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Cuban Civil Society

I. Reinterpreting the Debate

by Jorge Luis Acanda González

Any analysis of civil society in Cuba faces two major difficulties, one of a theoretical and the other of a political nature. The theoretical difficulty stems from ambiguities in the way the concept of civil society is used in the contemporary social sciences. The political difficulty arises from the liberal use of the term “civil society” in conflicting political discourse about the Cuban reality. The U.S. government, the most rightwing sectors in exile and so-called “dissident groups” inside the country have raised the battle cry of building and strengthening civil society in Cuba—assuming that none exists—as a means of bringing down the existing political-social system.

In response to this call, some circles identified with the Cuban Revolution adopted a narrow interpretation: Cuba did not need a civil society because it would only lead to the dismantling of socialism and a return to a quasi-colonial dependency on the United States (thereby implicitly accepting their enemy’s premise that civil society is incompatible with a socialist state). This posture was later followed by affirmations that Cuba had the best civil society in the world—made up of grassroots organizations (recognized under Cuba’s Constitution) as well as other nongovernmental organizations—and that there was no reason to discuss the matter further. The subject of civil society frequently has become a battleground of accusations, dogmatism, and suspicions that seems to preclude any need to reflect on its characteristics and on how it actually functions and develops.

One prevalent reading of the concept of civil society is that it is defined by exclusion and
antithesis vis-à-vis the state and politics; exclusively identified with associative activity, voluntarism and spontaneity; and regarded as homogeneous, having a strictly positive connotation in which “strengthening” civil society implies uprooting authoritarianism, developing civic awareness, and so forth.

Many Latin Americans have rejected this pervasive view of civil society, arguing that it is oriented toward strengthening the dominant oligarchy. A simplified state-civil society dichotomy suggests that strengthening everything that is not government-related represents a step toward democratization and emancipation. This could be compared to the neoliberal notion in that it promotes the belief that any sort of privatization would be a step toward a more developed civil society. This use of the concept of civil society tends to mask the real differences present in society so that phenomena such as social class, economic power elites and part of civil society (although they also may be included in other areas, such as the state and the economy), where cultural and ideological hegemonic relationships are reproduced and transformed on a daily basis. Finally, civil society is understood as the space par excellence for class struggle and, consequently, for obtaining or challenging existing hegemony.

The concept of civil society, then, does not refer simply to voluntary contractual relationships between people—the production and reproduction of civic life has become much more complicated than that—but rather to the totality of social relationships that produce meaning. Thus, when invoking the idea of civil society, we should avoid simply echoing liberal theoretical constructs or accepting unquestioningly their political structures. It is worthwhile to recall that this term has been invoked by leftist movements in Latin America to point out the defects, deficiencies, and limitations of the liberal democratic model and to call for a radical review of its premises.

For these reasons, I adopt a second reading or interpretation of the concept of civil society, one developed by Antonio Gramsci in *Prison Notebooks*, that I think more closely approximates the essential characteristics of society and its objective processes.

For Gramsci, the distinction between civil society and political society is methodological, rather than organic, and assumes a broader, relational understanding of the state, power and politics, expressed in the theory of hegemony. Structures such as the capitalist market, institutions like schools and universities, professional and religious associations, community and labor organizations, the mass media, and cultural and academic publications all form so on vanish from social perceptions. Likewise, it dilutes the central role of the capital-labor relation in defining power relations.

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Hernández’s articles launched the debate over civil society in Cuba. Representatives of this critical Marxist sector followed with a series of articles, published mainly in *Temas* magazine but also elsewhere, presenting their views on the theoretical legitimacy and revolutionary imperative of reflecting on the development of Cuban civil society. Thus, from 1994 to mid-1996, the three sides to the debate were clearly defined. The first is what I term the “liberal” position, which was extremely hostile to the socialist project and unquestioningly adhered to a neoliberal interpretation of the concept of civil society. This position was largely represented inside the country by so-called dissident groups and lay intellectuals directly connected to the Cuban Catholic Church. The second position was “suspicious Marxism,” which rejected outright the use of the concept and any reflection whatsoever on the matter, viewing it as an enemy maneuver (again, thereby accepting their opponents’ interpretation of the concept of civil society). The third position, “critical Marxism,” rejected the other two positions as based on the same unilateral theoretical premise and offered a view of civil society as the ideal space in which to consolidate socialist political hegemony.

The March 1996 publication of the resolution approved by the Fifth Plenum of the Central Committee of the Cuban Communist Party (PCC) represented an historical benchmark. It is a contradictory document. On the one hand, its harsh rhetoric seemed to discredit the debate over this and other issues. But equally significantly, it marked the first time that an official document of a Communist Party in power acknowledged and valued the existence of civil society. That same year Armando Hart, then Minister of Culture and member of the Politburo of the PCC, referred repeatedly to civil society in a series of articles and interviews published in the Cuban press, in which he discussed the importance of its development for the consolidation of the Cuban revolutionary process. In my opinion, the positions set forth in the Fifth Plenum of the Central Committee and Armando Hart’s statements ushered in a third stage, and this is where we are today. The position of rejecting the term “civil society” as anti-Marxist and anti-socialist has been completely discredited. The clash of views now centers fundamentally on two issues: the content of the concept of civil society and what rebuilding Cuban civil society really means. This is particularly evident in how some have used the expression “Cuban socialist society” to identify only those political and/or grassroots organizations that have been in existence since the 1960s. This exclusive interpretation can only serve to undermine the development of a civil society that, in order to be “socialist,” should genuinely contribute to a socialization of power and property (can socialism do anything less?) that counteracts alienation in all of its forms. Conversely, those who espouse a Gramscian approach conceive of civil society as the breeding ground for ideological production, interconnected and interwoven with
political society and with the state. Their reflection is centered on building a Cuban civil society that contributes to the growth of socialism through the development of the structures and institutions of ideological-cultural production: the education system, the mass media, editorial policy, the discovery and improvement of new means of production, and economic relationships that contribute to the effective socialization of property, and so on.

Prior to 1959, conflicting processes characterized Cuban civil society. True, it was denser and more complex than that of most countries in Latin America and the Antilles due to more highly developed capitalist social relations in Cuba. But with an illiteracy rate of 30% (compounded by high levels of functional illiteracy) and an unemployment rate that never dropped below 25% in the best of times, development was fragmented, weak and uneven. Broad swaths of the population were barred from any form of inclusion in the social fabric and from any sort of decision-making power or control in public matters at the local, much less the national level, while their interaction with agents of ideological production and reproduction (schools, the press, etc.) was limited or nonexistent.

Nonetheless, the civil society of that period played a significant role in the insurrectional movement against the Batista dictatorship in the 1950s and this reveals a long-standing trait of Cuban civil society: its profound and explicit politicization. Cuban civil society underwent a radical transformation in the aftermath of the 1959 Revolution and most forms of association (political parties, professional institutions, religious groups) disappeared. This was the result of actions taken by the new government as well as of a process of self-dissolution, as most of their membership left the country with the first migratory wave from 1959 to 1962. The new social dynamics at play created new spaces for activism. Existing agents of socialization expanded, new ones emerged, and new types of associations appeared. In the words of María López Vigil, “Cuban society became one large-scale civil society.” Grassroots participation was profound and pervasive, and the capacity for self-management became more significant and relevant than ever before. Indeed, the socialization of power was accomplished at levels that were without precedent in most countries.

The 1960s witnessed explosive growth in Cuban civil society, but this was not only, or even mainly, due to the emergence of new grassroots organizations such as the Committee for the Defense of the Revolution (CDR), the Federation of Cuban Women (FMC) or the new social role accorded to existing organizations such as trade unions and student organizations. This growth was the result of the reorganization of the entire system of institutions responsible for producing and disseminating the new ideological paradigms that had become the building blocks for the new era. Many social sectors that had previously played a passive role, or because of their marginalized status could not have been considered involved at all, became active participants in this civil society. It was this new civil society that enabled the Revolution to achieve hegemony.

With the advent of the “institutionalization process” of the 1970s, this panorama experienced gradual, but crucial changes. It was transformed into a paternalistic, top-down political system based on the all-embracing presence of the state. The state occupied nearly all aspects of social life: livelihoods were inextricably linked to its presence, and it played a key role in ideological production (displacing the church and the market). Its monopoly over ideological...
production was credible since, at that time, the state ensured economic growth and social mobility, thus creating compatibility between its ideology and the actual benefits it was able to produce. While civil society expanded at extraordinary levels in the 1960s, taking on many traditional state-government functions, the opposite was true in subsequent decades as state-government institutions took on many of the functions of civil society. The crisis that swept Cuba in the early 1990s marked a turning point for all areas of Cuban society, including civil society. One important factor contributed to the changes taking place in this sphere: the state was unable to continue functioning with the same degree of effectiveness as before. While the economy was still based on a socialist model, it was compelled to open up significant space for foreign investment, different forms of ownership and the emergence of what has been termed “self-employment.”

The state was forced to allow other actors to take on certain functions heretofore under its exclusive purview. The emergence of market relations, which have become increasingly significant in the economy and in the daily life of the country, has created certain social distinctions that were unheard of in the previous period. The state's inability to meet basic needs gave rise to new forms of association, and it was obliged to look for decentralization mechanisms in order to make more efficient use of scarce resources.

But the economic crisis was not the only cause of these changes. Cuban society has become more diverse and disparate than it was in the 1970s, or even in the 1950s, owing in part to the revolutionary process itself. The needs and demands of a more educated and culturally advanced population have become increasingly complex, and this places intense pressure on existing mechanisms for participation and representation. Manifestations of this could be observed beginning in the mid-1980s. With the growth of the professional sector came the need to create (in some cases re-create) professional associations. Several new professional organizations emerged in the latter half of the 1980s, joining existing groups, such as the Union of Cuban Journalists (UPEC) and the National Union of Cuban Writers and Artists (UNEAC). It must be acknowledged, however, that most of these professional organizations have had little visibility or impact on Cuban society. UNEAC constitutes the most relevant exception to this. Through its debates and the professional-artistic contributions of its members, this organization has played an important role in reflecting on the national reality and creating forums for discussion and debate in the media.

During the first half of the 1990s, the number of registered organizations grew. This growth came to a halt in 1996 when the government suspended the authorization of new civil society organizations, a measure that remains in effect to date. The Cuban political panorama is informed by the contradiction between existing and moderately significant trends toward decentralization on one side, and a system that continues to be characterized by excessive centralization within a pyramidal model on the other. Legal-institutional reforms could play an important role in creating a framework that facilitates citizen action against bureaucratic trends and helps identify new models for civic associations that promote socialist values; clearly, however, legal reforms alone would not constitute a decisive factor.

**The country's political and economic structures** must evolve in the direction of implementing new forms of participation and the socialization of power. In my opinion, a decisive factor would be to identify and develop new forms of collective ownership in the economy. It is imperative to seek out and experiment with new forms of organizing social property that foster collective values different from the typical egotism of the capitalist market. Cooperatives and other forms of empowerment and self-management must lead to greater socialization of property. Very little has been done in this area in recent years.

Another significant challenge is restructuring the public sphere under the country's new circumstances. Prior to the 1990s, the public sphere and the state were interrelated. Now new non-state public spaces and expressions have emerged. The autonomy of nongovernmental public life poses an important challenge, the implications of which have yet to be addressed.

An equally important task has to do with the development of a culture of debate. It cannot be said that there is no debate in Cuba. In fact, there is more now than there was in the 1970s and 1980s and, to a certain extent, a level of diversity that did not exist even in the 1960s. But if this is to grow, it is necessary to strengthen the legal and structural mechanisms that expand people's right to receive sufficient information and to debate it; this task is still pending.

Ways must be found to combine the vertical structure that ensures the existence of the state—which for myriad reasons must maintain a certain degree of strength—with the development of the horizontal structures that foster empowerment/self-management and ensure that these new experiences are shared and information is exchanged. This quest has come to a halt and must be resumed.