

Working papers



**The U.S.-Cuba System and the
Key Mechanisms of Regime Change
After Castro**

Andreas Pickel

TIPEC Working Paper 06/1

The U.S.-Cuba System and the Key Mechanisms of Regime Change After Castro

Andreas Pickel, Trent University

The proximity of the United States of America is surely perceived as a threat by many Cubans. The regime's propaganda is very active in this respect. Yet there is no need to worry much about such a world power – provided it remains democratic. One has to be apprehensive primarily about totalitarian states. Vaclav Havel, in an exchange of letters with Cuban dissident, Oswaldo Paya ¹

This paper is less sanguine about the unthreatening nature of democratic regimes to neighboring countries than former Czech dissident and President, Vaclav Havel, in particular when the regime in question is the United States in the early twenty-first century. While the author frankly admits to a highly critical view of U.S. democracy, foreign policy and neoliberalism, the primary purpose of this analysis is not political but scientific. Thus essentially the same series of events may be described by some as the U.S. annexation of Cuba, by others as the liberation of Cubans from tyranny. This paper is interested in the process to which both refer. Much so-called social science on contemporary Cuba is at best applied science (policy studies), at worst simple-minded ideology. If a piece of analysis offers a more or less explicit position on one of the following questions, it is likely to be primarily policy advice or political argument rather than social science explanation: What should happen to the Cuban Communist regime after Castro's death? What ought to be the role of the United States in any post-Castro transition?

These are of course important and legitimate questions that motivate much scholarly work on Cuba today; but as explicitly normative questions, they are not for the social sciences to answer. This is not to deny the social sciences any role in dealing with normative questions. Policy programs and political strategies are full of claims and assumptions about how the world works, which is where they overlap with the concerns

¹ Published in *Journal of Democracy* 15, 2 (2004), 165-69.

of the social sciences. Anticipating Castro's death as a fundamental turning point in Cuba's political and economic transformation, the present paper is interested in the dynamics of subsequent regime change. We can assume that, whatever other sources of legitimacy the Cuban regime may have, the end² of Cuba's charismatic revolutionary leader will quickly set regime changes in motion. While few social scientists can resist developing likely scenarios of the future, social science cannot predict the outcome of regime transformation. There are two cognitive reasons for this: any outcome is at the same time "overdetermined" – too many causal factors that are playing a role – and "underdetermined" – the process is open, i.e. contingent on the timing and sequence of future events. In contrast to explanatory theories, policy programs and political agendas very much require a "predictive" element since they attempt to reduce contingency, intervene in the process, and shape the future. In hindsight, we should be able to explain regime change more easily since the major events and outcomes will be known. However, the problem of overdetermination will not go away; it may even become more serious as more event knowledge becomes available. Policy programs and political agendas, on the other hand, may quickly become irrelevant if some of their basic assumptions about the future collapse.

It is not unusual in the social sciences to have a fairly good understanding of macro-structural processes, yet at the same time prediction of the future is so difficult because specific political and economic developments are triggered or driven by key events we cannot foresee. In the Cuban case in 2005, however, the situation seems to be partially reversed. Castro's death, the crucial event in question, is foreseeable even if we don't know the precise date. This will trigger a chain of other fundamental events, more or less unpredictable, yet embedded in a macrostructural context that is quite well understood. The unpredictability of future developments is therefore not primarily a result of our insufficient knowledge of contemporary Cuba, but of the genuine openness of the change processes following *the* event. It is possible to develop a range of scenarios reflecting different conceivable outcomes – from a relatively high degree of regime

² Fidel Castro's death would clearly be "the end," but his terminal incapacitation would probably also release the same forces for regime change.

continuity and gradual reform to peaceful regime change or violent regime collapse.³ But what is more important from a social science point of view is to identify some of the key mechanisms that will be at work, regardless of the transition's specific form or its eventual outcome. Curiously, in much of the literature on Cuba's transformation, two key mechanisms that will be examined in this analysis routinely receive little if any serious attention: the powerful role that the U.S. will play; and the role of nationalism in Cuba. This lack of attention, I believe, is a result of the fact that certain widely held political and normative assumptions preempt serious analysis: first, the role of the U.S. is widely considered benign (cf. Havel quotation above); and second, Cuban nationalism is seen as little more than an instrument of the Communist regime. The question here, however, is not to what extent those assumptions are normatively or politically defensible but about the actual change processes they hide.

Ever since the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe, Cubanologists have derived lessons from the transition processes applicable to Cuba. One lesson, the imminent collapse of the Castro regime, has been a standard prediction since 1990. Being historically falsified year after year, the prediction has had to be reformulated repeatedly. Even the most ardent opponents of the regime have now grudgingly accepted the watered down claim that the Castro regime will end only with the death of Fidel. There are two crucial differences between Cuba and Eastern Europe with respect to the key change mechanisms just mentioned – the U.S. role and Cuban nationalism – that are largely unrecognized.⁴ First, while the Soviet Union played a powerful and dominant role in Communist Eastern Europe throughout the post-World War II era, it was Gorbachev's voluntary reversal of that role that precipitated the regime collapses in the region in 1989. The Cuban situation is pretty much the opposite. Having been shut out of Cuba and shutting itself out for decades, Castro's demise will return the United States

³ Many studies of contemporary Cuba sketch out alternative scenarios of this kind (see e.g. Corrales 2005; Horowitz 2004; Dominguez 2003; Brundenius 2002). They are of course interesting and useful, but they tend to be less informative about the central mechanisms of change, which are indeterminate as to what outcomes they may be associated with. In this paper, the focus is on two of those key mechanisms which will be involved whatever the specific transition scenario may turn out to be.

⁴ In an earlier paper (Pickel 1998), I have drawn attention to the significance of Cuban nationalism in explaining the Castro regime's survival after the demise of the Soviet Union and the collapse of Eastern European communism. While I recognized the integral role of the U.S. in Cuban nationalism, I underestimated the direct role the U.S. would play in Cuba's transformation, especially in radical regime change.

to the kind of powerful and dominant position the Soviet Union gave up in Eastern Europe in the latter part of the 1980s. Second, the idea of liberating the nation from the yoke of Communist rule in Eastern Europe and “returning to Europe” was a major cause in regime collapse and provided a fundamental resource in the legitimation of post-Communist regimes and transition policies. Here too the Cuban situation is pretty much the opposite. The Castro regime was the liberator of the Cuban nation in 1959, and Cuban nationalism since has always been closely tied to Cuban socialism and anti-Americanism. The return to U.S. tutelage is not easily made compatible with the idea of national independence and does not seem to be quite as enticing a prospect for many Cubans as the return to Europe was for Poles or Hungarians.

The fall of communism in Eastern Europe was precipitated by Gorbachev’s historical decision to abandon the Brezhnev doctrine of limited sovereignty for fellow Communist states, the most fundamental military and political fact holding together the Soviet bloc and propping up its Communist one-party regimes. It was this unexpected and unpredictable policy change emerging during glasnost and perestroika that radically altered the dynamics in each of the Communist countries of the bloc in the late 1980s, culminating in regime collapse and a rapid transition to capitalism and liberal democracy. Everyone, not least the major actors themselves, were surprised by the unfolding of events during the Soviet bloc’s peaceful revolution. No one had contingency plans, and Western governments initially had no idea what their role should be.⁵ The story of free market advocates mostly from the United States trying to convince postcommunist leaders and populations of the virtues of Anglo-Saxon capitalism is well known (Bönker, Müller and Pickel 2002; Wedel 2001). Neoliberal ideology clearly was one of several fundamental conditions forming the global context for the political and economic transformation of postcommunist states. Other global conditions included the role of international financial institutions in the transition process, the disappearance of the Soviet Union, and perhaps most importantly, the possibility for a number of postcommunist states to join the European Union.

⁵ As Johnson (2004, 19-20) reminds us: “Totally mesmerized by academic ‘realist’ thought, . . . [the American leadership] missed one of the grandest developments of modern history and drew almost totally wrong conclusions from it. At one point after the Berlin Wall had come down, the U.S. ambassador to the Soviet Union actually suggested that the Soviets might have to intervene militarily in Eastern Europe to preserve the region’s ‘stability’.”

The key event in Cuba comparable to Gorbachev's foreign policy revolution will be Castro's physical demise. It will produce a sudden opening of the previously blocked road to regime change. In contrast to the Eastern European cases whose Communist order was generally accepted as permanent until they actually collapsed, Cuban regime change has always been considered a real possibility by its opponents ever since the 1959 revolution, and eagerly anticipated as imminent since the early 1990s in the wake of the collapse of Communism in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. When regime change finally does happen in Cuba, it will not come as a surprise to anyone. In diametrical contrast to the superpower withdrawal under Gorbachev's leadership, the United States is going to step up intervention in Cuba immediately. There is no European Union that a post-Castro Cuba could be looking forward to joining as a political equal. There is the huge North American market into which the Cuban economy will be reintegrated. Politically, the prospects for international integration are equally clear: the Cuban state will resume its historically subordinate position in the Western hemisphere of the American empire. Cuba itself has demonstrated in the last four decades that geography does not have to be destiny. However, at the same time the equally long-standing US embargo of the island has served as a constant reminder that what you can be nevertheless depends on where you are.

While it is impossible to know the domestic dynamics emerging after Castro, it is much easier to anticipate what the United States will do. Remember, in contrast to Gorbachev, who turned the Soviet Union into a regional non-actor, the United States under Bush or his successor will become deeply involved in the Cuban transition process. This is not idle speculation or unsupported conjecture but a matter of stated policy, as will be documented below. Clearly, Cuba's future will be determined in part by its own domestic dynamics, but the key change mechanism that will overshadow all others will be the U.S.-Cuba relationship, that is, the various forms of intervention that different parts of the American political power structure will undertake in promoting the establishment of a "free market democracy."⁶ Domestic developments in Cuba will be decisive in so far as they will facilitate or obstruct the transition according to Washington

⁶ This ideological phrase is an apt shorthand description of the "universal" model championed by the United States.

and Miami. In other words, Cuban dynamics will determine the forms of intervention chosen by the United States. It is unpredictable what outcomes this key mechanism is going to produce, as no doubt other crucial mechanisms will come into play at the same time. As argued earlier, the point of identifying key mechanisms is not prediction but a deeper understanding of how underlying social processes work.⁷

For this purpose, let us break down U.S.- Cuba relations into the major systems in which they take shape, from the global system to a variety of subsystems such as the Pentagon, the Cuban-American community in Miami, and independent “civil society” in Cuba. It is usually much easier to explain the workings of systems that are relatively stable than it is to explain systems undergoing rapid change. My assumption is that Cuba is likely to undergo further⁸ rapid and fundamental transformations in the next ten years. We can distinguish three kinds of systems that will be relevant in this transformation process:

1. relatively stable systems, including the global system, the regional system, and the U.S. as a national system, whose key mechanisms are quite well known;
2. rapidly changing systems I, primarily the U.S.-Cuba system, for which we know or can reasonably conjecture key mechanisms;
3. rapidly changing systems II, above all Cuba’s political and economic systems whose key change mechanisms we do not know, though of course there is room for informed conjecture.

Relatively Stable Systems

The systemic perspective employed here differs from a realist perspective. In the latter, the United States and Cuba appear as two distinct, unitary actors – sovereign states, albeit of vastly different power, in a world of states pursuing their “national interests.” Against all odds, the Cuban Communist regime has been able to maintain state sovereignty in the face of strong opposition from the United States, and even more astoundingly has survived for a decade and a half the loss of its former powerful ally and supporter, the

⁷ Karl Popper once compared the social sciences with meteorology: sciences dealing with volatile open systems which make reliable predictions difficult (Popper 1972).

⁸ The “earlier” fundamental transformations I refer to are not only the revolutionary changes after 1959, but also the deep social and economic changes in Cuba in the 1990s. See further on this below.

Soviet Union. From a realist viewpoint, regime survival has become increasingly difficult to explain since the demise of the Soviet Union eliminated any remaining international factors that could have accounted for the unlikely survival of a Communist country in the U.S. backyard. Regime change after the death of the revolutionary leader, however, will once again bring political reality in line with realist expectations. To be fair, in trying to explain relations between the world's most powerful state and one of its small neighbors, realist theory does not mislead us completely. In the absence of a formal structure or higher authority restraining the stronger, the weaker state will be subordinated, sooner or later. Of course, this is not a particularly deep insight. For a more systematic analysis of U.S.-Cuban relations that tells us how these processes of subordination work, we require a different framework.⁹ In the perspective presented here, U.S.-Cuban relations will be examined in the context of different systems in which they are played out: the global or world system, the regional or hemispheric system, the system made up of certain parts of the U.S. and Cuba (to be referred to as the U.S.-Cuba system and defined further below), and each country's domestic systems. All of these systems are relevant contexts for U.S.-Cuban relations¹⁰, and each of these systems affects them in a particular way. Let us see how.

World System

The most encompassing system for U.S.-Cuban relations is the global system. In contrast to the period from 1959 to 1992 when the cold war provided the setting for a bipolar system of opposing blocs, the post-cold war global system is a unipolar system with a single state dominating the rest in military, political, economic, and ideological dimensions. The Cuban regime has lost its former international supports with respect to all four power dimensions.¹¹ Even the remaining regimes ruled by Communist parties

⁹ The systemic framework employed here draws on the various alternatives to the realist approach in international relations, especially world systems theory, critical theory, and constructivism. See also Pickel 2006.

¹⁰ I use the phrase "U.S.-Cuban relations" in a general and vague sense to refer to a variety of state and society relationships between the two countries. The concept of "U.S.-Cuba system" will be defined more specifically below. In general, the social systems I speak about are overlapping and do not necessarily have sharp boundaries (see Pickel 2006 on systems and mechanisms based explanation).

¹¹ For a systematic analysis of the scope and limits of U.S. global dominance in each of these four spheres, see Mann 2003.

have openly embraced capitalist economic systems. Globally, therefore, Cuba appears like an anachronistic leftover from another historical epoch not unlike North Korea. In short, major mechanisms at the global level strongly work against the Cuban Communist regime and will remain parameters for its post-Castro transformation. Clearly, much more could be said about the world system, U.S. dominance, and Cuba's pariah status, none of which however would fundamentally alter how these global mechanisms work.

Regional System

A traditional system for Cuba since national independence has been the hemispheric system dominated by the United States. The U.S. helped to liberate Cuba from Spanish colonialism at the end of the nineteenth century, subsequently firmly integrating the country into its regional sphere of influence. Revolutionary Cuba since 1959 has played a singularly exceptional role in this regional system. In no other country of the region has the United States tolerated left-leaning governments for very long, intervening directly or through local parties to bring down such governments, which notably in most cases were the product of free elections or popular revolutions (Guatemala, Brazil, Chile, Nicaragua, Haiti), by supporting their opponents, in many cases repressive right-wing military regimes or militias (as in almost all of Latin America in the 1970s). Together with Mexico, which in the 1990s democratized and opened its economy, Cuba is the geographically closest neighbor of the U.S. and a potential candidate to join Canada, the U.S., and Mexico in the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). The rest of the hemisphere since the 1980s has been "structurally adjusted" to the requirements of international capitalism under the direction of U.S. dominated global financial institutions, and all Latin American countries are now committed to liberal democracy by holding regular free elections. The major exception in the regional system is Venezuela, where a democratically elected leftist leader has so far survived strong domestic and American opposition to his rule. While the United States is trying to establish a hemispheric free trade zone, Venezuela, Brazil and Argentina are resisting further integration by insisting on strengthening their own, separate regional trade organization (Mercosur). In short, key mechanisms in the regional system will put strong pressure on a post-Castro regime to structurally adjust itself to free market democracy, although

emerging counterforces in the region may help Cuba to counteract these mechanisms to some extent.

Rapidly Changing Systems I: The U.S. –Cuba System

In addition to belonging to a common global and regional system, U.S.-Cuban relations also form a specific transnational system of their own. In the traditionally asymmetrical relationship between the two countries, post-Castro Cuba will be an object of American action, whereas Cuba's transformation is unlikely to have a significant effect on the United States. In other words, all of Cuba's subsystems will be strongly affected by U.S. actors, but only a small number of U.S. actors will be significantly involved in U.S.-Cuban relations. Thus the overwhelming dominance, relative systemic stability and small number of actors on the U.S. side, on the one hand, and the dependence, high degree of post-Castro systemic instability, and large number of actors on the Cuban side, on the other. These are some of the fundamental characteristics of what I refer to as the transnational U.S.-Cuba system.¹²

The two societies have a long and varied history of relations with each other. While involved in the island's decolonization, the United States quickly established itself as a neocolonial power in Cuba after its formal independence. Castro's revolution in 1959 was above all a national revolution against a right-wing dictatorship supported by the U.S. In the face of powerful opposition from the U.S. government, private economic interests and the Cuban exile community in Miami, the 1959 national revolution quickly developed into a socialist revolution which qualified the new Cuban regime for military, political, economic and ideological support from the Soviet Union and its allies. A failed U.S. sponsored invasion of the island in 1961 and the brinkmanship of the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962 which brought the world close to a nuclear holocaust, integrated the Cuban regime into the relative security and stability of the cold war order. While the U.S. has maintained a comprehensive trade embargo and remained the regime's major political

¹² This conception of the U.S.-Cuba system as a transnational system differs from standard conceptions which, even if highly sophisticated (e.g. Brenner et al. 2002), focuses on the U.S. political system as the basic unit of analysis when examining U.S.-Cuba relations in terms of U.S. foreign policy and its determinants.

and ideological opponent, it has until recently not supported or threatened military invasion again (more on this below).

With few exceptions, U.S. economic interests have been prohibited from doing business with or in Cuba, and American citizens without Cuban relatives are generally not allowed to visit the island. (This is US policy, not Cuban policy.) There is a sizable Cuban exile community in the U.S., concentrated mostly in the Miami region, which has a significant influence on U.S. policy towards Cuba. Otherwise U.S. society shows little interest in the island. While the U.S. regime has cut most economic ties with the island, the Castro regime in turn has relatively successfully insulated the country from American political and cultural influences reaching Cuba via airwaves, print, or direct contacts. In any event, Cubans are very interested in the U.S., whether as an object of fear and nationalism or a symbol of individual freedom and opportunity.

Before looking at the most relevant parts of U.S. political structures for the U.S.-Cuba system, let us briefly examine economic and ideological systems in which the Cuban transformation will be played out. Some U.S. economic actors are clearly interested in open access to the Cuban economy. The embargo has excluded them with few exceptions from trade with and investment in Cuba, leaving the field to Canadian and European corporations. In addition, there are more specific economic interests on the part of those who were expropriated by the Castro regime. This includes some large American corporations such as the United Fruit Company, but above all members of the 1.3 million large Cuban-American community who owned significant property on the island. While clearly there are some purely economic interests which stand to gain from a liberalized Cuban economy, their relative importance fades in comparison with the ideological dynamics in the United States. This is well illustrated by the Cuban-American community where economic interests are closely bound up with ideological motives.

Most Cuban exiles have left the country because of the Castro regime, whether as propertied refugees after the revolution or political or economic refugees in the more recent past. Most of them can be expected to have a deep ideological commitment to seeing the Cuban Communist regime replaced. Not all are equally radical, but few can be expected to come to the defense of the regime – though some may find strongly

interventionist U.S. policy distasteful or counterproductive. The general ideological climate in the United States can be quickly summarized. The Cuban Communist regime was an arch enemy throughout the cold war, and has remained so after the collapse of Communism in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. Even on the more moderate, liberal side of U.S. ideology, few are willing to show sympathy for a regime that openly refuses to respect certain basic civil and political rights and to hold multiparty elections. In the heated post-9/11 atmosphere in which the United States divides the world into friends and foes, the Cuban regime – classified as a “state sponsor of terrorism” – firmly belongs to the group of pariah regimes. For the United States as the self-appointed global defender of freedom and democracy, Castro’s Cuba is not only an ideological affront to the American way of life but to the “free market democracies” of the region and the world at large. This is the ideological backdrop for American Cuba policy.

In contrast to Afghanistan and Iraq, where major military intervention took place without serious planning for the “nation-building” following regime overthrow, extensive plans for U.S. intervention in post-Castro Cuba have been made, and a special coordinating agency in the State Department was set up in July 2005. These plans do not mention military intervention as an option explicitly – its availability should be self-evident.¹³ Washington’s Cuba transition plan is far-reaching and detailed. There is little doubt that it will provide the administration’s blueprint for intervention after Castro’s death. Before looking more closely at this blueprint, it is necessary to discuss the foreign policy making process in the U.S. as a major part of the U.S. -Cuba system.

Major American Elements of the U.S.-Cuba System

As any student of American politics knows, the U.S. political system is internally highly fragmented. However, the same is not true of the American state as an international actor since World War II (Fisher 2000; Silverstein 1997). As the recent war in Iraq has forcefully demonstrated, foreign policy initiatives and especially decisions on military interventions are highly concentrated around the President, with representatives of the Pentagon playing an increasingly powerful and unaccountable role. Congress, on the

¹³ Cuba was recently added to the National Intelligence Council’s secret watchlist of 25 countries in which instability could require US intervention (Guy Dinmore, “‘The Day After’ Fidel Castro dies,” *Financial Times*, November 5, 2005).

other hand, is easily ideologically manipulated and overwhelmed in a policy area where its influence is relatively weak to begin with (Johnson 2004). Under George W. Bush, the president's power in foreign policy making has further grown, in particular his power "to act alone, even when in the midst of a dizzying array of political forces that constrain the White House" (Haney 2005, 290). As Patrick Haney has pointed out in his recent analysis of foreign policy making under Bush with respect to the anomalous case of Cuba policy:

[T]he policy process around U.S.-Cuba policy had largely escaped the firm grasp of the White House by the time President George W. Bush came to office. The range of actors involved in Cuba policy, and its center of gravity on the Hill rather than in the White House, had come to make the Cuba policy process look more like a domestic-policy issue than a foreign-policy one (Haney 2005, 293).

Perhaps the strongest manifestation of the president's limited powers was the 1996 Helms-Burton Act which, against then-President Clinton's preferences, turned the U.S. embargo of Cuba into law. Clinton was able to circumvent the full force of the law by "licensing" limited sales of food and medicine to Cuba. But his administration was not able to bring about a fundamental reevaluation, let alone reversal, of U.S. Cuba policy.

During elections, Cuba policy usually comes up in the context of securing majorities in the Florida districts with large Cuban-American populations. Hard-line anti-Castro Cuban Americans formed a significant support base for Bush's election in 2000 (and for his brother's election as governor of Florida in 2002). Not having satisfied these conservative interests during his first term as president, in the run-up to his reelection Bush formed the President's Commission for Assistance to a Free Cuba, which presented its report and recommendations in May 2004. In addition to being a detailed blueprint for post-Castro regime change (see below), the report included a number of immediate measures concerning stricter limits on visits and remittances from Cuban Americans to relatives on the island which Bush promptly imposed. As Haney (2005, 295) notes with respect to the Commission:

What was really more an interagency committee than a "commission" of experts was chaired by Secretary of State Colin Powell and Secretary of Housing and Urban Development, and Cuban American, Mel Martinez. The merging of politics and policy, and the effort by the White House to take control of policy and create a process that existed alongside yet largely separate from the dynamics with which we had become accustomed for Cuba policy, is striking.

It is thus the Bush Doctrine as put into action in Afghanistan and Iraq that provides the current model for U.S. policy in the U.S.-Cuba system. Foreign policy making is subordinated to the global war against terrorism as conceived by a small group of insiders around the President and a very limited group of advisers. While somewhat more enlightened advice on post-Castro policy is available even from conservative think tanks such as the Rand Corporation and other expert institutions¹⁴, it is unlikely to have any direct impact on the administration's policy making.¹⁵ Here the relevant guide is the Commission's report to be discussed in a moment. Looking at other actors in the U.S.-Cuba system, no critical opposition can be expected to emerge from the U.S. mass media which, though in principle and on occasion capable of reporting damaging revelations, are ideologically streamlined and "patriotic," deferring to and reinforcing the official ideology. Much the same holds for the potential influence of regional and international organizations on the U.S.-Cuba system where the United States has demonstrated time and again its willingness to ignore international opposition to its policies.

The overall picture emerging from this brief look at the U.S. political system shows that the central mechanism driving U.S. Cuba policy will be at the top-level executive, much like the entire "war against terror" is being masterminded by the White House and the Pentagon. This of course is not a surprising insight but simply a reminder of the basic structure of U.S. foreign policy making in the post-cold war age that will drive the Cuban transformation.¹⁶ Thus the key mechanism at work in the U.S. part of the U.S.-Cuba system is the decision making of a small executive group that has at its disposal the financial and military power of the United States. In contrast to other international interventions, U.S. Cuba "nation-building" policy after Castro has been well prepared.

The U.S. transition plan for Cuba after Castro

In July 2005, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice appointed Caleb McCarry to a newly created post in the State Department, that of "Cuba transition coordinator." Creation of

¹⁴ For Rand Corporation: Gonzalez and McCarthy 2004. See also the "Cuba Transition Project" at the University of Miami (<http://ctp.iccas.miami.edu/main.htm>)

¹⁵ On the very limited role of outside advisors in White House foreign policy making, see Lemann 2004.

¹⁶ For a broader analysis, see e.g. Johnson 2004; Mann 2003.

this position was one of the recommendations made in the May 2004 Report to the President by the Commission for Assistance to a Free Cuba (CAFC).¹⁷ CAFC is in fact not just a temporary commission of experts but a permanent coordinating body¹⁸ including the secretaries of Treasury, Commerce, Housing and Urban Development and Homeland Security, the President's National Security advisor, and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). Several things are striking about this body: first, its very establishment – as if Cuba was naturally under the authority of the U.S. administration; second, CAFC's membership, which brings together a host of U.S. government ministries and agencies; third, CAFC's scope of activity, which envisions getting involved in all areas of Cuba's public life; and fourth, the assumptions underlying the creation of a Cuba transition agency, above all the belief that another society will be moved from tyranny to freedom.

1. What from the perspective of international law must seem outrageous – that is, the self-appointed authority of the U.S over the affairs of a sovereign state – is unsurprising in terms of our conception of Cuba as part of a transnational U.S.-Cuba system discussed earlier. In global and hemispheric terms, Cuba is simply being normalized after almost five decades of exceptionalism.
2. In addition to the core departments of Treasury, Commerce, Housing and Urban Development and Homeland Security, the Cuba transition agency is set up to work closely with a host of other departments – Defense, Interior, Agriculture, Education, Health and Human Services, Labor, and Justice – and agencies – National Security Council, Office of National Drug Control Policy, Peace Corps, Social Security Administration, Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, Foreign Claims Settlement Commission, Export-Import Bank of the U.S., Overseas Private Investment Corporation, Small Business Administration, Army Corps of Engineers, Environmental Protection Agency, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, and the U.S. Coast Guard.
3. All of these departments and agencies were involved in drawing up the Cuba transition plan and are organized in five working groups: Working Group on

¹⁷ Available under <http://www.state.gov/p/wha/rt/cuba>.

¹⁸ Chaired by Secretary of State Rice, it met again on December 19, 2005.

Hastening Cuba's Transition, Working Group on Meeting Basic Human Needs in the Areas of Health, Education, Housing, and Human Services; Working Group on Establishing Democratic Institutions, Respect for Human Rights, Rule of Law, and National Justice and Reconciliation; Working Group on Establishing the Core Institutions of a Free Economy; and Working Group on Modernizing Infrastructure and Addressing Environmental Degradation. The transition plan, an almost 500-page document, provides detailed recommendations for what is to be done in all areas of Cuban political life, public administration and the economy – from holding free and fair elections and instituting a structural adjustment program for the economy to traffic and vehicle safety and drinking water management. In addition, the transition agency will try to incorporate in its coordination efforts a range of non-governmental organizations and actors – from the Cuban American community to various civil society actors.

4. The U.S. transition plan for Cuba is based on a number of assumptions. They include: The Cuban state has been in the hands of a totalitarian regime that upon the death of the tyrant¹⁹ can finally be dislodged. Cuban society has been helpless and impotent in the face of repression and propaganda. The Cuban economy has been shackled by a centrally planned system disallowing private enterprise, which has condemned Cubans to a low standard of living. Cuba's state institutions are incapable of providing basic governmental services. After Castro, the communist regime will try to stay in power, which means that radical regime change is necessary. The United States has the military, political, economic, and ideological power to bring about radical regime change. Regime change will clear the way for establishing a free market democracy under U.S. guidance. Given the presumed lack of legitimacy on the part of the current Cuban regime and the self-evident legitimacy of free-market democracy, there will be overwhelming popular support for regime change and radical transition. The

¹⁹ As Secretary of State Rice put it in her report on the December 19, 2005 meeting of the coordinating body: "The Commission was reconvened to identify additional measures to help Cubans hasten the day when they will be free from oppression and to develop a concise but flexible strategic plan that will help the Cuban people move rapidly toward free and fair democratic elections. This plan will not be an imposition but rather is a promise we will keep with the Cuban people to marshal our resources and expertise, and encourage our democratic allies *to be ready to support Cuba when the inevitable opportunity for genuine change arises*" (<http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2005/58283.htm>; emphasis added).

United States will receive international support from global and hemispheric organizations and from other governments for its transition efforts. Clearly, these are far-reaching assumptions, most of them highly problematic. What matters for the purposes of this paper is not whether and to what extent these assumptions are right or wrong, but the very fact that they will be held by a major group of actors in the post-Castro transformation. As such, they will determine in considerable part the coming changes in Cuba. It is this part of the U.S.-Cuba system that will remain relatively stable, and the working of which can therefore be anticipated. The same is not true for other parts of the U.S.-Cuba system, as the final section will argue.

Rapidly Changing Systems II: The Cuban Political Economy after Castro

The mechanisms that will drive changes in Cuba's domestic political economy are numerous, and it will be their particular combination and interaction with the two key change mechanisms identified in this paper that will shape the country's post-Castro political economy. Most important, the central political and economic actors of the future are not on the scene yet; they will either newly emerge or reconstitute themselves from existing institutions. Today's small number of dissidents and homegrown oppositional organizations in Cuba are unlikely to play a major role in the transition process. As we further know from the Eastern European experience, emergence and reconstitution of collective actors can take many different forms (see e.g. Stark and Bruzst 1998; Bönker et al. 2002). It therefore makes little sense at this time to divide Cubans and exile Cubans in political categories like conservative, reform, and radical, or to sketch scenarios from military rule to rapid democratization for the island's future. The meaning of such political categories will be defined and changed during the transition process which itself will not follow any simplistic scenarios. Instead, I have identified two key mechanisms that will play a major role in Cuba's transformation – U.S. intervention and Cuban nationalism. We could look at them as “catalytic mechanisms” (Pickel 2001) that will be centrally involved in all change processes. Having examined the U.S. role as key catalytic mechanism in earlier sections, let us look more closely at the significance of Cuban nationalism.

A second key catalytic mechanism in the U.S.-Cuba system after Castro will be what I call the nationalizing mechanism (Pickel 2003, 2004, 2006). Over its almost half-century long existence, the Communist regime has successfully fused nationalism and socialism (Pickel 1998). By posing a consistent threat to the Castro regime the U.S. has faithfully reinforced the connection between nation and regime. This basic mechanism will remain in place and will be a rich reservoir for mobilization and rhetoric after Castro's demise. Clearly, the U.S. administration, Cuban-Americans and their future allies on the island will attempt to define themselves as the defenders of democratic Cuba's true national interest. On the other hand, the Cuban Communist Party and the military, whether conservative or reformist, will claim to be the true defenders of the national revolution. The heavy handed intervention of the U.S. administration and its Cuban allies that will go into high gear "the day after" is likely to reinforce this longstanding image of the Cuban nation and its major external enemy. The political parties and organizations that will be supported by the U.S. will have to prove themselves in this context. Neither the U.S. nor Cuban-Americans will be welcomed as liberators by dancing crowds in the streets of Havana. At the same time, both will see themselves precisely in this light, exerting their considerable economic, political and military power as they try to guide the country's transition. However, any redefinition of the Cuban nation and its future would have to be achieved against the background of this sudden and extensive political and economic intervention by the U.S. and Cuban Americans. The absence of a significant degree of national unity, as the Eastern European experiences have shown, constitutes a major liability for political and economic transformation processes. The existence of relative national unity, on the other hand, constitutes a major resource for new regimes.

This much can be deduced from the mechanisms that are at work in 2005 without engaging in excessive speculation. Of course it does not put us in a position to predict how the transition process will actually unfold, but if the key mechanisms this paper has identified really are at work, we can infer what in all likelihood is not going to happen. Cuba will not have time to embark on domestically driven restructuring. The U.S. administration will not hesitate for a moment to massively intervene in Cuba the day after. Cuban nationalism will not decline. Cubans will not celebrate the demise of Castro

or redefine their nation's interest as rapid re-Americanization. While identifying this fundamental contradiction may be a meager result, this analysis differs from most other accounts of post-Castro transition misconstrue the U.S. role, on the one hand, and misunderstand Cuban nationalism, on the other – the two key change mechanisms that can be counted on in the future.

References

Bönker, F., K. Müller and A. Pickel, eds. 2002. *Postcommunist Transformation and the Social Sciences: Cross-Disciplinary Approaches*. Boulder, CO: Rowman and Littlefield, 2002.

Brenner, P., P.J. Haney and W. Vanderbush. 2002. "The confluence of domestic and international interests: U.S. policy toward Cuba, 1998-2001." *International Studies Perspectives* 3, 192-208.

Brundenius, Claes. 2002. "Whither the Cuban economy after recovery? The reform process, upgrading strategies and the question of transition." *Journal of Latin American Studies* 34, 2, 365-395.

Corrales, Javier. 2005. "Cuba after Fidel." *Current History* 104, 679, 69-76.

Dominguez, Jorge I. 2003. "Cuba: His Brother's Keeper." *Foreign Policy* 139, 34-35.

Fischer, Louis. 2000. *Congressional Abdication on War and Spending*. College Station, TX: Texas A&M Press.

Gonzalez, Edward and Kevin McCarthy. 2004. *Cuba After Castro. Legacies, Challenges and Impediments*. Santa Monica, CA: National Defense Research Institute.

Haney, Patrick J. 2005. "Foreign-Policy Advising: Models and Mysteries from the Bush Administration." *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 35, 2, 289-302.

Horowitz, Irving L. 2004. "Transition Scenarios for a Post-Castro Cuba: Military Outcomes or Civil Prospects?" *Human Rights Review* 6, 1, 27-34.

Johnson, Chalmers. 2004. *The Sorrows of Empire*. New York: Henry Holt.

Lemann, Nicholas. 2004. "Remember the Alamo: How George W. Bush reinvented himself." *The New Yorker*, October 18, 148-161.

- Mann, Michael. 2003. *Incoherent Empire*. London: Verso.
- Pickel, Andreas. 2006. forthcoming. *The Problem of Order in the Global Age: Systems and Mechanisms*. New York: Palgrave.
- Pickel, Andreas. 2004. "Homo nationis: The Psychosocial Infrastructure of the Nation-State Order," *Global Society* 18, 4, 324-346.
- Pickel, Andreas. 2003. "Explaining, and Explaining With, Economic Nationalism," *Nations and Nationalism* 9, 1, 105-127.
- Pickel, Andreas. 2001. "Between Social Science and Social Technology: Towards a Philosophical Foundation for Postcommunist Transformation Studies," *Philosophy of the Social Sciences* 31, 3, 459-487.
- Pickel, Andreas. 1998. "Is Cuba Different? Regime Stability, Social Change, and the Problem of Reform Strategy," *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 31, 1, 75-90.
- Popper, Karl. 1972. *Objective Knowledge*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Silverstein, Gordon. 1997. *Imbalance of Powers*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Stark, D. and L. Bruszt. 1998. *Postsocialist Pathways: Transforming Politics and Property in East Central Europe*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Wedel, Janine. 2001. *Collision and Collusion: The Strange Case of Western Aid to Eastern Europe*. 2nd ed. New York: Palgrave.