EDITORIAL

THIS ISSUE

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This edition of IJCS has the common theme of reform and change in Cuba, but addresses these issues from diverse perspectives. Two articles by the Cuban economists José Luís Rodríguez and C. Juan Triana Cordovi examine the economic and social dimensions of recent developments in the island. Lana Wylie and Lisa Glidden question the notion of a ‘Cuban Spring’. Velia Cecilia Bobes examines the ‘civil society’ debate and its implications and, finally, Karen S. Christian analyses the themes of gender and sexuality in a 2002 book by the contemporary Cuban novelist Ena Lucía Portela.

José Luis Rodríguez, ‘The Recent Transformations in the Cuban Economy’

Rodríguez, currently an analyst at the Centre for the Study of the World Economy (CIEM) in Havana, comes to this subject with the immense hindsight and experience he gained as Minister of Finance and then Minister of the Economy during the period 1995–2009. Having played a major role in managing the Cuban economy during the ‘Special Period’ and overseeing the island’s recovery in the second half of the 1990s, he is especially qualified to make an informed and objective assessment of the current changes. The article opens with the important observation that these ‘transformations’ are not part of a ‘transition’, as in the former communist countries, but an updating of the island’s socialist revolution in response to prevailing circumstances. Consistent with the opening statement, the author begins his analysis with the early trajectory of the revolution and the internal and external challenges of building socialism in an underdeveloped country. This gives a context for Cuba’s responses to the unprecedented problems it faced in the ‘Special Period’ after the collapse of communism. The author notes that in addition to the extraordinary, and sometimes undesirable, measures that had to be taken to address the crisis, Cuba’s difficulties were compounded
because reforms to the system that were planned before the communist debacle were never completed, leaving a double challenge for policy makers. While the stabilisation that took place during the ‘Special Period’ could be regarded as a success in certain economic and social areas, it did not provide a model for future development. Continuing external financial imbalances; low levels of efficiency; poor labour productivity; insufficient growth in agricultural and industrial production; restrictions on consumption; over centralised bureaucracy, etc. are all structural problems that need to be addressed. Cuba’s policy makers have therefore decided to use a combination of decentralisation, reform of the state administration, land reform, labour deregulation and market openings for individuals and enterprises to engage these issues, in the hope of creating the conditions for a ‘sustainable socialist society’. The author concludes that while this new initiative will face enormous obstacles, it has socialist underpinnings and by seeking to preserve such factors as solidarity, it will offer better prospects for the population than a neo-liberal solution.

**C. Juan Triana Cordoví, ‘A Lot Done but Much More To Do: An Assessment of the Transformation So Far’**

Triana of the Centre for the Study of the Cuban Economy, University of Havana, has had a long and distinguished career analysing the Cuban economy and is well placed to contextualise and consider the implications of the current reforms. The article begins by pointing out that the changes have precedents during the period of the revolution, but the background to their current implementation is qualitatively different, as they are complemented by profound institutional modifications that present challenges to the political and ideological structure of socialist Cuba. For instance, how will the concept of prosperity be judged in the ‘new’ Cuba? Will the concept of collective prosperity prevail or will there be increasing acceptance of private property? Such questions and processes imply a paradigm shift, but one the author claims still seeks to keep the socialist ideal alive. The main catalyst behind the changes is identified as the external environment and, particularly, the inability of the economy to resolve its negative balance of trade and the debt that has ensued. Internal measures are seen as an attempt to rectify this external crisis and their objective is sustainable economic growth. Citing a World Bank statement, the author implies that the Cuban leadership should make their intentions clear to the population and seek their support, but no country is identified as a successful example of this process in action. Key to promoting growth is investment, but internally this is difficult to raise because of various factors including low levels of savings and pent up demand for more consumption. This leaves foreign investment which, in turn,
requires a series of internal reforms, some of which are being enacted. Precisely because of these internal implications, such investment was seen as an evil in the past, but the author notes that evidence suggests that what has taken place already has had a positive effect on economic development.

Importantly the author reminds us that every successful market economy has been so because of judicious state intervention and regulation, and in a socialist economy this will have to be even more rigorous: for example, measures to prevent the concentration of wealth in the hands of a few. These observations and statements are followed by a detailed analysis supported by figures and statistics on Cuba’s current economic situation and the processes that are developing as part of the reforms. External relations with countries such as Brazil and Venezuela are also identified as important variables. The article concludes that Cuba has charted a way forward into the future and some predictions are made concerning possible outcomes in the short term.

These two highly informed articles on the recent changes in Cuba give a measured but optimistic perspective of the future for this island under its remodelled socialist trajectory. Cuba’s leadership during the revolution has usually been held in high regard by objective observers for its forethought, preparation, consultation and caution when implementing new policies that will impact significantly on the population. This round of measures is no exception and, faced with the pressures of practical policy making, their logic is defensible. However, one should not forget that market socialist experiments have been notoriously difficult to implement in the context of neo-liberal globalisation, are theoretically disputed within Marxism, and the unresolved global crisis could present unplanned variables to those who believe structured change is possible in one country.

Lana Wylie and Lisa Glidden, ‘The “Cuban Spring” Fallacy: The Current Incarnation of a Persistent Fallacy’

The ‘colour revolutions’ (Ukraine, Iran, Georgia, Lebanon, etc.), the Arab Spring and mass protests in general of the past ten years or more, have made significant use of digital media, (the internet, cell phones, etc.) and social media networks, to organise and enhance their objectives. This article questions if these forms of mass communication could play a role in helping to foment a ‘Cuban Spring’; something that is envisaged in certain quarters in the US government and its various agencies, sections of the US media and groups opposed to the Cuban government. Indeed, the US has been active for many years in using
communications technology as a means to undermine revolutionary Cuba. This includes radio and television broadcasting to the island and interference with Cuba’s international communications, and it is assumed that if the Cuban population have more access to the internet and other digital media it will help achieve the necessary political connectivity for a popular uprising against the socialist government. The authors of this article argue, however, that this assumption is flawed in various ways. First, recent research suggests that the use of communications technology alone is not sufficient to explain the collapse, or survival, of state power. Bahrain is cited as an example of a high tech society where a mass popular revolt failed. Second, even if this kind of technology plays an important role in processes of political change, Cubans have limited access to such technologies and this situation is not likely to change rapidly. To further counter the ‘more communications, more political change’ view it is also argued that Cuba is already very socially interconnected by the nature of its society, and information spreads quickly through word of mouth and old technologies such as telephones. Third, it is assumed that technology leads to a growth in ‘civil society’ and democracy, but the authors note that a US conception of ‘civil society’ differs from the one understood in Cuba, leaving such a perspective misaligned with reality. Fourth, and perhaps the most fundamental flaw, is the belief that Cubans are totally dissatisfied with their government and the system under which they live and are poised for revolt. But, on the contrary, while they acknowledge their problems, they generally support the revolution and what it has achieved in the social sphere. This last flawed assumption in particular is founded on a misconception of Cuba, underlain by a political discourse based on imperial hubris and paternalistic understandings of the island. Perhaps a case of the superpower believing its own propaganda. The authors might have added to this well-argued piece that US ‘democracy promotion’, as fostered through such agencies as the National Endowment for Democracy, is more to do with using democracy as hegemony; ‘a global good’ which provides a façade of legitimacy behind which wider Western foreign policy objectives, often with exploitative intent, can be implemented through the ‘approved’ democratic government that has been manoeuvred into place by external powers.

**Velia Cecelia Bobes, ‘Cuban Civil Society during and beyond the Special Period’**

The tightly integrated, state-managed Cuban political economy that had existed since the 1970s suffered a huge shock with the collapse of communism in the early 1990s. The initial and visible impact was economic, but as resources,
organisations and processes that had been fundamental to running the Cuban system came under increasing strain, new spaces began to open for non-state led activities and initiatives. From a political perspective based in the liberal tradition, it is precisely in such spaces that ‘civil society’ can emerge. A social pluralisation in which economic, religious, sexual, professional, discursive and, to a lesser extent in Cuba, political groups take root and establish their own identity, and the nature of the links between themselves, the state and the rest of society. With the rise of market liberalism on a global scale, the replacement of dictatorship by democracy in Latin America and Cuba’s own crisis and market-orientated reforms, the ‘civil society’ debate has become increasingly relevant to Cubans. However, as the author notes, Cuban scholars have tended to seek to challenge the liberal discourse by introducing socialist conceptions of ‘civil society’, in which mass, professional and social organisations are seen as areas of ‘civil’ action. As Dilla (1999: 31) suggests, ‘civil society in Cuba has emerged from the bosom of the socialist project and numerous participation spaces characterized by solidarity and collective action on behalf of the common good’. The author of the previous article explores this idea further and briefly examines socialism’s theoretical alternative understanding of ‘civil society’. However, the most recent round of reforms has opened a more receptive space for the Western liberal conception of ‘civil society’, by taking personal gain and material acquisition from the list of socialist heresies, and encouraging such behaviour as part of a new market socialist development model. Echoing the previous article, the author argues that access to electronic media, although limited in Cuba, is creating more opportunities for civil society actors. Furthermore, transnational processes such as ‘cultural globalisation’, ‘global civil society’ and the experiences learned from the Cuban diaspora, are reinforcing and redefining civil society in Cuba. This will have implications for the future economic and political trajectory of the island. However, whether such an opening will lead to a better society for all Cubans is debatable. It would appear today that those societies that have the highest ratio of Western ‘civil society’ and private activity to the state sector are the most unequal and disfunctional, especially when one takes into account the undemocratic supranational forces of globalisation. It is worth remembering that from a Marxist perspective the evolution of socialism presumes the absorption of civil society and the state into ‘political society’, where citizens can begin to control processes to not only satisfy the ‘general will’, but also to consciously provide opportunities for the creative development of ‘social individuals’. Ideologically contested definitions of civil society are central to the current debate in Cuba on the future of the revolution.
Karen S. Christian, ’Beyond Essence: Performing Gender and Sexuality in Ena Lucia Portela’s Cien botellas en una pared’

This article examines the effect of the stresses of the ‘Special Period’ on gender and sexuality as portrayed in the above novel. The author argues that the novelist seeks to dismantle the traditional patriarchal structures that are claimed to have dominated Cuba’s attitude towards sexuality during the revolutionary period. The ‘Special Period’ was certainly a time when relatively stable and predictable Cuban socialist society was destabilised and writers and artists have responded in literature, cinema and other art forms to this period of unavoidable austerity and systemic convulsion. As the author notes, Portela’s novel, in its attempt to deconstruct Cuban sexual norms in the context of extraordinary circumstances, does not simply seek to use new spaces to legitimise and represent alternative sexualities, but rather creates an unresolved flux in which meanings become deceptive and contradictory. For example, diversity is represented as the norm rather than the exception, but this is presented through allegory and metaphor in which while one thing is said another is inferred. This is linked to the concept of the unreliable narrator, but it is not just the author/narrator who is introducing uncertainties and ambiguities, but also suggests that the subject itself is volatile and not amenable to any consistent interpretation. In this complex and imprecise process, gender and its relationship with biological sex do not follow predictable trends as lesbians, gay men and ‘macho’ heterosexuals break stereotypical boundaries in what the author calls ‘gender-bending performances’. Despite the anti-essentialist view of gender which prevails in the narrative, it gives a strong voice and conceptual framework to lesbian relations, which Portela argues have been particularly marginalised during the revolution, even if through the rather unstable sexual prism which characterises the novel. As Christian shows, the post communist trauma in Cuba has had profound effects on all aspects of life, including sexuality, which have delinked with revolutionary norms and directions. She maintains that aspects of Cuban policy towards non-heterosexual behaviour in the past has been too constrained and formalised, but notes the recent progressive activities and programmes of CENESEX (led by Mariela Castro Espin) and other organisations. However, one should be careful in assuming that emerging liberal-style civil society and the quest for individual identities can alone achieve, without a collective revolutionary context, the equality that is being striven for.

All the above articles address important aspects of Cuba’s current process of change and realignment of the revolution. What is perhaps most encouraging is that it would appear that, unlike countries that passed through transition
from one system to another, Cuba has given itself time to consider how it can manage and adapt to new circumstances, while seeking to remain within its revolutionary trajectory.

Reference