


Cuba: Achievements and Crossroads

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ABSTRACT: The destructive obsession of the United States with Cuba persists after six decades, and the blockade continues with as much intensity as the counterrevolutionary plots. The reforms to reverse the stagnant economy have been postponed for fear of undermining the social gains of the revolution. However, a mixture of market and combined forms of accumulation with state protagonism is unavoidable to recover growth. The recent protests reflected these tensions, which the government managed by neutralizing the right-wing exploitation of social unrest. Renewing the political system would allow processing the economic and social mutation underway. The feat of sustaining the Revolution is recognized internationally by the significant regional current of solidarity and ignored by social democracy, which covers imperial harassment with a polite mask. The experience of Eastern Europe has debunked the illusion of a socialist *denouement* from actions sponsored by the right. Left critiques must offer viable alternatives based on contemporary experiences.

KEYWORDS: Cuba, Cuban revolution, update of Cuba's model

1. *Introduction*

SINCE THE 1960S, CUBA HAS BEEN the main regional obsession of the White House. No U.S. president has dispensed with the package of invasions, conspiracies, and aggressions against the island prepared by the permanent staff of the State Department. Trump redoubled the barrage by obstructing travel and family remittances and adding 243 additional harassing measures.

Biden did not modify the stifling policy demanded by the Florida lobby. He maintained the legal classification of Cuba as a “terrorist

state,” resumed the withdrawal of accreditations for Cuban officials, and at least until 2022 refused to comply with the agreed-on visa quotas.

It also favored a renewed deployment of their communicational artillery through a sophisticated engineering of fake news. After excluding the country from the Summit of the Americas, Biden tried to expel Cuba from UN organizations and injected more dollars to the organizers of the anti-Cuban campaigns.

The U.S. president maintains the blockade as a premeditated strategy of suffocation to make the daily life of the population unbearable. This chokehold was reinforced during the pandemic, affecting the supply of medicines to a country that imports a considerable portion of the most essential ones and the inputs to produce them locally.

The Helms-Burton Act also obstructed the energy supply, which prevented companies trading with Cuba from doing business in the United States. This type of strangulation tripled the cost of maritime freights and amplified the financial imbalance generated by the blockade. These losses have already totaled 147 billion dollars over the last six decades (Rodriguez, 2021).

No White House spokesperson has been able to justify a siege that contradicts the well-considered principles of free trade. The semantic flip-flop of presenting it as an embargo does not modify the siege’s brutality. The blockade seeks to provoke a humanitarian disaster, to force Cuba’s surrender, and to present further foreign intervention as an act of relief. That is why Biden has also obstructed donations. He recently reestablished flights and modified the limits on remittances to regulate a flow of migrants not seen in decades.

2. *Economic Adversities*

The U.S. siege exacerbated the severe restrictions the country faced during the pandemic. Like the rest of the region, the country lacked sufficient resources to cover the confinement of the population. However, it had to deal with additional external financing difficulties due to the unresolved outstanding payments with foreign creditors.

The coronavirus also devastated tourism, the primary source of foreign exchange and an essential driver of economic activity. In order to sustain GDP growth, 4.5 million visitors were needed in 2020, but

the country received only 1.3 million tourists. The subsequent recovery to 2.2 million visitors in 2021 did not allow to restore the levels required to support the functioning of the economy.

This adversity also occurred in the problematic situation generated by the failure of the monetary unification. This initiative was expected to set up the necessary commercial and financial framework to promote a sustained reactivation. It is now debated whether this monetary directive was poorly designed or ill-timed, but it did not achieve its objective for various reasons. This failure, in turn, aggravated the new inflation problem. Hurdles in oil imports worsened the situation adding fuel shortages and the reappearance of blackouts at a time when the worst harvest in recent times has been experienced.

These difficulties do not simply express the inconveniences of the economy's cyclical ups and downs. Cuba has a severe problem of stagnation, which has prevented it from achieving the expected growth with the gradual introduction of mercantile mechanisms.

The 1% or 2% annual increase in GDP contrasts sharply with the expected 4.5% expansion. The collapse suffered during the pandemic (8%) was an exceptional event that does not differ from the regional average. However, the medium-term obstructions affect the entire productive circuit and present a singular profile.

The diagnosis of these misfortunes is well known. Cuba can survive on tourism, the sale of vaccines, and the export of medical services. However, if it does not produce rice, beans, meat, or vegetables, the asphyxia will tend to recreate itself repeatedly. Basic manufacturing processes are increasingly necessary to cope with the suffocation of the external sector.

Here too, solutions have been discussed, but their implementation tends to be postponed repeatedly. The reasons for this delay stem from the dangerous social consequences of the changes already endorsed. There is evident hesitation in implementing transformations that could aggravate social inequality.

Reforms do not only imply an increase in the incidence of the market. They imply the presence of a stream of investors that would modify the structure of state ownership, with the State retaining financial control while granting its management to private interests. The delays in these changes stem from the potential of these transformations to

lead to a capitalist restoration. Such a regression would reverse the outstanding achievements of the Revolution.

This threat hangs over all the initiatives underway. The monetary unification, for example, is conceived to facilitate the inflow of dollars and reduce the crippling lack of foreign currency. However, if a mechanism of fiscal compensation is not established to curb the inequity generated by this influx of funds, the social gaps will only get wider. Those who receive dollars would be placed at the top of the pyramid *vis-à-vis* the sectors deprived of these resources.

3. *Unavoidable Dilemmas*

The dilemmas faced by the Revolution have been present since the formulation of the reform plan in 2011. They had their first test with the reduction of the role of the rationing “libreta,” which ensured the basic supplies of families. Subsequent uncertainties have persisted in a framework of low growth. This stagnation restricted the income needed by the State to compensate for the consequences of a more significant role of the private sector.

The Revolution brought about a substantial process of social equalization with no precedent or equivalent in the rest of Latin America. No other country achieved with so few resources the equalization that Cuba achieved in education, health, culture, sports, or social assistance. The reforms have been postponed for fear of destroying that heritage in the new model, which assigns greater centrality to the market and a growing importance to combined modalities of accumulation.

However, implementing changes has become a requirement of the very mutation the country is facing. The crisis of the 1990s abruptly modified the social homogeneity that followed the Revolution, and since then, three overlapping circuits of state, mixed, and mercantile economy have been consolidated.

The first segment brings together activities supported by the public budget, the second links private investment with state-owned companies, and the third brings together the broad sector of fragmented self-employment and small private businesses, which generates their own forms of income.

This sector already involves 22% of the employed population, and its stagnation reflects the obstruction faced by the Cuban economy. It

has not managed to overcome the stage of simple reproduction nor become an engine of commercial take-off (Ortiz, 2022). It remains a precarious segment, with irregular development and coexistence with the other two sectors affected by the same lack of dynamism.

The result of these shortcomings is the absence of the expected take-off with the reforms and the consequent lack of a course of accumulation that would recompose the socialist horizon (Regalado, 2021). In this lack lies the contrast with the high level of activity achieved by the models of China or Vietnam (Valdés, 2022a).

These schemes molded the previous trajectory to the international scenario created by the implosion of the USSR, with strategies aimed at avoiding a repetition of that collapse. Their economic growth counterbalanced this danger, but generated new contradictions derived from social inequality and the tension between the State and internal capitalist sectors. This molding is part of the dynamic to forge prosperous societies in underdeveloped countries that require high growth rates.

Lenin was the first to recognize and confront this type of dilemma when, in the 1920s, he promoted the partial restoration of the market (New Economic Policy or NEP) to counteract the adversities imposed by the international hostility and isolation of the Russian revolution. Cuba now faces the challenge of finding its own development path, knowing that it is integrated into a Latin American scenario as distant from the old Soviet context as it is from the current Asian framework.

Cuban leaders have debated this crossroads since the collapse of the so-called “socialist camp” and after sustaining the epic of the “special period” with admirable heroism. They are aware that there are no magic solutions around the corner.

The island is harassed by the U.S. imperial power while it wages an extraordinary struggle against the millionaires of Miami. The Revolution has endured with popular support, walking a narrow path of hardships and difficulties. However, it now needs to foster an economic upswing by implementing the delayed reforms. That course requires perfecting state control, to combine growth with the preservation of the Revolution’s social gains.

4. *Assessing the Protests*

The economic rethinking has become imperative after the street demonstrations — a phenomenon that has affected not only Cuba but

several other countries facing economic hardships after the pandemic. These mobilizations had resonance in the neighborhoods with the greatest social problems and were preceded by a visible uneasiness in the lines to buy products.

The protests had three very different moments. With actions by artists, they debuted on November 27, 2020, gained visibility with the marches of July 11, 2021, and failed in the new call for mobilization on November 15 of the same year. The three episodes were very different in their origin and outcome.

The first call was driven by a limited action of intellectuals, who exposed their discontent without proposing channels to resolve their demands. The second movement was significant for its extension and for the social displeasure expressed by its participants. It was not a majority, but it included important popular segments with significant shortages. The third call had no echo because right-wing forces led it with the undeniable purpose of destabilizing the government. The bulk of the population rejected this type of action.

The government remained cautious, knowing the potential right-wing exploitation of social unrest. It organized some counter-marches to demonstrate the effective support of the Revolution, but lowered the tone of the confrontation and prioritized the political battle.

The government opted for a dual strategy that avoided frontal clashes, but included selective arrests. It developed a response as far from simple repression as from naïve tolerance. It sought to sincerely acknowledge the adversity of the context in order to redouble its political bet (La Tizza, 2021).

With this orientation, the government managed to frustrate the operation mounted by the right-wing opposition to transform the discontent into an episode destructive of the Revolution. Washington's direct influence on the leaders (Yunior García Aguilera, Magdiel Jorge Castro) and the organizations (Archipiélago, Patria y Vida, el Movimiento de San Isidro), which have driven this counterrevolutionary attempt, is evident (Veiga, 2022).

This frustration of the right wing was corroborated during the past year. Despite the dire living conditions, difficult access to medicine, food, transportation, and electric power, the logistics and money the State Department provided were insufficient to reproduce relevant street movements. It is likely that the explicit alignment of the organizers with the Miami groups has discouraged turnout. The

discomfort with the hardships the island is going through did not lead to the acceptance of the reactionary vengeance these groups promoted.

However, the problems persist, and the rejection of the right-wingers does not annul the difficulties that surfaced in the street demands. Probably the sector that most explicitly expressed its concern in the protests was the new segment of the precarious and self-employed. They are the emerging segments of a mercantile circuit that does not take off, segments lacking defined political identities or cohesive subjectivities (Ortiz, 2022).

Renewed state aid has calmed social discontent without resolving it, while another significant tendency — towards emigration — is now manifest. The economic response to these challenges involves combining reforms with adjustments in the political system.

5. Mutations in the Same Structure

The appearance of street mobilizations different from those traditionally organized by the government illustrates a more diversified political scenario. The government demonstrated that it can successfully dispute the primacy of the street, but this advantage does not modify the change introduced by a growing political heterogeneity.

The current institutional system is flexible and allows the inclusion of all the actors in the new context after its revitalization with the new Constitution. It operates as a structure anchored in popular power through a model opposed to bourgeois constitutionalism. It functions around multiple integrated assembly mechanisms under the Party's leadership.

However, that regime was forged under the leadership and arbitration of Fidel. His leadership played an irreplaceable role because of the authority he exercised over the whole society. The same system, deprived of that command, no longer has the old safeguard and operates with a different dynamic. It is not only Fidel who is absent. All the architects of the Revolution are now replaced by a new generation, which must adapt the political model to other institutional patterns.

The corrective measures have been debated and involve an agenda of collegiate decisions to achieve greater efficiency in the public administration, decentralization of the municipalities, and separation of Party and State bodies. The new Constitution, its electoral

law, and its plebiscite component facilitate these transformations, but their actual effectiveness requires an effective adaptation of the leading sectors (Valdés, 2022b).

Citizen participation in the elections and the definition of the issues subject to referendum confirm the existence of a firm basis to support this adaptation. However, the Revolution needs greater participation from below to renew its legitimacy and sustain its continuity through a new consensus. Despite some progress in this agenda, the rotation of leaders and the assimilation of young people into the political system are still largely pending issues, which Cuba is processing under the complex adversity imposed by the U.S. siege.

This encirclement by a gigantic imperial power imposes a state of defensive alert, which forces to sustain the heavy budget of modernization of the armed forces with the reduced resources of the State. Washington not only facilitates all the aggressive operations promoted by the ultra-right in Florida. It also sustains radio and TV interference and refuses to discuss Cuban sovereignty over the military stronghold of Guantanamo. The magnitude of the imperial threat is evident when one hears the mayor of Miami call for a proper Pentagon intervention by means of air strikes similar to those perpetrated in Panama and the former Yugoslavia.

The Cuban political system has demonstrated its ability to sustain its David against Goliath stance for decades. However, the renewal of its strength requires adapting the current political structure to an internal scenario of growing diversity of opinions. This variety is compatible with the common underpinning of Cuban sovereignty.

The new multiplicity of viewpoints includes a broad spectrum of revolutionary political strands — Fidelistas, Guevaristas, conventional socialists, pesepistas, critics, anarchists — which battle in common against the pro-capitalist currents — centrists, social democrats, socio-liberals, annexionists (Valdés, 2022b).

These political struggles tend to be transparent under the current model of popular power. This system is more effective than the multiparty system promoted by bourgeois constitutionalism. The formal diversity of political organizations that characterizes the latter regime is totally fictitious when a handful of capitalists hold the effective power of society. The republican masquerade of counterweights usually conceals the domination exercised by the wealthy with their military, judicial, and media partners. The Revolution is based

on another model, which tends to adapt to the transformations that society is experiencing.

6. Debates and Battles Abroad

The internal discussions in Cuba include a complex variety of approaches to determine the scope of the economic reforms, the protests' profile, and the political system's renovation. On the contrary, outside the country, the debates are crossed by more basic confrontations of contestation or defense of the Revolution. In Latin America, the main divide separates the promoters of burying the current system (following the path opened with the collapse of the Soviet Union) from those in favor of sustaining and improving the current model.

The confrontation between both positions has intensified in the heat of the growing influence achieved by the ultra-right. All reactionary currents are obsessed with demolishing Cuba and have transformed that objective into the guiding agenda of many journalists and influencers. They have specialized in spreading lies about the island and multiplying infamies against the Revolution.

They all act under the command of neo-fascist groups based in Florida, who incite hatred to renew the old program of incursions against the island. That sector of the bourgeoisie of Cuban origin settled in the North maintains great influence in the U.S. establishment and shares the imperial yearnings of the first power.

Because of the magnitude of these enemies, Cuba's resistance elicits admiration and support among the progressive and popular sectors of Latin America. In that country, a revolutionary project was preserved under harsh conditions of isolation and external plotting. In addition, for a long time, they sustained improvements in the educational and health fields, which were praised throughout the region.

Even in the recent dramatic scenario, Cuba made substantial progress in the Abdala, Soberana I, and Soberana II vaccines, as well as other vaccines and medicines. It will be the first Latin American country to generate immunization against COVID-19, reaffirming the capacity already developed against meningococcus. These successes crown a long work experience in the country with the highest number of doctors per capita in Latin America.

Solidarity with Cuba has been a cohesive principle of the bulk of the Latin American left, which has accumulated a long experience of actions to support the Revolution. Important support demonstrations have occurred in numerous Latin American cities in the last two years. These marches contributed a message of encouragement to the continuity of the resistance the Cubans themselves developed.

The same solidarity extends to the denunciation of the blockade that suffocates daily life on the island and makes it difficult to roll out the reforms. Any economic policy to overcome the country's problems requires the eradication of this external harassment. In 2023, for 31 years in a row, the overwhelming majority of nations represented in the UN voted to lift the U.S. blockade against Cuba (with the sole opposition of the U.S. and Israel, and the Ukraine's abstention). But, repeating the overwhelming majority vote against this siege in the UN General Assembly is not enough. Constant and generalized pressure is needed to bend the arm of imperialism.

This regional support of Cuba is also an act of retribution for a Revolution that contributed to the durability of the Latin American Left. The vitality of this space, in contrast to what happened in other areas of the planet, is largely due to the permanence of a socialist project 90 miles away from Miami. The contrast with what happened in Eastern Europe after the collapse of the USSR reflects Cuba's regional gravitation.

That influence has even fetched the sympathies of some presidents and many officials in the region. They see in Cuba an exemplary defense of sovereignty that has been lacking in most of the region. This is why López Obrador proclaimed that the island should be declared a "Historical Heritage of Humanity" and adopted new measures to strengthen solidarity.

7. The Social-Democratic Deception

The firmness exhibited by most of the Latin American Left in Cuba contrasts with the adaptation to imperial harassment that prevails among the social democrats. Their political current does not participate in acts of solidarity and joins all the criticisms promoted by the regional establishment against the Revolution.

The letter of some intellectuals criticizing the organizations that refused to support the protests is an example of this submission

(Comité Directivo de CLACSO, 2021). They lashed out harshly against an “authoritarian government” (Diario de Cuba, 2021), omitting the measured way in which the Cuban government responded to the protests (in sharp contrast with the manner in which, say, France, Germany, or the U.S. have recently treated their protesters), the brutal harassment suffered by the island, and the consequent right it has to defend its sovereignty.

Some social democratic thinkers favor the equidistance between Miami and Havana, attributing Cuba’s problems to the fanaticism propagated by extremists on both sides. However, they place on the same plane two alignments that are not comparable. A powerful U.S. imperial aggressor does not tolerate challenges a few kilometers from its border.

Also, these same political ideologies ponder the dialogue between the government and the opposition as the primary channel to solve Cuba’s difficulties. However, they do not clarify the agenda and political framework of these talks. In fact, they promote the disarticulation of the country’s institutional structure.

They disguise that purpose with a ritual exaltation of “civil society,” but advocate the disarmament of a system that has made it possible to resist imperialism. They avoid registering the brutality of the right-wing plans and disqualify the danger posed by their incursions as if there were no proof of the conspiracies organized from Miami. Furthermore, they postulate that the blockade is only one problem among many others, omitting the devastating consequences of that siege.

This detached social democratic view relativizes the severity of the imperial threats. It disregards the importance of the external financing received by the opposition. It assumes that the intense struggle for the defense of Cuba can be carried out in cordial terms of republican kindness. They ignore the prominence of a new ultra-right wing and its determination to demolish the Revolution. As this crude scenario does not agree with their sweetened messages, they opt for all kinds of vagueness in their reflections on the island.

The social democratic view is also reactive to the heroic trajectory of the revolution. Sometimes, it mocks the “Cuban novel that the left has constructed” and considers the confrontation with imperialism as out of fashion. This position is in tune with the comfortable world of NGOs, but has lost touch with the reality of the region (Kohan, 2021).

8. *Entanglements and Contradictions*

Social democrats tend to blame the government of Cuba for the social unrest and consider it the architect (or accomplice) of an adjustment that underpins the restoration of capitalism.

They believe this reintroduction has already been completed and that the protests registered on the island are similar to any other popular uprising in Latin America (Sorans, 2001). Some declare their enthusiasm for these actions, observing in their development the potential germ of a socialist dynamic. They perceive this foundation in the disgust against capitalism expressed in the questioning of the “Special Stores” (Altamira, 2021).

However, at no time do they clarify what would be the connection between these events and an anti-capitalist development. Neither do they provide antecedents of processes of that nature in any country in the last decades. The experience of that period rather illustrates outcomes opposite to those imagined by those authors. It is enough to look at what happened in Russia or Eastern Europe to assess more sensibly what happened. No protest in that region led to the renewal of socialism. On the contrary, they all anticipated the restoration of capitalism and the burial of the socialist project for a prolonged period of time.

The danger of repeating those bitter experiences in Cuba is evident, and the forces supporting such a remake under U.S. auspices are very active. They are promoting the exaltation of “civil society” with the same phraseology of humanitarianism that in those countries anticipated the neo-liberal alluvium. The current ultra-right governments of Eastern Europe emerged from that wave.

Some more realistic visions recognize this potential regressive trend and call for counteracting it without suggesting how to develop such an antidote. Instead, they consider that the primacy of a counterrevolution is relatively inevitable in the current context of international adversity (Sáenz, 2021). They call for a struggle against this influence without indicating any effective path for such action. In fact, they suggest that the masses will have to go through the harrowing experience of a right-wing command to later rediscover the advantages of socialism.

Reviewing what has happened in the last decades, the proposal to walk together with the right wing along some common path that

will finally lead to socialism has no credibility. Its own proponents do not insist too much on spreading it, and in their chronicles, they limit themselves to describing the facts, recognizing the imperialist management of the opposition. However, they do not accept that in the face of U.S. harassment, the defense of Cuba is a priority. This support can only be developed in the Revolution's own camp and never on the opposite side (Katz, 2021).

9. Alternatives and States of Mind

Other left-wing groups postulate more balanced approaches, but equally critical of the Cuban government. They consider that Cuba has faced the blockade with extraordinary heroism, avoiding the restoration of capitalism that they understand to be consummated in the rest of the planet. They consider that in Cuba, a bureaucratic administration still distant from capitalism has prevailed (Unified Secretariat 2021).

However, this characterization contains a striking divorce between statements and conclusions. If a small locality in the Caribbean has managed to maintain the historical project of the socialists (which was abandoned by deserters from other latitudes), it would only be appropriate to congratulate the architects of that feat. They would have managed to resist the restorationist wave with insignificant resources and in great international solitude. Such a feat would deserve a simple message of admiration, because what weight can any criticism have in the face of such a gigantic achievement? The solidarity that prevails in the Latin American left obeys, in fact, intuitions of this type.

On the contrary, the cautiously critical vision exhibits great impatience in the absence of a more accelerated course of socialist development. However, such a course involves a long journey that Cuba cannot traverse alone. Those who have repeatedly stressed the "impossibility of building socialism in a single country" sometimes assume that this goal could be achieved in a small corner of the Caribbean.

The protracted and complex nature of a socialist transition has been much emphasized in the country's internal debates. The very use of the term Revolution in capital letters points to this long sequence, as opposed to the current interpretation of this concept as a revulsive event, punctual and limited to the change of a social regime.

Criticism is also aimed at placing the axis of Cuba's problems in the absence of a genuine socialist democracy. The serious mismanagement of the economy is attributed to this deficiency. However, objections of this type have been persistent in the internal history of the Revolution since no one is unaware of the negative consequences of bureaucracy, unproductivity, and ineffectiveness in countless sectors of economic life.

However, experience has also demonstrated the inexistence of sudden solutions to these adversities. The mere extension or deepening of democracy does not entail solutions to economic dilemmas. The model of "socialism with democracy" is an empty phrase when it evades concrete proposals to resolve the difficulties. These remedies are not linked to the simple expansion of popular sovereignty.

Cuba faces, for example, a pressing need for foreign exchange, and its procurement generates the social inequalities accompanying remittances, tourism, and foreign investment. How would the simple expansion of democracy solve this dilemma? The proponents of this solution do not offer answers to this question.

Sometimes, they allude to workers' control of management as the great corrective, but they do not clarify how this mechanism would work. How would it work, for example, in the tourist sector that provides the dollars? Would each company define the administration of the foreign currency required by the whole country? Is there any international precedent to evaluate such a scheme?

One merit of this view has been to underline the importance of cooperatives. However, no economic model in any country develops around these associations. They always operate as complementary modalities of more determinant structures of the economy, and strategic decisions are processed in this second plane.

By avoiding the evaluation of concrete national models of contemporary development, this faintly critical view lacks real referents to the amendments it imagines for Cuba. With this omission, all debates are placed in the universe of abstraction and good intentions. If there is nothing to learn from any country (China? Bolivia? Vietnam?), it is impossible to imagine solutions to the crossroads facing the island.

Certainly, Cuba has not succeeded in forging a model that combines the market with capitalist investment and socialist planning. However, at least it is testing that course, registering the impossibility of overcoming the current crisis with another path that keeps the horizon

of an egalitarian society. This course is undoubtedly problematic, but at least it provides a path to follow.

On the contrary, the lack of answers and alternatives induces pessimism and despair, which is very visible in some chronicles or experiences of the island. However, the Revolution never validated resignation in the face of difficulties. It has always underpinned the convictions and hopes linked to all the fighters for socialism.

That tradition can be enriched with contributions to the alternatives that Cuba is developing in the convulsive scenario of Latin America. As this context continues to be conditioned by imperial policy, further analysis of the ideological underpinnings of such policy is required. Also in need of special analysis is the extent to which the current geopolitical context in Latin America, with its new Left tide combining with the challenges to the U.S.-dominated “rules-based order” by Russia and China, open new opportunities for Cuba.

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