ELEVEN

A Loss of Purpose: Crisis and Transition in Cuba

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In Spain in 1994, a bitter Cuban exile told me his latest Castro joke. Fidel is performing as a torero. The arena is packed. The crowd watch with bated breath as the enormous bull rushes at el lider maximo. In the nick of time he steps backwards, completely in control. As the bull rushes past him, Fidel leans forwards, his head inches from the bull’s enormous head. The bull continues a few paces and then falls to the ground, dead. Consternation. ‘Fidel, what did you do?’ Fidel: ‘I only whispered in his ear, Socialismo o muerte.’

I repeated this joke scores of times in Cuba. What fascinated me was not so much the hilarity, but the eagerness with which so many Cubans kept on explaining the punch line to me. Had I understood it properly? Faced with the choice between socialism or death – the motto with which Castro usually concludes his speeches – the bull preferred to die. Asi estamos. That’s what things have come to.

Cuba is in crisis, and Cuba is in transition. In this chapter, I aim to summarize the ingredients and depth of the present predicament and to discuss the direction and pace of the transitions under way. In addition, I present a number of observations regarding legacies from the present which a post-communist Cuba will again have to face. The chapter combines scholarly analysis with a more personal approach. I attempt to use my own experiences of and observations on the island to indicate some of the deeper layers of the current crisis, and to reflect on the applicability of this volume’s emblematic title, Societies of Fear, to the Cuban case.

The Demise of the Revolution

For present purposes, the revolution’s emergence, its initial achievements and failures, and its post-1989 collapse can be summarized succinctly. Despite common assumptions, Cuba was one of the more developed countries in
Latin America before the 1959 revolution. However, its economy was completely dependent on sugar and on the USA, and the gulf between Havana and the impoverished countryside was enormous. The political history of the island, which had become independent under US tutelage around the turn of the century, was characterized by incompetence, corruption and violence. Cuba in the 1950s was undeniably ripe for change. Although the followers of Castro never constituted a mass movement, he was able to count on a large popularity after the 'triumph of the revolution' (jargon now rephrased as el accidente on Cuban streets). A more equitable distribution of wealth, diversification of the economy, clean politics and renunciation of US patronage were aims which could call up wide support in the country.

The balance of the revolution up to 1989 was two-sided, and usually involved weighing up differing elements. On the one hand, by regional criteria Cuba enjoyed a reasonable standard of living, fairly evenly distributed among the entire population as a result of the levelling out of what had been enormous economic and social inequalities. The regime guaranteed an impressive system of health-care and education. In addition, the position of women and of the Afro-Cuban population improved considerably, at least in public life. Finally, thanks to the new start which was made in 1959, Cuba was a source of inspiration in the region and much farther afield. This was reinforced by the ongoing conflict with the USA. The American embargo, no matter what its economic significance, helped to underline Cuba's stature as the proud David standing up to Goliath.

On the other hand, critics and opponents of the revolution focused primarily on the extreme concentration of power, the society's militarization, the limited civil rights, the repression of all political opposition, and the dependence on the Soviet bloc. The debate between supporters and opponents has often been marked by complete mutual incomprehension. More impartial observers, many of these located outside the Havana–Miami–Washington axis, tended to favour a point of view which simply juxtaposed the polar opposites enshrined in the two perspectives.

In the meantime, the relevance of discussing the achievements of the Cuban revolution in terms of this balance sheet had begun to be overtaken by events. By 1970 state policy, largely based on the Soviet model, had not brought about any genuine diversification of the economy. Sugar remained the main product, and dependence on the Eastern bloc was as strong as the subjection to the USA that it had replaced. The various economic policies which were implemented after 1959 were marked by inefficient production and distribution and a chronic shortage of consumer goods. Cuba had begun to experience negative economic growth during the period 1986–90, before the collapse of the Soviet bloc.

The termination of Eastern European protection for what had once been seen as a case for the Soviet model made the previous balance of pros and cons redundant. Within months, it became apparent to all but the revolution's
most staunch partisans that many of the achievements of the revolution had merely been financed by the Eastern bloc. The withdrawal of support exposed the glaring weakness and inefficiency of Cuba's planned economy. By 1991, the size of the economy was only half of what it had been in 1989, and in spite of the present, apparently impressive growth rates, the visible pace of recovery is, in reality, tantalizingly slow.

The Mid-1990s Crises

With the collapse of the Eastern bloc and the concomitant withdrawal of Soviet support to Cuba, a crisis that had already been smouldering on the island came into the open. Public discontent, certainly not a common phenomenon of the post-1959 era, became widespread. Growing impoverishment, frustration and demoralization led to a dramatic collapse in the legitimacy of the regime and of Fidel Castro himself. Although one could feel that something was brewing, it took a remarkably long time for the tensions to burst out. Until 1994, only a few incidents, mainly outside Havana, were reported. The riots that broke out in the capital on 5 August 1994, though rapidly quelled, were a novelty and an unmistakable signal. Once again the regime applied the 'safety valve' technique: coastal controls were suspended as they had been during the 1980 Mariel crisis, when more than 100,000 Cubans were allowed to leave the country. This time, over 30,000 refugees (balseros, or 'raft-people') seized the opportunity to leave by sea on any available vessel.

In the following weeks, intensive US–Cuban negotiations led to an agreement in which Cuba committed itself to stop the exodus. The remaining 30,000 balseros interned in the US military base of Guantánamo on the southeastern coast of Cuba were allowed to leave for the USA. However, proclaiming them the last ones to arrive without a valid visa, Clinton abandoned the line of more than thirty-five years of Cold War diplomacy: Cuban refugees would no longer have the automatic status of political refugees. While some hoped that this agreement would initiate an era of more pragmatic US–Cuban relations, such expectations were not to be realized. Indeed the opposite was true as exemplified by a tightening of the embargo through the passing of the Helms–Burton act. After the shooting by the Cuban army of two small and unarmed aircraft belonging to the Cuban–American organization Hermanos al Rescate, the Clinton administration controlled this trend by reconstituting a harder line towards Cuba.

At the same time, both Latin America and the European Union have become increasingly upset by the intransigence and the political immobility of the Cuban regime. By 1996, these two blocs found their own policy of 'constructive dialogue' with Cuba frustrated by the regime's unwillingness to wed political reform to its economic liberalization. The Cuban position in international politics is once again characterized by isolation. Castro's eagerness to visit the Vatican in late 1996, and the ensuing 'hot news' of the
Pope's visit to Cuba in early 1998, only underline this isolation. The regime's enthusiasm about this potentially risky visit to the island demonstrates its own sense of being an outcast.

In reality, a decade after the fall of the Berlin Wall, Cuba is still caught between partial economic adjustments from above and growing dissatisfaction from below, hardly any political openings, and an isolated position in world politics.

Economic Decline

The post-1989 economic breakdown was devastating for Cuba. The cumulative destruction of the island's economic infrastructure; the collapse of the sugar industry and the failure of other sectors of the economy to pick up the slack; and, of course, the shrinking of per capita incomes to less than half of the modest levels attained in the mid-1980s – all have been extensively documented.

All over Cuba, the consequences were quickly felt. Cubans soon learned that following official guidelines led to a reduction in the amount of goods and services which people had long taken for granted. The disastrous food situation was a striking illustration of the failure of the planned economy. Cuba is one of the least densely populated and most fertile countries of the Caribbean. Nevertheless, both the volume and range of agricultural products available were minimal in the early 1990s. With the exception of Haiti, no country in the Caribbean failed as comprehensively in providing its people with food. The subsequent opening of peasant markets has helped to lessen the worst of the food crisis, even if the quantity and quality of supplies continued to be limited and expensive. Over the past several years, the regime has implemented a number of measures which would have been unthinkable a decade earlier, such as the far-reaching dollarization of the economy, the promotion of joint ventures with foreign corporations, and experiments with domestic 'capitalist' markets. For many reasons, it remains questionable whether these economic changes will inspire sufficient confidence in the foreign investors whom Cuba is so frenetically trying to woo, and whether they will provide a solution to, or at least a substantial alleviation of, the crisis in the relatively short term. There are signs, however, that the 'reforms' are having a limited success. In 1995, economic growth rates suggested a hesitant recovery, and by January 1997 the regime boasted prospects of a growth rate of nearly 8 per cent for the year ahead. Yet, whether the reforms and concomitant growth will be sufficient to ease popular discontent remains an open question.

The introduction of a parallel 'dollar economy' along with measures reminiscent of a market economy has inevitably led to the creation of a two-tier economy and a population of haves and have-nots. Those managing to operate in the 'capitalist' sector are much more successful. Few people still
entertain reservations about the need for more market-oriented activities, and there are very few who do not participate in the semi-illegal informal sector. Still, the growth of the dual economy is met with understandable resentment by those – still a majority – who have lost more and more in the post-1989 years without seeing anything take its place.

Who profits from the economic openings? Those who have access to dollars, either through relatives abroad, or through participating in the 'dollar economy' in Cuba. Every visitor to the island will be familiar with the wide range of legal, semi-legal and illegal services which are provided by individual Cubans working for the tourist dollar. Less conspicuous are state organizations, such as the Cuban army, which are currently active in these markets.

Dissidence and Repression

Unrest is growing behind the crumbling façade of socialist Cuba, and, as the events of 1994 revealed, it can suddenly erupt. There is, however, a more widespread change taking place. Never before have Cubans complained as openly about the regime as they do now. The country now faces the risk of a whole generation of young people turning their back on education, the state economy and many of its fundamental values. All this has severely undermined the legitimacy and strength of the regime.

In this respect, one needs to imagine the ideological effects of the economic crisis. The post-1989 periodo especial has been a training school for civil disobedience. As no one can survive without ignoring the letter and even spirit of Cuban law, every Cuban has now learned semi-clandestine behaviour which has significant implications. Socially, every citizen faces the problem of a sliding scale of values. Buying or selling an egg on the black market is as minor an offence as one may think of, yet for some individuals it opens the door to potentially serious criminal behaviour. From the regime's perspective, the political implications of this behaviour are even more worrying. The necessity to sidestep the law demonstrates, in glaring terms, the regime's inability to help its citizens. At the same time, the act of actually breaking the law may help many Cubans develop a political awareness that the state's hold on the population is not omnipotent after all.

This has clearly been one of the lessons of the 1994 riots and the balseros crisis. The state's response to the black market has been pragmatic, legalizing and hence controlling and taxing citizens' activities rather than enforcing regulations which are now obsolete. Its reaction to political dissent, on the other hand, has been anything but flexible. Despite growing dissatisfaction with the lack of political liberty, the willingness of the government to liberalize political activity appears minimal. The totalitarian style remains supreme. There may not be excessive violence, as in so many other authoritarian regimes all over the world, yet the strict surveillance of all sorts of potentially independent institutions such as churches, universities and cultural
centres continues undiminished. The same applies to individuals seeking independent political parties or labour unions. There is no space whatsoever for the organization of opposition, as its would-be platform Concilio Cubano experienced when its public meeting was cancelled at the last moment, at the height of the Hermanos al Rescate crisis, in 1996.

The regime is suffering from a self-imposed dichotomy. On the one hand, there is the unwillingness to do away with a system which not only confers many privileges and considerable power to its elites, but with which large portions of the population have psychologically come to identify over the years. On the other hand, there is the fear among these very elites that, as soon as repression is seen to be decreasing and a genuine political opening emerges, the current leadership and the system that it represents will irrevocably fall. The recent history of the Eastern bloc suggests that this fear is quite justified.

The Crisis Within

There is a worrying social dimension to the economic decay of socialist Cuba. The ongoing collapse of the economy and the progressive betrayal of the high expectations nurtured by the revolution have incited a sense of despair and a concomitant social disintegration which will arguably haunt Cuba for a long time, no matter what the pace and ultimate character of the transition will be. Some observations regarding the illegal economy, a generational gap, gender, and racial relations illustrate the point.

First, the short-term successes of the new 'entrepreneurs' (from hookers and pimps to illegal taxi drivers and black marketeers) seem to confirm that the respectable long-term strategies of the past for achieving social success have been undermined. Further education and university degrees do not provide employment, or, if they do, only low-paid work. Participation in the civil service and party organs? Who still believes in them? Ever fewer people may mourn the erosion of the Communist Party and related institutions. All the same, it is certainly a problem for the future that the present protracted impasse has not only brought about an enormous demoralization, but that it can mean that many out of one or more generations of young people go to waste. Growing up among the ruins of communism, without a real picture of what to expect from a future capitalist society, leads many to drift along without any ambition. The cost to society is evident. The price that an individual has to pay may be even higher. A dramatic example is the jineteras, a Cuban euphemism for women working as prostitutes.

During the last few years, the regime has singled out tourism as the main growth sector of the economy, although it has done so reluctantly and with concern about the predictable spin-offs. Castro has often complained about the loss of the 'virginal purity' of the revolution. He had good reason to do so. The still modest tourist boom inevitably involved the demonstrative
effect of relatively rich, mainly white, capitalist tourists; the exoticization of
the local culture; and the inevitable growth of illegality on the fringe. The
phenomenon of the jineteras must have confirmed Fidel’s worst fears. Every
hotel, disco and beach which attracts tourists is crowded with a mass of
young women, and men, offering themselves for money. And there is little
doubt that not only Cuban state officials, but equally state organizations have
been benefiting from sex tourism.

Jineteras are a metaphor for decline. They do not regard themselves as
prostitutes. As Carmen claims: ‘Estoy puteando, sí, pero no soy puta.’ Making a
television documentary about these young women, we were able to interview
and film not only many jineteras, but some of their grandfathers as well, men
who had known Havana as a US brothel before the revolution and now saw
history repeating itself. The discussions, and particularly the confrontations
between the two generations, were often highly charged and moving. The
sad thing was that each of the two parties – for that is how it was in most
cases – had a tale to tell which was as convincing, or at least as under-
standable, as that of the other party.

She: ‘I’m broke / there’s nothing to eat / we haven’t got anything / I have to
look after my kid.’

He: ‘Things aren’t that bad / there’s always an alternative / you’re behaving
like a prostitute / you’re throwing away your dignity.’

And more such words. Spirited discussions marked not only by bitterness
but also by mutual concern and love – one of the reasons why they are so
sad. At one point, one wondered whether those families in which close
relatives had long since accepted the dealings of their daughters, grand-
daughters or sisters weren’t even more depressing.

Why is the phenomenon of prostitution so distressing in Cuba? Sex-work
is a worldwide phenomenon. The young girls and women hanging around
Cuban hotels and discos are looking for clients for the same reasons as
women in cities like Bangkok, Lagos, Manilla or Santo Domingo: not enough
money to go round, what they see as the lack of genuine alternatives, the
obligation to support relatives, and so on. What adds an extra painful
dimension to the presence of these jineteras in the streets of Havana is not
so much the phenomenon itself, nor the reasons behind it, but simply the
realization that history has come full circle. Today, the revolutionary refrain
of Havana under Batista as the brothel of the USA has become a sad
parody of itself.

How many times has Castro labelled ‘old’ Cuba as the whorehouse of the
USA during the thirty-five-plus years that he has been governing the island?
The revolution would not only offer the country a better future, but it would
also restore the dignity which the pseudorepublica had lost. And now, in the
mid-1990s, Cuba is back to square one. No hotel is without its flood of
young prostitutes and randy tourists. All the bargaining in the hotel lobby,
less and less discreet and without exception pricey is intended less to bring this sector out of the sphere of illegality than to let a few other Cubans share in the proceeds. It is not that the phenomenon is unique. It is rather the awareness that the huge supply of *jineteras* makes it clear in the most tangible way possible that this is the end of an era. A dream shattered, and one doesn’t need to have been a believer to experience its tragedy. A dream shattered, and to gain a better idea of what that feels like, one should simply talk to older Cubans, old enough to have lived under Castro’s corrupt predecessor, Batista, who now see their granddaughters ‘on the street’.

This semi-professional prostitution may be an extreme expression of the Cuban crisis. Yet in a wider sense, the mentality of making one’s skills available as long as there is a dollar reward is not limited to the *jineteras.* Nor is the supply limited to physical goods or material services, such as the ones offered by clandestine taxi drivers, cigar vendors, and so on. Many others, such as artists and even Afro-Cuban religious specialists, cater for the dollar market too, often demonstrating a mentality which at times seems only different in degree rather than substance from the *jineteras*’ cynical and desperate outlook.

‘Che’ Guevara used to prophesy that the New Man would be born, or rather produced, in Cuba. He was wrong. All the same, the awareness that so much is now being wasted is a reminder of the various achievements that were made. The decline is painfully visible, as is the loss of organized solidarity with the economically weak, especially old people; and there are many more dimensions. Women’s emancipation is a case in point. The revolution’s policy was primarily successful in public life – Cuban men discarded little of their *machismo* in their private lives – but at least that result was achieved. Now more and more Cuban women are finding that their partners are passing the responsibility for housekeeping and child-care on to their shoulders all too easily, and perhaps even more than they ever did in the past, while precisely now it is so extremely difficult to keep a household going.

Again, this is a problem of wider dimensions which was officially acknowledged even before the present crisis. The rectification campaign started in 1986 targeted the Cuban family as one of the areas in need of correction of ‘negative tendencies’. To anyone studying Latin America and the Caribbean – or the ‘inner-city crisis’ in USA, or Caribbean minorities in Europe for that matter – the list of problems reads as a painfully familiar one. Teenage pregnancy, early marriages, a high divorce rate, single parent, female-headed households: the revolution apparently did not do much better than other social systems. By 1987, officials such as Vilma Espín, president of the Federación de Mujeres Cubanas (and spouse of Raúl Castro), were openly deploiring the hedonism and lack of responsibility and revolutionary spirit of younger generations.

One may doubt whether it makes much sense to think of *machismo* as a ‘pre-revolutionary’ rather than as a deeply engrained characteristic of Cuban
(and Latin American) society. Either way, the revolution has apparently not broken the spell. There are indications that, in the present situation, women bear an even heavier share of the crisis than men do. Many Cuban women certainly say so, and impressionistic evidence tends to support their case. Thus, for instance, it seems more than just a passing comment on the present predicament of Cuban women that among the 1994 balseros, single, young men were the largest category, many of them leaving spouse or girlfriend and children behind. Likewise, of the young fineteras working in Havana or the Varadero beaches, many have a child to support whose father is no longer of assistance, if ever he was.

The Resurgence of ‘Race’

Race, long an official non-issue in Cuban society, is another sphere of life in which pre-revolutionary history and its legacies and revolutionary slogans and realities provide a worrying enigma. The post-1959 ideology has been one of colour blindness. Afro-Cuban emancipation has certainly been a constant in official government policy. Racial discrimination was formally abolished, and there has been an undeniable increase in the number of Afro-Cubans in schools and universities, in white-collar positions, and so on. There is strong evidence that the Afro-Cuban population benefited disproportionately from the revolution’s redistribution of wealth and opportunities.

In itself, such successes need not reflect a particular interest in the fate of blacks; in his famous 1953 speech, ‘La historia me absolverá’, Castro did not even mention Afro-Cubans as a specific group. In fact, after the first months of 1959 the potentially explosive issue of racism was not allowed to surface in official discourse again until the mid-1980s. Rather, the socio-economic emancipation of blacks reflects the revolution’s programme to improve the lot of the lower classes, in which Afro-Cubans just ‘happened’ to be over-represented. At the same time, however, the leading positions remained almost exclusively in white hands, and among the elite there was no question of colour blindness, not in the public sphere, and much less so in intimate relations. It was always a matter of opinion whether improvement was really to be merely a question of time, as many hoped or promised. In fact, both exiled Afro-Cuban and African American intellectuals published bitter accounts of the persistence of racism in revolutionary Cuba.  

In the current deep crisis, the black population is more essential for Fidel’s survival than it has ever been. There are no reliable statistics available, but it is realistic to estimate the proportion of Afro-Cubans at a near 60 per cent of the total population. This is a sharp increase over 1959, not least because most of the emigrants were white. In this context, it is not surprising that there has been a deliberate policy of courting the black population by labelling Cuba as afrolatino, of stressing the island’s history of slavery, and of displaying more tolerance towards the Afro-Cuban culture than used to be the case.
This strategy has attempted to exercise a greater control over black Cubans at the same time.

The way the regime has handled Afro-Cuban religions is a telling case. In line both with Marxist-Leninist orthodoxy and the policy to control every sphere of society, and with the traditional elite definition of Cuba as a western or even outright white nation, any attempt to promote an Afro-Cuban culture as distinct from what was defined as mainstream Cuban culture was prohibited or at least thwarted for most of the revolutionary period. In fact, in the early 1980s participation in Afro-Cuban religious cults could still be classified along with drug and child abuse and juvenile delinquency as 'pathological behaviour'. Starting in the mid-1980s, this policy was remarkably reversed. Afro-American religions such as santería became accepted ingredients of Cuban culture. For much of the revolutionary period, believers had encountered serious problems with the authorities for even the most discreet demonstration of their creed. Suddenly, the state began actively to court Afro-Cuban religious leaders. Today, santeros wear their paraphernalia openly in the streets, ceremonies are attended by quite numerous gatherings, in which whites seem to have a growing share, and Afro-Cuban religions have finally become legitimate subjects for research in scholarly institutions from Havana to Santiago de Cuba.

To some extent, this rather spectacular policy shift may reflect a growing need even within the ruling elite to find spiritual comfort in the present crisis; in fact, figures as highly placed as Raúl Castro are rumoured to be believers. Yet one may well speculate on more machiavellian motives for this sudden emancipation of Afro-Cuban religions. Trivial as it may seem, Afro-Cuban cults soon became a financially rewarding sideline for the emerging tourist industry. More importantly, as these religions proved impossible to eradicate, turning the wheel the other way was not only pragmatic but also extremely useful in order to secure Afro-Cuban support for the regime, and to suggest that the regime was indeed searching for ways to relax its control. Actually, from a perspective of raison d'état, it would be wiser to allow the proliferation of perhaps more escapist and outwardly oriented religions such as santería or palo monte, with their lack of national organization and hierarchy and their tenuous international links, than to tolerate the growth of the Catholic Church with its potentially subversive political impact. After all, in various Eastern European and Latin American transitions, the Catholic Church has played a crucial role.

Meanwhile, in spite of this feigned or real acceptance of Afro-Cuban culture, and in spite of the relative improvement in socio-economic position, black Cubans are still predominantly concentrated in the lower strata of the population. One may debate whether this demonstrates the revolution's unwillingness, or simply its incapacity, to break a deadlock dating back many decades and even centuries before 1959. For now, however, it is sufficient to conclude with the bitter irony that although the Afro-Cuban population has
made the most relative progress since 1959, this advance is quickly being annihilated by the present crisis. A major disadvantage confronting the Afro-Cuban population is that its share in dollar remittances sent by the predominantly white Cuban American community is very limited. The consequences are evident. Black youths in the major Cuban cities are now prominent in all branches of the illegal economy, not the least among the jineteras. The theme of race and racism is clearly among the hitherto taboo subjects now all too openly discussed again all over Cuba. At the same time, and certainly to the dismay of the regime, Afro-Cubans now figure prominently in the dissident circles, such as in the Concilio Cubano.

At the same time, it is the black Cubans who are understandably frightened by the prospect of a return of the predominantly white Cubans from Miami and the Florida coast. In the meantime, there seems to be something of a white backlash here and there in Cuba. Some identify black Cubans with the failed revolution, and one hears blatantly racist remarks in this respect. 'Because all the support has not got them any further; they simply aren't up to it.' Others blame Afro-Cubans for an alleged disproportionate involvement with subversion and the illegal economy. These are plenty of different sticks to beat the same dog with – another explosive ingredient in any future Cuba.

The Crisis Within: Pain, Anger and Fear

Not surprisingly, then, emotions run high in contemporary Cuba, and in spite of frequent oblique incantations of a Cuban calor humano which would help Cubans through this period as it has through earlier crises, the emotional climate is bitter. Such bitterness need not be unidirectional. A painful and often angry awareness of the failure of the experiment may be shared by most Cubans, yet the target of such frustrations differs. Whereas many, and perhaps most, Cubans put the blame on the failure of Fidel's regime, there are still large numbers who hold the counter-forces – whether the USA, Cuban exiles, or the 'spoiled' younger generations – responsible for the crisis. Pain and anger therefore are potent ingredients in contemporary Cuban discourse, a potentially explosive cocktail indeed. Moreover, even if in less consistent fashion than used to be the case, anxiety over the state's unbroken capacity to clamp down on 'anti-social' behaviour lingers.

A couple of personal observations may help to elucidate both the significance of such emotions in today's Cuba and the puzzlement an outsider frequently feels in trying to account for these.

I'm photographing a completely decrepit building which once stood as a monument in the centre of Havana. A middle-aged woman laughs as she passes by and says: 'Chico, estás fotografiando las ruinas del socialismo' ('Boy, you are taking pictures of the ruins of socialism'). One hears more remarks of this kind while taking such pictures of demolition sites: 'Asi está toda Cuba, arruinada' ('That's the way all of Cuba is like, ruined'). During the last few
years reporters have described the progressive decline of Cuba in a variety of ways. Anyone who knew Havana before the 1990s must be astonished at the ruination of the city, the empty shops, the shortage of food. Still, one wonders what is the more baffling indication of the new Cuban condition: the ruins and the poverty, or the openness with which Cubans now give voice to their desperation. In the early 1980s, too, there was decay to be seen, the standard of living was modest, and there were a lot of complaints about the lack of ‘luxury’ and the omnipresence of a state which many felt to be not so much hostile as pesado (‘heavy’), irritating and annoying. But hardly anyone ever ventured to criticize anything in public.

All that has certainly changed, at least at a grassroots level. The 1994 balsero crisis was one dramatic episode when irony, sarcasm and subdued despair gave way to openly expressed bitterness and anger. These were weeks of dramatic scenes in and around Havana and other coastal towns, as well as on the open sea, where many people drowned, and many more agonized. There was outrage, misery, fierce discussions, and something closely resembling a collective psychosis: not only were people leaving, but now ‘it’ was bound to happen. But it remained unclear just what to await. Another riot, a rebellion, a clamp-down by the regime? How does one find out in a country where the news is almost by definition anecdotal, and in an atmosphere which came so close to hysteria at this time?

We were filming at the Cojimar beaches, just outside Havana, in August 1994, at the height of the balsero crisis. A rocky beach was covered with makeshift rafts, different ones every day. Those leaving, nervous, macho, explained in front of the whirring cameras of the world’s press why they wanted to leave: ‘¡Aquí es peor que en Haití!’ (‘Here it is worse than in Haiti’). Predominantly young adults, often men, were leaving their girlfriends and young children behind ‘to go for them later’. The stay-at-homes and the curious always formed a large majority; the fury and openness of the discussions; the bitterness of both the balseros and the spectators, whether sympathetic or not; the aggression, including that towards one another; the eagerness to speak out.

Cojimar, June 1995: there is nothing left to recall last year’s episode. It is as if none of it ever happened; and if you want to hear anything, it’s better to do so indoors where people still do a lot of talking. The relatives and neighbours of the three balsero protagonists of our 1994 documentary tell us once more the rest of the story. All three were picked up by the US coastguard and interned in Guantánamo. They did not get any further for many months. In desperation, one of them escaped from the base, was rescued from a minefield by the Cuban navy, and came back by bus to Havana. Bitter irony. All for nothing. He does not want to talk. The other two have just heard that they belong to the last group which will be allowed to go from Guantánamo to the USA. Very mixed feelings among those left behind. Their menfolk did not fly in vain, but they have been gone almost a year by
now, leaving their female and young relatives in an even greater predicament without them. And the prospects of ever being 'picked up' are very uncertain. Increasing financial demands are imposed by Cuba on those who leave. In the USA, the time when Cuban immigrants were invited in with open arms has passed, as has the time that a fresh Cuban immigrant would easily find reasonably paid work. The hopes of those left behind to meet again with their *balseros* are uncertain. We rate the chances even lower, but cannot bring ourselves to tell them.

Habana Vieja

And so Cuba is still on the ever-prolonged eve of something unknown. Havana: a city full of miniatures, which the visitor may find amusing or melancholic, but which many Cubans now find gloomy or aggressive.

One more impression. A shoe-shiner seated in the hallway of a dark flight of stairs in the old city centre. A common enough phenomenon in the countries surrounding Cuba, but a striking one here. Until recently such activities were not allowed; even on this scale, business was capitalism, after all. Now that it is permitted in the context of economic liberalization, many prospective entrepreneurs lack the necessary experience and spirit of enterprise – not to mention the trivial fact that they lack the requisite materials. Just try to get shoe polish in a country crippled by shortages of all kinds. For sale in dollars, like anything else, but how do you get hold of the dollars in the first place?

I decide to have my shoes polished, hoping at the same time, in vain, to shake off the man who has been following me for several *cuadras* in the hopes of getting his hands on some of my money. A feeling familiar to everyone who walks through cities with a good amount of beggars – in Havana, of course, a phenomenon of the last few years only. One feels guilty not giving anything, but not much better if one does; and now and then one simply feels fed up, especially if the beggar is truly aggressive and irritating. Such is the man following me now. Around thirty-five, and looking healthy enough. An ‘anti-social element’ in the language of the revolution, not because of his political views but because he does not seem to have a job and disgraces his country by definition as a beggar.

I try to start up a conversation with the shoe-shiner while he is polishing my shoes. It’s tough going, he isn’t very talkative. Emaciated, black, he must be around eighty. Looks pretty tough. All this time the beggar has not given up. He runs through the whole gamut of prayers and curses. It is hot, I have had more than enough, and I burst out: ‘Why don’t I give you anything? What have you done for me? What do you actually do all day? Why should foreigners give people like you a tip while you do nothing except bother us? Look, this man here is doing something for me, that’s why I pay him. You’re much younger, but all you do is complain.’ And more of this kind of talk
of which I am not proud, but which certainly helps to let off steam. To my surprise, the shoe-shiner suddenly stops polishing and shakes me firmly by the hand without saying anything, gestures at the beggar to clear off – which he eventually does – and carries on with his work.

Now he starts to tell fragments of his life story. He worked when he was a young boy (‘as a slave, really’), and never stopped working. Now he is eighty-three. The revolution made his life so much better, but the US blockade made it all more difficult every time. Racism was terrible before 1959, and disappeared afterwards. The revolution made one big mistake: spoiling the younger generation with free education and so on. ‘Now they don’t know you have to work to eat, and they choose the easy way: begging, prostitution.’

I listen with mixed feelings. The fact that the US embargo has long lost whatever justification it might once, if ever, have had is clear, but it is nonsense to suppose that the embargo explains why the Cuban economy has been in the doldrums for so long. Most people, both Cubans and foreign observers, agree that institutional racism was worse before the revolution than it is today, but does this mean that racism has disappeared? Nonsense. And I have more sympathy for the ‘spoiled’ Cuban youth. The present-day dissatisfaction is an expression of a deep frustration, a loss of confidence in a revolution which kept on making more promises than it was able, or sometimes even willing, to keep. But at the same time, how can one fail to sympathize with the old man’s bitterness at the generation which has had it much easier than him, and who will not provide for him in his last years? How could one contradict him, what would be the point of reminding him of the obvious failure of Cuban communism to provide him with a reasonable retirement: the shabbiness of his old clothes, his incredible leanness, the fact that he still has to work for a few indispensable cents at his age?

Like the fineteras, the shoe-shiner too comes to symbolize the unfulfilled promises of the revolution; the shocking tragedy for the older generation, people who did believe, and who also gave a lot in the conviction that it would result in something better for all Cubans. The system has never functioned properly, only too often the leadership has been cynical, foolish or misleading; but still there was once confidence of some kind. For the Cubans who once believed – and perhaps still do, despite their better judgement – Cuba in 1997 is a worse drama than it is for the younger generation. After all, lots of young people never believed in the dream which now lies shattered for so many of the older generation.

The Regime’s Staying Power

Presiding over this sad situation is a regime which has held power since the very beginnings of the revolution, and is therefore rightfully identified with whatever el proceso achieved, or failed to achieve. There are obvious analogies with Eastern Europe on the eve of the Wende. When the Eastern bloc
collapsed, it was generally supposed that Cuba would be the next domino. The bankruptcy of Eastern Europe had not only deprived the communist model of its credibility, but it had also stripped Cuba of its crucial economic benefactor. Why did these predictions fail to come true? Why did Castro remain in control while the system of fraternal regimes in the Eastern bloc collapsed like a house of cards?²⁹

Several factors help to explain the remarkable resiliency of the regime. The visible gains of the revolution guaranteed the legitimacy of _el proceso revolucionario_ for much longer than had been the case in Eastern Europe. Moreover, though socialism may not have been as popular among the Cuban population as was argued by the regime, it was certainly not seen, as it was in much of the Soviet bloc, as an imposition by an imperialist USSR. In Eastern Europe, this imposition tended to foster anti-communist nationalism. In Cuba, arguably, the opposite happened. Over three decades of US hardline policy only helped Castro to capitalize on Cuban nationalism for the regime's sake. Combined with the omnipresence of a large-scale system of control and repression, this encouraged a larger degree of complacency than was the case in Eastern Europe. This 'complacency' was encouraged by the fact that Cuba generally exported its dissidents and successfully prevented the emergence of an opposition organized around institutions such as trade unions or the church. Even geography helped: no bitter winters inspiring panic over expected shortages of calories and fuel, no domino effect in an isolated island at a large physical distance from its fraternal regimes.

Yet there is more. Many Cubans see the alternatives as undefined and obscure, if not alarming. While the Eastern European opposition was oriented towards Western Europe, the Cuban orientation towards the USA is ambivalent. Although Cubans are painfully aware of the enormous differences in prosperity and political freedom, there is also a certain apprehension about American life. The Cuban media have systematically highlighted the toughest aspects of US capitalism; besides, the expectation that the former welfare state provisions could be scrapped to a large extent under capitalism is not ill-founded. In addition, there is concern about an economic and political invasion by the Cuban Americans, who could completely overshadow the local population, taking control of business and government, claiming their former houses, and so on. As indicated above, the racial factor plays a part in all of this too. Even if the Afro-Cuban population is still predominantly represented among the lower echelons of society, black Cubans are understandably afraid that their position will deteriorate under American-style capitalism. Evidently, there are also very concrete stakes in maintaining the status quo. Officials fear a day of reckoning for their participation in the communist state. But in a wider sense, the prospect of a sudden breakdown of authority now evokes fear of anarchy.

This brings us to a crucial factor making Cuba socialism _sui generis_. Fidel. Much has been written on Castro's charisma, and even if his flamboyant style
has definitely deteriorated with age, just like the appeal of his revolution, there is no doubt that he still personifies the revolution and holds the key to Cuba’s immediate future. Journalists continue reporting that Cubans hardly dare think about a Cuba without Fidel. One may well question the extent to which this once probably valid statement still holds true. Again, the Cuba of the 1990s is a country in which foreigners are continuously approached by Cubans not only practising ‘anti-social’ behaviour, but equally voicing strong opinions on el barbudo. The question may be less whether Cubans can imagine a Cuba without Castro, but rather to what degree they dare voice their views, whether in private or in public. Certainly, they do so far more openly than ever before. Yet there is always the apprehension, and occasionally indeed the sudden and unnerving affirmation, that a plain-clothes security official is listening and may act, or that there will be another clamp-down on the openings conceded so far. As long as he is still in charge, another type of question emerges. Castro may still hold the key to a smoother transition, but is he willing and able to use it? Here, the Cuban regime appears to be even more closed and enigmatic than were most of its Eastern European counterparts.

Castro’s charisma, communism and cubanidad may indeed have been a potent potion in the past. Yet by now it is hard not to conclude that repression is the main explanation why the jabaja Fidel! slogan is so seldom heard or read. In that sense, indeed, Cuba is as much a society of fear as one undermined by sabotage and illegality. Either way, of course, the fact remains that the immediate future still depends very much on what Castro will allow to happen.

Scenarios for a Transition

With the benefit of hindsight, the collapse of the Eastern European communist bloc was relatively easy to explain. Yet even in 1989, on the eve of the fall of the Berlin Wall, few specialists foresaw the astonishing direction and pace of the changes overtaking the Soviet bloc. This observation may serve to remind us of the perils of forecasting regime transitions in general, and of predicting the future trajectory of Cuba in particular. This truism has certainly been experienced by the scholarly and journalistic communities – not to mention the Cuban population both on the island and abroad – infinitely charting and discussing the state of affairs on the island. As soon as the Soviet bloc collapsed, many observers started to predict the imminent fall of Fidel Castro’s communist regime. Some of the best journalistic books published in the early 1990s were sold under such telling titles as Castro’s Final Hour and Fin de siècle à la Havane. Yet in 1997, Castro is still el líder máximo and, in spite of the prolonged crisis devastating the country, there is no firm evidence that he will soon cease to be so. At least, therefore, his final hour seems to be a remarkably long one.

Cubanology so far has been at a loss adequately to predict the outcome of
the Cuban crisis. Indeed, there is not one obvious encompassing scenario for the next few years. Scenarios vary from maintenance of the economic status quo with increased political repression, through the 'Chinese–Vietnamese' model of market socialism, to democratization and a complete break with the planned economy. Maintaining the economic status quo and stepping up repression is no longer a viable strategy and has accordingly been abandoned, despite Fidel Castro's initial lack of flexibility. The regime has definitely opted for a scenario of economic reforms without significant change to the political system, and particularly a refusal to tolerate any opposition.

What will be the result of this policy? The economic transition towards a free market and more capitalism is irreversible, as the regime consistently informs potential foreign investors. This is absolutely true, as there indeed is no alternative left. The question is only how long it will take for this to produce tangible and lasting results. For the time being the economic future of Cuba evokes the picture of a development that has come full circle. Not long ago, Cuban historian Manuel Moreno Fraginals, once a figurehead of Cuban Marxist historiography, now an exile in the USA, summed up his view of the future of Cuba quite graphically: \emph{país capitalista y pobre}. One sees the point.

The political scenario, which will in its turn affect the pace of the economic transition, is more difficult to predict. Can one conceive of an ideal transition? Under the circumstances, the most realistic scenario still seems ongoing economic liberalization, which then might eventually be followed by a political opening. A preliminary question is, evidently, whether the economic reforms will pay off in time for the regime, a rather open question. Should the answer turn out to be positive, in this model a second-phase political transition might still be a receding horizon, as is evident in Vietnam and China. One would expect such a delay to cause more serious problems in Cuba than in these two Asian countries, simply because of the emphatically western orientation of the island in terms of its politico-cultural tradition and environment, and because of the weight of the exile community. In the end, we have to confront here once more the opaqueness of the power game, and particularly the crucial question of how Fidel Castro's position will evolve.

Among the more spectacular political scenarios are that of foreign intervention, an internal coup, or the death or withdrawal of Castro. The first two options are not very likely. Under 'normal' conditions, an intervention is practically excluded; no one takes this idea seriously apart from isolated Cuban radicals in Florida. It would undoubtedly be in vain and would lead to large-scale bloodshed, while foreign (US) interests no longer have much to gain from a bloody intervention in the current situation. An internal coup would have to be executed or supported by the army. This is not very likely either. The ministry of defence is led by Cuba's number two, Fidel's brother Raúl. The two brothers wield enormous power over the army, partly because they have constantly been on their guard – resorting to physical elimination
where necessary – against the rise of popular military leaders with possibly subversive ideas of their own, such as General Ochoa in the late 1980s. As for the party and the bureaucracy, there too the reformers can apparently operate only in an extremely cautious way, within the limits set by the commandment of absolute loyalty to their líder máximo.

Castro will obviously not live for ever. As long as his health permits, however, he will not be prepared to leave the fort; he repeatedly states that he cannot transfer the leadership at such a difficult time as the present, an argument that comes across persuasively in a macho culture. Castro will probably resign only if he is no longer able to rule, or if he is forced to go. That does not seem to be on the agenda for the time being.

Besides the scenario of a gradual transition, there is the possibility of a crash landing. New, more extensive riots, leading to a popular uprising, would force the army and the police to take sides. This would mean either heavy repression to regain control or the end of the regime. In the first case, even the option of external intervention might regain plausibility, evoking prospects of massive bloodshed. The latter case, regime collapse, would spell chaos and anarchy too, at least for a time – again, hardly an attractive scenario. One hopes that the USA will keep its distance, while less pockmarked parties such as Latin America and Europe may act as arbitrators. All the same, it is more likely that the transition will primarily be an internal affair.

Finally, a word on the regional context. As the transition progresses, Cuba will return more and more to its natural habitat: the Caribbean, Latin America, Florida. Now that the Cold War is over, Cuba will come to be an entirely new and much more serious threat to the neighbouring areas. In economic terms, the island will be reinserted primarily into the US sphere of influence, though without giving up the links that have been reinforced with Latin America and the European Community during the last few years. The geopolitical situation may thus be slightly more in equilibrium than it was before 1959. Given its potential and scale, Cuba may completely outstrip the other Caribbean islands in the crucial economic sector of tourism. In addition, (temporary?) large-scale emigration and the problem of the illegal economy will come to affect other countries more than in the past – especially if there is a crash landing with a loss of internal order. A weak transition government could be the ideal breeding ground for the growth of Cuba as yet another Caribbean centre for narcotrafficking, money laundering, and other mafia-like practices. Both the USA and the smaller powers in the region will then look back with nostalgia on the time when Cuba was still Castro’s Cuba, communist, and safely isolated.

Fin de Siècle

Cuba has long been the odd one out (or, depending on one’s perspective, the odd one in) in Latin America. It continues to be so today, as its leadership
continues stubbornly to refuse to join the wave of democratization which has swept the continent since the 1980s. Both for its domestic achievements and for its lonely and in a sense heroic posture against the USA, Cuba has long inspired enthusiasm and admiration throughout the Americas south of the Rio Grande. Cuba’s internationalism, too, while provoking concern among politicians of different leanings, served to boost the island’s status as a major power with a different agenda. Already prior to the collapse of the Soviet bloc this reputation had become tarnished, even among the Latin American and Caribbean Left. In the post-Cold War era, little is left of a Cuban model. Tales of economic catastrophe, the permanence of totalitarianism, and massive discontent now dominate the imagery of the Cuban revolution. As a point of reference and a model to emulate, Cuba has definitely lost whatever significance it once had.

As Cuba has become ideologically ever more isolated and economically in dire straits, the Cuban population continues to experience both economic hardship and political repression. Yet does it really make sense to think of Cuba as a ‘Society of Fear’, as this book’s title proposes? One may want to express reasonable doubt. There are no killing fields in Cuba, and it makes only limited sense to compare Castro’s Cuba to the slaughterhouses which have disgraced the Latin American continent in the postwar years. Cuba, too, has had its share of violence, of executions and disappearances, yet the figures were less gruesome than in many other places.

On the other hand, the degree of totalitarianism which has characterized the communist regime is probably unrivalled in modern Latin American history. Within Cuba, the revolution has generated a sterile intellectual climate in which only a few dare to volunteer creative ideas, and in which hardly anybody gets away with dissident opinions.

There are no independent labour unions, space to manoeuvre for churches is extremely limited, academic institutions are fully controlled, neutral NGOs do not exist, most dissidents have been deported or are harassed. The authoritarian regime now nearing its fortieth anniversary has definitively not produced conditions favourable to an early soft landing.

By repressing or exporting dissident organizations and individuals, the revolution has undermined, if not destroyed, the basis for an early national reconciliation. Abroad, there are the exile communities, the most vociferous of these with a dubious reputation for tolerance and democracy. Their abhorrence of reconciliation is not only dysfunctional but equally reminiscent of Castro’s own stubbornness. Credible mediators are hard to come by, and Castro, the one who should allow them to start doing their work, is not sending out any clear positive signals so far. For the moment, as the island remains in the doldrums, and as long as there is no such thing as a ‘post-Castro’ Cuba, one can only hope that Fidel, with his obsession with being a Historical Character in capitals, will settle for a negotiated, gradual, but significant, opening of his regime.
Meanwhile, Cuba suffers from an overly protracted \textit{fin de siècle}. The post-
1989 \textit{período especial} has provided a detrimental training school. One senses
uncertainty, regret, frustration, a loss of purpose and dignity. Many Cubans
now drift along without much ambition. This is a waste of precisely what
the Cuban revolution did supply for decades: relatively well-trained and
motivated human capital, and, perhaps even more, a sense of solidarity and
common destiny. Straying away from all this not only causes social disintegra-
tion and a loss of purpose today; it also threatens to usher in endemic
anomie, criminality and anarchy, should the present repressive institutions
collapse. The prospect is horrendous indeed.

The importance of a rapid and peaceful transition is obvious. The longer
the current malaise continues, the more of whatever economic, educational
and moral gains the revolution made will be lost. The longer the present
decay and demoralization continue, the more likely a crash landing, and the
more difficult the task of reconstruction and national reconciliation.

\textbf{Postscript}

The events of 1997 and 1998 have not given cause to alter the views expressed
in this chapter. The Pope’s visit to Cuba in January 1998 was an encounter
between two old men, each trying hard to show the world his personal
stamina and his unwavering faith in his own cause. It is difficult to establish
which of the two succeeded the best. For Castro, the Pope’s visit \textit{per se} was
useful in enhancing his own credibility in the world. Yet at the same time it
demonstrated how desperately he needs to boost this credibility, both at
home and abroad, and how enthusiastically many Cubans took this opportu-
tunity quietly to demonstrate perhaps not their longing for Catholicism but
certainly their longing for fundamental changes in society.

In the winter of 1998, former Chilean dictator Pinochet was imprisoned
in the United Kingdom. At the time of writing, it is not yet clear whether
he will indeed be put on trial for the atrocities committed under his rule.
Reactions to Pinochet’s arrest have been mixed in Chile. International human
rights organizations have welcomed a trial, stating that this is an important
signal for dictators all over the world that they cannot get away for ever with
their crimes. Laudable as this may be, there is a darker side to this story. If
dictators can no longer be sure of the guarantees given for a negotiated
transition, then why should they bother to cede power anyway? For Castro,
stepping down has now become an even less attractive proposition. Many
Cubans therefore, no matter how much they may welcome a possible trial of
Pinochet, must nurture mixed feelings regarding the consequences for their
own country. Thus, Cuba remains caught in a deadlock of tantalizingly slow
change.
Notes and References

Apart from the Postscript written in January 1999, this chapter was completed in February 1997, and is based on both literature and printed sources and on various visits to the island. My personal experiences in Cuba date from 1981, 1983, and from five field trips in the period 1994–97. Fragments of this paper were published in the Dutch press and were used in two documentaries made for Dutch television. I would like to thank Patricio Silva and the editors for their useful comments on the earlier version.

1. More detailed overviews of the revolutionary period are presented in Eckstein, Back from the Future, Pérez-Stable, Cuban Revolution, and Bengelsdorf, Problem of Democracy. Admirable journalistic accounts of the situation in the early 1990s appear in Oppenheimer, Castro’s Final Hour; and Fogel and Rosenthal, Fin de Siècle. Useful scholarly accounts on this period include Baloyra and Morris, Conflict and Change, Domínguez, Cuba: Order and Revolution, Mesa-Lago, Cuba after the Cold War, and Pérez-López, Cuba at a Crossroads.


3. Literally: ‘I’m playing the hooker, but I’m not a whore’.


5. See Moore, Castro, the Blacks and Africa, p. 28.

6. See particularly the book by the Afro-Cuban exile, Carlos Moore, Castro, the Blacks and Africa. Not surprisingly, his polemic position and work have provoked heated debate among pro- and anti-Castroites. In a short introduction to the book, Domínguez underscores several of Moore’s points; his own views are more cautious, though (cf. Domínguez, Cuba: Order and Revolution, pp. 7–8, 224–7, 483–5). For a severe criticism, see Brock and Cunningham, ‘Race’. Alejandro de la Fuente provides a thorough and cautious evaluation of the material advances made by the black Cubans during the revolution. See Fuente, ‘Race and inequality’; cf. Knight, ‘Ethnicity’.

7. Cf. the rhetorical use of the ‘shared’ past of slavery by Castro in his address to Nelson Mandela, in Matanzas (Mandela and Castro, How Far We Slaves Have Come). On the political significance of the official recognition of Afro-Cuban religions, see Moore, Castro, the Blacks and Africa, pp. 343–5; Oppenheimer, Castro’s Final Hour, pp. 337–55.

8. Untrue, to my mind; but what’s the use in saying so, at that point?

9. For a systematic analysis of the relevance of the Eastern European experiences for Cuba, see the reader edited by Mesa-Lago, Cuba after the Cold War, particularly the contributions by Linden, ‘Analogies’, and Mesa-Lago and Fabian, ‘Analogies’; see also Radu, Cuba’s transition.

10. Cf. O’Donnell, Schmitter and Whitehead, Transitions: Comparative Perspectives. For Cuba, see the literature mentioned in note 1; Schulz, Cuba and the Future, and Smith, ‘Cuba’s long reform’.


12. See Oostindie and Silva, ‘Europa en de CUBAANSE crisis’.


14. Much has been written on the narrow limits of expression in revolutionary Cuba. A useful summary is provided by Dopico Black, ‘Limits of expression’. Dissidents claim that the situation has anything but improved under the periodo especial.