1 Introduction

A CITY IN FLUX

The 1960s movie classic *Midnight Cowboy* features a pair of New York hustlers at their wits’ end. As winter sets in and one of them becomes increasingly ill, they set their hopes on escaping south. The healthy one robs an incautious businessman and, with the proceeds, buys a pair of bus tickets to Miami. The movie ends as the very sick member of the pair, played unforgottably by Dustin Hoffman, dies in the bus as it is about to reach its destination. In 1980 and again 1994, the Cuban government opened its ports, allowing anyone wishing to leave the island to do so. Tens of thousands of desperate people promptly took to the waters of the Strait of Florida in anything that could float.

Northerners wishing to escape freezing temperatures and southerners fleeing political oppression have nothing in common in terms of their ethnic origins or their history. Their only commonality is their destination, at the tip of Florida. These convergencies created a social and economic dynamic unseen anywhere else in the nation and, for that matter, in the world. The city in which they came together and which occupies us in this book is a strategic site for the study of urban change, less because of being representative or emblematic of other cities in the United States than because of the opposite, its radical uniqueness.
In the past, Miami has had its crop of serious and distinguished historians, but by focusing on how the city emerged and grew during the early twentieth century, they have been inexorably bypassed by the march of events. That fate was also that of the book published by the senior author in the early 1990s. It attempted to trace the transformation of the city up to and including the crucial year, 1980, and its sequels. The diagnosis of that earlier study—that Miami was perched on a precarious “edge”—was valid at the time, but it has been superseded by events since then. Our focus in this new book is change during the last quarter of a century, not only as a logical continuation of the earlier study, but because this is the period that led decisively to the present social, economic, and political character of the city. The confluence of diverse populations in this single geographic spot continues to produce change without a blueprint, leading to surprising outcomes. Tracing them is the object of our investigation. Before launching into it, it is convenient to outline a set of conceptual guidelines framing our analysis.

THE STUDY OF CITIES

Since their emergence in ancient history, cities have been at the center of the evolution of humankind. This is because they are loci, vehicles, and reflections of what takes place in the broader society. From their very beginnings, they have served as administrative centers and places of refuge in dangerous times. To these functions was added their key role as a marketplace. That is why so prominent a figure as Max Weber defined the city as a market. The central place of commerce for the existence and growth of cities is no better reflected than in their shriveling to near-extinction in the Europe of the eighth and ninth centuries. As the French historian Henri Pirenne tells the story, the Islamic conquest of the Mediterranean deprived the continent of vital imports and key outlets for its exports; the urban system put in place since Roman times imploded as a result, and civilization had to take refuge in the countryside—in manorial demesnes and in feudal subsistence production. Only the reconquest of the Mediterranean by the Crusaders two centuries later reversed the trend, setting the stage for the emergence of the great Italian
Thereafter, cities never lost their central role as marketplaces and as centers of administration in the West, these functions preceding and being more universal than their subsequent role as sites of mass production. The latter came into full force only with the advent of the Industrial Revolution in the nineteenth century. Thereafter, cities became primarily defined by the industrial goods they produced—cloth and apparel in Manchester and Birmingham; machinery in London; steel in Pittsburgh; ships in Philadelphia; and eventually automobiles in Detroit. But before that industrial turn, cities in ancient, medieval, and even modern times did not produce much of anything, serving primarily as markets and as sites for administrative coordination. In that capacity, they were the loci and the vehicle of the course of major events in human history, and their physical appearance stood as the reflection of such trends. The historical role of cities as sites of commerce and administration, rather than productive entities, must be kept in mind as we approach the city that is the subject of this book.

There are two additional features of urban life to be noted before going back to that story. First, urban phenomena are essentially political. They involve the interaction, conflict, and cooperation among interests backed by different amounts of power. This is not to say that such events do not take place elsewhere; but it is in the cities, by virtue of the concentration of large numbers of people in limited space, that the political interplay and struggles of interests and power become more visible and poignant. Contests for hegemony always culminate in cities, even if their origins lie elsewhere. Revolutionary armies can never claim victory until they have conquered the capitals of their respective realms; it is also in cities where political leaders claim office or are removed from it.4

Within cities, the competition for space inevitably triggers political confrontation. The wealthy always seek to influence politics in order to reserve for themselves privileged access to urban amenities and services. Everyday citizens, on the other hand, must band together in movements or parties in order to make their voices heard. Indeed, their claims do not become visible as “urban” issues until they enter the political arena. Above all, the most common political confrontation is spawned by the conflicting commercial cities—Venice, Pisa, and Genoa—and farther north, the cities of the Hanseatic League.3
functions of cities as sites for human habitation and as centers for wealth accumulation. Competition among economic interests and their common wish to turn cities into profit-making entities inevitably clash with the desire of the working population for livable space. Industrial pollution, traffic congestion, ghetto areas right next to wealthy gated communities, inflationary “bubbles” in land and real estate are among the myriad problems issuing from this confrontation.

Second, urban phenomena are spatial. The attraction that the city has always had for generations of scholars is based on how clearly facts of social life are reflected in its physical configuration. It is often possible to “read” parts of the history of a nation, its present class structure, and its distinct culture by taking a leisurely stroll or a slow drive around its built environment. It is true that all social events tend to be projected into space. The unique feature of cities, however, is that the spatial reflection of social, economic, and political processes occur in a physically circumscribed perimeter. That makes them all the more visible and easier to understand.

Space in the city is more than land and the built environment. It is also a resource put to multiple uses by different actors. The result of the confrontation between private economic interests and the citizenry is often reflected in how much “free space” there is, how easily and cheaply one can travel from one place to another, and to what extent home dwellings in single plots are crowded out by land demands for multistory office and apartment buildings. Space can be used as a resource by upper-class families to escape the crowdedness and insecurity of central cities by moving into suburbs. In other instances, certain groups may deliberately choose to cluster in certain patches of urban space. Ethnic and minority groups frequently do so, albeit for different reasons: for some, the only way to maintain a precarious foothold in the city is by settling in its least desirable places; for others, it is the means to foster business growth by drawing on the in situ coethnic community as a market, a source of credit, and a labor supply.5

A view of cities as loci, vehicles, and reflection of broader societal processes and of urban phenomena as simultaneously political and spatial gives us the conceptual tools to approach the analysis of our topic systematically. With this theoretical spadework done, it is now possible to approach and understand better what has taken place in the city at the tip of the Florida peninsula.
It is appropriate to begin the story in 1992. The hurricane that practically wiped out the southeastern quadrant of Miami-Dade County took place that year, marking another decisive moment in the turbulent history of the city. Andrew, the “Big Wind,” was not only a natural catastrophe; in then unrecognized ways, it marked the beginning of a new era. More than anything, it accelerated trends that were already in place and that moved the city away from the “edge” in which it had been precariously perched. City on the Edge, a book by the senior author with Alex Stepick, published one year after the catastrophe, summarized the social and economic conditions of Miami at that time as follows:

1. There is no mainstream. The hegemony of the old “upper uppers” has given way to parallel social structures, each complete with its status hierarchy, civic institutions, and cultural life. As a result, economic mobility and social standing have ceased to depend on full acculturation or on pleasing the elites of the old class order.

2. While the business class does exercise indisputable control in governing the city, it is increasingly composed of recent immigrants, rather than exclusively of “old” families or corporate branch executives.

3. The overlap of parallel social systems in the same physical space has given rise to “acculturation in reverse”—a process by which foreign customs, institutions, and language are diffused within the native population. As a consequence, biculturalism has emerged as an alternative adaptive project to full assimilation to American culture. Opponents of biculturalism must either withdraw into their own diminished circles or exit the community.

These were extraordinary developments unique in the American urban landscape. Miami became loci, vehicle, and reflection of a clash of forces not seen anywhere else. The first chapter of the earlier book concluded by asking: How did it happen? How could a large American city be transformed so quickly that its natives often chose to migrate north in search of more familiar cultural settings? How could an immigrant group reproduce its institutions so thoroughly that a parallel social structure was established? And, perhaps most important, where would this process of change without a blueprint lead?
The postscript about Hurricane Andrew and its aftermath, reproduced as a prescript to this book, adumbrated some of the answers by pointing to incipient trends that would consolidate over time. In the ensuing years, the process of convergence tentatively announced in those earlier lines accelerated, leading to a more solid and more transparent social order. That trend was not the result of a social “pact” between the warring ethnic communities of the past in order to cope with effects of the hurricane’s destructive force. Instead, the demographic trends anticipated in that 1993 postscript did materialize: native whites continued to leave Dade County in droves, and Latins, particularly Cubans, consolidated their hold, translating it into growing political and economic power.

The institutions of the old Miami establishment gradually gave way. The Non-group, an appropriately named entity, made up of local white brahmans who decided the course of the city behind closed doors, disappeared. Establishment leaders like that perennial figure, Alvah Chapman, publisher of the *Miami Herald*, faded from view, as did local politicians and journalists wedded to nostalgic images of what Miami had been. Private and public institutions that first ignored the presence of the Cubans and then resolutely confronted their rise were forced to yield and, in some cases, were taken over by the very people they had so fiercely resisted.

Of these institutions, none was more important than the *Miami Herald* itself—for years a power player in its own right and the voice of the local “Anglo” establishment. It is worth recalling what the confrontation looked like in the mid-1980s. Joan Didion, visiting the city at that time, remarked, “This set of mind in which the local Cuban community was seen as a civic challenge to be determinedly met was not uncommon among Anglos to whom I talked in Miami.”

An Anglo executive of the *Herald*, interviewed in 1987, remarked:

> We made a bet during the 1960s that the normal pattern of immigration that this country had seen over many years, when ethnic minorities came in large numbers and settled in different sections, would not be very different here; that within a reasonable number of years, English would become the dominant language. So we made a bet in 1960 that that would occur here in Miami as a large number of Cuban refugees came in, following Castro’s takeover. That didn’t happen as fast as we thought it would.
A black civic activist of the time minced no words:

In those days, I said to Cubans in a speech that there was going to be a time when white folks are going to try to treat you all like niggers. They’re going to put you again in your place as they do with all minority groups. But unlike black Americans, Cubans had no history of being kept in their place, and, as a result, they responded differently. We black folks were saying to white folks, “Let us in.” Cubans were saying to white folks, “Let us in so that we can take over.”

And a Cuban American banker summarized the high point of confrontation with the *Herald*:

The conflict between the Cuban community and the *Herald* reached its peak when, after the resignation of one of the directors of the Cuban-American National Foundation, the newspaper started speculating, without basis of fact, about internal divisions in the organization. We decided to write an open letter, and it was published as a paid announcement in the newspaper. The *Herald* never expected that we Cubans would do something like that! . . . Richard Capen, the editor, called to complain, but, faced with the threat of a massive boycott, the newspaper relented.

At the time, the Cuban-American National Foundation was running ads on radio and even in Miami city buses reading, “Yo no creo en el *Herald*.” (I do not believe in the *Herald*.) In the end, the defeat of the newspaper was complete. After a sustained confrontation with the president of the foundation, Jorge Mas Canosa, the publisher, David Lawrence, left his post. Shortly after, the *Herald*’s parent company, Knight-Ridder, left Miami, not without appointing a new editor in chief for the paper, Alberto Ibargüen, a second-generation executive of Cuban and Puerto Rican origin. What traditional white leaders of Miami never fully grasped was the magnitude of the historical phenomenon that had appeared at their doorstep. Accustomed to run a tourist city for the benefit of Americans up north, the local establishment never paid much attention to events in its Caribbean backyard, or it regarded them with a measure of condescension.

While the energies of the exiled Cuban upper class were initially devoted entirely to the overthrow of the Castro regime in Cuba, they knew how to react when local Miami elites, clustered in the Non-group and spearheaded by the *Miami Herald*, attempted to put exiles in their place as another
ethnic minority, just as the black leader quoted above announced. Instead of accepting that role, Cuban leaders redefined Miami and then laid claim to it. This was “the Great Change” about which a Cuban banker of the time spoke eloquently:

Before the “Great Change,” Miami was a typical southern city, with an important population of retirees and veterans, whose only activity consisted in the exploitation of tourism during the sunny winters. No one thought of transforming Miami into what it is today. It is no exaggeration to say that the motor of the Great Change was the Cuban men and women who elected freedom and came to these shores to rebuild their homes and face with courage an uncertain future. . . . These last decades of the twentieth century have witnessed the foundation of a dynamic and multifaceted Miami over the past of a Miami that was merely provincial and tourist-oriented. Today, the level of progress has reached unanticipated heights, beyond the limits of anyone’s imagination.14

When faced with opposition by the old Anglo establishment, Cuban leaders of the time turned their attention to electoral politics. Despite attempts by local nativist groups, such as Citizens of Dade United, to turn back the clock, the local political apparatus fell relentlessly into the hands of the Cubans. At the beginning of the confrontation in the early 1980s, the exiles’ expectations were much more modest. Thus, a Cuban American county official of that period:

The Anglo power structure is scared to death about the Cuban rise in this community. It has tried co-optation through an “interethnic relations committee” of the Miami Chamber of Commerce which is really a sham. There is now an embryonic organization promoted by the [exile] business leaders; the plan today is to try to elect a Cuban mayor of the city and perhaps one or two state legislators.15

Twenty years later, the mayors of Miami-Dade County, of the city of Miami, and of other large municipalities in the county were Cuban or Cuban American. So were three-fourths of the area’s congressional delegation and over 70 percent of its state senators. By 2015, two Cuban Americans had been successively elected to the U.S. Senate from Florida, Mel Martinez and Marco Rubio. The latter even saw fit to run for president of the United States in 2016.16
Thus, the convergence foreseen in our 1993 Postscript did take place but not through compromise. Instead, it marked the near-complete triumph of one of the contending factions. As Aranda, Hughes, and Sabogal, authors of a more recent study of Miami, conclude, “Cubans no longer share power with Anglos . . . as they did in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Cubans politically dominate all other ethnic and national-origin groups in offices representing the larger constituencies.”

Looking back, the question still lingers: How could an immigrant minority, just recently arrived, lay claim to an American city and impose itself to boot? Immigrants, by the very character of their condition as foreigners, are defined and see themselves as guests of the host society and subordinate to its culture and preexisting social order. They are more likely to find themselves in the role of supplicants than that of claimants. Those foreign groups that eventually ascended to positions of political power in the past, such as the Irish in Boston and Chicago and the Italians in New York, took generations to reach that goal.

The anomalous story of Miami can be explained by an unforeseen convergence of three facts. First, the Cuban upper classes that landed in the city as a consequence of the successful Communist revolution on the island were not only accustomed to power back home, but, in addition, were quite familiar with American politics and culture. They did not come from some remote Southeast Asian country but from what had effectively been, until 1959, an American protectorate only ninety miles from U.S. shores. They had reached their positions of wealth and power under American hegemony to which they readily acquiesced.

Second, these groups did not see their departure and arrival in South Florida as a final outcome but only as a temporary expedient as they prepared for a seemingly inevitable return. The Communist victory in Cuba was seen as a political aberration that the nation claiming leadership of the Free World would simply not tolerate. Thus, the Cuban exile leadership lined up solidly behind the U.S. government in the global struggle against communism and, in particular, in the effort to defeat the dictatorship of Fidel Castro on the island. This situation gave Cuban exiles the status of allies in a common political endeavor, not refugees. The ignominious defeat at the Bay of Pigs in 1961 and the Missile Crisis of 1962—resolved by an agreement to refrain from any future
invasions of Cuba in exchange for the removal of Soviet missiles from the island—were perceived by the exile leadership as unfathomable calamities.\textsuperscript{20}

By the same token, however, and as an unforeseen consequence of these events, the status of Cubans in the United States was further legitimized. The failure of the U.S. government to deliver on its commitment to its fervent Caribbean allies left it, in a sense, obliged to them. Stranded in Florida through no fault of their own, they were entitled to both respect and assistance in the effort to reconstruct lives so unexpectedly shattered. This did happen, and federal support arrived in Miami in sufficient amounts to permit the exiled Cuban population to build its economic enclave in the next two decades.\textsuperscript{21}

In this context, the attempt by some members of the local Miami elite to “put Cubans in their place” by sponsoring a referendum to forbid the use of Spanish in the city government was profoundly misguided. Proponents of that measure, mostly transplanted northerners, had no idea of the geopolitical drama they had stepped into. For the Cubans, the anti-bilingual referendum was the last straw. Having lost their island, they now confronted the prospect of also losing their adopted city. As we know, this did not happen. The Cuban leadership lost no time in marshaling its considerable resources, swiftly placing the hapless nativists in “their” place.

The anti-bilingual referendum thus accelerated what it had tried to prevent. Before the referendum, Cubans had never laid claim to the city, preferring instead an accommodation of sorts with what were perceived as friends and allies in the local establishment. That accommodation came to an end in 1980, with the former exiles steadily gaining political and economic power. It was not difficult to do so because of the third key fact at the time: the pre-1980 Miami establishment was rather feeble, lacking the historical roots of urban elites in other American cities, from Boston to Jacksonville.\textsuperscript{22} Recent arrivals themselves, they did not possess the cohesion and resources to resist a determined onslaught. That made the Anglo attempt to marginalize the Cubans all the more pathetic. In a few years, local Anglo hegemony—including the lead role of the \textit{Miami Herald}—became a thing of the past.
THE AFTERMATH

The transformation of Miami was, like all urban phenomena, essentially political. Spatially, it was reflected in the expansion of Cuban-owned enterprises, originally concentrated in an enclave in the southwest corner of the city, to the entire metropolitan area; the move of wealthy Cuban families to the exclusive Coral Gables municipality; and the renaming of city streets and parks in honor of Cuban heroes. More important is what took place afterward, that is, in the twenty-five years after Cuban elites took political control of the city. Contrary to the expectations of nativists, Miami was not pushed over the “edge,” nor did it become a “banana republic.” On the contrary, Cuban leaders demonstrated a remarkable affinity to American capitalism, promoting domestic and foreign investments in what was now “their” city and seeking to convert it into a true global metropolis—the strategic center of trade and financial transactions between Europe, the United States, and Latin America.

Local interethnic battles took place under a resilient U.S. constitutional system that adjudicated impartially between winners and losers of electoral contests and that prevented extreme outcomes. Instead, under its new leadership, the city flourished, engaging in a momentous forward push whose consequences—physically reflected in its skyline—were unimaginable only a few years earlier. As Allman puts it in a 2013 afterword to his earlier study of the city:

By 2010, the decennial U.S. Census revealed Greater Miami had outstripped the Washington D.C. area in population. It also had surpassed what previously had been the South’s dominant metropolitan region, Atlanta. . . . If, on election day 2012, you had driven from the center of Miami into what only recently had been the Everglades, you might have reached a restaurant done up in traditional “Latin” style. . . . Until very recently, there would have been no need to go inside to know what was happening. The winning candidate ranting about Castro, the Cuban flags waving, the political party of the victor would have been foregone conclusions. This time, however, the winner talked about other subjects: the environment, education, the need for all kinds of people to find common ground.
Cuban American political leaders took firm control of the local Republican Party, seeking to use it as the instrument to move into state and even national politics. At the same time, the new economic leaders of the city engaged in a determined push outward, toward Latin America and Europe in a bid to make their city a true cosmopolitan center. As the banker Luis Botifoll had anticipated, they succeeded beyond all expectations. Specific reasons for that success are analyzed in a later chapter. For the moment, the key question is what consequences this unprecedented expansion had and how they have been reflected in the political arena and in the spatial layout of this metropolitan area.

Politically, the old-style Cuban elite that had been at the forefront of the ethnic battles of the 1980s and early 1990s aged and gradually relinquished power. It was replaced by a more acculturated Cuban American second generation that came to occupy increasingly prominent positions in the metropolitan economy and politics. These new leaders engaged with the rest of the country and looked for allies everywhere. If many older Anglos had left the city in frustration twenty years earlier, newcomers from the North now replaced them, ignorant of past battles and attracted by the city’s dynamism, opportunities, and climate. They were joined by steady flows of migrants from the Caribbean and South America, to the point that by the 2010 census non-Cuban Latins came to rival Cubans in numbers. Both Haitians and West Indians also became important elements of the metropolitan population. To these flows must be added a substantial number of Europeans, Russians, in particular, also attracted by the climate and the region’s opportunities. The convergence of so many groups, combined with steady investments in real estate, financial services, and tourism, created an increasingly diversified and more cosmopolitan population. The old ethnic divisions did not disappear, but they were gradually submerged in this new urban mosaic.

So many new players and such diverse economic interests had the consequence of partially displacing the Cuban elite while preventing the rise of a new cohesive power structure. In welcoming major players in numerous economic sectors, Cuban leaders gradually lost hegemonic control of the city as power became diffused among several centers. The consensus among all well-placed informants is that no one governs Miami today, at least not in the way that the Non-group did in years past and that the
Cuban leaders who replaced it could have done. Instead, a number of important actors—from banking and trade leaders to sports and arts entrepreneurs—make their voices heard and seek to coordinate with elected officials in order to advance their interests. To be sure, Cubans and Cuban Americans still hold on to most of the important elective offices in the city and county, but they must now share authority with powerful actors in a number of other sectors. As a prominent Cuban American educator and longtime observer of the local scene concluded, “There is no mainstream in Miami now; power is diffused among multiple centers. As a result, anyone can come here and rise to a position of leadership in only a few years.”

The city is no longer on edge due to the confrontation between rival ethnic powers, but it faces the prospect of an increasingly amorphous social order, splintered among different interests and to which no one really belongs. As an Anglo educator and prominent civic leader puts it, “Miami today is a case of hyper-fragmentation: too many commissioners, too many voices, and no one really in control.”

Examples abound. The cruise industry that converted Port Miami into the largest facility of its kind in the world has a major say on anything traveling by water. The port itself and the airport have become power players in their own right, as they concentrate key international trade routes (see chap. 4). A major league baseball team, the Florida Marlins, changed its name to the Miami Marlins and, in exchange, persuaded the city to back a bond issue to build itself a spanking new stadium. Marlins Stadium was indeed built, but the controversy surrounding the bond cost the Cuban mayor of Miami-Dade his job. He was replaced by another Cuban American, who then had to face another sports controversy: David Beckham, of soccer fame, came calling, wanting to bring a major league soccer team to Miami and build it a large stadium by Biscayne Bay. Faced with the determined opposition of the newly affluent residents of the area, as well as the city’s mayor, Beckham relented. He did not abandon his plans, however, but transferred them to Overtown, a traditional black inner-city area, whose inhabitants lack the power to resist his plans.

Similar dynamics are visible in the arts and culture world that has grown apace with the city’s transformation. The organizers of Art Basel, a major show in Miami Beach, pretty much get what they want from city and metro authorities to facilitate their annual extravaganza. Well-heeled
tourists arrive by the thousands during Art Basel, leaving behind significant sums. To anchor the art scene beyond Art Basel days, the city now features a new museum, the Pérez Art Miami Museum (PAMM), built, in part, with the donations of billionaire developer, Jorge Pérez.30

Not to be outdone, a pair of Jewish philanthropists, the Frosts, announced plans to build their own science museum next to the Pérez. Plans were approved by the County Commission, which also committed a substantial sum to the initial construction of the facility. However, private philanthropy fell far short this time, leading to the stoppage of museum construction. Miami-Dade mayor, Carlos Giménez, was then faced with the dilemma of committing additional tax dollars to forge ahead with construction or leave the museum half built. His decision was to proceed, despite the prospect of mass resistance from a taxpaying citizenry still smarting from the Marlins Stadium episode.31

Such controversies reflect both the growth pains of the city and the lack of a unified power structure. It is worth noting that the loci of controversies, when they occur, are all in the service sector, corresponding to the character of a resolutely nonindustrial city. As Allman noted in 2010:

The metropolis built on a desire to escape freezing temperatures had overtaken such long established centers as Boston and San Francisco, as well as Rust Belt cities like Detroit . . . and regional capitals like Denver and Minneapolis-St. Paul. . . . Miami still did not produce much of anything.32

Contrary to its industrial sisters up north, Miami adhered to the age-old historical roles of cities as markets and administrative centers. Its present socioeconomic profile curiously resembles those of medieval Italian city-states. As in Renaissance Florence and Genoa, trade and finance are the key businesses of the city by Biscayne Bay, with the proceeds invested in arts, recreation, and culture, which, in turn, have become major centers of capital accumulation on their own.33

TRANSIENCE AND INEQUALITY

The absence of a consolidated power structure and the still-evolving character of local culture are reflected in other urban features—from the
relative feebleness of civic institutions to the mass of empty condominiums, bought as investments but not lived in by their proprietors. The geographer Jan Nijman made the “transience” of Miami’s population the central point in his analysis of the city:

Transience has always been Miami’s genius loci—a constant coming and going of people dating back to the times of Ponce de Leon. It has only intensified in more recent, global times. Very few people here seem to plan a permanent stay. For most, the city is merely an interlude in their unfolding lives.34

The same author emphasizes the absence of “good government” coalitions in either the municipalities or the metropolitan area as a whole and the frequent incivility in public places, reflecting the lack of social cohesion. Whether this absence of a “we-feeling” is a temporary consequence of the city’s rapid growth or whether it becomes entrenched as a defining character of urban life here is a concern to be explored in a later chapter. For the present, it is worth noting that the diagnosis of “transience” is not shared by everyone. Others see Miami, if not yet a consolidated global metropolis, at least as a city in the process of becoming one—including a nascent multiethnic philanthropic class. Thus, the Anglo head of a major university concludes:

Miami is working toward becoming a global city—it has the feel of a place that is going to be great. The last fifteen years have witnessed the creation of great community-wide institutions—the Pérez Art Museum, the Adrienne Arsht Performing Arts Center, and the Miami Science Museum. Global cities require excellence, activity, and competition. Miami is developing this.35

And a former mayor of the city says:

It is not true that there are no Miamians. More and more people feel that they have roots in this city. One sees this in the world of philanthropy. Wealthy people are making major gifts here instead of sending their money to New York charities as before. I myself am a true Miamian, growing up here and educated at the city’s schools and the University of Miami.36

Finally, according to a Cuban American property developer and philanthropist:
Miami is becoming a serious city. In order for Miami, and any city, to be great and serious, people need to feel strong loyalty toward it. Miami is still considered a temporary place; however, loyalty is blossoming at universities like UM [the University of Miami]. This is a snowball effect which will help further fund-raising. . . . My own gifts to the city have been prompted, in part, to serve as an example for a new generation of Hispanic philanthropists. Legacy means what you leave behind, not how much money you are worth.37

Notice in the three preceding testimonies the sense of evolving toward something great but not being quite there yet. Nijman’s diagnosis of transience may not yet be discarded. The bid for global status comes, however, with more serious pains than transience. There is real and growing inequality between different components of the metropolitan population. The glittering skyline of Miami’s downtown and business district contrasts markedly with the vast dilapidated areas where most of the native black population and many immigrant groups live. One of our best-placed informants explains the situation as follows:

In the past, everyone who could, left the city so you had a homogeneously poor population. At present, a lot of well-to-do people are moving into downtown condominiums, Brickell Avenue, and other expensive areas. The tax base of the city has improved greatly, but inequality has also grown because the poor population—made up of African Americans and new immigrants—has also stayed here.38

The local developer and philanthropist we interviewed confirms the point:

Inequality in Miami is a huge problem. There is a massive distance between high-income and low-income areas. The “moderate-to-middle” class gets squeezed out, unable to find proper locations to settle in. The private sector can’t deal with this alone, we need government programs.39

This collage of positive and negative views and predictions may leave us uncertain about prospects for the future. Looking back at the last quarter of a century, what is not uncertain is the amazing transition from a place ruled by a tight Southern-style elite to one where former exiles and their offspring gained the upper hand to one where that hegemony had to cede
place because of the ceaseless arrival of capital and people from other countries and continents. That remarkable transition is reflected in the city’s demographic expansion, a skyline unimaginable a few years ago, and levels of inequality surpassing those of other major cities.

THE “CAPITAL” OF LATIN AMERICA

It is a common saying that Miami is the capital of Latin America. It is also inaccurate. No Latin country is governed from Miami, and Miami has no say in political changes and policies in any nation. Its role vis-à-vis the Americas is both different and double. This dual relationship is examined in detail in a subsequent chapter. For the moment, it suffices to note its core features. First, the city is an economic entrepôt—the place where trade and financial flows from the global North and East encounter those from the South. There is no better meeting place to do business between Europe, North America, and South America than Miami. This is one of the reasons for the rapid growth of banks, foreign and domestic, here. It is also reflected in trade flows in and out of the city. In 2014, Miami’s international trade reached $69.8 billion, of which almost half was with Latin American and Caribbean countries. Of the ten principal trading partners of the city, eight were Latin American nations.40

The second and key role of Miami with respect to Latin America is as a place of refuge. The instability and repeated political convulsions in Latin American countries invariably trigger flows of people and money to South Florida. The well-to-do in the region view Miami as a place to invest and save with security and in their own language. The city combines the safety of the American legal system with the ease of transacting real estate and banking operations in Spanish. As a former mayor of the city of Miami puts it:

Every populist revolution in Latin America is a boon to Miami. When the rich in these countries have to move their money, where are they going to go? To Waco? This was the main reason why Miami got out of the financial and real estate crisis of 2008–9 faster than any other large American city.41
And an Argentine businessman now living in Miami Beach told us:

Every morning when I wake up and open the newspaper, I give thanks to God that it is not going to say that the dollar has been devalued by half, that taxes on the rich will go up by 100 percent, or that their properties are going to be confiscated.42

Latin American revolutions that end up impoverishing their countries redound, almost inevitably, to the benefit of the city by Biscayne Bay. Fidel Castro showed the way, and the exiles of the Cuban Revolution, as they came to power in Miami, fully understood the dynamics at play. That is why they opened the city to the world and welcomed the flows of capital from Brazil, Argentina, Nicaragua, Venezuela, and Ecuador as each of these countries came, in turn, under the sway of populist regimes. Transient the city may be, but it is also secure. For those who come escaping political convulsions at home, it may be seen initially as a temporary refuge, but, with time, it can become home, especially as their children grow roots here.43

The definition of urban phenomena as “political” with which we started this chapter acquires in Miami a special character. This is not where winners of revolutionary struggles arrive to claim their prize but where the defeated classes come to secure refuge, comfort, and perhaps fight again at a later date. Miami has been the repository of these classes, and, out of their plight, it has constructed a vibrant economy and culture that, if still in transition and flawed in many ways, possesses exceptional dynamism. It stands as the promise of a global city built, in large measure, on the ashes of so many failed political projects in its backyard.