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by Juan M. del Aguila

On the surface, the search for meaningful distinctions between the concept of “exile” and “immigrant” may not go further than a simple definition of either. From a conventional standpoint, someone is or becomes an exile by the act of leaving one’s country, usually for political reasons, whereas an “immigrant” is normally regarded as someone who leaves the country of his or her birth in search of a better future elsewhere. In the case of exiles, the political dimension stands out, that is, one consciously chooses to emigrate for political reasons of either a subjective (personal) or objective (context) nature, but it is one’s political dissatisfaction with a government, ideology, or society that drives the decision.

In contrast, an immigrant’s motivation is not exclusively political, in the sense that politics is not as central to the decision as is the desire to improve one’s lot in life. Even if one believes that the decision to leave one’s home country is shaped at least in part by political factors that have an economic impact, thus making the decision to leave inherently political, for the most part the principal motivation is of a different nature. For example, studies of immigrants from Mexico, Central America and the Caribbean reveal this to be the case in recent years, though immigration from Central America to the United States in the 1980s was clearly more political than in the past.

In some cases, a country’s poor economic performance may be due to political or governmental decisions that limit opportunities for social and economic advancement. In the mind of a prospective immigrant, another country offers more opportunities for advancement and improvement, so that emigrating

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becomes part of a rational calculus driven by a desire for a better life. Persons emigrating under such conditions are usually regarded as "economic immigrants," namely individuals whose principal motivation stems from economic considerations.

For this type of immigrant, the probability of social advancement and the prospect of a higher standard of living override the risks of emigrating, more so when conditions in the home country make one's future prospects dim. The fact that the perception of a future improvement in one's status may be incorrect or illusory does not necessarily quench the desire to leave, especially if "visions of gold in the streets" have taken root in one's thinking. Independent of their social status (working class, middle class, professionals, highly skilled individuals, etc.) immigrants willingly leave familiar surroundings and search for a more or less permanent life in another country; for the most part, immigrants are convinced (correctly or otherwise) that things will inevitably get better.

In this paper, I establish some qualitative differences between exiles and immigrants, emphasizing the political reasons that push individuals out of their particular countries, including Cuba. Going into exile directly affects one's self-concept and identity, which are subsequently recreated as one settles in to a new country and is re-socialized under new values and symbols. This is particularly evident (and more complicated) in the case of adults, that is, older cohorts socialized under a system of values which has either disappeared, or is becoming dysfunctional. In time, this may produce new loyalty to "the second homeland" in the sense that formerly primary and secondary attachments are replaced by new commitments.
Exiles and Immigrants: Definitional Issues and Characterizations

Leaving aside legal definitions mostly used by governments, issues of definition include individual motivation, self-concept, and some objective conditions of life. One’s motives for leaving one’s country are a key to subsequently thinking of oneself as either an exile or an immigrant, and must be so understood. A cursory review of the factors that define either exiles or immigrants suggests that it is difficult to disentangle the highly subjective elements that shape the decision to leave one’s country. Departing for a strange country is one element that exiles and immigrants have in common, but qualitative differences define each role.

My argument here is no more than an approximation and should not be considered definitive, but I contend that political factors such as dissatisfaction and alienation from a particular order of things separates an exile from an immigrant. An exile is someone who consciously breaks with a government or political order and leaves it behind, assuming the various risks that leaving entails. Seen from this perspective, going into exile is the ultimate sign of displeasure and rejection, an indication that for eminently political reasons, life in this or that country under this or that type of regime is unacceptable.

On the other hand, an immigrant may be politically alienated or dissatisfied, but that political discontent is not the primary reason for deciding to leave a country. It is the expectation that life will improve materially that drives the decision to leave. Disloyalty to any particular regime is not the dominant factor explaining one’s decision to leave: rather, it is the expectation that settling abroad permanently will improve one’s lot in life that separates exiles from immigrants.
For instance, thousands of Cubans migrated to the United States during the second half of the nineteenth century, settling in communities where their skills and talents were in some demand. It would be difficult to establish whether these émigrés thought of themselves as immigrants or as exiles without analyzing what led them to leave Cuba in the first place. In all likelihood, they were officially regarded as immigrants, that is, as persons who came in search of opportunities and a more prosperous future.

The contributions of Cuban émigrés --- shopkeepers, workers in tobacco factories, skilled and unskilled laborers, seamstresses and a growing class of professionals --- to cities like Tampa, Key West, Ocala and others in Florida and elsewhere during this period has become the stuff of lore, romanticized by poets and chronicled by historians. In some of these communities, significant levels of political activism characterized social and cultural life, and the active participation and financial contributions of many émigrés in the struggle for Cuba’s independence has properly been recognized and eulogized. This history forms part of Cuba’s national identity and shows that thousands from the generation that lived around the War of Independence left for exile, making their contribution to that effort while living abroad.

Second, that these émigrés rallied behind the pro-independence cause indicates that the fate of their homeland was central to their identity, and that what ultimately happened in Cuba would go a long way in determining where they themselves would live permanently. The possibility of returning to one’s country of origin and resettle there was real, once Spanish colonial rule ended. Simply stated, many of these émigrés firmly believed in their eventual return to a free Cuba, a longing that would reappear in a different context in the expectations of subsequent waves of émigrés, namely the thousands who left
Cuba in the 1950s (exiles from the Batista regime) and the nearly two million that left since 1959.

Comparatively speaking, the socio-economic profile of those Cuban émigrés during the last decades of the nineteenth century was not that different from that of millions of others, mostly Europeans, that migrated to the United States in search of a better life at around the same time. Many of them were unskilled workers who spoke little or no English, earned their living through their own hard labor, suffered discrimination and social rejection, resisted integration and transculturation, and lived in communities where thousands of their countrymen had settled.

On the other hand, what subjectively did differentiate them from other immigrants, particularly those from Eastern and Central Europe was their belief in a possible return to the home country and the probable sense of ambivalent identity that these feelings caused. For early arrivals in particular, thinking of themselves still as “Cuban” meant that intense attachments to the homeland defined an identity that would in time invariably evolve. Because the hybrid individual ---the Cuban-American of future generations--- had not appeared on the scene, primary and secondary attachments remained strong among the earlier cohort and the process re-socialization was incomplete.

For the most part, one does not go into exile in order to become rich or famous, nor is the decision to leave made lightly. It is literally a decision with life-long consequences, particularly painful when it involves separation of family members from each other. In point of fact, one leaves the homeland because the situation in it already is, or one anticipates that it will become intolerable. To put it differently, the personal costs of staying, however one chooses to add them up, are substantially higher than the risks of leaving. The loss of personal and political freedoms the single most important factor that drove millions of Cubans out of
their country, that is, the costs of living under a Marxist-Leninist dictatorship was simply unacceptable.

For example, hundreds of thousands of Jews fled Germany in the 1930s not only because they were repressed and vilified by the Nazis, but also because there was no reason to believe that the situation would improve. More recently, the "massification" of exile became a new phenomenon in recent decades when thousands who under my criteria would qualify and probably think of themselves as exiles, left Chile, Argentina and Uruguay in the 1970s, El Salvador, Nicaragua and Guatemala in the 1970s and 1980s, Cuba since the 1960s, and Haiti following recurring political crises in the 1980s and 1990s.

One of the difficulties in separating the identity of an exile from that of an immigrant stems from the fact that motivations are highly subjective. Second, separating economic considerations from strictly political factors may not be feasible in definitely determining the status of Cuban immigrants after 1959 precisely because these two forces are so closely intertwined. Until 1994, the United States government held that Cubans fleeing communism were to be granted political asylum once they arrived in the United States, assuming in almost all instances that political fear and persecution drove these Cubans into exile. This policy may have been a factor in these immigrants thinking of themselves as such. Yet one can readily question whether the label is appropriate in all cases and just how much things had really changed in Cuba itself that would justify the new classification.

Thousands of middle class Cubans who came to the United States particularly in the 1960s, did so for political reasons, namely opposition to communism and Castro's rule. My argument is that this was their primary motivation, expressed in a fundamental rejection of the new order of things. Reasons for going into exile stemmed directly from dissatisfaction with Marxism-
Leninism, personal opposition to Castro's rule, fear from acts of repression visited upon "counterrevolutionaries," or other clearly political reasons.

Only secondarily was their decision to leave Cuba affected by the loss of economic and social status as a consequence of the coercive intervention in the social system by the revolutionary government. The growing difficulties surrounding daily life, such as material scarcities and lack of confidence in the regime's economic policies pushed many out of Cuba, but these issues were seen in political terms. To be sure, in revolutionary Cuba, middle class individuals and those of associated higher or (subsequently) lower status would not remain middle class given the radical restructuring of the social system. But for them, losing the conventional individual or civil freedoms that in part define a democratic system made all the difference.

Classification is more problematic when it comes to Cubans arriving in the 1980s and 1990s. Though the underlying political factors that drove the first waves of exiles out of Cuba are still present ---Cuba is still governed by a repressive communist dictatorship--- it is harder to establish the fact that many of these newer arrivals are leaving for strictly political reasons. The precipitous decline of the Cuban economy and the brutal decline in the standard of living increases the likelihood that individuals would leave the country for economic rather than strictly political considerations. The contention here is that there is much evidence to indicate that this is indeed the case, namely that more recent waves of Cubans are motivated more by a desire to improve ones lot in life than by a rejection of communism per se.

In sum, it is my argument that subjectively, that is, in terms of how individuals think of themselves, there are significant differences between the self-concept of an "exile" and that of an "immigrant." My argument makes no normative judgement regarding either of these two notions of individual identity
given the semantic difficulties mentioned above, but rather focuses on one's self-concept. The distinction that I draw emphasizes political factors in the motivation and self-concept of an exile, factors that are present to a lesser degree in that of an immigrant.

Some Observations on the Issue of Identity

Historical cases do not necessarily provide a definitive clue as to where the answer lies precisely because the process through which immigrants or exiles acquire a new identity is complex. For example, one can live in one's new country for decades, even become a citizen of that country and subjectively remain "an exile" for purposes of one's identity. Attitudes and personal beliefs regarding who we are do not necessarily change even if legal status does, and in all likelihood there are many exiles who not only reject the label of Cuban-American, but insist that their identity will forever be "Cuban."

For many immigrants discarding past identities is one way to enhance their passage into the new society, or to use the conventional vernacular, this is how one "becomes Americanized." From one standpoint, this kind of behavior is rational. Those who adopt it could minimize social and cultural rejection while retaining ties to the original culture. Cultural changes impinge on the process of acquiring a new identity, but prior attitudes, values and beliefs appear to be more central to the making of a new identity than contingent factors. The sheer passage of time is a powerful incentive to moving into the mainstream, given the opportunities that it creates.

As memories of the "old country" recede and the prospect of returning appears more and more remote, cultural integration becomes more of a necessity. As a practical matter, there is abundant evidence that millions of cohorts, not only Cubans, realize that this imperative must be confronted. In addition, the extent
to which one's identity is unaffected by the environment, that is one's belief that
despite living in a strange land one can remain "an exile" is less and less likely as
time goes on. Anecdotal evidence and simple observations strongly suggest that
in the case of Cuban-Americans, younger cohorts are more at ease with their
"American" side than older individuals. Surveys regularly show that for younger
Cuban-Americans, la causa de Cuba is not what defines their identity; rather, their
socialization appears to follow broader patterns found in American society.

Any effort that attempts to connect the experiences of exiles or immigrants
to the larger issue of national identity must include some defining terms. The
reason why individuals think of themselves as exiles, and not immigrants, stem
from a realization of what it means to leave one's country. Second, there is also
a distinction between voluntary and involuntary exile, and the assumption here
is that most of the Cubans who left (and continue to leave) did so voluntarily,
they chose to do so. One could always argue that had conditions not changed
(from this standpoint, for the worse) due to the revolution, that one would never
have left thus making one's departure involuntary. But that is a contextual
argument that fails to differentiate between primary and secondary causes for
one's decision to leave and overlook a basic principle of going into exile, namely
the exercise of one's free will.

Thinking of oneself as an exile means that as long as the conditions that
drove one to leave prevail in the home country, one will remain exiled from it.
Exile is an extreme type of estrangement characterized by a deep sense of
alienation from where one came, and simultaneously, one's conscious and total
separation from it. To put it differently, an exile is someone who has been
uprooted for political reasons from that which is permanent, familiar, even
affective: the nation, the family, one's culture and social group, and other symbols
that partly define identity. To think of oneself as an exile forces one to realize
that one has entered a strange new world, forever leaving behind the primary and secondary attachments that formed the basis of one's prior identity. It is, in short, a definitive rupture from the historical, social and emotional moorings that bind an individual to his homeland.

Another aspect of an exile's identity is sustained by a belief that a return to the homeland is possible and desirable, under certain conditions. It is possible because to an exile the madness that drove him or her out must end, so that eventually normalcy will return. It is desirable because one can reclaim familiar surroundings and simply pick up where one left; nostalgia is central to this belief. In short, in the best of all possible worlds, the society to which one returns would not be much different from the one once left behind. Lamentably, as time moves on, this becomes a remote possibility.

In fact, this hope sustained middle class Cuban exiles for years, eventually turning into a deeply ingrained faith that the revolutionary government would collapse either through direct action or los americanos no van a tolerar eso. Eventually, the belief that a return to Cuba and the status quo ante was less and less likely forced many exiles to come to grips with something that many had considered neither probable nor desirable, namely that returning was not a foregone conclusion.

At one level, the shattering of this illusion reinforced the sense of alienation that drove many to exile in the first place, because to finally conclude que no hay regreso can only be due to the fact that things in the home country have gotten progressively worse. To put it more crudely: "if things were awful when I left, look at them now." Since return was predicated on a change in conditions for the better, that is, on irrefutable evidence that all that went by the label "revolution" had collapsed, to realize que no hay regreso in terms of how many exiles define it, means that exile turns into a longer-term, more permanent situation.
At a second level, a process of de-idealization of the homeland deepens, nourished by evidence of deteriorating conditions in the once-idealized homeland. I am not referring to the ideal of pre-Castro Cuba which presumably informs the thinking of many and is apparently found more often among older cohorts when compared to younger ones. Rather, I am speaking of a new vision of the homeland that begins to take shape once it is clear that return is not possible. This includes very harsh judgements of conditions overall, as well as more critical views of those that stayed behind. In some cases, filtering out information that is inconsistent with a highly prejudiced view constitutes a form of denial.

For a while, exiles believe that the better nature of their countrymen would re-surface, that they would recognize their mistakes, make amends, overthrow the dictator, and welcome the exiles back with open arms. For the most part, this belief, so central to an exile’s ambivalent identity, has been suspended, largely because the dictatorship (though decayed and nearly exhausted), retains staying power. And since there is no evidence that “the masses” will finally rise and get rid of the dictatorship, frustrations tend to build up.

Second, a consequence of this process of escalating frustrations is the deepening divisions between some sectors of the exile community and insulares. Many in the community are perplexed by the passivity and apathy of insulares, and cite the historical precedent of rebellions against tyrants like Machado and Batista as the source of their unmet expectations. Continued tolerance of an illegitimate and repressive regime by insulares is at times scorned, or otherwise the source of misunderstandings and bitter debates. Insulares are seen as unwilling and unable to do much about the miserable conditions that surround them, exacerbating judgements about them that were seldom dignified. It is as if by remaining apathetic and unwilling to confront the dictatorship, those on the island deserve what they have.
Not surprisingly, there is a feeling among *insulares* that a comfortable life in a rich capitalist country (what cynics would by now call "a golden exile") takes the edge off any political or moral recrimination that exiles aim at their more unfortunate brethren. A more pointed criticism of the exile community, one with some historical merit, is that if more people had stayed and fought, resisting the dictatorship would have been more effective and may have been in the end successful. That this often acrimonious debate continues suggests that a wide gap remains between exiles and *insulares* regarding their respective understanding of Cuba’s predicament.

In any event, the system’s survival is usually attributed to the people’s apathy, to Castro’s political talent, to the perfidy of foreign investors, to the opportunism of tourists and pleasure-seekers (Spaniards, Canadians and Mexicans come in for strong invective), and the ineptitude of successive American administrations. Few exiles can accept the fact that that which they left behind was functional to millions of their countrymen who stayed, namely those caught up in the frenzy of the times who were neither estranged from nor repelled by the revolutionary order. Eventually, this irrefutable fact forced exiles to question their most cherished beliefs about the society which they left and is the source of unflattering judgements about those who stayed behind.

**Comments on the Cultural Dimensions of Identity**

A central dimension of identity is defined by one’s location in a particular culture and social system, because these provide the elements that either contribute to, or detract from, one’s self-concept. For those living in a community that is somewhat self-contained and culturally isolated from "the outside," limited contact between one’s primary culture and *ultramonte* reinforces one’s sense of identity and belonging. If one’s cultural needs are satisfied in an environment
that is familiar, not threatening, one that replicates that left behind in Cuba, then one’s identity is less likely to be transformed through culture shock.

Politically speaking, the issues around which attitudes form stem from one’s experience as an exile, that is, the past shapes one’s political choices to a significant degree. Research on socialization shows a major event during one’s life, such as the Great Depression for millions of Americans, or the Cuban Revolution for Cubans, leave indelible psychological traits on individuals. Such a crisis or revolution, becomes the reference point for future conduct and is a source of subsequent, and deeply rooted, political attachments. Subsequent experiences are interpreted in light of that event’s impact. For thousands of Cubans, going into exile meant being uprooted and living through a major disruption that changed their lives for good.

Individuals who fled communist regimes have that experience in their consciousness when making political choices, and that tends to define their core political beliefs. Judgements made about candidates, parties, and policies are related to how each is perceived to stand on a core issue like anti-communism. Because Cuba is still a communist country, the ending of the Cold War has not taken the power out of anti-communism as a galvanizing issue for the community. Consequently, political attitudes and electoral preferences are dominated by a single issue, and their expression is part of one’s political identity.

The lasting power of this issue is remarkable, so recognized by candidates and officials at all levels of government. This forces candidates for national office to pay lip service to a foreign policy issue that is insignificant for national politics, but lies at the core of local politics. Some local political campaigns are at times little more than competition for establishing who is the most anti-Castro candidate, with demands for “firmness” being regularly articulated and expected.
In short, this issue galvanizes the community like no other, constituting an explosive force that politicians regard at their peril.

If one’s native language becomes dominant, this strengthens ties to one’s original culture, its values and symbols. In other words, the greater the familiarity with one’s surroundings, even in a “foreign” country, the greater the likelihood that one’s identity will remain fundamentally unaffected by the norms, values, beliefs and behavior(s) observed in the larger culture. In fact, the cultural tapestry found in communities with substantial Cuban populations provide a sense of security and continuity to individual and group life, limiting the impact of cultural disruptions.

From this perspective, the insertion and expansion of Cuban culture into U.S. cities with significant Cuban population(s) ---the creation of what sociologists call “the enclave”--- produces a dynamic and familiar cultural environment and support system, two incubators of identity. Cultural influences shape identity dynamically, a process involving adaptation as well as resistance. Conflicting cultural messages retard cultural adaptation, forcing individuals to resist through complex psychological mechanisms, or in some cases, retreat into isolation.

A certain level of demographic and racial homogeneity brings cohesion and stability to daily life, shaping a cultural framework where individual identity is nourished by familiar surroundings. To a degree, cultural cohesion develops among groups that have the experience of exile as a common denominator, despite the fact that there are growing generational, economic, social and increasingly, political differences among its members. Lastly, of particular importance is the growing numbers of black and mulatto émigrés, still a minority to be sure, but groups that deserve to be studied with some sensitivity.
For instance, some research indicates that the first waves of exiles, that is, individuals (nearly all white) who left Cuba in the early to mid-1960s, hold stronger anti-Castro beliefs than more recent arrivals. Émigrés from the 1970s and 1980s (including significant numbers of blacks and mulattos) in particular were socialized under a revolutionary culture and disproportionately come from modest socio-economic backgrounds. The “Mariel Generation” and the balseros bring their own experiences and ethos with them, creating evident socio-cultural cleavages in what was traditionally a fairly homogenous context. In short, the common bond created among exiles of different generations and strata is under some stress, and it remains to be seen how well their respective members cohabit.

It is not that the larger culture is kept out, or that the enclave is impermeable and totally isolated; rather, diffusion is diluted by the strength of the enclave culture. In addition, the salient cultural characteristics of the enclave define the sources of identity in exile. Those standing out include speaking Spanish, emphasizing family life and values, establishing associational networks that reinforce cultural bonds, paying attention (reading, listening, viewing) to Spanish-speaking media, and repudiating privately and publicly much of what revolutionary change has wrought in Cuba.

As the cultural boundaries of the enclave expand over time, new influences combine with tradition in order to produce a richer cultural life. But because expansion is uneven and is perceived with suspicion, it may be seen as a cultural threat that has the potential to disrupt a settled cultural environment. If so, strategies are developed to limit “contamination.” In short, it appears that an intense cultural struggle develops inside of and around the enclave, producing clashes with the forces of the wider culture seen by many as carriers of unhealthy practices and alien values.
Summary

The observations included here suggest that there are normative differences in the self-concept and identity of exiles and immigrants, with political factors playing a more critical role in defining the identity of the former. If one left Cuba in order to show one's fundamental disagreement with, and rejection of, the revolutionary system and Castro's rule, then one is likely to think of oneself as an exile, even as decades go by. On the other hand, those whose primary motivation for leaving Cuba is (was) to improve their economic situation fall closer to one's definition of immigrants. To think of oneself as an exile means accepting that one is not altogether comfortable with the norms of the new society, and some still entertain illusions of returning to the homeland.

The identity of exiles is shaped by historical experiences as well as by how easily the process of adapting to a new environment proceeds. Living in cities and towns with substantial Cuban populations facilitates the process of adaptation and makes it easier to achieve a reasonable level of stability and cultural comfort. Age and education are major factors, as is the ability to learn and use English. Second and third generation cohorts appear to be "bic multicultural" individuals, and there is some indication that many reject the culture and values of their parents. With a few differences, their socialization resembles patterns found in the larger society.

Finally, the "enclave" becomes a cultural cocoon of sorts, offering protection and a sense of belonging, crucial factors in reinforcing one's identity. Primary attachments broken because one left the home country are recreated, starting with family ties and expanding through associational relationships and job-related activities. The degree to which one balances "traditional values" with new cultural norms either facilitates or detracts from one's ability to function in the new milieu.
Selected Bibliography


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Juan del Aguila is an associate professor of Political Science at Emory University. He is a graduate of the University of North Carolina (M.A. and Ph.D). Del Aguila’s research interests include Cuban politics and foreign policy, political change, the state and governance in Latin America. He is the author of numerous articles on Cuba and Costa Rica and is the author of the book Cuba: Dilemmas of a Revolution (Westview Press, 1984).

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