

# **THE PATH LESS TRAVELED**

## **AN ANALYSIS OF DEMOCRACY, OLIGARCHY AND US-CUBA POLICY**

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*Primo io, dopo io, sempre io, viva io ... Benito Mussolini*

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1. Our government has said for years that the purpose of its Cuba policy is to bring democracy to Cuba's people who it says lack it but need it. Unfortunately, one of the most important things we lack in this mass community of 270 million people we're trying to create is a common English language for our political discourse. It's not just that words like "democracy," "socialism," "capitalism," "terrorism" have become so vague as to be virtually useless (as time goes by the reality underlying the concepts changes). It's also that each person develops his or her own understanding of these words based on his or her learning, which often differs considerably from the understandings of others, especially when those who speak to us through our mass media change meanings to suit their purposes. Our common language deteriorates and the essential ingredient of community — communication — disappears, leaving us like those who lived in the Tower of Babel.

## **DEMOCRACY.**

2. Since the word democracy derives from the Greek word "demos" meaning "the people," it would seem that to have an intelligent connection to the past it must involve people participating somehow in the important societal decisions which affect their lives, such as "government by the people," an idea that the people can collectively manage their societies. Because in mass society each individual cannot meaningfully participate in decisions for the whole, it has come to mean decision-making by "representatives" (career politicians in the United States) who are said to decide and act on behalf of the people who elect them.

3. US political philosopher Cliff DuRand indicates that the core of the idea of democracy is the possibility of collective decision-making about collective action for a common good. He says this is the opposite of the concept of democracy found in US popular consciousness today which defines democracy as the freedom of individuals to decide on their own about actions to pursue their own purposes<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> Cliff DuRand, "The Idea of Democracy and the Ideal of Socialism," presented at conference, *Socialism toward the 21st Century*, University of Havana, October 21-23, 1997.

4. The question of freedom brings to mind what the lawyer Cicero said at a time when the Roman republic was deteriorating into empire: that freedom is the participation in power<sup>3</sup>. There seem to be two interrelated types of freedom: “freedom from” (domination, coercion), and “freedom of” (meaningful participation). History demonstrates that the more participation we have the less necessary the coercion, since we are more likely to accept and implement decisions we joined in, or at least had an opportunity to be heard on personally or by true representation. Significantly, the US has at least double the number and percentage of people incarcerated in any other nation, whereas Cuba is known for its relatively low incidence of crime. About fifty-three years ago Albert Einstein described the essential human crisis of modern times as follows: “...*It concerns the relationship of the individual to society. The individual has become more conscious than ever of his dependence on society. But he does not experience this dependence as a positive asset, as an organic tie, as a productive force, but rather as a threat to his natural rights, or even to his economic existence. Moreover, his position in society is such that the egotistical drives of his makeup are constantly being accentuated, while his social drives, which are by nature weaker, progressively deteriorate. All human beings, whatever their position in society, are suffering from this process of deterioration. Unknowing prisoners of their own egotism, they feel insecure, lonely and deprived of the naïve, simple and unsophisticated enjoyment of life. Man can find meaning in life, short and perilous as it is, only through devoting himself to society.*”

## **OLIGARCHY.**

5. The men who set up our government were not so dishonest as to call it a democracy; rather its form was said to be that of a republic. Our revolution was essentially an act of political decentralization by propertied white males who wanted the power to run things here rather than submit to a parliament in London. They sent their delegates to Philadelphia in 1787 to frame our political institutions so as to limit popular participation, protect their class, and structure the government so that it could not interfere in their private pursuits, which is precisely what they did. As DuRand points out, this gave institutional backing to a turning away from collective action toward a culture of individualism, where the state, rather than the means for pursuing action for the common good, becomes an instrument limited to ensuring the conditions for pursuit of self interest, promoting a privatization of life<sup>4</sup>.

6. Today in the US the common interest is seldom the real basis of political decision at the national or state levels. Although it's often given lip service, it's usually by politicians and others serving private interests. Rather than through public institutions, individual and group interests are pursued in civil society

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<sup>3</sup> Marcus Tullius Cicero, *De re Publica*, Scipio's thesis. See Anthony Everitt, *Cicero, the Life and Times of Rome's Greatest Politician* (Random House 2001) 181.

<sup>4</sup> Albert Einstein, *Why Socialism*, Monthly Review, May 1949 (NY).

where they are not subject to any common good test until they reach the national level (if at all). The victors in the self—interest game are always the business organizations because they are considered by the law to be “persons” with all the rights and privileges of real persons. They are able to amass and invest in politicians and the media much more money than real persons can, or even unions or environmental or other special interest groups no matter how large they are (such groups not being involved in the business of making money).

7. Increasingly large, centralized, wealthier and therefore more powerful, far beyond any control by owners or government, with common values and aims, a relatively few businesses fund our politicians and mass media (for most of us our only information source). Through them they gain our acquiescence in the key policy decisions they make. Their ideology says there is no common — only private — good; therefore our political institutions should not be changed. Such a system can only accurately be described as a disguised commercial oligarchy because those who have the power are pursuing private rather than public interests.

8. Although the dice are loaded against most of us, we Americans have apparently chosen for ourselves to continue playing the self—interest game. This does not mean, however, that we should accept US oligarchic interference in the political institutions of other countries that have made different choices, particularly those whose people face entirely different circumstances and are pursuing different kinds of national projects. To impose our political standards on them would be the ultimate travesty of the idea of democracy.

## **COLLECTIVISM AND INDIVIDUALISM.**

9. The Cuban revolution, arising more from an economic than political crisis, defines the nation by a different project. Under conditions of neocolonialism, the needs of property owners became secondary, and after the initial period the revolution was able to widen the scope of public affairs to include the human needs and social justice demands of the workers and unpropertied people as its driving force, with the government becoming the institutional structure for popular participation in collective decisions about action for social change. This was embodied in the Cuban Constitution, adopted in 1976 with 97% voter approval out of over 90% of eligible voters participating, and amended in 1992 by more than two—thirds of an elected National Assembly as constitutionally required. In June 2002, provided, eight million Cubans, more than 90% of the adult population signed declarations in support of their constitution making it irrevocable.

10. In the US and all other so—called liberal democracies the national governments are essentially oligarchic and authoritarian rather than democratic, however democracy sometimes occurs at the local government level or in private special interest groups. The authoritarian character of our governments results from economic centralization at the nation—state level and the size and

complexity of the resulting mass societies being created — something peculiar to our last two centuries when technological innovation has been transforming our economies, and our populations have been increasing exponentially.

11. For the same demographic and economic, nation—state centralization reasons it's also true that the so—called socialist democracies have been to differing extents authoritarian at the national level — but not oligarchic where, as in Cuba, their national projects have come to operate collectively for the benefit of all. The class nature of Cuban society has gradually disappeared, with the propertied people either giving up most of their property or leaving. Under the 1992 changes to Articles 3 and 5 of the Cuban Constitution, the ultimate sovereignty of the republic rests in the people, from which derives the power of the state; and construction of socialism has become the project of the whole nation with the Communist Party of Cuba (PCC) its guide.

12. I'm not suggesting that in today's world the collectivist approach is always or inherently superior to the individualistic. Both are pursued by countries in proportions that suit their national projects. If possible, most societal functions are better performed locally, by either government or private groups, where they can be undertaken democratically. Where a function must be done nationally, there will always be questions about which things the government can perform efficiently and well for the common good and which are better done privately.

13. For example our government seems to have taken for granted that one of its primary functions is to help US businesses make profits in foreign countries, even where it involves exploitation of people or empowering oppressors or conducting “regime changes.” Under the guise of national security it has developed an enormous and expensive weaponry system and established military bases and “intelligence” networks all over world — in reality to promote and protect transnational business enterprise. It seems to have forgotten the common need of Americans to have friendly relations with foreign peoples. It's not in the interest of our families to have relatives killed or injured in faraway places, or to be attacked by suicidal terrorists at home, or to give up our liberty for security. A democratic US government acting for the common good would consider the obvious alternative: it would privatize its role in helping US businesses operate in foreign lands, let them deal themselves with foreign laws and governments, and allow any necessary international coercive functions to be decided on and performed by international organizations, perhaps a more democratic United Nations.

14. Social change is structural — it occurs by changing institutions rather than personalities. Democracy at its most basic level (the individual) is a desperate human need, but democracy in modern mass society is not a reality, rather its oligarchic myth. The contradiction between the individual and the community has been with us from the beginning and as far as we know it always will be. The larger the community, the more difficult it becomes to transcend. At this stage in human development, the only kind of democracy that exists or can exist is the grassroots variety. Mass democracy is propaganda, one of the ways our

national oligarchies have managed to maintain the political status quo in the face of dramatic technological and economic change.

15. In order to make progressive political change, we must first get back to reality. If we start from fantasy, change leads us only to another fantasy. The political institutions Cubans have developed over the last forty years are based on their reality - what has worked for them in pursuing their socialist project, which has enjoyed enormous and increasing popular support in the face of economic hardship and struggle.

## **POLITICAL PARTIES.**

16. Last May 20 our President stated in Miami that he would end the blockade and our other attempts to isolate Cuba if they will hold free and fair elections with multiparty candidates and comply with some additional political conditions he requires. Cubans have been holding elections at the local, provincial and national levels for more than thirty years, which are at least as free and fair as ours. Political parties are not mentioned in our Constitution. In the early days of our republic they were frowned on, George Washington especially discouraged the idea. Nor are political parties referred to in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The US idea of the necessity or advisability of multiple parties is another oligarchic myth. It leads people to believe they have choice in political decisions and thereby maintains the political status quo. In the place in US where democracy sometimes occurs — the local level — political parties are not allowed.

17. Similarly, in Cuba parties are not involved in elections. For Cubans, the last century was a long struggle for independence and national dignity. They had plenty of experience with the multiparty system under US tutelage during the first part of the century, when Cuba was a virtual US plantation — over 75% of the economic production property was owned or otherwise controlled by US businesses. They have learned from bitter experience that their continued liberation depends entirely on their national unity, whereas political division makes them vulnerable to manipulation and economic domination by US businesses and their former rulers who now live in the US as part of the Cuban—American community. They have therefore forged a political system that seeks to preserve their sovereignty and independence, with institutions that achieve democracy by participatory consensus rather than class warfare or clashing ideologies.

18. The PCC is not an electoral party, rather it's an organization of activists (about 15% of the adult population are members), which under Article 5 of the Cuban Constitution organizes and orients the common forces of the revolution. Its role is to lead the nation. It sets long—range goals for the whole society, and it seeks to promote social justice and a populace with social consciousness. The PCC Congress, which meets every 5 years, is its highest decision making body. Its local and provincial branches elect delegates. Implementation is by its Central Committee (150 members) and its political bureau (24 members), which

operate on the principle of democratic centralism. People work their way up through the PCC based on their ability and merit as determined by peers. It encourages free expression of ideas and respect for differences of opinion, within the ideals of the revolution<sup>5</sup>.

## **GRASSROOTS DEMOCRACY.**

19. Rather than a coercive or dominating force to be feared and limited, Cubans view government as the primary structure for participation by the people in collective decision—making. Cuban government bodies at the municipal, provincial and national levels are autonomous, positions are elective and neither PCC nor parties are involved in electoral processes. There are no political campaigns. Candidates are elected for short terms; they are accountable and subject to recall at all times. They are not career politicians — most are part—time, not paid, and usually serve only one, 2 ½, or 5—year term. Seldom does personal benefit or career interest affect their decisions. They do not promote themselves, rather, like our municipal and county boards they are elected by people who know them personally or by reputation as to character and ability to truly represent the people and their common interest. They function as advocates for the people and must have frequent meetings with constituents to make sure that official institutions are accountable. All adult citizens are entitled to vote, the ballots are secret and Cubans vote in much higher percentages than Americans do<sup>6</sup>.

20. In the so—called liberal democracies, the multiparty system is a thing of the past if one is speaking of the value based political party. All modern nations are ruled by elite’s who are in agreement as to the general nature of their project and the actions they take on fundamental issues. In the US the “two party” system offers no real choice regarding basic values, approaches, ideology or policy, particularly as concerns structural change in the political economy. There are some differences in emphasis and rhetoric, which are usually highlighted in the media. But in reality the two parties function primarily as money raisers and accounting firms for the candidates, who are elected on the basis of their incumbency, celebrity, financial backing and capability (which permits exposure in the media), perceived personal characteristics and other matters unrelated to party values. They must think and talk within the narrowing “mainstream” in order to get mass media attention and become serious candidates.

21. Most US politicians above the local level base their decisions on obtaining or remaining in office or seeking higher office, because their careers bring them power and wealth. Correctly perceiving that our “representatives” are in reality acting on behalf of powerful private interests — which situation can’t be

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<sup>5</sup> Cliff DuRand, *supra*, 2.

<sup>6</sup> Constitution de la Republica de Cuba (Editorial de las Ciencias Sociales, La Habana, 2001), Art. 5. Max Azrici, *Cuba Today and Tomorrow: Reinventing Socialism* (University of Florida Press 2001) 105, 114.

remedied by voting for either of the two oligarchic party candidates — an increasing majority of eligible Americans don't vote, despite all the urging they get. In the recent elections to the House of Representatives (supposedly the democratic branch of our national government with elections every two years to enhance responsiveness to constituents' desires), over 90% of the seats were uncontested or not seriously contested. About 39% of that eligible voted, producing another "landslide" for the incumbents. The two oligarchic parties had in previous years gerrymandered the congressional districts to make the seats virtual lifetime appointments — if desired by the parties and officeholders, the constituencies' desires being considered irrelevant. Our politicians have become experts at keeping their jobs by avoiding clear—cut votes on controversial issues and by disguising their real positions relating thereto.

22. Thus has our oligarchy divided up our Congress on a permanent equal basis between its two political wings, which it funds and controls. Keeping them out of the mass media and public debates prevents the formation of alternative, value—based parties. Although in the past two centuries we have enfranchised new groups, such as unpropertied people, racial minorities and women, it's clear that voting every two or four years for national or state candidates is not an accurate barometer of the quality of our democracy. If an unbiased observer from another planet were to try to make an assessment of democracy at the national level of US as compared to the national level in Cuba he would probably conclude that the US is ruled by elite's on behalf of commercial and business interests, whereas Cuba is lead by elite's on behalf of working and poor people. That is, the whole nation, because everyone in Cuba is now in our sense economically poor individually, much of the economic production property being held in common. To compare the quality of true democracy, he would focus his attention on the grassroots, where some people of both countries can and do participate meaningfully as electors of true representatives and as activists before local government boards, which have jurisdiction in limited areas, or in special interest organizations, usually limited to one area. The Cuban system promotes participation at the grassroots through the electoral processes (including elections, accountability sessions, and workers' parliaments and other types of group consultations on major policy issues) and personal and group advocacy at the municipal level as activists individually or through special interest organizations often but not always sponsored or encouraged by the state under Article 7 of their Constitution.

23. The Cuban Organs of People's Power (OPP's) are responsible for administration at the municipal and provincial levels and for legislative and constitutional matters at the national. Elections to the National Assembly (601 members) occur every five years. One half of the members are drawn from local and provincial OPP deputies and the other members are drawn from people from various walks of life, such as the trade unions, small farmers and women's federation. Thousands of nominations are made by the OPP's and citizens in these organizations. The job of the National Candidacy Commissions is to whittle these down to 601 nominees who are a "mirror of the nation." This is a



continuous “consultation with the people” process, involving group sessions with many organizations representing millions of people. (7)

24. There must be at least two candidates for each local or provincial election (2 ½ year positions) and to be elected in any election, a candidate must receive 50% of the popular vote. The local and municipal OPP’s are analogous to our town and county governing boards, but with much broader authority. They deal with community issues such as economic enterprise, planning, budgets, education, construction, health, employment, social services, environment, elections and many other matters. They have substantial participation by individuals and groups, which results from their broad authority.

Decentralization of political power, which permits and promotes popular participation in decision-making, has been going on in Cuba for more than twenty years<sup>7</sup>. Keys to Cuban style democracy are the periodic local accountability sessions and the neighborhood consultations (“consejos populares”, meetings with local ombudsmen and local special interest group representatives who help resolve local issues), which have been seen as an adaptation of Rousseau’s direct democracy model, delegates acting as agents of their constituents<sup>8</sup>.

25. There are many thousands of Cuban special interest groups in which most Cubans participate, seeking to improve their communities. Some are national or provincial only, most of them are local and federated at the provincial and national levels. They often use consensus process rather than “majority rules,” similar to the US Green Party and other US grassroots groups. The local PCC groups advocate the long-term needs and ideals of the revolution before officials and the public. The more than 20,000 CDR’s (Committees for Defense of Revolution) are neighborhood associations that do almost anything and everything, from locating emergency medical care to improving local peace and tranquility. They are also social and to some extent counteract the atomization and depersonalization of life in modern mass society. Other well known advocacy organizations are the Women’s Federation, the trade unions, the small farmers’ unions, the environmental groups, the student groups, scientific groups, religious groups and charities, social service groups, professional groups for teachers, nurses, doctors and cultural groups.

26. These all have quick and easy access to official decision-making, and often are the main players involved in such. Mechanisms exist so that local groups can bring important matters up for discussion and decision even at the provincial and national levels. For the past twenty years Cubans have been pursuing an anti—bureaucracy campaign at all levels, which has had some success although it still has a long way to go. The time—consuming formalities

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<sup>7</sup> Peter Roman, *People’s Power: Cuba’s Experience with Representative Government* (Boulder Representative Press 1999) 105-154.

<sup>8</sup> Arnold August, *Democracy in Cuba and the 1997-98 Elections* (Habana: Editorial Jose Marti 1999) 102-104, 312.

Max Azrici, *supra*, 122-123. Peter Roman, *supra*, 74-99.

Peter Roman, *supra*, 155-238.

and contentious and expensive legal wrangling peculiar to countries dedicated to serving private interests are not seen much in Cuba. The distinction which counts is whether a proposal or practice is within or without the ideals of the revolution, which to most people, especially those who participate, represents the common good. To Cubans formalities, legal technicalities, jurisdictional infighting, distinctions such as “private — public” are irrelevant.

27. A foreigner has to adopt a broad perspective, not limited by his own background in a country where the government promotes private rather than public interests, to understand and appreciate how politics works in Cuba. In a society where much of the economic production property is part of the common wealth, the people naturally become more concerned with and dedicated to the common interest because it, rather than individual accumulation of money or property, is what serves their self-interest. The focus is on people’s responsibility as well as their rights. Problem solving in Cuba usually occurs in a cooperative way, and this happens internally in the local groups where people operate and in their advocacy before local officials. Cuban local groups have more power as participants than their counterparts in privatized societies, because the amount of money they have or can raise doesn’t matter and everyone sees that they are acting in the public interest as well as their own.

28. For example the women’s groups pursue post—patriarchal goals as in other countries, but not in a self—interested way, rather to make sure that women are equal participants and beneficiaries in the revolution. The trade unions (over 90% of industrial and construction workers belong) see themselves as having a dual role, to defend workers rights before management, and also to act in favor of values that enhance productivity and other enterprise needs. They accepted a decrease of wages and increase in hours during the “special period” of economic hardship during the 1990s. The environmental and healthcare crises in Cuba, to a large extent resulting from a lack of funds, have led the environmental, health and farmers’ groups to find solutions that don’t require much money. They pursue programs like alternative and renewable energy, conservation, recycling, urban agriculture, micro—brigades (volunteer work), community gardens, bicycle transportation, organic farming, natural and alternative medicine and treatments, and many other practices, some of which are innovative and have contributed substantially to human development, especially in poor countries.

29. In both Cuba and US the national leaders claim to be deciding and acting for the common good. The main difference in how the political systems work has to do with how and who makes the decisions about what is the common good. In the US these decisions are made nationally by a commercial oligarchy that recognizes only private good. In Cuba they’re made by individuals and groups and accountable representatives at the grassroots, based on the standard of the needs and goals of their revolution.

## THE EMPIRE OF COMMERCIAL OLIGARCHY.

30. Obviously there are serious economic problems in Cuba — but they don't result as significantly from lack of political participation as do the many severe problems existing in the US. Nevertheless, it's clear that not all Cubans support the revolution and the key to its success will be the people's confidence in each other — their belief that they can collectively make it happen. When people have to spend most or all of their time individually struggling for the necessities of life, the social bond weakens. Grassroots democracy is what makes it strong.

31. Our government has embargoed Cuba, unsuccessfully invaded it, sent agents to assassinate its leaders, and allowed US based terrorists to destroy its crops, its buildings and airplanes. Under Helms-Burton it blockades Cuba by threatening and punishing foreigners who dare to do business there. By unrealistic financing limitations it prevents medicine and medical supplies and equipment and nutritional food from reaching Cubans. In Latin America it threatens and punishes nations economically for trading and having normal relations with Cuba, and it rewards nations economically for breaking relations with Cuba. It has lost its seat on the UN Human Rights Commission for politicizing the Commission on Cuba issues. It funnels money to groups and people in Florida and on the island who are trying to destabilize and overthrow the Cuban people's government. It conducts a relentless propaganda campaign against Cuba, and it unconstitutionally prohibits its own citizens from traveling to Cuba to learn what is really happening there.

32. These are the kinds of decisions and actions that are characteristic of commercial oligarchic empire rather than democracy. Demonizing a nation's government and punishing its people for the supposed misdeeds of leaders are steps in the processes of dominating and exploiting these people and their resources. Democratic governments do not do these things because, being local, they derive power from and truly represent their constituents.

33. In the unlikely event that our government ever succeeds in forcing Cubans to adopt a political system like ours, it will destroy the very significant democracy that exists there at the grassroots — which is the participatory and accountable representative type of democracy, the only real kind. The new system will likely have to be enforced by a long and severe military occupation. Clearly, democracy for Cubans is not a motive for our government's policy. It has close, friendly relations with and supports economically many monarchies and other regimes that have never held an election and would never think of holding one. Any reasonable person must wonder what the underlying motive for US-Cuba policy really is. Questions about this must be asked. After all, we're talking about 11 million people living on an island in the Caribbean. If we don't like their political system, why can't we leave them alone and let them find their own way?

34. Could it be that something is happening on the island that the world's only superpower is afraid of? It seems so. Could our oligarchy fear that if the Cuban revolution continues succeeding (based as it is on real democracy) that it's own

drive for World Empire will fail by regime change or perhaps even progressive political system change here? It seems so.

35. The Cuban Constitution acknowledges that the political system it creates is based on the thinking of its independence leader Jose Marti. Wanting to learn about the US version of democracy, Marti had lived here for several years in the 1890's. Disappointed with the corruption of politics by money and the resulting commercialization of life he saw, he argued against this type of system for Cuba. One of his sayings was: "Cuba: al salvarse, salva ..." which means "Cuba: on saving itself it saves others..."<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup>John M. Kirk, *Jose Marti, Mentor of the Cuban Nation* (University Press of Florida 1980). Azrici, supra. Ch. 5, note 16, 338.