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Cuba: History of an exodus

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Cuba: History of an Exodus

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www.population-demographie.org/revue03.htm ; www.cairn.info/revue-population-et-avenir.htm

In the annals of history, the year 2015 will be notable for the “migrant crisis” in Europe and for the re-establishment of diplomatic relations between Cuba and the United States. It becomes doubly important to de-code the exodus of the Cubans under the Castro regime: first, to better understand certain mechanisms of international migrations; and secondly, to elucidate the relations between Cuba and the United States.

In Cuba, the cumulative migratory deficit, for the period 1959¹-2015, is established at more than one million, that is, more than 12% of the average population for that period. In less than a half-century, one Cuban out of eight chose to leave the island and turn his back on the Castro revolution. Four-fifths of this group opted for the United States where, during the periods when the latter country accepted them, the immigrants were received as “refugees”, victims of the Communist dictatorship.

► The first wave of exodus

Such an intensity of exodus is explained principally by the liberty-crushing character of the Castro regime, but at a rhythm which evolved as a result of the varying permeability of the frontiers. A first wave of exodus took place during the first four years of the revolution, at a time when departures were possible, until the suspension of regular air traffic in October, 1962, at the instigation of Washington. This exodus was facilitated by Castro himself, who was in no way opposed to the emigration of potential opponents.

Subsequently, the United States decided to use the granting of visas as leverage by which they could exercise influence on Cuban politics, putting on limits in certain years in the hope of fanning the discontent and increasing the pressure on the Castro regime. The level of annual emigration, therefore, depends on the state of the relations between the two countries; the Castro regime seems to be always in favor of the departure of opponents, as long as a demographic hemorrhage can be avoided.

► The second wave, double assistance

In 1965, a second important Cuban exodus was produced, when the Cuban government opened the port of Camarioca to anyone who wanted to leave the country. Faced with the sometimes-fatal conditions associated with this exodus, the United States and Cuba reached an agreement which permitted Cubans to travel to Florida via charter flights set up by the American government. Thanks to Freedom Flights, about 300,000 Cubans found refuge in the United States between 1965 and 1973. Concurrently, in 1966 Congress passed the

1. year Fidel Castro came to power.

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Cuban Adjustment Act (CAA) : This act gave the possibility of permanent residency to Cubans who had been present in the U.S. for at least one year.

► The third wave, followed by accords between Cuba and the United States

In 1980, the third wave began: The departure by sea of the *balseros*, the name given to Cubans who, putting their lives in great peril, began to flee in any kind of conveyance which could be found – sometimes even just a buoy – across the Caribbean. This wave grew even larger during the Mariel exodus: 125,000 Cubans arrived in southern Florida, but many others were drowned during the crossing. Then the exodus by boat continued, from several hundred in 1989 to several thousand in 1993. In 1994, a new rise in the exodus led to two agreements on the migration question between Cuba and the United States, agreements whose aim was to ensure a safe, legal, and orderly migration. Combined with the CAA, these migratory agreements of 1994 and 1995 established the current “wet-foot, dry-foot” policy. This meant that Cubans intercepted by the U.S. while still at sea, the “wet-foots”, would be sent back to Cuba, whose government, according to the agreements, promised to not exercise any kind of reprisals on them. As for those who managed to reach the shores of the U.S., the “dry-foots”, they were generally allowed to stay and could obtain the status of permanent resident after one year. As a result of these different exoduses, the Cuban population in the United States continued to grow, from 737,000 in 1990 to more than one million since 2010. To this should be added the exodus of Cubans to other countries: Spain (115,000), Italy (23,000), Puerto Rico (17,000), Mexico (14,000), and Canada (11,000).

► Cuba tomorrow : Still a country of emigration ?

Following the re-establishment of diplomatic relations between the United States and Cuba in 2015, the Cuban diaspora in the U.S., a group which is heavily concentrated in Florida and which has largely voted for the Republican Party² in recent years (at the opposite of other Hispanics in the U.S.), is sharply divided. One group dreams of multiplying economic and touristic exchanges with Cuba, thus opening up the market economy. Another group, skeptical about the reality of democratic changes in Cuba, led by the Republican senator Marco Rubio, whose parents left Cuba to settle in the U.S., thinks that President Obama “has given the Cuban government everything they wanted, and has received no assurance nor action in the matters of democracy and liberty”. As for the Cubans, their hope of democratization seems limited, as the American Coast Guard has noted an increase in the number of Cuban migrants desiring to enter United States territory in 2015. ☹

(Translation: C. Knutson-Beveraggi)

2. Thus, in 2002 their vote helped elect George W. Bush who, because he managed to carry Florida, became President. Cf. Dumont, Gérard-François, *Démographie politique. Les lois de la géopolitique des populations* [Political demography. The geopolitical laws of populations], Paris, Ellipses.