



**SCHOLARLY PERSPECTIVES ON IMPLICATIONS OF NORMALIZATION OF U.S.-
CUBAN RELATIONS: INTRODUCTION TO AN AU/SSRC WEB FORUM**

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For longtime observers of Cuba-U.S. relations, and for anyone concerned with Cuban affairs, D-17 has become universally recognized as shorthand for the date in 2014 that Presidents Barack Obama and Raúl Castro appeared on television simultaneously to announce their intention to restore diplomatic ties and endeavor to normalize relations between their two countries. Catalyzed by a year and a half of secret negotiations directed by senior confidants of the two presidents, bypassing normal diplomatic channels, the unexpected announcements provoked elation in some quarters and consternation in others. After 55 years of estrangement and hostility, the two presidents acknowledged that an alternative path based on mutual respect was both possible and desirable. To move in that direction, their statements outlined a series of measures that had been taken that very day, including an exchange of long-imprisoned spies and the release of USAID contractor Alan Gross from prison in Cuba. President Castro agreed to free a number of imprisoned dissidents and President Obama committed his administration to take a series of executive actions that would loosen the infamous embargo, even while the embargo itself would remain in effect, since by law only the Congress could fully abolish what the Cubans have long referred to as the blockade. It was widely recognized that this was improbable given Republican control of both legislative chambers, and that indeed the Republican majority in

Congress was unlikely to confirm an ambassadorial nominee. But the U.S. President's ability to effect meaningful change unilaterally was clear to everyone, and the significance of the measures he articulated was "game-changing."

The devil, of course, is as always in the details, and during the three months or so since the historic announcement, senior diplomats from the two countries have met at least three times in an effort to negotiate agreements on a wide range of issues related to the restoration of diplomatic relations. Not surprisingly, these conversations have not produced instant results, and both sides have repeatedly introduced demands that they know will be problematic for their counterparts. But this was to be expected, and by most accounts the diplomatic exchanges have been constructive. All signs suggest that the momentum toward restoring diplomatic relations is advancing steadily. Yet the path toward "normalization" is replete with obstacles, and as Philip Brenner points out in his contribution to this series of essays, it may well be that there never has existed a "normal" state of affairs regarding U.S.-Cuba relations. Despite widespread relief and even optimism in some quarters that had given up on the prospect of change in Cuba policy during the last two years of the Obama administration, a long road lies ahead.

Countless op-ed pieces have been written since D-17, and many of them have been very insightful, but as befits the genre they have largely provided soundbites rather than deep analysis of the implications of efforts by both regimes to change the terms of the bilateral relationship. The essays presented in this forum, sponsored by the Center for Latin American and Latino Studies at American University and the Cuba Program at the Social Science Research Council, and edited by Eric Hershberg and William M. LeoGrande, aim to delve more deeply into the ramifications of changes in U.S.-Cuba relations, drawing on the scholarship of the contributors

and on the substantial body of academic research that can inform our understanding of the present conjuncture and potential trajectories in the future.

The analyses encompass a variety of themes, ranging from U.S.-Cuba relations to hemispheric dynamics to the consequences for ongoing political, societal and economic change in Cuba. What does it mean to contemplate “normalization” between two countries with such a fraught history of interaction? How might experiences of “normalization” between the U.S. and other countries with which it sought to reduce longstanding hostilities provide lessons for those who seek to understand the likely course of events involving the U.S. and Cuba? To what degree does D-17 and its aftermath alter the landscape of international relations in the western hemisphere? How might Cuban cultural production and everyday life engage differently with U.S. audiences and with members of the Cuba diaspora? Will rapprochement between the U.S. and Cuba have consequences for Cuba’s political trajectory? What impact will changed bilateral relations and a relaxation of U.S. sanctions have on ongoing efforts to “update” and perhaps transform Cuba’s economic model?

Our hope is that this web forum can enrich debates about these and other matters. We are especially pleased to include contributions from leading experts from Europe, Latin America, and Canada, as well as from the U.S. and Cuba. The essays are intended to inform the work of researchers, students, and practitioners, as well as the general public, and we encourage readers to download and distribute them widely.