

Cuba: The Long Road to Utopia

Review of Cuba and its Neighbours: Democracy in Motion by Arnold August.

By [Ricardo Alarcón](#)

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[Democracy Cuba](#)

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Ricardo Alarcón de Quesada served as Cuba's permanent representative to the United Nations for nearly 30 years and later served as Minister of Foreign Affairs from 1992-1993. Subsequently he was President of the National Assembly of People's Power from 1993-2013. He was a Member of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Cuba until 2013.

*He wrote the Foreword, titled *The Long Road to Utopia*, for the Cuban Spanish edition of Arnold August's **Cuba and its Neighbours: Democracy in Motion** (*Cuba y sus vecinos: Democracia en movimiento*) that was launched at the Havana International Book Fair on February 22, 2015*

We are pleased to present the English translation of Alarcón's Foreword here.

Foreword: The Long Road to Utopia

by **Ricardo Alarcón de Quesada**



Ricardo Alarcón de Quesada

It is all too frequent for books published about Cuba and its Revolution to be devoid of academic rigour and professionalism even as they draw favourable reviews and sales, thus conferring the reputation of specialists on their authors. Many "Cubanologists" have no in-depth knowledge of the history and the tangible experience of what they judge, let alone the Spanish language, yet, mystery of mysteries, some of them earn fame (and wealth) from books turned out after a couple of quick trips to Havana. They feel comfortable interpreting Cuba from the outside, from an arbitrary perspective incrustated with prejudices and dogmas that channel their thinking along narrow, well-traveled paths, even though they do not generally notice the blinders they are wearing.

Cuba and its Neighbours: Democracy in Motion is completely different, and so is its author, Arnold August. Like others of August's studies,¹ this one is the fruit of diligent, systematic work based on field research that was conducted during lengthy periods spent in Cuba. August participated alongside ordinary Cubans in the meetings and activities of the communities who hosted him, as well as holding interviews with dozens of individuals, including academics, politicians, and most importantly average citizens, the key protagonists of our democratic project.

The result is an objective vision, from within, of a reality that is (like reality in general) shifting and changing, making gains and making mistakes, proud of its strengths and grappling with its deficiencies. Readers may agree or disagree with one or another of the author's views, but this is something that happens constantly between Cubans in daily life. This book makes a contribution to a necessary discussion about our political system, and as such it is a useful tool that will help to refine this system, making it ever more authentically democratic.

August was able to achieve this because he comes to the topic without the Eurocentrism, not to say "U.S.-centrism," that characterizes a broad swath of Western academic thinking. Authors of the latter type have tended to address the subject of democracy with an assumption that readers are ignorant about it and that their ignorance ought to be cultivated.

In particular, those who depict democracy as if it were the exclusive heritage and creation of developed capitalism want us to forget that the concept was actually a dirty word until relatively recent times. The Founding Fathers, in fact, would have scoffed at the notion that U.S. society is founded on the democratic ideal.

One need only read the texts collected in *The Federalist*² to discover that for Madison, Hamilton, and Jay — and for the interests they embodied — the republic they were in the process of organizing was not a democracy but something different, indeed antithetical. The constitution designed by these men in an effort to accommodate the prerogatives of states within a federation, and to establish a careful balance among three supposedly separate branches of government — executive, legislative, and judicial — was intended to guarantee, above all else, that the country would be governed by its large landowners. The "American Revolution" of the eighteenth century was to a decisive extent a rebellion by slave owners fearful of what contemporaneous British legal developments presaged in terms of imminent abolition, and interested in eluding restrictions that the British Crown might seek to impose on the westward expansion of slavery. As a result, slavery persisted for another century in a new republic which, on its march to the Pacific, subdued the aboriginal populations for good measure.

The twentieth century was well underway when President Woodrow Wilson believed he had discovered the nature of the problem: "The government, which was designed for the people, has got into the hands of the bosses and their employers, the special interests. An invisible empire has been set up above the forms of democracy."³

In truth, these "forms" had been envisioned by the founders for the very purpose of making sure that it would not be the people who governed, but rather "the bosses and their employers." As John Jay was fond of saying, "those who own the country ought to govern it."

Despite their initial aversion to the dirty word in question, over time the owners of the

country strove to appropriate it and, at the same time, to truncate it, seeking to reduce the democratic ideal to a very different concept, that of “representative democracy.”

Even now, in the twenty-first century, a product is being sold under this banner that is as old as the emergence of the European nation-state. Its main weakness is in reality a “manufacturer’s defect,” and it is ironic to note that this fact was evident to certain observers from the very first.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau, in an analysis that remains valid to this day, argued that such a system “serves only to keep the poor in their poverty and the rich in their usurpation,” since “laws are always useful to those with possessions and harmful to those who have nothing.”⁴ For Rousseau, the “Citizen of Geneva,” sovereignty is not transferable, and “representation” in societies based on human inequality is necessarily a fiction. For representation to become a reality, equality would first have to be achieved, and then mechanisms would have to be instated to ensure that representatives always act in accordance with the general will and obey its “imperative mandate.” Hence Rousseau argued that democracy would become the mode of societal organization once it superseded capitalism, which was then in its infancy. Democracy, that is to say, was tantamount to utopia.

The quest for this ideal, an important point of contention between the Jacobins and other groups during the French Revolution, was also a factor in uprisings by several grass-roots sectors of the Thirteen Colonies, and it influenced the struggles of workers and artisans throughout the nineteenth century.

The political history of countries where “representative democracy” holds sway has revolved in large measure around the question of the franchise: Who has the right to vote? By whom will the representatives be elected?

What began as an exclusive privilege of feudal nobles wanting a share of their monarchs’ absolute power has traveled a prolonged path to supposed formal recognition that this right rests with the majority of citizens. However, voting restrictions have always abounded, whether predicated on gender, skin colour, education, personal income, or other considerations. In the U.S. case, for example, it is a much-discussed fact that the majority of eligible voters do not vote. But it is forgotten that a similar number of citizens do not even enjoy this right, or cannot exercise it due to barriers that they must overcome in order to get onto voter rolls or go to the polls on a work day.⁵

The other theme that has been a focus of discussion since Rousseau’s time is that of the reductionist thrust to limit the practice of democracy to a day known as “election day.” This leads us to a key question about the complex contradiction between representative democracy versus direct democracy: Is the latter possible at the scale of contemporary society? Or are citizens condemned to total dependency on their “representatives”?

The philosopher of law Hans Kelsen, who wrote foundational texts on this matter⁶ and was the principal architect of the Austrian Constitution, found the answer in the experience of the soviets during the early phase of the Bolshevik Revolution:

“Given the impracticality of implementing direct democracy in large, economically and culturally advanced states, efforts to establish the closest

connection possible between the will of the People and popular representatives, whose existence is unavoidable, and the tendency toward at least an approximate form of immediacy do not lead to the elimination or even just the curbing of parliamentarism.”

Thus is dissolved the illusion of a single parliament that is supposedly the repository of popular sovereignty, whose fictitiousness irremediably condemns it to isolation from real society — more than people’s “representatives,” its members become characters in a play that the people may consider watching when no more attractive spectacle is available⁷ — to be “replaced by a whole system of countless parliaments, which are based upon a pyramidal structure” and must “be transformed from mere [talk shops] ... into real working bodies.” In this way, the citizen goes from being “[t]he Object of administration [to] its Subject. He does not do so directly, however, but through elected representatives. The democratization of the executive is at first merely a parliamentarization.”⁸

Kelsen thus described what he regarded as the only solution: participatory democracy which, when fully developed, would lead to the parliamentarization of society.

August’s book examines the Cuban experience with the development of people’s power, a system of participatory democracy in which, need it be said, much remains for us to accomplish. Its roots are buried deep in the very origins of the Cuban Nation, which sprang from two essential ingredients: the slaves’ unending struggle for their freedom, and the striving to create an indigenous, autonomous school of thought based on the ideas handed down to us by Varela, Luz, Martí and other teachers. The two ingredients were merged on October 10, 1868 when, in the words of Antonio Maceo, “Cuba hoisted the flag of war in the cause of justice,”⁹ touching off a revolution that, after moving through countless avatars, remains committed today to its founding ideals: absolute independence and human solidarity.

To transform the spectator into a protagonist, it will take more than radical societal change and the systematic, conscientious application of socialist democracy and the mechanisms of people’s control. What is needed is a profound alteration of civic conduct that can only come from praxis and education – from a true cultural revolution. This is necessarily a process of continual movement, guided by a spirit of creativity and by dissatisfaction with what we have accomplished so far. Make no mistake, it is utopia that we are reaching for. That, after all, is the path we were set on by Carlos Manuel de Céspedes, the Father of our Homeland, when he proclaimed that the Cuban Republic must be based on “perfect equality.”¹⁰

Notes

¹ Especially his *Democracy in Cuba and the 1997-1998 Elections* (La Habana and Montreal: Editorial José Martí and Canada-Cuba Distribution, 1999) and his chapter “Socialism and Elections” in *Cuban Socialism in a New Century: Adversity, Survival and Renewal*, ed. Max Azicri and Elsie Deal (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2004).

² *The Federalist* (New York: Modern Library, 1937), a collection of 85 essays by Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, and John Jay promoting the ratification of the United States Constitution, published in *The Independent Journal* and other New York publications in 1787.

³ Woodrow Wilson, *The New Freedom: a Call for the Emancipation of the Generous Energies of a People* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1961, 36), a collection of Wilson’s speeches during the

1912 electoral campaign.

[4](#) Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Essential Rousseau* (New York: Penguin, 1983, 116). The same volume includes the *Discourse on the Origin and Basis of Inequality Among Men* (Second Discourse), another foundational text by Rousseau.

[5](#) There is a copious literature on this subject, including the useful *Why Americans Don't Vote* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1989) by Frances Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward. Its authors, members of the liberal establishment, show how electoral regulations discriminate against blacks, Latinos and the poor in general, such that white, Anglo-Saxon, upper-middle-class citizens hold a de facto electoral majority.

[6](#) Hans Kelsen wrote extensively about the problem of democracy in contemporary society. He dedicated a section of his *General Theory of Law and State* to what he termed “the fiction of representation.” The quotations in this paragraph are from another foundational work: Hans Kelsen, *The Essence and Value of Democracy*, ed. Nadia Urbinati and Carlo Invernizzi Accetti, trans. Brian Graf (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, [2013]).

[7](#) The characterization of the citizen as a spectator seated in the last row who can barely hear what is happening on stage is due to Walter Lippmann, the eminent American journalist who frequently wrote in defence of liberalism. A broad selection of his work is collected in *The Essential Lippmann: A Political Philosophy for Liberal Democracy*, ed. Clinton Rossiter and James Lare (New York: Random House, [1963]).

[8](#) Kelsen, *The Essence and Value of Democracy*, 55–6.

[9](#) Speech to the Constituent Assembly of Jimaguayú, 30 September 1895, in Antonio Maceo, *El pensamiento vivo de Antonio Maceo*, ed. José Antonio Portuondo (La Habana: Editorial de Ciencias Sociales).

[10](#) Carlos Manuel de Céspedes, *Escritos*, comp. Fernando Portuondo and Hortensia Pichardo (La Habana: Editorial de Ciencias Sociales, 1974).

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