

Exploraciones/Explorations

Globalization and the Cuban Revolution in the Twenty-First Century

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Abstract: This article questions the assumption that Cuba's reform process must eventually make concessions to, and perhaps eventually join, the wider global world system dominated by neo-liberal economics and democracy as defined by the advocates of this world order. To undertake this task it is necessary to explain globalization and distinguish it from the preceding post-war period and then seek to understand the consequences of its ascendancy, especially its failure to produce a sustainable model of development. In this context Cuba's socialist experiment will be considered as an alternative, both in the form of its performance in social provision and its ideology of community above that of the individual. While these strengths may be attractive to those forces in the world that wish to resist globalization and build something new, Cuba as a single country example is not viable. Consequently these achievements can only become part of a transformative force if they are integrated with already existing popular resistance to the current neo-liberal order. Finally, it is argued this symbiosis is taking place in Latin America where Cuba is deeply involved with new social movements and progressive governments. *Keywords:* Cuba, globalization, Fidel Castro, neo-liberalism, crisis.

In 1989, with Communism disintegrating and global capitalism empowered, Francis Fukuyama issued his triumphalist statement proclaiming an 'end of history' in which he believed that the world had arrived at 'the final form of human government' based on markets and democracy. At the same time Fidel Castro (2007, 386) recalls, despite Cuba's appalling predicament, precisely because of the above events, that he continued to believe history was on the side of the Revolution, not globalization, stating, '[...] I was fully convinced that it was the other way around, and that it [globalization] had to be resisted. This is the certainty I had then'. He, and the Cuban leadership, therefore decided to, '[...] wait patiently, for globalization to collapse'. Today Castro's perspective on the current world order is echoed in some unlikely quarters, including the renowned currency speculator George Soros (2008), who in a presentation to the U.S. House of Representatives made in connection with the current financial crisis stated, 'Since market fundamentalism is built on false assumptions, its adoption in the 1980s as the guiding principle of economic policy was bound to have negative consequences'.

Although we are now experiencing a global financial contraction, which most informed observers believe will result in a long recession or worse, it would still be premature to claim that Fidel Castro has been 'absolved'. Nevertheless, it would be unwise not to acknowledge that the corpse of history is stirring. Most importantly, today's crisis brings into sharper focus the contest of ideologies that the two momentous predictions by Fukuyama and Cuba's former leader infer. With global capitalism in difficulty and its future uncertain, the world's last existing socialist experiment gains a renewed relevance.

The problem remains, however, that the hegemony of almost 30 years of ‘market fundamentalism’ has not only sought to put an end to ‘history’ but also, logically, to ideology. The latter does not respond in synchronization with material developments and we are, in the main, still captives of our own mythology, unable to imagine anything outside of market liberalism’s ‘discourse of the given’. This tendency is not absent from academia, despite its claims of ‘objectivity’.

Because of this ‘suffocating consensus’ (Borosage 1995), Cuba continues to be seen by mainstream academia as either a socialist anachronism in a global capitalist system, or a tenacious little nation whose history and revolutionary tradition have given it the strength to continue to chart its own course. Both of these perspectives are valid in the context of their separate ideologies and are represented by strong academic arguments, but as Castro’s statement above suggests, Cuba has a grander vision of its destiny. To give a foundation to this third perspective, it is necessary to define and critically assess globalization and Cuba’s approach to socialism, each from within its own intellectual framework.

Globalization: background, definition and assessment

Globalization is a complex and illusive process that has invited a multitude of definitions and interpretations and is the subject of much controversy. Most analysts would agree however that it has a historical background, and in economic terms it is principally associated with the deregulation of international finance in the 1970s, a technological revolution, especially in microelectronics, and a transformation of production processes. It is also generally accepted that such developments are complemented and facilitated by ideological and political changes that have taken place during the last two decades of the twentieth century; principally the rise of neo-liberalism and the collapse of Soviet style communism. While it is pointless to claim one ‘correct’ interpretation of globalization, as divergence itself is mainly the product of ideology rather than empirical fact, it is perhaps useful for the purposes of juxtaposition with Cuba to view it from a political economy perspective. Having said this, it is necessary to locate the author’s own position within the globalization debate. Held and McGrew (2000) produce a useful overview of contemporary global analysts which falls into three categories. These include the ‘hyperglobalizers’ (Ohmae 1995, Wriston 1992, Redwood 1994), principally neo-liberals who see globalization as the inevitable ascendancy of market forces to the status of world system, and would generally agree with Fukuyama’s thesis; second are the ‘sceptics’ (Hirst and Thompson 1996, Gordon 1988, Weiss 1998), who believe that globalization is a phase of capitalism that is little different from previous periods of international expansion, particularly the ‘laissez-faire’ era; finally there are the ‘transformationalists’ (Giddens 1990, Stubbs and Underhill 1994, Castells 1996, Hoogvelt 1997, Scholte 2000, Robinson 2004), who are mainly political economists and sociologists, whose perspectives differ quite substantially, but all see globalization as a distinct epoch in world development. The author accords with the left-wing (Robinson, Hoogvelt) of this third group, and also places particular importance on the historical and ideological identification of globalization.

Globalization is in sharp contrast to the world order that was designed after the Second World War at the Bretton Woods conference in 1944, which was under-

pinned by semi-fixed exchange rates, the pegging of currencies to the U.S. dollar and gold, restrictions on speculative capital flows and a general acceptance that states had the right to manage their own internal affairs to support development. This post-war order was not anti-market, nor anti-capitalist, but anti-speculation; an activity which was regarded as the main cause of the Crash of 1929, which in turn precipitated the Great Depression. Addressing the conference, U.S. Treasury Department Secretary Henry Morgenthau stated that an agreement should be reached that would, '[...] drive the usurious money lenders from the temple of international finance' (Helleiner 1994, 4). Capital was to be used for 'productive' and 'legitimate' purposes, and the 'laissez-faire' environment, at whose core had been Britain and the City of London financial markets, would be rejected. Britain's representative at the conference, the eminent economist John Maynard Keynes, commented, 'What used to be a heresy is now endorsed as orthodox' (1980, 17).

At the centre of this system was the United States. But despite America's new and conclusive role as a world power, which generated vast opportunities to benefit from previous centuries of European colonial expansion and acquisition, the first task was to ensure the survival of world capitalism after the devastation of the War. There was also a new communist superpower, the Soviet Union, whose real threat was perhaps not so much its large army and nuclear weapons, but the prospect of an alternative to capitalism, which might become more attractive if the latter did not adopt a human face.

The new post-war regime of accumulation, based on the 'Fordist' mode of production, required national level control of finance for stability, and socially demanded a certain level of 'class compromise' (Aglietta 1979, Lipietz 1992). From a Marxist perspective, this new phase of capitalism presented less of a 'compromise' if one takes into account that capital enjoyed a high level of profitability in the 1950s (Coates 1980, 180) and labour productivity grew significantly (Yaffe 1973, 48). Nevertheless, this economic model did lead to sustained growth and a significant increase in equality, especially in the developed countries, leading to what sociologists termed the 'embourgeoisement' of society.

From the mid-1940s to the 70s, the state in the major developed countries controlled the 'commanding heights of the economy', managed national developmental processes, and key industries in both the state and private sector were run by a patrician elite who presided over a wider system of social and national responsibility. In the U.S. this mode of organization was termed the 'technostructure' by Galbraith (1968), in which corporations were not controlled by capitalist owners and shareholders, but by professional managers whose principal concern was the maintenance of a 'social enterprise', into which workers were incorporated as partners rather than simply factors of production. The industrial nation's preference for a Keynesian mixed economy was reflected in the post-colonial and Third World by state-led approaches to 'development'. These were represented by modernization theory, structuralism and more radical attempts to foster development. While the Less Developed Countries (LDCs) did register economic growth, modernization, and some improvements in equality, the 'world system' continued to be disproportionately controlled by the former colonial powers and the U.S. The latter in particular frequently engaged in imperialist intervention to enhance the interests of its corporations operating abroad, often under the guise of preventing the advance of

communism. The failure of the major capitalist nations to encourage a viable model of development in the Third World, and the Soviet Union's Cold War strategic posturing towards developing countries, created an opportunity for Cuba to promote its own brand of socialism. A distinctive world perspective, which despite Havana's close relationship with Moscow, sought to shift the axis of world division from East-West, based on the contest between intransigent monolithic systems defended by nuclear arsenals, to North-South, in which the fight against poverty and underdevelopment took precedence over superpower Cold War imperatives.

Despite the general success of the Bretton Woods system, by the late 1960s deep internal problems began to weaken this post-war model of economic and social organization. These included: an over-extension and over valuation of the U.S. dollar (exacerbated by the escalating costs of the Vietnam War and increasing international trade competition); declining and insufficient gold reserves to back the dollars in world circulation; ideological resentment to aspects of capitalism as indicated in the student/worker protests of 1968; and growing demands for a greater share of wealth from organized labour and welfare states. These factors, and particularly the last one, helped to precipitate a falling rate of profit in the major powers (Piore and Sabel 1984, 165-187; Reich 1991, 75-6; Harvey 1990, 141), causing a reluctance on the part of capitalists to invest (Holland 1975, 69). In an attempt to restore profitability, holders of private finance and emerging multinational businesses sought to break free from the restrictions of national level state control (Coates 1980). States themselves also began to aid and facilitate changes in favour of capital; both as a consequence of speculative pressures on their currencies and the growing pro-market volition of state actors (Helleiner 1996). As private capital secured the freedom to evade domestic controls through such mechanisms as the private, London-based, Eurodollar Market, the statist Keynesian style system began to break down. This economic process was complemented by the rise of right-wing politicians such as Margaret Thatcher in the U.K. and Ronald Reagan in the U.S., who further shifted state level power towards supporting the interests of private capital. By the mid-1980s the 'usurious moneylenders', which Morganthau condemned at Bretton Woods, had returned with a vengeance.

For the contemporary theoretical champions of globalization, including Fukuyama, as cited above, and many others (Ohmae 1990, Redwood 1994, Barnevici 2001, Wolf 2004), it represents a logical and necessary extension of market forces into transnational space. In a human context it is succinctly described by Thompson (1992, 182), who envisages an atomized world of individuals existing as, 'free standing agents, each equipped with his or her distinctive set of preferences, and each transacting on an equal footing with whosoever it pleases him or her to transact with'. Globally, 'it is not just the world financial village that is in the making. It is the international car, global fashions, intercontinental telecommunications, worldwide brands, and the global consumer [...] people [...] choosing that have similar ambitions and styles' based on 'democracy and capitalism' (Redwood 1993). Such ideals are defensible in theory, but in practice difficult to implement successfully.

It is true that the liberalization of capital in a period of advanced modernity facilitated the globalization of production, and the formation of enterprises that 'know no national boundaries' (Reich 1992, 124). Since the 1980s these twin proc-

esses have transformed the organization of world production, distribution, the apportionment of profits and patterns of consumer demand. A truly global system, leading to what one author has described as 'the end of geography' (O'Brian 1992). But this 'transnationalization' of capitalism has also led to the formation of a 'transnational capitalist class' (Sklair 2001) and the emergence of a 'transnational state' (Robinson 2007), in which the latter stretches from supra-national agencies like the IMF and WTO, right down to local government that is increasingly organized to serve the interests of global capital. Contrary to the claims of its advocates, this process has not led to an idyllic world for the global consumer based on 'democracy and capitalism', but a concentration of elite power in transnational space. As we have seen in the post-war pre-globalization era, nations, and especially developed ones, largely contained productive forces within their geographical boundaries, therefore social classes were obliged to negotiate for 'who gets what' through democracy and a consensus on the functional logic of a mixed economy. Once the nation-state began to lose control of finance and production, these ties and responsibilities were broken, as ruling elites were able to manage the process of accumulation globally, diminishing the role of politics (Boggs 2000) and weakening the effectiveness of democracy at the national level. Today 'democracy' is promoted as a 'world good' by the major powers, but as Robinson (1996) argues, what we have is a very questionable form of 'procedural' democracy which he has termed 'polyarchy'. A system in which populations are 'free' to choose between competing elite groups who, by choice, or obligation, all support the same free market system controlled by the interests of transnational capital. Robinson goes further to argue that in this context 'democracy promotion' becomes an instrument by which to enhance the interests of the latter, usually to the detriment of the citizens who engaged in the 'democratic' process. It is not surprising, therefore, that voter turnout in elections is generally poor (Walden 2006), nor that one author (Nye 2001) speaks of a 'democratic deficit'.

Although globalization has generated visible material wealth, particularly in the developed world, it would be unwise to see it as an engine of growth, and totally misguided to believe that it is sustainable. In a well researched article entitled, 'The Emperor Has No Growth: Declining Economic Growth Rates in the Era of Globalization' (Weisbrot et al. 2001), the authors show, using generally accepted economic performance measures, that compared to the 30 years of Keynesian style economics from 1945-75, the subsequent two and a half decades registered mediocre performance at best.

Besides engaging in the theoretical debate concerning the nature and performance of globalization, it is also important to examine its consequences for the world's population as a whole. Again, as one might imagine, this issue is highly contested, but the main body of opinion seems to accept that globalization has so far resulted in growing inequality. The United Nation's Development Programme (UNDP) Human Development Reports since the mid-1980s have indicated that there has been a growing disparity in wealth, both on a global scale and within countries. In 2000, for example, it claimed that between 1970 and 1998, the richest 20 per cent of the world's population increased their share of income from 70-85 per cent, while the share of the poorest 20 per cent has declined from 2.3 per cent to 1.4 per cent during the same period. In the first years of the twenty-first century,

the world's population was approximately 6.6 billion human beings; out of these, 830 million were reportedly chronically undernourished, 1.1 billion lacked access to safe water and 2.6 billion were without basic sanitation (UNDP 2006, 174, 33). Nearly half the world, or approximately 3 billion people, live on less than two dollars a day (Ramonet 1998). The world's 200 wealthiest people have as much money as 40 per cent of the world's population (*Der Spiegel* 2008). Recently, one individual hedge fund manager earned US\$ 3.7 billion in one year (Pilkington 2008), while in Haiti many of the poor are obliged to eat 'biscuits' made of earth and vegetable fat to survive, and even these are becoming too expensive (*Der Spiegel* 2008). It has now been widely accepted that we are facing a global food crisis, which will exacerbate existing problems of poverty.

Even those emerging economies that are deemed to be 'successful', such as India, which until recently was recording an annual growth rate of 9 per cent, reveal some disturbing truths when one considers the nation as a whole. It has been suggested that this stunning growth is only benefiting 10 per cent of the population, while 350 million people still live in poverty with an income of less than a dollar a day (Hilary 2008). Another 900 million eke out a living on under two dollars a day. One million mothers and children die every year because of poverty and limited access to healthcare (Hilary 2008); 'a quarter of all maternal and neonatal deaths globally occur in India' (Crisp 2007, 35). According to the UN (2008) there are now almost 1 billion malnourished people on the planet and 40 per cent of these live in India. The sub-continent's child poverty figures are worse than Sub-Saharan Africa, and it is home to half the underfed children in the world. In contrast, the Indian IT 'miracle', which we hear much more about in the media, involves at the most one million workers or a quarter of one per cent of the country's workforce (Bardham 2005, 2). In reality it is inequality that is the star performer in India, and according to the Merill Lynch World Wealth Report (2007), the country now has 93,000 millionaires and one of the fastest growing numbers of 'net worth individuals'. In Latin America the most dramatic increase in poverty was between 1980-1995, when the number of people living in this category, according to calculations made by ECLAC, rose from 136 million to 230 million, from 41-48 per cent of the population (Robinson 1998/99, 118). ECLACs Social Panorama of Latin America for 2005 claims that between 2003-2005, poverty has decreased in the region by 13 million to 213 million or 40.6 per cent of the population, but its most recent study, with projections for 2008, suggests that poverty is again on the rise. Moreover, in 2004 the fairly conservative Chilean based democratization monitor, *Latino-barómetro* calculated that only 35 per cent of Latin Americans are satisfied with democracy, with some countries like Peru and Paraguay registering only 7 per cent and 13 per cent respectively. From the same source, it is also interesting to see that over 70 per cent of Latin Americans believe that their countries, despite democracy, are still run by an elite minority who hold power to principally serve their own interests.

Increasing inequality is not only experienced in developing countries, but also the industrialized world (Toynbee 2002, Wilkinson 2005, Hutton 2006). Between 1973 and 1990, real wages in the U.S. dropped for 80 per cent of the population and rose for 20 per cent. An estimated 34.2 per cent of North Americans are categorised as poor to very poor, while the top 10 per cent own 83.2 per cent of all as-

sets (UNDP 1998). The U.S. is the most unequal of the industrial powers and the problem is getting worse, with skewed income distribution returning to levels not seen since the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Piketty and Saez 2006). As the recession deepens in the major powers, these inequalities will increase, and declining asset values, job losses, stock market falls and panic government spending to save the banks, will expose the middle classes to declining living standards. These arguments, plus other criticisms of globalization, such as its tendency to create financial instability, vulnerable service sector based economies and environmental damage etc, place the whole experiment in question; especially now that it is in crisis. It appears, however, that most governments do not accept this, do not understand it, or do not care, because their current policies continue to seek to promote more consumption, create more debt, and protect the elites: precisely the three factors that have led to this current critical juncture.

Today the project of the 'transnational elites' is facing problems and resistance, as the prime mover of globalization, transnational capital, spins out of control after inducing a debt and leverage inflated boom for the past ten years. In the context of the foregoing statements, Fidel Castro's (2007, 397-400) perception on the consequences of globalization, with specific reference to the Third World, are worth quoting at length:

The Third World is being required to pay a debt of \$2.5 trillion, which is utterly unpayable under the present conditions. And yet \$1 trillion is being spent every year on increasingly more sophisticated and lethal weapons. Why and for what? [...] A similar amount is being spent on commercial advertising, which produces in billions of people an urge to consume that is impossible to satisfy. Why and for what? [...] consumer society is one of the most frightening, terrifying inventions of developed capitalism today in this phase of neo-liberal globalization [...] I try to imagine 1.3 billion Chinese with the per capita number of cars that the United States has [...] I can't imagine India, with its more than a billion inhabitants, living in a consumer society; I can't imagine the 600 million people who live in sub-Saharan Africa, who don't even have electricity and in some places more than 80 per cent of whom don't know how to read and write, in a consumer society [...] Our species, for the first time, is in real danger of extinction – self extinction, due to the madness of human beings themselves, who are the victims of this so-called 'civilization' [...] From my point of view, no task is more urgent than creating universal awareness, taking the problem to the masses, to the billions of men and women of every age, including children, who inhabit the planet. The objective conditions, the suffering of the immense majority of those people create the subjective conditions for the task of awareness building [...] the battle of ideas is what we are doing.

Castro's reference to 'the battle of ideas' is important because he believes that the 'objective conditions' of systemic global failure will produce 'subjective conditions' in which Cuba's alternative socialist experience, and the resistance that is forming to globalization around the world, will provide an embryo of a counter-hegemony to the neo-liberal world order.

The Cuban Revolution as counter-hegemony to globalization?

But does the Cuban revolutionary experience contain the seeds of a possible alternative to this faltering system? One that is now strengthened by a growing popular disenchantment with globalization, especially in Latin America, and a global crisis that is weakening the neo-liberal myth of inevitability? A theoretical perspective on Cuba's vision of socialism is given by the Cuban intellectual Martínez Heredia (1993, 64), who states:

Socialism is [...] a process of successive upheavals not only in the economy, politics and ideology but in conscious and organized action. It is a process premised on unleashing the power of the people, who learn to change themselves along with their circumstances. Revolutions within the revolution demand creativity and unity with respect to principles and organization and broad and growing participation. In other words, they must become a gigantic school through which people learn to direct social processes. Socialism is not constructed spontaneously, nor is it something that can be bestowed.

As with the neo-liberal vision, socialism's theoretical ideals, as expressed above, are difficult to achieve in practice. The Cuban Insurrection of 1959 took the world by surprise, and was seen as a fresh new revolutionary experience which appeared to shun the staid Soviet model of communism and seek a form of popular and participatory socialism. Che Guevara, the iconic 'revolutionary guerrilla' became an international symbol and modern day saint, who embodied the idea not just of building a new society and a 'new man' in Cuba, but also exporting the Revolution to the rest of the world. But while the 1960s in Cuba was a period of mass involvement in the process of change, one author has suggested that what was taking place was 'command-mass participation' (Petras 1973, 289) and the population was largely absent from key areas of decision making.

In the 1970s Cuba seemed to move closer to its Soviet protector, as demonstrated in 1972 when the island joined the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (CMEA). This served to further centralize and bureaucratize the command structure. However, initiatives were still taken such as the formation of Cuba's local government system, 'Poder Popular' (People's Power), which sought to give citizens more local democratic control and deepen their participation in the Revolution. The so-called Sovietization of Cuba ended with the rectification programme of 1986 which, according to Cuba's leaders, was an attempt to return to the consciousness building of the 1960s. Fidel Castro's (1987, 225) reasoning for launching this change represents a powerful statement on the ideals of Cuban socialism:

[...] we began to go off course; [...] what was happening to us; the blind belief [...] that the construction of socialism is basically a question of mechanisms [...] I think the construction of socialism and communism is essentially a political task [...] it must be fundamentally the fruit of the development of awareness, [and ...] [w]e must appeal to people's consciousness, and the other mechanisms, the economic factors, [...] we must use these economic mechanisms in material production, but with this concept, as an auxiliary means or instrument of political and revolutionary work; because believing that these methods will

give us the miracle of efficiency and economic and social development is one of the most ridiculous illusions there could ever be.

Despite this idealistic proclamation, nothing could have prepared Cuba for the collapse of communism, as the island suffered a greater economic contraction in peacetime than perhaps any country in the twentieth century. In the 1990s survival became the only 'revolutionary' objective. In 2004, 14 years after the Soviet debacle, Fidel Castro claimed, 'The great hero in this feat [Cuban economic success/survival] has been the people, who have contributed tremendous sacrifices and immense trust. Our survival has been the result of justice and of the ideas planted over 40 years of revolution. This genuine miracle would have been impossible without unity and without socialism'.

Although Castro's comment is valid in general, since Cuba lost its Soviet protector and entered a world in which capitalist globalization rules, it has experimented with market mechanisms, and many Cubans have adopted non-socialist views as to how they might build a future. Indeed, in the mid-1990s it seemed that the island was about to enter a period of 'transition'. Some Cuban academics, such as Julio Carranza (et al. 1995) and Pedro Monreal began to suggest that the Revolution might need to consider moving towards a mixed economy, but retaining special emphasis on 'social provision', which has remained highly popular. But as others (Dilla et al. 1993, 25) noted, 'The market is too powerful a mechanism to incorporate as a docile instrument of socialist construction'. In a study of financial strategies open to Cuba, an international specialist in fiscal policy arrived at a similar conclusion:

The more Cuba enters the international economy, and the more dependent it becomes on international markets to rebuild its economy, the more control that these market actors will have on the nature of Cuban development. As these actors tend to harbour an underlying bias against socialist economic designs, and they have fairly narrow (and short-term) conceptions of what constitutes 'healthy economic fundamentals', this market control will be in sharp contrast to the ambitions of Cuba's current policy makers (Moses 1996).

By the end of the 1990s, it seemed that any market-orientated options were being quietly dropped, and in 2005 Fidel Castro stated in a speech delivered at the University of Havana that, 'The empire [U.S.] was hoping that Cuba would have many more *paladares* (privately owned restaurants), but it appears that there will be no more of them. What do they think that we have become – neo-liberals? No one here has become a neo-liberal [...] the country will have much more, but it will never be a society of consumption [...]. It will be a society of knowledge, of culture, of the most extraordinary human development that one can imagine' (2005). But despite this confident statement, Cuba has changed, probably irrevocably, because of the collapse of communism and the ascendancy of neo-liberal globalization. Inequality, poverty, marginalization, a breakdown of social values, corruption, materialist aspirations and perpetual shortages have all now become significant factors in Cuban daily life. Novels like Pedro Juan Gutierrez's, *Dirty Havana Trilogy* (2001) and *Tropical Animal* (2003), which have become internationally available, give insights into the degeneration of parts of Cuban society under the

pressures of isolation and economic contraction. In the February 2007 Cuban Film Festival, young film makers like Aram Vidal and Alina Rodríguez showed works that sought to reveal everyday life experiences in Cuba that are not reflected in the official media, although government newspapers have become openly more critical of problems and failings in Cuban society. Vidal's documentaries *Calle G* and *De Generación* focus on youth culture and the generation gap, in which the political project of the older revolutionaries is no longer shared by some younger people. Rodríguez's documentary *Buscándote Havana* deals with the life of migrants from the interior that have moved to Havana, and the challenges they face.

The enormous difficulties and pressures that Cuba has endured over the past 18 years have inevitably diluted its revolutionary ideals, but the belief is still held by many that it is socialism that offers a future, not the kind of transition that has taken place in other former communist countries. Shortly after the demise of the Soviet Bloc, Martínez Heredia (1993, 75-76) noted that, 'Decisive as the Revolution has been [...] it has not produced an effective system of participation [...] with respect to the deficiencies of the existing regime, the debates and preoccupations with it reflect a need not to replace the regime but to improve it by deepening its ideals and its socialist project'. Today this observation is even more relevant as it becomes clear that many 'transition' economies, including Cuba's former Russian protector, have been unable to form viable economic and social bases under capitalism. According to a 1999 report by the United Nations Development Programme, GDP fell 12 per cent in Central and Eastern Europe between 1990 and 1997. Then growth improved, but income distribution was dramatically skewed towards a new rich class, sharpening inequalities. By 1997, after several years of 'shock therapy', Russia's GDP stood at only 55 per cent of the 1990 level, and from 1990-2006 its overall GDP per capita annual growth rate registered only 0.6 per cent. In contrast Cuba has experienced positive growth since the mid-1990s, and in 2006 the island's Economy Minister claimed an annual rate of 12.5 per cent, and predicted over 10 per cent for 2007 (*Cuba Briefing* 2007). Although Cuba may at that time have been the fastest growing economy in Latin America, one should not forget that living standards for the majority of its citizens are still lower today than they were in the late 1980s, before the collapse of the Soviet Bloc. However, the stark difference between Cuba and its former communist allies is that despite facing by far the greatest economic shock in 1990, it has attempted to protect its social achievements and maintain at least the human and ideological framework of socialism.

Some indication of this can be taken from a simple measure like life expectancy. In 1990 Cubans (male and female combined) on average lived to 74 years old and by 2006, despite 16 years of very difficult economic circumstances, this had risen to 78 (UNICEF 2008). In contrast, in the Russian Federation life expectancy fell from 68 in 1990 to 65 in 2006. Even for the star performer of the transition states, Poland, which has received Western aid, substantial foreign investment, and since 2004 has been an EU member state, the corresponding figures at 71 and 75 are still below Cuba's, despite improvements. Now that the global economy is contracting, these 'transition' countries face disproportionate pressures as their structurally weak economies go into recession, and in some cases insolvency. Reporting on the effects of the emerging crisis in Eastern Europe, in October 2008 the

Economist stated, ‘At best, the region is in for more nasty shocks that will need external support from lenders such as the IMF. At worst, some countries face debt restructuring, currency collapse and depression; that raises the specter of political upheaval, too’. And concerning ‘democracy’ the same article notes, ‘voters have grown steadily disillusioned with politics [...]. Cuba also faces difficulties in the global recession, but because it has not compromised its economy or core socialist objectives, it may be better able to weather the storm.

Although Cuba has not fully attained the socialist ideals its leaders, intellectuals and undoubtedly many ordinary Cubans aspire to, it has survived as a socialist nation. Considering the virtual impossibility of constructing socialism in one country, combined with its isolation in a globalized world which promotes a totally contrary ideology, this is no mean feat. However, if Cuba and its world vision are to have a future, it must do more than survive. Internally, the Revolution, as noted previously, has in general continued to concentrate on meeting social needs. Health care, education, local democracy and participation, the promotion of social initiatives such as the popular peri-urban agricultural movement and extensive popular consultation have all taken their initiative from revolutionary and socialist experience, rather than drawing on the new market orientated methods of global ‘best practice’. Unlike many populations in developing countries and parts of the industrial world, who have largely abandoned political and social involvement and become disillusioned with democracy, Cubans are still deeply engaged in local and national processes, and few things change in Cuba without popular input and consultation. In its international policy, and particularly aid and assistance programmes such as health care, it still has an enviable reputation. For instance, while health aid financed by the major donor agencies, and delivered by various NGOs, is in crisis (World Bank 2007, Crisp 2007), Cuba is internationally acknowledged for being well organized, effective and efficient at providing such assistance, even to some of the most underdeveloped and politically unstable nations in the world. More than this, Cuba’s criterion for its actions is seen to be morally superior to the ‘West is best’, and commercialized attitudes of the major donors. As the Health Minister of Mali noted in a recent debate on Cuba in the European Parliament (EP 2008), ‘Cuba does not give, as it often happens with other Northern counties, her leftovers. She shares what she has, which is sometimes not enough to cover her own needs’.

It is indeed through Cuba’s external co-operation with other countries, especially in Latin America, that its revolutionary ideals may be re-invigorated. In this region, New Social Movements have grown over the past two decades that have begun to take actions which correspond to the ideals of socialist behaviour that Cuba espouses in theory and, to varying degrees, delivers in practice. As Raby (2006, 9) states, ‘The Cuban revolution is clearly the starting-point for contemporary Latin American revolutionary movements, yet remarkably little attention has been devoted to its political originality’. The wider move to the left in the region has been dubbed a ‘Pink Tide’, implying a softening of harsh neo-liberal measures rather than radical change and, in general, this is an accurate perception. However any visitor to Venezuela, Bolivia or Ecuador, and many other countries in Latin America, who is witness to popular mobilization and organization must realize that besides soft political change, there is also a growing popular consciousness and

action that are beginning to shape events. Cuba is highly involved in the region, both at a local level and through its leading role in the Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas (Martínez 2006), which proposes a regional structure of co-operation based on need instead of profits. In Venezuela, Cuba's principal partner in the region, over 30,000 Cuban personnel are making a major contribution to the building of the country's first national health and education systems that are free and available to all. In this context of co-operation, Cuba is not exporting revolution, as one might argue was the case from the 1960s to 80s, but forming a symbiotic link with resistance to global capitalism. In the author's view, this is how Cuban socialism will be sustained and developed in the future.

The Cuban Revolution is only a partial success even when measured against its own criteria, but it can count itself among some of the most progressive socialist experiments in history, alongside such examples of the realization of popular power as the Paris Commune, the early Russian Soviets, and the revolution within the Spanish Civil War. It also still represents not just a socialist alternative to neo-liberal capitalism as embodied in globalization, but a distinct ontology. While neo-liberals believe in the individual, competition, markets, procedural democracy and the survival of the fittest, Cuban socialism champions and practices encouragement of the 'social individual', co-operation, distribution according to need, participatory democracy and protection of the weak. Since the early years of the Revolution, this process of development, which claims adherence to socialism, has impressed and influenced people around the world. This is not just in health care, as noted previously, but also through its adherence to principles of social co-operation that are necessary for millions of people to achieve more control over their lives and provide a future for themselves and their children. Cuba's significance and symbolism as an alternative may be increased as the global crisis deepens, and for Cuba the prospect of 'transition', or even an attempt to move towards a mixed economy, is much less likely to be adopted. The prospects for a small developing country, and especially Cuba with its revolutionary tradition engaging more fully with a failing system, is now highly unattractive. There is also much debate today of a possible rapprochement in the long feud between North America and Cuba, and indeed this may take place. However, in the context of aligning Cuban socialism with a growing counter-hegemony in Latin America, any compromise with Washington could serve to sap the Revolution's internal and external energies.

There is no certainty that Cuba can overcome its own problems, or that what is happening in Latin America will consolidate its socialist orientation. But with globalization in meltdown, the potential of the ideals of the Cuban Revolution, and their synchronization with an emerging resistance to the dominant order should not be underestimated. In February 2008, when Fidel Castro stepped down from the leadership, the *Economist* concluded that, 'real change in Cuba will only start after Fidel's death and that there are just two options for this sad, dysfunctional island: transition or collapse'. In light of the failure of the 'market fundamentalist' system that the *Economist* has unstintingly supported for three decades, perhaps the time has come to revise this conclusion. It is now incumbent, especially on academics, to consider the possibility of alternatives. In this context, the Cuban Revolution should be seen as more than an anachronism in the global capitalist system, or a socialist anomaly, and instead as a possible catalyst of necessary historical change.

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