

TRANSITION AND EMIGRATION: POLITICAL GENERATIONS IN CUBA

Silvia Pedraza

Ever since Fidel Castro became seriously ill and ceded power to his brother Raúl in July 2006, Cubans who live outside the island have been hoping and expecting a transition to democracy to take place in the island. I myself see the transfer of power as the first step in such a transition (see Sibaja 2007).

In July-August 2007, I traveled to Cuba for three weeks, to engage in a preliminary reconnaissance for a future study contrasting the relationship of the major faiths—Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, Santería—to the revolutionary process. I traveled the full length of the island, from the city of Havana to its outskirts (such as Rincón, Regla, Alamar, Bejucal, San José de las Lajas), to the city of Pinar del Río, and then on to Santa Clara, Camagüey, Santiago de Cuba, and back. During this time, I sounded many persons regarding their perspective on the future. As a sociologist who is used to being sensitive to the difference that social class, race, sexual orientation, age, religious persuasion, and political generations make in structuring attitudes and experiences, I was careful to speak with Cubans who represented all these various social characteristics. In effect, I duplicated the methodology of my past work, as reported in my book, *Political Disaffection in Cuba's Revolution and Exodus*. In that study, I interviewed, in-depth, 120 Cubans who left Cuba from 1959 to 2005 (Pedraza 2007), as well as engaged in substantial participant observation among the refugees in many different cities. This time my focus was those in the island who never left.

Given my past work, I was also conscious of the importance that developing a trust relationship makes in be-

ing able to conduct honest interviews in a highly politicized situation where there is still fear. Hence, in my recent travels I spoke with many Cubans with whom I had been well-acquainted during past trips, who were also able to “broker” a trust relationship with others for me, as well as with new acquaintances when the situation allowed us to quickly express ourselves candidly.

I also traveled everywhere I went by bus and stayed with family or friends or in a “Room for Rent”—all of which was made possible by the camping and back-packing skills I developed when I was young. Traveling the full length of the country by bus, eating what ordinary people ate, bathing as they did, living like them, watching TV with them, sharing a day at the beach—all enabled people to speak their real attitudes and feelings. Hence, while the sample is not a randomly drawn sample, it is what Anselm Strauss (1987) called “theoretical sampling”—where one chooses the respondents according to the theoretical question asked. My respondents included the young, middle aged, and old; religious people as well as non-believers; Catholics, Protestants, Jews; artists and professionals, such as architects, doctors, health care workers, doctors, priests; workers and musicians, taxi drivers, *campesinos* (peasants); black, white, and mulatto Cubans. In this presentation, I quote from 25 of the many more people I spoke with. Since it is not possible at present to tape interviews in Cuba, I wrote down the most salient aspects of each day's conversation at night in a note book, to preserve the flavor of people's answers. To maintain the confidentiality of their answers, I have changed many of their names as well as any other identifying information, except in the case of public intel-

lectuals who want their opinions to be attached to their names.¹

Overall, I did not find major differences in the attitudes expressed among the different races, or among people in *el interior*, the provinces, and Havana, although only Havana is really a cosmopolitan city. The major difference I found was by *generations*—especially political generations. As defined in the work of Karl Mannheim (1952); Luis Aguilar-León (1958); Maurice Zeitlin (1966), Egon F. Kunz (1983, 1971); and myself (2007), political generations are constituted by people of the same age, who in their adolescence, their coming to adulthood, experienced dramatic historical events that marked their consciousness. Demographers would call it the interaction of a cohort effect (those born at the same time, who are the same age) with a period effect (those who lived through dramatic historical moments that marked them, particularly when they were young).

The four major groups that emerged were:

1. people who are now quite old (70 and over) who made the revolution through their own efforts and substantial sacrifices (at times, the death of a loved one). They participated in its civic glory. I call them the Generation of the Glorious Revolution;
2. people who are middle-aged (roughly 50–70), and who were in their early teens when the revolution first triumphed, who had lived the early years of the revolution as years full of idealism and hope—*“los tiempos bonitos de la revolución.”* I call them the Generation of Idealism and Sacrifice.
3. people who are adults in their late 30s and 40s, whose coming of age into adulthood coincided with the “special period.” They lived the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe (sometimes while living and studying there) and the economic and political crisis that resulted. I call them the Generation of the Collapse; and
4. people who are now young, in their 20s or adolescents, who were born during the “special period” itself and for whom the glory of the revolution is

only a story they have been repeatedly told, while they have known only poverty, as well as the wish to be free. I call them the Generation of Unbelief.

EXPECTATIONS REGARDING CHANGE

The first question I asked was, what changes they expected would take place in Cuba. Quite consistently, I found that they were not expecting great changes to take place. As Berta and Isaac (pseudonyms), a Jewish couple in their 50s whom I met in a synagogue in the provinces put it, “It is quite difficult for things to change here.” In Santiago de Cuba, Manuel (pseudonym), a truck driver, whom I had seen bow to police authority, expressed it more emphatically and bitterly: *“Aquí lo tienen todo muy bien amarrado”* (“Here they have everything quite neatly tied up”). Referring to Raúl Castro, he added: “For as long as there is one of them left, there will be no change.”

When I spoke with a Catholic youth group of around 10 young men and women in a church, they underlined they had been born in a poor country when the “special period” began and had never seen anything change. Hence, they did not expect to see any change. Martín (pseudonym), a dark-skinned 20 year old, explained: “Change may come over the course of a couple of generations, very gradually. My children and grandchildren will see it, but I don’t believe I will.” As part of our conversation, however, I reminded them that I had seen a great deal of change in my lifetime, beginning with the origins of the revolution until today. Hence, I did expect to see the transition to democracy, so I thought they would also see it.

No one, I think, expressed it better than René (pseudonym), a middle-aged professional in Havana who drove a cab to earn the dollars and Euros that make lives easier: “Living in Cuba is like being inside a tunnel where there is not a light at the end, a tunnel that is still in darkness.”

While real change was not in the horizon, all interviewees expressed their hope for more liberty and for a gradual and peaceful transition. Monsignor Carlos Manuel de Céspedes hoped it would take place like the transition in Spain, led from above, by those in power

1. See the Appendix for a list of the interviewees, many of them identified by pseudonyms.

who were *reformistas*. De Céspedes stated that while Fidel lives, there will be no changes. Raúl and those who are in the pinnacle of power consult with him daily. “But there have been substantial changes in the economy, and they will continue to take place,” spurred by the *reformistas* in power. Old and ill, Monsignor de Céspedes was not sure he would live to see the actual transition, but he hoped it would be “gradual, peaceful, slow, with neither a civil war nor popular uprisings nor a military coup.” Other people presaged precisely those outcomes, however. To Piro (Rolando) Suárez, a committed lay person who holds an important public relations position for the Catholic Church in Havana, the transition is already in process, as peaceful changes have been taking place. However, he stressed the depth of the economic crisis, the result of the closing of the sugar mills that has left “*pueblos muertos*” (towns that are dead) in its wake.

Father Mario Delgado, from a small town parish in San José de las Lajas, underscored that the stress on a peaceful, gradual transition suggested to them that the opposite could well be true. He thought the day might come when *el pueblo*—the common people—“*le pasará la cuenta al gobierno*” (will render the government responsible) for all their suffering. Pastor Héctor Méndez of the Presbyterian-Reformed Church in Havana underlined that it is clear from people’s actual behavior what *el pueblo* wants: they look for “*más espacios de libertad*”—greater spaces of freedom. “But they do not know how to get there, nor do they know what shape that liberty should take.” Catalina (pseudonym), an intelligent old lady in her late 70s, remained behind in Cuba while virtually all of her family left or died. She emphasized that, “for the most part, *el pueblo* wants democracy.” But her cousin, Magda (pseudonym), who was always imbued with revolutionary fervor, to the point of naming her son Boris, after a high-ranking Soviet visitor, expressed the fear the government has instilled in many: “The Miami mafia,” she said, “is going to come to take their old homes. But they now belong to *el pueblo*.” That fear is, indeed, present in some people, especially since the government regularly fans its flames, but the most often expressed feeling was a wish for democracy. “It is very hard to live with a mask on—*una careta*,” expressed

Pastor Méndez. He had taken off his many years ago, he emphasized.

This notion of *la doble moral*—the dual morality—is never far from people’s minds. In recent years, it has been discussed openly. Jorge Enríquez, a Cuban artist who lives in Alamar, paints elongated faces without a mouth. “They cannot speak,” he pointed out. He also painted a similar figure holding *una careta*, a mask, in his hand. His son lives in the buildings built by the Cuban government in 1959 when Pastorita Nuñez was in charge of the housing sector. The buildings have deteriorated enormously, e.g., the mailboxes are corroded by rust due to their proximity to the sea. But inside, family life goes on. Enríquez’s son, himself a mechanical engineer who repairs clocks, lives with his family and is an example of how Cubans continue to find beauty in their island, purpose in their lives. “To see the sea every day is a gift,” he said.

EXPECTATIONS REGARDING THE FUTURE

My second question was, what would you want to keep in a future Cuba? What would you want to change?” Ernesto (pseudonym), a young man who worked in the field of computer science had just witnessed such a discussion at the University of Havana. He told me: “Changes that do not respect the educational and public health systems would be *demasiado violento* (too drastic) for Cubans. But they do want democracy,” he said. Claudio (pseudonym), an artist in Camagüey who paints in a surrealistic style, also emphasized the importance of keeping the safety net: education, public health, assistance for the elderly. “But everything else needs to change. Here we have not only communism but also militarism, fascism, *yoismo* (“meism”). All of that has to change, to be left behind. Most fundamental is to recuperate liberty.”

Elizabeth García, architect, worked in the Office of the Historian (*Oficina del Historiador*) in Camagüey, and also helped with church restorations. Along with two other artists, she had designed the altar for the Pope’s mass in Camagüey. Her husband, Joaquín Estrada, had been Secretary of the National Commission for Culture of the Cuban Catholic Bishops Conference, and had taught history at the seminary in Camagüey. She had been left alone with Gabriela, their 9-year old daughter, when Joaquín, went to

study at the University of Notre Dame and, rather than return, remained. She emphasized that in Cuba it is quite difficult to know what is good and what is bad: “Education is free, and that seems like a good thing. But in truth we pay for it because our salaries are so low. Also, after we finish studying, we owe the state two years of social service at extremely low pay. So we pay for it twice.” Upon my return, when I mentioned to Joaquín her reply, he added: “She is right. And we pay for it a third time with the lack of liberty.” Still in Camagüey, Elizabeth continued: “Likewise, the free health services are good, but right now our health care is extremely poor with all the health professionals exported overseas. And the hospitals lack hygiene; you can pick up diseases in the hospitals.” Erasmo Pedraza, my cousin, also emphasized the deterioration of the health system. In his early 60s, he had had to wait for months before they could do an ultrasound to detect his cancer of the colon because the machine was not working. In the meantime, the cancer progressed. Luckily, they were able to extirpate it totally, when they operated.

Luciana and her daughter Amelia were living alone, with very few possessions, having sold nearly everything hoping to be reunited with her husband Ariel who had left the country. His desertion made it unlikely they would soon be reunited. The tragedy of the divided family—politically and physically—continues to haunt the lives of Cubans. But their lack of faith in the possibility that real changes will take place impels them to leave.

Dagoberto Valdés, until recently the editor of *Vitral*, now editor of *Convivencia*, the most independent magazine in Cuba, underlined the importance of the development of civil society, of institutions that have some measure of autonomy from the government. In his work, he has consistently underscored the harm occasioned by the excessive exodus. *Vitral* was subtitled “*la libertad de la luz*” (the freedom of light as it passes through a stained-glass window, refracting different colors). It was seen as too aggressive and combative. He and other members of the *Vitral* leadership team were recently forced to resign as they were unable to accept the changes in content and style that the new Bishop of Pinar del Río, Monsignor Jorge Enrique Ser-

pa, called for due to “scarce resources,” such as the lack of paper. As Dagoberto explained, he and the 10 others who resigned went out of their way to accept the cutbacks in the publication. However, they were not able to accept a “decaffeinated *Vitral*,” as he put it—one that would be the same in name but not in content, resulting in *un engaño* (a lie). This recent crisis in *Vitral* may well signify the beginning of a new period in the relationship between church and state—a period that some describe as collaboration, others as “*chenche por chenche*” (tit for tat). Either way, it is clear that members of the church hierarchy that protected the development of spaces of liberty in Cuba, such as Monsignor José Siro González Bacallao in Pinar del Río, who had protected *Vitral*, are now too old to continue and must retire. Clearly, they are not being replaced with like-minded church members.

GENERATIONS

The contrast in the attitudes and the possibility for personal change was quite strong among the four major generations.

For the Generation of the Glorious Revolution, the very old who are now over 70, attitudinal change is, I believe, largely impossible. They participated in the revolution at a young age, sacrificed themselves for it in every way, and were sometimes marked by the death of a loved one in the struggle against Batista. They staked themselves on the revolution, around which they grew. They see the good side of the revolution and look past the negative. Marta Anido came from a family of professionals who valued education and the arts in Santa Clara. She was a founding member of the Cuban Communist Party. To her, communism means a system that looks after the poor, that gave women and blacks their rightful place, that promoted the arts and culture, areas in which she was deeply involved. No matter how poor Cuba has become, her own family has become, she still believes that communism is a good system that means that everyone is equal. She simply ignores its repressive aspects. “Every Cuban has a policeman inside,” I pointed out to her. And she blames its failure in delivering a decent lifestyle to all Cubans, particularly the middle classes who have grown ever poorer, as she has, on the embargo. The generation that made the revolution has remained

quite dominant in social life. Though they are now quite old, they have really not handed over the reins to the next generation and still dominate the Party and other major institutions.

To understand this, I often use the image of a tomato plant that has grown wrapped around a central stake. If one removes that stake, the plant breaks in many parts, parts that were weak on their own but were held upright by the stake at its center. I have several family members like that: good people who staked themselves on the revolution, and climbed with it as far as it would take them. People like them are grateful and loyal to the revolution for having telescoped them into a social system they would not have belonged to otherwise.

Another taxi driver, Pedro (pseudonym), in Pinar del Río, expressed his gratitude. A *guajiro del campo* (a peasant), he said “I was an *alfabetizado*, taught to read and write by the *Campaña de Alfabetización* in the early years.” After 24 years of driving a taxi, his wish was for the economy to change—for more space, better economic possibilities. But, he stressed, “Only the economy should change. Nothing else.” As a sociologist, I refrained from pointing out that one can hardly change without the other. However, since he had already expressed his attitudes well, I did press him on: “Would you want more liberty?,” I asked. To which he replied: “It depends on what type of liberty—not for some to kill others.” Again the fear of violent change surfaced.

For the Generation of Idealism and Sacrifice, the middle-aged who are now from 50 to 70, who shared in the idealism and hope of the early years, the last half century has been a story of decline and disappointment. They chose to remain in Cuba for a number of reasons: family reasons (for example, relatives who had to be looked after); because of relatives who were *comunistas de convicción*, people of ideals; or because they were religious people—priests, nuns, pastors, those whose calling led them to be of service, to share the hardship of the poor and the sick with whom they threw their lot. Some of them involved themselves in “*la parte buena*”—giving themselves to the expanding services in education and public health.

Clara (pseudonym) graduated from the University of Havana, where she specialized in medicine in 1968, “*el año del guerrillero heroico*,” the year of the heroic guerrilla, named after Che Guevara upon his death in Bolivia. It was a generation full of idealism, she stressed, “that did everything they could, that sacrificed itself to change the country.” Specializing in public health, she made every possible sacrifice, climbing up and down the mountains of Oriente in the tropical heat, going on foot to the remotest parts of the island to open up the health clinics for the common people. “Next year we will celebrate our 40th reunion. What do we have to show for it? There were some good years, but the results now are not positive.” Right now, she and others stressed, “the health system caters to those who have *divisas* (foreign exchange)—the tourists and those in power. They have good health care. But the average Cuban now has poor health care.” Doctors and other health practitioners are being sent to Venezuela and many other countries, exported in exchange for foreign currency and oil. “The quality of life for the average Cuban is too poor,” Clara stressed. “And people are exhausted morally. There is no idealism left.” To her, her generation felt defrauded, cheated: “All the sacrifices we made were for nothing,” she said.

The health professionals themselves go to work in those other countries expecting their salaries will improve—both there and at home. To me, that makes them true economic immigrants: people who migrate temporarily expecting their lives at home to improve as a result. I met a number of them and spoke with two. Mariana (pseudonym), an anesthesiologist, was 48 years old. She grew up in Cuba and knew no other world. But she witnessed the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe, as well as the government’s execution of General Arnaldo Ochoa in the mid-80s. Like others in her generation, she tends to be pragmatic. Their criticism is shared only among like-minded friends in their *azoteas* (rooftops) in the evening. They adjusted to living in Cuba “as is” and make the best of a poor situation. They do so with the help they receive from “*la FE*” (a common joke in the island because “*fé*,” literally means faith, but is short for “Family in the Exterior”). Many have become licensed to “Rent a Room” to foreigners; others engage in other income-producing small ventures.

A different generation consists of the adults who are in their 30s and 40s, the Generation of the Collapse. When speaking with Esteban (pseudonym), an electrical engineer, I highlighted the contrast between, on the one hand, the billboards that show up everywhere, with messages from the government regarding *la patria* and, on the other hand, the wish, especially evident in young people, to leave Cuba—evidence of the lack of a felt sense of *patria*, I thought. Esteban replied this was due to the lack of worth given to the person: “*Es porque no se ha valorado la persona*,” he said. He was born in the mid-60s and came of age during the “special period.” He remembered he was not allowed in the best hotels and restaurants, which were reserved for the tourists. The message was that being Cuban was worthless. Hence, despite all the billboards exalting *la patria*, he had little sense of it. He remarked that friends who left for the U. S. wrote him that they had learned to love Cuba after they left it, in exile.

The dissatisfaction of those younger than 30, the Generation of Unbelief, was quite evident. On the bus on the way to Santiago de Cuba, in total darkness late at night, alone in the very back seat, I spoke with Salvador (pseudonym). A young man in his 20s, nice looking though quite short, he was dressed in black, with long black hair first in a ponytail, then loose about his shoulders. When I asked him for his views, he first responded with what I call the Preface: “First of all, I want you to know that I am a revolutionary and I am happy here.” Then he got to the point: “But all *la juventud* (the youth) here wants is to leave.” Ariel, another young man, blonde with green eyes and dressed more conventionally, was an architect who also worked as a taxi driver to make do. Desperate to leave, especially after his two best friends had left, he was hoping he would be able to claim Spanish citizenship from his grandfather who had immigrated to Cuba. When I remarked I felt sad so many people simply wanted to leave, he stressed: “I will never again have these years to live.”

The dissatisfaction of the youth was quite apparent to the parents’ generation, now in their 40s and 50s. Tall and thin, Arturo (pseudonym) was a well-educated, pensive man. He was a health technician who, “in truth,” he said, did not want to leave. But he sought to

leave for the sake of his children. “There is no future here for them,” he said. One of his sons was a dancer (*un bailarín*) at a tourist hotel in Varadero; his other son was serving in the obligatory military service for a year; his daughter was a piano teacher.

PATRIA AND EXODUS

Cubans in the island make enormous efforts to adjust to an impoverished reality—they use the black market to eat better; they engage in entrepreneurial efforts, such as becoming taxi drivers or renting tourists a room in their homes; they use the remittances their families send to improve their consumption. And they take just pride in their ingenuity, their ability to make ends meet. They also try to hold the politicization of their lives at bay. For example, they go to the beach in the hopes of enjoying a day of sun and sand, surrounded by family, friends, children. But, as I found out, the system still intrudes.

I spent such an afternoon with my family and their friends in Santa María del Mar. We returned back to Havana in two cars, one of which carried four girls (ages 4 to 12) *retozando* (horsing around) in the back seat. I was wrapped in the loveliness of the sunset over the *malecón* in old Havana when, suddenly, our car was stopped by the police from the MININT (*Ministerio del Interior*). No one knew why we were stopped, especially not the car with the four girls. But it was a reminder that even in a moment of innocent joy and beauty, the long arm of the state is never far away, showing its repressive side.

Without doubt, Cubans want a better economic future—what Alejandro Ríos, today Director of Media Relations at Miami-Dade College, called “a solution to the three major problems they face: breakfast, lunch, and dinner” (interview in Pedraza 2007). But they also want more liberty, not to feel constantly watched by the police, the *Seguridad del Estado*, work supervisors, even family and friends. Pastor Hector Méndez provided an example. In Miramar, he noted, there is a small beach that is not very good—rather than the soft, sandy beaches found elsewhere in Cuba, this beach is full of *diente de perro*, coral reef, so it is necessary to keep one’s shoes on. Yet this rather bad beach fills up with people every weekend because it is not watched by the police.

Overall, I emphasize that Cubans' lives are marked by an enormous *desesperanza* (hopelessness). And what lies ahead promises to be yet another belt-tightening period, as Raúl Castro announced in his July 26, 2007, speech, when he spoke of a continuation of the "special period." Following Amaro and Portes's (1972) early depiction of the Cuban exodus as "those who wait," "those who search," and "those who escape," I (Pedraza 2007) called this recent wave "those who despair." At the same time, a massive exodus has been taking place through both legal and illegal means. Estimates put it at 26,000 persons a year since 1994–95, when the new Migration Agreement was signed by Cuba and the United States. Easily over 360,000 Cubans have arrived since then. Using the *exit vs. voice* image that Albert O. Hirschman (1970) gave us in his work, many of us who are analysts of migration have long stressed that a massive exodus becomes a way to externalize dissatisfaction and dissent (Pedraza-Bailey 1985; Valdés-Hernández 1997). In effect, a massive

exodus robs the society of the dynamic to change, of efforts to change the society from within. This is particularly true, I add, when it is the young who are most anxious to leave, for everywhere in the world social movements and revolutions have been the work of the young. As it was the case, once upon a time, in Cuba.

I will close recalling the observation made by René, the professional who drove a taxi to make ends meet. He gave me the best image with which to express Cubans' feeling of lack of a future. "Living in Cuba is like being inside a dark tunnel with no light at the end." Like most Cubans I spoke with, he hoped for a peaceful transition, but he also underscored that to change the economy you have to change the polity: "the one goes with the other." Overall, he felt that the situation now was like a game of chess: "When Fidel Castro dies, a piece on the *tablero* (the chess board) will move—one of the most important pieces. That will open up the space for other moves to begin."

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APPENDIX

Interviews—Summer of 2007

- Berta and Isaac (pseudonym)
- Manuel (pseudonym)
- Martín (pseudonym)
- René (pseudonym)
- Monsignor Carlos Manuel de Céspedes
- Pastor Hector Méndez
- Piro (Rolando) Suárez
- Father Mario Delgado (pseudonym)
- Catalina (pseudonym)
- Magda (pseudonym)
- Jorge Enríquez, father
- Jorge Enríquez, son
- Ernesto (pseudonym)
- Claudio (pseudonym)
- Elizabeth García, Gabriela, and Joaquín Estrada
- Marta Anido Gómez-Lubián
- Erasmo Pedraza
- Dagoberto Valdés-Hernández
- Pedro (pseudonym)
- Clara (pseudonym)
- Mariana (pseudonym)
- Esteban (pseudonym)
- Salvador (pseudonym)
- Ariel (pseudonym)
- Arturo (pseudonym)
- Alejandro Ríos