

THE 'CUBAN SPRING' FALLACY: THE CURRENT INCARNATION OF A PERSISTENT NARRATIVE

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Abstract

This paper explores the role of communications technology in the U.S.-Cuban relationship. It argues that the idea that anti-government dissidents will use the Internet, cell phones, and social media to foment a popular uprising on the island, modelled after the 'Arab Spring' is flawed because it fails to take into account the uniqueness of the Cuban situation. The paper then explores how it has become possible for this idea to have gained such traction in certain discourses in the United States. In doing so, the paper considers the history of paternalism and imperial hubris that has dominated U.S. policy toward Cuba, with an emphasis on the relationship during the Castro era. The paper demonstrates that current U.S. policy rests on fallacious assumptions about Cuba, the Cuban state and the relationship between the Cuban state and the Cuban people. The belief in a 'Cuban Spring' and in the idea that the United States could engender revolution in Cuba via communications technology is part of this larger narrative.

Keywords: Arab Spring, Cuban Spring, communications, technology, social media

Introduction

When Republican primary candidate, Newt Gingrich, called for the United States to provoke a 'Cuban Spring' in January 2012 he was echoing a popular idea that technology, especially social media, could ignite revolution. This idea was popularised by the revolutions in Tunisia, Libya and Egypt in the spring of 2011 and somewhat earlier by the use of digital media in the protests in Iran after the 2009 election, known as the 'Green Revolution'. Appeals for the United States to help start similar uprisings in Cuba, now dubbed a 'Cuban Spring', have been heard ever since. This paper will explore the role of communications technology in the U.S.-Cuban relationship. In particular, it argues that the idea

that anti-government dissidents will use the Internet, cell phones, and social media to foment a popular uprising on the island, modelled after the 'Arab Spring' is flawed for a number of reasons. This belief rests on a popular though problematic link between technology and revolution that has since been shown to have been overblown even in the 'Arab Spring' cases. Although this idea makes for interesting headlines it rests on a number of problematic assumptions about Cuba and does not take into account the uniqueness of the Cuban situation, in particular the state of communications technology in Cuba, the presence of civil society, the strength of the opposition movement, and political opinion on the island.

The paper then explores how it has become possible for this idea to have gained such traction in certain discourses in the United States. In doing so, we consider the history of paternalism and imperial hubris that has dominated U.S. policy toward Cuba, with an emphasis on the relationship during the Castro era. Since the earliest days of the Cuban Revolution, American policy has been guided by the conviction that the Cuban state is near collapse and that the Cuban people are poised to revolt against their government. The paper demonstrates that current U.S. policy rests on similar assumptions about Cuba, the Cuban state and the relationship between the Cuban state and the Cuban people. The belief in a 'Cuban Spring' and in the idea that the United States could engender revolution in Cuba via communications technology is part of this larger narrative.

The 'Cuban Spring' Discourse

Even after the events of the Arab Spring itself lost their lustre the idea of a 'Cuban Spring' remained a recurrent theme in the United States. The concept of a 'Cuban Spring' became part of the discourse of the Republican primaries in the spring of 2012. Newt Gingrich told Floridians during the CNN debate,

I think it's amazing that Barack Obama is worried about an Arab Spring, he's worried about Tunisia, he's worried about Libya, he's worried about Egypt, he's worried about Syria, and he cannot bring himself to look south and imagine a Cuban Spring. And I would argue that we should have, as a stated explicit policy, that we want to facilitate the transition from the dictatorship to freedom. We want to bring together every non-military asset we have, exactly as President Reagan and Prime Minister Thatcher and Pope John Paul II did in Poland and in Eastern Europe (Gingrich 2012).

He criticised Obama to the FIU College Republicans, stating, 'I don't think it occurs to a single person in the White House to look south and propose a Cuban spring', (Whitefield and Roth 2012). Just prior to Pope Benedict XVI's visit an

Associated Press article debated the likelihood of a ‘Cuban Spring’ (Associated Press 2012). Other major news outlets have also adopted this discourse. As well as a number of articles addressing a Cuban Spring in the *Miami Herald*, *Fox News* asked ‘Will We Ever See a Cuban Spring?’ (Goodwin 2012); *CBS News* reported ‘Gingrich: “Create a Cuban Spring”’ (CBS 2012); *Forbes* magazine declared ‘The Cuban Political Prisoners Deserve a Cuban Spring’ (Glassman 2011). The concept of a Cuban Spring is also gaining some traction elsewhere. In February of 2012, Laima Andrikiene, a member of the European Parliament’s subcommittee on human rights declared, ‘The Arab spring surprised the world in 2011 throwing away one dictator after another. Spring is unavoidable and inescapable, in Cuba also’ (Andrikiene 2012).

U.S. Actions, Technology and the Dissident Movement

The idea of using communications technology to help foment opposition movements in countries opposed by the United States does not have its genesis in the events in North Africa in the spring of 2011. This idea can be seen in the implementation of the Voice of America and Radio Free Europe and has been a part of the American strategy in Cuba at least since the era of Ronald Reagan. Radio, and later TV, Marti, were created to influence public opinion in Cuba. A 1982 RAND report argued that Radio Marti could ‘intensify elite-mass divisions within Cuba’ and ‘erode popular support for the regime and thus weaken it ...’ (Gonzales 1982). Most recently, this strategy has expanded to include the Internet, including U.S. State Department expenditures of about ‘\$70 million on circumvention efforts and related technologies’ in 2011 alone (Glanz and Markoff 2011).

The arrest of a U.S. citizen in Cuba in December 2009 brought the issue of communications technology to the top of U.S.-Cuban relations. Alan Gross, a subcontractor for the U.S. Agency for International Development, was convicted of bringing banned satellite and related communication equipment into Cuba and was given a 15-year prison sentence. The Cuban authorities believe Gross was a CIA agent sent to Cuba to incite an uprising against the government. A key part of his plan, they assert, was to set up a communications structure (using small satellites that would provide Internet access) beyond the control of the state in Cuba that would allow dissidents to communicate with their contacts in Washington. According to one Cuban authority involved with the case, ‘It’s just like the (1961) Bay of Pigs invasion, ... but this guy came with other arms. He didn’t come on a boat and didn’t disembark with a gun in his hand, but it’s the same story’ (Miroff 2011). According to Washington officials, Gross was a development worker, not a CIA agent, and he only wanted to help Cuba’s

Jewish community improve their Internet access. In September 2011 former New Mexico governor Bill Richardson failed to negotiate the release of Gross. It is noteworthy that Gross was not one of the thousands of prisoners released in December 2011. His case remains a key source of tension between the two governments.

Regardless of whether Gross was a CIA agent or a relatively naive development worker, current U.S. strategy in Cuba involves the provision of Internet access on the island. Well before the revolutions in the spring of 2011 American officials were considering the potential role of the Internet in fomenting opposition on the island. In 2009, the head of the U.S. Interest Section in Havana, Jonathan Farrar argued that the United States should remove its restrictions on software downloads in Cuba. In a leaked U.S. diplomatic cable he urged the lifting of these restrictions that had made Microsoft and other American companies block access to their services in Cuba to comply with anti-terrorism statutes. Such restrictions, Farrar argued, work 'directly against U.S. goals to advance people-to-people interaction' (Wikileaks 2009). He also argued that increasing access on the island could 'help facilitate Iran-style democratic ferment in Cuba' (Wikileaks 2009).

Apparently accepting Farrar's analysis, in March 2010 the Obama administration announced that companies like Microsoft and Yahoo could avoid the export restrictions imposed on Cuba, Iran and Sudan. Now these companies are able to apply for a general license to export Internet services and related software to these three countries (Landler 2010).

Some policymakers would like to see the United States take a more active role in providing Cubans with Internet access. Senator Marco Rubio (FL) believes that 'There's a reason the people in Cuba don't have access to the Internet. It is because the government [couldn't] survive it'. Rubio described, 'unfiltered access to the Internet and social media' as Cuba's 'best hope' (O'Grady 2012). He explained,

Fifteen years ago if you wanted to organise a group of people to do anything politically, you needed a big, burdensome organisation to coordinate it. Today anyone with access to Facebook and Twitter can be an organiser, and it's happening all over this country, it's happening all over the world, and it will happen in Cuba.

Rubio pressed this argument as the featured speaker at a conference in Washington in March 2012 titled 'Cuba Needs a (Technological) Revolution: How the Internet Can Thaw an Island Frozen in Time'. He argued that the U.S. should focus on trying to provide wireless Internet access to all Cubans. He said, 'That's what U.S. policy should really begin to focus on, a twenty-first century effort' (O'Grady 2012).

Some American non-governmental organisations (NGO) with an interest in Cuba have also accepted the idea that technology can play an important role in fostering change on the island. The U.S. based NGO, Cuba Study Group, organised a ‘Cuba, IT & Social Media Summit’ in New York City in January 2010. One of the participants, Irving Wladawsky-Berger reported (2010),

Internet technologies and social media represent potential mechanisms to empower the Cuban people to better communicate with each other as well as with the outside world. For years now we have seen the power of these technologies, most recently with Iran’s Green movement The Internet, mobile phones and related communication technologies are a thorn on the side of repressive governments.

Other organisations are also attempting to put this idea into practice. American NGOs such as Roots of Hope and 100 Cameras have recently initiated projects on the island (Valdes 2009).

Some Practical Flaws behind the Idea of a ‘Cuban Spring’

While the idea of a ‘Cuban Spring’ is attractive in Washington and with elements of the Cuban-American community, there are some practical flaws with this theory in the Cuban context. This section will review why the notion of a ‘Cuban Spring’ is likely to remain in the realm of ideas.

Role of technology in the ‘Arab Spring’

The idea that technology can be revolutionising is not new. It goes back at least as far as the creation of the printing press in fifteenth-century Europe. But the relationship is not straightforward. Technology has been credited with aiding the shift from medieval to modern Europe, by spreading the Renaissance beyond the borders of northern Italy, spreading Luther’s ideas of the Protestant Reformation, and allowing people to consider new ideas – a foundation of the Scientific Revolution (Eisenstein, cited in Dewar 1998: 11–14). Collective action and social movement literatures link technology to the ability or likelihood of protest. Dennis argues that communication technology creates ‘the conditions and boundaries for collective action’ (Dennis 2007: 22; see also Noveck 2005). Social movement scholars point to resource mobilisation and newly available resources as a crucial ingredient for collective action (McAdam 1982; McAdam, McCarthy and Zald 1996; McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly 2001).

However, while technology can help to defeat hegemonic power, as the printing press challenged the power of the Catholic Church, we must recognise that challenges to power do not go without response.¹ New technologies, after all, are not solely in the hands of those who seek to challenge power, those in

power also have access to technology. The idea that technology can be liberating is powerful, but it only tells one side of the story. As Larry Diamond explains:

Liberation technology enables citizens to report news, expose wrongdoing, express opinions, mobilize protest, monitor elections, scrutinize government, deepen participation, and expand the horizons of freedom. But authoritarian states such as China, Belarus, and Iran have acquired (and shared) impressive technical capabilities to filter and control the Internet, and to identify and punish dissenters. Democrats and autocrats now compete to master these technologies (Diamond 2010: 70).

As the nascent research into the Arab Spring demonstrates, the presence of technology is not sufficient to explain the collapse of state power. 'It is not technology, but people, organizations, and governments that will determine who prevails' (Diamond 2010: 82). Experiences of Arab Spring suggest the Internet *can* play a role, but it is neither necessary nor sufficient to explain state collapse. There are many cases of high technology societies where it does not matter – Bahrain and the other failed Arab Spring movements (Anderson 2011). Meier (2011), in examining the connection between technology and protest, finds there is not a strong connection based on his study of Egypt and Sudan, and little connection in the other cases he quantitatively examines. Kalathil and Boas (2001) also find little evidence that authoritarian states face a challenge from technology. Diamond (2010) argues that new technologies historically have been thought to challenge states, but have ended up strengthening them.

Furthermore, critics have pointed out the problems with grouping the events that took place in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya together in one single category. As Lisa Anderson points out,

The important story about the 2011 Arab revolts in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya is not how the globalization of the norms of civic engagement shaped the protesters' aspirations. Nor is it about how activists used technology to share ideas and tactics. Instead, the critical issue is how and why these ambitions and techniques resonated in their various local contexts. The patterns and demographics of the protests varied widely (Anderson 2011).

Local context is relevant. The next subsections will address the particularities of the Cuba situation, demonstrating the difficulties associated with implementing this idea in the Cuban context.

The state of communications technology in Cuba

The use of communication technology in Cuba lags well behind the 'Arab Spring' countries. For many years, the Cuban state tightly controlled the ownership of cell phones and computers. While the law was changed in 2008, legalising the unrestricted ownership of cell phones and computers, access remains limited

in both cases. Few Cubans have cell phones. In 2008 there were one million landlines and 800,000 cell phone lines in Cuba (Reuters 2010). By 2010 there were 1,003,015 cell phones and 1,163,625 landlines (International Telecommunications Union 2011). In 2012 cell phone minute-rate prices came down, but cell phones are still quite expensive for Cubans on a fixed income. Most Cuban citizens must pay for cell phones in convertible pesos (CUCs), which are used for purchasing luxury products and are as much as 25 times more expensive than the *moneda nacional* (the currency used by Cubans to purchase necessities). Even cell phone owners are careful not to use their minutes and instead use their cell phones like pagers, returning calls when they have access to a landline. To do otherwise would be excessively expensive for most people.

Only 3.3 per cent of Cubans have computers in their homes and far fewer can go online from their residence (The International Telecommunication Union 2010). Most people who are online have Internet access through their jobs because it is much more difficult to obtain permission for home use. Some professions such as university professors and doctors are granted home access but the majority of Cubans are not permitted to go online from their homes. According to the International Telecommunications Union (2010 figure) only 15.9 per cent of Cubans have access to the Internet.

Soon after Cuba joined the Internet in 1996, Decree-Law 209, ‘Access from the Republic of Cuba to the Global Computer Network’ was enacted. This law prevents Internet use ‘in violation of Cuban society’s moral principles or the country’s laws’ and stipulates that emails must not ‘jeopardise national security’ (Deibert, Palfrey, Rohozinski and Zittrain 2008). Following this law, some blogs and websites have been blocked by the state. Although Cubans are prevented from accessing some blogs and other similar sites critical of the Cuban state, the government recently lifted some of these restrictions and now allows Cubans access to blogs that were previously off limits.

Critics further charge that the Cuban state is deliberately restricting Internet availability for political reasons. Jorge Luis Perdomo, the deputy-minister of information, told an audience in 2011 that the restrictions were simply technical, not politically motivated. The official explanation for the restrictions on Internet availability is related to the small amount of bandwidth on the island. According to the government, the U.S. embargo prevents Cuba from connecting to the undersea fibre-optic cables. As a result connections must be processed through satellites, which limits the bandwidth available for the island and is very costly.

While government restrictions have an impact, cost remains the main barrier to widespread Internet access. Citizens without access at home or their place of employment can get online from the country’s few Internet cafés or from business centres in tourist hotels, but the hourly rate averages between 6–10

CUC/hour. Furthermore, service is extremely slow compared to other countries. Most connections use a dial-up service reminiscent of 1990s access abroad. Cubans are permitted to have web-based email accounts such as Gmail but because of bandwidth concerns they can only access those accounts in off peak times (such as before 10 am).

For these reasons there are few Cubans on social media. Cubans are allowed to have Facebook and Twitter accounts but it is difficult to get the pages to load with a dial-up connection. In an effort to provide its own alternative to social media, the Cuban government launched Red Social in 2011, a virtual copy of Facebook, available for Cubans via the country's intranet and mainly used by Cuban university students (Sanchez 2011).

There is a small but growing Cuban community on Twitter. Both Cubans opposed to the state such as the blogger, Yoani Sanchez, and some of the most well-known officials, most famously, Fidel Castro, have Twitter accounts. Likewise, Mariela Castro, Raúl Castro's daughter and a well-known academic and activist for gay rights in Cuba, joined Twitter in 2011 and soon thereafter made international news for her exchange with Yoani Sanchez (Diario de Cuba 2011). While some 'regular Cubans' also Tweet, the number of Cubans active on Twitter appears to be relatively small.

Despite the nascent state of this technology in Cuba, there is an expectation that access and quality of the Internet on the island will improve. At the beginning of 2011 the state announced that a fibre-optic cable was going to be installed between Venezuela and Cuba which by some estimates would increase the rate of data transmission by 3,000 times (*The Economist* 2011). The installation of the 1,600-km cable was finished in February but the government pushed back the date it would be operational, moving the date to June and then July. However, these dates came and went with no noticeable change to the Internet in Cuba. Then, in January 2013 Reuters' Cuban offices reported improved speed in Internet transmission, indicating that the cable was operational (Frank 2013). In May 2013, the government announced it had activated a cable from Jamaica to Cuba, further increasing the bandwidth on the island. However, speeds remain poor in comparison to other countries. The government attributes this to Cuba's outdated domestic network (Tamayo 2013). There has been little said about why the cable is not functioning as expected. Rumours abound in Havana with everything from fraud to government indecision being blamed for the delay.

For these reasons, even the main anti-government bloggers do not see a 'Cuban Spring' style revolution working in Cuba in the near future. Yoani Sanchez explained,

Unlike in North African countries, the ability to use social media in Cuba to organize (protests) or get together over social networks is minimal ... Cellular phones are subject to a state monopoly with very high rates. So the idea of using a Blackberry or iPhone to send messages like 'Let's occupy Revolution Square tomorrow', right now just is not there (Sennitt 2012).

The presence of civil society

Arguments that technology leads to an increase in civil society and strengthening of democracy can be found in several literatures. Most Americans' conceptualisation of civil society is based on liberal democratic thinking, and is usually defined as individuals coming together and associating voluntarily free from state control. In the mid-nineteenth century Alexis de Tocqueville described voluntary associations among Americans in the newly independent country as a solid foundation for its democracy because through these associations citizens can check the power of the state. Weber (2011: 27) argues that the voluntary associations are powerful because they offer 'alternatives in social, cultural and economic life, to that of state power'. However, others argue that civil society does not always lead to more democratic outcomes (Otero and O'Bryan 2002). Berman (1997) describes the growth of civil society in Weimar Germany, which in the absence of strong political institutions to channel the demands of civil society resulted in the rise of Hitler and Nazism.

Antonio Gramsci presents an alternate conception of civil society, one that examines 'social relationships that produce meaning' (Acanda González 2006: 33). Political and economic institutions are considered to be part of civil society in this articulation, because they include spaces 'where cultural and ideological hegemonic relationships are reproduced and transformed on a daily basis' (Acanda González 2006: 33). Many on the Left in Latin America, including Cuban scholars, favour Gramsci's conceptualisation (Acanda González 2006; Chanan 2001). In such articulations, even groups who are not 'free' can still be productive, and civil society is not necessarily separated from the state. Otero and O'Bryan (2002) note that civil societies look different in liberal democratic versus state-socialist regimes, which is something that is not recognised in the U.S. discourse on civil society. For Otero and O'Bryan, civil society includes a civil sphere where both 'traditional' civil society actors operate along with private economic actors, labour groups, and opposition political groups and dissidents (2002: 33).

The idea of a 'Cuban Spring' is based on the assumption that Cuba does not have civil society or strong social networks. The United States has actively promoted the growth of civil society in Cuba, based upon the belief that there is no civil society currently and that a vibrant civil society in Cuba will work to

overthrow the Castro (Raul or Fidel's) government. U.S. policy reflects this goal by allowing 'people-to-people' licences to travel to Cuba,² in order to support civil society and 'promote independence from Cuban authorities'. The U.S. also seeks to support dissidents in Cuba, and for a time under the George W. Bush administration displayed messages to the Cuban people from near the top of the U.S. Interests Section in Havana informing them of their rights. In fiscal year 2011 the U.S. State Department reported to Congress expenditures on human rights and civil society promotion in Cuba totalling \$20 million. Of that, \$12.4 million is for civil society, which includes a focus on using technology to build civil society (Miroff 2012).

This paper argues that Cuba already has civil society, though its presence and power have varied over time (Acanda González 2006; Otero and O'Bryan 2002; Crahan 2008; Fernández 2008). According to liberal understandings of civil society, civil society was strong in the 1960s, as previously marginalised sectors of the population became empowered, declined in the 1970s as the Cuban state consolidated its power and circumscribed what actions could be included as revolutionary, and increased again in the 1990s as the ability of the Cuban state to provide the same degree of resources to society was in decline (Acanda González 2006: 36).

Cuban scholars who study civil society are critical of liberal notions of civil society, especially current articulations of liberal civil society that argue that state and society exist as things apart. Hernández (2003: 29) argues that socialism is not solely a system of the state and state power, but is an 'organisation of the whole society' that has roots in civil society. He draws on Theda Skocpol's (1979) work on social revolutions, where she demonstrates that revolutions rarely follow the ideological plans of initial leaders. A revolution 'produces new politics', and changes in 'the political system and ideological discourse, ... [that] has its roots in civil society' (Hernández 2003: 13). Returning to a Gramscian idea of civil society, this is because of the productive nature of social relations, where we cannot separate the social from the political from the economic.

Of course whether one believes there is civil society in Cuba depends on where one stands in terms of the Cuban government and the meaning of the term 'civil society'. According to many in the United States, the only civil society in Cuba is found among religious and political dissidents (Hernández 2003). Critics of the Cuban government argue that even registered civil society organisations are not examples of a true civil society in Cuba because they are not completely autonomous from the state. Ironically, the U.S. government's limited conceptualisation of civil society in Cuba and their support of the dissident groups negates the possibility of those groups being called 'civil society' by their own definition

of autonomy from the state. Again much of this debate revolves around differing conceptualisations – liberal vs. Gramscian – of civil society discussed earlier.

Otero and O’Bryan (2002) argue that the Cuban government has successfully circumscribed civil society by using repression, being flexible, and fomenting anti-U.S. sentiment (where promoting civil society might be seen as an achievement of U.S. goals).³ Cubans have a high degree of social capital (connectedness and social trust that are thought to be prerequisites for civil society) because of the input they have in the political process, for example through popular power councils, and also have a strong sense of nationalism because of the struggle for Cuban sovereignty and the struggle against U.S.-led neoliberalism (2002: 35). On the basis of nationalism alone, it is unlikely that the Cuban people would rise up against the Revolution, effectively letting the U.S. ‘win’. The presence of a ‘thoughtful, educated culture’ in Cuba also correlates with the possibility of high degrees of civil society (Hernández 2008: 78). While one may argue that the Cuban people are motivated by material incentives, it is also true that Cubans still find value in solidarity, and are more likely to value equality over individual freedoms⁴ (Whitefield and Sheridan 2008). Otero and O’Bryan argue that due to these factors it is likely that Cuba could experience a transition from below, although it may be to a form of democratic socialism, contrary to the expectations of many U.S. policy makers.

The idea of a ‘Cuban Spring’ is further challenged by evidence that technology has an inverse relationship to social capital and civil society. Putnam (1995: 665) defines social capital as ‘features of social life – networks, norms, and trust – that enable participants to act together more effectively to pursue shared objectives’. His research demonstrated that civic engagement in the U.S. declined, as measured by the decreased level of participation in voluntary associations. He argued that the decline in civic engagement coincides with the disappearance of the last generation to grow up without television. Technology, he argues, is ‘privatizing our lives’. ‘We may suspect that [the technological trends we can anticipate] will promote individualism and will make it harder, not easier, to govern and organize a coherent society’ (Pool 1990: 262, quoted in Putnam 1995).

Although Cuba has relatively low levels of connectedness – in landlines, cell phones, and Internet connectivity – it has high levels of social capital or connectedness; it is amazing how quickly word travels in Cuba. In Havana pay phones that use phone cards purchased in the Cuban subsidised currency are widely available but word travels even in areas with few phones of any kind. In Cuba there are high levels of communication in the absence of technology because there is a high degree of social capital. Word seems to spread very quickly and everyone knows what is going on with everyone else. Cubans call it

Radio Bemba, basically word of mouth, which seems to be surprisingly effective at spreading information (pers. comm.).

Ironically (at least from the U.S. policy perspective) some of the forces that may be working to weaken social capital in Cuba are market reforms allowing more private businesses and the promotion of tourism as a major revenue source for the government, which result in greater income inequality, a factor that is often cited as working against the effectiveness of democracy. In the last three decades the Cuban government has allowed for opening in the economy to varying degrees by permitting people to establish private businesses. In the early 1990s, as a result of the 'Special Period', a time of major economic contraction and restructuring that followed the demise of the Soviet Union, the Cuban government allowed more 'privatisation' (though heavily taxed) and legalised the U.S. dollar. As government expenditures decreased, civil society increased to fill the gaps the state could not. Remittances increased which created inequalities between Cubans with family abroad and others who did not have access to these additional funds.⁵ The economic reforms have challenged the ideals of the Cuban Revolution by allowing for the reformation of classes.

The promotion of tourism as a revenue source also has worked to skew incomes in Cuba, to what many Cuban scholars call an 'inverted pyramid' (Uriarte 2008). In this inverted pyramid large numbers of people are employed in high-paying fields that require few skills or educational preparation – taxi drivers, hotel cleaning staff, restaurant waiting staff. The base salary to these workers is paid in the same subsidised currency called *moneda nacional* or the Cuban peso, they also receive tips in hard currency – dollars until 2003, and now the Cuban Convertible Peso (CUC). Highly educated people do not hold jobs that allow them access to hard currency, so effectively their income is much lower than jobs that require little education. The incentives for higher education are disappearing, leading to an exodus of teachers and engineers, for example, to the tourism industry. The resulting income inequality will likely also present problems for norms of social trust, solidarity and the prioritising of social or public good over individual gain.

Technology is a concrete example of a resource that allows for easier mobilisation because it allows disparate groups to communicate, however social movement scholars also consider the strong social networks and social capital in Cuba to be another example of a resource that can aid collective action. As we have discussed, the presence of technology alone is not sufficient to bring about organisation. The organisational capacity of the society matters, the degree to which someone can shape or take advantage of the opportunity matters, and the capacity to compellingly frame the message matters in terms of the effect the presence of technology or any other resource will have on the capacity for

individuals to mobilise and organise. The argument that technology will foster the growth of civil society in Cuba glosses over the established presence of civil society on the island and the related high levels of social communication illustrated by ‘Radio Bemba’.

Public opinion and reform in Cuba

The belief that with access to technology Cubans would work to overthrow the government assumes that Cubans are simply waiting for the necessary resources and opportunity to oust the government. This is a faulty assumption that has (mis)guided U.S. policy for decades. It is not that every Cuban is supportive of the political system and wants the status quo to continue, but neither is it a society that faces so much repression that the right resources or opportunity would bring an uprising against the government. As argued by many scholars, Cubans tend to have ‘differentiated understandings’ of the Revolution. They recognise, appreciate, and want to maintain the wide-ranging benefits of the Revolution, including the excellent health care and free access to education. Cuban citizens are also proud of the way their government was able to maintain these services during the Special Period, especially when this is contrasted to the way other governments have handled similar crises. That said, they would also like to have more political and economic freedoms (Domínguez 2006; Glidden 2011).

Further evidence that the ‘Cuban Spring’ assumption is incorrect is the de-politicisation of many young Cubans. The closest Cuba came to something like the mass protests of the Arab Spring was the 5 August 1994 spontaneous uprising called the *Maleconazo*, where thousands gathered to protest the deprivations of the Special Period (Gershman and Gutierrez 2009: 37) when Fidel Castro was touring the neighbourhood. Accounts differ, but either Castro himself was able to calm the protesters who then dispersed, or the security forces were able to disperse them. Either way, those protesters are not the young generation today. Landau (2008) argues that all Cubans have been de-politicised by the government’s circumvention of ‘critical public dialogue’, although some Cubans are very politically aware and willing to engage in critical discussions. Landau argues that the situation is different among young people. Young people, however, ‘have high levels of culture, except when political themes arise; their eyes glaze’ (Landau 2008: 43). Young Cubans do not remember the ‘bad old days’ prior to the Revolution, or the ‘good old days’ when socialism brought societal benefits and trade with the Soviet bloc led to a relatively high living standard. This is a generation who mostly remember the hardship of the Special Period, when many of the benefits of the Revolution eroded, the economy contracted, and material goods virtually disappeared. They have been subject to ‘party jargon and slogans that bear little relationship to their reality’ (Landau 2008:

43). One young, highly educated professional woman who worked evenings as a waitress in a private restaurant (*paladar*) described it as '*saturación mental*', or mental saturation (pers. comm.). Young Cubans are not interested in politics. As such, the arguments of 'cyber-optimists' who suggest the Internet will engage young people politically are not easily applied in Cuba (Jensen, Danziger, and Venkatesh 2007: 41). Likewise, studies of the creation of a 'cyber society' based on research in the U.S. do not necessarily map well onto the Cuban context. For example, Muhlenberger (2004, cited in Jensen *et al.* 2007) found that online political discussion forums help to mitigate the differences in socioeconomic stratification that we find offline, but in Cuba socioeconomic stratification is minimal (though as noted above it is increasing).

The term 'slacktivist' captures another complication of the cyber-optimist argument (Morozov 2009). With the click of a mouse the slacktivist signs online petitions or reposts a Facebook status, feeling politically engaged while generating few practical results. For example, the Kony 2012 video on Facebook went viral as it was posted and re-posted by people who were uninformed about Joseph Kony, his arrest warrant issued by the International Criminal court in 2009, or about the ramifications of increasing funding to the current Ugandan government. While the Internet can be a resource for information and deep analysis (see Drabble 2012), it also provides resources whose merit and validity are questionable.

Moreover, the recent reforms have attempted to address the Cuban public's desire for greater political and economic freedoms, further mitigating any potential support for an uprising. As president of Cuba, Raúl Castro has initiated substantial liberalisation measures. Soon after he officially took over the leadership of the country in 2008 he lifted restrictions on the sale of some electronic items including computers, cell phones, DVD, and video players. He also withdrew the ban on Cubans staying at tourist hotels. Although the 2008 hurricanes reduced the anticipated rate of reform, the government has continued to enact changes, including major alterations to the agricultural sector.⁶

In 2011 the Cuban state removed two important restrictions placed on Cubans early in the Revolution. For the first time in many years Cubans were able to buy and sell their cars and real estate (Meneses and Levya 2011). The ability to sell property is a major change, and according to *Granma* it reflects a process of 'updating of the country's economic model' (Meneses and Levya 2011). In November 2011 the government also announced a new credit system to facilitate loans to small businesses, farmers, and individuals (Orsi 2011).

Raúl Castro has also made a number of personnel changes at the head of his government and has implemented term limits for high-ranking officials. Most importantly, in March 2009, he removed Carlos Lage from his post as

Vice President of the Cuban Council of State and Felipe Pérez Roque as foreign minister. These dismissals have been seen as indicative of a shift toward a less ideologically motivated and more pragmatic approach to international affairs. Also indicative of adjustments in Cuba's approach to foreign and political affairs are Havana's signature on two major international human rights declarations and the state's decision to release thousands of prisoners during 2010–2011 (CBC 2011).

The Cuban government's recent changes also include opening space for greater debate. Although freedom of expression in Cuba remains limited in comparison to Cuba's neighbours, the change in this regard is widely acknowledged. Jenny Kassman's study of public consultation over the current set of reforms found that consultation and public involvement in the process was widespread. She noted:

In 2010, after the National Assembly had presented the proposals, all members of grass-roots and professional organisations and all other interested members of the public were invited to attend open meetings to scrutinise the content of the proposed legislation and to suggest amendments. As a result, from November until March of 2011 meetings were held the length and breadth of the island at workplaces, universities, youth and pensioners' organisations, in local neighbourhoods, branches of the Federation of Cuban Women and in other grass-roots organizations ... (Kassman 2012: 11–16)

This study concluded that '[i]n all, 8 million people attended these discussions, 3 million actively took part in debates and 781,644 submissions for amendments were received' (Kassman 2012). According to Cuban social scientist, and editor of *Temas*, Rafael Hernandez,

The government has called for disagreement, for the expression of different viewpoints, it has called for the critical discussion of policies. ... Indeed, the public debate in Cuba constitutes a form of appropriation by the citizens of the political changes, because the expression of people's views, of the opinions of the ordinary citizens, has been a fundamental step. ... Just as important as the policies themselves are the debates that have been conducted on these policies. (Hernández, Interview 2011)

Although Cuban citizens would like further opening in this regard, citizens appreciate the greater freedom of expression.

The population generally welcomes the reforms. A 2011 Freedom House poll of Cubans found that 63 per cent of those polled have a favourable view of the recent reforms. Freedom House also noted '[t]here is a growing sense of optimism since the last round of field research conducted by Freedom House in December 2010' (Moreno and Calingaert 2011).

While most Cubans are certainly not enamoured of their government they do not seem ready to support the opposition movement either. Cubans are proud and nationalism is strong. Cubans are taught from an early age about

their country's struggle for independence, the benefits of the Revolution, and the state's achievements. Most Cuban schoolchildren are very familiar with Cuba's national hero, Jose Martí and his ideas about Cuba's independence from the United States. These ideas further complicate any attempts to organise against the state, especially when the opposition may be perceived as being aided by the United States.

Although Cubans are frustrated with what they see as the slow pace of reform and want to see greater change, a good many also want to maintain the benefits of the Revolution. A Freedom House poll outlined the complaints of the people of Cuba, including criticism of the restraints on freedom of expression and economic hardships, but it also reported, 'Many respondents, however, were more measured, believing in socialism but wanting to see some reforms and liberalization' (Moreno, Brady, and Ribar 2011: 15).

The lack of an organised and deep-seated opposition to the government has clear implications for the argument about the potential of a 'Cuban Spring'. Following his discussion of greater freedom of expression, Rafael Hernández (Interview 2011) argued, 'It's a fundamentally democratic debate, and consequently the space for a Cuban Arab Spring, for a collapse, for chaos, for the implosion of socialism, is beyond the present horizon'. Even the top official at the U.S. mission in Havana, Jonathan Farrar recognised the lack of support for the dissidents in the population. He explained in a Wikileaks cable that, 'We see very little evidence that the mainline dissident organisations have much resonance among ordinary Cubans', (Franks 2010). He based his analysis on polls of visa and refugee applicants that showed 'virtually no awareness of dissident personalities or agendas' (Franks 2010).

Other analyses echo this same opinion. A report in the *Global Post* reflected, 'Now activists are once more testing Raul Castro's tolerance for public protest – and whether the tactics used by tweeting insurgents in the Middle East could spread anti-government sentiment here. So far: not so much' (Miroff 2011a).

The Attractiveness of the Idea of a 'Cuban Spring' in the United States

As the above section illustrated, the idea that social media could transform Cuba's political or economic reality makes for interesting headlines but it is not a scenario that is likely to play out in Cuba. The idea does not take into account the unique factors discussed above. How then is it possible to understand the popularity of this idea in the United States? In considering this question, this section will briefly discuss the underlying paternalism in U.S. relations with Cuba, highlighting the interplay between this view of the island and the enduring conviction in the inevitable failure of the Cuban Revolution.

Paternalism and imperial hubris in U.S.-Cuban relations

American paternalism and imperial hubris have been defining features of the U.S.-Cuban relationship for centuries. Even before Cuba gained independence from Spain, Cuba was infantilised or alternatively gendered as female by government officials and popular culture in the United States. These representations of an inherently inferior Cuba appeared in American cartoons, official statements, and popular discourse, making American tutelage seem necessary.⁷ Senator Albert Beveridge justified American involvement in the 1898 Spanish-American war over Cuba because God has made Americans ‘the master organisers of the world to establish system where chaos reigns ... He has made us adept in government that we may administer government among savage and senile peoples’ (Beveridge 1900: 704, quoted in Twing 1998: 22). In 1823 John Quincy Adams expressed the idea that Cuba was ‘ripe fruit’ that was ‘incapable of self-support’ and thus after being severed from Spain would ‘gravitate only toward the North American Union’ (Adams, quoted in Benjamin 1992: 8). These ideas were reinforced by the Monroe Doctrine and its subsequent, ‘Roosevelt Corollary’, which warned European powers that the United States considered all of Latin America to be within the American sphere of influence. Even though Cuba did not officially become part of the United States after it severed its ties with Spain, it was still assumed that Cuba, like any other ‘inferior’ state, would naturally want to emulate the more superior American model.

This image of Cuba continued to construct U.S. policy after the Cuban Revolution. In fact, because Cuba was seen as disobedient, U.S. policy became more punitive during the Castro era. The Cuban people, however, were understood as benefiting from U.S. ‘guidance’ and since the 1960s have been portrayed separately from their revolutionary government. While government rhetoric in the United States was hostile to Fidel Castro and other representatives of the Cuban state it has always purported to be working on behalf of the Cuban people.

President Obama announced his 2009 policy adjustments with a fact sheet entitled ‘Reaching Out to the Cuban People’. It begins, ‘Today, the Obama administration announced a series of changes in U.S. policy to reach out to the Cuban people in support of their desire to freely determine their country’s future’ (The White House: 2009). Similar references to the Cuban people are made in most government statements. For example, in January 2012, after the death of Cuban prisoner, Wilman Villar, the White House issued the following statement: ‘The United States will not waver in our support for the liberty of the Cuban people. We will remain steadfast in our outreach to the Cuban people’ (The White House: 2012). This declaration echoes statements made by every

administration since that of President Eisenhower. This emphasis on a distinct separation between the Cuban state and the people facilitates the conviction that the revolutionary government lacks support in the populace and thus is destined to collapse.

The belief in the ultimate failure of the Cuban state

Soon after the revolutions in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya in the spring of 2011, the idea of a 'Cuban Spring' was born. However, the idea that the Cuban people would revolt against their government was not new. It has been a popular idea in the United States for many years. A *Havana Times* writer put it this way, 'Since the 60s, the commitment to confrontation has always been accompanied by farfetched political or economic analysis predicting the imminent end of the revolution. No one knows how many times they have repeated the words "now it's over"' (Ravsberg 2012). This conviction has been one of the main reasons given for the embargo. According to a 1960 memo from the Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs, the embargo was designed to deny 'money and supplies to Cuba, to decrease monetary and real wages, to bring about hunger, desperation and overthrow of government' (US Department of State 1958–1960).

Following this same thinking, President J.F. Kennedy and his advisors expected the Cuban people to support the invaders during the 1961 Bay of Pigs invasion. Even though some quarters of the U.S. government recognised that a majority of Cubans supported the revolutionary government, the president and his inner circle were largely convinced otherwise by the CIA. In March 1961 the CIA had reported that there was 'diminishing popular support of the Castro government'. The report went as far as to say that 'fewer than 20 percent of the people' support Castro, and that 'many Cubans think that it is possible that Castro will soon fall'. The report then predicted that during the invasion 'approximately 75 to 80 percent of the militia units will defect when it becomes evident that the real fight against Castro has begun' (National Security Archive). Consequently, the decision of the Cuban people to resist the invasion and side with their new government shocked many of Washington's highest officials. The lack of this local support is frequently cited as one of the most important causes of the failure of the invasion.

Yet, the idea that the United States could engender revolution in Cuba continued to dominate American policy toward Cuba. Operation Mongoose, begun just after the Bay of Pigs failure, relied on the same underlying premise. The stated objective of the operation was 'to help the Cubans overthrow the Communist regime from within Cuba and institute a new government with which the United States can live in peace'. The document states that in order for

this operation to work '[i]t must have the sympathetic support of the majority of the Cuban people, and make this fact known to the outside world'. Despite the recent failure of the Bay of Pigs the document argues that, 'the majority of Cubans are not for the present regime' (U.S. Department of State 1961–1963). Furthermore, Brigadier General Edward Lansdale told the president that the report 'aims for a revolt which can take place in Cuba by October 1962' (quoted in Pious 2001). Over the next decade the CIA executed a series of varied, and often bizarre, attacks on Cuba designed to bring about the end of the revolutionary government.⁸

Even though the evidence must have been mounting against this theory, Washington officials continued to expect the collapse of the revolutionary government. In 1964, Secretary of State Dean Rusk declared that the United States viewed the Cuban government under Castro as 'temporary' (quoted in Zeiler 2000: 65). This thinking continued to be voiced in the U.S. during the Cold War, prompting many other efforts to hasten the end of the Castro government.

When the end of the Soviet Union created an economic crisis in Cuba the decline of the Cuban state was seen as even more inevitable. In most cases, Washington's account of the situation on the island was fairly accurate given that the magnitude of the actual crisis was immense, making it unnecessary to exaggerate the economic devastation on the island. However, the assumption that this would cause mass insurrection was once again widely repeated. Cuban-Americans celebrated. A popular saying at the time in Miami was "En los noventa, Fidel revienta" (In the nineties, Fidel bursts)' (quoted in Walsh 2012: 134). In 1992 Andres Oppenheimer wrote a famous book entitled, *Castro's Final Hour: The Secret Story Behind the Coming Downfall of Communist Cuba*. Following this logic, the 1992 Cuban Democracy Act (CDA) was designed to inflict the final wound on a dying state. Track I of the Act was based on the idea that the backing of the Soviet Union had helped Cuba withstand the embargo and now that the USSR was no longer supporting Havana, the government would fall. According to Cuba scholars, Marifeli Pérez-Stable and Ana Covarrubias Velasco, the 'act was flawed by wishful thinking. Orthodox Marxism and embargo supporters aside, economic crises alone have never determined societal change anywhere. Castro always excelled in politics and nowhere did the CDA acknowledge the intangible resources still at his disposal' (Pérez-Stable and Velasco 2011: 28).

Post Cold War policy continued to embrace the logic that the revolutionary government was on its last legs and just needed a 'push' from the United States to topple it. The 1996 Helms Burton Act was also designed to hasten the 'inevitable end' of the revolutionary government by penalising foreign companies that were involved with Cuba. The 2003 and 2006 reports of the Commission for Assistance to a Free Cuba likewise predicted that Cubans would soon overthrow

their government and that the U.S. government could facilitate the process. The 2006 Report of the Commission stated, 'The civic opposition movement is creating momentum for democratic change in Cuba. With our offer of support, advice, and help to all who seek democratic change in Cuba, we hope to add to this momentum and to keep pace with the Cuban people as they press for democratic change' (Commission for Assistance to a Free Cuba 2006).

Ironically, the report also predicted 'Fidel Castro and his inner circle have begun a gradual but intrinsically unstable process of succession' (Commission for Assistance to a Free Cuba 2006). When Fidel Castro fell ill in the summer of 2006 and 'temporarily transferred' power to his brother, people celebrated in Miami, convinced that this meant the end of Cuba's revolutionary government (Goodnough 2006). Once that succession had clearly succeeded and Raúl Castro became the country's permanent leader, the same people then predicted that Raúl would be unable to hold the country together for long or that the government would still fall upon Fidel's death. The director of the Center for a Free Cuba, Frank Calzon emphasised the problems Raúl Castro would have maintaining control. He stated, 'I would caution that rather than celebrate, we should consider how we can be of help to the people of the island, how we can do what we can to prevent bloodshed' (News 2006).

Thus, when, following the Arab revolutions in the spring of 2011, the rhetoric shifted slightly, the underlying message remained the same – the Cuban regime is on a precipice and the United States can make the difference.

Conclusion

The idea behind the notion of a 'Cuban Spring', that anti-government dissidents will use the Internet, cell phones, and social media to foment a popular uprising on the island, modelled after the 'Arab Spring', is ultimately predicated on a particular understanding of Cuba that portrays an imminent collapse of the Cuban experiment. Analyses that predict this event in Cuba rely on problematic assumptions about Cuba and do not take into account the uniqueness of the Cuban situation. Further scrutiny of the condition of communications technology in Cuba, the presence of civil society, the strength of the opposition movement and political opinion on the island complicate the predictions of a 'Cuban Spring'.

The idea of a 'Cuban Spring' in American political discourse turns on imperial hubris and broader paternalistic understandings of Cuba and the relationship between the state and the Cuban people. Since the 1960s, American foreign policy has been guided by the conviction that the Cuban state is on the verge of collapse and ideas about the potential catalyst role of U.S. policy in this regard.

The conviction that a ‘Cuban Spring’ is probable and the idea that the United States could engender revolution in Cuba via communications technology is thus part of a broader historical narrative that has been a part of the U.S. understanding of Cuba for longer than five decades.

Notes

1. We thank Naomi Schiller of Temple University, discussant for a presentation of an earlier version of this paper at the Works in Progress in Latin American History and Society (WiPLASH) at New York University, for this insight. We also thank the anonymous reviewer for his/her comments and suggestions.
2. After being cancelled by the George W. Bush administration in 2003 they were reinstated by the Obama administration in 2011.
3. According to Otero and O’Byrne forms of civil society in Cuba are ‘unorganized dissidence, prodemocracy and human rights groups, seeds of opposition political parties, the regrowth of religious activity, and independent press, and the microentrepreneurial sector’ (36). See especially pages 39–49 of their article for a comprehensive summary of groups they see operating in civil society.
4. According to the Cuba poll, conducted in 1994, 50 per cent of Cubans valued equality over freedom, and 38 per cent valued freedom first (Whitefield and Sheridan 2008: 101).
5. The majority of remittances come from family abroad in the United States, and the amount of remittances permitted by U.S. law has also fluctuated greatly since the 1990s.
6. *Gaceta Oficial de la Republica de Cuba*, 2 November 2011. For an analysis of recent economic reforms see Richard E. Feinberg, ‘Reaching Out: Cuba’s new economy and the international response’, Brookings Institution November 2011; and Pavel Vidal Alejandro, ‘Cuban Economic Policy under the Raúl Castro Government’, p. 55. Available at http://www.ide.go.jp/Japanese/Publish/Download/Report/2009/pdf/2009_408_ch2.pdf. (Accessed 6 July 2010.)
7. See, for example, Christopher A. Vaughan, ‘Cartoon Cuba: Race, gender and political opinion leadership in Judge 1898’, *African Journalism Studies* 24, no. 2 (2003): 195–217; Louis A. Pérez Jr., ‘Fear and Loathing of Fidel Castro: Sources of US policy toward Cuba’, *Journal of Latin American Studies* 34 (2002), 227–254; Louis A. Pérez Jr., *Cuba in the American Imagination: Metaphor and the imperial ethos* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2008); Lars Schoultz, ‘Blessings of Liberty: The United States and the promotion of democracy in Cuba’, *Journal of Latin American Studies* 34 (2002), 397–425.
8. The CIA apparently tried everything from assassination attempts via poisoned cigars to attempting to make Castro’s beard fall out.

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