

Review of: "The Young Pioneers of Cuba: The Formation of Cuban Citizens through Civic Education"

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The article *The Young Pioneers of Cuba: The Formation of Cuban Citizens through Civic Education* suffers from serious problems of conceptual weakness, lack of investigative penetration, and a paternalism that greatly hinders its understanding of the topic it proposes to investigate.

First of all, the authors of the article uncritically accept expressions and concepts generated by the Cuban system itself. In this way, they take for granted political or ideological preconceptions that later do not adjust to the reality they analyze. The most notorious concept that is accepted at face value is that of "revolutionary spirit," which in practice in Cuba means the obedient and uncritical acceptance of both the ideological postulates and the political impositions of the Cuban system. What researchers call "patriotism" and "inclusive" nationalism is a definition of patriotism and nationality that explicitly excludes those who do not accept the ideological postulates and political obedience imposed by the Cuban educational system.

On the other hand, the article offers an ahistorical vision of the values promoted by the Cuban educational system, assuming that during all the years that the current regime has been in power, the educational system has been based on the same nationalist and socialist principles. He is unaware that until 1990, nationalism was a minor ingredient in the education of Cuban students. Although anti-imperialist and anti-American preaching was an essential part of the official discourse, both in the educational field and in the rest of the State's propaganda system, these were subject to the fight of the world socialist system, led by the Soviet Union, against capitalism and imperialism, on the path to build the future communist society. In the first congress of the Communist Party of Cuba, "the highest leading political force of society and the State," as the present constitution still states, it was declared in its official conclusions that "One of the supreme goals that the Communist Party of Cuba [...] is the formation of the communist man, whose social action is conditioned, from the earliest ages, by a way of life that inevitably leads to the internalization of character traits, convictions, and communist morals." In that struggle to build the new communist society, nationalist demands were seen many times as a petty-bourgeois remnant that had to be eradicated as a manifestation of chauvinism. Only after the disappearance of the Soviet Union and the Socialist Bloc of Eastern Europe did the Communist Party of Cuba and the state rethink their ideological foundations and replace the communist ideal with a nationalist ideology. Thus, the party goes from being, according to the 1976 constitution, "organized Marxist-Leninist vanguard of the working class," to "Martian [from José Martí, not from Mars] and Marxist-Leninist, organized vanguard of the Cuban nation" in the most recent constitution, and the Cuban educational system is consequently reoriented towards a fiercely nationalist discourse.

More insightful researchers would understand that when the Cuban educational system promotes an “unwavering patriotic dedication to the state,” “patriotic” is just the new lure of the old goal of state domination. The lack of subtlety of the article’s researchers engenders statements such as “Cuban education system embodies a form of inclusive nationalism.” What does “inclusive nationalism” mean in a context in which the educational system itself considers anyone who questions the ideology and policy of the state to be non-Cuban, anti-Cuban, or mercenary? Hence, a phrase like “education is meticulously structured and controlled by the state in a manner it deems most suitable for the majority of its citizens” is a very careful way to say that, in fact, the goal of the country’s educational system is molding citizens to the needs of the state.

In this context, the closed and paternalistic conception that the regime has of Cuban society seems to be shared by the authors of this article. They describe a socialist utopia growing apart from capitalist corruption where “Civic education is easier in the rural areas and more difficult in the cities because in the cities there is influence from the environment, where you have TVs, iPads, tourists—everything they see influences them,” says a professor interviewed by the authors. The authors refer as a point in favor of civic education in Cuba to its insistence on teaching about oppression, but without noting that all the oppression either refers to the pre-1959 past or to the capitalist system in the outside world, while at the same time blocking any possibility for students to recognize the oppression they are subjected to in the present in their own country, or how their own rights as citizens might be repressed or ignored.

Hence, the most interesting parts of this article (the quotes from the interviewees) are incongruent with what the authors maintain throughout much of the work. The statements that show the submission of students to the state and the implicit fear of contradicting it are not seen as a scandalous matter but rather as a national peculiarity. The article is thus full of tautologies such as “collective society” or naiveties such as “Gramsci’s concept of ideology’s power is deeply ingrained in Cuban schools” when in reality Cuba’s ideology is about old Stalinism adapting to the new conditions of state capitalism: a combination of state control, capitalism, and nationalism that brings the Cuban official vision closer to Mussolini’s than to that of his compatriot Gramsci. However, the researchers themselves recognize that “Cuban classrooms thus lack opportunities for open debate and free speech,” “the ideological basis is rigid,” which cannot be considered by any serious reader as a great discovery.

The researchers’ concern about the adaptability of Critical Global Citizenship Education (CGCE) to Cuban conditions serves, however, to appreciate the profound limitations of the CGCE. The CGCE’s focus on addressing neocolonialism and Western hegemony ends up minimizing the conditions of internal oppression that the own Cuban educational system reflects. There is also evidence of the ineffectiveness of the CGCE - similar to the Global Citizenship Education that is criticized in the text - to adapt to the conditions of specific societies. On the other hand, the CGCE seems perfect for use by an authoritarian regime that uses the narrative of neocolonialism and Western hegemony to deflect attention from how the regime oppresses its own citizens. On the other hand, the CGCE seems perfect for use by an authoritarian regime that needs to use the narrative of neocolonialism and Western hegemony to divert attention from how the regime oppresses its own citizens.

In order to have research relevance, this article would have had to analyze the effects that the inconsistencies of what is

taught in classrooms have on Cuban education. For example, the contradiction between the nationalist content of Cuban education and the glorification of foreignness by the tourist industry, or the overwhelming emigration that is emptying the country. Just before reaching the final conclusions, the authors even allow themselves to close the body of the article with an unrealistic positive note: “Nonetheless, recent protests and a changing political climate suggest the potential for a more accepting public space, potentially paving the way for a more diverse educational discourse in Cuba”. Anyone who is not aware of the Cuban reality could assume that the massive protests that took place throughout the country in July 2021 were accepted by the country's government as a legitimate criticism of their leadership when the only change in the political climate has been an increase of political prisoners—the highest number in the last three decades—and a greater repressive atmosphere than before the protests.