

Introduction

The Revolution and El Bloqueo

El bloqueo, the Cuban name for the economic embargo, was imposed by the U.S. government in 1960, and since then the United States has used its political, military, and economic powers to enforce it. This has been the longest and most restrictive trade embargo imposed by one nation against another in modern history. For more than 50 years, *el bloqueo* has shaped the daily lives of Cubans, who continue to invent, adapt, and persevere in its shadow.

The 1959 revolution brought Cuba a revolutionary government officially led by Fidel Castro, who, within the first two years, nationalized U.S.-owned assets in the island and declared a socialist regime. U.S. government officials, seeing the presence of a socialist country so close to home as a threat in the midst of the Cold War with the Soviet Union, imposed the embargo to quarantine if not subvert the Castro regime. More than 60 years later, the embargo continues and, more than three decades after the breakup of the Soviet Union, Cuba remains socialist. Today the embargo seems anachronistic and difficult to justify to many observers across the political spectrum in the United States. Cuban Americans supporting the embargo, who for decades had the political clout to influence U.S. elections, are now a minority in the Cuban American community. For Cubans and for many others in Latin America, *el bloqueo* is a constant reminder of U.S. imperialism and the refusal to treat Cuba as a sovereign nation. At the same time, as Cubans on the island often say, the *bloqueo* continues to provide an excuse used by Cuban authorities to explain shortcomings of the country's state-controlled economy.

In this book, we focus on contemporary Cuba. We use the *bloqueo* as a way to start a conversation with Cubans of different ages and walks of life who are experiencing the social, cultural, and economic changes transforming the island today. We, of course, recognize that many other systemic pressures beyond the *bloqueo* have a great impact on people's lives. As a small island, for example, Cuba is highly vulnerable to extreme climate events, natural disasters, and environmental changes such as rising sea levels; along the south coast, some households have

already been permanently relocated as a result of the rising waters. The small island's economy also has a limited natural resource base, which restricts its ability to diversify, prevents the development of economies of scale, and necessitates a dependence on imports of food and fuel.

Today Cuba faces socioeconomic realities of enhanced difficulty. In his first policy speech on July 26, 2007, former President Raúl Castro openly criticized what he labeled a stagnant and highly bureaucratized system. He called for change in the economic model, including decentralization and equal treatment of state and non-state producers. Cuba's new president, Miguel Díaz-Canel, who was born after the revolution and assumed office on April 19, 2018, continues to pursue cautious reform of his predecessor's economic policies, while trying to preserve the country's social structure. A difficult challenge that creates an additional burden is Cuba's demographic crisis: the improved healthcare brought by the revolution has translated into increased longevity. At the same time, the number of working-age citizens has declined due to out-migration, partly fueled by disillusionment among the young, who often lack prospects on the island for using the knowledge gained through Cuba's successful education system in productive ways. Until recently, out-migration had the added incentive offered by U.S. policies like the Cuban Adjustment Act of 1966 that basically stated that anyone who emigrated from Cuba and entered the United States, including U.S. territorial waters, had the right to pursue legal residency and, eventually, U.S. citizenship. This policy was revised in 1995 and came to be known as the "wet foot, dry foot" policy, which meant that Cubans caught in the waters between the two countries ("wet feet") would be sent back to Cuba or to a third country, and those who made it to shore ("dry feet") were offered initial financial support and a path to permanent legal residency. Even though this policy was suspended in January of 2017, which means that Cubans arriving on U.S. soil without a visa are now subject to deportation, the Cuban Adjustment Act remains on the books. Exacerbating the island's demographic woes is the fact that Cuba's fertility rates, far below replacement level, are now the lowest in Latin America. As a result of these changes, Cuba now has the oldest population in the hemisphere, and its population decline is expected to accelerate in coming years.

Despite internal and external pressures, the Cuban regime has created the socioeconomic infrastructure to provide all Cubans with access to the basics of food, shelter, health care, and education. Since the revolution, the Cuban government has given first priority to social and political needs when implementing its economic policies; productivity and efficiency have tended to be an afterthought. The socioeconomic infrastructure does ensure, however, that the island as a whole is, for example, capable of responding with a high level of efficiency to natural disasters. As well, economic changes since the 1990s have allowed the country to

survive the pressures of the U.S. embargo, even with the collapse of primary trade relations with the Eastern Block. Cuba has created a booming tourism industry in partnership with foreign investors, as well as joint ventures, such as nickel mining and rum and tobacco distribution, with Canadian and European companies.

The resilience of the island's residents has deep roots in a history marked by a long and persistent struggle against foreign domination. Spain established ruthless colonial rule of the island in the early sixteenth century. In 1762, Havana was briefly occupied by Great Britain, opening trade with North American and Caribbean British colonies and importing thousands of slaves from West Africa to work in the sugar plantations. After Haiti achieved its independence in 1804 through a slave rebellion that destroyed the world's largest sugar-exporting economy, Cuba became the leading sugar producer. During the 1800s Cuba expanded and diversified the slave trade, developing a brutal slave-dependent plantation economy. As with other islands in the Caribbean with large Afro-descendant populations, slave revolts and the specter of Haiti's revolution initially tempered the elites' enthusiasm for independence. But by the second half of the 1800s, when most Latin American nations had already achieved independence, the drive for independence in Cuba had taken off.

The Cuban national anthem was first performed at the Battle of Bayamo, in the first independence war initiated under the leadership of Carlos Manuel de Céspedes in 1868. Ten years later, the war ended with some concessions, but no independence. The war that would finally result in independence began in 1895, when exiled forces landed in eastern Cuba under the leadership of generals Máximo Gómez and Antonio Maceo, and of José Martí, "The Apostle of Cuban Independence." Martí and Maceo would die before their dreams were realized. Spain was driven out in 1898 during the Spanish-American War, when the United States intervened in the last war of independence and sidelined Cuban leaders during negotiations with Spain. Cubans immediately faced ongoing intervention and periodic occupation by the United States. The Platt Amendment of 1901, imposed by the United States, stipulated a series of conditions that formalized U.S. dominance over Cuba in exchange for the withdrawal of U.S. troops from the Island.

Between 1898 and the revolution of 1959, Cuba remained a quasi-protectorate of the United States, with a plantation-style economy run by U.S. interests and highly corruptible elected governments that rotated with U.S.-supported dictatorships. U.S. interference during the era of General Fulgencio Batista (1952–1959), when Cuba became a safe haven for U.S. organized crime figures, was particularly egregious to most Cubans. Cosmopolitan Havana boasted the world's largest hotel-casino complex outside of Nevada, was the second city in Latin America to offer television, and had an upper and middle class that had become accustomed to the luxuries of U.S. life. This stood in stark contrast to the abject poverty found in

View from Habana del Este,
Havana.









Sierra de los Órganos, Pinar del Río.



Centro Habana, Havana.



Centro Habana, Havana.