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Between mobility and immobility: the Cuban experience in the era of the pandemic and digital activism

Entre mobilidades e imobilidades: a experiência cubana na era da pandemia e do ativismo digital

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Abstract

This article examines the mobility and immobility of the Cuban population, focusing on recent migratory flows to Brazil (2013 to the present) through the lens of the *crisis migration* concept (McAdam, 2013). The methodology combines bibliographic analysis and data on Cuban migration to Brazil. The study analyzes Cuban migration policy, highlighting structures of discrimination and the moralization of these flows. It also considers key turning points in this "migration crisis," such as the role of digital technologies and public demonstrations in Cuban social mobilization, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, which worsened the island's economic conditions and triggered the largest exodus in the country's history. Finally, it discusses Brazil's emergence as a new destination for Cuban migrants, with a significant increase in asylum requests, exploring some of the factors influencing this choice and its social and political implications.

Keywords: Cuban migration; crisis migration; Cuban migration policy; street protests; cyberactivism.

Resumo

Este artigo examina as mobilidades e imobilidades da população cubana, com foco nos fluxos migratórios recentes para o Brasil (2013 até o presente), utilizando o conceito de *migração de crise* (McAdam, 2013). A metodologia combina análise bibliográfica e dados sobre migração cubana ao Brasil. O estudo analisa a política migratória cubana, destacando as estruturas de discriminação e a moralização desses fluxos. Aborda também como pontos de inflexão dessa "crise migratória" o papel das tecnologias digitais e das manifestações públicas na mobilização social cubana, especialmente durante a pandemia de COVID-19, que agravou as condições econômicas na ilha e impulsionou o maior êxodo da história do país. Por fim, discute a emergência do Brasil como um novo destino para migrantes cubanos, com um aumento expressivo nos pedidos de refúgio, explorando alguns fatores que influenciam essa escolha e suas implicações sociais e políticas.

Palavras-chave: migração cubana; migração de crise; política migratória cubana; manifestações de rua; ciberativismo.

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Introduction[2]

The mobilities and immobilities of the Cuban population are phenomena deeply rooted in the historical and political relations among Cuba, the United States, and, more recently, Brazil. Since the Cuban Revolution of 1959, hostile interventions and U.S. influence (including the longest-standing economic embargo in modern history), attempted invasions and subversive actions against the regime, have profoundly shaped Cuba's socioeconomic and migratory trajectories. These pressures have resulted in continuous emigration as Cubans seek improved living conditions and political freedom.[3] In parallel, Cuban migration policy has been continually recalibrated to respond to both internal and external pressures, influencing how migrants are perceived and treated both on and off the island.

Drawing on McAdam's (2013) concept of crisis migration and recent data showing an uptick in this phenomenon in Brazil, this article examines Cuban migratory flows over the past decade, with special attention to the period during and after the COVID-19 pandemic.[4] Crises are understood here as central to these dynamics, as contexts of instability directly impact living conditions and drive displacement. This concept encompasses both sudden events and gradual processes of environmental, social, economic, and political deterioration, positioning migration as a survival strategy marked by uncertainty, urgency, and fear–whether rooted in political repression, economic insecurity, or institutional violence.

In Cuba's case, decades of accumulated uncertainty, urgency, and fear have played a decisive role in intensifying displacement. While the U.S. economic blockade is a recognized structural factor, this analysis extends beyond it to consider the interplay of political, social, and subjective elements that also drive migration, revealing a more complex dynamic than a purely economic explanation would suggest. The research employs a qualitative approach, combining document analysis, secondary data, and interviews.[5]

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[2] I am grateful to the reviewers for their valuable comments, suggestions, and critiques, which contributed significantly to the revision and improvement of this text.

[3] For a more in-depth analysis of the impact of American imperialism on Cuba, readers are encouraged to consult works such as *Cuba: A revolution in the world* by Jonathan C. Brown (2017), *The economic war against Cuba* by Salim Lamrani (2013), and *The Cuba wars: Fidel Castro, the United States, and the next Revolution* by Daniel P. Erikson (2008), which address the consequences of United States interventionist policies on the island.

[4] The concept of migration encompasses human movements for a variety of reasons, which may be voluntary or forced. Forced migration refers to compulsory movements driven by persecution, conflict, environmental disasters, or severe economic and social crises, in which individuals have no choice but to leave their countries of origin. Refuge, in turn, is a specific legal category recognized under international law, applying to people fleeing persecution on the grounds of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion, as defined by the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees. In the analysis proposed here, the notion of crisis migration includes both asylum seekers and refugees, as well as migrants who, although they may have initially entered the country through regular channels such as work or study, ultimately resort to various strategies to remain after their contracts or scholarships end. This approach seeks to highlight the fluidity of migratory categories and the overlaps between them, acknowledging that migrants' experiences do not always fit neatly within institutional definitions.

[5] Although this work does not make direct use of primary data, our ongoing research also draws on information obtained through participant observation and 14 interviews with Cuban migrants residing in Brazil. Of these interviewees, eight arrived in 2023, two in 2024, and the remainder after

In recent years, expanded access to digital technologies and the rise of street protests have redefined forms of social mobilization, amplifying demands for political change and broadening the motivations for migration. Simultaneously, recent reforms to Cuban migration policy have altered the possibilities for leaving and returning to the country, significantly reshaping patterns of movement.

This study addresses crisis migration from the point of origin, focusing on the structural factors that trigger mobility, rather than privileging analyses centered on receiving societies. McAdam (2013) warns that nation-states may instrumentalize the notion of crisis to justify restrictive measures, thereby undermining rights and rendering migrants' legitimate claims invisible.[6] Moreover, framing migration as a state of crisis can reinforce stereotypes that cast migrants as threats or potential enemies, diverting attention from the structural conditions that force their departure (Moreira; Borba, 2021).

A crucial, often overlooked aspect is forced immobility – the experience of those who, due to lack of resources or opportunities, are compelled to remain in their country of origin (Betts, 2013; Black & Collyer, 2014; Martin, Weerasinghe & Taylor, 2014). The impacts of crisis migration also fall on those left behind, who face extreme vulnerability and a lack of institutional protection (Moreira & Borba, 2021).

Cuban migration illustrates this duality between those able to leave and those forced to stay. For many, remaining is not a choice, but the result of economic and political constraints, often rendering them even more vulnerable than emigrants. This reality underscores the link between humanitarian crises and mass displacement (Black & Collyer, 2014). At the same time, support networks among migrants and their relatives who remain on the island play a crucial role in maintaining ties and identities, challenging the notion of migration as a definitive and one-dimensional process. These transnational connections demonstrate that both leaving and staying result from a complex interplay between structural factors and individual decisions (McAdam, 2013).

By relating Cuban migration to the concept of crisis migration (McAdam, 2013), this study broadens the debate on forced displacement in authoritarian and protracted crisis contexts. It interrogates the dynamics of mobility, immobility, and migration control in contemporary Cuba, highlighting the humanitarian crisis exacerbated by the pandemic, the economic blockade, and the rise of social mobilization both online and in the streets. Additionally, it emphasizes the central role of migration policy reforms in intensifying these flows.

2014. They come from various regions of Cuba and include both men and women between the ages of 19 and 53, with different educational backgrounds, migratory trajectories, and forms of entry into Brazil. Most reside in São Paulo, while some are in Santa Catarina and Minas Gerais. Although the data from these interviews are not directly analyzed in this article, they contribute to the empirical foundation of the research and to a broader understanding of the ongoing migratory phenomenon. To reinforce this perspective, we have included footnotes throughout the text presenting the profiles of some of these interviewees, contextualizing their experiences and migratory trajectories.

[6] An example of such policies is the tightening of restrictions on the entry of migrants adopted, above all, by several European countries. In the United States, during Donald Trump's second term, anti-immigration policy has been one of the main pillars of his government agenda, reinforcing restrictive measures and significantly impacting migratory mobility. Among these actions, the use of Guantánamo Bay to detain immigrants stands out, highlighting a harsher approach to border control and violations of human rights. For further information, see: *Análise: medidas de Trump causam medo e desencorajam novos imigrantes* (Análise, 2025). *The Conversation: Trump inherits the Guantánamo prison, complete with 4 'forever prisoners'* (Hajjar, 2025).

The article is structured in three main sections: a brief historical overview of Cuban migration policy and its implications; a discussion of mobility and immobility in the current context; and an analysis of data illustrating Brazil's growing role as a destination for Cuban migrants. Through this approach, the article seeks to elucidate the factors perpetuating Cuban mobility and immobility, and the social and political consequences of these movements for Brazil.

Cuban migration policy: structures of discrimination and the moralization of migration flows

Cuban migration policy stands as one of the most complex and controversial areas of the country's legislation, with profound implications for the rights of citizens both on the island and abroad (Cobiella, 2017). The historical interplay between Cuba and the United States has been fundamental in shaping these policies, reflecting an ongoing negotiation of political, economic, and social interests. For decades, the United States encouraged Cuban emigration – both legal and illegal – as part of its strategy to destabilize the country, foment social dissatisfaction, and undermine the Cuban government (Urrutia Barroso, 1997). The "wet foot, dry foot" policy, in effect until 2017, allowed Cubans who reached U.S. soil to remain and eventually obtain legal residency. Its repeal by President Barack Obama, coupled with Cuba's willingness to accept deported nationals, marked a significant shift in migration dynamics between the two countries.

Cuba's Migration Law No. 1312 (Cuba, 2015) regulated the control of Cuban citizens' entry and exit, requiring various types of passports[7] and, for ordinary passports, additional entry or exit permits issued by the Ministry of the Interior. In 2012, substantial reforms through Decree-Law No. 302 and Decree No. 305 eliminated the need for an invitation letter and exit permit, easing previously rigid migration rules.

These changes occurred in a context where emigration had long been a sensitive issue in Cuban society. The Cuban diaspora became embedded in the ethos of the Revolution, evolving into an endogenous and endemic phenomenon (Aja Díaz *et al.*, 2017). From the 1960s onward, Cuban emigrants were branded as unpatriotic and often labeled with pejorative terms such as "*gusanos*" (worms), "traitors," and "nationals abroad" (Rodríguez Santos & Cogo, 2021). This stigmatizing environment paralleled internal sabotage attempts against the Revolution, frequently financed by the Cuban exile community in Florida and encouraged by U.S. foreign policy (Grenier, 2015). In 1981, the *Cuban American National Foundation* (CANF) was established, playing an active role in supporting opposition to the Cuban regime.

Beginning in 1994, Cuba undertook a reassessment of its migration policy during the "Special Period in Time of Peace," which defined the 1990s. The economic crisis triggered by the collapse of the socialist bloc, compounded by the U.S. embargo, led to drastic reductions in food and fuel imports, resulting in acute food shortages and increased reliance on remittances from Cuban emigrants (Goyanna, 2017)[8]. As part

[7] They are: "a) *Pasaporte Diplomático* (Diplomatic Passport), b) *Pasaporte de Servicio* (Service Passport), c) *Pasaporte Oficial* (Official Passport), d) *Pasaporte Corriente* (Ordinary Passport), e) *Pasaporte de Marino* (Seaman's Passport)" (Cobiella, 2017, p. 163).

[8] Over the decades, Cuba has faced various crises that have resulted in significant migratory flows, shaping the island's relationship with its diaspora. Among the main exoduses are the Camarioca

of this policy shift, the Directorate of Consular Affairs and Cuban Residents Abroad (DACCRE) was established, along with other representative bodies for the Cuban emigrant community worldwide (Mena, 2009). These transformations fostered a new, less politicized narrative around emigration, focusing primarily on economic aspects and presenting migration as a "temporary" phenomenon (Aja Díaz *et al*., 2017).

Nevertheless, for many, the urgency to migrate is immediate and pressing, driven by deteriorating living conditions in a hostile and/or economically untenable environment. Yet, this need is often thwarted by restrictive policies imposed both by the Cuban state and by other countries, such as the United States, which severely limit mobility. In addition to migration restrictions, the decades-long U.S. economic blockade further exacerbates Cuba's internal crisis, restricting access to essential goods and intensifying economic hardship, which in turn drives migration. Thus, the immobility of those who remain against their will highlights the complexity of control mechanisms, demonstrating how nation-states can restrict freedom of movement while deepening the vulnerability of those unable to leave (Moreira & Borba, 2021). Forced immobility, therefore, is a central dimension of Cuban migration dynamics.

Historically, Cuban migration law differentiated between citizens based on migration *status* and place of residence. Those who emigrated and failed to return within 24 months were classified as deserters and automatically lost their civil rights.[9] Health professionals who abandoned overseas missions faced forced exile, barred from returning to Cuba for up to eight years – a practice initiated in response to U.S. hostility since 1959 and later institutionalized (Farber, 2023; Rodríguez Santos & Cogo, 2021).

Since 2013, Cuban emigrants have been allowed to apply for repatriation, thereby regaining legal rights and residency on the island. This process, regulated by Resolution No. 44 (Cuba, 2021), requires various documents, including proof that the repatriate will be supported by a resident in Cuba (Diversent, 2014). Repatriation has become an important avenue for those seeking to reclaim their rights as Cuban citizens, representing an attempt to mitigate the harsh migration policies of the past.

Rodríguez Santos and Cogo (2021) note a recent shift toward strengthening ties between the Cuban nation and its diaspora, particularly on digital platforms such as X (formerly Twitter) and Facebook. These interactions reflect not only a less restrictive government but also a more engaged and dynamic Cuban civil society. The active involvement of the emigrant community on these platforms helps blur the boundaries between "the people" and "emigrants"[10]. As the authors highlight, "the binary and politicized construction of the Cuban emigrant in the early years of the

exodus (1965), when around 5,000 Cubans from Matanzas province left the country, followed by the "Freedom Flights", which enabled approximately 260,000 people to leave. The Mariel Boatlift (1980), near Havana, saw about 125,000 Cubans depart for the United States and was marked by the arrival of prisoners and psychiatric hospital patients sent by Fidel Castro, which had major political repercussions. Also noteworthy is the Balsero Crisis (1994), which led to the departure of approximately 30,000 to 35,000 people who attempted to leave the island on makeshift rafts, facing great risks in the Florida Straits (Silva, 2019). Although these migrations have played an important role in shaping Cuban migration policies, they will not be addressed in this article.

[9] As of 2015, it was established that it would be possible to extend the period of stay abroad, provided there was a valid justification and upon payment of the monthly fee set by the authorities for this additional time (Rodríguez Santos & Cogo, 2021).

[10] A recent example is the mobilization led by activist Anamely Ramos, who demanded the right of all individuals to return to their country, with the support of various artists and activists in the online *#DerechoARegresar* campaign. For more information, see: https://www.martinoticias.com/a/artistas-e-intelectuales-en-apoyo-a-anamely-ramos-y-derechoaregresar/313589.html.

Revolution found, on digital platforms, new forms of expression". Despite government efforts to control the digital environment, the internet remains a principal space for the socialization of critical and dissenting voices. Online, alternative narratives circulate and gain traction, challenging state hegemony and forging new avenues for political articulation and social mobilization (Farber, 2023).[11] This coincides with the revision of outdated revolutionary moral codes, as exemplified by the rise of the hashtag *#LaPatriaSomosTodos*.

Black and Collyer (2014) argue that crisis contexts are not limited to socioeconomic or environmental crises, but also relate to the impossibility of leaving such places. Practices of immobility originate at the point of departure and persist along migration routes and in destination countries, especially where anti-migration policies are intensifying, such as in the Global North. The complexity of this issue is heightened when considering both those prevented from migrating and those who choose to stay. The former face geographic, economic, political, social, and environmental barriers to mobility, while the latter retain the freedom of choice. Although both may be equally exposed to crises, perceptions of migration urgency vary with individual experience. Thus, distinguishing between those who remain by choice and those who are compelled to stay is essential for understanding the inequalities that shape migratory dynamics, as well as the conditions of displacement and immobility. This distinction is particularly relevant not only to the Cuban context but also to broader analyses of forced migration and global immobility.

Recent Cuban legislative changes have brought some improvements but have not fundamentally altered the situation for many emigrants, who continue to face exclusion and limitations on their civil rights. According to Cobiella (2017), the repatriation process offers hope for rights restoration, but additional reforms are needed to ensure full equality and respect for the fundamental rights of all Cubans, regardless of residence.

The combination of forced immobility and the stigmatization of emigration perpetuates a crisis migration system that continues to segment and marginalize a significant portion of the Cuban population – whether by making departure difficult or by excluding those who have already emigrated.

Cuban mobility and immobility: between the pandemic, digital connections, and street protests

Technological advances have sparked a struggle in Cuba over the meaning and reach of the digital revolution. According to Henken (2021), an analysis of events such as the San Isidro Movement (MSI)[12], the protests of November 27, 2020 (27N),

[11] The government's inability to exercise absolute control over the internet, unlike traditional media, enabled broader dissemination of information about the internal crisis, which mobilized the population and culminated in the July 11, 2021 (11J) demonstrations across the country (Farber, 2023) – a topic to be discussed in the next section.

[12] The San Isidro Movement, also known as MSI, is made up of a group of artists, activists, and intellectuals who advocate for freedom of expression and the defense of human rights in the country. Founded in 2018, the movement gained international attention after the arrest of some of its members in November 2020 during a peaceful demonstration in Havana (an event that became known as 25N). Since then, San Isidro has been the target of ongoing attacks and persecution by the Cuban government.

January 27, 2021 (27E), and the viral music video *Patria y Vida* (Homeland and Life)[13], reveals that internal changes and the use of technology by local actors are shaping the impact of digital technologies on Cuban society more than foreign policies.

On July 11, 2021, Cuba witnessed what was arguably one of the largest street protests in six decades[14],with thousands taking to the streets in more than 64 cities and towns, chanting "*Libertad*". These demonstrations, largely led by artists from the MSI collective in Havana, reflected growing public discontent, driven by a deepening economic crisis, frequent blackouts, and shortages of food and essential goods – many of which have been sold in foreign currencies since 2019 (Delgado, 2023)[15]. The spread of stores accepting only freely convertible currency (MLC) has exacerbated inequalities[16], creating a form of economic apartheid in which most citizens, lacking access to remittances or foreign currency, are excluded from purchasing basic goods (Herrera, 2023). The vulnerability of informal workers, who received no state support during the pandemic despite providing essential services, further intensified hardship (Herrera, 2023).

The government's response to the protests included a nationwide internet blackout, hindering the population's ability to follow developments. As historian Alina Hernández (2023) observed, "*It is impossible to know exactly what happened, because from three o'clock that afternoon, internet service was cut off in Cuba. We are a blind people, without the right to information and without the possibility to express ourselves.*"[17].

"*Patria y Vida*" (Homeland and Life), a Cuban hip-hop song circulated online, became the main slogan of the protests, serving as a critical counterpoint to the Revolution's iconic "*Patria o Muerte*" (Homeland or Death). Notably, until 2015, Cubans had no internet access, and only in 2018 did 3G and 4G mobile technologies reach six out of ten Cubans (Cuba [...], 2018). Internet access catalyzed radical political action, with intellectuals, artists, activists, and journalists using platforms such as X (formerly Twitter), Facebook, and Instagram to mobilize for protests and voice their opinions on politics, economic hardship, and widespread hunger during the COVID-19 pandemic. Civil society's active participation has transformed the production of information, playing a vital role in shaping public opinion through its plurality and verticality (Hernández, 2023).

[13] Music video available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pP9Bto5lOEQ.

[14] It is worth noting that these protests were not the first expression of discontent in Cuba, but they stood out for their scale and mass character (Delgado, 2023).

[15] This is the case of Rosalia, who held a formal job for 25 years at the state-owned tobacco company. Previously, she led a simple life but without major hardships. However, after the pandemic, the economic crisis worsened to the point of affecting her directly. Even by selling clothes to supplement her income, the money was not enough to buy food and other basic necessities. Faced with this reality, she arrived in Brazil in 2024.

[16] Freely Convertible Currency (MLC) refers to a foreign currency used in Cuba for commercial transactions, particularly in sectors dealing with imported goods and services. Introduced as a means to circumvent the island's exchange restrictions, the MLC cannot be directly exchanged for Cuban pesos (CUP) by ordinary citizens. Instead, it is used in stores selling electronics, imported food, and other consumer goods, where payments must be made in MLC-typically via prepaid bank cards or international transfers.

[17] Since the onset of the pandemic, the Cuban government has implemented Decree-Law 370 with the aim of regulating freedom of expression in the virtual sphere, seeking to assert control over the only domain that had thus far eluded its complete authority: the internet. The decree, justified by the stated need to "protect the public interest, morality, and good customs," grants the Ministry of Communications the power to fine and/or confiscate devices such as cell phones and other internet-connected equipment from individuals who express themselves in ways that contradict the official narrative or run counter to the ideological standards established by the government (Herrera, 2023).

The lyrics and video of "*Patria y Vida*" highlight the MSI's pioneering role in peacefully advocating for freedom of expression. The video ends with real footage of protests inside and outside Cuba, featuring slogans such as "*We are all San Isidro, long live free Cuba*", "*Freedom and change of government in Cuba*", and "*Freedom for all political prisoners. Long live free Cuba*".

On the MSI website, July 11, 2021 (11J)[18] is identified as "*the day we lost our fear*", marking a historical watershed in recent Cuban history. The group, led mainly by Black Cubans, declares on its website: "*we are connected*".[19].

The movement emerged in September 2018, following the approval of Decree 349[20], signed by President Miguel Díaz-Canel, which gave the Ministry of Culture authority to penalize, through cultural supervisors and inspectors, the freedom of association, expression, creation, and dissemination of art and culture – a systematic form of prior censorship of critical and autonomous artistic expression.

Using legal avenues such as communiqués and open letters to the National Assembly, intellectuals and artists voiced their concerns about the decree but received no official response. Alongside these efforts, a series of roundtable discussions (*#NoAlDecreto349*) were organized to debate the decree. This mobilization prompted the Ministry of Culture to meet with protesters and publicly announce a pause in the law's implementation, increasing the MSI's recognition within Cuban civil society and abroad.[21]

After the MSI's opposition to Decree 349, a wave of selective arrests targeted citizens labeled by the government as "deserters of the Revolution" (Álvarez, 2023).[22] Many activists and artists who have not been detained remain under constant state surveillance and face harassment, such as police summons, phone interception, and threats to their families, including the risk of losing their homes.[23]

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[18] Another significant milestone in the wave of street demonstrations was the 27N. This acronym refers to the largest gathering of artists to take place in front of a government building-the Ministry of Culture-on November 27, 2020, in protest against the closure of the MSI headquarters.

[19] The presence of Black individuals in the street demonstrations is a topic addressed in several chapters of the book *Cuba 11J: Perspectivas contrahegemónicas de las protestas sociales*, authored by Cuban intellectuals and activists who analyze the social and political dimensions of the protests. Guanche (2023) notes that the most impoverished neighborhoods – predominantly inhabited by Black and mixed-race residents – were the main epicenters of the 11J demonstrations, as these populations face the harshest housing conditions and have less access to remittances from abroad and to the internet.

[20] Access the full text of the decree at: https://derechodelacultura.org/legislacion_nacional/decreto-349-de-2018-contravenciones-de-las-regulaciones-en-materia-de-politica-cultural-sobre-la-prestacion-de-servicios-artisticos-cuba.

[21] The international response was so significant that foreign artists and writers-including Meryl Streep, Paul Auster, Orhan Pamuk, Elena Poniatowska, Isabel Allende, Zadie Smith, J. M. Coetzee, Jules Feiffer, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, and Khaled Hosseini, among others-joined together in a letter calling for an end to the repression and censorship of Cuban artists. For further information, see: https://brasil.elpais.com/internacional/2021-12-09/meryl-streep-elena-poniatowska-e-outras-300-personalidades-pedem-o-fim-da-repressao-contra-os-artistas-cubanos.html.

[22] One example is the case of Yamandu, one of our interviewees, who arrived in Brazil in December 2024. Prior to that, he spent 29 days in prison following the 11J street demonstrations. He stated that he had only been out on the streets out of concern for his mother, who worked at a gas station, emphasizing that he had no political involvement and that his routine had always been "from work to home." Yamandu also revealed that, ever since he was first fined at the age of sixteen in Varadero for speaking with tourists, he has avoided any political discussion.

[23] For further information on this topic, see: https://www.cibercuba.com/noticias/2022-05-04-u1-e208512-s27061-amplio-reportaje-television-chilena-recoge-voces-protestas.

Even among those not directly involved in the protests, there is solidarity with the demonstrators' demands for dignified living conditions, access to food, medicine, electricity, quality education and healthcare, a safe home, and the freedom to live and express themselves without fear (Pérez, 2021). Despite growing support for freedom of expression, many still fear repression[24] – not only from the government but also from ordinary citizens organized in the Committees for the Defense of the Revolution (CDRs).

A brief introduction to the CDRs is warranted, given their critical role in repressing those deemed counterrevolutionary during Cuba's social transformations. Established in 1960, the CDRs became the largest organization of the revolutionary vanguard, known as the "eyes and ears of the Revolution." The CDRs operated along three main axes: first, an organizational dimension that structured daily life, particularly on the streets and within Cuban neighborhoods; second, a political dimension, marked by ideological engagement and active grassroots mobilization – especially prominent in 1975 as the committees drew closer to the establishment of *Poder Popular (*People's Power); and third, a repressive dimension, focused on denouncing counterrevolutionary practices (Pereira Santos, 2017). In this way, the committees generated a unique and original experience, both in rural and urban settings, within the broader process of revolutionary social transformation in Cuba. As Commander Fidel Castro Ruz, then Prime Minister of the Revolutionary Government, stated in a speech delivered on September 28, 1960:

> We are going to establish a system of collective surveillance – a system of revolutionary collective vigilance! (applause) And then we'll see how the lackeys of imperialism can operate here, because, after all, we live throughout this city; there is not a single apartment building, not a single block, not a single neighborhood that isn't well represented here. In response to the imperialist campaigns of aggression, we are going to implement a revolutionary system of collective vigilance, one in which everyone knows who lives on their block, what they do, what ties they had to the former tyranny, what their occupation is, who they associate with, and what activities they engage in. Because if they think they can stand against the people, they are in for a rude awakening! We will set up a committee for revolutionary vigilance on every block (applause), so that the people may watch, so that the people may observe, and so that it becomes clear that when the masses are organized, there is no imperialist, no lackey or sellout to imperialism, no instrument of imperialism, who can move unnoticed (applause).[25]

"*They will have to go over our dead bodies if they want to confront the Revolution. And we are prepared for anything*" (Díaz-Canel, 2021). While these words could be mistaken for a continuation of Fidel's 1960 speech, they are in fact from Miguel Díaz-Canel Bermúdez, Cuba's president since April 2018, addressing Cubans protesting government repression and censorship. He characterized the protesters as manipulators

[24] On November 15, 2021, segments of civil society were planning the "*Civic March for Change*", aimed at securing the release of those detained during previous demonstrations. However, the march never materialized, as it was rejected by the government, which declared it "illegal" and "unconstitutional."

[25] Speech delivered by Fidel Castro Ruz upon his arrival at the United Nations, at the gathering in front of the Palace, on September 28, 1960. Department of Stenographic Versions of the Revolutionary Government (Castro Ruz, 1960).

of the #SOSMatanzas[26] and #SOSCuba campaigns and called on his supporters to confront the demonstrations (Delgado, 2023; Hernández, 2023)[27]. He went ont to say: "*We will not allow any mercenary or counterrevolutionary to provoke an uprising. We call on all revolutionaries and communists to confront these demonstrations in the streets [...] We will not permit anyone to manipulate or impose an annexationist agenda*" (Díaz-Canel, 2021).

Yet, what emerges is a complex and heterogeneous array of social actors dissatisfied with the government – not merely "mercenaries" or "deserters of the Revolution".[28] The 11J protests revealed widespread exhaustion with the role of mere defenders of the Revolution, and a growing desire for increased civic participation, autonomy, and political engagement (Herrera, 2023).

Within this context, a more dynamic civil society has emerged, characterized by horizontal agendas that challenge traditional left-right divisions, particularly on issues of gender and race. While ideological positions persist, these issues cut across various agendas, allowing for unexpected alliances (Guanche, 2023). Youth, in particular, have played a central role in street protests, making them crucial to understanding the dynamics of recent demonstrations.

The arrival of 3G mobile internet in December 2018 marked a turning point, expanding Cubans' access to information and social networks. With approximately 4.4 million users online, this digital advance strengthened youth participation in protests and decentralized the dissemination of information (Guanche, 2023). Despite government attempts to block independent platforms and repress their creators during protests, as with the 27E event (Cuban [...], 2020), technology has facilitated the organization and articulation of social demands.

According to Parker (2014), Cuban society is undergoing a gradual transformation, with internet access enabling citizens to overcome fear and isolation, and to exercise their rights in the virtual realm. While the use of hashtags and social networks does not yet constitute a mass movement capable of threatening the state, these initiatives signal progressive change, challenging established norms and creating new forms of civic expression and mobilization.

From March 2020, with the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic and the worsening of the economic sanctions imposed by the United States, the economic situation in Cuba became even more complicated. Key sectors like tourism were deeply affected, pushing the population into extreme poverty and limiting remittances from Cubans abroad – a crucial lifeline for many families. This scenario deepened

[26] The hashtag SOSMatanzas refers to the small city of Matanzas, known for leading protests during the COVID-19 pandemic. It was created to draw attention to the plight of the population, suffering from the effects of the coronavirus or from hunger. Later, as videos and photos documenting the shortage of medicine and food across the island began to circulate, the hashtag SOSCuba was adopted.

[27] In practice, however, it was not only pro-government civilians who responded to the demonstrations. State security forces – including uniformed police, political police agents, and special troops known as "black berets" – violently repressed the protests, using tear gas, physical assaults, and carrying out thousands of arrests. Among those detained were leftist activists critical of the government, illustrating that any form of dissent, regardless of ideological orientation, could become a target of state repression. By calling on his supporters to confront protesters in the streets, Díaz-Canel revived a maxim employed by the regime for over sixty years: "The streets belong to the revolutionaries." This same logic of political exclusion has also been applied in Cuban universities, where dissenting students and professors frequently face persecution, restrictions, and even expulsion (Farber, 2023).

[28] An example of this diversity within the left is the presence of various currents, such as "post-Marxists, critical Marxists and democratic republicans, ecosocialists, antiracists, anarchists, Trotskyists, feminists, sexual dissidents, decolonials, and social democrats" (Guanche, 2023, p. 45).

social and economic precarity, driving thousands to emigrate in 2022. According to the International Organization for Migration (McAuliffe & Oucho, 2024), "over 220,000 encounters with Cuban migrants were reported at the U.S.-Mexico border," making 2022 the largest exodus in over thirty years, with 125,000 Cubans arriving in the U.S. in just six months. Many fled for political reasons, escaping state persecution and repression. Others traveled to Nicaragua, which does not require entry visas for Cubans, or to Panama, continuing by bus through Central America. In 2022, more than 300 deaths and disappearances of Caribbean migrants were recorded–the highest number since the IOM began collecting such data (McAuliffe & Oucho, 2024).

Cuban migration to Brazil in the past decade

According to data from the National System for the Registration of Foreigners (Sincre) and the National Migration Registry System (Sismigra) – which compile records from the Brazilian Federal Police[29] –, 46,592 Cubans were registered in Brazil between 2013 and 2024. The largest influxes occurred in 2013 (5,467), 2014 (6,560), 2017 (5,346), and, especially in the post-pandemic period, 2022 (7,130) and 2023 (7,717). Gender distribution is balanced, with most migrants aged 25 to 40. The main occupational categories are "physician, surgeon, dentist, or similar" (16,333 individuals) and "student" (2,755 individuals). Most migrants (16,400) entered under Article 13, item I, of Law 6.815/80, which grants temporary visas for cultural trips or study missions, as well as Article 2 of Decree No. 9.277/2018, which concerns the issuance of a protocol and the Provisional National Migration Registration Document (DRNM) for asylum seekers (15,271 individuals).

A significant portion of this migration, especially after 2013, is linked to the Mais Médicos (More Doctors) Program, launched by the federal government to strengthen primary healthcare and bring doctors to underserved regions, with many professionals arriving through international cooperation with the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO). In 2014, of the 14,462 doctors hired, 11,429 were Cuban cooperants.[30]

In 2023, according to the "Refúgio em Números" report (Junger et al., 2022)[31], Cuba became the second-largest country of origin or habitual residence for asylum seekers in Brazil, with 11,479 applications, second only to Venezuela (29,467).

According to the Interactive Panel of Refuge Decisions in Brazil (Brazil, 2023), 1,035 Cubans were recognized as refugees between 2013 and 2022, with 843 granted status for political reasons and 58 for belonging to specific social groups. When considering only asylum approvals based on "political opinion," Cuba leads, followed

[29]Through the interactive database, it is possible to identify migrants who have submitted a registration request for the issuance of their National Migration Registry (RNM), formerly known as the National Foreigner Registry (RNE), in Brazil. It is important to note that this refers exclusively to data verification for registered migrants. Therefore, undocumented individuals and asylum seekers are excluded from this database – the latter being documented, but not yet holding an RNM/RNE. Nonetheless, the tool allows for a detailed breakdown of data by age and gender, country of birth, labor market participation, place of residence, and the legal grounds that guarantee this population's stay in the country.

[30]For more information, see: http://maismedicos.gov.br/cadastro-nacional-de-especialistas/12-perguntas-frequentes-do-cidadao/47-3-e-verdade-que-os-medicos-do-mais-medicos-sao-todos-cubanos.

[31]Prepared by the Observatory of International Migration (OBMigra) in partnership with the Ministry of Justice and Public Security (MJSP) and the National Committee for Refugees (CONARE), based on data from the Federal Police.

by the Democratic Republic of Congo (75) and Venezuela (49). This suggests that Cuban asylum applications are closely linked to the country's contemporary context, increased internet access, and the desire to express political opinions freely – often resulting in heightened state surveillance and repression.

According to the Interactive Panel on Asylum Requests (Brazil, 2023), since 2016 the number of asylum applications submitted by Cubans has shown a steady increase, with the exception of 2020 and 2021, when there was a significant decline, likely due to the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2016, 1,116 applications were registered, a figure that nearly doubled in 2017, reaching 2,010. This upward trend continued in the following years, with 2,741 requests in 2018 and 3,984 in 2019. However, in 2020 the number dropped to 1,340, and in 2021 it reached its lowest point in the period, with only 524 applications. From 2022 onwards, there has been a marked resurgence in the volume of requests, with 5,965 recorded that year, followed by a jump to 12,101 in 2023 and an even sharper increase in 2024, with 22,288 applications.

Cuban migration to Brazil in the past decade thus follows two main trajectories, reflecting not only conditions in Cuba but also Brazil's needs and the opportunities that arise in this context. The first trajectory involves targeted migration, with migrants entering on temporary visas – primarily postgraduate students[32] as well as by medical professionals who took part in the Mais Médicos Program[33], an initiative by the Brazilian government aimed at addressing the shortage of physicians in remote and underserved areas.

After the official end of Cuban participation in 2018, many professionals chose to remain in Brazil, facing challenges in diploma recognition and seeking alternative means to regularize their status. This led to a sharp rise in asylum applications, a strategy adopted not only by doctors but also by some postgraduate students to avoid deportation and secure basic rights while seeking labor market alternatives.

The second trajectory encompasses a significant contingent of individuals, often relatives of the aforementioned professionals, who arrived in Brazil after 2013 seeking asylum, motivated by increasing political and economic repression in Cuba. Santos (2018) notes that many are driven by family ties, and that while Mais Médicos professionals could visit Cuba annually, their relatives were not permitted to travel to Brazil. "This diplomatic rigidity adds drama and suspense to the lives of families striving to maintain physical closeness" (Santos, 2018, p. 361). Thus, the mobility of professionals participating in the program sets off a cascading effect, enabling them – once they have established permanent residence in Brazil – to bring their relatives over as well.[34] However, during their mission, the mobility of family members remains restricted, reflecting the migratory arrangements that shape both family mobility and immobility.

[32]This is the case of Valentina and Yamila, who arrived in Florianópolis, Santa Catarina, in 2017, and of Pablo, who arrived in Belo Horizonte, Minas Gerais, in 2014 – all of whom came to Brazil to pursue their doctorates.

[33]This applies to the case of Moria, one of the interviewees, who arrived in Brazil in 2015. After marrying a Brazilian and having a daughter in the country, she decided to settle here. Moria currently works as a physician and lives with her family in Guaranésia, Minas Gerais. She also plans to bring her brother to Brazil.

[34]Among the relatives of healthcare professionals, the case of the couple Laura and Luís stands out. They arrived in Brazil in 2023, brought by Luís's sister, who, after passing the Revalida exam, has been working as a physician in Brazil and, following her marriage to a Brazilian, obtained permanent residency in the country.

These two recent modalities of migration to Brazil prompt reflection on the diverse trajectories and family dynamics among Cuban migrants. Life histories reveal a wide range of experiences that transcend traditional categories of economic migrants or political refugees, highlighting nuances of belonging, adaptation, and support networks. This theme has been widely explored by scholars such as Machado (2011), whose work in migration anthropology and ethnographies of movement broadens understanding of the multiple factors shaping mobility.

Interviews indicate that both major trajectories of Cuban migration are embedded in what I propose as the *habitus of political silence* – a concern with maintaining ties to relatives in Cuba and avoiding being labeled "undesirable" in the country of origin. This creates constant tension between the desire for free expression and the need to preserve family connections, allowing continued visits to the island and amicable relations at home.

Conversely, there is a group that breaks with this *habitus*. Often with academic backgrounds, these individuals choose to sever ties with family and homeland or are more willing to openly discuss conditions in Cuba. This rupture can be seen as an act of courage – a deliberate effort to break free from repression and contribute to a broader dialogue about the island's political situation. Their experiences offer a perspective that goes beyond purely economic, professional, or family-based analyses of migration. This approach enriches the debate on mobilities in motion, which are linked to a particularly distinctive *habitus*: the willingness to break away from merely formal dialogues, interviews, or perfunctory commentary. Here, movement is a choice that often entails severing intimate ties and even breaking with one's citizenship.[35]

It is also important to recognize that Cuban migration to Brazil is not an isolated phenomenon, but part of a global migratory movement. The intersection of different migration motives – forced and voluntary/economic – reflects the thin line separating them and reveals the complexities of contemporary displacement.

Final remarks

The analysis of Cuban mobility and immobility dynamics, through the lens of crisis migration (McAdam, 2013), reveals a complex scenario. The economic crisis, intensified by the COVID-19 pandemic and the U.S. blockade, combined with expanded internet access, political restrictions, and increased repression, has driven a significant migratory flow. Migration emerges as both a survival strategy for many Cubans and a central element in understanding the country's contemporary migratory movements.

In recent years, the growing use of digital platforms such as X (formerly Twitter) and Facebook has redefined the relationship between Cuba and its diaspora, narrowing the historic divide between "the people" and "emigrants" and revealing a more engaged Cuban civil society. The proliferation of the hashtag *#LaPatriaSomosTodos* exemplifies this new, inclusive approach, challenging the binary view of "nationals" and "non-nationals" and seeking to strengthen ties with Cubans

[35]One example is that of Lúcio, who actively participated in street demonstrations in Havana and was arrested after being reported by his own father, a member of the Cuban Communist Party (PCC). Lúcio recounted that, after being detained several times and making his situation public through the media and social networks, government representatives "offered" him the option of leaving the country. He arrived in Brazil in September 2023.

abroad (Rodríguez Santos & Cogo, 2021). Meanwhile, the 2013 migration reforms, which allowed emigrants to apply for repatriation, and the 2015 extension of permitted stays abroad (subject to fees), signal a controlled relaxation of emigration. Yet, Cuban migration policies remain contradictory, oscillating between permissiveness and strict state control.

The research supports Black and Collyer's (2014) observation of the centrality of forced immobility in migration dynamics. In Cuba, this is reflected in government-imposed exit restrictions and economic and political barriers that hinder mobility. Visa requirements for many destinations and the need for material resources create a scenario of immobility for many who wish to leave but are unable to do so.

Brazil has emerged as a viable alternative, especially after the implementation of the Mais Médicos Program in 2013, which brought a large number of health professionals, followed by their relatives. Cuban migration to Brazil in the last decade can be divided into two main trajectories: the first, targeted, comprising postgraduate students and especially health professionals; the second, encompassing other social groups, mainly those seeking asylum due to growing political and economic repression, particularly in the post-pandemic years. The 2013 migration policy reforms in Cuba marked a significant inflection point, facilitating citizens' departure and impacting migration flows to countries like Brazil. While many migrants maintain a *habitus of political silence*, some – like Yamandu and Lúcio – break this pattern by denouncing repression, having been directly affected by it. Although it is not yet possible to quantify how many Cuban migrants in Brazil were involved in protests, interviews indicate that even those not directly involved often criticize Cuba's political and economic conditions, using social networks and diaspora spaces to express their views.[36]

This study underscores the need for migration policies that address not only economic factors but also human rights concerns. The rising demand for refugee status among Cubans in Brazil, especially on grounds of political persecution, highlights the urgency of more comprehensive and humanitarian approaches to managing these migratory flows.

Given this context, it is essential to discuss the implementation of programs that expand regularization options, moving beyond the limits of asylum and offering alternatives such as humanitarian reception and residence visas. Such measures are crucial to ensuring dignified reception and enabling migrants to rebuild their lives in Brazil, regardless of their willingness to share their political and social experiences. In the specific case of Cuban migration, these alternatives could significantly alleviate the challenges faced by this population, providing greater stability and protection without imposing unwanted exposure of their political experiences.

Translated by Marcos Pereira Rufino.

[36]It is important to note that breaking the silence is not limited to Yamandu and Lúcio. Other interviewees – including migrants who came to Brazil through graduate programs or with lower levels of education and without direct persecution – also voice strong criticism of the government, despite their fear. Interestingly, those who identify as political refugees do not share the same apprehension about being recognized, as they have already broken their silence. In contrast, the majority of those who left Cuba for economic reasons are the ones most fearful of being identified or included on the Cuban state's "undesirables list."

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