

Democracy in Cuba

Written by George Lambie

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GEORGE LAMBIE, AUG 14 2013

To give analytical relevance to this topic it is essential to go beyond the restrictive defining parameters within which contemporary mainstream democracy is contained. Of the hundreds of articles and books written on 'democracy', almost all assume a Western style system which takes as given a harmonious relationship between markets and democratic practices and models. This results in a rather narrow functionalist and procedural view of democracy which omits to take into account powerful material and hegemonic forces that serve to weaken democracy, and especially its basic underlying assumption of 'people power'. Some socialists argue that this problem resides in what they see as the fundamental contradiction of capitalist democracy in which private economic power is largely outside of state or popular control. Challenging this view, it could be maintained that a functioning form of democracy existed in the pre globalization post-war period when Keynesian style mixed economy prevailed in which nation states, and especially developed ones, had significant control of national finances, public services and either owned, or had influence over, major productive assets.

During this era governments were able, and obliged, to respond to domestic political and democratic pressures in the way they apportioned national goods and services. This was true at the level of local as well as central government. Although democracy under this form of capitalism was still limited, and tended to be more functionalist and procedural than participative, it did allow some citizen control, even if indirectly, over paternalist politics and economics run by a national elite. However with the rise of globalization in the 1960s and 70s power shifted from governments, national industry, trades unions and state managed assets, to transnational finance and corporations which are more concerned with making profits than retaining the social value of the entities they have acquired through privatisation. In this new 'borderless world' the national state has increasingly become a transnational entity itself, serving the needs of global finance, production and service provision rather than the democratic will of the majority of its people. This has led some authors to talk of the 'democratic deficit' in which it is recognized that in its contemporary form democracy is lacking. Interestingly now that democracy has been weakened, it is championed by major western states and the transnational interests they represent as a 'global good' and 'democracy promotion' is a stated commitment of the 'international community'. But as Robinson (1996) points out this is not democracy, even within capitalist definitions, but rather a form of 'polyarchy' whose purpose is to create the façade of a popular mandate behind which the anti-democratic forces of globalisation can pursue their private interests unchallenged.

Turning to Cuban democracy, it is important to recognize the above trends. Cuba's revolution, which began in 1959, was a reaction to distortions of democracy, dictatorship and the overbearing influence of foreign powers on society and the economy. As the revolution unfolded there was massive popular support to replace this inadequate and corrupt system. With a spontaneous mandate for change, the inexperienced Cuban leadership and population began to embark on a radical socialist and nationalist experiment which was driven more by a desire to implement popular, inclusive and workable change rather than follow any ideology. This initiated a nationwide educative process in which the Cuban people and the leadership learned through their mistakes as well as successes. As many in Cuba, most notably Fidel Castro and Che Guevara, realized, any transition towards socialism was above all about a transformation of peoples' consciousness and an authentic empowerment of the popular will. This distinguished the Cuban revolutionary process from other socialist experiments, especially the Soviet Union, where change became directed by centralized power and socialism understood as a 'model' based on material, technical and structural factors. The 1960s in Cuba was a period in which, despite inconsistencies and errors, the population and leadership enjoyed a particularly close relationship in deciding the direction and form of change. At that time democratic

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organization was based around a multitude of mechanisms which required popular participation, some spontaneous and temporary, and others with more formal structures such as the Committees for the Local Organisation of Industry (CILOs), Worker's Councils (*Consejos de Trabajo*), and mass organizations like the Confederation of Cuban Workers (CTC), the Federation of Cuban Women (FMC), the Young Communist League (UJC), the Federation of University Students (FEU), the Committees for the Defense of the Revolution (CDRs) and a basic form of local government, the Co-ordination, Delivery and Inspection Committees (JUCEI).

In this context some major concepts and practices of socialism were introduced or considered: a) key to building a people's democracy under socialism, according to thinkers from Rousseau through Marx to the Cuban leadership, is the eradication of private property, based on the argument that while a huge swathe of power lies outside of popular control and subject to the whims of a largely unaccountable elite, then no true citizen mandate can be exercised, b) for socialism to achieve true popular control, there must be a role for citizens to be more than passive consumers, as under capitalism, or passive recipients of state goods as under centralized socialism, and become involved in the decision making process, c) socialism is also about working towards a high level of equality with a role for everyone as an active participant in the process of economic and social change and progress. Once this overall 'general will' is established, spaces will (theoretically) open for the limitless development of social and individual potentials untrammled by pointless competition, irrational markets and a monopoly of economic, political and hegemonic power, as under capitalism. For those who support this line of thought, these are the necessary conditions for a 'true' democracy.

Although Cuba has sought to implement such ideals with a commitment rarely found in former socialist countries, there have been many obstacles which have frustrated the realization of these objectives; not least the pressures of US policies towards the island and especially the blockade which has distorted Cuba's international relations and the potential of its economy. However while these and other external factors, including the virtual impossibility of establishing socialism in one country, there are also internal issues and policies which have detracted from this idealist socialist project. For instance in the 1970s Cuba moved closer to its benefactor and protector the Soviet Union for strategic and practical reasons and joined the Soviet common market, the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (CMEA). This orientated the island towards the world socialist division of labour, with Cuba exporting mainly sugar and nickel and importing many of its other needs. Along with this economic link also came Soviet style forms of political and economic management which reflected the centralized role of the state. To counteract this process, in 1972 a permanent local government system, *Poder Popular* (Peoples' Power), was established which sought to maintain and encourage high levels of popular participation in the distribution and management of local resources and included a route for sending delegates to the National Assembly where countrywide policy was decided. Given the virtual absence of a market in Cuba for most of the period of the revolution, on a purely practical level people became highly involved in participating in *Poder Popular*, and other mass organizations and channels of expressing popular views, because these were mechanisms through which ordinary citizens could influence the provision of goods and services by the state and make their opinions and preferences heard. At a more political level it maintained a degree of popular participation and power in what was a rather centralized economy.

When the Soviet Union collapsed, Cuba lost over 75 percent of its external trade and the economy contracted more than perhaps any other in times of peace. With the US stepping up the blockade and numerous other pressures on the island, Cuba's socialist experiment was put to the test. Despite great hardship for the population, the island's previous socialist trajectory put it in a good position to attempt to resolve its crisis through a combination of centrally implemented emergency measures and a high level of popular inclusion and involvement in managing economic austerity. For instance the island's high external dependency on food was exposed in the crisis with some Cuban's going hungry for the first time in decades, so the state rapidly provided land and expertise while sectors of the population engaged in local peri-urban food production. This was not efficient in national productive terms, but it engaged and motivated people to resolve their problems in a cooperative and sustainable way. During this 'Special Period in Peacetime', which lasted until the late 1990s, many other mechanisms were established to respond to and represent popular interests such as the Peoples' Councils. There were also many government instigated local and national level consultations to decide on policies, giving ordinary citizens a sense of involvement in managing, and seeking to resolve, their problems. Analysing particularly the Peoples' Power elections during this period, some authors have praised the fairness and procedural rectitude of the electoral process and the relevance of these

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outcomes to popular influenced decision making (August 1999) .

Since the beginning of the revolution in 1959, Cuba has advanced along the road to socialism and the practice of socialist style democracy perhaps more than any other country. However its project faces challenges. Externally, after the global rise of neo-liberalism and the collapse of Soviet style communism, Cuba became increasingly isolated and began to compromise some of its principles to survive in a hostile international environment. While it was able to defend the main successes of the revolution such as universal health care, education and popular democratic practices, it was obliged to pass measures that seem to contradict its revolutionary objectives including: the legalization of the use of foreign currency by its citizens, permission to engage in market relations such as the establishment of small private businesses and the buying and selling of houses, and most recently a series of measures to deregulate labour relations making workers increasingly available in the emerging market sector. It could be argued that as a younger generation of leaders and decision makers take power, who do not identify so strongly with the early years of the revolution as the Castro brothers' generation, and have lived with over 20 years of austerity, they are more open to market socialist experimentation while seeking to resolve the problems of the existing system. Some socialists however (Guevara 2003, Mandel 1988) would claim that markets and socialism are incompatible and as people engage in competitive market relations to resolve their needs, the cooperative essence of socialism will be lost, including popular participative democracy which sets social priorities rather than legitimising individual and class preferences. Moreover if Cuba increasingly enters into the global capitalist system, its 'democracy' will be undermined by external forces and become weakened and irrelevant to popular needs, as it has in many other developing countries.

Cuba today stands at a crossroads. It could engage with market forces internally and become more responsive to the external pressures of globalization, but as noted above this presents enormous risks. Alternatively it might seek instead to deepen its socialist project by extending its participative democratic process beyond the opportunity to influence the distribution and management of resources and certain wider policy decisions, to the organization of production for society in the form of 'socialist planning' (Mandel 1986).

As the global financial crisis deepens, creating mass unemployment and increasing austerity for most of the world's citizens, capitalism faces the greatest challenge in its history, which in many ways is a crisis of democracy. Cuba's socialist experiment and its attempts to give democracy a participative social orientation perhaps therefore gains a global relevance in this age of uncertainty.

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