

The Role of Baseball in the Normalization of Cuba-US Relations

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Abstract: The December, 2014 announcement by Raúl Castro and President Barack Obama regarding the "thaw" of the US-Cuba diplomatic relations opens up new possibilities. Sport, specifically baseball, represents an area of opportunity for the rapprochement of both countries. MLB baseball is increasingly dependent on the inflow of foreign talent, especially on Latin American players. The status of the Cuban player is peculiar and it could normalize as a result of the full normalization of the diplomatic relations. This paper analyzes the economic incentives as well as the existing legal challenges in the US-Cuba interdependent relationship. Finally, the argument suggests that baseball could pave the way for a constructivist approach of other specific US-Cuba relationships, partially replacing the high politics that has dominated the bilateral relationship for more than five decades.

Keywords: U.S.-Cuba Diplomatic Relations, Baseball Diplomacy, Constructivism

Introduction

Different interpretations can be made around the December 17, 2014 announcement made by President Barack Obama's and Raúl Castro's announcement, in which they communicated their intention to normalize and re-establish diplomatic relations between Cuba and the United States of America.

This paper begins with an attempt to explain, theoretically, the thawing of the bilateral US-Cuban relations. A second section discusses what is considered a wide range of bilateral relations between the two countries. It also explains the reason that leads the author to focus on baseball as "*the*" relationship of study. That relationship, as argued, requires an analysis of the different actors (and interests) involved in baseball. The third section examines the way in which Major League Baseball (MLB) can serve as a formidable set of individuals and groups of interest around baseball and how this (not necessarily interstate) transnational social microcosm, could contribute to a truly revolutionary transformation of the relations between the two states. To achieve this, it is necessary to take into account the political economy of baseball. The fourth section seeks to explain the social, political, economic, and cultural significance that baseball has, first to Cuba and second, that of Cuban Baseball to MLB. The fifth section deals with the concrete (or potential) role that MLB has in the politics

of both the thaw and the normalization of diplomatic relations between the US and Cuba. The sixth section gets a head start on what could be some of the implications of the normalization of diplomatic relations in the specific social microcosm called baseball, as well as its potential links and impacts on other relationships between both countries. The final section explains the novel way in which baseball could become an efficient constructivist tool and a catalyst for a *reset* in the Cuban-U.S. transnational relations.

1. Theoretical explanations of the thaw of Cuba-United States relations.

To a large extent, during several decades, the U.S. relationship with Cuba was marked (perhaps it remains so by the inertia) by two realities: the political-economic context of the Cold War on the one hand, and intellectually, by the dominance of realist thought in International Relations.

Today, when realist tenets¹ usefulness is generally limited to the policy among the great powers (Mearsheimer 2001), other approaches (Mingst 2004; Wendt 2009; Zehfuss 2009) seem to be required to explain both the rapprochement of the US with Cuba and to analyze the possible paths of a relationship that seems to be in the process of normalization.

Karen Mingst (2004) reminds us that there are three models for decision making: 1) the rational model; (2) the organizational/bureaucratic model, and 3) the pluralist model. The first implies either a monopoly on decision-making through the rational-unitarian state, or at least a very important degree of autonomy enjoyed by the state versus other players. When this model dominates, it is normal to talk about the relationship that a given state has with its counterparts. That is the case especially because the diversity and complexity of the relations tend to be read through the lenses of a unitarian state policy. The second model involves decisions deriving from organizations or sub-national bureaucracies, but there is no denial of the dominance of state actors, although many sub-state actors are taken into account. The third model is particularly useful for the present paper, since it presents a perspective that

¹ Such as human nature, zero-sum games, balance of power, inherent human greed, the drive for domination, states as power maximizers entities, states considered as rational unitarian actors, limited cooperation, among others.

transcends the realist domain. As Karen Mingst claims, when she refers to the pluralist model "... in contrast to the other two alternatives, attributes decisions to bargaining conducted among domestic sources- the public, interest groups, mass movements, and multinational corporations" (Mingst 2004, 126).

President Obama seems to understand that *engagement* is the key to spread American values in Cuba rather than the isolation of the island. Obama said: "I believe that we can do more to support the Cuban people and promote our values through engagement. After all, these 50 years have shown that isolation has not worked. It's time for a new approach." (Obama 2014).

Contrary to the initial optimism that "the announcement" has generated, there is fear among those who consider that the U.S.-Cuban "rapprochement" could mean a return to *realpolitik*. Perhaps the logic of such fear, stems from the possibility of a further weakening of a country such as Cuba, which currently does not represent a serious challenge to U.S. hegemony in the Western Hemisphere. According to those supporting this fear, the change of strategies does not seem to nullify *per se* the contents or philosophical tenets of realism. In this line of thought, and certainly not coming from an academic background, the bullpen coach of the Pittsburgh Pirates, Euclides Rojas, foresees changes coming along with the thaw: "engagement seems the best way, to infect, then kill the beast." (quoted in Price 2014, 116).

In the present analysis, it is difficult to overlook the realist prevalence, so present and dominant within American foreign policy logic. Experience dictates that in situations of conflict, in cases in which the defense and security of the country seem "in check", the capabilities of the state and its absolute or relative power, *versus* other states, are decisive; however, there is room to think that there is a variety of international actors besides the states, and there is no "evident" reason to believe that there can only exist *a single relationship*, US-Cuba. From the perspective of this paper, it is wrong to think that only the realist approach is present or is the only motivator in the development of the relationship. Even within the realist logic, the economy, which is a pre-requisite for a state's strength, requires the participation of economic agents. The central idea of this paper is to explain how baseball, as a transnational social microcosm, can become *one of the many emerging relationships* that can benefit from the normalization of the bilateral state relations, at the same time that it can contribute to a harmonious development of that interstate relationship. Baseball can also

serve as a roadmap for the development of added transnational relations between actors of both countries.

This paper does not confront constructivism and realism, rather it acknowledges their coexistence. Alexander Wendt (2009) considers that the identities and interests of elites determines the type of relationships that will take place among states. He proposes that the structure alone cannot explain the quality of the interactions. The problem with Wendt's proposal is that it leads us back to state decision-makers. If we take for granted that the relationship between states occurs between states' elites, between central decision-makers, and that state actors are those who determine the decision, then there is no room for alternatives. If however, we admit that there are a multiplicity of relationships, some guided by the state, and many others, the transnational relationships, happening in spite of the existence of the state, we are obliged to understand how to develop this type of relations and how these alternative, non-state centered relations, could impact the interstate relationship.

The economics of baseball could shed light on the possible paths during the normalization period. The understanding of the political economy of baseball opens the possibility of incorporating a variety of state, sub-state, non-governmental, and individual actors to make sense of the normalization and the possible future of the bilateral relationship.

From the perspective of this work, the political economy approach does not necessarily have to lead us back to political realism. It could be useful as a guideline for a "*reset*", which is certainly not post-realist, but which could coexist with realism. It could also mean the acknowledgement of the existence of multiple relations, state-based as well as transnational, anchored in the promise of the tenets of constructivism.

2. Analysis of actors and interested parties involved in baseball.

Despite the nationalist-instrumental use that sport has experienced throughout history, and which ultimate expression can be seen in the national medal counts, we shall not forget that the majority of sports, in the majority of countries, are neither a function, nor a competency, or even the property of states. This reality obliges us to take into account the various sport stakeholders and their respective interests.

Beyond the national teams, sports take roots in individuals, groups (teams) and the associations of groups (leagues). At given times (Barcelona 1992–2008 Beijing), baseball has turned into a competition scenario among national squads within the Olympic Games or more recently in the form of the World Baseball Classic (since 2006). On the other hand, the flows of individuals, and their economic-sport impact on teams and leagues shows a tremendous continuity, much more evident than the one that baseball has as a confrontation domain between national representations.

It is worth noting that, despite baseball having greater implications for individuals, teams, and leagues, the three considered as economic units, than the implications it has for countries, the possibilities of playing professionally is to a great extent an activity that cannot be divorced from, and indeed is closely linked with the "high politics" of the states. Therefore, the possibilities are oftentimes constrained by the political and legal conditions that states dictate.

The classic work of Simon Rottenberg (1956) already warned about certain peculiarities that made baseball a non-perfect player's market. Among these peculiarities it is possible to mention the existing "labour agreements" between teams from the major leagues and the minor leagues, "territorial rights" of teams, "standardized contracts", *tampering* (the impossibility that a team has to negotiate with another team while the player in which it is interested has a contract with another team). Essential from the standpoint of this work is that in the mid-20th century, "most of the revenue of baseball clubs in baseball comes from admission receipts" (Rottenberg 1956, 246). While revenues from tickets accounted for 74.1% of revenues, television and radio rights represented only 10.5% (Rottenberg 1956, 246). In the mid-50s of the 20th century, baseball captured a quarter (25.1%) of viewers of professional sports (Rottenberg 1956, 246). Rottenberg poses a strong argument against the barriers, laws and policies that restrict the free market. Almost 60 years later, a series of factors, both domestic and international, linked with both economics and politics, have significantly constrained freedom (understood as free enterprise) in baseball.

Joanna Shepherd and George Shepherd (2003) identify new ways, that after decades, teams continue to use to promote and protect their interests. Among these strategies teams turn their eyes to foreign baseball markets. Shepherd and Shepherd acknowledge that despite the existing *draft* of the MLB covering now Canada and U.S. territories (including Puerto

Rico), between 1989 and 1991, the majority of countries in Latin America escaped the constraints set by the *draft* as well as age regulations.

They also argue that some of the benefits that teams expect to get from a player, in addition to the number of years that the player plays for the team, are: “directly more wins and indirectly in higher ticket and TV revenues” (Shepherd and Shepherd 2003, 5).

Scott Tainsky and Jason Winfree (2010) found evidence that the presence of every foreign player will generate \$595 632 in ticket sales. By 2010, the average MLB team roster had 10.78 foreign players (Tainsky and Winfree 2010, 127). Tainsky and Winfree, transcending the tickets revenues, talk about the possibilities opened up for media revenues by the creation of a global fan base. They believe that MLB broadcast in other languages is indicative of the new opportunities.

Mark Rosentraub (2000) notes that the globalization of certain professional sports, including baseball, have led to the questioning of the government’s actions and regulation of sports by some international associations and sports leagues. The core question for Rosentraub is how we can develop a system of sports governance that takes into account the interests of the owners of the teams, players, fans, other businesses involved, as well as the public interest of different societies. These intertwined interests have generated unintended transnational relations (Rosentraub 2000). Unlike Rosentraub, this analysis does not analyze or assess what might be a system of global governance. The present paper limits its analysis to the transnational, U.S.-Cuba relations, however taking into account the political economy of global baseball.

3. The MLB: a business increasingly dependent on foreign baseball players.

In order to understand the MLB as a key player in the thaw and the normalization of U.S.-Cuba bilateral state relations, it is necessary to understand basic principles of the political economy of baseball.

Arturo Marcano and David Fidler (1999) observed a series of parallels between large multinational corporations (MNC) and the MLB: 1) both involve a consumer market in other countries and 2) both look for access to global markets of talent and/or work. If we admit the

idea that there are scarce goods, we can then understand the double and complex relationship, both of dependence and interdependence, of the MLB with and within the system that the MLB and its component parts form.

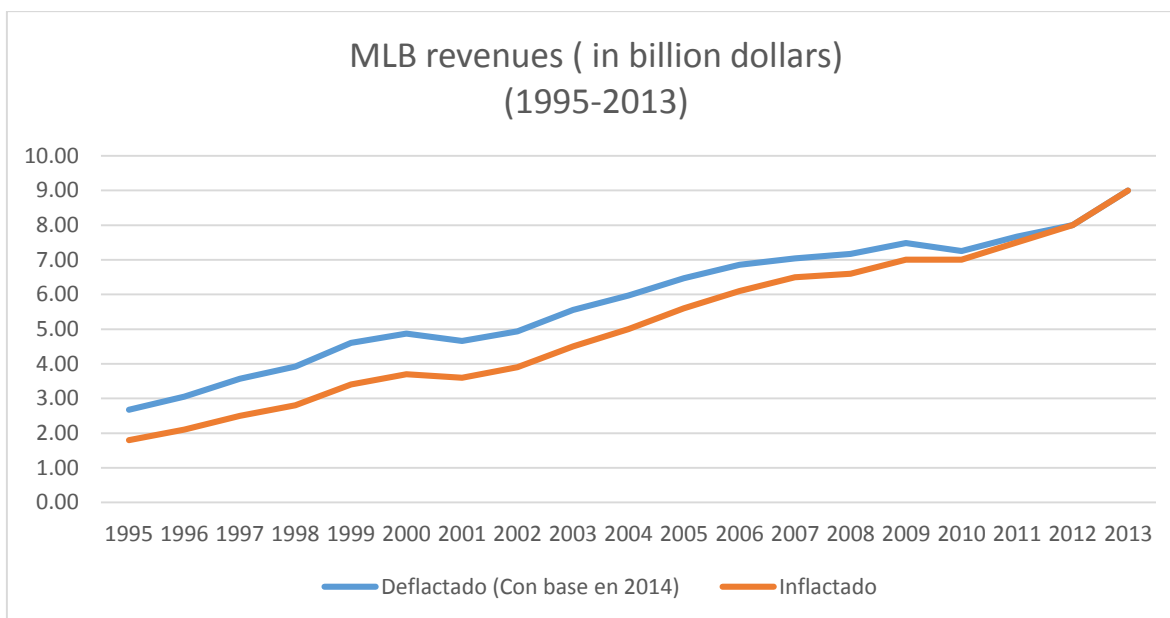
Shepherd and Shepherd (2003) noted that while in the decade of the 40s of the 20th century, there was only a "handful of foreign players²", by the first decade of the 21st century, more than 40% of major league and minor league players were born outside the United States. Foreigners, especially latinos, account for more than 25% of starting players in the MLB. Shepherd and Shepherd (2003) identified, as chief causes of the decline of U.S. players (mainly African-American players) two factors: 1) the establishment of the *draft* in 1965 and 2) age regulations. Excessive regulations have forced teams to recruit players in countries that do not have those locks or similar restrictions. By 1993, all MLB teams had at least one latino incumbent player (Shepherd and Shpeherd 2003, 14). For Marcano and Fidler (1999), 1998 was an iconic year, not only due to sport achievements, but also thanks to the fact that 32% of MLB players were born outside the United States, and because the 147 foreign players were representing 23 countries. Additionally, they note the fact that the San Diego Padres and the Colorado Rockies held its opening game of the season in Monterrey, Mexico in 1999. By the opening day of the 2014 MLB season, there were 26.3% of foreign players. 19% of this figure were born in three countries -Cuba, Venezuela and the Dominican Republic. Additionally, there were 27 players born in Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, and Puerto Rico, which gives an idea of the growing influence of Latin players in the MLB.

Marcano and Fidler (1999) suggest that one of the implications of such a controversial concept, such as globalization, is the notion of denationalization. When referring to the MLB, they observe that denationalization is precisely the hallmark of baseball towards the end of the 20th century.

The 1994 MLB strike marked a watershed in the history of the League; therefore, I consider important to link the profitability of the MLB with the boom of the foreign players market after the season-ending strike. This boom has extended for over two decades now.

² Shepherd and Shepherd observed that the fraction of Latino players was close to 0, and as a result of the racial desegregation (affecting black Latinos) in 1947, and prior to the *draft*, it only reached 7%.

Figure 1



Source: *Forbes*. 2014. "Major League Baseball Sees Record \$9 Billion in Revenues for 2014", December 10. <http://www.forbes.com/sites/maurybrown/2014/12/10/major-league-baseball-sees-record-9-billion-in-revenues-for-2014/>

Year	Foreigners	MLB total	% Foreigners³
1995	199	1133	17.56
1996	214	1141	18.76
1997	246	1123	21.91
1998	256	1186	21.59
1999	277	1209	22.91
2000	302	1230	24.56
2001	308	1220	25.25
2002	321	1218	26,36
2003	325	1230	26.42
2004	347	1247	27.83
2005	243	1237	19.64
2006	355	1243	28.56

³ There are a couple of reasons why the percentages of foreigners in these tables do not necessarily coincide with the data of the previous paragraphs. This table takes into account all players participating in the rosters of the teams throughout the entire season. For this reason, there are players who are temporarily promoted from the Minor Leagues. Also the fact that players born in U.S. territories usually are not considered foreigners. Many of the figures used in the drafting of the text (not in the case of this table), refer to foreign-born players. On either case, we can observe that there is a large number of foreigners and/or foreign-born players.

2007	276	1278	21.60
2008	276	1291	21.38
2009	223	1266	17.61
2010	229	1249	18.33
2011	234	1295	18.07
2012	243	1284	18.93
2013	241	1304	18.63
2014	224	1320	16.97

Beyond the numbers, the political economy of global baseball suggests, as argued by Roberto González-Echevarría, that the growing relevance of the Latin market of baseball is linked "to the widespread use of Latino youngsters as cheap and, ultimately, disposable talent." (Cfr. Araton 1998). Kevin Baxter (2011) notes the irremediable internationalized operations profile of MLB teams. Competition is high and it has become a reality in which "virtually every team has an academy in the Dominican Republic". The reasons, according to Baxter, are not only related to the sport talent, but also to a more cost-efficient rationale, so that a team can remain competitive and so that teams have access to cheaper talent, supplementing the *draft*. Baxter (2011) sums it up this way: "Last year the 30 big league teams spent an average of \$6.494 million in the draft. No team spent that much on international signings."

According to the perspective of this paper, it is not only the lower average cost of the acquisition of Latin American baseball player which explains their *boom* in the MLB. It is also related to the geographic proximity, as well as with the demographic characteristics of the United States. Its significant Latin population likes to follow the performance of players coming from their countries of origin. The quality of foreign players in general, and Latinos in particular, is illustrated in the following table.

Table 2. Percentage of foreign players in the All-Star games of the MLB (1991-2014)				
Year	Players in the All-Star Game	Percentage of foreign players in the All-Star game	Percentage of Latino players in the All-Star game	Number of Cuban players in the All-Star game
1991	58	22,41	22,41	1
1992	57	2105	19.30	1
1993	58	12.07	12.07	0
1994	56	1429	1429	0
1995	61	19.67	18.03	0

1996	59	11.86	11.86	0
1997	57	17.54	14.04	0
1998	62	27.42	25.81	2
1999	62	30.65	25.81	2
2000	68	27.94	25.00	0
2001	63	28.57	20.63	0
2002	64	37.50	31.25	0
2003	68	30.88	25.00	0
2004	64	42.19	35.94	1
2005	58	36.21	34.48	1
2006	50	30.00	28.00	0
2007	57	40.35	33.33	0
2008	59	32.20	25.42	0
2009	51	23.53	17.65	0
2010	58	31.03	25.86	0
2011	60	26.67	25.00	0
2012	61	29.51	27.87	1
2013	55	36.36	35.18	2
2014	62	35.48	32.25	5
Average 1991-2000	59.8	20.49	18.86	0.6
Average 2001-2010	59.2	33.24	27.76	0.2
Average 2011-2014	59.5	32.06	30.08	2.0

Tainsky and Winfree (2010) observe the peculiarity of the MLB versus other sport leagues, not limited to those in the United States. When comparing the MLB with the Major League Soccer (MLS), the Canadian Football League (CFL), and the European soccer leagues, they conclude that the MLB does not face the limitations of the other leagues, which allows for cases in which a majority of a MLB team is foreign-born.

Although the dependence of the MLB on foreign players occurs mainly with respect to Latin players, this dependence increasingly becomes global. Marcano and Fidler (1999) report that MLB is seen in 215 countries, either through ESPN or through local media companies. They also add that when a foreign player happens to be very popular in his country of origin, it is much more likely for the MLB to sell broadcast rights to the player's country of origin. Marcano and Fidler consider that the existence of a mature market in the United States has forced the MLB to make inroads into new markets. Japan, the country that

won the two first World Baseball Classics is an undisputed source of baseball talent, which incidentally serves a very important domestic market. In contrast to what happens with the Latin American and Cuban markets, it presents certain peculiarities that make it difficult to hire the services of Japanese players (Piehl 2010). The MLB now is forced to compete internationally for scarce talent, which today more than ever before, is dispersed in different geographical areas. As Matthew Piehl (2010) points out, the MLB faces a series of restrictions trying to gain access to Nippon Professional Baseball (NPB) players.

It is clear that the MLB increasingly depends on foreign baseball players both for profitability purposes as well as a result of the shortage of domestic baseball talent. Although the Latin American players have become fundamental, Canadian, Japanese and South Korean players, among others, are gaining relevance, not only on the field, but also as a spare head for the opening of international markets for the MLB.

4. The meaning of baseball to Cuba and the meaning of Cuba to the MLB.

This section starts recalling Mark Rosentraub's remark : "Sports are but a very small fraction of the global economy or even the economy of any major city, but they have been and remain fundamental components of life in many societies." (Rosentraub 2000, 123) In the specific case of baseball this is true both for the United States and Cuba.⁴

The history of Cuban baseball traces back to the 60's and 70's of the XIX century. If we talk about the introduction of baseball to the island, a byproduct of the return to the island of Cubans studying in the United States and/or as a byproduct of the influence of American sailors, we could then trace the origins back to the 60's of the same Century. If the reference point is the beginning of baseball as an organized competition system, then the dawn of Cuban baseball goes back to the year of 1878, only two years after the creation of the National League of United States (Manzano, n.d.).

⁴ In spite of the falling popularity of baseball over the past three decades, representing 23% of the sports audience in 1985 and only 16% in 2014, it remains as the second most watched sport in United States, only behind NFL Football (*Sports Business Daily* 2015). In the Cuban case, practically every source reports baseball as the most popular sport in the country.

Baseball has multiple impacts and usages in Cuba. According to Lydia Castro (n.d.) baseball transcends its specific scope, sports, to permeate the speech and meanings, within and outside the field. The same is true for both those who enjoy the game and those who are not fond of it.

Regarding the political use, Rachel Solomon (2011) wields the meanings or uses that baseball has had for Fidel Castro's revolutionary regime: a) a source of pride derived from the international success of the Cuban national team; (b) the consideration of players as national heroes; (c) the defectors have often been treated as traitors.

The above is a brief, simple reminder of what baseball means both to Cuban society and to Cuban politics. It is now the time to analyze what Cuba represents for the MLB.

Rosentraub (2000) reflects on the functional logic of leagues: 1) they promote the establishment of market areas (limited competition); 2) they work for the maximization of profits; 3) they try to ensure an adequate offer of sport talent and spectators; 4) they try to extend the influence of the League into other markets. Rosentraub predicts that the MLB, as an economic institution, will continue to seek opportunities for the expansion of the League in other countries. This will lead to more foreign players involved and to a further search for talent in both developed and developing countries. He also considers viable the foundation of new MLB franchises in other countries of Asia and Latin America before 2020. He thinks that these teams could play against the champions of North America in a sort of baseball World Cup. His forecast was not wrong, since 2006, there is a World Baseball Classic.

In the previous section we mentioned the growing interdependence between the MLB and foreign players. The analysis does not only have in mind the player as producer of the game, but as a spare head for the opening of new markets, whether by boosting the domestic demand and expectations of certain groups of immigrants, or with the intention of penetrating new foreign markets. Eric Liefer (1995), acknowledged not only a strong foreign presence within the U.S. professional sports, but also talked about the need of orienting sports towards a global fan base.

Among the four functions of the leagues already mentioned, in the case of functions 2 to 4, Cuba could be precisely the answer that the MLB looks for. With a population of 11 million people, Cuba not only represents a source of talent for the MLB but also an ideal market. Schmidt (2007) believes that Cuba would be a great thrust for to the expansion effort of

baseball, just as Asia and Australia were in the past decade. There is a list of 13 potential cities that could host a MLB franchise. Havana, San Juan, Santo Domingo, Monterrey and Caracas (all in Latin America) are considered viable, geographically speaking, but there are some problems posed by the logistics, the type of government, or simply as a result of poverty (Tomarkin n.d.). With the restoration of the U.S.-Cuba bilateral relationship, some of the political concerns and maybe poverty could be solved, because baseball could be a great catalyst for economic activity and because it could serve as an example for the revitalization of the Cuban economy in other areas. Havana, according to the study, has a wide fan base, with enough population to allow a market to flourish. It also has a strong passion for the game (Tomarkin n.d.). S.L. Price does not rule out an MLB team in Cuba. Latin American tycoons such as Carlos Slim of Gustavo Cisneros, for both political and economic reasons, could fund such possibility (Price 2014).

Cuban players enjoyed a significant presence in the major leagues since the beginning of the XX century. The Brooklyn Dodgers held some training camps in Cuba during the 30's and 40's of the XX Century. The Washington Senators had a minor leagues team in the island since 1946 (Schmidt 2014). Despite a low presence of foreigners in U.S. baseball during most of the XX Century, among that low number of foreign players, Cubans represented the majority of foreign players (36 of the 70 foreign players) who made their debut in that decade in the MLB (Shepherd and Shepherd 2003).

The tense and "special" U.S.-Cuba relationship after the Cuban Revolution, slowed what was in reality a special baseball relationship between both countries. Despite the *impasse* that followed the revolutionary process in Cuba, the quality of Cuban baseball is out of the question. The following data shed light on the strength of Cuban baseball and on the potential that Cuba has for the MLB. Baseball was an Olympic sport from 1992 to 2008. Cuba, not only is the maximum winner of Olympic medals, it is also the only country that won a medal in each and every Olympics in which baseball was an official sport. Another event of great regional relevance is the so-called "Caribbean Series". Once again, for political reasons, Cuba has only participated in 15 of the 58 editions; however, it has won 8 of 15 editions in which it participated. Regarding the World Baseball Classic, this tournament has been held three times since 2006. Cuba was the runner-up in the first edition. It could be argued that

the relatively poor performance of Cuba is to a great extent explained by the constraints that Cuban stars face when playing in the MLB.

Currently, Cuban players in the MLB are outnumbered by Dominican and Venezuelan players; however, the 19 Cuban-born players born enrolled in the MLB in the 2014 season represents the highest number since 1967, the year in which the number of Cuban-born players reached its peak (30 players) (Schmidt 2014). The “strike back” of Cuban players could be the result of two things: 1) the quality of Cuban baseball players is such that there is a growing demand of them in the MLB, and 2) despite the various political and legal difficulties that Cuban players face when trying to play in the MLB, the players have resorted to diverse resources in order to play professionally in the United States. Since 1991, nearly 200 players have defected from Cuba (Solomon 2011). The first official defector was Rene Arocha in 1991 (Arango 2007).

The U.S.-Cuba political thaw may open a new era for the MLB. According to statements by Rob Manfred, the MLB Commissioner, the MLB could play an exhibition game in Cuba in early 2016 (Costa 2015). It would signal the return to the "rich in baseball" island for the first time since 1999.

The MLB made the following statement shortly after the announcement of Barack Obama on the thaw of Cuba-U.S. relations:

Major League Baseball is closely monitoring the White House's announcement regarding Cuban-American relations. While there are not sufficient details to make a realistic evaluation, we will continue to track this significant issue, and we will keep our Clubs informed if this different direction may impact the manner in which they conduct business on issues related to Cuba. (*USA Today* 2014).

The thaw with Cuba seems perfect for the MLB. Its Commissioner, Rob Manfred, said that the League seeks to expand beyond the current borders, and Cuba is one of the countries that are under consideration for this expansion. Manfred said during the Florida Marlins spring training camp: "We are in conversations with the [U.S.] government about Cuba" (Spencer 2015). He added: "Cuba is a great market for us in two ways. Obviously it's a great talent market. [And] it's a country where baseball is embedded in the culture." (Spencer 2015). In addition, Manfred does not rule out taking the World Baseball Classic to Cuba.

5. Baseball's lobbying evolution in Washington.

In the pluralist decision making schemes, generally the state does not act independently of social groups, although it preserves some autonomy. As Mingst observes:

Societal groups have a variety of ways of forcing decisions in their favor or constraining choices. They can mobilize the media and public opinion, lobby the government agencies responsible for making the decision, influence the appropriate representative bodies [...] organize transnational networks of people with comparable interests, and, in the case of high-profile heads of multinational corporations, make direct contacts with the highest governmental officials. The decision made will reflect these diverse societal interests and strategies – a result that is particularly compatible with liberal thinking (Mingst 2004, 127).

One of the typical forms of dialogue, representation, pressure and exercise of influence by interest groups is *lobbying*. MLB is no stranger to such practices. This section will briefly deal with the evolution of MLB *lobbying*.

From 1993 to 2000, the MLB had a lobbying office in Washington, D.C. The office closed on June 1, 2000 (Moore 2000). According to Richard Levin, who served as executive director of public relations for the MLB, in 2000, a set of reasons led to the closure of the office. On the one hand, the economic difficulties faced by the MLB aggravated after the strike of 1994; on the other hand, the fact that in 1998, the Congress had passed the *Curt Flood Act*, which partially lifted baseball's exceptions to anti-trust laws, and which gave baseball players the same labor protections that other professional athletes enjoyed, reduced the need of a strong presence in Washington (Moore 2000).

At that time, baseball was the sport that spent more money on lobbying in Washington. According to the Federal Election Commission, a group in Washington that tracks spending on campaigns and *lobbying*, the MLB spent around \$880 000 USD on lobbying during the first half of 1999, which was more than the combined of the other U.S. professional leagues (quoted in Moore 2000).

Despite the MLB's decision to close its Washington lobbying office and/or subcontract lobbying, instead of having its own specialized office, Moore notes that the growing flow of players from Latin America and Asia, turn immigration issues (and we may add, foreign policy in general) into a concern for baseball. Just as baseball has opposed some Senate's

efforts to limit tax-free funding for the construction of new sports venues (Moore 2000), today U.S. foreign policy can rekindle the need for lobbying by the MLB. In this regard, Michael Schmidt observes:

Generally, important announcements from Washington foreign policy do not generate reactions from the office of the Commissioner of baseball and the players Union; however, after Obama message there were concise statements, claiming that they were monitoring the situation issued to the nation on Wednesday (Schmidt 2014).

In 2001, despite having closed its specialized lobbying office, MLB spent 1.2 million in lobbying through outsourcing. The amount was twice that of 2000 and twice the combined spending of the NBA, NFL and NHL, according to information from Political Money Line, (Mullins 2002), a research group on campaign finance. Other areas in which MLB has worked since 2000 is on PAC (*Political Action Committee*). The idea is to link owners with their allies in Congress, at the time they seek for new allies. Since the Fall of 2001 (and until the Summer of 2002), the MLB's PAC managed to raise \$157 450 USD among 12 teams. Mullins mentions that MLB raised during the 2001-2002 cycle around \$200 000 USD in donations. These donations were equally distributed among Democrats and Republicans. The MLB also contributed with a contribution of \$100 000 USD for President Bush's 2001 inauguration ceremony (Mullins 2002). All this shows that the MLB is ready and willing to work with both political parties, with the intention of having financial and political clout across the political spectrum.

The following information illustrate the importance that baseball owners give to politics: Carl Lindner, owner of the American Financial Group, Chiquita Banana and the Cincinnati Reds, was the sixth largest individual contributor in 1999-2000 with \$1.1 million USD. The owner of the Baltimore Orioles, Peter G. Angelos, also contributed \$940 000 in donations. Meanwhile, William DeWitt, co-owner of the St. Louis Cardinals, was one of the contributing pioneers to the campaign of George W. Bush, gathering more than \$100 000 USD (Mullins 2002). All this demonstrates that there is an existing link between sports and politics. As Jerry Colangelo observes: "In today's world, the political climate is relevant to how we conduct our business, and therefore it's important to be well represented in Washington." (quoted in Mullins 2002, 2008). Mullins also explains that not only the owners and the executive authorities of the MLB have resorted to lobbying, but the players Union has done the same.

This section concludes with a remark from Commissioner Manfred:

To the extent that we can play a role in helping the United States government effectuate a change in policy, that we're following their lead and we're acting in a way that's consistent with what they want us to do, that's an honor for us (*Cfr.* Costa 2015).

6. Various implications of the normalization of Cuba-United States diplomatic relations for baseball and its stakeholders.

The implications that could arise from the normalization of the diplomatic relations U.S.-Cuba, for both baseball and the involved actors and stakeholders, are the focus of analysis in this section. The implications are legal and economic. Individuals, teams, leagues (not only the Cuban and the U.S.) but other leagues such as the Mexican, Canadian, Japanese, the Taiwanese league, among others, are conditioned and impacted by the status of the bilateral inter-state U.S.-Cuba relationship. A plethora of actors, stakeholders, and interests will be impacted, for good or ill, by the normalization of the bilateral relationship.

If we bear in mind the globalization of the economy, baseball could have great relevance because it could/it should imply harmonization tendencies, equal competition within markets, as well as an increased respect for human rights. In this respect, Marciano and Fidler's (1999) work is important because it points out to the existence of unequal conditions, almost always unfavorable for Latin baseball players. Marciano and Fidler (1999) have drawn analogies with other multinational corporations which tend to treat foreign workers in a more unfavorable way in relation to the treatment that national workers get. In the specific case of Cuban players, a normalization of the bilateral relations, would open a horizon for the promotion of human rights and labor standards, when a truly competitive and fair market is in place.

Under the current embargo against Cuba, players from that country must establish residency in a third country before signing with a MLB team. That has led to a tortuous path for many players before joining the MLB (Costa 2015). For many Cuban players, including superstars such as Yasiel Puig and Yoenis Cespedes⁵, the departure from Cuba has required

⁵ During the recently held Caribbean Series in the Dominican Republic, the two superstar Cuban brothers, Lourdes Gourriel and Yulieski Gourriel defected, presumably to join the MLB (Strauss 2016).

smuggling networks and/or the establishment of residency in a third country (Mexico and the Dominican Republic, respectively), so that they are able to maximize their income by avoiding the *draft* (Beaton and Miller 2014). For decades there has been a strong defection of Cuban players. Some of them defected while playing overseas with the Cuban national team, but others risked their lives, putting their lives in the hands of smugglers. The story of Yasiel Puig is particularly dramatic. He left Cuba and was exposed to crocodile-infested waters, before being captured by part of the Mexican organized crime, which threatened to cut off his arm (Sánchez 2014). Scott Price (2014) observed that behind every story of multi-million dollar contracts of a Cuban baseball player, there is almost always the negative part of the story: wives and children who remain in Cuba. All this could radically change with the normalization of the bilateral relations.

Presently, U.S. policy toward Cuban migrants, argues that any Cuban who reaches American soil is eligible for asylum, but those who are intercepted at sea are repatriated. This policy is known as "wet foot / dry foot". Such a contradiction has encouraged smuggling and the activity of organized crime (Arango 2007). When a Cuban baseball player decides to defect, it must deal with two sets of arbitrary rules: dry feet policy and the regulations related to the signing of foreign players. Just as it happens with U.S. immigration policy, the MLB stance toward Cuban players is *sui generis*: any Cuban player who comes to the United States is considered to be a resident, and therefore has to be recruited through the *draft*. All the other foreign players are considered free agents and can sign with the highest bidder (Arango 2007). Solomon (2011) considered that Cuban players, as any other foreign players, should be treated as free agents, rather than forcing them *de facto* become a deserter. Cubans are treated differently in at least the following points: a) Cubans who want to play in the United States must *de facto* become deserters; b) they must renounce their Cuban nationality; c) they are subject to the Kuhn Directive, which as amended in 1991, prohibits the negotiation with anyone in Cuba in relation to the signing of any player in Cuban territory; d) a Cuban Player is required to establish residency in another country in order to be able to play in the MLB (Solomon 2011).

The implications of the normalization in the relationship could have repercussions (positive or negative) for different groups: criminal groups, for the owners, as well as for baseball's labor market. Ortiz considers that on the one side, the trips to the United States

could be less dangerous; on the other hand, astronomical contracts such as Puig's (\$42 million) and Abreu's (\$68 million) would be more difficult in the future (Ortiz 2014). The ease of Cuban players making it to the MLB would force salaries downwards, but for the MLB and its teams, it would represent an increased profitability.

From a marketplace logic, the United States could and should be interested in avoiding what happens in other sectors of the economy: the United States may arrive too late to the recently opened Cuban market. Certainly it is in the MLB best interest to avoid playing the "laggard" role. In this regard, the President of the Cuban Baseball Federation, Higinio Vélez, mentions that clubs in Venezuela, Nicaragua, Mexico, Canada, and some European nations have an interest in signing Cuban baseball players (Cuba Debate, 2015). Taiwan and South Korea also have important leagues that would like to compete for the Cuban talent. The Cuban government authorized its athletes, in 2013, to sign with foreign clubs. This event signaled the return of Cuba to professional status, since its abolition in 1961. The 2013 law allows Cuban professional athletes to sign contracts overseas provided "they comply with their obligations at home" (Ortiz 2014). These obligations include competing for their clubs in the Cuban National Series, which is played between November and April. Cuban baseball players currently do not face optimal conditions to access the MLB; as a result of these difficulties, they could be recruited by other leagues, in which the economic conditions are far from being appalling. Also, provided players do not defect, they can play in the World Baseball Classic, which gives the Cuban government the additional benefit of not losing that much quality in their national team. Certainly, the restoration of diplomatic relationships between the two countries could open a new era.

7. Baseball as constructivist catalyst for a new dawn in the Cuba-U.S. relationship.

Solomon (2011) reminds us that the efforts to normalize the inter-state relationship, through the two-way policy (*dual-track policy*), date back to the Bill Clinton administration. Despite its evident limitations, the interesting thing about this policy was to glimpse an alternate route out of realism. Non-punitive measures sought to break the monopoly of the bilateral relationship, allowing the gradual emergence of a series of extra-state "relationships".

If ideology has been an insurmountable wall in the dialogue between both countries, if the power of state politics has dominated the agenda and has silenced many of the voices and the sub-state or the non-state interests, then there is the need for new channels of dialogue, new perceptions, and new points of understanding to complement the normalization of the relationship. Of course, it would be naive to think that the thaw will immediately cancel or erase more than half a century of bilateral confrontations. On the other hand, we may argue there has to be a start point somewhere. Rene Gayo, scouting director for Latin America of the Pittsburgh Pirates summarizes the point:

The Communist Party will not go away because the USA wants to get access to what Cuba has to offer [...] It will take time for the Cubans to infiltrate (American baseball), volume-wise, to the extent that the Dominicans and Venezuelans have (quoted in Biertempfel 2009).

The problem does not lie in the question of whether baseball is a useful tool or not within the normalization of the international and transnational U.S.-Cuba relations. As we can see in this paper, there is a significant amount of news related to baseball that were published within a short time after Obama's announcement in December 2014. The heart of the matter is that many of the voices in favor of using baseball as a diplomatic tool, are based on a speech in which the beneficiaries would be only the MLB and the Cuban baseball players. Implicitly or explicitly there is a dominating view that the only loser would be Fidel Castro. If the new approach is a reset-like approach leading into a normalization of the relations, it is unfortunate and dangerous to imply that the *ultima ratio* of the normalization of the relations is a regime change. This would not only lead back to realism, but it will blockade the viability of the baseball diplomacy. Perhaps a variable-sum game solution could be that the Cuban team and/or the Cuban League could post its players in a similar way in which the Nippon Professional Baseball (NPB) does with its Japanese players. Taking into account the market price and the quality of the players, it should not be a problem to give greater dynamism to baseball, including the regulated flow of players. Certainly, both the MLB and the economy of Cuban teams would benefit through a "fair trade" of players, not to mention the invaluable gains in terms of human rights and security. According to Ben Badler (2014), a viable solution from the Cuban point of view would be based on two premises: 1) the

National Series must remain up and running, and function properly, and 2) the Cuban government should get money for itself as part of the negotiation process.

Although states should not monopolize the various international relationships, it should be guaranteed that each state, according to its degree of development and interests, gets sufficient incentives to cooperate, and in the case of U.S.-Cuba normalization, challenge the *status quo* that lasted several decades.

Culture is an important post-realist factor. Certainly, culture will not replace high politics in interstate relations; however, my bet is that culture could serve as a sort of spark plug, as a catalyst for areas of convergence, understanding, common languages, and common interests. Perhaps in so far as issues are fun for people, as issues are part of their national identities, cultural issues could positively serve as spaces and areas of understanding. These cultural forms, having legal, economic, and political implications can pave the way in other areas.

Solomon (2011) reminds some of the positive uses that baseball has had in the political and social history of the United States. He emphasizes Jackie Robinson and the breaking of the "color barrier", as well as the extra-field this case had. He also mentions the speeches by Commissioner Selig after September 11 and its connection with the war against terrorism. Solomon goes beyond baseball: "Altering the current Cuban baseball policy has the potential of effecting U.S.-Cuban relations as a whole" (Solomon 2011, 186). After all, we can reflect on the following reality: if diverse attempts to erode the revolution, if regime change policies have failed, if the efforts to put an end to monopolies of information, if the embargoes have proven to be a disaster... why would we think that baseball diplomacy is something naïve or marginal, without importance?

Talking about baseball diplomacy, bearing in mind table tennis diplomacy is neither unreasonable nor a novelty. During Clinton's second administration there were a couple of reciprocal games between a Cuban team and the Baltimore Orioles. Table tennis by no means counted on a similar US fan base as it did in the case of China. In contrast, baseball is well-known as the pastime of both countries, Cuba and United States.

According to Andrés Schipani (2011), the baseball diplomacy promoted by Clinton and interrupted during George W. Bush-era, has a great potential. Schipani believes that sport

contacts are positive because they encourage dialogue from people to people, groups to groups and cultures to cultures (as opposed to the fruitless dialogue between state and state).

It is not unreasonable then to believe that the approach in a specific cultural area such as baseball, fully understood, shared and cherished in both countries, is an area of opportunity that could contribute to the questioning, challenging, and dismantling of anachronistic interests and identities, and at least gives the opportunity to experiment if the tenets or hopes of constructivism can be an option, a viable alternative to *realpolitik*. Alexander Wendt (2009) proposed that the interests and identities of leaders are fundamental to understanding the interactions between states. The position in this work is slightly different: the interests of individuals and associations, in a specific cultural-economic domain, have the potential to alter the collective identities. At the same time, these communities, identities, and interests with transformed identities, could redefine state identities, which would necessarily impact on interests which have until very recently been considered “fixed.”

Conclusions

The announcement of President Obama on December 2014 and the opening of embassies in mid-2015 opened hope for the transformation of "the" bilateral relationship; the present paper, however, argues that the only possibility for a qualitative change in "the" relationship lies in the multiplication of *the* (transnational) international relations established by individuals and organizations from both countries.

As it was the case with table tennis diplomacy, which proved to be an effective catalyst for a new understanding between the United States and China, this paper has argued, that baseball can be an even better catalyst to cement a constructivist approach that allows for relations and transnational flows to flourish in a cultural sector, which is understood and appreciated by individuals and groups from both countries. Meanwhile, almost 14 months after “the announcement”, there are promising hints that baseball is already playing its part in the normalization of the bilateral relationship: the December 2015, three-day goodwill tour of Cuba by a group of MLB players, which included defectors such as Yasiel Puig, José Abreu, Alexei Ramírez, and Brayan Peña, is considered an important first step (Baxter 2015). The other promising step is the announcement that the Tampa Bay Rays will play an

exhibition game in Havana against the Cuban National Team on March 22, 2016 (Topkin 2016). The easing, normalization, legalization, and ultimately, the strengthening of the baseball links between non-state actors from both countries could be the triggering example for other economic, social and political actors.

Indeed, the fact that MLB made a series of statements in the hours following Obama's announcement is a promising sign that there is an objective interest in this League in the normalization of the bilateral relations. The course that the bilateral political relationship takes will influence positively or negatively diverse domains surrounding baseball: it will impact the profitability of the MLB, it will impact organized crime, currently involved in the flow of Cuban baseball players. However, one can also grasp the opposite direction: the needs and interests of the non-state actors involved in the baseball world, may exert sufficient pressure to transform the political relationship.

In conclusion, it is necessary to clarify that it is not the intention of the author to prognosticate the replacement of realism. Nonetheless, the novelty, and where the hope of baseball diplomacy lies, is that this constructivist approach could open a parallel route to the realist approach, a route which could develop and strengthen transnational relations of cooperation and benefit for individuals and non-state organizations.

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