

Cuban emigration of the 1980s



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by Charles McKelvey

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Between 1959 and 2010, some 1,539,650 persons emigrated from Cuba, representing approximately 8% of the Cuban population. Some 80% of the emigrants settled in the United States.

Although there was a degree of class heterogeneity in the Cuban emigration of 1959 to 1979, there was a significant overrepresentation of the national bourgeoisie and the privileged sectors in the emigration of that period. As a result, the political orientation of the emigrants coincided with the particular interests of the Cuban national bourgeoisie, which had fled the island in the early 1960s rather than participate in the construction of the new society. In the late 1970s, changes in U.S. policy were introduced by the Carter Administration, and a movement in the Cuban-American community for peaceful coexistence with Cuba became visible. These dynamics were threats to the prevailing consensus of the Cuban-American community, but that consensus continued to support the goal of the overthrow of the Cuban Revolution, a position that took priority over such issues as family reunification and the maintenance of contacts with Cuban society.

But a significant change in Cuban emigration began in 1980. Those who migrated after 1979 responded to a different reality, and their conflict with the revolution was not based in opposed class interests.

Around the middle of 1979, taking advantage of the reestablishment of diplomatic relations with Cuba by some Latin American nations, Cubans interested in migration began to penetrate by force the embassies of those countries, especially those of Venezuela and Peru, with the intention of receiving political asylum, which immediately was granted. The position adopted by the Cuban government was that it was not a question of political persecution, that these persons would be able to emigrate normally if those countries would grant to them the appropriate visas, but the use of force to attain asylum was unacceptable. However, the governments were not disposed to cooperate, preferring to convert the affair into a political show to damage the image of the Cuban Revolution, which culminated in a plan announced by the Organization of American States to establish "Cuban refugee camps" in the region. Cuban authorities decided to suspend legal authorization of exit visas, announcing on April 20, 1980 the opening of the port of Mariel for all those who desired to leave. For the next six months, 125,000 Cubans went to the United States on boats they had contracted, which had come from Miami to pick them up. It was the largest migratory wave in Cuban history.

The Mariel emigrants were viewed in Cuba, by both the people and the government, as anti-social, lumpen, and dissident elements that had abandoned their country. And they were treated as criminals by the government of the United States, interned in special centers where they were processed. At the same time, they were considered by the majority of the Cuban immigrant community, according to one depiction, as "a band of delinquents, blacks, and homosexuals sent by Fidel Castro to damage the prestige of the Cuban émigré community." They were characterized by the U.S. press as the most despicable groups of emigrants ever to arrive to the United States in the history of the country.

The negative image of the Mariel immigrants has been shown by scientific investigation to have been an exaggeration. Only 16% had criminal antecedents in Cuba, and in most cases, it was for illegal departure from the country or for economic activities that were not illegal in the United States and later would not be illegal in Cuba. In fact, they were much more representative of Cuban society than were the emigrants of 1960s and 1970s, with respect to employment and race; 40% were black, and only 40% had family in the United States.

The Mariel boat lift was a traumatic experience for both the United States and Cuba, which stimulated the Reagan Administration, in spite of its strong hostility to the Cuban Revolution, to arrive to a migratory agreement with the Cuban government. In the Migratory Agreement of 1984, the U.S. government agreed to admit up to 20,000 immigrants per year, among whom would be 3000 former prisoners for counterrevolutionary crimes who remained in Cuba. The agreement was for the most part not implemented, as a result of a lack of commitment by the U.S. government, which still had a political interest in stimulating illegal immigration. Moreover, the events of Mariel provoked a popular fear in the United States of a massive and uncontrolled immigration of Cubans, which led to more selective measures of admission. Requirements for potential migrants were difficult to satisfy, such that 80% of the solicitudes were rejected, and only 7,482 persons were able to migrate legally between 1985 and 1990.

The emigration beginning in 1980 increased the heterogeneity, social segmentation, and class polarization of the Cuban-American community. Far more so than the previous migrants, they maintained close ties with Cuban society, and their political priorities were related to the theme of divided families. Their participation in counterrevolutionary activities was much more limited.

Jesus Arboleya notes that, as a result of the migratory dynamics since 1980, the Cuban community in the United States no longer has the same characteristics that it had in the early 1960s, such that it is reasonable to make a distinction between the historic exile and the new immigrants since 1980. The new emigrants are more interested in current dynamics in Cuba, especially in the field of culture; they travel to Cuba more frequently; and they send a higher amount of family remittances sent to Cuba. Approximately 40% of the persons that arrived before 1980 sent remittances to Cuba, whereas 75% of those who arrived since that date send remittances.

The greater heterogeneity of the Cuban-American community enables us to imagine new possibilities for the role of the Cuban-American community. Its greater diversity has strengthened the sector in favor of “peaceful coexistence” with the Cuban Revolution, which has been present in the community in one form or another since the early 1960s. However, “peaceful coexistence” itself was conditioned by national developments in the United States, especially the turn of the Carter administration to peaceful coexistence with the Soviet Union. Today we live in a different historical movement, defined by the deepening of the contradictions of the capitalist world-economy and the relative decline of the United States, dynamics that have given rise to new forms of fascism. Meanwhile, Cuba has persisted and has become a model nation that, in conjunction with others paradigmatic nations, is indicating a necessary alternative road for humanity. As the Cuban-American community continues to evolve in defining who and what it is in relation to both Cuba and the United States, could it not see itself as responsible for explaining to the people of the United States what Cuba today means for the world?

In anticipation of the Fourth Conference on “The Nation and the Emigration,” which will take place in Havana from April 8 to April 10, we will continue to commentaries to themes related to the Cuban emigration.

Sources

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