

Alexander I. Gray and Antoni Kapcia, eds., *The Changing Dynamic of Cuban Civil Society*.

Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2008. Bibliography, index, abbreviations, notes, 2 figures, 14 tables, 202 pp.; hardcover \$59.95.

This edited volume is a comprehensive stock-taking and start salvo of an ambitious project to investigate a socio-political dimension of Cuba that focuses on the interactions between bottom-up and top-down dynamics that shape a society. To assess the changing dynamic of a civil society, one first has to demarcate what is or constitutes 'civil society' and, second, by the fact that it is 'changing', have at least two points in time for assessment as well as a framework and methodology how to assess the changes. We have to consider these issues before turning to the additional dimension that the Cuban setting adds as documented in the edited volume by Gray and Kapcia.

Civil society is perceived to be an essential component of a democracy, in particular in Anglo-Saxon countries, where citizens, generally as participant in some collective, are active in bringing a certain topic under attention to change a situation that already exists or is likely to materialize in the near future. According to this description, hobbies such as bird watching and playing rugby is not part of civil society, but the La Molina against the US base in Vicenza and Greenpeace activism are. In addition, one may want to make a categorization between the different types of collectives that are part of a civil society: people have different drives or ideologies for improving or preventing deterioration of their neighborhood compared to saving the planet by attempting to diminish the causes of climate change. In addition, given the existence of a civil society, one has to consider it in relation to itself and to the state: in cooperation, complementing, or against one another. Moreover, the description takes as a

premise that existence of a civil society is necessary, which is by no means an uncontested premise for at least three possible lines of thought: (1) if the government is really by and for the people as in a well-functioning democracy, then it would take decisions in the best interest of the people and therefore topical activism groups—and thereby also civil society—would be redundant, (2) a non-democratic government does not permit such spaces (power?) yet society keeps functioning and people are not defecting *en masse* through emigration, and, possibly related to item 2, (3) there is no history of citizen activism in society and therefore the people themselves do not perceive ‘gaps’ to be filled.

A simple method of determining change in a country’s civil society is to count registered collectives, including their membership count, at times t0 and t1. However, such bean-counting does not reveal ‘softer’ tendencies of the climate in which such collectives operate. Other measures to take into account are, among others, if collectives are obstructed in their operations (if so, by whom), if they are effective in reaching their goals, and who is funding them. In addition, taking the aggregate of the collectives and measures, can one identify different ‘levels’ of civil society? That is, attribute indicative notions to the state of a civil society in a country, such as ‘absent’, ‘discouraged’, ‘latent’ or ‘dormant’, and ‘active’; hence, be able to attribute different values to a civil society at those t0 and t1 so as to ascertain if a change has occurred. Given these parameters, the book takes a two-pronged approach: the introduction, conclusions and chapters 1 and 2 provide a theoretical setting and analysis, whereas chapters 3 to 7 report on fieldwork on the various dimensions on what constitutes—or *could* or *might* constitute—Cuban civil society.

The introduction provides a brief overview of the setting for assessing a (non-)existing Cuban civil society: ‘time zero’ as the pre-Special Period with the big six mass organizations

that—without unambiguous justification—do not count fully toward civil society in the editors' views; 'time 1' during the Special Period that initiated emergence of a civil society—permitted by the state to some extent by giving Cubans more space for initiative as well as opening up to support from non-Cuban NGOs entering the country—which was a response to deal with the economic hardship in the 90s and the related diminishing role of the mass organizations; and 'time 2' being the recent years with the economic upturn and new international economic and political ties of Cuba with, among others, other Latin American countries, which, taking account the short time for reflection, tentatively seems to have a tendency to curtail NGO activities.

The first step of the analysis is provided in Chapter 1 by Antoni Kapcia on "The Nature of Cuban "Communism" and the Revolution's Political Culture" (20-40), which goes through 20<sup>th</sup> century history of Cuba. First, it provides argumentation why the Cuban system cannot be tarred with the same brush as Eastern European countries—e.g., starting from *Cuba libre* and sovereignty versus having communism imposed from outside—and, second, it provides insight in the internal political dynamics in governance concerning 'reinventing the revolution' several times over the past 50 years, e.g., leaning more toward the USSR and its autocratic top-down structure in the 70s and the back to basics in the late 80s. While this may be well-known to Cuba experts, it is a comprehensive, dense, overview for the non-expert. Chapter 2 by Michelle Marín-Dogan, on the other hand, is essential reading for any type of reader. The well-researched chapter gives a historical account about the Cuban debate about civil society and thereby is an important contribution not only to explain Cuba's reluctance of experimenting with civil society, but also because it touches on the wider scope of the two-edged sword of foreign NGO meddling in any society. It charts the range of arguments brought up by intellectuals, cultural figures, *políticos* of the party and official state responses, up to public debate (41) why a civil society is, or is not,

compatible with the socialist project and on “the degree of ambiguity surrounding the term [civil society] itself” (41). One of the defining moments was Raul Castro’s statement given at the Fifth Congress of the PCC in 1996: “For us, civil society is not that to which the U.S. refers... Cuban socialist civil society is composed of our powerful mass organizations...as well as social organizations that group together, among others, the veterans of the Revolution, economists, lawyers, journalists, artists and writers, and those NGOs that act within the law and do not try to undermine the economic, political, and social system that has been freely selected by our *pueblo* [and which] together with the Cuban state pursue the common objective of building socialism.” (53-54). Thus, according to this version, there is space for civil society in cooperation with the socialist state—under *precisely* those terms. However, as the experiences described in other chapters demonstrate, neither most foreign NGOs nor other several authors (or their interviewees) contributing to the edited volume see it that way; in this light, chapters 3 to 7 are disconnected assessments to find the civil society needle in the socialist haystack.

Chapter 3 is the first case study from the economics angle by Francisco Domínguez. It is out of line in writing style compared to the sociologese of the other chapters, but is positively counterbalanced by the plentiful information on co-enterprising between state and foreign companies that is pervasive throughout the different economic sectors well beyond tourism and counting the highest amount of associations with Spain, Canada, and Italy (as of year 2000 statistics). However, overall, one is left with the taste that a thorough socio-economic analysis is yet to be conducted. For instance, it does not deal with the question *why* there are no lobby groups or sector-specific unions, but only raising the point that there *could be* very fertile ground for such developments. Chapter 6, on the other hand, assesses spheres of influence of religious groups. Christine Ayorinde discusses both the historical reluctance of the, until 1992, atheist

state against religious groups—used as counterrevolutionary tool primarily by the U.S. in the early years after the Revolution—and the loosening by the, now constitutionally secular, state, in particular after the Pope’s visit in 1998. However, the religious organizations are only allowed to operationalize the socialist component of their doctrine since the Special Period and as long as they do not violate Cuba’s interpretation of the socialist civil society.

A personal experience perspective is given by Nino Pagliccia from the Canadian Volunteer Work Brigade (Chapter 5). This is a fascinating chapter when taken in conjunction with Alexander Gray’s chapter that analyses personal perspectives and changes in procedures from the field from a range of civil society actors (Chapter 7). To couch the personal perspective in a theoretical framework, Pagliccia first discusses his “three-dimensional solidarity-charity space” with its axes charity, state-endorsed solidarity, and solidarity activism and resistance, concluding that “charity and solidarity (as resistance or state-endorsed) are mutually exclusive” (123), thereby adding an analysis dimension to Margalit’s (1996) charity paradox. Pagliccia’s, as well as the representative of Havana Ecopolis project’s—Legambiente-funded, which is at the green-left spectrum of the Italian political arena—documented experiences of cooperation in Cuba have the component of *shared ideology*, whereas other representatives, such as from Save the Children UK, talk about *shared objectives* instead even when their Cuban collaborators assume shared ideology. Notably, the latter group of foreign NGOs report more difficulties about their experiences in Cuba. Moreover, the different perceptions from the Cuban and ‘shared-objectives’ foreign NGOs seems like a recipe for break-up, or at least not sustainable in the long run, regardless the government’s position on NGOs. One could even argue that these different perceptions justify the reluctance from the state to grant foreign NGOs more freedom to operate

independently; after all, claiming mere ‘shared objectives’ is nothing more than veiling political, moral, and/or ideological fundamentals.

The analysis of possibilities of and limitations to local activism to improve one’s neighborhood can be skipped due to its broad over-generalizations that are not justified, hence of little use. Other points of critique are the overlap in contents between the field experience chapters that lack within-book cross references, and an appendix charting the pre-Special Period, Special Period, and ‘post’-Special Period socio-political organization with the main bodies would be useful to keep an overview. The conclusion chapter fits with the contents, except for the issues surrounding the solidarity-charity space and solidarity vs. cooperation. It merits further attention how the three—charity, solidarity, and cooperation (both with respect to NGOs and enterprising)—compete, interact, or complement each other both on a theoretical level and empirically, and if, and if yes to what extent, it differs from other states that show reluctance toward foreign non-military intervention or assistance. Last, recollecting the various dimension on civil society that were outlined at the start of this book review, the edited volume does not fully, or even partially, address all issues. To put this in a positive light: it raises more questions than it answers, not only in the case of Cuba but also in the wider setting to reflect on both spaces and tensions between NGOs, government organizations, government, and civil society—be it a social civil society or a competitive one.

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#### **REFERENCES**

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