BOOK REVIEWS


Reviewed by Renzo Llorente


If there is one quality that defines coverage of Cuba in the “mainstream” media, it is surely tendentiousness: news items almost invariably focus on social problems in Cuba or ineffective policies of the Cuban government, while downplaying or ignoring the formidable challenges which the country faces and the ongoing successes of the Cuban Revolution. This tendentiousness also explains the phenomenon described by Salim Lamrani in his Introduction to Cuba ¡Palabra a la defensa!: despite obviously being a victim besieged by the United States, Cuba routinely finds itself in the dock. Moreover, unlike other defendants, Cuba is practically never granted the opportunity to respond to accusations and state its side of the story (pp. 15–16).

A collection of ten interviews, Cuba ¡Palabra a la defensa! aims to help remedy the one-sided coverage of Cuba by allowing ten eminent figures, seven of whom are Cubans, to respond to the criticisms and accusations regularly levelled at Cuba. Lamrani, who has already authored and edited several fine books on Cuba, is a skilful interviewer, as he showed in his widely discussed 2010 interview with Yoani Sánchez, which dealt a devastating blow to the dissident Cuban blogger’s credibility and moral authority. Although Lamrani plainly shares many of the opinions and perspectives of his ten interviewees, his questioning is no less probing and direct than in his interview with Sánchez.

The first three interviews are with Mariela Castro, Ricardo Alarcón and Max Lesnik; these are both the longest and most substantial chapters in the book. The conversation with Castro, Director of the Centro Nacional de Educación Sexual (CENESEX) and daughter of Raúl Castro, offers a frank discussion of homophobia and sexual diversity in Cuba. Castro rightly insists on the importance of contextualising the homophobia that existed in Cuba after the triumph of the Revolution – the whole world was homophobic at the time of the Revolution, and the World Health Organisation continued to regard homosexuality as a mental illness until 1990 (pp. 24–5) – but also acknowledges and condemns the
institutional homophobia that existed in Cuba in the mid-1960s and early 1970s. Castro points out in this connection (p. 32) that discrimination against gays was actually far worse during the “Quinquenio Gris” (1971–6), which was a consequence of the National Congress on Education (April 1971) and its recommendations for cultural policy, than during the period from 1965 to 1968, when some gay Cubans suffered mistreatment in the now infamous UMAP (Unidades Militares de Ayuda a la Producción). She also admits that Cuban society continues to be homophobic, “pero mucho menos que antes” (p. 50). At the same time, Castro cites many examples of progress, from the decriminalisation of homosexuality in 1979 – which was, Lamrani notes (p. 42), two years before it was decriminalised in France – to the 17 May anti-homophobia day, celebrated annually in Cuba since 2007.

Lamrani’s interview with Ricardo Alarcón, former Cuban ambassador to the United Nations and former president of Cuba’s National Assembly, is the longest chapter in Cuba ¡Palabra a la defensa! As in his conversation with Castro, Lamrani poses questions that reflect common criticisms of Cuba, and the topics include the condemnation of Cuba for allegedly holding political prisoners; legal restrictions on migration; and the nature of recent economic reforms. Alarcón provides very cogent explanations in addressing these and other topics. Particularly valuable are his explanations for policies that have surely puzzled many a sympathiser with the Cuban Revolution, namely the long-lasting restrictions on Cubans’ freedom to sell their houses or automobiles. In fact, there were, Alarcón explains (pp. 70–5), good rationales for such restrictions: in the case of houses, the need to prevent the accumulation of property; in the case of automobiles, the need to prevent profiteering from the resale of cars imported by the state and sold to officials, or exceptionally deserving Cubans, at heavily subsidised prices.

Perhaps the most stimulating interview in this valuable book is Lamrani’s conversation with Max Lesnik, Fidel Castro’s early political comrade who went into exile in 1961. Lesnik’s commitment to dialogue with the Cuban government, coupled with an uncompromising defence of Cuba’s sovereignty, make him a controversial figure in Miami, where he has had to endure numerous attempts on his life. In the interview, Lesnik offers insightful analyses of political questions within Cuba, yet what makes it particularly absorbing is his sober assessment of the US government’s attitude and policy toward Cuba. In discussing the economic reforms in Cuba, for example, he observes that the US “aprovechará la nueva situación de libertad de empresa para usarla contra la Revolución y para desestabilizar el país” (p. 130), a policy which complements the US economic embargo: “El mantenimiento de las sanciones tiene como objetivo impedir el desarrollo del país” (p. 132).
In addition to the interviews with Castro, Alarcón and Lesnik, Lamrani has included interviews with four other Cubans: the writer Miguel Barnet; the late Historian of the City of Havana, Eusebio Leal; the writer and former minister of culture, Abel Prieto; and the founder of the Cuban film institute (ICAIC), Alfredo Guevara, who died only weeks after being interviewed for the book. These four interviews are, as noted, both shorter and less interesting than the first three chapters (which make up nearly 60% of the book), although they, too, contain many interesting comments and observations, such as Alfredo Guevara’s characterisation of Fidel Castro’s historical significance: “Fidel se encargó de la gran tarea de la independencia, de la soberanía y de la lucha por la dignidad de nuestro pueblo y de cada persona” (p. 195). The final three chapters consist of interviews with the former US diplomat Wayne S. Smith; the French politician Jean-Pierre Bel; and the former president of Guatemala Álvaro Colom Caballeros. While Smith’s illustrations of the inconsistency, hypocrisy and dishonesty in US policy toward Cuba are instructive, the interviews with Bel and Colom add little value to the book. Lamrani would have done well to omit these interviews and include instead additional conversations with Cubans (ideally, Cuban women).

While all of the interviews included in Cuba ¡Palabra a la defensa! appear to have been conducted between 2013 and 2015 and the book was published before the death of Fidel Castro, the book’s questions and answers do not prove the least bit dated. This is partly because Cuba faces the same challenges, both internally and externally, as it did in the early 2010s, but above all because mainstream media coverage of Revolutionary Cuba remains as inadequate today as it was in the past. Anyone who wishes to hear Cuban perspectives on these challenges and voices that the mainstream media systematically ignore will gain much from reading Cuba ¡Palabra a la defensa!