Searching for Civil Society: Cuba’s NGOs

“Revolución es…convicción profunda que no existe fuerza en el mundo capaz de aplastar la fuerza de la verdad y las ideas” – Fidel Castro

My study of Cuba’s nongovernmental organizations began with a clearly stated research question. I discovered, however, that this question was accompanied by, and perhaps even grounded in, a series of unconscious or unexamined assumptions. These assumptions went unwritten and overlooked, such that the research process was not only about discovering the unknown but also recognizing what was so familiar that it passed unnoticed into the research design. The following is an excerpt from my grant application:

My focus will be the identification of practices, relationships and discourses through which NGOs contribute to, consolidate, expand or complicate a Cuban notion of civil society. Thus the research will not only explore the methods and objectives of NGO programs but also how these programs are perceived by those involved. What vision of civil society is being constructed as they work? How self-conscious is this construction? How does this vision negotiate the gaps between discourse and practice? Where does the community fit in?

In this formulation the NGOs are the unequivocal agents. I portray NGOs not as the products of civil society but rather its authors and sculptors. The members of this “civil society” are injected almost as an afterthought.

In Cuba, I learned, the community doesn’t simply “fit in”. My approach, in retrospect, was an expression of a North American bias that sees NGOs in the post neoliberal era as powerful institutional actors, who, irrespective of the positive or negative valence assigned to their contributions, act upon society and independently of governmental restraint. This was never a view of NGOs that I wholeheartedly adhered
to, and much less one I would have consciously applied to Cuba, but one whose influence is nonetheless evident.

Accordingly, the most significant result of my research was the complete inversion (and ultimate deconstruction) of my naïve conception of the power dynamic. NGOs, my informants insisted, were not responsible for “constructing” a particular vision of civil society; after all, Cuban civil society existed prior to the organizations themselves. Rather NGOs functioned as dynamic organisms with the resources and know-how to address specific issues identified by the community. NGOs were more flexible than the state, more adaptable to the changing needs of the population. In other words, a space was allocated to NGOs in so far as they served the interests of civil society. Clearly by asking how these interests are identified and who articulates them we find ways in which any professed hierarchy begins to dissolve, and in the end we remind ourselves of what we knew all along, that power always works in both directions.

Nevertheless, the interviews I conducted generated a new series of questions. For example, rather than searching for “practices, relationships and discourses through which NGOs contribute to, consolidate, expand or complicate a Cuban notion of civil society”, I now wonder “what are the practices, relationships and discourses through which civil society is redefining the Cuban concept of an NGO?”. A visit to the used book store yielded one such discourse from several old issues of Temas magazine, in which contemporary Cuban intellectuals regularly publish their writings on civil society in roundtable format. Undoubtedly there are others.
Unfortunately, I was forced to abort my study in the early stages when Cuban immigration in Santiago caught wind of it and warned me that any research conducted while traveling with a tourist visa would constitute a violation of Cuban migratory law. Not wanting to jeopardize the possibility of returning to the island for further research in the future, I desisted. When subsequent questioning by immigration officials revealed that my phone had been bugged, my decision indeed proved a wise one. Needless to say, this experience in itself taught me much about the difficulties of producing scholarship in Cuba, the differences in contemporary meaning of revolution between the capital and the eastern provinces, and the near impossibility of escaping the tired dynamic of U.S.-Cuban relations. As far as civil society is concerned, I discovered that despite an academic discourse that speaks openly of the existence of Cuban civil society, despite my informant’s assurances that the term was not taboo, coming from a North American it was enough to mobilize an official investigation into my intentions. Given the existing polemic produced in Miami that portrays civil society as a catalyst for regime change this was hardly surprising, yet my understanding of the context only augmented my frustration. I had in fact gone to Cuba to refocus the debate, to explore an alternate vision of Cuban civil society in which I took the revolution at its word, if only to see where it would lead. I, like the Cuban intellectuals I was reading, believed in a Gramscian interpretation of the term in which civil society need not be a bounded category but rather could operate in ways that both overlapped with and were distinct from the State. In this light, my investigation of how NGOs contributed to this understanding was a project highly consistent with the professed aims of the revolution. To discover, therefore, that
the bipolar blockade logic was “capaz de aplastar la fuerza de la verdad y las ideas” was, unfulfilled research goals aside, both extremely revealing and terribly disheartening.

I left Cuba with many unanswered questions and it remains to be seen how answerable they prove to be from afar. My investigation was most valuable, however, in compelling me to approach my subject from both ends and to realize that, in Cuba, there is not one truth but several.