

POVERTY AND THE EFFECTS ON AVERSIVE SOCIAL CONTROL

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In his classic study *Development as Freedom*, Amartya Sen (1999) argues that political liberties, such as the capacity to organize, advocate, and mobilize in the public sphere, are conjoined to the expansion of markets resulting from successful development policies. Once some of these essential rights are attained, Sen argues, they become part of our socio-political DNA and cannot be revoked without a major overhaul or changes in the national political scene. For this reason alone, the promotion of national development becomes worthwhile for democracy since it also promotes freedom. As is routinely the case with other essays authored by Sen, this book presents a provocative argument that challenges, or perhaps refutes altogether, many conventional theories drawn from with the literature the social sciences once coined as pre-requisites for democracy.

In this paper, I shall explore the social and political effects of poverty; particularly, how conditions of personal deprivation, resulting from failures of development policies, render informal social control mechanisms effective. When individuals perceive themselves deprived, tentative economic reforms tend to divert attention from articulating collective political claims, as individuals try to capitalize on new opportunities rather than assessing the extent of reforms for what they really are. Paradoxically, under conditions of perceived deprivation, reforms promote conformism and complacency rather than change. In particular, this position contradicts the arguments from some pundits and policy-makers (Pepinsky 2009) who argue that economic crises often lead to political mobilization and an eventual regime change.

To be sure, all governments practice some forms of control tactics. In democracies, for instance, as we have witnessed in the United States, recurrent performances of patriotic rituals in public gatherings could be interpreted as sophisticated symbolic attempts to appease and delegitimize dissent by inciting patriotism. In contrast, among non-democratic regimes like Cuba, social controls and outright repression are perceived to be indispensable to sustain political order. In the 1960s, during the decade of revolutionary consolidation, Cuban leaders did not hesitate to crush any public opposition, regardless of whether it was peaceful or not, with atrocious repressive techniques and manipulations. Later, in the 1970s, the regime codified its appetite for control as part of its effort to institutionalize Cuba's brand of socialism. The ratified 1976 Constitution, specifically Article 7, unequivocally affirms the state recognition and promotion of mass organizations "incorporating them into the task of construction, consolidation, and defense of the socialist society," clearly dissuading groups with other political persuasions from organizing. More recently, as many of the old repressive tactics have been relaxed or modified, what I would call aversive controls have gained prominence as the preferred strategy for maintaining social order and curbing dissent.

In transitional economies aversive controls are nifty policy devices. One obvious reason is that when these countries embark on the tenuous path of reform, leaders attempt to manage the pace of liberalization to avoid undermining their own authority or antagonizing public opinion at home and abroad. Along with new economic initiatives, these countries also

desire to frame a new identity as reformers since enough lingering evidence of persistent traditional outright repression could hamper support for policy innovations and compromise international cooperation for development projects, eventually becoming a pricey liability for the regime. In addition to economics, there is the question of political cost that Robert Dahl (1972) first examined some time ago. According to Dahl, the cost of outright repression tends to rise disproportionately over time, undermining the political capital of authoritarian governments. Frequent quarrels over when, how, and who to censure, might also engender cleavages within ruling coalitions, causing irresolvable tensions.

My argument from here forward can be summarized as follows. Social conditions associated with poverty and deprivations often sustain political order despite what proponents of relative deprivation have argued (see Gurr 1970, among others). As the Cuban case amply demonstrates, in developing societies that are plagued by distortions, reproduced by transnationalism, domestic bottlenecks, and outright political economy inefficiencies, deprivation might lead to frustrations and popular discontent but not to concerted public demands for social change. In theory, the failure of socialist rhetoric to explain why rising expectations are often unfulfilled should also lead to a legitimacy crisis and eventual transformations, but this predicament rarely materializes in practice. In Cuba, as in other former Socialist countries, the opposite tendency seems to have unfolded. Rather than concerted demands for change, we witness increase political apathy across many social sectors adding to the unexpected longevity of the regime.

POVERTY AND AVERSIVE CONTROL

I conceive poverty as a condition of perceived material deprivation that undermines innovative entrepreneurial efforts in fulfillment of human desires for a better quality of life. Aversive controls are arrangements, often informal, that although might not have been formulated with the intention to foster political

apathy, end up deterring manifest political voices while promoting latent discourse. This is not to say that all actors, whether individuals or collectives, always retain some degree of political agency.¹ The notion of aversive controls explains why individuals often lean to accept adverse conditions against their own interests. Social psychologists, for instance, often employ aversive conditioning therapies to help clients avoid undesirable behaviors. This practice was developed as a substitute for more violent treatments such as shock therapy and the like. Sociologists Pearson, Dovidio, and Gaertner (2009) use the term aversive racism to describe attitudes, even among proponents of social justice, of subtle and indirect prejudice in the United States during post-civil rights decades when outright discrimination was legally outlawed.

According to the new institutionalism in sociology, particularly the work of W. Richard Scott (2008), all structural arrangements including poverty have three dimensions, the regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive, and each dimension has its own distinct “carriers” which range from objective laws and rules to the more subjective routines and artifacts (Scott 2008:79). The normative and cultural-cognitive dimensions of policies are usually the most unconscious and subtle manifestations of aversive control. When these mechanisms work well, they can be as effective as any punitive rules.

Moreover, normative and cultural dimensions of aversive controls are often framed as opportunities. This is particularly the case with contested reforms and policy innovations. When economic policies change, the new policies are interpreted by different constituencies and often promoted by the regime, as reforms despite the fact that these arrangements might consists of a strategy to support social order. There are many every day illustrations of this phenomenon. In American cities where speed cameras are in place, for example, local governments might argue that the cameras are installed to save lives, when in fact the motivation might be to create a new

1. Agency, according to Emirbayel and Mische (1998), “resides in the interpretative processes whereby choices are imagined, evaluated, and contingently reconstructed by actors in ongoing dialogue with unfolding situations.”

revenue stream. Recent immigration policies enacted in Cuba have been deemed as one of the demonstrable changes undertaken by the regime. Yet, immigration can also function to export dissent, curb underemployment and entitlement budgets, and generate revenues through remittances.

In a recent article published in *El País*, Rafael Rojas (2012) skillfully called attention to how the Cuban regime attempts to frame aversive controls as opportunities by officially blessing the apparent recent canonization of the once-disgraced writer Virgilio Piñera:

El caso de la apropiación de Virgilio Piñera por el Estado cubano debiera replantear el rol de los gobiernos en la administración de las literaturas nacionales. Es bueno que, en una época de tantos abusos culturales del mercado, los Estados se ocupen de la literatura y publiquen y honren la obra de los grandes escritores de un país. Pero cuando los poetas y novelistas del pasado son convertidos en emblemas de la legitimación de un partido o un gobierno, que penaliza el ejercicio de cualquier oposición, la literatura pierde y el despotismo gana.

Now that the government has appropriate Piñera's image, the symbolism of an apparent new break with the past could not be more striking. And yet, as Rojas contends, the new cultural posture of the regimes simply attempts to legitimize a policy of inclusion on its own terms, adding to its political capital while fostering a benevolent image. The case illustrates how a new official cultural policy was devised as more open, accessible, and tolerant when it really serves to legitimize an image of a new more benign and accepting revolutionary state organism. For many others Cubans, Piñera still personifies a cultural icon that dared to dissent publically and paid a heavy toll for his posture. The logic behind this episode should provide some valuable lessons about the new political practices to critics of the regime today. It is paradoxical that the more state policies promote reforms, the more dissidents struggle to get their views across.

POVERTY, RELATIVE DEPRIVATION AND CONTROLS

By examining development indicators and comparing Cuba's performance with some of its neighbors alone the full meaning of poverty in the island cannot be appreciated. According to the 2012 Human Development Index, perhaps one of the most respected quantitative measures of quality of life indicators, the island ranks fifty-ninth, at par with Panama, among countries in the world. This ranking puts Cuba ahead of such Latin American neighbors as Mexico, Costa Rica, Venezuela, and Peru, not to mention most of the Caribbean island nations (HDR 2013). With regard to freedoms, the island does not fare well, however. The 2013 Freedom in the World Index compiled by Freedom House (2013) categorizes Cuba as not free, with a composite index of 6.5, while its neighbors are categorized as either free or partly free.²

At first glance, this data may appear to contradict conventional development thinking since Cuba is less free than many of its neighbors that show poorer quality of life. While these statistics speak volumes to the empirical social conditions among Latin American nations, it says little about the normative and cultural-cognitive effects of poverty. The subjective dimensions of poverty are not easily captured in demographic and economic statistics alone. Poverty is often a human condition, a state of mind. Therefore, Cubans may not be among the poorest in the Western Hemisphere but they often perceive themselves to be the most deprived. This condition can easily be explained by status inconsistent theories that make clear how humans usually assess their wellbeing by comparing themselves with others and in the process usually mistakenly calculate the compatibility and the accuracy of their own subjective references. In addition, perceptions of poverty conditions are sometime also fueled by the rising popular expectations generated from grandiose pronouncements made by charismatic officials. This was the case with the rosy futures often painted by government officials in Cuba in the past decades. Transnational processes such as remittances, family visits, and tourism refurbish the sense of relative deprivation among ordinary

2. According to the Freedom Index scale, 1 represents the highest degree of freedom and 7 the lowest level of freedom.

Cubans in the island and undermine official projections of unrealistic expectations.

The end result is that researchers, observers, and visitors alike often describe a portrait of *desesperación* and desire for *resolver* among Cubans not uncommon in other societies. Depressed wages and tight labor markets have caused many professionals to abandon their trade to join the ranks of those in tourism-related service industries in search for more money and the prospect for a better life. The phenomenon of *jineteo* has bloomed for similar reasons. Marte Halsor (2012), a graduate student from Norway who recently conducted fieldwork in Cuba for her Master's Thesis, reports a conversation with a taxi driver on her way from the airport to her destination in La Habana. Jorge, an engineering school graduate turned taxi driver, illustrates the effects of aversive controls when he states:

A lot has happened since Che announced his ideas, and Cuba has undergone many changes in the last fifty years. Our country has now entered a new era, and our situation today is no longer compatible with the ideas from the past. I believe there is a need for new heroes. What we need is someone who can sort out the economic situation here. You know, in the end it all comes down to money.

In many respects, this passage is typical of other daily encounters observers report when they visit the island today. In this particular case, the driver instead of organizing with others to change economic conditions, voluntarily switched employment to a more profitable profession, complacently accepting his newly-achieved lower professional status. All the efforts invested to attain his engineering degree were put aside because as he eloquently says "it all comes down to money." Moreover, he calls for new leaders without forcefully demanding change. Jorge recognizes that Cuba needs new economic policies without questioning the extent to which the political impasse might be obstructing his own prosperity.

Another lesson one can draw from this passage relates to the question of discourse boundaries. Many Cubans today have learned to navigate the limits of accessible toleration that come along with the recent political openings. Notice that Jorge still discusses the current Cuban troubles in the abstract and without blaming any particular culprits. In this respect, Jorge typifies other fellow compatriots who speak in such value neutral terms as "resolver," "no es fácil,"

or "la cosa está dura" to protest current economic and social hardships.

This situation of ambivalence gives the appearance of freedom of speech, distracting observers from the tacit limitations and constraints that still exist with regards to the ability to speak freely in public and to organize for change. An implicit value in Jorge's remarks is how he delegates to political leaders the task to fix the despairs he and many others confront. This last point shows perhaps one of the lingering effects of state controls in Cuba. Like Jorge, most disenfranchised citizens today are willing to work hard to provide for themselves and their families, but when it comes to finding solutions to national problems, they still obediently follow the pace dictated by the state or simply free-ride. It should not be surprising that under these conditions, many Cubans still attempt to vote with their feet when the opportunity becomes available.

As in any other society, the need to satisfy basic needs also foments elusive relations of solidarity and trust among individuals. In an insightful study about solidarity during the Soviet transition, Burawoy and Krotov (1992) argue that as the Soviet economy began to succumb to stagnation, workers became more alienated as social camaraderie eroded.

How informal markets function and the types of reciprocity sustained by these relations is the topic of many current ethnographic studies in Cuban and other socialist nations. My point here is not to review this literature. Rather to simply point how these transactions in themselves become aversive control mechanisms that criminalize activities and types of market exchanges regarded as legal in most other economies. A typical case in point is the recent real estate legislation that allows for the sale of property while imposing limitations on the number of residential homes that can be legally owned.

CONCLUSION

In this paper I have attempted to construct a conceptual framework to understand how social order is sustained through the manipulation of aversive control mechanisms. The uses of aversive controls provide many advantages to all types of governments, particular authoritarian regimes undergoing economic liberalization. Since these elusive controls are less invasive, and often are perceived as voluntary, they elicit less internal opposition and condemnation abroad.

The effectiveness of these controls rests precisely in the use of positive sanctions and the appearance of reformism. As David Baldwin (1971) has argued per-

suasively, positive sanctions are an underrated dimension of power that often leads to conformity.

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