

SOCIAL MECHANISMS AND POLITICAL ORDER

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“Actions are caused by desires and opportunities.”

—Jon Elster¹

Can social mechanisms sustain political order in autocratic-authoritarian regimes? Does the use of mechanisms tell us something significant about how these regimes govern? In many ways, these questions are more than rhetorical. Despite the indiscriminate repression against its opponents, citizens continue to find innovating mechanism to resist state policies. In the case of the velvet revolution and others like it, these tactics ultimately contributed to the debilitation of the regime and their eventual downfall. In the end, autocracies continue to be more prone to experience revolutionary uprisings during the succession period than any other polities.

Alienation gives us another reason for examining mechanisms. Some institutionalized vehicles to foster political allegiance tend to alienate significant numbers of supporters. For example, capricious recruitment of party membership or rotation within the political elite often erodes support for these regimes. The secrecy around the rise and demise of key state figures from the public sphere gives way to widespread speculation about the inner workings of official circles. States recur to social mechanisms, then, because these provide deceptive maneuvers to manage state-society relations.

Conversely, mechanisms are also a strategy of popular survival and perseverance, especially among the

dissatisfied in non-democratic societies. In the absence of institutions to channel or articulate discontent, individuals resort to innovative manifestations against the existing political order. In Franco's Spain, for instance, many workers participated in work slow-downs since strikes were harshly punished. Opposition newspapers were also disguised inside official publications to avoid repression. The use of regional dialects, known to be a form of protest against the central administration in Madrid, became a mechanism to rally support for regional identity. Many economists cogitate whether sluggish productivity is a manifestation of popular disgruntlement in Cuba lately.

In this paper I propose to examine non-institutional manifestation of authority and resistance in non-democratic societies. In particular, I examine instances of preference falsification as mechanisms. My argument is that social mechanisms provide a unique opportunity to govern in situations such as the one we witness in Cuba today where the Castro regime faces a paradoxical situation. After the breakdown of its ideological bedfellows, Castro needs to promote a benign image abroad to avoid jeopardizing the inflow of venture capital and counter the persistent advocacy for political reforms while his government insists in marginalizing any organized dissent. Some informal mechanisms, such as market reforms, can reconcile these two contradictory needs by providing a deceiving sense of regime moderation and tolerance.

1. Jon Elster, “A plea for mechanisms,” in Peter Hedstrom and Richard Swedberg eds., *Social Mechanisms* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 58.

While Cuba today has implemented many reforms, the state continues to hold the arbitrary power to allocate resources, determine the legality of transactions, and decide when and to what extent enforce its autocratic decisions, among others.

The Cuban quagmire today resembles the final days of the former Soviet-style communism in Eastern Europe. From all these cases one can conclude that the longer these non-democratic regimes manage to rule, the more they will resort to mechanisms to maintain authority and bogus legitimacy. The longer an authoritarian situation persists, the more individuals too would resort to resistance mechanisms to survive the hardships imposed by these regimes. This assertion is almost paradoxical. One would expect that regime longevity might foster favorable conditions for Weberian institutional authority to prevail. Many authoritarian rulers set up political institutions but these do not operate autonomously. Prevailing lack of accountability and transparency and the disproportionate concentration of power in a handful of top government officials discourage institutionalization.

I plan to proceed as follows. After briefly surveying the literature on mechanisms, I plan to discuss the taxonomy of mechanisms people use in everyday situations and the range of state responses to sustain political order. I close the essay with a few observations about the *Proyecto Varela* and the *cuentapropistas* movement which are recently evident in the island. Since the Varela Project is the most formable recent attempt by the opposition to liberalize the political sphere, it serves as an important case to illustrate the interplay of social mechanisms between the regime and its foes. *Cuentapropistas* are viewed by some to be a hopeful sign of progressive market reforms.

A CALL FOR MECHANISMS

A significant motivating factor for examining mechanisms is the invigorating claim by Juan Linz about the “low specificity of political institutions” among authoritarian regimes.² Under the political conditions described by Linz, mechanisms provide a false

sense of legitimacy for authoritarian rule. In addition to re-enforcing an authoritarian situation, mechanisms may also foster a lingering continuity from the past. This is particularly the case when an authoritarian regime succeeds another and the former resorts to similar patterns of *clientelismo* and *personalismo* to assure political order.

In fact, there are several additional reasons to further investigate the low degree of rationalization and institutionalization in autocratic regimes. First, the notion of rationality embeds more political autonomy for bureaucrats than the autocratic leader is willing to tolerate—witness the lack of legislative autonomy of the *Poder Popular* in Cuba, for instance. Rational decision-making requires a number of available choices and alternatives and independent judgment to determine choices which undermines the regime demand for secrecy and orthodoxy. Institutionalization opens opportunities for citizens to challenge a regime’s rulings, something autocracy abhors. Adherence to constitutional law undermines the revolutionary aura the regime publicly likes to promote or perpetuate itself. Constitutionalism also implies stability and conformity. The persistent articulation of revolutionary rhetoric and appearance is a crucial strategy for political mobilization and recruitment among non-democratic governments. The use of social mechanisms, finally, could promote a fictitious appearance of regime unity and detachment from some of its most vulgar forms of political repression as was the case after the several attempts by the Cuban regime to disassociate itself from “*los actos de repudio*” against those seeking to leave the island during the early 1980s.

In short, mechanisms seem to cement political authority. In rare occasions, mechanisms are the only available tool to exercise political power, however. In most instances they form part of the repertoire of political maneuvers and strategies to sustain the ruling elite. In the case of Cuba, one finds simultaneously both institutions and mechanisms juxtaposed in many issue-areas and the looming threat of repres-

2. Juan J. Linz, *Totalitarian and Authoritarian Regimes* (Boulder, Colorado: Rienner, 2000), 160-161.

sion on the background. With regards to labor relations, for instance, there is a fairly institutionalized process to file labor grievances and seek compensation, but in the areas of hiring and recruitment, there is ample evidence that individuals rely on informal networks of acquaintances and friends more often than not.

DEFINING SOCIAL MECHANISMS

The concept of mechanisms has a long and grueling trajectory in the social sciences. Economists, for instance, spend a great deal of time theorizing about market mechanisms. Recently, Albert O. Hirschman and Thomas Schelling have resorted to mechanisms to explain purposive action.³ Jon Elster describes the political impact generated by the tension between adaptive preferences and counter-adaptive preferences.⁴ Other political scientists examine mechanisms of repression and cooptation as political maneuvers. Many sociologists revisited the notion of mechanisms after World War II as part of a movement promoting middle-range theorizing spearheaded by Merton and the Columbia School.

In *Social Theory and Social Structure*, Robert Merton defines mechanisms as “social processes having designated consequences for designated parts of the social structure.”⁵ Following Merton, I designate as social mechanisms state sanctions designed to internalize social order and the voluntary, informal, and extra-legal strategies to cope with the intricacies of governance. Mechanisms exist under every regime type. Industrial nations have witnessed the resort to symbolic manipulation and displays as vehicles for public protest and articulation by anti-globalization movements. Military coups, on the other extreme, could

be regarded as mechanisms to engulf political power by the military.

Evidence of informal mechanisms in authoritarian regimes suggests that despite the overriding control these regimes exercise, popular ingenuity cannot be crushed. Referring to Cuban society in a recent interview, the writer David Chavarría stated: “There are injustices, but the country has survived. This is the kingdom of improvisation. Everything here has to be invented.”⁶ The last part of Chavarría’s comment suggests that perhaps one of the reasons why informal mechanisms flourish in non-democratic societies is the basic necessity to make sense of everyday situations, what is popularly referred in Cuba as *resolver*. What makes this desire and others like it politically relevant are a persistence stream of state intrusive and measureless policies that categorize most social events political.

Further, in Cuba there is evidence of spontaneous instincts of everyday resistance in many spheres of society—witness, for instance, the art of hustling or *jinetear* as is known in the popular lexicon.⁷ Yet, in this paper I am more interested in exploring instances of preference falsification as mechanisms, or how most people publicly support a policy that few favor privately, and attempts by the state to regulate and sanction manifestations of organized popular resistance.⁸ Before proceeding, it is first important to mention the obvious. The widespread practice of preference falsification is most politically relevant among autocratic-authoritarianism and other non-democratic political types because it may be the most cost effective recourse to express popular discontent.

3. See particularly, Albert O. Hirschman, *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty: Responses to the Decline of Firms, Organizations, and States* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970) and Thomas Schelling, *Micromotive and Macrobehavior* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1978).

4. Jon Elster, *Sour Grapes* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

5. Robert Merton, *Social Theory and Social Structure* (New York: Free Press, 1968), 43-44.

6. *New York Times*, July 4, 2002, E14.

7. For this and many other terms that capture popular survival strategies, see Carlos Paz Pérez, *Diccionario Cubano de Términos Populares y Vulgares*, (La Habana: Editorial de Ciencias Sociales, 1994).

8. The most elaborate treatment of this topic can be found in Timur Kuran, *Private Truths, Public Lies* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995).

In this sense, falsification manifests itself indescribably. A survey conducted in 1999 presents examples of the widespread practice of falsification. Recent émigrés were asked in the United States after their arrival about the reaction of government sympathizers to the decision to invite the Pope to Cuba and 47% responded that the followers accepted the decision despite their disagreement with the visit. Later, when asked about how the average citizen reacts toward official repudiation against dissidents, 43% said they would assist the dissidence but privately. Of the same group, 35% said they participated in the Committees for the Defense of the Revolution or CDRs.⁹

Each of these responses gives us a glimpse of the complexity involved in finding sufficient empirical evidence to demonstrate the political effects of mechanism. Significantly, it is evident that close to half of the respondents feared state reprisals when engaging in any manifestation of political behavior while residing in the island since they insisted they would assist dissidents only privately. Close to half of regime supporters did not even feel confident enough to simply disagree with the regime publicly on matters of policy. About one third of all the émigrés had belonged to a mass organization while contemplating leaving the country.

These numbers also shed some light on the limitations of explanatory and predictive powers of models that attempted to analyze the downfall of communism in the former Eastern Europe and elsewhere. In many cases the patterns of resistance and dissatisfaction is disguised under social norms and symbols not easily captured by the kind of factual evidence required for empirical political analysis. Inter-subjective, interpretative evidence of falsification is difficult to grasp at first hand. In the pointed words of Kuran “preferences are imperfectly observable.”¹⁰

TAXONOMY OF MECHANISMS

As stated earlier, the use of mechanisms in the political arena generally falls into the categories of individ-

uals and official maneuvers. Within this dichotomy, I find it useful to categorize mechanisms into the political, the economic, the social and the ideological spheres. The first category captures those strategies related to the question of political authority. One obvious one is the ridiculous manipulation of judicial criteria to incarcerate and censor emerging adversarial voices. A more conspicuous shroud is the constant reference to the situation rather than any particular institution or individual when condemning policy failures. It is usual these days to hear state officials and other Cubans state matter of factually “*la situación no es fácil*” or “*se cometieron errores.*”

These references to an impersonal situation can be interpreted in many ways. Regime officials could save face by alluding to external constraints supposedly imposed by the embargo or the situation could also refer to other extraneous, uncontrollable forces. In any case, blaming hardships on the situation deflect any responsibility from individuals responsible for the situation. And since alluding to situations connotes ambiguity, it will be absurd and paranoid for the state to repress anyone who interprets state failures in such imprecise terms. This mechanism of falsification then permits state officials and other individuals to air differences without incrimination. In fact, references to “the situation” support the regime’s public deception of portraying itself as trapped by a hostile international environment. What makes this particular strategy anti-democratic is that it permits the state to take credit for any achievements while deflecting responsibilities for its failures. Notice that in pluralistic societies the opposite tendency is the norm. Particular public servants are generally blamed for all state failures, voluntary or not, during their mandate.

Economic mechanisms encompass bottlenecks imposed by the state to maintain its monopolistic grip on the economy, on the one hand, and the irresistible instinct to get around these bottlenecks, on the other. The juxtaposition of a dual market economy, con-

9. Churchill Roberts, Ernesto Betancourt, Guillermo Grenier, and Richard Scheaffer, *Measuring Cuban Public Opinion. Project Report* (Washington, DC: USAID, 1999), Table 38, p. 73, Table 43, p. 79, Table 70, p. 96.

10. Kuran (1995), 332.

sisting of official egalitarian rations and the perilous parallel market, has been a constant feature of the revolution almost since its beginning. More recently, along with the new restrictive market initiatives sponsored by the regime to cope with the necessities generated by the Special Period, the state has also devised more sophisticated vehicles of state control. The dollarization of the economy and the required exchange mechanism offers us one such illustration. While the official exchange rate is artificially set taking political considerations in mind, people have set up a more real second tier exchange unofficially to reflect true market value.

In other instances, *paladares* owners purchase receipts for merchandise bought at the so-called “diplostores” from neighbors and friends to show proof of purchase for goods bought in unofficial markets to protect themselves against an eventual visit by state inspectors. Moreover, *paladares* owners also do not include in their menu those dishes prohibited for sale by the state, rather they verbally communicate their availability to trusted clients.

Social and ideological mechanisms refer to inter-subjective norms, conventions, and principles that govern every day social relations. Two obvious illustration of this realm are the reconstructed meaning of the words *compañero* and *revolucionario*. To identify supporters and to characterize political allegiance, revolutionary officials popularized these two terms during the early days of the revolution.¹¹ Initially, the first conceptual implication of these terms was intended to depict a general sense of popular egalitarianism.

Today these terms have a much broader and binary connotation. Everyone calls each other a *compañero*

regardless of their feelings towards the regime, particularly in situations involving either a hierarchy of status or when people do not know one another. This implies a more cautious meaning of the term from what was originally intended. *Revolucionario* today practically describes any manifestation of social behavior that does not directly threaten the dictates of the regime. So, to march in support of one of the government’s initiatives and to engage in capitalist self-employment are simultaneously revolutionary under the current popular connotation.

It is clear that the transgression of meaning of these two norms imply an apparent culture of conformity or *habitus*.¹² Yet, a closer look at these practices reveals a distinct evidence of another manifestation of falsification identified by Timur Kuran as moral dissonance.¹³ Moral dissonance suggests evidence of a certain tension between the popular and the official. On the one hand, it indicates that social actions evolve within a framework of possibilities determined undemocratically from above. But on the other, it also reveals how social agents manipulate and negotiate the range of public spaces to justify new practices of social action.

The stage provided by formal mechanisms of socialization has not been spared from falsification. Conversations with recent émigrés indicate that the once-feared Committees for the Defense of the Revolution (CDRs) in many blocks have become social gatherings where participants exchange information about opportunities or seek services to satisfy immediate necessities. Here again, non-institutional patterns of dominance devised by the regime have been turned socially to survival. The result is a very dynamic constant negotiated social construction of reality.

11. In the words of Jon Elster, “Identification is one major mechanism whereby norms are internalized.” In Elster’s *The Cement of Society. A Study of Social Order* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 132.

12. Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977).

13. According to Kuran, “Moral dissonance arises when one’s value are impractical or infeasible. One feels obligated to achieve a goal, satisfy a limit, or abide by a standard; yet, one preferences steers one away from these objectives.” Timur Kuran, “Social Mechanism of Dissonance Reduction” in Peter Hedstrom and Richard Swedberg, eds, *Social Mechanisms* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 154.

Table 1 intends to summarize some of the behavioral manifestations of the taxonomy of falsification mechanisms discussed here.

Table 1.

	Official	Popular
Political	Social order	Resistance survival
Economic	Bottlenecks and sanctions	Parallel economic activities
Social/ Ideological	Hegemonic discourse	Moral dissonance

PROJECTO VARELA AND CUENTAPROPISTAS

Two recent developments that reveal the increasing meaningful negotiated social order in Cuba are the Varela Project, organized by opposing human rights organizations, and the widespread practice of self-employment or *cuentapropistas*. Although these two illustrations show few things in common, they do share an ongoing tension between being granted official accreditation and their own quest for survival. For opponents, accreditation will probably mean adopting the semi-official status of “soft opposition.” A political plebiscite is an apparent indictment against state officials but not necessarily against the revolution. Ironically, allowing the opposition to operate under terms outlined by the Varela Project could in essence afford the regime an opportunity to restrain this burgeoning movement at a very marginal cost. Also, the revolutionary state stands to gain most from this reform since it would deprive opponents of a chance to continue to wave the dismal human rights record against the Castro regime. But once again, autocracy considerations stand on the way of political reforms in Cuba.

The composition and development of the Varela Project has been well documented by others and there is no need to recapitulate its history here. Rather, I simply would like to discuss two aspects of this development that illustrate the thesis of this paper. First, while it is clear what the public demands of the opposition really are, there is a deep seated and indis-

tinct hope that the revolution will be radically transformed once its current leaders are deposed. In the words of Oswaldo Payá, one of the key figures behind the Varela drive, “the key to the Varela Project is the personal and spiritual liberation of people. No more masks. The regime did not respond. It fled.”¹⁴ Thus, again, the call for reforms manifests itself as the only falsification strategy of survival in the face of regime intransigence.

The second aspect of this incident that deserves consideration is the nature of state response. In the early years of the revolution not only would projects like Varela be deemed unthinkable, but the state would surely have responded with indiscriminate violence against it. Today, the state response has been more tamed and definably sophisticated. After briefly jailing some key figures involved in the project, government officials have resorted to discredit the effort and, up to date, have chosen not to officially respond to the specific demands of a plebiscite. A dissident characterized the government falsification strategy in the following terms. “We believe they will not reply to the project, and once again violate the Constitution. They do not hear us. We are not part of that public which has the right to intervene in the affairs of the homeland.”¹⁵

The other illustration I would like to briefly discuss stems from a recent a series of in-depth interviews I conducted with *cuentapropistas* visiting relatives in the United States. Many of the self-employed I interviewed described themselves as “passive sympathetic” with the revolution. In their minds, this means that they are not active in political organizations but have served the revolution in a number of capacities. One interviewee saw a lot of good deeds performed by the regime. For instance, when asked about her most defiant criticisms of the revolution, she replied calmly that leaders were usually not aware of abuses committed by lower levels bureaucrats and when they become aware, she said, they will immediately correct these situations.

14. “Cuba can’t ignore a dissident it calls insignificant,” *The New York Times*, October 13, 2002, A4.

15. “Cuba can’t ignore a dissident...,” *The New York Times*, October 13, 2002, A4.

Another interviewee organized a group of artists primarily composed of other people with similar political orientations. In her opinion, the main difficulty her group faces is the lack of accreditation by the state artistic agencies. The denominated official stamp of approval by the state would facilitate many of the routine business activities faced by her group, she assured me. Most prominently, state endorsement would permit her to sell her craft legally in state conventions and several hotels at a fair price in dollars. She was particularly interested in selling her art outside Cuba too, something that without state approval becomes officially impossible because of difficulties with transferring payments, shipping, marketing, or storage facilities without the legal infrastructure. Faced with no accreditation, my interviewee resorts to selling her trade to state own enterprises and foreigners through informal channels of friends and relatives both in and outside the island at heavily discounted prices.

Curiously, the inability to obtain official accreditation by these artists also demonstrates the sophisticated repressive tactics by the state. As with the Varela Project, the state capriciously decides the extent of permissible popular activities. However, instead of contemplating challenging the accreditation process to make it more open and transparent, the interviewees and others like them continues to promote their trade at the margins. Sometimes legally and others illegally, they engage in the very capitalist commercial enterprise the regime condemns. In the

minds of this group, engaging in this kind of commercial activity is revolutionary.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

In response to the two concerns at the start of this paper, it is clear that social mechanisms are another more sophisticated practice instituted by authoritarian-autocratic regimes to maintain their social dominance and by others to resist it. These mechanisms provide a corrupting façade of reform. They also offer a possible explanation for Elizardo Sánchez and others' observation that the regime has become more ruthless despite recent instituted chances. The increased sophistication of state-sponsored mechanisms demonstrates the maturity of the state apparatus. In this regard, the current situation in Cuba seems to support the keen observation by José Joaquín Brunner some time ago when he said "Pensamos que la represión y el efecto temor no son mecanismos capaces de crear y mantener un orden social; se necesita mucho más para asegurar el dominio de una clase y el funcionamiento integrado de una sociedad."¹⁶

Ultimately, this analysis also indicates some cause for optimism. The Cuban condition is not a one-sided, dead-end situation as the state proclaims. Social actors have remarkably retained their capacity to re-invent and negotiate spaces by manipulating their own mechanisms and reacting against those utilized by the state. History, as Marx once remarked, is made by individuals according to circumstances given. Social mechanisms are the vehicle to govern state/society relations in Cuba today.

16. José Joaquín Brunner, "La cultura en una sociedad autoritaria," FLACSO, SCL/10879/083 (1983).