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978-0-521-68729-4 - Political Disaffection in Cuba's Revolution and Exodus

Silvia Pedraza

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1

False Hopes

¡El vino, de plátano; y si sale agrio, es nuestro vino!

Our wine is made from plantains; though it may be sour, it is our wine!

José Martí, "Nuestra América" (1891)

Cuba's Refugees: Manifold Migrations

The triumph of the Cuban revolution was one of the most popular political events of the 20th century. A social movement that the majority of the Cuban population initially applauded, and for which many risked their lives, the Cuban revolution had the capacity to capture the imagination of most of its citizens. Romantic in its execution, expressing a call for social justice, it had vast international support. Yet by the end of the century, 40 years later, a very sizable proportion of the Cuban population had left for other lands. Working both with U.S. and Cuban statistics, Antonio Aja-Díaz (2006) of the Center for Migration Studies at the University of Havana estimates that between 1959 and 2004 roughly 1,359,650 Cubans left Cuba for various countries and by different means. Because the Cuban population has grown from 5.8 million at the time of the 1953 census to 9.7 million at the 1981 census and 11.2 million in 2000 (Martínez-Fernández 2003a), that number probably represents from 12 to 15 percent of the Cuban population. Certainly, it is larger than the population of Cuba's second largest city – Santiago de Cuba – at present. This study captures the process of political disaffection – the disappointment and sense of betrayal – that led so many Cubans, many of them ardent supporters of the revolution initially, to leave their homeland for other lands.

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To date, analyses of the Cuban revolution have focused on the changing stages of the Cuban revolution, with only a slight mention of the exodus of Cubans as a consequence of the vast upheaval of revolutionary transformation in Cuba (e.g., Horowitz 1995; Eckstein 1994; Domínguez 1978a). At the same time, analyses of the Cuban migration have focused on the incorporation of Cuban immigrants in comparison to other immigrant groups in the United States, with only a slight mention of the changing stages of the Cuban revolution as the backdrop to the immigration (e.g., Portes and Bach 1985). By contrast, this research links the two – revolution and exodus – not only as cause and consequence but also as profoundly social and human processes that were not only political and economic but also cognitive and emotive.

In my earlier work on “Cuba's Refugees: Manifold Migrations” (1996), I traced the development of the Cuban community in the United States as the result of four major waves of migration and described them with data from the U.S. census and other surveys on the social and demographic characteristics of each of the major waves. The research reported here goes beyond this work to capture the processes of political disaffection of participants in this major drama. Through the use of the two major research strategies of ethnography – participant observation and interviews – I emphasize the contrasts among the four major waves of the exodus not only in their social characteristics but also in their attitudes as members of different political communities and political generations. As such, this research project expresses the dual intellectual heritage of sociology as a discipline that can best be described as a melding of the principles that guide science and the principles that guide the humanities.

First, I will set the historical stage by briefly describing the nature of the Cuban exodus that is now nearly half a century old and has brought more than a million Cuban immigrants to American soil, an exodus that harbors distinct waves of immigrants, alike only in their final rejection of Cuba. In contrast to economic immigrants, as Peter Rose emphasized, refugees are more “pushed” by the social and political processes in the society they leave than “pulled” by the attractiveness of the new (Rose 1981; Kunz 1981, 1973; Lee 1966). Each of the major waves of migration has been characterized by a very different social composition with respect to its social class, race, education, gender and family composition, and values – differences that resulted from the changing phases of the Cuban revolution. They render the Cuban community in the United States today an extremely heterogeneous one, comprising different “vintages,” depending on their social characteristics

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and their processes of political disaffection. E. F. Kunz (1973:137) called refugee groups that leave the country as “distinct in character, background, and avowed political faith” different “vintages” because they lived through different social processes of maturation. This research captures that dual variability – in social characteristics and political attitudes – across the four major waves of the Cuban exodus.

The First Wave: Cuba's Elite

Nelson Amaro and Alejandro Portes (1972) portrayed the different phases of the Cuban migration as changing over time with the exiles' principal motivation for their decision to leave. With the unfolding of the Cuban revolution, they argued, over the years “those who wait” gave way to “those who escape,” who were then followed by “those who search.” To update their analysis, I added “those who hope” and “those who despair” (Pedraza 1996a).

In the first wave (1959–62), those who left were Cuba's elite: executives and owners of firms, big merchants, sugar mill owners, cattlemen, representatives of foreign companies, and professionals (see Figure 1.1). They left Cuba when the revolution overturned the old social order through measures such as the nationalization of American industry and agrarian reform laws, as well as through the United States' severance of diplomatic and economic ties with Cuba. “Those who wait” characterized these first refugees that came imagining that exile would be temporary, waiting for American help to overthrow Cuba's new government. This first phase of the exodus began with the triumph of the revolution in 1959 and ended with the failure of the exiles' Bay of Pigs invasion in April 1961.

“Those who escape” constituted the second phase of the first wave, which was engulfed by the growing political turmoil. The Catholic Church, which denounced the revolution after supporting it, was silenced; the electoral system and civil society collapsed, particularly when the independent press and radio and television stations were closed. Removing any doubt, Castro announced that he had always been a Marxist-Leninist and would be so until the day he died. As a result, the exodus doubled. As Amaro and Portes noted, the inverse relationship between date of emigration and social class in Cuba began to show. Still largely a middle-class exodus, now it was more middle than upper: middle-class merchants and middle management, landlords, middle-level professionals, and a considerable number of skilled unionized workers who wanted to escape an intolerable new order.

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Figure 1.1 Cubans from the first wave of the exodus (1959–62) were often middle and upper middle class. Here a family is being resettled by the Cuban Refugee Program in Cleveland, Ohio, in 1962. (Historical Museum of Southern Florida/*Miami News*)

Table 1.1 gives both the 1990 and 2000 census estimates of the number of Cubans who came to the United States by their year of immigration. The 1990 census provides a better estimate for the early waves of migration, the 2000 census for the more recent waves. According to the 1990 census estimates, from 1960 to 1964 around 172,919 Cubans arrived. The first wave ended in October 1962, when, as a result of the Cuban Missile Crisis, all flights ceased.

The Second Wave: Cuba's Petite Bourgeoisie

In the fall of 1965 a chaotic flotilla exodus began, when hundreds of boats left from Miami for the Cuban port of Camarioca, where they picked up thousands of relatives to come to the United States. As a result, the U.S. and Cuban governments negotiated the orderly departure of Cubans through an air bridge, the *Vuelos de la Libertad*, which brought Cubans to the United States on daily freedom flights. They began in 1965 and lasted until

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[More information](#)**False Hopes**Table 1.1. *Cuban Immigrants in the United States by Year of Immigration, 1990 and 2000 U.S. Censuses*

| Year of Immigration ^a | Number of Cubans ^b | Percentage |
|----------------------------------|-------------------------------|------------|
| 2000 census | | |
| 1959–64 | 144,732 | 17.5 |
| 1965–74 | 247,726 | 29.9 |
| 1975–79 | 29,508 | 3.6 |
| 1980 | 94,095 | 11.3 |
| 1981–89 | 77,835 | 9.4 |
| 1990–93 | 60,244 | 7.3 |
| 1994–2000 | 174,437 | 21.0 |
| TOTAL | 828,577 | 100.0 |
| 1990 census | | |
| 1960–64 | 172,919 | 25.5 |
| 1965–74 | 284,642 | 42.9 |
| 1975–79 | 27,713 | 4.1 |
| 1980–81 | 120,605 | 17.8 |
| 1982–90 | 71,633 | 10.6 |
| TOTAL | 677,512 | 100.0 |

^aThe 1990 census precoded the variable on year of immigration; hence, this recoding is the best possible approximation of the waves of migration. The 2000 census left the variable on year of immigration as single years; hence, this recoding is more accurate for the waves of migration. For this reason, results for the two censuses are reported separately.

^bTables do not include Cubans born in the United States.

Source: U.S. 1990 and 2000 Censuses (1993; 2003), Public Use Micro-data Sample, 5 percent, unweighted.

1974, when the Cuban Refugee Program ended. Kunz (1973) distinguished between acute and anticipatory refugee movements. The joint policy of the U.S. and Cuban governments turned this initially acute refugee exodus into a coordinated and orderly anticipatory refugee movement. In the largest wave to date, according to the census estimates, around a quarter of a million Cubans immigrated to the United States (see Table 1.1).

According to Amaro and Portes (1972), “those who search” characterized this wave of migration, which was largely composed of the working class and *la petite bourgeoisie*: employees, craftsmen, small merchants, skilled and semiskilled workers. They left Cuba during some of the leanest and most idealistic years of the revolution. While the Cuban government

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| Year of Immigration | Number of Men (%) | Number of Women (%) | Total Number |
|---------------------|-------------------|---------------------|--------------|
| 1959–62 | 55,252 (46.1) | 64,670 (53.9) | 119,922 |
| 1963–64 | 12,009 (48.4) | 12,801 (51.6) | 24,810 |
| 1965–74 | 105,053 (42.4) | 142,673 (57.6) | 247,726 |
| 1975–79 | 15,047 (51.0) | 14,461 (49.0) | 29,508 |
| 1980 | 55,540 (59.0) | 38,555 (41.0) | 94,095 |
| 1981–89 | 38,689 (49.7) | 39,146 (50.3) | 77,835 |
| 1990–93 | 32,060 (53.2) | 28,184 (46.8) | 60,244 |
| 1994–2000 | 94,315 (54.1) | 80,122 (45.9) | 174,437 |

Source: U.S. 2000 Census (2003), Public Use Microdata Sample, 5 percent, unweighted.

made real efforts to spread access to a basic education and health care across all social classes and from city to countryside, the hemispheric trade embargo began to be felt, the exodus continued to be a “brain drain” of skilled professionals, and Cuba failed in its attempts to cease being a sugar monoculture. Thus, in Amaro and Portes’s judgment, the migration increasingly ceased to be a political act and became an economic act. Yet their distinction ignored that, while life in Cuba grew harsh for all, it turned bitter for those who had declared their intention to leave. When the migration began in the early 1960s, 31 percent of the arriving Cubans were professionals or managers; by 1970, only 12 percent were, while more than half the arrivals were blue-collar, service, or agricultural workers (Aguirre 1976: table 2). Table 1.2, based on the 2000 U.S. census, shows the gendered nature of the Cuban exodus. The early waves of the exodus were female-dominated, in part because refugees resemble those caught in a sinking ship – women and children first. Moreover, the second wave was an anticipatory refugee movement, governed by family reunification criteria and prior approval by both countries.

When the air bridge ended in 1974, refugees who had first lived in Spain arrived. Alejandro Portes, Juan Clark, and Robert Bach (1977) found that these émigrés represented Cuba’s “middling service sectors”: cooks, gardeners, domestics, street vendors, barbers, hairdressers, taxi drivers, small retail merchants. They left Cuba when Castro launched a new “revolutionary offensive” in Cuba, confiscating more than 55,000 small businesses that

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[More information](#)

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were privately owned (Mesa-Lago 1978). This policy “pushed” out the little entrepreneurs and their employees.

With the economic transition to socialism accomplished, in the 1970s the Cuban government cast the shape of the political system – an institutionalization during which Cuba took on the features of Eastern European communism (cf. Roca 1981). The old idealism and romanticism of the 1960s gave way to what Carmelo Mesa-Lago (1978) called pragmatism. In 1978 a dialogue took place between the Cuban government and representatives of the Cuban exiles. As a result of the Dialogue, the Cuban government agreed to release 3,600 political prisoners and to promote the reunification of families by allowing Cubans in the United States to visit their families.

The Third Wave: Cuba's Marielitos

Those visits were partly responsible for the third wave – the chaotic flotilla exodus from the harbor of Mariel in 1980 that brought close to 125,000 more Cubans to America. From Miami, Cubans sailed to bring their families to the United States. At times they succeeded, but sometimes they brought whomever angry officials put on the boats. Toward the end, this included Cuba's social undesirables, whom Castro called *escoria* (scum): those who were in prisons (whether they had committed real crimes or had only challenged the state), those who were mental patients, and those who were gay (cf. Montgomery 1981).

Robert Bach's (1981–82; Bach et al. 1980) studies showed that the most salient characteristic of the *Marielitos* was their youth: most were young men, single or without their families, characteristic of an acute refugee movement that results from a crisis (see Table 1.2). Moreover, there was a visibly higher proportion of blacks than earlier. Their occupations showed that most were from the mainstream of the Cuban economy, hardly scum. This exodus was overwhelmingly working class – close to 71 percent were blue-collar workers. In addition, a significant number of young intellectuals were also part of this wave (the most famous being Reinaldo Arenas). These writers recognized themselves as belonging to a political generation, which they themselves called *la generación del Mariel*. “Those who hope,” I said, might well characterize this wave (Pedraza 1996a).

Because of their youth, the *Marielitos* clearly constituted a different political generation, one comprising individuals of approximately the same

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age who share, in their coming of age, certain politically relevant experiences that shape their outlook (Mannheim 1952). The *Marielitos'* coming of age occurred long after the early revolutionary struggle that demanded enormous sacrifices but affirmed the loyalty of many. Roughly half of the Mariel immigrants came of age during the late 1960s or the 1970s, at a time when problems of freedom of expression became acute, especially for artists and intellectuals, and deviance, particularly homosexuality, was dealt with by prison sentence. The *Marielitos*, therefore, were significantly different from the early exiles. At the two poles of twenty years of exodus stood two "vintages" that at best could hardly comprehend one another and at worst might be hostile. Over time, the dramatic changes the Cuban revolution underwent interacted with the social characteristics of those affected to produce markedly different processes of political disaffection.

The Fourth Wave: Cuba's Balseros

As the 1980s came to a close, a new Cuban exodus began that has yet to cease. Cuba's economic crisis reached new depths when communism collapsed in the Soviet Union, on which Cuba had been enormously dependent. The impact of these losses was devastating, so that Castro himself declared this "a special period in a time of peace." Such a *período especial* was supposedly temporary but, coupled with the United States' tightening of the embargo, went on for many years. Abject need and hunger defined Cubans' lives.

Initially, this new Cuban exodus was mostly illegal (cf. Rodríguez-Chavez 1996; 1993). Cubans became so desperate they left on *balsas* (rafts, tires, makeshift vessels), risking death due to starvation, dehydration, drowning, or sharks (see Figure 1.2). From 1985 to 1993, close to 6,000 *balseros* managed to reach the United States safely; more than 34,000 left just in the summer of 1994 when, in the midst of a crisis, Castro suddenly instructed the Cuban Coast Guard to let them go. Due to the high risk entailed in this acute refugee movement, it was mostly male-dominated (Table 1.2). In the United States, an abrupt change in policy took place, as the new attorney general, Janet Reno, saw the *balseros* as illegal aliens trying to enter the United States. This contrasted sharply with the long-standing U.S. view that Cubans were victims of communism. Hence, the Cubans were now criminals who had to be stopped, rather than refugees deserving a welcome. The U.S. Coast Guard blocked their progress at sea and directed them to Guantanamo. The United States and Cuba signed a new Migration

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Figure 1.2 Cuba's refugees from the fourth major wave of the exodus (1989 to the present) often fled Cuba on makeshift *balsas*. Here *balseros* signal to a rescue plane in December 1993. Of their initial crew, five survived six days of cold December seas, but one died along the way. (*Miami Herald*/Hector Gabino)

Agreement, and Guantanamo's *balseros* were resettled throughout the United States "Those who despair," I stressed, constituted this last wave.

Political Disaffection

Using Luis Aguilar-León's (1972) 1958 analysis of the political generations in Cuban history, Maurice Zeitlin (1966) studied the support the various political generations in the working class gave the revolution. Zeitlin found the strongest support came from the generation of '53, their consciousness marked by the anti-Batista struggle, followed by the two generations that came of age during the anti-Machado struggle of the '30s, while the generation of '59 and the republican generation of the '40s gave the lowest support. Thus, the historical period in which individuals became adults was significant in the formation of their political identities. These studies emphasize the need to study refugees taking into account their different political generations, as my research has done.

To illustrate the contrasts to be developed in the following chapters, I will simply offer a few brief illustrations from the interviews I conducted that

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focus on the contrasting processes of political disaffection that Cubans from the various waves underwent. For this, I rely on interviews with Rafael Peláez (pseudonym), Serafín García-Menocal, Carlos Gómez, Rafael Saumell, and Olguita Gómez (pseudonym).

Among those who had reached adolescence and adulthood in the 1950s, when the Cuban revolution first succeeded in its uprising against the dictatorship of General Fulgencio Batista, one finds three very different types of exiles. The first group, the *Batistianos*, sided with Batista against the incipient revolution. The second group, on the contrary, believed in the revolution that was gathering force and lent it their support. Some fought for it, in the underground movement in the cities or in the armed struggle in the hills of Oriente and Las Villas. Among them, a distinct third group resulted from those who felt the social and democratic revolution they believed in and fought for had been betrayed by Fidel Castro. These exiles, like Rafael Peláez, bore arms twice – first against Batista and afterward against Castro in the mountains of the Escambray. They speak of “the revolution betrayed.”

As an adolescent, Rafael Peláez had fought side by side with Fidel Castro when he attacked the army barracks of *el Moncada* on July 26, 1953, triggering the revolution as an armed struggle. Rafael was also among those who chose the colors of the flag for the new revolutionary movement that began calling itself the 26th of July Movement – red and black, to symbolize blood and mourning. The Manifesto of the 26th of July Movement spoke of a social and democratic revolution and expressed a social populism that was long a part of Cuban history. Soon after the revolution triumphed in 1959, however, Rafael was horrified by the massive killings Castro ordered in a stadium, brutality that was reminiscent of a Roman circus, and he also realized, due to his very proximity to the revolutionary center, that Castro was handing the revolution over to the communists. “The hatred,” he said, “the killings. . . . That was not the revolution we fought for. The revolution we fought for was not red, but ‘green as the palm trees,’ as Fidel himself said in one of his speeches, and it was to take place through the democratic process.” When the armed struggle against Fidel’s treason ensued, Rafael joined the organization that was most to the left, the Movimiento Revolucionario del Pueblo (Revolutionary Movement of the People, MRP). He then took to the armed struggle in the hills of the Escambray Mountains. Caught speeding down Havana’s seaside *malecón*, with a carload of arms, Rafael spent 10 years in prison and 8 more in Cuba bearing the stigma of “former political prisoner” before arriving in the United