

Pushing polyarchy: the US–Cuba case and the Third World

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Since the late 1980s US policy makers have argued that the basis of the long-running US dispute with Cuba is the lack of ‘democracy’ in the Caribbean island nation. The Clinton Administration has made it clear that its policy, including any eventual normalisation of relations, will be based on democratisation inside Cuba. Yet, from the triumph of the Cuban revolution in 1959 to the late 1980s, the US–Cuba conflict was presented in Washington as a product of Cuba’s ‘security threat’, emanating from Cuba’s foreign policy of active engagement in the international arena, including its support for Third World national liberation movements and its alliance with the now defunct Soviet bloc. Therefore, the current assertion in Washington that the dispute is over democracy represents a little-perceived yet significant change in US policy towards Cuba.

This shift in policy, from an emphasis on external ‘security’ factors conditioning US–Cuban relations, to the emphasis on internal factors—that is, on Cuba’s internal political system—is important on two accounts. First, it is central to an analysis of current US–Cuba relations and to prognostication on how these relations will unfold in the coming years. Second, it reflects an essential change in US foreign policy that dates back to the 1970s, came to fruition in the 1980s, is now being consolidated, and promises to play a major role in US foreign policy in the ‘new world order’. This change has been described by policy makers, scholars and journalists as a shift towards ‘democracy promotion’. The State Department now defines ‘democracy promotion’ as one of the three basic planks of US foreign policy, along with the promotion of ‘free markets’ and the maintenance of a US military capacity around the world. ‘Support for democracy’, declares one State Department policy document, ‘is becoming the new organizing principle for American foreign policy’.¹

This change is largely unexplored. Many have applauded ‘democracy promotion’, with a surprising shallowness in theoretical analysis, as a positive and long-overdue change for the better in US policy. Those who have opposed US intervention abroad, while more sceptical regarding US intentions, have tended to view ‘democracy promotion’ as merely a continuation, under new rhetoric, of the same US interventionism of the past. In fact, both positions are off the mark, and reflect the failure to appreciate the profound changes at every level that are accompanying the rise of global capitalism, including changes in international political relations and transnational class formation.

I will present a theoretical argument in this paper which runs contrary to conventional wisdom and mainstream thinking on US ‘democracy promotion’, yet one which, I believe, will elucidate not only the context in which US–Cuban

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relations will unfold into the 21st century, but also the general dynamic of US foreign policy in the 'new world order'. This paper is divided into five parts. First, I will discuss in historic perspective the shift to what policy makers describe as 'democracy promotion'. Second, I will give brief theoretical treatment to the concepts of democracy, and define exactly what US policy makers mean when they say they are promoting 'democracy' in Cuba and elsewhere. Third, I will provide an explanation for this shift. Fourth, I will analyse the concrete mechanisms, in particular, 'political aid' programmes, through which this shift is taking place. Finally, I will link this analysis and the theoretical discussion to the case of Cuba and speculate on how US–Cuban relations might unfold. It must be emphasised that space limitations preclude a full exploration of the theoretical and analytical issues at hand. What follows is by necessity a simplification of complex issues and concepts.

From promoting dictatorship to promoting 'democracy'

'We have 50 percent of the world's wealth, but only 6.3 percent of its population ... In this situation we cannot fail to be the object of envy and resentment,' noted George Kennan in 1948, one of the most important architects of post-World War II United States foreign policy. 'Our real task in the coming period is to devise a pattern of relationships which will allow us to maintain this position of disparity,' said the then-Director of Policy Planning of the Department of State. 'We should cease to talk about the raising of the living standards, human rights, and democratization. The day is not far off when we are going to have to deal in straight power concepts. The less we are then hampered by idealistic slogans, the better.'²

Kennan's candid statement, contained in a top-secret document which discussed US strategy in the aftermath of World War II, is highly instructive on two accounts. First, it underscores the fact that the strategic objective of US foreign policy during the Cold War was less to battle a 'communist menace' than to defend gross inequalities in the international order (inequalities which were seen as under challenge by the spread of socialism) and the tremendous privilege and power this global disparity of wealth brought for the United States as the dominant world power. Second, Kennan's statement suggests that democracy abroad was not a major consideration for the United States in the formative years of the post-World War II order.

Four decades after Kennan's 1948 counsel, Carl Gershman, the President of the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), a new agency in the US foreign policy apparatus created in 1983, admonished in a speech to the American Political Science Foundation: 'In a world of advanced communication and exploding knowledge, it is no longer possible to rely solely on force to promote stability and defend the national security. Persuasion is increasingly important, and the United States must enhance its capacity to persuade by developing techniques for reaching people at many different levels.' Gershman went on to emphasise in his speech, in sharp contrast to Kennan, that 'democracy' abroad, should be a major consideration for the United States, in its effort to 'enhance its capacity to persuade' around the world.³

The East–West prism in which Kennan and his generation had cast the North–South divide in foreign policy dictates evaporated with the end of the Cold War. Yet, as Gershman’s statement suggests, the fundamental objective of maintaining international asymmetries in an unjust global system, to which Kennan alluded nearly half a century earlier, did not change with the collapse of the Soviet system. What *has* changed are the methods and strategies for securing this objective. What US policy makers term ‘democracy promotion’, and the ideological dimensions it entails, is being developed as an effective instrument of ‘persuasion’, in contrast to—or more often, alongside—force in assuring ‘patterns of relationships’ that protect US interests (and, increasingly, the collective interests of the North) in an unjust international system. In other words, this shift from ‘straight power concepts’ to ‘persuasion’ is predicated on the development of a new component in US foreign policy—‘democracy promotion’.

The United States had risen from the ashes of World War II as the dominant world power, and policy makers had set about conceiving, developing and defending an international order largely under US-led Western domination. From World War II to the end of the Cold War, the United States employed military force across its borders over 200 times, became embroiled in large scale wars in Korea and Indochina and in ‘small wars’, counterinsurgency campaigns and covert operations throughout Latin America, Africa, the Middle East and Europe, including, as is well documented, against Cuba.⁴ Global interventionism was rationalised by the Cold War and the need to confront communism. But perceived competition from the former Soviet Union, while significant, was *not* the driving force behind foreign policy. Behind the ‘communist threat’ there has always been another, more fundamental threat: a challenge to ‘patterns of relationships’ which underpinned domination by the US-led bloc of core capitalist powers in the international system and prerogative derived from privileged position in an asymmetric international order.

National Security Council (NSC) Memorandum 68, one of the key US foreign policy documents of the postwar era, stated that postwar policy embraces ‘two subsidiary policies’. One was to foster ‘a world environment in which the American system can survive and flourish’, and the other was containment of the Soviet Union, which ‘seeks to foster the seeds of destruction within the Soviet system’. The Memorandum went on: ‘Even if there was no Soviet Union we would face the great problem’ of achieving global ‘order and security’.⁵ Revealingly, a major focus of NSC-68 was not the Soviet Union at all, but securing US and Western access to the raw materials, markets and labour power of the Third World, and on assuring a political environment propitious to the operation of an increasingly international capital. Behind East–West relations, therefore, North–South relations were always intrinsic and central to the whole Cold War era.⁶

Although ‘democracy’ often entered the foreign policy-making vocabulary for reasons of convenience, or under the circumstances of specific moments, it was *not* the principal political form which the United States promoted in the Third World in the postwar years. In fact, as the historical record shows, the principal form was the development of strategic alliances with authoritarian and dictatorial

regimes. The outcome of intervention, whether intentional or an incidental byproduct, was the establishment and defence of authoritarian political and social arrangements in the Third World. The USA promoted and supported a global political network of civilian–military regimes and outright dictatorships in Latin America, white minority and one-party dictatorships of post-colonial elites in Africa, and repressive states in Asia (the Batista regime was but one example). Authoritarian political and social arrangements were judged to be the most expedient form of assuring stability and social control in the Third World required for the free operation of international capital. However, by the 1970s, mass popular movements were spreading against repressive political systems and exploitative socioeconomic orders established during the years of the Cold War. The structures of authoritarianism and dictatorship began to crumble, above all, in US client regimes, and a general crisis of elite rule in the South began to develop. As the ‘elective affinity’ between authoritarianism and US-led Western domination began to unravel, ‘democracy promotion’ was substituted for ‘national security’ as the vernacular in Washington. A ‘democracy promotion’ apparatus was created from the late 1970s to the early 1990s, including new governmental and quasi-governmental agencies and bureaus (including, but not limited to, the NED), policy studies and conferences by government and private policy planning institutes to draft and implement ‘democracy promotion’ programmes.⁷ Where it had earlier supported dictatorship, such as in Chile, Nicaragua, Haiti, the Philippines, Panama, Southern Africa and elsewhere, the USA now began to ‘promote democracy’.

Democracy promotion promises to play a vital role in shaping a new international system. Under the rubric of promoting democracy, the USA has developed new modalities of engagement abroad in order to intervene in the crises, transitions and power vacuums resulting from the break-up of the old order and to try to reshape political and economic structures as a ‘new world order’ emerges. These modalities constitute precisely those newfound ‘techniques for reaching people at many different levels’ to which Gershman referred. Democracy promotion, as analysed below, is a way to relieve pressure from subordinate classes for more fundamental political, social and economic change. The impulse to promote democracy is the rearrangement of national political systems in the South so as to maintain elite based status quos in an unjust international system and to suppress mass aspirations for more thorough going democratisation of social life in the new world order. In more theoretical terms, the shift from backing authoritarianism to promoting ‘democracy’ represents the replacement, in a transnational setting, of coercive means of social control with consensual ones.

Polyarchy versus popular democracy

Democracy promotion has a crucial ideological dimension, given that democracy is a universal aspiration and the claim to promote it has mass appeal. The term ‘democracy’ is thrown around very loosely. But definitions can, and should, be precise. What US policymakers mean when they use the term democracy is actually what political scientist Robert Dahl has termed *polyarchy*, a system in

which a small group actually rules and mass participation in decision making is confined to leadership choice in elections that are carefully managed by competing elites. The polyarchic definition of democracy, building on early 20th century elitism theorists such as Gaetano Mosca and Vilfredo Pareto, developed in US academic circles closely tied to the policy-making community in the USA in the post-World War II years. According to Samuel Huntington, this 'redefinition' of the classical definition of democracy as rule, or power (*cratos*) of the people (*demos*) to make it more 'realistic' and 'compatible' with 'modern society', culminated in Dahl's 1971 study, entitled *Polyarchy*.⁸ By the time the USA rose to world power after World War II, the polyarchic definition of democracy had become established in Western academy. When US officials speak of 'promoting democracy', what they really mean, therefore, is the promotion of polyarchy, or what has elsewhere been referred to as 'low-intensity democracy'.⁹

It must be emphasised that democracy is what philosopher WB Gallie has termed an 'essentially contested concept'. This refers to a concept in which different and competing definitions exist, such that terms themselves are problematic since they are not reducible to 'primitives'. Each definition yields different interpretations of social reality.¹⁰ In this context, any attempt to address the issue of democracy and the US–Cuban dispute runs up against the following problematic: one particular definition of democracy, that of polyarchy, has achieved, in the Gramscian sense, hegemony among scholars, journalists, charismatic figures, policy makers and diplomats, not just in the USA, but in the international community and public discourse in general.

As an essentially contested concept, the polyarchic definition competes with the concept of *popular democracy*. The various views on popular democracy are traceable to the original Greek definition of democracy and rooted in Rousseauian–Marxist traditions. Popular democracy posits a disbursal throughout society of political power through the participation of broad majorities in decision making or forms of participatory, or direct, democracy, linked to representative forms of government and formal elections. Popular democracy is seen as an emancipatory project at whose heart is the construction of a democratic socioeconomic order. Democratic participation, in order to be truly effective, requires that democracy be a tool for changing unjust social and economic structures. In sharp distinction to polyarchy, popular democracy is concerned with both process and outcome. Elitism theories claim that democracy rests exclusively on process, so that there is no contradiction between a 'democratic' process and an anti-democratic social order punctured by sharp social inequalities and minority monopolisation of society's material and cultural resources. Thus, under the polyarchic definition, a system can acquire a democratic form without a democratic content or outcome. Popular democracy, in contrast, posits democracy as both a process and as a means to an end—a tool for change, for the resolution of such material problems as housing, health, education, land ownership, social inequalities and so forth. (It should be emphasised, however, that, although there is an abundance of literature on the concept of popular democracy, there is no fully elaborated *theory*. Such a theory would have to address the much-discussed issue of the institutional structures of

popular democracy and the *relation* between process and outcome in a popular democracy.¹¹)

Polyarchy's emphasis on process and disregard for outcome flows, in turn, from the theoretical premise of structural-functionalism that different spheres of the social totality are independent and linked externally to each other, and that the political sphere of the social totality, therefore, is separate from the social and economic spheres. US social scientists Larry Diamond, Juan J Linz, and Seymour Martin Lipset, in their introduction to a widely circulated, four-volume series funded by the National Endowment for Democracy and entitled *Democracy in Developing Countries*, explain: 'We use the term democracy in this study to signify a political system, separate and apart from the economic and social system ... Indeed, a distinctive aspect of our approach is to insist that issues of so-called economic and social democracy be separated from the question of governmental structure.'¹²

What theoretical or historical justification exists for the separation of the political system from socioeconomic matters is not clear. What is clear is that, owing to the hegemony enjoyed by the polyarchic definition of democracy, scholars, journalists, diplomats and so on, routinely refer to Latin America as 'democratic' in the wake of the 1980s 'transitions' (with the exception of Cuba). Yet, if we replace the polyarchic definition with the popular definition of democracy, we could argue, as US political scientist Carl Cohen does, that democracy is not a 'constant' (either existing or not) but a 'variable' (more or less of it), and democracy can be measured along the three dimensions of 'breadth, depth and range' of mass participation in societal decisions, voting for representatives being only one aspect of participation in decision making.¹³ In this framework, Cuba is less of a democracy at one level than the United States (eg lack of multiparty elections), but is a deeper democracy at other levels, measured by the breadth, depth and range of mass popular participation in decision making, and by a much more democratic socioeconomic order that contrasts sharply with the gross inequalities in power and wealth that characterise the United States and the vast majority of 'democratic' states in Latin America and the Third World. Although Cuba falls short of the model of popular democracy in many respects—the subordination of civil society to the state, a weak development of mechanisms in which state officials are held directly accountable to mass constituencies, a lack of multiparty pluralism, and so forth—the point here is that it is not particularly meaningful, either theoretically or in any practical sense, to judge democracy or the lack of it in Cuba by the polyarchic conception applied by the United States.

The implications of substituting the literal (or classic) definition of democracy with the institutional definition embodied in polyarchy are vast. It means that such issues as who controls the material and cultural resources of society, in whose interests is society organised, and so forth, become irrelevant to the discussion of democracy. What is relevant is simply political contestation among elite factions through procedurally free elections, no more no less. It means that asymmetries and inequalities both among groups within a single nation and among nations within the international order bear no relation to democracy. The notion that there may be a veritable contradiction in terms between elite or class

rule, in which wealth and power is monopolised by tiny minorities, on the one hand, and democracy, on the other hand—a contradiction which would flow from the original Greek definition of power of the people—does not enter—by theoretical-definitional fiat—into the polyarchic definition, rooted in the pluralist model of power and structural-functionalist theory.

It should be clear that popular democracy, including mass participation, social justice, economic equalities and national sovereignty, challenges an unjust international social and economic order, and is a threat to US interests. Behind contested concepts are *contested social orders*. Popular democracy is antithetical to the ‘low-intensity democracy’ which the USA seeks to promote. Popular democracy threatens elite status quos and US/Northern domination. In Haiti, in Chile, in the Philippines, in South Africa and elsewhere, people have been struggling to replace dictatorships—sustained by strategic alliances between local elites and the USA—with emancipatory projects along the lines of the model of popular democracy. In crucial moments in these struggles, Washington stepped in, through various forms of democracy promotion programmes, to seek polyarchic outcomes. And in Nicaragua under the Sandinistas and Haiti under Aristide, democracy promotion and other forms of US intervention sought to effect transitions from experiments in popular democracy (regardless of the deficiencies and weaknesses internal to these experiments) to elite-based polyarchies.¹⁴ I will argue below that US policy towards Cuba seeks a similar outcome.

Globalisation, promoting polyarchy, and consensual domination in the ‘new world order’

Struggles for popular democracy around the world are profound threats to the privileges of US-led Northern elites and their junior counterparts in the South. (I view the USA, in the age of globalisation, not as acting on behalf of a US elite, but as playing a leadership role on behalf of a transnational hegemonic configuration representing transnational capital; however, such a discussion is beyond the scope of this article.) Yet the methods and policies pursued during the Cold War years to confront these challenges have proved increasingly ineffective and untenable. This process has led US policy makers to initiate a shift in the dominant form through which the USA seeks to assure stability in a world system under Northern elite hegemony, from promoting authoritarian to promoting ‘democratic’ political and social arrangements in Third World countries. Both polyarchy and authoritarianism/dictatorship, as distinct forms of elite rule and social control, stand opposed to popular democracy. The shift in US foreign policy from promoting authoritarianism to promoting polyarchy is a shift from coercive to consensual methods of social control in the South, intended to address the post-World War II crises of elite rule. This assertion requires an expansion of the theoretical discussion.

The defining features of our epoch, which frames the shift from authoritarianism to polyarchy, is the emergence of a capitalist global economy. The emergence of a global economy brings with it the material basis for the emergence of a singular global society, including the transnationalisation of civil

society and of political processes. The old units of analysis—nation states—are increasingly inappropriate for understanding the dynamics of our epoch, not only in terms of economic processes, but also social relations and political systems. Promoting democracy can only be understood as part of a broader process of the exercise of hegemony, in the sense meant by Antonio Gramsci, within and between nations in the context of the transnationalisation of the economy, political processes and civil societies. ‘Low intensity democracy’ is a structural feature of the new world order: it is a global political system corresponding to a global economy under the hegemony of a transnational elite which is the agent of transnational capital. The shift from authoritarian to consensual mechanisms of social control corresponds to the emergence of the global economy since the 1970s and constitutes a political exigency of macroeconomic restructuring on a world scale.

The global economy has been well-researched and a discussion is beyond the scope of this article. Suffice it to point out here that over the past several decades the world has been moving from a situation in which nations have been linked via capital flows and exchange in an integrated international market to the globalisation of the process of production itself. This involves the restructuring of the international division of labour and the reorganisation of productive structures in each nation, and has major consequences for the social and political texture of each society. As Cuba has discovered, no single nation state can remain insulated from the global capitalist economy or prevent the penetration of the social, political and cultural superstructure of global capitalism. Globalisation, made possible by several post-World War II waves in the ‘scientific and technological revolution’, is transforming the very nature of the industrial production process and, along with it, the role of human labour. It has allowed for the decentralisation across the globe of complex production processes simultaneous to the centralisation of decision making and management of global production, that is, the complete separation of the site of management from the site of production and the geographic fragmentation of production and capital. Capital now has the means to move with total mobility across the globe in the search for the cheapest labour and the most congenial conditions for the different circuits in the process of production and distribution, without regard for national borders. In this reorganised world economy, the rich countries of the North are increasingly based on control of technology, information and services in a ‘global factory’, whereas the labour-intensive phase of international production is shifted to the South through the ‘comparative advantage’ of abundant cheap labour. The globalisation of production, which involves a hitherto unseen integration of national economies, brings with it a tendency towards uniformity, not just in the conditions of production, but in the civil and political superstructure in which social relations of production unfold. The agent of the global economy is transnational capital, managed by a class-conscious transnational elite based in the ‘centre’ countries of the world system, and led by the USA.

The accelerated concentration of capital and economic power around this transnational elite in centre countries has profound effects on arrangements between existing social groups, class constellations and political systems in every country of the world system, including a redistribution of quotas of

accumulated political and economic power towards new groups linked to transnational capital and the global economy. In every region of the world, from Eastern Europe to Latin America, states, economies and political processes are becoming transnationalised and integrated under the guidance of this new elite. This transnational elite has its exact counterpart in each nation of the South, in a new breed of 'technocratic' elite in Latin America, Africa and Asia who are the local counterparts to the global elite, and who are overseeing sweeping processes of social and economic restructuring.¹⁵

This transnational elite has an economic project and a political counterpart to that project. The economic project is 'neoliberalism', a model which seeks to achieve conditions which permit the total mobility of capital. This model includes the elimination of state intervention in the economy and the regulation by individual nation-states over the activities of capital in their territories. The neoliberal 'structural adjustment' programmes currently sweeping the South seek macroeconomic stability (price and exchange-rate stability, etc) as an essential requisite for the activity of transnational capital, which must harmonise a wide range of fiscal, monetary and industrial policies among multiple nations if it is to be able to function simultaneously, and often instantaneously, between numerous national borders. In turn, the political project of this transnational elite is the consolidation of political systems which function through consensual mechanisms of social control, that is of polyarchic political systems. It is precisely these new elites in the South who have entered into alliances to promote democracy, or to develop democratic consensual forms of social control in their countries in contrast to the earlier forms of authoritarian or dictatorial control. It is in this context that democracy promotion and the promotion of free markets through neoliberal restructuring has become a singular process in US foreign policy. The US Agency for International Development (USAID) explains that promoting democracy in the latter part of the 20th century 'is complementary to and supportive of the transition to market-oriented economies'.¹⁶

But why consensual over coercive mechanisms of control? Authoritarianism and dictatorship had become a fetter to the emergent patterns of international capital accumulation corresponding to the global economy. Globalising forces have been disintegrating previously embedded forms of political authority. Transnational capital has become sufficiently disruptive and intrusive as to break down all the old barriers that separated and compartmentalised groups in and between societies, while mass communications is integrating what were once secluded social and cultural experiences of different peoples within the world system. The communications revolution has penetrated even the most remote and isolated regions of the world and linked them with an increasingly global civilisation. The globalisation of social life has brought with it new social movements and revolutions in civil society around the world. In short, people have been pushed by the global economy into new roles as economic and social protagonists, and in this process, have been demanding the democratisation of social life.

This is what the Trilateral Commission, in its landmark 1975 report *The Crisis of Democracy*, referred to as 'the explosion of social interaction, and correlatedly a tremendous increase of social pressure'. Social and economic developments in

the world over the past several decades 'have made it possible for a great many more groups and interests to coalesce ... the information explosion has made it difficult if not impossible to maintain the traditional distance that was deemed necessary to govern'. The report went on to note that the 'democracy ethos make it difficult to prevent access and restrict information, while the persistence of the bureaucratic processes which have been associated with the traditional governing systems makes it impossible to handle them at a low enough level'.¹⁷

In other words, authoritarian political systems are unable to manage the expansive social intercourse and fluid social relations associated with the global economy. Social interaction and economic integration on a world scale are obstructed by the political framework of authoritarian or dictatorial arrangements; under the hegemony of transnational capital, they require *consensual* arrangements. The imperative for democracy as far as elite interests are concerned, lies in the view that democracy is the most effective means of assuring stability. The interest is not democracy, but stability, the former seen as but a mechanism for the latter. This is in contrast to earlier periods in US foreign policy history—and correlatedly, to the historic norm in centre-periphery relations predicated on coercive modes of domination, as in the colonial era—when military dictatorships or authoritarian client regimes were seen as the best guarantor of stability.

The extremes of military regimes and highly unpopular dictatorships, like those of Somoza in Nicaragua, the Shah in Iran, Marcos in the Philippines, the Duvaliers in Haiti and Pinochet in Chile, engendered mass opposition movements that became transnational in their significance as globalisation proceeded, that threatened to lead to more fundamental social, economic and political changes and that were no longer guarantors of social control. Thus the challenge in promoting polyarchy is to remove dictatorships *and* pre-empt more fundamental changes. The Iranian revolution, followed shortly afterwards by the Nicaraguan in July 1979, were compelling events that brought home this lesson to US policy makers. Polyarchy is seen as the preferred means of confronting, or at least controlling, popular sectors and their demands—or as Kennan would say, their 'envy' and 'resentment'—in the framework of an unjust world system. Supported upon the foundations of what Gramsci referred to as ideological hegemony, consensual arrangements are at play for the resolution of conflicts *within the parameters of a given social order*. On the one hand, says Gershman, 'traditional autocrats simply cannot adapt to the pace of change and conflicting political pressures of the modern world'. On the other is 'the declining utility of conventional military force in the contemporary world'. In this context, 'competition is likely to continue to shift from the military to the political realm, and it will become increasingly important for the West to develop a sophisticated and long-term strategy for democratic political assistance'.¹⁸ *Formal* democratic structures are therefore seen as more disposed to diffusing the sharpest social tensions and to incorporating sufficient social bases with which to sustain more stable environments under the conflict-ridden and fluid conditions of emergent global society. This new political intervention is more sophisticated than earlier forms of intervention by the USA and other former colonial powers. The process tends to be less a crude design hatched in Washington and other Northern

capitals than a complex convergence of interests among an increasingly cohesive transnational elite headed by a US-led Northern bloc and incorporating elite constituencies in the South. The demands, grievances and aspirations of the popular classes tend to become neutralised or redirected less through direct repression than through ideological mechanisms, political cooptation and the limits imposed by the global economy and the legitimising parameters of polyarchy.

The distinction between authoritarianism and polyarchy should not be belittled, either in a normative or a theoretical sense. However, the trappings of democratic procedure in a polyarchic political system do not mean that the lives of those in nations where the USA is promoting democracy become filled with authentic or meaningful democratic content, much less that social justice or greater economic equality is achieved. Seen in the light of popular democracy, US democracy and democratisation, have nothing to do with meeting the authentic aspirations of repressed and marginalised majorities for political participation and for greater socioeconomic justice. But polyarchy may prove to be a more durable means of social control. US democracy promotion, as it actually functions, sets about not just to secure and stabilise polyarchy but to have the USA and local elites thoroughly penetrate not just the state, but civil society as the locus of a Gramscian hegemony, and *from therein* assure control over popular mobilisation and mass movements. In other words, seen through the lens of the promotion of polyarchy, the composition and balance of power in civil society in a given Third World country is now just as important to US interests as who controls the governments of those countries. This is a shift from social control 'from above' to social control 'from below' (and within), for the purpose of managing change and reform so as to pre-empt any elemental challenge to the social order. This explains why the new political intervention, conducted by the NED and other agencies, does not target governments *per se*, but groups in civil society itself—trade unions, political parties, the mass media, professional guilds, peasant associations, women's, youth, student and other mass organisations.

The introduction of 'political aid'

The policy shift from promoting authoritarianism to promoting polyarchy has been a lengthy process drawn out over several decades. In addition, it involved the development of new modalities, instruments and agencies for actually accomplishing the transition, from authoritarian to polyarchic political and social systems in third world countries where intervention had taken place. This reorientation entailed, in particular, the introduction and expansion of an under-developed and underutilised instrument in US foreign policy, *political aid*, which has come to supplement the two main tools of US foreign policy since World War II, military and economic aid programmes.

'Programs to strengthen friendly political movements in other countries are one of the foreign policy arms of a modern great power', noted two participants in Project Democracy, a semi-secret programme launched in the early 1980s under the auspices of the NSC to develop democracy promotion programmes.¹⁹

'Until this century, there were three instruments for such efforts: diplomacy, economic, and military. This triad retains its primacy today, but it has been supplemented by two additional instruments,' they explained. 'One is propaganda ... The other new policy instrument—aid to friendly political organizations abroad ... helps build up political actors in other polities, rather than merely seeking to influence existing ones.'²⁰

Between World War II and 1990, the USA spent some \$400 billion in such foreign military and economic 'aid' (over a trillion dollars at 1990 dollars).²¹ The purpose of military aid was to bolster local repressive forces which could suppress dissent and maintain social control. US economic aid programmes, beyond gaining political influence, were intended to integrate the economies of recipient countries into the world capitalist market.²² The policy shift has not in the least bit eclipsed the two traditional foreign policy instruments; to the contrary, they have been refurbished and widely deployed. However, the key ingredient was still missing. It was the introduction of this third category which would play a centripetal role in facilitating the shift in policy.

Those arguing for the introduction of political aid, including a commission supervised by the NSC under Project Democracy to create the NED, made broad reference to the conclusions of a 1972 book by William A Douglas, *Developing Democracy*.²³ In his study, Douglas reviewed the debates in US intellectual and policy-making circles over whether authoritarianism or 'democracy' is best suited to meeting US interests. Douglas coined the term *regimented democracy* to describe the type of political system the US should promote in place of authoritarianism.²⁴ Comparing the populations of developing nations with 'children', and calling underdevelopment a result of their 'traditional attitudes', Douglas argued that the peoples of the Third World required 'tutelage', 'regimentation' and 'social control', but that 'democracy' could achieve these goals more effectively than authoritarianism. 'That a firm hand is needed is undeniable', but 'democracy can provide a sufficient degree of regimentation, if it can build up the mass organizations needed to reach the bulk of the people on a daily basis. Dictatorship has no monopoly on the tutelage principle.'²⁵ Douglas went on to develop detailed recommendations on how 'political aid' programmes should be introduced. Just as economic aid addressed economic underdevelopment, reasoned Douglas, political aid 'should address political underdevelopment'.²⁶ He emphasised: 'We should undertake an active policy of political aid, for both developmental and security reasons'.²⁷

The trick, said Douglas, was to devise the correct 'transplanting mechanisms' for establishing polyarchy in the Third World.²⁸ Included among the recommendations were the establishment of a specialised agency (later to become the NED); the participation of the private sector in democracy promotion abroad; and the modification of existing government institutions and programmes so as to synchronise overall foreign policy with 'political aid'. Two decades after his study, the 'transplanting mechanisms' and 'insulating devices' which Douglas called for became embodied in the new democracy promotion programmes. Douglas himself went on to become a senior consultant to the NSC's Project Democracy, which led to the creation of the NED. The operation and concrete mechanisms of democracy promotion operations in countries in

which the USA has intervened have been well-documented in a growing body of empirical studies.²⁹ The point here is that political aid, administered through the NED, USAID, and other channels, has become a sophisticated instrument for penetrating the political systems and civil society of other countries down to the grassroots level.

NED president Gershman has categorised US political intervention programmes into those aimed at 'long-term democratic political development', and those aimed at securing a 'democratic transition', that is, a change of regime.³⁰ The first category signifies programmes aimed at stabilising and consolidating polyarchic political systems in societies already considered 'democratic', by bolstering elite forces in political and civil society, and by inculcating what the operatives and theoreticians of the new political intervention consider to be the 'political culture' of polyarchy. Programmes under this category in the 1990s include most Latin American nations, as well as the former Soviet bloc countries, all of which were considered 'democratic'. In the second category, 'transitions to democracy', US policy makers identify two types of transitions: from authoritarian or right-wing dictatorships to elitist civilian regimes; and from left-wing, popular, nationalist or socialist regimes, considered adversaries, to elitist regimes allied with the US-led transnational elite. Chile, Haiti, Paraguay and the Philippines, fell under the first type in the 1980s and, in the 1990s, many African and several Asian nations fall under this type. Nicaragua fell under the second, as did Haiti under Aristide and as does Cuba at the moment.

The US challenge in Cuba: imposing a transition to capitalist polyarchy

The change in US policy towards Cuba, from an emphasis on external 'security' concerns to an internal 'democratisation' focus, is the combined product of the shift to democracy promotion and the end of the Cold War and US-Soviet competition. The US objective in Cuba since 1959, beneath and beyond real or perceived security concerns, has been to recover historic US domination over the country and to neutralise the threat that Cuba represented (a threat caused by Cuba's foreign policy practice and the revolutionary example it set, and thus a political as well as an ideological threat). This objective has not changed under the Bush or Clinton administrations. The destruction of the Cuban revolution will remain the US goal throughout the 1990s. In the early 1990s a remarkable, if largely unnoticed, consensus emerged in Washington across the mainstream political spectrum, from liberal to conservative, regarding a shift in Cuba policy towards democracy promotion. This consensus was expressed in a series of high-level policy reports, and has since been affirmed in actual policy.³¹ The following observations are presented, by way of conclusion, as a synopsis of the US democracy promotion strategy towards Cuba. However, it should be emphasised that Cuba is a special, enigmatic and exceptionally complex case.

The operationalising assumption in Washington is that the Cuban revolution can, and will, be undermined over the mid term, and that Washington stands a better chance than ever in the 1990s of reimposing its historic domination over the country (this distinguishes the current conjuncture from that of the late 1970s, when US and Cuban officials dabbled in negotiations over a real *modus*

vivendi). But this goal will be pursued in the context of the new policy of democracy promotion. The banners of anti-communist and national security have already been discarded. The new policy focus involves a shift from aggressive destabilisation from without to political penetration and cooptation from within, in which the target is as much Cuban civil society as it is the Cuban state. The undertaking will be largely along the lines of the 'Nicaragua model'. In that model, US objectives changed dramatically from 1987 onward, from an attempt to militarily overthrow the Sandinistas through an externally-based counterrevolutionary movement seeking an authoritarian restoration, to new forms of political intervention in support of an internal 'moderate' opposition. This opposition, organised and trained through large-scale US political aid programmes, operated through peaceful (non-coercive) means in civil society to undermine Sandinista hegemony. The shift from hard-line destabilisation to 'democracy promotion' in Nicaragua, culminating in the 1990 electoral defeat of the Sandinistas, a conservative restoration and the installation of a polyarchic political system, the reinsertion of Nicaragua into the global economy, and far-reaching neo-liberal restructuring, has been well-documented elsewhere.³²

US policy makers have acknowledged that a strategic weakness in their policy over the past 35 years has been an emphasis on hard-line destabilisation from abroad, without concern for establishing and stabilising any viable alternative to the revolution. In this sense, Washington is learning what revolutionaries have always argued: in order to overthrow a regime and install a new system, two factors must be met. First, the existing regime and its system must be in crisis (this is the approximate situation in Cuba). Second, a viable alternative must be in place, ready and capable of taking over and mounting a new system (this is the US challenge).

This shift implies an effort to transfer the nucleus of anti-Castro opposition forces from Miami to Cuba in order to ensure that the opposition becomes headquartered—physically and institutionally—inside Cuba. This shift also requires a greater flow of human, material and financial resources and communications between the United States and Cuba. It means transferring US support from the extreme-right political and paramilitary groups, such as the Cuban American National Foundation and Alpha 66, towards opposition groups considered moderate and centrist—and even leftist, by US standards. In this regard, the US strategy might lead to quiet negotiations on specific 'line-item' points, such as immigration and telephone lines. But such bargaining should not be confused with a US intention to negotiate a *modus vivendi*.

Promoting democracy in Cuba, to date, has involved large sums of political aid, mostly for Cuban groups located outside Cuba. These political aid programmes have been handled so far mostly by the NED, and have involved some \$20 million between 1986 and 1993.³³ The objective of these programmes is to create the 'in-country' agents of a transnational project for Cuba. Through the new modalities of political intervention it has developed, Washington has already begun to foment a national opposition network inside and outside Cuba, backed by a broad international support network, and including human rights groups, political parties, trade unions, communications media, youth and women's groups, civic associations and so forth, along the same lines as the

'Nicaragua model'. These political aid programmes would strive to provide this opposition network with a political action capacity and a public projection among the Cuban population. Such an opposition network would be interlocking in its leadership, sharing a common programme. It will not be a covert or violent opposition. Its public discourse will be moderate, even nationalist, and it will not call for the overthrow of the Cuban government but for dialogue, a political opening and peaceful change. It will raise sensitive issues among the Cuban population, emphasising the current economic hardships and the aspirations of Cuba's post-1959 youth generation. US strategists will attempt to cultivate a social base for political opposition among those within the Cuban population tied to the emergent external sector of the bifurcated economy, exploiting incipient internal social stratification, resentments and legitimate grievances. It should be noted in this regard that leadership and supporters of these opposition groups in Cuban civil society should *not* be depicted as mere puppets of US intervention, but as Cuban constituencies whose endogenous pursuits are incorporated through US policy into a larger strategy which manipulates problems and limitations stemming from objective conditions and from weaknesses internal to the Cuban revolution.

The tremendous constraints imposed on Cuba by the global capitalist economy makes more favourable the terrain on which the USA will pursue its objective. Irrespective of particular US policies, Cuba, like most other nations in the world, has little choice but to insert itself into the global capitalist economy under terms which are largely dictated from the principal Northern capitalist powers and their transnational economic and political instruments. The USA is playing the role of leadership in the emergence of a new transnational historic bloc, and Cuba's insertion into the 'brave new world' of global capitalism is thoroughly linked to US-Cuban relations.

In this regard, the economic embargo of Cuba is an essential ingredient in overall US policy. If it is lifted, it will be in exchange for such Cuban concessions as permitting the free flow of US support for internal groups. And it will probably not be lifted in the short, or even mid term.³⁴ The US strategy is to seek to arrest Cuba's efforts at reinsertion into the world economy and penetration of capitalist markets, so as to perpetuate economic attrition. The entire strategy rests on assuring the continuity of Cuba's severe economic crisis, at preventing recovery, since the underlying strategy is to convert an economic crisis into social discontent, and then to give a political expression to this discontent—that is, to foment a 'critical mass'. This is predicated on maintaining the embargo, while simultaneously achieving a 'demonstration effect' and a sense of 'relative deprivation' among the Cuban population through mass communications, image creation and symbolic manipulation.

The policy shift will help reduce the long-standing tactical differences over how to confront the Cuban revolution that have existed between the dominant groups in the USA, on the one hand, and the dominant groups in Western Europe and Latin America, on the other. The call for Washington's version of 'free and fair elections' will be ongoing. Nevertheless, the efforts to foment an internal political opposition will move forward with or without multiparty elections in Cuba. Washington will rely heavily on 'third-country' participation in its

policies. For instance, support for internal opposition groups will be channelled through other Latin American countries, and the call for 'free and fair elections' will be made through multilateral forums.

Despite the claim that it is only interested in process and not in outcome, the United States is actually interested, in Cuba and elsewhere, in outcome. In Nicaragua the 1984 elections were impeccably free and fair as regards process, but were rejected by Washington because of their outcome: a Sandinista electoral victory. In 1990, the elections were again impeccable in process, but this time the United States welcomed the process because it obtained its desired outcome: the removal of the Sandinistas from power. Similarly, we should not assume that US hostility would cease and relations normalise if Cuba were to hold elections tomorrow which were procedurally correct if the outcome were a ratification of the current government, since the United States is concerned with outcome in Cuba, not process.

Notes

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¹ Department of State, 'Democracy in Latin America and the Caribbean: The Promise and the Challenge', Washington, DC: Bureau of Public Affairs, Department of State, Special Report No 158, March 1987, p 13.

² Policy Planning Study (PPS) 23, Department of State, dated 24 February 1948, in *Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS)*, I(2), 1948, p 23.

³ 'Fostering democracy abroad: the role of the National Endowment for Democracy', speech delivered by Carl Gershman to the American Political Science Foundation Convention, 29 August 1986.

⁴ William I Robinson & Kent Norsworthy, *David and Goliath: The US War Against Nicaragua*, New York: Monthly Review Press, 1987, p 15. For a good summary of CIA interventions and a chronology of US wars since the founding of the US republic, see William Blum, *The CIA: A Forgotten History*, London: Zed Press, 1986. For overall analysis and description of US foreign policy in the post war period, including the policy of promoting authoritarianism, see, among other works, Thomas J McCormick, *America's Half Century: United States Foreign Policy in the Cold War*, Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 1989; and William Appleman Williams, *Empire as a Way of Life*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1980.

⁵ National Security Council Memorandum NSC-68, dated 7 April 1950, in *FRUS*, I, 1950, pp 252, 263, 272.

⁶ For a detailed analysis of the creation of the post-World War II order, see Laurence H Shoup & William Minter, *Imperial Brain Trust: The Council on Foreign Relations and United States Foreign Policy*, New York: Monthly Review Press, 1977.

⁷ For details on this 'democracy promotion' apparatus, see, among other studies, William I Robinson, *US Intervention in the Nicaraguan Elections and American Foreign Policy in the Post-Cold War Era*, Boulder, CO: Westview, 1992, ch 1, 'The new intervention'; Tony Smith, *America's Mission: The United States and the Worldwide Struggle for Democracy in the Twentieth Century*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994; Council on Hemispheric Affairs, *National Endowment for Democracy (NED): A Foreign Policy Branch Gone Awry*, Washington, DC, 1990; and General Accounting Office (GAO), *Promoting Democracy: Foreign Affairs and Defense Agencies Funds and Activities—1991 to 1993*, Washington, DC: GAO, 1994.

⁸ See Robert A Dahl, *Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1971. For Huntington's analysis, see Samuel Huntington, 'The modest meaning of democracy', in Robert A Pastor, *Democracy in the Americas: Stopping the Pendulum*, New York: Holmes and Meier, 1989.

⁹ See, eg, Robinson, *US Intervention in the Nicaraguan Elections*, ch 8, 'The future: low intensity democracy?'; and Barry Gills, Joel Rocamora & Richard Wilson (eds), *Low Intensity Democracy: Political Power in the New World Order*, Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1993.

¹⁰ W B Gallie, 'Essentially contested concepts', *Aristotelian Society*, 56, 1956, pp 167–198.

¹¹ A full listing of literature referring to popular democracy is impossible here. Antonio Gramsci and Rosa Luxemburg would be the classical thinkers in the Marxist tradition on democracy. For general discussions which contrast polyarchy (referred to as 'liberal democracy') and popular democracy, see, among other

- works, David Held, *Political Theory and the Modern State: Essays on State, Power, and Democracy*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1989; and David Held & Christopher Pollitt (eds), *New Forms of Democracy*, London: Sage Publications, 1986.
- ¹² Larry Diamond, Juan J Linz & Seymour Martin Lipset (eds), *Democracy in Developing Countries*, Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner and the National Endowment for Democracy, p xvi.
- ¹³ Carl Cohen, *Democracy*, New York: The Free Press, 1971.
- ¹⁴ For Nicaragua, see Robinson, *US Intervention in the Nicaraguan Elections*. For Haiti, see, among others, Paul Farmer, *The Uses of Haiti*, Monroe, ME: Common Courage Press, 1994; James Ridgeway (ed), *The Haiti Files: Decoding the Crisis*, Washington, DC: Azul Editions, 1994; and Worth Cooley-Prost, *Democracy Intervention in Haiti: The USAID Democracy Enhancement Project*, Washington, DC: Washington Office on Haiti, 1994.
- ¹⁵ William Robinson, 'The Sao Paulo Forum: is there a new Latin American left?', *Monthly Review*, 44, 1992, pp 1–12.
- ¹⁶ 'The democratic initiative', Washington, DC: US Agency for International Development, Department of State, December 1990.
- ¹⁷ Michel Crozier, Samuel P Huntington & Joji Watanuki, *The Crisis of Democracy: Report on the Governability of Democracies to the Trilateral Commission*, (New York: New York University Press, 1975, p 13.
- ¹⁸ Carl Gershman, 'The United States and the world democratic revolution', *The Washington Quarterly*, Winter 1989.
- ¹⁹ There has been much written on Project Democracy and the origins of the NED. See, for instance, Council on Hemispheric Affairs, *National Endowment for Democracy*; Robinson, *US Intervention in the Nicaraguan Elections*; and Holly Sklar & Chip Berlet, 'NED, CIA, and the Orwellian Democracy Project', *Covert Action Information Bulletin*, 39, Winter 1991–92.
- ²⁰ Michael A Samuels & William A Douglas, 'Promoting democracy', in *Washington Quarterly*, Summer 1981, pp 52–53. Samuels and Douglas were Project Democracy consultants.
- ²¹ See Doug Bandow, 'Economic and military aid', in Peter J Shraeder (ed), *Intervention in the 1980s: US Foreign Policy in the Third World*, Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1989, p 63. Note that if US aid channelled through multilateral agencies is included, the figure nearly doubles.
- ²² NSC-68 described economic aid as 'a major instrument in the conduct of United States foreign relations. It is an instrument which can powerfully influence the world environment in ways favorable' to US interests. National Security Council Memorandum NSC-68, dated 7 April, 1950, in *FRUS*, I, 1950, p 258.
- ²³ William A Douglas, *Developing Democracy*, Washington, DC: Heldref Publications, 1972.
- ²⁴ *Ibid*, p 122–123.
- ²⁵ *Ibid*, p 16–22.
- ²⁶ *Ibid*, p 16.
- ²⁷ *Ibid*, p xiii.
- ²⁸ *Ibid*, p 43.
- ²⁹ Among numerous works which document US democracy promotion programmes in diverse countries in Latin America, Africa, Asia, the Middle East and countries of Eastern and Southern Europe, see Robinson, *US Intervention in the Nicaraguan Elections*; Sklar & Berlet, 'NED, CIA'; Farmer, *The Uses of Haiti*; Cooley-Prost, *Democracy Intervention in Haiti*; Council on Hemispheric Affairs, *National Endowment for Democracy*; and Beth Sims, *Workers of the World Undermined*, Boston, MD: South End Press, 1993.
- ³⁰ Gershman, 'The United States and the world democratic revolution'.
- ³¹ Three such highly influential reports were 'Cuba in the Americas: reciprocal challenges', issued by the liberal Inter-American Dialogue (Washington, DC, October 1992), 'Hastening Castro's downfall,' issued by the conservative Heritage Foundation (Washington, DC, 2 July 1992), and a 'non-partisan' RAND report, 'Cuba adrift in a postcommunist world', prepared for the Undersecretary of Defense for Policy (by RAND analysts Edward Gonzalez & David Ronfeld, RAND, Santa Monica, CA: 1992). Several members of the Inter-American Dialogue, including President Richard E Feinberg, went on to occupy positions concerning Latin America policy in the Clinton Administration State Department and National Security Council.
- ³² Robinson, *US Intervention in the Nicaraguan Elections*. Also see Angel Saldomando, *El Retorno de la AID, Caso de Nicaragua: Condicionalidad y Reestructuración Conservadora*, Managua: Ediciones CRIES, 1992.
- ³³ See National Endowment for Democracy, Annual Reports, 1986–1993 (Washington, DC). For discussion, see also The Inter-Hemispheric Education Resource Center, 'Turning the screws on Cuba', *The NED Backgrounder*, 1(3) 1992; and Jack Colhoun, 'Washington goes shopping for Cuban "democracy"', *Guardian*, 25 December 1991, p 7.
- ³⁴ The three policy reports mentioned above all coincided in calling for such a *selective* lifting of the embargo. This position was reiterated in a September 1994 follow-up RAND report by Edward Gonzalez & David Ronfeldt, *Storm Warnings for Cuba* (RAND Corporation, Santa Monica), and has been followed in the US–Cuban negotiations that have taken place, on an on-again, off-again basis since 1993 over various bilateral issues.

