

## “Go Big or Go Home”: Teaching Latin American Social Democracy and the Cuban Revolution

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DESPITE ACCOUNTING FOR roughly ten percent of the world’s population, Latin America is largely absent from the American high school global studies curriculum—appearing only briefly in an insubstantial review of the classical and post-classical Mayan, Aztec, and Incan civilizations, then again (if there is time) during a review of the Bolivarian social revolutions of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and finally during a curt analysis of United States-Cuban Cold War foreign relations. In all of these cases, the curriculum interprets Latin American history as significant when Latin America comes into contact with the West or when the history is one of failure or collapse.<sup>1</sup>

Recent scholarship in the field of Latin American Studies argues that this is a dramatic oversight, and that the relationship between the region and United States is far from unidirectional. For instance, Greg Grandin argues that social democracy and liberal multilateralism emanated from Latin America in the early twentieth century, only coming to life in the U.S. under Roosevelt’s New Deal and Good Neighbor Policy decades later.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, he argues that a tradition of social democracy has long been present in Latin

America and has been remarkably persistent in the face of periodic interventions, most notably by the United States. The twentieth-century revolutions such as those led by Fidel Castro and Ernesto “Che” Guevara were not simply naive, anti-colonial insurgencies; they were also dynamic attempts to maintain and expand existing notions of social democracy from attempts by outsiders to reshape it along neoliberal lines.<sup>3</sup> Seen through this lens, the Cuban regime under Castro is less of a historical anomaly that managed to survive in spite of the growing capitalist tide in the West; rather, it can be used to explain the continuing presence of and rationale for social democratic movements in Latin America as alternative to Western, capitalist democracy.<sup>4</sup>

Armed with this new scholarship and a desire to improve the teaching of recent Latin American history, a group of social studies educators met to create and deliver a series of lessons for secondary students on the Cuban Revolution, its role in the emergence of social democracy in Latin America, and its relationship to contemporary American notions of democratic society. We chose to use historian Greg Grandin’s books, *Empire’s Workshop: Latin America, the United States, and the Rise of New Imperialism* (2007) and *The Last Massacre: Latin America in the Cold War* (2004), to guide our inquiry and focus our attention on the relationship, far too often overlooked, of the United States and Latin America. This work emerged as part of a larger project on *Teaching Recent Global History*,<sup>5</sup> designed to help bridge the divide between the research of academic historians and the teaching of global history in secondary schools. The chasm between historical research and the high school history classroom is vast and perhaps contributes to a growing student alienation with a watered down social studies curriculum.<sup>6</sup> Our task, then, was two-fold: to enliven the Latin American history curriculum and address the ever-widening gulf between high school history teachers and university history professors.

The lessons developed for this project utilized a variety of pedagogical approaches, including film, debate, current events, and argumentative essay writing. These activities required students to reflect on what democracy means to them, analyze the historical context for the beliefs of revolutionaries such as Castro and Che, and explain the ways in which social democracy in Latin America can offer a fundamental contrast to forms of liberal democracy found

in many capitalist countries, especially the United States. In many cases, despite the controversial status of Cuba in the minds of many students, the teachers found that learning about social democracy in Latin America caused students to contemplate their own views on liberty, equality, and the role of the state. The activities also deepened students' understanding of the reasons for the Cuban Revolution, contemporary issues in Latin America such as the rise of Hugo Chávez in Venezuela, and the continued strains in U.S.-Cuban relations. They also provided a comparative context for the ideological arguments at the heart of current political debates in the United States.

### **The Working Group**

This project was a true university-school partnership in that it brought together social studies educators from a variety of backgrounds, levels of experience, and teaching contexts. Four high school social studies teachers at public schools in New York City joined social studies education scholars for regular dialogues over the course of a school year at the Center for Latin American and Caribbean Studies (CLACS) at New York University (NYU). The group, while not a formal lesson study group, followed a collaborative development and observation process to bring Grandin's innovative historical scholarship on Latin America into their teaching of global history at the high school level, and to assess the effectiveness of their lessons on student learning. The teachers read excerpts of Grandin's texts and met for planning sessions at CLACS five times for roughly ninety minutes each and wrote teacher reflections in between meetings. Each teacher committed to teaching a unit of approximately one to two weeks in the spring of 2012 using at least one of their global history courses (although one later found a better fit for this material in a U.S. history course), to be observed by NYU social studies education scholars. Finally, each teacher was asked to submit a written reflection on the lessons they taught as well as student assessment data, usually in the form of written work, to be analyzed during a debriefing session at the end of the school year.

As this project involved a great deal of time and commitment on the part of teachers, as well as research in multiple schools, care was taken to create a group with a strong work ethic and clear

purpose. The teachers who participated in this project were selected because of their teaching experience, scholarly abilities, and interest in Latin American history. It was also important to note that each teacher had the curricular “space” to teach such long units as well as school administrators willing to support the teachers and outside researchers. While all four teachers taught at public high schools in New York City, the skill levels, demographics, and teaching environments for the teachers varied a great deal. Each teacher also came to the project with his or her own unique teaching styles and background on teaching Latin America.

At the time of the lessons for this project, Lisa Brando and David Hanna both taught at University Neighborhood High School on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, a school founded as a collaboration between the New York City Department of Education and New York University as a way to promote college awareness and readiness among a student body typically not college-bound. The school struggles, like many other small city schools, with meeting the needs of its diverse student body, which is about one-half black and the other half evenly Latino and Asian. Over ten percent of its student body are English Language Learners, and teachers regularly modify their lessons for native Bangladeshi, Spanish, and Chinese speakers. The school, once classified as “In Need of Improvement” by the New York City Department of Education, has worked hard to polish its academic reputation and outcomes, and now sends a majority of its students to college.<sup>7</sup> Lisa’s class posed an additional set of challenges in that it contained large numbers of English Language Learners as well as special education students, some of whom required constant supervision and guidance due to behavior problems and low literacy skills. This, combined with excessive amounts of absenteeism and tardiness on the part of many students, meant that Lisa struggled daily with student motivation and building students’ knowledge base for the Regents Exam.

David ended up teaching his lessons to his Advanced Placement United States History students instead of his global history class as originally planned. These AP students were some of the brightest and most motivated in the school, and David was often able to elicit high-level discussions and conduct inquiry lessons based on primary sources. While David faced fewer classroom management challenges than Lisa, these students nonetheless came to his class

with a wide range of skill levels and prior knowledge. Moreover, because this was an AP course, David felt pressured to move forward in the curriculum and was forced to connect his lessons to United States history in a more explicit way than he might have done in a global history course.

While designing and implementing lessons for this chapter, Conrad Martinez taught global history at Acorn Community High School in Crown Heights, Brooklyn. Acorn Community High School has a similar mission to University Neighborhood High School in that it currently implements programs designed to prepare minority students, especially black and Latino males, to enroll and succeed in college. Over ninety percent of the students are black or Latino, and eighty percent of its students receive free or reduced lunch.<sup>8</sup> Along with passing the NYS Regents exams, students are required to complete portfolios that demonstrate their proficiency in each core subject. In addition to these alternate assessments, the school prides itself on the individual attention given to each student through proactive mentoring and guidance programs. Because of the difficulties many of his students faced outside of school and their poor attendance, Conrad emphasized a safe learning environment and mutual respect between teacher and students. His classes during the period of teaching in question were “block” periods of ninety minutes each day, allowing him to pursue topics with greater depth than in a traditional global history classroom. Conrad, inspired by the portfolio assessments employed in his school, began to include performance assessment, including theatrical presentations, in his classes.

Ariela Rothstein taught at East Brooklyn Community High School, a transfer high school in Brooklyn that serves sixteen- to twenty-one-year olds who have a history of truancy and are under-credited. In addition to earning a third more credits per year, students at East Brooklyn Community High School prepare for the state graduation exams with significantly less class time than their peers. The school is comprised of over eighty percent Afro-Caribbean students, many of whom are immigrants or are children of immigrants from the West Indies, Guyana, and Haiti.<sup>9</sup> Given the pressure to help her students pass the Regents exams, Ariela spent a lot of time prioritizing skills and content that can be taught most efficiently in the least amount of time. The World History curriculum consisted of trimester courses focused on regions and/or themes, one of which was centered on

Latin American and Caribbean studies, a topic that Ariela felt was especially relevant given the students' backgrounds. The course used themes of historical perspective and moral values to explore the impact of colonialism on the region and the interactions between different national, ethnic, racial, and class groups. Each unit ended with a written argument assessment as well as a project-based assessment task, usually a debate in which students were required to address multiple historical perspectives of the same event.

### **From Scholarly Dialogues to Lesson Plans**

When the group came together to begin the planning process, discussions started as intellectual dialogues about Latin America and moved to explorations about the challenges of teaching the region to high school students. There was general agreement among the teachers that Latin America occupied a relatively minor space within the global history curriculum, and they were not happy with this oversight. Moreover, the group felt that the recent Global History and Geography Regents Exam tended to address the material in a manner that is far removed from the experiences of most high school students.<sup>10</sup> Given the ethnic backgrounds of many of their students and the large Latino populations in many New York City neighborhoods, the teachers were especially interested in developing lessons that they felt represented the Latino heritage their students were likely to see outside of school.

Having discussed the challenges that the teachers faced when teaching about Latin America, the group turned to the historical scholarship in the hopes of finding new ways of looking at the region that might resonate with students. Grandin, for instance, connects most of the major events in Latin America in the twentieth century to the expansion of social democracy across the region.<sup>11</sup> After discussing a variety of ideological conflicts to use as historical case studies, including the Mexican Revolution, Guatemala in the 1950s, and Argentina under Perón, the group decided to focus on the Cuban Revolution because it was a topic most familiar to students, and is also part of an ongoing ideological conflict today. The teachers predicted that some students would likely know something about the drama of the Cuban Missile Crisis, and others might be drawn to the almost mythical status of Che Guevara. The teachers added that the Cuban

Revolution and later Cuban Missile Crisis were both topics likely to be covered on the Global History and Geography Regents Exam and, for that reason, might be good topics to tackle for this project.

The group's reflections about Grandin's work also focused on students' misconceptions about other economic and political systems. Ariela, in particular, noted that her students seem to have a fixed belief that systems of government, economy, and education have always been the way they are now. David recounted prior conversations with students in which they voiced disbelief that there could be any other kind of economic system besides capitalism and considered events such as the Cold War to be far from their daily reality. Ariela added that while the Cold War may seem stale and irrelevant for students, the clash of social rights and individual rights highlighted in the Grandin interview were real and very present for them, and this theme was one that could potentially fill the gap between familiar and unfamiliar for her students. She argued that students' own daily experiences in New York City with government, the private sector, organized crime, and everything in between could serve as an excellent core for a study of Latin American politics.

At the same time, the teachers also discussed how teaching about social democracy in Latin America presented a unique set of pedagogical challenges. The most obvious and pressing concern to the teachers involved in this project concerned time. Most history teachers in New York City who teach Latin American history do so within the confines of the state's Regents Global History curriculum. Topics such as social justice and democracy require in-depth conversations over the course of several days, a luxury for teachers trying to negotiate a content-driven curriculum. The second concern for the teachers entailed connecting this material to students' prior and future learning experiences in their courses. While the traditional global history curriculum has its obvious faults, it is neatly woven into a relatively uncomplicated narrative in order to be easily understood by students. Stepping away from this risked disrupting students' understandings of global history, especially when so many were close to taking the Regents Examination.

One advantage of teaching a topic such as social democracy was that it had the potential to be much more engaging than the traditional curriculum. Teachers were determined to use this opportunity to develop truly meaningful learning experiences, or, as Conrad put it,

“either go big or go home.” Exploring students’ misconceptions and assumptions meant that the *process* of learning for the students would be just as important as the *content* the teachers presented. According to Paulo Freire, pedagogy of this kind shares a lot in common with social movements and revolution—the very concept the teachers wanted their students to experience.<sup>12</sup> Multiple-choice questions on Regents Exams about the purpose of government, checks and balances, the three branches, court cases, and early American history reinforce to students the notion that the government’s purpose is to create a society of equal opportunity with individual liberty and checks on government power. Yet the society that many young men and women experience in New York City is often very different from that espoused by the curriculum. The teachers’ group thus strove to address these big ideas in meaningful ways that would allow students’ own experiences and voices to be added to the discourse. Seen in this way, the group was interested in promoting not only critical thinking, but also “mutual humanization.”<sup>13</sup>

After several meetings, discussions, and the sharing of teaching materials and resources, the four teachers decided to focus on the following essential question for their lessons: *What role should a democratic government play in the lives of its citizens?* The teachers wanted students to analyze and explain the fundamental continuities and contrasts between their own, presumably American, notions of democracy and the Latin American conception of social democracy as articulated in the historical research. Through this study, students would also be required to better define their own notions of individualism, freedom, and success, and the role these concepts do and should play in society.

### **Designing Learning Experiences**

In settling on the big idea of social democracy, it became clear that the teachers were intensely concerned about the “fit” between the historical content of the Cuban Revolution and the students in their own classes. It was extremely important to the group to take advantage of each individual teacher’s strengths and thus not plan a “one size fits all” set of activities. Rather, the teachers wanted to develop high-quality, content-rich lessons that were responsive to the unique learning environments, skill levels, and prior experiences of

their students. Because of this tension, the group members agreed to create lesson plans that were different in some ways but adhered to the same essential question (see **Appendix**). Moreover, the teachers saw this project as an opportunity to provide students with multiple approaches to the study of social democracy in Cuba, including biographical narrative, philosophy, and the arts. Indeed, stereotypes about Cuba and social democracy were exactly the kind of thinking the teachers hoped students would leave behind.

Ariela designed an expansive mini-unit on social democracy using three very disparate entry points: social class perspectives during the Cuban Revolution, the students' own perspectives on social democracy, and the views of social democracy of members of the students' community outside of school. To Ariela, these entry points were crucial in that they emphasized the personal connections between her students and the content, but also between her students and other human beings. Her lessons combined primary and secondary source research and interviews, and concluded with individual research presentations to the rest of the class. Beginning with student reflection on the definition of equality, Ariela asked students to choose a social class position (Cuban lower class, Cuban middle class, Cuban upper class, American business class) as a lens through which they would learn about the Cuban Revolution. Using a set of primary and secondary source documents,<sup>14</sup> students then researched and learned about life in Cuba before and after the Cuban Revolution, paying close attention to how the experiences of those in their chosen social class position changed over the course of the Revolution. While the students were gathering this information during class activities, they were asked to interview a peer or community member from outside the school about the role this individual feels the government should play in the lives of citizens. The interviews focused on the life experiences of the interviewee in modern New York City and the impact of those experiences on their views of democracy. After the class learned about the Cuban Revolution and students completed their interviews, students revisited their initial thoughts on the role of government in a democratic society and presented their thoughts in a written paper and speech to the class.

Lisa's approach to the content was similar to Ariela's, but the composition of her classes required her to focus on a different set of

priorities. Given her students' challenges with literacy and learning the English language, Lisa came to the conclusion that her lessons had to be designed with an explicit focus on developing literacy skills. In terms of content, Lisa decided to have students learn about the role of democratic ideologies in Latin America during the Cold War and compare and contrast this with the degree to which social democracy exists in the region today. This break from her typically chronological curriculum bridged past with the present, making the theme of social democracy as relevant today as it was in the Cold War. With this goal in mind, she asked students to explore questions of whether or not democracy—as students would define it—had been achieved in several Latin American countries since the Cold War. She decided to introduce this theme by asking her students to imagine that they were journalists evaluating the success of democracy in Venezuela, Argentina, and Cuba. After students read their textbook entry on Latin America's social democratic movements during the Cold War,<sup>15</sup> Lisa led a class discussion designed to help her students develop a definition of democracy as had been promoted by these movements. She then directed students to develop their own definitions of social democracy, choosing the elements of democracy they deemed most important. Next, students examined current periodicals and carefully selected secondary source materials on the current leader of each of these nations. Searching for evidence of "democratic" or "undemocratic" actions or policies, students collected data on the extent to which each leader upheld the tenets of democracy defined earlier. Synthesizing this research, students worked together in groups to create political magazine cover stories on each nation, including a cover photograph of their assigned leader, a biographical essay about the leader, as well as an imaginary interview of the leader with his responses—drawn from actual research on his views—about democracy in his country.

Conrad also used role-playing techniques with his classes, but he took a more personal, debate-driven approach. Conrad used the lesson design process as an opportunity to facilitate a new kind of learning experience for his students, one in which the students would take control of the lesson. Aware of the difficult lives many of his students face outside of the classroom, he hoped to build students' confidence in their own abilities and provide a thought-provoking learning experience. Given the controversies and opportunities to

debate provided by topics such as social democracy, he decided that a dramatic performance would be the centerpiece of his students' study of the Cuban Revolution. At the outset of the unit, Conrad asked his students to write short responses to the prompt: "What is more important in a democracy, liberty or equality?" He then used these statements to divide into two groups, one of which represented the cause of "liberty" in Cuba, and the other of which represented "equality." At issue would be whether the Cuban Revolution was more about liberty or equality, and whether it succeeded in delivering either. In order to prepare students for their presentations, Conrad designed a series of learning activities using literature, documentary film, and secondary source materials designed to provide information on the causes, key players, and events of the Cuban Revolution. One such activity was a Cuban Revolution Gallery Walk, an activity in which Conrad posted around the classroom pictures and primary source materials from the Cuban Revolution, such as the rise of the Batista government, a description of the inequalities among Cubans before the Revolution, Fidel Castro and his influences, and the Moncada Barracks Coup. Each presentation group toured the room with the task of deciding whether the Cuban Revolution was more about liberty or equality, using a document analysis template Conrad provided them. The two student groups were also given identical sets of primary and secondary source documents about Cuba after the Revolution. The contents of the documents included descriptions of education, healthcare, daily life, and the Cold War in post-Revolution Cuba. Following a few classes of preparation, the students performed in front of several classes from different subjects and a panel of social studies teachers who acted as judges. The groups used skits, raps, and props, and were asked content-related questions by the judges after their presentations. The final task for the students was to write a persuasive essay arguing whether or not the Cuban Revolution could be considered a success in bringing greater democracy to Cuba.

David designed his unit for an AP United States History course, and, as such, chose to situate his lessons within a different framework than the other teachers did. His students had just completed a unit on the beginning of the Cold War when he started the Latin America unit, and they were already familiar with Fidel Castro's role in the Cuban Missile Crisis, although the students' text did not provide much context for the event other than to portray Cuba as an agitator.

David wanted his students to understand the ideological motivations behind the Cuban Revolution and why Cuba came to be seen as a threat by the United States. In essence, he hoped his students might see “the other side” of the U.S. conflict with Cuba and understand why the Cuban Revolution resonated with so many people and frightened so many others. In teaching about the Cuban Revolution, David decided the most logical entry point was the powerful life story of Che Guevara. In addition to a short biographical essay he wrote on Che, David chose excerpts from two films depicting different periods in Che’s life: Walter Salles’s *Motorcycle Diaries* and Steven Soderbergh’s *Che*. In *Motorcycle Diaries*, Bolivian miners were being mistreated by their bosses and not allowed access to clean water to drink. Che bravely challenges the boss and insists that the workers be given water, a powerful illustration of his sense of social justice. In the clip from *Che*, the individualistic society and economy of 1950s Cuba pits everyone against each other, and Che’s experience leads him to the belief that a free market economy does not reflect natural human characteristics or instincts. Before students watched the film clips, David had them reflect on the question, “What rights should every human being have?” Their answers were shared with the class as a whole, and written on the chalkboard for all to see. After watching each excerpt, David asked the class a series of reflective questions, some dealing directly with scenes in the films and others raising more broad discussion such as whether individual freedom is a guarantee of personal happiness. As students debated the issues, David modified the class notes on the chalkboard to reflect changing positions about human rights. Following the discussion, he asked students to write responses to a series of prompts based on the class discussions and the film clips. The students then used these prompts in a final class debate on the topic of democracy.

### **Impressions of the Lessons**

Despite the variations in lesson methodologies and student backgrounds, classroom observations, teacher reflections, and student work indicated that most of the students in the four teachers’ classes emerged from their respective units with the same general understandings of the concept of social democracy and its role in the Cuban Revolution. More importantly, though, the students

in these classes seemed to grasp the distinction between Latin American democracies' emphasis on social rights and the focus on individual rights in the United States. In David's and Ariela's classes, in particular, the quality of student dialogue on these issues was powerful, impressing the teachers and classroom observers alike. In Ariela's class, students spent a great deal of time debating various definitions of the term "equality" and its role in a democratic society. At one point, students in the class were using at least six different terms in conjunction with equality (opportunity, outcomes, social status, economics, political rights, and freedoms), and vehemently defended their definitions throughout the activities. Ariela herself reflected that the classroom dialogues between students were more open-ended and theoretical than usual, but that the greatest impact during this unit was on the classroom atmosphere, which she called "safer than it had been all year" because students were listening to and respecting each other's strongly held beliefs. She attributed these results to both the engaging content and the innovative, student-centered approach.

In David's class, discussions about the films had a similar impact in that they challenged students' thinking about the accepted wisdom in the United States concerning a democratic society, and helped to cultivate in his students an awareness of an attractive, if sometimes flawed, Latin American alternative that posed a challenge to the United States. For instance, many students left the unit believing that the heroes in *American democracy* tend to be the wealthy, famous, and powerful, whereas in a *social democracy* the idols seem more charitable, altruistic, and representing the rights of the downtrodden. This is likely the result of the focus on the biography of Che and David's choice of film clips, which emphasized the injustices faced by workers and the poor in pre-Revolution Cuba, so David and the lesson observers were not altogether surprised to hear students voice these opinions. The surprising revelation from the discussion, however, was that students, by and large, still argued in favor of the American system that they stated was skewed towards the wealthy few. When David pointed out this apparent inconsistency to these students, they argued that, in the United States, "the wealthy started out small just like everyone else" and "the wealthy are rich because they work hard." One student took things even further, arguing that, "without the rich, we wouldn't have art and technology." In

the United States, students argued, this “every man for himself” attitude actually served as an effective bulwark against totalitarian government because “everyone is competing with each other.” On the other hand, the students, while impressed with the charisma and passion of Che and Castro, also saw these same qualities as dangerous. According to the students, Castro claimed to give a voice to the poor, but no one was truly heard because, as one student eloquently stated, “having one person speak for the people is the same as having the voices of the entire population silenced.” Other students felt that Castro’s approach “left citizens with no other option” and resulted in “an individual with limitless amount of power and an entire population robbed of self-fulfillment.” A fundamental mistrust of social democracy and the motives of Che and Castro were embedded in these student comments. A few students seemed to believe that the political repression and economic stagnation in post-Revolution Cuba were part of Castro’s plan all along, and that the social revolutionaries lied to the Cuban people just to get into power. In later reflections, David attributed this skepticism on the part of some of his students to their backgrounds as immigrants or as children of immigrants. These students tended to see themselves as “strivers” whose families came to the United States because of their faith in its democratic system. To them, Latin American social democracy represented an inferior model for the role of government in society and was less an alternative than it was something to be avoided. While the discussions did not result in a change of opinion on the part of many students, they did solidify in students’ minds the differences between the two visions of democracy.

Whole-class discussions were not the only method through which students grappled with the differences between the American notion of democracy and that of Castro’s Cuba. Conrad’s group presentations revealed a broad understanding of the benefits and consequences of Cuban social democracy during and since the Revolution. The “equality” group used visual displays, dramatic performance, and a rap to show the benefits of Cuba’s free health care, free education, and income equality. The “liberty” group countered with a series of skits challenging the fairness of equal pay, the dangers of corruption, and the emergence of a black market. While the “equality” group was eventually judged by the panel of teachers to be the better of the two performances, the questions from

the judges (e.g., “If Castro’s redistribution plans were so popular, why was there so much repression after the Revolution?” and “Was Cuba better off during Batista or Castro?”) drew intense interest on both sides, and the outcome was contentious. The “equality” group left visibly disappointed and both groups continued talking heatedly about their performances on their way to their next class. Conrad agreed with the judges’ decision, although his reason was based more on the students’ papers than on the quality of their dramatic presentations. In general, the “liberty” group’s arguments about Cuba were more nuanced and effective than the “equality” group. This was likely due to fact that the “liberty” group’s evaluation of the Cuban Revolution was mostly negative—an easier position to argue given the past half-century of political repression by the Castro brothers—and the fact that this position is more closely aligned to the American vision of democracy which emphasizes political rights and freedoms. The “equality” group, on the other hand, drew the more difficult task of appearing to defend the Castro regime, at least in terms of its social reforms. Conrad reflected later that, had the group made the excesses and corruption of the Batista regime a larger piece of their presentation and written arguments, they might have made a better case for Castro’s reforms. In both cases, though, Conrad was pleased with the fact that each group articulated a clear vision for democracy in making their arguments.

All four teachers’ goals for the lesson were for students to move away from dichotomous categories of communism/socialism as totalitarian and capitalism as democratic, as well as from empty evaluations of these systems as “good” or “bad” to more nuanced understandings of the different forms of democracy in the world today. Student work supports the conclusions of the group that these lessons were largely successful in achieving their stated objective. In Ariela’s class, the students’ final presentations—which were based on their interviews, knowledge of the Cuban Revolution, and personal reflections—became lively debates about the purpose of government and the role it plays and should play in people’s lives. Student presentations focused on a variety of topics, including taxes, education, and the Cuban literacy campaign of 1961, as well as the Occupy Movements of 2012. While some students used their presentations on the Cuban Revolution as a way to reflect on the promise versus the reality of American democracy, other students

named newfound appreciation for certain freedoms in this country. One student, after speaking about the importance of voting, shared that her mother had never voted. Another proclaimed, “Over there, the government tells you what you have to study based on what you’re ‘good’ at by middle school. Here, we have choice!”

One interesting aspect of these lessons is the way in which most students’ belief in the American system of democracy was actually strengthened when presented with a fully articulated alternative form of democracy. David’s students were quickly able to recognize those rights that are, and are not, emphasized by advocates of social democracy, and sympathized with those Cubans who supported Che and Castro during the Cuban Revolution. Nevertheless, these same students continued to reject the social democracy as promoted by Che in favor of a more American-style democracy. Almost all the students’ written responses to David’s writing prompts emphasized the individual political rights that Grandin states are the hallmark of the American democratic system. Some students strongly argued for the importance of individual rights and freedoms, writing statements such as, “for a democracy to properly function, the people must be able to express themselves as free individuals,” and “a nation can’t be democratic without upholding the rights of the people.” Other students made references to respect for property and freedom of movement as essential to a democratic society, while also pointing out that these elements were not present in post-Revolution Cuba. Student writing was also skeptical of Cuban social democratic movements for economic equality, universal health care, and respect for indigenous rights. One student, in describing the lack of economic opportunity in Cuba despite the country’s well-publicized social reforms, wrote, “Cuba is like a golden cage, but in the end it is still a cage.” Similarly, while students were moved by Che’s experience with asthma, they were not necessarily convinced by his arguments for workers’ rights and universal health care. The arguments against Che’s vision usually relied on the uniqueness of his situation and the fact that not all workers felt the same way he did. For example, students argued against powerful unions, saying, “having someone else speak for you takes your voice away...It’s not fair to have someone deciding for someone else because they may not have the same interests or views.” Another student who was skeptical of Che’s arguments for universal health care wrote

that, when it comes to decisions about the health of individuals, “the government wouldn’t know what each individual desires or why they desire it.” In many ways, these student responses were somewhat unexpected by the group. David predicted that his teaching approach, and especially the films, would “convert” some students to Che’s vision for democracy in Cuba. After reading the students’ essays, however, it became clear that this did not happen. Indeed, in most cases, the students became even more attached to the American notion of democracy.

Unsurprisingly, many of Conrad’s students also wrote papers that coincided with the position they defended in their dramatic performance. Their papers were thoughtful and often included increased detail on their original positions on the importance of liberty and equality. Those students who argued that the Cuban Revolution was a success because it brought more equality to the Cuban people used the relationship between Cuba and the United States as a focal point for their arguments. Many drew contrasts between the United States’ exploitation of Cuba’s resources during the Batista government and the social changes in Cuba as a result of the Castro regime. Students described the Batista regime as a “brutal and oppressive dictatorship” in which “prostitution was common” and “Batista put all the country’s resources into providing holidays for the rich Americans he did business with.” Castro, on the other hand, “provided stability to the society” and “ensured that all Cubans received equal wealth, health care, and education.” One student commented that American democracy seems to promote competition and “survival of the fittest,” while in Cuba under Castro, “Cubans didn’t have to compete for survival as everyone was granted the same necessities.” On the other hand, students who criticized the Cuban Revolution took a remarkably nuanced approach. While admitting that Batista’s regime was corrupt and that Castro’s regime did provide more services to the Cuban people, they argued that the attendant loss of personal liberty was too detrimental to Cuban society. Cubans “weren’t allowed to run their own businesses” and “weren’t even able to speak their opinion without fear of punishment.” Such analysis viewed Castro as “power-hungry” and his social democratic system as a mere choice that “best accommodated his needs, not the needs of the people.” One student passionately argued for personal liberty as a “way of life,” the restriction of which is “immoral and

ultimately destructive to Cuba as a nation.” Perhaps the strongest arguments from the liberty group involved a scathing critique of the so-called equality Castro was promoting. Despite enforcing equality of income across all sectors of employment—so that, in the words of one student, “a doctor and a bread-maker made the same amount of money”—these students argued that “Cuba still ended up with little money” so “the Cuban Revolution was not worth it.” Conrad was pleased with the depth of the arguments presented by the students and the quality of the specific details gleaned from the source materials. Because students used topics like health care, education, and the economy as points of comparison between Cuba and the United States, their papers discussed not only the political differences between the two systems, but also the practical differences in the daily lives of each nation’s citizens.

Lisa’s evaluation was tempered by the realities of teaching in a challenging environment. She was extremely pleased to see that her students made connections to the colonial history of Latin America and wider connections to other regions they had previously studied. Daily class exit tickets indicated the vast majority of students understood the concept of social democracy, a cause for cheer given the language and conceptual challenges of a class with many English Language Learners. Additionally, more than half of her students completed a final written assignment, compared to a usual completion rate of below twenty-five percent. Yet while her students’ work reflected an understanding of their assigned country’s political and economic histories, few students demonstrated a complex understanding of the social democratic principles variably present in the three case studies Lisa assigned on Latin America. Many students researching Cuba, for instance, had a difficult time separating intentions and results, and as such needed help from Lisa to find components of social democracy during the Cuban Revolution or since. She indicated that in the future, she would make the components of social democracy more explicit for her students by providing them with a list of characteristics describing governments of all kinds. From this list, students would rank the characteristics by their importance to social democracy and compare those rankings to the Latin American nations they had been assigned to research. This would allow students to apply the definition of social democracy to these case studies in a more meaningful way.

The teachers' group decided that the decision to use multiple entry points to the study of social democracy during the Cuban Revolution was a very good one, given the high levels of engagement these entry points elicited from students. David and Conrad found particular success with their use of film and dramatic performance, respectively. David designed his lessons to explore Che Guevara's biography and political ideology, knowing that his unique, timeless story would appeal to his students. Indeed, the students were moved by Che's story, and one student likened him to a "rock star" because of his charismatic persona and lasting imprint in the minds (and on the T-shirts) of young people still to this day. Using film heightened this sense for many students, and David took the opportunity to allow his media-saturated high school students to interrogate the artistic films for their reliability as historical sources. In retrospect, the use of film probably influenced students' perceptions of Che Guevara, since several students viewed him personally in a positive light at the end of the unit. Yet, to David's surprise, the students did not see the film excerpts as the "whole picture," and were able to critically compare the dramatic episodes they had viewed to primary and secondary source documents, including writings from Che himself. This nuance helped soften the students' final evaluations of Che, whom they saw as more genuinely interested in social reform than Castro, whose social reform agenda students struggled to separate from the repression and human rights abuses of the post-Revolution regime.

In Conrad's class, the dramatic performance was the organizing event for the unit and helped build students' confidence with the material. He noted that the prospect of public performance drove students to engage with the material in deeper ways. Moreover, the group presentation required cooperation, responsibility, and leadership from students unaccustomed to working together with coaching rather than direct instruction from the teacher. While many natural leaders took charge in each of the groups, several low-performing students also took on major leadership roles within their groups, and each presentation was uniquely suited to the talents of the group members. In addition, Conrad stated that many of his students struggle with self-confidence and that this experience was the first public performance of any kind for many of them. He viewed this experience as an invaluable opportunity to practice the skills many would need in college or their careers, and it also offered him

a chance to show confidence in his students' abilities and give them a safe space to take chances.

Many of the methodological decisions made by the teachers were influenced by the desire to make the content relevant to students' own life experiences. Lisa found that an approach centered on contemporary issues was a successful way to increase student engagement in her class. Her students, many of whom struggled with learning global history, identified Fidel Castro as a key figure. In addition, many knew of Raul Castro, and a few were familiar with Hugo Chávez. These connections held sway for her students, helping them connect the present and past and leading to continued perseverance in class literacy activities. In debriefing her lesson with the teachers' group, Lisa proudly reported that two students came to see her after school one afternoon to talk about Cuba's current political situation, noting that such conversations are rare for her students, especially those who have trouble marshaling their thoughts during class discussions.

Ariela's interview assignment connected Latin American social democracy to students' own experiences in a much more personal way. Many students spoke with individuals about the impact of public services such as welfare, Section 8 housing, and public transportation, on the lives of people they know and care about. These personalized experiences led them to make passionate arguments for the "alternative" ideology of social democracy. Others wrote from their own experiences about the ways in which New York City's Administration for Children's Services (ACS) and the security measures at the school have led them to question their beliefs in a democratic system, rendering them critical of the role of the state in private lives. In either case, the project in Ariela's class made the social and political revolutions of Cold War Latin America personally relevant to students, and the impact of this relevance on the daily class activities was immense. As Ariela wrote while reflecting on her lesson, "sometimes that content gap between here and there, now and back then, us and them (or more accurately for a teenager, me and everybody else), shrinks to a manageable size. And when that happens in a high school history classroom, everyone feels it." This was certainly the case in this unit.

While the teachers employed different teaching methodologies to elicit student discussion and debate, they all agreed on the centrality

of written arguments in assessing student learning. Ariela's students wrote personal reflections and then prepared a formal presentation to their peers and other adults in the building based on interviews and material learned in class. The interview portion of the assignment required students to take on the role of political scientists, listening to others and gathering evidence in support of ideological positions. Lisa's magazine story approach also required students to analyze political events and trends and make an argument, but by keeping the assignment based in historical and current events, Lisa was able to better differentiate the writing assignments for her students. David asked students to respond to a series of prompts dealing the topic of social democracy, while Conrad gave students a choice of two positions on the Cuban Revolution to defend and support. This approach worked well with David's AP students in that they were experienced in responding to written prompts and marshaling evidence in support of thesis statements, but it also allowed students of varying skill levels, such as those in Conrad's class, to develop their writing skills using a more personal approach. In every case, the teachers found the students' writing engaging to read and the start of meaningful dialogues with students.

As is often the case with reflective educators, events in the classroom led the group to reassess the approaches they took to the material. In David's case, the use of film clips was motivating for students, but some students lacked the proper context for understanding what they were viewing. Indeed, it can be difficult for students to grasp the deeper meaning behind events portrayed on the screen because they are so caught in the narrative.<sup>16</sup> This might explain why students could feel a strong sense of sympathy with the workers' plight as shown in the film, yet remain so skeptical of Che's ideology. David suggested that in the future, he would incorporate written excerpts from *The Motorcycle Diaries* in tandem with the film, a useful strategy for priming students for deeper reflection.<sup>17</sup> At the same time, David also found himself in the position of playing "devil's advocate" a bit too often. After reflecting on the success of Conrad's performance model, he indicated he would think about ways to make the debate in his class more structured next time as a way to increase student participation and to encourage more "give and take" amongst students.<sup>18</sup> Lisa's students seemed to struggle with background-building activities and that may have been due to a

limited understanding of the dichotomy between ideals and realities of government. Her students, especially those researching Cuba, could have benefited from more direct instruction on the connection between theory and practice of social democracy. She also thought that next time, she should incorporate more learning scaffolds for such challenging reading material. In most cases, the teachers agreed that with a few additional tools and strategies to save time and increase student understanding, they would teach their units again, maintaining the same basic structure and approach.

At the same time, no lessons are without mishaps, and these were no exception. Some of these were unavoidable parts of teaching in urban public schools. In Lisa's case, technical issues—for example, an overhead projector bulb blew at a critical moment—and challenges of a multilingual classroom forced her to improvise in terms of student activities and assignments. Yet some of the challenges laid bare here are more enduring and structural in nature. Students who have wide disparities in content and skill level, pace of work, and absenteeism present serious challenges in a classroom, and this condition contributes to the achievement gap that characterizes many lower-performing schools. Both Conrad and Lisa experienced low attendance for part of their units, so they regularly had to modify group activities and rush to catch up students who had missed crucial parts of the unit.

Finally, as the group reflected on its work in later semesters, the importance placed on the concept of social democracy articulated here proved prescient. As this article was being researched, the 2012 U.S. Presidential campaigns were in full swing. In some ways, the debates between Republicans and Democrats echoed the same debates over the role of the government in a democracy that teachers were having with their students the previous year. A political climate of budget cuts and near libertarian economics promoted by the Romney-Ryan ticket was squared against President Obama's populist, "you didn't build that" rhetoric.<sup>19</sup> The teachers recognized that, as this argument was being played out in front of them, many of their own students were becoming voters. With the country in the middle of its own identity crisis, the students' daily experiences with government and the democratic system demonstrate how local—but also how enduring—all of these decisions about liberty and equality truly are. This produced a sense of urgency in the minds of the group

to continue teaching lessons on competing visions of democracy. In future semesters, the teachers planned to expand these learning activities beyond students' personal experiences with the American system into political debates of the day using an issues-centered approach. They also saw tremendous potential in this material for promoting civic engagement in their students. Indeed, some of the most powerful moments in these lessons were those in which students spoke their minds about how governments do (or should) work to protect liberty and equality. The group left this project energized to continue developing ways to ignite this same passion in students towards issues and concerns in their own communities.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

The group of teachers and social studies researchers who came together for this project found the collaborative curriculum development rewarding and very educational. Post-project interviews with teachers indicated that the single most important aspect of this project is that it allowed them to be more than just content deliverers. The teachers in this project were respected as history scholars and public intellectuals, yet also reveled in the role of global history students, unpacking the meaning of the innovative scholarship on Latin American and how it fits with traditional teachings of the region. Ideas were openly suggested as well as welcomed, and the group members were largely at their own liberty to develop and design a project of their own choosing—which is unfortunately a rarity for many curriculum designers in a standards-driven age. Collaborating with fellow educators was not only gratifying, but also inspirational in that every participant felt armed with fresh insights on what they are doing in the classroom and, more importantly, what they should be doing in the classroom. They hoped to use this approach as a model and bring that openness of thought and expression to their own curriculum development processes, both at the secondary and university levels.

This project clearly demonstrates that for a survey course like global history and geography that is unevenly weighted toward the regions of Western Europe and East Asia, it is vitally important to deviate from the standard global history curriculum. Infusing recent global history can increase student understanding and does not need

to be a trade-off for adequately preparing students for statewide standardized tests if those considerations are made while planning. The rewards can be seen in making global history and geography more explicitly relevant to students so that they are better informed about contemporary issues and can make more connections between the present and past. This ultimately helps students perform better on exams and makes for a much more enriching course.

## Notes

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## Appendix

### Social Democracy Unit Plan

Adapted from Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe, *Understanding by Design*, expanded second ed. (Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2005).

A = Ariela      C = Conrad      D = David      L = Lisa

<b>STAGE 1—DESIRED RESULTS</b>
<p><b>Common Core Standards:</b></p> <p>Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 9-10 topics, texts, and issues, building on others’ ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively. (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.9-10.1)</p> <p>Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources, attending to such features as the date and origin of the information. (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.9-10.1)</p> <p>Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence. (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.9-10.1)</p>

<p><b>Understandings:</b></p> <p><i>Students will understand that...</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• the American democratic system is just one of many (often) competing forms of democracy.</li> <li>• much of the current tension between the United States and Cuba can be explained by the different approaches to democracy promoted by the governments of the two nations.</li> <li>• the current government in Cuba has its origins in social democratic movements during the Cold War.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Big Idea and Essential Question:</b></p> <p>Social Democracy</p> <p><i>“The protection or guarantees, not just of individual rights—the right to free speech, the right to religion—but social rights to education, to health care, to social security, and the right to unionize.” (from Grandin, 2010)</i></p> <p>What role should a democratic government play in the lives of its citizens?</p>
<p><i>Students will know...</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• the main differences in emphasis between American capitalist democracy and Latin American social democracy.</li> <li>• the goals and results of the Cuban Revolution.</li> <li>• the key components of social democracy as promoted by Fidel Castro and Che Guevara, among others.</li> <li>• the role of social democratic ideologies before, during, and after the Cuban Revolution.</li> </ul>	<p><i>Students will be able to...</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• identify the characteristics of a social democracy as exists in Latin America.</li> <li>• describe the challenges faced by Cuba in establishing a social democratic government.</li> <li>• evaluate whether or not the Cuban Revolution lived up to its social democratic ideals.</li> <li>• articulate a sophisticated historical argument and support it with primary and secondary source evidence.</li> <li>• justify their own beliefs about democracy and social justice using appropriate historical examples (i.e. the Cuban Revolution) as well as relevant information from current events.</li> </ul>

**STAGE 2—PERFORMANCE ASSESSMENTS****1. *Written Paper and Speech* (A)**

Use your knowledge of Cuba and the opinions gleaned in your interview to make an academic presentation to the class that answers the following question: *What role should government play in society?* Your presentation should include: a thesis statement, primary and secondary source evidence, analysis, and relevant images or video, as well as a handout for your audience with key facts and information. The presentation will be evaluated based on the following criteria:

- content knowledge of Cuba before, during, and after the Revolution
- analysis of the events of the Cuban Revolution from the perspective of one social class
- quality and quantity of source material and relevant background information
- sophistication of argument, including thesis and connections between evidence and arguments
- presentation, interview, and research etiquette

**2. *Magazine Cover Story* (L)**

Imagine you are a journalist working for *Time*, on assignment in Latin America to cover a story on one of the leaders there (Hugo Chávez of Venezuela, Christina Fernández de Kirchner of Argentina, or Raul Castro of Cuba). This edition focuses on democracy in Latin America. Your story should include an image and details from an imaginary interview with the leader, and address the following questions:

- How democratic is your country?
- In recent history, what obstacles has your country faced in striving for or establishing democracy?
- How has your leader supported or obstructed democracy in your country?

**3. *Dramatic Performance and Argumentative Essay* (C)**

A. Each member of the class will be placed into one of two teams. Each team will develop a dramatic presentation in response to the following question: *From the perspective of liberty or equality, was the Cuban Revolution a success or a failure?* The presentations will be performed in front of an audience and evaluated by a panel of judges. Each presentation should be 5-8 minutes and include:

- Specific details and sophisticated arguments that the Cuban Revolution was either successful/unsuccessful given the criteria of liberty and equality. Your group must gather information from before, during, and after the Cuban Revolution.
- A creative, informative, and entertaining performance. You may choose any performance method you like.
- A narrator to explain to the audience and judges what to expect from the group's performance.
- A Question and Answer session with the judges after the performance.

B. Write an argumentative essay in which you defend a position on the following question: *From the perspective of liberty or equality, was the Cuban Revolution a success or a failure?* Your essay should adhere to the standards of formal English, including correct spelling, grammar, and transitional phrases.

#### **4. *Written Response to Prompts and Final Class Debate* (D)**

Respond to the following prompts in short answer format. For each one, you may choose to defend or refute the statement given to you. Use specific details from your experience with democracy in the United States as well as our study of the Cuban Revolution to support your answers.

- “In order for a democracy to function, the rights of the individual must be upheld.”
- “A democratic society with a wealthy few and many poor is not worth fighting for.”
- “No one has the right to speak for the people; only individual citizens can speak for themselves.”
- “Democracy does not mean the same thing in Latin America as it does in the United States.”

**STAGE 3—SELECTED LEARNING ACTIVITIES**

1. Using a set of primary and secondary source documents, research about life in Cuba before and after the Revolution from the point of view of one social class. Pay close attention to how the experiences of this group changed over the course of the Revolution, and reflect on how a member of the social class you researched would answer the following question: *What role should government play in society?* (A)
2. Interview a peer or community member from outside the school about the role government should play in the lives of its citizens, with a focus on life in contemporary New York City. What role should government play in the lives of private individuals? In keeping communities safe? In making the economy work for all? In fulfilling the roles outlined by the U.S. Constitution? (A)
3. Think/Pair/Share: What are the characteristics of a democracy? Why are these characteristics so important? (List might include: universal suffrage, regular elections, active participation in government by citizens, public education, equal treatment under the law, economic equality, stable economy, rule of law preventing leaders from abusing power, strong middle class). Follow-up: Which of these elements of democracy are important to the social democracies of Latin America, including Cuba, Argentina, and Venezuela? Which elements are less important? Why? (L)
4. Collect evidence on social democracy in Latin America over the last half-century in one of the following countries: Venezuela, Argentina, or Cuba. Use your textbook reading on Latin America's social democratic movements during the Cold War. What obstacles did your country face in striving for democratic government over the past 60 years? Then, examine periodicals and secondary source materials on the current leader of each nation: Chávez in Venezuela, Fernández de Kirchner in Argentina, and Raul Castro in Cuba. Search for evidence of democratic and undemocratic actions or policies. To what degree are these countries democratic? How has this leader supported or obstructed democracy in his/her country? How much progress has this country made towards social democracy in the past 60 years? (L)
5. Complete the Cuban Revolution Gallery Walk. Pictures, primary sources, and secondary source material are posted or placed around the room. These documents provide information about Cuba before and after the Cuban Revolution. This is the "evidence" with which your group will design your arguments for the dramatic performance. For each document, write down the important information you have learned about the Cuban Revolution and then decide whether or not this information is evidence of more/less liberty in Cuba or more/less equality. Use the **Evidence Collection Template** (see below) to help organize your thoughts. (C)

6. Read the short biographical essay on the life of Ernesto “Che” Guevara. Watch clips from the films *Che* (dir.: Soderbergh) and *Motorcycle Diaries* (dir.: Salles). The first clip depicts Che’s experience with the individualistic society and economy of 1950s Cuba. In *Motorcycle Diaries*, Che challenges the mistreatment of Bolivian miners. Use your notes from the film and your reading of the biography of Che to share with the class your answer to the following discussion question: “What rights should every human being have? Do you agree with Che’s vision of democracy?” (D)

### Evidence Collection Template:

#### Was the Cuban Revolution a Success or a Failure? You Make the Call

**Directions:** Analyze the documents throughout the Cuban Revolution Gallery Walk. While you are at each station, write down the most important information that helps you understand the Cuban Revolution. After you have gathered this information, decide if the material you’ve collected refers to the topic of equality or liberty and write a brief explanation of how this document helps you answer the research question.

<b>Document A</b>	Important Information:	Liberty or Equality? Explanation:
<b>Document B</b>	Important Information:	Liberty or Equality? Explanation:
<b>Document C</b>	Important Information:	Liberty or Equality? Explanation:
<b>Document D</b>	Important Information:	Liberty or Equality? Explanation:
<b>Document E</b>	Important Information:	Liberty or Equality? Explanation:
<b>Document F</b>	Important Information:	Liberty or Equality? Explanation: