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# Originality and Relevance of the Cuban Revolution

The predominant tendency in European intellectual and political circles is to regard the Cuban regime as a kind of fossil, a Stalinist hangover, and even in more traditional leftist circles which see Cuba as an example of social justice and resistance to globalisation, virtually no-one suggests that other countries could learn from the Cuban experience in political terms. The Cuban experience is identified with armed struggle, and since the neutralisation of the Central American guerrilla movements armed revolution has been discredited. Although strong insurgent movements still exist in Colombia – the FARC, ELN and others – their strategy is to combine armed struggle with other methods and to seek a negotiated political solution; their great achievement (which should not be overlooked despite government and media demonisation of them as ‘narco-terrorists’) has been to maintain popular armed resistance to neo-liberalism. Within the last decade other movements which defend the resort to arms have appeared, notably the Zapatistas in Mexico, but given their limited military capacity and their strategy of ‘dissolution’ rather than seizure of power, it would be more accurate to describe them as representing ‘armed contestation’ as opposed to revolutionary armed struggle in the classic sense. Small organisations which advocate armed struggle in theory exist in many countries, and it would be rash to suggest that the question of armed revolution will never again be on the agenda in Latin America; but at present it is clear that political conflicts are resolved through a combination of elections and mass mobilisations which are predominantly peaceful.

For many on the Left, Cuba is to be admired for its achievements in health, education and sport, and to be supported against the injustice and irrationality of the US blockade; but at the same time there is a consensus that it should become more ‘democratic’. There is a vague sense that Cuban Socialism is not quite the same as the Soviet variety, that it is more popular and more authentic, but little understanding as to how or why this is the case; and there is widespread scepticism as to the prospects for its long-term survival. Yet if Cuba did not

fall in the early 1990s along with the rest of the Soviet bloc, if it survived the extraordinary rigours of the 'Special Period' resulting from Soviet collapse and the intensification of the US blockade, if moreover it has recovered economically with less concessions to capitalism than China or Vietnam, then its prospects for survival cannot be lightly dismissed. 'Democratisation' along liberal lines would undoubtedly undermine Socialism and would open the door to domination by the US and the Miami exile mafia; Cuba has its own system of Socialist democracy, which may have limitations but merits serious examination. This chapter will attempt to explain how and why the Cuban revolution has achieved so much and why, despite its deficiencies, it is still very significant for Latin America and for the entire world.

#### ORIGINS: THE CUBAN REVOLUTIONARY TRADITION

The triumph on 1 January 1959 of the guerrillas of the Rebel Army led by Fidel Castro, and especially the dramatic process of radicalisation of the Cuban political scene and the transition to Socialism during the following three to four years, signalled the beginning of a new era in Latin America. Until then a Socialist revolution in that region, and above all in Central America and the Caribbean – the classic 'backyard' of the United States – was unthinkable. In these 'banana republics' comic-opera tyrants alternated with weak and corrupt civilian regimes, and the rare exceptions like the progressive nationalist government of Jacobo Arbenz in Guatemala from 1951 to 1954 were swiftly crushed by the Colossus of the North. In 1959–61 the memory of Guatemala was fresh in everyone's mind, and most observers anticipated a similar fate for the revolutionary regime in Havana. The political establishment in Washington has never forgiven Fidel Castro and the Cuban revolutionaries for their successful defiance of US hegemony, and nearly five decades later Cuba continues to be a thorn in the side of the imperial super-power. The Cuban–US confrontation became a central component of the Cold War, and there is no doubt that from 1962 to 1989 Soviet support was a critical element in Cuban survival; but it is necessary to recognise also that the Soviet Union only committed itself fully after the Cubans had demonstrated their own capacity for political and military resistance with the defeat of the Bay of Pigs invasion in April 1961. This independent Cuban will to resist has reappeared since the collapse of the Soviet bloc, surprising the prophets of the

New World Order who confidently predicted 'the demise of Castro' within months of the fall of the Berlin Wall; both Fidel Castro and the Cuban revolution have confounded the sceptics and demonstrated an unsuspected vitality. But those who really understand Cuban history should not be so surprised.

To understand the success of the Cuban revolution and its continued vigour we have to review the island's history from the nineteenth century, when it was Spain's most important remaining colony (after most of Latin America achieved its independence between 1810 and 1826). This delayed independence, together with the crucial issue of slavery and its abolition, gave the Cuban nationalist movement a more radical and democratic character when it finally emerged with full force from 1868 onwards. Also, the expansionist and annexationist ambitions of the USA, manifested from a very early date, contributed to the formation of a precociously anti-imperialist consciousness in Cuba. Already in 1805 Thomas Jefferson had proclaimed his country's interest in the annexation of the largest of the Antilles, and in 1823 Secretary of State John Quincy Adams declared that with the passage of time Cuba would fall 'like a ripe apple' into the lap of the United States; and in the course of the nineteenth century the US tried to purchase the island from Spain on four occasions (Cantón Navarro 1998, 40). It should not therefore come as a surprise that the literary prophet of the independence movement and founder of the Cuban Revolutionary Party, José Martí, declared in his last letter, shortly before his death in combat in 1895: 'Everything I have done unto now and all that I shall do hereafter has as its objective to prevent, through the independence of Cuba, the United States of America from falling with added weight on Our America' – *Nuestra América*, in other words Latin America as opposed to the Anglo-Saxon world (Martí 1975, 3). It was also Martí who insisted, at a time when racial prejudice was solidly entrenched in all Western countries, on racial equality within the independence movement and on its democratic and popular character. Furthermore, another hero of the independence struggle, General of the Liberating Army Antonio Maceo (a free mulatto known as 'the Titan of Bronze'), declared in reply to a young Cuban who asked him what attitude he would take in the event of a US intervention against Spain: 'In that case, young man, I think I would be on the side of the Spaniards' (Thomas 1971, 300) – an extraordinary declaration, and a clear indication that he agreed with Martí, even at the height of the struggle against

Spanish colonialism, in regarding nascent US imperialism as the greater danger.

The relevance of these warnings by the heroes of the independence struggle was confirmed shortly after their deaths with the US intervention of May 1898 and the Spanish–Cuban–American War. Taking advantage of the mysterious destruction of the battleship *Maine* in Havana harbour, the North Americans rapidly defeated the Spanish forces and occupied Cuba, Puerto Rico, the Philippines and the island of Guam in the Pacific, and then negotiated peace terms with the Spanish in Paris without consulting the Cuban liberation forces which had been fighting off and on for 30 years and were close to victory at that time (Cantón Navarro 1998, 61–74; Collazo 1972; Foner 1972). The US military occupation lasted four years, until in 1902 the island became formally independent. But it was no more than formal independence because Washington imposed as a condition of its withdrawal acceptance by the Cubans of the ‘Platt Amendment’, which gave the imperial power the right to intervene whenever it saw fit ‘for the protection of life, liberty and private property’, and also the right to establish naval bases on the island (this was the origin of the notorious Guantánamo base) and various commercial privileges. In the following 30 years Washington intervened militarily in Cuba on four occasions; the Platt Amendment was revoked by Cuba in 1933 and the United States in 1934, but US domination remained the central fact of Cuban affairs until 1959 (Roig de Leuchsenring 1973).

In the neo-colonial ‘Plattist’ republic it seemed for a while as if the values of Martí and the *mambises* (the Afro-Cuban nickname of the independence fighters) had been completely forgotten, but from 1922 onwards a new radical consciousness began to emerge with the formation of the FEU (Federación Estudiantil Universitaria, University Students Federation) led by the brilliant and restless student activist Julio Antonio Mella, who also founded the Liga Anticlerical and Liga Antimperialista in 1924 and was one of the founders of the Cuban Communist Party in 1925 (Kapcia 2000, 68–9). The labour movement was also beginning to become a force under anarcho-syndicalist leadership, but with a rapidly increasing Communist presence. Then in the next few years the political situation became more polarised as Cuba underwent its first experience of a classic Latin American dictatorship, as President Gerardo Machado, elected in 1925, began to assume arbitrary powers and held on to power by force until 1933, when a frankly revolutionary situation developed.

Out of the FEU, suppressed by Machado, there emerged a more revolutionary student body, the Directorio Estudiantil, which from 1930 onwards adopted a strategy of armed resistance. In this it was soon imitated by other clandestine organisations, the ABC and OCRR (Organización Celular Radical Revolucionaria), both of petty-bourgeois composition and nationalist/corporatist ideology. The world depression beginning in 1929 had a catastrophic impact on Cuba and contributed strongly to popular discontent (the price of sugar, which accounted for 80 per cent of exports, collapsed completely and long-term unemployment reached over 50 per cent). The early months of 1933 saw a political strike by sugar workers, and as political violence increased rumours of a possible US intervention began to circulate. But the recently inaugurated President Franklin D. Roosevelt had just proclaimed his 'Good Neighbour' policy in relation to Latin America, abandoning military intervention and promising support to democratic governments; so although the US Navy was on patrol in international waters only a few kilometres from the Cuban coast, Washington limited itself to sending a Special Envoy, career diplomat Sumner Welles, with the mission of 'mediating' between Machado and the opposition. But this only helped to undermine Machado's authority, and between May and August 1933 a series of strikes, demonstrations, bombings and assassinations culminated in an ultimatum from the military High Command to Machado, which finally convinced him to leave for exile (Cantón Navarro 1998, 110–16; Kapcia 2000, 72–3).

With Sumner Welles' support a liberal government was installed, but it had no real power base and fell in a matter of weeks. On 4 September 1933 the sergeants and NCOs of the army successfully revolted against the officer corps, putting effective power in the hands of Sergeant Fulgencio Batista who thus appeared on the political scene for the first time. But the rebellious sergeants did not assume governmental office, leaving a power vacuum which was occupied by the Directorio Estudiantil. The students nominated a 'Pentarchy' of distinguished intellectuals, one of whom, the respected medical professor Dr Ramón Grau San Martín, soon emerged as President of a Provisional Government in which the students had significant influence. The new government in effect represented the popular, democratic and anti-imperialist movement, but it did not enjoy the organised support of any political party or force and had to confront the pressure of Batista (who soon revealed himself to be an opportunist) and of the US Embassy.

The most interesting and influential member of Grau San Martín's government was the Minister of the Interior, Antonio Guiteras, a postgraduate student of Socialist ideas but not affiliated to any party. It was above all Guiteras who inspired many radical and popular measures decreed by Grau's government: the revocation of the Platt Amendment, the intervention (public administration) of the Cuban Electric Co. (a US subsidiary), the minimum wage and eight-hour day, female suffrage, the beginning of an agrarian reform, and so on. Many of these measures were never implemented since the government had no real power and was in any case overthrown after only four months, in January 1934, in a military coup carried out by Batista and encouraged by the United States. The 'Government of the Hundred Days' had failed, but the heady experience of these months changed Cuban politics for ever (Aguilar 1972; Cabrera 1977; Tabares del Real 1973). There is a notable similarity between the measures decreed in 1933 and those adopted by the revolutionary government in the first six months of 1959; in fact the 1933 revolution was the direct precedent of 1959, and revealed clearly the weakness of the neo-colonial power structure and the growth among large sectors of the Cuban people of an anti-imperialist and revolutionary consciousness.

From 1934 to 1959 all the main political forces in Cuba had their roots in the events of 1933: the Partido Revolucionario Cubano (Auténtico), formed by Grau and his associates and generally known as the Auténticos, the 'Authentic' Party; the Partido del Pueblo Cubano (Ortodoxo), or Orthodox Party, formed in 1947 as a breakaway from the Auténticos and led by Eduardo Chibás, who as a student had been prominent in the anti-Machado resistance; and Fulgencio Batista, whether as de facto strongman behind a series of puppet presidents (1934–40), democratically elected president (1940–44), or dictator (1952–58). Immediately after the 1934 coup Guiteras began to organise clandestine resistance, creating his own movement called Jóven Cuba (Young Cuba), but he was assassinated in 1935. In the next few years Batista revealed considerable political astuteness, decreeing a series of popular reforms, legalising the Communist Party and permitting the adoption of a remarkably progressive constitution in 1940. In 1944 Grau and the Auténticos won the elections, and this victory by the figurehead of the 1933 revolutionary government aroused great popular enthusiasm; but it soon became clear that the Auténticos had abandoned the ideals of the 'Hundred Days', and the new government descended into a morass of corruption and opportunism. Grau's successor, Carlos

Prío Socarrás (1948–52) was another Auténtico and heir to 1933, but continued on the same corrupt path, thus contributing to the failure of parliamentary liberalism in Cuba and paving the way for Batista's second coup d'état on 10 March 1952 (Ameringer 2000).

Batista's coup provoked almost unanimous repudiation, but the established political parties were unable to channel this sentiment into an effective strategy. Repression hindered open expression of the popular movement against Batista, but soon there was a series of attempts to launch armed struggle, showing the extent and intensity of opposition. The first efforts came from radical intellectuals and students: a philosophy professor at the University of Havana, Dr Rafael García Bárceña, organised the Movimiento Nacional Revolucionario (MNR, National Revolutionary Movement) which began to prepare a civilian-military uprising for early 1953, but he was arrested and his movement disintegrated over the next few months (Hart Dávalos 1997, 37–40). In Santiago, the country's second city and capital of the Province of Oriente, a group of students and young intellectuals led by Frank País created another clandestine armed movement, Acción Revolucionaria Oriental (Revolutionary Action of Oriente). But the first effective armed action was carried out by another clandestine group, as yet unnamed, organised in Havana by the young lawyer Fidel Castro Ruz: it was this group which travelled secretly to Oriente to lead the assault on the military barracks of Moncada (in Santiago) and Bayamo on 26 July 1953, which although unsuccessful would mark the beginning of Castro's emergence as revolutionary leader and would give the movement a name (Movimiento Revolucionario 26 de Julio, the 26 July Revolutionary Movement or M-26-7). Castro's famous 'History Will Absolve Me' speech – delivered at the in camera trial organised by the regime, but clandestinely printed and distributed by his supporters – became the manifesto of the new movement and helped to mobilise a broad civic movement in favour of an amnesty for the imprisoned Moncada survivors, an amnesty which was finally granted by Batista in May 1955 (Mencía 1993; Hart Dávalos 1997).

Fidel Castro had already become a household name in Cuba, and after his release it soon became clear that he was not safe there; so he and his brother Raúl chose exile in Mexico – but with the stated intention of returning to continue the struggle. It was of course in Mexico that they met the young Argentine doctor – already a revolutionary internationalist – Ernesto Guevara, nicknamed 'Che' by the Cubans because of his use of this interjection which means

'mate' in Argentine Spanish; Che Guevara would come to play a role second only to that of Fidel in the Cuban revolution. There followed 17 months of training and preparation for the expedition in the leaky yacht *Granma* across the Gulf of Mexico to land on the coast of Oriente with the aim of linking up with an insurrection in Santiago organised by Frank País and the urban underground of the M-26-7 on 30 November 1956. Once again the plan failed disastrously due to a combination of errors of judgement and sheer bad luck, with most of the expeditionary force dispersed or killed, and only a dozen or so men, including Fidel and Raúl Castro and Che Guevara, surviving to seek refuge in the mountains of the Sierra Maestra. But once again, as with the Moncada assault, this disaster contributed to the heroic aura surrounding Fidel, and his extraordinary knack for snatching victory from the jaws of defeat with the subsequent success of the guerrilla campaign completed his transformation into an iconic figure for the Cuban resistance against Batista. Che Guevara, Raúl and others like Camilo Cienfuegos and Juan Almeida shared, and rightly so, in this aura of revolutionary heroism, but there can be no doubt that the central figure, standing head and shoulders above the rest, was Fidel – popularly referred to from then on by his first name. No-one could dispute the fact that the decisive blows in the triumph over Batista were struck by the Rebel Army emerging from the Sierra Maestra, and that the strategic vision which had made this possible was above all that of Fidel (Hart Dávalos 1997, Ch. 16).

This however should not obscure the fact that the Cuban revolution was a popular mass movement in which tens of thousands of people participated in different ways. Although the rural guerrillas were militarily decisive and the M-26-7 leadership in the Sierra under Fidel was politically decisive, the movement also had many thousands of urban militants and sympathisers in Havana and throughout the island, functioning clandestinely in the urban armed resistance, in the trade unions and many other organisations such as the Resistencia Cívica, the 'Civic Resistance' which brought together thousands of members of the liberal professions – lawyers, doctors, engineers, lecturers – in opposition to Batista (Cuesta Braniella 1997). The scale and importance of urban armed resistance has been reaffirmed in several recent studies, especially Gladys Marel García-Pérez' *Insurrection and Revolution* (García-Pérez 1998) and Julia Sweig's *Inside the Cuban Revolution* (Sweig 2002). When one takes into account also the thousands of militants of the Directorio Revolucionario and further thousands of Partido Socialista Popular activists who



collaborated with the revolutionaries despite their party's pacifist line, it becomes apparent that the entire country was in revolutionary turmoil from 1955 to the fall of Batista in January 1959.

In this respect a complex historical and political polemic developed in the 1960s, and has recently been revived, regarding the relative contributions of the *Sierra* and the *Llano* (the Mountains and the Plains) to the revolutionary victory. The *Sierra*, the guerrilla force under Fidel and Che, has traditionally been seen as decisive, with the *Llano*, the urban underground, being regarded as secondary. This interpretation was given semi-official status with the publication of Che Guevara's *Pasajes de la Guerra Revolucionaria* (later translated as *Episodes of the Cuban Revolutionary War*) in 1963, followed in 1967 by Régis Debray's *Revolution in the Revolution*. Debray's thesis, largely based on his interviews with Guevara in Havana and later in Bolivia, was that in Cuba the *Llano* had been reformist and ineffective and that victory had only been possible when the truly revolutionary position of the *Sierra* had its way; and that this strategy could be extrapolated to Latin America as a whole, where the traditional Left, based in the cities and dominated by the conventional pro-Soviet Communist parties, was pacifist and reformist and based its strategy on an illusory alliance with the national bourgeoisie. As against this the Cuban experience had demonstrated that revolutionary conditions existed, or were latent, in the countryside, where the peasantry was ready to take up arms if only the revolutionaries, organised in a guerrilla nucleus (*foco*) would show the way; the guerrilla *foco*, in an inversion of the normal Marxist interpretation, would *create* the conditions for revolution.

This polemic, and the *foquista* strategy derived from Debray's position, contributed significantly to the rash of poorly organised and politically isolated guerrilla expeditions which failed disastrously in many Latin American countries in the 1960s and '70s. The strategy was also based on a misreading of the Cuban experience. Although there is no doubt that the military success of the Sierra Maestra guerrillas was ultimately decisive in the revolutionary victory, this does not mean that urban underground struggle was irrelevant. On the contrary, the urban resistance, both armed and unarmed, had contributed enormously to undermining Batista's regime, and had also played a vital role at certain moments in channelling supplies, arms and recruits to the *Sierra*. The *Sierra/Llano* polemic originally came to a head in relation to the strategy of a revolutionary general strike, which the urban leadership saw as the road to victory and

which was reluctantly accepted by Fidel and the *Sierra* in late 1957. The result was the general strike of 9 April 1958, a heroic but disastrous failure in which many militants lost their lives and the urban underground was severely disrupted by repression. In response a crucial meeting was held on 3 May at Altos de Mompié in the Sierra Maestra, attended by all members of the M-26-7 national leadership plus Che Guevara (García-Pérez 1998, 100); after what was by all accounts a difficult discussion, it was decided to unify the guerrilla and *Llano* command structures with Fidel as General Secretary of the Movement and Commander-in-Chief of the Rebel Army. The National Executive was now based in the Sierra and the urban underground, headed by Marcelo Fernández in Santiago, was subordinate to the Executive in the mountains. Those responsible for the general strike were censured for sectarianism in its preparation (marginalising the Partido Socialista Popular which controlled the bulk of the organised working class) and for underestimating the difficulties of armed confrontation with the police and military in an urban environment (Sweig 2002, 148–51).

The Altos de Mompié meeting did therefore conclude that the *Llano* leadership had committed serious errors and that the Cuban struggle had reached a point where rural guerrilla struggle against the regular military was the decisive element; and this proved to be correct. However, this is not the same as saying that the *Llano* leaders were irredeemable reformists or that a rural guerrilla *foco* could bring revolutionary victory in isolation from the urban movement and in any Latin American country, regardless of specific conditions. Whether Che Guevara really believed this or whether it was an unwarranted extrapolation of his views by Régis Debray is debatable, although it is undeniable that Che made tragic errors of judgement, apparently inspired by the *foco* theory, in the Bolivian campaign which would lead to his death.

Another element of the Cuban revolutionary struggle which cannot be overlooked is the contribution of the FEU (the Student Federation) and the Directorio Revolucionario Estudiantil (Student Revolutionary Directorate) which emerged from it. The Directorio leader José Antonio Echevarría had signed a crucial alliance with Fidel and the M-26-7 in Mexico in August 1956, and on 13 March 1957 the Directorio would lead a heroic but unsuccessful armed assault on the presidential palace in Havana with the aim of assassinating Batista. Despite the Mexico agreement, this reflected the Directorio's independent strategy of trying to defeat the dictatorship by

'decapitation'; they were not far from succeeding but were driven off with over 40 dead, including Echevarría (Sweig 2002, 18–19). The Directorio would subsequently rebuild and would develop its own rural guerrilla force in the Escambray mountains in central Cuba, but would never again really be in a position to dispute revolutionary leadership with Fidel and the M-26-7.

After the failure of the April strike, the key development in the revolutionary struggle was the summer offensive by Batista's army, with some 10,000 troops with tanks and aviation launching an all-out offensive on a few hundred guerrillas in the Sierra Maestra. By August the offensive was defeated, and as the guerrilla columns began to fan out into the plains and take the initiative it became clear that the dictator's days were numbered. As Raúl Castro consolidated control of the northern part of Oriente province, Fidel moved on Santiago and two columns under Che Guevara and Camilo Cienfuegos undertook a heroic march through the swamps of Camaguey towards the west of the island, repeating the great feat of Antonio Maceo, the 'Titan of Bronze' in the 1895–98 war of independence. Batista's forces disintegrated and it became clear that the M-26-7 and above all the Rebel Army were victorious.

#### 1959: VICTORY AND EUPHORIA

With Batista's hurried departure in the early hours of New Year's Day 1959 and the triumphant entry of the *barbudos* (the bearded guerrilla fighters) into Havana and Santiago, the country was swept by scenes of extraordinary euphoria. In the following weeks and months, with the consolidation of the new regime and the avalanche of decrees by the revolutionary government imposing change in all aspects of public life, it began to become clear that this was a situation without precedent in the history of Cuba or Latin America, and that the new authorities in Havana enjoyed unparalleled freedom of action. At local level a multiplicity of popular initiatives sprang up, the people began to seize control in neighbourhoods and workplaces, and provisional revolutionary town councils replaced the representatives of the dictatorship. With the collapse of Batista's army and police and the purging of *batistianos* from the civil service, the state apparatus was already being transformed. Within three weeks the most notorious of the dictator's agents, responsible for thousands of deaths and other abuses, were being put on trial and in many cases condemned to death; when US Congressmen protested about the trial procedures,

it was pointed out that at least the Rebel Army had maintained order and saved them from lynching:

The 12<sup>th</sup> of August 1933 had been marked in historical memory as the start of disorder, looting and social upheaval. To the amazement of our contemporaries the much-feared spectre of the excesses of 1933 was not repeated, giving the new revolutionary order a different character. (Díaz Castañón 2001, 105–6)

There was of course disorder in other respects, as the new government issued a raft of decrees which often could not be implemented, or in other cases ratified de facto situations which had been created by spontaneous actions.

It quickly became apparent that the only organisation with popular legitimacy and credibility was the M-26-7: for the vast majority of Cubans the Auténticos, the Ortodoxos, and even more so the Liberals and other traditional parties only represented the past – and one of the most remarkable aspects of the revolutionary situation was how these parties virtually disappeared from the political scene. They were not suppressed, they simply faded away over the next 18 months. The only party with a significant presence was the old Communist Party, known since 1944 as the Partido Socialista Popular (PSP), which had won the support of some sectors of the working class since the 1930s but had been somewhat compromised through its collaboration with Batista in his reformist phase (1938–44), and had become further discredited by its opposition to armed struggle against the dictatorship until the last moment: at the time of the Moncada attack it condemned Fidel and the insurgents as ‘petty-bourgeois adventurers’, and only officially changed its line in mid-1958. In 1959 therefore the PSP could support the revolutionary process and accept the leadership of Fidel and the M-26-7 – and this it did almost immediately – but it could not claim to be the vanguard of the revolution. In Cuban domestic politics the central issue of the next four years would be the relationship between the PSP and the M-26-7, which was at times friendly and collaborative and at times tense and conflictive. Other than these two organisations, the only other movement of any importance was the Directorio Revolucionario, which had emerged from the student movement and had played an important role in the clandestine struggle in Havana, as well as having its own rural guerrilla force in the Sierra del Escambray in central Cuba; its ideology was similar to that of the M-26-7, and after a few moments of tension in the early months of 1959 it also accepted the leadership of Fidel and the larger movement. In mid-1961 these

three organisations (M-26-7, PSP and Directorio) united to form the Organizaciones Revolucionarias Integradas (Integrated Revolutionary Organisations, ORI); in 1962 this was transformed into the Partido Único de la Revolución Socialista (PURS, Single Party of the Socialist Revolution), and finally in 1965 into the new Cuban Communist Party. The leading role, however, was that of the M-26-7, and it was fundamentally this movement with Fidel at its head which directed the agrarian reform, the nationalisations, the breach with the US and the transition to Socialism.

It is important to bear in mind these original characteristics of the situation in order to understand the headlong rush of events in the first three to four years. In the first nine months of 1959 some 1,500 decrees and laws were issued. The government decreed the purging of *batistianos*, the compulsory reduction of urban rents, the reduction of telephone rates and – when the US-owned company refused this – the legal intervention of the company, the reduction of electricity rates, wage increases for low-paid workers, and the first agrarian reform law (May 1959) (Pérez 1988, 319–20). The State Department condemned the measures, but the Cuban response was to reject any interference in the country's internal affairs and to press ahead with more reforms. From August 1959 onwards, armed attacks on Cuba began to be mounted by Florida-based exiles with the connivance of US officials; on 5 September the US Ambassador was recalled for a fortnight as an expression of Washington's displeasure with the agrarian reform and the measures affecting the telephone and electricity companies; on 21 October a Cuban Air Force deserter, Major Díaz Lanz, flew over Havana dropping leaflets and incendiary bombs, and in Havana itself counter-revolutionary terrorists planted bombs and machine-gunned people in bus queues; and Fidel announced in response the formation of a popular armed militia (Scheer and Zeitlin 1964, 104–7). This tit-for-tat pattern culminated with the Cuban expropriation of the Standard Oil, Texaco and Shell oil refineries in June–July 1960, the US decision to cut the Cuban sugar quota, and the Cuban expropriation of a series of industrial subsidiaries in August, until in October all remaining US properties were nationalised and Washington imposed its trade embargo, soon to become a virtually complete blockade, which has continued ever since.

What was remarkable in all this was the unflinching determination of the Cubans; where previously in Latin America, and especially in the Caribbean area, any nationalist or reformist government which faced the hostility of the United States had backed down or else

had been overthrown, this government in Havana reacted by taking more radical decisions in defiance of Washington. Then in April 1961 when the inevitable armed intervention came at the Bay of Pigs – an invasion by 1,600 counter-revolutionaries sponsored by the CIA, with the US Navy just off the coast waiting to land – the Cubans resisted and crushed the invaders, in an act of revolutionary affirmation which won the admiration of all Latin America and which Washington has never forgiven. It was also at this moment that Fidel proclaimed the Socialist character of the revolution, for the first time and after two years and three months in power; and the alliance with the Soviet Union, hitherto partial and limited principally to a trade agreement, developed fast over the next few months and was extended to the political and military fields as well. The final act of this geo-political drama came 18 months later with the Missile Crisis of October 1962, when Cuba stood at the centre of what was probably the most dangerous confrontation ever between the two super-powers. With the peaceful resolution of this crisis Cuban Socialism became a *fait accompli*, although subject to a systematic US blockade and integrated into the Soviet bloc in ways that were not necessarily always desired by the Cubans.

These are the bare bones of the Cuban revolutionary transition, of an exceptionally radical and rapid transformation occurring in an island of six million inhabitants (eleven million today) only 180 kilometres from Florida. The Cuban revolution has been studied to death, but there are still aspects of it which are misunderstood. First, it is necessary to look more closely at the political and ideological characteristics of the revolutionary movement itself. It is generally recognised that the PSP had little to do with the revolution, which was the work of Fidel Castro and the M-26-7: a broad, nationalist, democratic and anti-imperialist movement. Most observers also recognise that the movement as such was not Socialist or Marxist until some time after victory, at least in terms of programme and systematic doctrine (although a significant number of its militants were familiar with and sympathised with one or another version of Socialist ideology). Before and for some time after 1 January 1959 it included many individuals of liberal, Social Democratic or Christian Democratic ideology. With the exception of some right-wing US writers or Miami Cubans who regard the revolution as a cleverly disguised Communist plot, most scholars consider that the Cuban leaders became radicalised in the course of the struggle against Batista and especially in the confrontation with the US from 1959 to

1962. It is important to realise that US hostility did not begin when the revolution was declared to be Socialist (which was not until April 1961) but from the very beginning. Even on 1 January 1959 when Batista had just fled and the revolutionaries were in control of Santiago and marching on Havana, the US Embassy supported an attempted coup by General Cantillo to prevent Fidel Castro and the M-26-7 from taking power (Ibarra Guitart 2000, 352-3); it failed because Fidel immediately called for a general strike and confirmed his orders to Che Guevara and Camilo Cienfuegos to march on the capital. In the months that followed, despite conciliatory overtures to Washington by the revolutionary leaders, the US remained fundamentally hostile, and it was later revealed that plans for a counter-revolutionary invasion of Cuba (which would eventually materialise in the Bay of Pigs or Playa Girón expedition of 16-20 April 1961) actually began in May 1959:

... the Agrarian Reform Law was signed on May 17, 1959, and just two days later President Eisenhower signed the Pluto Plan, which aimed to destabilize Cuba. Pluto was the CIA's code name for the comprehensive program of subversion that culminated in the Bay of Pigs invasion. (Blanco 1994, 14)

This was almost two years before Fidel declared the revolution to be Socialist (which, not accidentally, he did on the first day of the invasion), and when Cuba had not yet even re-established diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union. Although Communism would later become an additional factor in US hostility, the fundamental reason was Washington's traditional view of Cuba as a US protectorate where its imperial fiat must be obeyed.

The view of North American liberals is that US hostility and political blunders drove the revolutionary leaders into the arms of the Communists: Robert Scheer and Maurice Zeitlin, writing in 1963, declared that:

An examination of the history of the years since the establishment of the Revolutionary Government demonstrates, we believe, that the tragic course of Cuba-United States relations has been encouraged and accelerated, rather than hindered, by the United States Government's foreign policy towards Cuba. That policy acted both to change political attitudes among the Cuban leaders and to increase the probability that men already holding Communist or pro-Soviet beliefs or both, would move into positions of influence and power within the revolutionary movement. Moreover, United States actions often confronted the Revolutionary Government with alternatives which led them to take steps

they apparently had neither anticipated nor desired ... (Scheer and Zeitlin 1964, 64–5)

The authors are undoubtedly correct in arguing that US hostility was counter-productive, but they probably underestimate the determination of the revolutionary leaders to take radical measures which would inevitably affect US interests – not because of a pre-existing Communist or pro-Soviet disposition but because of their own national-revolutionary ideology. This interpretation also overlooks the original characteristics of the revolutionary movement and the unprecedented character of the political situation obtaining in 1959.

As previously mentioned, one of the most remarkable features of the Cuban political scene in 1959 was the almost total lack of political initiative of the political parties and organisations of the bourgeoisie. It could be objected that the Provisional Government established in January included several figures of clearly bourgeois origin and orientation, beginning with President Manuel Urrutia and Prime Minister José Miró Cardona. But what is striking here is their complete inability to control the course of events, and the almost universal attitude that real authority was in the hands of Fidel Castro and the other *comandantes* of the M-26–7. It only took six weeks to bring about the inglorious resignation of Miró Cardona and Fidel's appointment as Prime Minister, a change widely regarded as natural and inevitable (Buch Rodríguez 1999, 69–75). Five months later (in July) came the crisis provoked by the differences between Castro and Urrutia, which produced first Fidel's resignation as Prime Minister and then Urrutia's resignation from the presidency (to be replaced by Osvaldo Dorticós) and, after several days of overwhelming and almost unanimous demonstrations of support for Fidel, his return to the premiership. In this conflict there can be little doubt that Urrutia's position represented bourgeois interests, but what is remarkable is the weakness of the support he received from traditional political forces.

Apart from questions of personal ethics – for example, the fact that unlike other ministers, Urrutia had not agreed to a 50 per cent reduction of his salary – the fundamental political issue was that in the preceding weeks the President had repeatedly denounced the threat of Communism, just at the time when one of the first revolutionary renegades, former Air Force Major Pedro Díaz Lanz, was doing the same in hearings at the US Senate (Buch Rodríguez



1999, 129–31). Moreover, this was at a time when the revolutionary government was far from being Communist-dominated; in fact there was public friction between the PSP and the M-26-7, and on 22 July the Communists demonstrated in protest outside the offices of the pro-26 July newspaper *Revolución* (Scheer and Zeitlin 1964, 100). By doing this Urrutia was in practice encouraging US interventionism, which was aimed more at the agrarian reform and its possible impact on US interests than at the as yet very marginal Communist influence on the revolutionary government. It would later emerge that Urrutia was a close personal and political associate of another anti-Communist dissident, Major Hubert Matos, whose desertion occurred in October 1959 (Scheer and Zeitlin 1964, 107–11; Buch Rodríguez 1999: 126–7).

The crucial weakness of Urrutia (and also of Hubert Matos and others like them) was the political impossibility of attacking Fidel. Their allegations of Communist influence in the government were known to be directed principally at Raúl Castro, who had previously been a member of the Youth Wing of the PSP, and Che Guevara, who made no secret of his Marxist (but not PSP) views. When Urrutia first learned of Fidel's decision to resign (which he did by reading the report in the morning edition of *Revolución* on 17 July – a circumstance which in itself shows how bad the relationship between the two men had become), his first reaction was to see it as a Communist coup against the *Comandante-en-Jefe*! (Buch Rodríguez 1999, 133). As it quickly became clear that this was not the case and that Fidel had indeed resigned because of disagreements with him, Urrutia had no alternative, given Fidel's overwhelming popularity, but to present his own resignation which would swiftly be followed by Fidel's return as premier. What he had failed to appreciate was that Fidel was determined to carry through the profound and radical revolution that the Cuban people were demanding, and to do so regardless of US hostility and with the support of whatever allies were necessary. Since no politician or party had the prestige to confront the *Comandante-en-Jefe* Urrutia saw that there was, from his point of view, nothing to be done.

With regard to the political parties, it is necessary to examine with some care the circumstances of the collapse of the Auténticos and Ortodoxos, particularly the latter. Supposed heirs of the revolutionary values of 1933 (and therefore of Martí and the mambises), these parties should theoretically have been the backbone of the resistance against Batista's dictatorship. The Auténticos were profoundly

discredited by the corruption and ineptitude of the Grau and Prío administrations (1944–52), although it might have been anticipated that they would be capable of reorganising and recovering to defend their rights as representing the legitimately elected government overthrown by the upstart military tyrant. But it would have been even more logical to expect the Partido Ortodoxo, founded in 1947 as a split from the Auténticos and in opposition to their corruption, to channel resistance against the dictatorship. Indeed it was from the Ortodoxos, and especially from the party's Youth Wing, that many militants of the M-26-7 emerged, among them Fidel Castro himself. But the Ortodoxo Party as such proved to be incapable of offering effective leadership in the anti-Batista struggle; not long after the coup it split into a revolutionary sector and a *pactista* sector, named after the Pact of Montreal which they signed in June 1953 with the Auténticos and other traditional parties. This sector came to accept the classic ineffective strategy of a legal or tolerated opposition to a dictatorship, of searching in vain for a peaceful and constitutional means of forcing the dictator to abandon power (Mencía 1993, 55 [Note 29], 205) – the same dilemma faced for many years by the Portuguese opposition to Salazar. Nevertheless, until the early months of 1957 Fidel insisted on the close links between his movement and *ortodoxia*, and it was in fact this party which contributed more than any other to the formation of the M-26-7. In March 1956 in Mexico Fidel made a categorical statement to this effect:

The 26<sup>th</sup> of July Revolutionary Movement does not constitute a tendency within the [Ortodoxo] Party: it is the revolutionary instrument of *chibasismo*, firmly rooted in its rank-and-file whence it sprang to struggle against the dictatorship when *ortodoxia* lay impotent, divided in a thousand pieces. (quoted in Harnecker 1986, 24–5)

– in other words, the rank-and-file of the Ortodoxo Party had revolutionary sympathies and remained faithful to Chibás' ideals even when the leadership had betrayed them. This being so, the new movement had to emerge from *ortodoxia* and had to base its legitimacy on the memory of *chibasismo*:

For the *chibasista* masses the 26 July Movement is not something different from *ortodoxia*; it is *ortodoxia* without the leadership of landlords like Fico Fernández Casas, without sugar barons like Gerardo Vázquez, without stock-market speculators, without industrial and commercial magnates, without lawyers working for powerful interests, without provincial *caciques*, without political

fixers of any kind. It is the organisation of the common people, by the common people and for the common people. (quoted in Harnecker 1986, 26–7)

This obviously implied the exclusion from the Ortodoxo Party of all bourgeois or oligarchic groups, and it could be objected that any party subjected to a decapitation of this kind would be transformed into a proletarian organisation. But it is noteworthy that Fidel did not make any similar declaration in relation to the Auténtico masses or those of any other party, which tends to suggest that he regarded *ortodoxia* – or perhaps it would be better to say *chibatismo* in the broadest sense – as the principal source of recruitment for the revolutionary movement.

In order to understand this affinity of Fidel Castro for *chibatismo* it is necessary to say a few words about Eduardo Chibás. The founder of *ortodoxia* has more than a few critics among Cuban historians and revolutionaries: they describe him as being excessively emotional, demagogic, as making unfounded accusations against his opponents, and as lacking a clear revolutionary vision or ideology. There is no doubt that in 1951 his accusation against Aureliano Sánchez Arango (Minister of Education in the Auténtico Government), of having stolen public funds for his private investments in Guatemala, lacked documentary proof, and it was the scandal created by this which led Chibás to his final crisis (when he shot himself while on the air in his weekly radio broadcast, dying ten days later) (Alavéz 1994, 64–5). It is also undeniable that Chibás' ideology was contradictory and lacking in coherence. But his emotional speeches conveyed to the people his passion and his conviction of the need for a new politics free from Auténtico corruption; his slogan of 'Honour before Money' (*Vergüenza contra Dinero*) was a reassertion of the profoundly ethical roots of Cuban radicalism since the time of Martí, and his criticism of the telephone and electricity companies and of the US loan reflected a nationalist and anti-imperialist position which was fundamental to the Cuban revolutionary tradition. Moreover, even if he was inconsistent, Chibás did at times take a clearly revolutionary stand: on the eve of the foundation of the Ortodoxo Party in May 1947 he proposed this succinct ideological formula: 'New ideas and procedures, nationalism, anti-imperialism and socialism, economic independence, political freedom and social justice ...' (Alavéz 1994, 53). Even if his conception of Socialism was not Marxist, what we have here is a more explicitly advanced position than that of 'History Will Absolve Me' six years later (which did not mention Socialism).

It is also instructive to read the *Bases* (Principles) of the Ortodoxo Party, approved on 15 May 1947 with a decisive contribution from Chibás: they imply a frankly revolutionary orientation, which however would not be practised by the new party because of the influence of more conservative and/or opportunist leaders. Thus the second article declared that the party should be ‘thoroughly revolutionary in its functional structure, which will incorporate the social groups interested in national liberation: productive sectors, workers, peasants, middle classes, youth and women’; the fourth article insisted on the need to avoid a purely electoral structure, because ‘it is necessary to adopt forms of organisation and leadership which ensure the discipline and militancy which are indispensable in a modern Revolutionary Party’; and the fifth proposed a method of popular participation which would be ‘the result of popular assemblies, and not an empty formula existing on paper only’ (Alavéz 1994, 53–4) – in other words, a party of militants and direct popular participation, which would have a revolutionary character.

In the light of these statements by Chibás it is easier to understand why Fidel Castro rendered such explicit homage to the *Adalid de Cuba* (Champion of Cuba) at a public rally on 16 January 1959:

If it had not been for those young people, if it had not been for those teachings, if that seed had not been sown, the 26 July would not have been possible, for it was the continuation of Chibás’s work, the flowering of the seed which he sowed among our people. Without Chibás the Cuban revolution would not have been possible. (*Revolución* 17 January 1959)

This does not mean that Fidel was simply a disciple of Chibás or that the M-26-7 was a direct linear successor of the Ortodoxo Party. If Chibás had lived he would not have had Fidel’s capacity to develop the political and military strategy to overthrow Batista, or to direct the revolutionary transition after 1 January 1959. The success of the M-26-7 lay in its capacity – which was essentially Fidel’s capacity – to bring together all the strands of what Tony Kapcia calls *cubanía revolucionaria*, with its roots in Martí and the *mambíses*, in Mella, in the 1933 revolution and in Guiteras (Kapcia 2000, 46–7, 85–97, 263–8).

An important tendency in the new movement drew its inspiration not from Chibás but from Guiteras, the most coherent protagonist of 1933 who had a clearly Socialist ideology and who subsequently organised a clandestine armed movement, Jóven Cuba (Young Cuba). The memory of Julio Antonio Mella was another source of inspiration,

and not only for the Communists: the work of that young student leader of the 1920s went beyond the limits of the Communist Party of which he was a founder, and inspired many who never accepted the Party's line. Figures like Mella and Guiteras formed part of what could be called the Latin American independent Marxist tradition, a school of thought derived from Marx and Lenin but adapted to the realities of the colonised Afro-Indian-Latin-American world and formulated by such thinkers as the Peruvian José Carlos Mariátegui. In view of this the participation in the M-26-7 of the young Che Guevara was not such a chance event, even if it did result from a fortuitous meeting in Mexico; the greatest influence on Guevara's political and intellectual development was precisely this independent Latin American Marxism, and no doubt he identified with the Cuban revolutionaries because he recognised in some of them the same philosophical outlook (Mariátegui 1969; Kohan 1997).

The presence of the Communist Party/PSP cannot be ignored; although it did not participate directly in the revolution until mid-1958, it had organised a large sector of the proletariat along class lines and had disseminated Marxist and Leninist ideas among Cuban intellectuals since the 1920s. As in other Latin American and European countries, many progressive intellectuals and activists had been members of the Communist Party at one time or another and had left or been expelled for differences with the official line. In the 1950s many of those who joined the M-26-7 were also in touch with the PSP but were alienated by its condemnation of Fidel and the *moncadistas* for 'putschism' and 'petty-bourgeois adventurism'. Thus Enrique Oltuski, later head of the M-26-7 in Las Villas Province and holder of various ministerial posts after the revolutionary victory, relates how in 1955 he had a talk with a PSP lawyer who defended the party's 'mass line' of agitation in the unions and among intellectuals to pressure Batista into granting free elections, a notion which Oltuski found completely illusory (Oltuski 2000, 64-8).

In practice, many rank-and-file Communists identified instinctively with the armed struggle and collaborated actively with the M-26-7, disobeying the party line. As the guerrilla struggle advanced, the party leadership came under greater and greater pressure to change its position and began to make contact with the M-26-7, until finally in July 1958 one of the top PSP leaders, Carlos Rafael Rodríguez, went to the Sierra Maestra to hold formal discussions with Fidel and the rebel leadership, and the party officially decided to support the insurrection (Scheer and Zeitlin 1964, 127-9). On 6 January 1959 the

Secretary-General, Blas Roca, publicly declared the PSP's support for Fidel Castro and the victorious revolution, implicitly accepting Fidel's leadership (Matthews 1975, 99–100); but they had little alternative if they wanted to avoid the complete marginalisation of the party. It was only to be expected therefore that the victorious revolutionaries, while accepting the PSP's collaboration, expected it to remain in a subordinate position.

### THE TRANSITION TO SOCIALISM

Does this mean that the subsequent Socialist option was due only to a defensive reaction in the face of US hostility, and to an alliance with the Soviet Union based on geo-political considerations? Not necessarily: it was possible to make a political and military alliance with the USSR without adopting Soviet-style Socialism, as for example in the case of Egypt under Nasser. Moreover this interpretation fails to give sufficient importance to the internal dynamics of the revolution, in which the Cuban bourgeoisie was excluded from the political process (or excluded itself) in little more than a year without any intervention on the part of the Soviets or even of the PSP, whose influence remained minimal until well into 1960. During the transition, leadership was always in the hands of Fidel Castro and the M-26-7 (with the collaboration of some figures from the Directorio Revolucionario), and the social base of support of the revolutionary government consisted from the start overwhelmingly of the popular classes, workers, peasants, blacks, women, middle class; although some representatives of the bourgeoisie and the landlords were involved in the early stages, they had little influence and were quickly marginalised. In a sense the M-26-7 was exactly what Fidel had suggested in 1956, *ortodoxia* without landlords, without industrial magnates, without opportunistic politicians, without lawyers in the service of vested interests, etc. It was therefore tendentially inclined towards Socialism, and the *cubanía revolucionaria* of its leaders, their unflinching commitment to achieving economic independence, political freedom and social justice, evolved necessarily in that direction. In another international context this would not have led to the specifically Soviet model of Socialism, and in this sense the geo-political factor was decisive; but the endogenous revolutionary impulse was leading the country towards some kind of Socialism anyway, a Socialism of original characteristics – and even with the imposition

of the Soviet model, elements of Cuban originality remained in what some observers in the 1960s called the 'Cuban heresy'.

From the very beginning the Cuban leaders had to respond to accusations of Communism from right-wing circles in the US and at home; in a press conference on 22 January 1959 Fidel declared, no doubt sincerely, 'I want to make it clear now that I am not Communist.' But at the same time he indicated that the revolutionaries would not allow themselves to be blackmailed by the 'red scare' into abandoning their goals: 'We will act according to circumstances and if they try to exterminate us, we will have to defend ourselves' (*Revolución* 23 January 1959). The leadership had to perform a balancing act in order to preserve unity while maintaining their revolutionary commitment and yet avoiding provocations. Internally there were problems with PSP sectarianism but also with blind anti-Communism from some members of the M-26-7 and Directorio. In May 1959 there was a vigorous polemic because some Communists tried to promote unity 'from below' between local branches of the different organisations in some districts, but on their terms, in a way which would guarantee PSP domination; they were condemned by Fidel in person in a press conference in which he insisted that the philosophy of the revolution was 'humanism and *cubanismo*' (Tamargo 1959, 65; *Revolución* 22 May 1959). Again in November 1959, at the X Congress of the CTC (Confederación de Trabajadores de Cuba, Cuban Confederation of Labour), there were lively arguments between Communist and M-26-7 delegates; in the elections victory went to the M-26-7 list headed by David Salvador, and the PSP delegates withdrew in protest (*Revolución* 20 November 1959; *Hoy* 25 November 1959). But the revolutionary leadership rejected the notion of anti-Communism as a general line: only a few weeks before Fidel had declared in response to right-wing critics that 'the accusations they make that we are Communist show only that they haven't got the courage to say that they are against the revolutionary laws' (*Revolución* 27 October 1959). It is interesting to note also that a year later, David Salvador was arrested as he tried to leave the country in a small yacht (Scheer and Zeitlin 1964, 293); he could not accept the Socialist option which was becoming a reality by then.

A fundamental element in the dramatic transformation of Cuba in this period was mass mobilisation and pressure. Some Trotskyists and other leftist writers, while expressing admiration for the Cuban revolution, lament what they describe as a lack of working-class or popular involvement or initiative, implying that everything was done

by fiat of Fidel and a few other *comandantes*. Nothing could be further from the truth: despite the crucial leadership role of Fidel and the M-26-7 commanders, there was enormous mass mobilisation throughout the country. The hundreds of thousands, even millions, who came to listen to Fidel's speeches did so spontaneously, and they came not only to listen but to shout and to answer back and to give their opinions. Workers, peasants, students and people of all backgrounds were active from day one onwards in taking over local governments, reorganising trade unions, demanding the purging of *batistianos* and making demands for wage increases and better conditions. Much of this activity was spontaneous and organised, although in other cases it was led by M-26-7, PSP or Directorio militants emerging from clandestinity. Tens of thousands of people were now joining these organisations, above all the M-26-7, as new recruits. At first the people lacked effective mass social organisations – with the exception of the unions in the CTC – but this soon changed as the process accelerated. The first new organisation was the militia – the *Milicias Nacionales Revolucionarias* (MNR, National Revolutionary Militia), organised in December 1959 in response to the wave of counter-revolutionary bombings that began in October, and becoming really operational in March 1960:

By bringing together in defence of the homeland everyone from the office worker to the housewife and the combatants of the guerrilla struggle, [the Militia] were the first associative space in which everyone could recognise each other as revolutionaries on the basis of the activity in which they were participating, and not just because of the guerrilla legend. (Díaz Castañón 2001, 119, 126)

The wave of nationalisations and the completion of the rupture with the US between July and October 1960 witnessed intense activity by the militia in their implementation, and they were accompanied by the formation of two major new mass organisations: the Committees for the Defence of the Revolution (Comités de Defensa de la Revolución, CDR) and the Cuban Women's Federation (Federación de Mujeres Cubanas, FMC). The CDRs, committees of militants at street level – one for each city block – were officially founded on 28 September 1960 in response to an appeal by Fidel, with the primary task of rooting out counter-revolutionaries; for this reason they have been condemned by dissidents as instruments for spying on the population, but the fact is that initially they sprang up spontaneously as neighbours rushed to show their enthusiasm to defend the revolution. Within a year they had recruited some 800,000 members,



and eventually incorporated 80 per cent of the adult population; they became crucial in mobilising people for all kinds of activities from health to education and recreation. As for the FMC, founded on 23 August 1960, it brought together several previous women's groups to form a national federation which would play a key role in educational and health campaigns and in promoting women's rights (Kapcia 2000, 110–11; Díaz Castañón 2001, 311).

The question of Socialism was resolved in practice between June 1960 and April 1961, with the refusal of the oil companies to refine Soviet oil, the Cuban expropriation of the oil refineries, Eisenhower's decision to cut the Cuban sugar quota on the North American market, Cuba's expropriation of US sugar mills, the imposition of the embargo by Washington and more Cuban expropriations, until the Bay of Pigs/Playa Girón invasion and Fidel's declaration of the Socialist character of the revolution (16 April 1961). Even before this, a key ideological statement was the First Havana Declaration, adopted by a mass assembly of more than a million people in the vast Plaza de la Revolución on 2 September 1960; although not yet explicitly Socialist, it was a militant anti-imperialist proclamation denouncing US interventionism throughout Latin America and defending the revolution in the name of the Cuban people. This declaration, often overlooked in English-language accounts of the revolution, is still relevant to global anti-capitalist politics today:

Close to the monument and the memory of José Martí, in Cuba, free territory of America, the people, in the full exercise of the inalienable powers that proceed from the true exercise of the sovereignty expressed in the direct, universal and public suffrage, has constituted itself in a National General Assembly.

The National General Assembly of the People of Cuba expresses its conviction that democracy cannot consist only in an electoral vote, which is almost always fictitious and handled by big landholders and professional politicians, but in the rights of citizens to decide, as this Assembly of the People is now doing, their own destiny. Moreover, democracy will only exist in Latin America when its people are really free to choose, when the humble people are not reduced – by hunger, social inequality, illiteracy and the judicial systems – to the most degrading impotence. In short, the National General Assembly of the People of Cuba proclaims before America:

The right of peasants to the land; the right of workers to the fruit of their work; the right of children to education; the right of sick people to medical and hospital attention; the right of youth to work; the right of students to free, experimental and scientific education; the right of Negroes and Indians to 'the

full dignity of man'; the right of women to civil, social and political equality; the right of the aged to a secure old age; the right of intellectuals, artists and scientists to fight, with their works, for a better world; the right of states to nationalize imperialist monopolies, thus rescuing their wealth and national resources; the right of nations to trade freely with all peoples of the world; the right of nations to their full sovereignty; the right of nations to turn fortresses into schools, and to arm their workers, their peasants, their students, their intellectuals, the Negro, the Indian, the women, the young and the old, the oppressed and exploited people, so that they may defend, by themselves, their rights and their destinies. (quoted in August 1999, 196–7)

This would be followed 17 months later (on 4 February 1962) by a Second Havana Declaration, asserting the right of peoples to self-determination and proclaiming that revolutions cannot be exported (contrary to the view of the US and the Organisation of American States which accused Cuba of doing this), but the Cuban example showed the peoples of Latin America that revolution was possible. In both declarations Cuba was described with the ringing phrase *Primer Territorio Libre de América*, the First Free Territory of the Americas, in itself an enormously symbolic statement which among other things, reclaimed the name 'America' from the imperialist power which had arrogated unto itself exclusive use of what was after all the designation of the entire hemisphere. In the words of the Cuban historian María del Pilar Díaz Castañón, 'the people as a whole is the protagonist of the subversive process', subversive, that is, of the established order (Díaz Castañón 2001, 126); the dramatic cry of '*¡Patria o Muerte!*', 'Fatherland or Death!', first proclaimed after the tragic explosion of the French munitions ship *La Coubre* in Havana harbour in March 1960, marked the identity of the concepts Homeland-Nation-Revolution, a unity which was given formal expression in the two Havana Declarations (Díaz Castañón 2001, 124–6).

The First Havana Declaration was followed after little more than six months by the long-awaited invasion, which would be defeated by the revolutionary armed forces, the militia and the entire people: 'The triumph of Girón consolidated the Homeland-Nation-Revolution identity which lent prestige to the epithet "socialist" in the name of which people fought and won', and gave the collective protagonist, the people as revolutionary subject, a heroic dimension (Díaz Castañón 2001, 133). The people of Cuba – the militia, the CDRs, the FMC, the CTC, workers, peasants, housewives, students – the vast majority contributed to this epic first defeat of US imperialism

in Latin America, which gave the Cuban revolution its unique place in history. The adoption of Marxism-Leninism would then become official with Fidel's speech of 2 December 1961 in which he declared 'I am a Marxist-Leninist and will remain so until the end of my days'; this was in part a response to the geo-political situation following the complete break with Washington, but it also reflected the real Socialist option which had developed among the revolutionary leadership and the majority of the Cuban people in the course of the dramatic struggles of the previous three years. Even so, contrary to appearances, it did not indicate total victory for the PSP or for Soviet orthodoxy.

The true orientation of the new regime in Havana began to become clear in March 1962 with the scandal of the 'micro-fraction' or 'Escalante affair'. As explained earlier, in June 1961 agreement had been reached to merge the M-26-7, PSP and Directorio Revolucionario into a single political force, the ORI. The post of Secretary-General of the ORI went to a prominent PSP leader, Aníbal Escalante. After a few months it became clear that Escalante was using his position in classic Stalinist fashion to appoint PSP loyalists to all the key positions in the new structure, often to the exclusion of outstanding guerrilla fighters from the rebel army or the urban underground. In a dramatic speech on 16 March 1962 Fidel publicly denounced this abuse of power; the ORI were completely reorganised, Escalante was sent into 'diplomatic exile' in Eastern Europe and his 'micro-fraction' was dissolved (Kapcia 2000, 130-2). It was made clear that real power in Socialist Cuba was in the hands of veterans of the M-26-7, and that the political, economic and military alliance with the Soviet Union did not imply acceptance of unconditional satellite status (when Escalante returned to Cuba in 1966, he once again tried to organise an ultra-orthodox fraction within the party, but in 1968 he was arrested and sentenced to 30 years in gaol) (Kapcia 2000, 138-9).

The final chapter of the rupture with the United States, the Missile Crisis of October 1962, also marked the limits of Cuban submission to Soviet power. The solution of the crisis by the US and the Soviet Union without consulting the Cubans provoked an indignant reaction in Havana, which refused on-site United Nations inspection to verify removal of the missiles. The end result was a US undertaking not to invade the island (a promise of somewhat dubious reliability), and the consolidation of the Cuban-Soviet alliance on a more realistic basis. Cuba needed, and could rely on, Soviet support, and became a solid bastion of the Soviet bloc right under the nose of Washington,

but subject to a systematic blockade by its super-power neighbour. For the next three decades Cuba always defended Soviet interests, but nevertheless insisted on retaining the right to take initiatives of its own, especially with regard to support for revolutionary movements in Latin America and Africa.

Internally the transition to Socialism was confirmed with the Second Agrarian Reform of 1963 (more radical than the first) and the 'Great Revolutionary Offensive' of 1968, which nationalised all small businesses. It was also during these years that the originality of Cuban Socialism was reaffirmed with the primacy of 'moral incentives' and voluntary labour, and the 'Great Debate' between Che Guevara and the defenders of Soviet orthodoxy in economic policy (see Silverman 1973). Similarly in international affairs, Havana's support for guerrilla movements elsewhere aroused Moscow's distrust; but to the Cubans this was an integral part of their revolutionary vision with its pan-Latin-American roots in Martí and Bolívar, naturally extended to Africa because of the history of slavery. Cuban idealism in the 1960s (and later) was the logical expression of the revolutionary populist bond forged between Fidel and the people through the years of armed struggle, the victorious confrontation with imperialism and the Socialist transition: the Cuban people had emerged as a collective subject with an indomitable will and self-confidence, and would not be content with bureaucratic half-measures.

This forging of the identity of the Cuban people as collective revolutionary protagonist through its intimate bond with Fidel as both architect and expression of their unity in the epic struggle of these years was reinforced by the special role of Che Guevara as advocate of Socialist purity and role model of the 'New Man'. The Cuban nation was not only the vanguard of revolution in Latin America and the Third World, it was venturing where no revolution had gone before, to realise the ideal of true Communist equality without waiting for the long transition of 'really existing Socialism' to run its tedious course. Che was also a model of internationalism, and as an Argentinian his acceptance in Cuba – not only at official level but in the popular mind – as second only to Fidel, was truly remarkable. Such acceptance could only occur in a revolutionary process, and is yet further evidence of the depth and authenticity of the Cuban revolution. Che's secret mission to the Congo in 1965, and then a year later his departure for Bolivia in fulfilment of the vision of 'turning the Cordillera of the Andes into the Sierra Maestra of Latin America' were the maximum expression of his, and Cuba's,

revolutionary internationalism. Although the circumstances of Che's departure and of his tragic death in Bolivia on 10 October 1967 have given rise to an enormous polemical literature with many critics claiming that Fidel, and Cuba, were in some way responsible, most Cubans and many others who were close to the two leaders regard this as inconceivable:

I knew from the time of Che's disappearance in 1965, that there could have been no ill-feeling or quarrel between the two men ... The cruel libel that Che Guevara and Fidel Castro quarreled and the Cuban leader punished his friend, both in Cuba and by sending him off unaided to his death in Bolivia, will, like so many malicious or ignorant lies, live in books and uninformed minds, either as belief or as doubt. (Matthews 1975, 266)

There are strong grounds for arguing that the Bolivian guerrilla strategy was ill-conceived, and indeed the entire Cuban strategy of supporting armed insurgency throughout Latin America from the 1960s to the 1980s was based on a revolutionary optimism which did not correspond to actual conditions in most countries. But it was entirely consistent with the ideological roots of the revolution, with Martí and Bolívar, which moreover undoubtedly found echoes throughout the continent even in countries where conditions were not ripe for insurrection; and its relevance in some countries was later vindicated by the Central American insurgencies, and arguably by the ongoing struggle in Colombia. In the 1960s Cuba played a central role in the Non-Aligned Movement along with Algeria and Vietnam, despite its close alliance with the USSR; in practice this reflected an autonomous Socialist tendency in the world context, a tacit refusal to accept the Moscow line of 'peaceful coexistence' while remaining faithful to the Soviet bloc in the Cold War confrontation. For many years afterwards the Departamento América (best translated as 'Department of the Americas') of the Cuban Communist Party under Comandante Manuel Piñero was the fundamental point of reference for Latin American revolutionaries, indeed down to the present it continues to express Cuban internationalism in a radically different context.

#### CHANGING DEVELOPMENT STRATEGIES

In terms of political economy Cuban policy also retained original features, although with very strong Soviet influence. The initial project of accelerated Socialist industrialisation had to be revised

in 1963–64 due to the inadequacy of capital accumulation and the bottlenecks caused by the rapidity of the transition; it was at this point that the decision was taken to maximise sugar production as a source of capital, while pursuing a long-term strategy of economic diversification. At the same time Che Guevara as Minister of Industry championed a centralised planning structure known as the Budgetary Finance System, which in contrast to the Soviet system relied on collective moral incentives to achieve labour discipline and growth. But this idealism was not confined to Che: after his departure in 1965 an anti-bureaucratic campaign inspired by Fidel and other ex-guerrilla *comandantes* led to the weakening of the planning and accounting systems in the name of direct Socialist initiative. In 1968 in the ‘Great Revolutionary Offensive’ all small businesses were nationalised: ‘... private enterprise was banned by fiat, and not as a result of education or a developing socialist “consciousness” ... The result was socialist evangelism, exhorting people to act in the “social” interest’ (Cole 1998, 30–1).

This strategy reached its limit with the famous ‘10 million ton *zafra*’ (sugar harvest) of 1970, an objective which proved impossible and which led to a political and economic crisis only resolved by Fidel’s personal assumption of responsibility and the adoption of a more realistic and orthodox economic project. In 1972 Cuba joined COMECON, the Soviet bloc’s integrated economic structure, and in 1973 it adopted a Soviet-style planning system known as the Sistema de Dirección y Planificación de la Economía (SDPE, Economic Management and Planning System). This certainly produced results, with a GDP growth rate estimated at 7.8 per cent per annum from 1972 to 1981 and continued growth through most of the 1980s when the rest of Latin America was suffering actual per capita decline during the ‘lost decade’. But it was based on the exchange of Cuban sugar and nickel and a few other primary products for Soviet oil and COMECON manufactured goods, essentially perpetuating Cuban underdevelopment although on more favourable terms than under capitalism. Moreover, in line with post-1965 Soviet policy, the SDPE combined centralised bureaucratic planning with enterprise profitability and individual material incentives, undermining collective Socialist consciousness. Although trade unions expanded in the 1970s and were in theory given much greater opportunities to participate in enterprise management, in practice their scope for decision-making was severely limited by the requirements of the

central plan and the international division of labour imposed by COMECON (Cole 1998, 32–6).

These deficiencies of the SDPE led to more and more outspoken criticisms until the system was abandoned in the mid-1980s. One of the most interesting critical Cuban writers, Juan Antonio Blanco, declares that in economics it led to a ‘primitive and incompetent’ style of authoritarian planning, and politically to the bureaucratisation of organisations that had been full of creativity and initiative:

In fact, I would say that the worst error we committed, the one with the most dramatic and lasting effects, was the decision to follow the Soviet model of socialism. Those 15 years of ‘Russification’ of our socialism left us with problems in almost every realm of society. (Blanco 1994, 24)

The defects of the SDPE were not limited to lack of popular participation. In the long run, just as in the Soviet Union, it also proved to be seriously inefficient. Enterprise autonomy was a fiction as ministries imposed central decisions, profitability was artificially maintained through arbitrary price increases, goods were hoarded to conceal overproduction, and workers slacked so as not to surpass norms. ‘The bureaucratic centralism of the SDPE was reflected in the bureaucratic habits and elitist pretensions of planners, with ministries keeping close control of their respective areas of concern, competing with other ministries for resources, which went as far as ministries ordering enterprises not to declare their excess and unused resources as “superfluous”’ (Cole 1998, 35). The result was a lack of real coordination, unfinished projects, inefficiency and cynicism. Also, Cuba had never ceased to trade with the capitalist world, and when world market conditions were favourable in the 1970s with high prices for sugar and re-exported Soviet oil, it made the mistake of contracting hard-currency debt. In the 1980s, just like other Latin American countries, it was unable to meet the debt payments; the difference was that it was sheltered by COMECON and thus was able to avoid IMF restrictions and continue to expand its economy, but the long-term result was to cut it off from Western sources of credit when the Soviet bloc collapsed.

As the negative effects, both political and economic, of this Soviet-style planning system became apparent, pressure grew from the more politically conscious revolutionaries for a radical reassessment. Once again the *Comandante-en-Jefe* took the lead in 1985 in denouncing the negative tendencies which threatened to undermine the revolution, promoting instead the policy of ‘rectification’ which was adopted at

the Third Party Congress in 1986. Centralised bureaucratic planning was replaced in 1988 by what was called 'continuous planning', allowing greater flexibility and autonomy in drawing up plans and greater worker participation. Work norms were made more realistic, there were general wage increases for the lowest paid (first in agriculture, later for nurses and teachers), and voluntary labour schemes were reintroduced. Private farmers' markets, authorised in 1980, were closed down because they had led to greater inequality (although this measure would have to be reversed a few years later in the 'Special Period') (Cole 1998, 45–50).

It was also in these years that the international situation began to take a much less favourable turn, with the intensified hostility of the United States under Reagan and the reformism of Gorbachev in the Soviet Union. Fidel surprised many observers by taking a strong stand against *glasnost* and *perestroika*, a stand which was widely criticised as 'Stalinist' or 'conservative' but which was in reality a reaffirmation of Cuban originality, of the more popular and participatory character of Cuban Socialism which did not therefore need a liberal 'opening' – an option which in any case, and in this Fidel once again showed remarkable foresight, would lead almost inevitably to capitalist restoration in the Soviet Union.

In fact 'rectification' began a process of debate and of return to the autochthonous roots of the revolution which contributed significantly to Cuban survival in the unprecedented crisis provoked by the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1992. In that period almost all observers were predicting the imminent collapse of the Cuban revolution, and the Miami mafia was eagerly preparing to celebrate the fall of Castro. The impact on Cuba of the disappearance of the Soviet bloc was indeed catastrophic: in three years the country lost 85 per cent of its foreign trade and its GNP fell by 35 per cent. The lack of Soviet oil was particularly serious: many factories closed for lack of fuel, there was scarcely any public transport, mechanised agriculture could not function because there was no fuel for tractors, harvesters or pumps, crops rotted in the fields because they could not be transported to market, there were blackouts 16 hours a day and for the first time since the revolution there was real hunger and malnutrition. The government announced the inauguration of the 'Special Period', defined as a war economy in peacetime, in order to administer a situation of extreme scarcity. It has been said, quite rightly, that in any other country such a critical situation would have provoked the overthrow



of the government in a matter of months, and the regime's survival in these circumstances is the most convincing demonstration of the continued vitality of the revolution. Furthermore the crisis was aggravated by the intensification of the US blockade: the Torricelli and Helms-Burton Laws (of 1992 and 1996 respectively) tried to tighten the noose around Cuba by forcing third countries to apply the same restrictions.

To understand Cuban survival in these circumstances it is necessary to take into account several factors: first, that even faced with such a grave economic crisis Cuba, unlike any other Latin American country (even Sandinista Nicaragua) did not adopt IMF-type deflationary measures; secondly, that it maintained universal free health care and education, the distribution of cheap rations (when the products were available), the control of rents which could not exceed 20 per cent of wages, and highly subsidised prices of gas, electricity and other basic services; and thirdly, that the reforms which were introduced in 1993–94 – free circulation of the dollar, individual self-employment for those that wanted it, joint ventures with foreign capital and a new tax system – were only adopted after an extensive process of consultation with the population. Another indication of the popular character of Cuban Socialism is the country's defence doctrine, which was revised in the mid-1980s following the US invasion of revolutionary Grenada: rather than just relying on the regular army, it was at this time that the Cubans devised the strategy of 'War of the Whole People', reviving the popular militia which had been neglected since the 1960s:

... some three million people were organized and trained in martial arts or tasks related to defense ... We distributed weapons in factories, farms, universities, different neighborhoods in cities and small towns throughout the island to make sure that the population would have access to them in case of a U.S. invasion ... (Blanco 1994, 25–6)

As Blanco points out, to arm the population in this manner was to show great confidence in popular support for the revolution. Finally, and without any doubt, the leadership of Fidel was once again crucial in the survival of the revolution, with his insistence that Cuba would not capitulate to US blackmail and neither would it follow the self-destructive path of *perestroika*; that it would remain Socialist and forge its own model in the new and hostile world which was emerging. What also became apparent as the country struggled through the hardships of the Special Period was that in some ways it was also

returning to its original Cuban and Latin roots, as a distinctive variety of Socialism with strong participatory characteristics.

From 1995 onwards there was a steady recovery of the economy, with a cumulative growth of about 25 per cent by 2002, and significant diversification of production also (the most promising sector being pharmaceuticals and biotechnology). Many state farms, particularly in the sugar sector, have been converted into cooperatives known as UBPCs (Unidades Básicas de Producción Cooperativa, Basic Units of Cooperative Production) in which the state still owns the land but planning and management is in the hands of the workers; the UBPCs have also diversified to produce other crops. Industrial management has been reformed to reflect market conditions within planning priorities set by the state, under the SPE (Sistema de Perfeccionamiento Empresarial, Management Optimisation System) which has been criticised as creating a new capitalist-minded management class (Carmona Báez 2004, 166–80). But Carlos Lage, Executive Secretary of the Cuban Cabinet (Council of Ministers), who is highly respected in Cuba for his Socialist commitment, argues that the SPE combines entrepreneurial efficiency with worker participation in planning and union and party involvement to ensure social justice; and even Carmona Báez recognises that ‘what is experienced in the application of the SPE is the maximisation of state influence over the market’ (ibid., 182–3). In Cuba there is extensive debate about alternative economic strategies, possibly involving greater enterprise autonomy (Carranza Valdés et al. 1996) or more small and medium-size individually or collectively owned businesses, and greater worker participation in management of state enterprises (Blanco 1994, 48–50).

Politically the most significant development has been the leading role assumed by Cuba in the international opposition to neo-liberal globalisation, and the internal debate on the quest for a new post-Soviet model of Socialism, appropriate to the circumstances of the twenty-first century but also faithful to the revolution’s Cuban and Latin American roots. Constant US harassment has probably limited the scope of this debate, since any sign of division or weakness is immediately exploited by Washington to undermine the revolutionary regime as such. But the opening to religious organisations ranging from the Catholic Church to the evangelicals, the promotion of organic agriculture, the increasing acceptance of gay rights, and Fidel’s active participation in international gatherings such as the Ibero-American Heads of States meetings and the UN ‘Earth Summit’ in Rio de Janeiro, are all indications of a Cuban desire to innovate

and to engage in discussion on the major issues of the day. Cuban leaders insist on the continued relevance of Socialism and the need to find a non-capitalist solution to the world's problems, but they do not pretend to export the Cuban model and have demonstrated a very open approach to supporting a variety of progressive regimes such as those of Chávez in Venezuela and Lula in Brazil. Cuba is the best example in today's world of a revolutionary regime which still remains a centre of interest and debate decades after coming to power, and this is why it is important to re-examine its origins, development and original characteristics.

#### THE TRUE ORIGINALITY OF CUBA

The originality of the Cuban experience, then, lies not so much in the recourse to arms as in its unorthodox origins and course of development. A careful analysis based on a detailed knowledge of Cuban history reveals at least four aspects of the Cuban revolution which were quite original. The first of these was the achievement of a remarkably broad consensus, an overwhelming degree of unity around a popular democratic ideology with deep roots in the national culture; in 1959 and later the political expression of the 'opposition', whether openly reactionary or liberal, was minimal. The second remarkable originality of the Cuban process was the achievement of a surprisingly rapid and complete transition to Socialism without any major rupture in the initial popular consensus: the popular democratic ideology evolved in a Socialist direction without trauma and without losing its original characteristics. The third original feature was the central role in the entire process of one man, Fidel Castro, whose significance cannot be overestimated; although – as has been well analysed by María del Pilar Díaz Castañón – the revolution was the work of the Cuban people as collective subject, Fidel was the personification of this collective subject, its intuitive mouthpiece. This has naturally led to accusations of 'populism' in the negative sense, of *caudillismo* and even dictatorship; accusations which are fundamentally misguided and incorrect, but which cannot be refuted without a clear analysis of the origins and characteristics of Fidel's protagonism. However, such accusations are also discredited by an understanding of the fourth and final original feature of the process, namely its essentially democratic character: despite limitations which will be discussed below, the revolution has striven constantly to forge a genuine participatory socialist democracy, and its achievements in this respect should not

be dismissed. The first two of these original characteristics – the broad revolutionary consensus and the swift transition to Socialism – have been analysed above, but the personal protagonism of Fidel and the issue of democracy need to be discussed further.

#### FIDEL: POPULIST CAUDILLO OR MARXIST REVOLUTIONARY?

On the basis of these original features of the revolution it should immediately be clear that those who describe the regime in Havana as ‘Stalinist’ have no understanding of Cuban history; despite strong Soviet influence from 1961 to 1989 the revolution had different roots and characteristics which never disappeared, and the theory and practice of Fidel, Che and the M-26-7 were anything but Stalinist. Almost all observers recognise its deep roots in Cuban popular traditions; in Fidel’s words, ‘The Revolution is as Cuban as the palm trees’ (*Bohemia* 22 March 1959, 75). There is also general recognition of its continuity with earlier popular struggles, beginning with Martí, Maceo and the *mambises* of the independence wars and continuing with Mella, Guiteras, the 1933 revolution and Chibás, a continuity which was constantly referred to by Fidel and the other leaders. Fidel’s personal leadership of the popular resistance against Batista was affirmed at the Moncada and confirmed with his active organisational role from exile in Mexico, the *Granma* expedition and the success of the guerrilla struggle in the Sierra Maestra. Although the M-26-7 was a national organisation with a collective leadership, there was never any doubt that the supreme leader was Fidel and that the strategic vision was Fidel’s, and as time went on it became clear that the greatest inspiration for thousands of militants throughout the country was the charisma and political genius of Fidel (only rivalled, for a time, by that of Che Guevara).

This makes it easier to understand why in January 1959, after the revolutionary victory, the explosion of popular enthusiasm did not find expression in any political party, not even – or perhaps especially not – in the PSP. The 26 July Movement had become the national liberation movement of the Cuban people, and it was identified in the popular mind less with a political programme than with the figure of Fidel and with the rest of the *barbudos* like Raúl, Che Guevara and Camilo Cienfuegos. This does not mean that policy decisions could be completely arbitrary (Herbert Matthews, who in general had a remarkably perceptive understanding of Cuba, at one point made the absurd suggestion that Fidel would have embraced any ideology from

liberal to Fascist if it seemed to produce results!) (Matthews 1975, 228). The movement did have an ideology (although not a dogmatic formula), summed up in what Kapcia calls *cubanía revolucionaria*; and there were essential popular demands like the agrarian reform, popular education and the purging of *batistianos* from the state apparatus which the leadership had to satisfy to retain the trust of the people. But within these broad parameters the leadership had great freedom of action: the people felt that their deepest desires were interpreted by Fidel and the M-26-7, they wanted and expected decisive action from the leaders, and they regarded party politics and elections as irrelevant or even as a betrayal of the revolution. Democracy – the power of the people – meant the absolute power of the movement which had overthrown Batista's tyranny and which expressed popular hopes and dreams after decades of frustration. These hopes and dreams, the popular will forged in struggle against the tyranny, were now expressed openly in Fidel's speeches which became the voice of the collective subject of the revolution, the Cuban people as protagonist of its own destiny.

The Cuban revolution, then, had the classic features of a left-populist movement: charismatic leadership, massive popular mobilisation, relative ideological fluidity (which does not imply lack of ideology), organisational and tactical flexibility, a radical but non-dogmatic discourse, and a remarkable capacity to bypass political parties and established institutions. Fidel Castro's exceptional ability as popular leader, and the particular characteristics of the M-26-7, facilitated during the armed struggle and even more during the radical transformation of 1959–62 the marginalisation of almost all political parties and institutions and the creation of a direct democracy – a structure of popular power – which gravitated automatically towards Socialism. The PSP was dragged along by the process against its initial wishes and in the end came to play an important but secondary role in the revolution. Everyone – Batista, the old Cuban politicians, the USA, the Catholic Church and the international Left – was surprised by the strength and radicalism of the process. Therefore the description of the revolution as populist does not imply that it was in any way reformist, opportunist or demagogic; quite the contrary, it confirms the words of Ernesto Laclau, that a Socialist populism is not the most backward form of working-class consciousness but the most advanced (Laclau 1977, 174; see the discussion below in Chapter 6).

One of the most important, and most misunderstood, features of the revolutionary situation was Fidel Castro's oratory, his

interminable speeches to which foreigners could not relate but which held most Cubans spellbound. Often passionate, sometimes calm and methodical, at times didactic, Fidel's speeches ranged in tone from solemn political pronouncements to intimate dialogue in which each listener might feel as if in a private conversation with the *Comandante-en-Jefe*. Moreover, in his constant travels around the country the leader did in fact converse with thousands of workers and peasants and listened to their concerns – and those who know him well say that one of his greatest virtues is his ability to listen. A fundamental aspect of Fidel's leadership of the struggle against Batista, little understood outside Cuba, was his insistence on the unity of the revolutionary movement and on a policy of alliances with all political forces prepared to agree on a minimum revolutionary platform; and in power as well, contrary to the impression of many outsiders who think that every important decision is taken by Fidel, his role has typically been to mediate and build consensus. Although on certain crucial occasions his analytical vigour and rhetorical brilliance have carried the day, at other times he has been in a minority among the leadership and has accepted the majority opinion (Blanco 1994, 30).

To appreciate the significance of Fidel's speeches (and to a lesser extent those of the other revolutionary leaders) it is necessary to bear in mind that there already existed in Cuba, as in other Latin countries, a tradition of grandiloquent and long-winded oratory. What was new and compelling about Fidel's discourse was, first, his direct and down-to-earth language, and second, his passionate sincerity. Where the self-serving politicians of the old regime had been renowned for their pretentious and bombastic rhetoric and hypocritical promises, here was a leader who spoke directly and frankly to the people in their own language and whose actions corresponded to his words. Although he spoke at enormous length his rhetoric was acceptable to the people because it was so frequently the expression of their own deeply held convictions, and they would listen to him for hours in the heat of the day because he was both giving voice to their desires and didactically explaining the reasons for and the implications of revolutionary policies. A distinguished and perceptive observer of this process was Jean-Paul Sartre, who visited Cuba for a fortnight in March 1960 and declared at the end of his visit:

Fidel Castro is very fond of the phrase 'The Revolution of the majority', and it seems to me that that phrase is absolutely correct. It's clear that at the moment

he has a relationship with the majority of the people and it is also clear that in that relationship he expresses and fulfils the will of the people ... At this moment there exists between the rulers and the people – and particularly between Fidel Castro and the people – a relationship which we could describe as one of direct democracy, which consists in explaining to the people the implications in terms of work, effort and sacrifice of the desires expressed by the people ...

This is therefore a Revolution which is creating its own ideology and its own instruments through direct contact with the masses. For all these reasons it is the most original Revolution I have seen ... . (*Revolución* 11 March 1960)

When Fidel spoke there was often a sense of dialogue, of mutual interaction, between him and the people, sometimes expressed in shouts, applause or interjections, and sometimes more instinctive ways; 'The dialogue and the incorporation into [public] discourse of anonymous proposals from the people brought about such a level of interaction as to convert the audience from spectators into participants' (Díaz Castañón 2001, 111). Fidel was in effect the mouthpiece of the Cuban nation.

That this was not merely a matter of ideological agreement is apparent from the accounts of various eye-witnesses who testify to the intensity of the experience. Enrique Oltuski, a leader of the M-26-7 in Las Villas who later held various ministerial positions in the revolutionary government, was in Santa Clara on 6 January 1959 when Fidel passed through on his triumphal march to Havana, and he describes the scene as follows:

... Fidel approached the microphone and a sensation of collective hysteria took hold of the crowd. After several attempts Fidel managed to say a few words. It was then that I saw for the first time the emergence of that strange communion between Fidel and the people. The people applauded him because he expressed their feelings, because he said what they were all thinking ... . (Oltuski 2000, 249)

Oltuski saw the same phenomenon the next day in Cienfuegos: 'Despite having passed many hours without rest, Fidel was transformed when he faced the crowd. Then he seemed to forget his tiredness, and the strange communion I had observed in Santa Clara occurred again ...' (Oltuski 2000, 253–4).

This is the essence of the populist phenomenon, and although it has mystical overtones it is not irrational, not just 'collective hysteria'. As we have seen it is based on the deeds, on the actual achievements of the revolutionary *caudillo*, and on his uncanny ability to synthesise

and express popular feelings with remarkable force and accuracy. The over-used term 'vox populi' can truly be applied to Castro at his best.

The legitimacy of the system derives precisely from its profoundly popular and revolutionary character. From the very beginning, without recourse to stereotyped formulae, Fidel insisted on the revolutionary character of the new government: 'The revolution cannot be made in a day, but rest assured that we will carry out the revolution. Rest assured that for the first time the Republic will be completely free and the people will have what they deserve ...' (*Revolución* 4 January 1959). Less than two months later, and once again in Santiago, he proclaimed: 'Many people have not yet realised the scope of the change which has occurred in our country ...' (*Revolución* 25 February 1959). The same message was delivered by Raúl Castro in a speech on 13 March in Havana: 'On the First of January 1959 we had done no more than conclude the war of independence; the Revolution of Martí begins now' – and he went on: 'This Revolution has a series of characteristics which differentiate it from all other revolutions. The world beholds in astonishment the transformation which is taking place in our country in economic, political, social, moral, cultural and all other aspects ...' (*Revolución* 14 March 1959). There was no talk of Socialism, much less of Marxism-Leninism, indeed not even of class struggle; but there was repeated insistence on the radical character of the revolution, on the decisive break with the past and the need for a real transformation of the country. Fidel came back to this theme in a speech on 25 March:

If it had been a question of a mere change of individuals, of a mere change of command and if we had left everything just as it was before and had not got involved in the task of reform, in an effort to overcome all the injustices of our republic ... [then it would not be a revolution]. There was a Revolution because there were injustices to overcome and because, in Maceo's words: 'The Revolution will continue as long as there remains an injustice which has not been remedied' .... (*La Calle* 1 August 1959)

Another constant feature of the revolutionary discourse was continuity with the historic struggles of the Cuban people, with the traditions of Céspedes, Martí, Maceo, Mella, Guiteras, Chibás and others. The revolution was a rupture with the structures of the past, with vested interests, with corruption and dictatorship, but a continuation and fulfilment of national and popular traditions. This reclaiming of historical memory was a fundamental component of



the movement's ideology and a central factor in its acceptance by the people as the legitimate expression of their interests. As already mentioned, Fidel said, 'the Revolution is as Cuban as the palm trees', and therefore it needed no lessons from abroad; and 'The *mambises* began the war for independence which we concluded on 1 January 1959 ...' (*Revolución* 25 February 1959). The same process of emancipation was now continuing, and this in itself implied the need for radical change. In February Marcelo Fernández, National Secretary of Organisation of the M-26-7, wrote an article with the title 'Permanent Revolution' insisting that the revolutionary transformation was only just beginning: 'The War of '68 ended with the Pact of Zanjón, that of '98 ended with the Platt Amendment, and the 1933 Revolution led to Welles' Mediation. But this Revolution cannot be shipwrecked with Pacts, Amendments or Mediations ...' (*Revolución* 16 February 1959). In the same way, when faced with criticisms by vested interests and reactionary attacks, the revolutionary government defended itself by appealing to the legitimacy of its continuity with Martí and the *mambises*; in June 1959, when the attacks on the agrarian reform intensified, Fidel declared that '... what we are doing, you gentlemen who defend powerful interests, what we are doing is to fulfil the declarations and the doctrine of our Apostle, who said that the fatherland belonged to all and was for the good of all ...' (*Revolución* 8 June 1959).

This insistence on Cuban national and popular traditions was logically connected with a defence of the Latin American character of the revolution, its identification with the struggles of the entire continent and with Bolívar's dream of unity. The victorious insurgents felt instinctively that their triumph was part of a larger movement, that they had a duty to support the struggles of fellow Latin Americans: 'Above all we feel the interests of our Fatherland and of our America, which is also a greater Fatherland', declared Fidel at a press conference in the Hotel Riviera on 22 January 1959, just before leaving for Venezuela on his first trip abroad after the victory (*Revolución* 23 January 1959). In the same press conference he suggested that the Cuban example would be imitated, and spoke out explicitly in favour of the Bolivarian vision: '... a dream I have in my heart and which I believe is shared by everyone in Latin America, is one day to see Latin America completely united, that it should be a single force, because we are of the same race, the same language, the same feelings'. This is the concept of race as *criollo* ethnicity, as the common heritage of indigenous, black and European citizens of

*Nuestra América*, and it was a constant reference for all representatives of the movement. In a television interview on 5 March 1959 Armando Hart declared that

at this moment this Revolution is making a contribution to the thought of Latin America; *Nuestra América*, to the South of the Río Grande, is in need of a system of thought for a continent which needs to unite and achieve integration as the Cuban people have done, overcoming any sectarianism. (*Revolución* 6 March 1959)

Similarly – and for obvious reasons – this was a frequent topic of Che Guevara’s speeches: ‘... we are carrying the Revolution forward in the midst of forces that want to destroy it even more because of what it represents for all the Americas, as a special beacon for [our] America at this time ...’ (*Revolución* 2 May 1959). Finally in July 1959, in relation to the aggressive plots being hatched against Cuba in the Dominican Republic, Camilo Cienfuegos declared that

Trujillo’s provocative plans won’t be successful because the peoples of the Americas are watching the development of the Cuban Revolution, because they know that the historic destiny of all the nations of the Hemisphere depends on the process which Cuba is going through at present. (*Revolución* 10 July 1959)

Indeed, not content with preventing plots against the revolution by neighbouring dictators, many young Cubans wanted to go the other way and planned assaults on the Dominican Republic, Nicaragua or Panama (Díaz Castañón 2001, 119).

But it was not only the Cubans who proclaimed the revolution’s continental significance. Right from the start this view was shared by representatives of other Latin countries, and the impact of the revolution on Cuba’s sister republics was enormous. The reasons for this are not difficult to understand: it was due, first, to the remarkable guerrilla victory over Batista’s regular army, and second, to the example of national independence and anti-imperialism – and this from the very beginning, at least implicitly, well before the radicalisation of the breach with the United States. At the end of February 1959 the then Chilean Senator Salvador Allende visited Cuba and declared that ‘The Cuban Revolution does not belong only to you ... we are dealing with the most significant movement ever to have occurred in the Americas ...’ (*Revolución* 28 February 1959). In the same vein Gloria Gaitán, daughter of the great Colombian popular (and populist) leader Jorge Eliécer Gaitán, declared in an interview in April 1959 that ‘The Cuban revolutionary movements

correspond to the entire wave of insurrections which in Latin America are challenging the past', and that the work of the M-26-7 was 'the beginning of the great liberation of *Nuestra América* ...' (*Revolución* 24 April 1959).

These sentiments of Latin American solidarity were one of the prevailing themes in the huge mass rally of 26 July 1959 in Havana, the first celebration of the founding event of the movement after the revolutionary victory. Among those present on the podium were Salvador Allende, Gloria Gaitán and Lázaro Cárdenas, the former Mexican President who had been responsible for that country's oil nationalisation and agrarian reform in the 1930s. Raúl Castro saluted the great Mexican statesman thus:

Brothers of the Latin American Continent, General Lázaro Cárdenas, this revolution is not the exclusive property of our people, neither is it limited to our frontiers. We believe that the hour of the second independence for the whole continent, foretold by our apostle [José Martí], is arriving ... . (*La Calle* 28 July 1959)

Cárdenas replied that '... the Cuban Revolution has aroused a profound sentiment of solidarity in the whole Continent, because the cause of Revolution is indivisible ...' (*Revolución* 27 July 1959). It was clear to all, long before the Socialist definition of the revolution, that Cuba represented the most vigorous expression of the Latin American anti-imperialist and unitary movement with its roots in Bolívar and Martí, and that it was entering a new phase which pointed towards a popular and participatory democracy with a profound social content. This orientation became clearer still in the final months of 1959, after the desertions of Díaz Lanz and Hubert Matos and the first bomb attacks from Florida; in the words of Che Guevara speaking in front of the presidential palace on 26 October, 'We are not Guatemala. We are Cuba, which rises up today at the head of the Americas, responding to each blow with a new step forward ...' (*Revolución* 27 October 1959).

What becomes clear from this analysis of the revolutionary discourse is that it is not necessary to postulate any supposed concealed Communist intent to explain the radicalisation of the Cuban revolution; this radicalisation sprang naturally from the popular character of the movement, from the structural contradiction with imperialism and from the leadership's ideology of nationalism and social justice, an ideology which had such profound roots in Cuban and Latin American history that it found spontaneous

expression in the course of the struggle. The great virtue of Fidel was his unrivalled capacity to synthesise and personify that ideology and the corresponding revolutionary will in a populist dynamic of dialogue with the Cuban people. This does not mean that Marxism was irrelevant to the Cuban revolution, but simply that the revolution would arrive at its Socialist goal by other means and with a different ideological inspiration.

This failure to conform to Marxist-Leninist stereotypes was also evident in relation to issues of class and class conflict. The revolutionary discourse made frequent reference to the movement's popular and anti-oligarchic character, but the protagonist referred to was not the proletariat or working class as such, rather it was the people, the popular classes, the humble: in other words, the great majority of the Cuban nation. The enemies of the revolution were the oligarchy and imperialism, the rich and the privileged; but the door was left open even for them, since if they abandoned their privileges they were welcome in the new country that was being built. This was very well formulated by Fidel in the phrase: 'The privileged [classes] will not be executed, but privileges will be ...' (*Revolución* 15 June 1959). But, he insisted, if the rich thought they could prevent revolutionary measures by bribery and corruption, they were badly mistaken:

They helped the Revolution in order to buy us out. So, as I could see that in that phase [of the armed struggle] everyone helped the Revolution, I ask them to make a sacrifice, to continue making a sacrifice for the Country, not just during the insurrection but in this creative effort, because the Revolution doesn't preach hatred, the Revolution preaches justice ... I know everyone helped, yes, but the Revolution was not made in order to maintain privilege, the Revolution was made to establish justice, the Revolution wasn't made to enrich those who were already rich, but to give to those in need, to give to those who had nothing, to give food to those that work ... (*Revolución* 12 March 1959)

Similarly, on several occasions Fidel insisted that those who wanted to provoke class confrontation were the counter-revolutionaries; speaking on Lawyers' Day (8 June) to the members of the Havana Bar Association, he declared: 'What do they want? To provoke class war? To incite class hatred when it is our purpose that the revolution should be seen as the work of the whole nation?' – because, he pointed out, here there were more than a thousand lawyers, who were far from being poor or underprivileged, but who supported the revolution as they showed by their applause (*Revolución* 9 June 1959). In the same

sense Raúl Castro also insisted that they were not closing the door on anyone, 'And that to those who in minuscule numbers are against the Revolution, we tell them in good faith – because in principle we don't wish evil for anyone – we make a patriotic appeal to them to adapt to the new situation, to adapt to the brilliant process which began on the First of January ...' (*Revolución* 14 March 1959).

The discourse of the revolution, especially in the first euphoric 18 months in power, was profoundly anti-oligarchic and anti-imperialist, but also generous and open-minded, with a powerful ethical commitment and an emphasis on social justice. It was therefore not a class discourse but a populist one: the protagonist of the revolution was the Cuban people, all of those who worked with the sweat of their brow, but also the intellectuals and even businessmen and industrialists if they were honest and supported the process. As the revolution radicalised and became more egalitarian, the discourse became explicitly Socialist and finally Marxist-Leninist, but the stereotyped formulae of the international Communist movement never became totally dominant in Cuba, and in the post-Soviet world Cuban representatives – Fidel, of course, but not only Fidel – have been able to engage in constructive dialogue with the new anti-globalisation and anti-capitalist movements and the new political and social movements in Latin America. It remains to be seen how Cuba will adapt in the long run to the new world situation, but perhaps the most striking development in Cuban policy is the intimate relationship with, and total support for, Hugo Chávez and the Bolivarian revolution in Venezuela. Despite obvious differences, the two revolutions share the same left-populist roots and the same popular-democratic and anti-imperialist characteristics, and Fidel has clearly recognised that Venezuela is showing the way ahead for the Latin American revolution in the twenty-first century.

#### THE ISSUE OF DEMOCRACY

Fidel's extraordinary dialectical relationship with the people is what Sartre described as direct democracy, and it was fundamental to the Cuban process. Liberals have always praised the social achievements of the Cuban revolution but labelled it as undemocratic because of the lack of Western-style elections, but it is necessary to understand that from the beginning the Cubans rejected the liberal-pluralist model as irrelevant, and this attitude was shared by a majority of the population. Early in 1959, as in any country just emerging from

dictatorship, the question of elections was raised, and the typical response of the revolutionary leaders was that they would be held in 18 months to two years, when the revolutionary process was consolidated. Pressed repeatedly on the question by Cuban and North American journalists, Fidel responded in a television interview on 25 March:

Which of us here has said anything against elections? No-one ... However, such is the weariness that people feel, such is their repugnance at the memory of that verbiage, at the memory of those rallies with hypocrites parading from one platform to the next ... We are favourable to elections, but elections that will really respect the people's will, by means of procedures which put an end to political machinations ... . (*Revolución* 26 March 1959)

Similarly in another interview in June – with a large audience – when a journalist quoted the opinion that anyone who spoke against elections was ‘Communist, Fascist or Nazi’, Fidel replied in a more polemical tone:

Do you want to have elections right away, tomorrow? Shall we call on the people to vote tomorrow? [The audience shouted ‘No!’] Supposedly elections mean consulting the people's will, so you people must be Fascists or Communists because you've shouted against elections. What a poor sense of judgement! Instead of blaming those who are responsible for the people's distrust of elections, those who converted politics into a quest for spoils ... What is really odd is that those who have no popular support talk about elections ... . (*Revolución* 15 June 1959)

Rather than elections, he explained, what was needed was genuine democracy: ‘There is democracy in the Government. The Government is at the service of the people, not of political cliques or oligarchies ... We have democracy today, for the first time in our history ... ’ – because real democracy, government of the people, he explained, only existed once before in Cuba, and that was with Guiteras in 1933; and that was destroyed by reaction (*Revolución* 15 June 1959).

Indeed, everything suggested that the people did not want elections, at least not at that time and not in the conventional form. An opinion poll conducted by *Bohemia* magazine in June showed that almost 60 per cent were against elections, at least for the next three to four years, whereas 90 per cent were in favour of the revolutionary government and the agrarian reform (*Bohemia* 28 June 1959, 70–3, 96). This poll also revealed the interesting fact that opposition to elections was stronger among workers and peasants, while those who

did want elections were proprietors, executives and professionals. The reasons given by those opposed to elections were that they would interrupt the work of the revolution, that they would encourage petty politicking and that they would mislead the people. On the other hand, the same social classes that opposed conventional elections also declared themselves in favour of a different type of elections, of a system (yet to be developed) of revolutionary democracy. This is why they responded so favourably to Fidel's repeated statements in favour of such a system, as when he referred to the agrarian reform:

And by redeeming the peasant, the Revolution is taking the first step towards building a true democracy; a democracy without slaves, a democracy without helots; which is also the strange phenomenon of a non-representative democracy, but one which is yet more pure: a democracy which lives through the direct participation of the people in political problems ... . (*Revolución* 28 July 1959)

This was one of the most sensitive and crucial issues of the revolution, and indeed of any revolution. As Raúl Castro also pointed out, if those who wanted to redirect the process towards 'those false democracies, those democracies of privilege', then true peace would never exist and in another 15 or 20 years at the most, 'as well as still facing all the problems we are fighting against today, another Machado or Batista would arise' (*Revolución* 7 September 1959). In other words, liberal democracy would not resolve the country's major social and economic problems, and this would lead to further political turmoil and eventually another dictatorship.

For some 15 years the revolutionary notion of direct popular democracy functioned in Cuba on an informal basis, and mass organisations like the CDRs, the CTC, the FMC and the UJC (Unión de Jóvenes Comunistas, Union of Young Communists) were the only institutional channels for popular participation. The spontaneous interaction with Fidel and other leaders was genuine and important, but it could not substitute for organised structures where popular concerns could be expressed. It was to overcome this deficiency that the system of 'People's Power' was created in the mid-1970s and given permanent status in the 1976 Constitution. The 'Organs of People's Power' (Órganos de Poder Popular, OPP) are elected governing bodies at municipal, provincial and national level, with delegates elected by universal suffrage and secret ballot. Municipal delegates represent small wards of 1,000 to 1,500 voters and candidates are nominated in public mass meetings; by law at this level there must be between

two and eight candidates for every seat. Both the Communist Party and the mass organisations like the CTC and FMC are forbidden by law from intervening in the nomination process, so that people nominate whomever they consider to be best for the job based on local personal reputation. Peter Roman, author of a detailed study of Poder Popular, points to three crucial differences between the Cuban system and that obtaining in the former Soviet Union: that in Cuba municipal delegates must reside in their electoral district; that the municipal elections are competitive by law; and that the Communist Party does not choose the candidates (Roman 2003, 103).

Attendance at nomination meetings averages from 70 to 90 per cent of eligible voters, and most delegates say that when they were first nominated they had no idea they were going to be proposed (Roman 2003, 107). The only campaigning allowed is the distribution of candidates' photographs and biographies. Once elected, municipal delegates are responsible for all local affairs including supervision of schools, hospitals, factories and other productive facilities within the municipality, obviously within the parameters laid down at national level. They serve for two and a half years and may be re-elected, but they also have to report back to their electors in public meetings every six months and may be recalled if there is widespread dissatisfaction with their performance. This is not an idle threat: in 1989, for example, 114 delegates were recalled, and only 45 per cent of delegates were re-elected overall (Cole 1998, 38). I have attended some report-back meetings (*rendición de cuentas*), and some of them at least are vigorous public cross-examinations in which the community asserts its authority in no uncertain terms. Moreover, the six-monthly reporting back is not limited to one public meeting per delegate: the size of each meeting is limited by law to 120 people, so most delegates have to hold between four and ten such meetings depending on the size of their ward.

One of the reasons for the non-re-election of delegates (as distinct from recall) is that the task is extremely demanding. Roman points out that 'The public conceives that their delegates are on call at all hours and for any reason. Many citizens with emergencies or personal problems contact their delegate first' (Roman 2003, 77). Delegates at all levels are non-salaried volunteers and continue to work in their regular jobs in addition to their representative duties, and with the pressure of popular demands and reporting back they are often under considerable stress; in many cases therefore they themselves refuse to serve more than one term. The reason for the insistence on non-



payment of delegates is to prevent the emergence of a professional political class, to ensure that as in Rousseau's ideal or in the Paris Commune, delegates should be just like the working people they are mandated to serve.

It seems clear that there is a close, even intimate relationship between municipal delegates and the electors they serve. In 1990 a survey conducted by *Bohemia* magazine found that 75.2 per cent knew the name of their municipal delegate, and asked whether they trusted their delegate, 59.1 per cent said Yes, 23.3 per cent said Somewhat, and only 17.6 per cent said No (Roman 2003, 78): a level of confidence which compares very favourably with that found in most liberal systems. One aspect of Poder Popular which cannot be emphasised too much is the small size of municipal wards and the sense of direct responsibility of delegates to their constituents, who are after all their immediate neighbours: with only 1,500 or so voters in most cases, the typical ward consists of half a dozen city blocks or a small village in the countryside (August 1999, 256–7). This creates a sense of direct involvement in the political process lacking in most countries, where even local councillors typically represent 10,000 people or more. If Cuban municipal delegates are tied up with what is sometimes disparagingly referred to as 'parish pump' politics, this is where involvement in the political process should logically begin; and if in most countries including Britain turnout in local elections is appallingly low (30 per cent or less), one reason for this is undoubtedly the remoteness of local councillors.

The other reason commonly cited for lack of participation in local elections in 'advanced' Western countries is the sense that local councils lack real power (a situation which in Britain has been accentuated as a matter of deliberate central government policy since Thatcher). In Cuba a similar problem emerged during the worst years of the 'Special Period' when very frequently delegates simply could not resolve concrete problems raised by their constituents because of the extreme scarcity of many goods: if a delegate were asked to improve the street lighting or paving, for example, they could not do it even with the best will in the world because light bulbs, asphalt and cement were not available. According to some reports this did lead to frustration and some loss of confidence in the system, but with improved conditions in recent years this is not such an important problem.

It should also be emphasised that Cuban local delegates do hold significant authority over social and economic affairs going well

beyond the 'parish pump'; through the municipal assembly they are responsible for all aspects of local administration. They do not legislate, but they do supervise the running of everything from schools and hospitals to recreational and productive facilities in their municipality: in Cole's words, 'Poder Popular decentralized the management of productive and service enterprises and institutions to the areas or constituencies which they serve' (Cole 1998, 36). Even large factories, although ultimately controlled by the central government, are supervised on a day-to-day basis by commissions of the municipal assemblies, which may report managers to higher authorities for poor performance, sometimes leading to their dismissal.

In addition to the municipal assemblies there is a further instrument of local democracy which was introduced in 1988, the people's councils. These operate on a smaller scale than the municipalities; each municipality is divided into several units, each with its own people's council consisting of the municipal delegates from that district plus representatives of the mass organisations and state enterprises in the district. The president and vice-president of the people's council are elected by its members and must be popular delegates, not appointees of the mass organisations or enterprises. Unlike the municipal assemblies, these councils do not have administrative responsibilities, but they do have extensive powers to investigate and make complaints about corruption, inefficiency and other problems, and have become an increasingly significant instrument for citizens to gain access to higher authorities and resolve important issues:

On the one hand, people's councils became part of the convergence of civil and political societies, by amplifying constituents' frequent and personal contacts with their elected municipal representatives; and strengthening the application of the *mandat impératif*, that is, the responses and responsibilities of municipal delegates regarding citizens' *planteamientos* [complaints]. On the other hand, people's councils have also supported the development of a more autonomous civil society ... (Roman 2003, 234)

The development and popularity of the people's councils has sometimes led to conflicts of authority with the municipal assemblies, but this can probably be taken as a healthy sign of local democratic vigour.

At higher level Popular Power as an expression of the direct will or interests of the people suffers from greater limitations. Under the 1976 Constitution provincial delegates were chosen by the municipal

assembly, and national delegates were likewise chosen by provincial assemblies from among their members. This pyramidal structure obviously severely limited popular influence on the process, and in 1992 it was replaced by direct election at all levels. But it is still the case that there is only one candidate for each position at provincial or national level, and the nomination process is less open than at municipal level, so that the election is more like a popular ratification of a preselected list of candidates. The one significant qualification of this is a requirement introduced in 1992 for delegates to receive the votes of at least 50 per cent of the registered electorate in their districts; if turnout is too low, the process has to be repeated, and this can be a mechanism for voters to reject unpopular candidates. National delegates, like local ones, are unpaid, except for those selected as officers of the Assembly or its commissions.

The Council of State, the country's supreme authority, is elected by the National Assembly whose deputies vote in secret ballot on a list drawn up by a candidacy commission which takes into account deputies' proposals but modifies the list to achieve 'balance'. It clearly does make an effort to include figures representative of different areas of national life and to achieve consensus in the Assembly on this, but the process is more one of negotiation within the governing elite than of democratic election. Decisions of the Council of State have to be ratified by the National Assembly, which has supreme legislative authority. However, the National Assembly meets in plenary session only twice a year for a few days, and its votes are always unanimous because of a convention that favours consensus; controversial proposals are usually withdrawn and redrafted. Most of the work is done by specialised commissions of the Assembly, on which about half the delegates serve and which have much longer sessions including public hearings, often meeting in the provinces (Roman 2003, 85–9). The commissions clearly do allow for a significant degree of debate and public input, but this does not alter the fact that debate in the Assembly as such is limited and many delegates feel pressure to conform. This is in part due to the need for national unity in the face of US hostility, but may also reflect the heritage of Soviet influence.

However, popular input into policy is not limited to the formal structures of Poder Popular; the Constitution provides for processes of popular consultation on major issues, and even if formal national consultation processes are not very frequent, they are remarkably extensive and thorough when they occur. The 1976 Constitution

was circulated in draft form to the mass organisations and debated extensively in thousands of local branches, and revised in accordance with these discussions before being put to popular referendum. In the summer of 1990 there were some 89,000 workplace meetings in preparation for the Fourth Party Congress of 1991, plus many meetings in neighbourhoods, schools and universities, generating a multitude of comments which served as input for the delegates in considering the constitutional amendments which would be adopted in 1992 (Cole 1998, 37). Also for the first time many delegates to the Party Congress were nominated directly by the rank-and-file, rather than members just being given a prearranged list to vote on; and in the Congress itself, in contrast to the Soviet-style tradition which had prevailed for the previous 20 years, the General Secretary (Fidel) did not pre-empt discussion by giving guidelines for discussion, but limited his opening remarks to a presentation of the country's problems and then opened the floor for debate (Blanco 1994, 30). In 1993–94 a similar process took place, again with over 80,000 'workers' parliaments' in workplaces discussing the proposed economic reforms (legalisation of the dollar and of foreign investment, self-employment, introduction of income tax and so on). Opinions expressed were synthesised and reported to the National Assembly, and the proposed legislation was modified accordingly. As a result of this consultation process the proposed income tax was limited to incomes from self-employment or private property, and was not applied to wages as originally proposed.

Direct popular involvement in economic policy and management is in fact a crucial element of popular democracy and Socialism: Cuban development policy cannot be understood in purely economic terms, divorced from the politics of Socialist participation. Thus the Rectification Campaign was conceived explicitly in these terms, as explained by Fidel himself:

The most serious error of economic policy put in practice between 1975 and 1985 was undoubtedly its reliance upon economic mechanisms to resolve all the problems faced by a new society, ignoring the role assigned to *political* factors in the construction of socialism. (quoted in Cole 1998, 44)

Ken Cole points out that the Soviet-style SDPE planning system was ended for *political* reasons: 'Economic regulation and control was to be a conscious political process of choosing priorities, and not considered to be the "inevitable" economic result of technical specialization ... or the necessary effect of the anarchy of market

forces ... ' (Cole 1998, 45). The directly political implications of the Rectification Campaign, relating to popular socialist consciousness and participation, were constantly emphasised both by the Cuban leadership and by the most critical and creative intellectuals. Thus Haroldo Dilla and others at the Centro de Estudios sobre América (Centre for the Study of the Americas) wrote in 1993: 'It would be wrong to see these changes ... as basically issues of economic administration ... the basic challenge of rectification was the problem of participation, the problems of which have been *less significant than the advances in socialist democracy*' (quoted in Cole 1998, 121; Cole's emphasis). This was further borne out by the measures adopted in the 'Special Period'; although the economic crisis obliged the leadership to reverse some of the policy changes of rectification (for instance, allowing private farmers' markets and self-employment, both of which had existed in the early 1980s and had been banned under rectification), in political terms the emphasis of the 1992 reforms was very much on improving participation and democracy.

The question of Communist Party intervention or influence in Cuban elections is a complex one. The legal prohibition of party intervention was designed to ensure separation of party and state, unlike the situation in the Soviet Union. At local level there is much evidence to suggest that delegate nomination is indeed free and independent, but at national level this is much less clear. Approximately 15 per cent of the Cuban adult population belong to the party, and 70 per cent of both municipal and national delegates are party members. The fact that 30 per cent are not does suggest a degree of independence in delegate selection; national delegates have included members of Catholic and Protestant churches, for example, an indication that the process is partially open to non-party interests. Since recruitment to the party is by popular nomination, in which workers in each enterprise propose for party membership those individuals they consider to be most outstanding, it seems only natural that there should be considerable overlap with the choice of OPP delegates; it should also be borne in mind that outstanding non-party delegates are often invited to join the party, another factor boosting the percentage who belong to the party without implying that it controls the electoral process (Roman 2003, 93). At local level it seems clear that there is a large degree of popular autonomy in both elections and municipal assembly discussions, but at national level there is little doubt that basic policy is decided by the Communist Party leadership and ratified by a National Assembly which it in

fact controls. It is possible to justify this as necessary to preserve the basic components of popular power and Socialism in the face of US sabotage, but it cannot convincingly be described as fully democratic.

The role of the Communist Party cannot be separated from the issue of multi-party liberalism versus direct, participatory democracy. The concept of a single party expressing national unity and consensus did not begin in Cuba after 1959, and neither was it borrowed from or imposed by the Soviet Union. Rather, it originated in the late nineteenth century with José Martí and the Partido Revolucionario Cubano, the Cuban Revolutionary Party which united many different political clubs in Cuba and among Cuban émigrés in the US and the Caribbean. Party politics – multi-party politics, that is – was seen as factional and divisive. The single-party system, therefore, is not only a defensive reaction to the US blockade, and once again a very interesting perspective is provided by Juan Antonio Blanco:

... rather than advocating an evolution toward a multi-party system, which is a system that emerged in the world some 200 years ago as a response to a specific historical reality, I would prefer to see us create a new kind of democracy using different tools. I think it is entirely possible to achieve a pluralist one-party system if in that system there were strong sectoral organizations – women's organizations, farmers' groups, neighborhood committees, etc. These sectoral organizations exist in Cuba today, but would have to be stronger at the grassroots level to play the role, when necessary, of challenging government policies. (Blanco 1994, 68–9)

One of the key issues here, as argued in my discussion of democracy, is the role and ideology of the single party. If it is to be truly democratic and an instrument of genuine unity and consensus (unity achieved from the grass roots and not imposed), it cannot be a vehicle of a very specific ideology such as Marxism-Leninism; in other words, it cannot be a Communist party as conventionally understood. Undoubtedly it should express a general commitment to popular power, participatory democracy and socialism, but within those broad parameters it should be open to all currents of thought and ideologies. The Cuban Communist Party has become more open in recent years; this can be seen in its practice of recruiting the best workers as recommended by their colleagues, and by the decision to accept religious believers as members. But it is still the case that members are then indoctrinated with Marxism-Leninism, by all accounts on the basis of very traditional, even dogmatic manuals;

and this cannot be the basis for a free and open Socialist democracy. Of course the ideas of Marx, Engels, Lenin and all the revolutionary classics should be studied, but on a critical basis and along with creative and progressive thought of all kinds – as already occurs in Cuba, but not with the blessing of the party.

The Cuban system of popular participation has been the subject of two interesting recent studies, one by the Canadian author Arnold August and the second by Peter Roman of the City University of New York (August 1999; Roman 2003). August's work suffers from a poor writing style and a number of historical errors, but it does have the virtue of being the first attempt to study the Cuban system seriously on the basis of direct observation; while Roman's study is a thorough and closely argued piece of academic research which sets the Cuban system in the context of the philosophy and practice of direct and/or Socialist democracy from Rousseau and Marx onwards, and constitutes an excellent antidote to the superficiality of most liberal accounts of Cuban 'dictatorship'. These two studies demonstrate that grass-roots participatory democracy is a reality in Cuba, and although the system has limitations in terms of freedom of expression and participation in decision-making at national level (to which US policy has powerfully contributed), it can in no way be dismissed as merely authoritarian. The crucial error of liberals has always been to judge Cuba in terms of formal political institutions, without understanding that Socialist democracy is about popular participation and decision-making in all spheres of the economy and society: municipal delegates of Popular Power appointing the managers and supervising the operations of local facilities from schools to factories or health clinics, trade unionists intervening in the management and planning of their enterprises, mini-brigades building houses for themselves and their communities, or people in local neighbourhoods organising their own *organopónico* allotments. It is this, coupled with the reality of social justice, which gives the Cuban system legitimacy with or without Fidel, and which makes it relevant today in the quest for an alternative to capitalist globalisation. The Cuban revolution is not over and it too will continue to change, but contrary to the prevailing opinion, that change does not have to be in the direction of liberal pluralism and a 'market economy'; rather it may well be towards a deepening of participatory democracy and socialism.