

Physically and Financially Trapped: Migration Desires and the Geopolitics of Cuba's *“Lineamientos”*

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DEPARTMENTAL HONORS

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Abstract:

Currently, the impact of a fifty-year embargo, inconsistent political management of the economy, the creation of a dual currency system, and the geopolitical tactics encouraging mass emigration have, in combination, created a unique social and economic situation in Cuba. The recently passed Decree-Law 302, which reduced the administrative barriers preventing many Cubans from traveling abroad, has been perceived by the international community as a major human rights concession, but the truth is more complex. Based on qualitative research conducted in Havana, this study finds that the freedom to travel is not accessible to all citizens because of various socio-economic conditions that limit the lower class's ability to afford travel. While it may appear that the island has opened the doors for people wishing to leave, unique social, economic and political factors keep many citizens trapped in Cuba.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Cuba's population is aging and shrinking. Its economy has been unproductive for over fifty years. Furthermore, emigration since Fidel Castro's communist revolution in 1959 has caused a significant national "brain drain," compounding the effects of a decreasing population into a diminishing workforce that contributes to sustained economic stagnation. Recognizing the impending threat to Cuban socialism's survival posed by this situation, the Cuban government has been slowly updating the country's economic model since 2011. It aims to stimulate growth and increase productivity in all sectors of the economy, a step portrayed as necessary to advancing the communist revolution. A huge component of the reforms include the lifting of various social prohibitions, such as Cuban citizens entering tourist-only hotels, owning cellular telephones, and most recently, leaving the country without individual, case-by-case government authorization.

This thesis investigates the effects of Decree-Law 302, Cuba's official travel policy reform, implemented on January 14, 2013. It seeks to understand how the policy change has influenced Cuban citizens' desires to leave the country. In order to understand the current economic phenomena in a historical context, the thesis first reviews the major historical cycles of political economic reform within Cuba since the Cuban Revolution. It then discusses the concurrent waves of Cuban emigration occurring during these phases, which were often influenced by an ongoing politico-ideological conflict with United States. Next, it details the current changes in Cuba's political economy, specifically examining the *lineamientos* – the name for the economic reform guidelines laid out by the Cuban government and the Decree-Law 302. Finally, it uses interview data collected

in Havana one year after the reform was implemented to reveal the actual migration desires of Cubans and how they have been influenced by the economic and travel reforms. The study finds that the travel reform has had minimal effect on Cuban desires to migrate. The update is primarily a cosmetic fix that only enables Cuba's elite and wealthier citizens to leave the country; Cubans without social capital or involvement in the tourist sector are still trapped by their financial situation.

1.1 Carlos

I first traveled to Cuba during the summer of 2012 for a Global Seminar class, titled *Race, Gender and Tourism in Contemporary Cuba*, taught by Dr. L. Kaifa Roland. Our group spent six weeks on the island studying tourism, socialism and Cuban culture. It was during this initial trip to Havana in 2012 that I first learned how the complicated and contradictory travel laws within Cuba actually affect the lives of young people with yearnings to see the world, not so different from my own. One sweltering afternoon while I was visiting my friend Carlos¹ in his mother's house in Playa, a neighborhood in Havana, he removed a folder from his desk drawer. He handed me the letter he had received in 2007 from the Pan American Skate Association (PASA) inviting him and two other skaters to compete in their annual championship skating games held in Brazil in 2008. At the time, Carlos was one of the top two skateboarders in all of Cuba. He told me it would be a great honor to participate in the competition. However, in order to legally travel outside of the island at that point in time, Cubans had to go through a lengthy process of government approval, reviled by nearly everyone for its extremely high cost and subjective nature.

¹ All names used in this thesis are pseudonyms, chosen by either myself or by the respondents themselves.

Because Carlos and the two other skaters were invited to participate in a sport-related trip they were required to get permission from INDER, *Institución Nacional de Deportes Educacional y Recreacional* (National Institute of Educational and Recreational Sports). Fortunately, Carlos did not have to apply for the *tarjeta blanca* (white card), a \$150 CUC one-month exit permit that Cubans universally hated. Who would not despise paying their government the equivalent of seven and a half months salary for a visa to leave one's own country?² (Díaz Torres 2013). However, Carlos was required to submit the letter of invitation from PASA, ask the association to pay the \$200 processing fee to the government, and obtain permission to be absent from his place of work (see Mesa-Lago and Perez-Lopez, 2012 for an explanation of travel requirements). After filing all of the appropriate documentation, INDER told the skaters the only way they could travel was if they took two “reporters” along with them, who would serve as bodyguards for the athletes. Carlos told me that the whole process felt very secretive, and in reality he believed they were actually spies and security escorts to insure the skaters returned to Cuba after the games. “This country is like a prison,” Carlos explained. He said the Cuban government “sends spies whenever its gets the chance.” Of course, PASA only had the funds to bring three Cubans, not five. After months of waiting and following all the correct procedures, all Carlos has to authenticate his accomplishment is the letter of invitation from PASA. He was not permitted to leave Cuba.

In a later conversation, Carlos told me that because the Cuban government does not recognize skating as an official sport (it is technically considered “recreation”) and deems it unworthy of an international audience, the competition was not really conceived

² Calculated based on a 2012 report by Cuba's National Statistics and Information Bureau (ONEI) that revealed the average monthly Cuban salary to be approximately \$20 CUC \$22 USD (Díaz Torres, 2013).

as a valid reason to travel abroad. Dejected, Carlos revealed that when he called the government office to talk to someone handling his request, they asked him why he thought “punk skaters deserved to represent Cuba in an international arena?” Underneath his broken English, I could feel Carlos’s pain and resentment toward his nation’s hypocrisy. In a socialist republic that aspires to achieve complete social equality, how could this young man be denied an opportunity to bring honor to his country simply because his sport was never officially approved by antiquated regulations? Carlos tossed the papers back into his desk and sighed; such disappointment is not an unfamiliar feeling for most Cubans, and as the country’s half-century long history of substantial emigration shows, the desire to leave the island is certainly not unusual.

1.2 The problem: implications for US immigration and foreign policy

The political climate in Cuba is undeniably changing as Raúl Castro continues economic reforms planned to go into effect gradually through 2015. Expatriates as well as Cubans still residing there are wondering if life on the island is possibly becoming more hospitable. Indeed, the slow market-liberalizing reforms have gained significant global media attention, as the rest of the world, US firms in particular, await unrestricted access to Cuba’s markets and investment opportunities. Additionally, the rich history of conflict between the United States and Cuba since its 1959 revolution, involving antagonistic migration policies, US military intervention, and economic trade sanctions, to name a few, makes this an issue of particular interest to Americans. Particularly, Cuban immigration to the United States has always been sizeable and the Cuban-American diaspora in Miami has had significant influence on US policy since the early 1960s. Nevertheless, Cuba is a country many mainstream Americans know little about.

This research contributes to the literature on Cuba's transitioning political economy and the trends and drivers of Cuban migration, and in general, aims to enhance American understanding of Cuba.

Chapter 2

Background and Literature Review

Historically, Cuba has been a country of geopolitical fragility, subject to changes in foreign domination and, over the last fifty years, influenced by the United States' economic embargo. Geographically, it is a small island with strategic proximity to the United States. In the colonial era, it was initially colonized by Spain in the late fifteenth century and remained under Spanish control until 1898 when the United States intervened in Cuba's Second War for Independence (also known as the Spanish-American War) and claimed recognition for defeating Spain. Then, in 1903 the US oversaw the writing of Cuba's new constitution, adding the Platt Amendment, which effectively established Cuba as a US protectorate, and allowed the US to intervene, at will, in Cuba's domestic affairs, (Hudson, 2001; Roland, 2011). Next, a string of US-backed presidents ran the island until 1953 when Fidel Castro, Raúl Castro, Ché Guevara, and other revolutionaries started a guerilla war to overthrow President Fulgencio Batista. In 1959 the revolution triumphed and Fidel Castro began instituting radical political, economic and social reforms in the country through his transition to a single-party Communist Republic (Hudson, 2001).

2.1 Cuban political economic history

An understanding of Cuba's political economic history and of the roles that the United States and Soviet Union (USSR) played in influencing the Castro regime's

responses to its fluctuations are both essential to analyzing the key features of Cuban emigration trends. Carmelo Mesa-Lago and Jorge Pérez-López (2013) divide Cuba's economic and social development from the post-revolution era to the present (1959-2012) into eight cycles. Economic and social policies during these cycles swung between "idealist" and "pragmatist," the former being ones that move away from the market and the latter being market-oriented (Mesa-Lago and Perez-Lopez, 2013). Each cycle was in one way or another influenced by the previous cycle, all of them varying in terms of length and intensity. Characteristics of idealist cycles include: ambitious goals (such as rapidly reaching high production levels and social transformation), centralized decision-making, and expansion of free social services. The ambitious nature of these cycles tended to weaken over time with each new idealist cycle and consistently resulted in perceived regime instability and poor economic performance (ibid.). Conversely, the market-oriented reforms implemented during pragmatist cycles increased in boldness with each cycle change and typically resulted in increased unemployment and inequality. The pragmatist reforms are characterized by: the improved economic performance and increased living standards they initiated, de-centralized decision-making, and a cutback of free social services (ibid.). Table 1.0 provides a summary of each cycle and its respective characteristics.

Table 1.0: The Eight Cycles: Characteristics and Effects
(Source: Mesa-Lago and Perez-Lopez, 2013, pp. 2-3)

1959-1966	Mostly idealist, with some facets of pragmatism particularly in 1964-1966
1966-1970	Strong idealist cycle
1971-1985	First well-identified pragmatist cycle
1986-1990	Third idealist cycle

1991-1996	Second pragmatist cycle, under the “Special Period in Time of Peace”
1997-2003	Slowdown and halt of reforms, a cycle of policy stagnation
2003-2006	Reversal of reforms to fourth idealist cycle, although weaker than previous idealist cycles
2007-Present	Structural reforms under Raúl Castro, third and strongest pragmatist cycle

Generally, the cycles have fluctuated back and forth from idealist to pragmatist, with the current stage of liberal reform being the strongest pragmatist stage of the revolution. The *lineamientos* describe guidelines for the calculated implementation of these highly market-oriented reforms.

The unique and separate roles of the United States and the Soviet Union in the initiation, continuation, or termination of certain reform cycles must not be overlooked. The two international actors’ individual foreign policies prompted important reactionary developments in Cuba during specific phases. By 1962, in the wake of the revolution, Fidel Castro had managed to nationalize nearly all foreign assets, force out any remaining American corporations, expand free social services such as healthcare and education, and adopt a Soviet-style central planning model. This idealist central-planning system proved incompatible with Cuba’s dependence on a sugar monoculture, shortage of well-trained managers (many of whom had fled after the revolution), and lack of experience with the features of a centrally run economy (Mesa-Lago and Perez-Lopez, 2013; Sweig, 2009), and eventually led to the pragmatist reforms of the 1970s and early 1980s. This market-oriented phase incorporated stronger ties with the Soviet Union, including price subsidies, soft loans, technical assistance, and increased trade relations with the socialist countries of Eastern Europe (Mesa-Lago and Perez-Lopez, 2013). “By the mid-1970s, it was estimated that Soviet-funded projects accounted for 10% of Cuba’s total GNP, and

by the end of the 1980s, the annual Soviet subsidy had reached between \$4 billion and \$6 billion” (Sweig, 2009, p. 71). However, Castro quickly became weary of the economic recovery and increased power of leaders within the planning agencies, eventually leading him to implement a phase of “rectification” that “shared the same antimarket tenor of those of the previous idealist cycle” (Mesa-Lago and Perez-Lopez, 2013, p. 12).

Subsequently, in the early 1990s, when the Soviet Union dissolved, so did its economic and ideological support for Cuba. The economic and material crisis that followed became known as the “Special Period in Time of Peace” and eventually led to an emergency response in the form of market-oriented economic reforms similar to those outlined in the current *lineamientos*.

The United States’ antagonistic foreign policies, such as the 1960 commercial trade embargo and preferential immigration laws encouraging Cubans to defect have profoundly influenced Cuba’s internal policies as well. The Cuban government’s fear that any regime instability might instigate US intervention promoted the persistence of its idealist reform cycles, and, as will be explained later, led to stiffened emigration policies. Yet, despite it being a sovereign nation, the foreign policies of various US presidents have influenced Cuba’s economic activity; Richard Nixon, Ronald Reagan, and George W. Bush strengthened US embargo sanctions, whereas Jimmy Carter, Bill Clinton, and Barak Obama softened sanctions (Mesa-Lago and Perez-Lopez, 2013). The US embargo, a set of economic and trade sanctions initiated by the US Congress in 1960, aims to encourage a “peaceful transition to democracy and a resumption of economic growth in Cuba through the careful application of sanctions directed at the Castro government and support for the Cuban people” (United States Congress, 1992, n.p.). With this policy, the

US hoped that severely limiting Cuba's trading ability would destabilize its existing economy enough to lead to the termination of communism on the island. Fifty years later, this policy still has yet to induce the fall of Cuban communism. Despite the United States' inability to change specific internal policies in Cuba, it did, under President Eisenhower, turn to another tactic to encourage the deterioration of Castro's power: an "open-door" immigration policy for all Cubans.

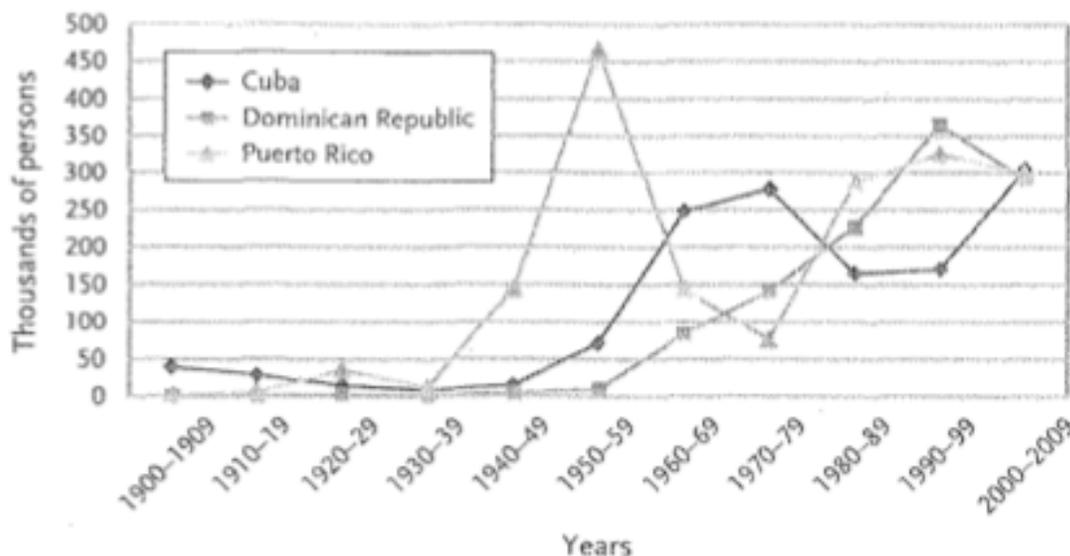
2.2 Migration history and trends

Cuban migration to the US can be divided into two distinct periods: pre-revolutionary migration and post-revolutionary migration. Pre-revolutionary migration was primarily politically motivated and geographically concentrated in Florida because of the state's proximity and comparable climate, (Masud-Piloto, 1996). In the early 1800s Cuban immigration to the US was steady, but relatively low. Professionals, merchants and landowners had migrated in small numbers to New York City, Philadelphia, and New Orleans by the 1820s. However, the Ten Years War (1868-1878) and the Spanish-American War (1895-1898) precipitated the beginning of large scale Cuban migration to the United States (Duany, 2011; Masud-Piloto 1996). Before 1870, more than 100,000 Cubans, it is estimated, were living abroad, with over 11,000 Cubans living in the United States by 1900 (Gibson and Jung, 2006; Masud-Piloto, 1996). Sizeable Cuban-American diaspora communities had formed in the cigar manufacturing industries of New York City, Tampa, and Key West by the end of the nineteenth century as people continued to migrate. From 1929 to 1933, during the dictatorship of Gerardo Machado, various Cubans left for exile in Miami, eventually including Machado himself. During 1940s and 1950s, thousands of Cubans emigrated in search of better employment options and more

civil liberties. By 1958, just a year before the triumph of the revolution, more than 53,000 persons of Cuban birth were living in the United States (Duany, 2011).

The post-revolutionary era can be further divided into three major waves of Castro-permitted emigration, the Golden Exiles, the Freedom Flighters, and the Mariel boatlifts, and one non-Castro-permitted wave, the Special *Balsero* Period. The final wave is not characterized as a state-permitted exodus, but it does have significant geopolitical implications. The post-revolution era was a period of mass emigration from Cuba, with migration being driven by factors ranging from political and religious refuge, disillusionment, economic hardship, material deprivation, and family reunification. The spike in mass migration is visible on the graph in Figure 1.0, and clearly stays well above pre-revolution numbers through 2009 (See Figure 1.0). Duany (2011) summarizes these migratory trends into four main flows as well, distinguishing them based on demographics, reasons for leaving, and political economic situation during each wave. He also details the complexities of US-Cuban relations and how they impacted the migration process during each phase.

Figure 1.0: Migration from the Hispanic Caribbean to the United States, 1900-2009



Source: (Duany, 2011, p. 37)

2.2.1 Golden Exiles

The initial exodus from Cuba, known as the Golden Exiles, began in 1959 and consisted of military personnel, wealthy landowners, and followers of the former president, Batista (Duany, 2011; Pedraza-Bailey, 1985; Wasem, 2009). This flow was sparked by the Cuban revolution, but accelerated in 1960 when Castro nationalized all foreign assets (Pedraza-Bailey, 1985). The majority of these émigrés were well educated, light skinned, and came from urban, white-collar locales such as Havana (Duany, 2011). The Cuban Refugee Adjustment Act of 1966 would later allow these exiles to adjust to permanent legal status once in the United States. As the revolution radicalized, disillusioned members of the middle class joined the exodus, most motivated by political reasons, but some for religious reasons as well when Castro denounced the Catholic

Church (Duany, 2011). In January 1961, the United States broke diplomatic relations with Cuba and unsuccessfully attempted a military invasion on the island to overthrow Castro, known as the Bay of Pigs invasion. At this time the US embassy in Havana and the US consulate in Santiago were both still issuing visas to Cubans who wanted to leave the island (Duany, 2011). They continued to do so until October 1962 when a US aircraft claimed to have photographed ballistic nuclear missiles in Cuba (Masud-Piloto, 1996). The Cuban Missile Crisis caused the US to abruptly cancel all flights between Cuba and the United States. However, between 1959 and 1962, 248,070 Cubans legally entered the United States, increasing the Cuban-born population in the US six-fold (Clark, 1975).

2.2.2 Freedom Flighters

The Freedom Flighters constituted the second wave of Cuban migration to the US. In September 1965, amidst political turmoil and mounting economic troubles in the country, Fidel Castro took advantage of the “open-door” policy Eisenhower had established, which gave preferential US admittance to Cubans under the title of “refugees.” “Knowing that the US open-door policy made it politically awkward, if not impossible, to refuse refugees from Cuba, Castro announced that exiled Cubans could pick up relatives wishing to emigrate at the Port of Camarioca in Matanzas, Cuba” (Masud-Piloto, 1996, p. 4). Castro seized an opportunity to manipulate US refugee policy to his advantage and permit large-scale emigration. By allowing political dissidents and anti-revolutionaries to leave, he avoided serious domestic crisis. In December 1965, because of treacherous maritime conditions faced during the boatlifts, a regular air bridge between Varadero (a tourist town east of Havana on the north coast of the island) and Miami was established. “The airlift became the largest and longest refugee resettlement

program in U.S. history, as twice-daily flights transported 260,561 Cubans to the United States” (Duany, 2011 p. 44). The demographic of this wave was also more representative of country’s actual population, including more blue-collar, semi-skilled service workers and small farmers (Duany, 2011). However, Castro, claiming the US was encouraging a “brain drain,” limited his citizens’ access to the flights by establishing strict qualifications for exit permits. “Young men of military service age (15 to 26), as well as professionals, technical and skilled workers whose exit would cause ‘a serious disturbance’ in delivering social services or in production” were not permitted to leave on the freedom flights (Pedraza-Bailey, 1985, p. 16). This type of restriction, used to limit “brain drain,” has remained a component of Cuban emigration policy through present day.

2.2.3 Mariel Boatlifts

The beginning of Jimmy Carter’s presidency in 1977 sparked a new era of US-Cuba relations that seemed to be more open to mutual diplomacy. Increased peaceful dialogue between Castro and the Carter administration, as well as Cuban engagement with the exile community in the United States seemed to signal the possibility of future reconciliation (Masud-Piloto, 1996). However, on April 1, 1980, relations changed when six Cubans pleading for political asylum intentionally crashed a bus into the Peruvian embassy in Havana. When the Peruvian government agreed to grant the bus crashers political asylum and refused to hand them over to Cuban security forces, Castro removed all guards and barricades from the embassy. Within seventy-two hours over 10,000 Cubans who wished to emigrate rushed into the embassy’s grounds. News coverage in the US claimed that the defectors were “desperate for a chance to live in freedom” (ibid.

p. 80). However, Duany (2011), Masud-Piloto (1996), and Pedraza-Bailey (1985) all note that the migration drivers at this time were economic rather than political.

Again seeking to take advantage of US preferential refugee policy and to cover up his embarrassment, Castro unilaterally reopened the doors to the US once more by allowing any Cubans wanting to leave to do so. Cubans' family members abroad could pick them up via boat at the port of Mariel, near Havana. Within five months of the opening, approximately 125,000 Cubans fled to the US. The Cuban Adjustment Act of 1966 permitted entrance to the US to any undocumented Cuban under the label of refugee, "an opportunity which no other nationality has" (Wasem, 2009, p. 2). The Office of Immigration Statistics defines a refugee as: "a person who is unable or unwilling to return to his or her country of nationality because of persecution or a well-founded fear of persecution on account of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion" (Martin and Yankay, 2013, p. 1). However, many of the Mariel migrants were young, single men from working-class backgrounds with low levels of education, who had been familiarized with the economic opportunities abroad by the thousands of exiles who recently had been permitted to return and visit Cuba. Unlikely to face persecution, "technically and legally, the Cubans were simply undocumented aliens seeking asylum, not refugees" (Masud-Piloto, 1996, p. 84).

Despite the new context of migration, President Carter followed his predecessors and apprehensively concluded that "the United States would continue to 'provide an open heart and open arms for the tens of thousands of refugees seeking freedom from Communist domination'" (Masud-Piloto, 1996, p. 83). This crisis revealed the contradictions in US-Cuban immigration policy because many *Marielitos* emigrated for

economic, not political reasons. Moreover, Mariel was a geopolitical opportunity seized by Castro. He effectively used the crisis as a bargaining chip, telling Carter and the United States that if they wanted to talk about orderly migration procedures, the US would also have to discuss the economic embargo, the naval base at Guantanamo Bay, and US spy flights over Cuba (Masud-Piloto, 1996).

2.2.4 Special Period *Balseros*

Cuba's fourth major migration wave began as a response to the country's early-90s economic crisis, labeled "The Special Period in Time of Peace" and is not considered a wave of Castro-permitted emigration, *per se*. It does, however, represent a significant migrant flow that generated geopolitical implications. Like the Mariel crisis, this wave was primarily driven by economic despair, not by political persecution or motivation. It began in the early 1990s after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the subsequent collapse of the Soviet Union (Duany, 2011). As noted in Section 2.1, the loss of Soviet subsidies led to an economic crisis in Cuba unmatched since the Great Depression.

Since as early as 1959 people had been attempting the ninety-mile passage to the US through the Florida Straits in homemade rafts, inner tubes and stolen boats. However, in 1994, amidst increasing political unrest and riots due to the economic crisis, the exodus, larger than the Mariel wave, spiked. Motivations for the unauthorized exits were predominantly driven by extreme material deprivation, state ration reductions, and family reunification, rather than political or religious persecution (Duany, 2011).

According to Duany (2011), "Cubans increasingly resembled economic migrants from other Caribbean countries, such as Haiti or the Dominican Republic, driven abroad by their quest to improve their living standards" (p. 47). This created tension in the US,

because these migrants, who were far from being true political refugees, were still admitted into the country via the previously established “open-door” policy for Cubans. The context of reception in the US had also changed as a result of the Mariel exodus. Many Americans perceived these new migrants, or *balseros* (rafters), as an economic burden, rather than as victims of communist oppression. Consequently, in 1994, President Bill Clinton announced the end of the “open-door” policy. Any *balseros* interdicted at sea would be detained at the US naval base in Guantanamo Bay until they could be processed for entrance into the US or deportation back to Cuba (Masud-Piloto, 1996). Negotiations between Clinton and Castro eventually led to the 1994 Migration Accords, a bilateral set of agreements attempting to normalize safe, legal and orderly migration between the two nations (Wasem, 2009). These accords evolved into the current US immigration procedure referred to as the “wet foot/dry foot” policy, which admits Cubans who reach US shores (dry land) to stay and adjust their legal status at the Attorney General’s discretion, and returns Cubans interdicted at sea back to Cuba.

In 2003 Bush administration canceled annual migration talks that had been taking place between the US and Cuba since 1995 and strengthened the reach of the embargo by reducing the total family remittance allowance considerably, from \$3000 to \$300 (Lee, 2014). When Barack Obama was elected in 2008, the same year Raúl Castro assumed presidency in Cuba, he began fulfilling campaign promises by easing travel restrictions for Cuban-Americans wishing to visit family on the island as well as eliminating the Bush-era remittance caps (“Obama eases limits,” 2009). He also permitted the licensing of non-Cuban American travel to Cuba for educational, religious and cultural exchange purposes (Lee, 2014). In a speech made in Miami in 2008, the president was cautious of

appearing soft on the communist dictatorship to Republican constituencies in Florida. He was quoted saying, “‘It’s time to let [Cuban-Americans]’ money make their families less dependent upon the Castro regime’” (“Obama eases limits,” 2009). Nonetheless, Obama’s progressive steps toward normalizing foreign relations with Cuba also include restarting yearly migration talks in 2009, with particular focus on the release of political prisoners held in both countries. The most recent round of talks took place on January, 2014 and discussed issues such as the Cuban Adjustment Act, the US promise to issue at least 20,000 immigrant visas a year, Cuba’s new Migration Law, and the continued safe, legal and orderly travel between the nations (Psaki, 2014).

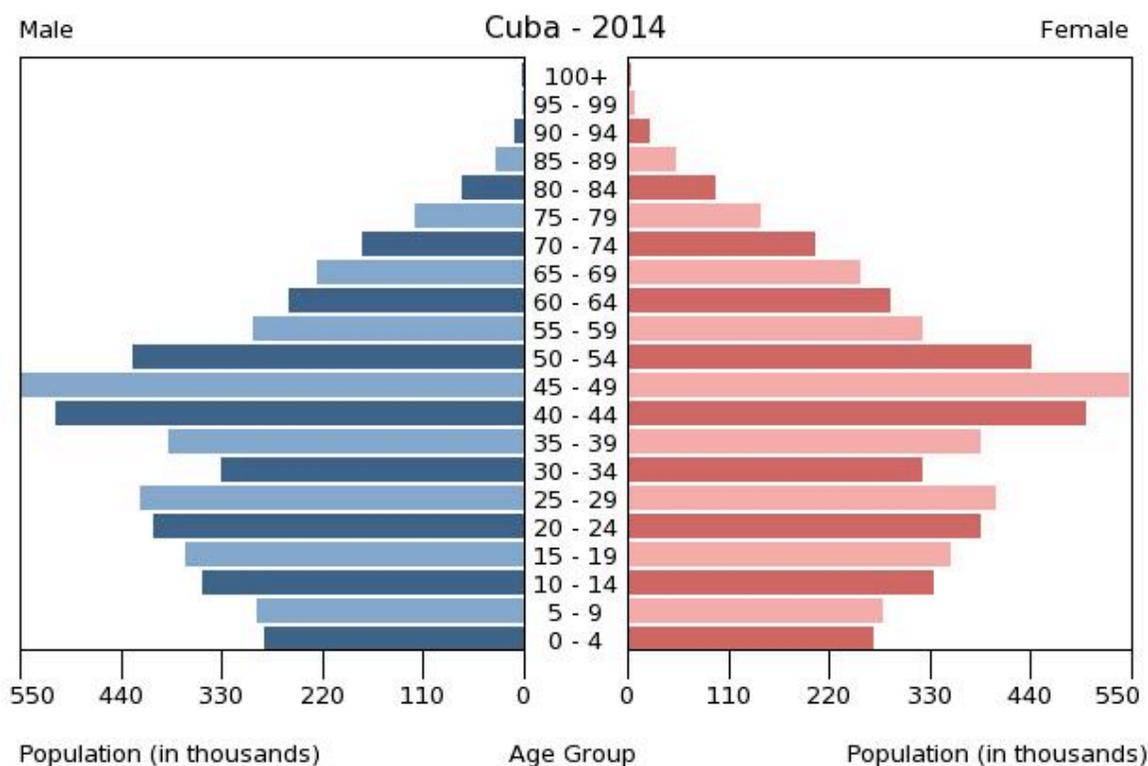
Jorge Duany (2011) speculates that emigration to the United States will increase substantially in the second decade of the twenty-first century due to deteriorating Cuban living conditions and the unemployment produced by state-sector downsizing, which aims to cut 500,000 public jobs by 2015 (Duany, 2011, Peters, 2012a). Duany’s work provides a background for understanding the state-authorized migration permitted by the 2013 travel policy, which, for the purposes of this research, is understood as a fifth phase of emigration. Why is this emigration considered a problem for Cuba?

2.3 Demographic squeeze

Despite a half-century of prohibited foreign travel, emigration has contributed to mounting demographic pressures, which pose a threat to Cuba’s economic productivity. As previously explained, notable human flight began occurring in 1959, and has created a substantial “brain drain.” This skilled and unskilled labor loss decreases the amount of human capital available to achieve the country’s goals of enhanced domestic productivity. Additionally, based on 2013 estimates by the CIA World Factbook, low

fertility rates (1.46 per woman) due to high health standards and free abortions also factor into a negative population growth rate of -0.13% (Central Intelligence Agency, 2014, n.p.).

Figure 2.0 Cuban Population Pyramid 2014



Source: (CIA World Factbook, 2014, n.p.)

These statistics are concerning for Cuba because a shrinking workforce and low fertility mean there will be fewer productive members of society to support the growing elderly population that is dependent on social services. In Figure 2.0, Cuba's population pyramid, the bubble in the middle shows large numbers of people who will become dependents (age 65 for men and age 60 for women) in the next ten to fifteen years. The younger cohorts are significantly smaller and thus will struggle to financially support their parents and grandparents as they age. High life expectancies of around 78 years

mean that the diminishing workforce will have to support the elderly for longer time periods (ibid.).

After decades of a floundering economy, or “an economy long on life support,” these social and demographic issues may truly be catastrophic for Cuba’s economic future (“Cuba’s Elderly,” 2012, n.p.). However, the reforms laid out in the *lineamientos* propose to adjust Cuba’s social and economic model in order to increase worker productivity and facilitate the country’s re-insertion into the global economy, all the while continuing to “provide free health care, education, and other benefits” (Peters, 2012a, p. 8). The reforms include policies that continue the flow of émigré remittances, first legalized in 1995 as a part of the second cycle of “pragmatist” reforms, as well as the current migration law, which contains provisions encouraging return migration and émigré investment in Cuba (Mesa-Lago and Perez-Lopez, 2013). The reforms signal another shift in the state’s socialist ideology toward an acceptance of a liberal free market, a breakthrough that could reduce emigration’s “brain drain” effect and eventually help spur economic viability. Why is Cuba so focused on productivity and economic efficiency?

2.4 Cuban economic turmoil

A massive phase of de-industrialization, from which Cuba has not recovered, began in 1989 when the Soviet Union withdrew subsidies and financial support that had been keeping the Cuban economy afloat since the early-mid 1970s. Mismanagement led to the eventual collapse of the sugar industry, which “essentially was a ‘cash cow’ milked to death for its foreign exchange earnings, by insufficient maintenance, by insufficient re-investment preventing productivity improvement, and by the exchange rate regime under

which it labored” (Ritter, 2011, n.p.). Also, the country has been unable to produce enough food to feed its population and its growing number of tourists, having to rely on imports for up to 80% of domestic food consumption (“Agri-Food Past,” 2012).

Another major economic issue is related to Cuba’s dual currency system. State employees are paid in *moneda nacional* (CUP), while foreign money and CUP can be exchanged for the *peso convertible* (CUC), the tourist currency that is pegged to the US dollar. Increasingly, everyday and household items are being sold in CUC by the Cuban government at prices, even after conversion, that the vast majority of Cuban citizens earning state salaries cannot afford. This gives citizens with greater access to the CUC, for example, individuals working in the tourist sector and receiving tips in CUC or people receiving remittances from family abroad, an unfair economic advantage. It also encourages participation in the black market to try and obtain the CUC. The structure of the dual currency system not only stratifies Cuban society, but also increases economic inequality, both of which can be interpreted as anti-socialist dynamics.

One of the most problematic components of the dual currency system is that businesses enjoy a special exchange rate for converting the national currencies. While workers who receive their salaries in CUP can convert their money to CUC at roughly 25 to 1 exchange rate, Cuban enterprises can exchange the two equally. Not surprisingly, elimination of the dual system is included in the list of reforms (*lineamientos*). An official announcement from the Cuban government noted, “The restoration of the Cuban peso’s value and of its functions” will bring “order to the economic environment and, consequently, provide an accurate measurement of its performance” (qtd. in Grogg, 2013, n.p.). Joaquín P. Pujol, the previous secretary of the Association for the Study of the

Cuban Economy, also notes, “The maintenance of an exchange rate that is not representative of market conditions has contributed to... difficulties in obtaining financing from abroad” (Pujol, 2011, p. 9). The current system “makes it nearly impossible to determine the real profitability of various economic activities” (ibid.). These are just a few examples of the many issues contributing to the stagnation and inefficiency of the Cuban economy. With the introduction of the *lineamientos*, it appears that for the first time since the revolution, the Castro regime has recognized the need for liberal economic restructuring and a loosened grip on the Cuban people. What exactly do the reforms entail?

2.5 Reforming Cuba’s political economy: The *lineamientos*

Cuba is currently in a phase of progressive economic and social transition. In 2006, longtime national patriarch, Fidel Castro conditionally stepped down from his position as head of state after serving for 45 years, and appointed his younger brother, Raúl Castro, in his place. Two years later, Raúl officially assumed presidency. After stepping into his new role, Raúl requested reports from over 3,000 state enterprises detailing their biggest problems and suggestions for addressing them (Mesa-Lago and Perez-Lopez, 2013). This paved the way for government and citizen discussion about how to best update the country’s economic strategy in order to guarantee the continuation of Cuban socialism. After three years, a list of liberal, market-oriented policy “updates” referred to as the “*lineamientos*” (guidelines), were published for public criticism in November 2010. Then, in April 2011 the Sixth Congress of the Cuban Communist Party³ ratified a final set of reforms into law, principally aimed at enlarging the private sector

³ This is Cuba’s highest ruling body, capable of setting and reforming national policy (Peters, 2012a).

economy and cutting government spending. As mentioned above, the intent of the reforms is to slowly permit capitalist activities that will boost national productivity and expand and diversify the economy.

Some of the policy changes include: the right to buy and sell residential property at freely-set prices, the right to apply for licenses to operate small private businesses, widespread agricultural reform, new tax policies, and the endorsement of public scrutiny of the changes in order to best adapt and improve the new system (Peters, 2012a). However, Mesa-Lago and Perez-Lopez (2013) argue that the reforms adopted by the Congress are “positive, but plagued by obstacles and disincentives that would limit their effectiveness in addressing national problems” (p. 195). A few of these potential issues include: 1) the slow arbitrarily-set pace at which the reforms are supposed to be implemented, despite the public’s expectation for “prompt and deep changes” (Mesa-Lago and Perez-Lopez, 2013, p. 195); 2) the continued use of central planning as the primary instrument of economic management (including centralized price setting), with slow, limited integration of free market policy instruments that are subject to strict government regulation and taxes; 3) the unification of the two currencies, but with no explanation of how or when this might occur; 4) the legalization of self-employment, most of which is in unskilled professions, and banned to university graduates with formal education in the field of interest; and 5) the “excessive level of taxation and other costs, which act as disincentives for the creation of formal employment and prolong informal employment” (Mesa-Lago and Perez-Lopez, 2013, p. 201).

Two of the most controversial components of the *lineamientos* are the reduction and eventual elimination of the state food ration and the gradual increase in salaries. A

shift toward decentralized, cooperatively-owned farming operations and suburban organic agriculture are intended to increase the efficiency of the country's food production, thus reducing the dependence of foreign food imports. The Congress has agreed to gradually remove items from the ration list, while further limiting items available to people with high incomes. The monthly ration now covers only approximately ten days of consumption, causing some people to lie about the number of people in their household to acquire more food,⁴ and forcing others to purchase from markets at high prices. Mesa-Lago and Perez-Lopez (2013) reason that "it is reasonable to do away with subsidized prices for people with high income, but such subsidies are fundamental for the survival of the poor and for others in need who do not receive remittances" (p. 208). The problem of income differentials as well as low salaries will be discussed in more detail in section 5.0 Findings and Discussion. But, it is important to note here that although the Congress has agreed to gradually increase state wages, permit multiple employments, and eliminate salary caps, there has been almost no evidence of these policy implementations, as of 2009 data (Mesa-Lago and Perez-Lopez, 2013)⁵. Although the government has begrudgingly recognized areas for economic and political improvement, the suggested solutions are limited and indeed have their flaws.

In 2012, Economist Phillip Peters echoed some of the *lineamientos*' potential problems mentioned by Mesa-Lago and Perez Lopez (2013) but highlighted the anticipated migration reform. He proposed:

The new housing market will create a source of wealth for many Cuban families and is already bringing capital into Cuba. Migration reform seems

⁴ I rented a room in Havana from a woman who continued to pretend her son who immigrated to Spain was still living in her home so that she could get extra food rations.

⁵ In June 2014, medical professionals will finally receive a salary increase, almost six years after such raises were initially promised (Garcia, 2014).

to be a double-edged sword. In the near term it could increase emigration, worsening Cuba's job picture and if Cuba becomes a country where citizens can travel in and out as they please, it is possible that fewer Cubans would want to emigrate. (Peters, 2012a, p. 20)

Peters' (2012a) near-term emigration increase follows the prediction made by Duany (2011). To build on their predictions, more research is needed to obtain the actual opinions of the Cuban people, the ones whose decisions will ultimately shape the coming migratory trends.

2.6 Loosened travel restrictions

At the time when both Peters (2012a) and Duany (2011) articulated their respective projections about Cuba's future migration patterns, the island had not yet passed the Decree-law No. 302, which officially reformed travel restrictions prohibiting Cubans from traveling abroad. On January 14th, 2013, the state-run newspaper, *Granma*, notified the public that the government would no longer require citizens wishing to travel abroad to obtain an invitation from a resident of their destination country, and would do away with the excessively expensive visas previously needed for exit, known as the *tarjeta blanca* (white card). Now, Cubans may leave their country for up to two years without forfeiting their citizenship and other rights such as free health care. This is a profound reform as countries have long criticized Cuba for its violations of basic human rights, prohibition of foreign travel being one of them (United Nations, 2013). Another key component of the migration reform addresses return migration. Under the new migration law, Cubans who previously emigrated may now come back to visit Cuba for up to ninety days (Peters, 2012b). Additionally, emigrants who left illegally more than eight years ago (people who fled on rafts to the US and Mexico or those who received

permission to leave but never returned such as athletes and medical personnel) may now apply for residency in their former homeland. Homero Acosta, the secretary of the Council of State⁶ noted that these changes aim to “improve relations with Cuban emigrants, who with the passage of time have changed considerably from having eminently political motivations in the first years of the Revolution, to having economic motivations” (qtd. in Peters, 2012b, p. 3). Certainly another important goal of the Cuban government is to encourage the sending of remittances, which in 2012 totaled more than \$2.5 billion by some estimates (Morales and Scarpaci, 2013). Some critics argue that the migration policy reform was a politically motivated move by the Castro regime, an attempt to win public support as the government continued restructuring other facets of Cuban society. Whatever the intention, it will be challenging to determine exactly how future migration trends might be influenced by these changes.

Cuban scholar and president of Cuba Educational Travel, Collin Laverty, and research associate at the Institute of the Americas, Fernanda Luchine, predict that Cubans might use their new freedom to travel to the US and then take advantage of their privileged immigration status in order to permanently flee their home country (Luchine and Laverty, 2012). But on the other hand, they also suggest that “more open travel, along with other reforms to open the private sector and provide Cubans with more rights – such as to own cell phones and stay in tourist hotels – may convince more Cubans that things are changing and a brighter future awaits them at home” (Luchine and Laverty, 2012, p. 1). Either way, these reforms are a significant political step for the Castro administration, as the aging regime attempts to leave a positive legacy to its people.

⁶ The Council of State is Cuba’s legislative body.

Chapter 3

Research Question: the effects of the travel policy change

Given Cuba's political economic history of implementing market-oriented reforms in times of economic stagnation and crisis and its use of state-permitted emigration to manipulate public approval of the dictatorial regime, my research explored the implications of the new 2013 travel policy on Cuba's future. My general research question asked *what effect has the travel change had on Cubans' migration intentions?* This study uses migration intentions and opinions because considerable evidence shows that they serve as helpful determinants of future behavior. However, "intentions in the migration decision-making process are considered to be only one of a number of preconditions for migration," driven in part by other factors such as social networks, policy-based legal permission, and economic conditions (Creighton, 2013, p. 80; see also de Haas, 2011). The background research presented earlier in this thesis guided my fieldwork in Havana as I sought to answer the following questions:

- What are the opinions of young working-age Cubans of/about the *lineamientos*? I hypothesized that if the liberal market changes increase inequality, emigration might continue to be the solution to economic despair.
- If the reason the Cuban government enacted this policy reform was to slow emigration and encourage return migration (Peters, 2012b), then are people more or less interested in staying in Cuba now that the policy has officially been updated?

- Is this piece of freedom finally a sign of a new Cuba? If the *lineamientos* have truly increased public support for the regime, then Cubans who oppose Castro might now be more likely to stay in Cuba.
- Do average Cubans feel empowered by the reforms, or do they still feel limited by a controlling authoritarian regime? If everyone does not have equal access to the *lineamientos*' benefits, class divisions might develop in society which could influence people's migration desires as well.

While migratory flows are often expressive of larger political economic dynamics occurring in both sending and receiving countries, every individual migration decision is influenced by a person's unique perspective or particular life context. Furthermore, according to Douglass Massey, one of the most prominent contemporary theorists of human migration, "If one seeks to shape the behavior of migrants through policy interventions, it is critical to understand the reasons why people migrate" (Massey, 2012, p. 15). The data revealing the broader migration trends occurring since Cuba's travel policy update have been compiled only in the past year. Indeed, approximately 184,000 people have already traveled out of Cuba since the policy's implementation in January 2013, and only roughly 82,000 have returned to the island (Ortiz, 2013). However, this type of quantitative data fails to express personal motivations and migration opinions, an examination of which provides more information about *why* people leave. Therefore, talking with Cubans about what drives their individual desires and perspectives regarding emigration and the economic reforms provides us with a greater understanding of what sort of migration dynamic might either currently be happening or expected to occur in the future.

Chapter 4

Methodology

The research for this project was designed to answer the research questions stated above. It investigated Cuban citizens' perspective of their country's recently implemented travel reform and how it is influencing their desires to emigrate. I conducted thirteen semi-structured interviews in and around the city of Havana, Cuba during a two-week period in the winter of 2013-2014. The interviews ranged in length, lasting anywhere from twenty minutes to an hour long per subject. They took place in a variety of locations and at varying hours of the day, depending on when and where the subject felt most comfortable conversing. Some interviews were conducted in the house that I was staying in, while others took place during daylight hours in the middle of a popular pedestrian intersection. A few were also conducted within the privacy of the subject's own home. My research protocol received an exempt certification from the University of Colorado Boulder's Institutional Review Board (IRB) on December 11th, 2013. The research protocol number is 13-0667.

4.1 Sampling

I employed a snowball sampling procedure to gather subjects for the study. The following inclusion criteria were required for the selection of each subject: an individual within the age range of 18-35; a current or former citizen of Cuba. A totally random sample was inappropriate for this research because of no need to interview subjects above or below the target demographic (ages 18-35), as the research was primarily interested in the opinions of working age youth. The initial participants in the study consisted of

personal acquaintances whom I had previously met during my first trip to Cuba in the summer of 2012. All future participants were either individuals recommended by the initial subjects or subjects whom I encountered or met in various public spaces while interacting and observing Cuban youth. Because it was possible that the snowball sampling procedure could place the original subjects in the position of being asked to disclose information about a third party without that party's consent, and raises privacy concerns for the secondary subjects, I implemented the following safeguard procedures as suggested by the University of Colorado at Boulder Institutional Review Board:

- Telling the initial subjects that they would be asked to suggest the names of other potential subjects, but that they had the right to decline to provide this information if they so wished.
- Obtaining the initial subject's consent to disclose their identity to subsequent subjects if it was deemed necessary for contacting such future subjects.
- Explaining the nature and purpose of the research to each subject (such as where it could be published and what sort of anonymity procedures would be used), so that he or she could make an informed decision before participating in the study.

Participant observation such as recording direct observations, group discussions, personal stories, and my experiences within Cuban society were also implemented as a secondary method of qualitative data collection. As a measure of protecting the anonymity of all subjects, each individual mentioned in this paper has been given a pseudonym, selected by either the subject or myself (depending on the subject's choice).

4.2 Consent

The interviews were conducted in Spanish, a language of which I speak with relative fluency. Despite my proficiency, one of the interviews was recorded because of difficulties hearing and understanding the subject (it was noisy outside and the subject spoke very softly). The research presented no more than minimal risk of harm to subjects and involved no procedures for which written consent is normally required outside of the research context. Because some participants in this research might have been averse to signing a formal written consent document (given the fact that a consent form is the only written link connecting an individual to the interview), and to ensure their complete anonymity, participants were only asked for verbal consent to participate in this study.

4.3 Interview questions

I drew on a long list of questions as a guideline during the interview process. Each subject was asked some mixture of the questions with the most focus being on the migration policy and whether or not it had changed or influenced their desires to leave and/or travel. Interviews tended to vary in length and subjects' levels of interest differed as well, so for some interviews it was not possible to ask all questions. Some subjects preferred to give a short answer to each question, while others opted to engage in a conversational discussion that was framed by the interview questions. See a list of interview questions in Appendix A.

Chapter 5

Findings and Discussion

Has the travel policy change made it easier for Cubans to leave the country? Technically, yes. There are now fewer administrative barriers restricting Cubans' ability to travel, such as the *tarjeta blanca* exit visa and a required letter of invitation. Yet, every person I interviewed said they did not have the money to actually make a trip outside the country. Young people still want to travel and visit other nations of the world, and even though Decree-Law 302 now legally permits them to do so, many people, even those with college degrees and high levels of human capital, say they cannot afford to. They consistently blamed low salaries and the dual currency system for their financial woes. Conversely, the statistics on migration in 2013 contradict this finding, revealing that 184,787 Cubans have in fact left the country in the last year. This research argues that the people leaving Cuba and taking advantage of the *lineamientos* are part of Cuba's emerging upper class. These are government officials, people with social capital living abroad, tourist sector workers, and skilled hustlers participating the black market informal economy. While the government has seemingly awarded its citizenry the right to free travel, the Cubans I talked to have been unaffected by the change. With little faith in the superficial economic and social reforms, they remain trapped in Cuba.

5.1 Theoretical contexts and the idea of “no prospects”

In order to analyze the effects of Decree-Law 302 and understand how Cuban migratory aspirations might have changed, I first began asking people if they had ever thought about leaving Cuba. Every respondent answered “yes.” Common destinations of

interest were Spain, the United States, Australia, Brazil, Italy, and Switzerland. Only one out of the thirteen respondents said he wanted to leave Cuba permanently; the other twelve wished to leave the country for a short period of time for tourism. El Veneno⁷, the lone respondent fervently wanting to emigrate, identified himself as a “*jinetero*” or street hustler. Noting that he did not understand communism, this man said he was more interested in an “*economía exacta*” (exact economy) where he had the ability to “*crear*” (create). El Veneno explained that he was currently unemployed because he did not want to work for a government that only supported children, elderly, and the rich. Echoing the desire to leave Cuba, Simpatía, a 24-year-old cook currently working in a hotel told me, “I think about leaving every night. I am learning English so that I can become be a server in the hotel restaurant and talk to customers, but it will be helpful for getting a job in another country too. I would go to Switzerland or Canada. I know it’s cold, but I could earn money for a few years and then eventually come back to Cuba to live.” In a rapidly globalizing world, it is not surprising that young people, especially those like El Veneno and Simpatía who are more likely to interact with tourists, are being exposed to a global culture and want to see what societies look like outside of Cuba.

The respondents all spoke about leaving in theoretical contexts. None had actually planned out the details for how he or she would specifically leave. Carlos, the surfer forbidden from attending the competition in Brazil mentioned in the introduction, wanted to leave and work somewhere with good surfing waves like Hawaii, Australia, or Portugal: “In fact I might have an opportunity to go to Portugal in April to work illegally as a surf instructor. I can sleep on the beach and surf every day. I only need to make what

⁷ I allowed my interviewees to select their own pseudonyms if they wanted to. This man chose the name El Veneno, which means “the poison” in Spanish.

is necessary to eat and live.” Later, Carlos told me of another “opportunity to leave,” saying he might have the chance to go the United States before traveling to Portugal as part of a People-to-People cultural exchange. Despite these potential trips being only three and four months away, he only spoke of them as “possibilities.”

What, exactly, contributes to a potential migrant’s decision-making process? One factor is social capital. For most Cubans, traveling abroad is contingent upon the financial support of someone else: a friend, a relative, or a foreign sponsor. Carlos’s prospective trip to the United States was being planned and funded with help from Colin Lavery, the Cuban economic scholar cited above in section 2.6, who has previously facilitated the travel of Cuban hip-hop artists for cultural exchanges across the US. Social Network Theory explains this role of social capital: “Migrants are inevitably linked to non-migrants through networks of reciprocal obligations based on shared understandings of kinship and friendship. Non-migrants draw upon these obligations to gain access to employment, housing, and other forms of assistance at the point of destination, substantially reducing their costs” (Massey, 2012, p. 17). This theory suggests that Cubans with larger social networks have more social capital and thus greater ability to travel (i.e. friends and/or family abroad sending remittances or directly paying travel costs). Even though six of the fifteen interviewees had left Cuba at some point in their lives, none had been able to fund the trip themselves.

5.2 Hopelessness and better jobs abroad

Celia, the woman I rented a room from in Havana while I was doing my research, fears her son, Juan José will leave Cuba in the next few years. “It’s not so bad here,” she told me one night while making yucca fritters in the kitchen. “Juan José is all I have left

in Cuba. My sister and her children are in Miami and my other son moved to Spain. I mean, here I have my own house, a good job, a college degree, but I only make 300 CUP per month (roughly \$12 USD). Juan José just wants to be able to buy material things like in the United States.” In 1996, with the passage of the Helms-Burton Act, the US effectively tightened the economic embargo to include sanctions against US trade partners also trading with Cuba (United States Congress, 1996). This severely limited Cuba’s ability to import essential goods and technology such as foodstuffs, clothing, and medical equipment. Celia’s son, Juan José is an information systems engineer studying at the University of Havana with one year left before earning his degree and does not have much hope for his occupational future. “Because this country lacks the technology and infrastructure to make many advancements in the field of computer science, my degree is not very useful here,” he confessed that same evening while chewing on a piece of fried yucca. He acknowledged that the US would be one of the best places to work in his field, but said he preferred to go to Spain, where his brother currently lives. Our conversation then briefly shifted to the Spanish economy and the lack of job prospects for young people there. Juan José revealed that his brother assured him “he could easily find a computer related job.” Whether this is true or not is irrelevant; Juan José was confident that his social capital, his family tie in Spain, was all the support he would need to move if he did choose to emigrate after graduating.

Over the last fifty-five years huge numbers of highly skilled, college-educated Cubans like Juan José have emigrated seeking better-paying jobs abroad. Neoclassical Economic Theory posits that migration decisions are made at the individual level based on a rational cost-benefit analysis of wage differentials between origin and destination

countries (Massey et al., 1993). A Cuban woman named Silvia on my flight to Cuba revealed that she made a similar analysis when she decided to immigrate to Canada. Once she received her degree in software engineering from the University of Matanzas in Cuba, she applied for a permanent work visa and was accepted. After two years of waiting, she said, “The process was very easy. They [her employer] paid for my plane ticket, found me housing and helped me out financially while I adjusted.” Silvia has been living in Toronto for six years now and had just gone back to visit her family in Matanzas, Cuba for the first time when I met her. She said she never plans to move back because “being a software engineer, I would never have the same kind of job opportunity in Cuba that I have in Toronto.” If it were not for her employer, she said she could have never afforded to leave.

Interestingly, almost every Cuban I talked to complained that state salaries were too low, and needed to be raised in order for travel to be a possibility. Neoclassical Economic Theory would assert that this is a driving mechanism of Cuban migration desires. Ironically, salary increases are one of the last policy reforms in the *lineamientos* set to take place. Carlos used an analogy to help convey the weak purchasing power of his salary and why foreign economies attract so many Cuban migrants. By converting his monthly salary into soft drinks, Carlos calculated that each month he earns enough to buy about 48 soft drinks, whereas some of Cuba’s poorest earn the equivalent of ten soft drinks monthly.⁸ He, like other Cubans who have interacted with tourists, understood the income differential between Cubans and Americans and wanted to emphasize the absurdity of his \$15 monthly salary.

⁸ Carlos said he earns 400 CUP each month, or roughly 15 USD.

For comparison, in order to even be considered for a US immigrant visa, Cubans must undergo an interview, the requirement for which is to pay a non-refundable deposit of \$160 at the United States Interest Section in Havana. That means if Carlos were to interview and get rejected he would lose over a year's salary. Unfortunately, this happened to his mother, Eva, in November 2013. Holding back tears of frustration, she told me that she regretted telling the truth in her interview. When asked by the non-Cuban and non-American⁹ interviewer why she wanted to go to the United States, Eva told the interviewer that her daughter lived in Miami and that she wanted to meet her newborn niece and nephew. Despite justifying that she honestly had no desire to emigrate, the elderly female interviewer denied the visa request. "Perhaps most people lie," Eva grumbled. "Either way, I never got the \$160 back. It was a huge sacrifice I made for my family." The structurally low salaries controlled by the central government prevent even people with high levels of human capital, like Silvia, Juan José, and Celia, from earning a living wage. The US trade embargo has a role in Cuba's inability to advance technologically as well, by restricting the island's access to necessary equipment and information. These aspects make Cuba seem as if it were lagging ten years behind the US's rapidly digitalizing culture.

5.3 Tourism and the introduction of relative deprivation

Despite the embargo, tourism has helped break the island's global isolation, making the cosmopolitan Cubans I talked to in Havana strikingly aware of the economic and material disparity between their lives and those of the people coming to visit. The New Economics of Labor Migration (NELM) explains that migration decisions are made

⁹ Eva thought it was strange that the interviewer was neither Cuban nor American.

by family or kinship groups and their broader social networks, based on maximizing expected incomes and minimizing risks associated with market failures (Massey et al., 1993). While it is beyond the scope of this thesis to discuss all of the specific socio-economic factors determining migrants' decision-making, it is significant to note that the NELM posits, "Households send workers abroad not only to improve income in absolute terms, but also to increase income relative to other households and hence to reduce their relative deprivation compared with some reference group" (Massey 1993, pp. 438). This sense of relative deprivation,¹⁰ as compared to the rest of the world, arises because of Cuba's reliance on tourism to keep its economy afloat¹¹.

Tourism has contributed to both the perceived sense of relative deprivation compared to foreigners, and actual income differentials between Cubans working in tourism and those who are not. The 1990s brought an influx of tourists into the country, increasing from just 270,000 to over 1.1 million during the period of 1990 to 1997 alone (Hudson, 2001). Since then, growing numbers of Cubans have been exposed to the outside world's culture and money. In particular, Cubans working in the tourist sector and interacting with foreigners on a regular basis can more easily access CUC, the tourist currency, primarily because of tips (Hudson, 2001). These citizens are then able to pay for goods and services sold only in the CUC, further segmenting society and creating what Hudson (2001) calls "tourism apartheid." Similarly, all Cubans begin to perceive their relative deprivation as tourists enter non-"tourist only" spaces. Despite attempts by

¹⁰ Relative deprivation is defined as "the experience of being deprived of something to which one believes to be entitled. It refers to the discontent people feel when they compare their positions to others and realize that they have less of what they believe themselves to be entitled than those around them" (Relative deprivation, 2013, p. 1484).

¹¹ Gross income from Cuba's tourist sector rose from \$234,400 in 1990 to 1.54 million in 1997 (Hudson, 2001, pp. 377).

the military police to keep Cubans and foreigners separate, interactions with foreigners have proved difficult to control; thus, when Cubans observe tourists walking through Havana listening to iPods, wearing trendy clothes, and carrying more than \$12 in their pockets, they are reminded of the materials their own lives are lacking.

One evening while I was transcribing interviews on my computer in the living room of the casa I stayed in, Yalia, the 51-year-old mother of one of my closest Cuban friends, stopped by for a visit. Glancing from the iPhone in my hand being used as a Spanish dictionary and then to my shiny silver MacBook Pro resting on my lap, she asked me, “¿Cuánto cuesta?” (How much does that cost?). I hesitantly choked out the response, “Casi un mil” (almost one thousand dollars), deeply embarrassed by her wide eyes and the look of resentment on her face. While her son, Reinaldo, has an iPhone that he bought from someone who illegally imported it for sale on the black market, this simple question underscored the stark difference between our respective economic situations. A trip through the Miami airport’s international terminal is enough to portray the material deprivation experienced in Cuba, as friends and relatives line up at security with cartfuls of flat screen TVs, computers, *quinceañera* dresses, and kitchen appliances to take down to family in Cuba.

5.4 A new socialist inequality

Low salaries, the necessity of social capital, and the economic segregation enabled by the dual currency system and tourism combine to make travel impossible for Cubans “following the rules” and abstaining from black market activities such as street hustling and stealing from the workplace. Marco, a 23-year-old mechanical engineering

student articulated the inequity of the reforms to me while we sat on the Malecón¹² one evening. Watching a teenager do a kick flip on his skateboard, he said: “[The reforms] are good changes, but for Cubans who have a little more money, people who have good jobs, like businessmen and members of the government, or people who work in hotels...” After pausing for a moment, as if to make sure no one was listening, he continued, “and for people who do illegal jobs, you understand me? Jobs that sell things ‘*por la izquierda*.’”¹³ I nodded, well aware that some Cubans steal from their workplaces and sell the items for personal profit. “These are the people who live better in Cuba, inventing, surviving just the same,” Marco went on, “but they don’t want to work hard at a job, and for this people don’t want to work legally in Cuba.” His explanation was similar to what I heard from other Cuban youth; the reforms have little effect on the day-to-day lives of average people in Cuba, forcing many to continue working ‘*por la izquierda*.’

As noted in Table 1.0 on page 5, the Special Period emergency return to free market ideology in the early nineties included the reintroduction of international tourism as a means to prevent economic catastrophe (Roland, 2011). With this came the dollarization of the economy, the creation of the tourist currency, and the acceptance of foreign direct investment (ibid.). Despite the government’s efforts, various anti-socialist activities emerged such as prostitution, street hustling, and black market participation. Leaders of the regime believed the “‘backwards’ step on the path toward communism to be temporary—a Special Period of the Revolution” (ibid. p. 13). However, the reforms outlined in the *lineamientos* are far more liberal and reminiscent of an invisible hand than

¹² The Malecón is the seaside cement boardwalk extending eight kilometers (5 miles) along the Gulf of Mexico at Havana’s northern edge. It serves as a very important social space where citizens can walk, run, fish, relax, hang out, and people-watch.

¹³ While the phrase “*por la izquierda*” can refer to any illegal work, here Marco was referring to Cubans who steal from their workplaces and sell the items for personal profit on the black market.

any of pragmatist shifts seen to date, and they are silently dividing Cuba's purported egalitarian society. When I asked Marco if it was easier to travel since the migration law was passed he said, "It is easier when you have a friend abroad, they tell you many good things, and they can send you money, or help you with a business affair." Cubans understand that having friends and family in other countries or partaking the informal economy "*por la izquierda*" (literally meaning 'by the left hand') gives certain citizens better access to the more valuable convertible peso (CUC), and thus greater ability to afford leaving the country. Although the government has tried to address some of the shortcomings of its prior economic model, saying the current reforms will bring Cuba up to date with the rest of the world, it has inadvertently permitted inequality to permeate the country's socialist fabric.

5.5 The superficial wrappings of a broken system

Decree Law 302's text asserts the policy's explicit objectives, stating that the amendment to the 1978 Migration Law is "designed to preserve the workforce trained for the social, economic and scientific-technical development of the country" (Cuban Ministry of Justice, 2012). If the true intent of the migration reform is to slow emigration, particularly the economy-damaging brain drain, then addressing these economic determinants of migration and creating more incentives to stay and work in the country are vital to the success of the policy and the broader economy. The reforms laid out in the *lineamientos* attempt to make Cuba a more hospitable place for its citizenry to live by attracting foreign direct investment, lifting consumer prohibitions (i.e. owning cell phones, staying in tourist-only hotels, and purchasing personal computers), licensing small businesses, and permitting free-market car and home sales (Peters, 2012a).

However, Cubans do not seem convinced by these diversions, the superficial wrapping paper put up by the regime to distract from larger structural, and perhaps political, issues.

Of the thirteen interviewees I asked, all thirteen said that the reforms were unfair in some way or another. A 23-year-old student of Spanish Literature, Julián explained that he felt little empowerment from the reforms. “They are just a way of continuing an image. It’s like when you paint the front of a house a bright new color,” he laughed, “and then you walk inside and everything is destroyed!” He went on to explain that the rich people in Cuba benefit the most from the economic restructuring. “They only help a minority of people. It’s a way for the government and their friends to stay rich. For them, the reforms are significant because these people have lived in an unproductive country for so long, they can now use their money to make more money.” Shockingly, in a purportedly egalitarian socialist country, grievances such as these and distrust of the government were not at all uncommon in my interviews.

To compare the perspective of Cuba’s youth with the older generation, I asked Yalia, the mother of my friend Reinaldo, how she felt about the reforms, and she too lamented that her salary was too low to ever allow her to travel. “In theory [the reforms] are good” she noted, “but in reality they don’t have a big influence on the lives of Cubans. They don’t really change much for the average person.” What was more important, she explained, was changing the way *they*, tapping her shoulders¹⁴, think. “The revolutionary leaders still have an elitist attitude that they are smarter and better than common Cubans like me for example.” The country’s increasing inequality in recent years has not gone unnoticed by scholars studying Cuban society. But, during my

¹⁴ Silently tapping one’s shoulders is a common way that Cubans will refer to or complain about the government, without explicitly saying so.

interviews the topic never came up until I specifically asked about it, as if discussion of personal inequity in a socialist country was forbidden. Respondents all consistently blamed their low government salaries and the dual currency system for their inability to purchase imported household items like furniture, home appliances and quality-manufactured products (Grogg, 2013). In another interview with a 53-year-old individual, María agreed that the reforms were unequal, “but so is the world. Total equality doesn’t exist,” she qualified. She restated the same grievance as almost all the other interviewees, that even though the reforms were an “attempt to equalize [Cuba] with the rest of the world,” they were bound to be more beneficial to some than to others.

5.6 “*Condenados*” (Condemned): physical and ideological entrapment

Perhaps it was her age that had hardened María to the realities of life in Cuba, for she appeared to have accepted the impossibility of meaningful political and economic change. The youth however, expressed markedly more anguish and frustration with how the slow pace and inequality of the reforms prevented them from being able to leave the country. Cundo was a 28-year-old artist I interviewed who illustrated these feelings both verbally and through his paintings. On my last afternoon in Havana, I was walking to an air-conditioned hotel to check my email and confirm my flight time when I passed him and a few friends sitting outside a bodega. After telling Cundo about my research, he told me his artwork was the “visual expression of what I was investigating.” I agreed to check out his studio, and as he showed me his paintings I asked him several interview questions.

He reiterated much of what I had already heard from other respondents, such as government selfishness and the slowness and inequality of the reforms. However, when I

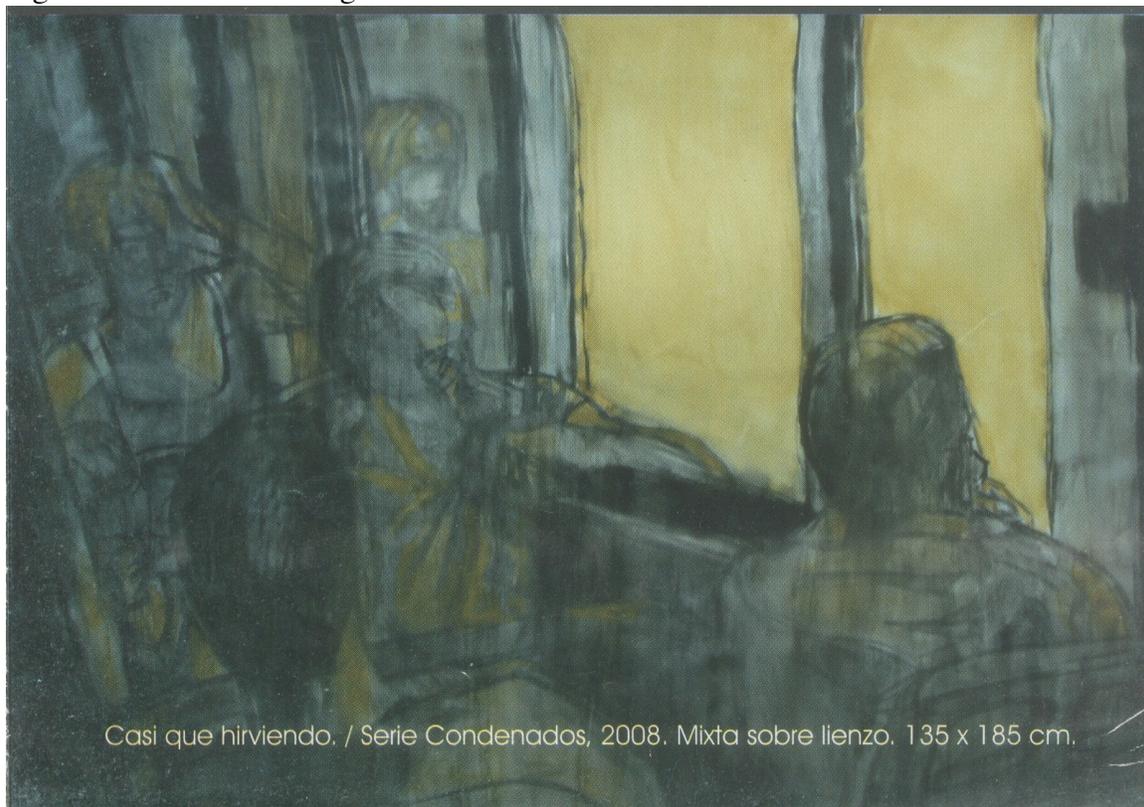
asked him about the migration policy specifically, he said, “It doesn’t exist. It’s a political game. Yes, there are changes, but only on paper and in theory. Cubans’ ability to travel now is no different than before.” He then revealed paintings from an exhibit he had recently presented in Havana, depicting the despair and entrapment he experiences in Cuba, unable to express himself and effect real change in the government.

Figure 3.0 “Some Day We Will Arrive”



Source: (*Cundo, 2006)

Figure 4.0 “Almost Boiling”



Source: (*Cundo, 2006)

Figures 3.0 and 4.0 depict the mood experienced inside of Havana’s city buses.

The passengers’ faces are devoid of passion and emotion. The contrast of darkness inside and color outside, through the buses’ windows, conveys the hopelessness and confinement felt by many poorer Cubans. Color is only accessible by passage through a window, and happiness through a political border. Having felt he was always being lied to, Cundo told me he wanted to travel, “to see and learn the truth about the real world.” Talking about media censorship he added, “I wish for a free country with freedom of expression and free speech. Here, I cannot write everything I want to say, and that is why I paint.” The brochure from his exhibit reads:

In our context, the human has become increasingly habituated to his everyday life. The rhythm of contemporary society has led him to focus more on the practical consideration of life. Dreams, illusions, chimaeras; the logical desire to break from the rules and conventions of his daily life,

and of searching beyond their essence, have stepped into the background. 'Condemned' is the metaphor for the gray society I encounter constantly in public spaces, such as the bus. It is a glance at that desolate context, deprived of dreams or hopes of a future. It's the condemnation of having nowhere to go. (*Cundo, 2006)

Reading the brochure and looking at the paintings, I realized that Cundo was right, his art *was* the visual expression of what I was researching. Although the government appears to be making progressive structural changes to the economy in order to improve the lives of its citizenry, they are mostly cosmetic, perhaps aimed at silencing the international community's accusations of human rights violations. Unfortunately, the regime has underestimated the intelligence of its people. The travel reform is not fooling Cubans. Covering up the economic and social issues with the veil of migratory freedom is simply painting the outside of a destroyed house.

Chapter 6

Conclusion

Since Cuba's revolution, the country's political economic ideology has shifted between phases of "pragmatist" and "idealist" principles. The former, market-oriented cycles increased in intensity over time and the latter, anti-market cycles decreased over time. Understanding the reasons and driving forces behind the consistent fluctuation from anti-market to pro-market reform helps contextualize the significance of Cuba's current situation. The current phase of "pragmatist" reforms, those described in the *lineamientos*, are very clearly the most radically liberal political economic changes to be suggested since Fidel Castro's communist revolution triumphed and the US-backed former

president, Fulguencio Batista fled the island. This current stage of economic “updating” arrived immediately after Raúl Castro transitioned into the role of Cuba’s president and head of state. He seems to have realized that the forces of globalization require substantial political economic restructuring in order to lift the country from sustained economic life support. However, unlike the rapid post-Soviet privatization of Russia and other members of the former USSR, the Cuban government spent four years (2007-2011) studying and debating the pressing needs of society and the economy before the Congress ratified the guidelines laid out in the *lineamientos*. Western opinions of the proposed reforms vary; on one hand, many investors are eager to seize the opportunities of the newly emerging Cuban market, while on the other, historians and anthropologists fear the Americanization of this untouched time capsule of the Caribbean. Regardless, things on the island are undoubtedly changing.

Likewise, Cuban politics cannot be discussed without mentioning the topic of migration. Since its days as a Spanish colony, Cuba has witnessed the ebb and flow of people moving back and forth across its coastal island boundary. Pre-revolutionary economic and political ties with the United States made Miami and New York popular destinations for Cubans crossing the Florida Straits.¹⁵ However, when Fidel’s socialist revolution triumphed and the US severed diplomatic relations with the country, migration became a weapon of geopolitical influence. The United States created preferential immigration policies that enabled the easy admission and naturalization of Cubans fleeing the nation’s new socialist administration. In response, Fidel permitted massive departures of dissidents during key periods of political and economic upheaval, using

¹⁵ The Florida Straits is the body of water that separates Cuba from the Florida Keys.

state-permitted emigration as a safety valve to prevent the destabilization of his revolution.

Currently, the impact of a fifty-year embargo, inconsistent political management of the economy, the creation of a dual currency system, and the geopolitical tactics encouraging mass emigration have, in combination, created a unique social and economic situation in Cuba. The regime's official loosening of travel restrictions appears to be a significant human rights offering. However, the more opaque reality is that the right to travel is not accessible to all Cubans. Social capital, remittances, tourist-sector jobs, government appointment, and hustling skills all serve as avenues toward membership in Cuba's emerging upper class. Citizens without these privileges are forced to survive on their pitifully low salaries and dwindling state food rations. While it may appear that the island has opened the doors for people wishing to travel, their socio-economic condition keeps many citizens trapped in Cuba.

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Appendix A

Interview Questions

Prior Desires:

- Have you ever thought about leaving Cuba?
- Would you want to leave permanently or only for a short time?
- To where would you emigrate or visit?
- Why do you think so many Cubans have immigrated to the United States?
- What are their reasons for leaving Cuba? What draws them to the United States?
- How do young Cubans imagine the United States?

Economic Reforms:

- What is your opinion of the “*lineamientos*”?
- Do you think they are effective? Are they accomplishing their intended goals?
- Do you feel empowered by the economic reforms? Do you have access to the benefits the reforms are supposed to create?
- Or do you feel limited/held back by the authoritarian control of the government?
- Do you think the reforms will bring more money into the pockets of average Cubans? Or do they disproportionately affect certain Cubans?
- Do you think these reforms will provide the same opportunities to Cubans that are available in the United States?

New Travel Policy:

- What do you think of the policy announced in January 2013 about the freedom to travel abroad?
- Is it easier to leave now?
- Does everyone have the same ability to leave? Or are some people still prohibited from leaving?
- How does the policy affect *you*, personally?
- Has it influenced your desire to leave Cuba?
- How have your desires changed since the travel policy was officially announced?
- Does it make you want to leave permanently or just temporarily for tourist purposes?
- Do the *lineamientos* affect your choice/desire to travel?
- Do you want to stay in the country to take advantage of the economic liberalizations?
- Or is the United States/another country with a free market economy still a more attractive location for earning money?
- Is it more or less appealing to stay in Cuba since the *lineamientos* were announced?
- What about since the travel policy was passed?
- How do you think this travel policy will affect Cuba's future of increasing economic productivity?

Do you think people will continue to leave? Or will they want to stay in order to take advantage of the new freedoms in Cuba?

- Do you think more people will leave for a short time, earn money abroad, and then come back to Cuba?

Do you think the travel freedom was just a political move to increase political approval of the Castros?