The Future of Cuba—Part Two

written by Samuel Farber | February 15, 2023

Cuba is experiencing a crisis that is approaching that of the *Special Period* of the nineties. We don't know when and how it will end. It is conceivable—although it appears to have a small likelihood of occurring given the situation at the beginning of 2023—that the economy will exit the crisis. What might such an exit mean?

Perhaps Cuba can get through the crisis with the help of a successful tourist industry (assuming a notable decline of the Covid world rate of infection), possibly supplemented with the income produced by a rise in the international price of nickel, a notable increase of the medical services provided to various countries, and the increasing commercialization of biotechnology and of new pharmaceutical outputs produced in the country.

This would probably favor those in small and middle-sized private industry (PYMES) and self-employed people concentrated in the manufacturing and trading of goods and services destined for domestic consumption. The Cuban people would end up witnessing the creation of a new bourgeoisie composed in part by the uniformed military through its armed forces-controlled business enterprises (GAESA), primarily concentrated in international tourism, by the private proprietors of the PYMES mid-size industry, and successful self-employed people, like for example the proprietors of houses and apartments rented to tourists at lucrative rates. Obviously, any normalization of economic relations with the United States would significantly improve these prospects, given the importance that U.S. investments would have, especially Cuban-American capital willing to invest in Cuba.

In light of what happened in many formerly "socialist" countries, as well as in other lands, we can assume that such changes would very possibly increase the inequality between "winners" and "losers," and in the absence of independent social movements that could defend the interests of the "losers," state policies would support the "winners": tourism and the industries that supply hotels and restaurants serving tourists as well as nickel and other extractive industries, biotechnology, and tobacco. The "losers" would be neglected and ignored: the numerous manufacturing enterprises that are not "competitive," what is left of the sugar industry, and agriculture in general. In the absence of independent movements that could defend popular interests, the state of public investment and social security, already very deteriorated and with reduced budgets, would suffer even more.

These developments would mobilize the new social classes, like the bourgeoisie and the middle class, who, unhappy with the progressive deterioration of the medical and educational state services, would exert pressure for their privatization. This would bring about, in the case of medicine, the creation of a system like Medicaid in the United States—an under-supported public service for the needy—to attend most poor Cubans. As happened in the United States, this division of medical services between the poor and the middle and upper classes would considerably weaken any

political support to improve the medical service to the poor, let alone build and maintain a public medical service that attends, competently and with dignity, not only the rich and the middle class, but all Cubans in the island. Similarly, there will be a great deal of pressure to allow private education at all levels. The Catholic religious orders, and perhaps to a lesser degree the conventional Protestants and the evangelical churches, will recruit the best teachers and buildings to educate the sons and daughters of the successful proprietors, administrators, and technicians of the "winning" sectors of the economy. These possible changes would have the most negative effect on Black Cubans, who have lacked until now a vigorous program of "affirmative action" to incorporate them into all important levels of the social, economic, and political life of the country.

In the absence of a fully democratic system of national economic planning, regions of the country with an economy of "losers," like Oriente, the easternmost region of the country, will continue to suffer disproportionally, except for those relatively small zones where the nickel industry and some places of tourist interest are located. Regional inequality will increase even within the Havana metropolitan area because the tourist and real estate investment will continue to concentrate in the relatively more prosperous neighborhoods near the Gulf of Mexico shore while the "interior Havana" farther from the sea and much poorer, will continue to deteriorate.

The Role of the United States

Without a doubt, the principal obstacle to the normalization of relations between the United States and Cuba is the economic blockade that the U.S. empire has imposed on Cuba for more than sixty years. Despite the arguments put forward by the Cuban government, the blockade is not the principal cause of the economic problems that affect the island. That place is occupied by Cuba's economic system, which is most responsible for the economic inefficiency, workers' apathy, and the lack of responsibility of political bosses and economic administrators. There is no doubt that the criminal blockade has caused great damage to the Cuban economy, especially during the initial years of the revolution, when machinery and equipment of every type had to be imported from the Soviet bloc to replace those manufactured in the United States. And it continues to inflict damage through the sanctions against international banks that carry out transactions with Cuba and the prohibition of investments and export of every type of goods and services from the United States. It is true that for more than twenty years the export of food and medicines to the island has been allowed, but, unlike the transactions with other countries, it requires special licenses and payment in cash before the goods are delivered. During the last several years, the U.S. government, basing itself on the Helms-Burton Act of 1996 (signed by Democratic President Bill Clinton), has increasingly interfered with European investments in Cuba, to such a degree that there have been strong political and legal objections from the European Union.

As we know, on July 20, 2015, diplomatic relations were reestablished between the United States and Cuba. What considerably diminished the expectations for an improvement in the relations between the two countries was the election of Donald Trump in 2016 and his success in reversing many of the changes introduced by Obama in his second presidential period. Trump also did a great deal to change the political climate in south Florida, especially among Cuban Americans. It is worth noting that in the 2012 elections when Obama was reelected, as in the 2016 elections when Hillary Clinton was defeated, the Cuban-American vote for the presidential candidates of the Democratic Party rose considerably and came close to a tie with the Republican candidates. The public opinion polls of the time showed that the inclination to vote Democratic was more pronounced among those who had more recently emigrated from Cuba. This changed from 2016 to 2020, when Trump reestablished a clear Republican hegemony among Cuban Americans. This was the result of the great efforts made by Trump through his frequent visits to the south of Florida to agitate the "antisocialist" sentiments of Cubans (as well as Venezuelans and Nicaraguans) while the Democrats did very little to counteract Trump in the area.

We must consider the role of the new social media and "influencers" like Alexander Otaola in adding fuel to the fire in support of Trump's politics. Another important change occurred among the recent immigrants from Cuba. According to the Cuban sociologist Guillermo Grenier, who publishes the "Cuba Poll," the great majority of the recently arrived Cubans have been electorally registering as Republicans, in contrast with what had happened in earlier years. Nevertheless, it must be noted that a minimum of six years must elapse from the arrival of Cubans to the United States until they can become citizens and register with a political party. That interval is sufficient for the new Cuban Americans to become socialized into the political culture of South Florida.

Some observers reason that the crushing defeat of the Democrats in the 2022 midterm elections in Florida will paradoxically help to improve the relations between the United States and Cuba because the Democrats will be less pressured to accommodate Cuban Americans in a state that is no longer considered competitive. Perhaps there is some truth to that observation, but I don't think that it is sufficient to lead to important changes to soften or eliminate the U.S. economic blockade of Cuba. The loss of political weight of the Democrats in Florida could be more decisive if it combined with a more active participation among various sectors of the U.S. capitalist class. For example, for quite some time the very influential U.S. Chamber of Commerce has been in favor of renewing economic relations with Cuba. In fact, Thomas Donahue who was the Chamber's president and CEO from 1997 until he retired in 2019 visited Cuba on various occasions. Other important sectors of American capital such as the large agricultural corporations and the maritime transport industry (both freight and passenger oriented) have supported such efforts. In the past, various congressional bills proposing a change in U.S. economic policy towards Cuba have gotten support from both Democrats and Republicans, and a good number of those congresspeople have visited the island. The problem is that, for those powerful interests changing economic policies towards Cuba has not necessarily been a political priority, while for the Cuban right and its allies in South Florida the maintenance of the blockade is indeed a priority.

Meanwhile, it is very unlikely that the United States will try to invade Cuba, either directly or using their Cuban supporters as happened in 1961; obviously not because of political principle, but because since the end of the Cold War the importance of Cuba for the United States has greatly declined. This does not mean of course that the U.S. government will cease its other hostile activities against the Cuban government, for example through its propaganda organs such as Radio and TV Martí.

Cuba's Political Alternatives

The political leaders of the traditional transitions from "socialism" to capitalism, including the state capitalist countries like China and Vietnam, were not automatons who simply responded to the supposedly objective necessities of such transitions. These leaders had to resolve diverse transition problems, many of them critical, but their perceptions of how to solve them were determined by their political ideas and conceptions, be they liberal, authoritarian, conservative or even fascist. That would also be true for Cuba.

Bearing this in mind, when we speak of a transition in the Cuban context, the obvious question is: a transition to what? In other words, what type of political, social, and economic system would replace the existing one? It is very regrettable that under the influence of "socialist" and "communist" antidemocratic systems, various political terms have grown confusing on the left, including the term "left" itself. It is therefore necessary to redefine what is meant by the left. For the purposes of the present discussion, I propose that to be "on the left" consists, more than anything else, of a rejection of the bureaucratic and capitalist conception that proposes that liberty is incompatible with equality, and in the affirmation that democracy, whether at work or in all other political and social contexts, far from being an "extra" in socialism, is in fact indispensable and the only way in which that system

can and should represent the working class and popular will. At the same time, being on the left implies defending the right of national self-determination, as much against the U.S. policies in Cuba and Latin America, as against the policies of Vladimir Putin's Russia in Ukraine.

There is no doubt that although the critical Cuban left has grown — for example, with organizations of groups of African descent and publications such as *Havana Times* and *La Joven Cuba* — it is still weak. This is due, more than anything else, to the fact that until this moment the Cuban working class has not shown any signs of resistance *as workers*, although of course many of them and especially Black Cubans have done so as poor people, when they participated in the street protests that have been occurring since July 11, 2021.

It seems that the only options that Cuban workers perceive as feasible are emigration and self-employment. Meanwhile, many of them survive on the remittances that their relatives send from abroad—especially in the case of white workers—given the shrinking number of subsidized items that they can receive through the ration book. Others survive by the theft of state property, which should be considered, under existing conditions in Cuba, as a form or extension of what Roman law called *furtum famelicus* (theft motivated by hunger), based on the Latin proverb *necessitas non habit legem* (necessity is not ruled by [or does not recognize] the law).

On the other hand, the Cuban right is very strong in the south of Florida, not because of the numerous small political groups that abound there, but because of the political and social hegemony achieved through publications and newspapers such as *El Nuevo Herald*, the Cuban right wing radio programs, the well-known activities of "influencers" such as Otaola, and the great social weight achieved by Cuban-American capital in that area. The three Cuban-American congresspeople that represent the area in Washington, as well as the state and municipal functionaries and elected officials at every level, have been very important in establishing and propagating a broad political and ideological right-wing agenda.

The great power and influence that the Cuban-American right wing has in Florida doesn't mean that it can reproduce itself in Cuba just as it is. It is worth noting for example that during the street protests that have taken place since July 11, 2021, very few if any people have echoed the political demands of the Cuban right, like the proposal by the Cuban dissident biologist Ariel Ruiz Urquiola calling for "humanitarian intervention" in the island, that everybody knows would be in the first and last instance an intervention guided and realized by U.S. forces and interests.

Cuban Americans have had a growing cultural influence, and thus indirectly a political impact, on Cuba, whether transmitted by the contents of the "weekly package" — the popular rentals of USB flash drives containing imported musical and variety shows, soap operas, and other similar materials tolerated by the Cuban government — or through other means. One example is the video titled *Patria y Vida* (Fatherland and Life) counterposed to the government's slogan of *Patria o Muerte* (Fatherland or Death), which has undoubtedly been a great artistic success, but highly ambiguous considering its total silence about its preferred political and social alternatives, even if in broad general terms. It is precisely that ambiguity that allows the most right-wing Cubans of South Florida to celebrate the video and its protagonists.

That cultural influence plays an important role in the development of the "common sense" of many Cubans in the island, even though that "common sense" is not necessarily "good sense." It is that "common sense" that led Dr. Ana María Polo of the popular television program "Caso Cerrado" (Case Closed, a "judge" show on Spanish language television in the United States similar to Judge Judy and its English language equivalents) to proclaim more than once in the past that there is no unemployment in the United States, since "as we all know and can see" one can always get a job if one makes an effort to obtain it, even if it is cleaning houses or washing automobiles. The economic

and social structures and realities do not exist, and what exists and counts is only individual will. According to this form of reasoning, there is no alternative to individualism, and consequently capitalist competition would be the principal axis of a new Cuba. Everybody on their own and the last one in the race “stinks” as we used to say about children and teenagers racing in the neighborhood of *Los Quemados* in the Cuban city of Marianao of my childhood and adolescence.

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