

Dilemmas of Participation in Latin America

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Socialist revolutions appear in Latin American countries that lack, among other things, effective channels of mass participation in national politics. Where such revolutions triumph, an opportunity arises to empower those in whose name the revolution was made. What form shall this empowerment take? The answer has been satisfactorily given neither by Marxist theory nor by the practice of the established socialist states. It is an area in which the few socialist governments of Latin America proceed hesitantly by trial-and-error.

This article first describes the problems accompanying political participation in such postrevolutionary situations and then examines one indigenous solution: the "Organs of Popular Power" eventually created in Cuba. The Cuban experiment will be compared not to abstract criteria for democracy. Rather the question will be framed this way: to what extent is the Cuban system a satisfactory, if incomplete, resolution of both the leaders' and their followers' expectations regarding political participation?

Marxism, according to Harry Boyte, “assumes that a sundering of people from their historical and organic connections—from their ‘roots’—is the indispensable preliminary to freedom.”¹ Through its multiple forms of alienation, capitalism liberates workers from past identities. Stripped of these divisive identities, it is argued, workers recognize the proletariat in each other and begin both the liberation of their class and the creation of a more rational social order. “The left does more than name and describe modern suffering,” comments Boyte. “It also proposes a theory for ending it that assumes people are and must be that to which capitalism tends to reduce them.”² It is clear that Boyte does not believe that political courage and creativity flow from alienation.

Latin American revolutions support Boyte’s views. Perhaps because Latin American capitalism is dependent and incomplete, revolutionary protest has been fueled by strong ties to land and neighborhood (*barrio*), by nationalism, and by a critique of capitalism rooted in Catholicism, which antedates capitalism. Revolutionary behavior flows at least as much from values and memories embedded in popular tradition as from alienation experienced in the modern workplace. The 1979 revolution in Nicaragua is a case in point.

Made in the name of Sandino, this revolution invoked a history of popular resistance dating back to the 1850s, when the United States first impinged on Nicaraguan sovereignty. Popular support for many of the revolutionaries arose from their being seen as *los muchachos*: youths performing the heroic role accorded them by a culture that links each new generation to societal regeneration. Loyalties to neighborhood were evident in the widespread resistance to Somoza. In Monimbó, a *barrio* of Masaya that exemplified this neighborhood solidarity, artisans used traditional skills to manufacture weapons. Today the revolution is remembered in terms of local citizens who died to make it happen. One sees not massive monuments to all the war dead of Nicaragua, but individual streets named after individual local martyrs.

Particular attention should be paid “liberation theology,” which to Marx would have been a contradiction in terms. In both Nicaragua and El Salvador, Christian *comunidades de base* (grassroots congregations often led by laity) have served functions comparable to those provided in the U.S. civil rights movement by the black church: legitimating “illegal” challenges to the dominant order while offering sanctuary to those who make this challenge their praxis. Some of the combative popular organizations united in the Democratic Revolutionary Front in El Salvador grew out of *comunidades de base* and the cooperatives they spawned. According to one estimate, by 1979 there were over a hundred thou-

1 “Populism and the Left,” *democracy* 1, no. 2 (April 1981): 56.

2 *Ibid.*

sand of these grassroots congregations in Latin America.³

Among the revolutionary leadership of both Nicaragua and El Salvador are lay preachers and ordained clergy, mostly Catholic but some Protestant. Dietrich Bonhöffer and John XXIII are quoted alongside Sandino, Martí, and Marx. Among the rank and file the fusion between Christianity and revolution takes forms ranging from the Pietá-like photograph of the dead Ché Guevara to the inscription scrawled on a Nicaraguan wall: "Fortunate is the womb that bore a Sandinista fighter." The link is not lost on U.S. policymakers. From the *Rockefeller Report* commissioned by Richard Nixon to the Committee of Santa Fe influential with Reaganites, advisers of U.S. presidents have warned against the Church's contribution to revolution in Latin America.

If since 1968 a significant faction of the Latin American Church has openly endorsed popular protest and empowerment, over the preceding centuries the authority-supporting Church harbored, in the recesses of its doctrine, Aquinas's legitimation of disobedience. (Civil authority that violates natural law—God's law—should not be obeyed. Open rebellion may be justified only in extreme cases, but extreme cases exist.) Of course the finer points of theology never permeated the masses, and it may be argued that the anarchism that Richard Morse and other students of the region view as a persistent tradition owes more to geography than to theology—to the distance separating king from colonial, tax collector from rancher.⁴ Whatever the reason, in most Latin American cultures the sense of justice seems rooted more in intuition and historical precedent than in positive law. Civil obedience is not a given; rebellion has credentials.

Names such as Zapata, Martí, Evita, Sandino, Gaitán, and Ché resonate in specific national contexts as embodiments of the revolutionary option. When political openings appear, as a split within the military will sometimes create, ordinary citizens remember this tradition and try to translate inheritance into action. The 1965 uprising in Santo Domingo is a case in point. A book describing it

3 Penny Lernoux, *Cry of the People* (New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1980), p. 448. In the 1970s in El Salvador alone, some 15,000 lay leaders of the Christian base communities were trained. A Maryknoll nun described the impact this movement had in the countryside in these words: "When I first arrived in Tamanique, every time a child died the family would say, 'It's the will of God.' But after the people became involved in the Christian communities, that attitude began to change. . . . After a while they began to say, 'The system caused this.'" Tommie Sue Montgomery, *Revolution in El Salvador* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1982), pp. 103-4.

4 Richard Morse, "Toward a Theory of Spanish American Government," *Politics and Social Change in Latin America*, ed. Howard Wiarda (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1974).

is entitled *Barrios in Arms*; those *barrios* were for the most part neighborhoods of the poor.⁵

No matter how rooted revolutionary behavior is in traditional values, post-revolutionary leadership usually exhibits a strong national, modern, and Marxist concept of the task at hand. Leaders view the arduous work of socialist transformation of their maldeveloped, dependent countries as if the masses only act *en masse* out of a dedication born of a modern understanding of the nation's plight. Ché Guevara sometimes revealed this abstract, homogenized, Marxist conception of political motivation. Five years after the revolution triumphed in Cuba, he announced that cutting sugarcane was done "with love and grace" since "what enslaves man is not work but rather his failure to possess the means of production."⁶ A few years before, Fidel Castro proclaimed, "here there is just one class, the humble; that class is in power," and later: "today, when there is total identification of the people with their resources; today when there is complete identification of the laborer with the fruits of his labor, . . . it would not occur to anyone to consider a machine his enemy."⁷

In their first years of rule, the Sandinistas avoided this abstract idealism that ironically springs from materialist Marxism. Owing to the multiclass nature of the opposition to Somoza and to the new regime's dependence on the private sector to reconstruct the economy, "*diálogo*"—dialogue—and "*pluralismo político*" became key phrases in the leaders' vocabulary. In its concrete dealings with peasants, however, and with Atlantic fishermen, Miskito Indians, market vendors, coffee growers, and some clergy, the ruling *comandantes* betray the same impatience, the same flight into rhetoric, the same reluctance to comprehend the real choices their policies force on the powerless, as their Cuban counterparts did at a comparable moment.

True, the external pressure on the Sandinistas is intense. Given stagnation in the world economy and reaction in the White House, Nicaragua's was the right revolution at the wrong time. Acknowledging these pressures, however, does not diminish the tragedy of another revolution, pledged to honor the diversity of its supporters and to empower them, slipping into a dialogue of the deaf. By the

5 José Moreno, *Barrios in Arms: Revolution in Santo Domingo* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1970).

6 *Venceremos! The Speeches and Writings of Ché Guevara*, ed. John Gerassi (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1968), p. 337.

7 *Fidel Castro Speaks*, ed. Martin Kenner and James Petras (New York: Grove Press, 1970) pp. 77, 173.

time the new law of political parties was proclaimed, it was moot, much of the opposition hounded into silence. At the grassroots one now hears either ritual incantations or the cynicism for which peasants are famous: "It's the same monkey with a different tail."⁸ How are we to understand this process?

First, it is apparent that revolutionary leaders share with many of their followers a disdain for previous forms of routinized political participation. Some students of Latin America argue that liberal democratic forms never suited the subjective understanding of politics, others that these forms were discredited by decades of fraud and corruption. Among those identified with revolution one senses an initial preference for continuing the task-oriented, minimally structured, frequently consensual politics of the military struggle. But two problems soon arise.

Revolutionary consensus, fed by hatred of the old regime and by unrealistic dreams of what will replace it, erodes under the pressures of postrevolutionary reality. Secondly, during the fighting so much popular participation occurred in face-to-face interactions within neighborhoods or within guerrilla units that it is hard to find a model of *national* political organization while clinging to the simpler, more direct forms of the previous phase. When the Sandinistas triumphed, for instance, there were only two governing structures operative throughout the country: the national directorate of the *Frente* (essentially nine guerrilla commanders joined by "the Twelve" prestigious civilians) and the *barrio* based Civilian Defense Committees. Three years later, it is still not clear how national leadership connects to local organizations.

The two problems intertwine. In the postrevolutionary period leaders are reluctant to pin down the mix of command and representation until they see how amenable the led are to the vanguard's prescription of what needs to be done. In both Cuba and Nicaragua leaders have given higher priority to defending the revolution from external enemies and to attacking the legacy of social and economic underdevelopment than they have to institutionalizing popular participation. At best leaders are ambivalent about yielding the near monopoly of decision making that characterized the fighting phase. Prematurely representative politics, in their eyes, would leave the new order vulnerable to internal divisions and outside penetration. They have little trust in those who did not put their lives on the line and a strong sense of obligation to those who did and paid the price.

While socialist in spirit, these new governments are saddled with tasks of re-

8 For information on attitudes inside Nicaragua, I am indebted to Dennis Gilbert and Forrest Colburn, whose observations should find their way into print soon. I visited Nicaragua in January 1982 and remain responsible for the interpretation given here, although benefiting from Colburn's and Gilbert's separate interviews in Nicaragua before and after mine.

construction and accumulation that require denial and discipline from the populace. Revolutionary leaders must complete the work of capitalism while confronted with the hostility of capitalist powers. In the euphoria following the military triumph, it is not clear that the masses will accept their historic duty as a sacrificial generation. It is best, some leaders argue, to maintain the disarticulated politics of the military phase: mobilization below with decision making confined to the top.

Whatever the reason, and there are many, both Cuban and Nicaraguan leaders have delayed institutionalizing leader-led relations. In Nicaragua the Sandinistas postponed until 1985 the national elections they had promised during the fighting. Framing electoral and party legislation has proceeded slowly in the Council of State, and has been eclipsed by the emergency decrees. While mass organizations have methods of selecting national representatives from regional and municipal units, these procedures have not been formalized. In Cuba a project to draft a new constitution was begun six years after the triumph; two years later a scheme for "local power" was broached. These attempts at institutionalizing political participation were aborted, however, and the project not seriously advanced until the mid-seventies.

The older revolution in Cuba provides clues both to this delay and to the eventual resumption of the leadership's interest in institutionalized participation. Throughout the first decade of the Castro regime, the vanguard mobilized the masses in support of its attempt to overcome underdevelopment while trying to escape dependency on a single world power. The spirit of equality born of the guerrilla war and reinforced by external attacks gave leader-led relations considerable directness. There were few explicit means, however, by which rank and file supporters could either control local institutions or send a clear message to the national leadership.

The effort to achieve a ten-million ton sugar harvest in 1970 has come to symbolize the gradual transition from this mobilization phase to a more representative system. When the desired "great leap forward" of the late sixties produced stumbles that increased reliance on the army could not avert, the Cuban vanguard modified its strategy, adopting a slower, more coordinated assault on underdevelopment, with less emphasis on autonomy from the Soviet Union and more emphasis on two-way communication between leaders, cadres, and the citizenry at large.

Structured participation by the rank and file was seen in a new light: less as a constraint upon national leadership and more as an ally in the vanguard's struggle against low productivity. In an effort to elicit high quality work from workers unaccustomed to it, to minimize the demoralization that favoritism brings, and to prevent middle-level bureaucrats from strangling society in red tape, the Cuban

leadership turned to a formal system of popular participation combined with administrative decentralization and economic reforms. This occurred fifteen years after the revolutionaries came to power.

If we ask what political inventions are acceptable to revolutionary leaders once they recognize that the honeymoon of uncritical support is over, two answers arise from the Cuban experience. Local participation is more attractive to elites than national participation, inasmuch as citizen involvement at the local level may help implement national plans in the face of understaffing or sabotage by the bureaucracy. Leaders also welcome forms of participation that, while placing the broad strategy of the revolution beyond debate, spread understanding and acceptance of the sacrifices necessary to make that strategy work.

Turning to the rank and file, we are on shakier ground. It *seems* likely that most supporters of a Latin American revolution are similarly ambivalent about a well-articulated political structure. Their participation in the fighting is localized, action oriented, and accompanied by high risks. John Booth's summary of the literature on political behavior in Latin America suggests that this focus on the local arena could be sustained as normalcy returns.⁸ Writings on "political culture" point to a probable dropoff in activity, however, as the stakes diminish and political action appears less consequential. More politically involved than many peoples in times of crisis, Latin Americans seem to participate less than others under normal conditions. While some postrevolutionary tasks lend themselves to campaigns modeled on the guerrilla effort (e.g., literacy "brigades"), most are less dramatic. Under conditions of austerity and denial, followers may have no more enthusiasm than leaders for being enmeshed in political structures that take time and involve a lot of ritual talk. While leaders want to get on with the tasks at hand, as they define them, followers want to look after their own interests—and have some time to enjoy life.

Studies of grassroots attitudes in Latin America suggest that successful post-revolutionary politics would need to be securely rooted in the *barrios* or in equivalent arenas of face-to-face interaction. In a culture where the powerful are legitimate only when they respect the personhood of ordinary citizens, a structure that permits authorities to hide behind the trappings of office, to obfuscate common understandings of what is going on, or to distance themselves through claims of privilege will not attract mass loyalties. Rhetoric will play a role in a culture that values oratory, but to be successful the symbols used must be rooted in popular history and religion, not in arcane ideology. Both structurally and

⁹ "Political Participation in Latin America," *Latin American Research Review*, 14 (1979): 40-50.

symbolically, accessibility is key: the opportunity to know and be known by leaders and thus to be confirmed as an individual.¹⁰

Thus far I have outlined a political opportunity: the creation of new forms of popular participation in postrevolutionary settings. Limits on this process also have been anticipated. Too representative a structure too soon is obviously unacceptable to the vanguard. Too abstract a process—too distant, impersonal, and routinized—will not attract the energies of rank and file citizens who otherwise identify with the revolutionary project.

What makes Cuba's current experiment with Popular Power interesting is the degree to which it fits these assumptions. It emphasizes neighborhoods, face-to-face communication, and each citizen's right to explanation and access. Thus Popular Power seems a promising adaptation of cultural patterns and, as such, an alternative to Boyte's reading of Marxism as a force that tries to wipe the slate clean of such inheritances.

Essentially the Organs of Popular Power (OPP), launched nationally in 1976, vest popularly elected citizens with responsibility for overseeing government activities appropriate to their level and locale. Municipal OPP is responsible for local transportation, retail commerce, housing, local health and communications, hotels and restaurants, schools, and some agricultural and industrial enterprises. At the provincial level, OPP oversees regional equivalents of these activities (for example, intercity transportation). At the national level OPP deputies discuss and ratify policies that, for the most part, originate in the ministries and among the Cuban Communist Party leadership. The following description concentrates on the municipal level, where participation is more extensive.

Municipal delegates are nominated at open meetings held in the *barrios*, typically under the auspices of local Committees for the Defense of the Revolution. At such meetings anyone can nominate or be nominated. After the merits of potential candidates have been discussed, one or more votes are taken to produce a majority. Candidates chosen at these meetings compete in secret elections to choose from each ward (*circunscripción*) one delegate to Municipal Popular Power. There are variations on the procedure described here, as population density and special circumstances require.

¹⁰ Few subsequent attempts to characterize political culture in Latin America have altered the picture presented by John Gillin in "Ethos Components in Modern Latin American Culture," *American Anthropologist* 57 (1955). One recent work is Julius Rivera, *Latin America: A Socio-cultural Interpretation* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1978).

One need not be a member of the Communist Party to be elected, although the campaign is conducted through standardized posters containing biographies compiled by the mass organizations. Over half those nominated have been Party members, a concentration that increases among those elected and especially among those subsequently chosen to serve at provincial and national levels.

	Popular Power Delegates With Party Ties		
	(1) COMMUNIST PARTY MEMBERS	(2) COMMUNIST YOUTH MEMBERS	(1) + (2)
Municipal OPP			
Candidates	53.4%	17.1%	70.5%
Municipal OPP Delegates	58.8	16.4	75.2
National OPP Deputies	91.7	5.0	96.7

Note: Data in this table are for 1976. Subsequent elections have not significantly altered the pattern.

Source: Marta Harnecker, *Cuba: Dictatorship or Democracy?* (Westport, Connecticut: Lawrence Hill, 1980), pp. 84, 222.

Providing continuity and direction at the municipal level is an executive committee of five to twenty-one members, many of whom become salaried employees of the OPP system, particularly in the larger cities. Each committee member typically oversees a facet of local administration, aided by task forces which include other, nonpaid delegates, state employees, and citizens with relevant backgrounds.

The elected delegates also perform what United States politicians call constituency services. They hold office hours once a week. Through his or her delegate, for example, a constituent might obtain materials for fixing a house, obviating the long wait for public crews to attend the problem. Another mandated interaction is the thrice-yearly "rendering of accounts" (*rendición de cuentas*), which typically occurs in a roped-off street during the evening. Here the delegate must explain how he or she processed issues raised at the previous *rendición* before opening the meeting to new queries and complaints. What emerges at these meetings affects the entire *barrio*, ranging from complaints about garbage collection and unsafe housing to suggestions for improving service in the shops or learning in the schools.

One *rendición* I observed could have been a New England town meeting were it not for the street commotion, the milling about of children. The delegate and his constituents addressed one another as equals and discussed community issues in an open, critical way largely devoid of ideological abstraction. True, the topics discussed were closer to what C. Wright Mills called "personal troubles of

milieu" than to "public issues of social structure."¹¹ But here was a local authority taking citizen questions seriously and citizens apparently receiving straight answers in return.

As one moves up the OPP ladder, elections become more indirect and the screening of candidates by Party officials more decisive.¹² Nearly half of the national delegates (called deputies) are not elected at the ward level, and participation in the twice-yearly, three-day National Assembly meetings often seems perfunctory, except in a few key committees. The overlap between the executive committee of the National Assembly (the Council of State) and the Communist Party's Central Committee is almost total. As one approaches the vanguard's domain, then, popular representation thins out. Preliminary analysis of one objective study of the National Assembly, however, reveals a trend toward greater participation by deputies who are not members of the Council of State, more spontaneous comments from the floor, and greater attention to the substance rather than the form of legislation.¹³

At the local level, Popular Power appears to institutionalize participatory norms that as yet are more preached than practiced at the national level. Municipal OPP provides a forum for discussion of those issues that local initiative can help resolve. It subjects administrators to scrutiny and provides channels for cutting through bureaucratic logjams. The system is structured in such a way that the delegate represents the people to the administrators and the administrator to the people. Delegates, who serve two and a half years and are subject to recall, can collectively fire the administrators.

One would have to live in the system to determine how representative it is. The experiment in *poder popular* does not alter the fact that the media are controlled and political prisoners exist. The most visible change brought by the new system is accountability: an emphasis on ordinary citizens receiving public explanations for why things are the way they are. In a December 1980 speech Fidel

11 C. Wright Mills, *The Sociological Imagination* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959).

12 Delegates to the provincial and national assemblies of the Organs of Popular Power are chosen by the municipal assemblies from slates proposed by nominating commissions headed by a Party representative and including local leaders of the mass organizations. Outside candidates may be incorporated at this point, on the theory that neighborhood constituencies are unaware of citizens who excel at their workplace. The electoral law provides that at least half the candidates for the higher assemblies come from "the base" (i.e., initially elected in the wards). Where a municipality is entitled to more than one delegate, its nominating committee usually proposes separate slates to achieve this balance of inside and outside representatives.

13 Lourdes Casal and Marifeli Pérez-Stable, "Party and State in Post-1970 Cuba," in *The Withering Away of the State?*, ed. Leslie Holmes (Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1981), p. 96.

Castro reiterated the public's right to "satisfactory explanations when immediate solutions are not possible."¹⁴ One need only reflect on the trauma experienced by homeowners at Love Canal or by servicemen exposed to A-bomb tests to realize how devastating lack of accountability can be.

That accountability should be emphasized is not surprising, for it is the one norm that serves both democracy and economic development. At least in its local manifestation, OPP brings to the surface the politics inherent in policy implementation, making it more difficult for bureaucrats and cronies (*socios*) to subvert policy and feed public cynicism. The decentralization of decision making, which accompanied OPP and appears in recent economic reforms, seeks to wed participation with efficiency. According to state planning director Humberto Pérez, these moves were "designed to increase participation by the masses and lower levels of administration in the solution of problems."¹⁵

How well the new system meets most Cubans' expectations of political participation is almost impossible for an outsider to assess. Participation in the OPP remains high after three elections. The percentage of those eligible to vote who actually do so remains in the nineties. Between October 1976 and March 1979, ninety-nine delegates were recalled, suggesting active involvement by at least some of the citizenry.¹⁶ While uncritical in their assessment of OPP, Marta Harnecker and her Chilean associates published interviews that suggest the system is used by rank and file Cubans, for some of whom it appears to be a real political opening. "When the people are given a chance to define and resolve their problems as they see fit," one informant told Harnecker, "when they see themselves as directly in charge, as the real doers, all this engenders a new climate, a different atmosphere."¹⁷

Clearly all the evidence is not in. All we can say at this point is that Cuba may have found a structure that satisfies elite requirements while being congruent with popular attitudes. On the long road to fully democratic socialism, Or-

14 Speech to the Second Congress of the Cuban Communist Party, delivered December 17, 1980.

15 Interview in *Bohemia*, February 16, 1979.

16 *Latin American Political Report*, March 20, 1979. Others resigned for a host of reasons, which included fear of recall. As reported by *Granma*, the Party newspaper, participation in the last election (1981) was high both in the meetings to nominate candidates (86 percent of those eligible) and in the election itself (97 percent). There is a concerted effort by the Committees for the Defense of the Revolution, however, to get out the vote, and because the Popular Power system has an impact upon daily life, many Cubans may participate simply to stay in the good graces of local authorities. We simply do not know.

17 Marta Harnecker, *Cuba: Dictatorship or Democracy?* (Westport, Connecticut: Lawrence Hill, 1980), p. 109.

gans of Popular Power represents the first steps. Given the propensities of Latin culture and the dilemmas of underdevelopment, it is a beginning worth taking seriously.

In all political systems mass participation serves different, usually contradictory, needs of leaders and led. Those with power use participation to increase the identification the ruled feel with the rulers. Those without power tend to see participation as a way of limiting the powerful, or at least making them accountable. The scarcities and pressures of the postrevolutionary situation in Latin America—to which Washington contributes—tempt revolutionary regimes to perpetuate the concentrated decision making of the fighting phase. Marxist-Leninism's concept of the vanguard provides ample justification for this. *Sans* Lenin, Marxism contains a participatory, democratic thrust as well—one that resonates with anarchistic and religious values embedded in Latin American popular culture. It is this latter thrust that one hopes will emerge as the dominant concern of leaders and followers alike in Nicaragua, in Cuba, and in those parts of Latin American fortunate enough to have this problem on their agenda.