



NOTES ON THE REVOLUTION / Column 2



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September 8, 2019

Freedom of the Press

The concept of freedom of the press in the United States was formulated in the context of the American Revolution of 1776, which sought independence from England, because the King of England had adopted trading and taxing policies that were disadvantageous to the English colonies in North America.

The revolution was convoked by an elite that consisted of larger merchants and landholders, and the "educated gentry." They sought to enlist the support of artisans, laborers, small farmers, and small merchants in the independence cause. To this end, they developed presses dedicated to explaining their cause to the people, which included the printing and dissemination of pamphlets, such as Thomas Paine's *Common Sense*. The English colonial government, however, responded with repression of the press.

The concept of freedom of the press gained force in response to such governmental repression. It was a progressive concept, because it defended the right of the various sectors of the people to join forces to challenge a colonial government with exploitative economic policies. Other rights were conceived in this context as well, such as the freedoms of speech, assembly, and organization.

However, the concept of freedom of the press later would be instrumental in promoting anti-democratic tendencies, as a result of two dynamics that fundamentally changed the situation. The first was the emergence of monopoly capitalism during the second half of the nineteenth century. The concentration of capital, driven by the morally and legally questionable practices of the "Robber Barons," meant that large corporations became the central pillar of the economy, and as a consequence, they became the owners of the press and the media of communication. The press is no longer owned by rising merchants in alliance with popular sectors, but by large corporations.

The second fundamental change was the emergence of representative democracy. Governments are no longer controlled by monarchs, as they were at the time of the American Revolution; rather, they are controlled by the people, at least in theory. Let us leave aside for the moment the important question of whether or not the people actually have power in representative democracies. Let us simply note that the people are supposed to have power.



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Artículo Editado por Ed Newman

09/09/2019 12:31:44

So the historical and social context of the question of the press has completely changed since the freedom of the press was proclaimed in republican constitutions. The press is no longer owned by a rising merchant class in alliance with popular sectors, but by large corporations. And the state is no longer controlled by a monarch, but by elected representatives who are supposed to represent the people. In today's context, it would be better, from a democratic point of view, for the press and the mass media to be owned by the state, because this would imply that the press would be managed in accordance with the determinations of elected representatives who are supposed to represent the people, rather than in accordance with the interests of the corporations and their governing boards.

The case of Cuba is relevant to our reflections here, because in Cuba, the state actually is under the control of deputies of the people. Every five years, in more than 12,000 small voting districts throughout the country, the people, with a voter participation rate ranging from eighty-five to ninety-five percent, elect delegates to 169 municipal assemblies, selecting from two or three candidates that emerge from a series of neighborhood nomination assemblies, organized through the participation of mass organizations. The elected delegates of the 169 municipal assemblies in turn elect the deputies of the national assembly, which is the high legislative and consultational authority in the nation, responsible for the election of the head of state and the ministers of the executive branch, including those who have authority over the media. The deputies of the national assemblies do not have electoral campaigns, as in representative democracies, and therefore they do not have to finance electoral campaigns. They arrive to a position of membership in the highest legislative body of the nation without a debt or obligation to anyone, and without the need for the support of large campaign contributors to sustain their political careers. In Cuba, the political system is designed to ensure that the deputies have an interest, above all, in legislating and electing in accordance with the will of the people, who have elected them.

Last week, in our first column in *Notes on the Revolution*, we saw that the press and the media in Cuba play a positive role in the education and political formation of the people, as exemplified by the article by the Cuban journalist Raúl Antonio Capote on "The deadly legacy of nuclear arms tests." The excellent quality of the Cuban media also is exemplified in the Cuban evening news program *La Mesa Redonda*, as noted in a *Radio Habana Cuba* editorial of September 4. The reason for the high quality of the Cuban media is that most of the institutions of the media are under the authority of the state, with state-appointed directors, and the state itself is politically controlled by the elected deputies of the people. These elected deputies, not needing to attract the financial support of an elite class, have no interest in the mis-education of the people. Quite the contrary, with the USA constantly seeking regime change in Cuba, the deputies of the Cuban National Assembly of Popular Power have a vested interest in a mass media that educates the people and promotes their cultural and political formation, so that the people are capable of understanding and defending their political-economic-cultural system.

As a result of these dynamics, Cuba provides for us a laboratory that enables us to observe what happens in the development of the media, when, first, the media is owned by the state; and secondly, when the state is controlled by the elected deputies of the people. And what we observe is that the media is of high quality, contributing to the education of the people.

The situation is different with respect to representative democracies, because they are structured to respond fundamentally to the interests of large corporations, and not the people. But even representative democracies give some voice to the people in the structures of the state. In the context of representative democracies, state ownership of the media would be better than corporate ownership of the media, because under state ownership, there would be some possibility for popular influence of the media, but much less so with respect to the corporate controlled media.

In representative democracies, progressive movements ought not accept and defer to the historically dated concept of freedom of the press, which functions to promote the latest interest of the power elite in the confusion and division of the people, enabling the elite to maintain political control. Rather, progressives should advocate the expansion of public television and radio, which are under the authority of the state, where the people at least have some voice. Progressive movements should promote the public media as a better alternative to corporate controlled media.

It would not be politically intelligent to propose nationalization of the corporate controlled media, because in the current ideological context, many continue to believe in the historically dated formulation of freedom of the press, and the proposal would provoke much opposition. The best strategy would be to advocate greater state investment in the development of the public media, and to call upon the people to take advantage of the public media as the better option for their political and cultural formation.

This is Charles McKelvey, reflecting on the global popular socialist revolution, continually evolving among the peoples of the Third World, demonstrating that humanity has a tremendous thirst for social justice.

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