

Is Cuba Different?

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Review: *Cuba Since the Revolution of 1959: A Critical Assessment*. By: Samuel Farber. Chicago, IL: Haymarket Books, 2011, 378 pp., \$24 paper

Since the 1930s, most of the international left has defined their “socialism” not as the uncompromising defense of working class self-organization and self-activity, but as the uncritical support of one or another regime that claimed to be “socialist.” Whether they idealized the Soviet Union, China, Cuba, Albania, or North Korea, most socialists have placed the defense of their particular “socialist fatherland” above the needs of working people at home and abroad. The twists and turns of the Communist movements in response to the changing domestic and diplomatic needs of the bureaucratic rulers of these societies have resulted in the most grotesque distortions of socialist politics: the ultra-left sectarianism of the “Third Period” that led to the surrender of the German workers’ movement to Hitler in 1933, the “popular front” derailing of revolutionary upsurges in France and Spain in 1936-37, war-time patriotism and strike breaking in the United States in the early 1940s, undermining of mass strikes across western Europe in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and support for brutal repression of workers’ movements in Hungary (1956), Czechoslovakia (1968), and Poland (1980-81).

The collapse or self-transformation of the bureaucratic regimes in the late 1980s and early 1990s profoundly disoriented the international left. The Chinese and Vietnamese bureaucracies’ opting to abandon centrally planned command economies for a version of state capitalism that continued single-party rule, and the Soviet and Eastern European ruling elites’ embrace of neoliberal capitalism and profoundly limited forms of parliamentary rule fueled the notion that “socialism is dead” not only on the political right and center, but for most of the left. Shocked that the leaders of the “socialist countries”—not pro-Western “dissidents” or imperialist powers—restored capitalism, most of the pro-Communist left was unable to envision any other alternative to capitalism. Since the early 1990s, most of this left has either retreated into politically irrelevant nostalgia for the “socialist past” or embraced attempts to make neoliberal capitalism a bit more “socially responsible.”

Opposed to the supporters of what Hal Draper, a founder of this journal, called “socialism from above” there has always been a minoritarian current of anti-Stalinist advocates of “socialism from below.” This political current has long argued that the bureaucratic regimes were in no sense socialist. They not only defended the notion that socialism is the democratic self-rule of working people, but also argued that “socialism from above” was an untenable basis either for an anti-capitalist politics in the West or a viable alternative to capitalism in the east. On the one hand, revolutionary democratic socialists argued that the Communists’ counter-revolutionary politics in the capitalist world were rooted in their political and ideological subordination to the ruling bureaucracies in the post-capitalist world. Only currents that rejected both capitalism and Stalinism could hope to renew revolutionary socialism. On the other, the bureaucratic command economies were unviable socially and economically. Without either democratic planning and control of the economy, or the “whip of the market,” the post-capitalist economies would stagnate and ultimately implode. Not surprisingly, it was the partisans of “socialism from below” that were able to maintain their revolutionary opposition to capitalism after the collapse of the bureaucratic economies.

Among anti-Stalinist revolutionary socialists, there was one tendency that combined steadfast opposition to the bureaucratic regimes and the Western Communist Parties with the insistence that “Cuba was different.” The Fourth International, whose most well known leader was Ernest Mandel, long argued that Cuba was exceptional among post-World War II anti-capitalist revolutions. They claimed that Cuba’s was the only revolution, after 1917, led by a non-Stalinist revolutionary organization. The July 26th Movement’s roots in Cuban anti-imperialist politics made it different from the Chinese, Yugoslav, or Vietnamese parties. Led by non-Stalinists, the Cuban revolution produced a very different type of post-capitalist regime. While acknowledging the absence of institutions of workers’ democracy—multiple, competing political parties, and workers’ and community councils with real control over planning and social life—this tradition insisted that Cuba was a non-bureaucratic society. Pointing to the radical, anti-imperialist and anti-capitalist pronouncements of Castro and Guevara, these comrades claimed that the Cuban leadership and their supporters in Latin America were revolutionaries, far to the left of the increasingly reformist, pro-Soviet Communist Parties.*

I have identified with the Fourth International for over forty years. For much of that time, I too argued that “Cuba was different.” For much of the 1970s and 1980s, I believed that the absence of democratic rights, even for socialist dissidents; the growing alignment of Cuban with Soviet foreign policy (support for the invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968 and the repression in Poland in 1981, apologies for the authoritarian PRI regime in Mexico); and the repression of gays and lesbians were “anomalies”—“errors” of an otherwise healthy, revolutionary leadership. By the early 1990s, however, my thinking began to change. I started to question the notion that a post-capitalist regime without workers’ control could resist the growth of a privileged, bureaucratic ruling elite for over thirty years. In this process of reevaluating the Cuban revolution, I was fortunate to be able to grapple with the works of a number of anti-Stalinist Marxists. It was the work of Jeanette Habel, in particular her *Cuba: The Revolution in Peril* (1991), that helped me understand how the absence of socialist democracy had produced wide spread alienation, especially among Cuban youth, by the late 1980s. While Habel, one of the Fourth International’s experts on Cuba, resisted the conclusion that Cuba had become another Soviet-style bureaucratic society, her analysis forced me to radically reconsider my political assumptions.

Ultimately, it has been nearly thirty years of discussion and debate with Sam Farber that has led me to the conclusion that Cuba was never different. In both numerous and lengthy informal discussions, and reading Sam’s essays in *Against the Current*, *New Politics*, and *International Socialist Review*, and his full-length books *Revolution and Reaction in Cuba, 1933-1960* (1976) and *Origins of the Cuban Revolution Reconsidered* (2006), I was forced to critically reexamine all of my assumptions about the Cuban revolution and the regime it created. Through these exchanges, I came to understand how the Cuban revolution, despite the limited participation of the bulk of urban and rural laborers, could overthrow capitalism and establish a polity and economy modeled on the Soviet Union.

Farber has synthesized, updated, and deepened his analysis into a comprehensive history of the Cuban revolution since 1959. *Cuba Since the Revolution of 1959: a Critical Assessment* is an extremely timely book. The Cuban Communist Party, under the leadership of Raul Castro, has announced plans for a radical economic liberalization of the Cuban economy—without any political democratization—including the lay-offs of hundreds of thousands of state employees. Farber traces the roots of the current crisis of the Cuban regime to the absence of socialist democracy from the destruction of capitalism in Cuba in 1960-61. In a work that moves effortlessly from a lucid analysis of the long-term stagnation of the Cuban economy, to the vacillations of Cuban foreign policy, the position of workers, Afro-Cubans, women, and LGBT people, to the repression of dissidents, Farber demolishes both right and left-wing mythology about Cuba.

Beginning with a synthesis of his earlier work on the origins of the Cuban state, Farber restates his thesis that the alienation of all social classes—capitalists, workers, peasants, and professionals and managers—from the Bonapartist Batista government created the conditions for a relatively socially isolated group of *déclassé* intellectuals and professionals to overthrow capitalism and establish a bureaucratic regime. He delineates how Che Guevara's and Raul Castro's Stalinist sympathies before 1959 facilitated the revolutionary Cuban government's adoption of the Soviet model of bureaucratic "monolithic unity." Repression, from the beginning of the revolution, was not directed solely at right wing, pro-capitalist elements but at dissidents—socialists and democrats—who challenged the consolidation of a single-party dictatorship in Cuba.

The chapter on the Cuban economy recognizes the impact of the criminal U.S. embargo and the end of Soviet aid after 1989 on the Cuban economy. However, Farber convincingly argues that the main cause of the current economic crisis is found in the very structure of the bureaucratic command economy. Farber traces how top-down planning produces "big thumbs and small fingers"—the capacity to effectively carry out mechanical and repetitive operations (mass inoculations, hurricane evacuations), but not operations that require flexibility and innovation (the development and introduction of sophisticated labor-saving techniques). The result has been chronically low levels of labor productivity, enormous waste of resources, and a slow but steady "hollowing-out" of investment in plant and machinery. In response, the Cuban regime's economic policies, since the mid-1960s, display the same "zigs and zags" between hyper-centralized planning and market liberalization that marked the economic history of the Soviet Union, China, and Eastern Europe. Ultimately, workers have borne the costs of economic stagnation in the form of deteriorating standards of living, including in the social provision of health care, housing, and education, over the past three decades.

The heart of *Cuba Since the Revolution of 1959* is Farber's account of the positions of workers, Afro-Cubans, women, and LGBT people in Cuba. While recognizing real improvements in the lives of working and oppressed people in Cuba since the revolution, Farber points to how the absence of self-organization limits these gains and leaves the bulk of the population vulnerable to bureaucratic abuses in the past and the ravishes of market reforms in the future.

While workers have enjoyed secure employment until recently, they face the active collaboration of enterprise managers and the state-run unions in attempts to raise productivity through speed-up and deskilling. The absence of independent unions is especially dangerous as the regime moves to introduce market mechanisms—including unemployment and falling real wages—against which workers have no means of collective self-defense. A similar pattern marks the experience of Afro-Cubans, women, and the LGBT community. While gains have been made by all of these traditionally oppressed groups and, in the case of LGBT folks, vicious homophobic repression has ended, this has been the result of top-down decisions made by party-state run "mass organizations." The ban on any and all independent, self-organization of the oppressed not only puts their fate in the hands of "enlightened" bureaucratic despots, but also leaves them vulnerable to new assaults as the economy is liberalized. Already, Afro-Cubans have experienced a *de facto* exclusion from the best jobs in the tourist industry—the main source of "hard currency" for those without family abroad—because they are viewed as "less presentable" than light-skinned Cubans.

Farber moves to an analysis of the emerging dissident currents that have emerged in Cuba since the 1990s. Pointing out that all open dissent is at the whim of the Cuban party-state machine, Farber argues that most of dissident opinion, including within the Cuban Communist Party, tends to be pro-market. Left-wing criticisms tend to be muted. At best unorthodox members of the Communist party are allowed to describe the problems of Cuban society—growing economic inequality, the double-day for working women, institutional racism against Afro-Cubans—but are clearly forbidden to analyze its roots in the bureaucratic regime, no less advocate radical, democratic reforms. Farber identifies

the website Havana Times as a possible locus for the emergence of a revolutionary, democratic socialist current. Ultimately, he argues that a revival of “socialism from below” in Cuba requires the reemergence of independent working class struggle and organizations, in particular unions.

Farber also engages various attempts to apologize for the Cuban regime. He effectively dissects claims that despite bureaucratic rule, Cuba is a beacon of “modernity” and “progress” in Latin America, arguing that only working class rule—embedded in institutions of popular democracy—can be a stable and viable alternative to capitalism and imperialism. Finally, Farber analyzes the economic reforms proposed at the 2011 Sixth Congress of the Cuban Communist Party. Demolishing claims that Raul Castro’s proposals for a radical liberalization of the Cuban economy, including the reintroduction of mass unemployment, was the result of “popular consultation,” Farber demonstrates that these proposals—like similar proposals in the other Stalinist regimes—are the product of the deepening crisis of bureaucratic rule. Farber predicts that Cuba will probably proceed along what he calls the “Sino-Vietnamese road”—where elements of the party-state officialdom (in particular the Army, which has become the largest employer in Cuba through joint ventures with foreign private capital) institute a form of state regulated capitalism while maintaining repressive, single-party rule.

Cuba Since the Revolution of 1959: a Critical Assessment is essential reading for anyone on the left concerned with the history and future of the Cuban revolution in particular, and of socialism in general. Farber’s meticulously researched and lucidly argued investigation of over half a century of Cuban “socialism” presents a challenge to supporters and opponents of the Cuban revolution on both the left and right, particularly for those anti-Stalinists who believe that “Cuba is different” from other bureaucratic societies. For those of us who have long argued that only a democratic, revolutionary socialism can pose a viable alternative to capitalism, this book is an essential weapon in our political and theoretical arsenal. My only criticism is that Farber fails to present an explicit theory of the bureaucratic societies. Such a theoretical framework would help establish two key points. First, the social and economic crisis in Cuba is not simply the result of “bad policies” of certain leaders or the criminal U.S. embargo, but is rooted in the bureaucratic character of the planning process. Second, the Cuban leadership’s social position makes it impossible for them to “opt” for greater workers’ democracy, leaving them the alternatives of presiding over a deepening crisis of the bureaucratic economy or attempting to restore capitalism. In sum, an explicit theory of the bureaucratic societies would have greatly strengthened Farber’s claim that Cuba is not different.

Reviewed by Charles Post

P.S.

* From New Politics: <http://newpol.org/node/679>

* CHARLES POST teaches sociology at the Borough of Manhattan Community College-CUNY, is active in his faculty union, and is a member of Solidarity. In the interests of full disclosure, I read and commented on one of the chapters in *Cuba Since the Revolution of 1959: a Critical Assessment* before its publication. I would like to thank Sam Farber and Kit Wainer for comments on an earlier version.