

# Cuba: A Fifty-year Old Process

Views on Cuba on the occasion of the 50<sup>th</sup> year of the Cuban revolution

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## Introducing “Views on Cuba”

**ON THE OCCASION** of the 50<sup>th</sup> year of the Cuban revolution, the editors of *Against the Current* asked several contributors for brief contributions on how they view Cuban society, politics and culture today. Each statement represents the views of its author. Just as we published a set of diverse perspectives on the imprisonment of dissidents in Cuba six years ago (ATC 105, July-August 2003), the positions taken here cover a wide spectrum of attitudes toward the Cuban regime. We remain committed to opposing all forms of U.S. imperialist intervention against Cuba’s self-determination — the economic embargo, the travel restrictions, the occupation of Guantanamo and any military threats — while we also uphold the importance of open and critical dialogue on the left about the Cuban reality.

**David Finkel**

**See:** [Views on Cuba - On the occasion of the 50<sup>th</sup> year of the Cuban revolution](#)

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*“The dictatorship has been defeated. There is immense joy. But, nevertheless, there is still a lot to be done. Don’t let us deceive ourselves by believing that everything in the future will be easy; maybe everything will be harder from now on.”* — Fidel Castro, 1959

*“One cannot say that the transition of one social system to another can take place overnight, that’s impossible; it is a process of many steps, which concludes with the predominance of goods produced in the majority hands of the population.”* — Raul Castro, 8 January 2008

TO GO BEYOND the debate concerning whether to characterise Cuba as socialist, state capitalist or simply an anti-imperialist state framed by Cold War logic, I propose that instead of defining socialism as a state or a place, we regard it as a process. In today’s Cuba, internal contradictions can no longer be hidden, nor can those who believe in radically transforming our world ignore the resilience of the Cuban people; there is something still going on there.

A critical balance sheet on the now 50-year old process, therefore, is called to order when contemplating the future of socialism. Looking back on the historical development of this process may also serve as a reference point for those progressive forces that seek to take power. We should start with the premise that every attempt at radically transforming society is shaped by historical circumstances, domestic experiences of popular resistance and international pressure. [1]

## **The Roots of Revolution**

The actual victory of the Rebel Army against the forces of the Batista dictatorship in 1959 should be understood in light of the Trotskyist theory of Permanent Revolution. There are many aspects to the concept of Permanent Revolution, but the most important in regards to Cuba is that, as a theory, it provides understanding on how socialist revolutions can occur in countries that have not yet reached advanced capitalism.

Peculiarly, however, although Cuba in 1959 was seen as a country that did not yet enjoy advanced capitalist development, prior to the revolution Cuba already did have a bourgeoisie that invested in industry as well as agricultural production, and this same social class enjoyed materially the benefits of the advanced technological development of its time. It is worth noting that Cuba came to know the train, telephone and television before most places in Western Europe. [2]

Even so, we can start with the premise that the Cuban economy was dependent on U.S. business and imperial interests, and its political system could be characterised as having a neo-colonial relationship to the United States. The grotesque social inequalities that were found at the time reflected this system.

Today, official state discourse says that the Cuban revolution was the cumulative result of social resistance at least from the time of the Cuban people's struggle for national liberation against Spain and slavery, and indeed since the time of the native Indian revolt against early colonialism. The problem is that when state leaders read history as a way of explaining the present, they tend to ignore the contradictions that occur in the chain of events.

An example of this is the continuity portrayed by official Marxist-Leninist-Martiano ideology between communist party politics of the pre-Revolutionary PSP and today's communist party (PCC). We know the historical reality that the PSP and most Stalinist parties in 1959 worldwide did not recognise the mass-popular revolt led by the Rebel Army as a socialist process until a number of years later. [3]

In any case, we can identify the links between the 1959 Revolution and the various struggles that marked Cuban history, especially since the formation of the pro-independence and abolition movement led by Antonio Maceo and Jose Marti. Throughout the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Cuban masses developed a rich tradition of popular resistance — attested by the existence of an independent party of people of colour (PIC) in the early 1900s, the workers' revolution of 1933 against the dictatorship of Machado, the long history of anarchist and communist syndicalism, and the anti-imperialist struggles against U.S. firms in the sugar industry. [4]

Now the revolt against the Batista dictatorship was something different all together. Who was this Batista? He was a sergeant linked to the national bourgeoisie who actually led Cuba to develop its liberal democratic order embodied in the Constitution of 1940. He also happened to be the one candidate endorsed by the communist party — the PSP — in the first free, multiparty elections, an example of where so-called Marxist politics can go wrong.

After a period of paralysis of the electoral processes, Batista returned to take dictatorial power in

1952, persecuting even his one-time friends in the PSP and the national trade union confederation (CTC).

The revolution of 1959 was the result of a movement representing a young generation of Cuban workers and students who were fed up with a political and economic system which, dominated by a national bourgeoisie in the service of U.S. imperialism, continuously failed them. At the time, there was no political party or institution that would represent the interest of workers or the oppressed masses.

This is where the July 26<sup>th</sup> movement comes in. Composed mostly of students and led by the young activist and lawyer Fidel Castro, after the attacks against the Moncada military police barracks in 1953, this movement decisively vowed to violently overthrow the government of tyranny and re-establish a democratic and progressive order. Released from prison and exiled in Mexico together with other leaders of this movement, Fidel formed the Rebel Army that would return to the island and commence a three-year struggle to definitively rid Cuba of Batista and those supporting the dictator.

Although the intent on capturing power was heralded by a small group of young rebels and the leaders of the July 26<sup>th</sup> Movement, the participation of landless peasants, workers, students, the “wretched of the Earth” as Fanon would say, was essential in toppling the Batista government initially and ridding the country of its national bourgeoisie. [5]

But the Cuban revolution cannot be characterised by the events of 1959 alone. Rather, what made the Cuban process revolutionary were precisely the political shifts, turns and contradictions that were to due to mass mobilization, national leadership and international pressure. We can see how the Cuban revolution evolved by categorising a number of stages corresponding to subsequent decades.

## **’60s Revolution and Radicalization**

The decade following the revolutionary triumph was marked by the many attempts that were made to eliminate the oppressive character of bourgeois and neocolonial social relations. At the top, the Castro leadership had to confront international relations immediately, while organizing the revolutionary forces politically on the ground. At the mass base, the poor expressed their anger by either destroying or taking over property of the upper classes, but also organized at their neighborhoods and participated in the occupation of the factories, sugar mills and public transport facilities.

Providing education, health and housing were the principal priorities of the revolutionary forces. Additionally, land appropriations, collectivizations and nationalization programs took place at a very high level. This developed quickly into a fierce confrontation with the U.S. capitalists and polarized the relationship between the countries, while forcing the Cuban leadership to come under the discursive and material auspices of the Soviet Union. Ideologically, this process of radicalization was inspired by the thoughts of the well-known Ernesto “Che” Guevara who during that period emphasised the creation of the “New Man.” [6]

Equal rights for women and black Cubans were also important features of this period. It only took two years of mass popular mobilization and U.S. intervention to consolidate the socialist identity of the Cuban revolution, which was applauded by and seen as a source of inspiration for many countries in the world that were at the same time gaining their independence.

## **'70s Normalization-Institutionalization**

The 1970s represented a step back from radical revolution, as the organized political structure, which was framed in a Cold War context, had to come to terms of surviving in a sea of capitalism or the world capitalist system. This period could also be seen as the decade of institutionalization of the revolution, which for radical socialists might represent a contradiction.

As the price of sugar fell on the world market, Cuba was to integrate further into the Soviet bloc by entering the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (Comecon), adopting a Marxist-Leninist and Martiano constitution. The 1970s also saw the first congress of the PCC — which had been established back in 1965 — the establishment of the System of Economic Planning and Development with its five-year plans and aggressive attempts to eliminate the underground economy, something that the Cuban party/state apparatus was never successful in achieving. [7]

A managerial sector was formalized during this era, which often clashed with the will of organized workers. Parallel to this formalization of the Marxist-Leninist state, the fruits of revolution were documented: an improvement in the population's standard of living and the highest level of income and material equality in the Americas. [8]

Internationally, Cuba became a Third World Superpower, leading the Non-Aligned Movement, contributing to military strategies of revolutionary and anti-imperialist forces worldwide and in the region, offering its humanitarian services in solidarity with other countries and contributing to the end of colonial racism in southern Africa.

It is important that we understand that even though Cuba moved into the Soviet bloc economically, politically it always maintained its independence. We are not talking about a regime that was imposed by the military forces of Moscow, but a consolidation of social forces that in the face of U.S. aggression was forced to depend on the parallel Soviet market system.

At times, however, we saw Cuban and Soviet interests clash. Against the will of the Soviet Union, the Cuban state aided guerrillas in Angola, and later Nicaragua and El Salvador in the 1980s. We should point out that Cuba never cut off its relations with the West economically, as this relationship always represented 30-40% of its trade. [9]

## **Searching for Another Model**

It was principally the result of the so-called normalization of the Cuban revolutionary process that led to many social contradictions, which were meant to be treated by Fidel Castro's Campaign to Rectify Errors and Negative Tendencies, starting in 1986. It was during this time that the image and words of Che Guevara returned to Cuban daily life.

Official state discourse ramped and raved about the errors that were committed during the formalization of the managerial sector of society. It was a moral campaign, which attempted to rid the country of various forms of corruption and tendencies that followed political developments in the Soviet Union.

While observing developments in Eastern Europe, Cuba began opening its doors to foreign investment and joint ventures, which compensated for declining Soviet interests. At the same time, Cuba closed its doors to political tendencies suggesting that the PCC should loosen its control over the political apparatus or disrupting unity. [10]

The fall of the Soviet Union had its impact upon the Cuban economy. There is no room to detail the process here. But it suffices to say that the end result was the island-nation of Cuba, suffering an enhanced trade embargo, lost 65% of its subsidized trade between 1990 and 1993. This reduced its GNP growth rate to zero. [11]

The maintenance of the Cuban party/state apparatus was partially orchestrated by the fourth PCC Congress held in 1991 and the llamamiento or call by the Party to the people to gather, organize, plan and dictate how national resources would be distributed. Priorities were also set at this period. In their respective municipal meetings, over one million citizens participated and voiced their opinion in this llamamiento.

The electoral process, which had not been reformed since 1976, resulted in a tremendous turnover in the 225-member Central Committee and the entire 25-member political bureau. This was supported by an electoral turnout of 99% of the voter population, with the voting age reduced to 16. New governing and more democratic bodies of the local economy called Consejos Populares, which predated the Participatory Budget of Brazil, were created and gave more power to workers at a local level. [12]

At the national level, the economic changes were drastic. Namely, the fourth PCC congress declared the end of five-year plans, legalized the possession and use of the U.S. dollar, allowed for foreign direct investment in all sectors except health, education, housing and the military. National industries were decentralized and gradually set into the realm of so-called socialist competition. Self-employment, with a gradual tax and revenue system, was introduced.

Outsiders initially saw this as a push towards greater economic reforms, but in reality it was the state capturing the black market. Furthermore, Cuba saw the decentralization of the Bank system, and the arrival of foreign banks to service foreign corporations. The strategy was to enter the global market while protecting the fruits of the revolution and social welfare. [13]

The results were miraculous: The economy began to grow after 1996 and the party-state apparatus survived, due to its insistence on mobilizing popular support. All throughout the 1990s, the state was capable of continuing its policy of investing heavily in health and education. There were of course social consequences as well, as new contradictions began to appear. Those with access to hard foreign currency, mostly rich, white Cubans with family living abroad, started to establish different material lifestyles.

Then material inequality started to translate into racial divides, reminiscent of pre-revolutionary days. Nevertheless, these same contradictions opened new spaces for popular expression that were absent in the years prior to the crisis. Hip Hop artists tackling racism started blooming all over the island, gays were portrayed positively in Cuban films, and the government recognised the Rastafarian communities of the Eastern provinces. Cuba was also the second country in Latin America, after Argentina, to recognise the rights of transsexuals. [14]

Furthermore, due to the economic constraints, Cuban food and agricultural production became greener; the lack of pesticides opened the doors to trendy organic markets and small scale agricultural production offered a more diverse use of the country's tropical soil.

## **After Fifty Years**

The turn of the century brought on yet another stage in the revolutionary process in Cuba. As left movements started to win power in Latin America, Cuban society now finds itself in the company of

stronger allies at both the state and popular levels, particularly its open relations with countries like Venezuela in its own Bolivarian Revolution.

Cuba is benefitting from new dimensions of social resistance that were unthinkable during its isolation at the end of the Cold War. Just like the anti-imperialist and anti-capitalist processes elsewhere today, however, the continuity of the socialist project will depend wholly on the level of popular mobilization, worker control and support for more democratic and progressive ideals. [15]

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## **P.S.**

\* From Against the Current (ATC) 142, September-October 2009:  
<http://www.solidarity-us.org/node/2366>

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## **Footnotes**

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[2] Thomas, H. (1971), *Cuba, or the Pursuit of Freedom*, Eyre and Spottiswoode: London.

[3] Kapcia, A. (2000), *Cuba: Island of Dreams*, Berg: Oxford.

[4] Aline Helg (2007), "To be Black and to be Cuban: The Dilemma of Afro-Cubans in Post-independence Politics," in Darien J. Davis, eds., *Beyond Slavery: The Multilayered Legacy of Africans in Latin America and the Caribbean*, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers: Lanham.

[5] Betto, F. (1985), *Fidel y la religion: conversaciones con Fidel Castro*, Consejo de Estado: Havana. See also, Fanon, F. (1963), *The Wretched of the Earth*, Grove Press: New York.

[6] Guevara, E. (1965), "Socialism and Man in Cuba," in ed. Aleida March, *The Ché Reader*, Ocean Press: Melbourne.

[7] Nuñez Moreno, L. (1997), "Mas allá del cuentapropismo," in *Temas*, No. 11, Havana.

[8] Stubbs, J. (1989), *Cuba: The Test of Time*, Latin American Bureau: London.

[9] Eckstein, S. E. (1994), *Back from the Future: Cuba under Castro*, Princeton University Press: New Brunswick.

[10] Mesa-Lago, C. (1992), "Economic Effects of the Soviet/Eastern European Crisis on Cuba," in *Paper for the Andrew W. Mellon Project on eastern Europe and Cuba*, University of Pittsburgh: Pittsburgh.

[11] García Reyes, M. and López de Llerga, M. (1997), *Cuba después de la era soviética*, El Colegio de México: Mexico, D.F.

[12] August, A. (1999), *Democracy in Cuba and the 1997-1998 Elections*, Editorial José Martí: Havana.

[13] Carranza Valdés, J., Monreal González, P. y Gutiérrez Urdaneta, L. (1997), *Cuba: la reestructuración de la economía*, Nueva Sociedad: Caracas.

[14] *Latin American Perspectives*, Issue 164, January 2009, Vol. 36 No.1, Sage: Riverside.

[15] See: Raby, D.L. (2006), *Democracy and Revolution: Latin America and Socialism Today*, Pluto: London, and Bruce, I. (2009), *The Real Venezuela: Making Socialism in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, Pluto Press: London.