

The Generation Gap

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Abstract: For years there has been talk and warnings about stark generational differences in Cuba. Now the polls and social unrest signal a clear fracture between the old and the young. This may bring hope to some, but the lack of democratic values, imbalanced culture and increased radicalization of Cubans are a bad omen for the future. This essay focuses on the gap between generations, and ideas, and why this isn't particularly helpful to build a democratic consensus in Cuba.

On July 11th a large number of Cubans jumped to the streets in an unprecedented political protest. According to witnesses and the available footage, many of them were young. For years there's been talk and warnings about stark generational differences in Cuba. Now the polls and social unrest confirm the fracture between the old and the young. This may bring hope to some but the lack of democratic values in Cuba's political culture and increased radicalization of Cubans are a bad omen for the future.

A Tale of Rupture vs. Continuity

The conceptualization of generations in Cuba can be as much political as academic. Different schools of thought prioritize generational continuity while others focus on the rupture factor.¹ This resembles the government propaganda in the island and its insistence on political continuance opposite to radical change². For the purposes of this article, we'll address to what extent younger generations are avoiding continuity and embracing rupture in a new Cuban Zeitgeist.

For decades the symbology of the revolution has been mostly focused on the rebels that overthrew dictator Fulgencio Batista, and especially on the figure of Fidel Castro. This failed to transmit a sense of political belonging to newer generations, often subject to the whims of their predecessors. It took 60 years for a new generation to assume power on the island, and yet it happened through previously well-established professional ties and within limits. Praising the "historical generation" of the revolution is a necessary ritual for young and old people with political aspirations in the state. The social and institutional dynamics that prevent change in Cuba are rooted so deep that a real transformation requires more than presidential political will, but the empowering of reformers in the government.

Young advocates for economic and political reform (even with left-leaning inclinations) struggle to ascend the bureaucratic ladder and often are ostracized from any position of power. Natural leadership is perceived as problematic and disincentivized. In the past, universities have received

orders to identify “negative leaders” and track their behavior. The Communist Party (PCC) controls the budget and leadership of the Communist Youth (UJC) and they control the Federation of University Students. These are the only legal organizations for the young in Cuba. The protests of July 11th found large portions of the youth disengaged from these institutions, which today lack credibility and real operability.

Given the government's reluctance in the past to extend the Internet, the COVID-19 social distancing measures caught the island in the worst position for political stability. Enough connectivity to access a highly politicized social media environment but not sufficient to study or work from home at a massive scale. For many, social media is their only contact with reality, and political activism the only control they have right now on their future. New leaderships are being shaped online, far more effective than their counterparts in the institutions.

The desire for change starts at home; the youth only need to see the poor fate of their parents and grandparents to pursue some kind of change. Despite a series of promises and periods of hope, the government's reluctance to reform the economy and domestic politics only aggravates distrust in the future. In this scenario, the president's support for continuity was not only a mistake but made July 11th inevitable.

Numbers (and Immigrants) Don't Lie

Quantitative information about political preferences and social behavior can be scarce and hard to find in Cuba. Independent polling is not permitted (though a few have been conducted) and the information gathered by the Communist Party is for their eyes only. In order to understand generational changes, we have to look beyond national borders and observe the behavior of migrants. Florida is the largest hub of Cuban immigrants and the information collected on new arrivals can tell us much on what's going on in the island. Valuable data from Florida and Cuba will shed some light on generational differences.

A survey³ conducted in the fall of 2016 by NORC at the University of Chicago provided a rare glimpse of Cuban public opinion. According to the research “*older Cubans are about twice as likely as those in younger age cohorts to have a positive outlook on the current economy. Twenty-three percent of Cubans age 65 and older say the economy is excellent or good compared with 1 in 10 younger Cubans*”. This gap in expectations and government accountability related to the economy comes from 2016, before the normalization of relations was axed by the Trump administration and COVID-19 paralyzed the already fragile economy. We can expect a bigger difference now.

The Florida International University 2020 Cuba Poll⁴ provides data on generational differences within the diaspora. Hardline isolationist policies towards Cuba are embraced by the old, with 68% of pre-1995 immigrants supporting the embargo compared to 54% of the other immigrants. Maximum pressure policy to promote regime-change in the island has 64% support from immigrants before 1995 and 59% after. Old grudges and personal trauma play a role in this phenomenon, but also the long-lasting myth that political change is just one push away.

The 2016 presidential election was a catalyst for the political preference of Cuban Americans. The Trump administration supported far-right influencers in social media, most of them young, and achieved new levels of social and political mobilization. The numbers changed drastically since 2016: the 72% support for diplomatic ties fell to 59% in 2020 and the 34% backing of the US embargo increased to the same 59%. The trend of immigrants moving towards Democrats and supporting normalization was effectively reversed. Today, the Republican machine is highly effective recruiting new arrivals in Miami; 76% of registered voters who entered between 2010-2015 reported registering as Republicans. To this date, the Democratic Party has shown little interest in breaking this machinery for radicalizing immigrants towards conservative policies in domestic and foreign policy issues.

One of the conclusions of the poll is how *“the Republican party is receiving an infusion of new energy from the most recently arrived Cuba-Americans”*. While the NORC survey suggested years before that most Cubans with a desire to migrate to the US were young and supported normalization, new arrivals in Florida appear to adapt quickly to the conservative political context and embrace maximum pressure on their peers in the island as legitimate means to an end. The lack of civic and democratic values in Cuban education and public sphere contribute to this lack of empathy once Cubans are out.

Cuban Vulnerabilities

The Trumpification of US policy towards Cuba and its cruel effect on everyday life had a generational impact on the island. Previous optimism and hope were replaced by pessimistic inertia and increasing efforts to migrate by younger generations. COVID-19 also took away their hope for the future. On July 11th we saw a glimpse of the dissatisfaction and desperation of many. Such a vulnerable situation doesn't come without perils.

With increased access to the Internet, many young Cubans, mostly from urban areas, are shaping their political ideas based on foreign information provided by friends and family abroad. This influence mostly comes from cities like Miami and Madrid, epicenters of conservative policies in the United States and Europe. Such interactions create a perception among young Cubans that Florida-style democracy is the paradigm of American politics or that the People's Party in Spain represents the European model for political and economic development. Social democratic ideas from Nordic countries or the movement for democratic socialism in the United States are rejected by Cuban authorities and mostly ignored by newer generations with a desire to fit global political trends.

Still amazed with having access to social media, Cubans have little recognition of the hazards of political interaction online. This is not unique to Cuba. In many countries, we can see how echo chambers and alternate realities on the Internet support preconceived ideas and further radicalize groups with different political inclinations and age. The Cuban government has focused on controlling access and speech on the Internet, first by cutting off social media when deemed necessary and second with Decree-Law 35 that prohibits the dissemination of false news and incitement to violence. Anything can be considered false or inciting by the authorities under Cuba's fragile rule of law.

Since the Cuban government depended on Fidel Castro's charismatic leadership for decades, the science of political communication is often disregarded as a bourgeoisie entrapment. While older generations maintain overall loyalty to the party, new communist leaders are not particularly captivating to the young and cannot compete against dissidents with international experience. Pandering to the Cuban people while reinforcing their pre-existing beliefs is common practice nowadays on both sides. This battle for hearts and minds has a target audience inexperienced in the tricks of populism and ripe for demagoguery. The digital arena provides little incentive for critical thinking or nuances.

The US embargo deserves particular consideration when analyzing the generational gap. Older generations remember a life with Soviet support and relative abundance in Cuba while the youngest only know the crisis and the everlasting justification of the US embargo. Even when US sanctions are not targeted to government officials but impact every Cuban citizen, not all ages place equal blame for their suffering on the US government. Younger generations that have grown up constantly hearing Cuban officials blame the US embargo are more skeptical of this explanation for Cuba's economic ills.

Young intellectuals, journalists, and activists, are aware that the use of economic pressure to achieve political goals is not a legitimate practice in the eyes of international law, but they still avoid denouncing it (or at least denounce it less often than domestic issues) to avoid siding with the Communist Party. Over time, the Cuban government's abuse of the embargo to explain domestic hardships provoked a rejection and underestimation of the effect of sanctions. Now that the US continues its focus on provoking maximum hardships among Cubans, mentioning the embargo is like one of Aesop's Fables: the government has cried wolf too often. The protesters of July 11th probably didn't see much US responsibility for their misfortune.

We can find a direct correlation in Cuba between economic scarcity and political unrest, which explains US determination to continue massive sanctions against the nation. As explained by a US government official in a famous memorandum⁵ from 1960: "*The only foreseeable means of alienating internal support is through disenchantment and disaffection based on economic dissatisfaction and hardship*". The events of July probably corroborate and incentivize the tactic of economic asphyxiation, as inhumane and disrespectful of international law as it is. The Biden administration lacks a policy towards Cuba but instead prioritizes its electoral strategy in Florida for the upcoming midterm election. In practice, the Trump administration hasn't ended for Cubans and the strategy for regime-change is counting on the generational gap to achieve its objective.

This context of poor government management and external sanctions makes it hard to determine where the embargo ends and regime responsibility begins, a question that only the end of sanctions would answer. The regime-change activities sponsored by the US government also begs the question: how much of July 11th was genuine and how much manufactured by external influence? Certainly, extended economic hardship and increased radicalization can brutalize socio-political behavior and lead to violent extremism. A destabilized Cuba, fractured by ideologies and generational differences 90 miles away from the US is a new phenomenon that could have unforeseen effects.

There is little interest in either the US or Cuban governments for doing the hard work of cultivating democratic values and moderation to pursue a national consensus in Cuba. While most actors remain focused on politics, others take advantage of a vulnerable moment. Every day evangelical churches expand in Cuba and their socially conservative agenda targets every generation. We have seen before what happens when communist rule starts to collapse; religion fills the ideological vacuum as it did in post-Soviet countries. The US taxpayer is already helping fund these activities, in the last decade [Evangelical Christian Humanitarian Outreach for Cuba](#) has received millions of dollars from USAID for projects that combine religion with political activism.⁶

Recently, the Cuban government proposed a Family Code that legalizes equal marriage in the island. Conservative groups and particularly evangelical churches are mobilized against it, just as they were in 2018 when they forced the government to remove this guarantee from the draft constitution. There is little attention in Washington on the fact that US taxpayers are funding a conservative anti-LGTBQ agenda in Cuba.

One last factor that contributes to social unrest is the behavior of the Cuban government. With a population thirsty for change, any decent politician would embark on a program of reforms to increase support. The Communist Party has promised those changes again and again but delivered very little. When Raúl Castro assumed power in 2008, he began a process of limited changes celebrated by the people as a positive sign, but these were later slowed down by hardliners within the party. The current president Miguel Diaz Canel is vulnerable, lacking the symbolic power (and possibly the capability) to go much further than Raúl Castro. Institutional dynamics and the strengthening of Cold War ideologues during the Trump years have diminished the possibilities for internal change.

A positive signal to win back the hearts and minds of Cubans would be announcing an inclusive approach towards Cuban exiles and the opposition, celebrating national unity instead of exacerbating on political differences. Cuban authorities are doing the opposite, further radicalizing its people and alienating the youth that protested on July 11th.

Zeitgeist

The protesters on July 11th probably felt like the vanguard of the nation. After all, when Fidel Castro assaulted a military compound in 1953 with 135 men and women, most of the youth in Santiago de Cuba were celebrating the summer carnival. A small group can definitely change the course of Cuban history, as has happened time and time again. But attributing generational representation to a specific group of Cubans or specific generation means to disenfranchise others. Leaders of the Communist Youth and young dissidents have something in common; they both claim to be the voice of Cuban youth and consider themselves at the frontline of the nation's future. Both can't be right.

US media focus on opposition activists from urban areas, giving little or no voice to rural groups or non-opposition activists. This behavior mimics the Cuban government's practice of giving voice only to their followers. The fact is that Cuba is a nation divided by generations and ideas, some supporting and some against communist rule in the island. A well-known activist arrested

and abused on July 11th is Leonardo Negrin,⁷ a 21-year-old socialist student from Havana opposed to both the US embargo and government repression of protesters, certainly is not the average freedom fighter imagined by political elites in the United States. Reality often surpasses foreign expectations and stereotypes of Cuba. Among the extensive footage of the protest, we can find parents and grandparents. There is an inclination for criticism among the young but the protest didn't seem generational per se nor can be simplified in its objectives and social composition.

The generational gap is a reality but it is hard to measure how far and deep it extends. Communists still have youth organizations with followers, some mobilized by self-interest and others by true belief. The future of the government in Havana depends on its ability to transform itself and rebuild a national consensus. The first step would be to recognize that change represents an opportunity to renew its mandate, but the Communist Party remains obtuse.

With every generation the alternatives are more biased and extreme between the left and the right, but the challenges faced by government and opposition supporters have long remained the same. Communists are unable to combine the pursuit of social justice with democratic norms and economic prosperity. Many dissidents can't reconcile their pursuit of individual freedoms with the preservation of national sovereignty. Ironically, the National Hero Jose Marti had a vision for Cuba that included individual freedoms and independence, particularly from the United States. The habit of cherry-picking individual and national liberties like groceries appears to be endemic.

The opposition gains momentum with social disobedience that highlights generational differences, but this has its limits. Government critics can recruit effectively in the current crisis, but appear to depend on social distress to be effective. Despite claims, July 11th wasn't planned by any political group, but was mostly a spontaneous mobilization. Dissidents don't have a governing plan for winning hearts and minds; most of them don't go further than advocating to overthrow the government. What the opposition will bring to the table as an alternative to communist rule is another question, but so far there has been little scrutiny of their agenda. How the Communist Party will react to these and new challenges also remains to be seen.

Given the radical nature of many among the competing political forces in Cuba, how different would it be for the Cuban people to replace an authoritarian communist state with an authoritarian right-wing government? Are the far-right and far-left the only alternatives, or just the most incentivized right now? What is the US responsibility for the misery of Cubans and what is true "democracy promotion?" Generational differences and rejection of the Communist Party are on the rise, but not necessarily the case with democratic values. Distracted by the recent problems of the government, social scientists should pay more attention to the radical behavior coming from all sides and lack of empathy due to increased polarization. The gap among generations and ideas won't be particularly helpful to build a democratic consensus in Cuba.

Notes

¹ In the beginning of the century, the Cuban government started a campaign for a "change of mentality". The initiative was soon dissolved but many researchers attempted to understand the dynamics of social change and thought in Cuba. An example of this is "*Generations and*

mentalities: is there a generational consciousness among Cuban young people?” that includes a recollection of different schools of thought regarding generational differences in Cuba. Available at

<http://biblioteca.clacso.edu.ar/ar/libros/cuba/cips/caudales05/Caudales/ARTICULOS/ArticulosPDF/0107D006.pdf>

² President Miguel Díaz-Canel’s unofficial slogan is “we are continuity” and the 8th Congress of the Communist Party was known as “the summit of continuity”. An example can be found here: <https://twitter.com/DiazCanelB/status/1384114325367918598?s=20>

³ Available at: <https://www.norc.org/Research/Projects/Pages/survey-of-cuban-public-opinion.aspx>

⁴ FIU Cuba Poll available at: <https://cri.fiu.edu/research/cuba-poll/2020-fiu-cuba-poll.pdf>

⁵ Memorandum from the Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs (Mallory) to the Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs (Rubottom). <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1958-60v06/d499>

⁶ For more information on the Evangelical Christian Humanitarian Outreach for Cuba see the research of journalist Tracey Eaton in his blog. Available at <https://cubamoneyproject.com/2018/11/20/god-usaid-and-cuba/>

⁷ A testimony of Leonardo’s arrest and harassment in jail is available at <https://jovencuba.com/abusos-manifestantes/>