DOES CIVIL SOCIETY EXIST IN CUBA?

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Amphibians are proliferating in Cuba. We are not, however, referring to frogs or others of their species. Rather we mean individuals and groups who transcend, or perhaps more accurately transgress, the boundaries between the state and non-state sectors. Our argument is that to better understand the nature of civil society in Cuba and how it functions it is necessary to redefine its parameters. In short, the functions of civil society in Cuba, that is, imposing demands and accountability on the state are exercised largely by a society incorporated into mass organizations which contain within them sectors that generate somewhat alternative discourses to that of the state, as well as help modify public policies and programs. In addition, there are networks of individuals within the core state apparatus that consult regularly concerning state policies and programs with those who are fully or partially outside. These networks include some individuals who previously worked in the bureaucracy. Interestingly a fair number have ended up in the research centers and universities which are part of the state apparatus, but which allow for more divergence from the hegemonic ideology of the state. Hence, one finds "on the state payroll" scholars and other experts, together with filmmakers, painters, composers and others who produce alternative discourses to that of the state. In addition, there is a long tradition in Cuba of geographic, economic, familial, and ethnically based networks, some of which overlap, that increasingly serve to represent community interests. Then too, historically, Cubans have had a strong associational life through a wide variety of civic and religious mechanisms. Among the most pervasive networks in Cuba today are those based on religious beliefs as faith based communities have assumed assistential roles, as well as championed environmental and other causes. In addition, old and new NGOs, including the Masons and more recently the independent libraries

movement, are expanding their influence. Finally, political parties are reasserting themselves in Cuba, in part as a result of resources provided by the Christian Democratic, Social Democratic and Liberal Internationals. However, the most extensive networks appear to be those that are religiously based. While attendance at services continues to be relatively low, religions provide the most organized nationwide networks within civil society. Add to this the fact that recent surveys indicate that approximately 75-85% of all Cubans believe in the divine and religions have considerable potential to exercise influence.

The study of civil society within Cuba presents considerable challenges, for it falls outside the parameters of most of the existing paradigms. For example, the study of Cuba forces us to grapple with concepts that, notwithstanding sometimes serious disagreements among scholars, can be employed with more or less some consensus in mainstream cases. One such concept is civil society itself, which we broadly define as a complex network of individuals and groups through which people participate in community and polity. As such it includes not only civic associations and institutions, but also informal networks that are linked horizontally and, at times, vertically to political elites and the state, particularly in an effort to secure the public's interests. In the Cuban case such networks regularly transcend the boundaries of the state and non-state sectors.

If, however, one of the defining attributes of civil society is its clear-cut differentiation from the state, then the conclusion must be that civil society is very narrow in Cuba. But if one recognizes the degree to which associations in Cuba, including those initially organized by the government, but subsequently "semi-spun off," have carved out expanding autonomous spaces in which to operate in recent years, then it

is possible to analyze civil society on the island in a more complex fashion. For example, in Cuba the definition of civil society actors suggests more divergence than traditional categories allow for and includes not only autonomous non-state actors, but also sectors within state organized research centers together with heterodox groupings within mass organizations and a variety of networks that include elements within the state's bureaucracy. Indeed, networking among fully non-governmental organizations and those with some governmental connection has stimulated the broadening of civil society activity especially in recent years.

A critical question is how much space the Cuban government is willing to accord non-oppositional civil society that may not be mobilizing for regime change, but is increasingly critical of socioeconomic and political conditions. Furthermore, it is hard not only for experts, but also for the Cuban leadership, to disentangle oppositional, dissident, and non-oppositional sectors of Cuban civil society. Yet it is imperative to do so given that Cuba is clearly in the midst of a transition whose outcome is unclear. While networking among sectors is somewhat limited, there is a positive disposition among influential sectors such as intellectuals, artists, labor, and church leaders towards the fortification of civil society. As a result they are increasingly assuming roles as community organizers and leaders, providers of food and medicine to those in need, and molders of public opinion. That is, they are occupying more and more public space.

A close look at the associational sphere in Cuba reveals a high degree of diversity along a continuum that ranges from fully autonomous groups with or without government licenses through state initiated organizations that operate somewhat autonomously and beyond to government mass organizations that contain within them sectors that generate

counter discourses to those of the state. In terms of political attitudes and behavior the spectrum ranges from sharp opposition to the government and Cuban socialism through criticism of the Castro regime, but not necessarily of socialism, to dissidence within not only the state's mass organizations, but also within the government bureaucracy.

Cuban civil society, then, can be said to incorporate opponents of the present government, dissident groups that range along a reformist spectrum, together with critical and heterodox individuals within the state who participate in civil society networks. Given this level of articulation of alternative discourses to the state's, it is not surprising that a growing number of organizations have carved out a certain degree of autonomy from the government which allows them to function as a source of new ideas, debate, and citizen action. Conceptually speaking, these associations contribute to an expanding public sphere in Cuba, contrary to the expectation that the circulation of discourses is essentially determined from the commanding heights of the state.

Such elements have the potential to create spaces for debates over power, claims to authority and policy-making, and norms and practices in society. Of course, the level of civic engagement and debate in Cuba is limited when compared to some other societies, but it is crucial to recognize the existence of an expanding public sphere constituted by an increasing number of mini-spheres within the country and sustained by higher levels of voluntary associational activity. Some of the discourses that circulate in the public sphere concern models of socialism and economic reform, non-political descriptors which shape the identity of youth (particularly rap music and fashion), and the responsibilities of religious believers in a society that until the early 1990s was described in its constitution as a materialist atheist one.

Such a situation raises a critical question, that is, can the principles and norms that sustain a strong civil society be a basis for the incorporation of self-organized groups into a socialist system, thus making it more pluralistic and participatory? This is at the core of the exceptionality of the Cuban case for if a pluralistic civil society were deemed compatible with socialism, then a program of reforms could focus on expanding structures of participation in such a way that they would not be totally subsumed by centralized political or economic structures. Some analysts posit that Cuba could deepen the autonomy of mass organizations as a way of allowing civil society to help rebuild social and political consensus. Others question the realism of a pluralistic concept of civil society in a context where close to fifty years of governmental ideological hegemony has resulted in a fairly high degree of suspicion of ideological and political heterodoxy.

A second issue concerns the fact that the Cuban political class has generally restricted the debate about civil society and limited the broadening of the public sphere arguing that civil society could become a "fifth column" on behalf of the U.S., a particularly sensitive issue given the longstanding hostility between the two countries. A third issue results from the effects of globalization on Cuba, particularly the penetration of non-socialist norms and behaviors, including those transmitted by religious actors. Indeed one of the most notable developments in contemporary Cuba is the intensification of international exchanges between religious organizations at both the macro and micro levels. This has been stimulated by a variety of humanitarian efforts, as well as the natural impulse to build community with one's counterparts. It has resulted in more discussion of the need for religions to formally undertake a role in promoting reconciliation, including developing a theology of reconciliation, among Cubans on the

island and with Cubans abroad. Such a development could help increase the likelihood of a consensual civil society agenda.

Given that religions in Cuba are increasingly playing an intermediary role (both formally and informally) between state and society in meeting the latter's basic needs, can religious actors gradually assume a mediating role in the current transition? Does increasing governmental and societal dependence on religious actors, national and international, provide a real opportunity for religions to influence the direction of society? The indications to date are that the government would resist such a possibility, but there is no guarantee that it will continue to be able to do so. To what degree, then, will religious actors be able to take advantage of the situation? Furthermore, given the broad spectrum of opinions within the religious sector over the nature of the transition and the extent of the restructuring to be undertaken, would there be a consensus that goes much beyond the need for change? And to what degree will a civil society with strong strains of secularism be willing to accept a substantial leadership role by religions even if the latter have the most extensive networks? In short, what is the disposition of Cuban citizens to accept the leadership of religions in building the Cuban society of the future?

While there has been some discussion of goals and agendas within a revitalizing civil society, the proposals circulated to date tend to be quite schematic. The topic has been explored in various sectors and to a degree in secular and religious publications, conferences, and within informal networks, but again without any strong indication that there is a consensus about what form the Cuban polity, economy, and society might take in the future. This reflects the degree to which Cuban civil society is somewhat adrift conceptually. For their part, religious actors have not yet offered specific proposals nor

succeeded in stimulating a discussion that could result in greater consensus in this realm. In short, although Cuba has a strong history of associational activity, with deep historical roots and a society permeated with religious belief, these historical legacies have not succeeded in mobilizing civil society. The state continues to maintain considerable political hegemony in the face of a variety of counter discourses that thus far have had limited impact over society in general, in large measure given historical cleavages and sectoralism that have been exacerbated by tensions among Cubans within and without the island. As a result, while Cubans have a history of strong associationalism, together with a tradition of religious beliefs informing civil society, neither appears to have sufficient strength to guarantee that a religiously informed civil society could determine the outcome of the transition that is currently underway in Cuba.