

PREFACE

I am not the only person of Cuban descent to write about Cuba, the USA, and Miami's Cuban exiles. The list of authors is longer than one might imagine. Cuba is but a small island in the Caribbean after all, albeit with an outsized impact on global affairs over the last half century. Part of the difficulty I had writing this book was overcoming the thought Cuban diaspora scholars would one day read my work. My work would be compared to theirs as well as the scholarship of others. What did I have to contribute? Would I get what I had to say right? Questions like these are things every writer wrestles with in their own way, I am sure.

I want to say a few words here about self-doubt, how I would remove it wholesale from view if I could, for me still, my loved ones, my students. I know it is cliché and will come across as Pollyanna, but believe me, if I can do this—for me it was write a book—then so can you, beloved, friends, students, the reader, be and do what you dream of. Not that it will be easy. Spread faith and belief in yourselves and others and keep at it.

Overcoming self-doubt requires a fighting spirit, a willingness to compete. So too does politics. Leadership is the definition of politics this book draws upon. Culture defined broadly to include ideas from political theory is the focus of the approach to the study of politics this book takes. Ideas one believes in, the courage of one's convictions, can help people find the courage to risk leading, to participate in politics engaging others in public discourse, debate, and action. They have a strong

emotional appeal that emerges from experiences of community that make people who they are. Ideas are the heart of the ways of life communities and societies represent. Ways of life that communities and societies represent, ideas people embrace that make people who they are, these play a central role in the study of civic politics this book offers.

The power of ideas is a phenomenon political scientists are familiar with. It is something scholars in other disciplines recognize as well. The power of ideas is a phenomenon familiar to many people. The thinking about politics with a focus on culture (including ideas from political theory) that this book primarily draws upon comes from literature on the performance of democratic institutions, including civic organizations.

Civic organizations in Miami's Cuban community project ideas their participants and supporters hold dear into the public square. The ideas are reflected in the political culture of the organizations, and they have come to shape the political culture of the community outside of and surrounding the organizations through participants' and supporters' tireless efforts over many years. The cultural context of politics within which civic organizations function in the first place takes shape in and through the community's civic organizations. The contributions civic organizations make to the political culture of the community are the principal subject matter this book engages.

This is a book about the cultural politics and leadership that contributes to civic organizations success. The book examines the unique approach to civic engagement Miami's Cuban community is pioneering. Ideas contribute to the success of civic organizations in Cuban Miami in myriad ways. They play a central role in the process of civic engagement the community has developed.

The approach to politics focusing on ideas from political theory is often associated with politics in a different context—the politics in social movement organizations, for example, or campaigns for electoral office. The broad understanding of politics as the ideas people embrace and model their social practices and institutions after is what efforts like these in different contexts have in common.

Miami's Cuban community is home to a distinct substantive tradition of political culture, a Cuban exile identity many community members embrace. I call the political culture participatory political culture bracketed by politics understood as elite and/or state-centered activity. It combines liberal and corporatist political theory. The political culture constitutes a broad tradition of civic engagement, and it helps to sustain

a dense, rich network of civic organizations. The organizations implement the political culture in different ways, in keeping with the respective goals and objectives, as well as the structures and ways of operating they embrace. But the same basic cultural structure is there nevertheless, guiding the operations of the organizations.

The political culture represents a broad consensus among many members of the community over goals for the future and a vision of community. The consensus makes gaining the support of the community easier than would otherwise be the case. Civic organizations can improve their chances for success, this book argues, when they get the question of political culture right—i.e., the cultural values, beliefs, and identity at stake in the processes of civic engagement civic organizations have developed, including the activities they undertake as they seek to advance their participants' and supporters' interests. How the political culture of civic organizations and that of the larger community outside line up, or align, helps scholars understand civic organizations' performance.

This book explores lessons to be learned about the nature of political leadership from a unique experiment in civic engagement in Miami's Cuban community. The book explores how the cultural politics of Cuban civic organizations in Miami and that of the larger community outside interact to shape civic organizations' performance. How the interaction is likely to change as USA–Cuba relations evolve is an important question the book indirectly considers.

Ideas from political theory contribute to the success of the organizations included in the book when the organizations were grouped together. They also contribute to differences in performance among the organizations taking other differences of culture and identity into account. The social class status many ethnic Cubans in Miami identify with and embrace becomes apparent when racial/ethnic identity and political theory are held constant.

Class identity is apparent in the processes of civic engagement the organizations have developed. It is apparent in the ways the organizations implement the political culture many ethnic Cubans in Miami embrace. The processes of the organizations reflect what participants believe about who the principal actors and what the fundamental purposes of civic engagement are—that is, whether participants believe elites or the broad populace should lead the community's civic engagement efforts and, also, whether engaging the larger world outside of the

community or building the community participants call home is the primary purpose of civic engagement.

Ethnic politics with significant class dynamics is at work in Cuban Miami. Differing class identities exist between or among people who share the same cultural traditions, the same ideas from political theory, and the same visions of political community. The cultural dynamics of politics rooted in ideas from political theory make the class dynamics at work in every community easier to see than they would otherwise be. The focus also makes the terms from political theory rooted in class identity more apparent than they would be with a different focus.

The power of ideas is something I saw up close among people in Miami's Cuban community as I conducted the fieldwork for this book. The fighting spirit is what I admire most about the people this book engages. I recognized the spirit instinctively when I saw it. I knew it in my bones. It is the spirit my mother and father taught me each in their own way. The spirit is the heart of the process of civic engagement Cuban Miami is pioneering. The spirit is what has led people to participate in civic organizations in great number over many years.

The story of how this book came to be involves more biography, more of the story of me, than the reader may want or need. But the book was in my heart as a tribute to my parents first and foremost and to my teachers, too, especially from college. My father taught me to love ideas. My mother taught me to express sympathy for people. The two commitments came together for the first time during my years as an undergraduate at university in the early stages of my academic career.

How a young person like myself got to university in the first place is another story altogether; I would be remiss though if I didn't mention at least some of the details. I am an educator in addition to my life as a scholar. That means I work with students many of whom feel over their heads in college. I felt that way too when I got my start as a student in higher education. A fighting spirit in school was a trait I had to learn to develop. I was a mediocre student at best as a youngster. I had siblings who were far better students. There were just too many other things going on, as I look back on it now, staying together and healthy as a family making so great a transition. I was the youngest of six and the first to be born in the USA. My parents were in the middle of rebuilding their lives as Cuban immigrants. We were Cuban immigrants in the Midwest. My father was our champion, a true lion, the definition of grit. He was the cheerful glue. My mother was too.

She was a saint, honestly, though we felt her influence from more of a distance.

Luck played no small part for me getting to college. What I could do well that got me there was athletics. Once I was there I found my passion. The ideas I encountered that helped me make sense of who I was as a person and what was happening to me and my family made the difference.

My time in college was a joy and a blessing. I learned what I could do with my life that was consistent with my values. I learned how questions I had could affect the future, starting with myself. The most basic questions were important. “Why is the world the way it is?” “Why do people do what they do?” I managed to connect my values with thinking about politics and society, with my own power and passion as well, starting in the classrooms of the university itself. I discovered what I wanted to do, or what I could do that I felt would matter. I wanted to contribute to building civic engagement in whatever way I could—democratic culture oriented toward the whole of the community in all its diversity and toward participation as the ultimate source of freedom. If people were anything like me, I knew there was an ocean of energy and desire for positive contribution out there waiting to be tapped, especially in anyone who had ever felt like an outsider, which is to say in everyone at some point or another.

Many of the concepts at the heart of the analysis offered here of the civic politics of Cuban Miami I encountered first as a university student. The role of culture in politics involving the contest of ideas from political theory is subject matter I am still engaged with today as a scholar. It forms the basis of the study of civic organizing undertaken here. The analysis highlights the power of ideas ethnic Cubans in Miami embrace and model their civic practices and institutions after, including their civic organizations. Stories ethnic Cubans in Miami tell themselves and others about who they are as Cuban exiles is where the ideas from political theory come from that many community members embrace. Exile makes the stories more compelling than they would be otherwise under different circumstances.

How civic organizations work is of interest to a growing number of readers—policy makers and citizen organizers and leaders alike—who see in them and the local sphere of life the potential for broad democratic reform, including, as well, more meaningful experiences of living than are currently the norm. Civic organizations gesture toward social

space less dominated by modern large-scale bureaucratic structures and institutions. Civic organizations are an area of interest to scholars in a variety of disciplines as well—political scientists, international relations scholars, and sociologists, in particular—who are interested in such topics as civil society; democratization; development, participation, and the performance of democratic institutions; and race/ethnicity. I approach the question of civic organizations from the standpoint of my interest in democratic social movements, development and participation, citizenship in a transnational setting, and diaspora communities. In Cuban Miami, none of these concerns can be separated from a web of international problems linking Cuba, the Cuban diaspora, and the governments of the USA and Cuba.

The story of this project is not entirely academic lessons I gained from experience in the field also played a role. The desire for change and idea I might contribute led me to the field of community organizing and the thinking of Saul Alinsky after completing my undergraduate studies. I searched for a job with people who shared my beliefs and commitments after graduation. I went to work as a community organizer for a neighborhood organization on Chicago's Southwest side, the Southwest Parish and Neighborhood Federation. I was employed full time and paid a professional salary. The Federation was a successful, well-established, Alinsky-style community organization in the best tradition of strong neighborhood political participation that in many ways is Chicago. My thinking about politics and society expanded through the work I was doing and the interactions I was having, including the training I received from the Institute for Community Empowerment, which worked with the Federation providing consultation. I was introduced to the thinking of Saul Alinsky and the practice of politics from the community organizing perspective. As an organizer, I saw neighborhood residents I worked with grow as they took on new roles becoming active in the organization. The process was exciting to see. It confirmed what I experienced as a student at university.

The experiences I had through my interaction with community organizing have been formative. I learned about relational power and self-interest. Relationships matter, they are an important source of power. Self-interest includes one's primary ties, values, beliefs, and identity in addition to the material wants and needs people are facing as individuals. I learned about the role of local organization in the process of nonpartisan political organizing. "All politics is local," and leadership at the local

level can make a difference. I learned about change. “The process is the program,” and change starts with the individual.

I became a student again going back to graduate school to learn more about the field of community organizing and how to make a difference. The appreciation I gained from scholars whose work I discovered in the process was important, particularly the work of Harry C. Boyte. Harry is a leading civic politics scholar who teaches at the Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs, in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Harry also codirects the Center for Democracy and Citizenship at Augsburg College. Harry’s work explores lessons to be learned about democracy and citizenship in the modern era from politics in broad-based community organizations as well as other experiences of civic agency in the tradition of citizen-centered democracy from the American context and beyond. I applied to the Humphrey Institute to pursue a master’s degree to work with Harry.

At the Humphrey Institute, I learned about public affairs from a policy perspective and studied the constructivist public work approach to citizen politics and theory that Harry and his colleagues have developed. Practical democratic theory emphasizing the role citizens play in building society is a principal source of scholarly inspiration that has fueled the longstanding interest I have developed in civil society groups and organizations, as well as ethnic, kinship, religious, and other traditions.

For my master’s thesis, I studied sources of trust helping to fuel the growth of the enclave economy among Cubans in Miami. I conducted fieldwork in Miami and performed interviews with civic organizations’ leaders and organizers. The research exposed me to the remarkable tradition of civic engagement and many successful community organizations to be found in the community.

I had a specific idea for a project in mind when I applied to graduate school to pursue my doctoral studies. What could be learned about successful civic organizing from the Cuban community’s civic organizing experience? I hoped my research would help create awareness of successful civic engagement initiatives and lead to greater and more effective citizen participation in public affairs.

I chose the International Relations Department at Florida International University for the interest of faculty in civil society in the context of Cuba and Miami, the program’s multidisciplinary approach, and the focus of the program on social theory, including constructivism. I felt the approach would provide the training I needed to conduct the research I was interested in doing. I had little appreciation of how vital

the training I received at FIU would be, working with scholars like, Paul A. Kowert, whose mentoring and good counsel I continue to draw upon to this day. My training at FIU was broad and wide ranging. The focus of the program on social theory in the context of the broad understanding of politics in the discipline was important. It opened the door for research I was interested in doing exploring the role of social power and informal institutions, the politics of cultural identity and political theory. Such analysis is important for understanding the dynamic qualities of civic organizations in Cuban Miami. Cuban Miami *is* a dynamic political community. Understanding the politics of the community can contribute to understanding successful civic and political organizing.

I have others to thank for their interest in this project, in addition to the special people I have already mentioned, particularly my friends and colleagues at Huston–Tillotson University. Michael L. Hirsch was generous enough to read the entire manuscript. Mike’s comments on the research and his eyes as a wordsmith were a tremendous help. James J. Kraft and Andrea C. Holman read sections of the book and shared valuable insights. Thank you to Bob Kellogg and Paul Anaejionu for their many questions about the project and the many interesting and engaging conversations.

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Robert M. Ceresa

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Ceresa, R.M.

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