

EXIT VS. VOICE OR EXIT AND VOICE?

CUBA IN REVOLUTION 2016 – 2025.

By

Silvia Pedraza

University of Michigan
Department of Sociology and
Department of American Culture

Paper for the Social Science History Association Meeting in Chicago 2025.

Abstract

The metaphor of *exit* vs. *voice* came from the work of the political scientist Albert O. Hirschman (1993, 1970), who proposed that when that which a nation or organization has to give declines in quality, those who belong to it have only a couple of choices – to *exit* or to express their *voice*. That is, they can leave or they can protest. Most of the time, Hirschman (1970) understood that relationship as being like a seesaw – the more that people *exit*, the less they can express their *voice*. However, towards the end of his life, when Hirschman was able to witness the changes that took place in the German Democratic Republic as the wall that separated East and West Berlin came down, he noted that in the end, both *exit* and *voice* increased in tandem (1993).

Exit vs. *voice* has been an important metaphor that guided my work on the Cuban revolution and exodus (Pedraza and Romero 2023). For most of the 66 years of the Cuban revolution, the relationship was, indeed, what Hirschman first delineated: the more *exit*, the less *voice*.

In this presentation, I propose to focus on what has happened in Cuba since the death of the major leader, Fidel Castro, in 2016. In Cuba, this is a new era. An era without the populist leader at its helm that for those who believed in him was “the father of the nation.” The political leadership of the nation first passed to Raúl Castro. He did not have the charisma that Fidel Castro had but was a reformer that ushered in changes that were important to those in the country, such as the return of self-employment and the re-establishment of relations with the U.S. He, in turn, passed the political leadership on to Miguel Díaz-Canel, who as Cuba’s new President lacks the qualities both Fidel and Raúl had. Moreover, due to his relative youth, he lacks the legitimacy of being part of the original revolution. In addition, in recent years Cuba has experienced the deepest economic crisis ever – deeper than that of the ‘90s when communism fell in the Soviet Union and the Eastern European countries. To put it briefly, the country that was once the major exporter of sugar to the U.S. and to the rest of the world, due to Fidel Castro’s closing more than half the sugar mills in the island, today imports sugar for domestic consumption. Even more, its economic relationship to Venezuela, that became its economic lifeline from the trade of Cuban doctors for Venezuelan oil, has also deteriorated. As a result, there is not much gasoline in the island and moving around the country is extremely difficult. Finally yet importantly, recently the people there have been experiencing long blackouts when they receive no electricity, blackouts that have taken place throughout the entire island, frightening people who have little to protect themselves with.

Two responses to the dire situation at present have become evident. One, the exodus of Cubans, particularly the young professionals, has now become larger than ever. While in the past, the exodus from an island of 11.2 million people peaked on a couple of occasions (125,000

in 1980; over 36,000 in 1994), in the last two fiscal years it has attained extraordinary proportions: half a million people. The island is now experiencing negative growth.

Two, inside Cuba there has been a larger attempt than ever before to organize a social movement of protest against the government, where young people asked the government to engage in a real dialogue with them and to usher new, political democratic reforms. That social movement, which took place throughout the length of the island in July 2021 (called “11J”), met with enormous repression from the government, which jailed many of the most active protesters. In the process, new political actors have arisen, not the least of which is the Catholic Church. While it was mostly apolitical in the recent past, it has now grown to ask for real change.

The result of both these responses has been a situation in which, for the first time, both *exit* and *voice* are increasing in tandem in Cuba. That is the relationship that I wish to examine in this paper. As always, my methodology consists of in-depth interviews with participants in these events; analysis of economic and political trends; and participant observation in both the island and major communities of the diaspora.

References:

- Hirschman, Albert O. “Exit, Voice, and the Fate of the German Democratic Republic: An Essay in Conceptual History.” *World Politics* 45 (1993), 173-202;
- Hirschman, *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970).
- Pedraza, Silvia, and Carlos A. Romero. *Revolutions in Cuba and Venezuela: One Hope, Two Realities*. (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2023).