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REFLECTIONS ON THE PROCESSES OF JUSTICE AND SOCIAL PARTICIPATION FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE FAMILY*

IN ORDER TO MAKE general reflections on two important concepts in the definition of the characteristics of Cuban society, justice and social participation, placing them in the context of the daily reproduction of family groups, it is appropriate to address the philosophical aspect of both processes as well as the current socioeconomic context of Cuban society. On the philosophical plane, both processes may be perceived in a dialectical relationship which is representative of the most diverse relationships and social contradictions. Social justice as an accomplishment of contemporary civil society provides a propitious setting for the development of the most effective forms of social participation. In the same manner, as the forms of social participation become more effective—entailing direct action by the masses in the solution of their problems—we would be on the road to a more complete system of social justice.

Evidently, from the Marxist perspective, when these concepts are put into social practice they manifest a strong mutual dependency, a constant stimulating action, and even a contradictory relationship under certain circumstances. The general socio-economic context of every society confers its most relevant characteristics to the dynamics of the relationships that are established between the two processes.

In the case of Cuba and in the light of its current situation of adjustments, there is the endorsement of a social justice policy that since the first years of the Socialist Revolution has been our principal banner on the international arena and an important stimulus in the country for the reaffirmation of its social project. In the context of our current situation, social justice is based on a policy of social equity that starts with the equitable distribution of the crisis and favors the maintenance of existing social programs, such as those in education, health, and social security. The economic mechanism that supports this policy is based on the development of four basic industries: tourism, sugar, pharmaceuticals, and the food program. Unfortunately, in practice this strategy has been affected by economic and political factors that in many cases have acted as non-stimulators of social equity and social justice.

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*Editor's note: translation by Isabel Valiela.

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In the economic sphere, the rapid depreciation of industrial installations, of the transportation of cargo and passengers, and of living quarters, among many other components of the social and economic infrastructure, has affected certain social programs. On the other hand, the introduction of the "Empresas Mixtas" [Mixed Industries] and the "Economías Cooperadas" [Cooperative Economies] emerging from the current period of economic adjustment, aside from the unquestionable advantages it has meant for the health of our economy, has affected the policy of social equity in so far as "the material well-being, based on guarantees of greater and better consumption, has been polarized in the area where the dollar circulates."[1] It is true that the objectives of social justice, equity and quality of life exceed the patterns of economic efficiency, but it is also true that the former can only be supported on a long term basis on models of economic efficiency that are capable of bringing to socialism a mechanism of broad reproduction. The processes which have been briefly discussed here are very concretely manifested on the level of small social groups, as in the case of different families.

JUSTICE AND SOCIAL PARTICIPATION IN THE CONTEXT OF THE DAILY REPRODUCTION OF FAMILY GROUPS

The conditions under which the daily reproduction of family groups in our society takes place present a general character. However, the differences that exist in this process should not be ignored, particularly significant are those differences that are related to the level of urbanism in each community, the place that a particular family group holds in the social and class structure of society, the woman's ties to work, the life-cycle phase in which the family finds itself, and in the current historical context, the conditions of families at the beginning of the Special Period.

The significant accomplishments of the Cuban Revolution on matters of health, education, and social security in general, were appropriate for the great majority of Cuban families in the last 30 years. The State's social policy has been oriented mainly towards permanently safeguarding these accomplishments. This constituted an important precondition for the transformations that have been taking place within the Cuban family, in its living conditions, and in the fulfillment of its functions. These great accomplishments constitute the most important factors of the daily reproduction of family groups. Throughout the years the fundamental concentration of our economic resources has been oriented towards the formation of our material technical base; the focus has centered on boosting our future development and obtaining the essential guarantees that comprise the panorama of contemporary social justice.

Nevertheless, that which we call the "small domestic problems" of daily life: daily activities in the market, the delivery of small services, repairs for domestic appliances, have constituted throughout the years of the Revolution a latent focus of concern and tension for the majority of families. These domestic issues exist as a discouraging element which somehow contradicts the great gains of social history. Such routine problems as fixing minor household items or repairing a stove can turn into a

family crisis, consuming many hours which would otherwise be used for relaxation, or, even to benefit society.

This contradiction becomes even more acute under the Special Period, since the family, more than ever, comes to constitute the principal medium of reproduction. The efficiency of the work force and the life of the individual are slowly reduced to the struggle for survival, preoccupied with daily domestic tasks which detract from other interests, such as educational and cultural pursuits. For example, in the impoverishment of cultural life one finds, during this crisis, a reduction in recreational and cultural offerings, a decrease in the publication of newspapers and magazines, and limited television programming. All this can lead to a sustained or increased deficit in the cultural-spiritual development of family members and a negative influence on their desire for knowledge.

The life of the family could be improved through an increase in the family's participation in the solution of daily problems, especially those problems that require organization, control, and distribution of resources for community development, as well as the search for mobilization alternatives. However, it is significant that the family and the population in general, when faced with the task of dealing with these types of problems, adopt individual approaches primarily benefitting their group, ignoring avenues of popular participation which would form collectives of neighbors and consumers facing the same problems. This reality, which could be refuted only with particular examples drawn from a few communities, reflects the need to prepare our population to achieve a greater level of quality social participation oriented towards identifying and implementing actions to resolve those problems.

There have been many advances in the legal mechanisms which stimulate the participatory process. The great majority of mechanisms that have been introduced in the measures taken by the "Consejos Populares" [Popular Councils] are directed towards this goal. Nevertheless, running parallel to these positive steps there remain negative aspects concerning the manner of decision-making that has a direct impact on family life.

On occasions one can observe the unbridgeable distance between the demands of the population in the "Asamblea de Rendición de Cuentas" [Financial Accounts Assembly] and the decisions of the municipal "Organos del Poder Popular" [Units of Popular Power]. And these distances are not temporary or superficial, but rather conceptual in character. For instance, one may find the case in which priority is given to the construction of a funeral home in a community which has historically demanded recreational centers or other social services; or there may be the case where municipal agencies assign resources to build a "Consultorio de Médico de la Familia" [Family Doctor's Office] in an urban zone that already has a community polyclinical hospital but lacks other installations and services.

These are some examples of the manner in which resources meant for community development are handled, neglecting the needs and interests expressed by the community through established legal means. These cases underscore the great importance of structuring effective mechanisms of popular control over decisions,

processes, and decision-makers. Naturally, situations such as these are costly to the quantity and quality of social participation; in reaction to such experiences families and communites may become more passive and less likely to engage in participatory models that strengthen the role of the community in the development of society.

PERSPECTIVES ON BOLSTERING BOTH PROCESSES

Adjustments accompanying present and future transformations in Cuban society should bolster the processes of justice and social participation from the perspective of family life, and at the community level. Those elements contrary to social justice should be remedied in light of the positive transformations, especially economic ones, which will be produced.

The decentralization of the negotiation process of the Cuban State, as well as the considerably open character of the "Resolución sobre el Desarrollo Económico del País" [Resolution on the Economic Development of the Country] approved by the 4th Party Congress gives us a glimpse of the legitimization of:

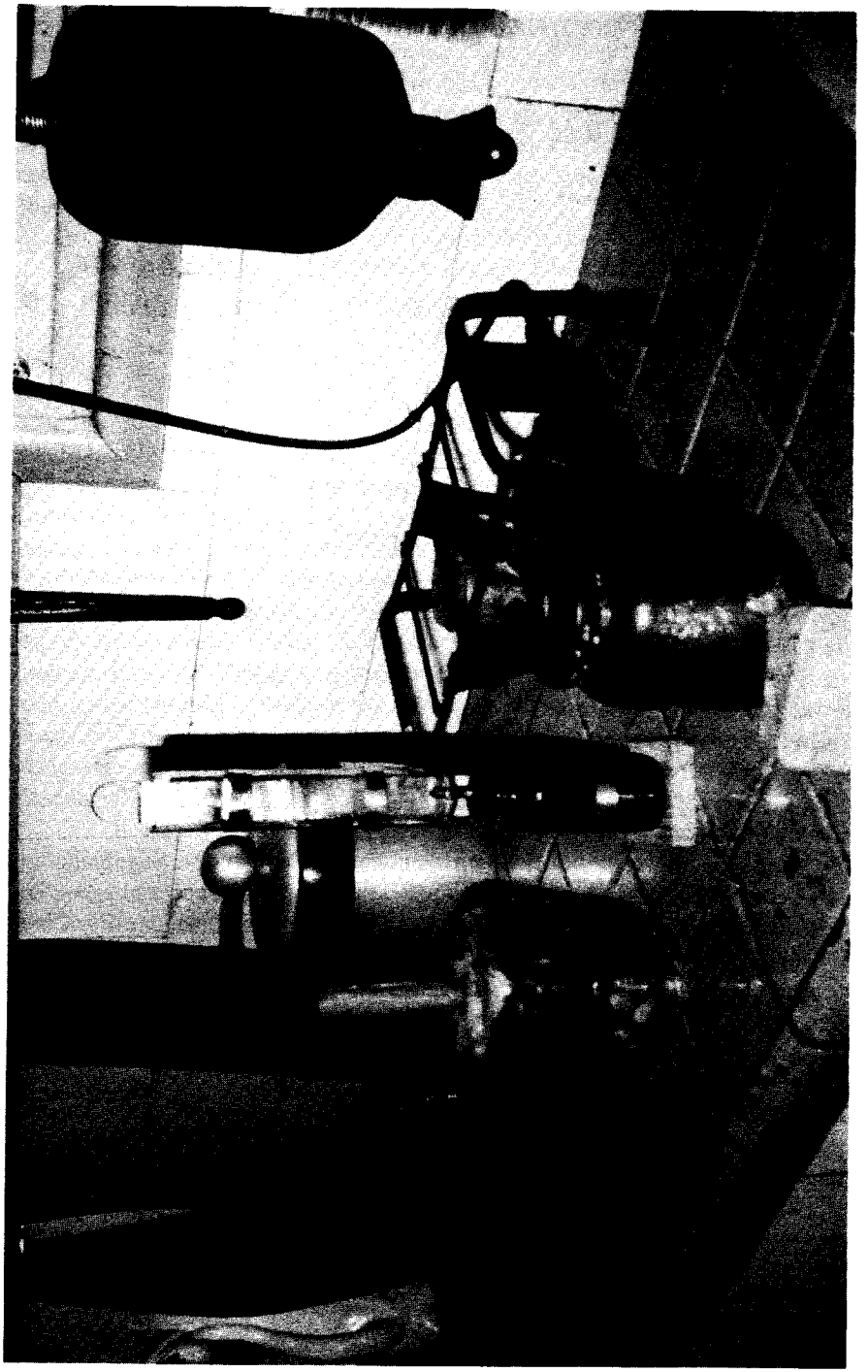
> la iniciativa privada en una vasta franja de prestaciones (muchas de las cuales se realizan de hecho hoy privadamente, a través del sector informal) entre igualmente en el futuro en la agenda del ajuste, posiblemente en el radio de acción de la suficiencia que se trata de imprimir a la comunidad.[2]
>
> [the private initiative in a broad band of services (many of which today are accomplished privately, through the informal sector) between equally in the future in the agenda of adjustment, possibly in the radius of action of sufficiency that is attempted to imprint on the community.]

Likewise, the modifications which were introduced in the "Organos del Poder Popular" [Organs of Popular Power], fundamentally those facilitating its representations at the base level, constitute favorable conditions for a more direct participation of the people in their demands for community development in accordance with their interests and legitimate needs.

Naturally, the fact that there are favourable conditions for bolstering the processes analyzed here does not necessarily imply that positive development in the future is assured. The constant search for popular control, of non-formal means of social participation, of the articulation of effective ideological messages to guide the collective will, all constitute a challenge for social activists involved in this renovation process, and alert us to the un-postponeable task of fully implementing the ideals of justice and social participation.

NOTES

[1] A. Alonso Tejeda, "La economía cubana: el reto de un ajuste sin desocialización," CEA, 1992.
[2] Ibid., 18.



"The Special Period Exhibit." Photo by Isabel Valiela, Havana, 1994