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Introducing Nuevos Espacios (New Spaces)

By Aldo Álvarez, Co-Editor



Many changes over the past decade, have transformed Cuba into a more heterogeneous society. Compared to the 1990's, the new generations that makes up Cuba's social fabric today still embrace a national identity, but from different perspectives, and with a high diversity of views on the country they call home.

We are witnessing a process of rebirth in economic interests, lines of thought, political views, income sources, career ambitions, personal challenges, and behavioral paradigms. Some are due to the removal, or substitution of, policies and regulations from previous eras that were no longer adaptable to Cuba's new reality — changes that for quite some time had been acknowledged and demanded by civil society. These include the opportunity to purchase and sell real property; own a smart phone and surfing the Internet from anywhere; access hospitality spaces previously available for tourists only; travel without an exit visa; and launch and operate a private business, among other changes, that may seem trivial today but were unimaginable for many Cubans just 10 years ago.

Of course, in the midst of these transformations, there have been various new measures that extend the repressive practices of the past, such as the decrees 349 and 370. In other areas, the languid pace of reforms that would serve and expand

on the above-mentioned openings, remind us that we are experiencing a living process, one that is in constant debate, and often with itself.

Cubans today are revisiting, and in many ways renegotiating, the defining tenets of their society, including fundamental factors such as the generation and distribution of wealth. Unfortunately, a new economic reckoning continues to be postponed, as if its inevitable outcome could be stopped.

The twin phenomena of transnationalism and circular migration have also led to obvious changes in the daily lives of Cubans. Cuban emigration has been largely de-stigmatized, and now coexists with permanent residency as a social norm. Although many obstacles to greater social integration persist, the ability for Cuban émigrés to have an impact on the economy and society of their native country is a positive step forward for this sector.

Continuous contact with both expats and tourists visiting the island have allowed for the introduction of moral values and experiences from other societies that in many aspects differ from those of Cubans on the island. This is exactly how we became aware of issues such as gender-based violence, the rights of LGBTI community, consumer protections, e-commerce, the right to unencumbered access to the Internet, animal rights, among other Western norms.

Meanwhile, the emergence of independent media and the penetration of social networks have accelerated the access to news and information, bringing citizens closer to realities that had been denied to them for a long time. The diversification of Cuba's media ecosystem has resulted in the proliferation of in-

The Cuban society we see today is possible because during the past few years, new generations of Cubans have been able to question and push limits established in previous times, and they have done so firmly and continuously.



Illustration: Maikel Martínez

formation from different sources and perspectives, no longer from a singular voice with unilateral views. At the same time, official outlets have had to adapt to compete. This means that although over-compliant narratives persist among state platforms, we often find more frank dialogues when it comes to addressing our nation's problems.

We could go on enumerating changes, but the ones already mentioned are enough to ascertain that the modern Cuban society is more open, plural, and diverse than it has been in decades.

The Cuban society we see today is possible because during the past few years, new generations of Cubans have been able to question and push limits established in previous times, and they have done so firmly and continuously. Just as they have demanded that spaces taken away in the past be returned to them, they are also creating new spaces they consider their own.

While the widespread change in mentality necessary for more profound social transformations has yet to arrive, these new spaces are the real intellectual battlefields where the struggles for Cuba's future are being forged.

The Cuba Study Group believes that all who not only wish for, but contribute to, the steady progress and improvement of modern Cuban society, as well as those who strive for creating better conditions for tomorrow's Cuba, must protect and highlight these new spaces.

With this goal, we hope that Nuevos Espacios will serve as a platform to amplify the essential new voices actively shaping Cuban discourse, as well as all those who wish to continue expanding the limits of Cuban reality.

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Independent Media in Cuba: One Swallow Does Make a Summer

By Carlos Manuel Álvarez



uban independent media has had quite a liftoff this last decade, moving from a desolate landscape, very much like a desert with only a few cacti at sight, to a varied and complex ecosystem, solid at times, and on many occasions struggling even with itself. Their different agendas strengthen public debate, and also, each one of the media outlets in particular, because these agendas make each more specialized, more aligned with their particularities, with their own editorial lines.

However, that monolithic bloc that constitutes the state-owned media prefers to stick with the convenient argument that all independent media is one, that they all have the same interests or that all are run by the same owner, as if there were such a thing. This occurs because the ones in power—the Ideological Department of the government—need to conjure an enemy that looks just like itself, in order to be able to understand it.

Language often says less of what is said than of who says it, and when the national media system run by relevant governmental authorities judges independent media the way they do, or decides to ignore its different shades, they do nothing more but to reflect themselves in front of the mirror of words. They are looking forward to mapping or defining a territory that keeps the public debate within a known perimeter: one that

has been plowed for decades by official rhetoric. It is as if they wanted to keep playing inside their house at all costs. That arena, which was once the amphitheater of the world, but has been nowhere to be found for 30 years, had a name: the Cold War.

The success of Cuban independent media, that is to say, its proliferation and progressive professionalization over the last decade, amidst a hostile, almost warlike environment, is a consequence above all of having moved (consciously or not, or even in both ways) some of Cuba's rhetorical lines towards certain spheres of global modernity; of having installed a renewed idea of what is real in a significant part of the collective consciousness.

In that sense, some debates are generated on unknown territory to all, with the sometimes comforting feeling that they have managed to penetrate a country that is perhaps not new, but

The success of Cuban independent media, that is to say, its proliferation and progressive professionalization over the last decade, amidst a hostile, almost warlike environment, is a consequence above all of having moved (consciously or not, or even in both ways)...

at least different, in spite of the fact that the official and political power structures remain at the same they have always been; still settled and conceived within its totalitarian logic, but more worn out and less resistant.

We must remember that the professions which have suffered the most in Cuba are those which were adapted to serve the

interests of the authorities and submitted to a violent castration of their purposes, arbitrarily turned into their opposites. Among them, there is probably no worst castration as the one committed against journalism, which has been asked to call cancer the flu.

There is an elucidating factor to consider, having to do with the use of the category independent to label non-state media. The answer is simple and absolute, but apparently some think

there is an area where the word fails. The independence of a medium —specifically of small media which anywhere in the world have to resort to different models or alternatives of financing by means of patrons, donations, or grants—consists of the complete autonomy of its journalists in order to determine the editorial line of its own medium.

In this case, money (and this is something I have been able to ascertain not only in Cuba, but in the majority of Latin America's most important independent outlets, meaning, those magazines and websites which do not respond to any transnational corporation, nor are subordinated to the whims of the State) is a factor that helps operationalize such freedom, and looks forward to promoting, and not kidnapping, it. In the end, it is the rigor, plurality, and impact of journalistic contents which will demonstrate or not before a society —its only real judge—the true independence of a press medium.

In my case, I am the senior editor of the magazine *El Estornudo*, which made its appearance in March 2016. The fact that it existed approximately two years without any kind of monetary support is a solid argument that shows, as a generalizing example, that the explosion of alternative media during the last years responds to crucial interests — that is to say, spiritual, professional— and in particular political and historical ways.

At *El Estornudo*, we have tried to establish a dialogue with the government, though not in the way they expect us to do. We have resisted a descent into conciliatory and pusillanimous forms of rhetoric that almost sound like asking for forgiveness, giving explanations instead of demanding them, or twisting words with a fear of punishment until someone considers we have learned who knows what lesson and decides to unblock the direct access to our website, which is censored in Cuba.

Likewise, we avoid inflammatory labelling, appealing tones, turning ourselves into the news, passively assuming the role of victims, or restricting our informative agenda in ways that risk us become the kind of emphatic and militant press so functional to the interests and intents of official authorities.



... Some of Cuba's rhetorical lines towards certain spheres of global modernity; of having installed a renewed idea of what is real in a significant part of the collective consciousness.

The fact that Cuba is largely immersed in a serious moral, economic, and social crisis is something that our magazine has highlighted in multiple reports and analyses, not because someone wanted us to do so, but because in the long run those are the facts. Furthermore, we insist that our country is a far richer landscape, more plural and subversive than what its government wants it to be. We care about the government inasmuch as its presence influences, prejudices and determines the life of so many Cubans. It is a means to access reality, not the end of it. We reject the equivalence between "government" and "country" because to accept it would mean to cede more territory to the government than it deserves.

I mention these qualities, which would appear restricted to purposes of El Estornudo, because I think they should be—and in many occasions are, although not in others—the deontological guidelines of independent media in general. Ultimately, the practice of journalism as the scrutinization of power, scalpel of conflicts, pulse of politics and the society, and witness and archive of the times and historical memory, is not transferable and not negotiable, regardless of whether the conditions to practice it are increasingly adverse or precarious.

The origin of this new communicative terrain stems from a series of changes that have taken place in other aspects Cuban life over the past few years. Namely, the progressive but increasing presence of the Internet in our country, the healthy normalization (though temporarily on hold) of diplomatic relations with the United States, the significant loss of economic support from Venezuela, the presidential transitions from Fidel Castro to his brother Raúl, and from the latter to Miguel Díaz-Canel. Even cosmetics—if we want to see it that way, and we have

plenty of reasons to do so—always bring about some variation and a certain order change.

In the case of Cuba's independent media, there is maybe as never before, a beneficial blend of awareness spawning from different experiences and personal careers: self-taught reporters with weathered skin who have suffered the vicissitudes of repression and censure, and a group of graduate journalists formed at the country's schools of communications, those institutional seedbeds which normally produce employees for the state-owned media.

Ultimately, the risks associated with this scenario are encouraging for independent media, broadly speaking, the proof of a certain efficiency. But only journalistic rigor can guarantee its survival. The strengthening and pluralization of an ecosystem spanning from fashion magazines and "breaking news" media to environmental news outlets. There is a didactic, effective and robust phrase expressed by Arthur Miller, that ultimately summarizes this condition: "A good newspaper, I suppose, is a nation talking to itself."

Carlos Manuel Álvarez is a Cuban journalist and author of three books. He is also the cofounder of the Cuban independent news magazine El Estornudo.

Cuba's Small Businesses Step Up in Fight Against Covid-19

By El Toque

Albert Einstein once said, "let's not pretend that things will change if we keep doing the same things...all crises bring progress...It's in crisis that inventiveness is born, as well as discoveries made and big strategies." The words of the German physicist resonate during the health crisis that has engulfed the world, from which Cuba has not been spared. In spite of the discouraging outlook before us, creativity and progress have blossomed in these tough times. And at least for the time being,



Juanky's Pan and the Club de Motos Eléctricas de Cuba (MEC).

the government has displayed a different attitude toward private sector initiatives, which seems to confirm the theory that crises produce not only better people, but better countries. Even though functional alliances between the Cuban private and state-owned sectors are still

limited and very cautious, it is important to stress that the Covid-19 crisis has laid the foundation for the emergence of unprecedented cross-sector collaborations. Examples abound of the support Cuban entrepreneurs and business owners have given to local authorities in order to provide stability, support social distancing measures, contribute to the production of

Even though functional alliances between the Cuban private and state-owned sectors are still limited and very cautious...the COVID-19 crisis has laid the foundation for the emergence of unprecedented cross-sector collaborations.



Club de Motos Eléctricas de Cuba out to make deliveries.



Illustration: Maikel Martínez



Bella Ciao delivers meals to elderly residents in the neighborhood.



MEC delivery driver helps an elderly neighbor with her face mask.

protective gear for healthcare staff and general population, and guarantee assistance to the most vulnerable groups in our society. Among the pioneers of this movement is the Club de Motos Eléctricas de Cuba (Cuban Electric Motorcycle Club or MEC), a network of scooter enthusiasts that responded immediately to



Juanky's Pan makes burgers to go.

the government's call for social distancing by teaming up with food vendors to provide delivery services. Mandao Express, a Havana-based private courier service, has also played a key role in facilitating social distancing, offering its services to many restaurants and coffee shops like Juanky's Pan, enabling these to stay in business and provide free food to the elderly. Bella Ciao, a restaurant located in Buena Vista neighborhood of Playa, also responded to the crisis by identifying the most vulnerable members in its neighborhood and coordinated with the local CDR (neighborhood block committees tasked with mobilizing support for the government) to provide them with free meals. Other examples of collaboration between the private and state sectors have stemmed from the field of tech, in which entrepreneurs specialized in digital fabrication have had manufactured 3D-printed facemasks and spare parts for critical equipment at the Cuban hospitals, such as ventilator valves.

We can find these and other examples of entrepreneurial support through their services, even pivoting their businesses to address local needs. This proves that the private sector is already an intrinsic part of Cuban society and has achieved a level of organization higher than what is often recognized. At the same time, it is important to note that the visibility of the



private sector has increased not only due to its coverage in independent media. Official outlets such as Mesa Redonda (TV of Certainly, this represents another step forward in increasing cooperation among sectors. To this end, ideas in all forms and scope continue to pour into our society. It seems after all that things are just as Einstein said: "let us stop, once and for all with the only dangerous crisis, which is the tragedy of not being willing to overcome."

eITOQUE is an independent, multimedia platform focused on reporting Cuba in all of its diversity: complex, creative, and sometimes even painful or occult.

Cuba Must Not Wait to Unleash the Potential of its Workforce

By Ricardo Torres

The most intense debates taking place in Cuba revolve around economic reforms and possible pathways for development. This justifies any effort to figure out the essence of the challenge posed before the Cuban society. The problems and their solutions are not limited to the economic field. But these issues have such an impact on the material and spiritual lives of people, that they easily draw a lot of attention. Everyone knows that decisions made today will alter the political equilibrium and position of this small Island before the world. This article seeks to contribute to the analysis of economic perspectives of our country by setting aside the mantra which expresses a certain national preference for the tragic narratives of the history.

Domestic resources for Cuba's development

Economic models are transcendental for guiding the development efforts of a country during any era. During the agricultural period, the population and availability of land were crucial elements which made possible the development of civilizations. Later, the Industrial Revolution changed the focus to physical capital, more specifically to machinery, and transportation systems necessary to link growing production with the consumers. In recent decades, we have witnessed a movement towards a productivity model in which the education of the labor force, and information and communications technologies (ICTs)¹ are more prominent. (Figure 1). It has been estimated that between 1995 to 2012, half of U.S. economic growth was related to skilled work and ICT capital (Jorgenson, 2018). This does not imply that all countries advance at the same rate. Nor is progress automatic or spontaneous. But adapting to

¹ There is some dispersion in the rigorous treatment of the terms knowledge, human capital, technology, capitalintangible, or technical change; especially by non-specialized literature. The use of the term knowledge in this work is done to group everything that differs from traditional factors of production, specifically its directly material part.

this shift is crucial precisely because scientific and technological development are driving the most dynamic sectors of the modern economy.



Source: Torres, modeled after Gorey & Dobat, 1996

Taking into account its land endowments (0.64 acres per inhabitant) and natural resources, we can say that Cuba is relatively poor. The acquisition of rents remains consistent with investments, and its products can't count on dynamic markets. Consider sugar or nickel as examples. Furthermore, the meager level of investment in, and continual expansion of, the labor force result in very low levels of physical capital per worker. Repurposing that human capital would be far more promising. According to the U.N.'s Human Development Index,² Cuba's educational attainment achieved is close to 80%³—above the average of other countries in the region and countries with similar income levels. However, there are conflicting ways to interpret these results. A favorable view is that this success was achieved in spite of Cuba being a poor country. A more pessimistic interpretation suggests that the country has not been able to capitalize on these results to improve its economic performance and the living standard of its people.

² It is an indicator calculated annually by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) for all countries, which integrates the dimensions of health, education, and income in the developmental measurement.

³ This means that 80% of the result of the country with the best position in that category has been achieved.

The unlocking of this potential faces multiple obstacles present in any development strategy. To put its human talent to use, Cuba must have access to hardware, which in the 21st century consists of ICT systems and digital infrastructure. Internet is to this century what electricity was at the beginning of the 20th. As a famous economist once said: "it is impossible to make a good programmer without a computer." There has to be some level of correspondence between human talent and the physical capital it needs to be truly productive.

Cuba possesses all the essential components to become a health and wellness hub. Of course, this requires different type of organizations than the ones we have, and workers motivated by other incentive structures.

This balance cannot be achieved through abstractions. Not all activities utilize human capital equally. That is why dynamic economies are those which are able to allocate a growing part of their labor force to dynamic sectors which make more intensive use of

knowledge. This not only refers to technical skills. It is just as important to invent a new process as it is to commercialize it efficiently. In this, there is a remarkable gap in Cuba. Under a different approach to development, the export of medical services could enhance its scope beyond the mere sending of professionals, by means of contracts with a high degree of standardization and buoyed by relations with the destination country. Cuba possesses all the essential components to become a health and wellness hub. Our international tourism industry should aim beyond just the sun, beaches and all-inclusive hotels; and highlight other unique characteristics, such as our art, history, and nature. In that regard, the salaries of workers cease to be a cost and instead become a basis of differentiation. Of course, this requires different type of organizations than the ones we have, and workers motivated by other incentive structures. The productive transformation of an economy depends on the instructions provided by its software, meaning its economic model.



Reforming the economic model

The notion that Cuba's future development depends on the profound reform of its economic model is not new. In fact, the launch of what was called the "actualización" ("updating") confirms that even the authorities recognized the presence of systemic weaknesses that are incompatible with our long-term economic sustainability. What we have yet to achieve is a consensus on the steps needed to implement the changes, which are neither minor nor easy.

In general, a centrally-planned economic model combines two interrelated characteristics. On the one hand, the overwhelming majority of the means of production are managed by state-owned companies. On the other, the central allocation of factors and resources by a public entity substitutes the pricing system as the principal mechanism for coordination. This property system was considered to be the basis for a new society, one of social justice. Yet with the passing of time, this way of organizing production posed undeniable challenges. The dominance of state-owned property creates perverse incentives in enterprise management which discourage the search for efficiency and innovation (Kornai, 2014). At the same time, efforts to substitute the pricing function with administrative edicts and mobilizations create serious distortions in economic management.

These practices cause serious contradictions that affect Cuba's political economy as well as its policymakers. The poor performance of state enterprises leads to a lack of resources to meet the requirements of a hypertrophic "welfare state."⁴ Nor has social policy been sufficiently modified to serve a more heterogeneous and fragmented socio-economic structure. The tension between needs and resources leads to sub-optimal levels of productive investment, which feeds into slow cycles of growth and low productivity. The solution is not to be found in reducing social spending but in increasing the effectiveness of

⁴ This term is used to denote the lack of correspondence between the social benefits to be attempted extend and the real economic possibilities to sustain them over time.

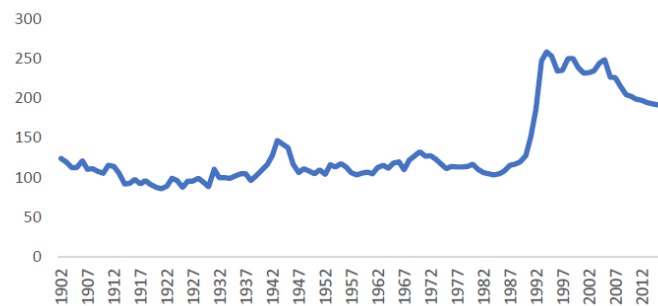
firms. On the other hand, pressures to generate new resources and income combined with the uncertainty inherent to market relations, lead to the search for contracting partners who could offer favorable terms. These provide a significant source of income which enables the postponement of changes considered taboo on the Island. Lastly, the difficulties of linking an economy like ours to other markets required the implementation of an impossible system: a *sui generis* system of monetary and currency exchange. Since 1993, officials have tried to make this system work to no avail, and the resulting distortions have been so severe that, at the end of 2019, we are once again heading down the road of partial institutional re-dollarization.⁵

On relations with the United States

No country is an island, economically speaking. At the very last, we can never ascertain whether economic trajectories are exclusively the result of domestic policies. Invoking the strained relationship with the United States in order to justify internal evils or framing it as the only cause of these evils, is old hat in the history of Cuba. The United States has always been Cuba's most important neighbor, but it has experienced enormous transformations during the past 200 years. The existence of a remarkable asymmetry in economic power is well known, even if it is poorly documented. This asymmetry has always served the interests of the United States, which has used it to impose certain decisions on its neighbors, not only on Cuba. The dimensions of this imbalance are overwhelming, even though the numbers have not always remained the same, as shown in Figure 2. These dynamics help us understand many developments of the 20th century.

⁵ The term refers to the phenomenon in which a foreign currency replaces the domestic currency in the functions of money. It is partial because the replacement has not been completed in all functions. It is institutional because the authorities create spaces where this substitution is manifested. For instance, trading consumer durables only in foreign exchange. In the case of Cuba, a informal re-dollarization as some key prices began to refer to some currency, or the saving took place in foreign currency.

Figura 2
EEUU y Cuba: ratio del tamaño de las economías
(veces)



Source: Torres, modeled after Bolt, Inglaar, de Jong, & Zanden, 2018

As Cuba entered the second half of the 19th century, the gap widened. The country which intervened in the Spanish-American War had an economy 124 times larger than Cuba's, the latter of which, to be fair, was devastated by the war. During the 20th century, the gap between the two economies fluctuated, but always remained large. The widest point came after 1985, when a profound economic crisis devastated the Island due to internal deficiencies, which we tried to mend with the Rectification of Mistakes and Negative Tendencies Process (Proceso de Rectificación de Errores y Tendencias Negativas), followed by the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Council for Mutual Economic Aid (CAME). From that year on, the economic asymmetry more than doubled. Add to this another important element: the origin of a liberal unipolar international order in which the United States emerged as the indisputable leader (Mearsheimer, 2019).

Models that try to explain bilateral trade highlight two fundamental variables: size and proximity. In the case of Cuba, this means that the United States would be its natural trade partner since it amply complies with both conditions. The productive output of both countries shows a high level of complementarity. Each one produces and exports goods and services that the other buys in large quantities. Combining this economic asymmetry with the privileged position of the United States in Cuba's international trade relations helps us understand the contemporaneous factors that greatly influence Cuban development. First, inaccessibility to the American market means a substan-

It is clear Cuba's this potential cannot be unleashed by public entities alone and the perverse incentives they create. A market-driven coordination system is crucial in order to reduce distortions in our productive sectors and improve the measurement of economic activity.

axis of the postwar international order, and its community of Cuban immigrants. Secondly, this asymmetry provides U.S. administrations with plenty of leeway to impose sanctions, due to the marginal impact these have on its domestic economy. At the same time, its internal political agendas discourage the lifting of these sanctions. It is true that U.S. hegemony is now being challenged by China. But it will take decades before China can claim supremacy in all important fields, and it would still remain a geographically distant partner for the Island.

What can be done?

Our analysis leaves us with some certainties about possible alternatives and brings order to the sequence of implementation... Since development is essentially a home-grown process, Cuba should start by fixing its own internal inequities. Relying on a favorable outcome in the upcoming U.S. election or the geopolitical whims of great powers to improve our outlook is a dangerous illusion, as has been repeatedly proven throughout Cuban history.

Full use of the talent and energy of the Cuban labor force cannot be achieved by the country's current state firms, at least not most of them. It is clear Cuba's this potential cannot be un-

tial increase in costs for Cuban foreign trade, regardless of its access to other markets. A partial compensation of these immense costs can only be achieved if other markets could open to Cuba under preferential conditions. This is not always possible due to the internal commitments of governments and has been proved to be unsustainable in the long term. Because of its huge size, finding a substitute for the United States is not easy. Its importance is magnified by its technological superiority, its position as the

leashed by public entities alone and the perverse incentives they create. A market-driven coordination system is crucial in order to reduce distortions in our productive sectors and improve the measurement of economic activity. It is also necessary for improving the conditions of Cuban enterprises that compete in foreign markets. A functional market must not be seen as a synonym for an unregulated or frenetic one. Referring to its relations with the United States, Cuba must recognize the position of the former in the international order. Even though the Cuban economic dimension is not relevant to the United States as a whole, this does not have to be the case to specific states or industries. That is a kind of approach which must be boosted in the near future. Any economic exchange based on information networks contribute to the cutting of costs generated by trade with more distant markets. Instead of pondering solely on when the embargo will end, the most important question for the leaders of the Island should be: what are we doing to prepare ourselves to use this hypothetical favorable situation to our advantage?

Dr. Ricardo Torres is a professor of economics with the Center for the Study of the Cuban Economy at the University of Havana.

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Three Events that will Shape Cuba's Future

By **Aldo Álvarez**



uban reality is in constant flux. As occurs in any process of change, there will be events that make a difference and shape the character and direction of social transformations. In the next twelve months, three major events stand to have a sizable impact on Cuba's future trajectory. Therefore, they deserve our highest attention.

A considerable segment of Cuban society has long demanded a faster pace to the reforms promoted by the Government. As is typical of an increasingly heterogeneous society, the demands have varied. For example, some sectors consider that the reform process in Cuba today is not nor will ever be enough and is worthless because the problem is systemic and requires a total transformation. For another, changes have not been or are not even necessary, and our nation's efforts should be focused on recovering the "better times" where everything was easier and simpler. There are also those, both inside and outside Cuba, who prefer to stay away from "politics" because they consider that circumstances are unfavorable to express their opinions, or because they see no favorable correlation between the energies invested and its revenue potential. Finally, many who are distant in both space and time from Cuba for migratory rea-



Illustration: Maikel Martínez

son, still remain anchored to previous realities, which they can better manage and understand, and process new information within those scenarios, intermingling issues from different decades.

Yet, from any of these positions, or others found through a deeper dive into Cuban society, we can see that Cuba is in a process of recognizing new realities and readjusting relationships: society-government, society-emigration, society-private sector, etc. Powered by new technologies, these dynamics are causing a shift in citizen participation across the different issues that affect our daily lives: a new ecosystem where social networks, influencers, opinion articles, academic research, independent media news, official press releases, among other media, coexist. This applies even for those who don't have access to information in real time, or at all, and who access this ecosystem through alternative or indirect sources, such as *el Paquete* or *la Mochila*, work-related internet accounts, or prudent use of mobile data packets. We have gone, in a relatively short period of time, from being a country with an absence of information where it could be problematic to hold an opinion, know about something specific, or communicate with others to suffer the consequences of information overload or infoxication, as do all post-modern societies.

New events go viral almost every week, (i.e., the expression referring to the importance of "the limes" uttered by the president Díaz-Canel, the video showing Pau Massola at the beach during lockdown; the hospitalization of comedian Juan Carlos "el Gordo" after having been accused of being an anonymous influencer). On the other hand, every month, we also enjoy a variety of exceptional journalistic articles analyzing Cuban reality from diverse perspectives (i.e., Ricardo Torres, Triana Cordoví, and Everleny on the economy; La Jiribilla and Rialta on culture; and Temas, Flacso, and Centro de Convivencia on society). Moreover, we read different points of view on relevant and interesting topics (i.e. *Joven Cuba*, *El Estornudo*), investigative journalism (i.e. *El Toque*, *Periodismo de Barrio*); and can even often

find positive examples of journalistic works in official channels of communication (i.e. Cubadebate, Juventud Rebelde) or on TV (Lázaro Manuel Alonso, Thalía González, Abdiel Bermúdez). Besides, it now common to be subjected to a bombardment of information from all sources, updating us on everything from relevant issues (i.e., modifications to the customs regulations) to the most insipid topics (i.e., an opinion on Facebook about someone on any particular topic).

These will be among the questions that will determine if Cuba's social transformations will be simply cosmetic, or if we are in the presence of a deeper process that will bring about the possibility of building, together, a better society defined by coexistence.

transformations currently taking place in our nation. These are the (long-delayed) implementation of structural measures envisaged in planning documents approved by Cuban authorities during the 7th Congress of the Cuban Communist Party (PCC) in 2016, which must be implemented before March, 2021; the U.S. Presidential election this November, and the 8th Congress of the Cuban Communist Party to take place in April of 2021.

The Implementation of Reforms approved during the 7th Congress of the Cuban Communist Party.

It is curious, to say the least, that a package of measures proposed by the government of a country doesn't instituted, or after being implemented, barely complies with its provisions.

In this sea of good—and in some cases not so good—intentions, which forces us to be constantly aware of events, and in which we all take part, actively or passively, we risk losing perspective on potential future versions of ourselves. Information overload tends to make us think only focus on present. Hence, it is important to highlight three events that will likely shape the sociopolitical and economic trans-

What has happened in Cuba, over the last few years, (or as we should best say, what has not happened), is evidence that Cuban authorities have centered their attention on the generational handover of power that is still in progress, and thus neglected what should have gone hand in hand with such process and waved as the main flag of this cause: namely, the political, social, and economic agenda. It was not until now, as we face a pandemic and its resulting economic devastation; and in a moment in which popular support is needed at a greater level than exists at the moment, that the topic of the previously approved reforms has made its way back to the official discussion table.

Finally, this month, the Cuban government officially announced its intent to implement the "Concept Documents of the 7th Congress of the Cuban Communist Party, approved by the 3rd Plenary Session of the Central Committee of the Cuban Communist Party on May 18th, 2017, and endorsed by the National Assembly of the People's Power (Cuban Parliament) on June 1st, 2017." Twelve years after the beginning of the implementation of the reforms, there are plenty of reasons for skepticism. People won't, as the villagers in the fable of The Boy Who Cried Wolf, respond to the signals. But that only makes the announcement, despite the state's capacity to implement such changes or the pace they'll take, all the more relevant.

Some of the most anticipated transformations of the last few years include: (i) the unification of the currency, (ii) wage reform and a more adequate relationship between wages and purchasing power, (iii) recognition of "legal personality" in the private sector, that is, the creation of a formal non-state business sector, (iv) greater flexibility of state enterprises, and their regular interaction with other sectors of the economy, (v) an economic policy focused on progress and wealth generation, (vi) the elimination of bureaucratic obstacles, (vii) greater dynamism in decision-making at the local and provincial level, and (viii) a closer relationship with emigration, among other claims. The list is long. In this crucial context, we can identify several noteworthy elements: apparent political goodwill in

the public acknowledgment of our challenges, ongoing popular demand for the previously mentioned claims, open public discourse on these topics of common interest via social media, and with it, broader participation in the national debate. In any event, however far we manage to move forward in the reform process, even under the current circumstances, the outcome should give us a more realistic idea of the true capacity of current Cuban authorities (with fewer and fewer members of the so-called "historic generation") to pursue their political agenda.

U.S. presidential elections in November 2020

The U.S. presidential election is highly relevant to Cuba. In the specific case of Cuba, the impact of US foreign policy is intensified by various factors: (i) the geographical proximity and enormous political influence of the US over politics of the countries of the hemisphere, (ii) political differences accumulated over decades of ideological conflict, (iii) disparities between both countries and its consequences for economic development of Cuba, (iv) a politically-engaged Cuban community in the USA, of national consequence for its role Florida elections, which includes (v) a sub-segment with a defined hardline agenda toward Cuba (that has become end onto itself, after decades pursuing policies that don't accomplish their goals), (vi) the influence of United States foreign policy over the global financial system and the decision-making processes of regional and international organizations, (viii) penalties imposed on banking and the hindrance to international financing agreements, which make the development of both the Cuban economy and national infrastructure very difficult, among other factors.

That is why, as in the brief rapprochement period pursued by President Obama showed, there is another possible scenario for the private sector, the emigration/diaspora, civil society, and the general citizenry to advocate for the social transformations they consider necessary in our nation. The dynamics common to Cuban society; however, have been hindered by the policies of the Trump administration. As can be seen, 3 years since the

re-establishment of economic sanctions and other policies that have negatively impacted Cuban society, we are neither in a better situation nor closer to favorable conditions for the development of Cuban civil society. Criticism leveled at Obama administration's policy of engagement and dialogue (that could be easily reestablished by future administrations, i.e. if Biden would be elected president) has been supported by the falsehood that Obama had "given everything away in exchange for nothing"; however, such opinions are based on a deep misunderstanding of modern Cuban social matrix, or a total indifference toward furthering any social transformation in Cuba short of so-called "total change" (for which there have never been any real conditions). Add a political sector of Florida, which continues to use the Cuban issue as a way to shore up votes and political careers, with little serious concern for policy outcomes. The impact of their policies on the social transformations taking place in Cuba has been minimal. Instead of enabling Cuban socio-economic transformation, they only disrupt it. Thus, four more years of the current policies, would mean four more years in which we would digress from the direction our nation should be heading: promoting spaces for dialogue, achieving national reconciliation, and economic and social inclusion for Cubans at home and abroad. The truth is that the so-called "nothing" Obama achieved was nothing less than ushering of a new era in which the Cuban people worry less about the whims of US politics and politicians and focus more on their own relationship with the American people. We consider that Cuban society is capable, by itself, of establishing its own objectives, and of claiming the pertinent social transformations it desires. Anything else that does not contribute to the achievement of these objectives is but an obstacle to our future.

The 8th Congress of the Cuban Communist Party, to be held in April 2021.

The "historic generation", for purely biological reasons, is disappearing, and its natural consequence has been the transi-

tion of power that the country has undergone over the past four years. This has included a new Constitution, declared objectives for 2030, and an ambitious multi-year legislative timetable. In April 2021, the leadership of the Cuban government will be definitively reconfigured for a new era. From that moment, we'll be able to evaluate the new balances of power and positions of each of its members and learn whether current members of the government delayed reforms, or if the obstacles are deeper and more systemic. The VIII Party Congress could be a starting point for a vastly different period in Cuban history.

However, none of these transformations would suffice on their own. More democratic spaces for dialogue between society and government are needed, the search for a greater social consensus in decision-making, an empowering platform for the private sector, a favorable reintegration of our emigration/diaspora, greater recognition of claims by all sectors of civil society including animal rights defenders and the LGTBI+ community, and the clear regulations for their implementation and compliance. These will be among the questions that will determine if Cuba's social transformations will be simply cosmetic, or if we are in the presence of a deeper process that will bring about the possibility of building, together, a better society defined by coexistence.

Conclusion

The outcomes of these three events will help us gain a better idea of what Cuba's immediate future will look like (at least until the period 2024-2025). As we all know, unpredictable variables could always affect social and political processes. In any case, there is a combination that would potentially allow for more an ideal scenario for the transformation of society: the full implementation of all pending reforms due before March/2021, delivering enough reforms to overcome public skepticism; a post-U.S. election pivot toward a policy of engagement with Cuba that enables greater social and commercial ties between the peoples of both countries; and finalizing the generational handover of power so that new authorities can focus on the

full implementation of the socioeconomic reforms so urgently needed. We don't know which direction events will take, but the next 12 months are all but sure to pave a path.

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Rendezvous in Havana: In Search of a Transna- tional Nation-State?

By Roberto Veiga González

In April of this year, the latest in long cycle of sporadic meetings between Cuban emigrants and Island officials should have taken place in Havana. COVID-19 made this impossible, but many of us assume that the meeting will not take long to materialize once that the pandemic is controlled. In addition, some of us presume that the severity of the crisis could breathe greater substance to the outcomes of the meeting.

Cuba is facing growing economic difficulties and a progressive deterioration of its social welfare. This won't be reversible without the active and equal participation of all Cubans. Given these circumstances, all forums should procure a comprehensive projection of Cuba: that is to say, with all and in favor of all Cubans.

It is difficult to discern whether the government understands the urgency of this universal and integral approach. But it is obvious that it at least understands the need of having a greater integration of formerly relegated Cubans who can contribute to the nation's stability, mainly in its economy. Nevertheless, it would demand a broader process, able to gradually institutionalize without hesitation the immigration status of these Cubans. Otherwise, what could constitute a "migration"



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will be transformed into a new form of exile. An immigrant is a person who relocates permanently to a foreign country but retains all formal and material rights in his country of origin, including political ones. At the same time, emigration can be due to family, economic and even political causes, among others. Now then, the motivating reason that compels a person to change his or her residence to a foreign country is the one qualification for the relocation and does not always coincide with the immediate motivation that the person might have perceived.

If someone decides to leave his country to reunite with family members who, in turn, also left before because, like him, they found it difficult to build a life under current conditions, then the real cause is not family reunification, but rather issues preventing proper living standards. Nor would we find the real cause of economic underperformance if the motivation were due to a lack of material resources; the cause is in the hurdles preventing a proper economic growth. In both cases, it is crystal clear that the main reason lays in the failure to guarantee living conditions. Thus, the cause is political in nature.

On the other hand, if the migrant, no matter what type he is (family, economic, political or other), is deprived of his rights in his native country, he ceases to be a citizen of the latter, although he continues to be a native of the same, which makes him an exile. Exile implies banishment; either by an official resolution declaring someone exempt from rights in his country of origin and forcing him to leave; or because when a person leaves his country, he officially loses his formal and / or material rights. And a refugee can only be one who was forced to leave his country because of a threat of real and direct danger.

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It would be possible to understand that our diaspora may be considered as emigration and not as exile, but only if the universe of family, cultural, economic and political relations among Cubans is guaranteed, regardless of where they live. The economic issue is only one of them, although especially important. Furthermore, it would not be possible for the emigrant to fully commit to the establishment of an economy, without guaranteeing that, with it, he will gain access to his individual, social and political desires in Cuba. For this reason, it would also be essential for emigrants to regain the right to participate in the political life of the Island.,

Thus, the next meeting in the Cuban capital would be the appropriate event to formalize such a commitment, place it in the public sphere, and begin efforts to legitimize it. It would be a positive move worthy of support.

However, the solution to all this must be part of a more comprehensive approach. Now that private enterprise will be allowed, it would not be possible to argue that ownership rights to companies on the Island extended to Cuban emigrants of should not also be granted to Cubans living in the island. Nor without the possibility for Cubans – whether living on the island or abroad – to take part in a genuinely associative social fabric without been compelled to join civic organizations tied to the Cuban Communist Party when they don't share said ideology. Equally, it would be necessary for emigrants to exercise the right to vote in Cuba, but this would also require that any Cuban citizen to run for all elected positions (not only as municipal delegates).

But the epicenter of these challenges is in the need of an accommodating attitude toward Cubans with different ideas and criteria, regardless of whether they sympathize with the official

Given these circumstances, all forums should procure a comprehensive projection of Cuba: that is to say, with all and in favor of all Cubans.

stance, whether residing on the Island or abroad. This poses a dissonant challenge to certain elements of the dominant ideology, and thus it would be unrealistic to expect meeting organizers to have ironed out solutions to all of these things. But at the same time, it would be improper to hold an event of this nature that doesn't at least consider a universe of solutions.

Additionally, we can expect the meeting will be burdened with long-standing and politically unsustainable administrative bottlenecks, which the bureaucracy has so far been unable to remove. These include excessive consular fees for Cuban emigrants, the ability remains outside of Cuba for more than two years without losing permanent residence and property on the Island, and the need to streamline the process of repatriation for Cuban emigrants. Hopefully, authentic solutions for these hurdles will be announced before the meeting is scheduled, so as to maximize the time to discuss other matters.

Finally, it will be beneficial for the event to be organized based on a democratic methodology that ensures representation of transnational Cuban society. Perhaps, unlike any of these meetings in the past, this one has the imperative to achieve adequately free deliberations, channeled through an agenda that is elaborated in a pluralistic way.

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Cuban Information Flows in the Time of COVID-19

By **Milena Recio**



The first half of an unforgettable year is past us. We have experienced simultaneously, in almost every country of the world, the fear of imminent death and physical pain. We were forced to halt to our daily lives, confine ourselves away from the streets, while the global economy induced itself into a coma, posing serious consequences for less developed countries such as Cuba.

Many, when thinking about the presence of the virus in Cuba, foresaw a major disaster. Our precarious material conditions and inability to store products to resist long-term confinement, sizable high-risk groups—people over 60, who represent 20% of the population—and the low availability of ventilators at the ICUs were three of the principal causes for concern. The shortage of financial resources needed to import products during the pandemic, and the limitations to the Cuban economic and commercial activities caused by the blockade/embargo imposed by the United States, completed our Dantean outlook.

Nonetheless, Cuba has achieved—in medical and epidemiological terms—praise-worthy results in the struggle against the pandemic. On June 23rd, there were 2,319 confirmed cases



Illustration: Maikel Martínez

and 85 deaths in total. In less than three months—from March 11th, when the first cases were confirmed—Cuba managed to control the spreading of the disease preventing the sanitary system from collapsing.

The fast-detection strategy (more than 157,000 tests were conducted), extensive tracking of the chains of contagion; the isolation of people with suspected COVID-19, even without having any symptoms, in facilities prepared to comply with this purpose; and the use of an array of preventive and therapeutic medicines—many of them produced in Cuba—were key factors that contributed to the containment of contagion, and above all, to achieving low levels of mortality.

Due to its magnitude, the COVID-19 pandemic imposed an unparalleled state of emergency on Cuba; even though the official authorities as well as the population had a vast experience throughout decades facing natural disasters such as powerful hurricanes, and epidemic outbreaks such as dengue, Zika, cholera, HIV, or the meningococcal meningitis, among others.

Such crises and their management also offer insights into the governing conditions and the civic reserves available in a country.

In Cuba, responses to extreme situations generally call for an increase in the generation and dissemination of information, and of communication by the official press run by the Communist Party. This arrangement has regularly monopolized rhetoric and interpretation of events, echoing the official voice and sources, and channeling message lines of propagandistic character. However, the last decade has seen both an increase in

In the face of COVID-19, it has been possible to develop more shock-absorbent strategies in Cuba – not despite of, but rather thanks to the growing participation of diverse communication agents capable of sharing public opinion and forcing accountability and policy adjustments

the access to digital technologies and to Internet connection in Cuba and a growing media ecosystem within, about, and directed at Cuba. At the end of 2019, there were 7.1 million Internet users in Cuba (63% of the population) and more than 6 million people owned SIM cards. This has represented a gradual democratization of information in Cuban social life. Nonetheless, these processes have not unfolded without causing frictions, disputes, and obstacles.

“Conversations” on Cuban social media have a transnational magnitude and influence deliberative action, the mediatic agenda, the formation of public opinion, and decision-making in Cuba.

During the COVID-19 crisis, independent journalists, YouTubers, and opposition activists denounced interrogations and detentions, and the imposition of fines under Decree-law 370 “About the Computerization of the Society in Cuba”, which in its article No. 68 establishes as an offense the “spreading, through public networks of data transmission, of information opposite to the social interest, values, good habits, and the integrity of the people. This wording is quite ambiguous and can lead to arbitrary interpretations.

The enforcement of such a draconian measure to repress what the authorities consider to be actions opposite to the social interest, also underscores the dearth of regulatory protection over public communication processes in Cuba.

For years, the enactment of a Press, Information, and Communications Law has been expected. This law is supposed to regulate the rights and responsibilities of those involved in these practices, and to protect society from oppressive actions against freedom of speech and media manipulation.

Cuban authorities condemn the existence of programs whose purpose is to advance regime change. These programs, which are sponsored from abroad, provide moral and monetary support to anti-government media initiatives. In light of these accusations, it is of fundamental importance for Cuba to establish laws that clearly define the rules of the game for everyone

and eliminate the arbitrariness that plagues the state’s current relationship with independent media outlets.

In the face of COVID-19, the possibility of developing shock-absorbent strategies in Cuba has proven more conspicuous than before – not despite of, but rather thanks to the growing participation of diverse communication agents, capable of shaping public opinion and forcing accountability and policy adjustments.

This has likely been the result of not only the efforts of a somewhat unstructured civil society, new alternative communication channels, and social media actors, but also of a more lenient attitude by governmental institutions that has allowed for questioning and guidance. Also, the national press has deployed creative resources in a more professional manner, even though it is still not fully tolerant towards diversity of opinions and is still rooted in a model mainly based on propag

Some possible lessons

As advised by the World Health Organization, the communication of the risks and spread of truthful information, accompanied by early advice and guidance, are crucial in the management of epidemic outbreaks.

The public administration of data about the evolution of the pandemic has been one of the most important and instructive particularities of this process in Cuba.

After the first positive cases of coronavirus were confirmed, rickety official news broadcasts on the Cuban Television were suddenly replaced with live speeches via Internet and national TV given by Dr. Francisco Durán—who has become a kind of national hero due to the positive results achieved in the struggle against COVID-19.

During Dr. Durán’s press conferences, he offered data related to the number of tests conducted, hospitalizations, deaths, medical discharges, and super spreader events. He also gave additional explanations about the pandemic and answers to ques-

tions from the national media, the accredited foreign press, and users on social media.

Cuban audiences were grateful for the daily update, but soon many recognized a bias in some questions which were selected to avoid delving into thorny issues. The program evolved into a format in which the questions appeared to have been

Interactions online are a very relevant type of social action that the authorities monitor and that generates two-way exchanges between the virtual and the physical world.

shared with the speaker beforehand, leaving little room for improvisation. Thus, the program ceased to be a press conference, taking on the qualities of a simulated dialogue. It became formal and lost the ability to respond “on the spot” to people’s criticisms and concerns; whom in turn

realized that the epidemiologist couldn’t give proper answers to every question, since some refer to problems collateral to those caused by the pandemic, whose solutions were beyond his competence. Dr. Durán’s charisma helped serve his purpose, since he uses a simple and calm language which conveys a sense of knowledge and security, and also had an impact on the public compliance with the protective measures.

One of the shortcomings in the handling of statistical data by state entities—including the Public Health Ministry and the official press—has been a lack of format versatility and analytic derivations from the raw data.

On the Internet, the services of a project named Postdata, linked to the School of Mathematics and Computer Science of the University of Havana, whose dean took part in the government’s science advisory commission created to address COVID-19, had a lot of merit. Yet despite these connections, they were not able to present data visualizations in the official media; especially on television, infographics would have added complexity to the interpretation of figures.

Besides official statistics on the epidemiological crisis shared by Dr. Durán, other strategic information about how to behave during quarantine was transmitted in a fragmented or scattered way. Such was the case of the Carmelo neighborhood in Havana, which was declared a quarantine zone one night—access points would be closed and safe passage granted to essential workers—yet denied by officials the following day.

Furthermore, clarifications about how specific groups of people—physically disabled people, pregnant women and those who perform as heads of households, the elderly living alone, etc.—should behave during quarantines were not provided in time. Social assistance was provided to all of them, but sometimes inefficiently and poorly communicated. This diminished the positive impact of social assistance on some groups who needed help.

In all the coverage, not a single website was created with all the necessary, organized, and accessible information on the spread of Covid-19 in Cuba. Such would have complimented the long transcripts and summaries of Mesas Redondas published by Cubadebate, through which it is difficult to find desired data due to the diversity of topics covered in each broadcast; as well as the mostly-sterilized updates on the Councils of Ministers which tend to be published on the President’s official website and are reproduced throughout the state media.

For Cuban audiences, who must transfer a significant portion of their income each month to ETCSA in order to surf the Internet, it would have been more useful to have a one-stop source where they could find information related to the pandemic, including government declarations, institutional reactions, expert opinions, local reports, scientific findings, international updates, etc.

Along with Dr. Durán, other officials like Prime Minister Manuel Marrero, Minister of Public Health, Dr. José Ángel Portal and the Minister of Economy Alejandro Gil gained visibility and sympathy, since they showed resolution and authority, in sharing their own perspectives with the public. The participa-

tion of scientists from multiple fields also benefitted the official media coverage. In the independent media space, we saw an alignment in favor of health care and the postponement of ideological agendas in favor of journalism focused on the severity of the circumstances: in prevention and risk mitigation, dissemination of information on services, and the duties and responsibilities of institutions and specialists confronting of the crisis. In many instances, the discourse was of greater quality, since it leaned towards informative pieces focused on the “hard facts” about the situation in Cuba and around the world. This entailed the recovery of professional attributes inherent to journalism, such as the comparison of sources, the attribution of authority to sources, and the placing of data and information in corresponding contexts. This was the case even among some outlets which otherwise focus on generating clickbait, fake news and driving polarization among Cubans.

Investigative journalism proved its usefulness during the pandemic. Various reports contributed to the clarification of developments and the establishment of best practices from a journalistic point of view. Among these was an exposé published in the newspaper *Invasor*, from Ciego de Ávila, inspired by a local outbreak in the municipality of Florencia. This case was cited by Cuban president Miguel Díaz-Canel, who referred to the people involved as “irresponsible” and called for “rigorous” action. *Invasor* indirectly debunked that allegation and explained that the “party” accused of being a super spreader event was just a family lunch with Cubans who live in the United States, which took place several days before the closing of national borders imposed by the government, and the enforcement of stay-at-home and social distancing measures. The local newspaper found the facts and redeemed the dignity of those affected.

Fact-checking and detecting fake news showed their promise among new media initiatives in Cuba, for example in the joint coverage provided by *El Toque* and *Periodismo de Barrio* to counter the outbreak of disinformation that coincided with the SARS-CoV-2 virus.

On May 21st, ETECSA announced that since March they had seen increases of 46% in voice traffic through cellphones, 92% in the use of mobile data, and 96% in the use of Nauta Hogar (Wi-Fi at home). The amount of information shared among Cuban users through apps such as Whatsapp, Telegram, Twitter and Instagram has skyrocketed during the outbreak.

Even informed audiences became victims of disinformation campaigns. One of the first fake news reports exposed was one related to the description of Cuban Interferon-Alfa2B as a vaccine. This idea spread on social media, and often the carriers of this misinformation were supporters of the Cuban government who, far from helping, were reducing the perception of risk.

The lesson is clear: omissions of fact and half-truths create a void which will always be filled, in many cases with other fake or low-quality information, used to manipulate the public and deny them joint responsibility or decision-making capability.

Cubans on social media—the forum where those who live on the Island and those who belong to its diaspora gather to share, shatter or build consensus—“won”, by means of the debates and demands, some

“battles” from which some lessons can be drawn. They contributed to decisions to close borders and schools sooner rather than later, and influenced fee reduc-

tions by ETECSA, which while minimal, provided a degree of economic relief. They drove public scrutiny and attempts to fix the problems with the state’s new e-commerce system, which sell products in foreign currencies. They demanded the “rescue” of a press note removed from Granma, which was later included again with some edits, in which Díaz-Canel announced “a Social and Economic Development Strategy in which we ratify that we cannot keep doing things the same way” and talk-

The “conversation” on Cuban social networks has a transnational dimension and affects deliberative action, the media’s agenda, public opinion, and decision making in Cuba.

ed about “introducing the new sectors involved and actions already established into our economic strategies and development policies” based on economic planning documents issued over the past decade. Interactions on social media were highly relevant, and a type of social action closely monitored by authorities, which create a two-way exchange between the virtual and physical worlds. “Conversations” on Cuban social media have a transnational magnitude and influence deliberative action, the mediatic agenda, the formation of public opinion, and decision-making in Cuba. Another accomplishment driven by social media was the retraction of news coverage of alleged offenses that were being simultaneously adjudicated in both Cuban courts and via live television. During the spring, National Television News broadcasted 52 of these offenses, and in many cases the identities and images of alleged offenders were exposed, and these were subjected to interrogations and confrontations before TV cameras. Such behavior was rebuked as unethical, even by journalists of the official media, and considered official misconduct that affected due process. Due to intense public criticism, reporters and editors at local news television programs refrained from repeating that same method.

In the long run

Even though the figures allow for positive and optimistic interpretations from the public health perspective, this disease has caused deaths and suffering in Cuban families. The COVID-19 pandemic has represented for Cuba, like for all affected countries, a tragedy.

It will be long before the sociological and psychological effects of the pandemic can be fully known or explained. There are hints that alongside its burden on people and institutions, the struggle against COVID-19 also may have strengthened bonds of solidarity and co-responsibility, invigorated by a shared feeling that, thanks to the efforts of many, our dangerous battle against the pandemic in the Island has been won.

Considering Cuba’s complex media ecosystem, the management of communication has been far more effective than during past critical events, such as the tornado that hit Havana in January 2019 and its recovery; and the Cubana de Aviación crash in 2018.

There was more transparency and consistency in the provision of data, greater diversity of outlets and opinions, less misleading propaganda, visibility toward local events, and new linkages between civil and political societies, among other aspects. However, there are no heroes, nor should any one person receive special credit. There is a long way to go before we achieve greater journalistic efficiency, societal democratization, rule of law, and the restoration of collective political and moral values which reinforce our identity.

The pandemic has been controlled, but the worst of this crisis is still ahead for Cuba – the economic crisis, whose origins are not rooted in the outbreak, but in what preceded it. The COVID-19 crisis has worsened the traumas of an economy which suffers from structural distortions that impose a heavy load upon its citizens. There will be no magical solutions, but solutions will be needed now more than ever. The way out from the economic quagmire is correlated to the topics discussed above: how a society and its authorities manage and promote dialogue and communication, how they shed centralized planning and authoritarianism in favor of law enforcement, citizenship participation, and consensus building.

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Private Sector in Cuba: An Opportunity to Empower Women

By *Glenda Boza Ibarra*

Economic independence, increased income, the ability to select the right or desired job, and teamwork with colleagues or family, constitute the primary motivations for Cubans who have embraced self-employment (*cuentapropismo*), whether as contract workers or business owners.

However, Cuban women represent only 33.9% of total *cuentapropistas*. Although their proportion within the total of self-employed workers increases every year, that number has never risen above 35%.

With so little representation, the contributions of Cuban women in the private sector may seem insignificant; however, female entrepreneurs on the Island have shown not only that they can be financially successful, but also contribute to empowering women while breaking down gender biases. But what causes still hold Cuban women back from joining the ranks of the non-state labor force? How have successful business owners overcome these obstacles? This article explores some problems women face in the complex context of the Cuban private sector and highlights several successful examples of Cuban women who have managed to overcome these challenges, while revealing possible paths for other female-run enterprises.



Illustration: Maikel Martínez

Attention to Labor Matters

There are several motivations for women to pursue entrepreneurship in Cuba, most common among them increasing personal income and leaving the ranks of the unemployed.

However, these reasons are not sufficient to commit to entrepreneurship. Many Cubans do not dare to dive into the private sector due to job insecurity and the absence of contracts and vacations – which protect state sector employees.

Often in the Cuba non-state ecosystem working arrangements are agreed upon between employers and employees through verbal agreements in which fixed minimum wages are not determined, but hourly payments are.

Although the right to wages and personal time off are earned spaces for Cuban state workers – as established in the country's Labor Code – these protections are not always respected and ensured in the non-state sector. In the case of contract workers, the right not to lose your job after obtaining maternity leave, although remunerated and established by law, is one of the most commonly defied outside of state labor.

Add another situation: faced with the demand for employment in the private sector, many women may not be willing to demand their rights to keep a coveted job and for which there is intense competition.

Although these situations –born of job insecurity and a regulatory framework that establishes difficult-to-enforce rules– have been recognized by organizations and ministries that should encourage, train and ensure compliance with labor rights, such as the Ministry of Labor and Social Security and the Federation of Cuban Women, respect for these legal guarantees is applied in a discretionary manner and according to the understanding and circumstances of each business owner.

Some self-employed women assert that when their employers are also women, there is a better understanding and respect for these guarantees, perhaps due to a matter of empathy and solidarity.

However, it should be made clear that there are other state policies that protect self-employed mothers, such as the access to early childcare and part-time schools. In addition, the compulsory affiliation of *cuentapropistas* to the Social Security system offers protection against maternity, old age, temporary or permanent total disability, and deaths in the family.

Beyond Social Expectations

In Cuba, the majority of women who work in self-employment (70%) fill positions traditionally associated with women: manicurist, seamstress, childcare and elderly care, hairdresser, makeup artist, domestic staff, costume rental, washing machine, reviewer, decorator or music teacher.

Due to strong patriarchal influence in our society, stereotypes persist as to what trades are “destined” for women, and many do not consider jobs that are not traditionally associated with the female sphere. In this way they not only limit their individual potentials, but also their opportunities.

However, several examples show that they can also be successful in “masculine” tasks.

Led by women, *Veló Cuba* – a bicycle repair and rental workshop in Havana – and *Constructora Gotera* – dedicated to the repair and restoration of real estate – are case studies of how some Cuban women have found paths to empowerment, success, and job creation in “unconventional” trades.

Since 2017, *Veló Cuba* has achieved an alliance with the Office of the Historian of the City of Havana to work on the *Habici* project, a public mobility initiative that installed the first public bicycle system in the country's capital.

Likewise, *Constructora Gotera* extends its work through various provinces and has carried out important works such as the restoration of the domes and towers of the Hotel Nacional. Advancing the feminization of labor activities is not simply a “moral” achievement, it can also represent personal and economic growth. Quality work has guaranteed contractual relationships with the State that not only allow for higher incomes,

but also greater access to resources and more guarantees of job offers extended over time.

Such is the case of Ciclo Ecopapel – a venture that produces eco-friendly paper (without chemicals or artificial binders) – and launched by offering services to the Antonio Núñez Jiménez Foundation, its first client. Its founder and director chose the venture not only to increase her income, but also as a way to spend more time with her daughter.

Women's Networks

The positive impact of the private sector is reflected in the increase in the number of women active in this space. Although most of them are not business owners, but rather act as contract workers, a discreet but constant growth is evident: both among women in the sector and in their proportion to men. (Table 1)

Woman in the Cuban private sector (thousands of workers)

Year	Total	# of Women	%
2010	228.1	29.5	12.9
2011	391.5	61.9	15.8
2012	404.6	63	15.6
2013	424.3	73.3	17.3
2014	483.4	142.5	29.5
2015	499	152	30.5
2016	540.8	174.8	32.3
2017	583.2	193.2	33.1
2018	580.8	197.2	34.0

However, dedicating on average 14 hours a week more than men to unpaid domestic tasks such as caregiving and homemaking is a factor that prevents many Cuban women from pursuing entrepreneurship.

The instability of supply in the retail network poses another obstacle. There is only one wholesale vendor in Cuba. Add to that legal insecurity and bureaucracy, the cost of imported

goods, and the risk of informal markets and payments of customs taxes.

In several cases, due to the absence of support programs and actions that encourage female entrepreneurship, many women end up almost “forced” to opt for contracted work and existing subordination schemes in Cuba.

However, many successful female-led ventures have shown that it is possible to overcome these obstacles, appealing to creativity, women's networks and the selection of work activities with market demand.

Given the scarcity of products and a wholesale market, several business owners have had to get creative and reinvent themselves, and that is a virtue that Cuban women, almost always heads of households, seem to have in their genes.

Appealing to that creativity, the home design shop La Bombilla, and craft studio Rústica Cuba, use recycled materials and offers unconventional products with a secure market. La Penúltima Casa, for example, is a digital communication initiative that provides solutions, training and advice tailored to the Cuban reality and mainly focused on the management of social networks for central organizations.

Penúltima Casa founder Katia Sánchez Martínez noticed a lack of information, knowledge, and good practices in Cuban organizational, institutional and business communications, and recognized a market opportunity for her digital marketing services.

Some self-employed women workers have also chosen to create entrepreneurial networks, not only to share experiences but also to integrate services. The operation of these networks is clearly evident among home renters, who not only offer lodging services, but also associated services such as private transportation, recreation, and food, throughout the country.

Some receive commission, but, in many cases, the real gains come from word-of-mouth recommendations in other provinces. For many hosts the measure of success is having a repeat clientele, which they achieve with quality service and as comprehensive as possible.

Furthermore, women have a greater tendency to associate, thereby sharing both opportunities and risks.

Saily González, owner of the Amarillo B&B hostel in Santa Clara, founded the FullGao project with the goal of sharing her knowledge in positioning content on online booking platforms. The collaborative network not only offers advice to other tenants but also provides photography, interior design, and other services. Many of the entrepreneurs who joined FullGao claim that their clients have increased since the association.

Similarly, Beyond Roots decided to link businesses that promote Afro culture in Cuba. Founder Adriana Heredia integrated several projects into a comprehensive service — gastronomy, sightseeing tours, recreation, shopping — all centered on the promotion of afro-cubanismo. The shortage of products for black women has not stopped being an obstacle for Heredia, but Beyond Roots' success is based on connections and networks among entrepreneurs whose businesses were not well-known. These, like other projects, not only influenced the individual and professional growth of its owners, but also that of other women and of the community itself.

Some Proposals

Although the research into the role of women in the Cuban private sector remains lacking, anecdotal evidence suggests that women have not yet adopted traditionally “male” leadership practices, assuming instead more supportive and empathetic ways of collective work and shown greater personal commitment to their workers.

Considering the possible economic, family and emotional advantages of incorporating women into self-employment, there are several factors that may widen the path for women.

Greater access to advisory services on labor rights, marketing, business administration, accounting issues, legal frameworks, and basic knowledge to start a business are necessary and of urgent need for Cuban self-employed women. Proyecto

Cuba Emprende offers workshops and training to the private sector in Havana, Cienfuegos, and Camagüey. Yet other provinces lack these or similar courses. According to Cuba Emprende's own data, women are the most interested in these workshops, perhaps because they are not afraid to acknowledge their lack of knowledge and need for support.

Increasing state policies and options for credit and financing — whether national or international — to develop business models that generate female employment and extend to the community, would favor start-up generation by women eager to become entrepreneurs, but lacking the financial resources to do so.

Expanding public-private alliances, mainly with successful businesses led by women, can contribute to breaking gender stereotypes in society. It also urges government agencies to promote measures that recognize the value of women's unpaid work as labor.

Creating effective mechanisms to monitor compliance with labor rights and legal guarantees and protections is another urgent need in Cuba.

Entrepreneurship always carries risks. Beyond the challenges described, the growing integration of women into the non-state sector has contributed to a progressive decrease in the unemployment rate among Cuban women: from 3.5% in 2011 to 1.8% in 2018. Cuban women bet on self-employment and have shown that it is possible to start a successful business in their country. Much potential remains untapped, but it is essential to understand that in the case of women, entrepreneurship works as a network: an entrepreneurial and empowered woman almost always helps empower other women. They all win.

Glenda Boza Ibarra is a journalist for elTOQUE.

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A Cuban Fight Against Independent Demons

(Independent artists in Cuba and their relationship with society and the state)

By **Carlos Lechuga**



In 2016, I premiered my second film “Santa y Andrés”, a love story between a homosexual artist and a peasant woman who is sent to watch over him, at the Toronto International Film Festival. The work, in addition to containing a message of political protest, was an attempt to bring two people with very different ideas to have a dialogue at the same table. It motivated me to bring to light old wounds from the island's past and try to find a way to heal them.

Life later showed me that the wounds weren't that old and that a lot of people weren't interested in having a young, independent filmmaker feature them on screen.

“Santa y Andrés”, apart from the joys it brought me, immersed me in a multi-year process during which I experienced censorship (on the Island and at a film festival in New York), received a visit from state security, and had to go through a dozen endless meetings with state ministers and institutions.

That is why I find it funny to be sitting in front of my computer now writing about this topic, because I do not want to talk only about my experience, nor do I want to sound resentful. From what I know, I will try to be as objective as possible, knowing that some subjectivity will escape me.



Illustration: Maikel Martínez

Since 1961, with the release of Orlando Jiménez Leal and Saba Cabrera Infante's "PM" and Fidel Castro's "Words to the Intellectuals" speech, the men who oversee the direction of Cuban culture have used what Fidel said as their prime directive – "Within the Revolution, everything. Against the Revolution, nothing"—to determine and make clear what can be exhibited or presented on the Island.

It seems surreal, because it is difficult to determine with any sense of objectivity which artistic works fall within the Revolution and those that remain outside. This without contemplating what an aberration it is to try to put brakes on artistic expression. But it became standard practice for many cultural officials during these years to doubt and mistrust the motives behind speeches and artistic proposals by the island's creators.

As many of us know, many artists left Cuba and those of us who stayed, in one way or another, with different intensity, have had to collide with that wall of censorship, self-censorship and what can and cannot be talked about. It is not clear to me when the term "independent artist" took hold. As an old friend joked: Independent of what?

In fact, in recent years, some retired military officials and old censors have tried to demonize independent art via social networks (Check the posts by the pseudonymous Arthur Gonzalez against Juan Carlos Cremata or against "Santa y Andrés." Those posts contain inappropriate images like a cartoon of a snake made of celluloid, in order to portray Cuba's emergent independent cinema).

Yet over the past few years and especially due to changing times, new technologies and the internet, there has been a boom of independent art in Cuba. The freedom provided by the democratization of social media has changed Cuban society. At some point someone should analyze how Cuba has changed since the moment its leaders allowed Cubans to connect in masse onto social networks. For those of us who know Cuba, we know that its rulers relate to its citizens in a centralized way. Being a socialist system where the State governs almost everything and

owns the television, the press, galleries, printing presses and cinemas, for independent artists today, it is difficult for us to exhibit and distribute our work.

And I'm talking about the independent artists of today because I don't know how an artist from the 1970's, 80's or 90's could work from the Island without being linked to any state-run organization. It is not clear to me if it was even a concept at that time. In 2020 it is easy for a musician to record in a home studio. Studios are made with consoles and microphones brought from abroad and built-in soundproofed rooms inside private homes.

The freedom that the democratization of social media gives has changed Cuban society.

These songs can then be shared through social networks and thus manage to be heard inside and outside the Island. In my opinion, musicians who are not affiliated with any state institution have a more discernible freedom compared to independent filmmakers, for example, who need cinemas to show their work. A musician loads his song on the internet and is not dependent on national media outlets.

Though not everything is rosy for them since often the State, wanting to "look after the tastes of the population", tries to impose certain types of rules on bars, restaurants, and the radio. And they look to ban what the population hears. Reggaetoneros like Chocolate MC or Wildey, for example, have faced an impossible fight, since they are frequently followed. Yet in the end people will always listen to what they want.

Another artist friend once told me: "Who are they (the State) to look after the tastes of the population? What do they know about music, about cinema if the majority are bureaucrats? They are not artists. They are civil servants." Joking aside, this kind of attempt to discern what is and what is not art seems naive in the 21st century. Since "Aglutinador" and Sandra Ceballos, "independent" visual artists have had a little more freedom

when creating and exhibiting their works. I remember several slogans that emerged from their ranks: "Neither for nor against, quite the opposite" (An exhibition) or "Each house a gallery", speaks of the attempt to get the entire system of your back and the role of intermediaries in governmental artistic centers and national museums. After all, the work of a plastic artist can be done alone from the same house. The problem, as for everyone, comes at the time of exhibition.

The point came when the ministry of culture realized it is lagging behind the times and that in order to regain control it must create a decree: the infamous decree 349 that supposedly does not function against independent art but was created to regulate and organize what is in good or bad taste. According to them, it is a way of protecting the population by defining who is and who is not artist (I am paraphrasing here). Sadly, the decree has great implications for freedom of artistic expression and affects the entire community of Cuban artists from various aspects.

It would be interesting at some point to analyze how Cuba changed at the moment its leaders allowed Cubans to connect en masse to the internet

With the growth of the Internet access on the island, many writers, poets, and essayists who used to struggle with publishing their work, have

managed to create spaces in digital publications, literary magazines, and blogs.

It is not always censorship that prevents publication. Recall that since we live in a centralized state, there are times when the government needs to use paper for some matter, and the printing presses (all state-owned) have to stop production and place themselves at the service of the "bigger task".

Most of these sites are easy to access from the island, though a few are blocked so that Cubans cannot read them. But anyone interested in reading them can download a VPN and circumvent the censors to access the sites.

I never decided to become an independent film director. I studied in two film schools in Cuba, one of them with tremendous international prestige, and in both cases my education didn't cost me a penny. When I graduated and had to start looking for a job, without having any friends or contacts at ICAIC, the institution that governs cinema in Cuba, I knew that it would be difficult for me to make a film through the established system. Some friends had created an independent creative group for the development and production of film projects, and I joined.

My first film, "Molasses", presented a vision of the country too sad for the liking of the vice presidents at the film institute and they would not let me release it in the theaters, we could only show it within the framework of the Havana Film Festival, and after a scolding. But it was not prohibited. After this experience I began investigating censorship in Cuba and from there came my second film, the aforementioned "Santa y Andrés"; which was banned and for which we were punished and censored.

For both my first and latest films, the institute did help with filming permits, equipment import permits, and supported the filmmaking process prior to completion of the works. But once they saw the final product, they decided to retaliate; making it once again clear that the problem is not so much in the production of films, as in their distribution and promotion, which is very difficult. Again, independent art, in a country like Cuba, is not completely independent.

At the same time, independent art suffers from another serious challenge in the eyes of the state institution: its content and sources of funding. In my films, knowing in advance

And I'm talking about the independent artists of today, because I don't know how an artist from the 70s, 80s or 90s of the last century could work from the Island without being linked to any institution.

that they were critical of the Cuban reality, we made sure that our financing sources (always foreign) had nothing to do with the United States, so that no one could not tell us the money came from the CIA or U.S. Department of State. After 60 years of a cruel blockade against the island and many other "regime change" schemes by the U.S. government, for the leaders of the island, everything that comes from their "northern neighbor" is seen with suspicion. It is the "fortress under siege" syndrome. Our production company only applies to European funds with an established history and prestige. We never work with the United States.

But in Cuba, when I needed money for a film, there was no film promotion fund to provide it. Instead, state funds for film marketing were granted to committed filmmakers with a recognized film career. It remains difficult for young people to make a feature film. It's the old case of the snake biting its tail: the government is not able to provide everyone with solutions to their needs and at the same time gets upset when the individuals try to make it on their own. I hope that now with the new Fund for the Promotion of Cuban Cinema, everything improves. Time will tell.

In the past, when it comes to my work, I have been treated as a stateless person, although I live on the island, and I am interested in the welfare of my country. For the mere fact of wanting to show a truth, I have been punished. I have been insulted in social networks, the police have summoned me to strange places, I have been followed to international festivals and they have erased me from the state media. Today I work from home and remain independent. I am just one more. Due

Not everything is rosy for them since many times the State, wanting to "take care of the taste of the population", tries to put certain types of rules in bars, restaurants, the radio, and so on.

to the mistrust established in revolutionary discourse and suspicion toward what is not part of the State –towards the independent– few times do state promotion networks gives voice to someone who is not clearly associated with any state organization. This has claimed the careers of several talents who, out of pain, have decided to leave the country or continue inside, making their art privately.

Without being pessimistic, I summarize the relationship of the state with independent art as the relationship of a paternalistic father who does not trust a son who can embarrass him, criticize him, or get him into trouble. The scolding almost always begins with a wake-up call from an institution, then some kind of threat, and in the end the whole case is handed over to the state security.

I think Cuban society is eager to open up to the world. To know stories and topics that were previously forbidden or forgotten. I honestly don't believe that the ordinary Cuban on the island has a problem with independent artists. In fact, I think they seek and hunt for all the music, artwork, photography, and films that have been made outside of the institution. It is a way of staying aware of the changes that are happening little by little on the Island. It is a way of "being part" of something new. To be informed and to be able to see what everyone wants to see. Consume what you want, without needing a permit or national filter.

My modest opinion is that with the number of problems we have as a country, it is crazy for cultural institutions to demonize independent artists who show or speak of some social aspect of Cuba that can be critical or difficult to digest.

With the facilitation of Internet access on the island, many writers, poets, and essayists who struggled to publish their work have managed to open space in digital publications, literary magazines, and blogs.

As there is always an exception to the rule, I think there are some independent artists who avoid politics and who may have been able to make their careers without many incidents.

At present, on the Island, there are creative groups, artist studios, small scale publishing houses, and music studios that are independent and that help to nurture Cuban culture. I hope that as the years go by, the state no longer sees us as a threat. We're not asking for help, just to be left alone.

Finally, on an emotional level, I believe that the term "independent artist" will gradually disappear. On the street, in the neighborhoods, most young people have in their possession a powerful weapon: a smartphone with a camera.

For years, the most interesting videos — whether journalistic reports, or those that simply show a different face of the country— have been made by amateurs. The power of images, of the "here" and "now", of the immediacy of filming and posting the material on the internet in two minutes, is changing the country's narrative. Today we are more independent than integrated. The institutions, the authorities —the government, in short— is more and more losing control over visual mediums.

Carlos Lechuga studied at Cuba's High Institute of Art and graduated from its International School of Film and Television. He has worked as a director, screenwriter, script doctor, and ghost-writer.

Race and Heredity in Contemporary Cuban Society

By Julio César Guanche



In 2017, the university student Yanay Aguirre Calerín was involved in an argument with a taxi driver in Havana. After receiving racist comments, she was forced to get out of the vehicle.

In Cuba, according to the 2012 Census data based on self-identified skin color, Whites represent 64.3% of the total population, Blacks represent 9.3%, and mulattoes 26.6%. Consistent with this data, the young woman who was discriminated against for being Black belongs to a minority. However, what her story reveals is not a minor issue.

Racism is expressed like a catalogue of prejudices, but more so it is a pattern of power that accumulates differences to systemically organize, distribute, and justify advantages and disadvantages. It unfolds through individual and institutional actions, while also defining the access to opportunities within the social structure.

The media debate around Cuba offers plenty of remarks about racism. On the one hand, it assures that only “reminiscences” of the scourge survive. On the other hand, it acknowledges that Cuban power structures practice State-sponsored racism. In contrast, an analytical look finds both improvements and problems in this field.



Illustration: Maikel Martínez



Photo: Julio César Guanche

The Revolutionary Experience

In January 1959, the newspaper *Revolución* published the text, “Not Blacks...citizens!” in which Black people explained the meaning of what they considered to be a new life. In March 1959, two of Fidel Castro’s speeches broke existing segregation against Blacks to access public spaces, such as beaches. The initial great measures of the Revolution—which included agrarian reform, rent reduction, scholarship plans, and job creation—equally benefitted Whites and Blacks. As Ana Cairo said, “it became a moral and political postulate that no self-defined Cuban revolutionary could say or do something that could be perceived as racist,”¹ a major barrier to the spread of racial prejudices. Walterio Carbonell identified a cultural profile of the contribution of Blacks and mestizos to the 1959 triumph: the “Afro-Cuban” cults undermined the cultural legitimacy of Catholicism, and the social order it organized, and diversified the scale of social values.²

1 Cairo Ballester, Ana (2015): “La problemática racial en la cultura de la Revolución”. In Denia García Ronda (Ed.): *Presencia negra en la cultura cubana*. Havana: Sensemayá Editions, p.449

2 Towards the end of the 1960s, Cuban religions of African ancestry were associated with criminality and certain counterrevolutionary behaviors. Guerra, Lilian (2014) “Raza, negrismo, y prostitutas rehabilitadas: revolucionarios inconformes y disidencia involuntaria en la Revolución”, *América sin nombre*, No. 19, 126–139



Walker Evans, in Cuba (1933)

After 1959, photography, cinema, theater, historical research, painting, publications, institutional work, sociocultural research, music, and literature reflect a repertoire of great quality and wide circulation that reworked the Black image as part of an effort to dignify historically marginalized subjects.

Its vanguard includes: *Suite yoruba* (1964) by Ramiro Guerra; *Palenque y mambisa* (1976) by the National Folklore Ensemble; or *La última cena* (1977) by Tomás Gutiérrez Alea (with collaborations by Manuel Moreno Fraginals and Rogelio Martínez Furé).³ Today, data show a different panorama to apparently “defining” ideas about racial inequality in the country. The Census collects indicators that demonstrate contrasting distributions amongst Blacks and Whites: in some, Blacks have advantages, in others, both have similar proportions, and in others, the differences favor Whites. But, in a good number of cases, these differences are discrete.

3 Cairo, Ana (2015): Cited Work.



Cartier Bresson, in Cuba (1963)

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The Census collects indicators that demonstrate contrasting distributions amongst Blacks and Whites: in some, Blacks have advantages, in others, both have similar proportions, and in others, the differences favor Whites. But, in a good number of cases, these differences are discrete.

Amongst university graduates, Blacks have a larger proportion of representation (12.1%) than Whites (11.5%). There is a greater proportion of Blacks with master’s degrees than Whites—though this is not true for doctorate degrees. Houses built after 1982 are, in proportion, majority mulatto owned. Among Whites who are leaders, 88.8% are in the state sector, but among Blacks who are leaders in the state sector, 90.7%.

The proportion of White and Black professionals, scientists, and intellectuals is identical (15.6%). At the level of social perception, there is criticism that Blacks are majority “musicians and athletes,” though music and sports are sources of national pride.



Foto: Julio César Guanche

There are differences, though not significant ones, with respect to the color of skin in the availability of services within the home, such as cooking or accessing a bathroom or shower, or in the possession of refrigerators, washing machines, or rice cookers.

On the basis of its indicators—which leave out, for example, a comparison of income in convertible currency—the official Census study concludes that the existing differentials between Whites, Blacks, and Mulattoes cannot “concretely confirm that this problem [racism and racial discrimination] is quantitatively present in a critical form in today’s Cuban society.”⁴

At other levels, education, health, and social protection systems have maintained the same universal character for the past six decades. The Labor Code (2013) expressly prohibits discrimination based on skin color. The new Constitution (2019) still pro-

⁴ Center for the Study of Population and Development. *El Color de la Piel según el Censo de Población y Viviendas* (de 2012), 2016, p. 62

hibits it, and a National Program against Racial Discrimination has been approved.

This provides evidence to the thesis that the revolutionary period contains the best performance against racial discrimination in national history. Likewise, other examples point to truly relevant problems regarding racial issues in the country.

Problems Around the Racism Debate

Esteban Morales has made an inventory of issues concerning racism in today's Cuba, among them the "lack of acceptance around its existence, insufficient public debate, absence of the subject in school curricula and mass media, limited presence in academic research, and the use of the issue as an instrument of internal political subversion." The researcher also points out conceptual errors when approaching the subject. In my opinion, three of these points are: presenting racism as a "vestige," arguments that reject terms like "Afro-Cuban," and the promotion of an uncritical vision of miscegenation.

Labeling racism as a vestige affirms that the present contributes to eradicating it, not reproducing it. That idea understands racism as a cultural issue—an aggregate of ideas and prejudices. It is, but that is not its only dimension. Limiting it in this way prevents one from appreciating how one's material base upgrades the competition for power, opportunities, and resources.

That approach denies results from the social sciences that demonstrate the existence of a structural, social, and cultural heritage that is simultaneously "rebuilt in moments of crisis, in which competitive spaces appear."⁵

Miscegenation is presented as the denial of all inequality originating from "race." Ironically, that notion celebrates a nation without racial differences, but the 2012 Census reveals larger disadvantages precisely for mestizos (mulattoes).

⁵ Rodríguez Ruiz, Pablo; Carrazana Fuentes, Lázara; García Dally, Ana J. (2011): *Las relaciones raciales en Cuba. Estudios contemporáneos*. Havana: Fernando Ortiz Foundation, p. 48



Cuban Mambises

Alberto Abreu questions this uncritical vision of miscegenation because it does not offer answers to dispute the "kidnapping" of "autonomy and cultural differences of black subjects and their gestures of counter memory, interpellation, and resistance to hegemonic culture." It is, according to Abreu, the repertoire that has allowed it to "survive for centuries." The official Cuban language assures that the term Afro-descendent "is alien to our reality." It is a statement that contains several conflicts.

Fernando Ortiz, a core reference of Cuban miscegenation, used the expression Afro-Cuban to dignify historically discriminated sources in Cuban culture. Collectives that use the term today do so to examine their experiences "using an approach that analyzes race, gender, class, sexual orientation, ability, religion, and geographic location," all as part of an interrelated whole. The Census criteria ignores both positions. Since it is reproduced by official bodies—as is the case in the 2016 report to the UN Committee for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD)—it implies restrictions on the expression of identity and the imposition of the format of possible political participation based on discrimination.



Photo: Julio César Guanche

The Double Dimension: Cultural and Structural Racism

Racism is both cultural and structural in nature. It exploits the inequality of color, which is reinforced with others such as class and gender. It generates material poverty and cultural devaluation, social hostility, and malicious treatment. Such issues are not the sole consequence of skin color or class structure, but both are reinforced. Declaring that racism exists, but that it is only “cultural”—without a structural component—reveals a poor theoretical understanding anchored in a politically interested use that ignores the mechanisms that reproduce racism. In contemporary Cuba, racism continues to produce differentiating class uses. Around 2010, various investigations found that the Black and mestizo population had the worst houses, received less remittances, depended more on their personal effort and scarce resources to gain complementary income, had less access to emerging sectors; and in tourism, were mostly located in “inside” jobs not directly linked to the client.⁶

⁶ Rodríguez Ruiz, Pablo, work cited (it is a compilation of different investigations and diverse authors). See also Rodríguez Ruiz, Pablo (2011): *Los marginales de las alturas del mirador. Un estudio de caso*. Havana: Fernando Ortiz Foundation.



Photo: Julio César Guanche

Taking into account the proportion of Blacks and mestizos in the population, these investigations coincide in that these groups had a lower presence (what is known as “under-representation”) in the tourism sector and within corporations; they constituted a small minority of the private agricultural sector (2%), and that of cooperatives (5%); they were at a disadvantage to receive remittances⁷ and were underrepresented as heads of state-owned companies.⁸

A decade later, further investigations have arrived at similar conclusions. Specific research done on Black and mestizo groups finds that they experience income inequality in convertible currency, have fewer bank accounts and savings, travel less, have less access to internet, remittances, and another citizenship—including the travel advantages that come with it—and are rarely amongst those that own the most lucrative private businesses. Other investigations confirm how structural dimensions coexist with cultural profile discriminations, such

⁷ Refers to the fact that on that date, 83.5% of immigrants were White, and the remittances sent by them were proportionally higher, both in number of recipients (mostly their relatives), and in amount.

⁸ Morales, Esteban (2010). *La problemática racial en Cuba. Algunos de sus desafíos*, Havana: Editorial José Martí, p. 129

as stereotypes about Blacks and mestizos, which result in negative consequences for their labor and economic participation.⁹

They observe that Black and mestizo women are the majority in informal employment areas such as street vending, elderly care, restroom and house cleaning, and informal business. There is no information on the profile of the prison population, but it appears to be majority Blacks and mestizos, and there is evidence of racial profiling within police criteria for identifying possible offenders of the law.

CERD has shown concern over structural issues related to race in Cuba. In addition, it has deplored the lack of information on the direct application of the International Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Racial Discrimination in Cuban courts and has pointed out deficiencies with respect to the investigation of complaints about racial discrimination, as well as cases of wrongdoing, police treatment of Black and mestizo people, and against anti-racist activists.

During his last term as head of the country, Fidel Castro reiterated the problems of racism at a national level and celebrated practices to improve disadvantaged sectors, a process known as the “Battle of Ideas.”¹⁰ Both Raul Castro and Miguel Díaz-Canel Bermúdez, two of Cuba’s top leaders today, are also seen criticizing the consequences of racism in their statements.

Despite the evidence, there are tendencies to relativize, at both a social and official level, the structural dimension of racism in Cuba, the inequality it generates, and the systematic nature of its pattern of unfair distribution of opportunities and resources.

⁹ Pérez Álvarez, María Magdalena (1996): “Los prejuicios raciales: sus mecanismos de reproducción”. En *Temas* (no. 7, July-September), pp.44–50 and Pañellas Álvarez, Daybel; Cabrera Ruiz, Isaac Irán (Eds.) (2020): *Dinámicas subjetivas en la Cuba de hoy*: ALFEPSI Editorial

¹⁰ Espina, Mayra (2015): “Desigualdades en la Cuba actual. Causas y remedios”. In Denia García Ronda (Ed.): *Presencia negra en la cultura cubana*. Havana: Sensemayá Editions, p.486

Paths to Follow

Solutions to racial inequalities must encompass elements such as cultural justice, law, distributive policies, and be able to define which paths can contribute to such solutions. Schools can contribute to revaluing discriminated identities, promoting cultural change, undermining racial stereotypes, and promoting an acceptance of differences. Curricula should include subjects about General African History and its current processes, as well as the history of Cuban Blacks.

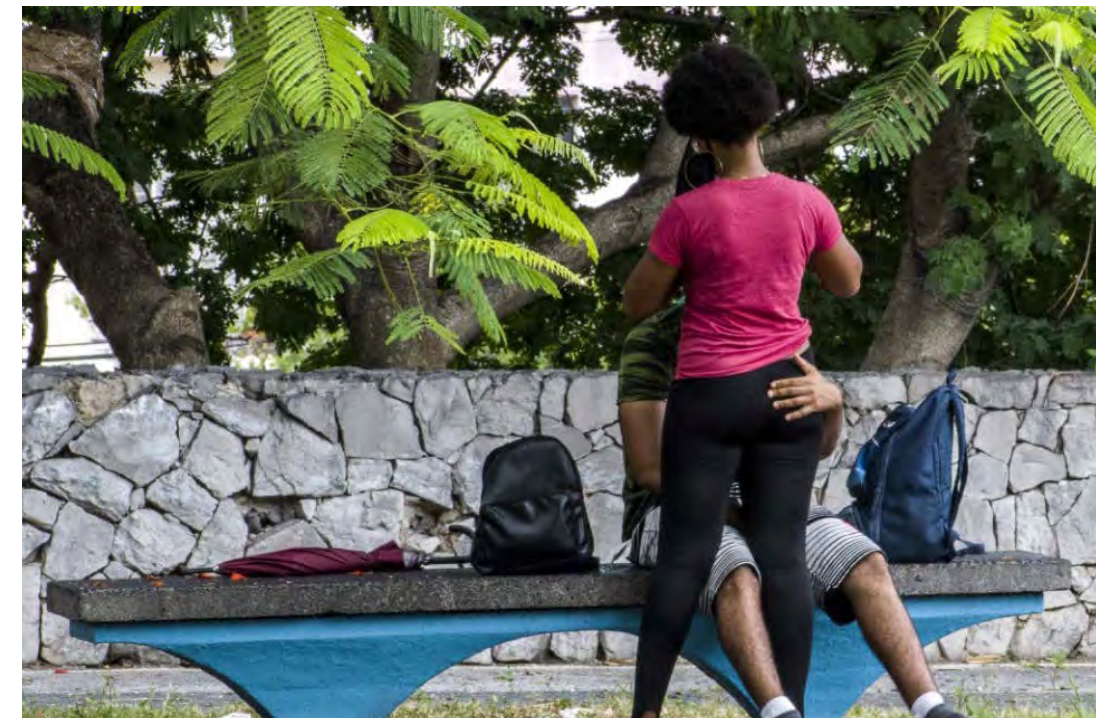


Photo: Julio César Guanche

Racial discrimination is punishable in Cuba, but its procedural channels have not been effective: an official report in 2017 cited a single act of crime against the Right to Equality. The approval of a specific law on the subject and the provision of more resources for the protection of rights is a decisive step in the road ahead. As Mayra Espina has argued, social policy must pay attention to disadvantaged groups, specifically to their intersection of class and “race.” It should include care services for children, the elderly, and the sick; free educational support ser-

vices to improve school performance, preferential and advantageous subsidies or loans that support continued studies, as well as the construction of popular housing.¹¹ Promoting is also caring. Affirmative action policies that redistribute opportunities and offer material and training support to sustain economic activities need to be established. It is crucial to recognize the legitimacy of anti-racist activism in civil society. Organizations not recognized by the State—including those not considered dissident—face serious problems when it comes to legal registration and social performance. Greater participation, horizontal dialogue, and coordination between civil society and the State on the subject are pertinent.

Ethnicity, Color, and Anti-Racism

Cuba is a nation with multi-ethnic origins that became a single racialized national ethnic group. Current genetic research demonstrates the miscegenation of the Cuban ethnos. However, the word “black” has certain specificities and different consequences than “white” throughout peoples’ social existence. There is a history to words and their uses. Anti-Black racism is a central component of the Cuban national formation.

About a million Africans came to Cuba during the 19th century. Under the monstrous regime of slavery, the island became the world’s leading producer of sugar and the second Latin American country with the largest population of enslaved peoples, after Brazil. Each concurrent village/ethnic group in the slave process was fixed in certain social places, a fact that today marks the uni-ethnic nation that emerged from such foundations. Words also have their impact. The color of skin is “the first element that Cubans use to form images of the other.”¹² It is not uncommon: the amount of melanin is the most obvious indicator of biological differences between people.¹³

¹¹ Espina, Mayra (2015): “Desigualdades en la Cuba actual. Causas y remedios”. In Denia García Ronda (Ed.): *Presencia negra en la cultura cubana*. Havana: Sensemayá Editions, p.486

¹² Idem, p. 480

¹³ Guanche Pérez, Jesús (1996): *Etnicidad y racialidad en la Cuba actual*. In *Temas* (no. 7, July-September), pp.51–57.



Enslaved child with guitar. Photo taken in the 1870's.

Popular language has developed a vast set of representative words and phrases that refer to the color of skin. To refer to Blacks there is “negro-azul,” “negro color teléfono,” “negro coco timba,” “negro cabeza de puntilla,” or “negro.” For Whites there is “blanco,” “rubio,” “blanco orillero,” or “blanco lechoso.”¹⁴ It is similar with other groups, such as mulattoes.

According to Jesús Guanche Pérez, all these terms may have, “depending on the context, an emotional or derogatory connotation,” but there is a consensus that the intensity of the presence of melanin is a factor of social differentiation. It is another way of saying that races do not exist, but there is racism.

In a history founded on slavery, race behaved as “a category of difference, as an engine of stratification and inequality, and as a key variable in the processes of national formation.”¹⁵ The available evidence on inequality and skin color shows modes of reproduction of anti-Black racism in Cuba today.

In that context, limiting oneself to the idea of equal opportunities is problematic. It is more reasonable to defend the equality of results. With it, it is not about leveling down, but about

¹⁴ Idem

¹⁵ Alejandro de la Fuente y George Reid Andrews (2018): *Estudios afrolatinoamericanos: una introducción*. Buenos Aires, Massachusetts: CLACSO/Afro Latin American Researcher Institute, Harvard University, p.11

closing inequality gaps and overcoming discriminatory ideas and practices that reproduce injustices. Only in this way could there be a definitive change to the situation behind the Cuban saying, “in a White fishery, the Black man carries the nets.”

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Reforms in Cuba: Will the Third Time be the Charm?

By Aldo Álvarez



In July 16th, 2020, Cuban authorities announced a New Economic Strategy planned for the next few years, initiating a new period of reforms promoted by the Cuban government. Taking this into consideration, it is worthwhile to establish a general guide explaining the reform periods that have occurred—including the counter-reforms that preceded them—during the last 30 years in our nation, beginning with the Cuban crisis post-1991. Understanding these reform processes can serve as a tool to better explain where, presumably, the country is headed.

Using the Cuban crisis post-1991 as a reference, **three main periods of transformation** can be identified:

- (i) The changes during the **Fidelista period** (1989-2002)
- (ii) The changes during the **Raulista period** of direct implementation (2008-2016)
- (iii) The changes during the **Raulista period** of indirect implementation and collective responsibility (2020-?)

Let's look at three important markers to understand more deeply the magnitude of the Raulista period: (i) the transfer of presidential responsibilities from 2006-2008 after Fidel Castro's illness and inability to continue exercising power, (ii) his election in 2008 to President of the Council of State and Ministers, and (iii) his subsequent confirmation as the First Secretary of the

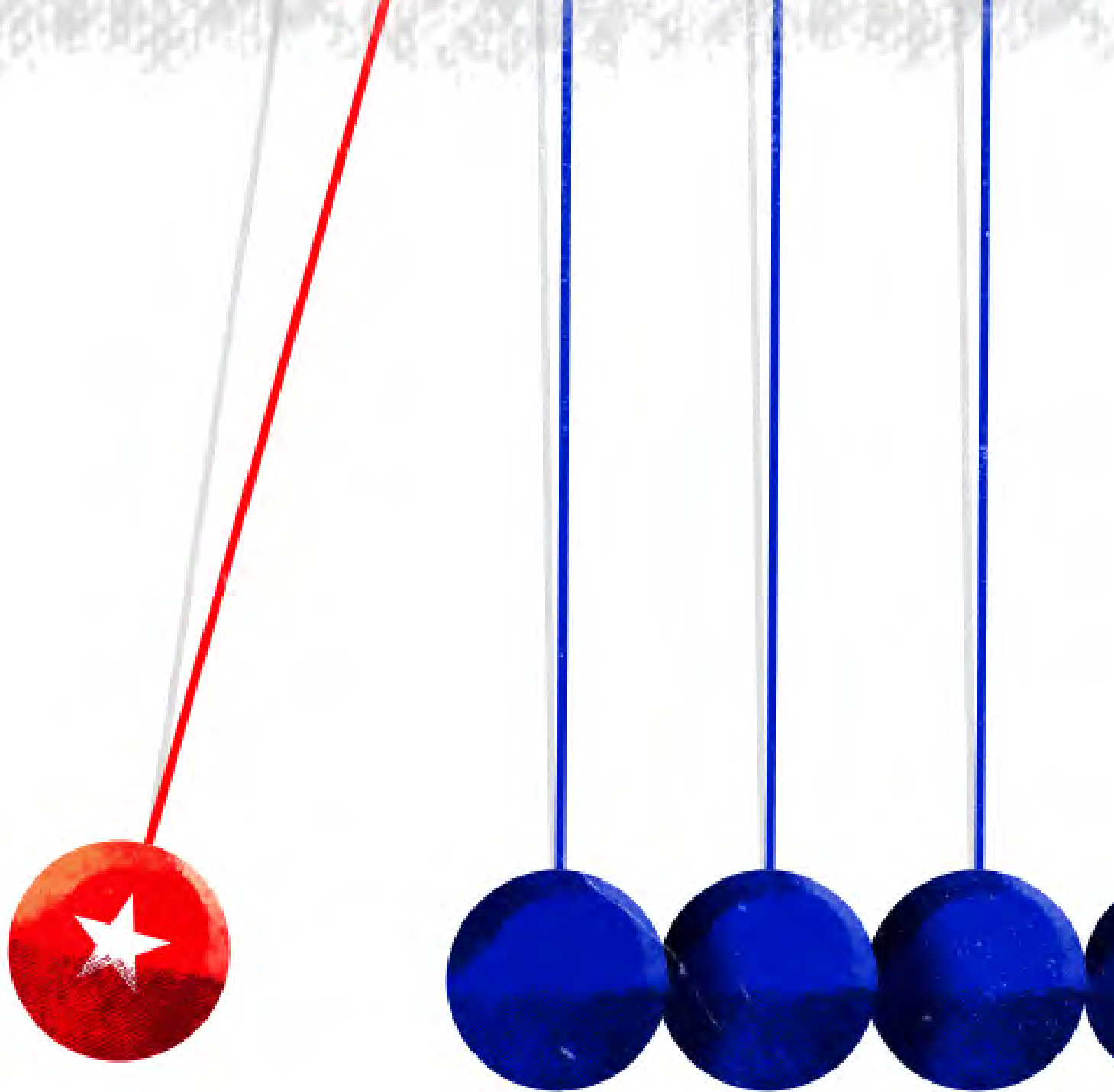


Illustration: Maikel Martínez

Cuban Communist Party (PCC) in 2011. From 2006-2011, Cuba experienced its first official transfer of political power since 1976. Each appointment brought important consequences that merit a deeper analysis beyond the one in this article.

Raul Castro's succession to the highest offices of the country occurred in three instances over a five-year period. Notably, he met several essential conditions: he was a protagonist of the seizure of power in '59; he held high positions in his subsequent political life; and since 1976, he had been confirmed as first deputy minister, minister of the FAR, and as the second secretary of the PCC. Taking this into account, it could be safely assumed he would be chosen to substitute for Fidel Castro. This allowed him to start implementing certain socio-economic transformations even before he was confirmed as the First Secretary of the Party, a role that, in all of its political-structural affects, holds true maximum authority in Cuba as outlined by both the 1976 and 2019 Constitutions.

Within the Raulista period we can clearly identify **two different phases**:

(i) **The phase of direct implementation**, which includes events that occurred during the presidential (2008-2018) and party (2011-2021) mandates (2021 being the date provided for Raul's stepping down as First Secretary of the Party and his retirement from public life) and

(ii) **The phase of indirect implementation and collective responsibility** (current and future), which includes events that have occurred since the announcements on July 16th, 2020 until 2030.

This second phase will depend on any derivations Díaz Canel may establish from the reforms in his position as President of the Republic and First Secretary of the Party. However, considering that the roadmap for the socio-economic transformations planned to this date has been debated, agreed upon, announced, and published under the mandate and direction of Raul Castro, he will also be responsible for carrying that forward. It is not in vain that Díaz Canel has made the axiom "We are Continuity" noticeably clear since he took office.

The Fidelista period reforms (1989-2002) and their counter-reforms (2002-2008)

The reforms of the Fidelista period (1989-2002)

According to the criteria put forth by Aurelio Alonso and Juan Valdés Paz, this period of structural modifications began in 1989, just before what is considered the main—though not singular—cause of the Cuban crisis post-1991: the collapse of the Soviet Union.

These changes meant the first incursion of Cuba's socio-economic system into the market economy and brought with them social definitions that still persist in our current society.

According to Alonso's typology, broadly speaking, the main changes during that period were:

a) 1989-1993, the period of "disconnection shock":

opening to foreign capital, prioritized development of the tourism and medical industries, food programs, emergency measures in the central control for resources, agreements from the fourth PCC Congress, constitutional reform of 1992.

b) 1993-1995, the period of structural reforms and dealing with the fall of the Soviet Union:

decriminalization of the possession and free circulation of the U.S. dollar, rehabilitations of private initiatives through self-employment, privatization of agricultural production in UBPC (Basic Unit of Cooperative Production) and of the home economy, creation of small market networks, elimination of gratuities, and development of non-governmental style foundations and associations.

c) After 1995, the period of economic recovery:

tributary legislation, restructuring of the bank system, economic resolution of the fifth PCC Congress, and business improvement program for the state sector of the economy.

The counter-reforms of the Fidelista period (2002-2008)

This period is complex to analyze because authorities not only

make "decisions by action" but also paralysis itself carries "decisions by omission"—in other words, they are preceded by the absence of measures that continue the reform process. In this sense, we can identify these counter-reforms by following the analysis of Mesa-Lago and considering 2002 as the moment it became evident that Cuba had entered a period of reformist setback.

The counter-reforms meant a strengthening of the economy's centralized regulation policies (or recentralization) and a decline in the role of the market. This way, the market was discarded as an economic mechanism for generation and regulation—even with direct and indirect control—and there was a return to policies that sacrificed efficiency and maintenance of macroeconomic balances, as a starting off point for economic growth.

The main elements of the counter-reforms during the Fidelista period were:

- Limiting self-employment. The obstacles for obtaining new licenses increased, as did taxes, making these types of businesses unprofitable. For

example, in 2003 only 22% of self-employment applications were approved.

- Reconsidering foreign investment, especially that associated with small and medium foreign enterprises and other specific sectors. This new mechanism for the Cuban economy was directly associated with an increase in relations with Venezuela, as well as the exportation of services as a main source of income. As of 2004, this role is assumed by the export of professional services fundamentally to Venezuela. In 2004-2007, the export of services grew at an annual rate above 28% (Vidal and Pérez Villanueva, 2011).

- An increase in financial, accounting, and operational control over state businesses, in addition to the return to a kind of foreign trade monopoly, which repealed the measures applied in 1994 that allowed an authorized group of state-owned companies with direct access to imports to carry out these func-

tions. Because of this, the culmination point of the centralization process was the creation of a single state account and the Currency Allocation Commission (Sánchez Egozcue and Triana Cordoví, 2010).

In 2009, Aurelio Alonso summarized this period by saying:

“The Constitutional Reform of 1992 protects levels of transformations that have not been implemented. It is not about transitioning from one system to another preestablished one, but about channeling the critical load and the potential for social innovation that is being continuously generated for the benefit of a democratic construction that will be insufficient as long as it remains subject to a centralized verticalism.”

The Raulista period reforms of direct implementation (2008-2016) and its counter-reforms (2016-2020)

The reforms of the Raulista period (2008-2016)

The intentions, successes, and failures of the reforms during the Raulista period can be summarized in one phrase: The Guidelines of Economic and Social Policy approved in 2011 (known as los Lineamientos).

Fundamentally, the main axes of transformation during this period include changes in agriculture, foreign investment, and the opening of the private sector:

- The distribution of land in usufruct to private farmers and cooperatives.
- The approval of “non-state forms of production” or “self-employment” (private businesses) which abolished the state monopoly on employment.
- The authorization for the purchase and sale of real estate, automobiles, and other goods, as well as the accommodation of nationals in hotels and tourist facilities in foreign currency.
- The authorization for the free use of telephone and internet connections, and the sale of computers, printers, and other instruments at foreign currency stores.

- The Migration Law reform, a significant political reform that eliminated the “authorization” needed for Cubans to enter and leave the country and extended their ability to stay abroad for up to 24 months.

- The new Foreign Investment Law, which relaxed some limitations in the previous legislation established in the ‘90s, though it continues to disincentivize foreign investment.

- The creation of a wholesale market destined for non-agricultural cooperatives in Havana, with the intention of expanding it to other regions of the county within reason.

The counter-reforms in the Raulista period (2016-2020)

Rafael Rojas indicates that: *“the most accredited economists on the island and in the diaspora considered the so called ‘guidelines’ insufficient, though admittedly they served as a jumping off point for a non-state sector that could facilitate a transition to a socialist market. Beginning with the seventh congress, and after Obama’s popular visit, there have been indications of counter-reform. We see a reaffirmation of the hegemony of the state in economic policy, international relations, ideology, and culture, which also reflects an increase in control of the public sphere, alternative electronic networks, the repression of civil society and opposition, and a hardening of official rhetoric.”*

To gain a better grasp of the situation, it is important to bear in mind that, as the economist Ricardo Torres points out, a regulation was announced in December 2018 that severely limited opportunities within the private sector. Just a few days before its implementation, this regulation was corrected by Díaz Canel himself, who said:

“There is no reason to believe that the corrections are setbacks, nor can we confuse them as weaknesses when listening to public opinion. Revolution is to change everything that must be changed. None of us can do as much alone as all of us can together.”

In a deeper analysis, this moment could be considered an inflection point during this period of counter-reform, in addition to

serving as an indicator that we were nearing a new period of reforms.

The Raulista period reforms of indirect implementation and collective responsibility (2020-?)

The problems that have dragged on unsolved from the beginning of the post-1991 Cuba, in addition to those that were added as consequences of both previous imperfect and unfinished reform processes, have been aggravated by two international elements with relevant impact on today's national reality:

(i) The embargo, which has been tightened during the Trump Administration under the influence of certain political sectors of South Florida, and

(ii) The international economic crisis provoked by the COVID-19 pandemic.

These factors have shown that, once again, the need to carry out new reforms is evident, and above all, unavoidable. This new reformist wave has received mixed reactions. Some call it gatopardismo, because it supposedly wants to change everything, but in the end will change nothing. Others see it with hope, focusing on its potential and what it could mean in the medium term. Others argue it is deceptive and foolish, citing the two previous unsuccessful attempts at reform to back their argument. In any of these cases, it is undeniable that the modifications to be made in our country during the coming months and years will once again affect the way our citizens relate to themselves, and mainly, to the Cuban state.

Conclusions:

Broadly speaking, in the last 30 years of Cuban history we can identify two "reformist waves," followed in both cases by corresponding periods of counter-reforms. These counter-reforms have been justified as periods of "review and analysis," but in both cases have meant paralysis, immobility, and even regression—in other words, they were conservative counter-reforms.

Perhaps with this same knowledge, both the President Miguel Díaz Canel and the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of the Economy Alejandro Gill mentioned the following in their speeches on July 16th, 2020:

(i) *Díaz Canel: "The worst risk would be to not change, to not transform, and to lose trust and popular support. We will achieve popular support because we are going to make improvements and get better, and it is essential to constantly evaluate the political and social impacts of what we implement."*

(ii) *Alejandro Gil: "Everything we are doing to face this scenario is here to stay. This is not the now only to regress later, but rather we are always going to move forward."*

In the near future we will be able to verify whether or not everything announced by Cuban authorities has finally come to pass, in what sense it is carried out, and if at least some of the socio-economic problems embedded in our society can actually be resolved. Only time will tell if the age old "the third time's the charm" holds true.

Aldo Álvarez is an attorney and Young Professional member of the Cuba Study Group. He lives in Havana, Cuba.

Photo Gallery: Cuban Women Entrepreneurs Make their Mark

By *El Toque*

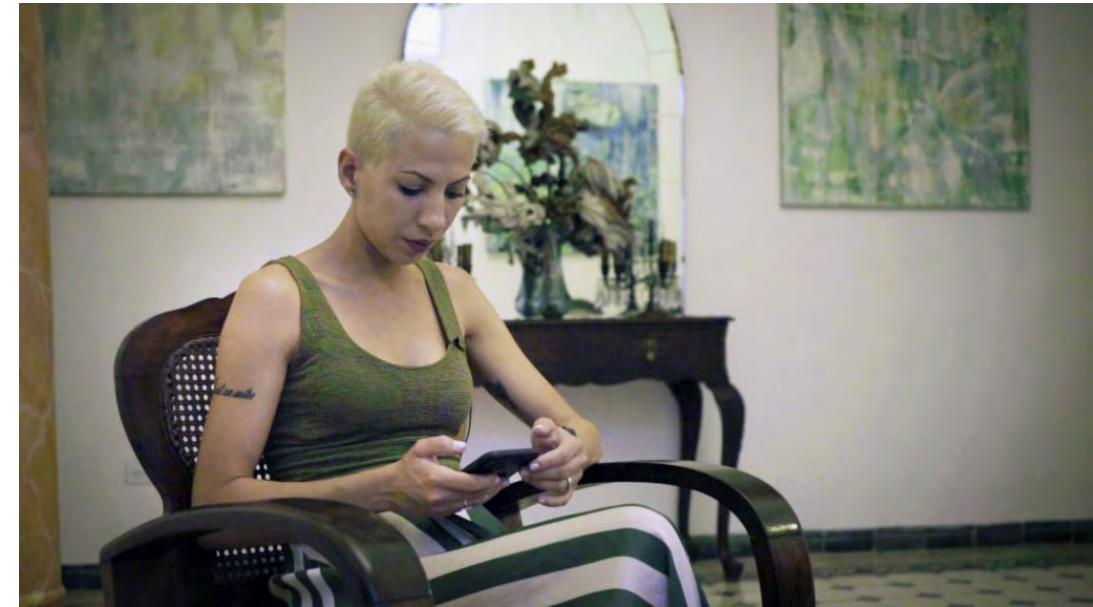
Being an entrepreneur in Cuba is like participating in an endurance race inside an obstacle course. Those in the private sector who want to develop value and transform their environment, while also earning a sustainable income, know this well. However, three women are devoting themselves to their businesses despite the crisis resulting from COVID-19, market mechanisms, and the systemic machismo in Cuban society.

Adriana Heredia decided to apply the tools she learned from her undergraduate degree in economics and left teaching to open the Beyond Roots tour in Guanabacoa—which brings visitors closer to the roots of black culture in Cuba—and later created a store of products for Afro-descendants. Her skin color was not an impediment to being an entrepreneur, but rather being a woman made it difficult to establish herself as a leader within a business environment mostly comprised of men.





Beyond Roots founder Adriana Heredia and her product offerings.



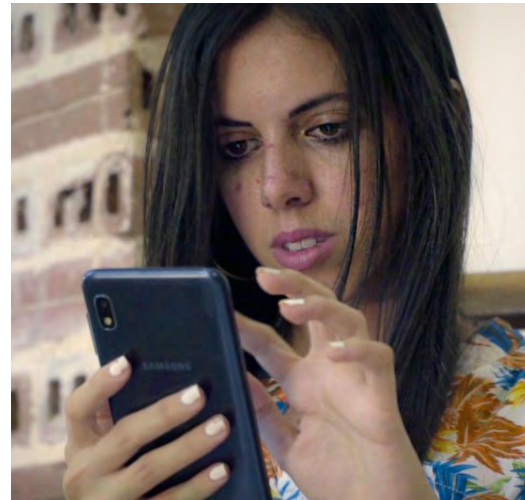
Saily González managed the Amarillo BnB hostel and trained people who aspired to work on their own. Amid the crisis that the pandemic generated in the tourism sector, she knew how to adapt her knowledge and efforts to create Amarillo Co-Working. This project brings together entrepreneurs and provides them with collaborative tools and spaces for communications training and marketing.



Saily González hosts other entrepreneurs at Amarillo Co-working.



Katia Sánchez of Le Penúltima Casa



The pandemic also didn't keep Katia Sánchez from working on her blog, La Penúltima Casa. Her podcast and online conferences during COVID-19 have helped many people reorient their businesses, boost digital communications and enhance the value of their brands. For Katia, being a woman is not a limitation when working with her team, but she says it is with some clients. Like Adriana and Saily, she recognizes that the main barrier to entrepreneurship in the country is the inconsistency of the legal framework.

eITOQUE is an independent, multimedia platform focused on reporting Cuba in all of its diversity: complex, creative, and sometimes even painful or occult.

Imposed Social Agendas or Outstanding Debts?

By Alina B. López Hernández



Anyone who uses social networks and digital media will find that in Cuba, the trends of the debate about civil society display some recurring themes: racial discrimination, feminist demands, the struggle for rights of the LGBTI community, oppositional artistic projects, and protections for animals and the environment. Some converge and others march separately; as a whole, they could be conventionally defined as a “public agenda,” although they lack the organization and joint planning characterized by the term.

The Cuban government perceives these demands, and especially the activism they generate, as infringements by external entities trying to subvert and change the regime.¹ It is not illogical to think that disagreements on these issues can foster

¹ See articles “¿Una contrarrevolución preferible?” <http://www.cubadebate.cu/especiales/2020/05/30/una-contrarrevolucion-preferible/> and “Revictimizada mil veces” Granma 18/7/2020, by Javier Gómez Sánchez.



Illustration: Maikel Martínez

internal political discrepancies; however, accepting this thesis does not help explain the popularity these movements enjoy today. In order to do so, two fundamental aspects must be considered: 1) Cuba's internal conflicts with respect to these issues, which have its roots in the final years of the sixties, and 2) their resurgence dating back to the nineties, motivated by the fall of socialism and its resulting economic and ideological conflicts. But the fact that their current prominence is driven by greater access to the internet and social networks should mislead us. When was the road lost? When were these sensitive topics revisited again? This article sets out to answer such questions, but does not pretend to characterize the multiple movements, projects, activists, or platforms that exist in the digital media ecosystem.



Verde Olivo magazine

The Lag

In the late 1960s, the world was awash in Cultural Revolutions² The French protests of May 1968 led a movement against all kinds of authoritarianism and hierarchies: familial, social, artistic, and educational. Young people challenged the values of their parents and opposed a corseted and conventional society. They criticized elitism, bureaucracy, bourgeois morality, Soviet Marxism, the state, and militarism.

These youth and countercultural movements were atomized into multiple groups, representative of the social fringes that sometimes intersected: pacifists, feminists, homosexuals, ecologists, different tendencies of modern art; even in Czechoslovakia, they advocated for “socialism with a human face.”

Directed towards the cultural and ideological, these struggles were seen on the streets, classrooms and university campuses, concerts, and camping trips. The movements resonated on all continents and in all countries, although not equally, and their relative failure did not undermine the impetus they gave in subsequent years to the feminist cause, to the historical struggle for the rights of minorities and inferior racial groups, and to early environmentalism. Such events in Cuba coincided with a period of radicalized socialism. The Cuban Revolution achieved a popular consensus with widely accepted measures which included: equal and free access to education, basic levels of nutrition, a public health system unthinkable for a third world country, and diverse cultural options. To the same extent that it benefited the majority, it required unconditionality. Unanimity was carved as a monument—especially after 1965, the year the Cuban Communist Party was established as the country’s single Party. The early control of the press by the government made it possible to direct public opinion. The aspiration to build a communist society took hold in 1968 with the Revolutionary Offensive, which liquidated small, and even smaller, private pro-

² N.E. – the author refers to these movements: https://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/Movimientos_sociales_de_1968

perty—a decision that would take decades to reconsider and has never been admitted as wrong.

In the artistic field, controversy was generated by the poetry collection *Fuera de Juego*, by Heberto Padilla, and by the play *Los siete contra Tebas*, by Antón Arrufat. A significant symptom of the direction taken by cultural policy, which was controlled by the Party’s ideological apparatus, would reach its maximum expression three years later with the agreements of the First Congress on Education and Culture.

There was an interesting, symbolic appropriation of the centenary celebration of the wars for independence. The Revolution was ruled as a unique process with a genesis in 1868, but which intrinsically included socialism, considered a milestone in 1968. This idea is conveyed by the cover of the *Verde Olivo* magazine corresponding to April 7th, 1968, even before Fidel’s well-known speech on October 10th in which he proclaimed said thesis.

As the definition and limitations of “revolutionary” were tightened, civil society was reduced. This was obviously influenced by the prohibition of associations other than those authorized by the government.

At a time when the Cultural Revolution in China became a protagonist of world events, with its opposition to bureaucracy, verticalisms, tradition, and authoritarianism; an antithetical discourse was building strength in Cuba since it demonized everything that deviated from the norm. At that stage we were, more than ever, an island.³

It was utopic to think that racism would be abolished immediately by egalitarian policies applied from the start, since they benefitted black and mestizo people as part of the common good. It was also not a good time for feminism or for homosexuals. It was not good for anyone who tried to stand out from the social body. We coexisted as a gigantic majority.

³ https://elpais.com/elpais/2018/06/04/opinion/1528129217_246327.html

The predilection for a monolithic, standardized, and obedient society can be seen in the following cartoons:⁴



"Musa snob"



"Los vagos"



"Los extravagantes"

The first, "Musa snob," makes it clear at a textual level that the different is not good; this idea is reinforced in the image where the culprit of controversy is dressed informally, has long hair, and is carefree. His attitude contradicts the dapper figure with necktie and noticeably short hair reading a history book, shown (by coincidence?) on the left. He looks amazed, annoyed, and simply reads on.

The second, "Los vagos," presents a standardized image of a public. Similar looking people fill the picture. They dress the same way, resembling an army, and smile. There is no room for the only one who looks different.

In the third, "Los extravegantes," a worker turns his back on figures with long hair, different costumes, and who enjoy music and the English language—they represent what is "alien" and are consenting of imperialism. They are antagonistic to the nation, as indicated by the flag about to be burned.

These cartoons did nothing more than confirm/reaffirm the policy of intolerance that was already in place. The Military Production Support Units (UMAP) functioned from 1965 to 1968. They were camps located in the province of Camagüey, where men who were considered outside the revolutionary norm were confined: homosexuals, religious men, common prisoners, long-haired young men, and rock n' roll lovers. Testimonies from those at the camps, or their families⁵, show that they were subjected, for re-educational purposes, to methods ranging from psychological pressure to physical torture. No one has ever taken responsibility for what happened to them or apologized to those affected.

The article "Primavera de Praga-Verano en La Habana" reveals aspects of that period reflected in the press.⁶ In addition

⁴ Appeared in Verde Olivo magazine, on the dates: 27/10/68, p. 13; 07/04/68, p. 44 y 06/10/68, p. 53.

⁵ Alberto I. González: Dios no entra en mi oficina, CreateSpace. Independent Publishing Platform, 2012; Carolina de la Torre: Benjamín. Cuando morir era más sensato que esperar, Editorial Verbum, 2018; Raimundo García Franco: Llanura de sombras. Diario de un pastor en las UMAP, Christian Center for Reflection and Dialogue-Cuba, 2019.

⁶ Javiher Gutiérrez and Janet Iglesias, Fernando Ortiz Center for Higher Studies, University of Havana, (unpublished).

to the Ofensiva Revolucionaria, the internal news focused on the coffee belt around Havana, as well as the preparation needed for the production of ten million tons of sugar two years later that would earn us the capital to industrialize ourselves. The external news emphasized the struggles of African Americans for their rights—comparing them to the achievements on the island—and on the condemnation of the war in Vietnam. A prominent part of the news reflected daily life in socialist countries, from fashion to the use of free time, as well as political and economic achievements.

We must constantly return to the decade of the sixties to talk about the lost opportunities in economic, political, and ideological development. There was a drive to build a national, socialist project, which acquired early on a dogmatic ideology but was still confronted by critical leftist tendencies, that later failed due to enormous errors and aggravations by external pressures.

Due to the failure of the 1970 harvest, Cuba adopted a model of socialism that was administratively and ideologically similar to the Soviet one. Unanimity, intransigence to differences, and the cult of dogmatism would be its defining attributes.

The call to shape the “new man” was the aspiration of the educational system, which reproduced intolerance thanks to its behaviorist and authoritarian model; for its part, the Quinquenio Gris from 1971 to 1976 was characterized by dogmatism in the cultural sphere, limitations of intellectual freedom, and the enthronement of socialist realism as a method of creation.

Homosexuals and the religiously devout were discriminated against and could not work in sectors such as teaching, culture, or public relations. After the creation of the Ministry of Culture in 1976, some of the irrationality was corrected. However, in the educational sector of the early 1980s, being effeminate could cost one their job or the opportunity to study. It would not be until 1988, with the creation of the National Center for Sexual Education, that the study of sexuality would be updated and a respect for orientation promoted.

Within the feminine sphere, despite the many benefits that the revolutionary process provided—scholarships, jobs, support for raising children, equal pay, etc.—we lagged in concepts and discourse. It did not have the theoretical tools of gender, which made it possible to hide serious problems such as psychological and physical abuse, and even feminicide, disguised under the euphemism “crimes of passion.” The Mariel exodus left many women as head of their household, a situation that was later reinforced by high divorce rates.

Regarding racism, the lack of research and debate was such that the political scientist Jorge Domínguez called it a “non-issue” in Cuban studies.⁷

The End of Utopia, but Not of History

In the winter of 1991, the USSR witnessed 74 years of socialism come to a not so happy end. The rest of the socialist bloc had preceded it. Cuba, which was economically dependent on them, stopped receiving oil, and lost its largest sugar buyer, 85% of its commercial exchanges, and a steady supply of technologies. The crisis was brutal. It was called the “Special Period”—a noble epithet for what we lived.

Some sectors were more vulnerable because they were not related to any of the new sources of income: tourism, small businesses, or remittances. Poverty levels and inequalities increased. We were no longer the homogenized and smiling group that the cartoon showed. The creation of careers in sociology during those years revealed the government’s concerns.

Among the most disadvantaged were black people, who are historically disadvantaged because they do not own, with few exceptions, long-standing heritage, large and luxurious mansions, or other properties that could be used for business. Racism presented obstacles to accessing the private sector, which have higher paying jobs.

⁷ José I. Domínguez: “Racial and Ethnic Relations in the Cuban Armed Forces. A Non-Topic” in *Armed Forces and Society*, no. 2, 2/1976, pp. 273-290.

The historian Alejandro de la Fuente draws attention to a significant fact of the past year: while 58% of Whites have an annual income below \$3,000, among Blacks that proportion reaches 95%. In addition, they receive a limited part of family remittances.⁸

In the 1990s, the non-topic would become relevant and allow for the articulation of a movement that included Black intellectuals, filmmakers, artists and musicians, and more recently bloggers, independent journalists, activists, and cultural promoters.⁹

Another vulnerable group were women. At the beginning of the nineties, a pioneering feminist organization called Magín emerged, but was forced to disband in 1996 due to intolerance by political authorities. The 2015 book, *Magín, Time to tell a story*, written by Daisy Rubiera and Sonnia Moro, explains:

In those years, the worst of the economic crisis was experienced [...] many [women] left their jobs and returned home; some put off forever the desire to have children; a great majority drew strength and creativity from where there seemingly was none, almost in an act of magic and inventiveness, to support the hygiene, health, and life of their family nucleus. Some emigrated, others stayed, some prostituted themselves, and the vast majority resisted the blow of the crisis for themselves and their loved ones. Almost all of Cuba moved by bicycle, made its own soaps, innovated culinary techniques, juggled electrical blackouts, and lived with the bare minimum.

Women tend to experience the consequences of shocks more quickly, and the benefits of recovery more slowly, as found in a study by researcher and activist Ailynn Torres Santana in OnCuba.¹⁰ However, the FMC, a non-feminist women's organization, prioritized the defense of revolutionary conquests throu-

⁸ "Cuba hoy: la pugna entre el racismo y la inclusión," <https://www.nytimes.com/es/2019/04/26/cuba-racismo-afrocubanos/>

⁹ Alejandro de la Fuente analyzes it in: "Tengo una raza oscura y discriminada: El movimiento afrocubano: hacia un programa consensuado."

¹⁰ "The 'Special Period' of Women in Cuba"

gh the iron unity of the Cubans, an attitude that made the specific needs and aspirations of women invisible. The disbanding of Magín interrupted the feminist experience for several years, which has resurged in recent times, because the problems became acute after being neglected.

Today we are owed laws that protect against gender discrimination, allow equal marriage, and protective the rights of animals, along with many others. Last March, a government commission was created to lead the National Program Against Racism and Racial Discrimination, but its concrete actions are still unknown.

The late arrival of the Internet to Cuba coincided with such an accumulation of debt in these matters, that we do not even have to blame external forces. Today we live out our cultural revolution energetically because it has been delayed for too long. Like the sixties, it takes place outside of traditional institutions of political and social participation, parties, or unions, which in Cuba are formal and have lost their leadership.

Now social networks and alternative media, with their lights and shadows, are becoming a platform for claiming rights. They not only offer an alternative to a civil society limited by prohibitions, but they also make visible multiple deficiencies. The roads that were lost on these issues 52 years ago are being traveled today, but the speed of the race is supersonic because the digital age begets immediacy.

A challenge remains before us: understanding that the struggle for the rights of social sectors and minorities must go hand in hand with pressures for political transformation. That will lead to a democratization of socialism and citizen participation. But that analysis exceeds the scope of this article.

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How Do Cubans Use Cryptocurrencies?

By *Kmilo Noa*



He contacts me through WhatsApp, he is not one of those currency sellers that station themselves outside the Exchange Houses (CADECA) and offer their services to passersby. His name is José, and we went to high school together. He talks about cryptocurrencies—Bitcoin, Ethereum, Litecoin, etc.—terms that are not completely unknown to me, but that between the daily struggle and the heat that threatens to cook us on this Island, I've been able to study little more about.

I ask if he will read me the sacred gospel of the “investors” that currently swarm the network, and he says he will not because he does not believe in Ponzi schemes or in the 200% miracle, a kind of Loaves and Fishes that “Trustees” use to recruit new members to their networks. Like my friend, there are already thousands of Cubans who have entered the world of cryptocurrencies. A simple Google search will show you more than 800,000 results between trade offers and information about communities of Cubans that have been created around this universe.

Cryptocurrencies vs the Economic Embargo and Sanctions

Using cryptocurrencies, or crypto assets [or tokens] as they're also called, is one of the ways that Cubans most frequently access the global market, especially that technological



sector so high demand and isolated from Cuba. Thanks to the versatility of electronic money, the citizens of this country have been able to circumvent the limitations of the US economic embargo, which prevents them from obtaining various services and products. To do so, it is necessary to have a virtual crypto wallet with a balance, as well as use VPNs or Proxies that grant the user online access from other locations in order to purchase from stores that are not available due to restrictions.

Among the most common uses of crypto assets on the Island is the recharging of cell phones and the sending of remittances on platforms such as **TropiPay** and **Bitrefill**. Other platforms, born of Cuban entrepreneurs, include **Nercado**, a virtual store that allows the purchase and shipment of food and electrical appliances to Cuba and other parts of the world using cryptocurrencies, and **BitRemesas**, from developer and influencer Erich García Cruz and his team. The latter is aimed at sending remittances from abroad while avoiding the high taxes and restrictions of traditional platforms such as Western Union.

Of course, the informal market also has an impact on how crypto assets move in Cuba. Some users of pyramid systems such as TrustInvesting and Attonbank take advantage of the profits generated by these schemes to sell them to people who run businesses recharging cellphones, MLC cards¹, and sending remittances, among others.

Thanks to the versatility of electronic money, the citizens of this country have been able to circumvent the limitations of the US economic embargo, which prevents them from obtaining various services and products ...

¹ MLC stands for "Moneda Libremente Convertible" or "Freely Convertible Currency"

Homegrown Exchange Platforms and Communities

Even though few Cuban media outlets have addressed the issue of cryptocurrency management, this has not stopped information from reaching people, leading to the creation of communities for trading and exchanges. Some established sites such as CubaCripto, which has more than 1,300 members, offer platforms for information and exchange.

Forms of Acquisition in Cuba

Some users comment that they have acquired tokens through "faucets", which are applications that offer fractions of cryptocurrencies in exchange for actions such as sharing content, solving Captchas, watching ads, or using beta versions of games and applications.

There are also the so-called "airdrops", through which newly created cryptocurrencies are obtained. This is a way to encourage users to use new token denominations that are about to become available, thus incentivizing their entry into the community.

Others have preferred to use mining platforms in the cloud that work through referral links, meaning, the user registers and begins to generate Bitcoin fractions. When these reach the minimum necessary to make an extraction, the interested party must be able to attract a certain number of people (referrals) to register and complete the extraction.

Until now, the most effective method continues to be buying cryptocurrencies directly, which was practically impossible to do from Cuba until the appearance of Fusyona (currently disabled) and Qvashop, which have taken the place of the exchange sites inaccessible to Cubans who cannot pay with credit cards abroad.

Fears Associated with the Use of Cryptocurrencies

With the growing persecution of illegal currency trafficking by the Cuban authorities, concerns also grow for those who use assets as a bargaining chip to access the credit of the Freely Convertible Currency (MLC) cards. This means that they are

***“...To do so, it is necessary to have a virtual crypto wallet with a balance, in addition to VPNs or Proxies that grant the user online access from other locations in order to purchase from stores that are not accessible due to restrictions.*”**

increasingly cautious about publishing ads in trading groups on WhatsApp and Telegram, as well as on Revolico and other classified ad sites, although the government has not directly expressed interest in exercising control over the trading of crypto assets.

Traders prefer to operate selectively and within their own communities according to a CubaCripto user who wished to remain anonymous.

Scams and other hoaxes used by unscrupulous people have also targeted the crypto arena. They take advantage of the anonymous and volatile nature of these tokens with monetary value and have devised scams posing as exchange companies or certified Traders. After their victims have been chosen (almost always people who are not familiar with the exchange procedures), they offer to sell them Bitcoin, but when the interested party makes the bank transfer or sends their pre-paid cellphone minutes (also transferable, and thus traded, in Cuba), they simply disappear without a trace.

This type of situation, in addition to the lack of information and market culture on the internet, has led some Cubans to have reservations about the use of cryptocurrencies in their financial operations.

The Future of Crypto in Cuba

On July^{2nd} on the television program Roundtable, the Minister of Economy and Planning of Cuba, Alejandro Gil Fernández, said that “the benefits of virtual currency are being studied,” but no concrete facts have been outlined by the Cuban State to normalize its use in the international market despite governments from Venezuela and Iran, two countries that also suffer from economic sanctions imposed by the United States, having done so.

Meanwhile, everyday Cubans are exploring the infinite possibilities offered by the possession and use of cryptocurrencies. Some see it as a way to make their savings grow and avoid using national banks that exercise control over and audit people’s finances. In addition, “it is an effective way to keep money moving and, of course, to make it grow through trading” according to Yoniel Suárez, a user of the social network Twitter.

There is still a long way to go for crypto assets to form part of Cuba’s economic and financial culture, however the Island is taking its first steps. It is expected that, sooner rather than later, the use of cryptocurrencies in Cuba will be as common as going to the agricultural market and paying for overpriced bananas, but this time from your cell phone with your electronic wallet.

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I Was at the Doors of the Ministry of Culture

By Aldo Álvarez

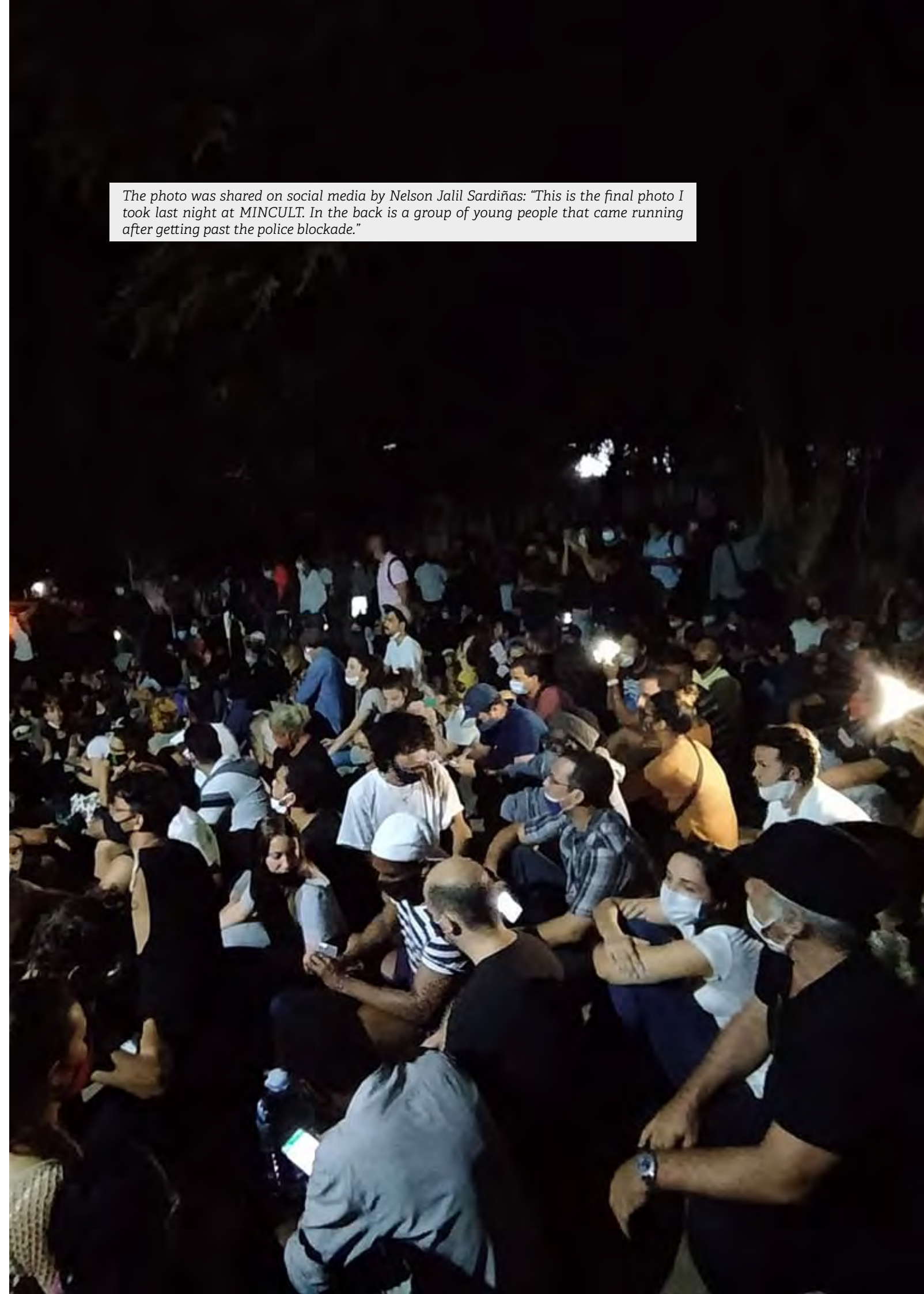


nobody summoned me. I am not an artist. I do not agree with Solís's statements in the video of his arrest, nor with most of the positions of the San Isidro Movement. I was not – nor am I – aware of most of the details of the dynamics among its participants. I do not support annexation, nor military intervention, nor fifth-generation warfare, nor artificially manufactured destabilization.

However, I felt the need to participate in a natural space for civic expression. At least as far as I remember, in my generation we have never had a similar experience in my country. This year the death of La Fornés, but especially El Danny's, were examples of natural civic expressions, but in totally different social fields.

To support, to participate, to be there, one should not be required to agree with everything that someone proposes, nor to totally identify with a specific event. It simply requires empathy and civic awareness. A movement will receive my support as long as there are no double intentions, and the social claims are valid and do not violate the rights of third parties. As is well remembered, Voltaire said, "I may not agree with what you say, but I will defend with my life your right to express it."

The photo was shared on social media by Nelson Jalil Sardiñas: "This is the final photo I took last night at MINCULT. In the back is a group of young people that came running after getting past the police blockade."



Cuban society is heterogeneous. From my point of view, we need to accept that reality in order to learn to coexist within the disagreements. We do not need to throw up our hands over each specific issue, nor eliminate friendships from social networks because of political views. Yesterday it was Trumpism, today it is the position of the artists and what happened with the San Isidro Movement, and tomorrow it will be something else.

At this rate, we're going to run out of friends, and as I see it, it's likely even artists to enjoy. When an artist acts, there are those who decide in fits and starts whether to consume their art or not. Art, encapsulated, ceases to be art, and becomes simple consumer merchandise. We shouldn't forget John Donne's poem: "No man is an island of his own. Each man is a piece of the continent, a part of the whole."

What was lived in front of the Ministry of Culture that night was a natural, peaceful, and frontal social movement and dialogue with institutions. On Calle 2, between 11 and 13, they applauded, they sung the national anthem, and evoked Teresita Fernandez, Frank Delgado, and Liuba María Hevia. Cell phone batteries, cigarettes, and water were shared, and probably even a little rum. When analyzing the geopolitical, we must never lose sight of the people.

From my perspective, this issue should be socialized, not politicized. The "besieged plaza" syndrome should no longer generate these consequences. It is time to create a new way of relating as a society and to face differences without always having to look for or make mortal enemies of each other. Cuban society and civic expression cannot continue to be the collateral damage of a war of opposites that surpasses and exceeds us.

The contrary path to dialogue is radicalization, it is extremism, it is confrontation. Our society needs to listen, accept its

What was lived in front of the Ministry of Culture that night was a natural, peaceful, and frontal social movement and dialogue with institutions.

differences, and learn to live with itself. Our social fabric, after so many years of conflict, must begin to heal. I hope that the night in front of the Ministry of Culture can set us on that path.

Aldo Álvarez is an attorney and Young Professional member of the Cuba Study Group. He lives in Havana, Cuba.

Tech Entrepreneur-ship in Cuba: The Pandemic Points to the Road Ahead

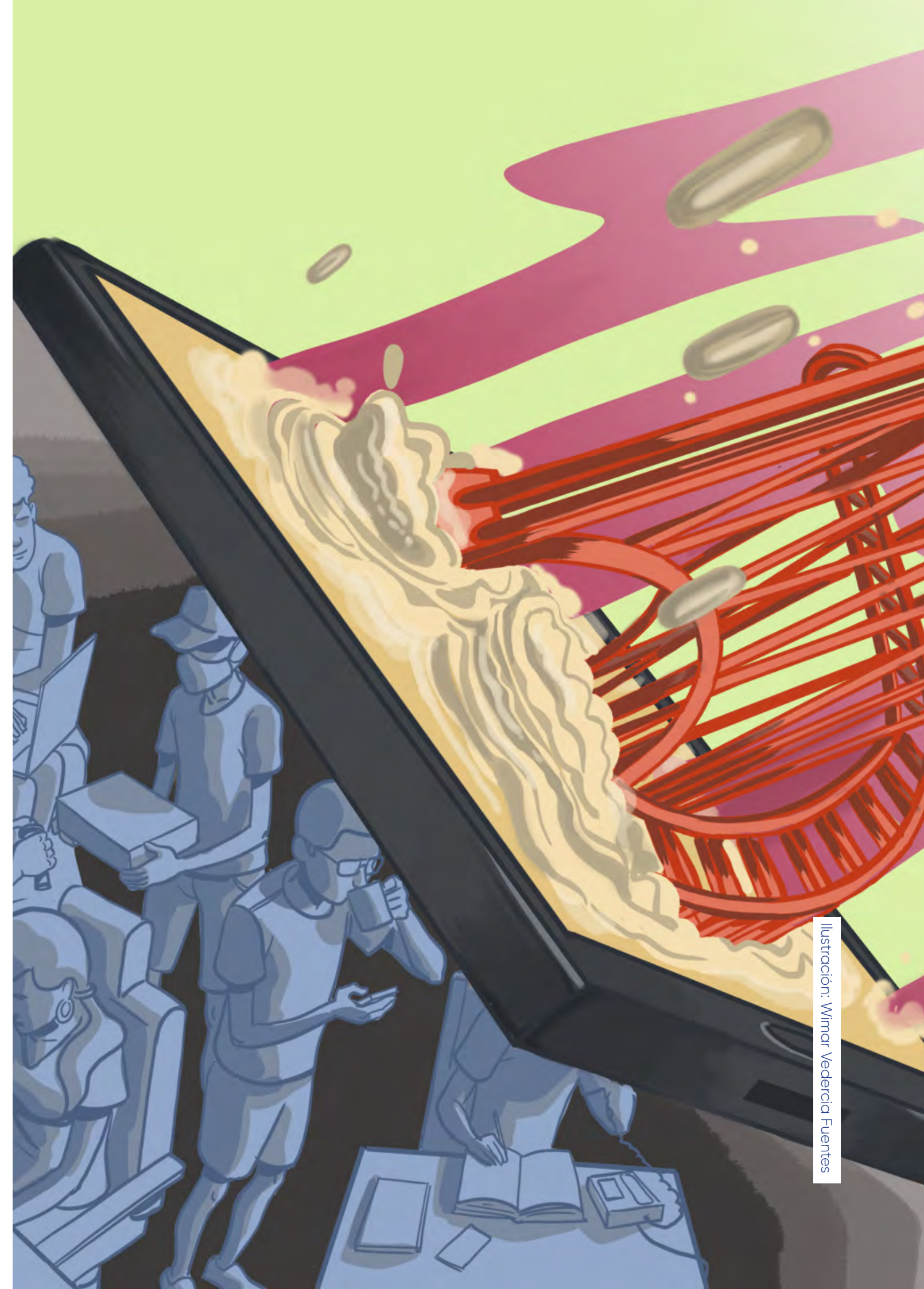
By *Sandra Madiendo Ruiz*



How many businesses closed, and how many will reopen? How many were able to transform themselves to survive? How much did the home delivery industry grow during the pandemic? These factors remain uncertain but are essential to understand the changes experienced by entrepreneurs in Cuba after the announcement of the first cases of coronavirus on the island.

While some suspended their operations due to the nature of each business – such as massage services – or due to the conditions in Cuba, such as scarcity or increased costs, others reinvented themselves and adapted.

A rental house became the **first co-working space in Cuba**; **Behart** held online exhibitions, placing the gallery at the click of a button; startups emerged to solve problems ranging from delivering **farmers markets** and **gastronomic services** to homes, to sending **remittances to family members through alternative means**. Organizations such as the School of Creative Photography in Havana (EFCH), the **Cuba Emprende Project**, and gyms such as **Charlotte, Dale Dale, and Pura Vida** offered workshops and classes through Telegram and WhatsApp.



It was also the right time for the expansion and consolidation of **home delivery services**. For this, gastronomic businesses had several alternatives, from creating delivery systems with their own fleet of couriers, to associating themselves with other traditional businesses and tech platforms such as **Alame-sa**, **Pa'mi casa**, and **Mandao**.

According to **Marta Deus**, leader of the Mandao messaging app, her business “reached its maximum load and work capacity. From one day to the next, the number of orders and demand rose.”

More than 10 traditional businesses in retail services such as the sale of clothing, lights, or household items have been transformed thanks to **El Catre**, a **marketplace** that, in the midst of this situation, has committed itself to the digitization of SMEs and offers a space for exhibiting products. Among them, Confecciones Procle, La Bombilla, and Mi Rinconcito.

However, in the midst of this productive panorama for some, others have been forced to stop. As reported by **ElToque** and **IPS**, some 243,203 of the 600,000 self-employed workers have ceased their operations since mid-May. Even digital businesses such as the “Cuban Ubers” – **Bajanda**, **Cuber**, and **Sube** – had to stop due to mobility restrictions imposed by the government.

We do not know which webpages were the most visited during quarantine, but there was a **registered** “growth in the additional volume of traffic on Etecsa networks by more than 10%” in March. By May, that had **grown to 60%**. How much have startups billed through e-commerce websites, and how much has user acquisition increased among Cuban startups?

We can affirm that there has been a jump, both in the supply and demand of certain types of services and products due to the isolation caused by the coronavirus, the modifications of traditional commercial relations, and the emergence of others.

This is how the incipient podcasting industry found its roots and has developed with platforms such as **CubaPod**, which already has 111 registered podcasts of various categories ranging from sports to business, and 6,820 unique downloads on its Telegram bot and administration pages for podcasters.

The Cuban government has also contributed, albeit indirectly, to the burgeoning of the digital ecosystem. It has made use of digital banking with the state’s “fintech” apps **Transfer-móvil** and **Enzona** to pay for services and transfer or create new bank accounts.

Entrepreneurs have used these applications to send and receive payments without the need for physical exchange. Although this sector is not separate from the rest, Enzona **statistics** indicate that from July 2019 to September 2020, several million pesos have circulated through its platform, and the number of users has skyrocketed since March, coinciding with isolation.

Yaiselis Ramirez, leader of the **Cuban app store** Apklis, says that more than 600 people have registered on the platform as developers in the past 6 months and 203 new applications have been incorporated. This commitment to app development is not accidental, so much so that with the arrival of COVID-19 the response to inform and help in the investigation of cases has been immediate.

Here is a summary:

Sector tecnológico cubano, tirando códigos contra la COVID-19 ▲

-COVID-19-InfoCU partió de Enrique Acosta Figueredo e Infomed- Portal de la Red de Salud de Cuba- una app que promueve y sigue los boletines cubanos e internacionales.

-Covid19CubaData fue el primer sitio web donde los cubanos podían tener información actualizada sobre el avance de la enfermedad en la Isla. Fue concebida en alianza entre Postdata.club, la revista de Ciencia y Tecnología Juventud Técnica, la Facultad de Matemática y Computación de la Universidad de La Habana (Matcom) y los equipos de CUSOBU (Soluciones informáticas para Cuba) y Daxslab.

-Pesquisador Virtual una aplicación de autopesquisaje ante síntomas de la COVID-19 que ayuda a la detección mediante encuesta epidémica

-Porter@ app para controlar las colas mediante escaneo de carnet de identidad

Sector tecnológico cubano, tirando códigos contra el Covid-19

Translation of figure:

- COVID-19-InfoCU came from Enrique Acosta Figueredo and Infomed – a portal of the Cuban health network – an app that promotes and follows Cuban and international newsletters.
- Covid19CubaData was the first website where Cubans could access updated information about the progress of the disease on the island. It was conceived in partnership between Postdata.cub, the journal of science and technology Juventud Técnica, the School of Mathematics and Computation of the University of Havana (Matcom), and the teams from CUSOBU (computer solutions for Cuba) and Daxslab.
- Pesquisador Virtual is a self-screening application for symptoms of COVID-19 that helps detection by means of an epidemic survey.
- Porter@ is an app to control queues by scanning ID cards.

This digital revolution has been made possible, in part, thanks to the gradual reduction of the national digital divide. The number of users subscribed to mobile telephony is more than **6 million**, and **3.9 million** of them use the internet through mobile data (IxDM). This figure is higher than the **158,000 subscribed** to the Nauta home service out of more than **1.3 million fixed lines**.

“From a technological point of view, Cuba has had a fairly big turnaround. We are gradually immersing ourselves in technology. We may not be at the level of the rest of the world, but several successful applications and solutions have emerged within the country,” says Yaiselis. For post-pandemic Cuba, tech entrepreneurship is still a pending issue. An approaching Enterprise Law would include an important demand of Cuban entrepreneurs: the legalization of SMEs. However, tech startups have their own DNA to differ them from many of the characteristics present in traditional ventures, both in terms of market and taxation.

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