

Flight, Dilution, and Solidarity: Cubans in Venezuela

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**Paper prepared for The Cuban Diaspora in the World: A Symposium
Presented by the Cuban Research Institute, Florida International University
Miami, Florida, Thursday March 28, 2012**

First, I want to thank the staff of the Cuban Research Institute for making arrangements to get us all here. Things couldn't have been any smoother. And, I sincerely thank Jorge Duany for the invitation and for having the foresight to organize the first symposium acknowledging the simultaneous diversity and interrelatedness among Cuban diaspora locations and the island. Venezuela is certainly a key location and an example of that diversity.

Nothing demonstrates the deep historical and emotional connection better than an anecdote attributed to Venezuelan novelist, poet, humorist and publisher, Miguel Otero Silva (1908-1985), who said that when The Cuban dictator Gerardo Machado fell in 1933 he used up half the joy he'd been saving for when the Venezuelan tyrant Juan Vicente Gomez would eventually die in 1935¹. The politics of each place has had more than an echo in the other. The two peoples share a real, continuing lived experience of struggle to establish a national political identity with protagonists from each country participating in the other.

Between 1959 and 1980 Cubans who were unable to consolidate democracy at home could try again in Venezuela. Three waves of Cubans entered Venezuela under these terms. A fourth group came through diverse paths between 1990 and 1999, fleeing the economic chaos of the Special Period only to encounter Venezuela's growing economic problems, escalating crime and, for the first time, an anti-immigrant sentiment. Initial needs of all four of these waves were met by direct, organized mutual aid from a self-appointed group within the Cuban community that offered temporary housing, job placement and other needed services to each wave of newcomers².

Beginning in 2000, a rotating fifth wave that has grown to include more than 40,000 Cuban internationalists, who serve as medical personnel and in other advisory roles, has produced a new type of Cuban community^{3,4}. Many of these temporary workers were born during the Special Period and knew only deteriorated conditions and economic scarcity in Cuba. They go to Venezuela on 2-3 year renewable work contracts. This temporary transnational community has an opportunity to help construct XXI century socialism in Venezuela while, ironically, amassing sufficient capital through work bonuses to advance their material situation upon return home – contributing to the growing class differentials in Cuba⁵. Potentially, these temporary workers could also capitalize small businesses upon their return, while simultaneously shoring up Cuban socialism at a macro-economic level through the excess payments to the Cuban state generated by their international service⁶.

Before discussing the current situation I want to briefly trace common elements that distinguished the Cuban –Venezuelan community within the larger Cuban diaspora during the first four waves.

First, unlike the Cuban community in Miami, persons of Cuban descent were well established in the Venezuelan community prior to 1959. Although some Cuban businesspeople eventually became involved in politics they identified first as entrepreneurs rather than politicians. Families such as that of

Diego Cisneros, to give but one example, came to Venezuela in the late 1920s and succeeded in building a major conglomerate that could offer immediate employment in diverse fields to new arrivals.

Although they shared an inability to continue living in Cuba, the first two waves in Venezuela (Wealthy asylees in 1959-60 and professionals and skilled workers in 1961-1967) were not of one predominant political view. What the first and second waves of post-revolutionary arrivals had in common was that they selected Venezuela because business opportunities were coupled with relatively speedy reciprocal validation of credentials; an open immigration policy that was detached from cold war politics (related instead to Venezuela's chronic need for population) and therefore set up to facilitate rather than limit or question entry; a common culture and language and sense of being valued which made relocation less traumatic than in the United States. Cubans from the first three waves talk of "diluyendo" in Venezuela - dissolving in Venezuela even as they maintained ties with each other through institutions such as the Parroquia de Nuestra Señora de la Caridad del Cobre in Caracas⁷ or the Club Cuba in Valencia⁸. The Venezuelan community was not without terrorist elements as demonstrated by the bombing of a Cuban jet in 1976 but, unlike Miami, it was a place where diversity was respected and political loyalty was not the first criterion in making judgments.

The third wave, known as the "arrival of the political prisoners" demonstrated the relative political maturity of the Venezuelan community. In 1977-78 the community held public meetings to discuss a Cuban government offer of dialogue and release of political prisoners. Despite differing opinions on whether to meet with the Cuban government, the majority favored dialogue as a means to secure the release of thousands of prisoners and their vote was respected⁹. Mutual aid continued both to the newly released prisoners (many of whom had been 26th of July members) and to those who arrived at the same time as part of events leading to the Mariel exodus. In Miami the same issues lacked democratic process, produced violent differences and resulted in many sectors of the Miami community falling away from the new arrivals.

By the 1990s formal programs of entry had ended and a scatter shot pattern replaced the image of a rising wave. People entered however they could. In 1998 I interviewed twenty one recent arrivals who were being assisted by the Cuban community in Valencia. They included, people who had crossed the border from Brazil or Colombia; rafters who had washed up in outer islands; people who purchased false papers in the Venezuelan embassy in Havana; participants in arranged marriages and a group that had just been released from the U.S. Naval Base at Guantánamo. The community in the 1990s also included the Ni-Ni (Ni del gobierno – Ni del exilio) whose passports allowed multiple returns to Cuba and the Gob-Gob (government to government exchanges that foreshadowed the massive influx of Cubans in the Post-Chavez era).

Each wave had an inner core of those who stayed and a wider outer circle of those who saved enough money to move on with most tending to seek opportunity in South Florida within 2-5 years of arrival in Venezuela. Those who left did so by choice rather than coercion. In all cases the community organized itself to assist the newcomers. The benefits that were provided in the U.S. largely through government programs and couched in cold war rhetoric were provided by the Cuban community in Venezuela at their own expense and couched in ethnic solidarity¹⁰⁻¹⁴. With the election of Hugo Chavez this 40 year pattern was disrupted.

Within the core community that remained, right-wing activist, Salvador Romani, described the main reaction to the left turn as a four stage process: preoccupation; alarm; fear and stampede¹⁵. The alarm was not unfounded as activists and media personalities of Cuban descent became the objects of denunciations and, in some cases, arrest or loss of employment following the public release of data on

those who signed the 2004 Presidential recall petition. For example, Romani's son spent years clearing himself of charges related to accusation that he was an intellectual author of the political assassination of Danilo Anderson, the youthful state prosecutor investigating the 2002 coup attempt¹⁶. The senior Romani joined the stampede of those who were leaving and now lives in Miami. The core community's leaders have, individually and as a group, been under attack by the community media organized by the government, with all and sundry accused of serving as agents of the CIA¹⁷.

Many of the Cuban-Venezuelan labor leaders affiliated with center-left factions of the Christian Democratic unions, who gained political leverage for human rights in Cuba through their union alliances have also died, retired or left the country and the properties owned by the union groups have been sold to the government as the unions reorganize in the Dominican Republic, Colombia and Panama. As Pedro Perez Castro, an official of the STC said, "We have seen this movie before. It is totalitarianism all over again and it's best to just move on if you can. If I were 20 years younger, I would go too¹⁸."

Some prominent second generation Cuban-Venezuelans, such as journalist Macky Arenas have chosen to dissolve into Venezuela in a new way - by taking a lower profile or practicing self-censorship. As television and radio stations were closed and some well-known Venezuelan critics such as Patricia Poleo and Vilma Petrash were forced into exile, Arenas gave up her high-profile political reporting and started a non-controversial show called "Biografias" which dramatizes politically inoffensive life histories of early civic and cultural figures¹⁹. The core community's human rights activists have also gone silent.

Not all segments of the core community have defined the situation as one requiring flight or silence, however. Cuban-Venezuelan journalist Fausto Masó is an ongoing critic who defined the Chavez government as,

"a charismatic and authoritarian regime that has popular support because it confronts people who have not been able to give an answer to the country, nor articulate anything, that is to say, this is a struggle between the Plaza Altamira and the Plaza of Catia. Who do you think is going to win? Where are there more votes, in Catia or Altamira?

In Cuba the people who were with Fidel gave their lives. They confronted the United States and suffered hard times. In Cuba you never saw Camilo Cienfuegos with three mistresses and two SUVs, nor Che with four houses on the beach and a private yacht. When you see this [in Venezuela], there's no danger of Communism. There's just a mountain of thieves replacing the previous thieves²⁰."

Maso remains a strong critic still living in Venezuela.

There is no disagreement however about the fundamental disruption of the core community's tradition of welcome and mutual aid to arriving groups of Cubans. The Cuban workers who have come to number 40,000 – outnumbering the core community of approximately 10,000 and forming a new Cuban community in Venezuela – are expressly forbidden from interacting with the pre-existing Cuban community or other government critics through Chapter 4 Article 8 h – 8i of their *Reglamento disciplinario para los trabajadores civiles cubanos que prestan servicios en el exterior como colaboradores* which states that, "It is forbidden to maintain relations of friendship or other links with Cuban citizens whether resident or not in the country where collaboration is provided, or nationals of the country or foreigners hostile or assuming positions contrary to the Cuban Revolution."²¹

Moreover, the Cubans are scattered, isolating them from each other as well as the preexisting Cuban community. Most are working/living in medical, literacy or sports missions in low income communities.

Although some in cities have been moved recently to hotels for reasons of public safety, most continue to be isolated from each other during their missions.

Nonetheless, these workers provide valuable health services daily to Venezuelans, most of whom have never had access to health care previously and as has been discussed by John Kirk, Julie Feinsilver and others, these communal services build a lasting soft power benefit for Cuba as well as continuing personal/professional friendships^{3,22}. Respect for Cuba's successful medical diplomacy is a main factor in garnering support for annual UN resolutions condemning the U.S. embargo and it will be an important factor in determining public support for aid to Cuba in a post-Chavez era.

But, what are the implications for this new community for the prospects for development in Cuba. Sarah Blue in her recent article on internationalist remittances has theorized that the Cuban internationalists may represent development from below if they invest remittances sent from Venezuela and savings realized as part of their contract with the Cuban government in small business ventures. A felicitous coincidence of official economic opening would combine with the windfall received by professional workers thus boosting the capitalization of small business. Better still, since many of the internationalists are drawn from segments of the Cuban population who are without support from relatives in the U.S. or Europe – particularly those of African descent - Venezuelan earnings could provide development opportunities for the least advantaged and their surrounding communities⁶.

According to Blue, most internationalists in Venezuela are under two or three year contracts for missions that, until January 2012, provide that

- Their normal salary in Cuba continued to be paid to their relatives (about \$20 per month)
- An additional \$50 per month went to a designated relative as “family aid.” This amount rises to \$100 per month in the second year.
- A minimum wage salary was paid while in Venezuela. Some workers were able to send remittance to Cuba from this salary or to save while others have complained that it is inadequate to support even a subsistence life style in Venezuela particularly when the Cubans are housed with desperately poor families or communities who look to the Cubans for financial help.
- An escrow account in Cuba where \$200 (rising to 350 by the third year) is set aside monthly by the Cuban government. Internationalists had access to a portion of these funds during their twice per year paid return vacations and to the full balance when they successfully completed their missions.
- Finally, a sum equal to 20% of all earnings was paid as a bonus upon return.
- Additionally, until 2009, duty free packages could be sent from the host country in large containers at no shipping cost (3 per year and 5 at the end of the mission), thus allowing workers to purchase home appliances and other durable goods and ship them to Cuba.

Starting in January 2012 the family aid payments were eliminated but direct payment to the worker was increased and escrow payments were reduced by about half while final bonuses were eliminated. Although the benefits of foreign work are still superior to Cuban earnings, the reductions compromise development in that they basically eliminate savings. Some have speculated that the changes reflect Cuban adjustments in anticipation of possible reductions in aid from a post-Chavez Venezuela. However, given that the Cuban government is currently receiving over \$130, 000 per worker/year, and workers under the most generous conditions were receiving about \$14,000 per year, it seems a foolish economy when considered against the development potential²³. Also, Blue's interviews disprove the investment

theory as all but two respondents of eighteen surveyed, spent their savings not on business investment but on material goods and day-to-day supplement of income upon return to Cuba.

For some Cuban internationalists, Venezuela continued to be simply a stop on the way to the U.S. Despite the vigilance of Cuban officials, about 2% of internationalists leave their posts and seek entry to the U.S. under the Cuban Medical Professionals' Parole Program jointly sponsored by the Departments of State and Homeland Security.²⁴ Under the program, Cuban health professionals are given expedited entry to the U.S. though they are not given assistance in revalidation of their credentials and the Cuban government has established regulations prohibiting verification of credentials of those who take advantage of the program. Thirty six of these workers cast their experience in Venezuela as forced labor/ human trafficking/modern slavery and filed suit for 15 million dollars each against Cuba, Venezuela and the state-run oil company Petr6leos de Venezuela (PDVSA) for alleged conspiracy to force them to work in conditions of "modern slavery" in order to pay off the Cuban debt to PDVSA. The suit was subsequently dismissed at both the district and circuit court levels.

At the macro level the big question is whether the oil for health services swap will continue. This will depend first of all on election outcome. If Maduro wins, as most polls predict, he will need to continue his commitment to the development of a public health system that serves his constituency. Whether he will continue the shipment of oil and other petroleum products at its present rate of over 100,000 barrels per day is another question. It seems likely that economic necessity will force a reduction in volume. Capriles, on the other hand, has made the termination of oil aid to Cuba one of the four key planks of his campaign platform.

In closing, I would like to point out that the literature on the attitudes and outcomes of the temporary worker community in Venezuela is limited by lack of reliable survey data. Most of what is known comes from small and rather skewed opportunity samples and while they give us good anecdotal description I look forward to the day when scholars in Cuba and outside can cooperate in wider surveys with better samples in multiple locations.

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