

Cuban Dilemmas, Socialist Debates

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The situation created in Cuba following the events of July 11th raises questions on a number of levels for those of us fighting for a society free from class exploitation and all forms of oppression - for those who aspire to build what Marx called the “true realm of freedom” with free and equal people living in harmony with nature. That is to say, communism - the emancipatory horizon that gives shape to the hopes of peoples and communities.

There is an urgent need to debate the best way to defend (and extend) existing social gains in a post-capitalist country like Cuba against the imperialist siege. That means looking at strategies to short-circuit capital's restorationist designs, be they of Cuban or international origin, learning from the processes of capitalist restoration in other settings. Which raises the question of the political scenario, or better yet, what the political-institutional architecture best suited to these aims might look like. None of these three questions can be looked at in isolation from the others; and this short essay can only provide a cursory look at them.

For starters, we should make it clear that this debate has nothing to do with the claptrap arguments put forward by the Right - in the Spanish case taking the form of the Partido Popular and Vox cynically vociferating “against the communist dictatorship” in their usual publicity-seeking way. That's not the debate, and it's certainly not a debate to be had with them. What's more, those who didn't condemn the Franco dictatorship and who remain silent, or express approval, in the face of massacres in Chile or Colombia or the outrages of Bolsonaro or the Saudi regime, have no moral authority whatsoever. The Cuban Right just wants to get their mills, lands, and casinos back, and impose a neoliberal regime on the Cuban people. The Spanish Right is merely one more conduit for the Miami Cuban gang and its reactionary project of capitalist restoration - some of whose proponents are calling for a murderous US military intervention, the consequence of which would be a new form of neocolonial domination.

Winds of Revolution

Few can deny the legitimacy of origin of the 1959 revolution or the significance of its growing toward socialist aims in 1961. The encouragement this gave to popular aspirations in Latin America is a “structural” feature of class struggle in the region, and the enthusiasm it sparked in many generations of left-wing activists the world over was expressed through admiration for its two emblematic figures, Che Guevara and Fidel Castro. After years of slavery and colonial dependence on the Kingdom of Spain and then on the American colossus, the Cuban people achieved dignity as a sovereign nation. The legitimacy of origin was initially consolidated because the overthrow of the dictator was accompanied by important social gains and undeniable advances in the Cuban population's living conditions. The first few years also saw lively open and public socialist debates about the economic model, with multiple viewpoints and international participation. This also involved discussions on political decision-making mechanisms, since at the time the task was still seen to be one of sustaining the revolution's legitimacy in practice through new popular revolutionary institutions, beyond the figures of Che and Castro.

That's why imperialism was so quick to intervene. As Eduardo Galeano has said, "What bothers them about Cuba aren't the revolution's errors, of which there have been many. What they really can't stomach is that a poor, small country has not bowed down to the empire." It served as an example to discipline other wayward travelers. It was about nipping the experience in the bud; on top of failed military adventures, imperialism decreed a blockade to thwart 1959's revolutionary promise of freedom with bread, and bread without terror.

Blockade, Damn Blockade

The impact of American bullying - intensified following the 1996 Helms-Burton Act and yet again by the coming into force of its Chapter Three in 2019 and Trump's onslaught of further measures - has been devastating. The measures have prevented the island from substantially altering its place in the international division of labour - whether this has meant its sugar monoculture export model or its later conversion into a major tourist hub. Add to this the country's dependence on energy and food imports, for which advances in education and health as well as in cutting-edge biomedical research and training, have been insufficient counterweights. As a result, and we should all be very clear about this, the population's living conditions in 2021 have been hit by greater scarcity and also by unequal access to goods and services - especially in the wake of the dollarization of a wide variety of transactions via the hard currency (MLC) mechanism. This situation has been made worse by the inflation that has resulted from a series of wrong decisions.

Broad swathes of the population have been severely hit. Especially affected are the three million Cubans paid by the government in pesos, and the some three million more who live off the more or less informal part of the economy - in addition to whom are a few hundred thousand people who operate limited types of private businesses. Despite the country's healthcare advances and the targeted medical efforts that have been made, the pandemic has been a blow to public health and the GDP. The US ban on family hard-currency remittances, the shortfalls in Venezuelan oil deliveries, and the return of many healthcare professionals working abroad, have all made things worse.

Imperialism has lost many battles, but it might win the war by undermining the material bases for existing revolutionary gains and any renewed efforts at building an institutional framework of socialist democracy. This is very clear, and it would be naïve to expect imperialism to assist in the economic development of a dissenting country. The internationalization of the revolution is not a flight of fancy, but rather, a practical necessity for the long-term survival of a post-capitalist country.

This is not the first time that imperialism has sought to strangle emancipatory processes. It has been trying since 1917, and we saw the toxic effects of the military efforts the Sandinista Revolution was forced to deploy to deal with Contra aggression. These efforts bled resources away from the satisfaction of people's needs, leading to the failure of the revolutionary project and the ascendancy of the despotic Ortega-Murillo clique. Imperialism is quite happy to create a humanitarian crisis to wear down the Cuban people and limit the government's margin for manoeuvre, and Biden has not kept his election promises in this regard. In such a context, it's hardly surprising that there should be popular discontent, especially among the most impoverished sectors. In the extreme circumstances that Russia itself faced in the early days of the revolution and soviet democracy, Lenin warned that the worst error the Bolsheviks could make would be to ignore the realities faced by the masses.

Rebooting Internationalism

That's why it's so important to build anti-imperialist solidarity rooted in the people - especially in the working classes. Governments who see themselves as progressive or even just as democratic should

also be condemning and calling for an end to the illegal and inhuman blockade to which the Cuban people have been subjected, and demanding that Biden take Cuba off the list of state sponsors of terrorism. That would provide real economic relief. What's more, and this is essential, internationalist solidarity should help to overcome shortages by bolstering campaigns to gather and ship basic supplies to the island. It's baffling that Mexican president Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador and Argentinian president Alberto Fernandez haven't backed their words with deeds; while they don't have unlimited resources, they certainly are in a position to provide meaningful assistance. It's also unacceptable that Left parties, trade unions, and social-movement organizations the world over, especially in OECD countries, are not organizing active campaigns to promote and gather people-to-people material aid.

Anti-imperialism is essential in the Cuban labyrinth, but it isn't enough. And reducing Cuba's complex situation to regional or global geopolitics is also patently inadequate. While not diminishing these factors as part of the problem and any solution, we also have to look at the socio-economic facts on the ground in the country and the moribund state of Cuba's political system. Marxism sees social conflict as part of reality itself in all circumstances, and it can take many forms. To forget this, and to limit oneself to the discursive framework of geopolitics, is to stray some distance from the ABCs of Marxism. There are those on the Left who adopt a stance of uncritical defence toward whatever "friendly" governments may be saying at any given time in response to the imperialist foe. They display a crude and antiquated campism that lumps together and defends regimes and leaders in different parts of the world and of wildly differing character. Such an approach is inimical to a genuine defense of Cuba against the attacks that it faces.

A rather smarter and more useful approach is to consider the issue of Cuba solely or mainly within the framework of the interplay of centres of power and counterweights to that power, checks and balances, shifting equilibria and measures, between the states and governments of the Latin American region in relation to their all-powerful northern neighbour. The relationship of forces, of course, also plays out on that level - but not only. It also depends on the relationship of forces between classes in each country's social conflicts, which themselves have a bearing on the situation in the other countries of the region - and on the political and economic policies adopted by their governments. And this applies to Cuba as well. How the Cuban people resolve the problems they currently face and how they embark upon their future will also affect the final outcome in all of Latin America - because while the island's future depends greatly on what happens in the region, the region's future also depends on Cuba's.

Things Don't Happen by Coincidence

There is growing unease on the island for objective, material reasons but also political ones. The new leadership of the Communist Party of Cuba (PCC) does not enjoy the legitimacy of its elders - this isn't something one can inherit. Nor has it fulfilled the promises and hopes sparked by the Constitution of 2019 proclaiming the "socialist rule of law," which to date hasn't been given any practical material substance. Solutions can't be reduced merely to intelligent "management" of the country's ills; rather, there are structural problems in the actually existing system that require more far-reaching solutions.

July 11th was a wake-up call. It serves no purpose to diminish its scope by referring only to the few thousand people who took to the streets. These thousands potentially represented many more people, and we know that social dynamics can take big leaps in short periods of time - in one direction or the other. It is utterly pointless to view the protests as the result of imperialist, right-wing conspiracy and incitement. Such conspiracies and incitements exist, but there's no getting around a fundamental problem: socialism can't succeed in a single country, much less on a small island. For Cuba's transition to socialism to succeed, the socialist revolution has to deepen and

spread, at least into the surrounding countries of Latin America.

That's why, in addition to denouncing the blockade and imperialism, the Latin American Left must also champion emancipatory processes in each country – as much in the interests of their respective peoples as in defense of Cuba. In this respect, the Puebla Group's statements on the recent Cuban events are an expression of the political short-sightedness of Latin American progressivism. While very good at condemning imperialist manoeuvring and the impact of the blockade and pandemic, they are hopeless at offering ways to eliminate capitalism once in office in the countries of the region. Their progressivism ends when it's a matter of initiating a transitional process growing over to the goal of a socialist society.

No doubt the imperialist blockade and right-wing conspiracies were factors in the Cuban protests. But they were dipping into a larger tide, and it would be stupid to think otherwise. Above all, though, an approach based on seeing the intervention of foreign powers and manipulative forces as the sole drivers of social conflict is a double-edged sword. Just imagine reacting the same way to people in other countries when they mobilize in defense of their interests, reducing the causes to some sort of left-wing conspiracy. Popular protests do not necessarily start on the basis of fully-formed class consciousness, nor do they come with a clear socialist program. They are the expression of subjective awareness rooted in objective conditions. As a result, they are a group fighting for hegemony over leadership of the movement, in which different factions clash with one another.

To see all discontented people in Cuba as counter-revolutionaries is foolishness of the same calibre as seeing them as the bearers of revolutionary solutions. Above all, though, it's extremely serious that repression was carried out by the state apparatus against a segment of the population whose behaviour was overwhelmingly peaceful and in no way involved the use of arms against the regime. This repressive conduct involved the use of force, arrests – including of some communist activists who were involved – and a total lack of transparency regarding the people detained and their whereabouts. It also involved a shutdown of the Internet and calls to close ranks. All of this is incomprehensible in a country where the population has a high level of anti-imperialist consciousness, where there is widespread social awareness and community interaction, and where the Cuban Communist Party itself remains strong and continues to have deep popular roots. Truncheons and network blackouts are no way to deal with pressing socio-economic problems and popular demands and aspirations.

Hegemony in the Transition to Socialism

Cuba is not a socialist country; it's a country that has embarked upon a long transition to socialism, in a capitalist world, in which capital exerts constant pressure from within the island as well. As such, it's naïve to believe that economic and social crises of the sort the rest of the world-system experiences will not affect Cuba. Can there be crises and mobilizations for the same fundamental reasons as in other countries on the planet? Protests that are neither reactionary nor progressive per se, but which express malaise in a context of crisis? The answer is yes. Once we've accepted that, the debate becomes a political one: what is the way out or the proposed response when these kinds of protests take place?

We should be clear that the problem comes from the notion that from the moment the Communist Party comes to power, the question of legitimacy and hegemony in the period following the revolution has been settled once and for all time. For better or for worse, though, that just isn't the case. Politics never stops. New demands, contradictions, and dilemmas arise, even new social protagonists. Societies are increasingly more complex and diverse, and solutions require permanent public discussion. The infamous hegemony everyone's always talking about has to be constantly

renewed in the transition to socialism; the legitimacy of origin isn't enough. Such regeneration can only succeed through the active participation of the popular masses. Otherwise, sooner or later, and whatever its might, the Party will end up alone.

Every organization, trade union, and group committed to fighting the blockade and imperialist bullying should have complete freedom to operate and express its views. Thus far I've only referred to the heroic dimension of the revolution, the dimension of resistance. But in recent years, the Communist Party of Cuba has made a major policy shift toward pro-market reforms. Its cadres speak openly of the Vietnamese model. To be sure, this is described as a way to break the country out of its economic isolation, which has also been deepened by the Venezuelan disaster and the crises of other progressive governments. But it shouldn't be ruled out that a sector of the bureaucracy might be open to moving from the NEP to a new economic model in which the Communist Party retains its power in a state capitalist economy. This is already the case in China. There are even greater dangers to ward off, though, so it's useful to recall that it wasn't American imperialism that restored capitalism in the USSR. Rather, it was a section of the bureaucracy – among them Putin – that went over holus-bolus to capitalism, leading a vast process of privatization and appropriation of the choicest morsels of the productive apparatus.

Debating all these problems and options, and making conscious and informed choices, is what socialist democracy is about. And this just doesn't exist in Cuba today. Even the letter of the Constitution, let alone its spirit, has no impact on actual practice. While problems of material scarcity can certainly be blamed on the blockade, the dearth of socialist freedoms can only be understood as a consequence of the Communist Party's monopolistic conception of power. This is something more reminiscent of Stalinism than of Che Guevara, who Cuban leaders continue to claim as their own.

Socialism Means More, Better, and Complete Democracy

Neither in Marx nor in Lenin nor in 26th of July Movement-era Castro can we find any strategic theorization whereby socialism should be built over the long term solely and exclusively under the leadership of a single party monopolizing political power. [1] To be sure, the state plays an active role in the transition to socialism, until such time as it becomes possible to echo Marx and speak of the true realm of freedom. However, the best safeguard for partial gains and progress toward socialism is an organized people that neither depends upon the state nor is yet another of its many tributaries.

Socialist democracy has several components. One is the socialization of the means of production under different (and not solely state-centred) forms of social and collective property, under the active control of the working class. Another is the freedom to form political parties, trade unions, and social-movement organizations be they feminist, environmentalist, neighbourhood-based, or of whatever sort. Yet another is the establishment of democratic planning with active popular participation in all spheres and at all levels. All of this necessarily involves freedom of expression across the board, with full press freedoms. None of this is new; it goes back to the beginnings of the communist movement a century ago.

It's worthwhile quoting Rosa Luxembourgh extensively here:

“...It is a well-known and indisputable fact that without a free and untrammelled press, without the unlimited right of association and assemblage, the rule of the broad masses of the people is entirely unthinkable. [...]

“Freedom only for the supporters of the government, only for the members of one party

- however numerous they may be - is no freedom at all. Freedom is always and exclusively freedom for the one who thinks differently. Not because of any fanatical concept of 'justice' but because all that is instructive, wholesome and purifying in political freedom depends on this essential characteristic, and its effectiveness vanishes when 'freedom' becomes a special privilege."

The deepening of democracy is not a threat to the revolutionary process and socialist project. On the contrary, it is a necessary pre-condition for their fulfillment where true emancipation is the goal.

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P.S.

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Socialist Project

<https://socialistproject.ca/2021/08/cuban-dilemmas-socialist-debates/>

Footnotes

[1] In 1921, the Bolsheviks banned internal factions at the 10th party congress. This was a special, temporary measure taken in response to the dangerous situation faced by the Russian Revolution due to the attitude of the different parties in the Civil War and the beginnings of attacks against the legal status of the Workers Councils (soviets) by other Left parties. The ban also came following the events at Kronstadt, which in my opinion were resolved in the wrong way. Later, in March 1923, Lenin wrote his last article "[Better Fewer, But Better](#)," in which, among other things, he argues for closer ties between the state and the Bolshevik Party. For Lenin, this was a defensive tactical move - in response to the decision by all the other workers parties to quit the soviets, with some of them having even carried out armed actions against the new state. In my opinion, this was also meant to be a special, temporary measure. Unfortunately, Lenin's death ten months later opened the path to Stalin's political triumph, transforming the USSR into a despotic dictatorship under his thumb, erasing all forms of working-class and soviet power. Lenin was late in understanding the dangers of Stalin and the forces around him. The Left Opposition, and especially Trotsky, drew the lessons of the essential role of socialist democracy in the building of a society free from exploitation and oppression.