Cuba: The Risk of Repeating the Mechanism

Ernesto Cisneros Cino

Miami, 2026

Cuba: The Risk of Repeating the Mechanism

First English edition, May 2026.

Translated from the Spanish original

Cuba: El riesgo de repetir el mecanismo

Original Spanish edition: https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.20008510

Author: Ernesto Cisneros Cino

orcid: https://orcid.org/0009-0002-2833-1787

Contents

Preface

I was born in Havana. I grew up inside a system that presented itself as definitive and that demanded, from childhood, an allegiance that admitted no degrees. School taught a version of the world where questions came with their answers ready-made, and where disagreement was not error but disloyalty. Music, mathematics, and the visual arts, the three refuges I found early on, operated in another register: in them, the question mattered more than the answer, nuance was richness rather than weakness, and complexity was celebrated rather than feared. The distance between the official world and the real world of the disciplines that formed me was probably the first political training I ever received, although I would not have called it that until much later.

I left Cuba. I lived through exile in its predictable phases: the rupture, the adaptation, the rebuilding of an identity that can no longer be the same because the ground beneath it has changed. I settled in Miami, where the Cuban community is large enough to sustain its own contradictions and diverse enough that no one can speak for everyone without being corrected. I taught, composed, wrote, and at some point what had for years been a private reflection on Cuba began to demand public formulation.

This series of essays is the result of that demand. It is not academic work, although it respects academic discipline and is in dialogue with it. It is not a pamphlet, although it takes a position and does not pretend to neutrality. It is not a political program, although it proposes operational sequences and disciplines. It is applied thought: the effort of one Cuban, formed in several disciplines, to look at his country with as much honesty as he can muster, knowing that complete honesty does not exist and that the sustained approximation toward it is what distinguishes analysis from slogan.

The central essay, *Cuba: The Risk of Repeating the Mechanism*, was published first. The nine essays that accompany it expand its chapters into territories that required more space than a single text could offer: the comparative pathology of dictatorships, the impossible economy, the anthropological deformation that six decades inflict on human beings, the diaspora as proof and as bridge, the geopolitical position of the island, the militarized state and its economic conglomerate, civil society and a free press as republican infrastructure, the architecture of a transition that does not repeat the documented errors of others, and the reading of Martí as a situated thinker rather than as an oracle.

Each piece can be read independently. But the whole operates as a unit: a diagnosis that moves from the structure of power to the structure of the soul, and from there to concrete proposals for a reconstruction that will be the work of generations. The reader will notice that each essay includes serious objections to its own theses, and responses that integrate them. That practice is not formalism; it is conviction. Whoever does not think against himself before publishing is not thinking; he is confirming. Each piece also includes a section that declares how it should be read if history takes a direction other than the one foreseen. A political essay that serves only under the scenario its author would prefer does not really serve at all.

I write from Miami, in May of 2026, about a country whose future I cannot predict and whose present is painful. What I can do is offer the best reading of which I am capable, with the tools I have, for the Cubans who will eventually have to make decisions that essays cannot make for them. If anything written here proves useful when that moment comes, the work will have been worth it.

Ernesto Cisneros Cino Miami, May 2026

○ ○ ○

Cuba: The Risk of Repeating the Mechanism

Prologue. The Wound and Lucidity

Some wounds are not debated. They are felt.

Cuba is one of them.

More than six decades of a dictatorship that has failed in every register (economic, social, institutional, ethical, military, human) have left an exhausted island, an impoverished people, and a fractured nation. The Cuban government is not a "system with errors." It is a totalitarian dictatorship that has failed comprehensively: it has destroyed the economy, corrupted public morality, impoverished the civilian population to inhuman limits, turned the Armed Forces into an apparatus of repression and control, and betrayed every republican principle Martí ever dreamed of for Cuba.

Every Cuban, on the island or off it, carries some version of that history. Some lived it from within; others inherited it from exile. But all of them, in one way or another, recognize it.

That wound is not neutral. It shapes the way one sees. Mine included.

It would be dishonest to speak of the future without admitting that, on occasion, the emotional response prevails: visceral rejection, the need for total rupture. It is understandable. It is human.

And precisely for that reason, it is dangerous.

○ ○ ○

The greatest risk facing Cuba is not only the system it has lived under. It is the failure to understand the mechanism that made that system possible. Because the mechanism does not belong to an ideology. It belongs to the human condition. And if it is not identified clearly, it can repeat itself. Even with the best of intentions.

This text is not a manifesto. It does not propose a leader, a platform, or a party. It proposes something more difficult and more necessary: a way of looking that is, at the same time, a concrete guide for the transition to democracy. A transition that honors Martí not as a statue but as an ethical and republican compass.

Chapter I. The Mechanism: How a Single Truth Is Built

Dictatorships do not appear out of nothing. They are built. And they are built following recognizable patterns, almost as predictable as those of a disease and its stages.

First, a figure or a narrative emerges that promises a solution. It can be a charismatic leader or a powerful idea. In times of crisis, that kind of figure finds fertile ground: people are not looking for perfection, they are looking for a way out. Urgency suppresses critical judgment. The promise takes the place of analysis.

Then an enemy is defined. Internal or external, real or exaggerated, but necessary. Because every project that aspires to concentrate power needs to justify it. And nothing justifies it better than danger. The enemy fulfills an architectural function: it is the column that holds up the edifice of control.

From there, language begins to change. The adversary stops being an interlocutor and becomes an obstacle. Then a problem. Finally, a threat. And once someone has been turned into a threat, his elimination (symbolic or real) begins to seem reasonable.

Repression does not arrive all at once. It is normalized. It is accepted first in exceptional cases. Then in necessary situations. And finally as part of the ordinary functioning of the system. Fear is institutionalized. Disagreement is punished. Obedience is rewarded.

The Cuban dictatorship was not a historical accident. It was the systematic and conscious application of that mechanism: a charismatic leader who promised paradise, an eternal enemy (imperialism), a language that turned every dissident into a traitor and finally institutionalized repression as the

norm. Today, that mechanism no longer convinces even its own functionaries. It is an ideological corpse held upright by brute force and residual fear.

For that reason, identifying it is not a historical exercise. It is a practical necessity.

Chapter II. The Trap of the Pendulum

When a system of control endures for decades, it generates an inevitable reaction. The accumulated pressure does not disappear. It is transformed.

Anger appears. Urgency. The need for rupture. And with them, a tempting idea: that the problem can be solved by inverting the terms.

But that idea is a trap. The pendulum does not correct the error. It reproduces it in the opposite direction.

Where there was once ideological imposition, the impulse arises to impose another in its place. Where there was exclusion, the desire to exclude resurfaces. The mechanism remains intact. Only the discourse that justifies it changes.

Inverting the terms is not enough. To go from a left-wing dictatorship to a possible right-wing one would be to repeat the error in a different costume.

> *La libertad es el derecho que tiene el hombre de ser honrado,*
> *y de pensar y hablar sin hipocresía.*
>
> *(Liberty is the right of every man to be honest, and to think*
> *and speak without hypocrisy.)*
>
> *— José Martí*

Chapter III. Beyond Left and Right

The classical left-right frame is insufficient. It is used more to identify camps than to describe concrete policies.

The United States combines a market economy with labor regulation and social protection systems. The country has survived transitions between radically different administrations without collapse, because its institutions are stronger than the ideologies of those who temporarily occupy them.

China maintains centralized political control while operating an economy integrated into global markets. What remains constant is the concentration of power. And there lies the warning: China is not a model. It is a reminder that economic growth without political freedom is unstable in the long term.

The problem is not whether a system calls itself left or right. The problem is whether it permits the unlimited concentration of power, both political and economic.

Chapter IV. The Economic Failure: It Was Not Only the Concentration of Power

The Cuban model did not fail only because power was concentrated. It failed because central-planning socialism systematically destroys the three pillars that sustain any functioning economy: incentives, information, and property.

Incentives

In a planned economy, the link between effort and reward is broken by design. The consequence is not equality: it is leveling down. It is not that everyone has plenty. It is that no one has any incentive to produce more than the minimum. Cuba demonstrated this with decades of data.

Information

Friedrich Hayek explained it with mathematical precision in 1945: no central planner can aggregate and process the dispersed information that millions of economic actors generate with their individual decisions. The price of a good in a free market is not just a number: it is condensed information that no bureaucracy can calculate from above. Central planning is not merely inefficient; it is epistemologically impossible at scale. Cuba was not a failed experiment of a good idea. It was the experimental confirmation of a theoretical impossibility.

Property

Private property is the condition of possibility for economic responsibility. Whoever does not own what he produces has no reason to care for it or to risk anything in it. The result is the progressive degradation of everything: buildings, factories, land, hospitals, infrastructure.

A rule-of-law state without a genuine market economy degenerates. This is not a theoretical possibility. It is a historical regularity. Venezuela demonstrated it on a faster timeline: weak institutions plus a state-controlled economy plus oil rents produce the same result as Cuba, with a different vocabulary and at greater velocity.

Real economic openness is not one principle among others for Cuba's future. It is the condition of possibility for all the rest. Without a material base, democracy is fragile. Without economic incentives, freedom is abstract. Without property, dignity is nominal.

> *Ser bueno es el único modo de ser dichoso. Ser culto es el único modo de ser libre. Pero, en lo común de la naturaleza humana, se necesita ser próspero para ser bueno.*
>
> *(To be good is the only way to be happy. To be cultivated is the only way to be free. But, in the common state of human nature, one needs to be prosperous in order to be good.)*
>
> *— José Martí*

Chapter V. The Anthropological Deformation: The Damage That Speeches Do Not Show

This is the most uncomfortable chapter. And precisely for that reason, the most necessary.

Cuba does not suffer only a civic vacuum. It suffers a total civic impoverishment: entire generations have grown up without knowing what a decent wage is, what a home of one's own is, what a functioning hospital is, what a school that teaches one to think looks like. Material poverty is only the visible side. Moral poverty is worse: everyday corruption, *resolver* (to "resolve," meaning to obtain by informal or illegal means) as the ethics of survival, informing on neighbors and family as a tool of upward mobility, double morality as the norm of life. The regime destroyed the republican ethic that Martí placed at the center of the nation.

Informing as Social Norm

In a system that for decades rewarded the informer and punished private loyalty, distrust became a survival mechanism. This is not a moral accusation: it is a functional description. When informing protects you and trusting exposes you, rational people learn to inform and to distrust. Those behaviors, practiced for decades, are internalized. They become reflexive.

Double Morality as Second Nature

Saying in public the opposite of what one thinks in private. Applauding what one rejects. That permanent doubling is not ordinary hypocrisy: it is cognitive adaptation to an environment in which coherence is dangerous. It produces people who instinctively distrust any public discourse, including that of the opposition itself.

Dependence on the State as Identity

Several generations grew up in an environment in which the state was the only actor capable of solving problems. That dependence is not only economic: it is psychological. Any transition would require citizens who assume individual responsibility in an environment without guarantees. That leap is neither automatic nor immediate.

Cynicism as Shield

In a society in which promises have been systematically broken, cynicism is a reasonable adaptive response. But generalized cynicism destroys the social capital that any democracy needs. Democracies are sustained by citizens who believe, even with reservations, that the rules matter and that the vote changes something.

Institutions can be built in years. Social trust is rebuilt across generations. The deepest wound of Castroism is not in the destroyed economy nor in the deformed institutions. It is in the human beings who learned to survive under conditions that should not exist.

Chapter VI. The Diaspora as Ambivalent Actor, and as Evidence

Let us begin with what many analyses omit: the Cuban diaspora (especially that of Miami) is the most powerful empirical demonstration of what Cubans can achieve in freedom. In less than two generations, a community that arrived without resources, without institutional networks, without the language, built an economy, a cultural infrastructure, and a level of professional integration that few immigrant communities have achieved in any country in the world.

That gap in outcomes dismantles, more effectively than any political treatise, the narrative that Cuba's failure is inevitable or structural. The problem was never the people. It was the system.

Martí, himself an exile during much of his adult life, never proposed excluding those who stayed behind. He proposed uniting all Cubans of good faith. That is the only diaspora that can contribute to building something new: the one that arrives with capacity, not with a bill of grievances.

And yet. This must be said with equal clarity. For decades, significant sectors of the exile community have financed discourses of total rupture that reproduce, point for point, the logic of the pendulum. And part of the diaspora has operated within a political system that has instrumentalized Cuba for electoral ends. The same embargo that some sectors of the exile defend has functioned for decades as the regime's most effective argument for the failure of socialism.

What the diaspora has to offer is threefold: economic capital for reconstruction, human capital in the form of professionals trained in functional systems, and symbolic capital in the form of lived evidence that another Cuba is possible.

A real transition would need everyone. There is no legitimate Cuba of exile and illegitimate Cuba of the interior. There is one Cuba, fractured, and its reconstitution requires that both halves recognize the inalienable humanity of the other.

Chapter VII. Geopolitics as Structural Constraint

Cuba cannot be redesigned in a vacuum. The most dangerous illusion of certain transitional discourses is to treat the country as a neutral space that can be reinvented at will. The external variables are not secondary. They are structural.

The U.S. embargo has functioned both as the regime's internal justification and as external punishment. Lifting or reforming the embargo is not a gesture of sympathy toward the regime. It is a structural condition for any economic opening to have real prospects.

The historical dependence on Venezuela, the Chinese economic presence, Russian interests: Cuba is a strategic point in the Caribbean with established relationships with powers that have their own interests in the outcome of any transition. Those interests are neither benevolent nor neutral.

A viable transition has to take these variables into account, not as excuses for inaction but as the real map of the territory. To govern without a map is to be lost.

Chapter VIII. Polarization: Symptom and Tool

Polarization does not appear by accident. It is fed. On social media (the space where much of today's Cuban political battle is waged) polarizing content has greater reach and stronger emotional resonance than serene analysis. Algorithms reward outrage. A polarized country does not deliberate. It reacts.

Polarization is not the underlying problem. It is the visible manifestation of the difficulty of coexisting with disagreement without converting it into existential conflict. And in Cuba that difficulty is aggravated by decades of anthropological deformation: a society that learned that disagreement was dangerous does not learn overnight to treat it as something useful.

Chapter IX. Brain Drain as Political Fact

Cuba is losing, at this very moment, the generation that could build the democracy it wishes for.

Young professionals, technicians, artists, educators, doctors, engineers (those with precisely the human capital that a transition needs) are emigrating. This is not an ordinary brain drain: it is the active hollowing out of the social layer that would have been the scaffolding of any process of institutional reconstruction.

The system expels precisely those who would be the agents of change. And here a perverse circle closes: those who remain are, statistically, the most dependent on the state and the most marked by the deformation of the system. This is not an accusation. It is the predictable result of decades of adverse selection.

Mass emigration is not only a consequence of the system. At this moment, it is one of its most effective instruments of perpetuation.

Chapter X. The Armed Forces: From Instrument of Dictatorship to Guarantors of Transition

This is the chapter that political analyses of Cuba most frequently avoid. And that avoidance is, in itself, a problem.

The Revolutionary Armed Forces (FAR) are not a professional army in the conventional sense of the term. They are the armed wing of the Communist Party. But their role goes well beyond repression. Through the GAESA conglomerate (*Grupo de Administración Empresarial S.A.*, the Business Administration Group), the FAR control hotels, ports, hard-currency stores, and imports and exports; conservative estimates suggest they manage between 60 and 80 percent of the hard currency circulating in the Cuban economy. Cuban military officers are not only the regime's guardians. They are its majority shareholders.

That has direct consequences for any transition. A civilian government that attempts to reform the economy without simultaneously reforming the military structure would be trying to build a new house on foundations that belong to another owner.

In a democratic transition, the Armed Forces must be subordinated immediately to civilian power and to a constitution, not as a formality but as real architecture. They must lose all economic control: the audited and total privatization of GAESA and of every enterprise under military control is a condition of possibility for a free economy. There can be no genuine market while an actor with coercive capacity controls more than half the flow of hard currency. They must pass through a process of ethical vetting based on individual criteria: those who committed documented crimes against humanity are to be tried; the rest are to be integrated under new civilian command. And

they must receive a clear and singular mission: to defend the sovereignty of the territory, not a regime or an ideology.

As Martí warned in his speech at the Liceo Cubano in Tampa:

> *Una nación no se funda, cubanos, como se manda un campamento.*
>
> *(A nation is not founded, Cubans, the way one commands an encampment.)*
>
> *— José Martí*

A people that hands its destiny over to its soldiers ends up enslaved by them. To leave the Armed Forces unreformed is not a tactical omission. It is to leave intact the system's most powerful mechanism of self-perpetuation.

Chapter XI. The Civic Void and Ethical Reconstruction

A democracy is not built only with laws. It is sustained by citizens capable of understanding them, defending them, and demanding they be enforced. Without that base, any opening is at risk of being captured by familiar dynamics.

The first pillar is **active civic education**, not as a school subject but as practice. To rebuild the republican ethic that Martí placed at the center of his project: to teach the difference between a right and a privilege, between an institution and a favor, between the rule of law and mere order.

The second pillar is **freedom of the press and independent media**. Not as democratic ornament but as a mechanism of public oversight. A citizen who has access to only one account of the world cannot exercise real citizenship.

The third pillar is **organized civil society**: real labor unions, autonomous professional associations, community organizations, churches in their historical role as counterweights to state power. That space, in Cuba, has been systematically emptied. To refill it is not optional: it is the condition of possibility of everything else.

Without a society with a republican ethic, democratic institutions would be only facades. Martí warned of this with clarity: *the republic is not only a form of government. It is a form of being.*

Chapter XII. Principles for Not Repeating the Error

If there is one lesson that emerges from the experience, it is that the problem lies not only in who exercises power, but in how that power is structured:

Rule of law

Law above any figure, group, or ideology. An independent judiciary, not appointed by the executive.

Real separation of powers

A legislature that is not a rubber stamp, a judiciary that does not obey the executive, autonomous oversight institutions.

Active protection of dissent

Disagreement that is not merely tolerated but structurally guaranteed, even when it inconveniences power.

Individual justice

Responsibility based on documented concrete acts. Not on ideological belonging or on collective guilt.

Limits on power

Defined mandates, institutional transparency. No office without an expiration date.

Market economy with real property

The material basis of every other principle. Genuine private property, end of the state and military monopoly over commerce.

Demilitarization of the state

Armed Forces subordinated to civilian power, without economic control, without political function.

National ethical reconstruction

A republic *with all and for the good of all*, in which the dignity of the citizen is the foundation, not the favor of the ruler.

Chapter XIII. Models of Transition: What Experience Teaches

To speak of transition without looking at the historical evidence is philosophy without friction.

South Africa and the Truth and Reconciliation Commissions represent the most documented attempt to build justice without destroying the viability of the state. The lesson is not that impunity is acceptable, but that justice has to be designed within the limits of what a society can sustain without fragmenting.

East Germany, after reunification, opened the Stasi archives and allowed citizens to access their own files. It was not a witch hunt. It was a confrontation with the truth. Cuba has, in its own state archives, a similar tool, if it ever decides to use it with the same rigor.

The Spanish Transition was a pact of forgetting. Its consequences are felt to this day. What it teaches is not that forgetting works, but that pacts without truth generate wounds that do not heal.

Post-Pinochet Chile shows an intermediate path: individual trials, slow, partial, advancing across decades. The process itself had a stabilizing social effect.

No imported model can serve without adaptation to Cuban reality. But all of them teach the same thing: *truth is not negotiable; the mechanisms of justice can be adapted; transitions that try to resolve everything at once collapse.*

Chapter XIV. The Legitimacy of Transitional Power

Who governs between the end of the current system and the consolidation of a new one? With what legitimacy do they govern? How is it ensured that this transitional power does not become permanent?

Legitimate transitional power requires three conditions: **legitimacy of origin** (defined deadlines, international supervision, a prohibition against its members standing in immediate elections); **legitimacy of process** (total transparency, because a transitional government that operates in secret is laying the foundations of a new authoritarianism); and **legitimacy of outcome** (a short, public, and legally binding sunset date, eighteen to twenty-four months at most).

The transitional government must include representatives of civil society from the interior and from the diaspora. It cannot be the project of a single sector, a single generation, or a single geography.

Legitimate transitional power is not the one with the best intentions. It is the one with the best limits.

Chapter XV. Emotion as Engine, and as Danger

This chapter is addressed to those who are in the streets. To those who carry the rage in their bodies and not only in their words. To those who have seen their families suffer, to those who have been waiting for years, to those who can take no more.

You are right in your rage. You do not need to justify it.

Decades of humiliation, of institutionalized fear, of forced silence, of watching those you love depart: that generates a moral debt that cannot be paid in words.

But rage mobilizes, and rage without structure destroys what it would tear down as well as what it would build. Moments of historical rupture are also moments that decide the kind of future being built. What is done in those moments matters. It matters who makes the decisions and how. It matters whether the institutions built in urgency are solid enough to survive once the urgency has passed.

Rage is necessary. Rage is just. But rage that does not know when to stop does not transform: it destroys, and then becomes what it destroyed.

The challenge is not to choose between emotion and reason. The challenge is to use them together. Emotion without structure generates chaos. Structure without emotion has no force to move. Together they can build something that lasts.

Chapter XVI. The Possible Transition: A Concrete Guide for the First 24 Months

Cuba does not need another messiah. It needs institutions, an economy, and an ethic. The priority steps for the transitional period, in order of urgency:

Week one

Immediate release of all political prisoners and a general amnesty for crimes of conscience. This is the founding act of any transitional legitimacy. Without it, everything else is rhetoric.

First month

Convening of a plural and sovereign Constituent Assembly, with representation of civil society from the interior, the diaspora, and every region of the country. Its mandate: to draft a new constitution, not to reform the existing one.

First six months

Beginning of radical economic reform: declaration of full and irrevocable private property over land, housing, and enterprise; opening to foreign investment under clear rules and without state intermediaries; elimination of the state monopoly in every productive sector on a 24-month horizon; creation of an independent central bank and a convertible currency; dismantling the regulations that suffocate the entrepreneur.

Parallel and immediate

Beginning of military reform: subordination of the Armed Forces to elected civilian power; opening of independent audits of GAESA and every military

enterprise; beginning of the audited privatization process; establishment of a new institutional mission: defense of the territory, not defense of a regime.

First twelve months

National program of ethical and civic reconstruction: a new civic education based on Martí's republican legacy; active fostering of civil society; public recognition of the regime's victims and design of mechanisms for symbolic and material reparation.

Months twelve to twenty-four

First free, plural, and internationally supervised elections. The transitional government hands over power. Without exception. Without extension. Without invoking emergency.

This timeline is demanding. It is also the minimum necessary for the transition to be real and not a change of name over the same structure.

Epilogue. Responsibility

Cuba does not face only a political change.

It faces a historical decision.

To reproduce the mechanism (with another discourse, with other names, with another direction in the pendulum) is the shortest path. It is also the most familiar. And the one that most resembles what has already been lived.

To break it requires something more difficult: to understand it. Not in the abstract, but in its concrete, daily manifestations. In the language it uses. In the enemies it constructs. In the power it concentrates. In the limits it denies. In the economy it controlled. In the soldiers it sustained. In the human beings it shaped.

It is not a matter of replacing one truth with another. It is a matter of building a system in which no truth can impose itself without limits.

That system does not arrive complete and finished from outside. It is built by citizens: imperfect, contradictory, marked by decades of deformation but capable (as every Cuban who has flourished in freedom demonstrates) of something entirely different when conditions allow.

○ ○ ○

Cuba does not need to change the hands that hold the power that oppresses.

It needs to change the way power exists.

○ ○ ○

And it cannot do so with laws alone, nor with markets alone, nor with institutions alone. It also needs to heal the human beings the system shaped.

That is the longest work. And the most urgent.

Con todos y para el bien de todos.

(With all, and for the good of all.)

— José Martí

It is time to build the Cuba that Martí imagined.

It is time for Cubans, at last, to be the owners of our own destiny.

And Cuba has paid too much, with hunger, with exile, with blood, and with broken dreams, to deserve a repetition.

○ ○ ○

The Essays of the Series

The nine satellite essays that follow extend and deepen the central essay. Each engages a specific dimension of the Cuban question with theoretical apparatus, comparative cases, honest counter-theses, and operational proposals. The numbering of the essays uses Arabic numerals in their internal sections, distinct from the Roman numeration of the central essay's chapters. Each essay is autonomous and can be read on its own; together they form a single argument.

○ ○ ○

Essay I. The Mechanism and the Pendulum

A Comparative Pathology of Dictatorships

○ ○ ○

BEFORE WE BEGIN. Unlike the central essay, which takes Cuba as its case, this piece shifts focus toward method: what the central essay calls the mechanism is examined here as an observable pattern across different geographies and different moments. Cuba remains the central case, but it enters a wider conversation. The choice is deliberate and has a specific purpose: if the mechanism belonged to *castrismo* alone, the diagnosis would be local denunciation; if it is a reproducible pattern, the diagnosis is a civic instrument of recognition, useful well beyond its immediate circumstance. Concrete dates and names can age; the pattern does not.

Havana, a union assembly, late 1960s. A worker offers a minor technical observation about the operation of his workplace. Another worker, sitting three rows away, interrupts him with a remark that does not address the technical matter but rather the ideological profile of the first. The observation is buried beneath the denunciation. Caracas, 2006, neighborhood committee. A resident voices a criticism of the social program of the moment. Another, a member of the communal council, reframes the criticism in ideological terms. The critic falls silent; the next time, he does not raise his hand. Istanbul, 2017, the newsroom of a national daily. An editor discovers that three articles ready for publication have been pulled overnight on instructions that appear in no written record. Moscow, 2022, a university professor adjusts her literature course to avoid references that could be interpreted as criticisms of an ongoing military operation. Budapest, 2024, an official who for years voted for a party now in opposition reviews his social-media profile before accepting a new public post.

Five situations, five geographies, five moments. The surface is different. The internal grammar is not.

○ ○ ○

What These Cases Share

What unites those five scenarios is not ideology, nor language, nor even the degree of formal violence of the regime in which they occur. It is the functional operation: a field of legitimate discussion has been narrowed; an implicit authority decides what enters and what does not enter that field; and a personal cost attaches to remaining within the narrowed zone or to stepping outside it. Those who step out pay a price. Those who stay do so by adapting. Adaptation, multiplied by millions, sustains the device without anyone needing to administer it directly.

Hannah Arendt, in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951, with a final chapter added in the 1958 edition), described this phenomenon with a precision that time has not eroded. The difference between classical tyrannies and the totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century did not lie, according to Arendt, in the magnitude of the violence, but at a deeper level: classical tyrannies sought to impose external obedience; totalitarian regimes sought to redesign reality itself from within human beings. The Arendtian phrase that matters here is the one about the ideal subject of the totalitarian regime, who is neither the convinced communist nor the convinced Nazi, but the one *for whom the distinction between fact and fiction, between true and false, no longer exists.* That sentence, written seventy-five years ago, still describes with precision what operates in each of the scenarios above.

The mechanism we discuss in this essay is not that final state. It is the device that leads to it. And what matters is to understand that the device operates with recognizable, identifiable, and therefore foreseeable parts.

How is an architectural enemy built?

The first part is the designation of an enemy whose function is not to be combated in any military or police sense, but to be named permanently. The architectural enemy is not the circumstantial adversary; it is the category that organizes public discourse and justifies every exceptional measure the regime requires.

In Cuba, U.S. imperialism has fulfilled that function for more than six decades. The Bay of Pigs invasion in 1961, the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962, decades of embargo, the actual and attributed actions of the CIA: all of that has been real and has left a documented historical trail. But the function of imperialism as architectural enemy does not depend on its objective existence; it depends on its permanent use as justification for the indivisibility of internal power. When the hungry Cuban of 2025 hears that his hunger is the embargo's fault and not the result of the regime's economic decisions, he is being exposed to the architectural enemy in operation.

In Venezuela, the formula was repeated with almost uncanny precision. Hugo Chávez, from 1999 to 2013, built a discursive architecture in which any internal opposition was reinterpreted as part of an external conspiracy coordinated from Washington. Maduro inherited the device and intensified it: any criticism of the government is labeled an instrument of imperialism, regardless of its specific content. The Venezuelan democratic opposition, subjected to that permanent translation, has operated for two decades in a field where its arguments are not discussed; they are reinterpreted.

In Nicaragua, Daniel Ortega, after his return to power in 2007, reactivated the Sandinista language of the 1980s to frame the university, ecclesiastical, and political opposition as agents of foreign intervention. The student protest of 2018, massive and largely spontaneous, was officially characterized as a coup

d'état directed from abroad. The formula is identical to the Cuban one, with adapted vocabulary.

So far, cases on the left. It is worth now looking at the symmetry, because the mechanism belongs to no single ideology.

In Vladimir Putin's Russia, especially from 2012 onward, the architectural enemy is the West as a category: NATO, liberal values, "*Gayropa*," denationalizing globalism. Any internal criticism is reinterpreted as an expression of that external threat. The "foreign agents" laws, applied to journalists, NGOs, and individual citizens since 2012, are the legal codification of the device: whoever receives international funding or support, even for academic research or cultural work, is labeled an agent of the hostile power. The grammar is identical to the Cuban one, in a right-wing nationalist key rather than a socialist internationalist one.

In Viktor Orbán's Hungary, since 2010, the architectural enemy is George Soros as the personification of globalism, with its discursive extensions (the European Union as Brussels-as-warden, migration as demographic substitution, universities as ideology factories). The difference from Putin is important: Hungary remains nominally democratic, with competitive elections and a formally plural press. And yet the device functions: the field of legitimate discussion narrows, the implicit authority decides what enters, there is a personal cost for those who step out.

Turkey under Recep Tayyip Erdoğan offers a particularly instructive case, because it lets us watch the mechanism in slow motion across more than two decades. The AKP came to power in 2002 presenting itself as a democratizing alternative to the long-standing military tutelage of the Kemalist republic. During its first years the discourse was pro-European, reformist, integrationist. The shift became visible around 2013, with the repression of the Gezi Park protests, and accelerated after the coup attempt of 2016. From then on, the

architectural enemy multiplied into interchangeable categories (Gulenists, terrorists, foreigners conspiring against the Turkish nation, Kurds as internal threat), and the logic is exactly the same: any internal criticism is reinterpreted as part of an external conspiracy. Tens of thousands of officials, academics, journalists, and military officers have been removed or imprisoned since 2016. The press has gone from plural to mostly aligned. The judicial system has lost effective independence. And yet Turkey continues to hold periodic elections with high turnout. The distinction between democracy and authoritarianism, in such cases, ceases to be binary; it becomes a gradient. And the mechanism operates precisely in the gradient.

That is the first comparative lesson. The architectural enemy does not require mass violence to operate. It requires repetition, monopoly over translation, and material consequences for those who try to step outside the frame.

Why does language slide?

The second part of the mechanism is linguistic. And here it is worth introducing the most precise witness the twentieth century produced on this subject: Victor Klemperer, a German philologist of Jewish origin, professor of French literature at the University of Dresden, survivor of the Third Reich, who for twelve years kept a clandestine diary recording the changes in everyday German under Nazism. That diary, published in 1947 under the title *LTI: Notizbuch eines Philologen* (translated into English as *The Language of the Third Reich*), is probably the most detailed document we have on how a totalitarian system redesigns common speech to domesticate thought.

Klemperer's central thesis is operational, not metaphorical. Nazism did not impose itself by violence alone, or by propaganda alone in the conventional sense of the term. It imposed itself, and this is the subtle observation, by modifying the words people used every day, without questioning them, in their intimate conversations. *Words can be like tiny doses of arsenic: they are*

swallowed unnoticed, appear to have no effect, and then after a little time the toxic reaction sets in after all, Klemperer wrote. The metaphor of slow poisoning is exact because it captures what matters: the damage is not in the regime's openly declamatory discourse, which anyone can consciously reject; it is in the small words that filter into daily speech and that organize the perception of the world before the subject can decide about them.

Klemperer documented specific operations worth mentioning because they recur, almost without variation, in every later implementation of the mechanism. The inflation of the adjective (everything is *fanatical, historic, heroic, eternal*, until the words are emptied of any real descriptive capacity). The conversion of abstract nouns into quasi-religious categories (*the people, the nation, the race, the revolution, the homeland* operating as transcendent entities that justify any sacrifice). The technique of pejorative quotation marks applied to the adversary's terms (writing *"democracy"* or *"intellectuals"* or *"freedom"* in scare quotes to empty them of meaning without having to argue against them). The ritual use of acronyms, slogans, and watchwords as rituals of belonging that substitute for thought. Each of these operations is a modular piece that any later regime can take, adapt to its vocabulary, and apply with predictable effect.

Václav Havel, in *The Power of the Powerless* (1978), added a layer to Klemperer's diagnosis worth introducing here. Havel wrote from the "normalized" Czechoslovakia of the 1970s, not from the high-intensity totalitarianism of the Nazi or Stalinist period. His category, the *post-totalitarian system*, describes what occurs when the regime no longer needs to actively impose its slogans because language and practices impose them on their own. In the post-totalitarian system, no one believes the slogans any longer, not even those who repeat them; but everyone repeats them because the social machinery is already calibrated to reward repetition and penalize silence. The famous image of the greengrocer who puts the sign

Workers of the world, unite in his shop window, not from conviction but from defensive habit, captures the device at this stage. Contemporary Cuba, post-2014 Venezuela, Russia under Putin from approximately 2008 onward, are post-totalitarianisms in the Havelian sense. People repeat the language of the regime not because they believe in it, but because the social machinery has learned to function with it as its operative grammar.

George Orwell, in *1984* (1949), formalized this same intuition with the concept of Newspeak: a language progressively designed to reduce the available words, until disagreement becomes literally unthinkable. Orwell wrote fiction; Klemperer testified to reality. Both described the same phenomenon from different sides of the mirror.

Cuba has produced, over six decades, its own LTI. *Compañero* and *señor* as involuntary ideological markers. *Gusano* (worm) as a category applied to the dissident and the exile, a term the dissidents themselves later reappropriated and emptied of its sting. *Mercenario, vendepatria, escoria* (mercenary, sell-out, scum) as the vocabulary of ritual denunciation. *Logros, conquistas, proceso, batalla de ideas* (achievements, conquests, process, battle of ideas) as the lexicon of macroeconomic propaganda. *Resolver, luchar, inventar* (to resolve, to struggle, to invent) as the parallel lexicon of the underground economy, coexisting with the official one without ever being reconciled to it. Each word, taken in isolation, is trivial. Accumulated across decades, they form a linguistic map in which certain thoughts become difficult to think because the words for thinking them have been loaded, delegitimized, or emptied.

Venezuela replicated the operation with its own vocabulary. *Boliburgués, escuálido, pitiyanqui, apátrida, lacayo del imperio.* The function is the same: to mark the internal adversary with labels that expel him from the field of legitimate discussion without any need to argue with him. Hungary developed its own dictionary: *globalist forces, Soros conspiracy, migration mafia.* Russia

developed its own: *foreign agents, undesirable organization, traitor to the homeland.* The deep grammar is the same. The language changes. The operation does not.

When is repression normalized?

The third part is probably the most subtle, and also the most dangerous, because it occurs below the threshold of collective consciousness. It is the progressive normalization of measures which, seen as a whole, would be immediately recognized as repression, but which, applied in sequence, one by one, over years, end up forming part of the landscape without anyone being able to point to the moment the line was crossed.

It is important to understand why this mechanism works. It is not that people are stupid or cowardly. It is that the human cognitive system calibrates what it considers normal based on what it experiences as permanent. An exceptional measure repeated for six months is perceived as exceptional. Repeated for six years, it is perceived as fact. Repeated for six decades, it is perceived as nature. The device does not need to convince anyone of the legitimacy of repression; it needs to wait.

Cuba offers a documented sequence that illuminates the point. The first years after 1959 saw a rapid expansion of measures that any democratic society would have recognized as exceptional: revolutionary tribunals without ordinary procedural guarantees, televised executions, mass expropriations without effective compensation, formation of the Committees for the Defense of the Revolution (CDR) as a mechanism of neighborhood surveillance in 1960, creation of the category of *acto de repudio* (act of repudiation) as a tool of mob violence against individual dissidents. Each of those measures, at the time, was presented as an exceptional response to an exceptional situation. And each of them became, through nothing more than persistence over time,

part of the institutional landscape, with no public debate intervening over whether they remained exceptional.

The sequence continued for decades with new additions. Law 88 of 1999 (the so-called Gag Law) criminalized communicating with foreign journalists about matters that could affect state security, with penalties of up to twenty years in prison. Law 35 of 2021 on the regulation of national cyberspace applied the same logic of broad criminalization to the digital sphere. Decree 349 of 2018 made state authorization mandatory for any artistic or cultural activity, through the figure of a designated supervisor inspector. Each of these pieces, presented as a specific response to a specific challenge, accumulated on top of the previous one with none of them repealed once it ceased to be necessary. Legal accumulation is one of the central mechanisms of normalization: what enters the legal corpus as exception remains as habit.

The Soviet Union offered the archetypal example of this accumulation across the twentieth century. The exception decrees of 1918, justified by civil war, were absorbed into ordinary legality. The measures of the 1930s, justified by forced industrialization, were maintained afterward. Those of the 1940s, justified by war, were maintained afterward. Each generation inherited a legal corpus of accumulated exceptional measures, and learned to live with it as if it were the normal order of things. That is why consolidated totalitarian regimes are so difficult to dismantle legally: there is not a single decree to repeal; there are seven decades of legal accumulation that require reconstruction, not reform.

Venezuela went through the same process compressed into fewer years. Political disqualification of opposition candidates, progressively extended; extrajudicial detentions that moved from exception to routine; military tribunals trying civilians; suspension of free elections. None of that would have been accepted by Venezuelan society in 1998 if it had been presented as

a package. Accepted in sequence, over twenty-five years, it has become the scenario in which the opposition operates.

Russia offers the same sequence at its own pace. Gradual closing of independent media from 2000 to 2015; restriction of the right of assembly; expansion of the "foreign agent" category; redefinition of treason against the homeland; after 2022, the criminalization of the term "war" to refer to a military operation. Each step, observed individually, was presented as a response to a specific situation. The sequence, observed in its totality, amounts to a repressive device hard to recognize from inside.

The mechanism of normalization is what makes the language of totalitarianism always sound exaggerated to those who live it in its early form, and always sound belated to those who live it in its developed form. It is the epistemic trap of the process: when it is reversible, naming it seems unnecessary; when naming it is necessary, it is already barely reversible.

What makes the mechanism contagious?

The fourth component of the device is the atomization of those who endure it. Arendt formulated it with a word that sounds tepid and is not: loneliness. Not the psychological loneliness of the isolated individual, but the structural loneliness of a society in which horizontal ties (voluntary associations, independent unions, professional guilds, plural media, spaces of public deliberation) have been eroded or captured by the apparatus. *Loneliness*, Arendt wrote, *is the common ground for terror.* When a person cannot test what he thinks against other people under conditions of minimal safety, his capacity to maintain his own perception of reality erodes. And when that phenomenon spreads, the regime no longer needs to impose an official version of reality: people, isolated, end up adopting it by default, not from conviction but from disorientation.

Arendt identified this condition as a precondition of totalitarianism, not as its consequence. Her argument, in the final chapter added to the 1958 edition of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, is that modern atomization (the loss of traditional communal ties, the conversion of classes into masses, the experience of superfluousness) makes people susceptible to totalitarian offers before those offers even appear. The totalitarian regime does not have to create the atomization; it finds it already produced by modernity and deepens it for its own ends. That observation matters because it suggests that the counterweight to the mechanism is not built only in moments of political crisis but requires permanent maintenance of the associative fabric in times of apparent normality. Democracies that neglect their intermediate civil society during decades of prosperity discover, when the test arrives, that they no longer have the defenses they would need.

Cuba systematically destroyed the intermediate associations between the individual and the state during the first decade after 1959. Non-official unions, independent professional guilds, plural press, autonomous university spaces, religious organizations with a public voice: all of that was gradually eliminated or absorbed into single, centralized structures controlled by the apparatus. The result, sustained for six decades, is a society in which horizontal trust between strangers is extremely low and in which the state is the only interlocutor with real weight. That is not a byproduct of the regime; it is its operational condition.

Venezuela, during *chavismo* and *madurismo*, replicated the pattern less effectively but in the same direction. Cooperatives and *consejos comunales* (communal councils), presented as the expansion of popular power, were designed to replace autonomous associations with structures dependent on the apparatus. Hungary, in a less brutal version, has worked for fifteen years on the capture of the media system, the universities, and foundations, not to close them but to fill them with its own cadres. Russia, under Putin, has step by step

dismantled the civil society that had emerged during the 1990s, through a combination of media control, selective persecution, and, since 2012, the progressive criminalization of work in independent organizations. Turkey has closed, since 2016, thousands of civic associations under the legal pretext of links to the Gulenist movement, without any need to prove the link case by case.

What matters is to understand the common logic: no consolidated totalitarian or authoritarian regime tolerates horizontal associations with real autonomy for long, because those associations are the ones that allow people to verify perceptions, sustain disagreement, and resist atomization. Wherever the mechanism operates, intermediate civil society is one of the first fronts to be acted upon, not the last.

Why does the pendulum fail to correct?

Here enters the observation that distinguishes this essay from conventional denunciation, and which is probably the hardest lesson the comparative history of the twentieth century has bequeathed to us: the pendulum does not correct the mechanism; it inverts it.

When a totalitarian or authoritarian regime collapses or is replaced, the natural social reaction is to seek the exact opposite of the previous regime. If the regime was left-wing, what comes after tends to present itself as its right-wing negation; if it was right-wing, what comes after presents itself as its left-wing negation. That logic of the exact opposite produces, in most documented cases, not the correction of the mechanism but its reproduction in inverted form. The new architectural enemy changes its ideological position, but the function it performs in public discourse remains the same. The new loaded language is built with different words, but operates identically. The new exceptional measures are justified with different reasons, but are normalized

through the same procedure. Civil society continues to be captured or eroded, now from the opposite pole.

The reason is that the mechanism does not depend on the ideology that clothes it; it depends on the cognitive and social dispositions that the previous regime produced in the population. A society atomized for six decades does not reverse its atomization the day after the regime that atomized it collapses. A society accustomed to an architectural enemy does not learn to discuss without one; it learns to swap one for another. A language loaded for half a century is not unloaded by a transition decree; it reorganizes itself around new loaded terms. Reflexes are what survive, and reflexes are what the pendulum ignores when it announces itself as solution.

There are cases where the pendulum operated almost as caricature. Russia, between 1991 and the consolidation of *putinismo*, lived through an apparent pendulum from Soviet communism toward an oligarchic capitalism that in less than a decade reproduced the concentrating logic in inverted form. The voucher privatization scheme of 1992-1994, followed by the loans-for-shares program of 1995-1996, transferred the productive assets of the Soviet state to a small core of politically connected actors at prices well below market value. Russian society, atomized through seventy years of Soviet rule, lacked the capacity to organize and prevent the capture. The nominally free press that emerged in the early 1990s was captured by the new oligarchs, each with his own television channel defending his specific interests. When Putin came to power in 2000, he did so presenting himself as the restorer of order against the chaos of the nineties. The new architectural enemy changed: it ceased to be capitalist imperialism and became decadent Western liberalism. Language changed, slogans changed, uniforms changed. The structure of the mechanism did not.

Hungary, before Orbán, had been a democratic reformist state; the Orbánist pendulum, presented as the correction of a corrupt liberal elite, ended up

producing an illiberal regime with many of the features of the mechanism described above. In Latin America, movements that came to power presenting themselves as the antithesis of the military regimes of the 1970s and 1980s produced, in several cases (Venezuela, Nicaragua, Bolivia under certain phases), left-wing versions of the authoritarian devices they purported to correct.

This is not a banal symmetric claim. It is not a matter of morally equating incomparable regimes. It is a matter of identifying the mechanism that survives ideological inversion, because only by identifying it can something be built that does not reproduce it.

Three objections worth hearing

It is worth, at this point in the essay, pausing here and looking head-on at the most serious objections a rigorous critic can formulate against what has been laid out.

The first objection is fundamental. If the mechanism is as universal as this reading appears to suggest, the category becomes diluted. Does every concentration of political power tend toward totalitarianism? Are we not treating any form of firm authority as pathology? The objection is fair, and an honest answer must be given. The answer is that the mechanism is not identified by the presence of any one of its parts in isolation, but by the simultaneous occurrence of all four: permanent architectural enemy, loaded language, progressive normalization of exceptional measures, atomization of civil society. A functional democracy may have a polarizing leader (first part present), or use loaded language in its public debate (second part present), or apply restrictive measures at specific moments (third part present), or display erosion of its social capital (fourth part present). None of those instances in isolation constitutes the mechanism. What constitutes the mechanism is the sustained presence of all four, feeding back on one another. The distinction

matters, because without it the essay becomes universal denunciation and ceases to be a diagnostic tool.

The second objection concerns responsibility. If the mechanism is a structure, what becomes of individual decisions? Are Fidel Castro, Hugo Chávez, Vladimir Putin, Viktor Orbán interchangeable figures, mere incarnations of a device that would exist under any protagonist? The question is serious because it has moral and legal implications. The answer is that the mechanism describes conditions of possibility; it does not produce its consequences automatically. Individual decisions matter; they are subject to moral evaluation and legal accountability. What the essay claims is that certain decisions, repeated and combined, form a device that acquires its own logic and outlives its initial actors. Once formed, the device facilitates certain future decisions and obstructs others. But the responsibility for each decision remains individual. The structure does not exonerate the subject; the subject does not exhaust the structure.

The third objection is pragmatic. If knowing the mechanism does not stop its repetition, as is shown by the fact that whole societies knew it after the experience of the twentieth century and fell into new versions of it, what use is this kind of analysis? The answer requires humility. Knowledge of the mechanism does not guarantee immunity. But ignorance of the mechanism practically guarantees repetition, while knowledge at least opens the possibility of identifying it in time and of designing institutional counterweights that obstruct it. The democracies that have best resisted the totalitarian temptations of the twenty-first century are those in which civic awareness of the mechanism exists and in which institutions contain antifragile devices that block it (effective separation of powers, protected plural press, autonomous judicial system, organized civil society). Knowledge is a necessary condition. It is not a sufficient one.

How to recognize it, and how counterweights are built

The practical usefulness of an essay like this is measured not by its analytical elegance but by the tools it gives the reader to recognize the mechanism in its nascent state and to support effective counterweights. It is worth, before closing, taking note of both.

To recognize it, the markers are the four described. When a public discourse systematically converts every internal criticism into part of an external conspiracy, one part is operating. When certain words of the daily idiom begin to carry obligatory ideological weight and others become unsayable without social cost, another part is operating. When measures presented as exceptional accumulate without sunset clauses or legislative review, a third part is operating. When intermediate associations between the individual and the state are progressively eroded, captured, or replaced by structures dependent on the apparatus, the fourth part is operating. The simultaneous presence of all four over a sustained period is the indicator of the mechanism in operation. Whoever learns to read these markers can recognize them in different societies and at different moments, including, eventually, in his own.

To build counterweights, comparative experience suggests four fronts. Civic education as permanent infrastructure, not as a one-off subject; media literacy that teaches one to read a headline with the same seriousness as one reads an accounting balance; constitutional design with antifragile devices (self-blocking clauses for critical amendments, qualified supermajorities, effective mechanisms of constitutional review); sustained strengthening of intermediate civil society through protective regulation and transparent and pluralistic funding. None of these four fronts works alone. The four together, sustained for decades, form what can probably be called, without grandiloquence, a republic with defenses.

○ ○ ○

If History Takes a Different Direction

This essay rests on a structural diagnosis and proposes a pedagogy of recognition. But the future is plural, and it is worth declaring how this text reads under scenarios different from the one desired.

If a Cuban transition occurs and the institutional counterweights described are effectively built, this essay remains as a useful civic instrument for the new republic and for other societies confronting the mechanism in its early forms.

If a transition occurs but the pendulum operates with its habitual logic, substituting the left-wing mechanism for a right-wing version with a different architectural enemy, a different loaded language, different exceptional measures, a different but equally effective social atomization, this essay remains as an anticipated description of what is occurring. Not as the satisfaction of having predicted correctly, but as a tool so that those who see what is happening can name it and, eventually, organize resistance.

If the transition does not occur and the regime mutates into new variants, maintaining the logic of the mechanism under updated vocabulary, this essay describes the structure that will have been preserved beneath surface changes. To recognize structure beneath surface is probably the most necessary operation in order not to confuse cosmetic reforms with real transformations.

If the mechanism reproduces itself, in any setting, in forms we still cannot foresee today (with new architectural enemies, languages loaded with words now neutral, exceptional measures not yet invented, modes of atomization not yet operational), the four parts can still be recognized. That is the meaning of elaborating the pattern instead of denouncing the case. The case ages. The pattern persists, because it belongs to structures of the human condition in society that the twentieth century named for the first time with this precision and that the twenty-first has the responsibility to recognize whenever it manifests itself again.

To recognize it is the first condition. Everything else (the counterweights, the pedagogies, the institutions, the well-designed constitutions) depends on someone first saying, with sufficient clarity for the message to be understood: *it is happening again*.

○ ○ ○

Essay II. The Impossible Economy

Hayek, Property, and the Calculation Problem

○ ○ ○

BEFORE WE BEGIN. The matter is in part technical (the debate over economic calculation, comparative reform sequences) and in part operational (what to do when a window opens). The concrete figures that appear come from sources accessible at the moment of writing and are reasonable approximations, not audited figures. The argument here does not depend on those figures being exact; it depends on the existence of the economic structure they describe, and that structure exists. The central warning of the essay is twofold: one does not exit a failed model by improvising its opposite, and a clumsy exit can damage more than the model itself. That holds for any transition, anywhere, today and tomorrow.

1

On August 5, 2022, at dusk, lightning struck tank number fifty-two of the Matanzas Supertanker Base. The tank held around twenty-six thousand cubic meters of crude, half its capacity. According to the official information later published by the *Granma* daily, the installation's lightning-rod system did not withstand the energy of the discharge. The fire spread by dawn to a second tank and, in the days that followed, to two others. Seventeen people died, among them several young conscripts who had been sent to the front line without the professional training that an industrial emergency of that scale required. Wounded: one hundred forty-six. Evacuated: more than four thousand. The government declared the event the largest industrial accident in the country's history and requested international assistance. Mexico and Venezuela sent specialized teams and personnel. Argentina, Chile, Russia, and

Nicaragua contributed support. The column of black smoke was visible from Havana, one hundred kilometers away. The fire took seven days to extinguish.

If the essay began only with those data, it would amount to mere chronicle. What matters, and what connects the fire with everything that follows, is what occurred before the lightning. A lightning-rod system in a critical installation does not become inadequate on the night of the storm. It becomes inadequate over years of postponed maintenance, replacement parts not purchased, investment decisions never made, technical cadres trained but underused, spending priorities directed elsewhere. The lightning did not, strictly speaking, cause the fire. The lightning found an infrastructure that had been waiting for it for a long time. That the firefighters who died were young conscripts without professional industrial training is not an individual accident; it is the manifestation of a system that for decades formed highly qualified technical cadres in some fields and, simultaneously, failed to sustain the material and professional infrastructure necessary for those cadres to operate under safe conditions.

The Matanzas fire functions as a material synthesis of a specific economy. Each element of the disaster has its structural correspondence. The vulnerable tank is the aging industrial plant without replacement. The failed lightning rod is the planning that allocated resources without feedback from real costs. The indispensable international aid is the external dependence that no declared project of sovereignty has managed to close. The firefighters without training represent the assignment of people to tasks for which the system did not adequately prepare them. The subsequent opacity, with the internal investigation never published a year later according to *Infobae*, is the informational asymmetry that no central calculation can offset. The smoke visible from Havana is what the rest of the country perceives but cannot measure.

This essay is about that. About why the Cuban economy is built upon tanks awaiting lightning, and about why the exit from the model, if poorly designed, can produce damage as severe as the damage it intends to repair.

○ ○ ○

2

To understand what failed in Cuba, it is worth going back, to a theoretical debate that for decades was considered abstract and that the twentieth century resolved empirically at very high human cost. In 1920, the Austrian economist Ludwig von Mises published an essay titled *Die Wirtschaftsrechnung im sozialistischen Gemeinwesen* (Economic Calculation in the Socialist Commonwealth). His thesis was strictly operational, not ideological. Mises argued that in an economy where the means of production are collectively owned and there are no markets that form prices, the rational allocation of resources becomes technically impossible. Not improbable, not inefficient: impossible in the strict sense. Without real prices, planners cannot know whether it is preferable to manufacture ten thousand tractors with the available steel or to build five hundred bridges; they cannot compare the utility of alternative uses of the same resource; they cannot correct error in time because they lack the signal that error sends, which is the financial loss borne by whoever committed it.

Oskar Lange, the Polish economist, attempted to respond to Mises during the 1930s by proposing a model of “market socialism”: a central planning board would simulate prices through an iterative process of trial and error, adjusting until supply and demand balanced. The proposal was ingenious on paper. Friedrich Hayek, in a series of articles across the 1940s, showed why it could not work. His argument culminated in a brief and decisive text, *The Use of Knowledge in Society*, published in the *American Economic Review* in

September 1945. Hayek's thesis was epistemological before being economic. The knowledge relevant to production and consumption decisions is concentrated in no single place; it is dispersed among millions of actors who know particular circumstances of time and place that no central body can aggregate. The market price, formed by the decentralized interaction of those actors, is a mechanism for transmitting information that no algorithm can substitute for, because the knowledge it transmits is by nature tacit, contextual, and dynamic. A central board purporting to simulate that process would not be centralizing information; it would be destroying information, because centralization destroys precisely what makes the price informative: its dispersed origin and its immediate feedback.

That discussion, later called the Socialist Calculation Debate, was considered theoretical for decades. The twentieth century resolved it empirically. The centrally planned economies of the Soviet bloc, without exception, suffered what the Hungarian economist János Kornai called *chronic shortage*: a permanent state of insufficient supply, queues, black market, mistaken investments, declining quality, allocations responding to no revealed preference. Kornai documented this with almost clinical precision in *Economics of Shortage* (1980), writing from within one of the most reformist regimes of the bloc, Hungary. His later book, *The Socialist System* (1992), published after the collapse, synthesized the structural regularities of the model: party monopoly, predominant state ownership, dominance of bureaucratic coordination over market coordination, soft budget constraint in public enterprises (which never go bankrupt because they are bailed out), chronic investment hunger, diversion of products toward export or to the elite, institutional paternalism. Each of those regularities appears in Cuba in its specific local variant.

The soft budget constraint is worth a brief pause. Kornai formulated it to describe the operational difference between a private firm and a state firm in a

planned economy. The private firm that loses money goes bankrupt. The state firm that loses money is rescued, refinanced, reorganized, but rarely disappears. That asymmetry seems minor and is not. Without the real possibility of bankruptcy, business decisions lose the discipline of opportunity cost. The manager who invests poorly does not pay the consequence; society does, in the form of poorer products, delays, forced substitutions. When that logic is multiplied across the entire economy for six decades, the result is not an economy less efficient than its capitalist counterpart; it is an economy that progressively disconnects production and consumption, effort and reward, decision and consequence. Tank fifty-two at Matanzas, with its outdated lightning rod, is a material manifestation of that disconnection.

3

Cuba carried, in addition to the structural problems of the model, a specific challenge that the larger planned economies did not face with the same severity: structural external dependence. For three decades, until 1989, the Cuban economy functioned within COMECON, sustained by favorable terms of trade with the USSR, especially in the purchase of sugar at prices above world market prices and the supply of oil at subsidized prices. When that subsidy evaporated, the so-called Special Period (*Período Especial*) showed, in a few months, the extent to which the model's viability depended on a permanent external subsidy. The fall of gross domestic product between 1989 and 1993 was, according to the most credible estimates, between thirty and thirty-five percent. A contraction of that magnitude, in any economy, is equivalent to collapse.

The exit from the Special Period was not structural reform; it was the substitution of one subsidy for another. First, international tourism as a source of hard currency, managed by the military apparatus through the business network documented elsewhere in this series. Then, from the early 2000s, the

alliance with Chavista Venezuela, which for almost two decades guaranteed oil supply on preferential terms in exchange for professional services (doctors, athletes, advisors). When that source fell into crisis with the deterioration of the Venezuelan economy from approximately 2014-2016, Cuba was left with no replacement. The economic crisis the country has been experiencing since 2019-2020, with extended blackouts, severe shortages, informal dollarization, mass emigration, is not a circumstantial accident. It is the manifestation of a model that, for the third time in six decades, discovers that its structural problems were not solvable by a replacement external subsidy.

Cuban geography adds another layer. A Caribbean island, without abundant natural resources, with an educated but aging population, with aging and vulnerable energy infrastructure, cannot sustain a closed economy without paying very high costs. Autarky under Cuban conditions is not only inefficient; it is materially unviable for prolonged periods. And yet, the logic of central planning with state monopoly over foreign trade produced a structurally closed economy even when outside income was abundant. That contradiction runs through the entire economic history of the country since 1959.

4

So far, the diagnosis of the failed model. If the essay stopped here, it would have completed the easy half of the task. The reader already knows, before beginning to read, that the Cuban economy failed. The reader probably does not know, with the same clarity, that the exit can also fail, and that poorly designed exits in other geographies have produced economic and political tragedies comparable to the model they purported to replace.

The paradigmatic counter-example is Russia between 1991 and 1996. The post-Soviet transition combined two errors that reinforced each other. The first

was excessive speed in the liberalization of prices and trade without first having built the institutions that the market requires to function (a reliable judicial system, banking regulation, effectively protected property rights, an effective antitrust authority). The second was the privatization design. The voucher program of 1992-1994 distributed privatization certificates to the general population, but the absence of developed financial markets and the concentration of information among small groups meant that those vouchers ended up, for the most part, in the hands of politically connected actors at prices well below real value. The subsequent loans-for-shares program, between 1995 and 1996, completed the operation: the government, in need of financing, received loans from emerging private banks with blocks of shares of the principal state firms as collateral; when the government could not pay, the banks kept the firms. Yukos, one of the largest oil companies in the world, was transferred to Mikhail Khodorkovsky for approximately three hundred million dollars; when oil prices recovered, that same firm was worth two orders of magnitude more. The operation was repeated with Norilsk Nickel, Sibneft, Lukoil, and others.

The result, a decade later, was not a propertied middle class but an oligarchy with veto power over national policy. When Vladimir Putin came to power in 2000, he did so presenting himself as the restorer of order against the chaos of the nineties. The new regime did not dismantle the oligarchy; it disciplined it. Some oligarchs, those who accepted political subordination, kept their assets. Others, those who claimed political influence of their own, were expropriated, imprisoned, or exiled. That is the contemporary Russian version of what the previous two decades had produced: an economy dominated by a few actors wielding both coercive and economic power, presided over by a state that arbitrates among them but does not confront them. The pendulum from Soviet communism ended up producing, in less than fifteen years, a system that

reproduces some of the structural pathologies it intended to correct, now in inverted form.

The lesson is operational. One does not exit a planned economy by doing the exact opposite of the planned economy. One exits by deliberately building the institutions that the market needs to function as a mechanism of allocation, and by deliberately avoiding the designs that produce oligarchic capture. Those two tasks are simultaneous and require time. The impulse to do everything in six months is politically understandable and economically catastrophic.

5

To understand what works, it is worth looking at three cases that exited the Soviet bloc better and two cases that offer instructive Asian variants, though none of them is directly importable to Cuba.

Poland, under the Balcerowicz Plan from January 1990, applied a serious version of shock therapy: rapid liberalization of prices, commercial opening, macroeconomic stabilization, gradual privatization of small and medium enterprises, temporary maintenance of large enterprises in state ownership while institutions were built. The plan had real social costs in its first years: contraction of output in 1990 and 1991, high unemployment, runaway inflation before it was controlled, temporary deterioration of services. But the medium-term trajectory was notable. From 1992 the Polish economy began to grow; from 1995 the growth was sustained for more than two decades; in 2004, Poland entered the European Union as a functioning economy. The plan worked reasonably well for several reasons worth naming, because none was a given and all are conditions any Cuban transition would have to reconstruct.

First, Poland had a labor and civic movement, *Solidarność* (Solidarity), with massive popular legitimacy, which gave political cover to the adjustment and

absorbed costs that would otherwise have produced mass protest. Lech Wałęsa and the Solidarity leaders asked their base for patience during the hard years, and the base responded because they had accumulated reasons to trust those who asked. Cuba lacks, as far as one can tell, an equivalent movement with that accumulated labor and moral authority. The Cuban civil society that exists is valuable and diverse, but lacks the organizational scale that Solidarity had built during the decade before 1989.

Second, the prospect of accession to the European Union, formalized years later but present as a horizon from the beginning, served as an institutional anchor: reforms were designed in light of an externally verifiable standard, not of national improvisations. The European *acquis communautaire* (the body of regulation that an aspiring country must adopt to enter) functioned as a reform manual with internationally recognized technical legitimacy. Cuba has no comparable institutional equivalent. The Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC) and the Central American Integration System (SICA) offer much weaker frameworks. The question of which international institution could serve as a legitimate anchor for a Cuban transition is serious and worth raising early.

Third, the small and medium private sector in Poland, although officially repressed during communism, had survived in semi-tolerated forms and expanded rapidly once conditions changed. A significant portion of Polish agriculture, for example, had remained in private ownership throughout the socialist period, which meant that a culture of family entrepreneurship was ready to be activated. In Cuba, the private sector authorized in recent years (*cuentapropismo*, small and medium firms formalized since 2021) is new and precarious, and lacks the dormant business culture that Poland had in 1989.

Estonia, since 1991, offers the most radical version of successful transition in the post-Soviet bloc. Extreme liberalization, rapid adoption of Western institutions, high administrative transparency, electronic government from

early on. The conditions that made that design work were specific: a small, relatively homogeneous population; a national identity forged by decades of occupation perceived as foreign; a political elite mostly young and trained with a European outlook; the absence of a pre-existing oligarchy able to capture the process. Estonia illustrates that speed can work under conditions that rarely repeat themselves.

China since 1978, with the reform initiated by Deng Xiaoping, offers the opposite case and deserves honest treatment. Economically, the Chinese reform produced the largest episode of poverty reduction in human history: hundreds of millions of people emerged from absolute poverty in four decades. That is a fact that no honest analysis can ignore. Politically, the Chinese model did not democratize; it consolidated the power of the Communist Party through controlled economic opening. The question for Cuba, and for any transition, is whether that model is desirable and whether it is replicable. My argument here is twofold: it is probably not desirable as a complete model, because it leaves intact the features of the mechanism described in Essay I of this series; and it is probably not replicable under Cuban conditions, because China had scale, internal market, a diaspora with investment capital, and geopolitical positioning that Cuba does not have. What can be learned from China is the discipline of sequencing: local experimentation before national generalization, gradual authorization of private activity, special economic zones as laboratories. Those parts, separated from the political regime that accompanied them in China, can be useful.

Vietnam, with *đổi mới* since 1986, offers a variant closer in scale to Cuba. Gradual economic opening without democratization, accession to the World Trade Organization in 2007, significant foreign investment, an expanded private sector. The Vietnamese economic trajectory has been sustained: gross-domestic-product growth of around six to seven percent annually for nearly three decades, dramatic poverty reduction, progressive integration into

global value chains (especially in electronics and light manufacturing), maintenance of basic social services. Vietnam is probably the reference most studied by reformist sectors inside Cuba over the past two decades, precisely because it offers an apparent path: economic modernization without political transition, material prosperity without formal democratization. The question, again, is whether the Vietnamese model is desirable as a horizon. Economically it has produced sustained growth. Politically it maintains a single-party regime with all the features of the mechanism described in Essay I of this series: architectural enemy, loaded language, normalization of exceptional measures, atomization of civil society. Adopting it as a model would mean resolving half of the Cuban problem (the economic) and consolidating the other half (the political). That is a decision that should not be taken by inertia, and is a decision that would have to be taken by Cuban society as a whole in a deliberative manner, not by a leadership core that decides for it.

The Nordics, finally, deserve a brief mention for an important rhetorical reason. Cuban official propaganda for decades has presented Sweden, Norway, or Denmark as examples of democratic socialism, suggesting continuity between what those countries have and what the Cuban regime seeks or represents. That equivalence is false and worth dismantling. What the Nordic countries have is a fully functioning market economy, with widespread private property, regulated competition, independent institutions, plural press, regular electoral turnover, and, on that basis, robust redistributive systems financed through high taxes on income and consumption. The proportion of gross domestic product flowing through the public sector in countries like Sweden or Denmark is high (between forty and fifty percent, depending on the indicator and the year), but that proportion rests on top of an economy that in its production is mostly private and market-based. The system functions because it rests on a robust market base, not despite it. The combination of

robust market and robust state is exactly the opposite of the Cuban economy, which combines a weak market with a weak functional state, both hidden behind an extensive bureaucratic apparatus. The Nordics are not actually existing socialism with a friendly face; they are market economies with serious social safety nets, sustained by functional political democracies that make them politically possible.

6

What can be drawn from all these cases for designing the Cuban exit without reproducing the documented errors?

Institutions first, auctions later. The Russian error was to privatize before having a regulatory framework, a reliable judicial system, and an effective antitrust authority. The consequence was oligarchic capture. The reasonable sequence is the inverse: build the institutions that the market needs to function, and only then transfer assets. That means the Cuban economic transition should not begin by auctioning state firms; it should begin by creating the institutional framework within which subsequent auctions can be carried out with guarantees of competition and dispersion.

Well-distributed property is a condition, not a consequence. Hernando de Soto, in *The Mystery of Capital* (2000), argued that the difference between economies that work and economies that do not is the presence or absence of a legal property system that recognizes and protects the assets of ordinary people. Without legally recognized property, physical assets exist but do not become productive capital: they cannot be used as collateral, they cannot be sold with confidence, they do not generate the financial feedback effects that legal property makes possible. Cuba has a specific situation worth taking seriously: decades of expropriations, administrative assignments, de-facto occupations, unregistered informal sales. Any transition would have to decide

how to recognize existing property without opening mass litigation that would paralyze the economy for years. The Czech and post-1989 German cases offer partial references on how to address restitutions and indemnities, neither directly applicable, both instructive.

Pro-competition regulation from day one. One of the clearest Russian lessons is that monopolistic concentration is remarkably swift when there is no effective antitrust authority. Pro-competition regulation is not a regulatory luxury introduced once the market matures; it is a foundational piece without which the market does not mature. Cuba, before any significant privatization, would have to design an antitrust authority with resources, legal independence, and real powers of intervention.

The social safety net as infrastructure, not as ornament. The transition would have real social costs. Workers who today hold jobs in state firms would lose those jobs when the firms are restructured or disappear. Without a social safety net designed in advance, those costs translate into mass political backlash or humanitarian collapse. Poland and Estonia worked, among other reasons, because they built nets that partially absorbed the costs. Russia did not, and the demographic effects are visible in the male mortality data of the 1990s. Cuba already has health and educational infrastructure, however deteriorated; preserving and reorienting them is probably easier than creating them from scratch.

Specific care with strategic sectors. There are sectors where pure privatization leads, almost mechanically, to oligarchic capture: energy, telecommunications, large-scale banking, port infrastructure, natural resources. Those sectors tend toward concentration by their own economic logic, and without explicit anti-concentration design, the transition would produce private monopolies where state monopolies once stood. The difference for the Cuban citizen could be cosmetic. The known tools to avoid this (mandatory shareholding dispersion, individual stake limits, exclusion

periods for actors with conflict of interest, universal-service regulation) are the same ones discussed in Essay VI of this series with respect to GAESA and are applicable to the entire economy.

7

On the general posture worth maintaining when thinking through the exit from the model, a distinction the pendulum always tries to erase is worth making. The diagnosis of failure of the Cuban central-planning model does not imply adherence to the pure-market model, without regulation, without public institutions, without a social safety net. Central planning as an integrated system fails for the reasons Mises, Hayek, and Kornai articulated and that the twentieth century confirmed. The pure market without regulation fails for different reasons but ones documented with the same seriousness: tendency toward monopolistic concentration, regulatory capture, externalities not internalized, financial instability, exclusion of goods and services that are unprofitable to provide privately but whose absence produces significant social damage. Both extremes are known failures. The serious discussion is not between the two extremes but about the combination that produces the best outcomes under specific conditions.

The economies that work best in terms of their populations' wellbeing, by practically any comparable indicator of health, education, median income, social mobility, and reported satisfaction, are market economies with serious regulation, independent public institutions, progressive tax systems, and robust social safety nets. They are not actually existing socialisms; they are not pure capitalisms; they are specific combinations. The name we give them matters less than the structure. Cuba, if it reaches a moment of redefinition, would do well to think in terms of a desirable combination, not in terms of adherence to a label. The idiom of serious twentieth- and twenty-first-century economic thought is not the choice between socialism and capitalism; it is the

design of institutions that combine market, regulation, social protection, and political democracy in proportions that produce sustainable results.

8

How does one recognize when an economic transition is working, and how does one recognize when it is failing?

Indicators of success would include the following, within reasonable ranges. That incoming foreign direct investment is distributed across multiple actors and sectors, not concentrated in a handful of large investors with political connections. That privatized firms display, after five years, dispersed shareholding structures, with no individual owner or vehicle controlling more than a small percentage of any single firm. That labor productivity in sectors exposed to competition shows sustained growth. That the health and education indicators historically achieved by the Cuban system do not deteriorate during the transition but are modernized. That institutional trust, measured in comparable surveys, rises out of the low ranges in which post-totalitarian societies remain for decades. That net migration stabilizes and, eventually, reverses.

Indicators of failure, by contrast. That, in the first years, individuals or financial vehicles appear as majority owners of hotels, commercial networks, banks, telecommunications, energy, previously state-owned. That privatization auctions draw low participation and suspiciously low prices. That the press investigating privatization operations comes under pressure whose correlation with the economic interests at stake is verifiable. That social services deteriorate quickly and unevenly, with parts of the country left without effective access to health care or public education. That the returning diaspora does so by displacing local populations rather than integrating with them. That relevant macroeconomic decisions are taken by international consultancies

with weak local roots rather than by Cuban institutions with established legitimacy.

To recognize failure in time is the only way to correct it. The silence of the investigation into the Matanzas fire, a year later and years afterward with no public release, is a domestic example of how it should not be done. Opacity protects the continuation of error. Transparency, painful in the short term, is the only infrastructure on which any correction can operate.

9

I return to tank fifty-two. The material lesson of the Matanzas fire is not that Cuba had bad luck with a lightning bolt. The lesson is that in an economy where for decades resource allocation was made without the signals a price system provides, without the discipline of bankruptcy, without the feedback of competition, without the legally recognized property that turns assets into capital, without the regulatory institutions that verify the maintenance of critical infrastructure, without the free press that documents failures before they become catastrophes, without the civic mechanisms that allow technicians to raise professional disagreement without personal risk, the tanks wait for the lightning. They do not wait for one; they wait for the first one to strike, and one strikes each of them eventually. The accumulation of postponed maintenance, untaken technical decisions, precarized professional training, aging infrastructure, is not resolved by declarations of energy sovereignty, nor by tributes to victims, nor by artistic memorials. It is resolved by an economy that works, which means by institutions that allow the calculations to be made, the priorities to be debated, the costs to be known, the errors to be documented, the corrections to arrive before the next storm.

Any Cuban transition would face tank-fifty-twos in every sector of the economy. Some would be literal, critical infrastructures that the system could

not maintain. Others would be metaphorical, accumulated decisions across decades whose consequences would manifest when conditions changed. Most would not be known until they were already burning. The only thing that can be prepared in advance is the institutional frameworks that would allow, when the moment arrives, distinguishing between extinguishing the fire with available resources, rebuilding the damaged with criterion, and designing systems that reduce the probability of future fires. Those three tasks are different and demand different disciplines. To confuse them, doing everything in haste on the same day with the same actors and the same methods, is the most efficient known way to guarantee that the pendulum carries the Cuban economy from the fire we know to another fire whose name we do not yet know.

○ ○ ○

If History Takes a Different Direction

This essay describes structures and proposes sequences. But no design fulfills itself, and it is worth declaring how this text reads under scenarios different from the one desired.

If a transition occurs and the exit from the model is designed with the disciplines described here, this essay remains as one of many voices that converged on method and added themselves to the effort. Its usefulness would be one of cross-reference and shared frame with other similar documents.

If a transition occurs and the exit is captured by the logic of rapid privatization without institutions, without pro-competition regulation, without mandatory shareholding dispersion, this essay remains as anticipation of the Russian scenario applied to the Caribbean. What is described here would not have been avoided, but at least it would have been named in time, which allows those who live it to document the capture and, eventually, to organize political and legal resistance against it in the long term.

If the transition does not occur and the regime mutates toward a variant of single-party military capitalism in the Vietnamese or Chinese style, this essay describes the model that will have been normalized under another label. The concern over economic calculation would be partially resolved by controlled opening; the problem of the political mechanism would remain intact and would deepen, because partial prosperity can legitimize what scarcity once delegitimized.

If the regime collapses chaotically without ordered transition, the institutional frameworks this essay recommends building before any privatization would be impossible to implement in the proposed order. The most likely scenario then is informal and violent privatization, with capture by pre-existing networks with residual coercive capacity, an accelerated reproduction of the worst Russian scenario. This essay becomes, in that case, retrospective documentation of decisions that should have been taken before and were not.

In all four scenarios, the economic calculation that was missing for six decades will continue to be missing if the conditions for it to operate are not built. What changes is the cost of waiting.

○ ○ ○

Essay III. The Invisible Wound

An Anatomy of Anthropological Deformation

○ ○ ○

BEFORE WE BEGIN. Here we write about a matter that no quantitative datum can prove and no factual refutation can dismiss. What is diagnosed here is not a policy, an institution, or a figure; it is what a system does to the human beings who live under it. That matter is not measured. It is recognized. And because it is recognized or not recognized, the essay stands or falls, not in archives but in readers. My obligation as author is to say it with the greatest precision possible, knowing that no precision is enough.

A six-year-old child, in any house of any neighborhood of Havana, hears his father speaking quietly with a friend about something. The child does not understand what he hears. But he understands, without anyone explaining it to him, that what his father says is not repeated outside. He learns it from the tone, from the care with which the door is closed, from the way the conversation changes when the neighbor woman enters. That lesson, taught by no school manual and supervised by no ministry, stays. It stays for decades. It stays even when it is no longer needed. It is transmitted, without anyone deciding it, to the son of that child.

That silent learning is the raw material of this chapter.

○ ○ ○

An uncomfortable word for an old wound

Anthropological deformation. The phrase is hard, and it is worth looking it in the face before continuing. A rigorous critic, not an adversary, could rightly reply that calling the conduct of millions of people *deformation* has the air of

moral superiority. Who decides what is deformation and what is legitimate adaptation? From which balcony does one look down on the Cuban people in order to judge them deformed? The question is fair and deserves not to be evaded.

The answer, if there is one, lies not in denying the harshness of the term but in specifying what it means and what it does not. It is not a judgment about the people; it is a functional description of what a system, sustained for six decades, produces in those who are born and grow up within it. People are not deformed; people did what any rational person would have done under identical conditions. What is deformed is the situation in which they had to do it. The term applies to the effect, not to the agent. That distinction matters so much that, if lost, the diagnosis becomes insulting. And an insulting diagnosis does not diagnose; it expels.

Czesław Miłosz, in *The Captive Mind* (1953), opened this territory with the care of one who knew he was treading on real lives. He wrote about the Polish intellectuals, his contemporaries, his friends, the Alpha, Beta, Gamma, and Delta of his book, not to judge them but to understand what had happened to them. Miłosz, who could also have succumbed and did not, knew that disdain was the worst possible instrument for looking at human conduct under totalitarianism. What he diagnosed was an interior operation: *Ketman*, a word taken from the orientalist Arthur de Gobineau, which Miłosz applied to state socialism. *Ketman* is the practice of the systematic concealment of one's own thought while feigning acceptance of the official one. It is not hypocrisy. Hypocrisy presupposes someone who knows what he believes and conceals what he believes. *Ketman*, in its developed form, no longer fully knows what it believes. The frontier between mask and face becomes blurred.

Miłosz's Poles were not deformed in any pejorative sense. They were men and women who learned to survive professionally in an environment where coherence between thought and word brought ruin. That marked them. Cuba

has produced, with its specific differences, the Cuban equivalent of Polish *Ketman*. To call it by its technical name is not offense; it is precision. To refuse to call it by its name is complicity with the system that produced it.

Learning not to say

Double morality, in its everyday Cuban acceptation, is not the double morality of the moralists, that bourgeois hypocrisy that feigns virtue. It is something deeper and sadder. It is the cognitive separation between what is thought and what one is permitted to say, sustained for so many years that the two spheres cease speaking to one another.

Václav Havel, in *The Power of the Powerless* (1978), constructed the most exact image that has been written about this phenomenon. A greengrocer places each morning in his shop window a sign that reads *Workers of the world, unite*. The greengrocer does not believe in the slogan. Nor does he actively reject it. He puts it up because not putting it up would bring suspicion, problems, eventual loss of his post. He puts it up to be left in peace. But by putting it up, every day, for years, he communicates something subtler than adherence: he communicates available obedience. And available obedience, multiplied by millions of greengrocers with millions of signs, sustains the entire system. *Living within the lie*, Havel called that mode of existence. Not actively lying. Living inside an already-assembled device of lying, with no need to believe in it.

Cuba is full of Havel's greengrocers. The slogan is different, the sign is different, the language is different. The structure is the same. To applaud the official speech at the workplace assembly. To sign the document being passed around. Not to question in public what is questioned in private. To say the words that are expected, when they are expected. Each of those gestures, taken in isolation, is trivial. Added across decades, they form a way of

inhabiting language in which one's own word and the obligated word coexist without touching, in separate compartments of the same person.

The catalog of daily gestures in which that separation manifests itself is long and worth naming, because generalizations evaporate when not anchored in the concrete. The workplace performance assembly, in which each one intervenes with the ritual phrase expected of his labor category. The May Day march, where one walks with the assigned banner, shouts the assigned slogan, and at the corner returns to the interrupted conversation about the lack of milk. The Party cell meeting, for Party members, where mandatory self-criticism is performed as ritual without content. The defense of the senior thesis, where the introductory ideological component is drafted before the actual research, because both belong to separate registers. Each of those gestures teaches, with the force of repetition, that public language does not express thought; it fulfills function. And when language ceases to express thought, thought, in time, also ceases to seek language.

The damage is not in the obligated word. It is in the separation. Once one has lived long enough in compartments, exiting them is not automatic. The freedom to speak does not, by itself, produce citizens who speak. It produces first, for years, citizens who suspect that speaking might again become dangerous, and who maintain the separation by reflex even when it is no longer necessary.

Informing as Protocol

There comes a moment, in any mature totalitarian system, when informing on others ceases to be an exceptional act and becomes one of the ordinary tools of the management of daily life. Not the grandiloquent denunciation of literature, the traitor handing over the hero; that is the dramatic version of the phenomenon. Cuban informing, like Soviet-bloc informing before it, is more prosaic. It is functional.

It works thus. In an environment where professional advancement, travel permits, housing assignments, access to scarce services depend on the political judgment of superiors, informing on a colleague for ideological deviation produces material advantage. The one who informs improves his relative position. The one who does not inform loses the opportunity to improve it. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn formulated it with clarity in his context: when lying protects and telling the truth exposes, rational people learn to lie and to distrust. That lesson, repeated across decades, ceases to feel like calculation. It becomes reflex.

Cuba institutionalized informing with a specific device worth naming, not in order to accumulate accusations but in order to understand the architecture of the system. The Committees for the Defense of the Revolution (CDR), founded in September 1960, organized neighborhood surveillance as a daily task on every block. Each CDR covered a few houses, which meant that every Cuban lived under the documented observation of his immediate neighbors. The official function was presented as multiple (sanitary tasks, blood donation, vigilance against the "enemy"), but the structural function was a single one: to maintain a permanent channel of information about the political conduct of every household. The accumulating dossier, which in other systems required a professional secret police, in Cuba was built with the collaboration of the citizens themselves. That institution, with its mutations, has survived six decades. The damage it caused was not only informational; it was relational. It turned the neighbor into a possible informant by default, not by exception. And neighborhood trust, which in other societies sustains daily life, in Cuba was displaced into extremely reduced circles, predominantly familial.

The damage is not in the acts of informing, countable, identifiable, judgable. It is in the atmosphere that the permanent possibility of informing produces in human relations. A society in which any conversation may be reported is a

society in which conversations self-censor before beginning. In which friendships are filtered. In which trust, that good which democracies take for granted and which any economist would recognize as effective social capital, is reserved for extremely reduced intimate circles. Robert Putnam, in *Bowling Alone* (2000), documented with data what any advanced democratic society begins to lose when that capital erodes. Cuba did not lose it gradually; it lost it in a single systemic movement, more than half a century ago, and it has not recovered it.

To rebuild that trust under an open future is one of the longest tasks any Cuban transition would have to undertake. Institutions can be raised in years. Social trust, according to comparative data, is raised in generations.

Living in waiting

Erich Fromm, in *Escape from Freedom* (1941), wrote before the Soviet bloc existed about something that seemed applicable only to the Germany of the 1930s and that ended up illuminating the entire twentieth century. Fromm described how, under conditions of extreme uncertainty and the loss of traditional communal ties, human beings can experience freedom as threat rather than as gift. And how they then seek refuge in mechanisms of escape: authoritarianism (submitting to an authority that decides for one), destructiveness (eliminating what produces the anguish), or automatic conformity (becoming exactly what one is expected to be, in order to disappear into the group). Those three exits, Fromm wrote, are false resolutions of a real problem, which is the unbearable weight of freedom without a net.

Cuba has produced, across six decades, entire generations formed in automatic conformity and, simultaneously, in state dependence. The state was, for decades, the only actor capable of solving problems. Housing, food, work, education, health, transportation, leisure: everything came, at least in theory,

from the same source. That extreme centralization produced, alongside its catastrophic economic effects, a psychological effect less frequently observed and weightier in the long term. Citizen identity, which in a republic is built on individual responsibility and collective co-responsibility, in Cuba was built on waiting. Waiting for the assignment. Waiting for the permit. Waiting for the quota. Waiting for what has to arrive to arrive, without that arrival depending, ultimately, on oneself.

The ration book (*libreta de abastecimiento*), instituted in 1962 as a temporary measure and still in force more than six decades later, is probably the most efficient material device the system produced for teaching waiting as a way of life. The *libreta* is not only a rationing mechanism. It is a pedagogy. Every Cuban household learned, across generations, to organize its time around arrivals: the day rice comes, the day oil comes, the day chicken comes when it does. The queue is the physical place where that pedagogy is executed. Hours of queueing per week, per month, per year, per entire life. The queue is not only loss of time; it is school. It teaches patience, yes, but also teaches that one's own time is not one's own, that individual plans are subordinated to state availability, that individual initiative is counterproductive because moving ahead achieves nothing and can generate problems. A person formed for decades on the *libreta* and the queue does not become an entrepreneur overnight because someone decrees economic freedom. He would have to learn, first, to trust that his time is his.

A transition would demand citizens who stop waiting and start doing. That leap, described thus, seems simple. It is not. The capacity for individual initiative is not decreed; it is learned, under conditions that foster it, over years. The Cuban diaspora in Miami, Madrid, Toronto, demonstrated empirically that the capacity was there, latent, and that it activated as soon as conditions changed. But those who demonstrated it were those who left. Those who stayed lived for decades within the system that produced exactly

the opposite. To assume that the leap is automatic for everyone is to ignore the deep asymmetry between the two groups.

Cynicism as armor

There is a rational, almost inevitable response to an environment where promises are systematically broken and where public words do not correspond to daily realities. That response is cynicism. Not the philosophical cynicism of Diogenes, which was an ethical position; everyday contemporary cynicism, which is its opposite: the suspension of ethical judgment in the face of an environment perceived as irremediable. *Everything is a lie. Everyone steals. Nothing is going to change. Whoever does not take advantage is a fool.* Those phrases, repeated in countless Cuban conversations across decades, are the colloquial formulation of a precise cognitive operation: not believing in anything, so that nothing can disappoint.

Daily Cuban speech produced, during the so-called Special Period and persistently since, its own vocabulary for naming survival under conditions where formal rules do not allow living. *Resolver, luchar, inventar, jinetear, bisnear* (to resolve, to struggle, to invent, to hustle, to deal informally). Each of those verbs describes a zone in which the subject operates outside the official system without opposing it, simply because the official system does not provide. *Resolver* is to obtain what is needed through informal channels, generally outside the law but without negative moral connotation for the practitioner. *Luchar* is the broader version of the same gesture, applied to the whole of daily life. *Inventar, bisnear, jinetear* are variants with their own nuances, in which the underground economy and official legality coexist without touching. That vocabulary is not picturesque; it is the verbal mark of a society that learned to operate simultaneously on two planes, the official and the real, without reconciling them. And the impossibility of reconciling them teaches that the law is not the rule; it is one of the many obstacles to be

navigated. That lesson, internalized over decades, is probably one of the most serious challenges any transition to a rule-of-law state would have to face. It is not enough to change the laws; the very idea that law is shared rule rather than obstacle to be navigated has to be rebuilt.

As armor, cynicism works. As foundation of a democratic society, it does not.

Here it is worth looking head-on at a second serious objection. Western democracies also display cynicism, double morality, institutional dependence, loss of social trust. The data of Putnam himself on the erosion of social capital in the United States from the 1970s onward are striking. European surveys on trust in political parties, in news media, in supranational institutions, show worrying trends in formally free societies. If all that is true, what is specific about the Cuban case? Why speak of *deformation* when what is described looks, simply, like an acuter version of general phenomena?

The answer has two parts. The first is that the difference is one of degree, but degree matters. A society in which thirty percent distrust institutions is different from a society in which eighty percent have learned to distrust as survival protocol. To call the two the same is to lose sight of what differentiates a deteriorated system from a consolidated totalitarian one. The second is subtler: degraded democracies can correct themselves through institutional mechanisms they themselves preserve, free press, electoral alternation, organized civil society, oversight institutions. Cuba lacks those mechanisms. What in a democracy is a symptomatic crisis is, in Cuba, a structural state without internal correction routes. That is the difference the word *deformation* attempts to capture. It is not offense. It is the technical name of a real asymmetry.

The generation that already breathes another air

There is a third objection worth considering before continuing, because the essay, if it remains in diagnosis, is incomplete and, worse, can sound like

sentence. The youngest Cuban generation, those born around the limited internet opening of 2014 and, above all, those born around the crisis of 2020-2021, no longer fits much of the description above. They have grown up exposed to social networks, to real-time conversations with the diaspora, to cultural and political codes that do not come from the system. The protests of July 11, 2021, with all that they had of dispersed and spontaneous, were carried out mostly by people who did not internalize the logic of *Ketman* the way their parents and grandparents did. Not because they are better; because they grew up in a different informational environment.

The San Isidro Movement, the reggaetoneros and rappers who produced the song *Patria y Vida* in February 2021, the neighborhood networks that activated spontaneously when prices and blackouts became unbearable: all those phenomena are evidence that something changed in the Cuban human material during the last decade. The generation that grew up with mobile data in their pocket, however slow and expensive, had access to a view outside the official narrative that no previous generation had. For that generation, *Ketman* is a visible conduct of their elders, not a personal condition. The intergenerational fracture inside Cuba, between those who internalized the system and those who grew up with one foot already outside it, is probably one of the most relevant political data of the moment, and one of the least analyzed.

That changes the diagnosis, in part. Anthropological deformation is not genetic destiny; it is the result of prolonged exposure to a system. When exposure is reduced, the effects attenuate, at least in those who never came to internalize the system completely. Any project of Cuban ethical reconstruction has to start from that fact: the human material in question is not uniform. There are marked generations and there are less marked generations. The pedagogy would have to be different for each.

But the qualification deserves qualifying. Young Cubans exposed to the internet have escaped, in part, Havel's doublethink. They have not escaped, by contrast, cynicism, which is offered to them through global networks in still more sophisticated presentations than the regime's. Nor have they escaped dependence, because the economic system has offered them no real alternative, and many of them chose mass exit as the only form of individual initiative available. The youngest generation is less *Ketman* and more *exit*. That is a partial gain, not resolution.

What is exited by doing

If the diagnosis is well drawn, the exits cannot be declarative. It is not enough to decree freedom; that, paradoxically, would be to repeat the regime's logic, in which an official proclamation purported to suffice in producing reality. The exits have to be practical, distributed, slow. Four fronts can be named, without pretending to exhaust them.

The first is a sustained republican pedagogy, which is not inverse propaganda. The difference is crucial. Propaganda teaches *what* to think; republican pedagogy teaches *how* to think. To rebuild, from primary school to university, a civic formation that teaches to deliberate, to disagree, to sustain disagreements without converting them into enmity. That formation, according to comparative cases (Poland, reunified Germany, South Africa, Chile), works on a generational, not an annual, scale. Ten years is the floor, not the ceiling. And it must be designed by teachers who lived the system, not for imported teachers who do not understand the human material with which they work. The Polish experience after 1989 is illustrative: school manuals were rewritten several times during the first democratic decade, not because the first versions were defective but because society was discovering, year by year, what kind of civic pedagogy it really needed. Cuba would probably require that same iterative process. Whoever expects to arrive on the first day

of the transition with the definitive manual would arrive with the wrong manual.

The second is art as a ritual of collective mourning. The post-totalitarian societies that best processed their wounds did not do so through psychology manuals but through literature, film, theater, music, plastic arts. Poland had Wajda, Kieślowski, Miłosz, Szymborska. East Germany produced for years a cinema of *Aufarbeitung* (working through the past) that helped an entire society to look at itself, with films like *The Lives of Others* and *Good Bye, Lenin!* functioning as collective devices of processing. Chile had, in its poetry, in its narrative, in its murals, a grammar for naming what politics could not say. Cuba already has the paintings of Tania Bruguera, the texts of Leonardo Padura, the music of so many exiles and of so many who stayed, the documentaries of young filmmakers circulating outside the official apparatus. What is missing is not talent. What is missing are the conditions for that art to circulate freely within the island and to be recognized as part of the collective work of working through the past, not as marginal manifestation. A serious transition would invest in those conditions from the first moment, because the symbolic processing of what was lived is not ornament; it is emotional infrastructure without which material reforms come undone.

The third is public mental health with a post-totalitarian perspective. The literature on intergenerational trauma has advanced greatly since the 1990s. It is known, with data, that the psychological effects of living under totalitarian regimes are transmitted to successor generations even when those generations did not live them directly. The studies on the post-Stasi generation in East Germany (the so-called *Ostalgie* and its psychological accompaniments) are comparable material: diffuse anxiety, sustained depression, persistent institutional distrust, difficulty sustaining long-term relationships. Cuba probably requires a mental-health infrastructure designed specifically for societies emerging from prolonged regimes, not copied from clinical manuals

designed for other wounds. That infrastructure is not a one-time program; it is a permanent layer of public health, sustained for at least a generation, with protected funding and personnel trained in the clinic of collective trauma, not only of individual trauma.

The fourth is access to the archives. Here Cuba has, paradoxically, a possible tool that many other post-totalitarian societies did not have. The archives of the Ministry of the Interior (MININT), of State Security, of the Party, contain, presumably, the dossiers of millions of people. East Germany, after reunification, decided to open the Stasi archives to citizens through the creation of the *Behörde des Bundesbeauftragten für die Stasi-Unterlagen* (the office of the federal commissioner for the Stasi archives), which over more than three decades received millions of individual requests. It was not a costless decision. It generated tensions, revealed intimate betrayals, broke up entire families. But it allowed an entire society to look at what had happened, individually and collectively, and to process what they saw with truth rather than with inherited narrative. Cuba would have to decide, when the time comes, whether to open its archives or to seal them. Either of the two decisions has consequences. The first produces immediate pain and slow healing. The second produces apparent peace and wounds that do not heal. Comparative experience suggests that the first is the adult option. But the decision must be taken with care for the specific risks: in Cuba, unlike East Germany, the diaspora is massive, the archives may contain information about people now living in another country, and chains of informing may involve families separated by exile. The design of any opening of Cuban archives, if such opening is decided, would have to think that specificity from the beginning.

It is worth setting down how success and failure on any of these four fronts can be recognized. Success is recognized when a new generation, formed under different conditions, begins to produce public conversations in which

disagreement is sustained without rupture. When children stop learning, in silence, that certain things are not said outside. When social trust, measured in comparable surveys, rises out of the low range in which post-totalitarian societies remain for decades. Failure is recognized when, a decade after any opening, the same conducts appear with different vocabulary. When informing changes its object but not its grammar. When cynicism reconfigures itself, now directed toward the new institutions, with no interior force displacing it.

○ ○ ○

If History Takes a Different Direction

This essay describes a wound and proposes a pedagogy for healing it. But healing does not depend only on what is written here. It is worth declaring how this text reads under scenarios alternative to the one desired.

If a transition occurs and the work on anthropological deformation is taken on as central task of the new republic, this essay remains as a partial map of a wider work, one of the many voices that converged in identifying the priority and added themselves to the collective effort.

If a transition occurs and the work on the invisible wound is postponed, considered secondary to economic and institutional urgency, this essay remains as a warning about an omission that would manifest, a decade later, in the ways the new republic reproduces, with different vocabulary, the structures it intended to overcome. The omission is not noticed immediately. It is noticed when it is already late to correct it without high cost.

If the transition does not occur and the regime prolongs its current form for a decade or more, this essay describes a condition that deepens generationally. The generation already breathing another air would continue emigrating. Those who stay would continue learning, in silence, what no school manual teaches. The damage does not stabilize; it accumulates.

If the regime collapses chaotically, without ordered transition, under conditions close to those of a failed state, the observations of this essay remain precise but lose much of their practical utility, because the exits proposed here require a minimum of institutional order to be implemented. In that scenario, the essay survives as diagnosis of what would have to be retaken when, eventually, some institutional ground is rebuilt from which to work.

In all four scenarios, the wound described is the same. What changes is what is done, or not done, with it.

○ ○ ○

Essay IV. The Cuban Diaspora

Proof, Dilemma, Bridge

○ ○ ○

BEFORE WE BEGIN. This essay is written from within. The author is a Cuban resident in the United States diaspora, and that should be taken as relevant context. The voice of this text is not the neutral voice of the external observer; it is the voice of one who includes himself in the subject he examines. Where it says *we*, the reader should understand that the author has first thought against himself what he is about to write. The concrete figures come from sources accessible at the moment of writing (Spain's National Statistics Institute, the Migration Policy Institute, Cuba's ONEI, the United Nations, research by Juan Carlos Albizu-Campos, and others) and are reasonable approximations. The argument here does not depend on those figures being exact; it depends on the human dynamics they describe being recognizable to anyone who has lived them in any of their many forms.

1

A Cuban who has lived in Madrid for twelve years is visiting his brother's house in Miami. The conversation begins as conversations between brothers who do not see each other often tend to begin: the mother, the nieces and nephews, the neighborhood where they grew up, the health of the father who stayed in Havana. So far, all is well. So far, the two brothers speak the same language. The tension appears later, almost in passing, when the one from Madrid mentions that a mutual cousin, recently emigrated, asked him for help arranging papers in Spain. *I told him better not to come*, says the one from Miami. *In the United States there are more opportunities.* The one from Madrid does not answer immediately. When he does, there is something in his

tone, a minimal but perceptible distance. *It depends on what each one is looking for*, he says. The conversation continues, but no longer flows as before. There is a matter neither of the two is naming.

What stood between the two brothers is not ideological. They share the same position on the regime, the same family history, the same childhood Catholic education. What stood between them is something subtler and deeper: twelve years of Madrid against twelve years of Miami have produced in them two different ways of imagining Cuba, two different ways of reading exile, two different affective relationships with the very idea of return. Neither of the two has become someone else; both remain deeply Cuban. But the places where they landed, the communities in which they became adults, the political codes of the environment in which they built their lives, have installed in each one different coordinates for the same object. When Cuba enters the conversation, it is no longer a single person speaking with himself through his brother. Two different diasporas are speaking.

This essay is about that. About how we are plural without quite knowing it. About how the Cuban diaspora, narrated from outside as a unitary entity, is from within an archipelago of widely different experiences that recognize one another in essentials but diverge in the specifics. And about what consequences that plurality has for any possible transition.

○ ○ ○

2

There are four large migratory waves of Cubans after 1959, each one with its own psychology. They deserve to be named with care, because the word *exilio* (exile) and the word *diáspora* (diaspora) do not mean the same thing, and because each Cuban generation outside the island tends to feel represented by one and not the other.

The first wave, which we usually call the historical exile (*exilio histórico*), left between 1959 and the mid-1970s. It comprises those who left Cuba in the first months after the triumph of the Revolution, those who traveled on the Freedom Flights between 1965 and 1973 (around three hundred thousand people, in an aerial operation unprecedented until then), and the smaller intermediate waves of exile. Its sociodemographic profile was mostly middle-class and professional, with significant presence of business owners, liberal professionals, mid-sized property holders, and qualified technicians. Its specific trauma was abrupt rupture and the loss of a world: the Cuban republican society in which they had been formed, with all its deficiencies and all its achievements, ceased to exist as an active reference when they ceased to be in it. Its political psychology was built around return as a constant horizon, for decades, until time and biology gradually diluted that expectation without replacing it with another. The majority settled in South Florida, especially in the Miami-Dade metropolitan area, where they built the most economically successful Latin American immigrant community in U.S. history. The politics of the first wave was largely militant anti-communist, with a bipartisan inclination in the early years but increasingly aligned with the Republican Party from the late 1970s onward.

The second wave, the *marielitos*, left in 1980, almost one hundred twenty-five thousand people in six months, from the port of Mariel to the United States. The immediate trigger was the crisis at the Peruvian Embassy, where thousands of Cubans took refuge seeking exit, and the regime's decision to open the port. The social composition was radically different from the first wave: manual and service workers predominated, with significant presence of Cubans the regime wanted to expel, including common prisoners and persons with psychiatric histories whom the official propaganda apparatus later used as a battering ram against the entire exodus. The reception in Miami was conflictive. The first wave, already economically consolidated, looked at the

new arrivals with distance and shame, in part because the regime's propaganda had managed to install in them part of its stigmatizing narrative. The *marielito* psychology carries that double rejection: the regime's, which expelled them, and the historical exile's, which received them reluctantly. Their traumas are specific and rarely named in public with the same centrality as those of the historical exile.

The third wave, the *balseros* (rafters), left in 1994, during the Special Period, after the *Maleconazo* of August 5 of that year (the mass protest along Havana's Malecón seawall, the largest open street protest in Cuba since 1959). Almost thirty-five thousand people in less than a month, in improvised vessels, with all the consequences that the word *balsero* suggests: deaths in the strait, shipwrecks, interceptions, survivor traumas. The socioeconomic profile was again different: in many cases, professionals with university training pushed to the sea by the material impossibility of surviving in a collapsing economy. Their political psychology is probably the most nuanced of the four waves. They did not leave from militant anti-communism; they left because there was no food. That difference matters, because it produces less adversarial and, above all, less identity-forming emotional relationships with the regime. Many *balseros* maintain active contact with relatives on the island, travel frequently, send regular remittances, and process the Cuban experience with less centrality in their American identity. The politics of the third wave is heterogeneous, with a more balanced distribution among parties and with greater pragmatism regarding the embargo, travel policies, and remittances.

The fourth wave, underway since approximately 2014 and massively accelerated since 2021, is probably the most numerous of the four. The demographer Juan Carlos Albizu-Campos estimates that Cubans emigrating between 2021 and 2024 exceed one million people, possibly close to 1.79 million, a figure that surpasses the Mariel and *balsero* exoduses combined. The profile is again different. Young migration predominates (between twenty

and forty years old), mostly urban, with medium or medium-high educational profile. The feminization of the flow is notable: for the first time in Cuban migratory history, women are a majority, approximately fifty-six percent of the total. The routes are also new: commercial flights with humanitarian or transit visas, passage through Nicaragua and Mexico to the southern border of the United States, growing settlement in Spain through the *Ley de Memoria Democrática* (Democratic Memory Law) which recognizes nationality through ancestors, dispersion to Brazil, Italy, Chile, Uruguay, Serbia. The fourth wave feels Cuban without the affective centrality of the historical exile. Its politics is hard to characterize because it is in formation: pragmatic, international, digitally connected to the island, with a more fluid relationship to the younger generations that stayed.

Four waves, four psychologies. To treat them as one is the first trap of analysis.

3

Geography complicates the picture. A single wave produces different psychologies depending on where it settles. And the place of settlement influences almost as much as the moment of departure how each Cuban thinks Cuba in the long term.

Miami is the paradigmatic case and deserves careful treatment. Approximately 2.7 million people of Cuban descent live in the United States, according to the Migration Policy Institute, and a substantial majority concentrates in South Florida. That has produced something uncommon in the history of contemporary migrations: a city where the language of work, local politics, news media, educational institutions, religious spaces, are strongly marked by Cuban culture. Miami functions simultaneously as living proof of what Cubans can do in economic freedom (the first wave built there one of the

most successful immigrant communities in U.S. history) and as a space where political belligerence against the regime has produced for decades its own atmosphere, with its own tacit rules about what can and cannot be said. The Cuban community in Miami has had, for decades, electoral weight disproportionate to its national size, especially in the presidential vote in a state that has long been pivotal. That weight, instrumentalized by both parties but above all by the Republican Party from Reagan onward, has produced policies toward Cuba (Helms-Burton, embargo reinforcements, dismantling of Obama's thaw) that are the result both of genuine convictions of the first wave and of electoral calculations of the U.S. political process.

Other U.S. cities produce Cubans with psychologies different from the Miami one. Tampa; Hialeah, which is Miami but is not Miami; New Jersey (West New York, Union City); Houston; Las Vegas; Atlanta; Louisville. A Cuban in New Jersey, especially of the fourth wave, relates to his Cubanness differently from a Cuban in Miami: with less community density, with more integration into Anglo society, with less community political pressure, with more nuanced relationships toward the regime and toward the historical exile. The political landscape of the Cuban outside Miami is heterogeneous and, in many cases, no longer predominantly Republican.

Spain is the second world concentration, with more than one hundred sixty thousand Cuban residents according to Spain's National Statistics Institute (INE), distributed mostly among Madrid, Barcelona, Valencia, the Canary Islands, and other cities. The Cuban diaspora in Spain has specific traits. First, it is linguistically fluid: without the English barrier, professional and social integration is faster. Second, it is much less politicized as a bloc: Spain has no Cuban community that operates as an identity-based electoral subject in the Miami style, and relationships with the Spanish left and right are less predetermined by the Cuban question. Third, it is mostly young and recent: many arrived under the *Ley de Memoria Democrática* or with study and work

visas from 2010 onward. Their psychology toward Cuba is typically pragmatic and less belligerent, with active family relationships on the island and with a more nuanced view of the regime and of the historical exile.

Latin America, with Mexico as principal node but with significant presences in Chile (around twenty-four thousand people according to the U.N. 2020), Uruguay, Argentina, emerging Brazil, Colombia, Costa Rica, the Dominican Republic. The Cuban in Latin America operates within Spanish-speaking societies with their own political problematics, where the Cuban question enters public debate but rarely as a central theme. The Latin American psychology of the Cuban migrant is probably the most diverse of all, because each host society installs its own political frame and the Cuban question is reinterpreted within it.

Canada, Italy, the rest of Europe, the rest of the world. Italy with almost forty thousand Cubans, Canada with nineteen thousand, smaller presences in Germany, France, Sweden, the United Kingdom. Networks are less dense, integration tends to be faster in professional terms and slower in identity terms. The Cuban in Berlin or Toronto rarely connects with Cuban-specific political organizations; he tends to operate like any other Latin American migrant in those contexts.

The crossing of wave and geography produces very different psychologies. A *marielito* in Miami is not the same as a *marielito* in Madrid (where they are few but exist). A *balsero* in Texas is not the same as a *balsero* in California. A 2023 emigrant in São Paulo is not the same as one in Hialeah. When one speaks of the Cuban diaspora as a unitary political subject, this real diversity is erased. And the political transition in Cuba, if it arrives, would have to recognize this plurality or fail trying to reduce it to a single voice.

4

There is a variable cutting across waves and geographies that deserves careful naming, because it lends itself to misunderstanding. The educational and professional level of those who leave, in each historical moment, has varied significantly. And that variation has political consequences.

The first wave had a disproportionate share of professionals with university training, small and medium business owners, qualified technicians. That largely explains the relative economic success of the Cuban-American community in the United States, compared with other Latin American migrant communities. The people who arrived brought high human capital and, in many cases, rescued financial capital.

The second wave, the *marielitos*, was demographically more diverse and had, on average, less formal educational training and less transferable human capital. That correlated with lower rates of initial economic success, greater concentration in manual and service jobs, and, in some cases, marginalization within the receiving Cuban community itself. Saying so is not contempt; it is description.

The third wave, the *balseros*, had a notably high educational profile: many professionals trained by the post-revolutionary Cuban educational system, with university degrees that the system itself had produced. But that human capital did not always translate into credentials recognized in the host country. Cuban doctors driving taxis for years before having their degrees recognized. Engineers working as administrative assistants. That friction between actual training and institutional recognition left lasting marks on the political psychology of many *balseros*: a sense of underused competence, combined with resentment toward the regime that formed them but did not allow them to develop what it had taught them.

The fourth wave presents internal fragmentation. Young professionals with training in STEM, in humanities, in arts, leave through legal channels with

reasonable expectations of international professional integration. Other sectors, especially those who take the overland routes through Central America and Mexico, arrive with more vulnerable profiles, with education interrupted by the years of accelerated economic crisis since 2019, with less social and financial capital. The fourth wave is not homogeneous in formation or in capacity for integration. And that fragmentation translates into politically fragmented positions as well.

Why does this matter for a possible transition? Because the pretense that the diaspora speaks with a single voice, brings a single program, offers a single set of capacities and resources, is fictitious. The diaspora brings professionals and brings manual workers; it brings capital and it brings debts; it brings international networks and it brings isolation; it brings militant anti-communism and it brings conciliatory pragmatism; it brings nostalgia and it brings forgetting. Any design for return or participation that assumes uniformity would collide with reality very quickly.

5

When a Cuban leaves the island, it is not only he who emigrates. The departure has an effect on what remains. Albert Hirschman, in *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty* (1970), formulated the framework that illuminates this phenomenon better than any other. Hirschman argued that when members of an organization (a firm, a party, a country) are dissatisfied with the direction the organization is taking, they have three options: to exit (leave), to raise voice (protest in order to change the direction), or to maintain passive loyalty. The three options interact: ease of exit tends to weaken voice, because those who would raise voice leave instead of staying to press; loyalty tends to sustain voice, because those who feel attachment remain and reform from within.

Cuba has had for six decades one of the most sustained outflows in the world in proportion to its population. That was not accident. The regime has managed the exodus as a structural escape valve: when internal pressure rises, it opens an exit. Mariel 1980, the *balseros* of 1994, Wet Foot/Dry Foot for two decades, humanitarian parole after 2021. The consequence, in Hirschman's terms, is that internal voice has been weakened for decades not because Cubans have nothing to say, but because those with the greatest capacity to articulate voice (professionals, artists, technicians, potential leaders) left in disproportionate numbers. Mass exit is not only demographic; it is a political operation that the regime has deliberately exploited to diminish its internal contestation.

That reading has an uncomfortable consequence for us, those who left. Each individual departure was rational and, in many cases, necessary. But the aggregate of millions of individual departures has functioned, for six decades, as an involuntary subsidy to the regime's stability. It is not the personal responsibility of those who left; it is a structural reading of the phenomenon. And to understand that is a condition for thinking through the transition without illusion: if the diaspora purports to play a role in a future Cuba, it must accept first that its departure was part of the problem it now intends to help solve. That acceptance is not guilt; it is lucidity.

There are diasporas that have done that work and diasporas that have not.

The Vietnamese diaspora (the *Việt Kiều*) is probably the most studied case of mass exile for political reasons that ended up reconciling economically with the country of origin without fully reconciling politically. Vietnamese who left between 1975 and the 1990s, principally to the United States, Australia, France, built successful communities in their host countries. From the 1990s onward, with the economic opening of *đổi mới*, many began to return to invest, set up businesses, reconnect with family. The Vietnamese diaspora today contributes a significant percentage of foreign investment and

remittances in Vietnam. Political reconciliation, by contrast, has not been complete: Vietnamese dissidents continue to find obstacles to returning, and the regime maintains control over what kinds of investment and return are welcome. But the separation between the economic and political dimensions has allowed a degree of functional reintegration that benefits both the Vietnamese economy and the exiles.

The Polish diaspora is a different case. Poland had mass emigration during the twentieth century from multiple causes: wars, partitions, communism, economic opportunity. When the democratic transition occurred in 1989, important sectors of the diaspora actively supported the process, through remittances, professional networks, international political pressure, and, in many cases, physical returns to participate in institutional reconstruction. Lech Wałęsa was the internal face of the transition, but behind him stood decades of work by the Polish diaspora, especially in the United States and Western Europe, sustaining the idea of a free Poland during the hard years. The Polish transition would have been possible without the diaspora; but it would have been more difficult and probably less successful.

The Irish diaspora is an older and more affective reference. Generations of Irish emigrated to the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The relationship between the diaspora and the island remained intensely affective for generations, with remittances, visits, family ties, sustained cultural identity. When Ireland modernized economically between the 1980s and the 2000s, the diaspora contributed capital, networks, and, above all, narrative: the idea of Ireland as a viable, prosperous, contemporary country was produced in part by the diaspora before the island embodied it. The Irish diaspora shows that a deep affective bond can be sustained for generations without losing density.

There are also diasporas in the opposite sense, where the effect was reversed. The Lebanese, during the civil war of 1975-1990, financed armed factions

from abroad, prolonging the conflict. The Balkan diasporas during the wars of the 1990s did the same, especially the Serbian, Croatian, and Albanian-Kosovar, feeding money, weapons, and propaganda into the Yugoslav conflicts. In those cases, the diaspora did not contribute to reconciliation; it intensified the fracture. The lesson is that a diaspora can be a reconstructive actor or a destructive one, depending on how it organizes itself, what project it adopts, and what discipline it accepts.

6

What kind of actor do we, the Cubans in the diaspora, want to be, if a political transition opens in Cuba?

The question is honest and deserves an answer without rhetoric. There are three answers that circulate, explicitly or implicitly, in the Cuban diaspora.

The first is maximalist: that the Cubans of the historical exile, especially those in Miami, are the legitimate heirs of the pre-1959 republic, and that the transition should consist of their return to natural positions of leadership. That vision, present in sectors of the historical exile for decades and inherited by some sectors of the fourth wave that have been incorporated into the Miami political networks, ignores two fundamental facts: that the pre-1959 republic was not ideal in itself (it had significant corruption, important inequalities, structural dependence), and that the political legitimacy of any transition would have to come mostly from the Cubans of the interior, who paid the price of the regime and who would live the day after.

The second answer is minimalist: that the diaspora should abstain from any political role in the transition and limit itself to supporting whatever the Cubans of the interior decide, without interfering. That vision, present in sectors of the third and fourth waves with a more nuanced relationship to the regime, is also problematic. But that ignores the fact that the diaspora has

capital, international networks, technical capacities, institutional experience built across decades in democratic societies, all of which is necessary for a functional transition. To renounce contributing all that out of excessive political modesty is a waste.

The reasonable answer lies between the two. The diaspora is indispensable for a Cuban transition, but it cannot be the principal actor. Political legitimacy would have to come mostly from the Cubans of the interior, who for six decades have sustained Cuban society under conditions the diaspora did not share. The diaspora contributes conditions, resources, networks; the Cubans of the interior contribute legitimacy, knowledge of the terrain, and the right to decide on the rhythm and form of the transition. That proportion is not exact geometry; it is political discipline worth declaring before the transition and maintaining during it.

That has operational consequences. The diaspora, if it wants to be a constructive actor, would do well to organize itself with transparency about who is who, what interests it represents, what resources it contributes. The claims of representation, the platforms that claim to speak *for the Cubans in exile* without verifiable democratic mechanisms to legitimate them, are part of the problem, not of the solution. Bilateral negotiations between diasporic actors and potential interior actors, without the mediation of Cubans on the island, are dangerous instruments. What deserves to be built is a broad table on which all the waves and all the geographies are represented, with transparent mechanisms of legitimation, and on which voice has weight but not monopoly over the decisions the Cubans of the interior would take.

7

There is a specific question that no serious essay on the diaspora can evade: the expropriated properties. Tens of thousands of properties, from family

homes to large enterprises, were confiscated after 1959 and turned over to other uses, other owners, other institutions. Some of those properties are today occupied by Cuban families who have lived in them for two or three generations, with no responsibility whatsoever for the original confiscation. Others are functioning hotels or state enterprises. Others are abandoned or destroyed.

Any transition would have to decide how to address this knot. The extreme options are potential tragedies: total restitution, without nuance, would displace families on the island who are responsible for nothing in order to return properties to diasporic families that in many cases have built whole lives in other countries; total negation would ignore a documented historical injustice and condemn several generations to a perception of structural impunity. Comparative cases offer partial references. Post-1989 Germany opted for restitution where possible and monetary compensation where not. The Czech Republic did something similar, with clear deadlines and mediation mechanisms. Poland, much more reluctant, postponed decisions for decades with ambiguous results. No model is directly applicable to Cuba, but none can be ignored.

The principle that seems reasonable is one of phasing: to recognize the historical injustice in documented form; to offer mediation mechanisms case by case, not mass decisions; to prioritize the stability of current occupants who are not responsible for the original confiscation; to offer financial compensation or compensation of another kind when physical restitution is unviable; to accept that the adjustment would take a generation, not a decree. The diaspora would do well to enter that conversation with realism, knowing that the political legitimacy of any solution would depend on the Cubans of the interior recognizing it as just, not only on the diasporic claimants considering it satisfactory.

8

How does one recognize the success of a process of reintegration between the diaspora and the island, and how does one recognize its failure?

Indicators of success would include the following. That the four waves and the multiple geographies are represented at any table of dialogue, not only the first wave from Miami. That physical returns, when they occur, are voluntary and gradual, not mass recolonizations. That diasporic investments in Cuba are distributed among multiple actors and sectors, without the diaspora displacing Cuban entrepreneurs of the interior by sheer superiority of capital. That properties in dispute are managed through case-by-case mediation, without mass decisions producing secondary injustice. That the diaspora supports Cuban institutional construction without pretending to replace it. That relationships among the waves, within the diaspora itself, become more fluid with time.

Indicators of failure, by contrast. That the transition is captured by specific sectors of the diaspora with disproportionate financial or political weight. That properties in dispute generate waves of mass litigation that paralyze the economy for years. That physical returns produce forced displacement of interior families. That diasporic capital purchases critical infrastructure and public services at low prices, reproducing the Russian oligarchic operation with an American passport. That the diaspora divides publicly during the transition in ways that reproduce the divisions the regime cultivated for decades. That Cubans of the interior perceive the returnees as invaders rather than as brothers.

○ ○ ○

If History Takes a Different Direction

This essay describes a plurality and proposes a discipline. But plurality can organize itself in many ways, and it is worth declaring how this text reads under scenarios different from the one desired.

If a transition occurs and the diaspora organizes itself with the discipline described here, contributing without claiming the leading role, this essay remains as one of many calls that converged on the right direction. Its usefulness is one of cross-reference and shared frame with other voices.

If the transition occurs and the diaspora acts with capturing belligerence, especially from Miami sectors with economic and political power in the United States, reproducing the logic of the pendulum described in other essays of this series, this essay remains as a warning that was made and not heard. Its usefulness shifts to documenting what could have been avoided.

If the transition does not occur and Cuban emigration continues at the rhythm of recent years, the diaspora would continue growing and diversifying while the island empties. Albizu-Campos estimates that the resident Cuban population may have fallen to around eight and a half million people. The proportion between diaspora and resident population would continue moving toward an unprecedented equilibrium, in which the number of Cubans abroad could approach the number of Cubans on the island. That scenario, if prolonged, would make the questions about who decides what in any possible transition increasingly complex.

If the regime collapses chaotically without an orderly transition, the diaspora is probably one of the actors most tempted to fill the vacuum. Without functional institutions on the island, without legitimate mechanisms of political legitimation, without minimal state capacities, the diaspora with resources and networks could become a dominant actor by sheer absence of alternatives. That scenario would be the closest to the Lebanese or Balkan capture of the process, and it is worth anticipating in order to resist it.

9

The brothers of the opening are still talking in the Miami living room. The conversation does not break, but neither is it healed. What separates them is not ideology, not geography, not even time. It is something subtler and deeper: each one carries a different Cuba inside, made of the places where he landed, the friends he made, the political codes he breathed, the silences he learned to keep and to break. And neither can transfer his Cuba to the other complete, because the two Cubas are true and incomplete at once.

That is our condition. We are one and we are many. We are deeply Cuban and we are also what each place of refuge made of us across years or decades. When we speak of Cuba, especially when we speak in the future tense, we speak in the plural without knowing it. What the transition would have to learn to do, if it arrives, is to listen to that plural without trying to reduce it, to integrate it without trying to make it uniform, to let each diasporic Cuba contribute what it has without any one of them pretending to be the complete diasporic Cuba.

None of this is new in the history of human migrations. What is new is that it falls to us to think it from within. And to think it from within means, first of all, looking at our own brother when the conversation gets stuck, and understanding that the stickiness is information, not lack. What the brother in Madrid does not say to the brother in Miami, and what the brother in Miami does not say to the brother in Madrid, is what must first be learned to listen for. Before any table of dialogue with the Cubans of the interior, that conversation between diasporic brothers is the one still pending.

○ ○ ○

Essay V. Cuba on the Chessboard

Embargo, China, Russia, Venezuela

○ ○ ○

BEFORE WE BEGIN. This essay is written from Miami on May 2, 2026, one day after President Donald Trump signed a new executive order expanding sanctions against the Cuban regime, in a regional context altered by the capture of the deposed Venezuelan president Nicolás Maduro during a U.S. military operation in January, by an oil blockade against Cuba that has allowed only one Russian vessel to enter between January and April, and by diplomatic meetings in Havana sustaining, in parallel, conversations whose scope is not publicly known. The photograph of the moment is exceptionally fluid, and the reader who reaches this text in one or two years will face a different geopolitical map. The argument here does not depend on the specific configuration of the moment of writing. The argument is structural: Cuba's geopolitical position has been conditioned for more than a century by its geography, by a key historical decision taken in 1959-1960, and by a series of behavior patterns that reproduce themselves under each new configuration. Those patterns are what the essay tries to read. The concrete names and dates are illustration, not object.

○ ○ ○

1

I grew up near a refrigeration plant in Havana. It was a large installation, of the type the Cuban economy produced on industrial scale when it still claimed to operate as an industrial economy. The trucks arrived at irregular hours, and

my neighbors, who worked there, knew how to anticipate them through a routine the official system never explained: when movement began in the loading yard, within hours chicken would appear in the neighborhood's black-market bag. It was frozen chicken. It was good. It arrived in quantities sufficient for the entire block to eat animal protein for several days, which was no small thing in an economy where animal protein was a chronic scarcity.

What it took me years to understand was where it came from. The trucks had a brand painted on their sides that was not Cuban. My memory preserves the name with the uncertainty that comes with late childhood recollection: *Crowley*, written in large letters, in a corporate blue that did not resemble the red and yellow of the official slogans. Crowley Maritime Corporation. A shipping company headquartered in Jacksonville, Florida. A private American company that for years, authorized under the humanitarian and agricultural exceptions of the Trade Sanctions Reform and Export Enhancement Act of 2000, transported chicken, soy, corn, and wheat to Cuba in quantities that turned the United States, for several years, into one of the country's principal agricultural suppliers, the same country that officially declared the United States a historical enemy. Payment was in cash, in advance, without credit. Transactions, always within the U.S. legal framework specific to the agricultural exception.

The regime called that *the blockade*. It called it *genocidal blockade*, *criminal blockade*, *extraterritorial blockade*, in every public act, in every official speech, in every article of *Granma*, in every history lesson at school. And I, first as a child, then as an adolescent, asked myself what kind of blockade this was that arrived with a blue brand at my block's refrigeration plant and was later resold on the black market that the regime itself, in theory, persecuted. That question, which a child formulates without political theory or comparative literature, already contained the entire problem of the essay I now write. If what the regime called *the blockade* was not exactly what the regime

said it was, then the official discourse on Cuba's geopolitical position was at least partially broken. And if the official discourse was broken on that point, it could also be broken on others.

2

The truth about the embargo, looked at carefully, has been for decades more nuanced than either of the two extreme discourses. The Cuban official discourse has presented it as a total blockade, including medicines, food, technology, everything. The discourse of the historical exile, in some sectors, has presented it as a just and effective tool. Both positions are simplifications, and they deserve to be dismantled with the same honesty.

The U.S. embargo against Cuba, formalized by stages from 1960 and consolidated through the Cuban Assets Control Regulations of 1963, is one of the most prolonged sanctions regimes in contemporary history. But it has not been a blockade in the strict sense. Cuba has traded for decades with the rest of the world: with the Soviet Union until 1989, with Europe, with Canada, with Latin America, with China since the 2000s, with Vietnam, with the non-U.S. world as a whole. The specific question with the United States has been one of bilateral exclusion, not of global isolation. And even within that bilateral exclusion, the humanitarian and agricultural exceptions authorized from 2000 produced real commercial flows: in some years, the United States ranked among the five principal agricultural suppliers to Cuba. The Cuban Liberty and Democratic Solidarity Act, known as Helms-Burton, passed in 1996 under Clinton, hardened the regime by codifying it legislatively and by including extraterritorial provisions that affected non-U.S. firms. But not even Helms-Burton turned the embargo into a total blockade.

That the regime called *genocidal blockade* a sanctions system that allowed the import of frozen American chicken from Florida is consistent with the logic of

the architectural enemy discussed in Essay I of this series. The function of the discourse of the blockade was not to describe economic reality with precision; it was to mobilize a population emotionally against an identifiable external threat, to justify the centralization of internal power, and to displace responsibility for the material problems of the economic model onto an external actor. The real embargo, with its real effects and its real exceptions, mattered less than the symbolic embargo. The first was foreign policy; the second, internal engineering.

This does not mean that the real embargo has been harmless. The empirical literature on sanctions, especially the work of Gary Hufbauer, Jeffrey Schott, and Kimberly Elliott gathered in *Economic Sanctions Reconsidered* (in its successive editions since 1990), has documented carefully the effects of prolonged sanctions. The general conclusions, after reviewing more than a hundred cases, are sober. Sanctions rarely topple consolidated regimes; when they work politically, they do so over relatively short periods against unstable regimes or those with divided elites. Prolonged sanctions tend to produce counterproductive effects: they reinforce the internal discourse of the target regime about the architectural enemy, justify exceptional measures that would otherwise be questioned, harm the general population more than the elites, and produce subsistence economies that can become permanent structures. Well-designed sanctions (selective, conditional, verifiable, multilateral) can function as a tool of specific pressure; poorly designed sanctions (universal, unconditional, unilateral, indefinitely prolonged) tend to fail. The Cuban embargo, in its six-decade form, has structurally fallen into the second category more than into the first.

To say so is not to yield to the regime. It is to recognize a documented fact that any future design would have to take into account.

3

To understand why Cuba is where it is geopolitically, one has to look back. Not to the propagandistic 1959 the regime has cultivated for six decades, but to the longer and more interesting period: the century between the formal independence of 1898 and the revolution of 1959. During those sixty years, Cuba operated in a unique geopolitical position, asymmetric but functional: as an independent republic with an economy deeply integrated with the U.S., with cultural, demographic, educational, religious, and sporting ties to the north that no decree could break, and, simultaneously, with all the problematic dimensions that relationship carried.

The problematic dimensions existed and deserve honest naming, because to ignore them would be to fall into the opposite mythology of the gilded exile. The Platt Amendment, in force between 1901 and 1934, authorized the United States to intervene militarily in Cuba under certain conditions, which produced documented interventions in 1906, 1912, and 1917. The Cuban sugar economy, the country's principal productive sector for decades, depended structurally on the U.S. sugar quota and on U.S. ownership of mills and central refineries. U.S. complicity with dictatorships such as that of Gerardo Machado, in its final stage, and that of Fulgencio Batista, especially between 1952 and 1958, damaged Cuban democratic legitimacy and facilitated precisely the revolution that would later break the relationship. The mass presence of the American mafia in 1950s Havana, with prostitution, casinos, and organized crime, was a real part of the landscape, not a propaganda invention.

But, simultaneously, there were positive dimensions also worth not ignoring. The Cuba of the 1950s had one of the highest gross domestic products per capita in Latin America; it had a consolidated professional middle class; it had imperfect but real republican institutions (Cuba had a free press, competitive political parties, autonomous unions during significant periods of the twentieth century); it had an educational and health system with notable

advances, even compared with the United States in some dimensions; it had a vibrant cultural, sporting, scientific, and intellectual production recognized across the continent. Integration with the United States, asymmetric as it was, also produced relative prosperity, educational and migratory opportunities, technology transfer, and a transnational Cuban-American fabric that generations of Cubans lived without feeling contradiction.

It is worth pausing on some verifiable data that the Cuban official discourse has tended to erase. Cuba in 1958 had one of the highest physician-per-capita ratios in Latin America, ranking third after Uruguay and Argentina, and a proportion comparable to several European countries of the period. The Cuban educational system had literacy rates among the highest in the region (around 76 percent according to the 1953 census, high by Latin American standards at the time), although with significant urban-rural inequalities that the subsequent revolution would address. Cuban industry was diversified: in addition to sugar, there was production of tobacco, rum, textile manufacturing, basic chemicals, and cement, sectors less developed in other Latin American countries of the moment. Cuban cultural presence on the continent, in music, sport, literature, and visual arts, was disproportionate to the country's size. Cuban television was one of the first in the Spanish-speaking world. Cuban professional baseball competed at high levels with the American.

This does not romanticize pre-revolutionary Cuba. Social inequalities were severe, especially between prosperous urban society and rural reality. Political corruption was structural, not incidental. The Batista dictatorship of 1952-1958, in addition to its repressive brutality, had emptied of content the democratic institutions established by the 1940 Constitution. The 1959 revolution was born, in good part, as a legitimate response to that political and institutional crisis, not as an ideological caprice. The problem was not that the revolution attempted to reform the imperfect Cuban republic deeply; the problem was the specific direction it took after taking power.

The 1959 revolution faced the fundamental strategic decision: how to reorganize that deeply unequal and deeply productive relationship. The options were multiple. One was the nationalization of U.S. assets with negotiated compensation, maintaining basic economic integration under new conditions, in an operation similar to what Mexico had done with its oil in 1938. Another was the negotiation of a new framework of relationship that recognized Cuban sovereignty and restructured the terms of exchange. The option ultimately taken, especially between 1960 and 1962, was total rupture and strategic alignment with the Soviet Union, at the height of the Cold War, which led to the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962 and consolidated the geopolitical position Cuba has held for six decades.

The specific chronology of the rupture deserves attention because it reveals its character as decision, not as inevitability. Between 1959 and mid-1960, the United States and revolutionary Cuba maintained active diplomatic contacts. The nationalization of U.S. properties began in 1959-1960 without effective compensation, which produced staggered American responses (cuts in the sugar quota, commercial restrictions). Explicit alignment with the Soviet Union came later and progressively: the first Cuba-USSR commercial agreement was signed in February 1960; the first Soviet weapons arrived between 1960 and 1961; the declaration of the socialist character of the revolution did not come until April 1961, on the eve of the Bay of Pigs invasion. Each step was a specific decision, not the mechanical consequence of the previous one. There were moments at which the trajectory could have been different. The decision to follow the path that was followed was not historical inevitability; it was political choice with costs that only now, six decades later, can we fully calculate.

That decision was not inevitable. It was the political choice of a leadership that came to power by one route and consolidated its power by another. And it was a costly decision: it placed Cuba in a geopolitical position in which it has

paid extraordinary economic, human, and cultural prices for more than half a century, while countries with less favorable initial conditions (Costa Rica, the Dominican Republic, Panama, to a certain extent even Mexico) achieved more sustainable configurations for their relationship with the hemispheric power.

To recognize that is not to exonerate the United States from its historical responsibility in the prior deterioration of the Cuban republic. It is to read the revolutionary decision as a decision, not as destiny. And from there a conclusion follows that for six decades the Cuban official discourse has tried to deny: closeness with the United States, with all its problematic dimensions, is a Cuban asset, not a curse. A Cuba that recognizes geography as data and natural integration with its northern neighbor as a historical resource has more options, not fewer. A Cuba that insists on permanent rupture pays, again and again, the cost of sustaining it.

4

While Cuba maintained that rupture, other powers entered through the gap. That is the other part of the geopolitical story worth reading without alarm and without dismissal.

The Soviet presence in Cuba, between 1960 and 1989, was architectural. Sustained by subsidies, military assistance, diplomatic and intelligence presence, educational exchanges, imported institutional model. The Lourdes base, a signals intelligence facility located south of Havana, operated for decades as one of the principal Soviet interception centers in the Western Hemisphere, on Cuban territory, directed primarily against the United States. The Bejucal facility, a communications center, fulfilled complementary functions. When the Soviet Union collapsed, Lourdes and Bejucal were formally closed or reduced. The subsequent Russian presence, especially under Vladimir Putin from 2000 onward, reopened chapters: visits of Russian

warships to Cuban ports, joint exercises, partial reestablishment of intelligence capacities, energy supplies at critical moments. In March 2026, in the context of the U.S. oil blockade that prevented Mexico and other suppliers from sending fuel to Cuba, it was a Russian vessel with one hundred thousand barrels of crude that was the only one authorized to unload in Cuban ports, in a gesture that combined aid with the affirmation of geopolitical presence.

The Chinese presence is more recent and deeper in form. China has invested over the past two decades in Cuban digital infrastructure (especially through cooperation with Huawei in telecommunications networks), in the port sector (with agreements concerning the port of Mariel), in transportation projects, and in commercial relationships that for several years placed China among the principal commercial partners of Cuba. The Chinese presence in Cuba forms part of a broader hemispheric pattern: over the past two decades, China has deployed a systematic strategy of economic presence in Latin America, with loans, infrastructure, trade, and, in some cases, installations that U.S. intelligence agencies have identified as potentially military or interception-related. Cuba, for its strategic geography, has been an important node of that strategy.

The Venezuelan question added another layer from approximately 2000 to 2024-2025. The alliance with Chavista Venezuela produced, for almost two decades, preferential oil supplies that partially substituted for the lost Soviet subsidy of 1989. In exchange, Cuba sent doctors, athletes, intelligence and security advisors. That alliance was, for years, the principal sustenance of Cuban economic viability. The Venezuelan economic crisis from 2014 onward progressively eroded that relationship; Maduro's capture in January 2026 abruptly closed it. Cuba was suddenly without its principal energy supplier, in a situation that the U.S. oil blockade has severely aggravated. The figures speak for themselves: Cuban gross domestic product projected to fall by

around 7.2 percent in 2026; tourism halved; nickel and cobalt production halted by fuel scarcity; tobacco production with problems.

What deserves to be understood, without losing structural perspective in the immediate shock, is that the rotating dependence Cuba has had on external powers (USSR, then Venezuela, now Russia partially and China in some sectors) is no historical accident. It is the predictable consequence of having broken the natural relationship with the United States without building an economy autonomous enough to sustain itself without external subsidy. The regime has called that dependence *internationalist solidarity* in some moments and *strategic cooperation* in others. The label changes. The structure does not.

5

An uncomfortable observation deserves formulating before continuing: the discourse of "the non-benevolent interests of China and Russia" in the Caribbean, frequently repeated in certain U.S. geopolitical literature, requires nuance. China and Russia deploy presence in Cuba where they find strategic utility; they do so with their own agendas of power, without any altruism that would justify romanticism. But the logic of U.S. foreign policy in the Western Hemisphere over two centuries, from the Monroe Doctrine of 1823 to the present, has also deployed presence where it found strategic utility, without altruism that would justify romanticism in the opposite direction. The analytic asymmetry of speaking only of the first and omitting the second is a methodological problem, not a detail.

Symmetrical recognition does not mean moral equivalence. The United States is a democracy with hegemonic power; China is an autocracy with hegemonic ambitions; Russia is an autocracy with imperial ambitions. The three powers are not comparable in terms of internal political systems, respect for human

rights, or institutional transparency. A defensible Cuban transition would lean toward alignment with democracies, for reasons that have to do with the desirable political system, not with the simple calculation of force. But that alignment should not be subordination. The fundamental Martían aspiration, which no essay in this series has invoked nominally and which operates throughout all of them, is that Cuba be subject and not object of its own foreign policy. That holds in the face of any power, whatever its internal regime.

On the comparative effectiveness of sanctions, it is worth briefly reviewing five cases that illuminate different variants of the problem.

Iran under U.S. sanctions since 1979, intensified with multilateral nuclear sanctions from 2006, partially lifted with the JCPOA of 2015, reinstated with the U.S. departure from the agreement in 2018: four and a half decades of sanctions that have not produced regime change, have significantly damaged the Iranian population, have strengthened the hardest wing of the regime, and have produced a parallel economy oriented toward Russia and China. The Iranian regime is today more internally stable than it was two decades ago, not less. It is the clearest case of counterproductive sanctions on a global scale.

North Korea under sanctions since the Korean War, progressively intensified from the 1990s due to the nuclear program: seven decades of isolation that have produced an impermeable regime, a population with extreme levels of suffering, and a nuclear program the sanctions have not managed to halt. Another case of long-term counterproductive sanctions, with the difference that the humanitarian consequences have been catastrophic on a much larger scale than in other cases.

Iraq under United Nations sanctions between 1990 and 2003: thirteen years of sanctions that produced, according to estimates that generated international controversy, hundreds of thousands of child deaths from malnutrition and

preventable diseases, without producing the political change pursued. Madeleine Albright, then U.S. representative to the U.N., was questioned in a 1996 interview about the figure of half a million children dead as a consequence of the sanctions; her answer that “the price was worth it” became one of the darkest moments of U.S. diplomacy of the period. Sanctions against Iraq are the paradigmatic case of how universal sanctions produce humanitarian catastrophe without achieving political objectives. The Oil-for-Food program, instituted in 1995 as an attempt to relieve humanitarian cost, ended up captured by internal corruption of Saddam Hussein’s regime and of international officials, demonstrating that palliatives designed atop badly conceived sanctions tend to reproduce the pathologies they purport to correct. The Iraqi regime did not fall through sanctions; it fell through the military invasion of 2003, an operation that itself proved catastrophic in humanitarian and geopolitical terms. The hard lesson is that sanctions producing mass suffering on the civilian population without touching the regime, prolonged for more than a decade, are not a tool of political pressure; they are policy unsustainable on humanitarian grounds.

Apartheid South Africa under international sanctions especially from the 1970s until the beginning of the transition in 1990: a case frequently cited as an example of effective sanctions. The effectiveness, however, requires nuance. Sanctions against South Africa worked in combination with several factors: massive internal pressure from the African National Congress and from South African civil society, organized through union networks (COSATU), ecclesiastical (the South African Council of Churches under Desmond Tutu), and community ones (UDF), which over decades had built mobilizational capacity; global moral delegitimation of apartheid as a system impossible to defend ideologically, which produced boycott and divestment movements in universities, cities, and countries that the South African regime could not counter discursively; division within the South African white elites

over the economic and moral sustainability of the regime, especially among business sectors that saw apartheid as incompatible with global integration; specific international conditions (the end of the Cold War from 1989 deactivated the anti-communist argument that had protected the regime for decades, since apartheid had presented itself as an anti-communist bulwark in southern Africa). Sanctions were a necessary but not sufficient condition; without the other variables, they would probably not have been decisive. The operational conclusion is that sanctions work when combined with organized internal pressure and with international conditions that delegitimize the target regime; without those other levers, sanctions alone rarely produce change.

Russia under Western sanctions following the invasion of Ukraine in 2022: a contemporary case in motion whose result is not yet readable. Sanctions have partially damaged the Russian economy but have not produced policy change or regime change. The Russian economy has reoriented itself toward China, India, Turkey, Iran, remaining viable under increasing but, for the regime, bearable costs. The verdict on these sanctions will take years, but the first empirical reading is coherent with the general pattern: unilateral or near-unilateral sanctions against a power with strategic autonomy produce limited effects.

Five cases, five different lessons. What emerges from the set is that sanctions function as a political tool under specific conditions (relatively short, multilateral, conditional, complemented by internal pressure and international delegitimation) and fail or become counterproductive under different conditions (prolonged, unilateral, unconditional, without coordination with other levers). The Cuban embargo has historically lived in the second set of conditions, not the first.

What policy would then be defensible?

The reasonable answer, derived both from empirical evidence and from recognition of the Cuban structural position, is what could be called *conditional verifiable lifting*. Lifting, because maintaining the embargo in its current form is repeating a policy that has not worked in six decades and that sustains much of the regime's official discourse. Conditional, because lifting it without counterparts would oxygenate the regime without obliging it to anything and would be the opposite pendulum swing to the status quo. Verifiable, because the conditions have to be specific, observable, and auditable by third parties, not generic nor dependent on unilateral declarations of the regime.

The plausible conditions, formulated as bands rather than rigid points, could include: the release of identifiable political prisoners, verifiable by independent international organizations; the legal and operational recognition of independent press and civic organizations; the opening of political space to parties not controlled by the apparatus; eventually, elections supervised by international bodies of recognized credibility. Each milestone reached would correspond to a specific level of lifting; each sustained noncompliance would correspond to the possibility of reinstatement. The scheme is not an original invention; it is the general pattern that has functioned in negotiated transitions in other contexts, adapted to the Cuban case.

A fundamental piece of that design is its multilateral character. The embargo has been for decades predominantly unilateral, which has allowed the regime to present it as bilateral U.S. aggression rather than as an international response to verifiable behaviors. An effective conditional policy would require coordination among the United States, the European Union, Canada, the principal democratic Latin American countries, organisms such as the OAS, and, eventually, actors such as Brazil, Mexico, and Chile when their internal

political configurations allow it. Multilaterality is not a diplomatic luxury; it is what distinguishes a legitimate sanction from a questionable bilateral policy.

On the presence of non-democratic powers in Cuba (Russia, China principally), a defensible transition could not ignore what exists. There would be Chinese investments in infrastructure, Russian presence in specific sectors, established interests that would not vanish with political declarations. The reasonable approach is to renegotiate case by case with clear criteria: transparent and auditable contracts, pro-competition regulation that prevents monopolistic concentration by any foreign investor, prohibition of military or intelligence presence by foreign powers in Cuban territory without an explicit constitutional framework, diversification of investment sources to avoid dependence on any single power. The question of the Lourdes base, if it were to become operative again under any configuration, would have to be decided with criteria that are sovereign but responsible: a Cuba that operates Russian or Chinese intelligence bases directed against the United States cannot simultaneously claim natural integration with the hemispheric power as an asset. The two things are incompatible, and that incompatibility deserves naming.

On the United States as a natural ally, honest recognition of geographic, cultural, and historical integration does not imply political subordination. It implies accepting the fact of the neighbor, negotiating from a sovereign position the conditions of the relationship, and maintaining one's own autonomy while recognizing the real asymmetry of power. That is what other Latin American countries do with varying degrees of success. Costa Rica, without renouncing its identity and without uncritical alignment with Washington, has maintained for decades a functional relationship with the United States that has produced relative prosperity, democratic stability, and its own international agency. Mexico, with all the ups and downs of its relationship with the north, operates in a structural integration that produces

both problems and opportunities. The model is not Singapore, nor Switzerland, nor the Nordics; the model, in its best versions, is the Latin American republic that recognizes its geography without converting it into destiny.

7

There is an additional piece of the problem that cannot be evaded: the decision is taken by Cubans, not by analysts. The essay describes what seems defensible in structural and comparative terms; the political decision over Cuba's relationship with the United States, with China, with Russia, with any other power, corresponds to the Cuban people operating through legitimate institutions that today do not exist and that in an eventual transition would have to be built. Any posture imposed from outside, whether by Washington, by Brussels, by Beijing, or by Moscow, would repeat the logic that for a century has treated Cuba as object and not as subject of its own foreign policy.

That is probably the most difficult discipline for all external actors, including the diaspora. To make of Cuba what each one believes Cuba ought to be, instead of accompanying the Cubans of the interior in the construction of what they decide democratically, is the trap that external policies toward Cuba have fallen into for six decades on every side. The finer solutions are those that leave space for decisions to be taken where they correspond, while external actors limit themselves to offering conditions, resources, legal frameworks, and technical support so that those decisions are possible. The foreign policy toward Cuba that suits a transition is the one that understands this and subordinates itself to it. The one that insists on imposing predetermined models, in any direction, is part of the problem.

○ ○ ○

If History Takes a Different Direction

If a Cuban transition occurs and conditional verifiable lifting is designed with multilateral disciplines, this essay remains as one of many voices that converged on the reasonable direction. Its usefulness would be one of cross-reference and would contribute to documenting the decisions taken.

If the transition occurs but the exit is captured by sectors that insist on maintaining the embargo or, alternatively, on lifting it unconditionally without counterparts, this essay remains as a warning made and not heard. Its usefulness shifts to documenting the predictable consequences of those decisions so that, in a second phase, they can be corrected with the accumulated costs in view.

If the regime manages to adapt to current pressure, finding alternative energy suppliers (Russia, China, others), deepening non-Western dependencies and reorganizing its economy toward forms of single-party military capitalism in the Vietnamese or Chinese style, this essay describes the pattern that will have been normalized under another label. The geopolitical question would still be present and would arise again under even more complicated conditions.

If the regime collapses chaotically without an orderly transition in the context of current pressure, external powers would compete to fill the vacuum. China, Russia, the United States, the Cuban-American diaspora, Latin American actors, could intervene simultaneously with different agendas. That scenario, the most dangerous, would require a multilateral framework of accompaniment (not tutelage) that today is not built and that deserves anticipation before it becomes necessary.

In all four scenarios, the structural question remains. Cuba continues to be an island of the Caribbean ninety miles from the coast of Florida, with everything that geography implies in terms of opportunities and limits. The question is not whether Cuba would be subject to the geopolitical dynamics of its neighborhood. It is how Cuba, eventually, could become an active subject of

those dynamics rather than their passive object. The distance between the two positions is the distance between a republic that exists and a piece moved by others on the chessboard. To recover it is the work of generations, not of mandates. And it begins by recognizing that geography is neither curse, nor condemnation, nor excuse: it is data. What is done with that data is the politics that for six decades we have postponed.

○ ○ ○

Essay VI. The Militarized State

An Anatomy of GAESA and the Reform of the Armed Forces

○ ○ ○

BEFORE WE BEGIN. The figures on GAESA come from sources external to the regime (leaks published by the *Miami Herald* in 2024 and 2025, analyses from Columbia's Cuba Capacity Building Project, research by Emilio Morales, critical readings by Emily Morris) and are reasonable approximations, not audited figures. There is open dispute between estimates that place the conglomerate's assets above seventeen billion dollars and others that reduce them to a fraction of that figure. That dispute does not affect the thesis: what is diagnosed here is the structure, not the snapshot. The structure outlives the organization chart of any given year and the proper names that head it at any given moment.

There is a question that public conversations on Cuba evade gracefully. Who, in economic terms, is the owner of the island? Not the Party. Not the State, in any functional sense. Not the ruling family, although their shadow runs along the walls. The answer, uncomfortable and precise, is a military business conglomerate that for three decades silently absorbed the country's hard-currency flows, and that today operates under an institutional opacity that no rule-of-law state could tolerate.

This essay expands chapter X of the central essay, where the problem was named. Here its anatomy is documented, comparison is made with analogous cases in other geographies, the serious counter-theses a rigorous critic could formulate are laid out, and a possible sequence of reform is traced that does not pretend to resolve everything on the first day nor leave it intact under the pretext of order.

○ ○ ○

1. An army that is not an army

The Cuban Revolutionary Armed Forces (FAR) are not comparable, in their current form, with a professional army in the conventional sense of the term. They are not the French armed forces, nor the Brazilian, nor even the Venezuelan, where the military apparatus retains at least the fiction of an external mission. The FAR are simultaneously **the armed wing of the Party and the dominant business holding of the national economy**. That double function is neither accidental nor new. It has been consolidating for thirty years.

The conglomerate that materializes that double function is called GAESA, *Grupo de Administración Empresarial Sociedad Anónima* (Business Administration Group, S.A.). Its structure does not appear in the official reports of the Cuban State, nor does it report to the National Assembly. Its accounting does not reach the Office of the Comptroller General of the Republic. Its hard-currency reserves do not figure in the balance sheets of the Central Bank. And yet, it controls much of the sectors that generate dollars in the country: tourism, retail commerce in hard currency, international banking operations, remittances, telecommunications, port management, imports, exports, construction.

The problem is not that any country has strategic sectors under state control. Countries with consolidated democracies maintain public enterprises in energy, railways, telecommunications, banking. The problem is that in Cuba those sectors are under the control of an armed entity that does not answer to civilian power, because civilian power does not exist in any functional sense; that operates outside public scrutiny, because public scrutiny does not exist; and that concentrates coercive and economic resources in the same chain of

command. When an actor with a monopoly on violence also has a monopoly on hard-currency flows, there is no market, there is no separation of powers, there is no republic. There is something else, with another name.

A transition that ignores this structure is not a transition. It is a change of cast on the same stage.

2. From hard-currency cashbox to majority shareholder. Thirty years of silent accumulation

It is worth tracing the genealogy, because mechanisms are rarely new; they are usually old decisions accumulating.

GAESA was born in the early 1990s, within the Ministry of the Revolutionary Armed Forces (MINFAR), as an administrative response to the collapse of the Soviet subsidy. The Special Period left the Cuban State without resources to sustain its apparatus, including the military. The pragmatic solution was to authorize the Armed Forces to generate their own hard-currency income through business activities: tourism, foreign trade, services. The internal justification was twofold. First, the FAR had the discipline and hierarchy that the rest of the bureaucratic apparatus had lost. Second, the regime needed a secure hard-currency channel, controlled by personnel of proven ideological reliability.

That solution, presented as temporary, became structural. What in 1994 was an administrative cashbox so the army would not go bankrupt, by 2008 was the most profitable conglomerate in the country. The decisive inflection occurred with the internal succession of 2006-2008, when the second of the founding brothers took formal control of the apparatus. Under that direction, GAESA absorbed functioning civilian state enterprises: CIMEX, the largest holding for domestic and foreign commerce; Gaviota, the principal tourism group; Habaguanex, manager of Havana's historic patrimony turned into a

hotel business; TRD Caribe, the network of hard-currency stores; Fincimex, the window for international remittances; the Banco Financiero Internacional, the vehicle for foreign-currency banking operations; segments of ETECSA, the telecommunications operator; the special development zone of the port of Mariel.

The pattern is recognizable. Whenever a civilian state enterprise generated dollars with some consistency, it ended up absorbed by the military conglomerate. The justification was efficiency. The result was concentration. By the middle of the past decade, no dollar-producing sector remained outside the perimeter of GAESA, save for minor flows that the regime tolerated to maintain the appearance of economic plurality.

What began as a survival mechanism for an armed institution ended as the real economic architecture of the country. The concrete figures can be discussed, and they are; the structural pattern is hard to dispute.

3. Anatomy of the conglomerate. Subsidiaries, opacity, figures in dispute

The leak of twenty-two internal financial statements from GAESA, published by the *Miami Herald* in 2024 and 2025, was the first time specific numbers from the conglomerate became accessible. Those documents suggest that in March 2024 GAESA controlled assets of at least seventeen billion eight hundred ninety-four million dollars, of which approximately fourteen billion four hundred sixty-seven million were in liquid bank accounts. The figures exclude CIMEX, the largest of the group's enterprises, which suggests that the real total would be greater.

The researcher Emily Morris, writing from a perspective critical of the standard exile narratives, has questioned those figures and held that the leaked documents show assets of less than one billion dollars. The difference is

enormous and, in itself, significant: the institutional opacity of the conglomerate is so severe that even the leaked documents do not allow a consensual accounting reconstruction. When the range of reasonable estimates spans two orders of magnitude, what is in question is not a datum; it is the impossibility of verifying the datum.

What can be stated, because it does not depend on how internal balance sheets are interpreted, is the following. GAESA operates without competition in most of the sectors where it is present. It sets prices and conditions, captures high margins, controls access to hard currency. It pays no taxes and transfers no dividends to the State budget. Its financial operations are managed in a framework parallel to the rest of the State and the civilian economy. The macroeconomic program announced by the Cuban government in October 2025, which purported to address inflation, fiscal deficit, and informal dollarization, omitted GAESA entirely, which implies that Cuban fiscal policy is in practice designed over barely a fraction of the country's gross domestic product. Macroeconomic stabilization that excludes the conglomerate concentrating activity in hard currency is not stabilization; it is selective accounting.

The shareholding structure of the subsidiaries is not transparent. The chains of enterprises, with vehicles in foreign jurisdictions such as Panama, make it difficult to trace effective ownership. The formal direction of the conglomerate, embodied in figures such as the current executive president, has an operational role but not a proprietary one; the real decision, according to researchers who have worked on the subject for years, lies in a narrower core whose public identity is more an object of speculation than of evidence.

To dwell too long on proper names would be to fall into the trap this project tries to avoid. What matters is not who signs decisions today; what matters is that there is a juridical, financial, and armed structure that operates outside the

State it nominally serves, and that any transition would have to untie before pretending to a free economy.

4. The comparative pattern. What Egypt, Pakistan, Indonesia, and Myanmar show

Business concentration in the hands of the armed forces is not a Cuban rarity. It is a pattern studied by the specialized literature on civil-military relations under the name of *military business empires*, also called *khaki capital* or *military capitalism*. The scholar Kristina Mani described it in 2011 as a "faction of the capitalist class" that operates with the privileges of state coercion and the returns of mercantile activity. The phenomenon is observed, with variations, in Egypt, Pakistan, Indonesia, Myanmar, Thailand, Sudan, Algeria, and Angola, among other cases.

The Egyptian case is particularly illustrative. After the coup of 2013, the military regime consolidated a set of enterprises spanning construction, agro-industry, manufacturing, retail, and tourism, with fiscal privileges and preferential access to public contracts. Academic estimates place the military share in the Egyptian economy in a wide band, between five and forty percent of output, depending on the methodology and the sector included in the calculation. The opacity is similar to the Cuban one. The control over macroeconomic decisions is too: in Egypt, as in Cuba, the civilian finance minister operates over a portion of the economy that excludes the military conglomerate.

Pakistan offers a variant. There, the military apparatus has managed for decades a network of business foundations (Fauji Foundation, Army Welfare Trust, Bahria Foundation) operating in agro-industry, banking, cement, fertilizers, energy, and real estate. The political scientist Aasim Sajjad Akhtar has analyzed this phenomenon as "military neoliberalism," an arrangement

where market opening coexists with the privileged position of the armed forces. Pakistan shows that civilian subordination of the army can be nominal without affecting real control of the economy.

Indonesia is more nuanced. Under Suharto, the doctrine of *dwifungsi* (dual function) institutionalized military presence in politics and the economy. The democratic transition initiated in 1998 gradually reduced that presence through legal reforms, separation of police and army, and progressive professionalization. It was not immediate or total; it took more than a decade, and the military economic legacy persists in specific sectors. But Indonesia shows that reduction is possible if civilian political will is sustained and the military apparatus is not absolutely dominant.

Myanmar illustrates the opposite scenario. After a decade of supervised opening, the military apparatus retook formal power in 2021 with a coup that recovered direct control of the economy. The Myanmar Economic Holdings Limited and Myanmar Economic Corporation conglomerates, which during the opening had ceded space to private oligarchs, recovered centrality. What Myanmar teaches is that an economic opening that does not touch military control of wealth can be reversed when political conditions change. Reform without depth is reversible reform.

These four cases are not identical to the Cuban one, nor to each other. But they share a constant: when the armed apparatus controls significant economic flows, the political transition is, at best, partial; at worst, a pause before the next regression. Cuba has the additional complexity that its military conglomerate was born not as gradual appropriation but as an explicit design of the single party, which makes the separation more difficult but also, paradoxically, more necessary.

5. What Argentina and South Africa teach in the opposite direction

There are two cases that show the opposite: how it is possible to subordinate a dominant armed apparatus without destroying the State in the attempt. They deserve careful examination, because neither is directly importable, but both teach real disciplines.

Argentina post-1983. The defeat in the Falklands was, in political terms, the condition that made civilian subordination of the armed apparatus possible. Without that defeat, the *Proceso de Reorganización Nacional* would probably have negotiated a supervised transition similar to the Chilean one. The defeat humiliated the armed forces, discredited them before their own social base, and opened a margin of maneuver that the government of Raúl Alfonsín, elected in 1983, knew how to use. The National Commission on the Disappearance of Persons (CONADEP), created in December 1983, documented almost nine thousand disappearances; the Trial of the Juntas of 1985 condemned the principal hierarchs. There were important setbacks (the Punto Final Law, the Law of Due Obedience, Carlos Menem's pardons in 1989), but the trajectory of civilian subordination continued. The Supreme Court declared the impunity laws unconstitutional in 2005, and the trials resumed.

What Argentina teaches is threefold. First, that civilian subordination of a dominant armed apparatus is possible, but requires a specific political window (in its case, the external military defeat) and sustained civilian will across decades. Second, that transitional justice can have setbacks without losing direction, if civilian institutions remain active and civil society does not demobilize. Third, that the dismantling of the economic component of the military apparatus (in Argentina, above all, the defense industries) can be

done gradually, through budgetary reduction, staggered sales, and conversion of functions, without the need for sudden auction.

South Africa 1994. The South African case is relevant for a different reason: it shows how to integrate armed forces coming from opposite sides. The negotiation between the National Party and the African National Congress produced, before the 1994 elections, an agreement of military integration that brought together in a single institution (the South African National Defence Force, SANDF) the former apartheid Defence Force (SADF, approximately one hundred ten thousand troops), the ANC's guerrilla forces (Umkhonto we Sizwe, MK, around twenty-six thousand), the Pan-Africanist Congress's guerrilla forces (APLA, around six thousand), the forces of the former bantustans, and Inkatha's self-protection forces.

The integration had an explicit cost. There was no systematic purge of those responsible for human-rights violations of the apartheid apparatus; there was conditional amnesty managed by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. The African National Congress accepted that cost because the alternative, a total purge, would have destroyed the military viability of the new State and risked a white coup. That decision continues to be the object of moral and political debate in South Africa.

What South Africa teaches is that negotiated military integration is possible even between forces that were at war, if shared political legitimacy exists and imperfect compromises on transitional justice are accepted. The price is high and debatable. But the result, an armed force subordinated to civilian power under a democratic constitution, is real and sustained over three decades.

Neither Argentina nor South Africa are recipes transplantable to Cuba. But together they refute the idea that civilian subordination of an armed-business apparatus is impossible. What they teach, more than a model, is a discipline: that of realistic calculation between the desirable and the sustainable.

6. The framework. Why this chapter is always omitted

The classical literature on civil-military relations begins with Samuel Huntington, *The Soldier and the State* (1957), where the distinction is made between *objective control* (professionalized subordination of the military to the civilian, with recognized technical autonomy) and *subjective control* (subordination through political penetration, where the military is controlled through ideological loyalty, not through institutional rules). The Cuban case is a paradigmatic case of extreme subjective control: the FAR are not politically controlled by the civilian; they are the armed materialization of the Party. That configuration makes civilian subordination unviable by definition, because there is no civilian in an institutional sense to whom subordination can occur.

The more recent literature, especially from the 1990s onward, broadens the framework. Aurel Croissant has studied transitions from military regimes in Asia and has shown that in twenty-nine of seventy-one democratic transitions registered between 1974 and 2010, the military were actors with significant or dominant influence over the process. That means that transitions from dominant military apparatuses are not rare, but neither are they simple; the military, almost always, conditions the result.

The literature on military business empires and khaki capital adds the economic component. Kristina Mani, Aasim Sajjad Akhtar, Zoltan Barany, and others have documented how armed apparatuses with economic presence resist civilian subordination more effectively than purely political ones, because they have not only coercive advantage but also material advantage. The conclusion converges: military reform cannot be separated from economic reform of the military apparatus. To politically subordinate an army that controls the economy without touching its economic base is nominal subordination.

This explains why the chapter on the FAR is omitted so often in analyses of the Cuban transition, even among serious analysts. To address it implies recognizing that the political transition and the economic transition are the same transition, and that both are unviable without a third component, the transition of the military apparatus from dominant economic actor to subordinated professional institution. Three simultaneous dimensions are politically more complex than two. And yet, omitting the third does not eliminate it; it only guarantees that any reform would be captured by it.

7. Three honest counter-theses

A rigorous critic, not an adversary, could formulate at least three objections to what has been laid out here. They deserve presenting in their strongest form and then answering, not in order to refute them, but in order to integrate them.

First counter-thesis. To privatize GAESA may create oligarchs in uniform, worse than the status quo. The counter-example is Russia between 1992 and 1996. Voucher privatization, first, and the loans-for-shares scheme, later, transferred to a core of politically connected actors the principal productive assets of the country, at prices well below market value. The offer to Mikhail Khodorkovsky for Yukos, around three hundred million dollars, ended up multiplying by figures of two orders of magnitude when the oil sector recovered prices. The result was not a propertied middle class; it was an oligarchy with veto power over national policy. If Cuba were to privatize GAESA without a strong State behind and without rigorous anti-concentration rules, the most likely scenario would be the Russian one: a new class of owners arising from the same military apparatus, now with legitimately recognized capital, with international networks, and with incentives to capture the emerging political system.

Second counter-thesis. To touch the FAR before consolidating civilian legitimacy risks a coup or armed fragmentation. Comparative history is full of premature attempts at civilian subordination that ended in military regression. Egypt in 2013, Thailand at various moments, Pakistan recurrently. Armed forces do not voluntarily accept being economically disarmed while they retain coercive capacity. A Cuban transition that decreed in its first month the dissolution of GAESA could detonate internal reactions of the armed apparatus, from sabotage to fragmentation, in the worst scenario a short civil war. The aggressive timeline of chapter XVI of the central essay is exposed to this critique: is it realistic to demand immediate audits and audited privatization in parallel with a Constituent Assembly and deep economic reforms?

Third counter-thesis. The young generation of officers is not a homogeneous bloc, and to treat it as such pushes it to the wrong side. Exile analyses tend to treat the FAR as a monolithic entity, defined by its visible hierarchy. The reality of any large armed organization, with several generations of officers, is much more nuanced. There are young officers partially trained abroad, exposed to international standards, aware of the system's failure in professional terms (obsolete equipment, scarce resources, social prestige in decline). A purge without discrimination would push them to close ranks with the leadership that oppresses them professionally. The Argentine precedent confirms it: the *carapintada* rebellions of 1987-1990 were, in part, reactions of mid-ranking officers to judicial processes they perceived as indiscriminate.

8. Response to the counter-theses. Integrate, not refute

The three counter-theses are valid. They are not refuted; they are integrated into the design of the reform.

In the face of the first (risk of oligarchs in uniform), the answer is that the problem is not to privatize; the problem is *how* to privatize. The difference between an orderly privatization and an oligarchic capture lies in four disciplines that successful post-communist economies applied with uneven rigor. One, mandatory shareholding dispersion with maximum individual limits, so that no buyer (institution, person, financial vehicle) can concentrate more than a small percentage of any privatized firm. Two, temporary prohibition, for at least ten years, on active or recently retired FAR officers acquiring shares of firms that were under their command or in sectors where they had administrative decision-making power. Three, independent international audit prior to any auction, with publication of the real balance sheets of each firm and of its ownership chain. Four, pro-competition regulation from day one, with an antitrust authority endowed with resources and legal independence. These four disciplines, combined, do not guarantee perfect results but make the reproduction of the Russian scenario materially difficult.

In the face of the second (risk of military reaction), the answer is that military reform has to be sequenced in time bands, not in single milestones, and must be combined with positive incentives to the armed apparatus, not only with threats. The reasonable sequence, according to what the comparative cases teach, is the following. In the first months, formal constitutional subordination and separation between military function (defense of the territory) and economic function (management of enterprises), with the creation of a civilian Ministry of Defense and an economic ministry or authority that receives the administrative transfer of the firms. In the first year, independent international audit of the conglomerate, without sale. In years one to three, gradual privatization with the anti-oligarchic disciplines mentioned. In parallel, redesign of the military career with dignified salaries, internationally recognized professional training, and a clear and sustainable function. The

troops and subordinate officers have more incentive to support a reform that offers them professional dignity and material subsistence than to support a leadership that considers them disposable. To build that internal coalition is part of the work.

In the face of the third (non-homogeneity of the officer corps), the answer is that vetting has to be applied with individual criteria, not by category. Those who participated in documented violations of human rights are to be tried with procedural guarantees. Those who only fulfilled administrative or professional functions, without participation in repression, are to be integrated into the new structure under civilian command with clear conditions of retirement or reconversion. That distinction is difficult but not impossible: Argentina did it, with ups and downs; South Africa did it, with compromises; post-Stasi Germany did it. Individual justice is not complicit slowness; it is the only justice that does not become, within a decade, its own caricature.

9. Indicators of success and of failure

A reform proposed in these terms can succeed or fail. It is worth knowing, from the start, how each is recognized.

Indicators of success would include the following. That the international audit be published in its entirety, without redacted sections. That no privatized GAESA firm has, at the end of the process, more than five percent of property concentrated in a single physical person or vehicle. That active and recently retired officers be excluded by law from acquiring those firms for a full decade. That the hard currency the conglomerate captured pass to circulate within the civilian banking system, subject to the monetary regulation of the Central Bank. That the new professional armed force have a reduced but sufficient budget, with auditable dignified salaries. That civilian subordination

be materialized in a Ministry of Defense with civilian leadership sustained for at least two complete electoral cycles.

Indicators of failure, by contrast, would be the following. That the international audit be conducted but not published, or be published with redacted fragments. That privatization occur through auctions with low participation, where known buyers acquire important lots at suspiciously low prices. That, within the first three years, individuals tied to the former military command appear as majority owners of hotels, commercial networks, or banks formerly belonging to the conglomerate. That the new armed force preserve business subdivisions under any name, even reduced. That the Ministry of Defense remain in charge of a retired military officer with direct ties to the old apparatus. That the press investigating the process come under pressure, judicial or otherwise, that correlates with the economic interests at stake.

To recognize failure in time is the only way to correct it. No design works if those applying it are not willing to admit, in public, that it is not working.

○ ○ ○

If History Takes a Different Direction

This essay sustains a structural diagnosis and proposes a sequence. But future history may not accompany the desired scenario. It is worth declaring how this text reads under different scenarios.

If a transition occurs and a transitional government applies the anti-oligarchic disciplines described here, this essay remains as a reading of cross-reference: a roadmap that coincides reasonably with what was done and allows evaluating, step by step, the successes and the deviations.

If an opening occurs and privatization is carried out without the disciplines mentioned, with accelerated concentration in the hands of former apparatus

cadres, this essay remains as a catalog of the decisions ignored and of the consequences that ignoring produced. Its practical usefulness is not annulled; it shifts from prescription to documentation of what should not have been done.

If the apparatus does not open the political system but accepts a partial economic reform under control, deepening Chinese or Russian dependence and consolidating GAESA as a capitalist conglomerate under a socialist banner, this essay describes the model that will have been normalized. The description would still be precise; what changes is that the future reader would read it not as warning but as diagnosis of a prolonged present.

If the regime collapses through humanitarian crisis, internal fragmentation, or an unforeseen external scenario, without a transitional actor with legitimacy and capacity to lead the process, this essay becomes retrospective warning about what should have been prepared in advance and was not. The structure of GAESA, in the absence of institutional frameworks, could disintegrate into informal networks with residual coercive capacity, a scenario closer to Haiti or to parts of the former Yugoslavia than to South Africa.

In all four scenarios, the structural diagnosis survives: an armed apparatus that controls the economy is incompatible with a democratic republic. What changes, depending on the scenario, is the practical usefulness of the text. In no case does it lose meaning.

○ ○ ○

Essay VII. The Republic Yet to Be Built

Social Capital, a Free Press, Civil Society

○ ○ ○

BEFORE WE BEGIN. The descriptions of current Cuban civil society (artistic movements, churches, independent journalism, neighborhood networks) rest on information available at the moment of writing and are reasonable approximations, not an exhaustive census. The argument here does not depend on every case mentioned continuing to take the same form in the future; it depends on the pattern being recognizable. The essay treats the institutional and operational body of Cuban civil society. The ethical and philosophical substrate, where Martí has a central role, will be addressed in Essay IX of this series. Here Martí appears as a cross-cutting reference, not as protagonist.

○ ○ ○

1

On November 26, 2020, after nine days of hunger strike, agents of the Revolutionary National Police, dressed as health personnel, broke down the door of a residence at Damas 955, in the Havana neighborhood of San Isidro. Inside were fourteen activists, among them Luis Manuel Otero Alcántara, the rapper Maykel Castillo known as Osorbo, the journalist Carlos Manuel Álvarez. They had begun the sit-in to demand the release of the rapper Denis Solís, detained and tried for *desacato* (contempt of authority) sixteen days earlier. The formal pretext for the eviction was an alleged violation of the

COVID-19 health protocol. Access to social networks across the entire island was interrupted for several hours while the operation unfolded.

The next day, around three hundred artists, writers, journalists, academics, and citizens gathered in front of the Ministry of Culture in the Vedado district. Among many others were the filmmaker Fernando Pérez, the actor Jorge Perugorría, the artist Tania Bruguera. Thirty-two representatives of the gathering entered the Ministry and met with Vice-Minister Fernando Rojas. They presented six demands. The first was transparency in the judicial process against Denis Solís; the second, the freedom of Otero Alcántara; the four others, a statement of principles on the right to have rights, freedom of expression, free creation and dissent, an end to official defamation, recognition of independent positioning, cessation of police violence. The verbal agreement reached that afternoon was widely repudiated by the regime in the days that followed. But the gathering of November 27 remained in memory as one of the first public demonstrations not convened by the State in many decades. Iliana Hernández, one of the activists present, later put it precisely: that day made possible the day of July 11 of the following year.

It is worth pausing on this case, not to celebrate the San Isidro Movement as heroic synecdoche of the free Cuban, but because it illuminates an operative fact that official propaganda has tried to erase and that a certain exile discourse has also tended to underestimate: in Cuba civil society exists. It exists under difficult conditions, fragmented, persecuted, infiltrated, pressured, worn down, but it exists. The diaspora did not create it nor did foreign governments invent it. It was built, over years, by Cubans who stayed and decided, against the current, to do things together without the State's permission. Any transition that ignores that would build an architecture without foundations.

This essay treats what already exists, what is missing, and the disciplines that can distinguish a civil society sustaining the future republic from a captured civil society falsifying it.

○ ○ ○

2

Before cataloging the Cuban-specific, it is worth anchoring what we are talking about in analytical terms. The concept of civil society is neither a recent invention nor Western propaganda, as the Cuban official discourse sometimes suggests. It is a category with two hundred years of serious thought behind it.

Alexis de Tocqueville, in *Democracy in America* (published in two parts, 1835 and 1840), described a phenomenon that astonished him during his journey through the United States in 1831: the propensity of American citizens to form voluntary associations for almost any imaginable purpose. Associations to build a church, to found a school, to organize a library, to discuss books, to assist widows, to improve roads. Tocqueville argued that those associations were not cultural ornament but infrastructure of democratic liberty. They offered citizens practical training in deliberation, agreement, organization; they produced civic capacities no State could provide; and, above all, they created a space between the isolated individual and the State apparatus where critical thought could be gestated. Without those associations, Tocqueville wrote, democracy tends to degenerate into its opposite: an omnipotent majority over atomized individuals.

Robert Putnam, in *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (2000), took up the Tocquevillian line with contemporary empirical apparatus. Putnam documented the erosion of the American associative fabric during the second half of the twentieth century (decline in

membership in civic, union, religious, sporting, fraternal, neighborhood organizations) and proposed the operational concept of *social capital*: the network of relationships of trust, shared norms, and reciprocity that allows a society to cooperate for common ends without each cooperation having to be negotiated from scratch. Putnam showed, with data, that societies with greater social capital function better in almost every comparable indicator: public health, governmental effectiveness, citizen security, economic prosperity, democratic quality.

Jürgen Habermas, in *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit* (*The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, 1962), added the communicative component of the problem. The public sphere, in Habermasian terms, is the space where private citizens deliberate over common matters, where informed debate can form opinion, and where that opinion can in turn pressure the State. Without a public sphere in the robust sense (plural media, physical and virtual spaces of discussion, norms that protect disagreement), formal democracy remains empty: there are elections but no deliberation, citizens but no public.

These three frames (voluntary associations in Tocqueville, social capital in Putnam, the public sphere in Habermas) describe complementary aspects of the same phenomenon. None alone captures the whole picture. Together they outline what a democratic republic needs in its underlying political fabric in order not to be a façade. Cuba has been subjected for six decades to a systematic operation against all three components simultaneously. The question is what has survived and what remains to be rebuilt.

3

There is operational Cuban civil society today, fragmented across several spaces. It is worth reviewing them by type, without pretending exhaustiveness.

The **independent artistic-intellectual space** is probably the most internationally visible and the most documented. The San Isidro Movement, founded in September 2018 against Decree 349 (which sought to require artists to obtain prior State authorization for any cultural activity), articulated for years a network of artists, rappers, writers, performers, academics. Cases such as those of Otero Alcántara, Maykel Osorbo, Denis Solís, Tania Bruguera, Anamely Ramos, Iliana Hernández, Carlos Manuel Álvarez are individually notable and collectively significant: they show that within Cuba there are people willing to pay very high personal costs to maintain spaces of autonomous expression. Repression has been sustained and systematic, with criminal sentences, forced exile, prolonged house arrest. And yet, the space has not been entirely closed. The song *Patria y Vida*, produced in February 2021 by Descemer Bueno, Gente de Zona, Maykel Osorbo, El Funky, and Yotuel, circulated massively within the island via USB drives and became the soundtrack of July 11 of that year.

The **religious space** operates with a relative autonomy that deserves careful nuance. The Cuban Catholic Church has maintained for six decades a complex position: it has been persecuted at key moments, it has negotiated pragmatically at others, it has offered physical and symbolic spaces to civic initiatives the State did not tolerate elsewhere. The evangelical churches, especially the Pentecostal, have grown over the past three decades and have produced their own episodes of tension with the State, particularly when they have sought organizational autonomy or supported civic movements. The Yoruba lodges and other expressions of Afro-Cuban religiosity, although much more officially tolerated because they are considered cultural patrimony, have also produced spaces of socialization with varying degrees of autonomy. What matters is that religious institutions, with all their ambivalences, are one of the few places where people who do not know each other can gather

regularly for common purposes without need for case-by-case political authorization. That, in Tocquevillian terms, is valuable.

The **independent journalistic space** is probably the most relevant civic development of the last decade. Since the limited internet opening in 2014 and, above all, since the generalization of 3G in 2018, Cuban media have emerged that operate outside the State apparatus with varying degrees of professionalization: 14ymedio, founded by Yoani Sánchez in 2014; El Toque, with its work in local coverage; OnCuba, with a more general journalistic profile; Periodismo de Barrio, specialized in community and environmental matters; El Estornudo, edited by Carlos Manuel Álvarez; Hypermedia, with a cultural focus; Diario de Cuba, from exile but with internal correspondents; CubaNet, also with mixed interior-exterior editorship. Each has its own particularities of financing, audience, distribution, style. What they have in common is one thing: they produce information about Cuba that does not pass through the official filter. That, in a society without a free press for six decades, is cultural transformation, not merely informational. A generation of Cuban journalists is being trained to international professional standards, on or off the island, connected with their colleagues and audiences through digital channels. That generation is one of the most important civic assets any transition would have at its disposal.

Neighborhood and block networks are the most underestimated space. The protests of July 11, 2021, with all the dispersed and spontaneous character they had, did not arise from nothing. They arose from preexisting networks (familial, neighborhood, religious, professional) that the economic crisis accelerated since 2019 had brought into operative contact. When prices and blackouts became unbearable, those networks activated in concrete neighborhoods, not in national abstractions. The contemporary Cuban civic awakening is notably local: it occurs block by block, building by building, community by community. That is valuable and, simultaneously, fragile. It is

valuable because local social capital is the base on which any national reconstruction can occur. It is fragile because repression is relatively easy when organization is local and dispersed, without protected national coordination.

Professional and academic spaces maintain relative autonomy with varying degrees. There are university groups in which criticism from inside the system is exercised with intermittent official tolerance. There are professional associations (doctors, engineers, architects) that operate formally within the official framework but in their actual meetings discuss broader questions than those authorized. There are centers of academic thought that have produced critical analyses of the system itself, sometimes silenced, sometimes tolerated. That gray zone matters because it includes people with technical capacities any institutional reconstruction would need. They are not public dissidents in the open sense of the term; they are professionals who have sustained, in their respective fields, standards of competence and intellectual honesty against the current.

Women's and Afro-descendant organizations have gained visibility over the last decade. The Damas de Blanco (Ladies in White), founded in 2003, have maintained public presence for more than twenty years despite sustained repression. More recent movements, articulated around women's rights, gender violence, and Cuban structural racism (which the regime has denied for decades), have produced analyses and denunciations that touch dimensions the official discourse does not admit. The magazine *Negra Cubana Tenía que Ser*, the feminist collectives such as *Yo Sí Te Creo en Cuba* (I Do Believe You in Cuba), the Afro-descendant networks that have denounced racialized police violence, are examples of a civic fabric being built at the intersections the apparatus fails to control.

Seven spaces, all with real life, none sufficient on its own, all subjected to sustained pressure. Added together, they are the embryo of something. Alone,

they are too fragile to sustain a transition. Any serious transition design would have to start from them, not invent them.

4

It is worth, at this point, looking head-on at the three most serious objections a rigorous critic can formulate against what has been laid out, before continuing.

The first objection is one of proportion. To speak of Cuban civil society may suggest an organizational density that in reality does not exist. Compared with Polish civil society of the 1980s, with Solidarity as a mass union movement of millions of members, or with the religious and ecclesial networks of Eastern Europe, or with South African civic movements during apartheid, Cuban civil society today is modest in scale. A San Isidro Movement with dozens of active activists, not thousands. Independent press with audiences inside the island still limited by connectivity. Neighborhood networks that operate in specific moments but have not produced sustained national organization. That is true and should not be evaded. Cuban civil society exists; it is not massive. It is the raw material of something larger, not something larger already made.

The second objection is one of autonomy. A significant part of the civic spaces mentioned receives funding, direct or indirect, from sources external to Cuba: foreign governments (USAID, NED, European funds), philanthropic foundations, individual donors, diasporic organizations. That is problematic in at least two senses. In the immediate term, the regime uses such funding to criminalize recipients legally as foreign agents, which weakens their legitimacy before segments of the internal population that have been formed for decades to distrust any link with the United States. At a deeper level, external funding tends to align internal agendas with donor priorities, subtly or directly, which erodes the genuinely Cuban character of the projects. This

objection is not resolved by denying it; it is resolved by building funding that is more diversified, more transparent, and as Cuban as possible. I will treat it in detail below.

The third objection is one of elitism. To speak of civic virtue, social capital, public sphere, in a society where the daily problem is to obtain food, electricity, and medicine, can sound like intellectual luxury disconnected from reality. A hungry citizen does not deliberate; he survives. This objection is the most uncomfortable and deserves accepting in its strong form. Without minimum material conditions, civic deliberation is the privilege of the privileged. Any project of reconstruction of Cuban civil society has to understand that the neighborhood networks that activate under crisis conditions do so on the basis of concrete material needs, not of political theory. Viable Cuban civil society is not the one that imports abstract Habermasian models; it is the one that organizes around real problems (blackouts, transportation, food, health, education) and that, from that material base, gradually gains capacity to articulate broader demands. Civic virtue does not precede subsistence; it coexists with it or it does not exist.

The three objections are integrated into the design, not refuted. Cuban civil society is modest, partially dependent on external funding, and operates in a critical material context. That is the material with which one has to work. The question is not whether that civil society should be otherwise (in the abstract, it should); the question is what disciplines can make it grow in density, autonomy, and organizational capacity without losing what it already has.

5

Two comparative cases offer useful references, with neither directly importable.

Czechoslovakian Charter 77. In January 1977, two hundred forty-two Czechoslovakian citizens signed a manifesto invoking compliance with the human rights enshrined in the country's constitution and in the international agreements the regime had signed. Václav Havel was one of the drafters. The initiative did not seek to bring down the regime nor propose an alternative political program; it simply sought that the regime fulfill what it claimed to fulfill. That seemed moderate, almost inoffensive, and yet the regime responded with sustained persecution throughout the following decade. Havel spent years in prison. The majority of the signers were fired from their jobs, surveilled, interrogated, pressured. Charter 77 did not manage to change the regime while it existed. But it produced something that proved decisive twelve years later: a network of people who knew each other, who had shared risks, who had developed minimal capacities of clandestine coordination, and who, when the regime collapsed in 1989, were able to articulate a transition project because they already existed as a network. Havel went from political prisoner to president of the republic in a few weeks because the network was already there.

Polish Solidarity. In August 1980, a strike in the Lenin shipyards of Gdańsk, led by Lech Wałęsa, ended with an agreement that the Polish communist regime signed under pressure: legal recognition of an independent union. Solidarity reached almost ten million members in less than a year, in a country of thirty-six million. The declaration of martial law in December 1981 forced the union underground, where it operated for almost a decade. Adam Michnik, one of its most influential intellectuals, wrote from prison texts that combined political analysis with ethical reflection, holding that dissidence had to maintain moral authority even under conditions of repression. The Polish transition of 1989, the Round Table negotiations between the regime and the opposition, and the election of Tadeusz Mazowiecki as the first non-communist prime minister of a Warsaw Pact country, were possible

because Solidarity had maintained for a decade an organization with internal legitimacy and international recognition, capable of negotiating the transition from a position of moral force.

The two references teach different disciplines. Charter 77 teaches that a small group with sustained ethical coherence over years can produce, when the moment arrives, a decisive structural network. Solidarity teaches that the combination of a concrete demand (in its case, a free union) with mass organization and built moral authority can force transitions that seemed impossible. Neither is directly applicable to Cuba: the political context, the structure of the regime, the social fabric, the international conditions are different. But the disciplines (sustained ethical coherence, concrete demands the majority recognizes as just, construction of networks with internal legitimacy, maintenance of moral authority) are universal and pertinent.

6

The question of funding deserves its own section, because it is one of the points where Cuban civil society is most vulnerable.

There are three main sources of funding for non-State Cuban civic initiatives. The first is foreign government funding, principally from the United States through USAID and the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), but also from the European Union, individual European governments (Sweden, the Netherlands, the Czech Republic, Poland), Canada, and, to a lesser extent, some Latin American governments. The second is private philanthropic funding, through international foundations (George Soros's Open Society, the Ford Foundation, MacArthur, European foundations) and individual donors. The third is diaspora funding, through Cuban-American organizations, fundraising campaigns, remittances directed specifically at civic projects.

Each source has its own specific problem. U.S. government funding is the most structurally questionable, not because it is illegitimate in itself, but because it allows the regime to present its recipients as foreign agents and because it aligns internal agendas with the priorities of U.S. foreign policy, which change from administration to administration and rarely coincide completely with the real needs of Cubans. Private philanthropic funding tends to concentrate on a few actors with the capacity to write proposals in international formats, which produces inequality within Cuban civil society itself: those who can write proposals in English or in philanthropic language receive resources; those who only know how to do civic work do not. Diaspora funding runs the risk, mentioned in Essay IV of this series, of subordinating internal agendas to exile priorities.

What would a defensible design look like? Three principles can orient it.

Radical diversification of sources. No Cuban civic project should depend beyond a moderate percentage on a single source, especially if that source is a foreign government. Diversifying among multiple governments, multiple foundations, multiple diasporic communities, and multiple base-funding mechanisms reduces the risk of capture by any specific donor.

Integral transparency. Serious Cuban civic projects should publish their sources of funding, amounts received, and effective uses, in some accessible format, with the frequency security conditions allow. Such transparency does two things: it protects against legitimate suspicion and partially deactivates the official propaganda that presents recipients as hidden agents. Transparency has security costs for recipients, but in the medium term it is a civic asset.

Construction of Cuban funding mechanisms. In the long term, the sustainability of Cuban civil society depends on the development of predominantly Cuban funding mechanisms: small individual contributions from thousands of Cubans on the island and in the diaspora, subscriptions to

independent media paid by Cuban audiences, cooperative models in which the beneficiaries are also the funders. Those mechanisms are slow to build and require conditions (freedom of bank transfers, stable connectivity, a culture of civic contribution) that today are partially missing. But they are the only ones that can guarantee sustained autonomy.

7

There is a component of the problem that deserves specific treatment: the free press. It is not just one piece among many in civil society; it is a piece that operates as infrastructure for all the others.

A society without a free press is not only a poorly informed society; it is a society where voluntary associations cannot coordinate at scale, where the Habermasian public sphere cannot form, where neighborhood networks cannot expand into national networks. The free press is the circulatory system through which the information civil society produces and needs is distributed, contrasted, and processed collectively. Without that system, civic spaces survive in compartments.

Contemporary Cuban independent journalism has made notable advances in very little time, given the conditions. What deserves understanding is that its consolidation, in any future scenario, requires three things worth declaring.

Protective legal framework. In any transition, one of the first legislative decisions should be a media law that effectively protects freedom of the press, prohibits monopolistic concentration (private or State), regulates the transparency of media ownership, and protects journalists from judicial and political pressures. Poland, after 1989, took years to build that framework, and the subsequent setbacks show that without strong constitutional protections, a free press is vulnerable to reversals. Cuba would do well to learn from that process so as not to repeat the errors.

Plurality of media funding. Cuban independent journalism has survived for a decade with predominantly external funding because within the island there are no conditions to finance itself through advertising or mass subscription. That would change in a transition, but the change would be gradual. The first years would require maintaining mixed funding (external, diasporic, philanthropic, growing commercial), with anti-monopoly disciplines applied also to the media sector. The risk to avoid is that a single actor (an oligarch, a foreign government, an international media corporation) would buy most Cuban media in transition and reproduce, with different vocabulary, the operation of informational control the apparatus now exercises.

Sustained professional training. A free press is not made by itself; it requires journalists with solid technical, ethical, and political training. Cuba has a first generation of independent journalists trained under difficult conditions, partly self-taught, partly through training programs with international institutions. That generation would need to multiply, and that requires serious schools of journalism, with programs combining Latin American and Anglo-Saxon traditions, with emphasis on professional ethics. Such formative infrastructure can begin to be built from now, with the diaspora contributing capacity and resources but respecting that the training must be sustained from Cuba for Cuban journalists.

8

What should the diaspora do regarding interior civil society?

The principal rule is the one discussed in the previous essay and worth repeating here because it is central: **the Cuban civil society of the interior is and should be the principal actor of any Cuban civic reconstruction**. The diaspora contributes conditions, resources, networks; it neither decides nor represents. That discipline is not exact geometry; it is political proportion: the

weight of the interior should prevail over the weight of the diaspora in the decisions that affect the country.

Applied to civil society, that discipline implies several concrete things. First, civic projects led from the diaspora with internal extensions are different from civic projects of the interior with external supports, and it is worth not confusing them. The latter are the ones that sustain the republic to come; the former, in the best case, accompany them, in the worst, displace them. Second, the diaspora does well to develop capacities (technical, juridical, organizational) that the interior can use, but does poorly to organize itself to represent the interior when the interior can represent itself. Third, serious diaspora funding requires transparency, diversification, and absence of explicit or implicit political conditions. Donations with conditions are soft capture; transparency without conditions is real support.

There is also a specific contribution the diaspora can make and that is not recognized often enough: the formation of cadres. Cuban generations professionally trained in the democracies where the diaspora has settled have acquired technical, linguistic, and institutional capacities that would be necessary in a reconstruction. If that generation wants to contribute, the most useful thing it can do is to offer training, mentorship, the opening of international professional networks, and technical accompaniment, without claiming direct political leadership. The distinction matters: training those who would lead is contribution; pretending to lead from abroad oneself is capture.

9

How does one recognize the success of the reconstruction of Cuban civil society, and how does one recognize its failure?

Indicators of success would include the following. That the number of formally registered civic organizations, autonomous from the State, grow sustainably for at least a decade. That Cuban independent press reaches audiences within the island comparable to those of official media, and that it diversify its funding sources. That guild and professional associations recover autonomy from the State apparatus. That religious spaces can fully exercise their functions without political pressure. That neighborhood networks connect into municipal and national networks without losing their local anchorage. That social trust, measured in comparable surveys, rises out of the low ranges of post-totalitarian societies during one generation. That public Cuban conversation become denser, more nuanced, less polarized into antagonistic blocs.

Indicators of failure, by contrast. That the civic spaces today existing be co-opted or captured by actors with financial power (emerging oligarchy, belligerent diaspora sectors, foreign governments) and lose autonomy without the public perceiving it. That independent press concentrate in a few large actors that reproduce oligopolistic dynamics. That civic organizations polarize into antagonistic blocs associated with specific political sectors, losing capacity for social mediation. That social capital continue eroding, with generalized distrust and low participation in voluntary organizations. That the diaspora capture the representation of Cuban civil society in international forums, displacing the voices of the interior. That the regime, if it remains, refine its mechanisms of co-optation of emerging civil society, offering legalization in exchange for effective subordination.

To recognize failure in time is the only way to correct it. And to recognize that success would take at least a generation, probably two, is a condition for not becoming demoralized when the first signals are not conclusive.

○ ○ ○

If History Takes a Different Direction

This essay describes what exists, what is missing, and the disciplines that can make Cuban civil society grow. But history is plural, and it is worth declaring how this text reads under different scenarios.

If a transition occurs and the civic spaces today existing become the base on which a denser fabric is built, this essay remains as one of many voices that converged on recognizing them as a starting point. Its usefulness is one of cross-reference and shared frame with other voices.

If the transition occurs and the civic spaces of the interior are displaced by diasporic organizations or by projects of foreign governments with more resources and more international visibility, this essay remains as a warning made and not heard. Its usefulness shifts to documenting what could have been avoided and to supporting, eventually, a second generation of internal organizations that would claim their own legitimacy.

If the transition does not occur and the regime deepens its control over the emerging civil society, alternating selective repression with selective co-optation, the civic spaces described would suffer additional erosion. Some would survive in adapted forms, others would disappear, others would be exiled. What this essay describes remains precisely the patrimony worth preserving so that, when conditions change, one does not have to start from scratch.

If the regime collapses chaotically without an orderly transition, the civic spaces today existing would become one of the few points of institutional continuity available, and their capacity to articulate reconstruction would depend on the organizational density they had managed to build before. That scenario makes especially urgent the work of strengthening this essay describes: the weaker civil society is when the regime collapses, the greater

the vacuum that other actors (emerging oligarchy, residual coercive networks, diaspora with resources) would fill by sheer absence of alternatives.

In all four scenarios, the civic work that has been going on in Cuba for years is not lost work. It is the raw material on which any defensible future would have to be built. The people who for years have signed manifestos, organized hunger strikes, written articles without permission, held meetings under pressure, sustained publications under threat, formed neighborhood networks against discouragement, are the ones who have paid, are paying, and would pay the highest price for the republic yet to be built. To recognize them is not ceremony; it is lucidity about who has been doing the work while everyone else was discussing.

○ ○ ○

Essay VIII. The Architecture of Transition

Models, Legitimacy, Timing

○ ○ ○

BEFORE WE BEGIN. This essay is written in an exceptionally fluid regional context. What is proposed here is not a definitive plan or a closed program; it is the most sensible proposal of which I am capable at the moment of writing, given what comparative experience and the fundamental Martían discipline suggest. The essay describes principles, conditional sequences, thresholds, and disciplines, not rigid timetables or imported recipes. The specific decisions would be taken, when the moment arrives, by the legitimate Cubans of the moment operating through institutions that today largely do not exist and that in an eventual transition would have to be built. What this essay can contribute is comparative reading and warnings about the documented errors other processes committed, so that those errors are not repeated in Cuba if the opportunity opens. The text's usefulness does not depend on things occurring as drawn here; it depends on the disciplines identified here being useful under any real configuration history produces.

○ ○ ○

1. And if Cuba has to be remade, how?

The question is direct and deserves answering without preamble. The preamble is the entire prior work of this series and of the central essay that articulates it. If the seven preceding essays diagnose a mechanism and its dimensions (the totalitarian pattern, anthropological deformation, the impossible economy, the plural diaspora, conditioned geopolitics, the

militarized State, emerging civil society), Essay VIII faces the operative question: given all those pieces, how is a transition built that does not reproduce the mechanism under another label.

The short answer, before unfolding it, is this. **A transition that does not reproduce the mechanism requires building, simultaneously and with conditional sequence, three dimensions that sustain each other: an institutional architecture with effective separation of powers, an ethical architecture with recognizable moral authority that substitutes for that of the regime while institutions are being built, and an architecture of timing in which each decision is weighted not by the calendar but by its weight upon the decisions that follow.**

The three dimensions operate at different rhythms and with different logics. To confuse them, to do everything in haste with the same methods, is the most efficient known way to guarantee that the pendulum carries Cuba from the current regime to its negation in inverted form without ever passing through the republic that both extremes claim to represent.

The rest of the essay unfolds that short answer into its pieces, looks at what comparative experience teaches, identifies the traps worth avoiding, and proposes operational disciplines that would survive the specific configurations the moment of the transition brings with it.

2. Three traps every transition faces

Before proposing, it is worth naming the three gravest traps documented transitions have fallen into. Recognizing them does not eliminate them, but at least makes them visible in time.

The first trap is the rigid timetable. Transitions that try to resolve everything within fixed deadlines tend to produce one of two results: either they overflow the deadlines and lose credibility, or they meet the deadlines by

sacrificing the quality of each decision. The central essay, in chapter XVI, includes a sequence with relatively specific deadlines (week one, first month, first six months), which operates as a reasonable proposal but which would necessarily encounter reality when the transition occurs under specific conditions. No timetable designed in May 2026 can foresee the exact conditions of the moment of transition, whether that is next year or a decade from now. The alternative discipline, which this essay adopts, is **broad time bands with conditional sequence**: instead of "in month three X is done," the formulation is "before doing X, it is worth having secured Y." Time is subordinated to the weight of decisions, not the reverse.

The second trap is the imported recipe. The catalog of transitions of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries offers notable comparative wealth: South Africa, Spain, Poland, East Germany, Chile, Portugal, Indonesia, Tunisia, among others. Each case teaches real disciplines. But to claim to combine elements of each in a Cuban institutional patchwork produces a Frankenstein without context, not a transition. The alternative discipline is to identify universal patterns that comparative experience confirms (for example: that militarily supervised transitions fail more often than negotiated ones with legitimate representation; that constitutions drafted with low social trust tend to require refoundation; that transitional justice without documented truth is amnesty in disguise), and to leave the specific decisions to the legitimate Cuban actors of the moment.

The third trap is the nonexistent actor. Many Cuban transition plans presuppose the existence of a political actor with legitimacy and capacity to implement them. But that actor does not yet exist in Cuba as such. The political opposition within the island, persecuted for decades, has not been able to constitute itself as an articulated force with sufficient representation. The diaspora, plural and dispersed as discussed in Essay IV, cannot legitimately substitute for that force. Cuban civil society of the interior,

according to Essay VII, is modest in scale. A real transition requires the political actor to constitute itself before or during the process, not to be assumed. That means part of the transition work is the construction itself of the actor that would conduct it. The documented transitions that succeeded were preceded, on variable timelines, by the construction of such an actor: Polish Solidarity for a decade before 1989, the South African African National Congress over decades, the Czechoslovakian Civic Forum emerging quickly on the basis of Charter 77. Without an equivalent actor in Cuba, the real transition would not arrive; and if it arrives without it, it arrives captured by whoever holds power at the moment, whether the resignified military apparatus, the diaspora with resources, or an external power with an agenda.

3. What comparative experience teaches

A look at comparative cases, without pretending exhaustiveness, is necessary to identify the disciplines documented transitions confirmed as operative.

South Africa between 1990 and 1996 is probably the most studied case of a negotiated transition with explicitly assumed costs. The process began with the release of Nelson Mandela in February 1990, after twenty-seven years in prison, and with the lifting of the ban on the African National Congress and other political organizations. The formal negotiations (CODESA I and II in 1991-1992, then the Multiparty Negotiating Forum in 1993) produced a Provisional Constitution that came into force in April 1994, just before the country's first multiracial elections. The definitive Constitution was adopted in 1996, two years after the elections. What deserves understanding is that the process was in two phases: a transition phase with a provisional constitutional framework and early elections, followed by a consolidation phase with a definitive Constitution ratified once democratic institutions were already operating. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission, presided over by Desmond Tutu from 1996, offered conditional amnesty to those who fully and

truthfully confessed their actions during apartheid; those who did not remained subject to ordinary criminal justice. The cost was high: many crimes received amnesty without retributive justice. The benefit was also high: documented truth accumulated in public archives that South African society can consult to process its past, and the risk of a white coup or civil war was deactivated. The South African lesson is that the successful negotiated transition sometimes requires accepting imperfections of justice in order to preserve institutional viability. That decision is not neutral, is morally debatable, but was taken and its consequences are readable.

Spain between 1975 and 1982 offers a different variant: a pacted transition with partial institutional continuity, without substantive transitional justice, with the Constitution of 1978 as broad agreement among parties. The so-called *pact of forgetting* produced, for decades, political peace at the cost of impunity over Francoist crimes. That decision, defended by some as necessary pragmatism and criticized by others as structural injustice, generated tensions that began to be processed only partially with the Historical Memory Law of 2007 and, more recently, with the Democratic Memory Law of 2022. Spain shows that transitions that economize on transitional justice in their moment pay for it on longer timelines. The political peace bought through forgetting tends to become a wound that reappears decades later, under conditions where its treatment is more difficult.

Poland between 1989 and 1991 is probably the case structurally closest to a possible Cuban transition. The Round Table from February to April 1989 between the communist regime and Solidarity produced partially free elections in June of that year, with results that exceeded even the opposition's expectations: Solidarity won 99 of the 100 seats in the new Senate and all the competitive seats in the Sejm. Tadeusz Mazowiecki became, in August 1989, the first non-communist prime minister of a Warsaw Pact country. The economic transition was radical (the Balcerowicz Plan from January 1990),

with real social costs but with visible recovery within a few years. The political transition was consolidated with the direct election of Lech Wałęsa as president in December 1990, and with the new Constitution of 1997 ratified by referendum. Poland shows four disciplines: the importance of a civic actor with organized critical mass (Solidarity), the utility of a negotiating table with legitimate representation on both sides, the viability of a simultaneous economic and political transition under specific conditions, and the convenience of a constituent process with broad timelines for the definitive Constitution.

East Germany between 1989 and 1990 is a particular case because the transition coincided with national reunification. The Stasi archives were preserved and, through the creation in 1991 of the Office of the Federal Commissioner for the Stasi Records, were made accessible to citizens for more than three decades. That decision, costly in terms of revealed family and professional tensions, has been recognized as one of the most effective mechanisms for processing the past that any post-totalitarian society has implemented. East Germany shows that the controlled opening of political-police archives can be a powerful tool of collective processing, with bearable costs if the process is designed with care.

Chile from 1988 to the present offers the opposite version to Poland: a supervised transition with a previous Constitution inherited from the regime (the 1980 one, drafted under Pinochet), with transitional justice staggered over decades, with the 1978 Amnesty Law that maintained structural impunity for years. The Chilean transition began with the plebiscite of October 1988, in which “No” defeated Pinochet under conditions the regime had designed thinking it could not lose. The Concertación governed for two decades with the Pinochet-era Constitution partially reformed, until in recent years Chile initiated constituent processes that have faced significant difficulties, with two texts rejected in successive plebiscites in 2022 and 2023. The Chilean lesson

is ambivalent: a pacted transition with constitutional continuity allows immediate stability but mortgages future decisions, and subsequent attempts to refound the constitutional framework can fail precisely because of the accumulated fatigue of the inherited model.

Portugal between 1974 and 1976 shows a transition initiated by military revolution (the Carnation Revolution, April 25, 1974), with real risk of involution during an unstable period that included coup attempts and intense political polarization. The eventually successful civic-military pact, with the Constitution of 1976 and entry into the European Economic Community as an institutional anchor, produced a sustainable transition. Portugal teaches that transitions initiated militarily can work if the military accepts subordination to the civilian framework, and that an external institutional anchor (in its case, the European prospect) can operate as a stabilizing factor.

Indonesia between 1998 and 2004 illustrates a gradual military transition after the fall of Suharto, with limited transitional justice and slow democratic consolidation. Indonesia shows that transitions from dominant military apparatuses work when the apparatus accepts progressive civilian subordination, but pay the price of impunity for crimes of the previous regime.

Tunisia from 2011 to the present is an instructive case precisely for its regression. The transition initiated with the Arab Spring seemed successful for a decade (the 2014 Constitution recognized internationally, electoral alternation, active civil society), but suffered partial involution under President Kais Saied from 2021, with progressive concentration of power, weakening of the parliament, and persecution of opponents. Tunisia teaches that democratic transitions are reversible when institutions are not sufficiently consolidated, and that democratic consolidation takes generations, not years.

Eight cases. No model is directly importable to Cuba. What they teach, summed together, are universal disciplines that operate under different specific conditions in each case.

4. The discipline of weight: why timings are not uniform

An observation that documented transitions confirm, and that plans claiming rigid timetables tend to ignore, is that transition decisions do not have the same weight. Some are critical for the rest, in the sense that their results condition all the decisions that follow; others are consequences or corollaries of the first and can wait.

That difference of weight should operate as the organizer of timing. It is not the same to wait a year to release political prisoners (a critical decision that conditions the initial legitimacy of the process) as to wait a year to reform specific regulation in the tourism sector (a follow-up decision that requires previously functioning institutions). Confusing weights, or treating all decisions as if they had the same acceptable timeline, is a frequent error of poorly calibrated timetables.

An operational taxonomy by weight, not by calendar, could be organized as follows.

Decisions of maximum weight, which condition everything else and deserve being taken before the first thresholds: unconditional release of identifiable political prisoners; legal and effective recognition of independent press; recognition of civic organizations and parties not controlled by the apparatus; immediate suspension of the exception measures accumulated over six decades that operate as a repressive tool (Decree 349 on artistic regulation, the Gag Law, Law 35 on cyberspace, others); declaration of civilian subordination of the military apparatus and separation between the military function of defense and the economic-business function.

Decisions of high weight, which require the first months but demand minimal previous conditions: convening of a political transition mechanism with legitimate representation (negotiating table with Cuban actors of the interior and exile, international observation as accompaniment, not as tutelage); appointment of a transitional government with verifiable legitimacy of origin; establishment of a provisional constitutional framework that substitutes for the regime's current Constitution without claiming to be the definitive Constitution; independent international audit of State accounts and of GAESA; official identification of victims of human-rights violations during the regime and the beginning of the work of the corresponding truth commission.

Decisions of medium weight, which require the first and second year under the conditions of the previous: convocation of a Constituent Assembly with verifiable democratic representation; beginning of the process of privatization of State enterprises with the anti-oligarchic disciplines described in Essay II; reform of the judicial system with criteria of professionalization and independence; redesign of the armed force as a professional institution subordinated to civilian power with its economic component already dismantled; first phase of substantive transitional justice with identified cases of grave violations.

Decisions of prolonged weight, which require broad timelines and unfold over one or two generations: drafting and popular ratification of the definitive Constitution (a process that in other countries has taken between three and seven years); consolidation of new political parties with built democratic tradition; reconstruction of the civic fabric, organized civil society, renewed educational and health systems, sustained republican culture; integration of the diaspora with explicit disciplines; effective reparation to victims; criminal trials with procedural guarantees over the identified persons responsible for human-rights violations.

Each category operates with its own clock. To pretend that all are fulfilled in short timelines is to invite failure. To pretend that all can wait is to renounce the transition.

5. The constitutional question

There is a specific piece that deserves detailed treatment because it generates debate within the diaspora and among sectors of the internal opposition: the question of the Constitution that would govern a post-regime Cuba.

There are three positions in circulation, all with legitimate arguments.

The first holds that the 1940 Constitution should be restored as starting point. The 1940 Constitution, drafted in a constituent assembly with broad representation, was one of the most advanced of its time: effective separation of powers, social and civil rights ambitious for the era, the eight-hour workday, women's suffrage, the principle of non-discrimination by race, university autonomy, union freedom, labor protection. Its effective derogation with the Batista coup of 1952, and its definitive replacement after 1959, constitute a historical wound for broad sectors of the diaspora and the internal opposition. To restore it, according to this position, would be to resume the interrupted republican legality.

The second position holds that the regime's current Constitution, the 2019 one, should be reformed to produce a democratic text without need for constitutional refoundation. This position operates with the argument of institutional continuity and the political economy of processes: refounding is traumatic, reforming is sustainable.

The third position holds that a new Constitution should be drafted from scratch, through a constituent assembly convened under democratic conditions, without obligatory reference to either the 1940 one or the current regime's.

My argument goes with the third position with nuances. The 1940 Constitution, with all its historical and symbolic value, was drafted for a country and a moment that no longer exist. Its context was a pre-globalization Cuba, without massive diaspora, without dual citizenship as an operative problem, without internet or digital economy, without human rights in their contemporary form, without the prospect of multilateral integration in supranational organisms. To restore it mechanically would exclude broad sectors of exile that today have other citizenship for reasons not of their own will and that deserve full participation in a democratic Cuba. The 1940 Constitution did not accept dual citizenship, which today would be unjust and politically unviable. Nor did it contemplate dimensions that contemporary constitutional experience has incorporated: digital rights, protection of personal data, environmental rights, indigenous and Afro-descendant peoples in contemporary terms, gender questions beyond women's suffrage. A Constitution that aspires to guide Cuba over the coming decades cannot be a retroactive text; it must be a contemporary text gathering the best of the Cuban republican tradition (including what was learned from the 1940 one) and combining that substrate with the best contemporary constitutional practices.

To reform the regime's current Constitution, in turn, would mean inheriting fundamental structural defects: the primacy of the Communist Party as guiding force of State and society, the irrevocable character of socialism, the specific function assigned to the military apparatus as armed wing of the regime. Those defects are not adjustable through reform; they are the very architecture of the regime. To reform them until producing a democratic text would be equivalent to drafting a new Constitution with additional political costs. Better to start from scratch with honesty.

The defensible formula is then **a constituent process in two phases**, as many documented transitions have done. **A brief and operative Provisional**

Constitution, drafted by a transition mechanism with broad representation, with limited validity (five to seven years), establishing the minimum necessary to operate: separation of powers, fundamental rights, electoral framework, mechanisms of judicial control. **A Definitive Constitution**, drafted by a Constituent Assembly democratically elected under the provisional framework, with broad timelines for public deliberation, with regional and thematic consultations, with popular ratification by referendum. That second Constitution would be the one to definitively replace any prior framework and would be the institutional reference for the coming generations.

Dual citizenship should be incorporated from the provisional phase as explicit recognition. Not only out of justice toward the Cubans of exile who today are citizens of other countries; also out of recognition that contemporary Cuba is transnational in its real composition, and that no Constitution claiming to govern the totality of Cubans can exclude millions of them by a juridical circumstance they did not choose.

6. Transitional justice: truth now, reparation soon, selective criminal justice

The question of transitional justice is probably the most delicate of the entire transition, because it touches non-negotiable moral dimensions and, simultaneously, political dimensions where flexibility may be a condition of institutional survival.

Jon Elster, in *Closing the Books* (2004), formulated the three operative axes of any transitional justice: **truth** (public documentation of what occurred), **reparation** (compensation to victims), **justice** (criminal prosecution of those responsible). The three axes sustain each other but can also tension each other: massive criminal justice can hinder truth if those responsible do not cooperate

for fear of prosecution; reparation without documented truth can become resource transfer without recognition; truth without reparation is moral fraud.

The formula that comparative experience confirms as most sustainable is **truth now, reparation soon, selective and slow criminal justice**. Truth is non-negotiable and must begin immediately: a truth commission with broad authority to investigate, document, and publish, with archives accessible to victims and to society, with cooperation of those responsible incentivized in exchange for reduced sentence (not full amnesty, which would reproduce the early Spanish model). Reparation must follow as soon as State institutions can operate it: official identification of victims, economic compensation where appropriate, symbolic recognition, professional rehabilitation of those purged ideologically. Criminal justice must operate with individual criteria, without mass witch-hunt or general amnesty, over the documented persons responsible for grave violations: torture, extrajudicial executions, forced disappearances, criminal sentences fabricated for political motives.

The distinction between command responsibility and executive responsibility is important here. The high command of the regime, the signers of the political decisions that produced the violations, are the principal responsible. Low-rank executors, especially those who operated under real coercion or under ideological formation that purported to legitimize what they did, should receive more nuanced treatment: investigation, possible reduction of sentence for cooperation, recognition of specific circumstances. Justice that does not distinguish becomes, within a decade, its own caricature, and produces the internal rebellions Argentina experienced with the *carapintadas* between 1987 and 1990.

The question of the archives of the Ministry of the Interior and State Security, already addressed in Essay VI of this series, deserves reiterating here: the option of controlled opening in the post-Stasi German style, with institutional mechanisms of access, with protection of living persons who are not

responsible, with gradual publication, is probably the most adult. To seal the archives would be to renounce truth out of fear of the pain it produces; to open them without an institutional framework would be to invite chaos. The middle path, with high emotional cost but permanent structural benefit, is the careful institutional opening.

7. The military and economic question

There are two additional pieces whose sequence and discipline were already addressed in previous essays but deserve integrating here within the transition framework.

On the military apparatus, the discipline of Essay VI applies without variation. The separation between national-defense function (which the new professional Armed Forces would retain) and economic function (which would be transferred to a civilian authority for audit and gradual privatization) must be declared in the provisional constitutional framework. The privatization of GAESA must operate with prior international audit, mandatory shareholding dispersion, temporary prohibition of acquisition by active or recently retired officers, pro-competition regulation from day one. Military vetting must operate with individual criteria, without mass purge, with positive incentives for young officers who accept professional civilian subordination. Criminal responsibility over human-rights violations of the military apparatus must be processed within the general framework of transitional justice described in the previous section.

On the economy, the discipline of Essay II also applies without variation. The institutions the market needs to function (a reliable judicial system, an effective antitrust authority, a well-defined property framework, serious banking regulation) must be built before the auctions. Privatizations must operate with mandatory shareholding dispersion, with anti-oligarchic

disciplines inspired by what Poland and Estonia did better than Russia. The social safety net must be designed and financed from the start, not as ornament but as infrastructure. The social services the Cuban system has historically sustained (health, education) must be modernized without being dismantled.

The two pieces, military and economic, are interconnected: property concentrated in the hands of the military apparatus is one of the central knots the transition must untie simultaneously with the political and the cultural. Linz and Stepan, in *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation* (1996), called this phenomenon "triple transition" when it occurs in countries where, in addition to political and economic dimensions, there are questions of national identity or State structuring being reconfigured simultaneously. Cuba, with its specific dimensions (the weight of the military apparatus in the economy, the massive migratory question, the symbolic charge of the Revolution, the relationship with the United States), faces a transition of greater complexity than the paradigmatic ones from the Eastern bloc. That does not make it impossible; it makes it demanding.

8. The moral and symbolic factor when structures are missing

There is a piece that documented transitions show clearly and that deserves naming specifically: when institutions are not yet built, what sustains the legitimacy of the process is the moral and symbolic authority of the persons who conduct it.

Mandela operated in South Africa, during the first years of the transition, with a moral authority that institutions could not yet produce by themselves. Wałęsa fulfilled an equivalent function in Poland. Václav Havel, in Czechoslovakia. Suárez and King Juan Carlos I, in Spain, with all the nuances debated today about their roles. Aylwin in post-Pinochet Chile. Functional

moral authority is not charismatic presidentialism; it is something subtler. It is the capacity to sustain politically costly decisions with broad public backing because the public trusts whoever sustains them, while institutions are being built so that personal trust is progressively transferred to institutional trust.

Cuba lacks, as far as one can tell, figures with that authority accumulated on equivalent scale. The regime's repression has aimed for decades precisely at preventing such figures from constituting themselves, and the Cuban political processes have produced leaders the regime managed to exile, imprison, or discredit before they could acquire that national stature. That is a real difficulty any Cuban transition would face.

The construction of moral authority in the absence of a single consolidated figure can operate through several paths. One is **collegial leadership**: a transition table with representation from various currents (interior civil society, identifiable political opposition, religious sectors, public intellectuals, diaspora representatives with explicit disciplines), with shared and rotating authority, where legitimacy rests not on a single person but on the composition of the body. Poland operated thus during the first months of 1989, with the original Round Table group functioning as a transition body before the elected institutions took over. Another path is **the bridge figure**: a Cuban man or woman with accumulated professional prestige in some field (academic, religious, artistic) who accepts a transition function without long-term political pretension, with the explicit understanding that his or her role is a hinge between the moment of rupture and the institutional moment. Spain operated something equivalent with the figure of Suárez, with debatable costs and benefits.

What comparative experience confirms is that moral authority in transition is not invented from nothing in six months. It is built over years of prestige accumulated in some sphere, and is transferred to specific political function with care. Any Cuban process that pretends to produce that authority by

decree, by forced consensus, by importation from exile, would fail. The moral authority that is respected is the one that has been earned, and it has been earned in Cuba at high cost over decades, principally by people the regime repressed, by religious sectors that maintained ethical coherence, by public intellectuals who sustained dissent at real personal cost. To recognize them in time, instead of competing with them, is the principal discipline of any serious transition.

9. International accompaniment, not tutelage

The distinction between accompaniment and tutelage is probably the most important of all the ones this essay raises, because the documented transitions that lost legitimacy did so almost always through confusion between the two.

Accompaniment means presence and international support with auditable technical conditions, without substitution of the Cuban decision. It means electoral observation by organisms with recognized credibility, technical assistance for institutional reforms requested by the legitimate Cuban authorities of the moment, financial resources for the transition channeled through transparent mechanisms with public accountability, frameworks of cooperation with the European Union, the OAS, democratic Latin American countries, Canada, multilateral institutions with transition experience.

Tutelage means the opposite: imposition from outside of predetermined models, presence that does not respond to a Cuban invitation but to the initiative of external powers, financing conditioned on specific political alignments, substitution of Cuban decisions by decisions taken in Washington, Brussels, Madrid, or any other capital. Tutelage, in any direction, reproduces the logic that for a century has treated Cuba as object and not as subject of its own foreign policy.

The operational distinction is delicate because the line between the two can be difficult to maintain in practice. Three disciplines can help.

Explicit Cuban request. International accompaniment must operate at the invitation of the legitimate Cuban authorities of the moment, not at the initiative of external powers. That seems evident but in many transitions has been violated: external actors arrive before being invited, with their own agendas, presenting themselves as neutral when they are not.

Effective multilaterality. The more diverse the accompaniers (democratic governments from different regions, multilateral organisms, international non-governmental organizations with accumulated credibility), the lower the risk of capture by a single power. The concentration of accompaniment in one or two external actors (especially if one of them is the United States for obvious reasons) is a risk zone for disguised tutelage.

Schedule of departure. Accompaniment must have an explicit departure date, linked to concrete institutional milestones (definitive Constitution ratified, electoral system consolidated over three cycles, judicial institutions operating with verified autonomy). Without a schedule of departure, accompaniment becomes permanent and ceases to be accompaniment.

The diaspora occupies a special position in this framework. It is part of the Cuban nation, not a foreign actor. But its role must also operate under explicit discipline, as treated in Essay IV: it contributes conditions, resources, networks; it neither decides nor represents the interior. The disciplines are the same as for non-Cuban external actors: request from the Cuban interior as criterion, multilaterality within the plural diaspora itself, schedule of progressive transfer of functions to actors of the interior.

10. Indicators of success and of failure

How does one recognize when a transition is working, and how does one recognize when it is failing?

Indicators of success would include the following. That decisions of maximum weight (political prisoners, press, civil society, exception measures, declaration of military subordination) be effectively taken in the first thresholds with credible international verification. That the political transition mechanism have real representation of Cuban actors of the interior with established legitimacy. That the processes of economic and military audit be carried out and published without redacted fragments. That transitional justice operate with immediate documented truth, reparation within the first years, selective criminal justice with procedural guarantees sustained over the following decades. That the provisional Constitution be brief and operative, and that the definitive one be drafted with broad timelines, substantive public deliberation, and effective popular ratification. That dual citizenship be recognized from the start. That Cubans of the interior retain substantive political majority during the process. That integration with the international economy be diversified and not be captured by a single external actor. That democratic institutions consolidate through three successive electoral cycles without major involution.

Indicators of failure, by contrast. That, in the first years, individuals or vehicles appear as majority owners of strategic sectors formerly belonging to the State, with identifiable links to former cadres of the regime or to diasporic sectors with political power. That the military apparatus retain business subdivisions under any name, even reduced. That transitional justice operate through general amnesty without documented truth or, in the opposite direction, through mass witch-hunt that paralyzes the transition and pushes military sectors toward involution. That the Constitution be drafted quickly by an assembly with low social trust and need to be refounded within less than a decade. That the transition be captured by specific sectors of the diaspora, by

foreign governments with their own agenda, or by some successor of the current apparatus reorganized under a new label. That the press documenting failures in the transition come under identifiable pressure. That elections produce results contested by documented irregularities. That the neighborhood networks and the emerging civil society of the interior be displaced by new organizations with external financing and little accumulated legitimacy.

To recognize failure in time is the only way to correct it. And to recognize that success would take at least a generation, probably two or three before full consolidation, is a condition for not becoming demoralized when the first signals are not conclusive.

○ ○ ○

If History Takes a Different Direction

This essay describes disciplines and conditional sequences for a transition that by definition has not yet occurred. The disciplines hold as a useful reference under several scenarios.

If a transition occurs and operates with sequences and disciplines close to those described here, this essay remains as one of many voices that converged on the method and added themselves to the effort. Its usefulness is one of cross-reference and shared frame with other voices that would produce similar proposals with different emphases.

If a transition occurs but is captured by specific actors (emerging oligarchy with military links, belligerent diasporic sectors, foreign governments with agendas) and reproduces the pendulum described in other essays, this essay remains as a catalog of the decisions ignored and of the consequences that ignoring produced. Its usefulness shifts from prescription to documentation of what could have been avoided.

If the transition does not occur and the regime mutates toward single-party military capitalism, the disciplines described here remain applicable but with postponed timelines: when conditions change (through internal exhaustion, through economic crisis the regime cannot offset, through generational succession of the leadership opening different windows), the operational disciplines for that moment would be similar to those described here, even if the specific configurations are different.

If the regime collapses chaotically without an orderly transition, without a political actor with consolidated legitimacy, the disciplines of this essay would become retrospective warnings about what should have been prepared and was not. That scenario is precisely the most dangerous, and the best way to reduce its probability is to work from now, under still adverse conditions, on the construction of the pieces that would be indispensable in an orderly transition: political actors with legitimacy, organized civil society, mechanisms of international coordination, prepared legal frameworks, formation of technical cadres capable of operating the new institutions. The more that is prepared in advance, the smaller the vacuum that undesired actors would fill by absence of alternatives.

In all four scenarios, one structural truth remains. A defensible Cuban republic is not designed in a single decision, is not built in a single moment, is not completed in a single timetable. It is built in layers, over generations, with sustained disciplines that outlast the specific persons who implement them. The Cuban generations who undertake it would do well to think they are sowing for children and grandchildren, not for themselves. That is probably the hardest test: to accept that the republic we deserve is the one we may not see finished, and to work all the same as if we would.

○ ○ ○

Essay IX. The Martí That Is Missing

The Restoration of a Whole Mind

○ ○ ○

BEFORE WE BEGIN. This essay is written from Miami, in 2026, as the closing piece of the series *Cuba: The Risk of Repeating the Mechanism*. The eight prior pieces diagnosed mechanisms, material conditions, and operational proposals. This piece operates differently. It reads José Martí not as icon nor as contemporary oracle, but as a man of the nineteenth century whose categories and formulations remain applicable to the twenty-first-century Cuban situation in some specific dimensions, and require updating in others. The operation of the essay is restitutive: to recover Martí whole, situated, readable in his context, against the edited Martís that the regime and certain exile sectors have produced for decades. The Martían quotations that appear are verified in their sources. Their contexts are documented. What of his thought continues to demand work from the current Cuban generations emerges from the text itself, not from rhetorical invocation.

○ ○ ○

1. Tampa, Liceo Cubano, November 26, 1891

The hall was full of Cubans in exile, mostly tobacco workers, gathered that night at the initiative of the Ignacio Agramonte Club. Martí had arrived at midnight the night before, invited by Néstor L. Carbonell to participate in an artistic and literary evening. The Cuban community of Tampa, closely tied to the tobacco industry of South Florida, was not homogeneous. There were old veterans of the Ten Years' War with their wounds and their distrusts. There

were recent emigrants with concrete hopes. There were workers whose preoccupations were immediate: wages, contracts, workshop conditions. There were significant political disagreements about how the struggle for independence ought to be conducted, what role the military *caudillos* of the previous war would play, how the emigrants would relate to the combatants on the island, and, in ways not always named, what republic would be the one to be built after winning the war that was still to be fought.

Martí spoke that night for an extended time. Francisco María González, a tobacco-shop *lector* (reader) at the Hidalgo-Gato workshop in Key West, transcribed the speech in shorthand. The piece was later reproduced on broadsides and entered history under the name of its final phrase: *Con todos, y para el bien de todos* (With all, and for the good of all). The original phrasing, in the early edition, was *Con todos, para el bien de todos*, without the conjunction *y* that was incorporated in later reproductions. The detail is philological, but not minor: it shows that even Martí's most celebrated formulation has been edited in transmission, and demands care in its contemporary use.

What Martí formulated that night in Tampa was not a slogan. It was a specific political-ethical program, addressed to an exiled and divided Cuban community, under conditions suspiciously similar to those of another exiled and divided Cuban community. The structural proximity between that 1891 hall and today's Cuban diaspora is probably the reason why Martí continues to operate as reference, not by mystique but by historical homology.

An hour before pronouncing the phrase that would give the speech its title, Martí said the following: *Yo quiero que la ley primera de nuestra república sea el culto de los cubanos a la dignidad plena del hombre*

(I would have the first law of our republic be the cult, by Cubans, of the full dignity of man.)

That phrase, not the other, is the philosophical heart of his speech. If the final phrase was the mobilizing formula, the phrase about the cult of dignity was the foundation. Without the first, the second remained empty. Without the second, the first was harangue. This essay reads Martí from that foundational phrase, not from the mobilizing one. And it reads, through it, the eight prior pieces of this series.

2. Martí situated: what the nineteenth century conditions

Before reading him, it is worth situating him. Martí was born in Havana on January 28, 1853, the son of modest Spanish immigrants, in a colony where slavery still operated as a legal institution and where independence was the project of repressed minorities. He had his first political imprisonment at sixteen for a sonnet. He lived in practically continuous exile from the age of seventeen onward: Spain, Mexico, Guatemala, Venezuela, the United States, interspersed with brief returns to Cuba that always ended in deportation. He was a journalist, translator, professor, diplomat in consular functions, political organizer, poet, essayist, dramatist, public intellectual in four languages. He died in combat at Dos Ríos, in Oriente province, on May 19, 1895, at the age of forty-two, before fulfilling what he himself called *la agonía de la edificación* (the agony of edification).

That biography matters because it conditions what Martí could and could not think. He lived in an era without modern political parties as we know them today, without consolidated representative democracies in most of the countries he traveled through, without mass media comparable to current ones, without telecommunications, without the political categories of the twentieth century (totalitarianism, human rights in their contemporary form, the welfare State, supranational integration, contemporary gender perspectives, digital rights, political ecology). The questions the twentieth century would face with new vocabulary, Martí thought with vocabulary

available to his time. Some of his categories have aged well; others require updating; some, frankly, no longer apply or apply only after careful translation.

To recognize this does not lower Martí; it respects him as a real thinker, not as a perfect oracle. The opposite operation, to present Martí as our contemporary who already had the answers to all our problems, is the one that both the regime and certain exile sectors have practiced for decades, each one editing the Martí that suited them and erasing the rest. The regime has tended to erase his serious republicanism, his criticism of the concentration of power, his nuanced admiration for aspects of the United States republic, his cultural Christianity, his rejection of absolutism. Certain sectors of the historical exile have tended to erase his lucid anti-imperialism, his criticism of oligarchy, his defense of workers, his rejection of civil war among Cubans. To recover Martí whole is necessarily to recover a Martí who unsettles both camps. That symmetrical discomfort is the mark of the reading being well done.

What of Martí remains applicable does so because it touches deep structures that time has not modified: human dignity as the non-negotiable foundation of the republic, the homeland as practice and not as decorative sentiment, the unity of Cubans without ideological uniformity, equality before the law with justice, work as the core of citizen condition, prudence in the face of the powers and the ambition not to be the object of any of them. Those are the dimensions where Martí still demands what he demanded in 1891. Other zones of his thought (his sometimes grandiloquent language, certain formulations about race that were progressive in their context and today require nuance, his republicanism built on assumptions about masculine civic virtue that contemporary perspective has expanded, his economic thought anchored in debates prior to the analytic sophistication of the twentieth century) require updating before being applied.

The essay operates with that distinction. What passes the test of time, it reads directly. What requires updating, it names as such.

3. The first pillar: the full dignity of man as first law

Yo quiero que la ley primera de nuestra república sea el culto de los cubanos a la dignidad plena del hombre. That phrase, formulated in Tampa on November 26, 1891, contains a precise philosophical operation worth unfolding.

Martí did not say *one of the principles of the republic* nor *a value worth considering*. He said *the first law*, which implies hierarchy: there is a decision that precedes all the other decisions, and from that first decision all the following ones derive. That first decision is the cult of the full dignity of man. Every institution, every public policy, every specific law, every exercise of power, must be evaluated according to its consistency with that foundational principle. If an institution violates the full dignity of those who inhabit it, that institution must be reformed or eliminated, regardless of its antiquity, its prestige, or its functional utility. If a public policy sacrifices the dignity of concrete persons in the name of a general benefit, that policy is incompatible with the first law and must be reviewed. If the exercise of power produces systematic humiliation of the governed, that exercise of power has lost its legitimacy, regardless of the elections that produced it.

The operation is demanding and, read seriously, simultaneously disqualifies the current Cuban regime and several practices certain exile sectors have considered acceptable. The regime has violated the full dignity of Cubans for six decades through political repression, institutional informing, the anthropological deformation Essay III of this series diagnoses, the destruction of shared language, the atomization of civil society. No historical calculation, no appeal to social justice, no invocation of national sovereignty can justify the sustained violation of Martí's first law. But also, and here is the

symmetrical discomfort, the dehumanization of the Cuban of the interior by exile sectors who for years have treated them as a passive mass; unresolved racial questions in the diaspora; the practices of electoral co-optation that have instrumentalized the Cuban-American community; violations of dignity by displacement or labor exploitation under conditions of irregular immigration, are also violations of the first law.

Essay I of this series diagnosed the mechanism of dictatorships: architectural enemy, loaded language, normalization of exceptional measures, atomization of civil society. Each of those parts, read from Martí, violates the first law. The architectural enemy dehumanizes the internal adversary, converting him from citizen into dangerous category. The loaded language humiliates the speaker by obliging him to say what he does not think. The normalized exceptional measures deprive the governed of the legal framework that dignity demands. Atomization destroys the horizontal bonds without which collective dignity cannot be sustained. The mechanism is not simply unjust; it is, in the Martían reading, anti-constitutional in the deepest sense: it violates the first law from which all the other laws derive.

Essay III diagnosed the anthropological deformation produced by six decades of regime: double morality, defensive cynicism, State dependence, normalized informing. That deformation, read from Martí, is also a violation of the full dignity of man, in a particular variant: it is not violation imposed from outside, but violation incorporated from within. The deformed subject lives his deformation without recognizing it as such, because the first law was never taught to him as law. The republican pedagogy that Essay III proposes as exit is, in Martían terms, restitution of the first law to those who never lived it as such. That is not ornamental cultural exercise; it is construction of the republic from its foundation.

4. The second pillar: the homeland as altar, not pedestal

De altar se ha de tomar a Cuba, para ofrendarle nuestra vida, y no de pedestal, para levantarnos sobre ella.

(Cuba is to be taken as an altar, on which to offer our lives, and not as a pedestal upon which to raise ourselves.)

The phrase opens the Tampa speech, even before the formulation about dignity. And it operates with the same precision.

The distinction between altar and pedestal is geometrically exact. The altar is a place where one deposits offerings; the pedestal is a base on which one elevates oneself. The homeland as altar demands personal sacrifice in service of the collective good; the homeland as pedestal uses the collective good in service of personal advantage. The difference is not one of emotional attitude but of practical operation: what does each one do with the homeland? Whoever treats it as altar deposits in it time, resources, risk, work, without expecting individual counterpart. Whoever treats it as pedestal extracts from it visibility, power, advantage, comfort.

The Martían verification is practical, not rhetorical: it is recognized in the everyday conduct of each political actor, not in his public declarations. The Cuban regime has proclaimed for six decades to speak in the name of the homeland while treating it as a pedestal of its own continuity: the military-business apparatus diagnosed in Essay VI is the materialization of that pedestal, a structure where the homeland serves the administrators of the apparatus, not the inverse. But the verification operates also in the opposite sense. Sectors of the diaspora who have made political, media, or financial careers invoking Cuba for decades, without their daily activity showing real personal sacrifice for the country they invoke, are treating the homeland as pedestal even if their rhetoric is of the altar. The criterion is behavior, not declaration.

The plural diaspora that Essay IV describes contains both types: those who have sustained for years real civic work at personal cost, without public

protagonism, without material return, and those who have used the Cuban cause as a base of personal visibility or political advantage. The distinction is not always easy to make individually, but in the aggregate it is recognized. A serious transition distinguishes one from the other, and recognizes the first as natural allies of the process.

The second Martían pillar has an additional consequence for Essay VIII on the architecture of transition. Transition decisions must be taken with altar criteria: what does the homeland require? what does the collective Cuban good of several generations demand? Not with pedestal criteria: what suits this specific sector? what consolidates this individual position? That discipline protects against the capture of the transition by specific actors with their own agenda, whether the diaspora with financial power, sectors of the resignified apparatus, or external powers with their own interests. The transition designed from the altar is the one that produces republic; the one designed from the pedestal is the one that produces pendulum.

5. The third pillar: with all, for the good of all

The central formula of the Martían reading deserves careful unfolding because it has been edited by all camps, and recovering its original sense is necessary work.

Martí formulated *Con todos, para el bien de todos* as a practical response to a concrete problem: the division of the exiled Cuban community of his time, fragmented by accumulated distrusts during the Ten Years' War, polarized between military veterans with different readings of the previous conflict, divided between white and black Cubans whom the Spanish colonial apparatus had deliberately cultivated to divide, traversed by regional and personal rivalries. The unity Martí proposed was neither ideological unanimity nor uniformity of criterion. It was operational agreement on the minimal base

necessary to make independence: human dignity as principle, democratic republic as horizon, social justice as demand, national sovereignty as condition.

The formula has two components, and the order matters. *Con todos* (with all) is premise: the process must include all Cubans of good faith, without discrimination by geography, race, class, mother tongue, or previous political experience. *Para el bien de todos* (for the good of all) is objective: the result must benefit the whole, not a specific sector that appropriates the process. If the first component is missing, the process is exclusionary and reproduces the mechanism it intends to combat. If the second is missing, the process is capture disguised as inclusion.

But there is an observation Martí made in the same speech and that deserves not erasing: the *all* has practical limits Martí himself established. *A los lindoros que desdeñan hoy esta revolución santa… a los olimpos de pisapapel que bajan de la trípode calumniosa… a los alzacolas que fomentan, a sabiendas, el engaño…*

(To the dandies who today scorn this holy revolution… to the paperweight Olympians who descend from the slanderous tripod… to the tail-raisers who knowingly foment deception…)

That series of phrases, in the original speech, identifies those whom *all* does not include: those who act in bad faith, those who slander systematically, those who knowingly deceive, those who have made opportunism their method of operation. Martían inclusion is not naïve. It is moral inclusion with criterion: those who act in good faith fit, even if they disagree; those who act in bad faith do not, even if they repeat the correct slogans.

That distinction holds today. Possible Cuban unity does not require ideological agreement between those who participated in the regime and those who fought against it, between historical exile and new waves, between religious and secular sectors, between Cubans of the interior and Cubans

abroad. It requires good-faith agreement on the first law (full dignity of man), on the republican character of the project (institutional structure with separation of powers and rule of law), on transitional justice (documented truth, reparation, selective criminal justice). Those who accept those minimum agreements are within the Martían *all*, regardless of which side they come from. Those who reject them are outside, regardless of the flags they have waved.

This simultaneously resolves two questions the previous essays raised. The question of the plural diaspora (Essay IV): the *all* includes the four waves and the multiple geographies, without a priori hierarchy, without any sector having the right of exclusive representation. The question of the emerging civil society (Essay VII): the *all* includes those who have sustained the civic work from the interior at real personal cost, and recognizes them as legitimate interlocutors at any transition table.

6. The fourth pillar: the republic with base in the entire character of man

In the same Tampa speech, Martí formulated another phrase that has been less cited and that is probably the most demanding of his entire political work:

O la república tiene por base el carácter entero de cada uno de sus hijos, el hábito de trabajar con sus manos y pensar por sí propio, el ejercicio íntegro de sí y el respeto, como de honor de familia, al ejercicio íntegro de los demás; la pasión, en fin, por el decoro del hombre, o la república no vale una lágrima de nuestras mujeres ni una sola gota de sangre de nuestros bravos.

(Either the republic has for its base the entire character of each of its sons, the habit of working with one's hands and thinking for oneself, the integral exercise of one's self and respect, as of family honor, for the integral exercise of others; the passion, finally, for the decorum of man, or the republic is not worth a tear from our women nor a single drop of blood from our brave.)

The formula is conditional disjunction: either the republic has those characteristics, or it is not worth the effort to build it. Martí does not admit republics that are formally democratic but materially empty of the virtues that sustain them. The characteristics he enumerates are precise: entire character, manual work and one's own thinking, integral exercise of oneself and respect for the integral exercise of others, passion for the decorum of man. Five elements articulated in a functional unity.

Entire character means coherence between what one thinks, what one says, and what one does, the exact condition that Essay III of this series diagnoses as devastated by the Cuban double morality of six decades. To rebuild entire character is the work of one or two generations, through sustained republican pedagogy, minimal material conditions, civic spaces where coherence is possible without high personal cost.

The habit of working with one's hands and thinking for oneself combines two demands the twentieth-century Cuban experience disassociated. The regime valued manual work at the price of suppressing one's own thinking; certain intellectual sectors of exile cultivated their own thinking without recognizing the dignity of manual work. Martí demands the two together. The Martían republic is that of the worker who thinks and the thinker who works, not that of the intellectual disconnected from the concrete economy nor that of the worker disconnected from political deliberation.

The integral exercise of oneself and respect for the integral exercise of others formulates the classical formula of republican liberalism: each one has the right to develop fully, on the condition that he respect the equivalent right of the other. The Martían novelty lies in the image of *family honor*: respect for the integral exercise of others is not a utilitarian calculation of non-aggression, but a familial moral imperative. We Cubans are siblings in the republic, and harm to a Cuban is harm to all.

The passion for the decorum of man synthesizes the previous in affective register. The Martían republic is not a cold construction of institutions; it is a project passionate about concrete human dignity. That emotional dimension of politics, which the Enlightenment modernity tended to distrust, Martí claims as condition. Without passion for decorum, democratic institutions operate empty and, within a generation, are captured by interests that do have passion for themselves.

The final phrase of the paragraph is probably the most demanding: if the Cuban republic does not have those characteristics, *no vale una lágrima de nuestras mujeres ni una sola gota de sangre de nuestros bravos* (it is not worth a tear from our women nor a single drop of blood from our brave). Martí establishes an operational criterion of evaluation: the suffering the struggle for the republic produces is justified only if the resulting republic has the minimum virtues that justify that suffering. A transition that produces formal democracy without those virtues does not deserve the costs the transition demands. The demand is radical and deserves to be taken seriously.

7. The material conditions of the first law

Martí was not an idealist in the sense opposed to materialism. His thought incorporated with care the economic dimensions of the republic. And here enters a zone where updating is necessary, because Martí's economic thought operated within the debates available at the end of the nineteenth century and before the analytic sophistication that Hayek, Kornai, Mises, and others would contribute in the twentieth.

What is directly transferable is the principle. Martí understood that the full dignity of man requires minimum material conditions: dignified work, accessible property, fair commerce, sovereignty over the resources of one's own country. Without those conditions, declared dignity remains without

substrate. Essay II of this series, on the impossible economy and the pendulum worth avoiding, operates with a posture that is Martían at its core even if its vocabulary is contemporary: market economy with serious regulation, independent public institutions, robust social protection, without falling into central planning that annihilates calculation or into pure market that produces oligarchic concentration. Martí did not formulate that formula in those terms, but his demand for economic sovereignty with dignity for the worker is fully compatible with it.

On the military-business apparatus that Essay VI diagnoses, Martí was particularly clear: *los cubanos no vamos a querer gobiernos de tijeras y de figurines, sino trabajo de nuestras cabezas, sacado del molde de nuestro país.* *(We Cubans will not want governments of paper-cutout puppets and dummies, but work from our own heads, drawn from the mold of our own country.)*

The phrase rejects two things: imported governments and artificial governments. A military apparatus operating as economic owner of the country is exactly *gobierno de tijeras y figurines*, an artificial construction in which the army, instead of serving the republic, is served by it. The separation between military function and economic function that Essay VI proposes as the central discipline of the transition is a Martían operation *avant la lettre*.

On the geopolitics that Essay V treats at length, the Martían reading is nuanced and deserves careful treatment. Martí wrote *Nuestra América*, published on January 1, 1891, in *La Revista Ilustrada de Nueva York*, in the immediate context of the First International American Conference of 1889-1890, when the U.S. hemispheric power was beginning to articulate Pan-Americanism under its leadership. Martí's warning about the *vecino formidable que nos desdeña* (formidable neighbor who scorns us) was precise for his moment. But it deserves reading in its context, not as absolute condemnation of the United States for all time. Martí spent fifteen years in the United States as exile, observed that republic with sustained critical

admiration in his *Escenas norteamericanas* (North American Scenes) published in *La Nación* of Buenos Aires between 1881 and 1891, formed professional and personal ties with Americans, translated American literature into Spanish, knew well the virtues of its institutional system. His anti-imperialism was specifically against imperialism, not against the culture or against the American republic.

To recognize that is important for an honest reading. Martí distrusted U.S. imperialism as a threat to Cuban independence, not the U.S. institutional model in itself. The distinction between the two holds today. A defensible Cuba recognizes the United States as a structural neighbor by geography, culture, and history (including the documented imprint the nineteenth century left), maintains its own political autonomy, and distrusts subordination under any sign. That is the Martían discipline updated to the twenty-first century, not the caricatured reading the regime has made for six decades to justify the permanent rupture.

Trincheras de ideas valen más que trincheras de piedra, Martí wrote in *Nuestra América*

(Trenches of ideas are worth more than trenches of stone.)

The phrase functions in both directions. The ideological trenches of the regime against declared imperialism have produced, over six decades, more harm than any external power. And, simultaneously, the ideological trenches of certain exile sectors against everything that sounded like the left have impeded for decades the construction of a broad Cuban democratic consensus. Martí would ask to dismantle both trenches and to build, in their place, real institutions.

8. Unity without uniformity

There is a Martían distinction worth formulating precisely, because it operates throughout the whole series. The unity Martí asked for was not ideological uniformity. It was operational agreement on the minimum base of the republic, sustained by good faith in the diversity of criteria over everything else.

That distinction is what is missing in much of contemporary Cuban political discourse. The regime has pretended for six decades that national unity required uniformity of opinion on all political, economic, cultural, and international questions. That pretense is the opposite of Martí in exact terms: what it pretends is uniformity, not unity, and Martí distinguished between the two with care. Certain exile sectors have fallen into the symmetrical version of the error: pretending that post-regime Cuban unity required broad agreement on themes (specific economic model, specific foreign policy, specific territorial organization, etcetera) that in a democratic republic must be the object of continuous public deliberation, not of prior decision.

Martían unity is more modest and more demanding at the same time. Modest, because it does not demand agreement on everything. Demanding, because it does demand agreement on the fundamental: human dignity as first law, democratic republic as form of government, transitional justice with documented truth, national sovereignty without servitude or capture. Over everything else, Cubans can legitimately disagree and build changing majorities through the democratic process.

That formula, applied to Essay VIII on the architecture of transition, produces an important operational consequence. The provisional Constitution must be brief, limited to establishing the fundamental on which there is broad agreement. The definitive Constitution, drafted by a Constituent Assembly with democratic representation, must establish the institutional frameworks and the fundamental principles, leaving to ordinary political deliberation the specific decisions on the many dimensions of public life. To pretend that the

definitive Constitution resolves at once all the debates on all the themes is to repeat the error of the current regime: to want uniformity under the name of unity.

9. The integration of the pillars: how Martí reads the series

The eight previous pieces of this series diagnose and propose. Read from Martí, they integrate as follows, not as mechanical application but as structural demand.

Essay I on the mechanism and the pendulum identifies the totalitarian pattern in its constitutive parts. From Martí, that mechanism is systematic violation of the first law: dehumanization of the adversary, capture of language, normalization of abuse, atomization of civil society. What the essay diagnoses as a structural pattern, Martí names as fundamental offense to human dignity. The operation of recognizing the mechanism is Martían at its root: learning to see what is happening when it begins to happen, before it is irreversible.

Essay II on the impossible economy and the avoidable pendulum reformulates the economic question as a problem of calculation and of institutions. From Martí, what is missing from the economy is the material condition of dignity: dignified work, accessible property, sovereignty over resources. The formula the essay proposes is Martían at its core: neither central planning that annihilates the dignity of the worker with his autonomy, nor pure market that annihilates it with oligarchic concentration.

Essay III on anthropological deformation diagnoses what the regime has done to concrete persons over six decades. From Martí, that deformation is the exact opposite of the *carácter entero* (entire character) that the republic demands. To rebuild entire character is central work of any serious transition, and operates on generational timelines. The republican pedagogy the essay proposes is restitution of the first law to those who never lived it as such.

Essay IV on the diaspora describes Cuban plurality outside the island, with its four waves, its multiple geographies, its differentiated educational levels, its distinct psychologies. From Martí, the plural diaspora is within the *all*, without a priori hierarchy. The interior-diaspora proportion discipline that Essay IV formulates is the contemporary translation of *con todos, para el bien de todos*: effective inclusion of the plural diaspora in the transition process, without its financial or political capacity granting it the right of capture over the decisions that correspond mostly to Cubans of the interior.

Essay V on geopolitics treats the structural Cuban position among the powers. From Martí, the central discipline is not to be the object of anyone's foreign policy. That holds before the United States, before China, before Russia, before any future actor with hemispheric presence. Natural integration with the hemispheric power as a neighbor recognized by geography, culture, and history is compatible with that discipline, provided it is integration between sovereigns, not subordination of one beneath the other.

Essay VI on the militarized State and GAESA touches probably the most urgent zone of the work. From Martí, a military apparatus that is majority shareholder of the economy is *gobierno de tijeras y figurines* in its most radical form: an artificial structure in which the army does not serve the republic but rather is served by it. The separation between the military function of defense and the economic-business function is a direct Martían demand, not contemporary innovation.

Essay VII on the republic yet to be built describes the fabric of emerging Cuban civil society. From Martí, that fabric is the operative base of the first law on a social scale: the concrete persons who for years have sustained spaces where human dignity is respected against the current. To recognize them as legitimate interlocutors of any transition is a fundamental Martían discipline.

Essay VIII on the architecture of the transition is the most complete operational proposal. From Martí, the transition demands building the institutions of the republic on the base of the entire character of man, of unity without uniformity, of justice with dignity. The disciplines the essay formulates (staggered pace according to weight of decisions, transitional justice with truth now and reparation soon and selective criminal justice, constitution in two phases, international accompaniment without tutelage) are contemporary operationalizations of the republic Martí asked for in Tampa: of entire character, with all, for the good of all, with the cult of the full dignity of man as first law.

10. Equality before the law, with justice

There is a final piece worth formulating specifically because it traverses the entire Martían reading: equality before the law, with justice.

Martí, trained in law, articulated with clarity what republics must guarantee as a non-negotiable minimum: effective equality before the law, without distinction of race, class, geography, or previous political trajectory; justice that is neither bought nor negotiated for political convenience; due process for all, including those responsible for the previous regime; effective reparation to victims with equitable and verifiable criteria. Those components operate together. Equality without justice is empty formal legalism. Justice without equality is selective vengeance. The two together produce the republic that deserves its costs.

The transitional justice that Essay VIII proposes (truth now, reparation soon, selective and slow criminal justice) is the contemporary translation of that Martían demand. Documented truth, the public recognition of victims, just reparations, criminal prosecutions with guarantees, are the operational components of equality before the law with justice for a post-totalitarian

society. Without them, the republic that proclaims itself would not be republican in the substantive sense. With them, however imperfect and gradual, the substrate is built on which the first law can begin to operate as real first law, not merely declaimed.

Inclusion and order are the double face of that equality with justice. Inclusion without order produces demagoguery that violates the dignity of those who do not fit in the dominant group of the moment; order without inclusion produces authoritarianism that violates the dignity of the excluded. Martí formulated the two demands as inseparable: the republic he asked for was *ordenada y serena*, ordered and serene, and simultaneously *con todos*. That simultaneity is the principal discipline of the project.

○ ○ ○

If History Takes a Different Direction

This essay reads Martí from the closing moment of a series that has worked over months. But history is plural, and it is worth declaring how this text reads under different scenarios from the desired one.

If a transition occurs in Cuba and the Martían pillars operate effectively as criterion (full dignity of man as first law, homeland as altar and not pedestal, with all for the good of all, the republic with base in entire character), this essay remains as one of many voices that converged on recognizing Martí as a viable compass, not as an icon. Its usefulness would be one of cross-reference and would contribute to the broad civic work the transition would require.

If the transition occurs but the Martían pillars are invoked rhetorically without operating effectively over the decisions (Martí reduced to symbolic ornament while decisions are taken that violate the first law), this essay remains as a warning made and not heard. Its usefulness shifts to documenting the distance between the invocation and the practice, and to supporting those who under

more difficult conditions would attempt to recover the effective operation of Martían thought.

If the transition does not occur and the regime mutates toward new forms that retain the logic of the mechanism, the Martían pillars still operate as criterion for recognizing what is preserved of the regime even under new labels. Where the first law is violated, there is the regime, regardless of the words it uses.

If the regime collapses chaotically and the actors that fill the vacuum reproduce capture by specific sectors (emerging oligarchy, coercive networks, external interests), the Martían pillars would be the ones that allow recognizing quickly that what is being built is not the republic. That early lucidity is probably the only defense that can operate under conditions where institutions are not consolidated.

In all four scenarios, what of Martí remains is the demand of the first law. The full dignity of man as criterion of evaluation of everything else. When that first law is respected, there is republic; when it is violated, there is none, regardless of what the political structure that claims to represent it is called.

11. What the Cuban generations are to do

I close this essay, and with it the series, without a Martían closing citation. That is a deliberate decision. The complete series opens with the central essay that closes with *Con todos y para el bien de todos*. To repeat that phrase here would be rhetorical symmetry that would not add demand. The force of Martí outlives his invocation; he does not need it.

What I do close with is a synthetic formulation of my own, so that the reader is left with the voice of the author who has read Martí, not with Martí himself supplanting another's voice. And that formulation is the following.

The Cuban generations who inherit the moment of the transition, whether that is next year or a decade from now, would do well to think they are sowing for children and grandchildren, not for themselves. The republic we deserve is probably the one we will not see finished. That does not lower the work; it dignifies it. The decisions taken at the critical moment would operate over generations, and would be judged by children and grandchildren we cannot foresee. The only discipline that protects against the temptation of short-termism is to think those children and grandchildren as real interlocutors, even though they do not yet exist. What decision would they think we took well? What decision would they think we took badly? That question, sustained throughout the moment of transition, operates as a better compass than any conjunctural calculation.

The Martí we have read in this essay, situated in his nineteenth century, with his categories and his limits, continues to demand the same as he demanded in Tampa on November 26, 1891. That the Cuban republic have for its base the entire character of man. That the first law be the cult of human dignity. That the homeland be altar and not pedestal. That unity include all Cubans of good faith without ideological uniformity. That equality before the law operate with effective justice. That order coexist with inclusion, both verifiable in the daily conduct of political actors.

Those demands, formulated one hundred thirty-five years ago, remain unfulfilled in the Cuba that is. That they be fulfilled in the Cuba to come depends less on Martí than on us. And we are plural, divided within, traversed by the wounds this series has diagnosed, marked by the deformation the regime produced and by the contradictions the diaspora carries. To work with that material, without idealizing it and without discarding it, is the only possible transition.

The republic yet to be built is the work of generations. To begin well is the responsibility of ours.

○ ○ ○

Reference Materials

Selected Bibliography

This bibliography gathers the works and sources the essay invokes with sufficient detail to be identifiable. It is not exhaustive. The book's underlying conversation engages many other authors who do not appear here because they are cited in passing or without reference to a specific work. The aim of this list is to offer the reader the option of pursuing, should they wish, the trails the essay suggests.

○ ○ ○

ARENDT, Hannah. *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. Schocken Books, New York, 1951; with an additional final chapter in the 1958 edition.

DE SOTO, Hernando. *The Mystery of Capital: Why Capitalism Triumphs in the West and Fails Everywhere Else*. Basic Books, New York, 2000.

ELSTER, Jon. *Closing the Books: Transitional Justice in Historical Perspective*. Cambridge University Press, 2004.

FROMM, Erich. *Escape from Freedom*. Farrar & Rinehart, New York, 1941. Published in the United Kingdom as *The Fear of Freedom*, Routledge, London, 1942.

HABERMAS, Jürgen. *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*. Original German edition: *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt, 1962. English translation by Thomas Burger with Frederick Lawrence, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 1989.

HAVEL, Václav. *The Power of the Powerless*. Written in October 1978 and initially circulated as samizdat. Collected in *Open Letters: Selected Writings 1965-1990*, Knopf, New York, 1991.

HAYEK, Friedrich A. “The Use of Knowledge in Society.” *American Economic Review*, vol. 35, no. 4, September 1945, pp. 519-530.

HIRSCHMAN, Albert O. *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty: Responses to Decline in Firms, Organizations, and States*. Harvard University Press, 1970.

HUNTINGTON, Samuel P. *The Soldier and the State: The Theory and Politics of Civil-Military Relations*. Harvard University Press, 1957.

KLEMPERER, Victor. *The Language of the Third Reich: A Philologist’s Notebook*. Original German edition: *LTI: Notizbuch eines Philologen*, Aufbau-Verlag, Berlin, 1947. English translation by Martin Brady, Athlone Press, London, 2000; reissued by Bloomsbury, 2013.

KORNAI, János. *Economics of Shortage*. North-Holland, Amsterdam, 1980. *The Socialist System: The Political Economy of Communism*. Princeton University Press, 1992.

LANGE, Oskar. “On the Economic Theory of Socialism.” *Review of Economic Studies*, in two parts, 1936-1937. Republished, with Fred M. Taylor’s complementary essay, in *On the Economic Theory of Socialism*, edited by Benjamin E. Lippincott, University of Minnesota Press, 1938. Hayek’s response is collected in *Individualism and Economic Order*, University of Chicago Press, 1948.

LINZ, Juan J., and Alfred STEPAN. *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation: Southern Europe, South America, and Post-Communist Europe*. Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996.

MANI, Kristina. “Military Entrepreneurs: Patterns in Latin America.” *Latin American Politics and Society*, vol. 53, no. 3, Fall 2011, pp. 25-55.

MARTÍ, José. The quotations used in the book come from four fragments drawn from three specific sources, identified below.

MICHNIK, Adam. *Letters from Prison and Other Essays*. University of California Press, Berkeley, 1985.

MIŁOSZ, Czesław. *The Captive Mind*. Original Polish edition: *Zniewolony umysł*, Instytut Literacki, Paris, 1953. English translation by Jane Zielonko, Secker and Warburg, London, and Knopf, New York, both 1953.

MISES, Ludwig von. "Economic Calculation in the Socialist Commonwealth." Originally published in German as "Die Wirtschaftsrechnung im sozialistischen Gemeinwesen," *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik*, vol. 47, 1920. English translation by S. Adler, collected in *Collectivist Economic Planning: Critical Studies on the Possibilities of Socialism*, edited by Friedrich A. Hayek, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1935. The argument is expanded in *Socialism: An Economic and Sociological Analysis*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1951.

O'DONNELL, Guillermo, and Philippe SCHMITTER. *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule: Tentative Conclusions about Uncertain Democracies*. Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986.

ORWELL, George. *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Secker and Warburg, London, 1949.

PUTNAM, Robert D. *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. Simon & Schuster, New York, 2000.

SAJJAD AKHTAR, Aasim. *The Politics of Common Sense: State, Society and Culture in Pakistan*. Cambridge University Press, 2018. His analysis of "military neoliberalism" was developed in several academic articles published over the previous decade.

SOLZHENITSYN, Aleksandr. *The Gulag Archipelago, 1918-1956: An Experiment in Literary Investigation*. Original Russian edition: YMCA Press, Paris, three volumes, 1973-1975. English translation by Thomas P. Whitney

(vols. 1 and 2) and Harry T. Willetts (vol. 3), Harper & Row, New York, 1974-1978.

TOCQUEVILLE, Alexis de. *Democracy in America*. Original French edition: *De la démocratie en Amérique*, Charles Gosselin, Paris (Volume One, 1835; Volume Two, 1840). Standard contemporary English edition: translated by Harvey C. Mansfield and Delba Winthrop, University of Chicago Press, 2000.

○ ○ ○

On the Quotations from José Martí

The book uses four fragments from the work of José Martí, presented with the intention of literal citation, not concealed paraphrase. Their sources are the following.

"La libertad es el derecho que tiene el hombre de ser honrado, y de pensar y hablar sin hipocresía."

(Liberty is the right of every man to be honest, and to think and speak without hypocrisy.)

From *Tres héroes* (Three Heroes), an essay included in *La Edad de Oro* (The Golden Age), July 1889 issue. Collected in the *Obras Completas de José Martí* (Complete Works of José Martí), Editorial de Ciencias Sociales, Havana, various editions.

"Ser bueno es el único modo de ser dichoso. Ser culto es el único modo de ser libre. Pero, en lo común de la naturaleza humana, se necesita ser próspero para ser bueno."

(To be good is the only way to be happy. To be cultivated is the only way to be free. But, in the common state of human nature, one needs to be prosperous in order to be good.)

From the essay *Maestros ambulantes* (Itinerant Teachers), published in *La América*, New York, May 1884.

"Una nación no se funda, Cubanos, como se manda un campamento."

(A nation is not founded, Cubans, the way one commands an encampment.)

From the speech known as *Con todos y para el bien de todos* (With All, and for the Good of All), delivered by Martí at the Liceo Cubano of Tampa, Florida, on November 26, 1891.

"Con todos y para el bien de todos."

(With all, and for the good of all.)

Closing of the same speech from the Liceo Cubano of Tampa, November 26, 1891. It is the formula that gives its name to the complete speech in editions of Martí's works.

○ ○ ○

Cuban Documents and Institutional References

Throughout the essay, several legal instruments of the Cuban regime and entities whose full names deserve fixing are mentioned. This list includes neither analysis nor judgment, only identification.

Constitution of the Republic of Cuba of 1940. Socialist Constitution of 1976, with subsequent reforms. Constitution of 2019, in force at the moment of writing.

Law 88 of 1999 (known as the *Ley Mordaza*, the Gag Law). Decree 349 of 2018 on the regulation of artistic and cultural activity. Law 35 of 2021 on the regulation of national cyberspace.

Committees for the Defense of the Revolution (CDR), created in 1960. Revolutionary Armed Forces (FAR). Grupo de Administración Empresarial S.A. (GAESA, Business Administration Group), the business conglomerate under the military apparatus. Its principal subsidiaries mentioned in the essay include Gaviota S.A., CIMEX, Habaguanex, and TRD Caribe.

Helms-Burton Act (Cuban Liberty and Democratic Solidarity Act), passed by the United States Congress in March 1996.

National Commission on the Disappearance of Persons (CONADEP), Argentina, created in December 1983 by decree of President Raúl Alfonsín.

Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa, presided over by Archbishop Desmond Tutu, active between 1996 and 2002.

○ ○ ○

A Final Note on Method

This essay converses with many more authors and works than appear in this list. The choice has been to include only those whose theses or concepts are cited in the body of the text with sufficient detail for the interested reader to locate them, and to leave out the passing mentions that would require interpretive reconstruction. The reader who wishes to deepen the debate on democratic transitions, the political economy of socialism, the sociology of civil society, or civil-military relations, will find in the works cited starting points broader than the essay could encompass without overflowing its own format.

○ ○ ○

○ ○ ○

Cuba: The Risk of Repeating the Mechanism

By **Ernesto Cisneros Cino**

Miami, 2026

○ ○ ○