

The Historical Burden of Actually Existing Socialism

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The triumph of the Cuban Revolution on January 1, 1959, represented the inauguration of a process that guaranteed for specific segments of the population the exercise of rights previously denied to them. In this way a new social contract was established that embraced, in a short period of time, the construction of socialism as an alternative to the existing capitalist order that had been inaugurated with the formation of the republic in 1902.

The theater of the Cold War and the hostility of the United States government toward the incipient revolutionary process propelled the Caribbean nation toward the Soviet Bloc, on the one hand, and prompted it, on the other, to support guerrilla movements and other groups of rebels organized against the oligarchical capitalism in other peripheral, underdeveloped Latin American nations. The Cuban posture was consistent with the Marxist ideal of a world revolution, as the island sought regional and hemispheric support against the political and economic isolation that its neighbor to the north subjected it to after the triumph of 1959.

Nonetheless, from the first years after the triumph of the revolution, there emerged clear practices of political censorship in various cultural spheres—film, theater and dance, the visual arts, poetry and literature. In this way the repression or “paramaterization” (setting parameters) of numerous forms of artistic expression with critical or confrontational elements became evident. The autonomy of the university was also severely restricted by the authorities and subjected to political regulations that kept some would-be students out of the classroom, often reproducing multiple forms of discrimination along lines of race, gender, social class, and sexual orientation.

In these years the government actively promoted a state-centric unification and a hyper-institutionalization of the party-as-government (1965) while imposing a state monopoly on communications media and production (1968). Democratic mechanisms like public protest were suppressed, the direct election of national leaders was eliminated, and the legitimacy of peaceful dissent in the workplace was subjected to tight control via the criminalization of the strike. All of these measures, together with additional mechanisms of control and politico-social instrumentalization, were justified by pointing to the exceptional circumstances, of indefinite duration, generated by U.S. hostility.

The political establishment thus gravitated toward the bloc of nations that had implemented models

of “historical” or “actually existing” socialism. These regimes were characterized by the absolute administrative control of economic activities by the state. This economic model led to a generalized reduction in levels of productivity and the long-term slowing of economic growth, the scarcity of consumer goods, the systematic deterioration of industrial infrastructure, and basic restrictions on individual liberties, all in the name of egalitarian ideals and an ideologically driven ethos of forced collectivism.

At the same time, since salaries were unable to meet the basic needs of employees and basic resources were diverted into the informal economy for private gain, corruption proliferated. The problem was compounded by an absence of investment in the diversification of industry that was required to alter the model of monoculture and hyper-dependence on the sugar industry, a model that had formed the basis for economic and technological underdevelopment.

In spite of the undeniable gains in the social sphere driven by increased investment in sports, culture, health, and education, the country was characterized by the general absence of individual liberties, sublimated by the charisma of a populist leader, a status incarnated in the figure of the Secretary General of the Communist Party. In keeping with this model, the juridical and constitutional culture of citizenship deteriorated due to the absence of institutional mechanisms capable of responding in a consistent way to the interests of the popular classes.

To the detriment of workers’ rights, the government effectively co-opted the trade unions. Worker autonomy was undermined during the period 1961-1975 with the large-scale dissolution of worker cooperatives, which were added to the long list of state properties. These profound changes took place in a political environment characterized by authoritarian management by the party leadership, which imposed a centralized, party-line, bureaucratic framework. This new framework led to a sustained militarization of the economy in the entrepreneurial sector, with the dire consequences generated for the vast majority.

The prevailing Marxist orthodoxy was characterized by an imitation of the philosophical postulates imported from the Soviet Union (1961-1990), combined with a nationalist metanarrative that rendered vital sectors of anti-hegemonic resistance invisible. The revolutionary character of Marxist theory was subverted, in fact, by vulgar, dogmatic principles of the party-affiliated ruling class (which reproduced, in fact, political domination, economic exploitation, and social impoverishment). Peculiarities of the national landscape were ignored in favor of the homogenizing framework that the new ruling class adopted as the state ideology, in accordance with their own economic interests.

From State Socialism to the Neocapitalist Oligarchical Transition

The profound crisis that Cuba underwent during the so-called Special Period (1990-1994) plunged the nation into the era of its greatest material difficulties. The arrival of this precarious environment, generated by the collapse of the so-called “socialist camp,” affected all levels of the Cuban economy, prompting a third migratory wave to the United States. This exodus, characterized by a high percentage of poorer Cubans of color, occasioned a strong disdain, xenophobic and racist, among the Cuban bourgeoisie long-established in South Florida, revealing exclusionary impulses in their “democratic postulates.”

The debacle of 1990s Cuba reinforced the historical dependence of the island on foreign powers, extending in this manner the colonial condition that its communist leadership had not escaped in establishing asymmetrical economic relationships with its allies in Eastern Europe. In this sense, the Cuban leadership silenced for more than forty years the criticisms levied by internationalist revolutionary Ernesto Che Guevara, criticisms levied from a radical Marxist militance that held the island’s economic autonomy as the sole guarantee of national sovereignty.

The reconfigurations produced in this Special Period as a result of governmental policies aimed at “confronting the crisis” led to numerous concessions to private capital, both local and foreign. These measures generated new dynamics that were immediately evident at the national level, given the peculiarities that governed the insertion of Cuba into the world economy according to the “rules of the game” established by the Western powers.

The democratization of the political regime was never part of the ruling class imaginary, which remained incapable of understanding that despotism has disastrous results on productivity. At the same time, the afore-mentioned transformations—the concessions to private capital—prompted a resurgence of racism, an increase in inequality, and the “oligarchization” of the existing model by the ruling class, which made use of its overwhelming dominance over the politico-economic sphere.

The Leftist Libertarian* Alternatives to the Gordian Knot of Cuba’s Crisis

The Cuban government has leveraged its supposedly revolutionary character to deny recognition to other organizations or groups in Cuba that self-identify as leftist. The ruling political class has obstructed the very possibility of an autonomous existence for even nonconfrontational anti-capitalist, feminist, anti-racist, anarchist, or ecosocialist groups, simply by identifying them with the opposition. These collectives are in fact the stewards of political propositions far removed from statist and institutional centralism that tends to suffocate self-managed initiatives either through cooptation or direct repression.

These various groups representing *other* alternatives (popular, socialist, decolonizing, and sovereign-democratic alternatives) constitute a significant portion of Cuban civil society, and their very existence contributes to the rethinking of public participation in terms of innovative mechanisms for the redistribution of power, the redistribution of wealth, and participatory deliberation in decision-making for various social groups.

The *critical* leftist groups in Cuba have continually bumped up against the wall of a fossilized institutional machinery, which claims for itself full authority over an ultimately inauthentic socialist narrative, maintaining in this way its own privileges and its mechanisms of totalitarian control.

Such a governance structure renders unviable any and all alternatives intended to amplify the popular bases for democratic radicalization emphasizing reparative justice, the decolonization of knowledge and power, the reversal of high levels of environmental pollution, and the end of the labor exploitation to which the Cuban working class is subjected under the existing social relations of production, which are typical of state capitalism.

A scenario of social liberation demands the mass mobilization of a citizenship fully conscious of the ever-greater concentration of wealth among the traditionally hegemonic sectors. Such a scenario aims to establish economic structures capable of generating wealth in an egalitarian, ecological, dynamic, and sustainable manner.

The libertarian ideals of a popular socialist alternative synthesize the emancipatory, decolonized, counter-hegemonic essence of a critical Cuban left characterized by an anti- or post-capitalist ethos. They do so in order to consecrate the values of a democratic socialism as a counterproposal to the hegemonic monopoly of an authoritarian, Stalinist militance that arbitrarily pulls the levers of power in Cuba.

*Libertarian in this usage comes from the Spanish *libertario*, which is a term rooted in anarchist and Marxist-humanist ideas and practices of human and social freedom.

This article is part of a symposium on the critical left in Cuba.

James Buckwalter-Arias, "Introduction to Marginalized Discourse: Voices from the Critical Left in Cuba"

Alexander Hall Lujardo, "The Historical Burden of Actually Existing Socialism"

Lisbeth Moya González, "Cuba and the World"

Alina Bárbara López Hernández, "The False Dilemma Fallacy"

Lynn Cruz, "The Cuban Reality"

Raymar Aguado Hernández, "The Cuban Left, More Critical and Decolonized"