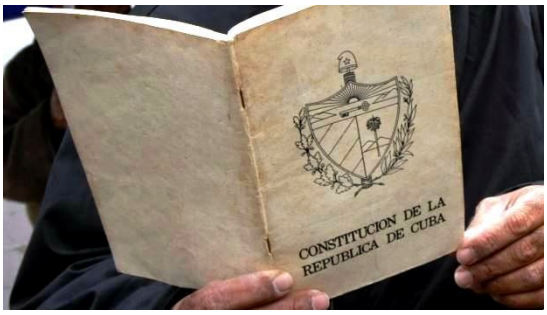
Should Cuba Remain a One-Party State?

written by Samuel Farber | March 27, 2016



The one-party state is a very controversial question that few of the left-wing critics of the Cuban regime have been willing to address. What follows is an attempt to explore, from the left, some of the issues around this topic.

In the first place, the abolition of the Cuban one-party state is one thing, separate and apart from the political system that would replace it, whether without or with many political parties. In reality the Cuban Communist Party (PCC, its Spanish acronym) is not a party – which would imply the existence of other parties – but the organ that monopolizes the political, social and economic life of Cuban society. This monopoly – explicitly sanctioned by the Cuban Constitution – is based, among other authoritarian mechanisms, on the control of Cuban society through the so-called mass organizations that function as transmission belts for the decisions taken by the PCC. For example, the CTC, the official trade union central, is the transmission belt that allows the Cuban state to maintain its monopoly of the organization of Cuban workers. Many left critics of the Cuban regime will agree that workers (and all other Cubans) should have the right to organize themselves independently of the PCC to struggle for their own interests. Taking this notion to its logical conclusion would imply the abolition of the one-party state system, including its control of the mass organizations that function as the transmission belts for the Cuban Communist Party.

Cuba's dominant system is going through a transformation – likely to accelerate after the historic leaders of the revolution pass away – towards the Sino-Vietnamese model of state capitalism under the direction of the PCC, which means that the need to abolish the one party state system with its transmission belts will remain in effect.

The function of political parties

The modern political parties came into being in the nineteenth century as suffrage expanded. As sections of the ruling class felt increasingly threatened, they organized themselves politically to defend their class interests, typically in conservative, liberal and, sometimes, Christian parties. There have been times when a ruling party represented one whole social class, as was the case of the Tory party in the U.K. in various historical periods. More frequently, however, different parties have represented different sectors of the ruling class. Liberals and conservatives not only represented material conflicts within the ruling classes, as for example the interests of the great landlords against those of the new industrial capitalists, but also ideological conflicts of pre-capitalist origin concerning the power and role of the Catholic Church in society.

Aside from representing different sectors of the ruling classes, these parties also incorporated intermediate sectors of society, such as independent professionals and small businesspeople, and tried to coopt popular expectations and struggles in a manner that would not threaten the

fundamental interests of the powerful. In many occasions, the so called middle classes and strata also organized their own political parties especially in parliamentary systems with proportional representation (which historically propitiated the creation of numerous parties.) In Cuban political history, we have the case of the Ortodoxo Party founded by Eduardo Chibás, a party principally based on the middle classes but with a growing multi class support. But the fact that this party implicitly or explicitly accepted Cuban capitalism does not mean that it was an expression or had an organic relationship with the ruling classes.

That means that, historically speaking, the relationship between class and party has not been unequivocal: the ruling class has usually not been a monolith and has generally not been represented by a single party. This has also been certainly the case with the working class, the representation of which has been assumed by such diverse parties as social democrats, communists and social Christians. In the case of the classical social democracy that represented the working class through its close links with the unions, its growing conservative tendencies were not merely ideological but also represented the growth of a union bureaucracy, which based on the power that the unions had acquired, had the possibility of extracting sometimes significant concessions from the ruling classes. These concessions helped to demobilize the workers and solidified a bureaucracy more concerned with protecting its huge investments in the union infrastructure than in risking everything in pursuit of a revolutionary break (like in the Europe of the first postwar period) or in resisting imperialist war making (1914). This was the history of the very powerful and supposedly revolutionary Marxist German Social Democracy, whose bureaucratic-oligarchic model was portrayed by the Italian-German sociologist Roberto Michels in his classic *Political Parties.*

With respect to the Russian Bolshevik party: although Stalinists as well as Cold War apologists in the Western world held on to the myth that there was no difference between the Bolshevik and Stalinist parties, numerous historians (Stephen Cohen, Alexander Rabinowitch and William Rosenberg among others) have demonstrated that before undergoing the process of bureaucratic degeneration that began with the Civil War that took place from 1918 to 1920, this revolutionary party was in reality quite pluralist and democratic. Among many examples, I can cite the fact that although Bolshevik leaders such as Kamenev and Zinoviev opposed the October Revolution, they continued to be important party leaders after the revolution, and that although Bukharin publicly adopted and agitated for a political line radically opposed to Lenin's regarding the peace of Brest-Litovsk in 1918, he remained as party leader for many years afterwards. Far from the "monolithic unity" defended by the Castro brothers, the Bolsheviks were characterized not only for the plurality of political positions, but also for a chronic tendency to factionalism that generally did not become an obstacle to "unity in action." It is for all these reasons that almost 80 years ago Leon Trotsky in *The Revolution Betrayed* harshly criticized the Stalinist theory about political parties and social classes that tried to justify the one-party state:

> In reality classes are heterogeneous; they are torn by inner antagonisms, and arrive at the solution of common problems no otherwise than through an inner struggle of tendencies, groups, and parties. It is possible, with certain qualifications, to concede that "a party is part of a class." But since a class has many "parts" – some look forward and some back – one and the same class may create several parties. For the same reason one party may rest upon parts of different classes. An example of only party corresponding to one class is not to be found on the whole course of political history – provided, of course, you do not take the police appearance for the reality.

With respect to the multi-party systems of capitalist societies: there is no doubt that political democracy has seriously deteriorated throughout the world. Political parties are increasingly devoid

of content and subject to the demands of the shallowest kinds of political marketing, a process that has been aggravated by the huge costs of political media campaigns, particularly in the U.S., which in turn has closed the access to the big media for nascent movements and candidates who oppose the existing system. Also, parliamentary bodies have been declining, and many of their powers have been taken over by the executive branches, which unscrupulously use the doctrine of state secrets to protect their newly assumed prerogatives. As a result, political apathy, ignorance, and abstention have become prominent features of capitalist democracy. While this is fatal to any notion of democracy built on the participation and control of an active and informed citizenry, is has certainly been convenient and highly functional to a capitalist system that structurally privileges private and corporate economic power at the expense of public regulation and democratic control from below.

After the One-Party State

But let's suppose that Cuba's one-party state will be abolished. Whether we want it or not, new parties will develop once repression and the legal and constitutional obstacles against independent party organizations have ceased to exist. Shall we demand then that those new parties are suppressed, or instead of that, shall we engage wholeheartedly in the propaganda and political and ideological agitation against the inevitable neoliberal and reactionary wave that generally has succeeded bureaucratic Communism throughout the world? Those are the circumstances, when we could struggle, for example, for a new Constitutional Convention to publicly debate the critical question of the kind of society that should replace bureaucratic Communism, debates that should include, of course, our arguments in favor of the construction of a socialism based on democracy and liberty. This debate would also be a strategy to prevent the immediate recourse to electoral campaigns and their marketing focused not on political programs but on individuals, many of who are going to be financed, among others, by the rich Cuban-Americans in Miami. To confront this plutocratic possibility, we could, for example, campaign for the exclusively public financing of all electoral activity, including free access to the mass media and distribution of public funds according to the popular backing for each political group.

But let us assume the optimal case – unfortunately very unlikely under the current circumstances – of a broad mass movement replacing the bureaucratic one-party system with a revolutionary and democratic socialism based on the fullest liberties and on worker, peasant and popular self-management. In that case, what would be the meaning of the unity that many Cubans have wished for? To the extent that there are common interests – material as well as ideological and political – we should aim for a unity based on joint political activities and negotiations to form alliances based on shared political interests and principles. But this need not be the "monolithic unity" propagated by Raul Castro and other revolutionary leaders, which has meant censorship and the suppression of different point of view even within the ranks of the revolutionary government. As Rosa Luxemburg put it, freedom is for those who think differently. It is mistaken and dangerous to assume that there will not be important conflict of interests as well as of points of view among the popular classes under a revolutionary and democratic socialism.

There is no reason to think that class conflict exhausts all possible social conflicts, including those based on strictly material questions. For example, one fundamental questions for any society, be it socialist or capitalist, is the rate of accumulation, or in other words, what part of economic production is to be immediately consumed and what part is to be saved to insure the reproduction of society and the improvement of the standard of living. In capitalism this is decided through the decisions of the ruling class within the framework of the market economy that favors and consolidates its power. Under socialism, this decision would affect every social group because it would determine the resources to be available resources for each work and community center. It is

to be expected that differences over this question will develop between, for example, those who want to enjoy a better standard of living today and those who are more concerned with the standard of living of future generations. In that case, how would those differences and conflicts be organized into coherent and systematic alternatives so they are decided democratically? That would be the critical function of parties under socialism, educating and agitating in favor of alternative visions of the road that society can or should take.

It is well known that political parties, like many other types of organizations, have shown pronounced bureaucratic and oligarchic tendencies. But there are measures that can be adopted to compensate and fight those tendencies, such as combating the apathy and abstention among the rank and file through democratic debate and the continual practice of real power. An active, informed and involved membership in the affairs of their parties and society is the best guarantee against bureaucratization. There are also organizational measures that can reinforce that participation and control from below, such as mechanisms that assure its local and national democratic control of union and party functionaries, and the maximum transparency with respect to party policies and its internal functioning, aside from its right to remove any leader through party and union referenda. (There are people who have advocated a ban on reelection for union and party leaders. Although this proposal is worth discussing, I believe that it would be counterproductive and possibly undemocratic and in any case would not prevent manipulation on the part of the leaders that have been officially removed.)

I hope that this discussion on the one-party state continues. The topic is too important to ignore it; it is one of the kernels of the thoroughly undemocratic system ruling in Cuba.
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**Samuel Farber* was born and raised in Cuba and immigrated to the United States before the 1959 Cuban Revolution. He has written many books and articles about Cuba including *Cuba Since the Revolution of 1959: A Critical Assessment*, published by Haymarket Books in 2011.

An earlier version of this article appeared in Spanish in ObservatorioCriticoCuba.org on May 27, 2015.

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