Review Essays

The Cuban Transition

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— *Toward a New Cuba: Legacies of a Revolution*, edited by Miguel Angel Cen­

In June 1998, an article examining the Cuban atmosphere appeared in *The Economist* predicting a ‘long hot summer’ for Cuban society. Clearly this prediction was not referring to tropical temperatures, but rather to political unrest on the island, thought largely due to the ‘disillusionment’ and ‘boredom’ of Cuban youth. The same article made references to the role students and youth movements had played in the downfall of the Suharto regime in Indonesia and suggested the possibility of a similar development in Cuba. The summer passed by quietly, however, and one keeps wondering about the predictive value of such statements that resemble those that have dominated discussions within the Cuban refugee community of Miami over the last decades (‘see you in Havana next Christmas’).

Why is it – despite a situation of increasing deprivation and decreasing standards of living – that popular unrest has not taken on the massive proportions *The Economist* predicted? Although there were scuffles with the police in Havana in 1993 and people have regularly fled the island across the Florida straits (the *balseros*), yet the signs of collective protest are few, and the dissident movement remains small and fragmented.

The presence of an effective apparatus with a capacity to control any dissidence offers an obvious explanation; critics of the Cuban Revolution have given this explanation almost exclusive significance. However, conforming to the regime has a more complicated basis than repression and/or fear of repres­sion. Many Cubans continue to support their government for better or for worse, although most observers of Cuban society detect considerable political fatigue, perhaps even a certain apathy. It is as though a possible consciousness of political alternatives has evaporated. For most Cubans, the present regime is all they have ever known. Their primary complaints concern the incapacity of the economy to reduce the scarcities that have appeared in virtually every area of daily life, complaints so basic that they apparently do not translate to a political level. The possibility of losing the few social securities that have re-
mained is more threatening than the perspective of radical political change. And although most Cubans want to be reunited with their family members living in the United States, the perspective of a return of the refugees is a daunting one for many.

These questions of continuity and change in Cuban society are at the core of all three books under review here. An explanation of the Cuban transition (or lack thereof) is, however, approached from different angles. Mona Rosendahl’s book is a social anthropological study of life in a Cuban village. She analyses the ideology and practice of support for the present political system on a micro level. Marc Vandepitte offers an account of the economic reforms in Cuba after 1990 and their impact on the socialist nature of the Revolution. Miguel Angel Centeno and Mauricio Font practice an eclectic historical approach in their analysis of present reforms, future political scenarios, and the influences that may affect the outcome.

Rosendahl’s *Inside the Revolution* is a particularly interesting book because no social anthropological studies in Cuba have been conducted since the work of Oscar Lewis and his associates in the late 1960s. Rosendahl has investigated the impact of official ideology in everyday life and, in doing so, draws a fascinating picture of the theory and practice of socialism in Cuban society. She illustrates how, on a local level, reciprocity and mutual help have become the cement holding society together in the unchanging situation of general scarcities, as had occurred in earlier historical periods, notably during the great depression of the 1930s.

In the 1970s and 1980s, the improvement in the standard of living was undoubtedly an important factor in popular support of the Revolution. In the perception of most people, there was a certain balance between sacrifices made and benefits received. However, the events following 1990 have shown that there is no simple connection between standards of living and loyalty to the revolution. The decrease in living standards has not led to a rise in disidence of equal intensity.

Rosendahl defends an actor-oriented explanation. People have their own ways of coping. They do not passively absorb political messages, but remake and reformulate them in the light of their own experiences and knowledge. Those who think negatively of the Revolution will see their views confirmed by the deterioration in living standards. Those who were actively involved in the revolutionary process and – at least in the 1980s – were able to compare their situation positively with the one they had experienced before the Revolution, either continue their support and refuse to resign to the idea that their sacrifice has been in vain, or drift into political apathy. This latter phenomenon, according to Rosendahl, has increased dramatically in recent years. In the absence of alternatives, the majority of Cubans have learned to adapt and cope with their individual situations, avoiding political involvement as much as possible. Feelings of patriotism, however, remain strong among all sectors of the population, irrespective of personal attitudes towards the Revolution. This contributes further to the image of stability noted by outside observers.

Vandepitte’s *Fidel’s Gamble* focuses on the nature of the reforms, in particular those in the economic and financial spheres that have been implemented by the regime since the termination of the special relationship with the former Soviet Union in 1990. He confronts the question whether these reforms imply a
radical change in the course of the Revolution and represent successive steps on the road toward capitalism. Each of the reforms is analyzed and the implications for economy and society are outlined. The analysis, however, is strongly biased toward the conclusion that the essence of socialism on Cuba has remained intact. Vandepitte's study is representative for a category of loyal Cuba-watchers who evaluate the system and its actions on the basis of political criteria that continue to play an important role in the discourse of the leaders but that – in practice – have lost their relevance as prescriptions for concrete courses of action. Public speeches of the Cuban leadership are taken at face value, disregarding the great distance that often exists between rhetoric and action. In his interpretation of present Cuban social and economic development, Vandepitte's analysis stagnates precisely at the point that the Cuban leadership – opting for an increasingly pragmatic course – has abandoned. At times, his account resembles a rather simple case of propaganda that, in Cuba itself, would probably not be taken seriously. The management of the crisis after 1990, the domestic reforms and the measures taken to integrate Cuba into the world economy are all interpreted as heroic actions to save socialism. The relative stability of the regime during the difficult times of 'the special period' is attributed to the success of these actions.

The book edited by Miguel Angel Centeno and Mauricio Font offers broad analyses of the present economic, social and political dilemmas of Cuban society in a period of transition. The Cuban leaders are obviously aware that maintaining the status quo does not represent a viable long-term option. They are also aware, however, of the chaos often associated with transition. The reform process is painstakingly slow and two steps forward are often followed by one step back. The organization of the economy and the degree to which central planning should give way to market forces remains unclear. There is an extreme preoccupation about control of the reforms and their consequences in order to avoid a 'Russian nightmare' in a Cuban context. The reforms continue to be challenged by excessive central planning, the presence of large state controlled enterprises insulated from competition, and highly controlled or regulated markets. This applies especially to the domestic sector, although the emergent informal and illegal market economy has been rapidly undermining regulation. The external sector (the export economy and tourism) relies mainly on market-driven entrepreneurship. This policy has compartmentalized the overall economy and has created severe problems of articulation between the internal and the external sectors.

Font expresses doubts as to the sincerity of the reforms. He notes that economic measures in the 1990s have been largely reactive and were often defined ad-hoc while responding to acute crises and confronted with the need to survive and resist as a nation. There is no consistent model or strategy that is being adhered to. Non-economic factors – mainly those forming part of the political-institutional context – are conditioning and shaping the reforms, contributing to an accumulation of irrationalities, and creating major economic dysfunctions with great impact on income distribution, work habits and rent seeking. As scarcity increases and moral and legal restraints weaken, people have learned to cope more often than not by engaging in informal and illegal activity in order to survive. These activities are not necessarily acts of resistance against the regime (although they do undermine the possibilities of central planning).
Neither do they call for capitalist transformation. In fact, the question ‘market versus state’ may not consistently, nor consciously be considered significant by the greater part of the population. As they have adapted to la situaciòn, they have drifted into the political indifference described by Mona Rosendahl.

All authors contributing to the Centeno-Font volume voice their pessimism regarding the likelihood of a development towards a more open, democratic society in the short or medium term. However, in the light of their own analyses of the drift towards a mixed economy, including the growing importance of foreign capital and the emergence of new institutions, actors and processes whereby the ‘old hands’ within the political elite are being replaced by a younger, better-trained and more pragmatically oriented generation, one may reasonably ask whether a less sobering message regarding the future development of Cuban society would be more appropriate.

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