

Social Justice in Cuba: Promises and Pitfalls

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I. Introduction

In the historic struggles over the formation of the Cuban nation, social justice was an essential feature of the community “imagined” by progressive forces, to use Benedict Anderson’s (1983) famous expression. From the early 19th century precursors of Cuba’s independence movement through the socialist revolution of 1959, class and racial justice were central to visions of the nation-to-be. In the 20th century, gender equality also figured prominently in the projects for social and political change. The goals of social justice were repeatedly thwarted by foreign interests, their allies among Cuba’s ruling upper classes, and disunity among progressive forces—a fact that underscored the evolving national consciousness in which independence, social justice, and unity were tightly intertwined. An independent Cuban nation was meaningful only to the extent that it achieved social justice, social justice was only possible in an independent Cuba, and Cuban independence required national unity. This logic, forged over the course of nearly 200 years of social and political struggles, continues to inform the complex process of change underway in post-Cold War Cuba.

The independence-social justice-unity logic is a powerful one, buttressed as it is by historical experience and by the remarkable social achievements of the Cuban nation since the revolution. However, as this paper will attempt to argue, the logic is also fatally flawed because it fails to incorporate the necessity of democracy. Social justice remained an illusive goal before the Cuban revolution not only because of imperialist intervention and the intransigence of the upper classes, but because substantive institutions and processes of democracy were never established. Moreover, the degree of social justice achieved since the revolution is at serious risk

not only because of the specter of recolonization and re-peripheralization but because the Cuban people still lack the autonomous institutions and democratic processes needed to defend and advance their interests. Social justice is fragile when its enforcement depends upon an authoritarian, paternalistic regime (however benevolent its intentions) rather than democratic political institutions and autonomous social organizations. The relationship of democracy to social justice is an issue of growing importance in debates and struggles within Cuba today over the next stage of the nation's evolution.

This paper will first review the centrality of social justice and the marginal role of democracy as guideposts in Cuba's historic struggles for meaningful nationhood. The status of Cuban women since the revolution will then be examined as an illustration of the promises and pitfalls of social justice absent political democracy and autonomous social movements. Finally, drawing upon extensive interviews with Cuban intellectuals, the paper will summarize current debates within Cuba which reveal a new concern about the relationship between democracy and social justice.

II. The Centrality of Social Justice

In his history of Cuban ethics and morality, Cintio Vitier (1975) emphasizes the centrality of social justice in political and social thought and action from the early 1800s through the Cuban revolution of 1959. This section of the paper uses Vitier's *Ese Sol del Mundo Moral* as a prototype of the paradigmatic narrative that has dominated Cuban politics since 1959, if not for most of the century. During the colonial period, Vitier argues, there was a widespread sense of injustice that could only be righted through winning the freedom of the nation *and* of Cuba's slaves. Vitier cites the important influence of independence movement precursors such as José María Heredia, Félix Varela, and José de la Luz y Caballero. Heredia's poetry drew the links

between political and physical slavery (ibid.: 17). Varela emphasized that sovereignty and authority resided with the people and that a just society required equality before the law, regardless of class or race (ibid.: 19). Luz y Caballero attempted to reconcile the moral thrust of Cuba's emerging social thought with the "rational" discourse of increasingly influential liberalism and its emphasis on utility: "A railroad is useful; but *more useful is justice*" (ibid.: 29).

The importance of social justice to the project of an independent Cuba grew under the influence of the *mambises*, the insurgents who rose up against Spanish rule in 1868. "Social justice, inseparable from their concept of independence, was the driving force" of movement leaders Carlos Manuel de Céspedes, who freed his slaves as he declared war against Spain, Máximo Gómez, a Dominican outraged by social inequality, and Antonio Maceo, a mulatto (ibid.: 55). A key component of their revolutionary thought was that liberty would require sacrificing the wealth that was based on slavery (ibid.: 43-44). This inseparability of independence and abolition, observed Vitier (45), is what distinguished the Cuban Revolution of 1868 from the American Revolution of 1776. The ten year war ultimately failed to secure Cuba's independence, as divisions emerged within the Cuban forces over (pro-U.S.) annexationist sentiments, regional conflicts, and caudillista power struggles (ibid.: 62-67).

The experience of defeat due to internal division was critical in completing the independence-social justice-unity trinity of Cuban revolutionary thought, which would be articulated most passionately by José Martí, who resumed the fight for independence in the last decade of the century. In summarizing Martí's social and political project, Vitier (86) emphasizes four key elements: continuity and unity of the revolutionary struggle, anti-racism, siding with the poor, and anti-imperialism. Democracy is a conspicuously secondary element of Martí's thought, as presented here, and there does not appear to have been a very clear awareness

about the importance of democracy in the bitter debates over the nature of the new republic that would be formed following Cuba's independence from Spain.

Full independence, of course, was denied Cuba by the United States' infamous eleventh hour intervention and the imposition of the Platt Amendment to the 1901 Constitution. Many Cubans apparently were convinced that acceptance of the Platt Amendment was the only way to avoid permanent U.S. military occupation (ibid.: 106), the first, one could argue, of many decisions to accept restricted democracy as justified by the menace of imperialist intervention. Later, in 1912, under the threat of a new intervention by the U.S. Marines, democracy was further restricted through the racist repression of the Independent Party of Color (ibid.: 111). Moreover, the polemics over universal suffrage in the new republic reveal a greater emphasis on the "social function" of voting rather than on the *right* to vote (ibid.: 110), further indication of the more marginal concerns with political democracy that characterized national thought. Vitier describes this as a period of dispersion of national consciousness (113).

In the 1920s and 1930s, a new generation of intellectuals and activists attempted to renovate the legacy of the *mambises* and of Martí, but now under the new conditions of neocolonialism. This new generation of revolutionaries, including Julio Antonio Mella, Rubén Martínez Villena, Pablo de la Torriente-Brau, and Antonio Guiteras, fought against the dictatorship of Machado but still gave more emphasis to social justice and anti-imperialism than to democracy, at least in this archetypal interpretation (ibid.: 115-119). In fact, many of this generation, some strongly influenced by Marxism-Leninism, were thoroughly disillusioned by the experience with representative democracy. The movement of the 1930s helped to shape the 1940 Constitution, one of the most progressive constitutions in the world in terms of labor and women's rights. However, the Revolution of 1933 was defeated and the promise of the 1940 Constitution was never fulfilled, due to a combination of ongoing U.S. intervention, the

subsequent Batista dictatorship, internal divisions, corruption, and caudillismo (ibid.: 120-156). (For an interpretation of this period which more fully appreciates the relationship between foreign intervention and the failure to consolidate a substantive democracy based on legitimate political authority, see Pérez Stable [1993: 43-60].)

For Vitier, as for many supporters of the 1959 Revolution, Fidel Castro was the both the heir and principal renovator of Cuba's long legacy of revolutionary thought and action. Describing Castro's passionate public statement against Batista's 1952 coup, Vitier (165) wrote, "What began to take shape in that denunciation was a new historical and ethical 'logic'. But that new logic demanded a rupture and a new beginning that would at the same time renew and update the glorious traditions of 1868, 1895, and 1930." Vitier's account highlights the importance of social justice and anti-imperialism that run throughout Castro's major writings and speeches. Castro's ideas constitute "a new social ethics which is the axis of the revolution" (ibid.: 190). They are ethics, according to Vitier, rooted in the ideals promulgated by the great struggles of the Cuban people, from the Mambises of the 1860s to the socialists of the 1960s: anti-imperialism, anticolonialism, antiracism, class and international solidarity, and abolition of "the new capitalist slavery" (ibid.: 190-91), to cite just a few items from his long compilation of noble concerns. Once again, strikingly absent is any reference to guaranteeing democratic governance by the people.

There is some persuasive and well-documented evidence to support the notion advanced in Vitier's narrative that Fidel Castro finally got the independence-social justice-unity equation right by factoring in the left's mid-20th century ideas about socialist economic development and political organization. By securing independence from the United States and internal unity through a uniquely Cuban version of state socialism and vanguard party politics, the revolutionary government achieved an impressive level of social justice by the 1970s and 80s.

Cuba could claim one of the most equitable distributions of income in the world and levels of literacy, school enrollment, infant mortality, and life expectancy that rival those of advanced, industrial nations.

In the post-Soviet 1990s, however, Cuba has faced an unprecedented economic crisis that threatens to reverse the most impressive social advances of the past 40 years, undermine its independence, and fray its national unity. As is well known, the revolution's social accomplishments depended to a significant degree on beneficial aid and trade arrangements with the former Soviet Union, conditions which no longer exist. Moreover, as Susan Eckstein (1994: 128-148) has documented, there were "unintended consequences" to the Revolution's successful social achievements, including serious fiscal problems.

Clearly, there are many dimensions to the complex problems facing Cuba in its attempt to preserve the historic commitment to social justice, including the need to revise its internal modes of production, distribution, and consumption and to build new links with the world economy. This implies rethinking prevailing notions about socialism and national sovereignty, a process currently underway in extensive debates within Cuba (see McCaughan, 1995 and 1997). Without denying the critical importance of economic reorganization and global relinking, here I want to emphasize the need to revalue democracy as a powerful weapon in the defense of social justice. It is a notion that has been overshadowed by the looming history of Cuba's independence-unity-social justice paradigm. The situation of Cuban women will illustrate the argument.

III. Cuban Women as a Case in Point

An impressive feminist movement emerged in early 20th century Cuba, and its influence was felt in the progressive 1940 Constitution. However, "after women gained the right to vote in 1934 and the Constitution of 1940 incorporated most feminist claims, the feminist movement

dissipated” (Pérez-Stable, 1993: 32). In the absence of a strong movement and consistently democratic government, women’s gains after 1940 were uneven. Though Cuban women had higher levels of education than men, they constituted only 13 percent of the economically active population in the 1950s and earned less than men in all job categories (ibid.: 32-33).

After the 1959 revolution, one of the first mass organizations created by the new leadership was the Federation of Cuban Women (FMC). Vilma Espín, the wife of Raúl Castro, was selected by the revolutionary leadership to direct the new organization, whose membership grew from 17,000 in 1961 to nearly three million by the 1990s (Leiner, 1994: 62). From its inception, the FMC tried to serve as both a base of support for the revolutionary government and as a lobby group on behalf of women. Where those two functions complimented one another, gains were impressive. Women’s participation in the labor force, an early priority of the new government, increased from 13 percent in 1960 to 39 percent in 1990 (Eckstein, 1994: 221). The quality of health care improved dramatically for women, as it did for the entire population. Infant mortality rates declined from 36 per one thousand live births in 1970 to 10.2 in 1992 (ibid.: 137). Cuban women’s ability to control and plan reproduction increased significantly, as “abortion services and contraceptives became readily accessible, at minimal if any cost” (ibid.: 139). Working women were entitled to miss work to take care of their children’s medical needs (ibid.: 137), and extensive day care facilities were constructed (Leiner, 1994: 62-63). Cuba’s 1975 Family Code required that “Both partners must care for the family they have created and must cooperate with the other in the education, upbringing, and guidance of the children according to the principles of socialist morality” (ibid.: 67).

However, despite these practical and legislative improvements, occupation segregation by gender, and thus wage differentials, continue to place Cuban women at an economic disadvantage (Safa, 1995: 38-39, 41). In fact, Cuban laws have discriminated against women, by

preventing them from being employed in some sectors of the economy, a policy usually defended with a strong dose of paternalistic concern for what is deemed appropriate types of labor for women (Bunck, 1994: 105-08). Despite the 1975 Family Code, unequal division of household labor persists (Safa, 1995: 44). Particularly since the economic crisis of the 1990s, women shoulder the burden of waiting in lines for scarce commodities (Eckstein, 1994: 99), and, from the author's first hand observations, Cuban women are still the ones who take on the many additional hours of household labor required to help a family survive during periods of austerity.

Moreover, when government priorities and women's needs have not coincided, women's interests were often sacrificed, and the FMC has been less than effective in preventing such backsliding. There has been a pattern of laying off women first and disproportionately during Cuba's periodic economic downturns, such as 1976, 1985, and 1990 (Bunck, 1994: 119; Eckstein, 1994: 55; Dilla, 1994: 51). Women represented 53% of the Cuban unemployed in 1985 and 60% in 1990 (Dilla, 1994: 51). Pérez-Stable (1994), Eckstein (1994), Leiner (1994), and Bunck (1994) all note the tendency, particularly since the late 1980s, to subordinate women's interests to foreign policy goals, resolution of economic crises, concerns with national unity, and/or worries about male unemployment and appropriate gender roles. The one organization that supposedly represents women's interests, the FMC, has failed to defend women in this context, acting instead as a defender of the ruling party and the status quo. As noted by Eckstein (1994: 216):

[D]uring the Special Period . . . the FMC played no role in defending the withering of women's revolutionary-won gains. The FMC encouraged women . . . to make their own clothes, their own soap, their own candles for lighting. These artisan activities were encouraged for survival purposes, but men were not exhorted to do the same. The FMC retreated from its initial role of "liberating" women to advocating activities that made women's work more onerous.

Moreover, outside of the FMC, women continue to be underrepresented in the leadership of the party and key political institutions such as the Assemblies of Poder Popular (Bunck, 1994: 108-9, 121; Randall, 1992: 152).

The measure of social justice won *for* Cuba women in the course of the revolution is now being undermined because it was not won *by* women, organized as an autonomous movement, in the context of democratic institutions and processes. The FMC has never provided women with an autonomous voice, because “like the unions and other mass organizations, [it] functions as an institution for carrying out or ‘transmitting’ formulated policies” of the Cuban Communist Party and state agencies (Leiner, 1994: 66). According to Margaret Randall, the North American writer who lived in Cuba and participated actively in the processes of the revolution for ten years, the FMC never encouraged a feminist discourse or any discussion of an autonomous women’s organization (Randall, 1992: 132). “If you demanded space for a discussion of feminism,” writes Randall (*ibid.*: 134), “or encouraged an analysis based on the retrieval of women’s history, women’s culture, and women’s experience, you would most likely be dubbed a ‘bourgeois feminist’—divisive, or worse, counterrevolutionary.” Noting that Fidel Castro often spoke in favor of women’s equality, Randall (*ibid.*: 146) continues:

Castro’s exhortation that women lead the struggle for our own equality faced the contradiction implicit in the Cuban revolutionary model. Its failure to develop a genuine and popular critical process greatly reduced the possibility that women—or anyone else—might question official assumptions. And its failure to develop an autonomous women’s movement meant that no organizational form existed through which a different practice might have been encouraged.

Randall does not use the word democracy here, understandably, perhaps, given the extent to which the concept has been eviscerated through its appropriation by neoliberal discourse. Yet when Randall regrets the lack of a popular critical process, of autonomous space and organization, she is describing crucial components of any genuine democracy. Critical processes and independent organization are essential tools for citizens attempting to assert or defend their

interests, which often conflict with those of even benevolent national governments in times of economic and political crises. As Eckstein (1994: 217) writes:

The threat that this de facto organizational vacuum poses for the poorest stratum, in the cities and the countryside, and for women and dark-skinned islanders, is particularly great. Any government that tries to restore fiscal order and make the economy more internationally competitive is likely to turn its back on the politically weak and unorganized. The unique “mass”-oriented achievements of the revolution may erode in the process.

As described in the following section, in the debates underway since the collapse of the Soviet Union, some Cuban intellectuals (who remain committed to social justice and equality) have begun to reconsider the need for democracy and organizational autonomy in defending the imperiled achievements of the revolution. It seems significant, given the leading role that women are playing in these debates elsewhere in Latin America, that Cuban women are not among the strongest advocates of democratization and social autonomy. The paternalistic relationship between the state-party regime and the FMC and the lack of experience with an autonomous women’s movement appear to have slowed the development of the sort of feminist consciousness that has emerged elsewhere in Latin America about gender inequality and, more broadly, about the nature of power, the relationship between patriarchal social relations and political authoritarianism, and the importance of democratic culture (see, e.g., Chinchilla, 1992 and Larguía, 1994).

Evidence of the relatively low level of feminist consciousness in Cuba comes from the results of interviews conducted with 43 Cuban intellectuals in the Winter of 1993 (McCaughan, 1993), as part of a larger comparative study of how left intellectuals in Cuba and Mexico are rethinking the big questions of democracy, socialism, and national sovereignty in the 1990s (McCaughan, 1997). In answering questions about how issues of gender inequality and sexuality were being reassessed, the vast majority of Cuban respondents demonstrated very little concern or awareness (McCaughan, 1993). The responses from male intellectuals were, perhaps, not

surprising. Some tended to view gender inequality as a generational problem that was disappearing with time. A few recognized the need to address issues of particular concern to women, but were concerned that this be done in a way that did not threaten the political unity of the party. One male respondent explained that some concerns with sexism and homophobia were expressed during the public discussions preceding the 1990 4th Party Congress but that they were not addressed at the Congress because of more pressing issues on the table. One man, who was forthcoming and eloquent on every other subject, simply said he felt unprepared to talk about gender-related questions. Only one man interviewed expressed concern that very little intellectual work was being done on issues of gender and race and that women and blacks needed independent organizations to fight for their interests.

More surprising were the responses of the women intellectuals interviewed. Very few expressed any concerns whatsoever about gender inequality or issues of sexuality. A typical response was to deny the existence of any “institutional sexism” and then move on to other topics. One university educated woman denied that there had ever been repression of gays in Cuba, even while referring to the homosexuality of one candidate for the National Assembly as a defect. The same respondent laughed at the notion of machismo, dismissing it as a cultural feature of Cuban society that could never be eliminated. One female respondent acknowledged the limitations of Marxism as applied to understanding gender, but tended to blame Soviet influence for the rigidity of Cuban thinking on issues of gender and sexuality. Another woman suggested that the best new thinking on issues of gender and race were coming from the participants in social movements elsewhere in Latin America, but then defended the Cuban policy of prohibiting autonomous social organizations.

One might be inclined to interpret such responses as evidence that Cuban women are unconcerned with such issues because the revolution has been so successful in eliminating

gender inequality. However, the empirical examples of persistent inequality cited earlier suggest that the interviews also reflect a lack of feminist consciousness resulting from the absence of an autonomous women's movement. And that presents another problem: feminist perspectives seem largely missing in the difficult debates now underway about all aspects of Cuba's future, including the relationship of democracy to social justice. At least among intellectuals, Cuban women more often seem to represent the voice of the status quo, in sharp contrast to the role being played by women in the Mexican left, for example (McCaughan, 1997: 195).

IV. Reconsidering Democracy: Current Debates in Cuba

The severity of the economic and political crises facing Cuba in the 1990s has shattered many old dogmas and opened some intellectual space for rethinking the question of democracy and its relationship to socialist alternatives in a post-Cold War world of globalized capitalism. As described and analyzed in more detail elsewhere (McCaughan, 1997: 42-104), three principal currents of thought have emerged in current debates about democracy in Cuba. The first two advocate conceptions of democracy that still adhere closely to the historical ideologies of state socialism and liberalism. A third, renovative current seeks to transcend the orthodoxy of these old ideologies. The existence of the liberal and renovative currents suggest that some Cubans are taking seriously the need to reassess the place of democracy in the quest for independence and social justice. The three tendencies—liberal, state socialist, and renovative—are briefly summarized below.

State socialist perspectives tend to define democracy in the broadest of terms, extending beyond the formal political arena to include the substantive goals of economic equality and social justice (not as prerequisites for democracy but as part of its very definition) (see, e.g., Fernández Ríos, et al, 1991). As revealed in interviews conducted with Cuban intellectuals

(McCaughan, 1993), democratization is understood by the orthodox socialist current primarily in terms of greater social equality and the state's defense or advocacy of working class interests—a view which tends to conceal the party's domination and its privileges in acting as the working class's fiduciary. The participatory aspect of democracy is frequently emphasized by this current, but without reference to the need for civil society's autonomy from state and ruling party. In essence, this perspective says the Cuban political system is the most democratic, most participatory in the world, requiring only some fine-tuning, as quotes from the 1993 interviews reveal. For example, a Communist Youth Leader expressed the opinion that, "The Eastern European regimes were perfectly democratic and it would be difficult to come up with a more participatory system than Cuba's Poder Popular." A young Communist woman said: "I don't know of a better system. Besides, the youth are not concerned with 'democracy,' which is a foreign discourse used against Cuba." For this tendency, the experience of liberal democracy has relatively little to offer Cuba: "Our experience with the U.S.-style political system has been mainly negative and not a point of reference," explained one high-level party official. A leading philosopher warned that: "In Cuba, the multiparty project is inevitably counterrevolutionary." State socialist views on democracy remain very influential, and were expressed by a majority of the women interviewed, but such ideas are no longer hegemonic among the revolution's intellectuals.

Since the collapse of the Soviet bloc, a degree of economic liberalization has been imposed in Cuba by the severity of its crisis, but political liberalization has been less evident. Indeed, Cuban revolutionaries remained somewhat isolated from the liberalization of political discourse about democracy that swept through most of Latin America in the transitions from military to civilian rule in the 1980s. Nonetheless, more liberal notions of democracy are emerging among some of Cuba's left intellectuals. This is particularly evident among individuals

associated with the social democratic opposition, but even some reform-minded Cuban Communists look to liberal traditions as one source of ideas for improving socialist democracy. For example, a Cuban social scientist, who has studied political and social movements in Latin America for many years, observed that "Liberal thought has been much more profound [than socialist thought] in elaborating the institutional forms needed to realize its project of democracy."

A liberal-leaning political perspective among Cuban revolutionaries emphasizes that existing political institutions have to be reformed, given more real authority and more independence from the Communist Party and state executive branch. For example, several of those interviewed believed the February 1993, secret-ballot, elections for the National Assembly were an important advance in the process of democratization, although they cautioned that it remains to be seen whether the new Assembly will become a forum of real debate and decision-making over real policy alternatives. Liberal-leaning Cuban revolutionaries also call for the professionalization of elected representatives, so that legislators have the time and resources to do more than meet once or twice a year to rubber-stamp policy decisions already made by the state-party's top leadership.

Liberal perspectives in Cuba also stress the need for a clearer delineation of legislative powers and oversight. A life-long Marxist, who is now a sympathizer of the social democratic current in Cuba expressed this concern in the following terms:

There has to be a separation between the parliament, as representative of the popular will, and the government, so that the government will be obliged to constantly account for its actions. This aspect of bourgeois democracy, even if it may appear a little formal, is necessary, in one form or another, in any socialist model.

Liberal-minded Cuban intellectuals also emphasize the need for pluralism in the political sphere, but many still believe that is possible within a single party. A common formulation is:

"Pluralism does not equal a multiparty system." This is one of the key points that distinguishes liberal forces still loyal to the Communist Party from the social democratic opposition within Cuba, which calls for a multiparty system. For example, Vladimiro Roca, son of legendary Communist leader Blas Roca and now an influential figure in Cuba's small social democratic tendency, said in an interview that "a multiparty system is preferable, even if it's imperfect, because it allows itself to be perfected and improved with the participation and the criteria of almost all strata of society."

The ideas expressed in the interviews just cited do not add up to any coherent, organized liberal tendency within the Cuban left. Rather, they reflect the gradually increasing influence of liberal notions about political representation, division of powers, and the acceptance of political pluralism. We will now turn to a third current emerging within the Cuban left of the 1990s, a renovative tendency that seeks to transcend the limitations of both state socialist and liberal thought. This renovative current is beginning to develop an analysis of democracy as a necessary tool for preserving and advancing social justice.

The term "renovators" is meant to signify those leftists who still emphasize social goals and social, even collectivist, political and economic visions, and who are critical of both state-socialist and liberal approaches. Renovators are inclined neither to expand the concept of democracy so broadly as to be virtually synonymous with Marx's utopian communism, and thus meaningless in any practical sense, nor to restrict democracy to purely formal political rights that likewise become nearly meaningless in the real world of political, economic, and social inequality.

Among Cuban leftists, a renovative perspective on democracy is critical of the statist traditions of socialism. Fernando Martínez Heredia (1991), for example, claims that Cuba's system of government—the Organs of Popular Power—was very successful at the *local* level,

but "in general the political system was weighed down by ritualistic formalism, a conservative expression that tried to take over society as well." Likewise, despite the importance and achievements of Cuban mass organizations (such as the Federation of Cuban Women and the Confederation of Cuban Workers), Martínez Heredia (ibid.) says their tendencies toward authoritarianism and paternalism have prevented civil society from becoming more than an appendage of the political system.

Cuban renovators emphasize that the key issue is popular participation *in decision-making* (not just decision implementation) at all levels of society. They see institutional innovation, like the recent emergence of some non-governmental organizations, as important, because it opens up new spaces outside of the state and the party for democratic participation in society. For example, several of the Cubans interviewed in 1993 expressed optimism about the potential contribution to Cuba's democratization of the "Consejos Populares" (popular councils), a relatively new institution. According to one urban planner:

The Consejo Popular is the most important development in terms of democracy. The Councils are organized at the electoral precinct level. Each precinct chooses a representative to the Council for the daily government of the community. The Council deals with problems like housing and street repairs and water service, the problems of daily life. There are 93 Councils in Havana, each representing about 20,000 people. Each council has a paid professional, elected by the neighborhood and important work places. Each month the representative has to give an accounting before the electorate.

One interviewee saw the Popular Councils as a key mediating link between the state and civil society: "They can be seen either as the government organizations closest to the masses, or as the community organization vested with the greatest governmental powers."

Renovators believe that such institutions could help deepen democracy in Cuba, *if* they are able to assert their autonomy from the state party. As one still-loyal but critical party militant and scholar put it:

The Party is the only institutional space here. Small groups, like the one around [social democratic dissident] Elizardo Sánchez, have created a little space. Young intellectuals in the mid-1980s began to create a new space outside the party that was not oriented toward Miami—in theater, sculpture, and to some extent the social sciences. But then the Party moved in and closed that space, co-opting some and leading others to move to Mexico. The Party is very verticalist, authoritarian, statist, and militarist. One is ever less able to participate.

One seemingly obvious change in the Cuban political system that would address the problem of the Communist Party's domination of all politics would be the adoption of a multiparty system. However, in the interviews conducted for this study, only the social democratic dissidents were prepared to declare themselves against the single-party model. This does not mean that renovators within the Communist Party are not concerned with issues of pluralism, dissent, debate, and alternative programs, but for the moment they call (publicly) only for democratization, perhaps even reconceptualization, of the single party. It is difficult to determine whether this position is based on principle or on a strategic assessment of the best way to push forward democratization without risking complete political marginalization. The risk of marginalization is real and recurrent, and makes the process of intellectual and political renovation difficult. Several of the renovative intellectuals interviewed for this study, for example, had been associated with the important Cuban journal, *Pensamiento Critico*, until it was closed down by the government in 1971 for its unorthodox views. Later, many of these same people worked for years at the influential Center for the Study of the Americas (CEA) in Havana until CEA was reorganized and they were purged in 1996 (Giuliano, 1998).

Haroldo Dilla (1992: 22-23), a renovative voice at CEA before the purge, does not want the critical issue of pluralism side-tracked by debates about multiparty systems, which he says "confuse the present with the future." Dilla says the bigger problem is to overcome the assumption that pluralism undermines unity, because unity has been distorted to mean a monolithic unanimity. The solution is to be found in what he describes as a simultaneous

decentralization *and* socialization of power, "the ideal matrix for correcting what has been a deficit in Cuban politics: the maturation of pluralism understood as the recognition of the diversity and autonomy of the participant subjects, and consequently of *conflict* as a moment in the creation of consensus." Admitting the necessity of conflict is something that distinguishes this renovative perspective from the more orthodox state socialist views on dissent.

From a renovative perspective, democratization is fundamentally about increasing the degree of real power people have over the decisions that affect their lives. A prominent but heretical Party intellectual recalled in one of the 1993 interviews:

After the 1960s, the capitalist ruling classes were in shock because their children rebelled. Samuel Huntington presented an analysis of the danger that people were taking democracy seriously, that the system was overloaded with demands that couldn't be satisfied. So it was necessary to lower expectations, which is what has happened since the 60s. In the 60s, democracy was associated with "power" and power was in the streets—black power, Chicano power, etc. Now democracy is all about elections. It's a big myth.

What could Cuban democracy be? I don't want Cuban socialist democracy to be what Huntington suggests. Elections are a trap. The question in Cuba now is how much power will the people elected to the National Assembly [in February 1993] really have. The elections weren't really the issue. Now, are we going to pass real shares of power from the centralized, self-appointed bureaucracy to the popularly elected representatives? Will elected delegates be able to give orders to Ministers of State?

Cuban renovators also reject the argument made by some that a Chinese model might be viable for Cuba, i.e., economic liberalization without democratization (a formula gaining adherents within the Cuban regime). A prominent Cuban sociologist who was among those purged from CEA, explained:

The proposals for economic decentralization without accompanying democratization are fundamentally about the enterprises and the economic bureaucracy, not about greater democratization and popular control. . . . [But] you can't compensate for the risks involved in the necessary economic liberalization without a radical project of democratization.

Along similar lines, Haroldo Dilla (1992: 3) concedes that liberalization of the economy may be necessary but certainly not sufficient and perhaps even counterproductive if liberal economic reforms "are not accompanied by policies designed to strengthen the spaces for participation and popular control." Noting women's high levels of unemployment during the government's recent efforts to "rationalize" the work force, Dilla writes: "It is precisely within this context that it is legitimate to believe that the Cuban women's movement needs a bigger dose of autonomy" (ibid.: 27-28).

The ideas expressed in the above cited interviews and writings reveal that an important process of critical reassessment about the relationship between democracy and the nation's historic commitment to social justice is underway in Cuba. However, the renovative current is very fragile and the delicate process of progressive change is conditioned by two factors. First, there are the dangers of social and political upheaval inherent in any severe moment of crisis, and Cuba's past experience with the potentially fatal consequences of internal division makes for caution. The demand for unity understood as unanimity remains part of the regime's *modus operandi*. As one of the Cubans interviewed in 1993 put it: "There is a serious contradiction between the popular participation demanded by the people and the discipline required by the current crisis." Secondly, there is what most Cubans interviewed perceive to be an overwhelmingly hostile international environment. In the words of a prominent historian: "Socialist democracy is viable in Cuba to the extent we can survive as a nation." He was referring to what many in Cuba view as a recolonization project directed from Miami. Those dangers strengthen the position of the more conservative forces who resist any democratization of the system. According to several people interviewed, the sudden disintegration of the Soviet Union, which left the regime feeling vulnerable, seriously narrowed a democratic opening that had begun in Cuba. As described in one interview:

Preservation of the state and of political power became the overriding question. There are conservative forces who might try to use the situation to strengthen their own positions. But there are also *fuerzas aperturistas* [forces supporting an opening up of the system] who have had to fight to make sure that the emergency is not used as an excuse to make no changes at all, even the minimal changes necessary to remain faithful to the revolution's commitments.

Haroldo Dilla admits that many legitimate arguments—particularly the very real threat to Cuban sovereignty posed by the U.S. and the powerful right-wing Cuban American political machine—can be made against the viability of democratization in Cuba today. But Dilla (1994: 55) insists that:

Even taking these adverse circumstances into account . . . the construction of a pluralistic participative democracy seems a precondition for patriotic resistance and for the articulation of a consensus about a path that seems full of obstacles and sacrifices. Probably the most obvious message of the fall of bureaucratic Eastern European socialism has been the necessity to reinterpret the relationship between democracy and governability in a socialist context, recognizing that only the expansion of democracy can ensure the stability of the system.

Just how far the democracy debate has evolved in Cuba is evidenced by such calls, from loyal revolutionaries, to recognize that democratization is a *condition* for resolving the crisis and rescuing the revolution's important social justice legacy. The emerging renovative perspective on democracy entails doing away with the false association between collectivist, social goals and authoritarian, centralized state power. A good part of the intellectual and political task of Cuban renovators is to break the old socialism-liberalism dichotomy and to assert the mutual interdependence of social equality, individual liberty, and democratic rule.

Vitier (1975: 165) described the new historical and ethical logic represented by Fidel Castro's early thought as both a rupture with the past and a renewal of the traditions of 1868, 1895, and of the 1930s. A break with old ways of thinking and doing were needed in order to preserve and advance the nation's long struggle for social justice. The renovative current that has emerged in Cuba of the 1990s faces the same challenge under new historical conditions: how

to break with the logic of an authoritarian state-party regime while renewing the revolution's commitment to social justice.

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