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Cuba, Irma, and ongoing exceptionalism in the Caribbean²

Discuss the subject of Cuba, outside of its shores and with non-specialists at least, and in my experience you nearly always invite strangely emotional responses that regurgitate the intractable politics of the Cold War. For almost 60 years the US Right, fuelled by a Cuban-American lobby long identifying as exiles in the free world, sought to reinforce the embargo as well as to undermine any potentially positive achievements to which the Revolution might be found guilty. Conversely, the more traditional Left has been too eager to view any happening in Cuba through the prism of resistance to capitalist imperialism: detention or exile of the Revolution's detractors are subordinated to geopolitics, and the embargo used to excuse any deviation from upholding human rights. On both sides, considerations of Cuban people and society are almost always reduced to the surrounding regime and the problematic relationship with its nearest neighbour. When last year I delivered a lecture on Cuban disaster preparedness and response—which unpacked why the United Nations calls Cuba the world leader in risk reduction—a student called out “that’s because it’s a communist regime!” The subtext was that it should not even be on the menu for discussion, and that the lecturer was potentially a petty propagandist. Given that the Cold War ended three decades ago and that security quandaries in the Caribbean (as elsewhere) are now remarkably different—the spectre of sea level rise and climate-

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related disaster risk comes to mind—the obstinacy of traditional framings is peculiar. Thankfully, other students were more ready to grasp the topic’s relevance and importance in a world characterised by increasing losses in the wake of natural hazards. Cuba proves that hurricane impact can indeed be reduced, and that hazards don’t immediately have to turn into disasters. Cuba’s extraordinary efforts to mitigate risk and limit damage deserve to be explored without recourse to political polemics.

In this article I review disaster risk/reduction in Cuba, particularly in light of the devastating 2017 hurricane season. The period after Irma is, for a number of reasons, an appropriate time to revisit the practices, meanings, and politics of disaster risk in this most interesting of cases. While Puerto Rico is negotiating temporary housing, an insufficient budget for critical services, and a disruptive political dispute over the post-disaster privatisation of education, the signs from Cuba are of significant recovery and business-as-usual as it enters the next hurricane season. Further intrigue is added by the fact that Raúl Castro stepped down as Cuban leader in April 2018, ending 59 years of Castro rule. The recent thaw in relations with the US under the Obama administration—and only partially refrozen by Trump—leads us to think through what the future might hold for disaster risk in a state widely considered to be in a process of opening to global influences and markets. I should add that I have as my primary target here an understanding of disaster risk rather than political ideology. Yet, as I will show, viewing the two separately proves impossible, given the clear links between societal form and top-down planning. Viewing them in tandem helps us to consider the mutually reinforcing connections between ideology, political-institutional legitimacy, and the triumph of societal organisation over not-so-natural disasters. As Cuba moves into the post-Castro era, its approach to hurricane exposure remains emphatically exceptional to what’s become a sad Caribbean norm of destitution, debt, blame shifting, and global political ineptness. Clues in dealing with the presence of natural hazards going forward must surely be found in independent analysis, as far as is possible free from twentieth century ideological conjecture.

Disaster exceptionalism

In an influential article, Centeno (2004) argued that Cuba had re-joined the “misery” of a poor, unequal and dependent Latin America. “[T]he great Cuban exceptionalism in health and education may be wearing thin”, he reported, with institutional weakness giving rise to a burgeoning informal economy, and remittances accompanied by fiscal adjustments and growing racial stratification (2004: 404). This “end of exceptionalism” thesis drew on Cuba’s self-defined “special period”—the decade post-1989 that saw the island negotiate the withdrawal of Soviet support and special market access for its sugar crop. For Morris (2007) however, the low of 1993-4, when poverty hit its peak, was followed by cautious recovery and expansion based on a limited liberalisation that maintained employment, nutrition and healthcare, and which “[shielded] the most disadvantaged from the worst effects of economic crisis and transformation” (2007: 45).

Regardless of the actual reality for Cuban people on the ground, the idea of an impending end to the country’s status as regional outsider nonetheless took hold—especially when considering the steps taken towards normalization of relations with the US after December 2014 (Pérez-Stable, 2016). The missing link here, of course, was the tendency among many outside observers to view Cuban exceptionalism solely through a political lens—and in fact, entirely through its political relationship with the USA. Cuban society was at once reduced to the formal games of geopolitics, and in turn, the organisational and institutional practices that mark it out as exceptional on the ground were washed over. Centeno’s societal “misery” (2004) rested on an assumption that the fallout from Soviet collapse was a quasi-permanent condition based on political-ideological miscalculation, and which had aligned Cuba with the rest of the region. For Pérez-Stable, moves towards normalization with the US meant “ordinary Cubans may well start taking baby steps away from exceptionalism” (2016: 102). Considering hurricane risk here forcefully disrupts these narratives. How could alleged misery coexist with a bewildering lack of casualties in comparison to all Cuba’s surrounding neighbours? If Cuban society is no longer exceptional does this mean it will now experience disasters in the mode of Haiti, Jamaica, and Puerto Rico—or, dare I say it, the US mainland itself? A global era of expanding vulnerability and climatic uncertainty requires the subversion of narratives privileging formal politics.

Why not learn from the Cuban approach and implement some of its successful strategies—based around preparedness and trust—elsewhere? Could it be that denying the relevance of Cuba’s ability to limit the human and economic costs of hurricanes is also to reinforce the externalisation of nature, such that the inevitability of “natural” disaster is left to play second fiddle to the high and mighty game of political competition and liberal democratic consolidation?

Truly exceptional is that from 1996 to 2005, as Cuba was mired in economic woes, a total of only seventeen people died across eight major hurricanes (Simms and Reid, 2006). In 2005 itself—until today the most intense hurricane season ever recorded—Hurricane Dennis had the same intensity at landfall as Katrina, which it preceded, and resulted in just fifteen fatalities. Hurricane Wilma, following some six weeks after Katrina, resulted in floods extending inland for more than a kilometre along swathes of Cuba’s western coastline, and yet the country managed to evacuate 640,000 people, with only one death (Ibid.; Nimitz, 2006). And the pattern goes on: 2010’s Hurricane Sandy caused 11 deaths in Cuba, while 157 perished from the same (by then downgraded) storm in New York; and during Hurricane Matthew in 2016—which hit Cuba more forcefully than anywhere else—just four died in comparison to 47 in the US and 550 in Haiti. We must no doubt treat statistics with caution given political tendencies to massage damage according to prevalent imagery and resources, but regardless of possible deviations the message remains unequivocally the same.

For the Caribbean disasters scholar Mark Schuller (2016), the extent of the carnage during and after Hurricane Matthew in Haiti—where the southwest peninsula city of Jérémie was all but destroyed—can be attributed to three principle factors. First by a limited evacuation in advance, which was aggravated by residents doubting warnings and refusing to vacate their homes. Second because emergency aid couldn’t access the city after the hurricane hit, dependent as it was on a ruined bridge originally built to transport sugar out of the peninsula. Finally, for Schuller, the widespread destruction stemmed from the squeeze on local livelihoods and access to health and education following economic restructuring, which led to increased pressure on local forests for charcoal production and consequently vastly augmented incidence of fatal landslides at urban fringes. While people were buried alive by the hundred in Jérémie,

in contrast, 200km across the water in Santiago, Guantanamo, Baracoa and elsewhere, a million had already been evacuated from danger.

Yet it was not always that way. Pérez (2007) reports that in hurricanes in 1884 and 1866, 500 and 600 people respectively lost their lives in Havana. In 1944 this was repeated with 330 deaths and 269 collapsed buildings. Hurricane Flora, four years after the 1959 Revolution, proved to be the turning point. Some 1157 fatalities wounded both the Cuban people and their new leader. Adamant to prove—not only to himself and the Cuban people but also to the wider world at the height of the Cold War—that ideological change could bring forth security and prosperity, Castro responded with the phrase “Never again... a Revolution is a force more powerful than Nature!” (Ibid.). The significance here is that the politics of hurricane risk became integrally tied to the politics of the nation, in the sense that societal coherence and resilience grew in conjunction with the experience of hazard and the symbolic value it held for political and territorial purpose. As Pérez notes,

The hurricane insinuated itself into the larger circumstances of the Cuban condition as a variable in the formation of nation... The idea of national community in Cuba did not originate wholly out of abstract notions and sentimental attachments. Much was forged out of actual experiences, these occasions in which common experiences passed into elements of a familiar shared history (2007: 10).

The theoretical lesson for other states and regions grappling with disaster risk is not so much that you must have a revolution in the Cuban image to deal with extreme hazard exposure, but that political resolve can work in tandem with societal trust and resilience—a snowball effect of risk reduction. And as one of the poorest countries in the Western hemisphere, at least in economic terms, the Cuban experience demonstrates that it can also be done on a shoestring budget. As each hurricane passes, socio-environmental memory is retold and relearnt, and solidarity and organisational development practiced and experienced.

Sceptics will of course point to a specific model of governance where a machine-like one-party state enforces civil defence, early-warning systems, regimented rescue and

emergency stockpiling of resources, with a subservient population acting collectively only in the context of authority (see e.g. Aguirre, 2002, 2005). Evacuations are legally mandatory in Cuba—yet as a number of commentators note, authorities don't actually force people to vacate their homes (Nimitz, 2006; Pichler and Striessnig, 2013; Thompson and Gaviria, 2004). Given the numbers of people involved, it is in any case doubtful that government alone could coerce such major mobilisations without significant collective buy in and trust in the process. In an in-depth study—based on significant field research—Pichler and Striessnig note:

Institutions were generally valued for enabling coordinated behavior and what individuals viewed as effective practice based on a transparent repository of knowledge. Education comes into play as relationships of trust are established in long-term learning settings, in schools, training camps, and neighborhood participation over generations... government [marshaling of] material and discursive power...is rewarded with even higher levels of popular response to emergencies and postdisaster legitimacy (2013: 31).

While disaster preparedness and response in Cuba is underpinned by overall high literacy and education levels alongside universal access to healthcare—neither of which should be underestimated—specific education programmes in disaster preparedness, particularly for school children but also through community groups and annual simulation exercises, create a sense of everyone knowing the best way to prepare for a hurricane and exactly what to do when it hits. Government information campaigns are disseminated to a population that can read and understand them, and from school age upwards people learn the phases of disaster response. Dedicated community personnel, in effect community civil defence, visit residents and keep lists of more vulnerable occupants including the elderly and disabled. Unlike in Haiti, the Dominican Republic and elsewhere, trust at the moment the disaster occurs is augmented by the widespread perception of shelters as “safe places”, and the knowledge that looting of abandoned houses would not take place due to military patrols (Ibid.). Mass participation in clean up operations enables people to examine the damage and thus mitigate it more effectively next time around (Simms and Reid, 2006).

In this way, warning systems become the less important partner in a wider strategy to build trust in a coherent societal system for dealing with hazards. As the World Disasters Report (2005) identifies, organisation from community level upwards becomes critically important to social capacity overall, and yet must develop together with more “top down” technical and managerial solutions. Cuba is of course not immune to hurricane damage, and although efforts are made to gear agriculture towards planting and harvesting with the hurricane season in mind, infrastructure, housing and power facilities have frequently been disabled for significant periods. This is the Cuban system’s one weakness: while trust in the rules keeps you safe, after the fact there are more limited guarantees on what you may endure materially or in food and energy supply.

To Irma and beyond

The 2017 storm season brought a reported twelve deaths across the island—the most for seven years—and yet we can easily argue that there could have been many more. Irma came at a time when Cuba, and particularly the north of the island, had been suffering from a four year drought that had led to reduced water storage and also more complicated mosquito borne disease vectors post hazard impact (OCHA, 2017b). The storm passed directly over the island of Barbuda, to the north of the Virgin Islands, Puerto Rico and Hispaniola, before skirting along half of Cuba’s 1000 kilometre-long northern coastline. Where many Caribbean islands were practically decimated and not fit to live on immediately after, Cuba nonetheless unleashed its preparedness routine, mobilised a mass evacuation, and weathered the storm. A week after the hurricane the UN Office of Humanitarian Affairs reported that, despite water supply, power, housing, and agriculture being badly affected, 92 per cent of schools had resumed classes, albeit in disrupted conditions (OCHA, 2017a). Estimates for reconstruction ran to around US\$56m, serving some three million inhabitants (of total population 11.5 million) (Ibid.). Three months later, tourist infrastructure at Varadero was on course for reopening, and much of the agricultural damage was forecast for recovery by mid-2018 (OCHA, 2017b). Housing of course

remains the critical issue, with an ongoing chronic housing shortage exacerbated by repeated storm damage, such as significant flooding during sub-tropical storm Alberto in May 2018. Longer-term purpose built shelters remain available for the homeless, and although safe, they are basic and lack privacy, with the result that those that can do often move temporarily to family and friends elsewhere until they can repair their own homes or gain a better solution from the state. Where imported building materials are scarce and expensive, undertaking repairs to your own home can last months or years.

Post-hazard impact, the entirety of Old Havana flooded, but evacuation there had not been mandatory and this was where the majority of fatalities occurred. Rather than directly from wind, rain, landslide or flood, seven died from falling stones and collapsing construction in an area well known for poorly maintained and dangerous housing (Francis, 2017). In a crooked twist, as Francis (*ibid.*) notes, it was just hours before Irma struck that Trump signed off the embargo for another year. Economic and political isolation has left Cuba unable to purchase the supplies it needs at agreeable rates, and construction has been one of the key sectors to suffer. The unusually high death toll of twelve during Irma—significantly less than the ninety-two killed in the storm in the US—might well be reduced significantly in a more open trading regime.

This remains a key point to consider from the discussions I have outlined above. Cuba's exceptionalism, rather than being a political status maintained in the absence of a standard relationship with its closest neighbour, is in fact a societal status. This is not to say that it acts and exists independently of the political regime and international geopolitics in which it finds itself, but that it has morphed and developed according to rules and trust existing between its members. The weakening of the embargo, rather than signifying the end of exceptionalism, may have non-linear effects that are difficult to qualify in the abstract; but better access to infrastructural and building materials and technologies can surely only serve to enlarge the country's already astonishing hurricane resilience, and ensure it remains exceptional when climate adaptations elsewhere fall significantly short. After Irma and Maria, the clear contrast with the series of ruined island protectorates nearby,

with billion-dollar shell companies galore but without provision of basic needs, is a stark reminder of the relevance of history, geopolitics, government, and trust in provision of a disaster resilient future.

Cuba is certainly no political paradise, but in a region of seemingly unassailable issues with all kinds of insecurities—from environmental to economic, political and corporeal—where would you choose to live on a low or barely existent income? Risk management systems, if they're to be successful, must take education and training seriously, first and foremost, both for the technical knowledge that can be imparted but more importantly for the trust within state and society that can be generated as a result. There is no magic or autonomous social capital to inform resilience in the abstract, but there is ample evidence that trust networks function in the knowledge that wider society and its institutions will genuinely work in your best interest at a time of crisis.

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