

Democracy in Cuba

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I

CUBAN REVOLUTIONARY politics after 1959 developed a concept of democracy based on two key points: increase in both quantity and quality the number of people who may have access to active political life and place social justice at the core of democratic politics.

The process multiplied the subjects of politics, the actors of democracy, largely thought by the largest part of liberalism as a competition between political elites, and developed democracy as an egalitarian ideal.

The new political culture repudiated the exclusionary boundaries of private property, took possession of the country and adopted new practices to think it, organize it and present its demands. It established a national collectivity and integrated a people as a political actor in their own power and projects.

With its social justice program, revolutionary politics separated the enjoyment of social rights from the economic wealth and power of certain classes and transferred them to the citizenry according to the status of *man* and *citizen*.

In the State discourse, this social justice value prevailed over any other specifically political ideal, such as for example that of “individual rights”. The centrality of this justice conducted under the principle of homogeneity expressed the Jacobin aspiration to develop a uniform social totality. The ideal of a Cuban-style democracy would be a “one-class society”, an echo of the revolutionary social equality traditions that preceded Jacobinism.

Over time, the importance given to the principle of homogeneity became an immanent source of limitations, including the prevalence of revolutionary “unity” over revolutionary “diversity”, the overvaluation of the State (with the heyday of “bureaucratism”), and the encoding of a State ideology.

II

The Cuban Revolution was seen as an anomaly by the official Marxism of the time (which interpreted it as a petty bourgeois process), although it complied with much of the Marxism program regarding the tasks of the social revolution.

Since its gestation, the Revolution foreshadowed traits that would mark the profile of its future hegemony, in that: a) it conceived the revolutionary struggle, inter alia, as the dialectic of exhaustion of legal channels, armed insurrection in the countryside and urban guerrilla warfare, political mobilization of the social fabric through strikes, fundraising, demonstrations, movements of solidarity to the victims of repression, sabotage, and propaganda; b) it built a

revolutionary army of popular representation; and c) it organized civil administration in the liberated territories.

It went as far as creating a dual power with respect to the power of the establishment, a requirement with which Marxism announces the feasibility of seizing state power. That is, as a counter-power necessary to ensure that the seizure of power would be a condition and a result of social transformation rather than a fleeting surprise attack.

Once the score with the political power had been settled, the Revolution continued to follow the Marxist script: it confiscated the properties of those who were most committed to the military dictatorship; armed popular militias; destroyed the structure of direct rule of the bourgeoisie by dissolving the regular army, the police and agencies linked to them; dismantled the bourgeois state apparatus, replacing it with a new state order of popular content that advocated an independent foreign policy; and laid the foundations for the impossibility of reproducing the social base of the *Ancien Régime*, by systematically attacking private property: in just four years it banished large estates; implemented the land reform; and nationalized surface and subsurface resources, oil refining, sugar, electricity, telephones, housing, cement, banks and foreign trade, among other sectors. While regenerating public life by prohibiting prostitution, illegal gambling and usury, it condemned discrimination for reasons of gender and skin color, redesigned the school system to ensure increased coverage in access to education, launched the “literacy campaign”, created the Contingent of Rural Doctors to assist a historically neglected population, increased the supply of jobs and minimum wages, and promoted a national economic policy with control of foreign exchange and imports, as well as the search for new markets (Bell Lara et al., 2006-2007).

This policy was unified by a goal: the social integration of the people as a sign of its organization into a collective political subject.

Several transformations were essential to ensure popular participation. The vast majority of the population joined the militancy organized into entities with an active political life, ownership and control of political practice and speech, collective and direct involvement in projects and socialization in values stemming from this experience. The population got actively involved not only in labor entities but also in mass movements with precise political objectives such as national defense, protection against disasters and economic output (Arenas, 1996, p.108).

III

The Cuban institutional system succeeded in achieving increased citizen participation, mechanisms of public consultation, the politicization of citizens in the requirement to participate in decision making, the promotion of values of solidarity and cooperation, social mobility, very high levels of equality and social integration, and the understanding of political activity as a public service.

The democratic ideal had to be developed amidst great tensions arising from development itself, in combination with external aggression - in the form of embargo, military invasion and systematic promotion of the destabilization of the system. Three problem areas stem from that, which have conditioned the course of this ideal: the “revolutionary unity” strategy, bureaucracy, and the production of a State ideology.

The consequences of these problems are complex: a limited understanding of democracy as a State monopoly in policy formulation and little institutional recognition of the autonomous representation of social interests.

IV

In the regulation of differences existing within the revolutionary spectrum, the concept of “revolutionary unity” had a central role.

This meaning, which was historically produced to justify the differences existing between the political formations that led to the triumph of January 1959, referred to two problems: the divisions that caused several crises during previous insurgencies (1868, 1895, 1933) and the need to confront enemy aggression as a compact national body, without cracks that could serve as support for the “fifth column”.

In 1959 it was essential to achieve unity between the main revolutionary forces, namely the 26 July Revolutionary Movement, the 13 March Revolutionary Directorate and the Popular Socialist Party. However, these movements had heated discussions about the level of participation of each of them in the triumph of the Revolution. The political strategy used was to confirm their revolutionary credentials. To date, unity is still proclaimed as a revolutionary necessity. However, for decades that concept has not referred to the same content of 1959. Back then, the platform of the unity came from organizations that relied on the ability to represent their existence through a political structure whose strength was characterized by adhesion to their own cause and means of communication.

After 1967, with the “micro-fraction process”, the explicit existence of different positions was no longer recognized - strategies geared towards power were designed - within the revolutionary sphere.¹ In practice, the call for unity does not stem from the prior recognition of substantive differences.

Certainly, the concept of “revolutionary unity” was the basis of the survivability of the process started in 1959. However, there is little reflection on the problems that lie hidden in its shadow: there is also reference to the open confrontation between revolutionary positions or to the continuous criticism of current policies, in order to avoid the direct promotion of citizen discrepancy in public media.

This use of the concept of “unity as unanimity” helps to limit the democratic possibilities of autonomous citizenry participation in representing their specific interests, since ensuring unity leads us back to the absolute superiority of state politics over the various forms of policies exercisable by society.

Just like, in the light of historical experience, it is preferable to stress the value of “proletarian democracy” over that of “proletarian dictatorship”, today it is preferable to emphasize the value of “revolutionary diversity” over that of “revolutionary unity”. This diversity, built on the foundation of justice in political participation can provide, perhaps exclusively, the benefits that “unity” produced back in 1959.

The problem can be summarized as one of “unity in diversity”, as opposed to “unity as unanimity.” It would be the result of an action aimed to ensure the material conditions necessary to reproduce, act and assert itself as such diversity, and from there build unitary articulations.

V

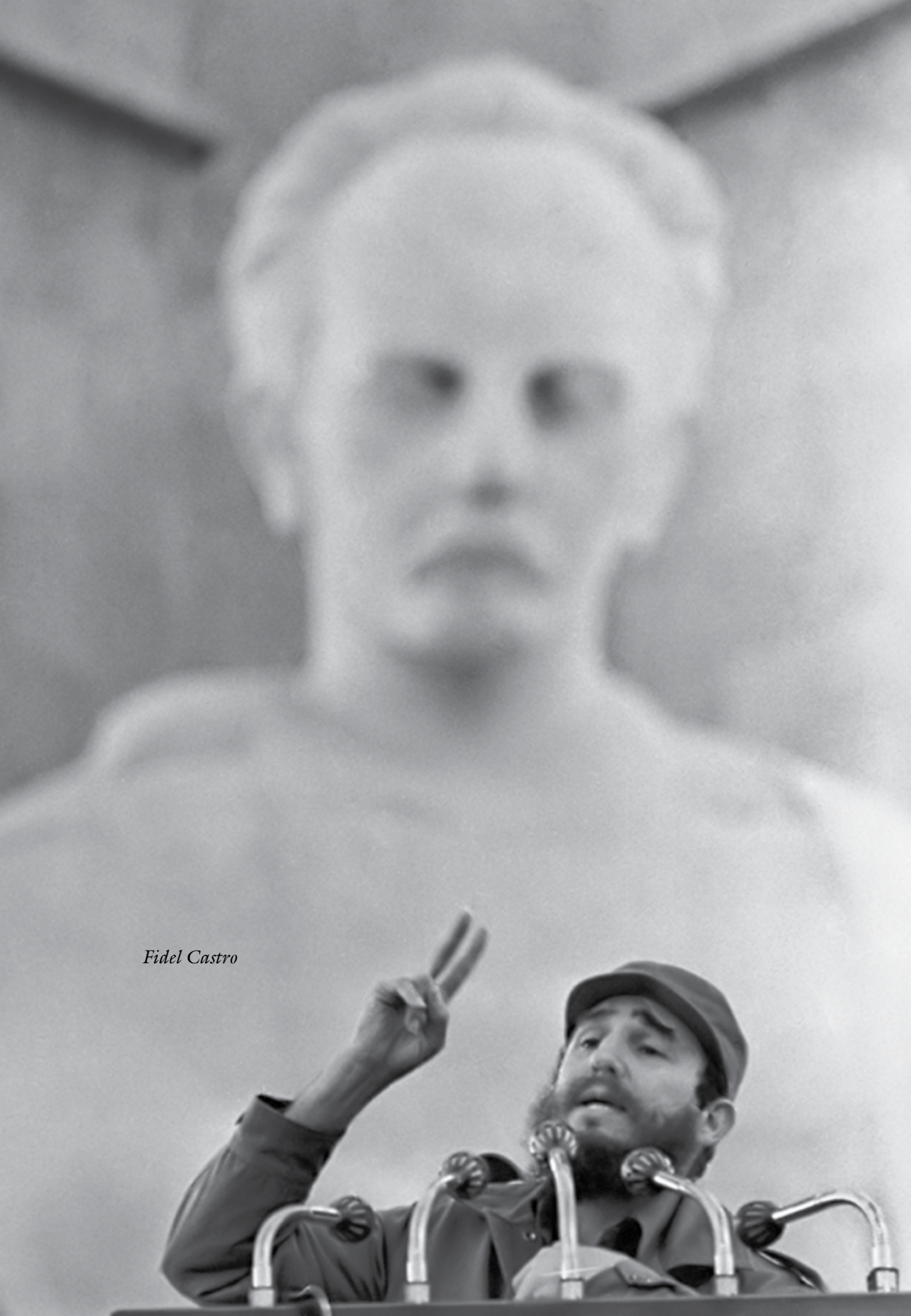
Among the corollaries of the practice of “unity as unanimity” are varying degrees of bureaucratization of institutional practices and the consequent deterioration of the quality of citizen participation, which has been explained in terms of the country by the terms “bureaucratism” or “bureaucracy”, which are still synonymous. However, bureaucratism means an excess of employees and procedures, and streamlining it could lead to an efficient technical administrative bureaucracy. Bureaucracy - politics – in turn, corresponds to the lack of popular control over decision-making.

The Cuban triumph offered an opportunity to analyze the topic at the same level as other achievements in Marxist reflection.

In 1963, Che Guevara (2001, p.177-9) had identified the causes of bureaucratism: “lack of an internal engine”, i.e., “lack of interest of the individual in providing a service to the State;” “lack of organization”, because “the methods to address a given situation fail”; “lack of technical knowledge sufficiently developed for making fair decisions in a short time.”

In turn, Fidel Castro (1965) provided the following definition:

The petty bourgeois [...] spirit has been responsible [...] for the enthroning of bureaucracy in public administration. Because [...] in the mentality of a petty bourgeois the masses can be dispensed with. [...] The socialist revolutions must know how to take measures to prevent this evil from becoming enthroned and causing all the damage it is capable of.



Fidel Castro

Thus, the Cuban Revolution appeared as the update of the following thesis: of the two dangers threatening the revolutions - the imperialist counterrevolution and bureaucratization - “the bureaucratic threat [is] the worst, because it appears in a more insidious manner and under the mask of the revolution [and] it threatens to cripple the revolution from within” (Mandel, n.d., p. 33- 61).

The heyday of Cuban socialist bureaucracy was consolidated in relation to the absence of a socio-juridical and ideological-cultural platform on the limits of state power, in a context in which the revolutionary state grew in proportions, influence and level of decision about social life.

The citizenry therefore could not afford the legal abstraction that should characterize it. Most political rights would not be granted according to the legal status of the citizen, but based on the political status of the revolutionary. That is, the right of revolutionaries to state power was ensured, but the rights of citizens - as a category more general than that of the revolutionaries - were not regulated to the same extent, neither in relation to power, nor in relation to the rights of power or to the control of power.

The issue of “bureaucratism” retains all its strength. It is recurrent in the criticism of the Cuban process, and it is also one of the targets of the official discourse itself, which today is aimed at “updating the economic model” (Castro, 2010).

To be effective, the “struggle against bureaucracy” should stem from the guarantee of the citizens’ rights to political participation, from the promotion of direct ways to exercise power and from the control of the state activity, with its consequence: to establish authority relations shared between different subjects - the State, social movements, citizen associations - from a renewed democratic understanding of the decentralized role of the State in socialism.

VI

What has been said here leads to the role of the socialist State in a democratic construction.

The Cuban Revolution took ownership of the State thesis that is typical of the historically existing socialism: the Revolution finds in the State not its instrument, but its consolidation.

As they are personified in the State, the attributes of the Revolution are ultimately transferred to it.

According to this argument, the Revolution is the order established by the will of the people as its actor and guarantee; its strength is ensured by the consensus of weapons and popular support; it is geared to the needs of the population, enjoys majority consensus by having established popular democracy and is part of a framework of rationality, which is the elimination of the exclusionary and destructive logic of capitalism.

As a derivation, the Revolution establishes a cosmic order that gives it the meaning of criterion of the good, i.e., the purpose of all things. This quality is also transferred to the State.



If the Revolution understands as an obligation to promote synergy with the State it has established, to the extent that both merge in an indivisible way, necessity emerges as a virtue and produces the State-Revolution merger.

The representation of the social is thus absorbed by the State: from it the policies for society are formulated, which are transmitted through social organizations.

From the ideological point of view, the fundamental consequence of this argument is the encoding of the revolutionary ideology as a State ideology.

The recently started reformulation of the Cuban state design was also called “privatization” (Guevara, 2010). So far, it has addressed basically the economic field. The changes it will generate in the directly political institutionalization (operation of state representative bodies, mechanisms of representation of sectoral and group interests, procedures for public control of new fields of government and private activity, etc.) are yet to be discussed.

For democratic development, the State should be an actor of decisive importance in social change, but not the only one. It would be necessary to clarify what kind of relationship established between state politics and the politics exercised in the social and personal spheres is more effective to redistribute power among the actors of the system and among the citizenry.

A key challenge would also be to develop an ideology of the revolution and not a State doctrine “unorthodox and eclectic enough to explain social di-

versity, history and national cultures, socialist experiences, our political culture and the ongoing ‘battle of ideas’ against capitalism and sectarianism” (Valdés Paz, 2009, p. 214).

VII

Democratic politics is about freedom, not happiness. It opens up the possibility of a life in community that recognizes the possibilities of establishing paradigms that are distinct and not subject to a single idea about happiness.

The Cuban revolutionary promise of 1959 about democracy can rebuild its goals in each of these areas of freedom: socialization of power, promotion of social diversity and development of the revolutionary ideology.

The promotion of these three areas helps to tackle major democratic challenges: to reorient the foundation of power based on its bottom-up development and management, within the horizon of socialization; and to decolonize the power matrix in order to unleash the social relations of designations based on class, race, gender, age, cultural differences, etc. within Cuban society.

Replacing the value of homogeneity with those of socialization of power, social diversity and non-disciplinary ideological debate, gives a new meaning to the political value of equality: it is about social equality, but also about the equality of political rights in the exercise of powers.

Therefore, it is essential to strengthen questions about democratic politics. What is the relationship between inequality, diversity and democracy? What is the relationship between capitalism and democracy? Is a person who depends on another person to survive actually free? Does the nature of this dependence change in the case of a capitalist employer or a socialist State? Does the “economy” tolerate universal access to citizenship rights? How to prevent the encroachment of political power in the hands of private powers such as the market and bureaucracies? How to be free without forcing to be free?

Democracy is the universalist regime par excellence. It is the only one capable of expressing the full range of interests of human and natural life and take them to a political expression based on the possibility of living as co-existing.

With its experience of 50 years, Cuban revolutionary politics after 2010 could reframe its key points of 1959. If these points consisted both in increasing the number of people who could have access to active political life and placing social justice at the core of democratic politics, they could be reformulated as follows: to universalize citizenship rights and promote personal, social and national independence.

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Notes

- 1 “Micro-fraction” is the name attributed to a group formed by militants of the former Cuban Communist Party which sought, in 1960, to bring the Cuban revolutionary course back to the Soviet bureaucratic designation, as a “model” of socialism. It was politically criticized in 1962 under the name of “sectarianism” and penalized in court in 1967.
- 2 Fidel Castro announced in 1965: “[...] *ya tendremos que comenzar a trabajar en el nivel superior del estado nacional y elaborar las formas constitucionales del Estado socialista cubano*.” (“[...] we shall now start to work on the superior level of the national state and draft the constitutional forms of the Cuban socialist State.”)

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Abstract – The revolutionary triumph of 1959 established in Cuba a new concept of democracy, one that aimed to ensure access to active political life for large sectors of the previously excluded population. Toward this end, policies for universal social inclusion were developed. The people’s political practices imparted the country’s wealth into the hands of the poor, generating a great deal of social mobility and increasing popular participation. The context of imperialist aggression and the development process itself consolidated notions that limited popular participation: the apogee of bureaucracy, unity understood as unanimity, and the adoption to a certain extent of the currents of Soviet Marxism. The current challenges to propagate democracy in Cuba are three-tiered: to socialize power, to promote social diversity and to develop the revolutionary ideology.

Keywords: Democracy, Participation, Socialism, Revolution, Citizenship.

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