

THE END OF “PLATTISMO”?

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When former President Bush set up his infamous “Commission for Assistance to a Free Cuba” in 2003, Washington’s firm belief was that it was the U.S.’ right and, indeed, its duty to decide Cuba’s political future. The Commission’s mandate amounted to nothing less than a program of government for a foreign country that had never asked for this kind of assistance. The Bush Administration even appointed its own modern-day version of a U.S. Pro Consul, called the Cuba Transition Coordinator. The Cuban government, quite unsurprisingly, described his mission as “part of a broader U.S. plan for Cuba’s annexation,” and well-known anti-Castro activists said that the Commission would only legitimize internal repression.

The above example illustrates that, until December 17, 2014, U.S.-Cuba policy essentially adhered to the Platt Amendment philosophy from 1901, which allowed the U.S. to intervene unilaterally in Cuban affairs. But this philosophy (known in Spanish as *plattismo* or *anexionismo*), so crucial in Cuban political discussions since the beginning of the twentieth century, has influenced both sides. On the one hand, *plattismo* has been the U.S.’ justification for the embargo, and has also been employed by Cuban dissidents and exile leaders, whom the Cuban government believes to support annexation. On the other hand, it has also been used by the Cuban government to justify its repression of most of its internal opposition. A major dividing line in Cuban civil society has been between defenders and opponents of the embargo:

the former were automatically considered enemies of the fatherland, whereas the latter were tolerated under certain conditions.

In the post-December 2014 context, the biggest questions are, first, whether the era of *plattismo* has finally come to a close and, second, how Cuba's economic and political system will be affected by the gradual lifting of the embargo and President Obama's recognition of its complete historic failure.

The Transition Paradigm in Democracy Theory

When Samuel Huntington introduced his concept of “the third democratic wave” in 1991,ⁱ followed by Fukuyama's “End of History,”ⁱⁱ the conventional wisdom among mainstream democracy theorists was that the Western liberal democratic model would be universalized as the “final form of human government,” to quote a key phrase from Fukuyama (1992). Much has happened since then, as clearly illustrated by the quite different analysis Fukuyama presents in his latest book, published twenty-two years after *The End of History*.ⁱⁱⁱ

Linz and Stepan (1996)^{iv} provide a classic theoretical framework for determining whether Cuba is undergoing a transition toward a more or less liberal democratic political structure, and to what degree, irrespective of the new U.S.-Cuba policy. They identify *five arenas of democracy: economic society, civil society, political society, rule of law*, and finally a *state bureaucracy* that is “usable by the new democratic government.” Their basic argument is that a stronger private sector in the economy will have spillover effects, leading to more political pluralism and, ultimately, more democracy.

Perhaps of more relevance to Cuban studies is the work of János Kornai (1992),^v whose classic tome on the political economy of Communism was modelled after the USSR and outlines

options for transition from a socialist or communist system. Kornai theorizes that changes in power and ideology must precede lasting economic transformations. Cuba's reform process, however, has until now been so clearly focused on economic rather than political transformations that Kornai's causality paradigm makes little sense in this case.

Two of Kornai's criteria for political reform, however, are of particular relevance when studying possible Cuban transformations in response to new U.S. policies. These include the prospect of a more widespread and intense opening to capitalist countries and the possible domino effect of international examples. Regarding Kornai's criteria for transformations toward a market economy, signs to watch for would be the rise of the private sector and, more generally, what he calls "the incoherence of the tendencies to reform." According to Kornai, "[the] Communist Party, amid the processes of reform, wants to retain its monopoly of power, but in the meantime, it releases political forces that immediately demand the abandonment of this monopoly."^{vi} In other words, even a careful reform process may undermine the entire system.

Among the many good analyses of factors leading to the USSR's disintegration, UK historian Archie Brown offers one of the most frequently quoted.^{vii} He, too, highlights the importance of the international context: while Cold War tensions invariably worked to the advantage of hardliners within the USSR and other Soviet bloc regimes, the end of the Cold War weakened the Ministry of Defense and the KGB's institutional interests and led to the rapid decline in the anti-reform influence of conservative Communists. One fundamental issue concerned the disappearance of the historic enemy image—an issue that is highly relevant for Cuba to the degree that its relations to the U.S. are being normalized.

Democratic Fatigue: The End of Transition Paradigm?

World events that took place after Linz and Stepan developed their analytic transition framework may have made the concept of “democratic transition” an increasingly unfit description of reality. Oxford professor Stein Ringen (2009)^{viii} argues that the world’s democracies are failing to live up to their ideals, endangering fundamental democratic freedoms and popular participation and making people increasingly distrustful of democratic political systems. He is particularly concerned with how economic power and inequality undermine the democratic principles of political equality. In this sense, his fears herald a new wave of *democratic pessimism*.

The ideological use of the transition paradigm has also increasingly been contested. The failure of “pro-democracy interventions” (e.g., Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya), the issue of what went wrong in Syria, and the more recent emergence of the Islamic State (IS) paint a bleak picture of democratic transitions. Laurence Whitehead has laid this out well in his 2008 article on the example of Iraq,^{ix} where he shows the contradiction between pro-democracy objectives and anti-democratic results, in what he calls “the dark side of democracy promotion” and “coercive democracy imposition.” This is presumably also what the neo-conservative Bush administration experienced with its failed Cuba transition project.

As Whitehead concludes: “What the pivotal experience of coercive democratization on this scale already demonstrates, however, is that when regime change is not mainly driven and controlled from within (as it was in Spain, Poland and South Africa), the theoretical models derived from existing academic literature are unlikely to provide much helpful guidance.” His conclusion seems particularly pertinent for US policy towards Cuba.

In a significant attempt to contextualize these new trends within a broader reexamination of the democratic transition paradigm, Thomas Carothers (2002)^x went through five core

transition assumptions that were less and less present, concluding that “of the nearly 100 countries considered as transitional in recent years, only a relatively small number—probably fewer than 20—are clearly en route to becoming successful, well-functioning democracies or at least have made some democratic progress and still enjoy a positive dynamic of democratization” (p. 9). This *democratic fatigue* is observable in most parts of the world, including the Latin American leftist regimes with close links to Cuba. The paradox of this situation is that the popular regimes coming into power on the continent over the latest fifteen years are often born out of civil society movements protected by more independent judiciaries and human rights institutions. Nonetheless, the movements themselves tend to ignore these same institutions upon winning executive power.

Besides casting doubt on the liberal, democratic role models of this world, the multiple crises and failed pro-democratic interventions have also strengthened alternative political role models by comparison. In the words of Whitehead (referring to the 2008 financial crisis): “The leading candidates to recover first and most fully appeared to be the most independent and successful non-Western economies, with the Chinese economy leading the way. Beijing was one of the most effective promoters of a countercyclical ‘stimulus’ package led by public investment. But China was not alone. Signs are appearing of a wider breach between the excessively indebted Western democracies and some leading emerging-market countries where ruling elites could respond to the crisis by favouring *developmental semi-authoritarianism*.”^{xi}

The emergence of this *second world bloc* of more or less authoritarian market economies has provided a highly relevant reference point to countries like Cuba, demonstrating economic and political development different from a liberal market economy. Some of the most significant expressions of this bloc have come from formally democratic countries in Latin America,

starting with the Venezuela-led ALBA (of which Cuba was a founding member) and followed by more general regional blocs like UNASUR and CELAC. The new regional institutional architecture in Latin America has provided Cuba with a very strong diplomatic tool against U.S. pressure, which in and of itself was probably one of the driving forces behind Obama's desire for normalization with Cuba.^{xiii} One important question for the future will be whether the new situation may lure Cuba back to the OAS—for instance, in order to get much-needed access to the Inter-American Development Bank and other international credit institutions.

What Political Changes May Be Expected in Cuba as a Consequence of a Thaw in its Relations with the U.S.?

The U.S. Perspective: The U.S.' starting point is to insist on concepts like representative democracy, rule of law, and human rights, all while referencing the Inter-American Democratic Charter. However, the U.S. continues to be limited by the "Platt Amendment Syndrome." Much of the respectful language used in President Obama's speech may indicate a wish to go beyond this limit, but some statements by State Department officials conducting the first round of negotiations in Havana in January 2015 suggested otherwise. These officials asserted that the aim behind the embargo remains democracy promotion; only their tactics have changed. Such statements are obviously part of an effort to minimize resistance from the pro-embargo hardliners in Congress, a position echoed by the toughest anti-Castro dissidents within Cuba. Such a stance, though, contributes to harden Havana's position. In Cuban civil society, the biggest difference lies between those who expect the U.S. to *negotiate* a regime change in Cuba and those who regard any political evolution in Cuba as a sovereign responsibility of the Cuban people. As pointed out by Lenier Gonzales of the new think-tank *Cuba Posible*, the two parallel

processes currently being undertaken must not be confused: on one side is a dialogue between two countries to reconstruct bilateral relations; on the other is a national, sovereign process *among Cubans* (government and non-government) to construct a political and economic model that will “re-articulate the national consensus.”^{xiii} New pressure from the U.S. to topple the Havana regime will definitely be counterproductive. The balancing act between attempting to avoid provoking both the U.S. Congress and the Cuban government is one of the major dilemmas the U.S. administration faces in handling the normalization process with Cuba.

The Cuban Perspective: The starting point for the Cubans remains that the new relationship must be based on principles of non-intervention and the international recognition of Cuba’s national sovereignty. For those who were in doubt, only three days after the historic announcement, President Castro made it clear in his speech to the National Assembly that the rapprochement with the U.S. did not imply that Cuba would renounce its socialist political system. But one phrase from his December 17 announcement has been seen as an important signal: “we should learn the art of living together in a civilized form with our differences.” Leading Cuban-American scholar Jorge I. Domínguez has emphasized another part of Castro’s televised speech, where he reiterates his willingness to dialogue about all of the deep U.S.-Cuban differences regarding national sovereignty, democracy, human rights, and foreign policy. As pointed out by Roberto Veiga of *Cuba Possible*, these elements of Castro’s announcement could indicate a willingness to accept more pluralism among a variety of national actors.^{xiv}

For many Cubans, the normalization process deals a heavy blow to the image of the U.S. as an eternal enemy, thereby threatening to deprive the Cuban leadership of its principal justification for repressing civil liberties. An internal counter-reaction has been quick to emerge,

causing the most orthodox to urge party cadres to be particularly vigilant against any effort to question party discipline.^{xv} It is too early to assess the final effects of this reduced enmity.

The role of the Cuban *civil society* will be crucial during the normalization process. President Obama insisted in his speech that the governments must be accompanied by civil society when meeting in Panama for the April Summit of the Americas. The Cuban government has shown its willingness to accept a broader representation of NGOs at this inter-governmental event than it has done before, and non-governmental leaders are working actively to test how far this commitment goes. An important aspect of this concerns the prospect for a relatively pluralistic Cuban civil society being integrated into an Inter-American (particularly Latin American) non-governmental community. The most implacable regime opponents are, of course, also testing the new limits, as occurred when more than 200 dissidents met in January and issued a “roadmap” for continued U.S.-Cuban dialogue, which emphasized the need for human rights improvements in Cuba.

The bottom line, as pointed out by Chaguaceda,^{xvi} is that U.S.-Cuban normalization does not automatically translate to Cuban democratization, but may result in very interesting scenarios for more economic and political pluralism emerging from processes unfolding within the island. The Cuban government will no doubt be put to the test frequently in the time to come. Now that most ordinary Cubans have gained a glimmer of hope for a better future, they will probably be less willing than before to accept “imperialism” as the source of all of the island’s problems.

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- ⁱ Huntington, Samuel P. 1991. *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Twentieth Century*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press.
- ⁱⁱ Fukuyama, Francis. 1992. *The End of History and the Last Man*. New York: Free Press.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Fukuyama, Francis. 2014. *Political Order and Political Decay: From the Industrial Revolution to the Globalization of Democracy*. London: Profile Books Ltd.
- ^{iv} Linz, Juan J. and Alfred Stepan. 1996. *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation: Southern Europe, South America, and Post-communist Europe*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- ^v Kornai, János. 1992. *The Socialist System: The Political Economy of Communism*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- ^{vi} Ibid. p. 571.
- ^{vii} Brown, Archie. 2009. *The Rise and Fall of Communism*. HarperCollins.
- ^{viii} Ringen, Stein. 2009. *What Democracy Is For: On Freedom and Moral Government*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- ^{ix} Whitehead, Laurence. 2009. "Losing the Force? The 'Dark Side' of Democratization after Iraq." *Democratization*, 16, no. 2 (April): 215-242.
- ^x Carothers, Thomas. 2002. "The End of the Transition Paradigm." *Journal of Democracy*, 13, no.1 (January): 5-21.
- ^{xi} Whitehead, Laurence (2010), op. cit. p. 56 (italics added).
- ^{xii} For further analysis of this question, see the contribution to this web forum by Andrés Serbin.
- ^{xiii} This quotation is taken from the new website of the organization *Cuba Posible* (www.cubaposible.net), and the first issue of the journal published there with the title, "Cuba y

Estados Unidos: Los dilemas del cambio,” containing a conversation between leading Cuban intellectuals on this issue (p. 40).

^{xiv} Ibid.

^{xv} Observation based on conversations in Havana, January 2015.

^{xvi} Chaguaceda, Armando. 2015. “Entre el deshielo y la democratización.” *Letras Libres* (February): 36-38.