ACADEMIC ARTICLE

CUBAN EMIGRATION TO THE UNITED STATES, PART 1, FROM 1860 TO 1989: A STATISTICAL AND COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

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Abstract

Since 1959, Cuban emigration seems to have been the subject of two consensuses. First, the Cuban Revolution would have resulted in a significant migratory movement towards the United States. Second, that this would reflect the rejection of the process of social transformation structured around a one-party political system put in place by Fidel Castro. The migration statistics of the US authorities, available for the period from 1860 to 2019, will shed light on this question by comparing the various flows from Cuba at different times (1860–1959, 1960–89, 1990–2019). Likewise, a comparative analysis of migratory flows emitted by the countries of the region will assess the relevance of these two hypotheses.

Keywords: Cuba, United States, emigration, America, statistics, comparative analysis

Introduction

Since the Cuban Revolution in 1959, the Cuban migration issue has been the subject of debate. Two postulates seem to have become widely accepted. First of

all, it is commonly accepted that the process of social transformation undertaken under the leadership of Fidel Castro since coming to power and the establishment of a one-party political system were the cause of a migratory phenomenon, unprecedented in the country's history, mainly to the United States. Secondly, a significant proportion of observers of Cuba consider that the massive emigration of Cubans since 1959 expresses the rejection of the political, economic and social system currently in force in the largest island of the Caribbean.

The statistics relating to Cuban emigration to the United States, available for the period from 1860 to 2019, with the exception of the years 1900–19, make it possible to assess the relevance of these interpretations. What was the migratory reality in Cuba before 1959 compared to the rest of the American continent? Is Cuban emigration from 1959 exceptional in comparison with previous figures and departures from other countries in the region? Are there objective factors encouraging emigration to the United States specific to Cuba from 1959? What was the migratory reality during the “Special Period” in general and more precisely during the famous *Balseros* crisis in 1994? What is the reality of migratory flows today? Finally, can we use Cuban emigration to assess the adherence of the population to the political and socio-economic regime present in the island?

After a presentation of the initial postulate, three chronological lenses will structure this study. First, it will be necessary to analyse Cuban emigration during the period 1860–1959, that is to say from the beginning of the decade which marks the outbreak of the First War of Independence in Cuba (1868–78) until the end of the reign of the military regime of Fulgencio Batista in 1959. A second step will focus on the Cuban migratory reality from 1960 until 1989, that is to say the imposition of the first economic sanctions by the Eisenhower administration until the year of the fall of the Berlin Wall. Finally, this analysis will end with the migratory reality of Cuba from the end of the Cold War to the present day (1990–2019).

Presentation of the Initial Postulate

According to the United States, Cuban emigration to their territory since 1959 is a fact that must be interpreted from a political angle. Understood this way, Cuban emigration would demonstrate the rejection on the part of a substantial part of the population of the political and socio-economic system in force on the island, which is said to have driven many Cubans into exile. Thus, according to the State Department, “in the years following the 1959 Revolution, several hundred thousands Cubans fled the island” (Department of State 2000). Washington stresses that this migratory phenomenon continues to this day: “For decades, Cubans have fled Cuba, often by raft, seeking freedom in the United States” (United States Accounting Office 1995).

This opinion is shared by the demographer Gérard-François Dumont, Professor at Sorbonne University, for whom Cuban emigration since 1959 is mainly due to political reasons:

In Cuba, the cumulative migratory deficit for the period 1959–2015 stands at over one million, or 12% of the average population during this period. In less than half a century [sic], one in eight Cubans has therefore chosen to leave the island and turn their backs on the Castro Revolution. Four-fifths opt for the United States which, in the periods when this country accepts them, welcome these immigrants as “refugees”, victims of the communist dictatorship. . . . Such an intensity of exodus can be explained mainly by the liberticidal nature of the Castro regime. . . . It is facilitated because Castro does not wish to prevent the emigration of possible opponents. (Dumont 2015)

Professor Felix Masud-Piloto, historian at DePaul University of Illinois, offers a more nuanced perspective and points out in his study *From Welcomed Exiles to Illegal Immigrants: Cuban Migration to the US, 1959–1995* that “the Cuban migration was triggered primarily by complex revolutionary changes in Cuba and the United States’ response to such changes, which included, among other measures, encouraging the migration”. The scholar explains the two reasons for such a policy: “To destabilize Castro’s government by draining it of vital human resources (such as physicians, teachers and technicians); and to discredit the regime through encouraging the flight of thousands from a communist dictatorship to a capitalist democracy.” Washington has allocated significant resources to this policy and “assumed long-term financial responsibility in assisting Cubans to resettle” in US territory (Masud-Piloto 1996: 2).

Thus, by way of example, of the 6,286 doctors available to the island in 1959 for a total population of 6 million inhabitants – i.e. a ratio of one doctor to 1,064 people – in the space of three years, 1,402 of them chose to leave the country for the United States, attracted by better professional opportunities and a favourable migration policy put in place by Washington for Cuban executives from all sectors (Rojas Ochoa 2015).

This assumption is commonly considered a reality by the press. Thus, according to Agence France Presse, “more than two million Cubans have emigrated over the past half century, out of a population that today numbers 11.2 million. Nearly 80% of them went to the United States, particularly to Florida, 150 kilometers north of the island” (Agence France Presse 2017).

These different interpretative frameworks should be compared to the reality of migration statistics.

Cuban Emigration to the United States from 1860 to 1959

1860–1869

According to official statistics from the US Department of Homeland Security, from 1860 to 1869, 3,420 Cubans chose to emigrate to the United States. The Caribbean island, located 150 kilometres from the coast of Florida and then populated by 1.2 million people, has always considered the country as a land of natural asylum for both historical and geographic reasons. By comparison, Mexico, a demographic juggernaut (7.7 million inhabitants) which shares an immense border with the powerful neighbour, recorded only 1,957 departures over the same period. Haiti (0.9 million inhabitants), located in the east of the island, registered only 78 candidates for emigration to the north. Jamaica, located to the south of Cuba, only observed 61 departures. The whole of South America (18 million inhabitants), from Colombia to Argentina, produced 1,536 exits to the United States, that is to say, less than half than the Caribbean island. Thus, during this decade the number of migrants leaving Cuba was 106 times higher than left a giant such as Brazil (7.2 million – 32 departures). As for Central America (1.7 million inhabitants), it had only 70 departures (US Department of Homeland Security 2020: table 2).

1870–1879

From 1870 to 1879, a period marked by the First War of Independence (1868–78), 8,705 people left Cuba for US territory, an increase of 150 per cent over the previous decade. Up to 5,133 people left Mexico over the same period. Haiti saw 149 departures and Jamaica 257. South America registered only 1,109 departures, almost eight times less than the Caribbean island. For example, Brazil generated a migratory flow of 219 people, Colombia (2.2 million) of 196, Venezuela (1.5 million) of 190 and Peru (1.9 million) of 127. As for Central America, it observed only 202 departures (US Department of Homeland Security 2020: table 2).

1880–1889

From 1880 to 1889, Cuba recorded a total of 20,134 departures, an increase of about 130 per cent from the previous decade. For its part, Mexico saw its migration figure drop to 2,405. Haiti had 255 exits, while Jamaica saw 355 people migrate to the United States. Central America observed a total emigration of 359 people during the same period, while South America produced 1,954 departures. Colombia was the main source of human capital in this part of the world with 1,210 exits (US Department of Homeland Security 2020: table 2).

1890–1899

For the decade 1890–9, marked by the Island’s Second War of Independence (1895–8) and the end of Spanish colonial rule, Cuban emigration to the United States continued to grow, with a total of 23,669 exits, an increase of around 17 per cent. Mexico saw its migratory flow drop to just 734, or 32 times less than the Caribbean island. Haiti (101) and Jamaica (223) in turn observed fewer departures than in previous years. This downward trend also affected Central America with a total of 674 departures and South America with 1,389 departures (US Department of Homeland Security 2020: table 2).

Ranking by number of emigrants to the United States from 1860 to 1899

	Country and region	Population in millions of inhabitants		1860–1869	1870–1879	1880–1889	1890–1899	1860–1899
		1850	1900					
1	Cuba	1.2	1.6	3 420	8 705	20 134	23 669	55 928
2	Mexico	7.7	13.6	1 957	5 133	2 405	734	10 229
3	South America	18	39.2	1 536	1 109	1 954	1 389	5 988
4	Central America	1.7	3.5	70	202	359	674	1305

Sources: US Department of Homeland Security, 2020: table 2; Brea 2003.

Thus, during this period of 40 years, Cuba occupied the first place in the region (Mexico, Central America, South America and the Caribbean) in terms of migrants leaving for the United States, ahead of a demographic giant sharing a common border with the destination country such as Mexico, and another more distant demographic colossus, such as Brazil. This reality shows that Cuba has historically been a land of emigration to the United States, far more so than any other nation in the area from Rio Bravo to Tierra del Fuego.

1920–1959

As official United States government statistics are not available for Cuba for the period 1900–19, it is now appropriate to focus on the decade 1920–1929. Cuba was then a formally independent republic, but it was in reality under the rule of Washington, the United States having imposed the Platt Amendment

on the island since 1902. Compared to the last decade of the nineteenth century, Cuba reduced its migratory loss, with only 12,769 departures to the North. In contrast, Mexico saw its emigration grow exponentially, with no less than 498,945 departures, an increase of 269 per cent compared to the previous decade. Central America saw 16,511 people emigrate and South America 43,025. Despite this decline, Cuba nevertheless sent three times more emigrants to the United States than a country such as Brazil (4,627), a nation which produced the highest migrant numbers Latin America, after Mexico and the Caribbean island. From 1920 to 1929, Cuba occupied second place in the ranking behind Mexico (US Department of Homeland Security 2020: table 2).

For the period from 1930 to 1939, Cuban emigration to the north continued to decline with 10,641 exits. Mexico's migratory emission to the United States was a fifteenth of what it had been, with only 32,709 departures, probably due to the consequences of the crisis of 1929. Cuba's neighbours produced less migrants. Thus, the Dominican Republic, whose statistics appear for the first time for this decade, saw 1,161 of its nationals emigrate to the northern neighbour. Haiti had only 207 departures. Central America produced a total of 6,840 migrants. As for South America, its number dropped to 9,990. For this decade, Cuba retained its second place behind Mexico (US Department of Homeland Security 2020: table 2).

On the other hand, the decade 1940–1949 saw Cuban emigration explode compared to previous years, with no less than 25,976 departures, an increase of 144 per cent, thus exceeding in absolute numbers the record of the nineteenth century. This figure is higher than that of all the other Caribbean nations combined (20,218 emigrants), that of Central America (20,135) and that of South America (19,662). Mexico almost doubled its number of emigrants with 56,158 departures. Once again, the Caribbean island ranked second on the continent (US Department of Homeland Security 2020: table 2).

From 1950 to 1959, Cuban emigration to the United States reached 73,221 exits, an increase of 181 per cent over the previous decade. Mexico, with 273,847 departures, observed an increase of 387 per cent. The Dominican Republic exceeded 10,000 exits (10,219), representing growth of 112 per cent. Cuba thus overtook Central America (40,201) but for the first time came behind South America (78,418) (US Department of Homeland Security 2020: table 2). Professor Felix Masud-Piloto says 26,527 Cubans left the island in 1959, after Fidel Castro came to power (Masud Piloto 1996: xxvi). Thus, from 1950 to 1958, 46,694 people left Cuba for the United States. Even with this reduction, Cuba retains its second place in the standings.

Ranking by number of emigrants to the United States from 1920 to 1959

Country and region	Population in millions of inhabitants in 1950	1920–1929	1930–1939	1940–1949	1950–1959	1959	Total
1 Mexico	27.7	498 945	32 709	56 158	273 847		861 659
2 South America	109.4	43 025	9 990	19 662	78 418		151 095
3 Cuba	5.9	12 769	10 641	25 976	73 221	26 527	122 607
4 Central America	9.3	16 511	6 840	20 135	40 201		83 687

Sources: US Department of Homeland Security 2020: table 2; Brea, 2003.

Thus, during the 40-year period from 1920 to 1959, in terms of the number of departures to the United States, Cuba moved from first place on the continent stretching from Mexico to Argentina, to second place. The Caribbean island produced more migrants than Central America during these four decades. It also overtook South America, except for the period from 1920 to 1929 and from 1950 to 1959. Cuba maintained its profile as a nation of emigration, mainly to the United States.

Cuban Emigration to the United States from 1960 to 1989

The Historical Context

Before addressing the issue of migration, it is important to recall the historical context of the decade 1960–9. In 1959, the Cuban Revolution led by Fidel Castro came to power and began a process of radical social transformation that challenged the established order, existing socio-economic structures and class privileges. The recovery of the country's natural resources through nationalisations generated strong tensions with the Eisenhower administration, which resolutely opposed the new regime, thus creating a situation of conflict from the first months. In March 1960, the White House took the formal decision to overthrow the government of Osvaldo Dorticós and Prime Minister Fidel Castro and launched a clandestine war operation against the island with a campaign of terrorism and sabotage, creating a feeling of insecurity among the population (Eisenhower 1960: 850–1).

In July and October 1960, Washington imposed economic sanctions on the island by first removing the sugar quota, the country's main source of income, and ending all exports and imports between the two nations (Paarlberg 1960: 979–80;

Goodpaster 1960: 1089–90). In January 1961, the United States decided to sever diplomatic relations with Havana (Hurwich 1961: document 7). In April 1961, a paramilitary contingent of nearly 1,500 men trained and armed by the CIA invaded the Bay of Pigs, an operation intended to overthrow revolutionary power but which ended in bitter failure within 72 hours (Kennedy 1961: document 157). In October 1962, as the White House continued its hostile policy against Cuba by increasing acts of aggression of all kinds, the missile crisis erupted, driving the world to the brink of a nuclear cataclysm. After 13 days of tension, a solution was finally found between Washington and Moscow for a withdrawal of the nuclear arsenal from the island (Khrushchev 1962: document 102).

Thus, during the first years of the Cuban Revolution, the island lived in an atmosphere of permanent tension, marked by the hostility of its powerful neighbour and the consequences of acts of economic and paramilitary aggression. This unprecedented geopolitical context can be considered to have been an objective factor in encouraging emigration for part of the population.

On the side of the United States, the administration of John F. Kennedy pulled out all the stops by creating in February 1961 the Cuban Refugee Program which could benefit any person of Cuban nationality who left Cuba on or after 1 January 1959 (Mitchell 1962). As the official text indicates, this government policy is unprecedented:

For the first time in its history the United States has become a country of first asylum for large numbers of displaced persons as thousands of Cuban refugees have found political refuge here. For the first time, also, the United States Government. has found it necessary to develop a program to help refugees from another nation in this hemisphere. (Mitchell 1962)

According to its director John F. Thomas, “The Cuban Refugee Program is unique in that it was developed through the utilization of the services of existing agencies to as great an extent as possible, though the overall responsibility rested with of the Department of Health, Education and Welfare” (Thomas).

The objective of the Program was to meet the needs of Cuban emigrants by providing them with all the necessary assistance. The political and ideological stakes were high: to demonstrate the superiority of capitalism over communism. This Program was detailed in nine points:

1. Provide all possible assistance to voluntary relief agencies in providing daily necessities for many of the refugees, for resettling as many of them as possible, and for securing jobs for them.

2. Obtain the assistance of both private and governmental agencies to provide useful employment opportunities for displaced Cubans, consistent with the overall employment situation prevailing in Florida.
3. Provide supplemental funds for the resettlement of refugees in other areas, including transportation and adjustment costs to the new communities and for their eventual return to Miami for repatriation to their homeland as soon as that is again possible.
4. Furnish financial assistance to meet, basic maintenance requirements of needy Cuban refugee families in the Miami area as required in communities of resettlement, administered through Federal, State, and local channels and based on standards used in the community involved.
5. Provide for essential health services through the financial assistance program supplemented by child health, public health services, and other arrangements as needed.
6. Furnish Federal assistance for local public school operating costs related to the unforeseen impact of Cuban refugee children on local teaching facilities.
7. Initiate needed measures to augment training and educational opportunities for Cuban refugees, including physicians, teachers, and those with other professional backgrounds.
8. Provide financial aid for the care and protection of unaccompanied children – the most defenseless and troubled group among the refugee population.
9. Undertake a surplus food distribution program to be administered by the county welfare department, with surplus foods distributed by public and voluntary agencies to needy refugees. (Mitchell 1962)

No other national group has benefited from a program of this magnitude. To this was added the adoption of the Cuban Adjustment Act in 1966, another piece of exceptional legislation.

The Cuban Adjustment Act

On 2 November 1966, in accordance with the hostile policy of President Lyndon B. Johnson, the United States Congress decided to adopt the Cuban Adjustment Act – still in force to this day – which grants special status to all Cubans who abandon their country from 1 January 1959. This legislation, unique in the world, allows any Cuban citizen who emigrates legally or illegally to the United States to obtain permanent resident status after one year and one day, as well as welfare assistance. One can consider that this text constitutes objectively a tool of incitement to legal and illegal emigration. Here is an excerpt:

To adjust the status of Cuban refugees to that of lawful permanent residents of the United States, and for other purposes. . . . the status of any alien who is a native or citizen of Cuba and who has been inspected and admitted or paroled into the United States subsequent to January 1, 1959 and has been physically present in the United States for at least two years, may be adjusted by the Attorney General . . . to that of an alien lawfully admitted for permanent residence if the alien makes an application for such adjustment, and the alien is eligible to receive an immigrant visa and is admissible to the United States for permanent residence. . . . The provisions of this Act shall be applicable to the spouse and child of any alien described in this subsection, regardless of their citizenship and place of birth, who are residing with such alien in the United States. (United States Congress 1966)

Ricardo Alarcón de Quesada, President of the Cuban Parliament from 1993 to 2013, underlined the specific character of the Cuban Adjustment Act:

There are two fundamental elements in this legislation. First of all, we refer to a very specific date, and everyone knows what it means. What does it mean to accept people from that date?

This means that everyone who arrived earlier is excluded, and this was the second largest emigrant country to the United States. This law does not apply to those who arrived before January 1, 1959, and therefore cannot benefit from it.

Why are people of Cuban origin who arrived in the United States before this date excluded? Quite simply because they represented a very important population; otherwise, there would be no reason to set a date.

[Next], this law has a destabilizing dimension because it is the instrument of a policy that seeks to promote the emigration of Cubans to the United States.

The only category of people among all the inhabitants of the planet who have the privilege of being able to acquire legal residence in the United States, if they present themselves to the authorities, are those of Cuban origin.

The only country in the world to have this law which stimulates, promotes, seeks with great reinforcements of publicity and media campaigns and by other forms of incitement to provoke the emigration of Cubans, only Cubans, is the United States.

There were other incentive and assistance programs such as the Cuban Refugee Program, where housing and jobs were provided to emigrants, unlike what is reserved for any other immigrant who, in general, is neglected when he has legal status and imprisoned when he is in an irregular situation. They do not have these privileges. (Lamrani 2007: 48–9)

1960–1969

In view of these elements, what was the migratory reality of Cuba during the first 30 years of the Revolution? Here it is in numbers.

From 1960 to 1969, no less than 202,030 Cubans left the island for the United States, an increase of 175 per cent from the previous decade. By comparison, there were 83,522 departures from the Dominican Republic, an increase of 717 per cent over the same period. Likewise, 28,992 Haitians emigrated to the north, an increase of 665 per cent. With 62,218 exits, Jamaica saw an increase of 741 per cent. This migratory boom was not limited to the countries of the Caribbean since it affected almost the entire continent. Thus, 98,569 people emigrated from Central America, an increase of 145 per cent. In detail, Costa Rica, with 17,975 departures, observed an increase of 344 per cent, Belize (4,185) of 269 per cent, Guatemala (14,357) 242 per cent, Honduras (15,087) 183 per cent and El Salvador (4,185) 182 per cent (US Department of Homeland Security 2020: table 2).

South America, for its part, had 250,754 departures, an increase of 219 per cent. In detail, Argentina saw the departure of 49,384 people, a growth of 202 per cent. With 6,205 candidates for emigration, Bolivia saw a 124 per cent increase. Brazil, with 29,238 departures, saw its emigration to the United States increase by 153 per cent. As for Chile (12,384), its exits increased by 165 per cent. The same was true for Colombia (68,371, + 339 per cent), Ecuador (34,107, + 297 per cent), Peru (19,783, + 230 per cent), Uruguay (4,089, +298 per cent) and Venezuela (20,758, + 109 per cent) (US Department of Homeland Security 2020: table 2).

Number of emigrants to the United States from 1960 to 1969

	Country	Population in millions of inhabitants in 1960	Number of emigrants over the decade 1960-1969	Evolution compared to the previous decade (%)	% rank
1	Mexico	36.9	441 824	+61	19
2	Cuba	7	202 030	+175	14
3	Dominican Republic	3.2	83 522	+717	2
4	Colombia	16.9	68 371	+339	5
5	Jamaica	1.6	62 218	+741	1
6	Argentina	20.6	49 384	+202	11
7	Ecuador	4.4	34 107	+297	7

(Continued)

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	Country	Population in millions of inhabitants in 1960	Number of emigrants over the decade 1960-1969	Evolution compared to the previous decade (%)	% rank
8	Brazil	72.8	29 238	+153	16
9	Haiti	3.8	28 992	+665	3
10	Venezuela	7.6	20 758	+109	18
11	Peru	9.9	19 783	+230	10
12	Costa Rica	1.2	17 975	+344	4
13	Honduras	1.9	15 087	+183	12
14	Guatemala	4	14 357	+242	9
15	Chile	7.6	12 384	+165	15
16	Bolivia	3.4	6 205	+124	17
17	El Salvador	2.6	4 185	+182	13
18	Belize	0.09	4 185	+269	8
19	Uruguay	2.5	4 089	+298	6
	South America		250 754		
	Central America		98 569		

Sources: US Department of Homeland Security 2020: table 2; Brea 2003; World Bank 2020a, b, c.

At the end of the 1960s, Cuba still ranked second behind Mexico (441,824) in terms of migratory departures to the United States, despite the Cuban Refugee Program, the Cuban Adjustment Act, economic sanctions and the clandestine war carried out against the island. In terms of percentage increase over the previous decade, the Caribbean island was only fourteenth on the Latin American continent.

1970–1979

For the period from 1970 to 1979, 256,497 Cubans left their country for the United States, an increase of 26 per cent over the previous decade. Mexico, with 621,218 departures, saw growth of 40 per cent. For its part, the Dominican Republic produced 139,249 migrants, an increase of 66 per cent. Haiti saw the departure of 55,192 of its nationals to the United States, a growth of 90 per cent. Jamaica (130,226) saw an increase of 109 per cent. As for Central America, with 120,376 departures, its emigration increased by 22 per cent. In detail, Belize (6,747) observed an increase of 61 per cent, Guatemala (23,837) of 65 per cent and El Salvador (29,428) of 104 per cent. For South America (273,529), its emigration grew more modestly with an increase of only 9 per cent compared to the previous decade.

Some countries like Peru (25,311, + 27 per cent), Ecuador (47,464, + 39 per cent), Uruguay (8,416, + 105 per cent) or Guyana (38,278, + 742 per cent) have followed the same upward trend (US Department of Homeland Security 2020: table 2).

Number of emigrants to the United States from 1970 to 1979

	Country	Population in millions of inhabitants in 1970	Number of emigrants over the decade 1970–1979	Evolution compared to the previous decade (%)	% rank
1	Mexico	50.6	621 218	+40	9
2	Cuba	8.5	256 497	+26	12
3	Dominican Republic	4.4	139 249	+66	6
4	Jamaica	1.87	130 226	+109	2
5	Haiti	4.5	55 192	+90	5
6	Ecuador	6	47 464	+39	10
7	Guyana	0.7	38 278	+742	1
8	El Salvador	3.6	29 428	+104	4
9	Peru	13.2	25 311	+27	11
10	Guatemala	5.2	23 837	+65	7
11	Uruguay	2.8	8 416	+105	3
12	Belize	0.11	6 747	+61	8
	South America		273 529		
	Central America		120 376		

Sources: US Department of Homeland Security 2020: table 2; Brea 2003; World Bank 2020a, b, c.

At the end of the 1970s, Cuba retained its second place in the standings behind Mexico. In terms of percentage increase from the previous decade, the Caribbean island ranked twelfth in the hemisphere.

1980–1989

In 1980, amid political tensions with the United States and material dissatisfaction within Cuban society, the Mariel crisis arose, which resulted in the departure of around 125,000 Cubans. In April 1980, a group of six Cubans broke into the Peruvian embassy. During a police barrage to prevent the bus from rushing through the gate of the diplomatic compound, a police officer was hit by a bullet ricocheting off the vehicle and was killed. The Cuban government demanded that the organisers of the action be turned over to the authorities, which the

Peruvian ambassador refused to do. Havana then decided to withdraw its security personnel from the diplomatic representation, leading to an invasion of it by several thousand would-be emigrants (Copeland 1983: 1338–50).

Initially, the United States was not involved in this affair, which concerned only Cuba and Peru. President Jimmy Carter, who had taken a constructive stance towards the island since coming to power, was persuaded by his national security adviser, Zbigniew Brzezinski, to take a stand on the subject. The White House then declared that the United States would open its doors to all would-be emigrants. The latter would be welcomed “with open arms”, declared the President (Weisman 1980: 1–13).

The government of Havana responded by announcing that anyone wishing to leave the island for the United States could do so from the port of Mariel, over a period of six months, even allowing Cubans in Florida to come and collect their relatives. According to some reports, the Cuban government even took the opportunity to empty the country’s prisons. Thus, between April and September 1980, approximately 125,000 Cubans left the country (Hufker 1990: 321–35). This episode is considered by historians and academics to be one of the greatest waves of emigration that Cuba has seen (García 2018; Barquet 1989: 345–56; Aguirre et al. 1997: 487–507; Card 1990: 245–57).

The official migration statistics of the United States government covering the decade 1980–9 allow us to take a more nuanced look at this period. In fact, Cuba observed the departure of 132,552 people, a drop of 93 per cent compared to the previous decade. At the same time, Mexico saw its emigration grow to the point of exceeding one million with 1,009,586 exits, an increase of 62 per cent. For its part, the Dominican Republic saw its number of departures explode and exceed for the first time that of Cuba with 221,552 migrations, an increase of 59 per cent. Jamaica also passed Cuba with 193,874 exits, an increase of 48 per cent. El Salvador, beset by civil war, also exceeded the number of emigrants leaving Cuba with 137,418 exits, an increase of 366 per cent (US Department of Homeland Security 2020: table 2).

Other countries, without exceeding Cuba in absolute numbers, saw their emigration increase substantially. Thus, Haiti, with 121,406 departures, observed a growth of 120 per cent. Central America as a whole saw its number of emigrants (339,376) grow by 181 per cent. Panama had 32,957 departures, an increase of 54 per cent, Costa Rica (25,017) went up by 101 per cent, Belize (14,964) by 121 per cent, Honduras (39,071) by 149 per cent, Guatemala (58,847) by 151 per cent and Nicaragua (31,102) by 185 per cent (US Department of Homeland Security 2020: table 2).

In South America, the number of applicants leaving (399,803) increased by 46 per cent compared to the previous decade. Thus, Colombia (105,494) observed

an increase of 48 per cent. For its part, Brazil (22,944) suffered an increase of 23 per cent, Chile (19,749) of 31 per cent, Bolivia (9,798) of 73 per cent, Peru (49,958) of 97 per cent, Venezuela (22,405) 103 per cent, Guyana (85,886) 124 per cent and Paraguay (3,518) 136 per cent. Thus, in absolute numbers, Cuba ranked fifth on the continent over the decade. In terms of percentage compared to the previous decade, Cuba occupied the twentieth place in the region (US Department of Homeland Security 2020).

Number of emigrants to the United States from 1980 to 1989

	Country	Population in millions of inhabitants in 1980	Number of emigrants over the decade 1980-1989	Evolution compared to the previous decade (%)	% rank
1	Mexico	67.6	1 009 586	+62	13
2	Dominican Republic	5.7	221 552	+59	14
3	Jamaica	2.1	193 874	+48	16
4	El Salvador	4.6	137 418	+336	1
5	Cuba	9.7	132 552	-93	20
6	Haiti	5.5	121 406	+120	8
7	Colombia	28.4	105 494	+48	17
8	Guyana	0.78	85 886	+124	6
9	Guatemala	6.8	58 847	+151	3
10	Peru	17.3	49 958	+97	11
11	Honduras	3.6	39 071	+141	4
12	Panama	2	32 957	+54	15
13	Nicaragua	2.9	31 102	+185	2
14	Costa Rica	2.3	25 017	+101	10
15	Brazil	121.7	22 944	+23	19
16	Venezuela	15.1	22 405	+103	9
17	Chile	11.1	19 749	+31	18
18	Belize	0.14	14 964	+121	7
19	Bolivia	5.4	9 798	+73	12
20	Paraguay	3.1	3 518	+136	5
	Central America		339 376		
	South America		399 803		

Sources: US Department of Homeland Security 2020: table 2; Brea 2003; World Bank 2020a, b, c.

Thus, in the space of 30 years, despite the economic sanctions, the Cuban Refugee Program, the asymmetrical war waged by Washington against the island and the Cuban Adjustment Act, all of which constitute objective elements of emigration, Cuba went from second place among emigrant countries to the United States in 1960, to fifth place in 1989. Apart from Mexico, all the other countries ahead of the island in the ranking have a population lower than that of the island. Thus, over this period, fewer Cubans emigrated to the United States on average than their neighbours on the continent.

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