Elections and Democracy in Latin America

Polyarchy or Participation: A Comparative Study of Mainstream Democracy and Popular Power in Cuba

The aim of this paper is to present an understanding of democracy which will seek to theoretically explain the functioning and relevance of the participative elements of the Cuban political process, with special reference to the system of Poder Popular (People’s Power). In our view such an analysis cannot be developed solely within the mainstream political debates on democracy, and must raise the question of the relationship between democracy and the current juncture of international political economy; globalization.

In his article ‘Democracy in Cuba: What is a desirable model?’, Jorge Domínguez (1996), a leading North American Cuba specialist, suggested a number of changes to the Cuban governmental system that would make it, in his view, more democratic. Among these he included greater tolerance of opposition political groups and freedom for them to compete against the ruling communist party in open elections; less restrictions on the emerging private sector; improved responsiveness of national level government to the demands of the electorate; etc. Domínguez is a ‘moderate’ who avoids the extremes of sections of the Cuban exile community in the US, who explicitly seek the demise of the Castro government and a return to the US dominated system that prevailed before the revolution, and he offers reasonable advice to Cuba on the measures it would have to take to establish a representative democracy and move towards a market economy.

Domínguez’s argument is based on the assumption that Cuba is run by an authoritarian regime that permits few, if any, democratic openings for the population and that any future sustainable progress the island might enjoy is dependent on the government embracing democratic and market reforms. In the current political, economic and ideological climate,
dominated by neo-liberal thinking, in which global markets are synonymous with democracy and progress, Domínguez is putting forward a mainstream view that will find few detractors. This position is also shared by other Cubanologists such as Mesa Lago (1993), Eckstein (1994), López (2002) and Falcoff (2003).

The problem with this approach is that the proposed solution to the Cuban enigma is the imposition of a capitalist rationality, based on individualism and competitive exchange, on a socialist structure which emphasises social need and planning. From the perspective of certain groups in Cuba, including the leadership around Fidel Castro, such an analysis is misguided and ideologically motivated, ignoring the social basis of individuals’ existence. They would also highlight the growing inequality in Latin America and the concomitant upsurge in independent popular democratic initiatives throughout the continent as people try to politically insulate themselves from the fallout of the global, ‘individualist’ competitive economy [see the final section of this paper]. In this context, it may be argued, that the Cuban emphasis on participatory democracy aims to give power to people in the social control of their existence, as opposed to democracy based on elite representation that is typically unable or unwilling to respond to popular need.

Our intellectual project is to compare and contrast these conceptions and practices of democracy to understand the meaning of democratic governance in the era of globalization, and the significance of the Cuban participative process.

**Globalisation**

We argue that democracy – socially legitimate public institutions able to mediate, by consent, between domestic groups with conflicting demands and interests – is a process which evolves with the changing social relations through which individuals exist.

From this perspective democracy cannot be understood as a theoretically and functionally discreet issue with its own internal logic: rather we have to take cognizance of the social context of human survival in the 21st century; democracy must be viewed as a social mediating process within the economic exigencies of globalisation.

Globalisation is a complex and much-contested subject (Sklair 1999, Held et al 1999): while some authors question that it is a distinctive phenomenon (Hirst & Thompson 1996), others
Robinson, 2004a) identify profound qualitative distinctions in the social relations of human existence, at least since the 1970s. There is not space here to fully review this debate, but for the purposes of our subsequent argument it is important to establish a perspective on the process of globalisation.

The debate on globalisation does not divide along a clear left-right split – with the former opposing the process and the latter taking up its defence – indeed some of the nationalist right are its most vehement detractors (Buchannan 1998). We challenge the neo-liberal perspective, that globalisation is an inevitable (Fukuyama 1992) and positive process (Redwood 1994, Barnevick 2001, Ohmae 1990). Neither do we support the arguments that globalisation has to be accepted and worked with – ‘making competitive markets work for the global poor’ (World Bank 2002) – as argued in much of the literature of the ‘modernisers’ and put into practise by ‘Third Way’ governments like that of Tony Blair. We also cannot agree with the analysis of the ‘Empire’ theorists (Hardt and Negri 2002), that globalisation is an especially ruthless phase of US imperialism.

It is however against the Hirst and Thompson (1996) thesis Globalisation in Question which we wish to set most of our argument. These authors claim, with reference to the late 19th and early 20th centuries, when Britain was the world’s hegemon, that a high level of globalised activity took place in terms of the movement of capital, goods and people, which was comparable to the current period. From this narrow economistic and quantitative view they suggest that the effects of contemporary global activity on states, capital movements, production, etc… have been overstated.

However if one goes beyond the economic data and addresses the (global) social relations through which people exist in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, extending Gramsci’s concept of hegemony into the international sphere (Gill & Law 1988, Cox 1994, Robinson, 1996) then globalisation is more than a quantitative process composed of the expansion of trade and production and the movement of capital and people; it is more importantly a qualitative change within the social relations of capitalism. A new epoch that has transcended national phases of capitalism to become a transnational phenomena (Robinson 2004a). To understand this argument we have to take an historical perspective on the evolution of the social relations of human existence and understand the political economy context in which they unfold.
In his opening address at the Bretton Woods conference of 1944, in which the allied nations met to reorganise the world capitalist order after the Second World War, US Treasury Secretary Henry Morgenthau stated that the task of the conference was to ‘drive the usurious money lenders from the temple of international finance’ (Helleiner 1994:4). This was in part a reference back to the 1929 Crash when the world of laissez-faire economics, that had existed since the 1840s under British hegemony, collapsed. In the social turmoil of the 1930s depression a coalition of politicians, economists and labour leaders emerged who emphasised state management of the economy and policies of social welfare, and these ‘Keynesians’ placed the blame for the debacle of 1929 on financial speculators and whole laissez-faire international community in general. Although the more radical controls suggested by Keynes and his followers were not adopted at the conference (such as co-operative capital controls) the system that emerged gave industrial nations a high level of autonomy over the management of national economies and domestic development priorities, which was principally achieved through an international system of pegged exchange rates, linked to the US dollar as the international standard of value. This was the economics of social democracy which relied on controls and restrictions on the international movement of private capital. The subsequent post-war Second World War growth of industrial, welfare economies is often viewed as ‘…a “golden age” of economic growth and international cooperation…’ (Keegan 2004).

In the quarter century after 1945 the world economy was essentially a ‘trading economy’, regulated by the Bretton Woods institutions – the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, the General Agreement of Trade and Tariffs (the forerunner of the World Trade Organization). Within a managed international exchange rate regime, governments were able to more or less regulate economic activity by manipulating interest/exchange rates, and with financial markets controlled, to reflect national priorities. In this context national electorates could influence political parties, vying for electoral success, to adopt various social priorities in party manifestoes.

However those (class) forces that sought the return of competitive international economic activity remained restless and were eager to break free from the constraints on private capital accumulation set by the Bretton Woods system. One mechanism which initially served their needs was the Eurodollar market. This facility was set up after the Second World War when a number of London banks provided a safe haven for Soviet and Chinese held dollars, that may
have faced confiscation had they been sent to the US. Although Britain was a key member of the Bretton Woods arrangements its former status as world hegemon centered on the City of London financial markets, made all governments, Conservative and Labour alike, were reluctant to totally suppress the ‘free’ activities of the City, especially given the extraordinary seniorage powers conferred on the US by the dominance of the dollar in the international system. Indeed the ‘free’ dollar transactions of the Eurodollar market were particularly attractive because they could take place beyond the control of the US Federal Reserve. It is not surprising therefore that when the Johnson administration in the US decided to make the Voluntary Credit Restraint programme mandatory in 1968, obliging US banks to concentrate their activities in the US domestic economy, that many of these banks decided to establish branches in London where the Eurodollar market provided them with a more flexible arena of operations (Moffitt 1988:48). International private capital movements were further aided in 1971 when President Nixon de-linked the dollar from gold to address the inflationary effects of the Vietnam War on the US economy and the excesses of foreign dollar holdings that far exceeded the gold reserves in Fort Knox. This was the first time the so-called ‘dollar weapon’ (Helleiner 1996:113) was used in which the US precipitated a fall in the value of the dollar to resolve its own internal crises raising its international competitiveness. This action also marked the beginning of the end for the Bretton Woods system as by de-linking the dollar from gold, the centrepiece of international semi-fixed exchange rate system was compromised, allowing for currencies to float and become open to manipulation by private financial speculators.

The greatest indirect boost to the Eurodollar market and private capital interests came however when the OPEC nations decided to raise the price of oil five fold in the early 1970s. Incensed by the support of the US for Israel in the Arab Israeli war and facing declining revenues because of the devaluation of the dollar (the currency in which oil is priced) OPEC nations decided to retaliate, but in doing so feared that the US would punish them. Like the Russians and the Chinese at the end of the Second World War they could not risk their dollars finding their way back to the US because they might be confiscated. The only other option was to deposit them in the Eurodollar market which was a ready recipient of this massive surge of petro-dollars. Faced with demands to produce a return on these investments the private banks channelled most of these funds to capital hungry Third World governments as loans, leading eventually to the debt crisis in the 1980s when interest rates rose, mainly because of America’s growing deficit, that had to be financed by attracting huge inflows of
foreign capital. As international private capital movements increased, facilitated either directly or indirectly by the states at the centre of the Bretton Woods system, the US and Britain, the mechanisms of ‘Keynesian’ control collapsed. Ultimately these gains in the power and resources of private finance meant that currency speculation would replace managed exchange rates as the determinant of the relative value of national currencies (and national products).

The deregulated Eurodollar market, the emergence of ‘floating exchange rates’ and currency speculation, was complimented by an ideological and political shift in the great powers with the coming to power of Prime Minister Thatcher in the UK and President Ronald Reagan in the US. Both these neo-liberal leaders supported the further liberalization of financial markets and promoted ‘supply-side economics’. As a consequence other less powerful governments were caught in a vicious circle of competitive deregulation to attract foot-loose international, speculative capital – the race to the bottom. To do this they had to offer ever-more ‘liberal’ investor-friendly economic environments with flexible labour markets, asset liquidation (privatisation), welfare spending cuts, and abandon restrictions on the entry and exit of capital: a “…structural transition at the global level … [which] was largely complete by the early 1990s…” (Herold 2002:5-6).

The dynamic of the world economy was transformed from trade and production, to finance and speculation. This change however did not just involve the return of the ‘usurious money lenders’ but also qualitatively altered the social relations which are at the heart of capitalism. As capital movements, with the help of new technologies, became truly transnational in their operation, some authors proclaimed ‘the end of geography’ (O’Brian 1992) and the ‘borderless world’ (Ohmae 1990), as production, principally through Multinational Corporations (MNCs) taking advantage of financial liberation, became transnationalised. Today although Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) is still seen in terms of the actual factory or plantation, transnational sourcing and production chains, through such mechanisms as subcontracting and outreach work, penetrate deep into social space far beyond the traditional workplace as we move towards a single global mode of production. Acquisitions and mergers, which have affected many companies, have also delinked firms from national space. Burbach and Robinson add a further dimension to this process when they state ‘the transnationalisation of production and productive systems and the transnationalisation of
capital ownership, which in turn leads to the rise of a transnationalised bourgeoisie that sits at the apex of the global order’ (1999: 15).

In the mainstream understanding of political science, politics and economics are distinct disciplines of inquiry. Using Weberian and structuralist and functionalist notions of the state, the idea of a transnational bourgeoisie is meaningless. However from a Gramscian Marxist perspective addressing the social relations of human existence, it is logical and plausible. From this latter perspective during the Keynesian post-war period of social democracy, the world was organised into an international system of nation states; finance, production and social welfare were largely contained within national political space. Essentially in this national system of ‘autocentric’ accumulation classes were more closely tied together in an economic, political and geographical space and were more or less obliged to co-operate – the ‘Fordist class compromise’. But now that finance has emerged as the international economic dynamic this social democratic class compromise has broken down, and globally mobile capital is free to exploit social spaces on a transnational scale, with little concern for specific demands or conditionalities on investment or production, or national political priorities. For Robinson: ‘A new “social structure of accumulation” is emerging, which is for the first time global... is transforming existing national social structures of accumulation’. He continues ‘The agent of the global economy is transnational capital, organised institutionally in global corporations, in supranational economic planning agencies and political forums, and organised by a transnational elite based at the core of the world system’ (1996:32-33).

If a Transnational Capitalist Class (TCC) is forming around the new material global arrangements of finance and production then states themselves cannot remain static and must be extending and modifying their social functions to align with the interests of this hegemonic ruling class and its national level adjuncts.

Contrary to Hirst and Thompson’s view, what is taking place today is not so much a quantitative, technological and linear expansion of world capitalism, but an ‘epochal shift’ (Burbach and Robinson 1999) it which financial and productive forces and class relations are being reconstitution at a transnational level. Virtually all theory in the social sciences is still founded on the assumption that the nation state is some form of supra historical entity, but if we are moving towards a single global mode-of-production in which profits and investments are dispersed according to the imperatives of a transnational elite, then the basis for state
centered theories needs to be reconsidered. Such a conclusion has profound implications for understanding democracy, which cannot simply be seen in terms of selecting the appropriate model or procedures for managing national political space within extant conceptualizations of democratic governance. Rather democratic governance must be seen as an interactive component of the globalization process, redefining the intellectual parameters of effective political representation. In our view it is unacceptable and intellectually inconsistent of theorists of contemporary democracy to dismiss any linkages between politics and economics and then to go on and claim that democracy and markets are compatible and essential for each other, especially given the hegemony of international finance since the 1970s and its material and class consequences in a ‘transnational’ context.

**From Elitist Democracy to Polyarchy**

Empirically the social effect of the delinking of capitalist relations of production from nation states has been: the weakening of workers’ trade unions rights with the promotion of flexible labour markets; the suppression of civil liberties to the end of liberalizing economies; the privatization of public sector service provision; the floating of currency exchange rates, the catalyst for economic crises and impoverishment in Mexico, the Far East, Russia, Argentina, etc…; constraints on fiscal policy restricting welfare expenditure; violation of global environmental commons for private profit; the commodification of human existence with everything ‘for sale’ (water, body parts, babies, women, etc…); the promotion of a political culture based on corruption, greed, self-aggrandizement, and sycophancy.

However it is assumed by most contemporary democracy theorists that either markets and democracy are inseparable, or that at least one can only conceive of democracy in a market society. This view was reinforced after the collapse of East European communism (1989-91), when a euphoric mood prevailed concerning the possibility of a universal democratic future – an idea contained in the notion of the ‘end of history’. At that time Diamond and Platter felt inspired to proclaim a ‘global resurgence of democracy’, which they believed constituted the ‘greatest period of democratic ferment’ (1993: IX). Platter understood this resurgence as a consequence of the failure of the antidemocratic forces of the left, in contrast to the success of the model developed in the West based on the market and with agreement on ‘fundamental democratic principles’ (30). These changes, he claimed, cleared the way for the citizens of former communist countries to ‘rejoin world civilisation’ and to embrace ‘normal society’. For Axworthy, ‘The world is in a democratic upsurge unprecedented in history. This upsurge
not only conforms to the highest ideals of Western philosophy, but is also our best guarantee of a peaceful world’ (1992: 117).

This is a curious position because historically the relationship between capitalism and democracy is a tenuous one in which there is little evidence that one is dependent on the other.

Macpherson for example states in his critique of Friedman’s *Capitalism and Democracy*:

> The liberal state which had, by the mid-nineteenth century in England established the political freedoms needed to facilitate capitalism, was not democratic: that is, it had not extended political freedom to the bulk of the people. When later, it did so, it began to abridge market freedom. The more extensive the political freedom, the less extensive the economic freedom became. At any rate, the historical correlation scarcely suggests that capitalism is a necessary condition for political freedom (Cited in Boron 1995: 9).

It would also seem that bourgeois economic revolutions did not give priority to the establishment of democracy but were much more concerned with the consolidation of economic and political hegemony over the old feudal order. In this sense the commodification of the labour force and the means of production, and the establishment of a liberal state that served bourgeois interests took precedence over democracy. Indeed any democracy that was established had limited franchise because the majority of the population was adversely affected by the emerging capitalist economy (e.g. at its most extreme the ‘enclosure movement’ and ‘highland clearances’ in Britain in the 15th and 16th centuries).

As Boron points out it was not the emergent bourgeoisie that established democracy but, ‘on the contrary, it was the mounting political mobilisation of the subordinate classes, with their demands and struggles, their parties and unions, that forced the democratisation of the liberal state’ (1995: 10). To which he adds that many of these democratising forces were influenced by socialist ideas. This leads him to suggest that ‘capitalist rule is highly flexible and adaptable, and it is always able to mix quite efficiently with alternative forms of political domination, ranging from bourgeois democracy to fascism’ (11). Tending towards the latter he raises the case of the Latin American dictatorships of the 1970s.
Boron cites the research of James Bryce who sought to identify the number of viable democracies that existed after the First World War, and Robert Dahl who made a similar survey in the 1970s based on a limited definition of democracy that he termed polyarchy, concluding that very few advances towards democracy were made during this period and that capitalist development and democracy have had a tenuous relationship at best, with no clear correlation between the two. Eduardo Silva, despite supporting capitalist democracy also concludes however that ‘the functions of the capitalist state apply equally regardless of whether the state is democratic or authoritarian in form’ (1999: 35).

Theorists of democracy from the late 19th into the 20th century sought to define a reduced form of democracy during this period of advanced capitalism, believing that the ‘classical’ model, associated with the Greeks and revived in certain ways by the theorists of the post French Revolution like Rousseau, was untenable in complex modern society. Weber [1864-1920] (1978) believed that the widening of economic regulation and social citizenship through the expansion of public services would narrow the possibility for the exercise of popular sovereignty and lead to an increase in bureaucratisation. Alternatively ‘mass society’ theorists like Mannheim [1893-1947] (1936) and Ortega y Gasset [1883-1955] (1994), who were concerned with the role of elites and intellectuals in society, argued that the popularisation of politics had served to undermine traditionally powerful groups, with whom they believed resided a higher order of rationality and regulation. From a contrary standpoint a leftist group of intellectuals represented by the first generation of the Frankfurt School such as Horkheimer [1895-1973] (1974), Adorno [1903-1969] (1951) and Marcuse [1898-1979] (1992) argued that the erosion of democracy stemmed not from mass participation in politics, but in the way that elites used the popularisation of politics to exert their influence. In particular they saw the extension of elitist control from the public to the private sphere, and a tendency for the commodity form to penetrate into the cultural realm.

Attempting to set out what were the most realistic democratic possibilities in capitalist society from an elitist perspective Schumpeter concluded that ‘democracy means only that the people have the opportunity of accepting or refusing the men who are to rule them’ (1942: 284-285). This abysmal prospect was revisited by Dahl (1971) who attempted to find the best form of democracy that could be practically developed in the modern period, concluding that much of the classical model would have to be abandoned for a form of ‘polyarchy’ which was firmly based on elite representative rule.
Once the inevitability of elite rule had been established and democracy reduced to procedural form based mainly on voting, the way was clear for neo-liberals to apply theories of rational choice to voter behaviour and tie democracy and markets into a convenient theoretical relationship, emphasizing ‘individual liberty’ rather than ‘social responsibility’. One that is constructed into an ‘ideal’ form in Huntington’s (1991) concept of the Third Wave of democratisation, which is defined by some spurious symbiosis between markets and democracy.

**Democracy in Practice**

As Dahl concluded in his study democracy was only thinly spread during long periods of capitalist development. For example for much of the 1960s and 70s Latin America became associated with dictatorship, and the experience in Africa and Asia was similar. The phenomenon of authoritarian rule in this period can be explained in many ways, from Huntington’s unsubstantiated claims about the threat of communism to the left-wing view that dictatorships were mainly the product of US imperialism. Other more structural reasons might include that during the social-democratic Keynesian period of economic development after the Second World War economic growth and social welfare seemed to be given greater priority than democracy, which was seen to be unworkable if not founded on some improvements in economic and social development. A point put into action clearly by the Asian tiger economies. This did not provide a justification for dictatorship but did give some legitimacy to progressive authoritarian rule. Another factor at that time which served to weakened democracy, especially in developing countries, was that nation states, even poor ones, had more self contained economies than today and governments had more direct influence over the population. Authoritarian rule therefore could be effectively employed to curb social demands on resource allocation, usually through violence; a point not lost on the powers and especially the US which often supported dictators who were aligned to the interests of their corporations (Morley 1987).

On the other hand democratic governments that attempted to satisfy popular demands like Allende in Chile, or Maurice Bishop’s ‘New Jewel’ movement in Granada, were opposed and undermined. But with the more complex and integrated world of globalisation such a strategy became anachronistic and as Carl Gershman the President of the National Endowment for Democracy, a right-wing US ‘think tank’ that was set up in 1983, stated,
In a world of advanced communication and exploding knowledge, it is no longer possible to rely solely on force to promote stability and defend the national security. Persuasion is increasingly important and the United States must enhance its capacity to persuade by developing techniques for reaching people at many different levels. He then goes on to stress that ‘democracy’ abroad should be promoted ‘to enhance its capacity to persuade’ around the world (Cited Robinson 1996:2).

In the 1980s the US in particular began to see democracy promotion as a potential weapon in its hegemonic armoury. This was not just because the world was becoming more complex and difficult to control by direct coercion, but also because once capital and production had been globalised national political constituencies had very little real power in influencing their elected leaders, especially in terms of wealth distribution and managing economies for social ends (full employment, etc). In this hollowed out procedural form of democracy, that has become consistent with the globalization process, it is increasingly difficult to persuade people that they enjoy democratic freedom as their experience is one of disempowerment. A consequence of the shift in the world economy from the management of production and trade to speculation and financial gain.

It is of particular interest in this context that before the hegemonic control of private capital, coinciding with the political resurgence of the right and the elections of Prime Minister Thatcher and President Reagan, there was considerable concern over democracy as expressed in the Trilateral Commission report of 1975, ‘The Crisis of Democracy’. In this document which was produced by a group of right-wing thinkers, including Huntington, it was feared that democracy could be used by the masses to extract concessions from capital that might lead to a destabilisation of the system (capitalism). This was also a first step in attempting to align democracy to the newly emergent forms of global capitalism. That the Commission report was written at almost the same time as Britain was going through a currency crisis, mainly because of the increasing deregulation of private capital movements, is a significant coincidence. To address this financial crisis the left-wing of the Labour Party, led by Tony Benn, proposed an Alternative Economic Strategy (AES) to save Keynesianism (and social democracy) in Britain and stem the rush to competitive markets and neo-liberal economics. The aim of this strategy was not only to maintain progressive welfare orientated intervention in the economy, but also to broaden democracy. Benn and his followers realised that to
challenge the increasing power of private capital, resistance had to go beyond government and enlist the support of popular democratic aspirations. Only by raising the consciousness of the population, by involving them in politics through extended democracy, could a sustained opposition to transnational capitalism be developed. The failure of this left group in the Labour Party to install the AES led to Britain’s agreement to a conditional IMF loan which effectively secured the power of private capital over the government. One of the first priorities of the AES strategists was to place capital controls on the City of London and had this been achieved, given the subsequent immense power of this financial market, the whole globalisation process might have been stalled, and political and economic power distributed democratically to the population with the balance turning against the emergent neo-liberal initiative.

US policy makers were fully aware of the importance of this situation at the time and National Security Adviser Brent Snowcroft remarked ‘I spent more time on this matter [Britain’s financial crisis] during those weeks than anything else. It was considered by us to be the greatest single threat to the Western World’ (Cited in Fay and Young 1978:30). Britain may have been the most important nation to develop a potentially anti-globalisation stance but other countries like Sweden, Australia and France also attempted to resist the rise of private capital forces, the key issue was not however one of economics but as Glyn (2001: page) suggests of ‘democratizing ownership and control in the economy’.

It was precisely this kind of democracy that concerned the authors of the Trilateral Commission report, which they saw as ‘intrinsic challenges to the viability of democratic government which grow directly out of the functioning of democracy’ (Crozier et al 1975: 7). Such tendencies were regarded as part of the general ‘dysfunctions of democracy’ (167). Democracy was not however to be suppressed but as suggested earlier to be ‘promoted’ in a reconstituted form. This was followed up by the foundation of such organisations as the US National Endowment for Democracy whose task was to design and implement a model of democracy to complement the economic agenda of the emergent transnational elite. Through a complex combination of media propaganda, direct in country support for acceptable groups and the grooming and financing of an international panoply of ‘academics’ a dominant mode of democracy (polyarchy) has been established.
Social Existence and the Democratic Process

Up to this point the contemporary perception of democracy has been analysed within the context of the current juncture of international political economy with the purpose of exposing its weaknesses: a task that is essential if Cuban participatory democracy is not to be dismissed and a legitimate space identified within which it can be studied. It remains however to propose a theoretical argument, concerning the meaning of democracy, in which the Cuban process can be placed. To do this we have to move from the mesa to the miso level and even beyond to raise the ontological question of human nature. The following analysis sees as its point of departure a particularly perceptive comment by Rose, Kamin and Lewontin who identify one of the sources of controversy within the social sciences when they state, 'Every theory of society implies a theory of what it is to be human. Every theorist carries out the same fiction apparently deducing the nature of society from a priori consideration of the innate nature of human beings, whilst inducing the necessary assumptions from the end to be reached’ (1984: 240).

To escape the circularity of contemporary social discourse, it is incumbent on analysts to take account of the evolving relations of social existence, a process which redefines the rationality of human behaviour presaging changes in the institutions of social organisation. This we have attempted above by highlighting, in the 1970s, the hegemonic rise of global financial capital and the subsequent ‘democratic deficit’ (Nye 2001) where political organisation reflects national constituencies.

To seriously address democratic governance we have to go beyond the notion of static models that are open to ideological manipulation and are designed to complement already existing dominant hegemonic structures, and look deeper into ourselves as an evolving species:

…creatures look up into the sky at night and see the stars. But we stare at them, wonder how many there are, wonder how far away they are, wonder how they got there, wonder what they are made of, wonder – indeed – why they are there at all …

We see no evidence that any other creature looks outside its own personal universe in this manner (Stewart & Cohen 1997:6, emphasis added).
Human beings, as a species, are uniquely self-conscious. We think about ourselves. We live in a personal universe. Instinctively and intuitively we reflect on our experience to understand and improve our lives: we are more concerned with what might be than with how things are right now, creating mental scenarios of what a more fulfilling life might look like. Fundamentally, we understand our past to create our future. In this creative unfolding of existence, individuals socially respond to the material environment through which they produce their existence.

And the link between individuals and society? The human mind.

People evaluate and define their personal ambitions, expectations and fears for the future within the social context of their existence: a social context which is politically organized to allow individuals more or less a degree of control over their lives so their futures might reflect their particular needs. People are more than individual consumers preoccupied with personal hedonistic expediency.

Typically, our intuitive assessment of the opportunities and constraints for improving our lives, reflects the cultural norms and habits of thought which, by default, become the intellectual parameters of what is possible. Our political horizons are limited by our conceptualization of human existence. But our actions are not simply determined by our environment. As individuals, our behaviour and motivation is a consequence of social life; yet the nature of that social life is produced by individuals in the process of survival. Neither the social nor the individual sphere of existence can be considered independently.

Human uniqueness resides primarily in our brains. It is expressed in the culture built upon our intelligence and the power it gives us to manipulate the world. Human societies change by cultural evolution, not as a result of biological alteration … [by] the inheritance of acquired characteristics. Whatever one generation learns, it can pass on to the next … Our large brain is the biological foundation of intelligence; intelligence is the ground of culture; and cultural transmission builds a new mode of evolution (Gould 1996:354-355).

In the contemporary world the institutions and structures of cultural and political integration have an international reach: the mode of evolution is global. And as this evolutionary rhythm
assumes the beat of commodity exchange with the spread of competitive markets –
globalisation – the sophistication of the international technical division of labour is politically
articulated as a social division of labour.

The political legitimation of the social relations of human activity is a cultural process; a
body of ideas evolves by which people understand their existence, and institutions emerge to
regulate social life. Because we are self-conscious beings the human mind is transparent to
itself – we can think about thinking: we are able to reflect on the cultural exigencies of
survival, understand processes of social change as a reflection of evolving human potentials,
and question and evaluate the institutional parameters of social existence. That some 224
million people in Latin America and the Caribbean officially live in poverty, with a further 98
million being destitute, and that the percentage of the total population who are impoverished
is actually increasing (ECLAC 2004); or, that in the 1960s per capita income in the poorest
nations was around $212 per annum, while that of the richest nations exceeded $11,400, and
at the turn of the century, the figures are respectively $267 and $32,400 (UNCTAD 2004); is
not immutable. Social existence is a human creation and can be institutionally ameliorated.

Contemporary development studies theorizes the process of deepening inequality and
disadvantage as a consequence of individuals’ failing to adapt to the exigencies of the
competitive world economy. Therefore, at least in principle, poverty can be eliminated by
helping the disadvantaged to ‘…engage effectively in markets…’ (World Bank 2001:39), and
consequently, ‘…policymakers need to … foster trade and open information exchange …
among regions, firms and individuals.’ (World Bank 2002:26). Such economic prescriptions
reflect an emergent political culture which emphasizes individual freedom in the choice of
political representatives.

**Conceptual Reality**

Social relations alter as the technical basis of social existence adapts to individuals evolving
potentials. Individuals’ ambitions and the social context of their existence are interdependent.
In this sense the importance of the human faculty of self consciousness and conceptual
thought as the basis for progress and development cannot be over estimated.

Man is, at one and the same time, a solitary being and a social being. As a solitary
being he attempts to protect his own existence and that of those who are closest to
him, to satisfy his personal desires, and to develop his innate abilities. As a social being, he seeks to gain the recognition and affection of his fellow human beings, to share in their pleasures, to comfort them in their sorrows, and to improve their conditions of life ... It is ‘society’ which provides man with food, clothing, a home, the tools of work, language, the forms of thought, and most of the content of thought; his life is made possible through the labor and the accomplishments of the many millions of past and present [individuals] who are hidden behind the small word ‘society’. (Einstein 1998:3).

At the risk of being trite, we are social animals. We exist through social relations of existence, and our potentials are social potentials. Although experienced everyday, relationships exist as concepts: it is the social space between us which cannot be sensuously perceived; an abstract reality which is none the less real for that.

Social knowledge is a product of conceptual thought: social reality is a theoretical reality. And if we are to understand political existence to socially progress and develop, then we have to explicitly theorize the abstract reality of relationships through which we change the world. I or you cannot change social existence: but we can: and to purposefully change the world we must communicate and share our ideas, hopes and fears and ambitions.

How do we conceptualize the abstract reality of relationships? Social life is a consequence of individuals reflecting on their experience and choosing how to behave. We can (intellectually) either focus on: individuals’ choices; the social context within which people choose; or the process by which individuals’ choices creates the social reality which defines the rationality of their choices. There are deep ontological principles involved in either emphasizing the individual, society, or the social individual (Cole 1999: Part 4). Ontological principles which define perspectives on knowledge creation and the conceptualization of social categories (Cole 1999: Parts 1, 2 and 3).

In addressing the conceptualization of democracy in political theory, theoretical emphases respectively address: representative democracy, social democracy, or participative democracy.
Globalization and Changing Human Experience

To understand the ‘democratic deficit’ – voter apathy – reflecting the changing social context of individuals’ existence we have to address the essential contemporary social relationship which is ‘globalization’.

Within capitalist economic relationships, necessary social existence is produced for profit within competitive markets; the logic being that individuals will be able to fulfil their unique talents in production, and satisfy their particular tastes in consumption through competitive exchange. And the dynamic of individuals’ hedonistic expediency will evolve society towards the ideal of ‘perfect competition’. ‘The Utopian theoretical concept of perfect competition … becomes relevant as a reference point by which to judge the health of an economy [and therefore society], as well as the remedies for its amelioration’ (Lal 1983:15, emphasis added).

In the contemporary world the rhythm of individuals’ social existence reflects global competitive markets. People’s livelihoods and well-being are increasingly a consequence of the decisions of transnational public and private entities which function outside the jurisdiction of national political constituencies.

Paradoxically, at a time when citizens are being disempowered by the changing social relations of their existence – globalization – President Bush is prosecuting a crusade to bring ‘freedom’ and ‘democracy’ to citizens of the world who have been/are denied ‘one person one vote’ in national elections. Yet where electorates ‘enjoy’ these freedoms there is growing apathy. Fewer and fewer people vote because electorates often feel that they are being deceived by politicians – the scandal of ‘spin’ (what used to be called propaganda) – with popular opinion and individuals’ preferences being manipulated within a manufactured climate of fear about the excesses of ‘international terrorism’ (Moore 2003). This mistrust combined with a growing belief that nothing changes no matter who is in power, is undermining the credibility of representative democracy.

Politics is controlled by a small (socially) unrepresentative elite and as a consequence electorates are increasingly disillusioned and mistrustful. The questionable election of George Bush in 2000 led to the Supreme Court of the United States of America being ‘…bombarded with thousands of letters from angry Americans, some of whom … sent in their voter
registration cards…’ (Bugliosi 2001:31); and at the time of writing [February 2005] litigation over evidence of fraud in the key state of Ohio in the 2004 presidential elections, further questions the integrity of political institutions (and of the media which is prone not to report news which might question the social status quo).

According to the Committee for the Study of the American Electorate (in 2002) ‘…the cumulative effect of voter disengagement during the past 30 years is that today 25 million voters who used to vote no longer do so’ (Cited Furedi 2004: ix). In the 2000 United States presidential elections over 90 million people, almost half the electorate did not vote (Hertz 2001: page); and in the 2002 mid-term election for the governor of the state of California, only about 30% of the 21.7 million voters bothered to go to the polls, in the worst ever turnout for a state-wide general election (Wildermuth 2002: page). In the United Kingdom, in the 1997 ‘landslide’ election which brought Tony Blair to power only 31% of the electorate voted for the Labour Party, in an election which ‘…excited less interest than any other in living memory’ (Furedi 2004: ix).

The paradox is, at a time when more and more of social existence is beyond the influence of voters in national elections, President Bush and Prime Minister Blair are crusading for people globally to have the benefits of national political sovereignty. We are told that Iraq was invaded to ‘spread democracy’: but if the global community had been ‘democratically’ consulted it would never have been attacked in the first place.

The social relations of human existence have evolved to reflect the needs of international capital accumulation. Political decisions on resource allocation are increasingly taken by politically unrepresentative international institutions and corporations. Therefore national political institutions have assumed a polyarchic profile: a small group of people whose financial interests are linked to global capital accumulation are effectively in control of social existence, while voters in national polities merely make leadership choices over who will manage relations of competitive exchange. ‘Democracy is limited to the political sphere, and revolves around process, method and procedure in the selection of leaders.’ (Robinson 1996: 49).

‘Hegemony in the global capitalist system is [now] exercised not by a nation state but by a new transnational elite … This empire of capital is headquartered in Washington
In the process of capital accumulation, where production is for private profit rather than social need, individuals’ ambitions and capacities are mere resources to be consumed: the logic of social existence is subsumed by the economics of commodity exchange. And as the dynamic of the world economy has shifted from governments regulating production and trade, to private speculative gain from financial transactions, effectively the politics of democracy has simultaneously both broadened and narrowed. Broadened, because as decisions on the fundamental issues of survival have been assumed by international economic interests, global social movements have emerged to challenge this unrepresentative economic and political hegemony. The emergent international power of capital at the end of the 1970s redefined the politics of resistance; struggles of people whose lives had been impoverished by market forces beyond their control, while still having to locally challenge the dominance of commodity exchange, have had to widen their political horizons.

The Poverty of Representative Democracy in Latin America
The local restructuring and international integration of Latin American economies in the 1980s and 1990s has been costly. The hegemony of international capital accumulation has generated institutional instability in the structure and organization of nation states, limiting democratic choice and redefining legality to accommodate the managerial functions of national polities within the global polyarchic political process. In Latin America, according to the Latinobarómetro (2004), only 35% of the region’s citizens are satisfied with democracy with some countries like Peru and Paraguay registering only 7% and 13% respectively. From the same source it is also interesting to see that over 70% of Latin Americans believe that their countries are still run by a minority elite who hold power to principally serve their own interests, despite democracy.

National institutions have been unable to respond to social conflicts and political tensions generated by impoverishment and disadvantage, and individuals’ are frustrated at being denied the right to realize their potentials. The parameters of the political terrain are being redefined.
In response the managerial functions of the nation state have narrowed the political focus. There has been an increased emphasis on local community action. As national political office no longer confers power over the local allocation of resources, increasingly people exercise control over what assets and productive processes do remain with their immediate purview: local democracy. ‘Almost every Latin American country [has] experienced waves of spontaneous uprisings generally triggered by austerity measures…’ (Robinson, 2004:174) struggles which have spawned local political initiatives – in recent times in the Americas: direct democracy and the participatory budget system in Porto Alegre (Rio Grande do Sul), Brazil (Bruce 2004); in Argentina ‘asambleas populares’ (Bielsa 2002); in Venezuela ‘circulos bolivarianos’ (Chavez 2005, and McCaughan 2004); in Brazil the Landless People’s Movement (MST), (Branford and Rocha 2002, and Harnecker 2003); the struggles in Cochabamba, Bolivia, over water-privatisation (The Democracy Centre 2000); in Mexico the movement of the Zapatistas in Chiapas (Holloway 2002, Chiapaslink 2000, Capital & Class 2005). Chavez and Goldfrank (2005) identify many other examples of the growth of independent initiatives in local participatory democracy outside the ‘mainstream’ of national and local politics.

Of course local struggles do have a national resonance: the victory of the Broad Front (Frente Amplio) of leftist parties, led by Tabaré Vásquez, over right wing parties that had ruled for 170 years in Uruguay in October 2004; August 2004 58% of the Venezuelan electorate reaffirmed President Hugo Chavez and the Bolivarian Revolution; October 2004 in Brazil, the Workers’ Party (PT) of President Luis Ignacio Lula da Silva won convincingly in municipal and state elections; May 2004, Martín Torrijos, general secretary of the Democratic Revolutionary Party (PRD) triumphed in the presidential elections in Panama; in Nicaragua the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) won the municipal elections in the capital Managua; in January 2004 Argentine president stated that pressure from the International Monetary Fund on economic policy was ‘unacceptable’; in February 2004 Haitian president was forced by the United States into exile (WSWS 2004); July 2004 Bolivian president Carlos Mesa won a plebiscite on the ownership of national resources, but in January/February 2005 faced mass mobilizations against economic austerity measures; February 2005, in Ecuador, where 70% of the population live in poverty and some 25% of the economically active population work in United States or Europe, renewed unrest at IMF
inspired cuts in welfare provision in preparation for the signing of a Free Trade Agreement with the United States; etc…

**Human Nature, Democracy, Cuba and Poder Popular**

In many ways the political institutions of *Poder Popular* in Cuba reflect the local/global dichotomy of narrower/broader democratic participation. Institutionally, people’s local needs and interests, mediated by the exigencies of international exchange, can be consensual: *democracy*. After the revolutionary victory of 1 January 1959, the 1960s were characterized by creative experimentation – idealistic spontaneity – tending towards centralized pragmatism (Cole 1998: Chapter 3), as Che Guevara’s faith in human creativity as the dynamic of social change inspired policy initiatives. But the 1970s were dominated by the Sovietization of Cuban society, with an emphasis on centralized planning; socialism, rather than a concern with individuals creative potentials became an issue of ‘fairer’ distribution. The initiation of Poder Popular in 1974 in Matanzas province (extended to the whole island in 1976) attempted to reconcile Guevara’s vision of people changing themselves as they change society, with the economic organization of society to meet centrally directed production targets, but as the 1970s became the 1980s, increasingly the exigencies of planners’ dictats failed to answer social needs.

The Rectification Process, beginning in April 1986, reassessed the process of socialist development in the light of the previous 15 years or so of central planning. This reassessment was also a response to the U.S. invasion of Grenada in 1984, and the anticipated threat to Cuba’s sovereignty. Any defence of the island and the Cuban Revolution had to rely on participation: an ‘armed democracy’ – prompting a consideration of economic priorities and social policies. ‘The most serious error of economic policy put in practice between 1975 and 1985 was undoubtedly its reliance upon economic mechanisms to resolve all the problems faced by a new society, ignoring the role assigned to *political* factors in the construction of socialism’ (Castro 1987:13, emphasis added).

Planning no longer implied centralization/bureaucratization, and economic development was less focused on sugar. Production was diversified, concentrating on bio-technology, pharmaceuticals and medical equipment, foreign investors were invited to participate in particular fields of activity, and organic food production began to take precedence over
export (sugar) production. There was an emphasis on self-sufficiency: not only in the economy and production, but also in culture and sport: Che Guevara’s emphasis on human creativity.

We realized that we could not develop an alternative society based on solidarity and feelings of love for your neighbour while using capitalist economic incentives … [and] the idea that the revolution was a spiritual project to release people’s creativity and give them a greater degree of participation in society… (Castro, cited Blanco and Benjamin 2003:440).

Central to this ‘spiritual project’ is *Poder Popular*: Article 3 of the 1976 Constitution states:

In the Republic of Cuba sovereignty lies in the people, from whom originates all the power of the state. That power is exercised directly or through assemblies of people’s power and other state bodies which derive their authority from these assemblies, in the form and according to the norms established in the Constitution and by the law (August 1999:253).

The Organs of *Poder Popular* are based on the Municipal Assemblies, Provincial Assemblies, and the 601 seat National Assembly. Delegates are chosen by the citizens of municipalities, widened to include the mass movements (Trade Unions, Federation of Women, Federation of Students, Committees for the Defence of the Revolution, Small Farmers Association, etc…) at the Provincial and National levels. The Communist Party is forbidden by law from playing any part in the electoral process. Delegates once chosen, do not campaign for office, but do report back to their constituents every 6 months, receiving no extra remuneration for their political activity, which is seen as a social duty rather than a career.

The process of *Poder Popular* has evolved, based on: an emphasis on economic equality; political rights, with delegates not belonging to a privileged, professional, political elite; parochial needs and interests subservient to the general political will, reflecting a lack of antagonistic class interest and a focus on consensus; a close identity between delegates and the electoral nomination assemblies and periodic accountability sessions; etc…
This is a vigorous, evolving, political system, in which, for instance in the elections of 1997-98, 98% of the population voted (voting is not compulsory), in 14,533 constituencies for municipal, regional, and national delegates to the Organs of *Poder Popular*, delegates having been chosen over a 9 month period in 36,434 ‘nomination assemblies’.


*Poder Popular* is able to address people’s needs in the context of wider social objectives (health provision, education, welfare, culture, etc…) reflecting the needs of international trade within a global division of labour, because, the rhythm of human existence in Cuba is not governed by the needs of private capital accumulation. The realization of shareholders’ profits through relations of competitive commodity exchange inevitably reflects the relative efficiency of productive enterprises: but this ‘technical’ efficiency reflects individual consumers’ subjective preferences, not social efficiency exhibited in human fulfilment (which is more than the quantity of commodities consumed). The social, political context of individuals’ fulfilment changes with people’s evolving human potentials: the process of democracy. The Cuban social scientist Fernando Heredia (1993:64) defines this process in an interesting way when he states:

> [Socialism is] ... a process of successive upheavals not only in the economy, politics and ideology but also in consciousness and organized action. It is a process premised on unleashing the *power of the people*, who learn to change themselves along with their circumstances. Revolutions within the revolution demand creativity and unity with respect to principles and organization and broad and growing participation. In other words, they must become a gigantic school through which people learn to direct social processes. *Socialism is not constructed spontaneously, nor is it something that can be bestowed* (emphasis added).

Heredia’s explanation of democracy as a social and revolutionary process suggests that a truly participatory and creative form of democracy, one which seeks not just to provide the
means by which people satisfy their material needs, but also their individual, social and spiritual potentials, cannot be contained and developed entirely in a structure of government; even *Poder Popular*. It is more than that, it is a multi-layered social process in which people have the scope for interaction and creativity not only through official mechanisms but also within the creation of life itself. It is interesting that this is also the conclusion reached by one of the advocates of the Living Democracy movement in the United States who states: ‘To work democracy ... has to be a way of life ... Citizenship is a lot more than voting ... Democracy is never fully in place. It is always in flux, a work in progress. Democracy is dynamic. It evolves in response to the creative actions of citizens. It is what we make of it’ (Moore-Lappe 1994: 14-15).

The concept of ‘democracy’ outside of official structures is a big issue that goes beyond the scope of this paper but it is hoped that in the near future research in Cuba will provide some insights into this subject.

**Conclusion**

Democracy in Cuba is a process and it would be inaccurate to suggest that Cuba has developed some form of ‘ideal’ democratic system that could be taken and implemented in other parts of the world. After the collapse of the Soviet Bloc the island still faces enormous problems, most of which are economic, but which can only be considered politically. All forms of democratic governance are historically contingent, being more or less partial, and the Revolution is not a perfectly functioning system reaching seamlessly from bottom to top expressing the unmediated will of the people. Just as in representative democracies much decision making is made by dictat (perhaps inevitable while the sovereignty of the island is precarious in the face of real external hostility). But within the socialist process there are interesting democratic ‘spaces’ which are expanding as the institutionalisation of the popular will evolves through a participatory social and political experience. Opportunities and possibilities are emerging from unofficial popular action that is generated by attempts to resolve social questions that state mechanisms are not coping with, have not addressed, or as yet are incapable of asking.

One area that might fit into this category is the movement in peri-urban organic horticulture in response to food shortages. In such instances the state often responds in a positive way, in
this case by supplying, land, outreach workers and seeds etc, but does not direct. Democracy in Cuba is not just about state/civil society relations but also about the interactions within civil society itself. What makes Cuba different in this respect is not only its democratic practices but also the relative absence of competitive markets and a rationalisation of social experience from the point of view of individuals as consumers. We would argue that the market is such an overbearing factor in capitalist society, and especially under globalisation, that it restricts the range of social (participatory) democratic potentials, rather than allowing them to flourish. Democracy, as argued in this article, cannot be reduced to a reflection of market relations because by doing so we are limited to seeing people as consuming individuals who choose political leaders and make decisions as though they were buying a packet of soap-powder; which in our view is individually alienating and denies effective political participation.

What the Cuban experience can perhaps demonstrate is that democratic ‘space’ is much broader than the current parameters set by contemporary democracy. It is important in this respect that academics attempt to look further than the simplistic neo-liberal ‘holy trinity’ of individualism, democracy and markets, that is conditioned by the ‘end of history’ mindset and the economic imperatives of globalisation, and conceive of ways in which democracy can be realised more as an expanding social process encompassing human existence rather than a polyarchic system which denies a creative livelihood to more and more people. It also will not do to simply talk about ‘participation’, ‘social inclusion’, ‘stakeholder involvement’ etc within the narrow spectrum of activity that ‘democracy’ can influence in its current form.

To address the ‘democratic deficit’ one needs to theoretically challenge the limiting intellectual parameters within which democracy itself is conceived and enacted, and give legitimacy to social activism that rejects this impoverished conceptual reality. The mainstream academy may shy from this task, but those whose daily lives are reduced and controlled by the restrictions that representative democracy places on them will not; as we are seeing in many of the new social movements their first task is to build their own participative democratic processes that seek to liberate not control.

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