

The Rise of Gay Tolerance in Cuba: The Case of the UN Vote

By Noelle Stout

IN NOVEMBER 2010, THE UNITED NATIONS ELIMINATED protections from extrajudicial or arbitrary executions because of sexual orientation. With the support of the Cuban delegation, the Third General Assembly changed language specifically denouncing killings inspired by sexual identity, adding the ambiguous term “discriminatory reasons.” Although the Cuban delegation had originally supported the 2008 decree that protected gays and lesbians from executions, in 2010 the representatives supported removing the explicit mention of sexuality.

The 2010 vote ignited a public controversy on the island, as Cubans accused government leaders of failing to promote sexual equality. Cuban bloggers were among the most vocal critics. Marxist blogger Yasmin Portales Machado charged government leaders with sacrificing gay rights to solidify political alliances.¹ Similarly, Francisco Rodríguez Cruz, a gay activist and Communist militant, published an open letter on his blog to the Cuban foreign minister warning against a return to the violent homophobia of Cuba’s past.² Yoani Sánchez, the most internationally renowned Cuban blogger, argued that the vote was equivalent to supporting the death penalty for homosexuality and criticized the lack of free speech on the island. “Not a single word is said by the official press,” Sánchez wrote. “No *travestis** have been able to go out and protest in the Plaza of the Revolution.”³

Gay advocates in state-sponsored agencies who typically avoided overt political criticism also condemned the vote. Most sig-

nificantly, Mariela Castro Espín, the director of Cuba’s National Center for Sexual Education (CENESEX) and the daughter of President Raúl Castro, released a statement on the CENESEX website pointing out how the vote contradicted the decriminalization of homosexuality in Cuba.⁴ In a similar vein, Dr. Alberto Roque, the president of the sexual diversity unit of the Cuban Multidisciplinary Society for the Study of Sexuality (SOCUMES), emphasized how Cuba had sided with governments that barbarically applied the death penalty for same-sex practice. According to the leaders of CENESEX and SOCUMES, sexual and gender identity were “inalienable rights of each individual,” and sexual rights are “human rights.”⁵

Cuban criticism of the UN vote circulated primarily on the Internet, and although only 14% of Cubans have Web access, the blog posts garnered unprecedented attention from policy makers.⁶ Minister of Foreign Affairs Bruno Rodríguez Parilla responded to the objections by publishing a note in support of Cuban LGBT communities and inviting bloggers and CENESEX activists to discuss the UN resolution. At the same time, however, he maintained that the delegates had considered the resolution sufficiently inclusive without the clause specifying sexual orientation.

Cubans were not alone in their indignation. International gay advocates launched a campaign to call for the UN representatives to reconsider their position. A month after the vote, in November 2010, the UN Assembly answered international criticism by reintroducing sexual orientation to the decree. In the revote, the Cuban delegates abstained—a mere softening of their earlier position.

* I leave the word *travesti* untranslated because the term *transgender* for U.S. readers too strongly suggests a transition from one gender to another. Cuban *travestis* I interviewed very rarely used the Spanish word for transgender (*transgenero*), and when they did, they were referring to women who had sex-change operations.

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Mariela Castro Espín (center), head of Cuba's National Center for Sex Education and daughter of Cuba's president, Raúl Castro, holds a gay pride flag during the May Day parade at Havana's Revolution Square on May 1.

The representatives' ambivalent position most likely reflected tensions between Cuba and the United States, whose delegation had taken the lead in encouraging the General Assembly to revisit the amendment. In response, the Cuban foreign minister accused the U.S. diplomats of political posturing and claimed that the United States had mandated extrajudicial executions at home and abroad. If the Cuban representatives had followed the U.S. initiative in the revote, it could legitimate the United States as a leader in promoting gay rights. In the ongoing competition over which national government can claim to be a leading defender of "human rights," this would represent a loss for Cuba.

The debate surrounding the UN vote raises key issues regarding the contemporary status of Cubans with non-conforming gender and sexual identities. On the one hand, Cuban diplomats' hesitant embrace of the amendment protecting gays indicates ongoing struggles to

institutionalize sexual equality in Cuba. On the other hand, the public outcry against the Cuban representatives reflects the expanding reach of Cuba's gay tolerance movement. Moreover, the role of advocates in shifting policy hints at a changing relationship between post-Soviet civil society and government leaders, indicating a widening sphere of public debate.

A CROSS DIFFERENCES OF COLOR, ECONOMIC BACKGROUND, and gender, gay Cubans often describe a mixed record of improvements and setbacks since the late 1980s. Government leaders decriminalized homosexuality in the penal code in 1988, and in the following decades gay themes gained unprecedented visibility in state-sponsored cultural and health arenas—two areas that the socialist government emphasized since the 1959 Revolution. During field research in Havana, gay men and women explained to me that homosexuality is

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now tolerated but still not accepted. For instance, citizens cannot be arrested for homosexuality, and sexual diversity is increasingly recognized as natural in public discourse. Yet subtle forms of discrimination persist in many neighborhoods, workplaces, and families.

In the 1990s, a new generation of artists and writers reintroduced homosexual characters and homoerotic themes that had been censored since the 1960s.⁷ The most iconic example of queer visibility in state-sponsored art was the debut of a gay protagonist in the film *Fresa y chocolate* (1994), directed by Tomás Gutiérrez Alea and Juan Carlos Tabío. The film followed the unlikely friendship between a headstrong Communist militant studying at the University of Havana and an eccentric gay intellectual forced to leave the island. Critics pointed out how the film offered a monumental moment for Cuban queer visibility, but also presented an asexual gay character who defended Cuban culture at all costs.⁸ While some state-sponsored artistic representations presented a romanticized gay Cuban intellectual that bordered on stereotype, many artists more forcefully pushed the limits of censorship. For example, writers and directors in Havana's performing arts deployed more radical queer representations to critique socialist conformity and satirize the dilemmas of everyday life.

More recently, a gay protagonist premiered on state-run television, the most conservative artistic medium, in the Cuban-produced telenovela *La otra cara de la luna* (2006). The melodrama received mixed reviews because the character was a married man who realized his gay identity after succumbing to an extramarital affair with another man and contracting HIV. The series aimed to educate spectators about high-risk sexual behaviors but ultimately perpetuated stereotypes linking homosexuality, infidelity, and AIDS. As representations of homosexuality in the arts continue to multiply, however, images of non-normative sexuality will more accurately reflect the diversity of Cuban gay communities.

In addition to the increasing visibility of queer-themed artistic productions, psychologists and medical professionals in national health agencies have also promoted the normalcy of same-sex desires. Most notably, CENESEX, under the direction of Castro Espín, has positioned the struggle for gay rights within the Cuban Revolution's humanistic framework and argued that Cuban society needs to develop a "healthier culture of sexuality . . . that helps to erode old, erroneous beliefs and prejudices."⁹ In 2007, CENESEX submitted legislation that would amend the Constitution to outlaw discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation or gender identity (the legislation

is still pending at the time of publication). Submitted in collaboration with the Federation of Cuban Women, the law would also extend social programs for travestis and allow them to change identity cards without undergoing sexual-reassignment surgery.

Cuban proponents of gay tolerance have tended to reject a model of identity politics, instead insisting on a depoliticized movement that seeks to integrate gays into mainstream society. Instead of rallying around a separate-but-equal identity, gay advocates have emphasized uprooting homophobia and integrating gay citizens into nationalist projects. For instance, CENESEX organizers sponsor an annual National Day Against Homophobia and question the separatist undertones of a "gay pride" march. This framing situates homosexual rights within socialist movements for equality, linking contemporary struggles to the fundamental principles of the 1959 Revolution. Working within state-funded arts and public health agencies, as opposed to denouncing the government, advocates work to assimilate gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender citizens into the Cuban national imaginary.

Most of the urban gays I interviewed in the last decade expressed high regard for CENESEX and referred to Castro Espín with affection, even if they were uninterested in gay politics. CENESEX is not without detractors, however. Cuban historian of sexuality Abel Sierra Madero has criticized the organization for what he sees as a normative approach to sexuality that prevents a more direct confrontation with homophobia.¹⁰

By rooting anti-discrimination policies within revolutionary socialism, Cuban activists have challenged the universal appeal of gay rights movements in the United States and Western Europe, which position gays as an interest group outside the state apparatus. While some might assume that socialism's prohibition of private media and gay neighborhoods would prevent the establishment of a Cuban movement for same-sex equality, the development of queer consumption, media representation, and gay residential zones has not secured civil equality for many gays in the United States.

Even as gay Cuban men and women have celebrated newfound visibility and enjoyed a rise in official tolerance since the 1980s, many of those whom I interviewed in Havana during 2003–4 and 2007 criticized the ongoing police intervention into informal, queer public gatherings. After the Cuban National Assembly decriminalized homosexuality in 1988, the police allowed informal, nightly gay gatherings throughout the capital. (The 1988 penal code still imposed fines on those who "hassled others with homosexual demands"; in 1997 the language

was modified to “hassling with sexual demands.”) Convening in public parks, along the Malecón seawall or outside of popular cinemas in Havana, the informal nightlife became the backbone of gay social life in the capital.

As foreign tourists and sex workers flooded the nighttime enclaves beginning in the 1990s, however, police sought to quell the rising sex trade and intermittently shut down the gatherings for weeks or even months at a time. CENESEX initiated a campaign to educate Havana’s police officers about the decriminalization of homosexuality to prevent the wrongful detention of gay citizens during the crackdowns, but the improvements have been slow to materialize.

The ongoing battles to secure queer public space in the capital, like the shifting vote of the Cuban UN delegation, indicate contradictions within the Cuban government’s position on homosexuality. Especially since the major economic transition of the 1990s, Cuban government agencies have demonstrated ambivalent reactions toward sexual minorities—a phenomenon that undermines the stereotype of “the Cuban state” as a unitary, hegemonic actor so often put forth by non-Cuban scholars and journalists.

THE CONTROVERSY SURROUNDING THE UN vote also illuminated the changing role of post-Soviet civic society in formulating government policies toward minorities. In part, the rise of gay tolerance reflected a broader trend in which Cuban officials included previously ostracized groups during the crisis that followed the dissolution of the socialist bloc. For example, in addition to loosening censorship of public debates regarding homosexuality, the National Assembly lifted the ban on religious organizations, and the Office of Religious Affairs worked with Christian groups to promote “revolutionary morality.”¹¹ Similarly, the Ministry of Culture recruited rap artists critical of U.S. imperialism, a sharp departure from the state’s previous accusations that rappers were antisocial delinquents.¹²

One way of understanding the context of Cuban leaders’ gestures of inclusion, proposed by the anthropologist Aihwa Ong, is “neoliberalism as exception”—a situation in which officials reject neoliberalism as an economic doctrine but embrace the measured introduction of capitalist investment.¹³ This mixed-market approach often reconfigures governing tactics and can inspire leaders to

incorporate previously marginalized groups.¹⁴ In post-Soviet Cuba, the economic crisis following the loss of Soviet subsidies fostered a measured embrace of capitalist investment and reordered the relationship between the welfare state and its citizens. The official acceptance of sexual minorities provided one avenue for rallying broad support during a time of national vulnerability.

The newfound embrace of sexual equality also reflects changing international dynamics regarding homosexual rights. Over the past decade, sexual equality has increasingly emerged as a diagnostic of the degree to which a government has embraced modern values—similar to previous discourses of women’s rights. Thus critics of Fidel Castro have cited a history of Cuban homophobic policies as instances of the human rights abuses. Conversely, Cuban leaders have sought to counteract representations of the United States as progressive in terms of gay rights. For example, the state-run Cuban newspaper *Granma* reprinted an article from *USA Today* titled, “When It Comes to Gay Rights, Is Cuba Inching Ahead of USA?”¹⁵ The article contrasted the sluggish progress of same-sex rights in the United States with the CENESEX legislative proposal that would grant equality to same-sex couples. At times, leaders on both sides of the 90-mile divide have deployed discourses of gay tolerance to grandstand, often accusing one another of homophobia while failing to secure basic sexual equality at home.

The public debate over the UN amendment that removed specific protections for marginalized sexual citizens reflects the rise of gay tolerance discourse in post-Soviet Cuba. The emergence of sexual equality rhetoric can be traced to multiple international and domestic origins, intensifying after the Cuban transition to post-Soviet socialism. In addition to broadening definitions of citizenship during a time of national crisis, the steady increase in public debates initiated by bloggers and gay advocates also indicates the appearance of new micro-public spheres in the post-Soviet era. Rather than abandon socialist values for capitalist notions of gay liberation, however, Cuban advocates for gay rights have voiced concerns about sexual rights alongside patriotic sentiments and reinvestments in state socialism. Through these campaigns, Cubans reimagine a revolutionary society that is relevant and sustainable for future generations in all of their diversity. ■

By rooting anti-discrimination policies within revolutionary socialism, Cuban activists have challenged the universal appeal of gay rights movements in the United States and Western Europe, which position gays as an interest group outside the state apparatus.

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