contemporary Cuba. In particular, I was asked to comment on two specific issues: (1) whether the explosion of social media may lead to a situation comparable to the “Arab Spring” in the near future; and (2) to assess the Cuban government’s control over the usage of social media platforms.

Before I comment on these two very timely issues, I would like to offer a brief caveat that I hope would contextualize my comments later. From a sociological point of view, it is fair to conclude that the character and content of any Internet outlet or communication threat is simply a product of an individual’s intentions. In other words, the Internet by itself is simply a technological facilitator and never the cause of any major historical event; hence the phrases “Internet revolutions” or “social media revolutions” are misnomers or just rhetorical headlines for popular consumption. “Moments of madness,” as a former professor described popular agitations and revolutionary upheavals, are the outcomes of native and long-standing unresolved grievances that may or may not lead to popular collective unrest. In short, the sources of social change are rooted in structural inequities, not the availability of technology.

Having addressed this rather obvious point outright, it is easy to see why I am very skeptical about the possibilities of an Arab Spring-like commotion in Cuba today, even if access to social media were easily accessible. My skepticism derives from my conviction that popular uprisings rarely take place in fragmented so-

cieties, where the opposition is for all intent and purposes leaderless, as Cuba is after the tragic events of last July 22, and where the state finds clever ways to control its people.

Paradoxically, in conditions of general despair, as many Cubans find themselves today, the only fight worth fighting for is to advance one’s own quality of life, or as is so artistically referred to in the island “resolver.” In one of the surveys conducted recently in the island, the overwhelming majority identified the high cost of living and depressed salaries, the dual currencies, and poor nutrition as the top three major social problems people face in the island, and only 1% blamed lack of liberties or the Communist government brand (IRI, 2012). Time and time again, social scientists have demonstrated that popular uprisings are the outcome, among other things, of either rapid declines in status as is the case with the anti-systemic movements through Europe and Spain today or distorted economic upswings, although one has to be careful not to over-generalize from the latter.

The Arab Spring was the outcome of deep-rooted social distortions, outright official myopia, and unfulfilled expectations. Social media only channels those frustrations into the collective consciousness, and this fear seems to be enough for Cuban officials to insist in controlling Internet access. The same survey cited above shows that only around 4% of Cubans have access to email and the Internet. In Cuba, however, “cuentapropismo” and “resolver” have similar symbolic messages, reinforcing the virtues of individualism and materialism as vehicles to attain relative prosperity. The current situation erodes even more

the necessary social trust and solidarity so crucial to sustain a viable opposition.

The end result then is that Cubans today tend to have a very skeptical and pessimistic view of the current reality and the future, hardly a condition that may foster any desire for change. Rather than suffering from shortsightedness—as other North African regimes—the Cuban state has invented new and sophisticated mechanisms of exclusion and control. Any anxiety the Cuban youth may suffer is more related to satisfying their desire for consumerism than political. In short, Cuban students will do well to remember Francis Fukuyama's (2003) skepticism about the potential of rational optimization to promote change in Cuba; it is more likely that any political transformation in the island would come from unresolved elite squabbles than from a possible virtual mobilization from below.

This brings me to my second point: the absurd addiction of the government for control, and its strategy to manipulate access to social media in Cuba. Here, officials seem to be committed to obstructing the normal course of communication technologies. I

often pause to wonder if it is worth assuming the cost such aberration entails in terms of widespread criticism for something that is organically inevitable. In all likelihood, if the Cuban government eases its grip on social media, the most likely scenario given the social conditions I briefly alluded above would be that social portals might be used to “resolver,” not to agitate. Even in the few instances where voices of dissent would circulate, these may not be sufficient to inspire the disenfranchised youth to get engaged. And as to the foreseeable wave of complaints of government excesses that are likely to circulate, those would be known with or without the Internet anyway; some are even well documented already. One could even argue that those legitimate demands would entice officials to serve the public better, ironically playing into something the government has tried to accomplish without much success for some time.

In short, as with most policy adjustments we witness in Cuba, the democratization of the Internet will come in a few years and when it arrives, everyone will realize this new policy was long overdue.

## WORKS CITED

Fukuyama, Francis. 2003. “Still Disenchanted? The Modernity of Postindustrial Capitalism.” Center for the Study of Economy and Society Paper # 3. Department of Sociology. Cornell University.

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