BOOK REVIEW

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Reviewed by Al Campbell

There are two sides to the relation between Cuba today and socialism, a relation which is so important to what Cuba has been since the triumph of the Revolution in 1959. The first is well-known around the world: Cuba’s commitment to building socialism, publicly declared in 1961, enshrined in its first revolutionary Constitution in 1976, and reconfirmed in its very recent 2019 revolutionary Constitution. The other side of the same relation with socialism permeates Cuba’s official documents from the 2010s and is referred to repeatedly in speeches by its leaders, but nevertheless is widely unrecognised by its anti-socialist enemies around the world, or even by the majority of its supporters. The other side of Cuba’s relation to socialism is its insistence that building socialism is un viaje a lo ignoto.

As is very well-known, after 1990 Cuba had to radically rethink how to go about the process of constructing socialism, which it continued to declare itself as committed to building. Rethinking how to build “it” inevitably opened up a rethinking process of “exactly what it was”. Even though Cuba’s process of construction of socialism had always been different from that in the USSR in a number of important ways, nevertheless it was closely related in other significant ways. Those latter ways of building socialism were no longer an option for Cuba exactly because they had failed in the USSR. Hence the question naturally presented itself – was the way the USSR defined and more broadly thought about socialism also incorrect, and if so, how should Cuba define and think about socialism?

On 17 November 2005, in a lengthy speech on the Cuban Revolution in the Aula Magna at the University of Havana, Fidel Castro bluntly indicated one such aspect of the way that they had thought about socialism and its construction which they now understood to have been seriously wrong:
Here is a conclusion I’ve come to after many years: among all the errors we may have committed, the greatest of them all was that we believed that someone really knew something about socialism, or that someone actually knew how to build socialism. It seemed to be a sure fact, as well-known as the electrical system conceived by those who thought they were experts in electrical systems. Whenever they said: “That’s the formula,” we thought they knew.

But if there are no recipes for you to follow, if no one knows how to do something and you are committed to doing it, what options does that logically leave you? Only the one that humanity has used over and over throughout its whole history: you figure out how to do it as you do it, and even beyond that, you figure out how to do it by continually trying to do it (including continually making and correcting errors). In my field of economics we use the phrase “learning by doing” for this process, which is so important to economic (and human) development in general. More poetically, two phrases that became popular in parts of the worldwide discussion on socialism after the implosion of the USSR, often associated with the Zapatistas who (publicly) launched their struggle on 1 January 1994, are “we make the path by walking”, and “we walk asking”. Exactly this is the so-generally overlooked essential other side of Cuba’s current relation to socialism. On 18 December 2010, in a speech during the closing ceremony of the Sixth Session of the Seventh Legislature of the National Assembly of People’s Power, Raúl Castro stated this poetically using an expression that has been frequently repeated, and expressed in other terms, over and over since then in Cuba. Comparing the building of socialism to the original flights into outer space, Raúl said:

While we have counted on the theoretical Marxist-Leninist legacy, according to which there is scientific evidence of the feasibility of socialism, and the practical experience of the attempts to build it in other countries, the construction of a new society from an economic point of view is, in my modest opinion, also a journey into the unknown – the undiscovered (“un viaje a lo ignoto”).

On the one hand, Cuba remains categorically committed to building socialism, and, on the other hand, it is simultaneously very explicit that neither it nor anyone knows what the society will look like that will be developed out of the fight to build a community free from the many barriers to human development inherent to capitalism. That will only be determined in exactly the process of building it. And given its unknown specific form, to build it Cuba needs a broad social discussion, and experimentation, on how to build it in a way so that it will achieve the humanist goals that drive the whole socialist project of transcending capitalism.
This book then is intended to be, and is, exactly such a contribution to the process going on in Cuba today of defining Cuba’s socialism by building it. As the title Social and Solidarity Economy in Cuba suggests, its intention is to look at experiences in Cuba through the lens of the worldwide anti-capitalist (somewhat vague) concept of a social and solidarity economy. As the subtitle Foundations and Practices of Socialist Development then further indicates, its purpose for looking at them is to consider their potential to contribute to Cuba’s 65-year project of building socialism.

The one (long) sentence back-cover promotional blurb that I wrote for the book gives a very brief indication of the book’s “raison d’être”:

This book is a broad and rich collection of essays which argues, both theoretically and with concrete examples, that contrary to being ‘anti-socialist,’ many of the participatory mechanisms and procedures of the social and solidarity economy are exactly what Cuba needs today to use more extensively to achieve its 63-year declared goal of building a socialism as it was understood in the 18th century – not only for all of society, but also by all of society.

I frequently find that a good way of giving a brief indication of the contents of such an edited collection is to list the titles of all the chapters.

Ch1. Socialism Is the Solution, Not the Problem: A Solidarity and Socially Responsible Formula for a Prosperous Economy
Ch 2. Now More than Ever, a Social and Solidarity Economy Is Necessary to Build Socialism in Cuba
Ch 3. The Social and Solidarity Economy: Integrating Bases, Experiences and Possible Projections for Socialist Development in Cuba
Ch 4. The Foundations of Popular and Solidarity Economics as Fulfillment of the Social Property of All People in the Socialist Transition
Ch 5. Participatory Budgeting: A Management Tool for Local Development in Cuba, Seen from the Experiences of the Office of the Historian of the City of Havana
Ch 6. The Inclusion of Vulnerable Groups as Subjects of Development: Proposals from the Viewpoint of the Solidarity Economy
Ch 7. Population, Value Chains and Social and Solidarity Economy: Epistemological Alignments
Ch 8. Do Public–Private Partnerships Have Room in the Present Cuban Context? Notes from a Practical Experience

Ch 9. Business Social Responsibility of the State Enterprise: The Experience of the Center of Molecular Immunology


Ch 11. The Cooperative as an Energizing Agent of the Social and Solidarity Economy Model in Cuba

Ch 12. Participation in the Strategies and Social Management of Nonagricultural Cooperatives in Centro Habana Municipality

Ch 13. Committing to Cooperative Solidarity Labor: The Taxi Rutero 2 Experience

Ch 14. Cooperative Social Balance: A Useful Tool to Establish a Social and Solidarity Economy

Ch 15. Gender Perspective Viewed from the Model of Social Balance in Agricultural Cooperatives in Santa Clara

Ch 16. Business and Social Responsibility in Local Development: A Look at the Training of the Local Actors in the Province of Mayabeque

Ch 17. “Go For It: You Can Do It!”: The Solidarity Experience of Female Entrepreneurs

Ch 18. Business Social Responsibility Does Not Go Unnoticed in Cuban Private Enterprises

Ch 19. Institutional Social Responsibility and Subjectivity