

Cuba: From Civil Society to Open Society

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What is civil society? According to Italian philosopher Norberto Bobbio, it involves a realm of social relationships that are not regulated by the State, and that is “understood narrowly and nearly always polemically as the complex apparatuses that exercise coercive power within an organized social system.¹ In this sense, the term, as it is used by this Italian thinker, ‘subversively’ fits our Cuban reality (on the island, specifically), where an omnipotent State that entirely controls all forms of production, in its role as sole employer and regulator of the few jobs that survive for the self-employed, on the margins of state-run ones, has the power to directly influence the private decisions of citizens, and control society with an iron fist.

Clearly, the State’s institutions, and their immediate sphere of influence, do not make up civil society. Let us say that in the Cuban case, all those “popular organizations” attached to the government, or that are controlled by it—such as the Committees for the Defense of the Revolution (CDRs), the Cuban Federation of Women (FMC), the Union of Communist Youth (UJC), or the Union of Cuban Writers and Artists (UNEAC)—do not comprise part of it. In Cuba, not even a theoretically independent organization like the Fernando Ortiz

Foundation, a cultural institution that is seen as being “political and civil, not governmental” in *Wikipedia*, could be considered a part of civil society. It is directly supported and influenced by the Ministry of Culture. While not meaning to sound redundant, this foundation is headed by Miguel Barnet, a high ranking, Castro official, who is currently president of UNEAC, and a member of the National Assembly of the People’s Power (the last is a sort of one-party ‘parliament’ conceived by the government to give its regime a veneer of representativity).

It is also generally the case that specialists tend to separate the notion of civil society from politics, especially party aligned, institutionalized or organized politics. According to Mexican scholar Enrique Brito Velázquez, civil society is a group of citizens “organized as such to be non-partisan actors in a political arena while desiring no personal gain, or political power, as they seek the common good.”² Venezuelan constitutional expert Ricardo Combellas reiterates that “constitutional interpretation leaves no room for doubt when distinguishing civil society and political society, as it stipulates their prototypical forms of organization: parties and political movements. Their organizational requirements and

assumed functions within a political system are different.”³ Both explanations are clear about the fact that politics is not healthy for the concerns of civil society because it limits society’s freedom—right at its core. French sociologist Alain Touraine highlights that “the recognition of the autonomy of civil society... is the primary precondition for democracy, as it is the separation of civil society and state that permits the creation of a political society,” an idea undoubtedly also applicable to the Cuban case.⁴

Thus, in Cuba, civil society would be made up of a class of citizens at the margins of the State and politics, or at least, of people who don’t see themselves as being involved with them. They would be found at any and all occasions and situations as a politically organized group, whether or not they could indirectly participate in or influence the game of politics, with all its multiple derivations. For example, an independent librarian can simultaneously

be a member of an opposition party and also offer his home as a location for an independent library and sporadic party meetings. Similarly, his home could host symposia and conferences on political subjects, based on the library’s holdings, and the event still might not necessarily qualify as being a political event.

Generally, the distinction between what is and is not civil society stems not only from who its members are, but also according to the governmental system that controls it. In Cuba’s case, the regime has sought to establish a direct relationship between the concept of civil society and its very own, state-manipulated organizations and foundations—entities that are politically aligned with it—such as the aforementioned Fernando Ortiz Foundation, and many others. This is how Castroism has attempted to get practically all its “popular organizations” the exclusive attention of the NGO (non-governmental organization)-controlled media, presenting them to internation-



Inauguration, Hall of Prominent Black Cuban Men and Women. From left to right: Rigoberto Hernández, Manuel Cuesta Morúa, Juan Antonio Madrazo, Jorge Olivera Castillo, Víctor Domínguez and Juan del Pilar Goberna. In the front row: Mara Michelle, Eleanor Calvo Martínez, Leonardo Calvo Cárdenas and Ramón Muñoz.



Attack on the Ladies in White

al public opinion as representative of Cuban civil society's thinking. Such was the case, and worse, at the Cuban Communist Party Central Committee's Fifth Plenary, at which the island's civil society was assigned an 'objective,' while it was also confirmed that said civil society was comprised of "powerful popular organizations (e.g., CTC, CDR, FMC, ANAP, FEU, FEEM and even the Young Pioneers), social organizations (including members who are revolutionary soldiers, economists, jurists, journalists, artists, writers, etc.), and of even other NGOs that operate legally, and do not attempt to undermine the economic, political, and social system that was freely chosen by our people—despite the fact these 'independent thinking and speaking' NGOs, still work with the State towards their common objective to further socialism. This is truly a case of the totalitarian tail wagging the people's dog.

This example shows that nothing could be further from the truth when it comes to the Cuban government's definition of civil society. Cuba's real civil society is surviving at the State's margins. It is sometimes, if not always, repressed by the State. The Cuban citizenry's

independence comes at a price: the more visibility and influence it threatens to have, the higher the price becomes. Such has been the case with the aforementioned system of Independent Libraries, and the blogger movement, among others. Interestingly, the government sees this as a civil society that has been "imported, financed, and manipulated by the U.S. government and the ultra-rightwing mafia in Miami, [and] that is made up of mercenaries and small groups who are opposed to the Cuban Revolution's social justice, participatory, and anti-imperialist projects, who lack the principles and moral fortitude, and to whom U.S. imperialists pay a great deal of attention and give an abundance of resources."⁵

Among the organizations and movements that currently do qualify as participating members in Cuban civil society (aside from those already mentioned) are the Catholic Church, the Ladies in White, and independent unionists and journalists. There are also independent legal and medical associations, countercurrent cultural groups like the well-known *Omni Zona Franca*, rockers and rappers, and even

groups that defend the rights of black Cubans, like the Juan Gualberto Gómez Movement for Racial Integration (MIR), the Independent Afro-Cuban Foundation (FACI), and the Citizens' Committee for Racial Integration (CIR). This last group found it necessary to establish the CIR on very concrete notions: "the suppression of spaces in which black Cubans can have independent debates and consider social matters; the growing disquiet due to the obvious fractures and shortcomings of that negatively impact Cuba's integrationist project today; the lack of governmental sensitivity in dealing with the problem's causes, assuming responsibility, and promoting a necessary debate about the subject, or society's dollarization and how material wellbeing depends on remittances, which have placed black and *mestizos* in an extremely disadvantageous situation."⁶

In June of this year, alternative communicator Ramón A. Muñoz sent an article from Havana that was read all over the Internet: "The Threat of the Cuban Ku Klux Klan." It contained declarations made by Sonia Garro Alfonso, organizer of the FACI, and others: "I have been beaten four times, and seem ready to do it again [referring to attacks by the Rapid Response Brigades, paramilitary forces that work for the government]. . . We are constantly watched by a patrol, and waiting for the Cuban Ku Klux Klan to declare itself our enemy. . . We are peaceful blacks who are only asking for our civil and human rights because of what seems to be the crime of the century: to be black in Cuba and raise your voice."⁷

The death of oppositionist Orlando Zapata Tamayo (after suffering repeated, physical abuses and enduring a long hunger strike in prison), and the lengthy hunger strike of another black dissident, Guillermo Fariñas, and pressure from street protests by the Ladies in White, have led to the Cuban government

doing something probably unimaginable in over half a century of being in power. It resorted to approaching the Catholic Church to mediate the crisis, promising to free the 52 Black Spring (2003) prisoners who remained incarcerated—a triumph not only for the opposers of the regime, in the first place (Fariñas demanded the release of the sicker prisoners for him to end his hunger strike), but also of Cuban civil society, the aforementioned religious entity, the Ladies in White, and Fariñas himself, as an independent journalist: they are all part of it.

Cuban civil society is barely surviving. In a country whose system is still residually totalitarian, anything 'civil' is dangerous. Notwithstanding, in the 'civil' Petrie dish that has been relegated to a marginal place grow the seeds of totalitarianism end. The State, particularly the Castro state, is more than aware of this. Sooner or later, the closed society that today reigns on the island will incubate an open one. Cuba's emerging civil society will be key in this endeavor.

Notes:

1. Bobbio, Norberto. *Democracy and Dictatorship: the nature and limits of state power* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989): 22.
2. José Carlos Cano Zárate y Razhy González, del Foro de Apoyo Mutuo, México, 2005.
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http://www.analitica.com/bitblbio/rcombellas/sociedad_civil.asp
4. Touraine, Alain. *What is democracy?* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1997): 41.
5. <http://www.cubasocialista.cu/texto/cs0241.htm>
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<http://www.cubavibra.es/admin/printArticle.php?article=raices11.inc>
7. <http://zoevaldes.net/2010/06/30/al-acecho-ku-klux-klan-cubano-por-ramon-a-munoz-gonzalez/>