

# Pittsburgh goes to Cuba

'Deliberative democracy' could be one of our most valuable exports

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With relations between the United States and Cuba now changing, interesting signs of change in Cuba itself have been occurring here in Pittsburgh. It began with recent visits from Cuban groups dedicated to the political integration of Afro-descendant communities in Latin America and is culminating in the related task of revisiting the constitution of the island nation.

For Manuel Cuesta Morua, a Cuban historian and political scientist, Cubans need to reflect upon the basic laws that will govern them as they move toward a more liberal society. What distinguishes his work and that of his colleagues from other proponents of democratic reform, however, is the emphasis on “deliberative democracy” as both the form and content of this constitutional conversation.

As has become painfully clear from attempts to transplant liberal constitutional ideals into countries without a history of democratic institutions, such societies all too often fall back upon sectarian and tribal affiliations. In ways that unfortunately have echoes of our own political divisions, each side views the other as the enemy to be defeated. In contrast to this, Mr. Cuesta Morua proposes to ground the Cuban constitutional discussion in deliberative forums that involve the informed and engaged participation of the citizenry.

Basic ideals of liberty and equality must be embedded in a consensus governing document, but the path to that document begins at the local level, where these ideas are exemplified in the very process of citizen deliberation. Already, Constitutional Initiative Tables (Mesas de Iniciativa Constitucional) have formed around the country with the purpose of bringing out “diverse, complementary or contrasting views.”

Based on the ideal elucidated by German philosopher Jurgen Habermas — that those affected by a policy should participate in the development of

that policy — citizen involvement in these discussions begins the process of overcoming the kind of disenfranchisement and apathy that has characterized the Cuban populace for decades. At the same time, the initiative tables will cultivate the civic virtues of toleration and a willingness to learn from the views of others. Along the way, a more deliberative democracy is taking root.

Our own experience with these kinds of forums in Pittsburgh demonstrates how simple guidelines and well-structured roundtable discussions can create the conditions for civil and informed conversations. And the experience itself cultivates the virtues of citizenship. In this way, the principles and practices of deliberative democracy become structurally connected to civil discourse and to civic engagement. It's precisely this kind of civil society that is missing from many nascent democracies. To cultivate it at the beginning is to ensure it at the end.

The Pittsburgh connection is two-fold.

The city itself has adopted deliberative practices in one way or another over the past 10 years. These have involved outside groups like AmericaSpeaks and EveryDay Democracy as well as homegrown participants such as Carnegie Mellon University's [Program for Deliberative Democracy](#).

In 2013 the area also hosted workshops and art events for the visiting Cuban delegation, members of which wanted to establish lines of communication among those working to make Cuba more democratic and those in our area working to make our local democracy more deliberative. Influential in bringing these groups together were Juan Antonio Alvarado, who now edits the journal *Identidades*, and CMU's Kenya Dworkin, who has seen decades-old connections between Pittsburgh and the Cuban community.

Those connections continued this year with a second visit and the publication by Mr. Cuesta Morua of "Constitutional Debate and Citizens" in the *Journal Identidades*. These Cubans get it, as does our Mayor Bill Peduto, who endorsed the recommendation that Pittsburgh become a center for deliberative democracy. Both have followed up with action — with workshops and neighborhood roundtables in Cuba and with

deliberative forums in the city's public-safety council meetings, discussions that engaged citizens in the selection of the new police chief.

Benjamin Barber has written recently that the dysfunction seen at the national and even state level of our democracy calls us to the cities, where decision-makers must face reality and where real citizen engagement can make a difference. Cities, he writes, are the “theatres of strong democracies.”

Through its use of deliberative forums, online tools like MindMixer and Next Door, and participatory budgeting, Pittsburgh can serve as a model for other cities, and, yes, even other countries. Like Cuba.

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