

“That’s So F**king Imperialistic”: Responding to a Supporter of Cuba’s Government

November 1, 2021



Following Cuba’s July 11th protests, University of Houston professor Bob Buzzanco posted on social media a strongly worded attack on *New Politics*, to which Lois Weiner and I responded with September’s “NP on Cuba: Consistent Opposition to US Imperialism and Support of Democratic Rights.” Buzzanco’s subsequent critique titled “Doing Miami’s Dirty Work (Wittingly or Not): Responding to ‘New Politics’” asked the following questions of us anti-authoritarian and Third Camp leftists: “What will Left criticism of Cuba accomplish? How will it benefit the people in the streets of Cuba protesting? Where’s your solidarity?” These are fair questions, and they should be mainly asked to Cubans on the island. As a non-Cuban who hasn’t experienced Cuba’s everyday realities, I will respond with humility and with attention to local voices.

While Buzzanco claims that criticizing Havana aids Miami, a consistent defense of democratic rights actually makes our anti-imperialist movements more credible and strengthens our case for ending the unconscionable blockade. As critical leftists, we can provide a credible socialist alternative, both to the state-capitalist regime and to the neoliberal tendencies trying to co-opt the Cuban opposition. We can argue that respecting Cuba’s self-determination will not only improve the humanitarian situation but will also strengthen Cuba’s democratic dissidents by removing President Miguel Díaz-Canel’s ability to blame all his failures on Washington.

I actually agree with many of Buzzanco’s points, including his acknowledgement of Cuba’s accomplishments in ecology and health care. But I have my own questions for people like Buzzanco who stand fully behind the Cuban government. What is your message for Cubans who are becoming increasingly disillusioned with their leaders? What do you offer them beyond the bleak, Orwellian view that they should not protest until the U.S. blockade is lifted? Here is what he writes:

“[A]ny protest inside Cuba, no matter the intention, was going to have U.S. and Miami fingerprints on it and serve the interests of the Miami mafia and the American ‘National Security’ establishment [...]

[A]ny disaffection in Cuba is generally engineered and absolutely and inevitably exploited by *Calle 8* [8th Street in Miami’s Little Havana neighborhood]”

I know that if I were Cuban, I would not take kindly to such condescending statements coming from a U.S. professor. I sent Buzzanco’s article to an Anarchist contact in Havana, and here was his response:

“That’s so fucking imperialistic in a pretty twisted way. We Cubans don’t owe shit to anyone. Not in Miami, not in Beijing, or in some office in Havana.”

Whatever a genuinely anti-imperialist approach toward Cuba might look like, it cannot be to rally behind a regime that denies Cubans some of their most basic rights. The most strategic way to build a socialist world, in fact the only way, is through critical though unwavering solidarity with the world’s oppressed. In consultation with Cuban leftists, we should explore what solidarity must mean when applied to a population that is suffering, firstly, from more than a century of U.S. imperialism, and secondly, from an authoritarian bureaucracy.

A Repressive State

If you’re not convinced by the consensus of human rights groups that Cuba is a highly repressive state, the same consensus that condemns the U.S. blockade, then you can ask Cubans themselves. I wrote to a Havana-based Anarchist collective called Taller Libertario Alfredo López (Alfredo López Libertarian Workshop). Here’s what they told me, originally in Spanish:

“You can’t lose sight in this analysis that today who represents the Cuban people in the government is a military mafia that has kidnapped the revolution. The two blockades experienced by the Cuban people must be denounced: that of Yankee imperialism and that of the Cuban Stalinist military bureaucracy.”

They identified the country’s largest business conglomerate GAESA (Grupo de Administración Empresarial SA), which is military-controlled, as central to the country’s power structure. GAESA controls much of Cuba’s hospitality, real estate, finance, shipping, transportation, construction, and retail industries. Its head, Arturo López-Callejas, is an adviser to Díaz-Canel.

It was against the authoritarian bureaucracy that thousands of Cubans protested in about fifty municipalities on July 11th, nationwide. If you still don’t believe that Cuba is a repressive state, you can listen to Díaz-Canel calling for “revolutionaries” to “fight” the still-peaceful protesters on the afternoon of July 11th, and you can watch the videos of violent government crackdowns against demonstrators. You can read that, months later, hundreds of protesters remain in prison, where many claim that authorities have physically and emotionally abused them.

Rather than criticizing such repression, Buzzanco resorts to whataboutism, pointing to the greater police brutality in the United States. Does he think a greater police state makes the lesser one okay, or that it’s impossible to oppose both simultaneously? He accuses *New Politics* of “equivalency,”

even though the magazine covers U.S. police violence far more frequently than it discusses Cuban authoritarianism. While context and perspective are important, choosing one or another geopolitical “camp” will not help abolish an interconnected global security state which often transcends such alliances. We see China financing American wars, American companies (including one owned by Blackwater’s mercenary Erik Prince) profiting from Chinese repression, Israel selling drones that Russia uses in Syria, and, as discussed below, Cuban authorities extraditing a wanted environmental activist to the United States. Given the globalization of repression, a coherent opposition must be consistent.

Who Were the Protesters?

Although Buzzanco follows the mainstream global Left in condemning the July 11th protests as being orchestrated by Miami, the evidence suggests otherwise. The Cuba-based *Comunistas* Editorial Board reports that the “overwhelming majority of protesters” consisted of “the working class demanding that the government improve their living conditions.” Taller Libertario similarly notes, “the poorest sectors of the population carried out the majority of the protests.” The protesters came disproportionately from Cuba’s Black communities, who suffer from deep racial inequalities. White Cubans control 98% of businesses and are five times more likely than Black Cubans to open a bank account.

In short, the protests truly were organic and spontaneous. Matanzas-based historian Alina Barbara López Hernández has summarized: “No political leadership was seen in the protests, neither from individuals nor from organizations. They had a disorganized character, even anarchic if you will, like all spontaneous outbursts. They were mostly peaceful, although there were acts of vandalism and violence.”

The relatively minor role of right-wing *instigators*, and the more significant role of right-wing *co-option* should of course be acknowledged and are addressed by *Comunistas*: “Although this was not the main factor that triggered the protests, it is undeniable that a strong right-wing campaign was orchestrated from the United States.” “Most of the protesters,” they explain, “were not linked to counter-revolutionary organizations, nor were the protests led by counterrevolutionary organizations.”

From these Cubans’ accounts, the protests included members of the Left and the Right but were overall ill-defined beyond generic demands for basic needs such as food and medicine, and for civil liberties and democratization. These were demands that the global Left could have supported.

Claiming that the Cuban protests were orchestrated by the imperialism of Miami and Washington, Buzzanco cites numerous articles, but it appears that none have a Cuban author. One article is by Manolo De Los Santos, founding director of the People’s Forum, and Vijay Prashad, director of the Tricontinental Institute. Combined, the People’s Forum and Tricontinental Institute have received some \$24.5 million in dark money through Goldman Sachs Philanthropy Fund, about half to each organization. Clearly, there is a huge divide between someone like De Los Santos and the thousands of working-class Cubans who took to the streets.

Pro-government propaganda would have one believe, as De Los Santos and Prashad argue, that the U.S. blockade, combined with COVID-19, ultimately caused the economic problems afflicting Cuba. Although decades of the U.S. blockade have indeed cost Cuba significantly, totaling over \$1 trillion by *Al Jazeera*’s estimate, it is irresponsible to ignore the central role of Cuban authorities in causing the shortages leading up to July’s demonstrations. One would not learn from De Los Santos’s one-sided report that the government helped starve the Cuban people by investing far more in tourism than in agriculture. Nor would one learn of the government’s austerity plan known as the “Ordering

Task” which raised the prices of basic necessities and made them largely unattainable to ordinary Cubans. One would not learn that the Cuban government exacerbated the island’s COVID-19 crisis by delaying vaccinations and by exporting even more doctors instead of using their medical services domestically.

And while one wouldn’t know it from such uncritical sources, even Díaz-Canel has admitted to making mistakes contributing to the unrest. He said in a televised address, “We also have to carry out a critical analysis of our problems in order to act and overcome, and avoid their repetition.”

A Model for the Less-Developed World?

Although Buzzanco claims “the people at *New Politics* and elsewhere offered little nuance in their condemnations,” it is his optimistic assessment of Cuba that lacks nuance. You would not know from Buzzanco’s presentation that Cuba is a one-party dictatorship lacking freedom of expression. Yes, we should acknowledge Cuba’s accomplishments in sustainability, medicine, and support for national liberation struggles. It is no small thing that Cuba has, with limited resources and despite the blockade, reached the top of the Sustainable Development Index, reportedly having the world’s best ratio of social development to ecological footprint. That doesn’t mean we should refrain from scrutinizing these accomplishments, and it certainly doesn’t mean we should use them to excuse Cuba’s ongoing human rights violations.

Yes, Cuba has made many accomplishments in sustainability, spreading agroecological techniques to dramatically improve small farms’ productivity both per hectare and per farmer. The post-1988 spread of agroecology, which began out of necessity with the loss of Soviet oil shipments, was accomplished mainly by grassroots efforts and especially the *campesino-a-campesino* (farmer-to-farmer) movement of knowledge transmission. By contrast, the Cuban government continues to promote an all-of-the-above strategy combining such techniques with conventional monoculture. Moreover, the government’s inefficient distribution methods lead to high levels of food waste, and contribute to a situation where, despite abundant harvests, Cuba has to import more than half of its food and the vast majority of its staples.

Ecological accomplishments, moreover, certainly cannot excuse the Cuban government’s act of kidnapping and torturing former Earth Liberation Front activist Joseph Dibee and extraditing him to the United States in 2018. Dibee says he was kept for more than two days without water or shade to escape the Caribbean sunlight coming through the window. Interrogators threatened him with “all sorts of tools” and warned they might throw him into the ocean to drown. It should be remembered that Dibee and the ELF have not been accused of committing violence against a human being.

It’s true that Cuba’s healthcare system has achieved similar results to the United States’ with a small fraction of the per-capita budget. This record strengthens the case for socialized health care here in the United States. Nonetheless, Cuba’s system should be criticized for, among other things, exploiting doctors and forbidding them from independently organizing. Those doctors sent abroad are unable to bring their families, have 75% or more of their salaries taken by the state, are surveilled by security officials, and are threatened with an 8-year travel ban as punishment for deserting the program.

Yes, Cuba admirably assisted several national liberation struggles, including in Angola and South Africa, but its foreign policy was far from consistently liberatory and anti-imperialist. Cuba’s government allied with fascistic and dictatorial regimes including those of Spain’s Franco, Mexico’s PRI, Uganda’s Idi Amin, Equatorial Guinea’s Nguema Macias, and Ethiopia’s Mengistu. Havana supported Soviet imperialist intervention in Czechoslovakia and Afghanistan.

Buzzanco writes, "Cuba, with all its problems, is a model for the less-developed world." I would not go so far. Although Cuba does offer some positive lessons in agroecology and health care, there is nothing worth emulating in the one-party state, the kafkaesque bureaucracy, or the ban on independent organizing. The state of Costa Rica, ranking first in the Happy Planet Index and second in the Sustainable Development Index, shows that Cuba's strong social and ecological rankings do not require a dictatorship. Costa Rica's economy, however, should be criticized, for its inequality and its reliance on destructive hydroelectric dams. I would argue that better models can be found in Latin America's horizontalist and anti-authoritarian movements such as Mexico's neo-Zapatistas (which have provided health and education services and kept out organized crime), Bolivia's Federation of Neighborhood Councils, and Mexico's Popular Indigenous Council of Oaxaca-Ricardo Flores Magón.

Perhaps such anti-authoritarian forces do not register in Buzzanco's apparently binaristic worldview which sees the world in terms of geopolitics rather than global class struggle. Buzzanco refers repeatedly to "the empire," sometimes capitalized as "the Empire," referring to U.S. imperialism, overlooking that Russia and China are also imperialist powers. Buzzanco concludes by asking "Which Side Are You On?," implying that we have to choose between Havana and Washington. Of course, he is referencing the classic United Mine Workers song about working-class solidarity. Why appropriate a union song in order to rally behind a government that doesn't allow independent unions?

"Where's Your Solidarity?"

With only the global Right offering a modicum of solidarity, many disaffected Cubans will understandably be tempted to drift rightward toward support for privatization and deregulation. We see this self-fulfilling prophecy happening in Cuba in real time, as the upcoming November 15th (15N) protests have lost the spontaneity of July 11th and will be largely dominated by the Council for Democratic Transition whose president also heads the right-wing Patriotic Union of Cuba. It will be Cubans, of course, who have the hard work of organizing class struggle to reverse such trends. The Taller Libertario member I spoke to warned me that in addition to resisting Washington/Miami and Havana, Cubans will need to be critical of an emerging third trend:

"I think that it's most coherent to criticize the Yankee blockade, the blockade of the Cuban military oligarchy, and also the new steps of Cuban liberals sacrificing the social question in order to prioritize the electoral agenda and the formation of new candidates to govern Cuba."

Criticizing the protests' potential rightward drift should not stop us from recognizing that the Cuban regime has also adopted increasingly right-wing economic policies, which Cuban-American socialist Sam Farber describes as "a greater opening to capital."

Buzzanco seems confused when on one hand he dismisses *New Politics* as "insignificant" and on the other hand warns that the magazine's words are influential and dangerous. Although I would not go so far as to call the magazine insignificant, I think Buzzanco way overstates its influence when he suggests that the U.S. corporate media pays attention to it: "[Miami Cubans] can advocate for even more sanctions and an even harsher embargo because the U.S. media has featured alleged Leftists who have supported the protests."

Anti-imperialists should wish that *New Politics'* coverage of Cuba would be featured in the U.S. corporate media, given that any representative reporting of *NP's* views would include mention of the

magazine's very strong opposition to the U.S. blockade and military intervention. U.S. citizens would see a truly principled, democratic form of solidarity with the Cuban people. Dissident Cubans, those who have Internet access, would see that they have support among the U.S. Left, whereas currently they could very well get the impression that their natural allies are on the Right.

"Where's your solidarity?" Buzzanco asked. I think it's clear that Cuban critical leftists are seeking help piercing the binaristic worldview that demands you support either either Díaz-Canel or Biden. I would like to know Buzzanco's message to the Cubans who took to the streets and to the many more who supported them. He might invite Taller Libertario or Comunistas or other critical socialist Cubans, perhaps LGBTQ activists fighting the government's queerphobia, onto the podcast sometime and then decide if he still considers them to be unwitting stooges of the empire.