Cubanidad and the “Democratization of Cuba”

Representing the thematic narrative for a monograph on the prospects for Cuban liberalization, my project with the Martí Institute outlines a basis by which disparate expressions of Cubanidad can find common ground. The primary objective of this monograph disentangles the complex processes of democratic transitions where regime change also requires a shift from a command economy to one based on private ownership. Addressing dual transitions requires that the political processes of transformation from an authoritarian to a non-authoritarian political system be examined along with highlighting the additional challenges that become manifest when economic transitions occur concurrently.

As globalization promotes neo-liberal policies in even the most inhospitable economies, stark realities of surviving in a transnational economy have begun to trump the economic sovereignty that countries once manipulated as a defense against the encroachment of democratic capitalism. The pervasiveness of transnational capital has forced states to shift their economic strategies from limiting its influence toward policies that realize its unavoidable presence can offer benefits directed toward servicing the needs of elites. Recently, even these rear-guard efforts to maintain some degree of economic sovereignty in service of elites have been eroded as states are being coerced by financial exigency to accept that a decontrolled economy is the only option. While command economies have been largely undermined by global capitalism, they can claim a relative measure of success in the realm of equality derived as a planned outcome of the provision and maintenance of basic social services that were once either non-existent or only available to those of a particular class.

In particular, this study examines the case of Cuba in an effort to evaluate its policy alternatives in the 21st Century. The Cuban economy has long maintained a unique economic system as both a function of its historical circumstances as well as active policy choices by national and transnational entities. As expected, wages are severely constrained, price/wage indexes are artificially maintained through government controls, and the labor market offers little mobility. The command economy offers some essential social services that establish a baseline for human survival; but beyond necessities, meaningful opportunities for improving the quality of life are not available for most average Cubans in the formal economy. However, asymmetries exist within the informal economy, particularly the sectors of the economy that are linked more directly to transnational capitalism. Furthermore, these inequalities of opportunity are widening and at the same time becoming more diversified. Cuba has found itself with an economic identity crisis, not unlike other post-socialist states who had once anticipated a more widespread revolution only to limp into the new era of ambiguous neo-liberalism. The contemporary political economy of Cuba must be examined in light of the experience of similar regimes to offer reasonable and prudent policy options for liberalization in the current global environment. This work offers an evaluation of the possibilities for making a transition into the global political economy while maintaining a basic level of commitment to the expression of the individual.

The key focus for this NEH Project addresses Cuban political development that necessitates understanding transition in a particularly “Cuban” context. Emphasis on this project rests on the political norms of how to maintain the dignity of the Cuban identity, both those cultivated by the revolutionary movement on the island and of those constructed as a consequence of the long
century of Cuban Revolution who have become immigrants and exiles. This work begins, like much of modern Cubanidad through the artistic impressionism of José Martí – so brilliantly self-aware and reflexive – Martí was able to create a philosophy suitable to nearly universally application for any effort to express the Cuba imagination. The book begins and ends with his vision and sense of purpose. First, it stands as the origins and the lasting articulation of the broad affect known as Cubanidad. Made measureable by historical circumstance, it serves as a guide to the limitations and probabilities of the future of Cubans to grasp and pursue liberty.

This work employs a methodological approach that is common in the transitions literature. Heuristic case studies examine "a set of concepts in order to develop generalizable theory from particular interests." The heuristic offers to facilitate the creation of a developmental framework that can explain complex social phenomena, such as those that surround the processes for democratic transitions. The heaviest of the theoretical exposition in the monograph addresses how authoritarian governments can deliver a stable transition to democracy by upholding the social contract embedded in culturally-acceptable expressions of justice.

The first chapter introduces the reader to the general concepts of liberty in light of the Cuban experience as a means to frame the larger question of dual transitions in the post-modern political economy. The second chapter provides a discussion of comparative transitions, dual transitions in particular, and the efforts that authoritarian starts have employed to manage the uncertainties during these profound social changes. Chapter two draws these lessons together into a more coherent theory of governability and social obligation (codified as “Hammer, Sickle, Fulcrum”) for regime survivability. Chapter Three offers real-world comparisons of states that have endured these transitions to demonstrate the viability of the theory. States who fail to maintain their social obligations will lean more heavily on more coercive mechanisms of social control. Chapter Four provides the Cuban case study as a heuristic and highlights the regime’s efforts at survivability. Chapter Five outlines the present state of the Cuban political economy and identifies some serious socio-economic cleavages that must be addressed prior to any successful transition (and/or to prevent increased repression). Chapter Six addresses policy alternatives for Cuba that allow the island to meaningfully engage in a controlled and gradual transition toward liberalization and democratization that promotes Cuban liberty, autonomy, and sovereignty.

The fruits of the NEH Institute on José Martí will be most clearly seen in the first chapter (on liberty), the fourth chapter (Marti in the historical record), and the final chapter of the monograph. This chapter, (“Martí’s Dream”), outlines a path for reconciliation of the divided communities to best offer a hope for Cuban autonomy on both sides of the ideological and physical barrier. This work seeks to outline the lowest-common understanding of Martí’s Cubanidad as a basis for constructing this “culture of reconciliation.”

This work is already under contract with Palgrave-Macmillan and it is expected to be completed in Fall 2019 and published in 2020. Several portions of the work have been presenting in academic conferences and public lectures. The monograph will stand as both a work on democratic theory as well as a case study of Cuban political history and public policy.
Working Bibliography


Lipset, Seymour Martin. “Party Systems and the Representation of Social Groups.” In State and Society: A Reader in Comparative Political Sociology, edited by
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