

## **“Citizen participation and associate space: some reflections from Cuba.”<sup>1</sup>**

“What does non government mean in a nation with state tradition? Would it not be better to use the concept of participation and, above all, the manner in which participation in the community is promoted, as criteria to evaluate associations?”<sup>2</sup>

Cuba changes. Although with a caricaturized evolution by discourses in the Cuban press and several foreign chronicles, a complex transformation is unfolding, changing the manner of live and spirituality, consumer habits and status symbols, family and cultural political roles. Although the institutional and normative framework may seem to fall behind –more than what common sense advises-; transformation is on the move, rejecting the dogmas imposed by neo liberal capitulation and bureaucratic immobility, both forms of historic fatalism. And if the intention is to delve in depth the change taking place, we will find a privileged and seductive scenario for analysis in associative space, understanding this as a social dimension that assumes–relatively- the autonomous forms of grouping and collective actions, apart from political and economic policy channeling the active will of the citizens in different spheres, characterized by a logic of reciprocity, solidarity, symmetrical interaction and defense of common identities.

Thus, participative experience in associations spread in the past few years, professing the process of gradual democratization of different agencies of political society<sup>3</sup>, especially in the local institutions of government. A process not exempt from external variables (harassment of the United States) and domestic (mark of underdevelopment and state tradition) that demonstrates a dynamic tension between democratic tradition of the left and bureaucratic tendencies typical of a socialist regime of state. Analyzing these collective groupings, their organizational and imaginative traditions, we evaluate them through their political nature, by their capacity to construct alternative or functional paradigms of domination within each social context.

A fundamental factor is the study of political culture analyzing participation as a protagonist variable of great importance for democratic development.<sup>4</sup> In so doing I define citizen participation as a process of conscientious and active involvement of the citizen en the problems and transformations of their social environment (community and institutional policy) expressed in divers modalities (direct, delegated, activism among others) y successive phases of development, assuming problems, proposal expression, preparation of an agenda, design and execution of a system of actions, control and evaluation of these, etc.

It is considered that the amplification of participation decisively contributes to social integration, to the strengthening of legitimacy, of consensus and political communication together with the formation of an active citizenry. What some authors

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<sup>1</sup> This article is part of a CLACSO- ASDI project in the main line of research of the author, as a subject for a future doctorate in Political Sociology.

<sup>2</sup> Quote from Ma López Vigil in “Sociedad civil en Cuba: diccionario urgente”, Revista Envío, Managua, No 184, July de 1997.

<sup>3</sup> These maintain an important role in the control, coordination and material support of associative forms that are a source of synergy and conflict.

<sup>4</sup> See Jorge Vergara, "Teorías democráticas participativas: Un análisis critico". Revista Venezolana de Economía y Ciencias Sociales. Volume 4. Number 2/3. Caracas, 1998 and Carole Pateman, “Participation and democratic theory”, Cambridge University Press, 1970.

call “(...) a new social contract of society” corresponds to an active citizenry, “redefining the distribution of responsibility among the citizens, and the State. This new contract of society is removed from the idea that the State is competent for everything. Instead, the citizens, active society will assume greater responsibility for the welfare of the community” and continue pointing out that “the State does not withdraw from social responsibility, but will always be committed with certain standards it has to guarantee, referring to social assistance. Also, the State must always be committed to a life lived in dignity”.<sup>5</sup>

The term citizen should be understood, not only as a subject of guaranteed institutional rights but of one who, in use of his faculties, takes an action, earns responsibility and intervenes in production and reproduction of social coexistence and the conditions that make these processes possible. This behavior has been analyzed in terms of political citizenry, defined as the right to participate in political power, either as a voter or through active social or citizen practice expressed as the right to enjoy a basic standard of life, welfare and economic security. Both focuses share the alarm that neither forms of citizenry can be unfolded in conditions of growing poverty, marginality and deprivation of health and education resources at world level. Consequently constitutional dedication of citizen prerogatives, of themselves, are not enough.

The context of participation: Civilian society as space and debate.

The “macroconcept” Civilian Society (CS) has become a polysemy, lax and amorphous term due to its indiscriminate usage. It has been identified indiscriminately as a group of non state institutional activates –political and cultural production, domestic life and voluntary association-;<sup>6</sup> with the totality of social life that is found outside the economic, the state and family;<sup>7</sup> with the non political region, of free and voluntary association of the individuals opposed to the State, the government and political society. However, the distinction between CS and political society –a product born of analytical and methodological efforts- does not reveal an absolute comparison of both spheres and, therefore, it is impossible to separate the factors that form both parts: a same institution may pertain to both or, at a specific time, be within a wide range CS forms of collective actions (apart from business, political-institutional spaces and, in general, familiar) that link affective, normative, associative, public factors and processes, using the last term that denies reduction of what is state. This CS is made up of a group of civil entities in charge of developing, with state institutions, the processes of political socialization of its citizens.<sup>8</sup>

A liberal view uses the concept to refer to spaces that are not linked to specific political institutionalism and reinforces the class distinction between political society

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<sup>5</sup> See presentation of Dr Michael Bursch “Participación ciudadana y estado social” in “Modernización del Estado y sociedad activa”, Editora Buho, Santo Domingo, that includes presentation in a similar forum organized jointly by the Friedrich Ebert Foundation and FUDIS, October 2003.

<sup>6</sup> See John Keane, “Democracia y sociedad civil”, Alianza Editorial, Madrid, 1992.

<sup>7</sup> See Andrew Arato y Jean Cohen, “Sociedad civil y Teoría Política”, FCE, México, 2000.

<sup>8</sup> It is a process that covers “(...) mechanisms of learning and conservation of beliefs and attitudes common to all members of a society that allows a comparison of different communities with agencies of socialization and their own “cultures”. See “Sociología Política”, Jacques Lagroye, FCE, Buenos Aires, 1993, P. 374. Its “(...) process of individual education under social influence (...) throw which the people take a systems of knowledge, norms, values that improved its participation in different social spaces.” In “Sociología Política”, Carlos Cabrera-Comp.-Tomo 2, Ed Félix Varela, Havana, 2004, P. 75.

and CS. Its supporters insist that these entities are an independent force of the State and grant centralization to the business world, developed with other actors (school, church, press) and charity organizations that channel –breaking them up– the demands of subordinate groups. For this matrix collective social action should be self-centered and should be apart from traditional political agendas.

Other authors see CS as made up by social movements (SM), non-governmental organizations (NGOs), the so-called “social economy” and certain public institutions (educational, cultural, and health). It is known (and defined as) a “third sector”, autonomous in relation to the state and the market and capable of being a counterweight. Focuses near this position favor a non-antagonistic relationship of the State and society; of complementation and cooperation whenever there is a point of contact in the interest of defense of what is public, for the common good.<sup>9</sup>

These discourses, inter-classist and multicultural, dilute structural elements and asymmetries within political processes and universalize as certain forms of grouping and collective actions.<sup>10</sup> If this position surpasses the anti-state satanization of previous focuses it makes errors of idealism by ignoring that the state is a function of the interests of the dominant group (be this bourgeoisie or bureaucratic classes) and cannot rationalize the action of several actors of the multiple world scenarios, taking into consideration that different political cultures –of government and associations– legal environments, levels of democratic development, opportunities or constraints for citizen protagonism, etc.

Other concepts –more radical– of CS perceive it within the framework of social relationships in which the market imposes asymmetries, as space for constructing inequalities and confluence of institutions representing divergent class interests. The CS would appear not as a jelled historical subject but as an hegemonic space of conflict in which collective social action is characterized by a constant and creative search for praxis, a positive and mobilizing rescue of utopias, the search for alternatives at all levels (micro and global) redefinition and reconquest of public spaces, among other features<sup>11</sup>.

But CS (and its contents) is also defined by their position within the context of spheres. A suggestive focus sees contemporary societies through a three-faceted prism that includes, within social totality, the State (complex of institutional relationships of political control and social order guided by a logical hierarchy), the market (relationships founded on the exchange of equivalents of the producers and consumers guided by the logic of efficiency and profit) and Communities (collectives that share identities, goals and preferences, whose praxis operates through interdependence, solidarity, mutual help and reciprocity) in a complex relationship that presupposes precise alliances among the different actors and the interpenetration of their particular logic in the functioning of their respective structures.<sup>12</sup> To assume this is to

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<sup>9</sup> See Ma López Vigil, *Op. Cit.*

<sup>10</sup> See “Reinventar la democracia. Reinventar el estado”, Boaventura de Souza Santos, Editorial José Martí, Havana, 2006.

<sup>11</sup> See *Hacia una sociedad civil globalizada: la de abajo o la de arriba*, François Houtart, [www.rebellion.org](http://www.rebellion.org).

<sup>12</sup> In this manner a ministry can support a contaminating transnational investment affecting neighboring communities; these communities can seek help for the public sector (universities, courts, social

acknowledge the existence of each context of a specific kind of relationship and correlation of forces among these actors.

One of the privileged components of associative space are the NGOs that, in the neoliberal point of view, are defined as substitutes of alternative social movements endowed with (client based) social bases and assuming redistributive prior state functions. Setting aside structural causes of social exclusion, many NGOs operate as correctives of the neoliberal model, offering it quotas of stability and governance. Along with the NGOs that fulfill these objectives (or changed for this purpose) others try, from within, to positively bear on the policies of these institutions and even some reject this perverse role.

Nonetheless many denaturalized mechanisms limit the autonomy of the NGOs since –for example- established procedures for the cooperation agencies to “efficiently and transparently” finance its projects, have been openly and covertly introducing business practices and views in the world of the NGOs as well as relationships of analogous dependence on those established between nations of the South and North. In the peculiar case of Cuba, due to its traditions “of state socialism” that actions of these associations are additionally marked –considerably- by a form of instrumental state view: not many NGOs are seen now as mere counterpart auxiliary agencies to the state that channel funds and work with an “attractive” facade, either as suspicious subjects to be controlled by legal mechanisms and other forms.

Other necessary actors in the associative space of any nation are constituted by social movements (SM). Currently the peoples of our region live in an activation process of this modality of collective action, some of the main characteristic are: territorialization, the search for autonomy; reevaluation of culture and affirmation of identity of their communities; capability to form, from the praxis, their own intellectuals; and trans-local articulation through forms of broad coordination and new representative mechanisms.<sup>13</sup> Generally these movements have common features, seen in their contents, values, forms of action and actors who form it.

With a strong pedagogical-emancipative accent, their members modify themselves through reciprocal and shared interaction towards a goal. This process constitutes cultural identities that transcend economic production and political, global relations mostly in ways of being and living, our consumerism, authority, gender orientation, care of the environment, etc. In today’s reality, social movements combine their traditional projects (modernization, social and/or national freedom) the emergence of new practices and identities both in traditional actors (workers, intellectuals, etc.) as other actors and discourses (environment, gender, youth, human rights, etc.) guided to a defense combined with pluralist focuses and specific practices. And this is also valid for Cuba.

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assistance) to counteract the impact of this unbridled mercantile action; an alliance of citizen associations can promote support of forms of popular and mutual popular economy to economically support the neighbors, etc.

<sup>13</sup> Los movimientos sociales latinoamericanos: tendencias y desafíos, Raúl Zibechi, course “Neoliberalismo y movimientos sociales en América Latina: la configuración de la protesta social”, Aula 561, Campus Virtual, CLACSO. For Haroldo Dilla the social movement’s are composed by subordinated and excluded social sectors, which develops actions resides the traditional political actors, has minimal organizational levels and defends a group of rights that broke the formal order. See Op cit.

Cuban associative context: a concise map.

The revolution of 1959 that was a socialist process of national liberation linked, organically and originally, the ideals of a National project inspired in Martí (social justice, political independence and economic development) adding to them in precision with renewed doses of democratization and civic commitment.<sup>14</sup> During the 60s the Cuban Revolution gave birth to a *sui generis* CS where millions of persons became “fulfilled” enthusiastically participating: they gained access to politics, became socialized and gained a feeling of belonging to a greater cause that was bigger than them; transforming together with reality. When many associative forms disappeared from society before the revolution the vacuums were filled by new mass organizations and popular organizations that, in a short time, would be followed by other professional and civilian associations. Metaphorically speaking we could consider that the revolutionary people (the great majority of the Cuban people) constituted as a General Will, subscribed to a *sui generis* Social Contract. During the 60s it developed into a specific kind of socio-political participation through political associations and organizations, able to combine mass ratification in great popular events centrally implemented in the leadership.

This functioned in accord to early necessities of the project<sup>15</sup> but soon began giving signs of exhaustion,<sup>16</sup> turning to a reorganization of an institutional order very close to the Soviet model and which solidly took off since the mid 70s. However, the process was influenced and did not exhaust its promises of democracy. In the mean time, parallel to an opening up to new encoded spaces and stable civil actions, strengthening the bureaucratic apparatus and consecrated lasting personal and centralized features in social leadership. In any case, since the 80s there was a certain repercussion in Cuban processes of Latin American participation and popular self-organization, (*i.e.* the Sandinist Revolution and experiences of Popular Education) that began to leave their mark on organizational and personal experiences of many Cubans. But, undoubtedly, an important milestone in that decade was the approval of the Law of Associations (currently in force) and the awakening of a similar movement.

The right of association in Cuba is recognized in Article 53 of the Constitution of the Republic as a means for the citizenry to carry out many scientific, cultural, recreational, solidarity activities of social benefit. This right was regulated by Law No. 54 in force since December 27, 1985 referring to: “(...) the transformations in the country that require reorganization of association registries of associations at a national

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<sup>14</sup> Consult Julio Fernández Bulté “Tras las pistas de la Revolución en cuarenta años de Derecho”, revista “Temas”, No 16-17, Havana, 1999.

<sup>15</sup> In which there are titanic tasks to assume (educational, health, defensive) and willing great masses that, as a rule, have modest levels of education and a great dose of enthusiasm and commitment.

<sup>16</sup> Without disdaining the punctual pertinence of certain “democracy of congregation” the potentialities must not be exaggerated –nor their dangers hidden- for a stable and orderly functioning of a democratic institution. Nothing surpasses systematic participation and the vote as linked organic mechanism in the exercise of individual, authentic and mature decision and the wise approval of the majority. Other mechanisms done in large spaces, without possibility to project and debate special proposals, where collective passion flares and the magnetism of charismatic leaders can generate phenomena such as unanimity, suggestion of audience and ignorance of nuances. What should differentiate socialism from the demoliberal praxis is not the elimination of representationalism but the complementation of new democratic spaces (*i.e.* of producers) nor the suppression of alternative debates but of recognition of that pluralism whose components (classist, socio-cultural and any other kind) favors reproduction of the popular project.

level and approved by a new legislation adjusted to the current needs to answer growing interests demonstrated by the population regarding the constitution and development of associations of social welfare”.<sup>17</sup>

But understanding the associative phenomenon goes beyond the strictly legal framework and covers historical, ideological, generational, etc. dimensions. Because, if for many Cubans the reality built during these almost 50 years can be codified as “the project” being a part of it implies voluntary pertinence and militant commitment, dedication of the individual to a greater work in which he carries out his life, family, etc. On the other hand this presupposes a rational and ordered character of construction of a model of society that goes beyond the merely political expressed in manner of behavior, ethical, ideological, esthetical codes and values that, obviously, make up a particular manner of being and citizen evolution. And I believe that many will agree if we consider the Cuban process as an anti-capitalist project that embraces means of distribution, social integration and behaviors foreign to capitalist logic. This feeling of participation is a crucial element.

Thus, in the 90s we observe an explosive rebirth of associationism in Cuba due, simultaneously, to the crisis of the collapse of the Eastern European bloc and a certain withdrawal of the state as socio-economic agent, the discredited ideology and practice of state socialism. Also with a bearing is the rise of decentralized process on world and regional scale, the proliferation of solidarity with Cuba movements, the emergence of new questions posed and revindicated discourses (environment, gender, ecumenicalism and popular religiosity, urban participation). During these years efforts are combined of communities, different foreign actors and the state to alleviate the effects of the crisis, promoting an associative boom. Currently, the associative space can be classified according to several kinds<sup>18</sup>, depending on the point of reference. In my case I propose cover it according to four groupings that would be: para-state associations (PA), anti-system associations (ASA), sectorial or professional associations (SPA) and territorial or popular associations (TPA)

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<sup>17</sup> Law of Associations No 54/85 Gaceta Oficial de la República de Cuba, Havana (19): 1985, 119p.

<sup>18</sup> Some authors mention an authoritative sector, state function that would include the PA and majority of authorized SPA and another “democratizing” minority, legally dubious and watched, democratic and transparent, reserved fundamentally from the ASA. See “Sociedad civil y el futuro de cuba: Una vía no política para reducir el poder estatal”, Ricardo A. Puerta, periódico La Opinión (January-1996) in [www.cosodecu.org](http://www.cosodecu.org). Others identify sectors made up by the dissidents or “civic anti-establishment movement”, legal independent and informal economy, Christian churches and other religious associations and a part of the official intelligentsia with independent attitudes. In other side, Gillian Gunn define organization which develop several kinds actions from top, with communitarians connections, and basis entities, oriented to citizens empowerment, with different levels of links to state apparatus. See Cuban Briefing Paper Series, No 7, February 1995, [http // www.trinitydc.edu](http://www.trinitydc.edu).

In the PA group (Committees of Defense of the Revolution [CDR], Cuban Confederation of Workers [CTC], Cuban Women's Federation [FMC]. FEU and FEEM) have a structure, purpose and symbolic repertoire more identified with state institutionalism and gather together all the great social groups of the country. A typical phenomenon of the experiences of "state socialism", have a national character and monopolize the representation of certain interests and associative identities, not allowing alternative structures of the same kind. They are a function of the political system, also constituting an important form of social organization that formally should represent before the State the interests and opinions of its members. At the same time they orient official policies serving as a mechanism for mobilization and propaganda and as spaces to obtain certain social protection. A certain form of schematization, uniformity and inertia entrenched in the styles of several organizations. Some have more legitimacy and renewing potential (FEU) but depends on the rescue of differentiated and autonomous discourses of the sectors they represent.

The ASA (opposition groups, certain entities and institutions linked to the Catholic church and its hierarchies) evaluated as "political opposition" count on a membership and internal influence so frequently overestimated as covert but demand a different reading to what we would deal with the organized counterrevolution of the 60s and 70s. In that case it was what was the illegal remains of the old order, interested in stopping the transforming wave of the revolution and, consequently, opposed to the progressive historical movement and majority support of the people. Today it is more complex that equally shares the subversive project ideologically and materialistically promoted by western governments and inconformity of a sector of society in a plethoric environment of restrictions to any form of organized dissent where even the spaces and principles of democratic regulations instituted (such as the popular powers and the so-called democratic centralism of political organization) are framed in an order of things that are too vertical and authoritative that limit its functioning. On the other hand, many dissidents, regardless of official restraint to promote alternative social projects have reedited traditions of servitude, corruption and domestic wheeling and dealing, placing themselves at the service of the historical enemy of the Cuban nation.<sup>19</sup>

On the other hand we have sectorial or professional associations –SPA- emblematically represented by the NGOs that group about 2 200 civilian associations. These entities are characterized by having a tendency towards professionalization and institutionalization; they have important costs for functioning and capacity of external management of resource and tend to be stable and selective in its membership, including salaried workers and population-clients. As a rule these associations develop a complex work plan (programs, projects) in several areas and have formal leaders and with considerable professional training.

Other visible actors are territorial or popular associations –TPA- above all the neighborhood movements; associated to structures such as Workshops of Integral Transformation of the Neighborhood and several community projects promoted by Cuban and foreign NGOs.<sup>20</sup> They have a local sense and essentially show no level of

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<sup>19</sup> See Philip Agee, "La sociedad civil y los disidentes", revista "La Jiribilla", No 115, Havana and [www.rebelion.org](http://www.rebelion.org), mayo del 2003.

<sup>20</sup> See Haroldo Dilla "Movimientos comunitarios en Cuba: un análisis comparativo"; Estudios Sociológicos, Vol. XVII, número 51. Colegio de México. 1999 and Haroldo Dilla, Armando Fernández y Margarita Castro "Movimientos barriales en Cuba: un análisis comparativo" in "Participación social.

connection among them, being mostly informal and territorial. They have limited access to economic resources and depend on external sources. Consequently they have a self-management system that favors an integral transformation of the communities based on socio-cultural considerations. They have a modest subject agenda typified by focalization of problems and have mass and relaxed membership that makes the task of collective leadership more difficult. They express a “diffuse” practice of coordination and activism (different to the logic of leaders and members of more formalized spaces) with a high protagonism of women. Professional and former leaders.

In their conformation the state has played a contradictory role. On the one side it disseminates technology and material resources (urban organic agriculture, alternative constructions), offers specialists to these and other fields (psychologists, planners) and pays salaries to the members of the leading team. But although it implicitly recognizes the existence of these movements, it prevents their legal recognition, rejects conformation of popular economic experience and attempts to absorb local productive efforts. Even so the MPB has experimented with relations of reciprocity (neighborhood help, distribution of food, donation to schools) promoting community help to some workers who work for themselves and formulas of cooperation by contracting their services for the projects of activity.

Both in one or another space we observe how the political culture of association frequently reproduces traditional standards (authorism, democratic restrictions, clientism) although their entities incorporate alternative practices (popular education, participative diagnosis, community work) and favor a more participative and democratic society. In truth, the relationships between these associations are as complex as the rest of the components of the social system, revealing collaboration relationships, competence and conflict in the development of their own interactive process.<sup>21</sup>

#### The dilemma of participation: incomplete evaluations

“I participate, you participate, he participates, she participates, we participate, you participate...they decide.”<sup>22</sup>

Within the agendas and focuses of these popular associations the participative component plays a central role. All forms of collective action have its own participative dynamism, - expressed in forms, levels and kinds-, born of their particular experience of organization and struggle. In these popular associations the vertical character, instrumento or hierarchical of mobilization participation confronts growing forms of democratic and autonomous action in a debate that vindicates the idea of micro power,<sup>23</sup> expands the repertoire of democratic rights and non conventional forms of political

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Desarrollo urbano y comunitario”, Aurora Vazquez and Roberto Dávalos (comp), Havana Universidad 1998.

<sup>21</sup> From analyzing my personal experience and the exchange with actors interview in the associative space defined a type of probable conflicts: associations (with or without institutional support) vs state institutions; associations (with or without state support) vs market spaces; associations vs market-state alliances; associations vs national or foreign associations (with or without support of other actors) and associations vs non organized communities (where the actors have a bearing).

<sup>22</sup> Grafitti anónimo, *Ibíd.*

<sup>23</sup> Los movimientos sociales frente a la crisis, Fernando Calderón Gutiérrez, CD Aula 561.

participation and projects demands and conflicting relations with questions previously considered mere moral, environmental or economic subjects.

When we speak of participation we refer to another polysemic term. It refers to forms and processes of social action where the subjects share a certain situation have the opportunity to identify interests and common demands changing them into forms of collective action. It integrates popular knowledge and capabilities, searches for an integral transformation that overcomes a relationship of dependence and subordination among the members of the community, on one side, and specialists and leaders. Participation as a fundamental democratic elements means distribution of real power in the community to influence, supervise and control institutional actions and that of their own local leaders as well as limiting the expansion of commercial logic. It is more than being present, mobilize, exchange criteria and give opinions, it means raising awareness, taking part, being involved, decide and act with commitment. That is why participating presupposes three basic requirements: to want (to feel the need to do so), to know (learn the ideal forms to do so), power (that the environment – including the community – allow the process).

This is expressed as a process through different phases, stages or levels and that contributes with different concrete forms. Each community, once it gets involved in a project should, previously, analyze the situation, needs, resources and expectation of the members; create ideal structures that strengthen interpersonal ties and collective action; to promote processes of education and ethical development. There are many levels of participation and they are commonly expressed as: information, consultation, and formulation of proposals, coordination, decision, management and control. The members of the community can participate in these levels with resources and means – economic, technical, human- necessary to follow up their objectives supplying knowledge, voluntary work, contacts or whatever technical means they possess, etc.

Members can participate intervening in the internal organizational process analyzing the situation, defining the objectives and procedures (programs, methods of work, etc.) necessary to carry out and do the tasks, carrying out planned activities, evaluation the process and their results. Frequently few persons participate in this modality. They can also take part in the results, benefiting from services or products of the activity, improving their level of information and interpersonal communication taking advantage, obtaining prestige, etc. This is one of the most frequent expressions of participation.

There is a debate on whether participation is an end or a means. On the one hand, if participation is a value in itself it must be applied to a maximum in any situation whether or not it is efficient, from ethical criteria that aspire for a maximum democracy and the conscious actions of persons transforming their environment. That would have an effect on public life but would have repercussions in the individual's private life. The other position defends the idea of participation as a valuable means but not infallible, having no answer for each problem either because there are real limitations (geographic demarcations or the existence of specialized knowledge) if citizen participation is understood as a process where all decide about every issue all the time and not as an ideal of social action where the majority decide over most things of their interest for a time and according to the forms they deem necessary.

To participate is first to take part, belong to an all-inclusive whole. This manner is limited and is used to call for attendance to a mobilization. But it can be the basis to release other processes, expressing the feeling of belonging and commitment in everything where one is included. It implies to have responsibility over the effects of my inclusion, for the consequences of how I affect the whole.

A second manner of participating is taking part, having some function in that whole that presupposes interactive mechanisms, processes of cooperation and competence, of encounters and misunderstandings, communication and joint negotiation. The presence of conflict is an undeniable part and taking part and is a measure of knowing how to recognize and assimilate accordingly, without generating a paralysis; and is one of the basic pillars of all participative process. Lastly, to take part, to decide, to complete the participative idea putting in play awareness of what can and should affect the course of events, through a critical analysis of the necessities and problems, a clear evaluation of the alternatives and balance of available resources from the point of view of this participative dimension that becomes a right.

Participation is a fundamental dimension of all preexisting community before the arrival of external programs that intend to boost participative actions. The intervening agent is included in an external social evolution that precedes it and that will continue after its intervention having its own social-cultural conditionings (informal networks of communication and participation, modalities set up to solve conflicts and taking of decisions, specific leaderships), frequently unknown for the new arrival. They are traditional forms of participation and community organizations built in the dynamics of daily life and that, also, receive an ideological influence of the dominant culture. The intent of some programs and technicians to “teach participation” can ignore the complicated bonds that hold together human collectives and their peculiarities. This tension is felt in the Cuban associative universe, specially in the relations built among sectorial-professional associations and their popular-territorial counterparts.

As a rule, all international institutions and associations (from the World Bank to Oxfam) agree that there is no human development without participation. In Cuba there are valuable experiences in participation where massiveness, linked to a strong commitment and effective support of state agencies has allowed the efficient fulfillment of literacy and health campaigns, diagnosis of community problems, etc. Thus, activities with scarce popular legitimacy have achieved meager results or, in the worst case, have ended in failure. This has occurred when the people perceive a subterfuge of state vigilance and control, when the real implication and interest of these people in the program in question are obviated, when access to the necessary information is restricted and the community’s opinion is not known or that alternatives could propose a solution to the problem.

Political participation is a variant of social participation in the public sphere and, particularly, within the political system, must be studied in a particular socio-historical context. It presupposes a decentralization of faculties and financial and material resources, always implying a redistribution of powers. In practice, political participation in modern societies is not possible without institutions, mechanisms, resources and participative cultures. Development of the so-called democratic participation related, in a greater or lesser degree, to direct participation (or under controlled delegation) of the

population implying development of strong local power and popular protagonism in administration and control within national institutions of powers.

In this sphere of participation we find authors who recognized a peculiar structure of participation levels that can be summarized as follows:

Voice: In which opinions are expressed on subjects of interest for the actors.

Consultation: In which opinions and criteria are expressed regarding proposals or issues regarding some level of direction.

Demand and Aggregated Demands: Moments where demands are expressed regarding services, goods, organizational or government organizations, etc. It included participating in the particular aggregated demands or environment.

Proposal: To prepare proposals for measures, priorities, candidates, etc.

Decisions or Decision Taking: Moment when application is decided in politics, plans or programs; carrying out measures; or taking decisions, etc.

Fulfillment or Execution: To participate in the fulfillment or execution of decisions.

Democratic control: Moment in which the socio-political process is controlled, in general, and policies in force as well as the process itself of participation.

Evaluation: Moment of participation in the evaluation of results of the application or execution of strategic and tactical, general and particular decisions as well as over the democratic development in force.<sup>24</sup>

There are several views about the opportunities and challenges about political participation in Cuba. According to Ricardo Alarcon de Quesada, veteran president of the National Assembly of Popular Power, “These organizations and others –such as those of the campesinos or professional or neighborhood ones- have a vital, organic participation in the direction of society. They are responsible to propose candidates for national deputies and provincial delegates. They are not only listened to but intervene directly in the taking of decisions. Some examples are the: Law of Tax System before presentation to the National Assembly that was a subject widely studied in the worker’s unions that led to important modifications to the original text; The Law of Farmer’s Cooperatives, an initiative presented by the National Association of Small Farmers that was discussed by thousands of members in all the cooperatives and, as a result, gave rise to the final version of the project that the Assembly considered and approved”.<sup>25</sup>

However, as noted by the sociologist Juan Valdés Paz: “The advances of decentralization of faculties, of resources and information in favor of non state sectors and local State institutions has been insufficient. Largely, institutional order

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<sup>24</sup> See Juan Valdés Paz “Notas sobre la participación política en Cuba”, in “Participación social”, Arnaldo Pérez (comp.), CIPS, Havana, 2004

<sup>25</sup> See "La democracia cubana no se agota en la representación formal, sino que incorpora mecanismos y formas de la democracia directa", Interview of Ricardo Alarcón by Pascual Serrano, [www.rebellion.org](http://www.rebellion.org), 6/12/2003.

demonstrates a high degree of centralization in all systems that is partly the effect of the surrounding conditions in which they develop and, in part, an effect of its institutional design and the high degree of centralization of political power (...). The basic objective of this popular participation in all its moments and, in a growing manner, in the taking of decisions, is blocked by the bureaucratic tendency of the institutions in each system, understood not only as an excessive number of officials and procedures but also in the taking of decision without democratic control. The advances in decentralization and rationalization in institutions of the political and economic systems, have been insufficient for a greater decrease of bureaucracy.”<sup>26</sup>

In this context, mobilization and consultation are presented as basic levels of appreciable participation in Cuba, both in institutional as well as in associative framework. Given the lack of socio-political institutionalism, although the associative universe seduces as a space of democratic communication of demands and feelings, not everything is idyllic. In many cases, leadership teams are elected at the base level but, later, their protagonism is decisive and uncontrolled, where members are reserved the passive role of beneficiaries or consultants. At times guidelines are object of attention by state organizations that express their consent of inconformity, at certain times, exerting pressure for not electing undesirable candidates and stimulating the marginalization of those who, once elected, demonstrate critical attitudes and discourses and greater autonomy from those “officially admissible” (even when these are organic) generally centered on traditions of uniformity and uniform.<sup>27</sup>

Having a bearing on this is the nature of related institutions, of the ideological foundations of their discourse, the intellectual formation of their leaders, the role played within official intellectuality: they are not identical to focuses of the Culture Ministry, of the Ministry of Science, Technology and Environment or of the Central Committee. Each association will be responsible, concretely, of the unreserved defense of their much debated (and always uncertain) margins of autonomy, capacity to negotiate non essential issues of principle, the ability to build bridges and win allies within the associative sphere with their foreign counterparts and obviously, with the Cuban institutional framework, its power to call on local and general public in decisive conflicts, etc. It should be considered that participation and real commitment of its members is a precondition for vitality and respect that associations enjoy, but the opposite is also real.

In our context different cultures of participation coexist where none is intrinsically “bad” or “good” since they simply have different references (historical, classist, cultural), finding this more traditional, “passive” (I inform, sensitize and mobilize)

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<sup>26</sup> See Juan Valdés Paz, “Desarrollo institucional en el “Periodo Especial”: continuidad y cambio”, in “Cultura, Fe y Solidaridad: perspectivas emancipadoras frente al neoliberalismo”, Armando Chaguaceda y Gabriel Coderch –Comp.-, Ed Félix Varela, Havana, 2005

<sup>27</sup> There is a certain allergy to the divers –heterophobia- by which view inserted in a socialist discourse are clumsily ignored for being born outside the “officially foreseen”. In face of this certain “minorities” discriminated by prejudices of official discourse and certain parts of society, defensively develop feeling of marginalization and the become potential targes for demoliberal discourses.

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preferred by many of our institutions, that has its reason for being historically, and, in spite of the need to be surpassed, still has much force. We have another participation, “active”, with several moments where the community meets, makes a bank of problems, defines an agenda of priorities, makes a plan, delegates its execution and then controls. It is a complex process and does not reject knowledge of the experts (it is not a utopia where all decide always like some want to make it seem, to disqualify it) experiences where all participate, yes, but at the same time not in every issue.

At times members are unaware of the participative possibilities (potential or effective), their attitude is centered on a passive wait for material, cultural benefits, identifying, of sociability or others and allow, as different permissible ranks of behavior, scarcely democratic, of its leadership. Action and features of these leaders depend on individual trajectories, levels of instruction and education as well as, obviously, personal features. It is necessary to tear down dangerous myths such as existing specific presupposed profiles (of age group, gender, sexual preference, occupational, etc.) that allow proposing, for example, a young environmental leader, black, poor and lesbian, as intrinsically emancipating subject since the large number of contextual and personal shaping could afford range of undesirable surprises.

Within associations, participation satisfies individual interests –identified with the central agglutinating subject of an agenda- and a broad range of personal expectations that include professional, living affective, communicative dimension, etc. Members are maintained grouped and participating in their associative dynamics in spite of external difficulties (material scarcity, legal limitations, institutional interference) that demonstrates a group commitment. This is maintained in spite of the effects of a certain “over-participation” or “multiple militancy”, characteristic of Cuban society by which citizens are classified in the para-state associations and party institutions being simultaneously inserted in so many convocations and mobilization that overlap and the people are exhausted, losing effectiveness.<sup>28</sup>

In this sense an experience designed and put forward by the author with the decisive collaboration of a group of colleagues has been developed since September 2006 in the Havana community of Alamar; integrating efforts of the Workshop of Neighborhood Integral Transformation in the locality; Popular Power (municipal government); the Oscar Romero NGO and the Fund for Local Initiatives of the Canadian embassy. The purpose of the project is to promote a strengthening initiative in the neighborhood, informal and institutional through a system of leadership workshops and community participation that would allow forming and developing a group of activists committed to the neighborhood problems. The objectives with these experiences are, in first place, to contribute to the formation of active leaders in small communities, promoting citizen participation and initiative to counteract the phenomena of perceivable social anomaly in our context. Also, as background to this collective reflection we propose creating a data base on theory and techniques of social participation adapted to concrete demands in the Cuban case.

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<sup>28</sup> Consult “Poder más allá del poder: reflexiones desde la experiencia cubana”, Elena Martínez Canals en “Cuba: sin dogmas ni abandono, Armando Chaguaceda (comp.), Ed Ciencias sociales, Havana, 2005.

Workshops sets off with some shared presumptions by the majority of those involved. Included are an understanding that the solution to the problems of their residential communities presupposes to continue developing interpersonal and inter institutional interests based on values of solidarity, reciprocity and self management that needs an overlapping of specific goals in the construction of collective feeling of social development. In community work, the main tasks of the neighborhood leaders should be directed to organization and mobilization of the members of the community or institution of an identification, decision taking, preparation and making solutions to their own problems and projections for their future development, raising protagonism of the members of the community or social institution and their capacity to question officials. Also, they should be capable to answer, in conjunction with public institutions designed for that effect, challenges in the areas such as a respect for socio-cultural diversity, of gender, generational and racial, attention to risk sectors (single mothers with small children, the elderly without family support, families with low incomes) promoting their self esteem and boosting their capacities for self development.

Evaluation of these workshop, under the auspices of the methodology of Popular Education and the focuses of Participative Research-Action, are determined by individual performance of the participants in the sessions through understanding basic methodological theories, as well as with the production of applicative collective results to the solutions of the neighborhood problems discussed. Professors of the course are researchers and professors in different centers such as the Center of Psychological and Sociological Research of Havana University supplying a deep multi-discipline knowledge. In the future we plan to develop additional activities covering related subjects, such as the participation in the environmental sphere as well as development of experiments in community economics (organic agriculture, arts and crafts, collecting raw materials, etc.) with priority to social insertion of the risk sectors such as the elderly, young mothers and handicapped.

Those who directly profit from these workshops are different communitarian leaders (youth, religious, women, cultural, etc.), delegates of Popular Power, personalities involved in the social life of localities, officials of local governments and specialists and investigators of related institutions. Each workshop prepares an average of 20 persons. The format of the workshops is a monthly integrating course that repeated every 10 months would have a total of 200 participants.

Beneficiaries participate in the execution of the project since it is the basis for training and reflection, it has a continued interrelation and exchange where the feedback is the factor that charges and carries out the project. Also, both the Group of Integral Development of the capital as well as authorities of the provincial and municipal governments have estimated that development and execution of the project adjusts to established regulations and their impact would be positive.

An NGO is a counterpart in the project and the entity in charge of requesting funds. This NGO is the "Oscar Arnulfo Romero Group of Reflection and Solidarity that, from its documents, defines itself Cuban Civil Society of Christian inspiration, orientation, macro-ecumenical and secular participation without financial interests or religious proselytism, formed by men and women from different social sectors with a plurality of

expressions of faith or varied philosophical concepts, identified in the need for diversity, on the basis of full dignity of the human being in its double dimension, individual and communitarian.

Another associated entity is TTIB Alamar Este located in the Alamar Popular Council, the youngest of 8 municipalities of La Habana del Este that has an extension of 9,2 Km<sup>2</sup> and 35 316 inhabitants. It is staffed by 6 professionals and 11 collaborators committed to the concrete actions for community projects and more than twenty colleagues who participate in diverse related actions with the workshops given here. At present the TTIB is reformulating objectives and actions in function of current moment of the workshop towards an integral consolidation with the community. For this reason, increased citizen participation is declared as its most important goal.

This work is developed in the midst of a group of difficulties that can be summarized as: physical infra-structural deterioration, lack of environmental education, insufficient means of transportation, lack of local sources of employment, lack of hydraulic networks and limited cultural and sports movement. There is also a certain instability in the leadership cadres, increased social lack of discipline, limited sense of belonging in some inhabitants and presence of a so-called “floating population” of immigrants from other parts of the country.

In spite of this, our efforts count on a group of potentialities such as: predomination of young and productive inhabitants of the sector, sports stars and personalities of culture, health and educational sections for all ages including the elderly. This is a tradition of TTIB in projects that arose from the community with specialists in different fields of learning and some political organizations and strengthened mass movement. At the same time there are different centers in the capital with possibilities of helping the community<sup>29</sup>, availability for growth and spatial development having free and uninhabited spaces, the process of municipalizing the university based in the barrio and certain expressions of political will to revitalize the territory, set by support of higher institutions of Popular Power and existence of a Secretary of Collaboration with experience in the management of projects. Up to now collective intent had given fruit in the celebration of three courses and the request of neighbors and institutions (local government and unions) to send their members. Among the difficulties is the slow execution of resources, difficulties in communication with some of the individual and institutional actors -derived from diverse identities and culture of participation mentioned above- as well as the well-known discursive and erratic theoretical-methodological barriers that we “specialists” find when beginning a mutual recognition and exchange with “local people” for the dialogue in the new project, demonstrating limitations that should be gradually surpassed.

Experiences like these, they tell us, the game in Cuba is not decided before hand. It all depends on our capacity to release the potential of citizen creativity with whom we have overcome the hard years of crisis, of the real commitment, knowledge and exemplarity that demonstrates to political class, degree of waste or vitality accumulated in the project and the carrying out of necessary corrective reforms capable of connecting with the demands of the people. This combination of factors make up the destinies of

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<sup>29</sup> These are, among others, the Martin Luther King Memorial Center, the Felix Varela Center, the Center of Interchange and Reference on Community Initiatives (CIERIC) and the Integral Development Group of the capital (GDIC).

the Cuban people for the next half century and on going actions (and capabilities) that will decide which scenario –dependent and peripheral capitalism or state and bureaucratic socialism, or libertarian socialism<sup>30</sup>- will be the triumphant project where future Cuban generations will live.

Setting sites on the last options implied a clear and passionate dedication of those who (from academia, the praxis or in a combination of both) commit themselves with the future of the country. In the end, the importance of the debate and action that today is unleashed surpasses a mere exercise in elegant rhetoric, from mercantile assistances and defense of community bases. And they should last to validate –by its capacity and pertinence- the collective construction of alternatives for a Cuba that is freer, more democratic and authentically socialist.

Havana, January 2007

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<sup>30</sup> For a concept of libertarian socialism that I share with Jorge Riechmann and Francisco Fernández Buey “Redes que dan libertad. Introducción a los nuevos movimientos sociales”, Ediciones Paidós, Colección Estado y Sociedad, Barcelona, 1994, P. 152- 153.