Cuban Civil Society

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A civil society emerges, mainly, due to citizens' need to actively involve themselves in the public sphere in order to address processes that impact their daily lives and affect their interests. At the heart of civil society, various social actors, with sometimes remarkable differences, group themselves around common issues that affect or interest all of them. Therefore, civil society is plural, characterized by the spontaneous organization of citizens and based on logics of autonomy, solidarity, and representation of specific identities; it is aimed at addressing collective demands, exploring solutions to issues that affect a given community, and having an impact in the public sphere.

A strong civil society is representative of a healthy and solid democracy since it propitiates participatory processes and dynamics of exchange and feedback between the people and the government. In a speech in 2012, Min Ko Naing, an activist for democracy in still-authoritarian Burma, said, "Without the cooperation of the people, the government cannot build a democratic society. The government did not introduce reforms out of concern for the well-being of the people. They changed because the people demanded it." (Naing, 2012)

From this perspective, a civil society is an element of the correlation between the government, which manages state institutions, and that civil society, which scrutinizes a particular administration. However, we do not want to establish a reductionist and binary vision that would describe two struggling parties, the government and civil society. We rather understand this correlation as a diffuse and diverse scenario. The functioning of the government within the state, no matter how centralized or vertical it might be, will never be monolithic and homogenous, and its relationship with different groups from the civil society will also vary; these relationships might be in some cases closer and more cooperative and in other cases more hostile and confrontational.

The works of Marie Laure Geoffrey (2012), Marlene Azor (2016), and Velia Cecilia Bobes (2007; 2015) are among the most recent and complete analyses regarding Cuban civil society. The first two authors have developed rigorous studies—with empirical bases, grounded in fieldwork—of emerging social actors that oppose the government, remarking their resistance to the government's attempts to control and coopt them. At the same time, Geoffrey and Azor recognize the difficulty that these social actors find in expanding and connecting their agendas with the expectations of a population that sometimes seems tired, demobilized, and more focused on daily survival. Bobes, on the other hand, has done an exhaustive evaluation of Cuban civil society, linking it to the characteristics of the current participatory model, which we think is important to review here.

Bobes identifies a permanent model of militant citizenship in Cuba—loyal to the official project and dependent on the state—which is articulated around social rights and which subordinates and links civil and political rights to the construction of a socialist society. This model of citizenship relies on a homogenous and equalitarian society that is changing today due to an increase of economic inequality, poverty, territorial differentiation, identity diversification, and different ways of living. Moreover, both massive corruption at all levels and migration have altered over time the type of

society on which this citizenship model is based. While this model remains hegemonic in Cuba, during the last 50 years there has also been a process of discursive assimilation by the official sector (which has implied that the traditional mass organizations and some nongovernmental organizations are recognized as part of the civil society) and an emergence of social actors that openly present themselves as opponents of the government or alternatives to both the officialdom and the traditional dissidents.

The development and growth of Cuban civil society remains obstructed by existing law. Since 1997 the Ministry of Justice has blocked the establishment of new civil organizations with very few exceptions and regulates some already existing ones. Moreover, for each already existing organization, the government establishes a "linking organism," a state entity that monitors its operations to protect "state interests." At the same time, the traditional mass organizations, which are the basis of Leninist civil society, monopolize the way entire societal segments are represented. This pattern makes it difficult for new organizations to emerge that could represent social groups such as women, lawyers, peasants, or others in a different way. In topics such as human rights and government accountability, the activity of officially recognized civil society is poor, mainly reduced to local experiences, and closely supervised by the state.

The Official Civil Society

The official discourse in Cuba has presented, since the 1990s, a socialist civil society[1] composed of mass organizations such as the Cuban Women Federation (FMC)[2], the Center of the Cuban Workers (CTC), and the Committees for the Defense of the Revolution (CDR). In all cases, these organizations represent the Leninist model of participation, which is vertical and limits tremendously these groups' autonomy. This model frames and labels entire segments of the population and promotes both morally questionable political agendas—mobilization and control of citizens—and positive communitarian activities such as blood donations, collection of materials for recycling, the cleaning of common areas in neighborhoods, and so on. However, participation in these organizations has decreased. Attendance at activities managed by these organizations has become routinized, and thus people's motivation has diminished. Nevertheless, this has not inspired action for change due to the lack of a legal frame (to allow alternative groups to work without fear of persecution), very effective mechanisms of control, and a well-established "survival mindset" within Cuban society today.

In the CDRs, the broadest mass organization, the leaders, for example, have held their posts for 10 to 20 years; young people do not accept responsibilities. This weakens the ability of the CDRs to exercise the kind of social control that previously allowed authorities to prevent or solve common crimes and to reduce political criticism in public spaces (Salas, 1979). CDRs rarely meet these days. The main function of the CDRs was to schedule and execute rounds of night vigilance to defend the "revolutionary process"; thus, these night-watches are not implemented as they were in previous decades (Salas, 1979). Even the anniversary of the organization, on September 28, is not celebrated in many neighborhoods today.

The government uses the CTC as a channel to transmit the official line of action and as an instrument of control in order to keep workers politically neutralized. However, the function of the CTC as a socializer of revolutionary values (Rosendahl, 1997) no longer exists. From the CTC Twentieth Congress'[3] documents, the emphasis on efficiency and productivity, the distribution of workers' participation into local assemblies (fragmenting what should be a national movement), and the manipulation of the organization's own history are points worth mentioning. There is no autonomous labor movement in Cuba, and thus there is no organization that genuinely represents the interests of the Cuban working class. The inscription, however, to the CTC is almost obligatory at each state-ruled enterprise and institution; employees are forced to affiliate with the mass organization, which is supposed to represent them at large as a homogenous group with shared

interests and problems. Very low wages have come to diminish members' interest in the functioning of the CTC, and this was reflected in the changes regarding the date of the Twentieth Congress and the directors of the event.

<h2 style="text-align:center">More Diverse and Autonomous
Spaces of Cuban Civil Society</h2>

Since the late 1980s, some organizations opposed to the government have emerged. Some of them are associations to defend human rights (the Cuban Committee for Human Rights is an example), others arise from "proto-political parties" with different political orientations (from conservative to left-wing), and finally, another segment of these organizations focuses on generating alternative channels of information that critique the Cuban reality (Dilia, 2014).

The opposition remained small and socially marginalized for a long period, in part due to government repression and fragmentation among the groups that composed it. After 2001, the Varela Project (an initiative for a referendum to rewrite the Constitution), led by Oswaldo Paya from the Liberal-Christian Movement, made the opposition movements more visible, inside and outside the island. The initiative was strongly repressed and criminalized, and as a result 75 dissidents were incarcerated in 2003. This, first, informed many inside Cuba about the movement since official television had no other choice but to cover the events, albeit with its own version of the story. Second, it triggered a negative reaction in Western foreign diplomatic bodies, and third, led the mothers and wives of the imprisoned—"Ladies in White"—to mobilize and organize themselves to ask for the liberation of their relatives. The courage of these women, who resisted physical and verbal aggression in the streets and on national television, gained them the support of international organizations including the Catholic Church, many NGOs, and militant groups from Europe, the United States, and Latin America. Even in Cuba, despite the aggressive official propaganda, they gained some respect and were supported by emerging bloggers, artists, and intellectuals.

In 2010 and 2011 the political prisoners were liberated thanks to the lobby of the Catholic Church in Cuba. This seemed to mark a new political era of openness and tolerance, but the repression just changed its form. Since prosecuting political activists is costly for the Cuban government (it generates international reaction), they prefer instead to threaten, in different ways, those who attempt to exercise any sort of activism to transform their realities. In 2013, while dissident activism increased—with communication campaigns, public demonstrations, meetings in private homes—the repression also rocketed: concentrated efforts to repudiate the political opposition, arbitrary detentions, house searches, and forced evictions carried out by public authorities in the case of eastern Cuba. The Ladies in White and the members of the Patriotic Union of Cuba (UNPACU) were victims of these actions and thus gained a protagonist role in the international media. Amnesty International, referencing data from the Cuban Commission for Human Rights and National Reconciliation (CCDHRN), documented an average of 862 arbitrary detentions each month[4] between January and November of 2016. On the other hand, the Cuban Observatory of Human Rights identified, during the first half of 2017, 2,539 arbitrary detentions; to this we may add dozens of activists who have been targeted, persecuted, incarcerated, or temporarily banned from traveling[5] to prevent, in most cases, their attendance at international events where they could export an alternative and well-structured picture of the Cuban reality.

New social actors, alternative to the establishment, emerged in the 1990s and initially did not have to deal with state control. This may suggest the appearance of an alternative civil society. New NGOs and communitarian movements, religious associations (Catholic, Protestant, Hebrew, Orthodox, and Afro-Cuban currents), and independent cultural projects—all these expressed a major diversification (new actors and agendas) of Cuban civil society even though this does not always translate into more popular empowerment. This is true because the development of these new social

actors is shaped by their relationships (negotiated autonomy) with the state.

In this segment of civil society there are groups that continue supporting a socialist model and propose significant, and many times also deep, reforms to the current structure. Hence, they try to work *within* the present social frame[6] but aim to restructure it. The groups (ecology projects, LGBT groups, and others) integrated in *Cuba Posible* (Possible Cuba) or *Red Observatorio Crittico* (Critical Observatory Network) are part of this sector, which is critical of the current order of things but which does not necessarily break up with it. Within this same spectrum we may also find open spaces in the Catholic Church in the form of centers for secular groups and the population in general, as well as websites, digital bulletins, and magazines that embrace diverse ideas and debates—commonly held among socialist intellectuals, Catholics, and social activists—regarding the future of the country. According to Farber (2012), this relative freedom of the Catholic Church is connected to its determination to place itself between the government and the dissidents, without wanting to decisively move toward one of the edges of the Cuban political scenario. This allows the Catholic Church, even though it does not have strong popular support (contrary to what happened in communist Poland, for example), to gain legitimacy and achieve public relevance in today's and, most likely, future Cuba.

Final Reflections

Although increasing diversity is present in Cuban civil society, domestic politics continue to be overwhelmingly dominated by the party/state elite that rules the country. Hence, the political participation propitiated by new spaces within civil society remains strongly shaped by the official framework.

In Cuba, as it has been pointed out by Bobes (2016), there is deep social erosion, in terms of citizenship, due to many factors: the obstruction of collective action, lack of interest in politics, corrosion of public policies and social rights, and the inexistence of any substantial progress in political rights. Moreover, without autonomous spaces that may articulate challenges to the state, the population is increasingly vulnerable at both the individual and social levels. Within this frame, as long as the relationship between the government and the governed remains unstable and unsecure, the opportunities for people to join public demands tend to be infrequent or nonexistent (Tilly and Wood, 2010: 267). Elucidating the Cuban case particularly, Tilly and Wood admit that in one-party regimes the tendency to restrict civil society—NGOs and social movements—is stronger than in other forms of authoritarianism.

Today, there is not yet a political atmosphere in which the state and civil society create multidirectional flows of ideas and fertile spaces for dialog. It actually seems that the government of the Cuban Communist Party is intensifying, as it has done before, the "ideological battle" and the control of all public spaces—including cyberspace—in order to hegemonize its discourse and dispute any narrative that may contradict the official project of the country's future. We will see whether the still weak capacity of organization and mobilization of the emerging actors of civil society make it possible, in the short run, to unlock and transform the current political scenario and its impacts on the daily lives of Cubans.

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Footnotes

1. This position became stronger as a response to the Helms-Burton law, which tried to strengthen non-governmental organizations in order to widen the public sphere that was not subordinated to the state.
2. All abbreviations stand for the original names in Spanish.
3. During the Twentieth Congress, on February 22, Raul Castro stated, "The CTC and its labor unions shall focus on what is important, which is to execute its activity to successfully implement the party political and economic program ["lineamientos"] and to develop a diverse and broad political and ideological work for the defense of the union of Cubans."
4. See here.
5. See here.
6. To see a profound analysis of the groups that oppose the government, see Geoffray (2012).