

A VIEW FROM BELOW:  
GRASSROOTS PERSPECTIVES ON HUMAN RIGHTS,  
THE U.S. EMBARGO AND EVERYDAY LIFE IN  
CONTEMPORARY CUBA

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I would like to contribute to today's discussion by doing two main things: (1) by looking at the issues at hand, i.e. U.S. policy towards Cuba, in particular the U.S. embargo, as well as the human rights situation on the island, from a Cuban grassroots perspective i.e. share with you how average Cubans think and feel about these issues; and (2) reflect on some of the changes and continuities and the tensions between the two that have taken place in Cuban society over the past ten to fifteen years and how these processes may factor into future developments both on island and in terms of policies towards it.

My comments are based on my work as an anthropologist who has lived and worked in and on Cuba for many years. They obviously do not reflect the views of all Cubans, but I do believe they represent a range of dominant opinions from a cross-section of the island's population in both urban and rural areas.

The strained U.S.-Cuban relations are an omnipresent, everyday reality on the island. Cubans have been bombarded with Cuban state-sponsored anti-American propaganda for the past fifty years; whilst the embargo known locally as *el bloqueo*, has been and continues to be one of the main foci of mass media programs, political rallies and speeches, classroom discussions, and other government organized public events. In the eyes of the Cuban state, the embargo (I use the term in its complexity not just the trade restrictions) has been the main obstacle to Cuba's economic and social development. In fact, in

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the state's logic, the U.S. embargo is a human rights violation and it goes as far as to call it 'genocidal.' This dominant discourse is furthermore interwoven with slogans and images of what is portrayed as the U.S.' own human rights violations and thus hypocrisy towards these issues. Meant to confuse, cover up, and distract people, this media and discursive war against the U.S. and its policies towards the island has, however, become what many Cubans refer to as *un sonido ambiental*, background noise, i.e. nowadays few Cubans take it seriously.

Nevertheless, U.S. policy towards Cuba, the embargo in particular, has and continues to concretely impact people's lives. To most average Cubans, the embargo means the lack of trade and thus goods, information, academic, cultural, scientific, and other people-to-people exchanges as well as restrictions on the sending of badly needed remittances and the separation of families due to the travel restrictions.

As a result, U.S. policy towards Cuba is not particularly popular among average Cubans. It is thought of as not only unjust and inhumane but also totally counter-productive. For instead of acting as a source of pressure on the Cuban government, it is seen as providing the regime with the perfect, ongoing excuse and scapegoat for the island's many domestic problems as well as an ideal justification for internal repression.

People in fact, speak of a double embargo: the external U.S. *bloqueo* or blockade and the internal Cuban one, and there is little confusion or doubt among Cubans that they are caught in the middle and in so doing are punished by both sides.

Similarly, Cubans are in no denial about the human rights situation on the island. They know that they live in a highly controlled and repressive society, that there are clear limits on what they can and cannot say and do, and that stepping over these limits can have harsh, even fatal consequences. But precisely because they know this, they have created and internalized self-protection mechanisms to deal with, and live and survive under, these circumstances. The regime's omnipresence, highly sophisticated vigilance system, and unpredictable nature has produced a collective

culture of fear, silence, and distrust and has made most people retreat into the private realm. There are obviously important exceptions such as the case of the dissidents, certain engaged clergy and laity, academics, artists and other courageous civil society actors. But generally speaking, even now since Raúl has taken over power and there has been a call for more open, public and critical discussion, most people remain distrustful and careful.

Moreover, and this is important, the economic crisis that began fifteen years ago after the Soviet Union stopped subsidizing Cuba, has been and continues to be the number one concern for most Cubans. Making ends meet is their main daily preoccupation and thus perhaps the government's greatest weapon alongside the fear factor to keep people busy and their minds off and away from other more politically oriented concerns and activities.

All of this does not mean that people are passive, complacent or indifferent to the political, economic, and social realities on the island. On the contrary. People are simply very clear and realistic about the power and ruthlessness of the state and their relative, individual powerlessness towards it.

Nevertheless, over the past fifteen years Cuba has undergone enormous transformations, which have in turn produced new social dynamics, spaces, and attitudes, and as result brought about fundamental changes in Cuban society. To illustrate this, I would like to share a few vignettes of everyday life on the island with you.

It is 9 a.m. and Dalia is anxiously waiting for Carlos, a local street vendor, to pick up her freshly made *croquetas*. Over the past years, Dalia has stayed up every night making around 200 cheese, fish, and/or chicken *croquetas*, which Carlos then tries to sell to hungry *santiagueros* during the day. Dalia is an accountant by training and until recently worked for a Cuban state-owned company. Although she enjoyed her work, she could no longer survive on her meager income and had to leave her profession. "I had no choice," she says, "I only earned 280 pesos and could not feed my mother, daughter, and myself on that wage. I now make *croquetas* but at least we can get by." (280 pesos is about 11 U.S.\$).

For the past few years Juan, an accomplished neurosurgeon,

who has served as a doctor on several internationalist missions to Africa, can no longer provide for his family of five on his monthly peso income. Having earned the right to buy a car after his first mission to Zambia, Juan, like many other Cubans who are lucky enough to own a car, has become a taxi driver. Due to the high cost and difficulties in acquiring a taxi license, Juan, however, works illegally. Despite the risks of a high fine if caught, Juan nevertheless drives his car around town every day and night looking for potential clients, preferably foreigners, who will pay in hard currency or convertible pesos. "What can I do?," he asks. "We need to live. I don't like working illegally but the state has literally pushed me into being dishonest."

As examples like these show, the economic crisis has not only altered people's lives in very practical, every day kinds of ways but also provoked major changes in people's attitudes and actions towards their own lives, their futures, and the state.

Before the crisis, most Cubans relied on the government and arguably many still had faith in the system. The stagnating economy, eroding quality of health care, education, and other social services coupled with the growing corruption and continuing repressive policies have, however, led more and more people to no longer count on the state to help them solve their problems but instead forced them to look for alternatives.

Although apathy, depression and leaving the country for good are some of the more drastic and dramatic measures people resort to, many, if not most Cubans have been responding by creating and carving out their own spaces, networks and mechanisms -- whether economic, social, cultural or other, independently or at least parallel to the state.

Beyond the realm of the informal economy, we thus, for example, find that religious centers and communities -- Catholic, Protestant, Pentecostal, Afro-Cuban, Jewish, and others -- have turned into increasingly important alternative spaces where people seek spiritual refuge and meaning as much as they look for entertainment, company, and material support.

Similar conclusions can be made about the increasing interest in

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alternative subcultures such as the rap or Hip Hop, *roquero*, as well as Rastafari movements. Particularly attractive to Cuba's youth, who make up more than half of the island's current population and are arguably among the most frustrated, these alternative lifestyles offer some the possibility to question and explore who they are and what they want beyond the dominant political discourse.

In fact, the search for news, information, and knowledge beyond that provided by the state has become an important endeavor for most Cubans. While contact with family members and friends abroad as well as doctors and other professionals who have completed internationalist missions, interacting with tourists, and listening to Radio Martí are among the more established forms of doing so, clandestine cable tv antennas, internet connections, and illegal video rentals have also become more common.

Pedro, for instance, is set up with what is locally referred to as '*un cable*', a cable. For 5 convertible pesos (a little over 5 U.S.\$) a month, he, like dozens of his neighbors in *Centro Habana*, is connected to a cable TV antenna through which he gets to watch movies, news and sports programs, talk shows and *telenovelas* from Mexico, Miami and elsewhere. Although highly illegal, more and more people are taking such risks, in order to connect with the outside world and experience a completely different reality.

Such examples demonstrate how people are increasingly carving out alternative spaces and parallel mechanisms to the state. In so doing they are acting independently; taking initiatives but also responsibility for themselves—i.e., taking their own lives into their own hands, which, after decades of depending on a cradle-to-grave system, is a huge step.

Given that many of the activities and mechanisms involved in doing so are deemed illegal, people have to be very creative in outwitting the system and must constantly be on their toes not to be caught. These are skills that can and should not be underestimated, let alone the energy and determination that go into them. Moreover, these activities are acts of defiance—defiance against a system that prohibits people from making an honest, decent living. And that takes courage.

In short, a qualitative difference in the way many people think and act has emerged and is growing more and more each day. It is this independent attitude and its accompanying actions that I would argue are among the most important social changes that have occurred on the island at the grassroots level in the last decade and that may just turn out to be one of the greatest challenges to the Cuban state.

Unfortunately there is a flipside to this story which includes several of the more preoccupying effects and consequences of the crisis on people's behavior, attitudes and values.

As we all know, the economic crisis and the many scarcities it has produced has forced people to seek alternative, usually informal and illegal means to resolve their problems which has in turn encouraged corruption and criminality. Breaking the law has in fact become standard practice as has the phenomenon of *la doble moral* or *doble cara*, which broadly speaking refers to a dual set of behaviors and opinions—one for public, the other for private consumption. In a society like Cuba, where state surveillance is omnipresent, *la doble cara* can be seen as a survival mechanism and act of resistance, a weapon of the weak as the political scientist James Scott would call it. However, the level of hypocrisy, instrumentalism, manipulation and opportunism towards the state, but also among people themselves, has taken on worrying proportions. Although acknowledged by many, the phenomenon of *la doble moral* is not openly, publicly confronted but has instead become an unchecked, *modus operandi* for many. In fact, many young people who were born and/or socialized in the 1990s have grown up in an environment in which thinking and acting in this manner has become normative behavior. This has had and continues to have an enormous impact on the social and ethical fabric of society.

In sum, we can thus on the one hand observe this newfound grassroots independence and sense of personal agency, kernels or seeds perhaps of a nascent civil society; but on the other hand we are confronted with an alarming growth of social disengagement and deterioration of civic values.

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The question and it is one I will leave you with today is what impact these diverse and changing social dynamics, attitudes, and values at the grassroots level will continue to have on the development of Cuban civil society and *its* role and engagement in the island's future.