

A light from the depths of the tunnel

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Deliberative Democracy is an expression that any Cuban loving freedom and progress must not lose sight of it. Its precepts are no longer some encouraging promise. They became indispensable tools for the most advanced sector of the civil society and the peaceful opposition. The Fifth Meeting of the Working Group on Cuban Deliberative Democracy and Constitutional Design was not another one among the many meetings organized to create viable programs and councils in the struggle

for human rights. After having systematized the development of popular workshops on dissemination and exchange of experiences and exposed the encouraging results in four previous events, the fifth meeting was held in Miami from September 30 to October 2 this year and turned into a breaking news, given the advantages of Deliberative Democracy as model for convening the citizens and training them in sociocultural strategies to successfully face the challenges of democratization.



Exercise on Deliberative Democracy in Antilla, Holguin

Beaten by cyclical and systemic crisis of both material and moral nature, Cubans have been seeing the future as an extension of the present. The latter viciously bites its own tail ad infinitum. It is a dangerous perception not only because it leaves us helpless—with neither resources nor optimism to identify the prospects for progress and even less to properly assume them—but also because it can lead us to make desperate choices that never produce good results, least of all in politics.

A long history of internecine violence and cunning selfish leaders who never think twice to lead their supporters to death, economic crisis and social quagmire, bears witness to this: behaviors propelled by popular confusion and despair have dramatically influenced in Cuba and the rest of Latin America. No wonder more Cubans every day are fearing that the circumstances of the eventual impasse that gravitate around the system of government today, could end up turning the people into an instrument of violence.

For so long and in many ways, the regime has been devoted to erase all traces of civic awareness and political culture among Cubans. It's something needed by any dictatorship, but the Castroite regime has managed to exceed all records, since the Castro brothers have had a more than half a century absolute power to do it, either through indoctrination and fear or by creating such an economic dependency that it seems that no brain cell is left to think about anything else than surviving.

Partially because of that, the opposition has not achieved a substantial number of followers among the Cuban people. With certain obstinacy—well intentioned, but obstinacy after all—we avoid acknowledging that it happens because most Cubans are not prepared to conquer democracy and presumably to live per its rules either. It has been our weak point, not by chance, but due

to a perverse Castroite plan. However, it does not mean that, eventually, we will be unable to enter the domain of democratic guidance and to recover lost values.

I do not think that anyone has evidence to seriously deny that the time has come. Since it is so, it seems commonsensical that deliberative democracy should have preeminence among the tools available to Cubans for advancing towards freedom and progress.

Training people in the exercise of free expression of ideas, from the point of view of political pluralism or any other diversity, as well as in the frank exchange—without the harmful effect of some wills, opinions or rules prevailing over the relevant group—through a dialogue under condition of mutual respect, will enable them to seek, beyond any protagonism, the solutions to the problems affecting or concerning the entire community. These are the essential premises of Deliberative Democracy.

Cubans often recall the renowned presbyter Felix Varela, to whom another famous Cuban scholar, José de la Luz y Caballero, granted the status "the first one who taught us to think". Father Varela is rightly credited with the merit of applying his intelligence and wisdom to cultivate the ideals of independence and abolitionism among his countrymen, especially among young people. Because of such an effort, he was regarded as the first one who taught the Cubans to think. Thus, he should be deemed the precursor of the actions by those working nowadays to spread the principles of Deliberative Democracy in the Cuban sociocultural praxis.

That is what this is about: learning to think, to enable the people for regaining the civic education that was part of our national heritage and got lost. Just because of that, we became an easy prey for the ideological dogmas and insane

hegemonic interests that led us to ruin. The initiative could have not been more trustworthy and commendable. Manuel Cuesta Morúa, National Coordinator of the Platform New Country and Recipient of the 2016 Ion Ratiu Democracy Award, materialized the idea of having popular workshops on Deliberative Democracy in neighborhoods and villages across the country. This effort was supported by the Platform for Cuban Integration and other exile organizations. It also was assisted by some international humanist NGOs. Precisely at the opening of the Fifth Meeting, Cuesta Morúa explained:

"The idea of Deliberative Democracy arose from certain vision of failure in Cuba. In one way or another, we have always tried to advance in the democratic field, to find a way to free us from the regime. Some had the view that democratic changes could occur

overnight, but enough time has passed and they have not been achieved. Thus, the main intention among some of us was to think how we could advance a mobilization process that were just that, a process. In certain circumstances, two texts on Deliberative Democracy fell into our hands and we found them very relevant and important for applying the ideas on how to handle pluralism and diversity in a country that had lost democracy and was divided into clusters with their peculiar visions on how to do things. In such situation, Deliberative Democracy seemed to be the fundamental tool to find concrete solutions to concrete problems. The Project New Country opened the discussions and the process began to open itself. We started to involve not only the greatest possible number of groups, but also to address the critical issues on law and the rule of law " .



Cuesta Morúa at the opening of the Fifth Meeting on Deliberative Democracy

On such a path, seeking that ordinary Cubans are truly informed and take part in solving the problems of their vital

environments, while opening to hear the different opinions for choosing the best ones, some activists of the independent

civil society have been devoted to spread the basics of Deliberative Democracy across neighborhoods in Havana and towns and cities in the inland.

The result is visibly significant and they have been formally expressed, step by step, through five international events organized by the Cuban Integration Platform. In addressing the third one, held at the Florida International University (FIU) in March 2015, *El Nuevo Herald* emphasized the Cuban experience under peculiar circumstances: "The process of Deliberative Democracy satisfies the conditions in Cuba —stated Cuesta Morúa— since it's possible to gather small groups in homes and other similar premises". He said that such meetings with citizens from different places may go unnoticed for the repressive forces;

thusly, the chances of success significantly increase, along with the number of attendees since they feel more secure.

The unique variant of implementation in Cuba is attested by the so-called Tables of Constitutional Initiative (Spanish acronym: MICs). These are spaces where citizens seek concrete solutions to concrete problems, but also engage in discussions and proposals on legal and constitutional matters that are invaluable for recovering the culture of law and legality shattered by the Castroite dictatorship. If the citizens do not regain their voices to enforce these cultural values in a dialogue opened by the institutionalization of the social, cultural and political pluralism, they won't be able to conceive the changes demanded by the Cuban society.



Table of Constitutional Initiative in Santiago de Las Vegas, Havana

Regarding the same meeting mentioned above, *El Nuevo Herald* commented another initiative promoted by the Project New Country. Its activists provide a ballot to each participant in the MICs asking them to indicate five

separate proposals on what they want for Cuba. There are already thousands of ballots accumulated, which practically operate as a national survey. That meeting marked the milestone from which the model of Deliberative

separate proposals on what they want for Cuba. There are already thousands of ballots accumulated, which practically operate as a national survey. That meeting marked the milestone from which the model of Deliberative Democracy ceased to be an encouraging promise to become an indispensable tool. Since the present has been reluctant to advance towards the future, the future must come to the rescue. That meeting in FIU was the appropriate preface to the fourth event the same year in the Center for Advanced Studies at the University of Puerto Rico and the

Caribbean. It featured personalities from both islands and the United States, including Jose Javier Rodriguez, a Democratic member of the Florida House of Representatives. Thanks to this event, I personally became convinced that the model was entering in a stage of fermentation among Cubans. Maybe it happened without having been noticed by the regime, or the latter is unable to prevent the spreading of the model. Anyway, the dictatorship could have finally met its match.



Fruitful exchange with the representative Jose Javier Rodriguez (center)

Ultimately the fifth meeting took place as a catalyst for new developments of ideas about Deliberative Democracy. It brought evidence that more Cuban activists have been engaged and such a national gain is accompanied by increasing international support. It also served to prove the maturity archived in Cuba through specific contributions to the model. Although it is neither Cuban nor new, the model is being constantly enriched by the dynamics of its application in the Isle.

Historical background

By 1980, Dr. Joseph M. Bessette —then Assistant Professor of Political Science at the Catholic University of America—coined the term Deliberative Democracy for the model he would rework in 1994. Since then it has been developed by renowned philosophers and political scientists. Of course, we talk about the formalization of the contemporary system. There are precedents of deliberative democracy in other much older systems as the agora

in Greece, the Swiss cantonal assemblies and even some proceedings in primitive African communities.

The system is also usually adopted by collegiate bodies of some large universities for encouraging discussions between elected representatives, experts and public opinion committees. Just at the opening of the fifth meeting, the Director of the Program for Deliberative Democracy at the Carnegie Mellon University (Pittsburgh, PA), Robert Cavalier, narrated how the City Mayor had established the model. It functions so well that Pittsburgh became center of reference for the exercise of deliberative democracy.

Cavalier specifies that "people do not come together to debate. Whenever we speak of debates, it means there is a winner and a loser, but these events are designed for sharing experiences. Normally what is done is to bring people together with their different views, six to eight persons around a table, with a previously trained moderator who should ensure that no one could dominate the conversation and that everyone feel comfortable and free to express ideas. At the end of the

conversation; a survey is made among the participants to collect all the opinions".

In Cuba, the contributions range from the effort to empower underserved or overtly marginalized sectors (African descendants, women, LGBTI communities and others) to the civic education of the people, the recovery of important traditions and the launching of relevant projects such as the review of the Constitution.

From the very first popular workshop on Deliberative Democracy organized in Cuba until today, the magazine *Identities* —published by the Cuban Integration Platform— has been the project mainstay for implementing the model of Deliberative Democracy. The magazine serves not only as resource base and printed spokesman. It also paved the way to better understanding through free circulation across the island with information and opinions on the fight for race, class, and gender equality, as well as for democratization, constitutionalism and perspectives of the independent civil society to address political, social, cultural and historical issues.



Analysis session with the magazine Identities in Mantilla, Havana

Resonance of the fifth meeting

This meeting of the Working Group on Deliberative Democracy Cuban and Constitutional Design focused on the topic with a well-deserved public resonance. Consequently, the recognition should be for all its organizers: the Cuban Integration Platform, the NGO Public Agenda, the Program for Deliberative Democracy at the University Carnegie Mellon, and the Cuban organizations Constitutional Consensus and Project New Country. They had the support of the FIU College of Law and the invaluable sponsorship of the magazine *Identities*. Its Chief Editor, Dr. Juan Antonio

Alvarado, has always stood out as the most consistent and dynamic organizer of these events inside and outside Cuba. The list of supporting entities and individuals is much larger, because this ambitious program demands all types of cooperation for implementing it well under the complex circumstances in Cuba. At the opening of the meeting, for example, Dr. Alvarado distinguished the support of the Miami entity Rodes Printing and delivered a diploma of recognition to its representative, while Cuesta Morúa appreciated the contribution of the Everyday Democracy Project (Paul J. Aicher Foundation).



Rodes Printing's representative receives a diploma of recognition from Dr. Alvarado.

The night before, a preliminary evening took place at the headquarters of the Cuban Integration Platform for allowing the representatives of the Cuban civil society participants to meet and to exchange their first impressions with Cuban activists in exile and other collaborators and partners abroad.

It was certainly a good idea. It opened the channel for the flow of two long and arduous work sessions. Dr. Alvarado welcomed everybody and stated: "I am

very happy to have received the delegation coming from Cuba. This is a night among friends".

The Cuban delegates stamped a special mark on the event. They are the protagonists of the whole story, who daily risk their necks by bringing the teachings of Deliberative Democracy to the people in humbler neighborhoods and towns. And they came to the States to share their experiences and enrich them through the exchange.



Professor Cavalier dialogues with some Cuban delegates at the preliminary evening

Led by Cuesta Morúa, the Cuban delegation included Eliécer Ávila, leader of the opposition group *Somos+*; the historian and freelance journalist Boris González; the member of both the Constitutional Consensus and the Project New Country Marthadela Tamayo, who is also promoter of the magazine *Identities* in Cuba; Yusmila Reyna, Commissioner of both the United Table for Democratic Action (Spanish acronym MUAD) and the Civic Platform Other 18 in the eastern provinces; Nelson Alvarez, from the LGBTI organization Afro-Más; Fernando Palacio, from the Liberal Cuban Party Solidarity; and Sander Alvarez, Vice President of the Cuban Integration Platform and member of the magazine *Identities*' team.

The activists coming from Cuba gave a distinct touch to the meeting. Responses for each question of the working group emerged from their interventions: How to get people involved in deliberations on the Constitution? How these discussions can be viewed as practical aid by the participants? How could the regime react? How could the

participants ensure productive and safe discussions? These are just a few among the many diverse questions answered during the meeting, while also new questions were arising from the discussions.

To close with a flourish, the cultural center Art Emporium Gallery opened its doors to launch the eighth issue of the magazine *Identities* and the book *The African footprint in Cuba* (2016), by Dr. Juan Antonio Alvarado, which summarizes more than thirty years of research on the contributions by African slaves to the Cuban nation, culture and history. Compared to other classic books on the subject, this piece of writing is innovative because the author studied the phenomenon at its root, in several regions of Africa from where their inhabitants were brought as slaves to America. It is essential for the Cuban historiography, but it can also substantially contribute to the central objective of the activism on Deliberative Democracy: teaching the most recent Cuban generations how to freely think.



The launch of The African footprint in Cuba by NeoClub Press at Art Emporium



Ilustración 1 Lively exchange among those attending the launch

The scenario was ideal to jointly present and distribute the magazine *Identities* in Miami. A particularly substantial exchange took place for a full hall of compatriots on both sides of the Florida Straits, who talked to each other in a frank and respectful way, even in cases of conflicting criteria, as the precepts of Deliberative Democracy advise.

Thusly the fifth meeting provided a strong conviction to the expectant children of Cuba: that finally a promissory light becomes visible in the depths of the tunnel. At the same time, this meeting gave to the world enough

evidence that all is not lost for Cubans, if we can thrive from the experiences of Deliberative Democracy.

Meanwhile the Castro regime strives increasingly to conceal its lack of interest before the urgent need to introduce structural changes to responsibly advance towards progress. To top it off, the regime does not even impose its power with a minimum of rationality, since it now denies, rejects, proscribes and pursues the practice of the pure and civilized principles of Deliberative Democracy

Graphic Chronology



A group of Cubans at the First Meeting on Deliberative Democracy (2013) in Pittsburgh



Closing of the second edition of the Workshop on Deliberative Democracy (2014) in Pittsburgh



Third Meeting (2015) on Deliberative Democracy in Miami



Fourth Meeting (2015) of Deliberative Democracy in Puerto Rico



Fifth Meeting in Miami: Dr. Alvarado at the opening reception



Fifth Meeting in Miami: Dr. Cavalier at the opening reception