Opening Paths to Renewed Popular Participation

by
Debra Evenson

Recent events and initiatives advance the dynamic of collective participation in decision making in Cuba. The necessity of such advancement has been voiced in many sectors in Cuba for more than a decade. Over time, the multiple spaces created for broad-based participation in the 1960s turned into formalisms under the weight of centralization and hierarchical decision-making structures. Since the 1990s, programs have emerged in diverse sectors to facilitate and cultivate experiences of collective participation, and initiatives by the government, the party, the press, and organizations have stimulated activities in that direction. Given the multiple spaces that exist for broad public participation in Cuba, these programs have the potential for the development of an expansive culture of debate.

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We are in a different moment of revolutionary transformations. The country is rethinking its structures; the party itself is rethinking its relationship to society in order to seek a more direct and effective dialogue and participation by the people in decisions.

—Eliades Acosta

The proposition that broad-based participation, premised on diverse and thoughtful dialogue, is critical to the future of the Cuban socialist project is hardly new; it has been echoed repeatedly in Cuba for many years (see, e.g., Valdés, 2004; Navarro, 2006) Particularly since the onset of the Special Period, Cuban academics and intellectuals have called for processes that facilitate collective decision making based on participatory practices that allow for the expression and exploration of alternative approaches to the challenges facing the Cuban socialist system (see, e.g., Fernández, 1996; Linares, Moras, and Rivero, 2004; and Pérez, 2004) Yet, both subjective and objective obstacles have prevented a change in the dynamic of participation that would free it of the hierarchical and formalistic constraints that diminish the space for debate and a collective approach to decisions. As the Cuban Revolution approaches its fiftieth anniversary, emerging initiatives have the potential to transform the national dialogue and popular participation in Cuba.

This article seeks to identify some of the indications of change in the direction of developing a “culture of debate” and to describe efforts that have been and are being made to implement strategies that engender experiences and environments favorable to expanded popular participation in decision making.

Debra Evenson, an attorney, has researched and written about Cuba for several decades and is the author of numerous articles and books, including Law and Society in Contemporary Cuba (2003).
Perhaps the most visible indication of a new initiative to encourage broader discussion was the call of the Cuban Communist party in September 2007 for mass discussion of Raúl Castro’s speech at the July 26th commemoration that summer. Toward the end of that speech Castro said, “History has offered abundant proof that our people’s determination is as hard as rock. To honor this determination, we are duty-bound to question everything we do as we strive to materialize our will more and more perfectly, to change concepts and methods which were appropriate at one point but have been overtaken by life itself.” Leaders of the meetings organized to discuss the issues facing the country were instructed to urge candidness and to assure participants that their names would not be recorded. Between September and January more than 215,500 meetings were organized nationally in various sectors, including work centers and neighborhoods. Well over 3 million Cubans participated. These sessions gave Cubans an opportunity to publicly express and hear criticisms and comments with frankness and without concern for repercussions. The criticisms touched on almost every aspect of Cuban life: discontent over having dual currencies, restrictions prohibiting Cubans from staying in tourist hotels, deficiencies in the educational system, in public transport, and in public health services, the insufficient purchasing power of peso salaries, and many more.

The exercise recalled the “workers’ parliament” held in the spring and summer of 1990, early on in the Special Period. Hundreds of town-hall-type meetings, many of them televised, took place across the island in which Cubans expressed their views about what reforms and measures were needed to move the country forward in the face of the crisis brought about by the disappearance of the European socialist bloc and the tightening of the U.S. embargo. Although these discussions led to numerous reforms, including direct elections of members of the National Assembly of Popular Power and other constitutional modifications, they did not alter the general dynamic of public debate in Cuba. To many, it was not clear whether the discussions that took place in the fall of 2007 would follow the same pattern: providing a momentary, albeit significant, platform for expression that dissipated once decisions had been made by the leadership.

However, there are several important differences between the mass discussions that began in fall 2007 and those of 1990. First, the recent meetings were not the only forum of public debate. They began at a time when broad and profound debate was already taking place among Cuban intellectuals. The previous winter, a swift and vigorous e-mail exchange erupted hours after the Cuban TV program Impronta featured Luis Pavón Tamayo, former president of the National Council on Culture and one of the central figures of the harsh censorship of the period 1971–1976, labeled by the Cuban writer Ambrosio Fornet as the “Quinquenio Gris” (La política cultural, 2007). The new electronic age provided the means for instantaneous and varied exchange of views and discussion among Cuban intellectuals alarmed by the specter of the perceived rehabilitation of Pavón and others and its implications for Cuban culture. Within days, a meeting was called by members of the Unión de Escritores y Artistas de Cuba (Union of Cuba Writers and Artists—UNEAC) with Abel Prieto, minister of culture, at which he stated on behalf of the party that the
TV appearances of these figures had been an error, thus allaying fears that a recycling of censorship was in the offing. Moreover, in subsequent interviews Prieto urged an end to sectarianism and dogma (García, 2007).

The episode was the catalyst for a series of lectures organized by the journal *Criterios* designed to reflect on the past and to promote dialogue on revolution and the role of intellectuals in Cuban society. These lectures, some of which were published in a compilation in 2007 (*La política cultural*, 2007), went well beyond recording and analyzing the Quinquenio Gris. Perhaps most important, they served to reemphasize the need for developing a culture of debate and the role of intellectuals in the pursuit of solutions to many of the pressing problems in Cuban society.

In addition, these lectures were a prelude to the candid discussions of contemporary problems in Cuban society at the April 2008 UNEAC Congress. The congress itself was historic in many respects. The first in 10 years, it was the center of extraordinary media attention. In fact, a substantial portion of the discussion was broadcast on Cuban TV and reported verbatim in the Cuban press, offering the entire population the experience of listening to serious, probing critiques of various aspects of Cuban society. Moreover, the strength of the criticism was matched by the commitment of those expressing it to work with other institutions to find solutions that sustain the socialist project. Among the many serious issues singled out at the congress, several pointed directly at insufficiencies that undermined the development of broad participation in the national debate: the paucity of Cuban media, deficiencies in the Cuban educational system, which fails to facilitate analytical learning and skills, the need to respect diversity and to foster inclusiveness, and the lack of involvement of intellectuals in social issues.

The dynamic of the congress reflected and reinforced the spirit of the speeches given by Raúl Castro in the previous months, in which he insisted upon the need for openness and dialogue among those with differing perspectives. In his December 28 address to the National Assembly, making reference to the mass discussions under way since September, Castro noted: “This process confirms something fundamental: anyone who occupies a position of leadership must know how to listen and to create an atmosphere that allows others to express themselves with absolute freedom.” The point was made even more strongly in February in his speech to the National Assembly after being elected the new president of the Council of State: “There is no reason to fear discrepancies in a society like ours. . . . The best solutions come from the profound exchange of different opinions, when it channels healthy proposals and opinions are given responsibly.”

At the same time, Cuban newspapers began introducing countering points of view. For decades, the only negative news covered in Cuban newspapers was that focused on specific problems in the economy or public life, and rarely, if ever, did journalists describe or analyze alternative approaches to their solution. In early 2008, the newspaper *Juventud Rebelde* was the first to take the initiative. In addition to publishing thought-provoking opinion columns, its journalists reported on urgent social and economic issues, such as the high prices of food in the agricultural markets, and did not take the habitual approach of simply presenting the problem and the complaints of citizens but offered a fuller analysis including interviews with a variety of
officials and leaders who gave differing views about how the problem might be solved (see, e.g., Juventud Rebelde, January 28, 2008). In March, Granma, the official paper of the Cuban Communist party, introduced a weekly section of reader opinions on a variety of subjects related to the economy and society in which the writers often responded to views expressed by others in prior editions. Although perhaps timid, these have been essential steps toward both opening public space for public criticism and debate of social and economic issues and providing a demonstration of dialogue between differing points of view—something that has generally been absent from public discourse.

REQUISITES FOR A “CULTURE OF PARTICIPATION”

Although these events of 2007 and 2008 have given new impetus to public debate, the mere creation of opportunities for debate, even with directives mandating leaders to encourage candid expression of diverse views, does not necessarily lead to broad public participation in the search for solutions to local or national problems, particularly among groups lower down in the hierarchy of institutional structures. In fact, as a formal matter, a myriad of spaces designed to offer opportunities for participation already exists. Many mechanisms provide channels, absent in most other societies, through which the Cuban population can express demands and complaints to the leadership. For example, all delegates to the National Assembly must periodically report back directly to their constituents at open meetings, and every workplace has monthly worker assemblies in which management must meet with all the workers to discuss the status of the business and to hear worker opinions. In addition, the government has over the course of the revolution initiated consultations on major legislation, generally convened through “mass organizations” that have chapters or membership throughout the country. However, in themselves these processes have not facilitated the development of a culture of debate.

For example, the success of efforts made in the 1990s to involve workers in new decentralized management systems was impeded by entrenched patterns of behavior instilled by years of formalism and verticality. Only in rare circumstances did workers actually participate in a sense other than to be informed of the process and, on occasion, consulted as to their opinions. Nor was management personnel given the skills needed to implement strategies that encouraged collective involvement and teamwork. Similarly, neither the customary participation in mass mobilizations nor participation in the implementation of programs determined by upper-level leadership has promoted a collective decision-making process for confronting the problems facing the society or fostered the generational commitment that the needed transformations require. This is not to say that these organizations have no participation in decision making. In fact, they do weigh in on national policy, sometimes having a decisive voice, but participation involves primarily the leadership and not the base membership.

Many have identified the obstacles to creating conditions for the dialogue and debate that are fundamental to collective participation in decision making. For example, in an issue of Temas featuring a round-table discussion entitled “The Debate of Ideas in Culture and Thought in Cuba,” the sociologist Mayra
Espina (2005) suggested that to foster debate hierarchical systems had to be converted into horizontal and democratic spaces. Others have noted the lack of education in the exercise of dialogue among persons with diverse points of view (Arce, 2005). Diagnosis and conceptualization of barriers to the process are significant steps, but an essential question for the future is how to introduce the changes necessary to achieve a culture of debate in decision making, one that encourages diversity of views, ideas, and proposals in a climate conducive to dialogue and reconciliation of conflicting opinions.

Making it safe to disagree, as Raúl Castro’s February speech exhorts everyone to do, is fundamental. Further, participation in the mass discussions of the fall of 2007 constituted important exercises in unrestricted collective involvement in identifying problems and the concerns of the population. Hearing and reading the diverse publicly expressed constructive criticisms of various aspects of Cuban society and culture, such as those expressed at the UNEAC Congress, are instructive experiences that strengthen the climate favorable to dialogue and debate. Similarly, the media play an essential role in publishing analysis and differing opinions on fundamental social and economic issues that both stimulate thought and involvement and provide an example of discourse among those with alternative perspectives. However, as Cuban professionals working in the area of organizational development have pointed out, collective participation and debate do not happen automatically; they are learned aptitudes and skills requiring active facilitation in the process of transforming the dynamics of group and organizational relationships (Rodríguez-Mena and Corral, 2006; Arenas and Rodríguez, 2004: 95).

**FACILITATING CHANGE**

Beginning in the early to mid-1990s, a number of projects emerged in Cuba to study and implement new methodologies for facilitating the development of community leadership and initiative, participatory experiences, and collective decision making. Although different in their approaches, these projects have shared the goal of breaking down hierarchical dynamics in groups and organizations and changing the nature of decision-making processes to promote authentic participation. The achievements of these programs and the experiences they provide contribute to the contextual and social framework in which a culture of participation and debate can develop and expand. Two such projects are the popular education program of the Martin Luther King Center, which runs workshops for groups of people involved in social and community programs, and the Human Change program of the Center for Psychological and Social Research. Both have produced positive outcomes among the participants in their programs. The success of these experiences and the growing interest in the implementation of new methodologies for creating cultures of participation have increased the demand for their services from a broad range of groups and organizations in Cuba.

Established in 1987 by the Iglesia Bautista Ebenezer in Marianao in the City of Havana, the Martin Luther King Center began its program of popular education in 1995. The mission of the program has been to “contribute to the development of a culture of informed, organized, and critical participation...”
among and by the social subjects of Cuban society.” One of its goals is to stimulate critical and creative thinking among subjects involved in different national and local activities.

The popular education program offers workshops for approximately 45 people from diverse backgrounds. Many more people apply to participate than can be accommodated. Selection among applicants is based primarily on diversity, experience, and commitment to community-based work. Thus, most of the participants are people who are active in one way or another in social and community projects or programs, including neighborhood development, education, and health. Many are delegates to the Popular Councils. Each workshop includes people of different ages, backgrounds, interests, activities, genders, sexual orientations, religious affiliations and nonaffiliations, etc., who share an intense experience living at the center for a week at a time, participating together in interactive workshops as well as recreational activities.

The workshop methodology is designed to give community leaders skills that facilitate the breakdown of hierarchy and the development of methods of promoting dialogue, communication, and collective decision making. The exercises include the dramatization of problem solving, in which all participate as either actors or commentators, and group discussions designed to stimulate horizontal participation and confidence. To strengthen effective participation and leadership ability, the workshops incorporate values of popular education, solidarity, dialogue, respect for diversity, interpersonal communication skills, and participation. The materials draw heavily on the writings of Paulo Freire and Antonio Gramsci, among other contemporary and historical social thinkers. They also focus on styles of group and team work as well as methods of coordinating groups.

According to program staff, more than 1,000 have participated in the workshops to date, and interest among young people is particularly high. In 2007, to increase the outreach of the program, the center initiated the Popular Education Accompaniment Distance Course. These courses are directed by graduates of the center’s workshops, and more than 21 of them are taking place across the island. The center’s bulletin, published on the Caminos website, provides testimonials of participants as to the benefits they have derived from the program.

The Human Change project, which also had its beginnings in the 1990s, takes a different approach to advancing participation. It emerged at a time when Cuba had begun to reorganize its economy in order to become competitive in the global economy after the disappearance of the socialist market. The decentralization of the economy and centers of decision making introduced a new and unfamiliar environment for both labor and management, requiring significant change in the dynamic of labor-management relations. Rather than helping individuals to be change agents, the project focuses on organizational development. Its researchers, psychologists, and sociologists develop and facilitate the introduction of strategies to move dynamic human processes toward change in order to improve the potential for a sustainable participatory culture within organizations.

Over the more than 15 years of these projects, both have made substantial contributions to both the conceptual understanding of the complexity of organizations (see, e.g., Arenas, 2004; 2006) and the internal human dynamics of Cuban companies. Further, the work of its researchers and the consultants who
have been contracted to assist Cuban companies has contributed to developing environments conducive to teamwork and participation (see, e.g., Casaña and Hernández, 2006). Although not directly related to the culture of debate on social and economic issues, the processes, methodologies, and strategies developed and introduced by the Human Change and other programs of the Center for Psychological and Social Research, such as the communities of learning, are designed to change the way groups and individuals learn and interact and thus contribute to developing capacities for dialogue and debate that are applicable to other contexts, whether political, economic, or social. Indeed, with regard to the application of these skills there is no boundary between the work center and the social sector. Each serves to nourish the other (Alhama, 2004).

PROSPECTS FOR CHANGE

These and similar projects and programs in Cuba today represent a significant accumulation of experience and resources for facilitating change in both the capacity for debate and the dynamic of collective participation in Cuba. However, the behavioral impediments resulting from years of verticality and bureaucratic formalism are not easily remedied. Change, like revolution, is a process, not an event. Continued development of debate and participation will depend on continued effort as well as changes in the internal processes of all Cuban organizations, including the Communist party.

In his February 2008 speech to the National Assembly, Raúl Castro said that since “the people are united behind a single party, this must be more democratic than any other.” In April he announced the convocation of the next party congress for the end of 2009. Given recent statements and events, one can expect that the discussions leading up to the congress will take on a new dynamic. However, the extent of the changes and the directions they take remain to be seen.

In Cuba, where the social, economic, and political system provides many formal structures for participation in both national and local decisions, the intersections of spheres of participation are multiple. Developing capacities in one nourishes capacities in others. Thus, programs and projects such as those described here, together with current initiatives of the leadership to expand debate and increase opportunities for public participation, provide a footing for moving the process toward revolutionary transformations.

NOTES

1. These statistics were reported in Raúl Castro’s speech before the National Assembly on December 28, 2007.
4. The “mass organizations” include the Central of Cuban Workers, the Association of Small Farmers, the Committees in Defense of the Revolution, the Federation of Cuban Women, the Federation of University Students, and the Federation of Middle-Level Students.
5. For examples of how the Cuban Workers’ Central (CTC) has influenced legislative and policy decisions, see Evenson (2001).
6. Proposals agreed upon at the Congress of the Union of Cuban Journalists, which took place the first week of July 2008, included making the Cuban press more analytical and bold in its publication and communication.

7. Other projects and programs focused on promoting participation, in addition to the ones described here, include those initiated by the Centro Graciela Bustillo, the Sociedad de Pedagogos de Cuba, which offers a Diploma in Popular Education, the Centro Félix Varela, and various neighborhood restoration projects such as that involving Old Havana and community environmental education. Several workshops for educators, social scientists, and facilitators have been organized in the past several years. In addition, since the 1980s many ministries have implemented training programs for enterprise managers in all of the provinces that include courses incorporating tools for developing teamwork and collective decision making, preparing the way for a more participatory dynamic in enterprises.

8. Other activities of the Martin Luther King Center include pastoral and social theological education, popular communication, international relations, and community service programs.


10. The popular councils (consejos populares) are local municipal administrative bodies charged with resolving local, neighborhood problems.


12. For more information on the Center for Psychological and Sociological Research and its programs, see its web site at http://www.cips.cu/gch.

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