

The Road of Patience

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The transfer of power in Cuba from Fidel to Raúl Castro, which took place already five years ago, has coincided in time with major changes in Cuban society, as well as the emergence of new social and political players in Cuba and abroad. Additionally, reforms made by the administration of President Raúl Castro, even aware of their limitations, have contributed to change traditional scenarios of conflict in the Cuban nation, as pointed out by Cuban essayist and historian Rafael Rojas. This text intends to evaluate, without trying to be conclusive, some of the positions at play on the Island. It will outline changes that have occurred in Cuban society in the past 20 years, give reasons in favor of including political players on the left, center and center-right of the spectrum for a re-tooling of the nationalist political consensus in the Cuban Nation.

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These days, as never before in the history of Cuba of the last 50 years, we can clearly sense that there are positions in the public sphere that allow us to affirm that the Island potentially has a political and ideological spectrum similar to that of any of any country in the western hemisphere. Changes occurring in the country in the 1990's and the impact of new communication technologies on Cuban society have made it possible for the emergence of a wide range of opinions on different issues. These referenced public spheres—an essentially urban phenomenon associated with cyberspace—constitute the main national epicenter of flowing ideas, and a total political laboratory where the future is concocted.

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Since the decade of the 1990's, it is possible to do the archaeology of “another” speech that began to take shape alongside official speeches, especially in the literature, theater, painting and other artistic expressions. These new narratives about the Island and its inhabitants emphasized issues that were outside the orbit of new symbolic coordinates of

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the Cuban government, relocated around revolutionary nationalism after the actual debacle of Eastern European socialism. Young Cuban artists were speaking about diversity, marginality, the failure of a utopia, emigration, and finally, the anguish of the Insular Being. This is not the place to assess negotiation dynamics deployed by the Minister of Culture, Abel Prieto (builder, together with the important intellectual Cintio Vitier, of that symbolic transition of the Cuban political system) in combination with this group of young Cuban artists. This dynamic takes place amidst the crisis of the 1990's, with its economic, social convulsions and implosion of paradigms. That crisis and the economic reform that came with it transformed the physiognomy of the country: They empowered the role of the community, the family and other new type of spaces as socializing agents.

Beginning in the decade of the 1990's and up to the present, the Catholic Church—that large space of expression and creation of ideas in Cuba for 400 years—was able to re-articulate its presence in the public space, after almost 30 years of reclusion as a consequence of structural atheism. Only in the area of Catholicism after the constitutional reform of 1992—the multiplication of social spaces of influence has been impressive: tens of regular publications, training centers, debate centers and social assistance and human promotion networks articulated with national reach, just to mention some of them. Other Christian denominations have also achieved major spaces with similar characteristics.

We should add that for approximately fifteen years the country has seen a resurgence of some regular publications with tones and contents outside the editorial line dictated by the Communist Party for the institutional communication media system, totally in the hands of the State. The role placed by socio-cultural magazines belonging to research centers and to other institutions has been important. Although it is true that they have a somewhat limited circulation, magazines, such as *Temas*, *La Gaceta de Cuba*, *Caminos*, publications associated with the Catholic Church, among others, constituted socialization spaces of new social subjects that have become the political players of the present.

Added to the ascent of the younger generations, and to the limited diversification of social spaces of expression, there is a third media of vital importance: The proliferation of new digital reproduction technologies. These realities have opened, to unsuspected limits, new spaces of cultural and political interaction, where the youth has been able to access political and cultural offers of the global market, including those belonging to Cuban groups in exile. In addition, the flow of communication between Cubans inside and outside the Island has increased considerably.

Added to this is the existence of information distribution networks that operate parallel to the institutional communication media system, such as foreign radio stations, clandestine banks of video and DVD films, clandestine access to the satellite television, etc. In addition, in the last several years we have witnessed an impressive multiplication of digital bulletins, web sites and blogs that involve thousand of young Cuban from all walks of life. Without a doubt, cyberspace presently constitutes the most dynamic means of expression. These realities have a powerful democratizing load that stirs up the foundations of the country's traditional communication systems where both the institutional communication media system, regulated by the Cuban Communist Party (PCC), and communication devices in the hands of other traditional social players, as is the case of the Catholic Church itself.

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Raúl Castro's arrival to power in 2006 and his so-called debate to make structural and conceptual changes" in the country, propelled a strong mobilization of players in Cuba, focused on civilian society. It is precisely during the intense debate experienced in the country after the illness of former President Fidel Castro (that had a devastating moment with the so-called "little war of the e-mails"), when we see with clarity the process of replacement and ascent of new social and political subjects in the Cuban public arena. Having as allies the new communication technologies, these players have been able to articulate public microspheres of debate where various political and social agendas merge and interact. This phenomenon, in the Island, is totally unheard of: for the first time, thousand of citizens—mainly in the cities—become involved in a socio-political debate alongside the Island's venues of power.

These social subjects, with the presence of many young people, have started to generate a discussion of renewal -seen as flexible, open, and critical—that has been directed to the most varied topics of our reality. It is perfectly possible to track these discussions from inside the island, positions that are consistent with typical postures within any political and ideological spectrum in a modern society. Economic challenges, the national historiography, democracy and law, the racial problem, social justice, emigration, reconciliation between Cubans, civilian society, the participation of intellectuals in public life, Cuban culture made in the Island and abroad, public spaces, institutional reform, denouncement of government excesses, the rights of homosexuals, among others, have been the fundamental topics that have marked this show of reflection displayed by these new social players.

These subjects, if we compare them to their compatriots of a previous generation, are characterized by a progressive distancing from the metaphor or allegory, to discuss the most heated subject matters of the Cuban reality. Their language is usually more direct, more incisive, and more coldly political. To the present, our institutional reality has made it impossible for all this diversity to be articulated in a more organic way and contribute to the national ascent and balance. In this flow of ideas that is taking place in Cuba today, it is perfectly possible to track political ideas from the left, center and right, with their consequential chromatic mixtures, hues and slides to one side or the other of the political spectrum.

In the case of the Cuban right, it has as exponents, inside the Island, opposition groups born in the decade of the 1990's, closely linked (materially and symbolically) to organizations of Cuban exiles in Miami and Madrid, and other international political circuits. These opposition groups were not able to reinsert themselves in the new dynamic imposed in Cuba by the digital age and the political work in cyberspace. Their participation in the domestic debate on issues previously alluded to, has been practically zero. Instead, a group of young bloggers saw the light and have filled that void. They have become the novelty of this time. Although they have not been able to articulate a solid socio-political proposal on the future of Cuba, they are indeed active in stating opinions and making accusations, and have been able to capitalize the support (through awards and acknowledgments) of Atlantic capitalism power centers and sectors of the Cuban exile community in Miami and Madrid. We could classify their positions as ranging from the political center to moderate right-wing positions, always very critical of the Cuban government.

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There is another sector of the Cuban right, not linked at all with the organized opposition, where there is thinking articulated with wide circulation inside the country, especially among the cultured elite and within university circles. They are exponents of the academic world, located for the most part outside Cuba, who

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have been able to conduct dialogues and interact with the new national players from a position of respectful and critical dialogue. This constitutes an important sector to the extent that it has been able to present an insight about the national future.

It is in the venues of the political left where we can find a larger range of hues, thought diversity and search for platforms when presenting proposals in reference to the Cuban reality. Presently, this young left, silently during several years in various research centers of the Cuban capital, has assumed the distinguished public role, alongside government institutions. In addition, it has been able to connect to continental social movements and achieve a certain convergence between the agenda of a sector of the Latin American left and proposals that they make for Cuba. For example, these young people have been the ones that have brought to the Cuban stage the experiences with regard to constitutional law that countries, such as Ecuador, have lived through. Unlike the aforementioned bloggers, their critical discussion is not projected globally against “the Cuban regime” but rather against some policies of the government, and they respect the areas of legitimacy that such government still holds. They feel themselves to be the heirs of the Cuban Revolution, even though they use its symbolic resources with a strong transforming characteristic.

Cuban essayist Julio César Guanche has certainly expressed the existence in Cuba of various “route maps” inside the left, where possible socialist exits to the future of Cuba are proposed. Such are the cases of the so-called advisory socialism, republican socialism and social democracy. Although it is true that these trends have not yet crystallized into social movements or political parties, they do constitute national sectors that have a discussion with a certain degree of articulation, supported on incipient (digital) socially radiating platforms.

Beyond the ideological category of proposals of these new subjects, in other words, the role given by them in their discussions on national sovereignty (and the type of relation with the United States), the operation of the economy, power structuring of the State, etc., it is in the position toward the Cuban government where this matter becomes more complex and interesting in the present time. As stated by political pundit Arturo López-Levy, there are three types of players in the Cuban stage: 1) Those that wish for a popular revolt in the style of the so-called “Arabic Spring” that brings down the Cuban government, 2) The Immobilists that wish for unrestricted maintenance of the present *status quo* in the country and 3) The reformists who wish for an orderly and gradual transformation of the present Cuban system.

The reformist sector has been historically very wide in Cuba. It aspires to a passage to a political system that guarantees an independent fatherland and a welfare State, economic prosperity and gradual democratization of the country, without abruptly dismantling the present institutionality or symbolic capital of the Cuban revolution, since this capital has its feeds from insular nationalism sources, strongly rooted in the people. It aspires to the present-day authorities of the country, with Raúl Castro at the helm, be the ones leading this orderly and gradual passage that would substantially transform the present state of affairs on the Island, without traumatic experiences or bloody incidents. In general, they are sectors reactionary to the Cuban American right and the U.S. government assuming any leading role on the life and destiny of the country. This diffused and slightly articulated trend, constitutes a space of potential political convergence where we could classify a large number of silent and partisan state officials, intellectuals, groups of sibilinas, sectors of the new left, members of the moderate right (inside Cuba and abroad), important sectors of the hierarchy, the clergy and the Island’s catholic lay public, and increasingly broader sector of the people who feel an urgent need for a substantial change in Cuba, given the substantial lack in material and spiritual life.

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Reararticulating political consensus in Cuba becomes strategic at the present time, since it depends on the country's stability and balance. Distances between the utopians who carried out the Revolution and the present generations have begun to widen rapidly. In addition, that national process would allow channeling constructively the differences between national sectors and would guarantee controlled management of conflicts. It would give us the possibility, to all Cubans, to be able to maintain the social accomplishments achieved and move gradually forward to more ambitious political goals. It would contribute to permanently eliminate the possibility of an internal de-stabilization in Cuba.

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Developing a collective process, especially horizontal, that would allow Cubans to agree on common goals facing the future, is the best way to contribute to stability and national balance. Said process must be supported on a vocation to having unrestricted dialogue that would confer on the "other speaker" a minimum legitimacy, although he or she may think differently or has been an enemy in the past. Many of the proposals made by the aforementioned social players have as common denominator the defense of social justice, national sovereignty and responsible freedom. Therefore, it could be relatively easy to achieve consensus in these aspects.

Appearance of new players in the national scene should not be assumed with suspicions, but rather as the natural course of history. Today it is strategic to initiate a political dialogue with those sectors of the new left, center and moderate right in Cuba and in exile. We must identify and enter into dialogue with those sectors that are willing to defend for Cuba a future of social justice and national sovereignty when standing in front of foreign powers, as well as greater individual freedoms.

The success of similar enterprise rests on several crucial elements: The need to have an open public sphere, the possibility that social players of the nation will go to it with total freedom, the imperative that the Cuban State should begin to serve as moderator of all the national diversity, the possibility of reforming the existing institutionality to be able to channel all these proposals satisfactorily and allow qualified national players to participate in an anthropological regeneration of the Cuban individual. To the extent that all this process contributes to broaden the political consensus within the country, we will be in a better position to prevent foreign powers from meddling in our domestic affairs.

In the person of President Raúl Castro, major elements come together that qualify him to guide a process of this type in Cuba. He has the historical responsibility to facilitate it, since his figure keeps major national forces cohesively bound together capable of achieving his success. To do this, political creativity and audacity are necessary because the time required to travel that road is each day inversely proportional to Raúl Castro's remaining lifetime by natural law. Without him, the road would become more uncertain and diffused, even perhaps chaotic.

The Cuban government should recognize the political plurality of the nation and consequently help channel the institutionalization of those new utopians inerted in the Cuban reality, through consolidation of an open public space that would welcome debate between each of these Cuban groups. Taking on this challenge bears implicitly the radical redesign of state institutions and the Cuban Communist Party to be able to effectively accept in its midst all this diversity that we have been talking about. This should lead us to do without a "State ideology" that, in practice functions as a straight jacket that makes invisible and constraints all of the national diversity. The Martian republic "with all and for the good of all", because of its ecumenism and universality, continuous to be the most suitable threshold to think Cuba in the beginning of the 21st century.

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