

POLITICAL CULTURE AND DEMOCRACY IN CUBA: COMPARATIVE REFLECTIONS

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As I saw the portentous events of almost forty years ago unfold in Cuba — the flight of a dictator, the collapse of the state's army, the accession of a savior prophet of the new order — I considered certain the determinant role of culture in them.

For in about sixty years of independence, twice, almost at midpoint, core political institutions of the nation collapsed — in 1933 the breakdown of pre-existing organizations was less extensive, yet still in this first case: the army was reconstituted by a rebellion led by a sergeant; a new generation of revolutionaries abruptly acquired the political upper hand; and given the factionalism that prevailed then, it took seven years to establish elected constitutional rule (under the guidance of the Constitution of 1940).

Why such weak political institutions?

It seemed to me at first that the phenomenon was traceable to what Cubans call *choteo*, a variant of the picaresque Hispanic cultural theme, an ethos central to Cuban national character.¹

Choteo, says the Spanish Academy dictionary, is Cuban term for *burla*: which in turn is mockery, jest, fun, among other meanings. *Choteo* in part is *relajo*: to have fun, to kid around, an element of a carnivalistic spirit of life.

It looked to me that *choteo* was an explanation for the evident weaknesses of political formal organizations, that it contributed to their corruption and subversion, to an undisciplined, highly disorganized — *relajo* ridden — political system, to the recurrent *desprestigio* — widespread loss of prestige — of the dominant political class, hence, to the institutional dissolution that had taken place.

In the consolidation of the 1959 revolutionary regime, it was clear that socioeconomic factors — that is, the poor sectors of the population that existed — played a role. The Revolution with its credibility — it had just defeated a much larger, better equipped army — promised to improve their condition, so why not back it even if dictatorial, these deprived sectors must have thought.

But the revolution had not consisted of a rebellion of the lower classes.² The leaders, the critical mass of participants, belonged to Cuba's better off social classes, starting with Fidel Castro himself, who when he organized the rebellion, was married into the family of a prominent member of Fulgencio Batista's team.

This brought me back to general culture — to view in its values, predispositions leading to the convulsive repeated patterns.

1. The classic statement is Jorge Mañach, *Indagación del Choteo*, which is critical of this cultural subethos.

2. The better Marxist literature recognized the low participation of the masses in gaining power, and the initial weak ideological ferment and organizational underdevelopment of the revolutionary groups, when compared with major revolutions; for instance, Robin Blackburn, "Prologue to the Cuban Revolution," *New Left Review* (1963).

Yet in Cuba politics could not be reduced to carnival. Heroes or Martyrs Fidel Castro had proclaimed. People died to make a revolution, there was a strong current for serious, honest government in the nation.

In fact, *choteo* was ambivalently held in Cuba. For, after all, people hold some things sacred. It is not fun to be subjected to mockery. The local literature on folkways registered not only the *jodedor* prototype — that is, the carnivalistic picaresque actor — but also the *guapo*, the *macho* descendant of traditional Hispanic chivalry, always prone to fight to maintain status.³

In short, culture is a complex construction or entity, not perfectly integrated, rather with subethoses or themes in conflict and subject to dynamic change.

An example. In Cuba there was a weekly called *Zig-Zag* that ridiculed the nation's leaders and politics, which was especially popular during the democratic period. After the Revolution's victory — loyal to its tradition — it started to satirize the revolution. Fidel Castro would not tolerate this: his revolution and him were too sacred to become subjected publicly to *choteo*. And *Zig-Zag* was the first publication that was repressed by the regime.

There is another trait of culture, however: plasticity, malleability. Consider the just cited case: the revolution projecting messianic, millenarian, apocalyptic quasi-religious themes and opposing and suppressing a carnivalistic cultural element. Yet Cuban analysts with different backgrounds have noted how the revolution itself has used the carnivalistic component to rally support for itself in the festive rallies and crowd fiestas that it organizes.⁴

Thus the carnivalistic cultural ethos can be seen as dysfunctional to totalitarian rule — tending to erode

it — as well as an instrument to rally support by the totalitarian regime.

It can be argued as well that Ramón Grau San Martín, the most prominent democratic leader in post-1933 years, used the picaresque cultural component to further his in this case democratic cause.

Carlos Márquez Sterling considered him a *pícaro*, a *burlón*, at least an active *bromista* (a joker, one who makes fun of, deceives).⁵ Listen to Márquez Sterling:

[Grau] gave never ending speeches. In them, constantly the phrase '*porque no decirlo, amigos*' bloomed. His long paragraphs, without periods or commas, despaired stenographers [but got] the enthusiasm of the masses, who in those harangues found or deducted what [Grau] had not even sought to say.

Certainly, in Grau's basic decalogue, considered to have framed his political and social thought by Antonio Lancís, his loyal follower, there is an inescapable picaresque presence: among other items, *las mujeres mandan* (women command); *dulce para todos* (candy for everybody); etc.⁶

Indeed, a society's general culture is as if "out there," waiting to be used by history-making political man, who can mold its themes both into democratic and authoritarian politics.

This is why prominent anthropologist Clifford Geertz considers culture as a cognitive science, a discipline of meanings and interpretations rather than one of fixed, inevitable laws of causation.⁷ There is both repetition or reproduction and innovation in history.

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While the carnivalistic-*choteo* cultural subethos was relatively very prominent in Cuba there are two other general cultural configurations that have been used to

3. A pertinent construction of folk prototypes can be found in Eladio Secades, *Estampas*.

4. Contrast Benigno Aguirre, "The Conventionalization of Collective Behavior in Cuba," *American Journal of Sociology* (1984), and Carlos Franqui, *Vida, Aventuras y Desastres de un Hombre Llamado Fidel*.

5. Carlos Márquez Sterling, *Historia de Cuba*, p.343.

6. Antonio Lancís, *Grau, Estadista y Político*, p. 149.

7. Clifford Geertz, *After the Fact: Two Countries, Four Decades, One Anthropologist*.

interpret democratic pathologies in Latin America that are applicable.

The first, the personalismo/machismo/familismo-amiguismo/clientelismo syndrome or matrix.

Introductory texts have noted the importance given throughout Latin America to family-friendship ties; the role of an extended familism-friendism, of *compadrazgo*, the “co-parenthood” system; the modality of hierarchical patron-client relationships based on paternalism and interpersonal loyalty; etc.⁸

These orientations typically have been seen to stress what sociologists call primary relations, as opposed to secondary, more impersonal social ties. As such the emphasis is on personalistic, personalized solidarity, and distrust of, and weak support for, impersonal institutions and organizations.

Subsequently these cultural values are mentally correlated by observers with political culture, that is, to strictly political objects and concretely ultimately to weak impersonal political organization.

Under this assumption, the state, for one, will be captured by a leader and his group of friends and followers to be personally used, unconstrained by the impersonalities of the rule of law: caudillismo, old-fashion personal rulership, subverted democracy, ruling group partisan privileges, and so on. Political parties are viewed as undermined as well: incapable of transcending a leader, ephemeral, etc.

The second syndrome or matrix, grounded in folk religiosity, can be called the miraculous/manicheanism/salvationism/messianism.

The importance given to miracles; the intervention of, and confrontation between saints and demons; hopes or expectations of salvation from dire reality, are also noted in introductory texts. And have political applications.

Allow me first to parenthetically stress that the phenomenon is not unique to Latin America. In his towering work Max Weber labeled as patrimonial organization a core of these patterns — he knew little about Latin America.

More recently, influenced by Talcott Parsons, Gabriel Almond and his associates defined political development in terms of the secularization of political culture and organizational development (“structural differentiation”).⁹ Obviously, the two mentioned syndromes define low cultural secularization and organizational development.

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Here are a few political applications of the two cultural constellations.

At the time that Fidel Castro’s revolutionary career began to ascend Juan Domingo Perón ruled Argentina. Evita codified the Peronist political doctrine in her memoir *La Razón de Mi Vida*.

It is readily seen in it how general cultural values are used to define the doctrine’s key principles. Perón is *un Gran Patrón*. Exulting familism-friendism Perón is “father” and the *amigo* (friend). Protector, godfather: hence paternalism, his *cariño*, and the loyalty owed to him. The regime is defined as an extended family: ruler/the people (especially the poor). Evita glorifies clientelistic relations of dependency in the context of the primary-group ideal dear to Argentines. Accepting as fact that Argentines do not like impersonal organizations and institutions, she says that this is why her social program for the poor is personally run by her — not as in Europe impersonally so, rather with her personalized—*cariño*—contact with the beneficiaries. The doctrine is of a Peronist community led by the Big Father: strong, protective, but loving and a friend; and by her loving wife: the mother figure always there to love, help and

8. To cite only one introductory text, Eric Wolf and Edward Hansen, *The Human Condition in Latin America*.

9. Max Weber, *Economy and Society, II*, Chapters 12, 13, and 14; Gabriel A. Almond and G. Bingham Powell, *Comparative Politics: A Developmental Approach*. Feudalistic social organization is of the family of patrimonialism but it is, especially, a more decentralized form than the latter.

sacrifice herself for the “good” Argentines (i.e., the Peronists, not the opposition).

The quasi-religious syndrome also finds expression in her remarkable document, to define doctrine and obtain legitimacy and support. “San Perón” has and makes “miracles” literally. In several Latin American countries the term *maniqueanismo* is used to define a politics perceived as a confrontation between all good-all evil actors or forces, as if saints versus demons. Evita excels in this categorization, hence, the extreme partisanship (*sectarismo* Latins call it), and need to repress the despicable, diabolic opposition: it deserves destruction, one can not “persecute” (i.e., ill-treat) criminals — their suppression is legitimate and needed! During this first phase, when Evita was a principal actor, Peronism is a messianic doctrine, salvationist, apocalyptic, full of popular religious imagery.

In short, Eva Perón shows us how drawing from general culture’s ethos or themes, these can be transformed into political doctrine and a legitimacy formula, in this case of a dictatorship that was high in originality despite its foreign Fascist influence.

I should clarify that what I have in mind when referring to the quasi-religious syndrome is folk religious patterns, not to philosophical doctrines of the clergy.

Concretely, I am not referring to Pope Leo XIII’s undemocratic doctrine taught still in the 1950s in Cuba (which Fidel Castro had to learn) that, for example, played an important role in Colombia’s civil war and Conservative dictatorship starting in the 1940s.¹⁰ Nor to post-Vatican II dissident political doctrines of sectors of the Catholic clergy known as Liberation Theology, that dismissed elected government — that is representative democracy — as only a “formal” democracy. In this view competitive elections are un-

important; such views played also a role in Central America’s long wars that escalated in the 1970s.

I must note also that the two general cultural syndromes are intellectual constructs that should not necessarily be viewed as totally independent of each other; they can interact and reinforce each other.

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My space is very limited. A very brief reference to Cuba: the personalistic, low secularization of its politics prior to the revolution’s success.

“Personal” means one’s own; private interest or domain. Also, it refers (especially in a hostile way) to an individual’s private character, as in the phrase “no need to be personal.”

Let us first focus on Batista’s 1952 regime. He justified his military coup d’état to avoid a different, planned coup; on the grounds of the immorality/criminality of those he overthrew; and to restore and guarantee the Constitution of 1940. Those whom he ousted and the emergent violent forces that eventually prevailed seven years later accused Batista of even worse immorality/criminality; and claimed that they had to use violence to restore the same Constitution of 1940.¹¹ (The Constitution had been reestablished to “elect” General Batista president in November 1954.)

Thus a revolution was fought so that the same Constitution that was formally upheld by all the parties become operative(!), guided by mutual accusations of lawbreaking, in a personalized struggle in which the personal character of opponents is stigmatized as totally evil—“criminal.”

Such politics in which force is employed by leaders in conflict, in which, to judge by their formal positions, the basic interest involved is their political advantage

10. The Jesuits taught us Leo XIII’s political doctrine contained in *Libertas Proestantissimum Encyclical Letter*. For the role of Catholic philosophy in Colombia’s early *violencia*, see my essay in R. Albert Berry et al., *Politics of Compromise: Coalition Government in Colombia*, chapter I. Again, now ultimately in dissidence from the Vatican, so-called “theologies of liberation” played a role in the civil wars of Central America decades later. See, for example, the undemocratic position from El Salvador, in Universidad Centroamericana José Siméon Cañas, *Estudios Centroamericanos ECA*, “Estados Unidos y la Democratización de Centroamérica,” XLI, 1986.

11. These formal positions are well documented: Fulgencio Batista, *Respuesta*; and Fidel Castro, “Condenadme, No Importa: La Historia Me Absolverá,” in *Pensamiento Político, Económico y Social de Fidel Castro*, published in 1959.

(the control of the state), is branded (extremely) personalistic, “of personalities.”

This is not to say that only personal interest was at stake: issues were involved, not all leaders were democratically acting.¹² In fact — you know — soon after victory Fidel Castro repudiated the democratic Constitution, from his abandonment of the need for elections to his proclamation in December 1961 that he had been Marxist-Leninist all along, what he had hidden to be able to gain power. Indeed, there is no end of ideology.

Technically, to understand pseudo-democratic politics — that is, in Latin America groups as those of Batista, Somoza, Stroessner, among others — it is useful to distinguish “ideologies” from “mentalities.” The latter refer to mental outlook, attitude, thought in action or operational concepts; as opposed to the former: a developed, elaborated philosophy. This facilitates engaging in undemocratic behavior (e.g., rigged elections, etc.) while claiming ideological or philosophical adherence to democracy.¹³

But let us move to a little bit earlier, the democratic period in Cuba prior to 1952.

Central to the then prevailing culture of opposition was the use given to democratic freedoms to engage in a type of opposition that has been called “primitive radicalism.”¹⁴ It is characterized by a prolonged campaign of an opposition leader who accuses the government — especially its head — of immorality and criminality. The participants in such a conflict, which is not unique to Cuban history, label their opponents’ personal character thoroughly evil, and the political arena is defined in manichean nonsecular terms — notice the intersection between our two

cultural syndromes, the personalistic and the quasireligious — as a stage where personalities Good and Evil, Saints and Demons, are locked in a furious battle in which no quarter is given. Typically, the tone of the accusations involving moral character is vitriolic and populist: the actions of the president and his associates are designed to injure the people. The attacks that fall under this type are not “ideological” in a proper sense: what is condemned is not that opponents are, say Fascists or Communists, and one is a democrat. Yet this type of radicalism is not conservative: it tends to undermine the position of established authority. And at times, its emotional content can surpass all bounds and take on the air of a dramatic theatrical piece.

Eduardo Chibás was the most prominent exponent of this political style, especially during the Carlos Prío Socarrás administration (1948-52), the last Cuban democratically-elected president half a century ago. Every Sunday, Chibás would subject the government to his accusations until, unable to present the proofs he had promised to make public in a case against the Minister of Education, perceiving losing popularity, he shot himself at the end of his transmission “dramatically shouting that this was his final ‘knocking,’ and that with his sacrifice he left the accusations proved.”¹⁵

Whether Prío’s government was run by indecent Cubans and Chibás’ group formed by holy, decent Cubans is not at issue. Regardless of the case’s merits (that transcends legal procedure and resolution, and again other nations also witness strong doses of melodramatic politics) these styles of opposition are conducive to democratic ungovernability. Indeed, their

12. In fact, Batista had reconstituted himself as leader of the state’s armed forces turned into an armed political movement or party with its own flag — the 4 September movement.

13. I first became acquainted with the Weberian concept of mentality through Juan Linz in his essay on Spain in Erik Allardt and Yrjö Littunen eds., *Cleavages, Ideologies and Party Systems: Contributions to Comparative Sociology*.

14. I elaborated the two concepts — primitive and ideological radicalism — based on the Cuban experience. But soon found out its presence in some other countries. See my *Sinners and Heretics: The Politics of Military Intervention in Latin America*.

15. Carlos Márquez Sterling, *op. cit.*, p. 355.

existence has been used by authoritarians to justify their imposition of dictatorship.¹⁶

The point is that before Fidel Castro became a national figure, uncivil political forms were operative in the country indicative of democratic pathology. And these have been given cultural interpretations.

And the rise of Castro's career was accompanied by increased polarization: the exacerbation of manichean, messianic/salvationist, still personalistic politics, calling for violence/repression before and after the Revolution's success.

To begin with, democracy's overthrow in 1952 ideologized per se the conflict: the ruler was not only allegedly corrupt, but a murderous *tyrant* and not a *democrat*. A civilized, workable consensus among Cubans became further elusive. Increasingly, Cubans became dichotomized: the Good vs. the Bad Cubans; Saints vs. Sinners; Salvation vs. Damnation; as if an apocalyptic confrontation against "heresy."

Suffice these post-revolutionary victory recollections. Early in 1959, Fidel Castro's portrait, as if with a halo of saint/savior, appeared on the cover of *Bohemia*, the weekly with the largest circulation.

The deification of the unconventional supreme-ruler, whose will has been to generate charismatic mystique, total loyalty, subordination and control, continued for decades. Consider this reported conversation with one of the official ruling party gurus: "Cuba's socialism sprang from ... above all ... Fidel. 'We have always had Fidel. His existence is Cuba's special merit,' I was told ... hands folded in benison: 'he is one of the great [men] of the century.' [The collapse of Communism in Europe] 'happened to them because they don't have a Fidel.' And after Fidel? 'People don't think of a successor. They don't want to believe he could die' ..."¹⁷

Castro continued to exude messianic-millenarian themes, his discourse is salvationist and apocalyptic, dissent is apostasy. Listen to him: "Before the Revolution ceases to be, not one single counterrevolutionary will remain with his head on his shoulders in this country." "Capitalism will never return to Cuba as long as there remains one Communist, one Revolutionary, one patriot ..." "If the Soviet Union disintegrates or disappears we will continue to build socialism in Cuba." "If we are to remain here alone, then so be it." "We prefer the destiny of death to surrender to the Yanquis." "Socialism or Death! *Vencemos!*" (We will triumph).

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In sum, we can conceptualize that political systems are embedded in nations with societal cultural and socioeconomic systems. Naturally, we are to expect in these differentiated societies relationships between politics and these other subsystems or parts. However, so-called "social systems" in fact are not that well integrated. Hence, *political* culture, structure or organization, and behavior show an independence of their own.

Take, for example, the case of Colombia. To be sure the *general* cultural syndrome that we have addressed as of familistic-friendistic orientations with its patron-client social organization (although distinct, cultural values orient social behavior and organization, hence they are related) has been potent in the country throughout the 20th century. As we saw, this cultural configuration has been considered to result in small, weak, highly perishable political parties. But Colombia's political history has been dominated (not without challenge) by two parties, Conservative and Liberal, which have usually controlled the government. Since 1901 Colombia only experienced two military coups d'état (1953 and 1957), and four years of military rule (1953-57 with its aftermath until full devolution to civilians in 1958); no caudillo

16. E.g., in his memoir Fulgencio Batista alludes to this type of "pathological" opposition among other reasons to justify his March 10 coup d'état.

17. The quoted statements are taken from David Selbourne, "Rebel Without a Cause: Crisis in Cuba," *The Sunday Times News Review* (London), October 21, 1990, and Michael Frayn, "In Cuba," *The Observer Review* (London), January 26, 1969.

ruled Colombia for more than five years. Contrast this experience with, say, Cuba's or Argentina's.

Latin American nations are unique in that they exhibit cultural and socioeconomic differences and also have particular political institutions and traditions.

Consider the cases of England and Japan. Feudal social organization in both coexisted with important political differences. In Japan with Emperor God/Shogun (great general). In England with Magna Carta/Parliament, precisely the precursors of representative constitutional government or modern elected rule by consent.

Does this mean that representative democracy can function in an *infinite* variety of societies? The answer is no, but history shows that it has operated in a wide variety of them, from Denmark to India.

My own view is that the society's general culture and socioeconomic organization provide environments that "facilitate" democratic institutionalization or pose "hurdles" to it.

For instance, patron-client social relations — which have been facilitated by a lesser developed money economy — have been also associated with political machines that subverted democratic elections in the United States.¹⁸ And historians show how the birth of the United States as an independent nation took place in a society in which patrimonial social organization, with its culture of personalistic-friendistic-clientelistic dependencies, had a hold.

This had *coexisted*, however, with the beginnings of democratic political institutions in the form of elected assemblies in colonial United States, a reflection in turn of the remarkable traditionalization of parlia-

mentary institutions in Great Britain. Recall the American slogan for independence: "no taxation without representation," that is, the right of subjects of the Mother Country to representation in Parliament. For at the time of the American independence, already a rudimentary form of "elected" government, the descendant also of the Magna Carta/Parliament, existed in Britain.¹⁹

The conclusion is that personalistic-familistic-clientelistic orientations can and have posed hurdles to representative democracy, from the United States to say Argentina. Yet given the plasticity of culture they can and have been overcome — they can and have coexisted with democracy.

Indeed, because of the relative autonomy of the political system, such cultural orientations can coexist with the prevalence of elected governments that acknowledge the opposition's victory. To wit, in stark contrast with Latin America, by the third president of the United States (Thomas Jefferson, 1801-9) the pattern had been established of accepting electoral defeat by governments. Not even during the Civil War, were elections suspended and the possibility that the President not be reelected contemplated.²⁰

What makes the difference — regardless of other social patterns with their dysfunctionalities — is that a critical mass develop in the nation, which supports representative democracy. The greater its numbers, the more sacred the commitment to democracy, the greater the probability of its institutionalization, of course.

You might consider my statement axiomatic and trivial. The first it is; the second unfortunately no. Several types of authoritarian regimes have been jus-

18. See the case made by Jimmy Carter about the fraud organized against his election to Georgia's Senate at the beginning of his political career, in *Turning Point*, his early memoir. And on the predominance of cultural and social organizational patrimonial forms at the birth of the United States, Gordon S. Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution*.

19. A feel for this complex representative system can be obtained from Sir Lewis Nemier, *The Structure of Politics at the Accession of George III*.

20. On the importance given to electing the nation's government see Joshua Kleinfeld, "The Union Lincoln Made," *History Today* (1997). Historians have argued that during certain periods, messianic themes have been used in support of democracy in the United States, a rebuttal of their link with only authoritarian or totalitarian regimes. See Paul Boyer, *When Time Shall Be No More: Prophecy Belief in Modern American Culture*. Again, the malleability of culture, its application to democratic and undemocratic politics.

tified in Latin America with allegations that extant social conditions do not permit democracy to function; moreover, that the dictatorship had to be established precisely to cure these national (international also at times) social problems. Of paramount importance in recent years — you will remember — was the issue of poverty to be solved by authoritarian or totalitarian rule. Thus, in fact, sociological “laws” (e.g., the causes of poverty) were used to discard political democracy, even in countries in which it had never taken hold before, the poverty therefor not explainable by it!

To provide a colorful example, when Juan Bosch — the Dominican ex-president 1962-63 — was advocating for his country a “Dictatorship with Popular Backing” no democratic regime had lasted any length of time in the Dominican Republic. Yet he wrote: “The Dictatorship with Popular Backing will not be ... a representative democracy, the political system natural to bourgeois society, which has been failing in Latin America for more than a century and a half. It won’t be because ... in the best of cases, [it] cannot guarantee work, health and education [etc.]”²¹ This was not the Dominican case.

In effect, the principal “cause” for not institutionalizing democracies is its insufficient support by political actors (often based on wrong or spurious reasons).

Parsimoniously, these are the axiomatic factors of the problem: insufficient commitment to representative form of government (competitive elections); insufficient support for constitutionality and the rule of law; inadequate levels of political tolerance (of opposition).

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I will conclude with another brief reference to Colombia. Cultural interpretations should be grounded sociologically to overcome their anecdotal propensity. Within a given nation, some individuals and groups hold certain values more than others. Survey research allows to explore these issues.

Despite the historical pluses in terms of its resilient party system and virtual absence of military rule, Colombia’s democratic record has not been good. Roughly, during the first half of the twenty century the modality was what I have called protodemocratic rule — that is, a system of the family popularized by the Mexican Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI). Its character: a party hegemony — the belief that the ruling party does not submit itself to authentic elections; that democratic electoral institutions do not work; fraud according to need to remain in power is part of the system. For although in 1930, a divided ruling party allowed the electoral victory of the opposition, this resulted in a change from a Conservative hegemony to a Liberal party one. In 1946, again a divided ruling party recognized the victory of an opposition, that all along had not participated in presidential elections on grounds of fraud and suddenly changed tactics. But democracy was not the result. Three years later the Conservatives established their party’s dictatorship to be changed subsequently to a military authoritarian regime. From this time, Colombia has never been pacified, though levels of political violence have fluctuated.

In the late 1950s, power was devolved in Colombia to the civilians, and a new full-blown coalition regime of the two parties was established. Many democracies operate under these premises known as “consociational” democracies.²² Yet the Colombian was not firmly established: it has been subjected from its initiation to serious revolutionary threats and violence. At best, in the last part of the twentieth century Colombia’s democracy was an unstable one, though no government was actually overthrown.

What was the profile of such inadequately supported, unconsensual regime?

In the late 1970s, we conducted a survey of political opinion and behavior in Colombia.²³ As we expected significant differences among social classes, the sample was stratified into five social class segments: an upper class — wealthy businessmen and profession-

21. Juan Bosch, *Dictadura Con Respaldo Popular: El Próximo Paso*, p. 52.

22. An extensive discussion of consociational regimes can be found in Robert A. Dahl, *Democracy and Its Critics*.

Table 1. Conceptualization of Violence in Colombia

Basic Characteristics	Upper Class %	Middle Class %	Working Class %	Lower Class %	Peasants %
1. Free elections	55.3	49.8	31.2	29.7	30.8
2. Government limited by the law (or Constitution)	22.8	12.0	10.5	7.4	11.1
3. Right to freely criticize and oppose the government	54.9	55.8	49.1	18.3	14.3
4. Right to organize any political, religious, social group	23.6	26.9	20.0	20.7	28.5
5. That everybody has a minimum of material well-being	28.8	21.5	21.8	43.4	46.0
6. Equal economic opportunity for all	35.8	39.2	54.6	59.3	50.6
7. Citizens' opportunity to directly participate in the important decisions	31.8	47.0	36.6	21.3	22.6
8. That people seriously work and the government supervise them so that the citizens fulfill their obligations	29.4	24.5	38.5	56.4	55.2

als; a middle class — smaller business and less prosperous professionals, white collar employees; a working class — skilled urban workers; a lower class — urban unskilled poorer individuals; and peasants — economically marginal, poor rural people.

I do not claim that it is possible to generalize our results to all of Latin America, nor even that they could hold through time in Colombia. Opinions and attitudes are subject to change. All that I will do is report temporarily limited findings for a particular country because of their potential comparative interest.

Most important was to explore the views of democracy held by the population. To this effect we asked: "There are different conceptions of democracy. I will present a list of eight elements that can be characteristic of a democratic system. Please, select among them the three traits that in your opinion better characterize democracy."²⁴ Table 1 presents the results.

Our premise was that political democracy is defined by the just mentioned three basic elements. The first four items (1, 2, 3, 4) directly covered these aspects (free elections; government under the rule of law; and political tolerance: the right to criticize government, the right to organize various kinds of political and social groups). We added two economic dimensions: equal economic opportunity (item 6) and a guaranteed minimum economic well-being (item 5),

to explore the salience of concepts of socioeconomic democracy. Item 7 — the opportunity to directly participate in important government decisions — was included as a measure of more participatory, direct conceptions of democracy rather than its representative form. Finally, item 8 provided a definition of traditional authoritarianism, a political system composed of duty bound citizens, not very politicized, working under government tutelage (or a Gran Patrón?).

Observe in the table the important differences in the conceptualization of democracy by social class. But first, our publics (as opposed to active politicians whom we did not have the resources to also directly survey) did not give priority to constitutional rule (item 2), a central concept of the descendants of the English cultural tradition and a conceptualization stressed in legal training in Latin America. Secondly, you can observe the relative low importance given to free elections as a component of democracy — only *small* majorities of the upper and middle class considered it to best characterize democracy. We might view in this light the appeal that some leaders questioning the importance of elections and constitutionality might have in populations with similar distribution of preferences. The depreciation of elections can result not only from formalized ideologies — say Marxism-Leninism — it can be also affected by the

23. The study was conducted with two Colombian colleagues, Rodrigo Losada and Eduardo Vélez. The findings discussed here are unpublished. Parts of the project's results appeared in Rodrigo Losada and Eduardo Vélez, *Identificación y Participación Política en Colombia*, and Eduardo Vélez, *Political Participation in an Unstable Democracy* (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Illinois, 1981).

24. The order in which the questions in the table actually appeared on the questionnaire was: 3, 5, 2, 6, 1, 8, 7, 4.

absence of a deep-rooted conviction in them in the traditions of folk political culture.

In the table, two different conceptualizations of democracy clearly appear: one held by the upper and middle classes, the other by the lower classes, urban and rural. (The working class fell between these two conceptualizations.) The first one is closer to the classical liberal political conception of democracy, with elections (item 1) and the right to criticize and oppose the government (item 3), i.e., political freedoms, as part of them. But notice that the two highest strata included other aspects — the upper class added a “modern” economic dimension to its conceptualization: its third choice was item 6 (equal economic opportunity for all); while the middle class emphasized (direct) political participation with its third choice, opportunity to directly participate in important decisions.

The second conceptualization, held by our lower class and peasant samples, was markedly different. Focusing again on the three top choices, these poorer respondents stressed economic rights: equal economic opportunities (item 6) and a minimum material well-being (item 5). At the same time, however, they also *defined* democracy in traditional autocratic terms (item 8, “that people seriously work and the government supervise them so that the citizens fulfill their obligations”). The data suggested that democratic political ideas had not penetrated much, especially in the poorer segments of the population.

This importance given to economic issues by the lower strata is not surprising, of course. This is precisely the opinion of publics in wealthier countries, that the Third World’s downtrodden are not interested in elections but in food, clothing, shelter, I had often heard in lecture tours. Notice that among all social class respondents a preference was shown for equal economic opportunity over a guaranteed minimum material well-being. I construed the pattern as consonant with the spirit of enterprise and attachment to private property that we had found among the Colombian lower classes — a priority on opportunity as opposed to equality of economic result or outcome.

Indeed, while there were disagreements among our samples in preferred socioeconomic policies and the wealthy were more sensitive toward maintaining extant private property arrangements, there was a relatively high consensus among all in having a mixed economy, with both privately and publicly owned industries, and government assisting areas and those in need of economic help — one of the bases of the welfare state. There was broad support for a state promoting development. At the same time, there was wide opposition to a statist socialist economy, in which the state owned the means of production. Colombians held both that individual achievement should be recognized and a fundamental egalitarian conception of man with sympathy for working people.

In conclusion, our exploration suggested the absence of a national coherent consensus about the basic institutions of democracy related to social class differences. There was a political conceptualization and an economic one, with the better off emphasizing relatively more the first. However, at the same time, among the poor sectors, there was a remarkable identification with a traditional authoritarian concept of government. And among all social class groups there was dissent on the fundamentals of democracy. Even among the prosperous classes where its liberal traditional conceptualization was strongest, there was disagreement, for example, on the importance of free elections and constitutional government.

We found a society with a significant cleavage about the ideal political order. Only minorities explicitly preferred authoritarian military rule: the range, from 14 percent of the upper class to 40 percent of the peasants. And substantial majorities of all social classes did not support the use of violence to obtain the political and social change that they desired: the “no violence” pattern per social class was 72, 69, 65, 69, 72 percent. The latter suggests that only minorities backed the violent revolutionaries, an important reason why they were unable to get the momentum necessary to triumph.

But the profile of the masses described in the table, combining a preference for an economic form of democracy with an authoritarian conceptualization of

the political order was suggestive of the potential support for authoritarian or totalitarian populism: the exchange of an intense emotional adherence to a ruler (Gran Patrón) for the state's handing out of wealth. That populist strongmen caudillos — a Juan Perón, Fidel Castro — had never kept power in Colombia for any considerable time is suggestive of the importance of other political factors in the outcome (i.e., the resilience of party traditions supporting plural leadership among the political elites of the largest parties, who had constituted the nation's principal political power structure).

Actually, receptivity to traditional authoritarianism — in the spirit of item 8 — by the lower classes was part of Cuban folklore. In the 1950s, one still heard a poetical musical composition popularized four decades earlier around the political campaigns of General Mario García Menocal, one of the earlier towering national caudillos. The populace danced singing:

Tumba la caña, anda ligero,
mira que ahí viene el Mayoral
sonando el cuero,
mira que ahí viene Menocal
sonando el cuero.

Tumba la caña refers to the manual harvesting with machetes of sugar cane, Cuba's principal crop. *Anda ligero*, to the order imposed on sugar workers reluctant to accept work discipline (or arbitrariness) established by the managers and foremen of the sugar mills. *Sonando el cuero*, to the whip used to ensure worker discipline. And Menocal, the *Mayoral* (boss), was precisely who would impose the discipline on the (Cuban) people "cracking the whip." The song had other verses, one full of the earlier discussed picaresque choteo ethos approvingly involving sinecures (*botellas*).

Poverty fosters conditions of dependence and this can take the form of a folk culture of patron-client mentalities. There is an immemorial thesis about the

inclinations of the populace to support (some) dictators. However, the traditional paternalistic conception of government — the ruler "Father of the Fatherland," to be "loyally and obediently" obeyed in his "firmly grounded" authority — has not been the exclusive domain of the lower classes, and incoherences and cracks in democratic ideas among the better off also contribute to the success of authoritarianism.

Two final considerations. Continued adherence by popular sectors to socialistic leaders claiming to represent the lower class is not guaranteed. Remember, in recent years two governments close to Fidel Castro eventually were voted out — Jamaica's Michael Manley 1980 and Nicaragua's Sandinista 1990. Poor majorities can also view governments too intrusive in one's personal life, impeding one's economic fulfillment; there can be popular dissatisfaction with "over-regulation" by the state.

And our respondents showed a motley profile. The presence of the traditional patron-client archetype did not simply portray a humble, modest lower class accustomed to obey and equate the ruler a protector. Our interviewees were neither fatalistic nor social revolutionaries. A peculiarity of Colombia was the early penetration of party politics among the masses, to the point that peasants came to identify themselves and traditionalize identification with the parties. But we could not depict the bottom of the class stratification pyramid in strictly "traditional" terms. For example, the sample was asked about qualifications for high office: very substantial proportions chose having high levels of education and specialized knowledge over traditional, so-called ascribed characteristics, i.e., to belong to a family with high social position or follow traditional ways. (The social class pattern that chose the latter two options consisted of only: 8, 10, 6, 13, 11 percent.)