On Cuban Political Exceptionalism

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Nuffield College Politics Working Paper 2003-W1
University of Oxford

Revised Final Draft (Post-ILAS Version)

* Paper presented to the conference on Cuba's Integration Into the International System at the Pell Center for International Relations and Public Policy, March 23rd 2002.

I Introduction

Comparative politics is a curious field of academic endeavour. It is about detecting commonalities between political processes that are in many of the most fundamental respects unique. All political histories are exceptional, but the political history of Cuba is so to an exceptional degree, as will be demonstrated below. This paper seeks to place current discussions about the foreseeable demise of the Castro regime, and alternative post-Castro scenarios, in a broader historical and comparative perspective. The object of this exercise is simply to explore the implications of Cubans political exceptionalism, not to essentialize it. Such an exploration is intended to broaden the repertoire of resources for thinking about possible post-Castro and even post-communist transition scenarios. It should not be expected to generate any highly predictive conclusions, since an exceptionalist tradition can develop in multiple directions.

Section two reviews the major features of Cuban political history that deviate from what one might call a standard pattern, and that therefore support the notion of Cuban exceptionalism. The main purpose of this section is simply to remind the reader of this recurring characteristic. But it is also necessary to make some brief and tentative comments about possible explanations for it.

The third section reflects on the consequences of persistently following a deviant path. If theories of cumulative causation or path dependence have any merit then the way we model future choices and outcomes for Cuba after Castro ought to take into account the island's deeply entrenched record of political exceptionalism. Standard models of regime transition and democratization that work reasonably well across a broad range of "normal" cases may not offer adequate guidance when extended to truly deviant cases.

Section four turns from the past to the present. Whatever the weight of Cuban history, in the early years of the twenty-first century the island must also contend with overwhelmingly strong international pressures to adjust, conform, or in the language of this conference "integrate", into a system whose requirements are radically at variance with many aspects of the currently existing and strongly embedded Castro regime. Standard power political and realist approaches to international relations would predict that however deviant Cuban politics may have been in the past, the objective realities are now stacked so heavily against disconformity with external norms that the past (i.e. the "revolution") is bound to be more or less

comprehensively dismantled or even liquidated. If so, an eventual fairly standard (non-exceptional) outcome can therefore be foreseen, and the only discussion becomes how to manage the intervening process of adjustment or transformation. This seems to be the intellectual framework within which most academic analyses of Cuban politics (including this conference) is now located, and it may soon be vindicated by experience. However, this framework glosses over the evidence of Cuban exceptionalism reviewed in this paper, and disregards its cumulative consequences. Moreover, this framework has so far failed to predict the course of Cuban politics since the break-up of the Soviet bloc a decade ago. In an attempt to fill these lacunae the fourth section of this paper contrasts realist and "constructivist" approaches to the analysis of Cuba's current political impasse. Section five then probes the limits of the "exceptionalist" interpretation, selecting the liberal constitutionalism of Benjamin Constant as an appropriately "universalist" alternative perspective.

The paper concludes with a reminder that Cuba's future possibilities remain highly contested and quite open. It comments on the Varela project, in the light of a theoretical reflection on the scope and limits to what might, on the most generous of interpretations, be classified as a "democratic" outcome in Cuba. If we are to prepare for unanticipated developments and political surprises we need to keep in mind not only a standard framework of analysis but also alternative possible angles of vision on the dynamics of Cuban politics and on interactions between the island and the world.

II Cuban Politics: How Exceptional? And Why?[1]

When Napoleon exported his version of politics to the Iberian peninsular, one eventual result was to deal a deathblow to European colonial rule in the western hemisphere. The only exceptions were Cuba and Puerto Rico. When Cuba did

[1] A paper of this type contains many historical assertions that are not developed in detail, and have therefore not been sourced. My interpretations are solely my own responsibility but draw on the three relevant chapters of the Cambridge History of Latin America and their accompanying bibliographies (by Luis Aguilar, Louis A. Perez Jnr. And Jorge Dominguez).

eventually break away from Spanish rule and became an independent republic it was again out of step. This was a time when the rest of the Latin American republics were nearing their first centenary celebrations, and when in most of Africa and Asia imperial rule was expanding, not contracting. Again the course of Cuban politics were desynchronised from broader political trends. Indeed even among the territories detached from Spain as a result of the war of 1898 Cuba was an exception. Puerto Rico and the Philippines were governed as US colonial possessions. Only Cuba secured independent statehood. The nature of Cuban independence was also *sui generis*. Of all the decolonizations of the past century no other independent state was subjected to anything as intrusive as the Platt Amendment, with its externally imposed constitutional provisions, (including acknowledging the right of a foreign state to land troops and assume governing powers under specified conditions to be determined from outside).[2] Cuba's formally sovereign political system was also subject to institutionalised external supervision every time the US Congress reallocated its sugar import quotas. In the long comparative history of military coups in the twentieth century, there are many cases of Generals seizing power, and not a few examples when the leadership came from the ranks of Colonels. But the Cuban Sergeants Revolt of 1933, which led to the twenty-five years of the Batistato, involved a fracture within the military hierarchy at a lower level than has been known anywhere else (setting aside cases where the hierarchy itself disintegration and the institution breaks up). Similarly, the frustrated revolution of 1933 was itself an almost unparalleled reaction to the Great Depression (the only more or less comparable experience being the Chilean socialist republic of the previous year). Then again, it hard to find examples of multi-party democracy as violent and corrupt as the system that prevailed in Cuba, between 1940 and 1952 (with the possible exception of the Philippines before Marcos). What all this indicates is that Cuban political exceptionalism has deep historical roots.

Cuban political exceptionalism was a highly developed characteristic long before Fidel Castro's apparently crackpot decision to attack the Moncada Barracks, and then later to land an expeditionary force of insurgents brought from Mexico in the *Granma*. These unpromising beginnings gave rise to the extraordinary and again unprecedented[3] spectacle of a fully equipped military regime allowing itself to be

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2 Perhaps the closest analogy was with Britain's occupation of Egypt between 1882 and the outright declaration of a Protectorate in 1914. This comparison seems to have occurred to Secretary of State Root, although the contrasts are also evident.

3 Somoza in 1979 is the closest analogy and that was very influenced by the Cuban precedent.

defeated first politically and then even militarily in the course of a short and not very bloody guerrilla war. By the time Castro had consolidated his hold on the government in Havana and then reassigned his country from the US-led “Free World” to the Soviet bloc, the apparently impossible had become daily fare in Cuban politics. However political logic might operate in the rest of the world, a quite different set of possibilities and imperatives applied on this island. This is certainly not to imply that no constraints applied. Indeed the Castro regime soon learnt some harsh lessons about world politics and the laws of economics that it had initially believed it could disregard. It is merely to underscore that the course of Cuban politics remained deviant from all standard patterns.

Cuba is the only communist-ruled country where the local communist party did not play a leading role in the seizure of power, where the Soviet Union was not expecting, let alone directing, the takeover, and where the ruling party was not even formally constituted until over a decade after the revolution. It is the only communist-ruled country where the “class war” was waged principally by means of the wholesale expulsion of the propertied class to a neighbouring country (leaving that class substantially intact, but external). It is the only constituent part of the Soviet bloc still to remain under the same leadership and system of government as before the fall of the Berlin Wall. It is the only communist-ruled country left apart from North Korea where private ownership and the market economy remain essentially suppressed by the authorities. It is the only country in the world to have been directly and continuously ruled by the same individual for over forty-three years. It is the only country in the western hemisphere denied membership of the Summit of the Americas process. It is the only country ever to have succeeded in isolating the USA in a series of international votes (strictly speaking the roll-call was the USA, Israel and the Marshall Islands versus the world in a vote of over extra-territoriality).

No doubt one could extend and refine this catalogue of respects in which Cuban politics have been exceptional, but this list will suffice for our purposes. The obvious questions that then arise are a) why was Cuba so different from everywhere else for so long, and b) does it make sense to suppose that after all this exceptionalism, Cuba can readily revert to “normal” patterns of politics any time soon? This paper is more concerned with the second question than with the first, but some consideration of the long run sources of Cuban exceptionalism are necessary before we can focus on the present and on future prospects.

Although geography is not sufficient to determine destiny, Cuba's geopolitical predicament provides a critical insight into the structural characteristics promoting and sustaining this extraordinary record of political exceptionalism. As the largest island in the Caribbean, and the seat of one of the great port and administrative cities of the world, Cuba was the essential naval link between Spain and the rest of her transatlantic empire. It was the most valuable and strategic location south of the US mainland as the North American Continent filled up with settlers, and as the US south struggled to counteract the supremacy of the Yankee North. When the USA acquired a major navy the possession (or failing that the neutralisation) of Cuba became a *sine qua non* for Washington's projection of seapower in more distant locations. During the Cold War the possession of secure military facilities behind the US security perimeter was such an asset to Moscow that it was worth extraordinary subsidies. Even today one of the Cuban regime's most valuable bargaining counters remains its location. It can protect the US from instability and drug trafficking, or it can threaten to unleash further waves of mass immigration. It can attract tourists from less equable climes to counteract the economic sanctions imposed by its most immediate neighbour. These geographical advantages (and the associated burdens of proximity to the USA) confer any Cuban government an opportunity structure different from that available to any other nation in the world. Many of the exceptional developments described earlier in this section can be at least partially derived from this distinctive geopolitical profile.

Another clue to Cuban exceptionalism concerns the machinery of social control available to rulers on the island. Although some attempts have been made to establish more than one centre of political activity within this single territory, Cuba is not like Hispanola, which can support both Haiti and the Dominican Republic. It is not like Colombia, with its intermontane basins and its *republiquetas*. Havana has long dominated its hinterland, almost all of which is readily accessible from a coastline. There has almost always been one hierarchical authority that exercises social control throughout the entire territory, due to the island's good internal and coastal communications and the natural boundaries of its insularity. Ever since the days of slavery and the traumas of the Haitian slave revolt, the rulers of Cuba have taken care to ensure that order was maintained uniformly throughout this large and fertile island. The predominance of the capital city, and the sophistication of the resulting administrative structure made any bid for power an all or nothing game. This helps to explain how independence could be deferred so long, and why the Platt

amendment did not generate the pluralist equilibrium possibly imagined by the more thoughtful of its authors. It also helps explain why in 1933 the Cuban armed forces fractured horizontally (ncos versus their seniors) rather than vertically. It makes the assault on the Moncada barracks more rational than most historians have appreciated, and it helps to explain why if Batista could not crush a few rebels in the Sierra Maestra his whole edifice of control could so quickly and completely unravel. It tells us why Kennedy's failure at the Bay of Pigs laid the foundations for such a durable and indigestible communist regime in America's "back yard", and it helps explain that regime's ability to block organised resistance even after the collapse or overthrow of all other communist regimes in the Soviet bloc.

Putting these two structural characteristics together it may be possible to generate partial explanations for other features of Cuban political exceptionalism as well. The combination of geopolitical predicament and unified social control could help to explain why the timing of critical developments in Cuban politics was so out of sync with the timing of similar processes everywhere else. This in turn could help to explain a pattern of powerful but frustrated political initiatives (notably the failed war for full independence, the frustrated revolution of 1933, and the failed experiment in competitive party politics in the 1940s), each of which is likely to have helped pave the wave for Castro's revolution, and to have eroded likely potential sources of resistance to it. The broad pattern seems to be that while internal conditions may have favoured comprehensive political reorganisation, geopolitical constraints kept blocking standard political outcomes. The interplay between these two logics generated a cycle of successive frustrations, each of which elicited non-standard projects and responses.

As already mentioned this paper does not attempt to provide a fully worked out explanation for Cuba's political exceptionalism. The two structural characteristics briefly summarised above are insufficient to account for all the distinctive features catalogued earlier in this section. They are both sketched rather than fully delineated. But they serve to confirm two points that are essential for the main argument presented here. Cuban exceptionalism preceded the 1959 revolution. And it would be rash to assume that its structural foundations are about to disappear just because the lifespan of Fidel Castro may soon be drawing to a close.

III Exceptionalism, Counter-factuals and Cumulative Causation

One of the key difficulties of historical explanation is how to specify the counter-factual alternatives to what actually happened. If we are to consider the "paths not taken" and historical might-have-beens that can provide a yardstick for evaluation actual historical outcomes we need well-specified counterfactuals. But while we may be able to identify quite clearly what actually happened, there is in principle an unlimited supply of possible alternatives that did not take place. One advantage of viewing Cuban political history within the exceptionalist framework is that it can help to bring order to this kind of analysis, because it can highlight certain standard outcomes that were typical elsewhere, and can thus focus attention on why Cuba was different, and on what consequences might follow from such a difference.

Thus, it is not arbitrary to compare what actually happened with the counter-factual hypothesis that Cuba might have attained her independence at the same time as all the other Spanish republics, or that Cuban communism might have collapsed when all other Soviet bloc regimes collapsed. Of course this kind of question always leaves much room for debate, but if there is a clear standard pattern then its implications can be laid out with a fair degree of detail and precision, and the main consequences of deviating from it can also be identified with some confidence.

Viewed from this perspective it becomes clear that each time Cuban politics deviated from the standard or expected pattern one consequence was to increase the likelihood that the following stage would also prove non-standard. If Cuba had become independent at the "normal" time it would not have experienced the Platt Amendment version of semi-sovereign constitutionalism. If Cuba had not experienced the Platt Amendment regime the Cuban armed forces would almost certainly not have fractured at the nco level, as they did in 1933. If the Sergeants Revolt had not taken that form then the twenty-five years of the Batistato would have been impossible, and some other perhaps more robust or even more legitimate form of domination would have been established. Without the Batistato it is hard to see how Castroism could have gathered the same strength, or could have prevailed with so little internal resistance. The extremely distinctive features of the Castro regime no doubt owe much to the personal trajectory and character of its leader, but they are also partially determined by these preceding considerations and by the many repeated national frustrations arising from prior US-Cuban interactions. The essential claim here is not that every link in the historical chain can only be understood in the terms just described, but rather that each link was exceptional in a way that can be specified by comparative analysis, and that cumulatively each of

these exceptional outcomes added to the probability of further deviations from a standard path, all clearing the way for what eventually become the Castro regime.

If “path dependence” has any explanatory value in the field of comparative politics, then the disconformity between Cuban and more typical sequences should lead us to expect cumulatively more divergent outcomes. But if this argument holds for the course of Cuban politics over the twentieth century it also carries implications about how well we should expect standard models to predict outcomes in the present and future as well.

One way of tracking these implications is by following up on the consequences of being a latecomer. Thus, Cuba was a latecomer to independence, which meant that by the time the Republic came into existence its creators already had knowledge of how the same process had turned out elsewhere. Not only were they constrained by the different context of independence after 1900 (as opposed to the 1820s), they were also guided in their strategic thinking by their understanding of the preceding processes. Similarly Cuba was a latecomer to communism. Not only did Cuban communism differ from its predecessors in that it was not an imposition following the advance of the Red Army. It also took a different form because the lessons of Stalinism were being digested by all communists after Khrushchev’s secret speech of 1956, and the differences between Russian and Chinese variants of communism were also known to the Cuban leadership, etc. Then again, since the Cuban regime did not collapse at the same time as the Soviet bloc, the leadership in Havana has had time to reflect on how transitions to post-communism can work, and what their consequences may be, and how to prepare for what to their predecessors was mostly an unanticipated shock. So now, if Cuba does eventually democratize, its transition path may not replicate that of other Latin American countries among other reasons because it will happen so much later, and that difference in timing will give rise to differences in understanding on the part of the key actors involved.

In summary, for reasons such as this, the logic of domestic politics suggests Cuban exceptionalism is more likely to reproduce itself (through eccentric path dependency, cumulative causation, and the consequences of timing differences) than to be dissolved. It would probably require some massive imposition from without for such political deviance might be eliminated. And in that event the prevailing logic would be that of US hegemony, rather than some “end of history” liberal convergence.

IV Ways Out of Cuba's Present Impasse: Realist v. Constructivist Perspectives

This section of the paper characterises the current political situation in Cuba as an impasse between a domestically based commitment not to liquidate the legacy of the Revolution, and an externally driven imperative to "integrate" Cuba into an international system that is fundamentally incompatible with the preservation of most of that legacy. The clash between these two forces has dominated the political scene for at least the past decade, and my interpretation is that, although there have been some interesting shifts of emphasis and partial attempts at accommodation, they have not resolved the underlying problem. Hence my characterisation of the present situation as an "impasse", and moreover as one that could easily continue well into the medium term future.

Before we can evaluate possible ways out of an impasse it is necessary to specify its nature. Experience suggests that in the short to medium term it quite likely that the existing balance of forces will remain stable. The Cuban regime may continue more or less on its current course, and the USA may maintain its unilateral sanctions without either extending their scope or securing major concessions from Havana.[4] This is what can be described as an impasse. To the extent that the conflict continues, but neither side budges, it could be argued that the deadlock suits both sides. More precisely, both sides may regard it as the lesser of evils, when compared to either yielding or acting more aggressively. However even when such an impasse persists for a long period of time it does not necessarily follow that the underlying equilibrium is truly stable. In addition to the contingent factors that could destabilise the situation (the death of Castro, the involvement of the USA in higher priority conflicts elsewhere, etc.) there is a more underlying source of tension. Even if both sides reluctantly conclude that the present deadlock is the lesser of evils, they still both adhere to incompatible views of the eventual outcome. Each side still believes that if the cost of extending the conflict is endured for long enough the other side may eventually be forced to back down. Official Washington continues to believe that in the end the Cuban regime will have to capitulate, and that when that happens the Cuban people will disassociate themselves from most or all of what it views as the unpalatable doctrines and practices that have emanated from Havana.

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[4] The most recent events associated with the Varela Project, ex-President Carter's live broadcast on Cuban television, President Bush's reaffirmation of Washington's sanctions policy, followed by President Castro's sponsorship of the signature campaign to make the revolution "irrevocable" all fit within this pattern.

A still dominant group in the Cuban leadership evidently believes that if Castro regime remains solid in its determination to resist the dictates of Washington, sooner or later US official hostility will weaken, American pragmatism will come to the fore, and some continuation of the present post-revolutionary political system will be reluctantly accepted by the USA.

So long as these two incompatible expectations persist the resulting impasse will remain a tug-of-war rather than a stable equilibrium. But in a tug-of-war, no matter how static the apparent balance of forces, each side is in fact expending great energy in an attempt to weaken the other. In this particular instance it is the Cuban economy and the future well-being of the Cuban people that is most weakened, by the persistence of the impasse, although Washington also suffers various inconveniences.

With these considerations in mind we can now attempt to theorise about the possible ways out of such an impasse. The most influential set of theories belong to what can be summarily labelled a "realist" perspective. The object of this section is to sketch out the broad realist approach, and then to contrast it with an alternative theoretical standpoint that can (again loosely) be labelled "constructivism". Admittedly this dichotomy between realism and constructivism is a simplification. Both positions can be refined and perhaps partially reconciled with each other. But this is not a theoretical paper, and a simple dichotomous reading provides us with a heuristic device that illuminates the Cuban experience. If standard "realism" explained the essential features of Cuban politics that would refute the thesis of Cuban "exceptionalism". But, if realism fails, then this paper's argument in favour of Cuban exceptionalism can be incorporated into the more general explanatory framework offered by constructivism.

A central argument of this paper is that realism does not provide very good guidance as to how Cuba reached its present state. It omits some key explanatory variables that are better illuminated from a constructivist perspective. If this is true of the present, it may also apply to the future. Realist approaches may continue to mislead us, when applied to Cuba's prospective future "integration" into the international system. The constructivist alternative generates insights into the course of Cuban politics that are invisible from a realist standpoint. The insights derived from cumulative causation and path dependence are highlighted by constructivism but obscured by traditional realism.

From the realist perspective deviations from a standard path should not become cumulative. This is because realists assume that when a political actor chooses an inappropriate or irrational course, the resulting high costs demonstrate the error. Either the political actor corrects the mistake, or those who bear the costs of the error acquire an incentive to change their leadership. On this model of political behaviour it would not have been rational to attack the Moncada barracks in the first place, since the chance of success seemed so low, and the cost of failure was extreme.[5] Once the Moncada attack had failed realists would not expect a second adventure to be attempted, and if it was they would not expect it to attract much support. Nor would they expect a fragile new revolutionary regime to switch alliances from the USA to Russia, or to risk a nuclear war over the introduction of missiles behind the US defence perimeter. Realists would not predict a long chain of apparently unrealistic revolutionary policies, each followed by still further acts of voluntarism in defiance of what they must regard as the objective logic of the situation. Still less would they predict that such deviant behaviour might be accompanied by growing support and eventual success (in part due to the polarised reactions triggered by the deviant behaviour). Finally, they would not predict that the resulting regime could last for over forty years, and outlive all its early sources of support. In short, conventional realism does not predict the Castro regime. Indeed, confronted by the intractable realities of Cuban politics a significant strand of realist analysis has been reduced to the conclusion that Castro must be "mad".

How would a constructivist perspective change this analysis? Take the example of sanctions. From a realist perspective sanctions are simply a cost that any rational actor will try to avoid provided the price of securing relief is not too great. But on several occasions – in the late 1970s, and again in 1996 – it is plausible to argue that the Cuban regime faced the possibility that sanctions against it might be lifted, and acted in ways calculated to avert that outcome. If Cuba was not the object of unilateral (i.e. internationally illegitimate) sanctions by an overbearing enemy the discursive consequences would be serious. Externally, it could lose its "David" status, and become just another relatively needy and somewhat unsuccessful Caribbean nation. Domestically, too, in the absence of a clear, visible, and constantly renewed indication of external aggression the regime would have to

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[5] A cost-benefit analysis of this type cannot accommodate the actions of a suicide bomber, or make sense of a phrase like *"patria o muerte – venceremos*". Despite the evident political potency of such a political style, under conventional realism it becomes irrational perhaps and even inexplicable.

change its explanation for the shortages and frustrations of daily life in Cuba. From a constructivist perspective these "soft" or presentational aspects of the sanctions issue could weigh more heavily with Cuban policymakers than the hard material consequences of the punishment. Put in more realist language, a certain type of political strategy – characteristic of actors in a position of material weakness but organisational autonomy – may be to convert objective loss and material sacrifice into political advantage. But once conventional realism is relaxed to allow costs and benefits to be redefined according to incommensurable and subjective criteria it loses the parsimony that provides its major theoretical justification. This less "realistic" version of realism (the shift from an instrumental to a symbolic calculation of advantage) is not just a practice of the present Cuban government, of course. It may offer some chance of success – or at least vindication – to the structurally weaker side in any conflict, it may be the loser's last resort. So it is also relevant, for example, to the Palestinian *intifada* or to the boycotts of segregated facilities in the US south in the 1960s. It applies to hunger strikers, to Buddhist self-immolators, and to Kamikaze pilots. All these variants of political action involve courting suffering (defying the logic of conventional realism) in order either to turn the tables on the strong, or to generate solidarity among the weak, or – failing that – at least to transmit a message of defiance.

The example of sanctions helps demonstrate how a constructivist perspective might provide an explanation for political events that would be unintelligible or irrational from a strictly realist viewpoint. It could help to explain not just the attack on the Moncada barracks, but also the priority that Cuba has recently attached to outmanoeuvring the US delegation at the UN Commission on Human Rights. What real benefit does the Havana government derive from all the efforts it expends to secure such a diplomatic victory? A constructivist approach offers clues to what would otherwise seem an inexplicable pattern of behaviour.

But here we need to add an important further point. Constructivism does not just attempt to explain the wasteful and quirky behaviour of eccentric and minor political actors. It aims to illuminate political interactions more broadly. So we need to consider whether the behaviour of Cuba's external partners and adversaries also require analysts from within this perspective, rather than being explicable in purely realist terms. For example, can Washington's longstanding and internationally unpopular stance towards the Castro regime be accounted for in terms of a realist

cost-benefit analysis, or is it also driven by other considerations?[6] More generally, has the long-term exceptionalism of Cuban politics induced a wide array of international actors to base their relations with successive rulers of the island more on symbolic considerations than on the *realpolitik* that is mostly assumed to prevail in international affairs?

A major argument of this paper is that the constructivist perspective deserves consideration when interpreting the island's relations with all three categories of partners: backers, sympathisers, and opponents. It can be applied to pre-1958 Cuba, as well as to the post-revolutionary period. It may continue to influence Cuban affairs even after a prospective post-Castro regime transition.

This argument can be developed by considering each category of partners in turn. First, there are the backers. Over the long run Cuba has been the protégé of three successive major external controllers and protectors: Spain until 1898; the USA until 1959; and the USSR until 1992. Thus, mostly for geopolitical reasons, the island has almost always found itself in a select, asymmetric, and exclusivist relationship with a single great power. Only over the past decade have the rulers of Cuba conducted their affairs without the exceptional support and constraints arising from an intense and privileged dependence on a single centre of world power. Until then, these tight reciprocal relations were charged with symbolism and characterised by love-hate feelings. They were far removed from the rational pursuit of self-interest between autonomous unitary actors postulated by the realist school. This may seem a banal observation in the case of Spain, since after all Cuba was then a colonial possession. However, even then the emotional and symbolic dimensions of the relationship were unusual, since Cuba was the *loyal* colony left over after most of the empire had broken away. Moreover, Cuba was an exceptionally wealthy and glorious possession, with a magnificent capital city and an unusually prosperous and modern economy. The Cuban elite had to be wooed by Spain, for if they had chosen annexation by the USA there was little their European rulers could have done to block them. Consequently Spain invested a huge amount of political and psychological capital in nurturing its special relationship with Cuba. When the island was eventually lost this was "el desastre", a shattering diminution of Spain's role in the world, and of its national self-esteem. Cubans understood the intimacy and passion of this relationship, and it coloured their attitude to themselves and to the

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[6] For a recent survey article which emphasises the irrational elements in the US stance towards Revolutionary Cuba see Louis A. Perez Jnr. "Fear and Loathing of Fidel Castro: Sources of US Policy Toward Cuba" Journal of Latin American Studies , Vol.34 part 2, May 2002.

rest of the world. This, at least, would be the line of argument that constructivists could deploy to differentiate themselves from the realists.

Then, for sixty years, Cuba experienced a peculiarly lopsided and ambivalent relationship with the world's newly emerging dominant power, the USA.[7] The Platt Amendment was the formal expression of this curious *desencuentro.* From a constructivist perspective we need to identify the interpretative structure behind the odd constitutional format. Why did Washington grant Cuba its independence, why did it retain *arrières pensées* about this generosity, and why was it so flabbergasted when anti-americanism proved to have such virulent popular appeal? Perhaps the key point is that the USA expected to combine the advantages of semi-colonial control over an absolutely strategic neighbour with the good conscience of demonstrating that it was not just another imperialist power, that it would establish and guarantee the autonomous rights to which a modern nation was entitled, and that the Cuban people would themselves endorse America's self-definition as a benign neighbour. From a constructivist standpoint, then, the most unforgivable aspect of the Cuban Revolution might not be the loss of property or even the military setback (although these were certainly painful enough, at least during the 1960s). The most enduring offence might rather be the discourse of the Cuban Revolution, its systematic denigration the US government and its tireless verbal assaults on North American self-esteem. From this standpoint it makes sense that whereas Washington can now forge partnerships with Russia and China, and can lift sanctions against Vietnam, something more is demanded of the Cubans. Washington's underlying goal would not be so much that the Cuban state should acknowledge its objective weakness, but rather that the Cuban people should repudiate the comprehensive indictment of American state policy that official Havana has reiterated so tirelessly since 1959. If there is a symbolic and emotional component in US attitudes towards the Castro regime, the psychological relationship is again reciprocal. Cuban leaders are fascinated by the USA, and they study American policies with obsessive attention. They pride themselves on their ability to understand and perhaps even to manipulate US reactions, albeit according to a logic that may be more expressive than utilitarian. Their discourse and strategy rests on a belief that Cuba's importance, Cuba's value to the world, arises from its valour in articulating general truths that others are too opportunist to express outright. Here at

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[7] For a recent survey of a century of US policy toward Cuba, focussing on the supposed objective of democracy promotion, see Lars Schoultz, "Blessings of Liberty: the United States and the Promotion of Democracy in Cuba" Journal of Latin American Studies, Vol. 34, part 2 (May 2002).

any rate is how a constructivist position might be differentiated from that of a traditional realist.

Cuba's third privileged relationship, with the USSR, can also be analysed within a similar framework. Castro's enthusiasm for a socialist internal transformation and a pro-Soviet realignment of the Third World was an ideological victory more inspiring than anything the post-Stalinist bureaucrats in the Kremlin could hope to conjure up from their own resources. The Cuban Revolution offered the USSR external validation for Moscow's otherwise not very plausible claims about the superiority of its political system and the necessary course of world history. The Cubans knew far more about the USA than other peoples of the world, and had benefited more than most from US investment and political influence. If these people asserted (for their own reasons, rather than in deference to Soviet compulsion) that the world's most advanced capitalist nation was hypocritical and exploitative, that would provide Moscow with an ideological vindication of exceptional value. The Cuban gesture came at precisely the moment when Moscow most needed it (when the breach with China had led to the withdrawal of all Soviet aid from Beijing). Moreover it was backed by an expressive willingness to assume risks and absorb costs in order to prove Cuba's new allegiance was irreversible. Even the unidealistic bureaucrats of the Kremlin found it impossible to resist the ardour of Cuba's courtship (although some of them had occasion to rue Khrushchev's impulsiveness, and what they called his "hare-brained" schemes after it was too late to re-establish distance between Havana and Moscow). The "love-hate" dimension of this relationship became particularly evident after Gorbachev's rise to power in Moscow, which was matched by what Cuba described, in undisguised criticism of the Soviet model, the "rectification of errors and negative tendencies". But in truth the ambivalence was there all along, as can be seen from the eccentric history of the ruling party itself (the first purge of a pro-Soviet "micro-faction" took place in the early 1960s).

Finally, after 1992, Cuba has found itself for the first time bereft of any significant external protector. The Chinese Communists, the Spanish Socialists, the Mexican PRI and the Canadian Liberals have all flirted with the idea of partially filling this vacuum, only to recoil (for reasons to be considered below under the heading of "sympathisers"). But the intense and privileged relationships to which the Cubans have for so long been accustomed are beyond the range of any of these external political actors, none of which have either the material resources nor the psychological dispositions to take on such a demanding mistress. Therefore, from a

constructivist viewpoint, we need to enquire about the symbolic and emotional significance for Cuba of attempting to "go it alone". From a constructivist perspective, this can be approached indirectly by examining how Cuba handles its remaining relationships a) with sympathisers, and b) with opponents.

The dominant relationship with sympathisers is to castigate them for faint-heartedness, and to pressurise them to emulate the Cuban level of valour and self-sacrifice. In due course this polarises potential supporters between unconditionals and the disillusioned ("traitors" in Castroite terms). A succession of leftist intellectuals from Jean Paul Sartre to Jorge Castaneda have experienced this unpleasant fate at the hands of the Cuban Revolution. But it is important to note that according to others in this conference a similar polarisation occurs in Miami, and it seems that this Cuban political style has a long historical pedigree. Thus, many sympathisers with the long independence war against Spain found themselves caught just such a vice. In extremes Machado and Batista also squeezed their allies and sympathisers into the unconditionals and the untrustworthies. This suggests that ideas of compromise and coalition-building, of meeting the other party halfway, may not be deeply rooted in the Cuban political tradition. Fidel's attempt to upstage all the other 50 national leaders at the March 2002 Monterrey summit on the financing of development is only his most recent in a characteristically extended sequence of intransigent displays. The absence of an external protector has not as yet diminished the current Cuban regime's proclivity for such performances. Indeed it may even be hypothesised that the psychological need for this kind of expressive politics is all the greater in times of isolation and weakness. Whether this style of political action would disappear as Cuba "reintegrates" into the international system is an open question, but the historical record raises some doubts.

Then there is the relationship with outright opponents. Arguably Cuban exceptionalism and intransigence would eventually be eroded by the interplay of pluralist pressures from without, if Havana faced no unifying and overbearing opponent to re-energise the struggle for self-affirmation. But although Cuba no longer has a privileged protector it still has a galvanising external antagonist. At least that is how the authorities in Havana still construct their understanding of the world, and that worldview helps them screen out a more sordid calculus of the costs and benefits of each choice. The foregoing constructivist analysis has already offered some suggestions why Washington can still be counted on to play its appointed aggressor role. US national pride and self-understanding requires the Cuban people

to apologise and retract, not just to cut a pragmatic deal. In addition, the intransigence of Havana is mirrored by the intransigence of Miami (each feeding off the other) which in turn constrains the Washington government's room for manoeuvre. But let us make the mental experiment, and imagine that despite these strong forces some future government in Washington did try unilaterally to step back from this unproductive confrontation. The experience of the Carter administration, and the treatment regularly meted out to potential sympathisers who were not unconditionals both suggest that Havana would not make it easy to negotiate a *détente*. From a constructivist perspective we could anticipate that even in its current condition of objective weakness the Cuban authorities might prefer the comfort of their exceptionalism to the internally divisive and disorienting consequences of a compromise *salida*. Each concession might therefore be followed by a stepped up demand. In practice it is difficult to envisage a pragmatic end to this discursive clash. Neither side can easily cool the rhetoric, for the discourse is an essential part of the political reality. It is what binds together both political communities. That, at least, is where a constructivist analysis might differ from a conventional bargaining strength perspective on Cuba's future course.

V "Liberal Constitutionalism" or "Cuban Exceptionalism"

This section tests the plausibility of the "exceptionalist" thesis from a different standpoint. The previous section drew on international relations theory, and examined the history of Cuba's geopolitical experience during the twentieth century. It exposed the limits of realism and highlighted the relevance of a constructivist perspective that would account for the island's repeated deviations from expected patterns, at least up until the present day. But looking to the future, and drawing on what has been learnt about the comparative politics of democratization, we might nevertheless conclude that the conditions for such deviancy are now coming to an end. In many other countries (including a wide range of ex-communist regimes) we have witnessed convergence on a remarkably standard pattern of democratic transition. Liberal constitutionalism has become the dominant form of political organisation throughout the western hemisphere, and international pressures to conform to that model have grown ever more relentless over the past decade. This section therefore reflects on liberal constitutionalism universalism and how it might apply to contemporary Cuba. Without attempting a predictive conclusion, it also

explores the continuing plausibility of "exceptionalist" arguments that might nullify tendencies towards a liberal convergence.

However strong the arguments may seem in favour of Cuban "exceptionalism" they can never entirely neutralise the operation of those social forces that have proved to be binding elsewhere. Cuba may be an island, but it is very much part of the wider world, as its people certainly know, and as its political leaders have always recognised. All claims about exceptionalism can therefore be no more then relative. They concern questions of timing, balance, and interpretation. The version of exceptionalism promoted by the Castro regime is basically that "We may be small and isolated, but it is the rest of the world that is wrong. That is why we owe it to others (as well as to our own people) to maintain our deviant standpoint despite the heavy costs we have to bear". Whatever else one thinks about this position, it clearly involves making universalistic claims. So whether one is a defender or a critic of the Cuban Revolution arguments about Cuban exceptionalism have to be weighed against claims that situate Cuba within some global framework of interpretation.

In this section of the paper the framework selected for consideration is that provided by doctrines of constitutional liberalism. This framework is selected because it has historical roots in Cuba,[8] and because it provides one influential source of guidance about how Cuba might eventually evolve once the inflexibility of the Castro regime begins to relax. The question for consideration here is whether the "exceptionalist" interpretation advanced earlier in this paper is sufficient to preclude the normal functioning of constitutional liberalism on the island within the foreseeable future, or how it might distort such functioning. A more familiar way of posing the same questions would be to enquire not whether "Cuban exceptionalism" in general may impede a standard to constitutional democracy, but more specifically whether the legacy of either "Castroism" or "the Cuban Revolution" may produce this effect. It is tough to disentangle the relationship between the two levels of analysis since the latter is so much the most visible and indeed exaggerated manifestation of the former. The advantage of trying to pose the question in terms of exceptionalism rather than Castroism is that it may offer some escape from the rigid ideological stereotypes (for and against) that so dominate the public debate and that therefore obstruct efforts to situate Cuba in a comparative perspective. But after forty-three years of absolute power exercised from a single viewpoint it becomes very difficult to

[8] Traditional socialism offered one possible global framework within which to place the Cuban experience, but in current conditions that does not seem the most fruitful way to test the limits of the exceptionalism argument.

distinguish which political legacies are attributable to the Cuban Revolution and which derive from further back.

The comparative evidence from other contemporary democratizations is only a very rough guide to the constraining effects of such legacies given Cuba's highly distinctive trajectory) and in any case it is fairly inconclusive. The deaths of Franco and Salazar were followed fairly soon by the installation of surprisingly conventional constitutional democracies. Little overt evidence of the previous political regimes survived. On the other hand the position was more mixed in such Latin American comparators as the Dominican Republic and Paraguay. But in any case these were all deeply anti-revolutionary regimes. The diverse post-communist successor states of the USSR and Yugoslavia also present a varied picture, with much stronger political legacies persisting in some countries than in others. Arguably, we should expect to find Cuba among the cases where prior legacies are most constraining, both because of the frustrated nationalism outlined in section two above, and because the Cuban Revolution may have penetrated more deeply into the national consciousness than elsewhere. This is hard to verify, but we do know that the revolutionary leader has ruled far longer, and has persisted with more vigour than most in attempting to project his legacy into his country's future. Given the limited utility of most contemporary comparisons, the after-effects of the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Empire are worth some consideration, especially since the issues that concern us here have long ago attracted the interest of a major theorist of constitutionalism – Benjamin Constant.

Constant's central preoccupation was with the political legacy of the French Revolution and what he regarded as the Napoleonic usurpation of its emancipatory potential. He tried to identify the despotic features of the regime that he believed were sure to perish, and to separate those from what he considered to be the enduring features of modern liberty, that could not be eradicated and that must be recognised and protected by the successor regime. Of course the Cuban case is separated from his concerns both by two centuries and by the Atlantic Ocean, but he pitched his arguments in a universal form, and his analysis provides us with a fairly appropriate yardstick for comparing the universalising logic of constitutional liberalism with this paper's "exceptionalism" claims concerning Cuba's historical trajectory.

Constant built his case around two propositions that jointly explained why the ideals of the French Revolution were worthy of respect and why, in practice, they had proved so flawed and untenable. From this explanation he derived a set of political

principles that he held to be applicable to all representative governments in the modern world. They can be summed up by the phrase "liberal constitutionalism" (individual rights, including those to private property, division of powers, judicial independence, press freedom, an elected assembly, civil control over the military etc.). The two key propositions were i) the liberty of the ancients differed from the foundations of liberty in the modern world in that the former was collective whereas the latter is individual; ii) a revolution made in the name of freedom was a noble enterprise, but if it promoted the ancient instead of the modern idea of liberty it would become oppressive and would therefore be doomed to fail. His solution was not to reject the revolutionary enterprise, but to refound it on modern principles of individual freedom.

Analysts of contemporary Cuba can find striking passages in the work of Constant that may seem to foreshadow key aspects of the island's political trajectory since 1958. Critics of the Castro regime can hardly fail to recognise it in such passages as:

> "It is somewhat remarkable that uniformity should never have encountered greater favour than in a revolution made in the name of the rights and the liberty of men. The spirit of the system was first entranced by symmetry. The love of power soon discovered what immense advantages symmetry could procure for it…. Today admiration for uniformity, a genuine admiration in some narrow minds, if affected by many servile ones, is received as a religious dogma, by a crowd of assiduous echoers of any favoured opinion".[9]

But friends of the Cuban Revolution can also find some passages in Constant that reflect their views:

> "The aim of our reformers was noble and generous. Who among us did not feel his heart beat with hope at the outset of the course which they seemed to open up? And shame, even today, on whoever does not feel the need to declare that acknowledging a few errors committed by our first guides does not mean blighting their memory or disowning the opinions which the friends of mankind have professed throughout the ages…. Especially when we lived

[9] Constant: Political Writings (Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought, ed. Biancamaria Fontana, CUP, 1988) pp.73/4.

> under vicious governments, which, without being strong, were repressive in their effects; absurd in their principles; wretched in action; governments which had as their strength arbitrary power; for their purpose the belittling of manking; and which some individuals still dare to praise to us today…..' [10]

Confronted by this apparently irreconcilable polarisation of opinion over the revolutionary project, Constant sought for solid ground from which to appraise the conflicting viewpoints. Those who struggle with the same problem of perception concerning Cuba may resonate to the following:

> "Any amelioration, any reform, the abolition of any abuse, all these are beneficial only when they second the wish of the nation. When they precede it they become nefarious. They are no longer improvements, but acts of tyranny. What it is reasonable to regard as important is not how fast improvements are implemented, but if the institutions are in accord with the ideas….. if authority will only remain silent, the individuals will speak up, the clash of ideas will generate enlightenment, and it will soon be impossible to mistake the general feeling. You have here an infallible as well as easy means, freedom of the press; that freedom to which we much always return; that freedom which is as necessary to governments as it is to the people; that freedom, the violation of which, in this respect, is a crime against the state".[11]

Instead of rallying to either camp in the ideological dispute over the justification of the revolution Constant invoked historical necessity as the authority for his conclusion that only liberal constitutionalism could resolve the post-revolutionary impasse. He was clear that Napoleon's personal system of rule could not be institutionalised, because it ran counter to what he viewed as the individualistic foundations of modern liberty. He therefore anticipated the opportunism and defections that accompanied the waning power of the supreme ruler. But he was not at all certain about the processes that would take France from imperial rule to liberal constitutionalism, and indeed these were marked by long delays and much contingency.

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[10] Op. cit. p.317.
[11] Op. cit. p.150.

Given the pertinence of Constant's analysis for today's Cuba watchers, together with his declared intention to provide a prescription to all modern representative governments, his writings may be invoked to support a liberal internationalist universalism (anti-exceptionalism) as opposed to a realist version of universalism. This view would be that Cuban political exceptionalism must be a time-limited deviation, and that liberal universalism applies to this Caribbean island as much as to elsewhere. It is indeed possible that something close to his prescription of liberal constitutionalism will proved the most widely acceptable formula for stabilising a post-Castro transition to democracy, and for reintegrating Cuba into the regional community of American status. That is not only what a wide range of external authorities and advisers are urging it is also what the 11,000 Cuban signatories to the "Varela" project called for in the spring of 2002. Constant/'s analysis helps clarify the logic of this position.

Nevertheless, the political trajectory of France after the fall of Napoleon, and the checkered history of Constant's own efforts to promote stable constitutionalism there, caution against accepting his analysis as a conclusive refutation of Cuban exceptionalism. Liberal constitutionalism certainly had a chequered career in the two centuries since Constant wrote, even in France. After the end of the Cold War his liberal universalism may have regained its self-confidence, but it cannot obscure the fact that throughout Cuba's entire first century as an internationally recognised sovereign erpublic the island's political system has at best only fleetingly and imperfectly conformed to Constant's basic prescriptions. The Republic has enjoyed international recognition, and has claimed to express popular sovereignty for a full century now without yet conforming to Constant's prescriptions. In fact, under his terminology we would even have to enquire whether nowadays it even belongs to what he called "the modern world". For him the modern spirit of individualism was founded on commerce,[12] as well as on certain expectations of freedom of choice and independence of action beyond the scope of collective constraint. He contrasted this to the system of "liberty" in antiquity, which "consisted in exercising collectively, but directly, several parts of the complete sovereignty ….But if this was what the ancients called liberty, they admitted as compatible with this collective freedom the complete

[12] "Commerce makes the interference of arbitrary power in our existence more vexatious than it was in the past, and this because, our speculations being more diversified, arbitrary power must multiply itself to reach them; but at the same time commerce makes it easier to evade the influence of arbitrary power because it changes the very nature of property, and thereby makes it virtually impossible to seize". Op. cit. p.140. Neither Cuba nor Russia nor China conformed to this model in the twentieth century, nor indeed did Nazi Germany.

subjection of the individual to the authority of the community…. all private actions were submitted to severe surveillance…." etc.[13]

Post-revolutionary Cuba seems closer to Constant's Sparta than to the characteristics he attributed to the modern world. Neither in the realm of commerce and private ownership nor in the domain of individual rights of opinion and expression does the situation on the island correspond to what this founder of liberal constitutionalism took to be the inherent features of modern liberty.[14] So here too, within the framework of this universalising theory, Cuba's claims to "exceptionalism" (or deviation from a presumably universal standard of social organisation) once again requires attention.

Constant also analysed the demise of what he called "the most complete despotism that has ever existed"[15] referring to the fourteen years of Napoleon's personal supremacy. In Cuba the equivalent period already exceeds forty-three years, quite long enough to obliterate the moral inheritance from previous generations ("the loss of this treasure is an incalculable evil for a people").[16] As it turned out event the fourteen years of Napoleonic rule produced such an impact on French collective consciousness that half a century later attempts were still being made to recreate it. The legacy of Castroism is hardly likely to be more easily eliminated. As a final argument in defence of the exceptionalism thesis, the Cuban revolution has long been encircled and besieged by much more powerful forces from without, whereas the Napoleonic Empire collapsed mostly from inner contradictions after expanding and dominating its weaker neighbours. The claims of national unity against overbearing adversity have reinforced Cuba's political resilience and disposition to defy external prescriptions. This source of exceptionalism in Cuba may not yet be exhausted either.

VI Tentative Conclusions about an Uncertain Transition

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13 Op. cit. p.311

14 Constant's contrast between the ancients and the moderns is now considered much overdrawn and it would be equally exaggerated to equate Cuba with his description of the ancients. After all, on the issue of religious toleration, so critical for Constant, contemporary Cuba is now more liberal.

15 Benjamin Constant: Ecrits Politiques (Gallimard, Paris, 1997), p.753. (My translation).

16 Constant: Political Writings Op. cit. p.74

In Cuba as elsewhere the past remains an imperfect guide to the future. So even though Cuban political exceptionalism has a remarkable pedigree, it cannot necessarily be extrapolated into the 21st century. Similarly, while the constructivism sketched in section four may help to explain some features of Cuban political dynamics that are inexplicable from a narrowly realist perspective, the understanding that it generates is not highly predictive. Nor is it helpful to overstress the dichotomy between realism and constructivism. After all there were real as well as symbolic consequences of all the episodes reviewed above. Those old enough to remember the Missile Crisis can hardly dismiss the emotions it aroused as purely subjective, and the division of so many Cuban families is a real wound to both sides, not a mere verbal disagreement. In any case, the "realism" criticised in the section four is a largely artificial academic construct. A sounder version of realism would take discursive and symbolic considerations into account wherever it could be shown that they were more than mere window dressing. Constructivism, and exceptionalism, are compatible with this looser and more interpretarive version of realism. Similar considerations apply to section V. For heuristic purposes it was useful to contrast Constant's liberal universalism with this paper's stress on Cuban exceptionalism. But again the dichotomy shouldn ot be overstressed. In practice throughout his political career Constant struggled with the awkward fact that French political realities proved stubbornly resistant to his universalising liberalism. At one point he even compromised himself as an adviser to Napoleon (after the return from Elba) and later on he had to face legitimist reaction. Although there was a space for the development of political liberalism in the wake of the French Revolution, it was only one doctrine in competition with other serious rivals. Similarly, Cuban exceptionalism and even the legacy of the Cuban Revolution include certain precedents that can potentially be developed in a liberal constitutional direction, even though the main thrust of these political traditions is clearly illiberal. It should not be forgotten that there was a long-running tradition of liberal constitutionalism prior to the 1959 revolution (Indeed Castro's "History Will Absolve Me" speech was an appeal to the 1940 constitution). Even now, although the Varela project is currently blocked, both Castro and his moderate opponents have in fact united on the underlying principle that it is for the citizens of Cuba to determine their form of government using the institutional devices provided by the 1975 Constitution. What can be declared "irrevocable" by a referendum can also be revoked by the same procedure.

Elsewhere,[17] in a much more general and theoretical discussion of democracy and democratization, I have referred to both post-revolutionary Cuba and Iran as "hard cases" which test the limits of our standard terminology on such questions. It may well be the case that these revolutions have both exhausted their followers, and can no longer rely on the spontaneous support of national majorities, just as Constant argued about post-Napoleonic France. But given the less-than-universal confirmation of Constant's faith in commerce and individual liberally in the modern world there is another theoretical possibility that requires consideration. Suppose, for the sake of argument, that it really was the case that a majority of the Cuban electorate would prefer, in a free vote, to maintain the island's 1975 socialist constitution as an "irrevocable" feature of their nationality. Is it even theoretically possible for a democratization process to validate one party rule and a statist system of economic authority? The outcome would clearly not be a standard "liberal" democracy, but are there any conditions under which it could still be rated a broadly democratic outcome? My argument has been that the ultimate test would have to be an unconstrained choice of the Cuban people. If they genuinely and freely chose to persist in their political exceptionalism, my theoretical argument is that that would have to count as a democratic choice. This thought experiment widens the scope of democratic constitutionalism well beyond current conventional thinking, and perhaps could be accused of providing a veneer of democratic legitimacy to a regime that was not, either in its origins or its inner convictions, respectful of the popular will. However, this theoretical standpoint on democracy and democratization carries at least three implications that are powerful protections against authoritarian misuse. First, if the people's choice is to be truly free, the election campaign must allow voters full access to the arguments of both sides, and they must be convinced that they choose without fear of retaliation. Second, even if they freely choose the 1975 Constitution they must retain the right subsequently to change their minds. Third, freedom of debate must include free exchange of ideas internationally as well as internally. Over time this would mean either that Cubans managed to convince the rest of the Americas of the legitimacy of their decision to be different, or international opinion would tend to convert Cuban opinion to the superiority of a more standard variant of constitutional democracy. ("Over time" may not mean quickly, at least to

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[17] Laurence Whitehead, Democratization: Theory and Experience, Oxford University Press, 2002) p.23.

judge how long was needed to reconcile French Republicanism with the other European variants of democracy).

This thought experiment can now be compared with the Castro regime's actual political practice, as illustrated by its reaction to the Varela project. In response to the eleven thousand signatures petitioning for free elections and other reforms, the Cuban authorised organised a popular plebiscite in favour of amending the 1975 Constitution to make socialism "irrevocable". 8,198,237 signatures were collected (out of a total population of 11.2 million) and in early July 2002 the National Assembly carried the amendment by 559 votes in favour, with 19 not present and none against. The organisers of the Varela project had offered the Cuban Communist Party the opportunity to demonstrate its respect for the freely expressed opinions of the people, and this was its reply. The experiment was judged too risky, and instead the ruling party put on an orchestrated display of unity, thus vindicating the classic liberal thesis that can be no pluralism in a state-dominated economy. For the standpoint of this paper this was yet another assertion of Cuban voluntarism and exceptionalism. Even in China, even in Iran, such a performance would now be viewed with embarrassment. It requires a suspension of disbelief that cannot indefinitely conceal the realities of Castro's mortality, and of the Cuban regime's untenable isolation. Those who signed and voted as they did are all too aware that nothing has been permanently resolved, but they obeyed the logic of "double morality" in a besieged political system.

This, then, is the starting point from which any eventual regime transition must depart. Under such conditions it is not possible to estimate which currents of opinion will turn out to have most support, or what new synthesis of collective aspirations can be constructed, once a genuine opening gets underway (as eventually it surely will). Much will depend upon precise timing and circumstances, which remains entirely speculative. Thus Cuba's prospective transition is subject to great uncertainties and – like its politics more generally – could well prove non-standard. What can be anticipated is that it would not be straightforward to establish public confidence in the exercise of its freedom of opinion and expression.

Yet any genuinely democratic outcome in Cuba requires the development of a civic dialogue in which alternative viewpoints can be formulated and exchanged without fear of sanction. Under such conditions we can also anticipate confrontations between long frozen and antagonistic positions on fundamental issues. Constant's central question about France would surely reappear: what should be dismantled,

and what can be preserved, from the entire legacy of the Revolution, and indeed of the first century of the Cuban Republic? Since the USA will not annex Cuba, but will almost inevitably exercise immense influence over any transitional regime, what balance can be established between the desire for national autonomy and reliance on external guidance? On the domestic side, what constitutional system can combine the diffusion of responsibility and the acknowledgement of diversity with the generation of consent and the effective management of public policies?

These are the most sweeping and foundational of issues for any democratic system, and the consequence of Cuba's long record of political exceptionalism is that the basic groundwork for a civic dialogue on such issues has yet to be laid. But in the absence of civic dialogue, and of a collective agreement on how to address such foundational issues, any attempt at regime transition will be profoundly unsettling. In short, not only the timing but also the structure and content of a post-Castro transition remain outstandingly uncertain. Such conditions provide fertile ground for the perpetuation of Cuba's secular tradition of political exceptionalism.

Both in practical terms, and also in terms of democratic theory, Cuba is a "hard case". This paper has argued that its political exceptionalism is deeply rooted, and may not end any time soon. It has also probed into challenge that Cuba has posed, and may continue to pose, to two currently influential types of "universalism" – realism in international relations, and liberal constitutionalism in comparative politics. The jury is still out on how these challenges – both theoretical and practical – are likely to be resolved.

18 December 2002 **Laurence Whitehead**

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