

Worker Control in the 1990s

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The revolution stumbled, and yet workers won more power in the workplace. During the retreat of the revolutionary government in Cuba in the 1990s, a moment of elites offsetting one another allowed working people to gain significant measures of workers' control. This article presents a strategic explanation of observations in Cuba, over some eight months of dissertation fieldwork in the 1990s. Its model helps to explain other self-management movements such as, the factory committees of the Russian Revolution, privatizations to the workers in Nicaragua in the 1990s, enterprise seizures of 2001 *Argentinazo*, land invasions in Zimbabwe, and even a briefly democratic cigarette factory in U.S.-occupied Iraq. In all of these situations, workers and peasants took advantage of counter-balanced or weakened elites to win greater control of production.

This model has four explanatory advantages over state-oriented versions of Marxism and over mainstream democratization and privatization theories. First, it challenges the idea of the state as relatively exclusive strategic vantage point. Liberal critiques of "totalitarianism" tend to overemphasize the state. At the same time Marxist, and particularly Leninist and social democratic theory, while seeing control of the means of production as important theoretically, tend to direct their strategic attention to the state. Second, it assigns more agency to the popular classes as maneuvering between capitalist and statist forces, sometimes taking advantage of them and at other times trapped between them. The popular classes intervene in the transformation of the means of production. Third, it embraces a popular and socialist, rather than middle class, capitalist construction of civil society in contrast with most democratization theories. It also allows that the state is not completely monolithic, with many loci of authority that can help create civil society, by providing education, club organization, neighborhood political representation,

unions, cooperative management committees, and workplace assemblies. Fourth, these movements offer a grassroots strategy to resist the social service cuts, impoverishment, joblessness, and inequality of the ruthless types of marketization in a post-Soviet world. The strategies of squatting and building cooperative enterprises were applied to a privatizing state socialist system in Cuba, but they could as well apply to privatizing enterprises of corporatist-type Latin American states, and to collapsing capitalist enterprises, as has occurred in Argentina, Uruguay, and Brazil.

This model explains a movement of working people taking control of production in Cuba, based on the accounts of journalists, scholars and representatives of three clusters of social forces. These are: high officials, economists, and social theorists who have advocated cooperativization within the socialist framework; Communist Party officials and enterprise administrators, who have been skeptical about cooperativization and marketization; and working people. The number of production centers researched—25—is not large in absolute terms, and the observations are subjective, yet the sample considers seven significant variables: one. The two different countries: two. Types of production including: industrial, service, retail or agricultural, 3. Proximity to the capital: four. Regions of the country: five. Whether urban or rural: six. Form of ownership: seven. Whether successful or unsuccessful: eight. and pro- or anti-regime.

Methodology

I was able to visit Cuba in 1993, when tensions between it and the US were relaxed enough to conduct a long series of interviews about workers' control in a metallurgical factory. When I returned in 1996 Raul Castro, Fidel's brother and heir apparent, had launched an ideological offensive against the research center that had provided the main contacts for this study, making it much harder to get official approval to do in-depth interviews with ordinary workers. Therefore most of the interviews in 1996 were conducted in a kind of limbo status, where there was no official policy against doing interviews, but there was no official policy permitting them either. Although it was harder to do interviews, dozens of academics and trade union leaders did grant interviews and the farm workers union arranged for me to see a cooperative assembly, to interview the co-op leadership and to speak with some of its workers.

Interviews and observations were conducted in work places covering key permutations of seven variables: 1. Industrial, service or agricultural; 2. Proximity to the capital; 3. Region of the country; 4. Urban or rural; 5. Ownership: state, cooperative, capitalist, squatter or mixed; 6. Successful, unsuccessful; 7. Pro- or anti-revolutionary; 8. The respondents included male

and female, young and old, black, white, *ladino*, and indigenous, educated and uneducated, and Protestant, Catholic, atheist and *Santero*.

This methodology has certain advantages. It is a contemporary version of the political-anthropological method used by Alexis De'Tocqueville. Traveling alone people were more willing to approach, and to be approached by, the researcher than with a group or a guide. In Cuba, interviews were conducted in Havana, the nearby Playas del Este, a little inland to Guines, across the island's spine to The Bay of Pigs, along the Southern side through Sancti Espiritu and Trinidad, east to Cienfuegos, Las Tunas, and north east to Holguin, then south east again through rural co-ops on the way to Santiago de Cuba and Pico Turquino. Riding the same of cheap, heavy, Chinese bicycle that Cubans use gives one closer access to the people and the work sites than traveling by car, makes one less intimidating and lets them see that one is experiencing a little of what they were living through.

TABLE 4-1. Worksites Observed

Name	Type	City	Region	Urban or Rural	Ownership	Success/Failure	Pro/Anti-regime
1. State, urban (industrial or service)							
Cubana de Acero	Industrial/metalurgical	Havana	North coast	Urban	State	Success, but very slow	Mostly pro
"forklift" warehouse	Industrial	Havana	North coast	Urban	State	Successful	Mostly pro but broke rules
Hotel La Colina	Service	Havana	North coast	Urban	State	Successful	Could not tell
De Lido Hotel	Service	Havana	North coast	Urban	State	Successful	Could not tell
cigar & black market	Industrial	Havana	North coast	Urban	State	Rather successful	Somewhat anti
2. Joint venture							
"East-side" Hotel	Service	Cienfuegos	East end of island	Town	Joint venture	Very successful	Very pro
3. Service, retail and artisan "co-ops"							
Paladar "Terpsichore"	Service	Havana	North coast	Urban	Co-op	Successful	Pro, cadre in family
"Gujira's" Paladar	Service	Havana	North coast	Urban	Co-op	Successful	Seem "fed up" with regime
4. Capitalist: Did not visit any purely capitalist ventures							

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Name	Type	City	Region	Urban or Rural	Ownership	Success/Failure	Pro/Anti-regime
5. Small Private Business							
Sandwich Shop Vender	Retailer	Playas del Este	North coast	Town	Private	Very Successful	Seemed anti-regime
“Parade” bed/breakfast	Service	Guaimaro	South	Urban	Private	Supplemented income	Moderately pro
“Spe-lunker” bed/breakfast	Service	Santiago de Cuba	East coast	Urban	Private	Supplemented income	Moderately pro
“Señora” bed/breakfast	Service	Havana	North coast	Urban	Private	Very successful	Mix of pro and anti
Tire repair shops	Service	Havana, highways	All regions	Urban, roads	Private	Minimally successful	Some anti
6. Black market							
Carpenter/driver	Construction	Havana	North coast	Urban	Private	NA	Somewhat anti
Jinoterás	Service	Santiago de Cuba/Havana	All regions	More urban	Private	Rather successful	Evenly pro and anti
Cock-fights	Service	Playa Larga/Bay of Pigs	South coast	Town	Private	Very Successful	Somewhat pro
Apartments	Construction/service	Havana	North coast	Urban	Private	Very successful	Could not tell
7. State farms							
Farm of the Diver	Farming	Jicotea	East end of island	Rural	State	Surviving at a loss	Pro
8. Agricultural co-ops—UBPCs							
Food UBPC	Farming	Near Havana	North inland	Rural	Co-op	Surviving	Acted pro
Cane UBPC	Farming	Maja	East end of island	Rural	Co-op	Losing money	Mostly anti
Dairy UBPC	Farming	Jimon-guaya	Central	Rural	Co-op	Poor but surviving	Could not tell
Cattle UBPC	Farming	Jicotea	Central	Rural	Co-op	Moderately poor	Could not tell
9. Small private farms							

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Name	Type	City	Region	Urban or Rural	Ownership	Success/Failure	Pro/Anti-regime
"Por que nosotros"	Farming	Near the Bay of Pigs	South coast	Rural	Private	Poor	Seemed somewhat anti
Tobacco	Farming	Cumanyagua	Central Cuba	Rural	Private	Successful	Anti
Pre-carista, semi-squatter	Farming	Jardin Botanica	Central Cuba	Rural	Informal land use	Just started	Resigned to regime's existence

Quotation marks signify a pseudonym.

Shaken elites in Cuba

In Cuba the bureaucracy faced a collapse of self-confidence and popular support in 1991-1993. The Cuban elite did not confront an internal capitalist class as the Sandinistas did, but an external one, principally from U.S. corporate and government interests, and from wealthy, influential, Cuban refugees. Cuba's principle strategic allies that had provided protection, trade, membership in an international community, and triumphal confidence, had crumbled. With the fall of the Soviet system, Cuba's exports declined 70 percent and imports 75 percent from 1989 to 1993. The GDP dropped by more than one third (Blackburn, 2000). Although Washington's hostility to Castroist Cuba has been long standing, it tried to take advantage of the island's economic crisis, and the expectation that the government could soon collapse. In 1992 presidential candidate Bill Clinton tried to win over the Cuban American vote, by chiding President George H. W. Bush for not signing the Cuban Democracy Act and missing a chance to "put the hammer down on Fidel Castro." (Blackburn, 2000) Bush then made up for this by signing the Act, and in 1994, President Clinton signed the Helms Burton Act, further tightening sanctions. At the Cuban government's weakest moment, it made concessions, giving peasants and workers more control over production, cooperativizing state farms, allowing farmers' markets, and setting up small "cooperative" businesses. As Laura Enriquez states, "Cuba's agricultural transformation is being carried out by a socialist regime whose objective is to fortify its economy and government in the face of serious threats to its existence." (Enriquez, 2000)

The official state farms, and later the cooperatives, lacked sufficient resources to cultivate all the land available to them, so in October 1991 Fidel Castro gave a speech at the Communist Party Congress saying that the food

crisis would be the highest priority, and there should be not one inch of idle land in Cuba while it lasted. (Deere, et al., 1994: 211-212; Whitefield, 1993) Rural working people took this as a green light to occupy and farm the uncultivated land. Apparently most people obtained unofficial nods from local administrators, but, Cuban scholar Niurka Perez tells me personally that some peasants informally started cultivating idle land without seeking permission, and Perez along with Diana Deere and Ernel Gonzales wrote that some peasants had actually seized land leading managers to lend, or authorize peasants to cultivate, parcels of the state farms from the beginning of 1992 (Deere et al., 1994). There were food riots in Havana as well. It seems, then, that there was agency from above and from below. This unacknowledged squatter movement went on for two years until the government gave notice, on September 15, 1993 that it would form the new farm cooperatives - Basic Units of Cooperative Production, (UBPC)—and establish regular channels for individual citizens, mainly retired, to cultivate unused land. (Whitefield, 1993). A Ministry of Agriculture administrator said that MINAGRI received about 5,000 formal requests to cultivate little plots of land within a month after the September 1993 laws were passed (Enriquez, 2000; Deere, et al., 1994). As of April 1998, 45,804 people managed to get parcels of land from government amounting to 10,943 hectares (Enriquez, 2000) or about 27,000 acres.

I encountered three men just off the road from the Bay of Pigs to Santa Clara, on the Southern side of the island between Torriente and Playa Larga at a *Jardin Botanica*—Botanical Garden—that cultivates exotic, but useful flora and fauna. Wearing yellow straw hats and rubber boots, their ages appeared to run from almost 40 to about 60. One had a machete and two had Chinese bicycles, like mine. One said they had received permission from a local official to farm the land but, “We are precarios.” That is, they are squatters on the land or using it at sufferance of the official. The field was grassy, but invaded by *marabú*—a rough, thorny, bush, so difficult to remove that the financially strapped government could not be bothered with it.

Cubans in the 1990s set up *conucos*—little gardens on land not legally their own to raise vegetables or a few chickens where the responsible officials would not notice or care. The word *conuco* is thought to derive from the indigenous Arawak or Taino languages and from colonial times when slaves would cultivate small individual plots of land during unsupervised moments. In the 1990s, the government established a formal policy to set up areas of *autoconsumo*—self-consumption—on all farms and coops and in any cultivatable spaces within urban areas, even including the front lawn of the Ministry of Agriculture. One dissident cooperative farmer within Cuba claims that officials complain that workers spend half of their time on their *conucos* so

that they are the main obstacle to productivity in the cooperatives. (Alonso, 2000) The *precarios* such as those in the Botanical Garden applied a kind of influence, sometimes forceful and other times very gentle.

Social forces were most determining in the shift toward more workers' control, but institutional, economic, and cultural/political forces had impact as well. Working people had exerted pressure on the system since the 1970s, although not in an organized, and often, perhaps, not even in a conscious way, by withholding labor. When the lack of worker motivation led to the failure of the 1970 sugar cane harvest, Fidel Castro began to encourage revitalization of the trade unions and certain forms of worker participation. (Fuller, 1992). In the early 1990s the economic crisis, the food riots in Havana, the country people's land hunger, and the regime's doubts about its own survival, all gave these working people the opportunity to acquire direct control of the means of production. The sense of elite weakness, and the opportunity that this gave to country people, were the major impulsions for the regime to offer land and for people to take it. The decisions of key persons in governing institutions, especially Castro's green light and the policy of cooperativization, were also critical. The economic crisis was the proximate cause for country folk to take the land and city dwellers to riot. The political culture was important as well, with Cuban ideology favoring workers, and the poor. Government officials were acculturated to believe their role was to help working people, so they were not prepared to repress vast numbers of them to maintain control.

In Cuba, although the conflict between the Cuban elite as a whole and international capital was important, the conflict within the bureaucratic elite affected workers' control even more. Arturo Villar describes elite conflict underway in Cuba as an "internal war. The battlefield is the economy... And the combatants are foreign investors, bureaucrats and managers of state-operated enterprises." (Villar, 1999) Villar favors management methods in the joint ventures including ability to "fire workers at will." Cuban workers have been free to goof off, and worker decision-making bodies have formally blocked management sanctions and, informally, driven out unwanted managers. Villar thinks that some bureaucrats see capitalism as "the wave of the future," while others "constantly place stumbling blocks in the way." A state economic planner says, "Resurrection of capitalism in Cuba is inevitable... we are simply looking for ways to do it while keeping the social costs down." He says the Cuban managers support Fidel Castro "circling the wagons while we learn the tricks of the trade to face the Yankee invasion and the soldiers from Miami," which indicates that even though the managerial elite in Cuba may hope to become more market oriented, it remains at odds with the Miami Cuban business elite. He says, "Among the managerial class, it

seems only hard-line revolutionaries and incompetents are against foreign investment.” An ex-vice minister says “We are fighting our own war here...the managers [struggle] with the help of the foreign investors.” (Villar, 1999) So Villar and his sources clearly believe, from a counterrevolutionary perspective, that there was a serious conflict, apparently between more entrepreneurial managers and investors, on the one hand and those politically committed to socialism on the other.

Enterprise managers (such as the one I interviewed at Cubana de Acero) see certain regulations as constraining productivity, so they hope a more market-oriented system would eliminate these constraints. In the late 1990’s Cuba began the *perfeccionamiento empresarial* program to introduce more independent capitalist-style management. Phillip Peters, a far-right, Reagan-Bush, State Department official, quotes Lázaro González, a Cuban manager, who says his authority at a rubber enterprise had been, “very limited practically all our problems were resolved at higher levels...I couldn’t structure my payroll or designate who works with me.” (Peters, 2001)

In Cuba, as in the former Soviet system, managers who hoped to do well became the pro-capitalist lobby within the bureaucracy. The managers might consider being careful what they wish for, however. In transitions of most of the former Soviet bloc and in Nicaragua, new constraints emerged, and the central planning mechanisms collapsed before market mechanisms could replace them, so although speculators profited, most real producers did not. In Cuba and China the complete collapse did not take place as the government never released its grip on the economy and the agricultural administrators never released control over the new cooperative units.

I talked with Cuban metallurgical workers and managers who perceive managers as representing the enterprise and its workers in negotiating with the government ministries. Executives seeking allies for enterprise autonomy looked naturally to their employees, offering greater participation—although not real workers’ control. Gonzalez, the rubber executive, describes drafting a proposal to the ministry for greater enterprise autonomy and managerial authority. He says, “Without the participation of workers in each step the process doesn’t work.” The managers would offer rosy business forecasts telling their workers if you let us be more independent of the government—to have more freedom to make enterprise decisions, to seek investors, lenders—we will all make more money and we will give you more power in the factory. Peters writes that González says, “he was concerned about worker support for the process...[and he] moved quickly to heed worker concerns about conditions and benefits.” Peters describes a construction materials plant CEO, Alejandro Gutiérrez, who stated that “his first step was to eliminate fear of layoffs,” telling workers that if any jobs were eliminated, the Foreign Trade

Ministry would have positions for them. The firm did increase worker remuneration, but had 15-percent fewer personnel, suggesting that layoffs may well have occurred. Peters quotes an unidentified observer of the *perfeccionamiento empresarial* who claims, “This is the first time workers’ opinions are truly being taken into account.” (Peters, 2001) However, even though managers may seek worker support in the short run, their desire for the power to “fire workers at will” would reduce workplace democracy in long run.

The Cuban government made a similar case to win support for the new UBPC cooperatives. The workers do not seem to have bought the pitch or received the touted benefits in the sugar cane coops, but the idea seems to have gotten some ‘traction’ in the food coops, as evidenced by the fact that cane has continued to lose money, while food coops have improved, so that they are nearly breaking even. So in both the enterprises and the cooperatives, pro-market managers offered what might be considered a short term democratization of the workplace in order to win over the workers.

The Pattern

Haroldo Dilla, a Cuban former Communist party member, and critical supporter of the Revolution from the left, offers his analysis of this process. He describes a “technocratic-entrepreneurial bloc” with access to global markets that emerged in Cuba along with the arrival of some 260 international investors and 800 foreign firms. He says this “techno-managerial sector” of “probably no more than a few thousand” began to appear just prior to the 1991 CCP Congress. “For several months, Cuba experienced the most democratic public debate in its history.” He says, however, that the “techno-managerial elite’s” goal is not empowerment of the people, but a “sugar-coated Chinese model,” that is economic marketization plus political authoritarianism. He notes that when the Spanish Melia investors established their first hotel in Cuba in this period, they tried, unsuccessfully, to prevent the union from operating. Concerned that the enterprising elite may foreshadow a “Cuban thermidor” or a “tropical mafia,” Dilla proposes an alliance between the “popular classes” and “the political elite that emerged from the revolution” to check this technocratic-entrepreneurial tendency. He advocates, among other things, a “renewal of popular forces,” more efficient “participatory municipal institutions,” and “decentralized, pluralist, local democratic planning” (Dilla, 2000)

A recognizable pattern emerges. First pro-capitalist bureaucrats and then actual capitalists try to ally with working people. The main social actor trying to bring about workers’ control will be the workers and peasants themselves.

They hope to save jobs and earnings through their own private ownership or collective control over the enterprise, or failing those alternatives, to get behind a strong captain to navigate a frail ship in the stormy seas of globalization. After the capitalist reorganization and economic crash, workers get laid off (thrown overboard), pensions shrivel up and citizens lose social services. Ordinary people are hammered by marketization, so they resist it through old or reformed workplace organizations. Working peoples' allies then become the former orthodox supporters of the socialist system, who by now are usually less orthodox and offer them a measure of workers' control.

Conclusion

First, workers and peasants used the stalemate of elites to assert control over farms and enterprises in Cuba. These were the moments of division in the Cuban political/managerial class after the fall of the Soviet system. Second, the elites never intended to give the workers as much workers' control as they took for themselves. The Cuban government had tried for three decades to set up a centralized agricultural system and had actually recentralized that system in the Rectification of Errors campaign of the late 1980s, but working people pressured the government to allow informal parcelization of idle land, cooperativization of the state farms, and self-owned micro-businesses.

Third, although the Cuban mass organizations have virtually no independence from the government, party and state cadres retain a sense of themselves as tough, but enlightened, servants of the people. Although they engage in repression, they have been unwilling to resort to mass terror, or to let people starve as have, for example, the Stalinist, Romanian, or North Korean regimes. In order for working people to use the pervasive, low-key, rule breaking of squatter tactics, and black market small enterprise, the Cuban officials had to have been willing to play the game.

Fourth, among the elites, the weaker party usually becomes the best ally of working people, who tend to be weakest of all the major players. Working people, as the weakest actor, usually have to join with the second-place player of the moment to balance against the strongest. Marketization creates conflicts among elites. Some expect to be winners and others expect to be losers. Just before, the pro-capitalist elite tends to be working people's best ally. Just after, the hard line socialists tend to be best. Elites have to hustle to find friends, so they look to working people for support, and one thing they can offer is a degree of workplace democracy.

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