WHY HAS MARXISM-LENINISM SUCCEEDED IN CUBA?

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Abstract

Many dismiss Marxism-Leninism as an obsolete and discredited doctrine, one that died with the collapse of Soviet communism. Nevertheless, Marxism-Leninism lives on in Cuba, where the Communist Party is using it to guide the Revolution and construction of socialism. This raises the question: why has Marxism-Leninism succeeded in Cuba? This article identifies four reasons. First, and most importantly, Marxism is compatible with the Cuban revolutionary tradition, as exemplified in the legacy of José Martí. Second, Marxism is a scientific theory, one that offers a truthful insight into the causes and solutions to Cuba’s social problems. Third, Marxism has remained compatible with Cuba’s national conditions, even as they have changed over time. Fourth, Cuba’s communist leaders have developed and enriched Marxism, thereby achieving its successful Cubanisation. Together, the success of the Cuban Revolution and...
the development of Cuban socialism demonstrate the contemporary vitality, achievements, and significance of Marxism-Leninism.

Keywords: Cuba, Marxism-Leninism, socialism, communism, revolution

Introduction

Marxism arose as a revolutionary communist ideology of the working class. Karl Marx and Frederick Engels outlined the fundamentals of the doctrine in their *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, first published in 1848. Here, the founders described the history of society as the history of class struggle. Capitalism, they argued, is the last exploitative society. The working class will overthrow the ruling bourgeoisie via a revolution, win the battle for democracy, and establish the dictatorship of the proletariat. Following that, the workers’ state will abolish capitalism, build socialism, and eventually establish communism, a classless society of material abundance and stateless self-administration (Marx and Engels 1958).

V. I. Lenin applied Marxism to Russia during the early twentieth century, thereby founding Leninism. In doing so, he led the October Revolution to victory and established the Soviet Union, the world’s first socialist state. Leninism made two core political contributions to Marxism. The first is its vanguardism. Lenin argued that the socialist revolution and construction of communism could proceed only under the leadership of a vanguard working-class party (Lenin 1973). Second, Lenin developed his theory of imperialism as the highest stage of capitalism, which presented anti-imperialist, anti-colonial revolutions as fundamental to the victory of socialism (Lenin 1934). Following Lenin’s death, Marxism-Leninism arose as a synthesis of Marxism and Leninism, and it governed nearly half the world’s population during the Soviet Era.

Many dismiss Marxism-Leninism as an obsolete and discredited doctrine, one that died with the collapse of Soviet communism. Nevertheless, Marxism-Leninism lives on in Cuba.¹ Alongside the ideas of José Martí, Marxism-Leninism constitutes the official governing ideology of the Communist Party of Cuba (PCC), the country’s ruling organisation (PCC

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¹ Aguilar (1989: 166) identifies “numerous difficulties” in assessing Cuba’s Marxist-Leninist credentials. Most notably, “Marxism-Leninism has become such a loose theory that it is constantly invoked by a wide spectrum of revolutionary groups and regimes to justify different policies”. Whilst acknowledging the diversity of Marxism-Leninism, this article maintains that the fundamentals outlined in the introduction are universal.
In Cuba, Marxism-Leninism is guiding the Revolution and the construction of socialism. This raises the question: why has Marxism-Leninism succeeded in Cuba?

This article identifies four reasons. First, and most importantly, Marxism is compatible with the Cuban revolutionary tradition, as exemplified in the legacy of José Martí. Second, Marxism is a scientific theory, one that offers a truthful insight into the causes and solutions to Cuba’s social problems. Third, Marxism has remained compatible with Cuba’s national conditions, even as they have changed over time. Fourth, Cuba’s communist leaders have developed and enriched Marxism, thereby achieving its successful Cubanisation. Together, the success of the Cuban Revolution and the development of Cuban socialism demonstrate the contemporary vitality, achievements, and significance of Marxism-Leninism.

The Compatibility of Marxism with the Cuban Revolutionary Tradition

José Martí is Cuba’s national hero and the father of the nation. Fidel Castro, leader of the Cuban Revolution, said that “there is a continuity of thought between the ideas of Martí and Marxist-Leninist ideas … Today Martí would be a Marxist-Leninist, he would be a communist, there is not the slightest doubt” (Castro 2011: 265). Likewise, Miguel Díaz-Canel (2022), First Secretary of the PCC, said that “in Cuba, Marxism merged with the best of the revolutionary national tradition … which had among its highest exponents José Martí …” This is a major reason why the Cuban people understand and accept Marxism-Leninism. The continuity between Martí’s thought and Marxism-Leninism has furthered the integration and success of Marxism in Cuba.

In 1975, on the 50th anniversary of the founding of Cuba’s first Marxist-Leninist Party in 1925, the Communist Party of Cuba held its first Congress and recognised that it was the heir of José Martí’s Cuban Revolutionary Party (CRP), which he formed in 1892. In 1894 Martí outlined the fundamental elements of
his political philosophy: a commitment to revolutionary change, social justice, anti-imperialism, and the development of a vanguard party, four Marxist-Leninist principles:

How beautiful is the united action of the Cuban Revolutionary Party on behalf of dignity never marred by intrigues, flattery or pleas from its members and the authorities it has empowered; the equity of its expressed goals which do not foresee the country’s destiny in the domination of one class over another in a new country, without the poison and voluntary debasement involved in the ideas of classes, but rather with the full individual enjoyment of man’s legitimate rights which can only be diminished by the negligence or excess of those who exercise them; and on behalf of the opportunity, on the brink of being lost, of the enslaved Antilles to occupy their place as a nation in the Americas before the disproportionately developed, most powerful part of America turns those lands, which can still be gardens for their dwellers and scales of justice for the world into a theatre of universal greed. (Martí, 1975: 13)

Although we cannot describe this as a fully Marxist ideology we can see, particularly in Martí’s understanding of the class struggle, that he was both consciously and unconsciously influenced by Marxist thinking. He begins by stressing the need for a disciplined vanguard party that is free of corruption and factionalism. He goes on to suggest that social equity cannot be achieved without eliminating the class system. And he ends by calling for Cuba to become a sovereign, independent nation, rather than a source of exploited wealth for American capitalists. This programme was not only a precursor to some of the aims of Lenin’s Bolshevik Party, but it also laid the foundations for the central tenets of the PCC. The CRP advocated armed struggle as the means to free Cuba from imperialist exploitation. As such it was an avowedly revolutionary party that, first and foremost, sought to prevent America from becoming the new dominant power, after its victory in the Spanish-American War of 1898: “The party was formed ‘to achieve absolute independence for the Island of Cuba’ ... The central aspects of Marti’s ideology are affirmed in this brief sentence: the absolute independence of Cuba” (Marinello 1975: 24).

For Martí – and later Fidel Castro – anti-imperialism was the main driving force of this revolutionary party. Social justice could not be achieved until Cuba was a sovereign nation. At the same time, Martí did not fail to denounce capitalist oppression of the working masses. He once wrote “Really, in truth, as long as there is one man who sleeps in the mud, how can there be another who sleeps in a bed of gold?” He paid tribute to Karl Marx
“because he stood on the side of the weak”. Martí was expressing ... his wish to throw in his lot with the world’s poor. (Marinello 1975: 30)

Martí, like Lenin, saw the need for a vanguard party to lead the struggle for independence. Whilst the CRP was not a Marxist-Leninist Party, the way it was organised and structured – with an emphasis on democracy and centralism – foreshadowed Lenin’s Bolshevik Party: “A form of democratic centralism clearly existed. In the case of Martí, like that of Lenin, the clear definition of purposes was united with supreme leadership capability” (Marinello 1975: 27).

There was a very close relationship between Martí’s CRP and Cuba’s first Communist Party which, based on Marxism-Leninism, only emerged after scientific socialism, the doctrine of Marx and Engels, was developed by Leninist interpretation and practice. Julio Antonio Mella and Carlos Balínó, the party’s chief founders, viewed themselves as the heirs to Martí’s legacy (Monal 2004; Ferrals 2022). “The Party came into being already in possession of a clear Marxist-Leninist outlook” because its founders “had very definite ideas as to what a Marxist-Leninist Party should be: a party armed with a Marxist-Leninist strategy and a Marxist-Leninist interpretation of social and political problems” (Castro 1975: 51). This analysis was arrived at through an understanding of the objective and subjective conditions of Cuba at that time. The nation’s history of colonialism and imperialism determined that a revolutionary Marxist-Leninist party was required to change these conditions by overthrowing capitalism. The Communist Party had the same aims and objectives as Martí’s CRP:

Since its creation as the Marxist-Leninist Party of the working class, the Communist Party organised its revolutionary struggles with two essential historical objectives: to free Cuba from imperialism through which it could secure its complete national independence and to emancipate the working class and the working peasants from the exploitation of the capitalists and the big landholders through the revolutionary establishment of the socialist system. (Grobart 1975a: 65)

The consistent application of Marxist-Leninist principles led the Party to establish a close relationship with the masses by giving its support to trade unions, peasants, women’s and youth organisations. The party gave the workers and peasants a powerful and indispensable ideological and political weapon. With its help, the working class succeeded in its struggle against foreign

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Accordingly, Ripoll’s (1994) claim that Cuban Communists retrofitted Martí’s Marxist leanings is unconvincing.
oppression and capitalist exploitation. The party was a link in the continuous historical chain that led the working class to its national and social liberation:

Our Revolution is a part of a process that began in 1868. In that long historical process, two key issues were at stake: the struggle for independence and the struggle for social justice … The two struggles are linked throughout the history of our country. The fighters for a social revolution were indissolubly linked with the fighters for our country’s independence. (Castro 1975: 49)

Before Castro formed the 26 July Movement and led the armed struggle he adopted Marxist-Leninist positions: “We bought our first books on Marxism-Leninism at the Communist Party bookstore … The main nucleus of those of us who organised the 26th of July Movement bought our books in that bookstore” (Castro 1975: 54). The leading revolutionaries, including Fidel Castro, Che Guevara, and Camilo Cienfuegos were not members of the existing Marxist-Leninist Party, the Popular Socialist Party (PSP), but they had studied and assimilated the essence of the thinking of Marx, Engels and Lenin before the attack on the Moncada Barracks in 1953. As Castro made clear, whilst History Will Absolve Me (the speech that he made at his trial for the attack on Moncada) was not an overtly communist programme, its underlying principles were guided by Marxism-Leninism:

Let’s consider a document like History Will Absolve Me … The Moncada Program was a practical document; its purpose was not to address the problem theoretically. Its task was to open the eyes of the masses. And it’s interesting to note that no one has accused the Moncada Program of being communist or socialist. But it was precisely the program that led us down the path to socialism. (Grobart 1975b: 72)

Whilst Castro and other leading members of the 26 July Movement were not members of the PSP, they shared its Marxist-Leninist ideology and methods:

… we were and thought like Marxist-Leninists. What we did was to evaluate a potentially revolutionary situation … beginning with Marxist-Leninist ideas and to develop a programme which reflected … the aspirations …of the great masses of the people and to guide them in a revolutionary direction, especially toward the revolutionary conquest of power. (Grobart 1975b: 73)

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5 Raúl Castro is a notable exception.
The 26 July Movement was directed by Marxism-Leninism but, tactically, Castro decided not to reveal this ideology during the armed struggle as he felt that it might alienate the peasants who were saturated with anti-communist propaganda and repeatedly told that the guerrillas wanted to steal their land. By not disclosing the true Marxist-Leninist nature of the 26 July Movement he was following the example of Martí who wrote: “I have had to work quietly and somewhat indirectly, because to achieve certain objectives, they must be kept under cover, to proclaim them for what they are would raise such difficulties that the objectives could not be realized” (Grobart 1975b: 72).

Another reason for acting covertly was that Castro did not want to alienate those elements of the bourgeoisie that were willing to support the revolution: “Lenin teaches us ... that in the first period of the revolution, where this revolution has an anti-imperialist character, the communists can use the assistance of the patriotic bourgeoisie” (Hoxha 1984: 101).

In other words, the period between July 1953 (the raid on the Moncada Barracks) and April 1961 (the declaration of the socialist nature of the Revolution) signified the first stage (or to use Marxist terminology, the “bourgeois-democratic” stage) and the subsequent consolidation (the triumph of the armed struggle January 1959 to Bay of Pigs April 1961) of the Cuban Revolution, which was driven by anti-imperialism. During this time Castro wanted to gain the support of as many members of the bourgeoisie as possible, in the same way that he needed the support of the peasants in the armed struggle. He did not want to jeopardise this support by openly declaring the socialist aims of the revolution (Kapcia 2008: 94).

There were no basic differences in the ideology, principles and programme of the 26 July Movement (which primarily represented the peasants), the Popular Socialist Party (which generally represented the working class) and the Revolutionary Directorate (which mostly represented the students). At the same time, each had its own leadership, tactics and sphere of action. The three organisational groupings were able to work together to further their mutual aims and objectives, despite some differences in terms of tactical questions and methods of struggle. The PSP, for example, considered the attack on the Moncada garrison a mistake as well as the armed struggle organised and led by Castro. Regardless of these misgivings, the PSP provided political support and practical aid for the guerrillas. Similarly, the Revolutionary Directorate also supported the 26 July

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6 Accordingly, Tismaneanu’s (1989: 771) claim that Castro fabricated his pre-1961 Marxism is unconvincing.
Movement. These organisations were able to work together because they had the same objectives – to end imperialism and capitalism – and because they shared the same underlying Marxist-Leninist principles. This enabled the creation of the Integrated Revolutionary Organisations (ORI) in July 1961: “The Party was formed through the unity of all the revolutionary forces … Our Party came into being through the unity, the fusion of the forces under the banners of Marxism-Leninism” (Grobart 1975b: 78).

On 16 April 1961, after the attempted invasion of Cuba by US-backed forces at Playa Giron (Bay of Pigs), Castro proclaimed the socialist stage of the Revolution. On 26 March 1962, the ORI became the United Party of the Cuban Socialist Revolution (PURSC). The revolutionary aims of the Moncada Programme were to be achieved by the new vanguard Marxist-Leninist party. Castro explained to the masses that: “From then on we would function as a single organisation and under a cohesive leadership. Martí’s and Lenin’s brilliant ideas regarding the necessity of a party to lead the revolution prevailed more than ever before” (Grobart 1975b: 80).

The revolutionary fervour that characterised the 26 July Movement was replaced by a stricter Marxist-Leninist discipline. The guiding principle of the party was that its authority and power came directly from the people. If it had no contact with the masses then it would lose its reason for existing. Another guideline was that the leading positions in the party would be filled by exemplary workers who were hard-working and incorruptible. Together with others, these concepts served as a solid foundation for the subsequent development of the Marxist-Leninist vanguard when the PURSC became the Communist Party of Cuba (PCC) on 3 October 1965. This ended the process of party development that had begun in April 1961. The culmination of this process was the 1st Congress of the Communist Party of Cuba in 1975 which provided the party with its Programmatic Platform and its Statutes.

These Statutes, updated in 2021, recognise that the party “embodies the heroic revolutionary traditions of the Cuban people”, and “constitutes a faithful continuation of the Cuban Revolutionary Party founded by José Martí”, “the first Communist Party symbolised in the lives of Julio Antonio Mella and Carlos Baliño”, and “the revolutionary organisations that led the struggle against the pro-imperialist tyranny overthrown on the 1st January 1959” (PCC 2021: 7). The party represents “the fusion of the radical revolutionary ideology of José Martí … with the fundamental principles of Marxism and Leninism” (PCC 2021: 9). In this way the party’s constitution reflects the long history of revolutionary struggle in Cuba: Its roots are the best traditions in the Cuban people’s history, and its ideology is that of the working class: Marxism-Leninism.
As this brief history of the revolutionary movement has demonstrated, Marxism-Leninism was not an alien Eurocentric ideology that was imposed on the people of Cuba. Rather, the principles of Marxism-Leninism perfectly articulated the Cuban people’s determination to overthrow imperialism and capitalism and replace them with socialism and communism. The leaders of the revolutionary movement, from Martí to Castro, understood that a vanguard party, guided by the principles of Marxism-Leninism, was absolutely essential to the triumph of the Revolution. As Castro made clear:

... we would not have made the Revolution if we hadn’t based ourselves on Marxist-Leninist principles ... Without this theoretical base we couldn’t have developed a correct and victorious revolutionary strategy ... we couldn’t have changed the social situation of our country; we couldn’t have freed ourselves from imperialist rule. (Grobart 1975b: 70)

**Marxism-Leninism as a Science**

Marx and Engels argued that the bourgeoisie’s downfall and the proletariat’s victory were not only desirable, but inevitable (Yu 2019: 563). Marx and Engels derived these convictions from their view of Marxism as a science, one that discovered the laws governing social development. They argued that socialism would inevitably result from the objective contradictions of capitalism, manifested in the class struggle (Engels 1908). Accordingly, a reason for the success of Marxism in Cuba is that Cuban revolutionaries recognised and demonstrated its scientific truths.

These truths first demonstrated themselves during the guerrilla struggle to overthrow Batista. Throughout the conflict, the government-controlled territories were much stronger than the guerrilla-controlled territories in both economic and military terms. Nevertheless, in January 1959 Fidel’s forces were victorious. A major reason for this success was that the 26 July Movement in the vanguard of the Revolution expressed and manifested Marxist principles. Although the Movement’s leaders were both consciously and unconsciously aware of these principles during the struggle, they subsequently acknowledged them, and that is why they and the Cuban people embraced Marxism.

At the most abstract level, the guerrilla struggle demonstrated the objective laws of development that Marxism discovered, the laws that recognised the victory of socialism over imperialism as inevitable. As Che Guevara observed in his *Notes for the Study of the Ideology of the Cuban Revolution*:
We, practical revolutionaries, initiating our own struggle, simply fulfil laws foreseen by Marx, the scientist. We are simply adjusting ourselves to the predictions of the scientific Marx as we travel this road of rebellion, struggling against the old structure of power ... That is to say, and it is well to emphasise this once again: The laws of Marxism are present in the events of the Cuban Revolution, independently of what its leaders profess or fully know of those laws from a theoretical point of view ... (Guevara 1985: 20–21)

Affirming Marxism, the 26 July Movement also demonstrated the superior popularity of socialism over capitalism. In the guerrilla-controlled areas established in the Sierra Maestra mountains, the rebels created a social system distinct from the corrupt, oppressive, and exploitative Batista dictatorship (Kozameh 2019). The rebels provided public services to local peasants such as elementary schooling and literacy education, hospitals, and medical services. The guerrillas maintained toll roads, provided protection from bandits, and enacted progressive laws and decrees (Guerra 2019). This system was not fully socialist, but it had socialist elements and principles. Recognising its advantages, the masses were gradually won over by the Revolution.

For most of the Revolution, the international community regarded Batista’s dictatorship as the legitimate authority, and it therefore received almost all the foreign aid (Kellner 1989: 45). But for the Cuban masses, who compared the territories under guerrilla control with those of the Batista dictatorship, Cuba’s hope lay with the former. This was not only because the guerrilla leadership was uncorrupted, unlike the Batista government, but also because the guerrilla-controlled areas established a social system that could better unite the people, provide social justice, and build an independent homeland, even though the living conditions in these areas were worse. This demonstrated the Marxist principle that socialism was the key to freedom in Cuba.

The 26 July Movement also validated Marxist revolutionary principles. One of them concerns the relationship between the subjective and objective conditions in a revolution, or in other words, the ideological and material factors. Marxism-Leninism gave primacy to the latter, maintaining that a revolution could not succeed in the absence of the right objective conditions. The present system had to be moribund and on the precipice of collapse. Only then would the masses develop a revolutionary consciousness, the subjective factor that would spark the revolution (Fedoseyev 1975: Ch. 2). Fidel Castro tailored his revolutionary strategy to this principle:

There can be no revolution, in the first place, unless there are objective circumstances at a given historical moment to facilitate and make the revolution.
In other words, a revolution cannot be created out of the minds of men ... people can interpret a historical law, a certain moment of historical development. In Cuba, our role has been that of propellors of that movement, through evaluating a series of objective conditions. (Castro 1961: 11–12)

Reminiscing upon the Cuban Revolution in December 1961, Castro remarked that the guerrillas won their struggle by exploiting the objective conditions, and above all, the capitalist exploitation of the peasantry, Cuba’s largest class (Castro 1961: 10). Many peasants were landless, whilst others worked as exploited tenants under ruthless landlords. The guerrillas told the peasants that by overthrowing Batista, they could disempower the landlords and distribute the land more equally. Upon hearing these promises, many peasants joined the Revolution and the guerrilla movement, swelling its ranks (Guerra 2019). By exploiting the objective conditions, in line with Marxism, the guerrillas succeeded in arousing the peasantry to the side of the Revolution.

The military victories of the Cuban Revolution also demonstrated the Marxist military strategies and tactics that Lenin (1965: 213–223) outlined in his article Guerrilla Warfare. Again, this is despite the fact that the guerrilla leaders may not have read the relevant Marxist works on military strategy.

For one thing, the guerrillas advanced the Marxist principle of linking guerrilla warfare to the class struggle as an essential condition for revolutionary success (Guevara 1998). On this subject, Lenin (1965: 216–217) argued that “the acts of individuals isolated from the masses, which demoralise the workers, repel wide strata of the population, disorganise the movement and injure the revolution”. Although, in Cuba, the guerrilla struggle began before gaining the support of a mass struggle, the guerrillas strove from the outset to ignite this struggle, and they were quickly successful (Castro 1961: 16; Guevara 1985: 122). Over time, peasants, students, workers, and progressive elements of the petty bourgeoisie increasingly supported the Revolution, either by joining the guerrillas or by expressing civil disobedience against the Batista dictatorship. “There is no question”, Fidel argued, “that the conquest of revolutionary power was due fundamentally to the support of the masses” (Castro 1961: 10). Due to its Marxist principles, the Cuban masses voted with their blood, sweat and tears for the 26 July Movement as the leading force of the Revolution.7

Second, Cuban revolutionary leaders endorsed the Marxist principle that guerrilla warfare is counter-productive if undisciplined and unorganised. Lenin

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7 Betancourt (1989: 809) is unjustified in claiming “that Marxism-Leninism reached power in Cuba not by the action of the masses ... but by the will of an individual” (Fidel).
(1965: 219) argued that it was essential for a vanguard organisation to direct and lead the guerrilla activities. In Cuba, this vanguard was the 26 July Movement (Guevara 1998).

Third, the Cuban rebel leaders endorsed Lenin’s (1974: 424) call for the armed people to destroy the old military apparatus of the ruling class. The Cuban people seized the government army’s weapons, thereby destroying the military machine of the old system. Fidel Castro highlighted this step as an indispensable condition of the Revolution’s victory, one that he borrowed from Lenin (Castro 1961: 22, 26). The successful application of these military strategies in Cuba validated Marxist ideas.

After assuming power in 1959, Fidel hoped to form non-aligned relations with both the US and the Soviet Union (Coltman 2003: 155–157). However, the US rejected the revolutionary government’s socialist reforms and Cuba’s anti-imperialist struggle. Sensing the rise of socialism in Cuba, the US imposed a new embargo in 1960, and the Bay of Pigs invasion on the 17 April 1961. This imperialist hostility encouraged Fidel to declare the socialist stage of the Revolution and its Marxist-Leninist ideology. Through its practical experience, Cuba’s revolutionary government became even more convinced that only Marxism-Leninism could realise Martí’s aim of bringing social justice, independence, and democracy to Cuba.

Under the official guidance of Marxism-Leninism, the Cuban people accelerated socialist construction. To this day, Cuba has maintained its “socialist planning system” as “the main national management tool of the national economy” (PCC 2011; 2017: 3). Within this system, socialist state-owned companies are the main economic modality (PCC 2017: 3) and play a leading role in market resource allocation. Additionally, Cuba still endorses Marx’s principle of socialist distribution: “from each according to his ability to each according to his contribution” (PCC 2017: 8).

At the same time, and taking account of the national conditions of an underdeveloped socialist system, Cuba’s updated economic and social model has developed market elements (Gabriele 2011; Wilkinson 2012), which the state has harnessed with a regulatory system based on Marxist political economy. In this way, Cuba has sought to develop the productive forces, improve the efficiency of its socialist planning system, and improve people’s livelihoods, without exacerbating social injustice or transitioning to capitalism (PCC 2017).

Cuba’s successes speak for themselves. Cuba has achieved rapid achievements in several spheres of human welfare, achievements that capitalist countries took centuries to obtain. Although the US embargo has stunted Cuba’s economic growth, it has established one of the most advanced public education and healthcare systems in the world (Regan n.d.; Pineo 2019). The people may be poor, but
they are healthy and well-educated. In addition, Cuba’s participatory democracy has empowered the working class (Collins 2015), whereas liberal democracy has experienced a legitimacy crisis for decades.

These successes of the Cuban Revolution, together with the development of Cuban socialism, have demonstrated the scientific nature of Marxism and the truthfulness of its theories, and this is why Cuba embraced Marxism-Leninism. As Fidel Castro remarked, “the more we have to face the reality of a revolution and the class struggle … the more convinced we become of all the truths Marx and Engels wrote and the truly ingenious interpretations of scientific socialism Lenin made” (Castro 1961: 46–47). Marxism has succeeded in Cuba because its leaders and people have witnessed and realised its truths in the concrete history of the Revolution and construction of socialism.

The Compatibility of Marxism with Cuba’s Prevailing National Conditions

Marx and Engels were born after several European countries experienced bourgeois-democratic revolutions, or in other words, the transition to capitalist democracy. They also witnessed reversions to feudalism and subsequent bourgeois-democratic revolutions, such as in Germany. Upon the basis of these developments, the founders of Marxism mapped the path of the socialist revolution. To promote this objective, Marx and Engels endorsed the formation of independent, united, and well-organised working-class parties (Yu 2019: 565–566). They warned that socialist revolutions would fail if the workers’ parties submitted to the bourgeoisie’s leadership (Marx and Engels 1978: 278).

During World War I, the socialist parties of the Second International violated this principle. Following their national capitalist classes, they supported the national war efforts and imperialist ambitions of their respective countries. In doing so, they rejected Lenin’s (1934) denunciation of the war as an imperialist conflict and manifestation of moribund capitalism. Many socialist parties missed the opportunity to overthrow imperialism in their own countries and build socialism. It was only by retaining an independent anti-imperialist position that Lenin’s Bolshevik Party led Russia’s working class to victory in the October Revolution (Yu 2019: 565). After that, the Soviet Union’s support for global socialist and anti-imperialist revolutions made peaceful coexistence between the Soviets and imperialism impossible.

Unlike Europe, Cuba’s bourgeois revolution was distant when Marxism arose. Cuba’s bourgeoisie tried to initiate one in 1868, when planters and other wealthy natives launched the war for independence from Spain, known as the Ten Years’ War. Two more anti-Spanish independence struggles followed: the
Little War (1879–1880) and the Cuban War of Independence (1895–1898). It was only with the establishment of the Republic of Cuba in 1901 that its bourgeois-democratic struggle achieved some success. Even then, the revolution remained incomplete. The US cemented its imperial control over Cuba via the Platt Amendment, and Batista established a US-backed dictatorship in 1952. Accordingly, Cuba’s bourgeois-democratic revolution only truly began with the 1953 raid on the Moncada Barracks, and succeeded in January 1959, when Fidel’s forces ousted Batista and established a revolutionary government.

At first, Cuba’s revolutionary government displayed the trappings of a radical bourgeois-democratic republic. It tried and failed to establish friendly relations with the US, ignoring Lenin’s discovery that anti-imperialism cannot co-exist peacefully with imperialism. Additionally, “the Revolutionary Government was established with the participation of various members of the treacherous bourgeoisie”, President Manuel Urrutia among them. “Serious contradictions developed subsequently” (Guevara 1985: 122). Besides criticising the growing influence of communists within government, Urrutia also desired the restoration of multi-party elections, which would have cemented the old system of corrupt parties and fraudulent balloting.

However, Fidel was successful in swiftly transitioning Cuba from the bourgeois stage of the revolution to its socialist stage. He publicly exposed Urrutia’s anti-communism in July 1959, which convinced the masses to demand and receive his resignation. Fidel also moved away from the US and towards the Soviets for support. In 1961, Fidel announced the socialist stage of the revolution, and combined Cuba’s revolutionary organisations into a single ruling Marxist-Leninist body, the Integrated Revolutionary Organisations, later named the Communist Party of Cuba. This move ensured the consolidation of socialism in Cuba.

Marx and Engels based their strategies for socialist revolutions on their analysis of Western European history. Accordingly, Marx denied that their analysis was a universal template, one that applied globally (Yu 2019: 566), regardless of the diverse traditions and circumstances (Marx 1989: 200). Highlighting this fact, Lenin argued that underdeveloped countries like Russia could proceed straight from the bourgeois revolution to the socialist revolution, without undergoing a phase of capitalist rule in between. He identified the Communist Party as the facilitator of this transition. If a workers’ party arose and gained strength before the completion of the bourgeois revolution, it could take power and proceed to socialism soon after, if the conditions were right (Lenin 1962: 293–303). Lenin successfully executed this strategy in Russia. He founded the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party in 1898, 19 years before Russia’s bourgeois-democratic revolution succeeded in February 1917. By building up their forces
during these years, the Bolsheviks were strong enough to complete the socialist revolution in October 1917, merely eight months after the bourgeois-democratic revolution.

Lenin’s strategy suited Cuba’s national conditions. The key reason why the socialist revolution succeeded in Cuba, an economically backward country, was that the working class, its Marxist party, and its revolutionary organisations existed before the bourgeois-democratic revolution succeeded. Six years separated the beginning of Cuba’s bourgeois-democratic revolution in 1953 and its victory in 1959. During these years, communist forces armed the masses for its success and acquired the resources necessary to challenge capitalist rule. However, this was by no means a foregone conclusion. There were still pro-capitalist forces in the government, and even some within the 26 July Movement. If the leadership around Fidel had not deployed a correct strategy (including continually working to gain the support of the masses) it was not inevitable that they would have won. Therefore, when Batista’s downfall in January 1959 brought Cuba’s bourgeois-democratic revolution to a conclusion, the required conditions for the success of a subsequent socialist revolution were effective leadership and revolutionary strategies that suited the national conditions.

After its founding, socialist Cuba found it difficult to promote economic development, due in no small part to US imperialism. At this time, however, another socialist country, the Soviet Union, lent a hand. Long before, Engels (1990: 426) explained that underdeveloped socialist countries could accelerate their economic development by emulating the advanced socialist countries, since the latter had experience of dismantling capitalism and unleashing the socialised productive forces (Yu 2019: 566–567). Engels’ observation fit the historical conditions of Cuba in 1961, and the Soviet Union was a textbook example of an advanced socialist country granting fraternal assistance. It was with Soviet methods and Soviet aid that Cuba achieved much of its early economic development. From 1970 to 1972, Soviet economists re-planned and organised the Cuban economy, founding the Cuban–Soviet Commission of Economic, Scientific and Technical Collaboration. With Soviet economic assistance, including machinery, cheap oil, and subsidies for Cuban sugar, Cuba achieved rapid growth during the 1970s (Brundenius 2009). Without such accumulation in the early decades of Cuba’s development, the country may have lacked the infrastructural foundation to survive the economic damage inflicted by the Soviet collapse. Accordingly, if other developing countries are to learn from Cuba’s development, they should never refer solely to Cuba’s experiences and strategies following the Soviet collapse; but should seek to learn from the whole experience and course of its history from the founding of socialist Cuba.
Furthermore, Cuba never simply duplicated “the Soviet Union’s orthodox version of Marxism-Leninism”, but has always integrated the fundamentals of Marxism with the concrete Cuban conditions (Ruffin 1990: 169), to make Marxism more compatible with the changing national circumstances (Castro 1961: 78). This became a necessity in the mid-1980s, when Gorbachev’s Perestroika and Glasnost reforms liberalised Soviet socialism. Cuba refused to copy the Soviets. Fidel warned that Gorbachev’s reforms were anti-socialist and unsuited to Cuba’s conditions. To oppose them and cement socialism, Cuba launched its “Rectification” policy to dismantle its Soviet-inspired economic structures (Pérez-López 1990). By applying Marxism to Cuba’s unique circumstances, Rectification was pivotal in ensuring that Cuba survived the Soviet collapse in 1991 (Yaffe 2006).

Cuba reinvigorated this principle in 1992, when it entered a “Special Period” of economic hardship following the collapse of the Soviet Union. The loss of Soviet trade forced Cuba to find new ways of sustaining its economy. Once again, the Cuban communists found unique solutions by “reinterpreting Marxism-Leninism” and applying it creatively to the country’s national conditions (Eckstein 1994: 127; Nahem 2017).

Marx and Engels (1976: 49) placed significant emphasis on the development of the productive forces. They viewed this development as the driver of socialist construction, without which privation and injustice would remain (Yu 2019: 567). Lenin inherited this emphasis, arguing that the fate of the October Revolution relied upon productivity (Sochor 1981). With these concerns in mind, in 2011 the Communist Party of Cuba (PCC 2011) announced reforms designed to develop the productive forces, by updating its economic and social model.

Lenin found that since Soviet Russia was an underdeveloped country, it could develop its productive forces more efficiently by adopting economic principles from the advanced capitalist countries, such as Taylorism (Yu 2019: 568). Since Cuba is also at an early phase of socialism, with underdeveloped productive forces, the historical conditions have made it necessary for Cuba to learn from the advanced capitalist countries as well. To develop the productive forces and accelerate socialist growth, Cuba’s updated economic and social model has developed various capitalist components, including markets and private enterprise (PCC 2017).

Highlighting these developments, some conflate Cuba’s economic system with the “market socialism” seen in China, Vietnam and Laos, the other Marxist-Leninist states (Gabriele 2011). More careful commentators show that “Cuba’s unique characteristics” distinguish it from these countries in several respects.

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8 For a defence of the claim that Cuba duplicated the Soviet Bloc model, see Falcoff (1989).
First, “Cuba’s brand of market socialism will remain characterised by a large relative role of publicly owned corporations”, and the state will “remain in charge of strategic sectors” (Wilkinson 2012: 266). Raúl Castro affirmed Cuba’s commitment to these principles in his Central Report to the 8th PCC Congress in 2021: “The state enterprise system faces the challenge of demonstrating in practice, and consolidating its position as the dominant form of management in the economy” (Castro 2021).

Second, the “[p]ublic delivery of basic services such as healthcare and education will continue in Cuba”. The encroaching privatisation of healthcare and education in Vietnam and China has “caused huge social problems. Cuba is not going to make the same mistakes of applying market-based approaches where they have proved to be inadequate” (Wilkinson 2012: 266). Raúl Castro made this clear when he introduced Cuba’s economic reforms in 2011: “In Cuba, under socialism, there will never be space for ‘shock therapies’ that go against the neediest”. The state will “continue ensuring healthcare and education services free of charge and on equal footing to all of the people and their adequate protection through the Social Welfare System” (Castro 2011).

In 2019, the Cuban masses discussed and accepted these principles when they approved Cuba’s new constitution in a national referendum. According to Ginsburg, the features outlined in this document share core similarities with “twenty-first-century socialism”, a distinctive Latin American theory and practice that emphasises classical Marxist ideas. Like twenty-first-century socialism, Cuba’s 2019 constitution endorses participatory democracy, social ownership of the means of production, an economic organisation dedicated to satisfying human needs, a decentralised planned economy, a combination of moral and material incentives, and education for human development (Ginsburg 2021). These principles encapsulate Marxism’s successful adaptation to Cuba’s Latin American socialist culture.

In sum, socialist Cuba has always applied Marxism-Leninism creatively to its national conditions, whilst at the same time adopting Marxist principles from other countries. For as long as Cuba does this, it will uphold Marxism as a valuable guide to socialist development:

The Marxism that, since its inception, gave the scientific basis to the class struggles of the incipient world proletariat of each country and of the international working class, has shown to possess a powerful explanatory capacity in the face of constant social transformations due to its capacity for self-development and critical assimilation of the knowledge accumulated at each moment and to expand without any dogma its perspective on the subject of the Revolution. (Díaz-Canel 2022)
The Success of the Cubanisation of Marxism

The final important reason for the success of Marxism in Cuba lies in its successful Cubanisation. These two successes are connected and mutually enhancing.

In the 1872 preface to the Manifesto of the Communist Party, Marx and Engels argued that the general principles of this work remained valid since its original publication in 1848. That said, when practically applying these principles, Marx and Engels urged communists to tailor them to the specific temporal and spatial conditions. For that reason, they rejected the necessity of implementing the ten socialist measures outlined in the Manifesto (Marx and Engels 1958: 21–22).

Following these recommendations, Cuba has not followed the Manifesto to the letter whilst building socialism. The Cuban people have developed the Revolution under the leadership of the Communist Party, which has integrated the basic tenets of Marxism-Leninism with Cuba’s concrete social realities. On the basis of Cuba’s historical conditions, the PCC has advanced with the times and successfully Cubanised Marxism. These achievements provided the foundation for the PCC to guide the Cuban Revolution and the construction of socialism in Cuba.

Historically, the development of Marxist-Leninist theory has been the product of individuals who have combined revolutionary theory and practice. Cuban Marxism is no exception. The Cubanisation of Marxism has been the product of the forerunners and leaders of the Cuban Revolution, most notably Julio Antonio Mella, Carlos Baliño, Che Guevara, Fidel Castro, Raúl Castro, and Miguel Díaz-Canel. Of these, the contributions of Che Guevara and Fidel Castro are especially significant.

Che Guevara’s Marxism

Che Guevara made several contributions to Cuban Marxism during his struggle to liberate the country and build socialism (Löwy 2007). Guevara developed a Marxist outlook long before the Cuban Revolution, through a combination of theory and practice (Llorente 2018). During his motorcycle journey around South America as a medical student, Guevara (1995) witnessed endemic poverty, oppression, and disenfranchisement. Drawing upon his readings of Marxist literature, Che viewed these phenomena as the result of capitalism and imperialism, and he concluded that the only solution for the region’s structural inequalities was armed revolution.

Che made seminal additions to the Cuban Marxist theory of guerrilla warfare, based upon his experience as a fighter in the 26 July Movement. During his time in the Sierra Maestra, Guevara helped win the peasants over to the Revolution, by organising health clinics and schools to raise their literacy. He
also advanced the guerrilla movement by establishing grenade factories and workshops to teach military tactics, and a newspaper to disseminate information (Kellner 1989: 45). Due to these achievements, Fidel promoted Guevara to commander of the second army column, which he led to significant military victories.

In 1959 Guevara wrote his book *Guerrilla Warfare* as a distillation of his experience. Guevara used a Marxist lens to outline the reasons for, prerequisites, and lessons of guerrilla warfare. Guevara also systematised various forms of combat between regular armies and guerrilla bands, thereby enriching Marxist military ideas (Guevara 1998).

Guevara presented guerrilla warfare as a last resort measure, one that became necessary only when there were no remaining peaceful and legal strategies. Guevara identified popular support for the guerrilla army as the fundamental prerequisite for conducting guerrilla warfare. In addition, he drew three lessons from the Cuban Revolution. First, popular forces could win a war against a regular army; second, guerrillas could create their own favourable conditions. They need not wait for ideal conditions to take shape. Third, in underdeveloped America, the countryside constituted the operational base for a guerrilla army (Guevara 1998: 7).

Highlighting his Cuban experience, Guevara argued that guerrillas should be not merely soldiers, but social reformers who should go amongst the masses, raise their consciousness, and improve their socio-economic conditions. He urged guerrillas to set examples that would inspire followers, and forge solidarity with the masses (Guevara 1998: 39). In this vein, Guevara identified a close link between the guerrillas, peasants, and Cuba’s land reform. By promising the peasants land, the guerrillas won them over to the revolution and strengthened their forces. Guevara’s emphasis on the peasantry’s revolutionary role differentiated his thinking from the orthodox Marxist focus on the working class.

In his *Notes on Man and Socialism in Cuba*, Guevara also shaped Cuba’s distinctive Marxist humanism with his conception of the “new man” (Llorente 2015), which he rightly described as “an important contribution to Marxism-Leninism” (Guevara 1985: 134). To provide some context, in 1959 Guevara became President of Cuba’s National Bank, and in 1961 he became Minister of Industries. These positions gave him leadership over the Cuban economy. To build socialism, Guevara oversaw the nationalisation of banks, businesses, and factories, whilst aiming to guarantee everyone employment, housing, and healthcare.

For Guevara, it was essential that an ideological transformation accompanied these material ones. “To build communism, you must build new men as well as the new economic base” (Guevara 1985: 126). However, some
Cubans still displayed the vestiges of bourgeois ideology, most notably an anti-work mentality, selfishness, materialism, and individualism (Guevara 1985: 125, 127, 128–129). Che sought to eradicate these mentalities and create the new man: a non-materialistic, work-loving, collectivist, and selfless being.

To promote the new man, Guevara sought to replace material incentives with moral ones in production (Guevara 1985: 126–127). Capitalism, he argued, was a dog-eat-dog struggle for survival, where workers could improve their lot only through mutual competition. Workers viewed each other as rivals, instead of comrades. Labourers worked only for money and material satisfaction (Guevara 1985: 124–125). Capitalism maintained exploitation and alienation. Under socialism, the new man could not think or act like this. Socialist labour was a means of overcoming alienation, eradicating exploitation, and building communism. Socialist labour enabled the workers to join for a common, mutually beneficial cause. As such, socialist labour was something that the workers should partake in for moral reasons, and not merely for money. Guevara promoted this mentality by championing volunteerism (Guevara 1985: 130). Besides working overtime at his ministry job, he performed unpaid construction and agricultural labour. Simultaneously, the government instituted moral incentives and work quotas. If a worker exceeded their quota, they received a commendatory certificate rather than a pay increase. Guevara’s rationale was that a person’s ideology was a stronger foundation for socialism than their material satisfaction. Socialism would be securer if people were poor but ideologically communist, as opposed to rich but ideologically bourgeois (Guevara 1985: 135–136).

Che’s political economy augmented this philosophy. During the early 1960s, Che became disillusioned with Soviet political economy, especially its excessive promotion of enterprise financial autonomy and material incentives. Che argued that these policies neglected the significance of moral incentives and centralised planning in the communist transition. Socialism had to gradually eliminate the market economy, commodity production, and money itself. By taking an incremental approach to some of these aims, and backpedalling on others, Che warned that the Soviet Union risked reviving capitalism (Yaffe 2009: ch. 9). With these arguments, Che “made an important contribution to both the theory and practice of constructing socialism” (Yaffe 2006: no pagination). The Soviet Union collapsed partially because its leaders ignored Che’s warnings. In the 1980s, Cuba used Che’s critique of Soviet political economy to inform its Rectification policy, “which pulled the island away from the Soviet model before it collapsed, arguably contributing to the survival of Cuban socialism” (Yaffe 2006: no pagination).
Fidel Castro’s Marxism

Fidel Castro made outstanding contributions to Cuban Marxism (Liss 2018: ch. 4; Nahem 2017). Like Che, Fidel promoted the Cubanisation of Marxism during his practical experience as a revolutionary leader. Using Marxism as a guide, Fidel led the 26 July Movement to victory in its guerrilla struggle, after which he governed the Communist Party of Cuba from its founding in 1965 until 2011, during which time Cuba developed into a socialist state.

Fidel played a leading role in integrating the fundamentals of Marxism-Leninism with the revolutionary ideas of José Martí, a combination unique to Cuba (Martínez et al. 2020). Fidel recognised that Marxism would not succeed in Cuba if communists copied its principles from abroad. The Cuban people would reject Marxism if they saw it as an alien ideology. To be successful, Marxism had to complement and develop the revolutionary legacy of Cuba’s national hero, Martí. Fidel ensured this by constantly linking the theory and practice of Marxism-Leninism to Martí’s legacy. In doing so, Fidel ensured that the Cuban people accepted Marxism as the continuation of Martí’s cause, thereby strengthening both. Fidel viewed this as his most important ideological achievement: “I believe that my contribution to the Cuban Revolution consists in having made a synthesis of the ideas of Martí and of Marxism-Leninism and having applied them consistently in our struggle” (Castro 1985: 163).

Fidel also contributed to Cuba’s distinctive emphasis on the revolutionary essence of Marxism. Starting from the Marxist premise that the revolutionary transformation of society continues until communism, Fidel argued that the Cuban Revolution did not end with the guerrilla victory in 1959. It continued from there, in different forms and methods. Although the Cuban masses had taken power, Fidel urged them to continue the Revolution as an essential part of building socialism and communism.

The Committees for the Defence of the Revolution (CDRs) are a unique display of Cuba’s permanent revolutionary orientation. After the revolutionary government arose in 1959, there were still many counterrevolutionaries in Cuba. Whilst some opposed socialism ideologically, others sought to promote an insurrection. To suppress counter-revolutionary elements, Fidel proposed the CDRs to uphold the proletarian dictatorship and defend the Revolution: “we’re going to set up a system of revolutionary collective vigilance. And then we shall see how the lackeys of imperialism manage to operate in our midst” (Fidel cited in Fagen 1969: 70). The CDR’s are a network of neighbourhood committees in Cuba, designed to monitor and oppose counter-revolutionary activity. Most citizens are members. Besides mobilising society for the defence of socialism, the CDRs also play a major role in promoting and implementing Cuba’s mass
medical, educational, cultural, and other campaigns, arranging community festivals, administrating community projects, and organising community attendance at mass rallies. In these ways, the CDRs maintain the Cuban Revolution and the revolutionary essence of Marxism.

Fidel also developed a distinctive method of mobilising the masses. Marxism maintains that the masses are the motive force of the revolution and building of communism. Communist leaders can only direct the construction of socialism successfully if they arouse the masses to activity and maintain their support and participation. Fidel upheld this principle in a unique way. From the early days of the Revolution, Fidel maintained close links with the masses, by going amongst them and updating them on everything. Whenever the government made a major decision, Fidel would publicly explain it to the masses. In the Plaza de la Revolución in Havana, Fidel routinely addressed over a million Cubans with his speeches, where he would ask them questions, seek their approval, and whip up their enthusiasm for the Revolution. By addressing the masses in this direct way, Fidel was able to bypass the state apparatus and harness their revolutionary energies for the tasks of socialist and communist construction.

His own special way of fusing himself with the people can be appreciated only by seeing him in action. At the great public mass meetings one can observe something like the dialogue of two tuning forks whose vibrations interact, producing new sounds. Fidel and the mass begin to vibrate together in a dialogue of growing intensity until they reach the climax in an abrupt conclusion crowned by our cry of struggle and victory. The difficult thing to understand for someone not living through the experience of the revolution is this close dialectical unity between the individual and the mass, in which both are interrelated and, at the same time, in which the mass, as an aggregate of individuals, interacts with its leaders. (Guevara 1985: 124)

Due to Fidel’s distinctive way of mobilising the masses, the Cuban Communist Party and government never lost touch with the motive force of the revolution under his leadership. This was also a major reason why Cuba survived the collapse of Soviet Marxism-Leninism. The Soviet Bloc leaders lost their legitimacy, and ultimately, their power, because they became divorced from the masses.

**Conclusion**

The foregoing analysis offers four key takeaways. The first is that Marxism-Leninism has never been an alien imposition in Cuba. It has never negated Cuba’s revolutionary traditions. Marxism-Leninism arose in Cuba as the natural
continuation of these traditions. José Martí, Cuba’s national hero, endorsed core Marxist principles, including the necessity for a revolution, anti-imperialism, social justice, and a vanguard party. The first Cuban Communist Party recognised and inherited these traditions, as did the 26 July Movement. There is an unbroken line of ideological continuity from José Martí to the establishment of Marxism-Leninism in Cuba. As such, the notion that Marxism-Leninism contradicts Cuba’s revolutionary heritage is untenable.

Second, Marxism-Leninism is neither dead nor obsolete. Cuba’s communists have embraced Marxism-Leninism because they see it as the truth. Cuba believes that the doctrine is still a scientific theory that offers the correct solutions to social problems. This is so because Cuban revolutionaries have never been dogmatic doctrinaires. As revolutionaries first and foremost, they have only endorsed those ideas that have helped establish Cuba as an independent and democratic state, one that provides social justice for all. The Cuban people embrace Marxism because they believe it is the best theory for securing these objectives.

Third, Marxism-Leninism has never contradicted Cuba’s national conditions. At each stage of the revolutionary process, Marxism has been flexible enough to adapt to the needs of the times, and advance the Cuban people’s struggle for national independence, democracy, and socialism. Cuba has not altered its national circumstances to suit Marxism. Rather, Marxism has been creatively developed to suit Cuba.

Fourth, Cuba’s communist leaders have not simply copied Marxism-Leninism from the Soviet Union or anywhere else. Each leader has integrated the fundamentals of Marxism-Leninism with the history, values, and world outlook of the Cuban people, thereby achieving the successful Cubanisation of Marxism. This means that it is impossible to grasp Cuban Marxism-Leninism by reading Soviet, Chinese, or other foreign interpretations of the doctrine. Cuban Marxism has succeeded by developing a distinctively Cuban flavour.

The rise and success of Cuban socialism is inseparable from the rise and success of Cuban Marxism-Leninism. The two are one and the same. As such, studies on Cuban socialism should pay more attention to Marxism-Leninism, the ideology that continues to guide the country’s policies. Since Cuba’s leaders take Marxism-Leninism seriously, then so should all who want to understand Cuba.

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