

Cuba Project 1998 Planning Meeting

Summary of Main Themes and Recommendations

The Cuba Project's 1998 Planning Meeting presented a unique opportunity for academics, policy-makers, and leaders in related fields, to discuss the direction of Cuba studies, and to establish priorities for research and programming. Participants engaged in debate and discussion to identify common areas of interest, evaluate approaches, and to make recommendations for inclusive programming and research.

Working groups were formed around the following topics: Cuba Seminar; International Symposia; Website Development; Culture; Policy; and Research. The tasks of the sub-groups included evaluating successes to-date, brainstorming new ideas, and prioritizing recommendations for the Cuba Project.

The working groups' reports reflected recurrent themes echoed throughout the day's discussions and debates:

1) The term "Transition" should be contextualized.

One of the most resounding themes throughout the meeting was the multitude of perceptions surrounding the term "transition." It was agreed that "transition" has particularly distinct connotations inside and outside of Cuba, with different implied objectives and agendas. Therefore, it is imperative to acknowledge the complexities inherent in such terminology, and carefully contextualize and define any discussion thereof. Julia Sagebien noted, "Change and reform is not a continuum...it is a dialectic."

2) "Integration" and "Globalization" are possible future themes.

Many of the meeting's participants prioritized "integration" as a research and policy topic to be addressed, as well as a worthy theme for future symposia and Cuba Project events. The idea of "integration" is significant in terms of Cuba's political integration into the hemisphere and multilateral organizations, as well as the island's integration into the global economy.

Several participants noted that the "integration" theme potentially resonates with all of Latin America, and does not have biased implications *vis-a-vis* Cuba, Europe, the U.S. or Canada. Additionally, the topic of integration allows for (and in some cases, necessitates) a contextualized discussion of economic and political reform. (For example, integration into/participation in some multilateral organizations is contingent upon democratization. Consideration of Cuba's participation in such organizations thus serves as a segue to discussions of other topics -- such as reform or transition.)

Secondly, the theme of globalization is of broad interest academically, and allows for comparative studies/multi-disciplinary approaches to studying Cuba. Several foundation representatives stressed that such a multi-disciplinary approach could prove important in creating funding opportunities. For example, Nobina Robinson, a Project Officer of FOCAL, the Canadian Foundation for the Americas, articulated: "[the issue of the Cuban] Diaspora has no resonance in Canada...Integration and a hemispheric focus *does* have resonance."

3) "Cultural identity" deserves more attention.

It was noted that the International Symposium did not include a designated

discussion or panel on issues of culture and cultural identity; it was suggested that this might be an area for future focus. Cultural identity is a large topic that might include issues of Cuban culture on the island, as well as transnationality, immigration, and the Cuban-American exile community.

There was some debate among participants regarding the actual role and influence of Cuban-Americans in U.S. policy, as well as the relevance of including the exile piece in international discourse sponsored by the Cuba Project. In general, U.S. scholars were more interested in the exile factor and dynamic, while European and Canadian participants saw its overall relevance to the scholarship at-hand more limited.

However, it was generally agreed that increased attention to culture issues pertaining to island Cubans would engage Cuban scholars, and promote an understanding of the "real Cuba." One participant opined, "We must consider what is realistic...It is our challenge to understand Cuba before trying to change it."

4) Participation of Cuban academics is critical.

Participants articulated the importance of diverse actors in creating a cross-section of perspectives and a "holistic" view of Cuban studies. The continued and increased participation of Cuban scholars was consensually deemed an integral part of developing and maintaining such a view -- not only as sources for critical information, but also to maintain the integrity of 'Cuban studies.' Individual participants raised several issues tangential to the topic of Cuban scholars' participation:

- It is important to acknowledge that "Cuba's academic world is not monolithic"; it is unrealistic to make assumptions to the contrary.
- In order to continue to attract (and expand) the participation of Cuban scholars, the Cuba Project must select topics that are of interest to Cuban scholars -- in particular, culture-related topics. The Cuba Project should engage a broad, interdisciplinary spectrum of analysis that does not solely focus on what has seemed to be a limited "hit parade" of topics within Cuban studies (e.g., Helms-Burton, Transition, economic performance).
- The participation of Cuban scholars is essential to helping understand the "real Cuba" and its many facets.
- A worthy goal of academic exchange might be to promote "*entendimiento con respeto*."

5) Approach/research agenda

It was noted that the frameworks used in Cuban studies are often out of touch with what is actually happening; they are often slanted in one way or another, and limited to narrow focus. Conceptualizing and theorizing on what possibilities exist for Cuba might be a more useful approach.

- Giorgio Alberti (CESDE) suggested that the Cuba Project should "place emphasis on comparative dimensions...imagining what Cuba could be like in a number of years...without jeopardizing interior and exterior political forces"
- An academic versus political paradigm is more neutral, and allows for broader participation and broader discourse.
- Kimberly Stanton articulated a dual objective of research exchange: a) incorporate the topic of Cuba into the agenda of international scholars; b)

bring Cuban scholars into the network.

- Participants noted that Cuba Project's location in New York is an important asset; New York exhibits a certain neutrality towards Cuba -- relative to D.C. or Miami.

The Cuba Project thanks the participants of the Planning Meeting for helping lay an auspicious groundwork for a challenging and fruitful year ahead. From the participants it drew to the discourse it fostered, the Planning Meeting was truly ground-breaking both for the Cuba Project and for the Cuba Studies field.

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