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## How to Visit a Socialist Country

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Travelers from the United States to Cuba cross more than ninety miles of sea: they cross decades of history. They may be limited to one suitcase, but they carry trunks full of ideological baggage, including biases about Cuba, beliefs about communists, commitments as to what a good society should be like, and a collection of conventional poli-sci formulas about power, government, and human behavior.

One Cuban commentator notes: Coming from North America or Europe to a typical Cuban urban neighborhood, the visitor's first impression might be one of poverty: crumbling or poorly maintained buildings, pot-holed streets, ancient cars, homes where there are few "extras" etc. On the other hand, if you arrive from Latin America or another developing country, other aspects of Cuban life might get your attention: no street kids, no malnourished faces, no beggars, and people walking the streets at night with almost no fear.<sup>1</sup>

Or easily identified as foreign, visitors may be beset by scouts for private, tiny restaurants, offers of guides, *ginateras* (a Cuban euphemism for prostitutes, usually amateur).

Members of delegations usually have planned itineraries, visiting various institutions and cultural events. They will learn about health care, education, cultural and sport resources, commitment to an ecological pathway of development, urban agriculture, equitable distribution through the rationing system, full employment, formal aspects of the political and judicial systems, achievements in gender and racial equality. These are all real, and demonstrate how far a poor country can go with so little. But it is obviously not the full story. There is nothing sinister in this. These are the things in which Cuba has pioneered, and of which Cuba is most proud and eager to show the world

When you get to know people better, the descriptions become more nuanced. Given the platform of achievement, difficulties and dissatisfactions command people's day-to-day attention. Basic equality has been undermined, not by socialism but by concessions to capitalism. There is no homelessness, but some 16 percent of the housing is classified as substandard. There is no unemployment, but there are wasteful jobs, such as parking lot attendants, that have become necessary only because of the inequality. There has been a massive recruitment of teachers in order to reduce class size, but teaching is not just a job, it is a calling. People enter on a wave of enthusiasm and some learn it isn't their thing, leading to a great turnover in the teaching profession. And there are people who manage to live without working. There is little crime by U.S. standards, but you still have to lock your car.

My own experience has been that the more committed revolutionaries have the most serious, complex, and thoughtful criticisms, while counterrevolutionaries mostly complain about particular hardships or unpleasant incidents.

Tourists who are on their own are exposed to less of the proud achievements and more of the dissatisfactions. Cubans are a complaining people. An old joke in Havana stated that, in Cuba, all economic plans are over-fulfilled. All plans are fulfilled, but the stores

are empty. The stores are empty, but people have what they need. People have what they need, but they all complain. They all complain, but are all Fidelistas.

Sympathizers with the Cuban process, as well as anticommunist leftists, sometimes carry a clipboard and grade sheet so that they can grade Cuba for health care, sexism, racism, pollution, homophobia, elections, number of political parties, a free press, strikes, or whatever else is on their minds. In the end, depending on the grade point average Cuba accumulates, they can decide if Cuba "is" or "is not" socialist (or whether socialism is or is not a good thing). Then they write praise or denunciations when they get home. The items on the grade sheet may be liberal, a list of rights we fight for under capitalism and then turn into universal principles. Or they may come from *a priori* schemes for socialism, principles such as "bottom up, not top down," or "workers' councils running the factories."

There are also expats living in Cuba, Americans who find the tranquility and sense of collectivity and purpose worth the hardships of daily life. Others are there by accident of marriage, and a few are political refugees. They are uniquely able to interpret Cuba to Americans and to provide a friendly foreign insight for Cubans. And Americans who divide their time between the two countries can offer a unique insider/outsider view of both countries.

The grade sheet approach is subject to many kinds of error. Those doing the grading do not talk to people who are a representative sample of Cubans. Their accounts are influenced by what they think you know already, what they think is important for you to know, what is uppermost on their minds at the moment, whether they want to sell you something. Imagine yourself being accosted by a Martian in Harvard Square with the question, "What's it like here on Earth?" I recall being approached by a well-dressed woman on a bus in Havana who told me in English in a loud voice, "Here you can't say anything!" This unleashed a rowdy, bus-wide seminar on politics, Miami, and everything else.

The things visitors see or hear about are not set in context. I was once at an international meeting where a U.S. delegate got up and asked why it was that the Cuban government won't allow foreigners to see the same television that Cubans see. She went to her hotel room, turned on channel 6 (Cubavision) and got a blank screen. She could not access Cuban national programs, only CNN and the tourist channel. With her previous images of totalitarianism, she assumed that this was an act of censorship. But in those days of the Special Period, with acute fuel shortages, Cuban TV only broadcast for a few hours a day, morning and evening, while during the day the blank screen was the national channel, shared with the Cuban people. My criticism is not that she was mistaken—it is easy to make mistakes in an unfamiliar environment—but that she made a particular kind of mistake that filled in gaps in her knowledge with prejudices from her own society.

Another misunderstanding comes from applying good judgments to the wrong society. For instance, visitors observe from the Cuban press that many military officers hold government positions, and some are delegates to the National Assembly. In Cuba this does not mean that "the military" is taking over. There is no "the military" as a separate caste as there is, for example, in Pakistan. Rather, what we see are Communists whose social assignment had been defense. With the economic problems Cuba faces, it does not make sense to have a large military sitting around waiting for an invasion, yet Cuba

does have to be prepared. Part of the solution has been the use of the armed forces in economic activity, generally with better administration than other enterprises and officers experienced in economics. It is these out-of-context applications of judgments from other situations that confuse many people who would like to be allies of the Cuban Revolution.

But beyond these simple mistakes, the whole notion of grading the revolution is flawed.

Socialism is not a thing but a process, the process by which the working classes of the city and countryside and their allies seize the reins of society to satisfy their shared needs. Through a telescope, we get a glimpse of the world-historic significance of the first efforts to replace not only capitalism but also all class society by a more generous, just, and sustainable way of life. That is, we are trying to overcome a ten-thousand-year detour during which our species adopted agriculture, deforested much of the planet, grew in numbers, and extended our life span and knowledge and destructive capacity, divided into classes so that we were no longer a "we," and expanded our productive capacity to the point where we can dispense with classes and become a "we" again.

This is more important in looking at the first century of socialist innovation than how well these revolutionaries do it, the particular decisions and those unexpected changes that surprisingly occur, and even the enormous difficulties and deficiencies of this effort. But, through the microscope of daily life, all these details are of overwhelming importance, and world history is no compensation for a lack of protein in the diet. We need both the telescope and the microscope.

Socialism is a complex path, zigzagging and contradictory, because the participants have different interests, respond in diverse ways to the events along the way, differ in knowledge and goals, in urgency and long-term perspectives. The same experiences can transform their aspirations in numerous directions, sometimes along converging pathways, and sometimes along divergent pathways.

The phrase "and their allies" has an enormous importance, because the struggle for socialism is very heterogeneous. This heterogeneity imposes many of the characteristics of the trajectory. People join the struggle for socialism for many reasons, but in general, they begin with the abhorrence of their most deeply felt miseries in the present society. These miseries are different for different groups within the revolutionary block. Some revolutionaries are conservatives struggling to defend their customary rights, when the dominant class is attempting to deny them. In Latin America, indigenous communities rise up to defend their land rights against transnational corporate exploitation and environmental degradation. In countries where their cultures are most intact, such as Bolivia, Ecuador, and Venezuela, and in the Mexican state of Chiapas, traditions of community decision-making, collectivity, and the striving for consensus carry over to the evolving political forms of socialism. Sometimes sections of the middle classes join the struggle for national independence.

In China, even many of the landlords allied themselves with the Communists, because they were the most militant and consistent defenders of Chinese independence against the Japanese invasion. Meanwhile, Chinese entrepreneurs wanted the overthrow of feudal constraints on their freedom to exploit. Later, they became a force for capitalist undermining of socialist goals. Some of the intellectuals wanted a meritocracy free of corruption, but were indifferent to the peasants. They all helped to make the revolution and push and pull about its direction.

Within the 26th of July Movement in Cuba, there were professionals enraged at the regime of corruption and repression of President Batista. Only some of them rejected the subordination of the Cuban government to U.S. imperialism. Among those who did, only some wanted deeper social justice. The working class shared these objectives with their middle-class allies, but also aspired to social justice. This social justice meant, in the first place, jobs with a decent income, adequate medical care, clean drinking water, and education. For some, social justice went further to include gender equality, the abolition of racism, and even the abolition of homophobia. A few dreamed of reversing the deforestation and erosion of Cuba.

Social Democrats usually favor a redistribution of consumption, as seen in the Scandinavian societies and Brazil, with a narrow salary spread and broad social consumption, but without a redistribution of ownership and state power, although with working-class participation in government. The petty bourgeois allies of the working classes are generally more educated, have more confidence in themselves, are more articulate, more comfortable with speaking up and writing, have had more experience in leading and managing. Therefore, they are often overrepresented in the early leadership of revolutionary movements. Starting in the early years of the revolutionary process, the components of the revolutionary block mutually influence each other. People, regardless of their class origin, see opening vistas of transformation, find their biases challenged, change their notion of what life should be like.

In the 1960s, I flew on an airplane leaving Havana for Spain with quite a few housewives of the upper middle class. They were disaffected because they met the revolution mostly as hardship, and feared for the religious education of their children, while their husbands saw in the building of a new society the compensation for material privation. Very different political currents may converge in the development of a revolutionary program, and their origins may be visible in the early demands of revolution. When things do not turn out as desired, people may turn against the whole process.

But the ambitions and individualism of capitalist society can adapt to new circumstances. People may seek office to compete for influence, and express their biases under the new circumstances. People who have been deprived may see their liberation as access to the privileges of the former rulers. The overworked may imagine socialism as liberation from work. Urgent needs may overwhelm long-term goals, and improvisations that are useful for the moment may be disastrous in the long run. Rosa Luxemburg warned that we are trying to construct the future with the materials of the past, including ourselves. Heroism and sacrifice may coexist with greed and ambition in the same individuals, solidarity with sexism. (Cuban women commonly described their husbands in the 1970's as "revolutionary in the street, reactionary in the home"! There is a high divorce rate in Cuba. The Women's Federation notes that men dream of women who no longer exist, while women dream of men who do not exist yet.)

Some may even see privilege as the reward for years of risk and sacrifice, as happened in Nicaragua during the notorious *piñata*. One South African social climber stated quite frankly that he didn't risk his life in the underground in order to be poor! A communist youth leader in the United States confessed to me years later, when he had become a liberal on the road to becoming a conservative economist, that during the years of his militancy, when the persecution of leftists was just heating up, he had expected the revolution to triumph, not only in his lifetime but while he was still young, and that there would be a prominent place for him in it.

Revolutions may be overthrown in struggle with external and internal class enemies, submerging back into capitalism in the same way that early steps toward capitalist development were thwarted in Sung China, the Renaissance Italian city states, Bohemia during the Reformation, and in Egypt under Mohammed Ali in the nineteenth century. Polish feudalism had a kind of revival, as late as the sixteenth century, that was dependent on Western European mercantile capitalism, especially the demand for grain. Compromises with capitalism may not only be emergency measures for survival but also undermine morale and commitment.

Because of conflicts between the revolutionary and counterrevolutionary sectors, because of external enemies, because of the heterogeneity of the movement, because of inexperience, and because of the enormous problems of finding a just way out of backwardness, not everything that happens during a revolutionary process is the result of the wishes of any particular group or of its leaders. And not every change of policy is the result of a struggle among leaders, or some trend toward "reform," or the rise or fall of "hardliners."

The lexicon of political science calls up false dichotomies regularly to explain changes in policies or practices. Among these, "reformer" versus "hardliner," and "pragmatists" versus "ideologues" are among the most frequently invoked. Pragmatists are not supposed to care about principles; they presumably just want to "get things done." Of course this dodges the question, "What things?" If the "things" are indicators of economic growth, then some policies make sense; but if the goal is meeting the needs of the population or strengthening its capacity to resist, other measures are practical.

Similarly, commitment to meeting the needs of the people can be labeled "ideological" in contrast with neoliberal commitment to the market as "non-ideological." If someone's beliefs are the same as our own, they are called principled, if counter to our own, they may be labeled "ideological." And measures we approve of are "pragmatic," while if we do not like them, they are "opportunist."

Another favorite explanation of policy change of the bourgeois poli-sci lexicon is that ubiquitous quote from Lord Acton: "Power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely." Popular also is its corollary: The overriding goal of those in power is to stay in power. This is almost never true. Even President Bush would never promote universal free health care, subsidize Venezuela, or renounce Jesus just to stay in power. While ancient rulers erected monuments purely to celebrate their power and military success, and looted tribute, today, behind every facade of power-hunger, there lurks a person of principles, though these may be noxious principles.

Had Lord Acton grown up in a third world country with a ruling class and government subordinate to the U.S. Embassy, he might well have added, "Impotence corrupts, and absolute impotence corrupts absolutely." That is the tragedy of the Puerto Rican government today. Acton might, then, have better understood the corruption of the governing strata of so much of the global periphery that is blamed for poverty, under the rubric of "lack of responsibility."

Policies change because circumstances change or because people learn. Rationing in the hardest times in Cuba has been the guarantee of at least minimal equality in food access. At other times, when more varied goods are available, it may be an obstacle to distribution and create a niche for "middlemen." Farmers' markets can make more produce available but also permit profiteering. Tourism may provide important flows of

foreign exchange but also become foci of corruption and undermine equality. Policies shift to reconcile opposing demands on an over-taxed system. The Internet may be limited mostly to institutional users when the cost in dollars of satellite access is too great, or may be made more accessible when resources are available—an expression of ordered priorities, rather than “reform.”

The Cuban policy of limiting hotel accommodations mostly to foreigners was grossly unfair, but necessary to capture desperately needed foreign exchange. To offset this, a certain number of rooms is reserved for Cubans who can use them according to socially determined priorities. For example, newlyweds get first crack at them (this has since been dropped in favor of higher wages), or there may be prizes for outstanding work. Since outstanding work usually means a combination of productive labor and social contribution, this policy makes good sense to Cubans, but would look like political discrimination to critics. A beautiful atlas of Cuba costs something like \$100 in the tourist shops, clearly out of reach for Cubans. But my Cuban friends bought it for \$10, still a burden but manageable. It has often been the case that widely publicized measures that undermine socialist values are partly offset by less well-known measures designed to mitigate that harm.

Any study of socialism must examine these real historical processes, rather than begin with an abstract checklist for evaluating a country’s socialism. In what follows, I will draw heavily on my experience as a participant/observer in the Cuban process, but with reference to other revolutionary movements as well, and give perhaps excessive weight to issues of democracy because these are usually the most contentious.

### The “Logic” of Socialist Development

If a socialist revolution does survive, there is a distinct kind of logic to its development that gradually asserts itself. “Logic,” in this sense, is no mystical spirit of the times or universal laws above human activity. (“Laws” never govern a historical process. They are intellectual constructs extracted from real processes and used to interpret observations). It is the set of social relations, challenges, commitments, categories of analysis, and dominant ideas that set the conditions within which human beings make decisions. It is the set of principles that determines the array of possible, acceptable, sometimes obvious, decisions and excludes others. It is the range of options for confronting all the urgencies that must be met in order to continue the socialist project. Sometimes some of these have to be postponed because of material limitations, lack of qualified people, lack of consensus, or the hostility of neighbors. But if too many of these imperatives are denied for too long for any of these reasons, the whole trajectory might collapse and the society revert to capitalism. History is not a smooth advance from backward to modern but a branching and looping process structured by social relations. These branch points are very much influenced by which people are doing the deciding and how they do it.

The logic of socialism makes some decisions seem necessary, obvious, and attractive. Among these are full employment, universal free health care and education, equality, and environmental protection. Others might appear to be self-evident goals but have to be redefined. For instance, consider “efficiency.” “Efficiency” seems to be an obvious self-evident good, and societies strive to be more “efficient.” But efficiency has had very different meanings in different contexts. In the Hebrew Bible, agricultural efficiency is measured by the number of seeds harvested per seed planted (it was about 1-3 seeds harvested per seed planted—above a ratio of 1:1, there is seed for the next sowing and,

above that level, there is food!).

In land-short Europe, a reasonable measure of efficiency has been yield per hectare. In the United States, with traditionally abundant land and scarce labor, "efficiency" was yield per labor day, and the boast was that one farmer could feed forty people. More recently, ecologists have talked about energy efficiency and calories harvested per calorie invested, and have insisted that the "real costs" of a process be measured—not only production costs but also the costs of cleaning up the pollution. The feudal estate had no overall measure of efficiency. It might be very productive in grain but lacking in timber or meat, with no way to exchange timber for meat, and lots of labor power but not enough good land to use it well. Shadow prices used to integrate it all might tell us that, for three hundred years, an estate was losing money, yet supported lords and serfs. The Soviet kolkhoz (collective farm) was notoriously inefficient in terms of profit. But, among its expenses, the kolkhoz had to provide health care and education for its members, giving it an unfavorable financial spreadsheet but social net benefit.

Since labor is a major expense in production, a company under capitalism is seen to be more efficient if it reduces staff, fires workers, and extracts more surplus value per worker by expanding the working day, intensifying the pace of work, and reducing payment. Fired workers fall off the balance sheet. All this is labeled with the positive term "flexibility." The CEO then gets a bonus. Mergers are often justified by promising to increase efficiency in this sense.

But for a socialist society, with its guarantee that everybody eats, dismissing workers into unemployment does not improve social efficiency. It is simply not an option. There are other possibilities. Sometimes it is best to over-staff and use working hours also for education. With surplus labor, enterprises can release people temporarily to harvest crops or build houses. Or jobs can be eliminated and workers given other jobs with at least the same pay, or they can be retrained for other work, or be paid to study. Cuba has adopted a "study as work" principle for workers displaced from the closed sugar mills. No matter what the decision, in all cases, the criterion of social efficiency at the level of the whole, not the enterprise, is present as a counterforce to shortsighted financial targets.

When multiple societal goals converge on particular programs, they become almost inevitable. For instance, urban agriculture in Cuba satisfied the need of the country for immediately available food when the economy collapsed after the loss of trade with the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. It offered employment at a time when factories closed for lack of raw materials or energy, and for the first time since the revolution there was unemployment. It simplified distribution from farm to consumer as transport became difficult and frequent power failures made refrigerated storage an unsure option. The Ministry of Defense was interested in promoting local self-sufficiency, in case natural disasters or military aggression disrupted national level coordination. Urban vegetable production supported the aims of the nutritionists to shift the Cuban diet from one heavily relying on meat and starch to one with greater vegetable consumption. City planners encouraged the preservation of green areas within the city that mitigated noise, absorbed rainfall and reduced flooding, countered the heating of the city, and encouraged neighborhood social interaction. And, as organic agriculture, it was healthier for the workers. The Ministry of Public Health did not want pesticides in cities. Ecologists pushed for polyculture and biological management of pests and soil fertility. Different organizations, ministries, and institutions had primary concern for one or another of

these goals, but they all converged in making urban agriculture an obvious and, in some sense, an inevitable choice. There were also ideological conceptions that made urban agriculture attractive, in particular, the Marxist goal to restore the metabolism between town and countryside, and the commitment that urban development must not be determined by real estate markets.

Taking a holistic view of agriculture was obvious. But the obvious does not always prevail. Many of the errors committed by the Cuban government were responses to urgency that ignored the broader and long-range consequences of a decision.

Or consider the response of the education system to economic contraction. In the United States, local school boards faced with inadequate resources chose to eliminate what they considered to be unnecessary frills. There was a move to concentrate on the basic skills of reading, writing, and arithmetic at the expense of social studies, literature, the arts, and physical education. Supplies were reduced and classroom size expanded. Ever increasing fees and tuitions were charged to university students. Academic programs in science and mathematics were supported, while those in liberal arts were mostly cut back. All of this made sense within the capitalist framework, where education is required mostly to train competent and docile workers and only a small minority of rulers and innovators, and the student is a customer investing in a better paying job.

Faced with the economic shortages of the Special Period, Cuba opted for educational expansion. Class size was reduced to twenty students per class room (with two teachers) in elementary school, fifteen in secondary school, and ten in high school. Art education was expanded, schools for art teachers established, and special programs were organized for handicapped students. Higher education was expanded by the establishment of university centers in all municipalities. Study as salaried work became an option for sugar workers displaced by the closing of some of the sugar mills.

Both the capitalist and socialist decisions make sense within their respective societies. For Cubans, education is more than training skilled workers. It aims at an informed citizenry, guided by José Martí's injunction "*ser culto para ser libre*" (Be educated to be free). The educational expansion was building for the future, while providing employment for teachers.

The "logic" of socialism emphasizes production aimed at meeting people's needs, basic equality, collective decision-making, and a rising standard of living. Part of that consumption is individual, generally purchased out of personal income. Part is social consumption, received as free health care and education. And part is purchased individually but subsidized from collective resources such as basic food, public transport, cultural goods, and access to sports and recreation. Beyond consumption, a part of the product is reinvested for development. It is here that we see the impact of the blockade. The costs to Cuba of the fifty years of hostility comes out to several percent of the national income, a significant fraction of what the country needs to invest in order to advance. It is this mixing of free, subsidized, and supply-and-demand distribution that makes the measure of Cuban salaries ludicrous. If most Cubans earned the exchange rate equivalent of their salaries, say the oft-quoted \$20 per month, they would all be dead by now.

## Consumption

Since all peoples and most governments claim as a goal a rising standard of living, one

question that arises is, What goods are needed for that rising standard of living that would not be a descent into "consumerism"? It is worth looking at "consumption" more closely. In poor countries, there is a real need to increase consumption of basics—food, housing, health care, public transport, and such. Bill McKibben estimates that up to a per capita income of some \$10,000 a year, increases in income make life better for people and show up in surveys of subjective happiness. People eat regularly, have shelter and clothing, access to healing and learning. That is roughly the level at which infant mortality stops its steep decline with national income.<sup>2</sup>

Beyond this kind of consumption, there is the consumption made necessary by particular social relations. The automobile, originally a luxury of the rich, became increasingly necessary in the United States because of the absence of low-cost public transportation, the development of suburbs and long-distance commuting, the separation of places of residence from places of employment. Office jobs demand certain kinds of clothing. Japanese men need several dark suits, not to keep warm but to keep respectable and employed. Dress codes for women are usually even more demanding.

It seems to be the case that the tastes and styles of a dominant class or society acquire a prestige far beyond any intrinsic value. In the biblical Middle East, Babylon was It. The Israelites deported to Babylon in 586 BCE were dazzled by the splendors of that ancient city to the extent that, seventy years later, when Cyrus the Great allowed them to return home, many of them decided to stay in their land of exile. Later, Herod spent his youth in Rome, partying and networking. And then he tried to bring Roman ways back to Jerusalem. Now, of course, with U.S. hegemony, McDonald's and Coca-Cola acquire a symbolic value far beyond their nutritional or flavor qualities. For many Cubans, their Rome or Babylon is Miami.

Finally, in a society that isolates people from each other, the remedy for despair is shopping. People who have experienced poverty sometimes find safety in accumulating things. And the capitalist imperative to expand leads to gigantic sales efforts to promote those feelings while inventing new ways for people to get into debt. All of these dimensions feed into consumerism.

But for socialism, a rising standard of living is not unlimited consumption of energy and matter. Rather, it centers on a rising quality of life. Therefore, we see a large fraction of the national product in Cuba going into social consumption, health, education, culture, sports, and the environment, even though, in the short run, this may slow down growth and prolong frustrating shortages. Some 10 percent of the gross national product is invested in capital formation, leading to a growth rate that fluctuates around 8 to 12 percent. (Following the devastation of the three hurricanes of 2008, Cuba still managed to grow at about 4 percent, but now, with the impact of the capitalist world recession, growth has stagnated). While there is still so much shortage, and almost any increase in production improves quality of life, it may seem like hair-splitting to criticize consumerism, but this criticism is important for the forming of both social and individual goals.

Perhaps the most complex and contradictory aspect of the socialist process takes place within people's psyches. The exuberance of triumph encourages a voluntarist orientation that assumes we can do anything we set about to do, and speak glowingly of "the new man" (sic) who is devoted to the collective goals, is generous, open, dedicated, and courageous. All this is real but incomplete. Cynics quote the weary adage that "the more

things change the more they remain the same," which misses the real and deep changes taking place to emphasize what hasn't changed. I recall as a child in the 1930s the endless debate as to whether we have to change society in order to change people, or change people in order to change society. Clearly, the answer is a helical process in which new conditions make new behaviors possible, and the changed people can drive the social changes that aim at a world where it makes sense to be kind. But along the way people are a mixed bag.

In times of hardship, some revert to doing individually what the collective can no longer do, while others take hard times as a challenge for greater cooperation and effort. These contradictions differentiate people from one another, but also occur within individuals. It seems as if the typical error of Marxists is to exaggerate the changes in the collective psyche, and we are surprised by the persistence of racism or sexism, class snobbery, careerism, and other bourgeois virtues. Hostile commentators and journalists seek any sign of these to sneer at and dismiss all claims of transformation and hope for progress. For them, what is important is what has not changed or has even regressed. But it is the new that shows possibilities and is exciting, the old that warns us of obstacles and difficulties, and how much is yet to be done.

A Marxist philosophical orientation emphasizes a wholeness, interconnection, and historical context that makes it easier to see how one sphere of life affects the others. This perspective does not determine what happens but rather provides the tools for thinking about what is happening, and deciding what to do. It is a partial counterweight to the inevitable urgencies that encourage shortsighted measures that undermine long-term goals.

This notion of the "logic" of a society resolves the contradiction between the fact that what happens depends on the decisions of millions of individuals and the perception that there are social "laws." It does not imply inevitability, but only contingency: the more a society departs from the imperatives of its "logic," the more trends accumulate that threaten to undermine the whole project. But there are always also countervailing trends at work within socialist development.

## The Gap

In all societies and institutions, there is a gap between proclaimed ideals and actual practice. Priests sin; police officers commit crimes; Buddhist generals lead wars. In societies, a gap is both inevitable and necessary. If there were no such gap, if everything worked exactly as intended, this would be evidence of a dreadful lack of imagination and aspiration. Obviously, we try to maintain the gap not by making practices worse but by raising aspirations.

Under capitalism, the ruling class must proclaim ideals for public consumption and convince people that these ideals are being fulfilled, even if incompletely. Therefore, the gap is constructed for social control.

Brezhnev's notion of "actually existing socialism" attempted to erase the gap by arguing, in effect, "This is all there is, there ain't no more. To ask for more is idealist. So shut up." One view within Christianity acknowledges the gap by seeing the ideals as coming from God and the failure to live up to them as coming from human imperfection or original sin. Even when the Church itself or its leaders fail to live up to their ideals, this is taken as evidence of the need for a Church.

In my own experience, one Sunday morning when, as an incipient teenager, I told my father that I was going out to look for my first communist organization, his response was, "OK. But don't expect a communist organization to mimic a communist society. If it could, we would not need a revolution."

This is one of the inevitable contradictions revolutionaries face. Building socialism is far more complicated and sometimes painful than we imagined, and often a frustrating as well as an inspiring process. The art of it all is to recognize the defects of socialism as both inevitable and unacceptable, to analyze their sources, and to discover ways to struggle against them as part of the revolutionary process, rather than as the justification for abandoning that struggle. One way of framing the contradiction is to see not only the "errors" but even the crimes of socialism in a dual way: they are not socialism, but *distortions* of socialism. But they are also distortions of *socialism*. An analogy is that of plant diseases: corn smut is not corn, but a *disease* of corn. But it is a disease of *corn*, not squash.

The first claim, by itself, could lead to a casual dismissal of a lot of awful things that have happened under socialist banners as being alien to socialism and therefore not really relevant. Pol Pot? Beria? Cayetano? They were never really with us, anyway. This variant also leads to the rationalization of the unacceptable as "necessary." The familiar plea that "you cannot make an omelet without breaking eggs" becomes the illusion that breaking eggs makes an omelet, and then the posturing that smashing of eggs is a sign of militancy. We come out clean and learn nothing. "Objectivity" and "necessity" become the cloaks for cynical instrumentalism.<sup>3</sup>

The second claim, by itself, can also lead to withdrawal, the conclusion that socialism is a naïve illusion that inevitably leads to horrors, so it is enough to look out for yourself. Or to the discovery that because socialism does not look like what people expected, they feel personally betrayed and disillusioned, and justified in joining the other side. Many renegades from socialism have taken this path. Both one-sided interpretations end in cynicism.

## Democracy

Democracy is a crucial issue for socialists. It is worth examining the questions of democracy in the emerging socialisms, not only to correct obvious misrepresentations, but more importantly, to open up our own understanding of democracy. Liberal critics of Cuba, on the grounds of human rights, are very selective as to which articles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights they refer. They usually acknowledge, but pass quickly over, such things as the rights to have elementary needs met, including food, water, education, health care, gender equality, mass access to culture, sports, and security in old age, but downgrade these as unimportant compared to political rights. And their criticism of lack of political rights takes our own formal rights as the only legitimate measure of democracy. In the service of their anti-democratic model of Cuba, they say things like, "Fidel handed power over to his brother Raoul"—when what actually happened was a legal succession from a disabled President of the Council of State to the first Vice-President.

Critics of Cuba, solidly grounded in ignorance, routinely decry the absence of elections. Of course there are elections in Cuba, by secret ballot monitored by schoolchildren and immune to ballot stuffing. Peter Roman's studies are the best account of the processes of election, which differ very much from our elections: the elections are non-partisan but

not One Party (the Communist Party does not run candidates, although many candidates are Communists). Nominations for delegates to the municipal assemblies are made at open neighborhood meetings, and the voting is for one of two to eight candidates. In some 10 percent of the cases, nobody gets more than 50 percent of the vote, and there is a runoff between the top two contenders. There are no campaigns, TV ads, or interviews, but only a one-page biography of each candidate. Cubans boast that you don't have to be rich or have rich friends to run.

At higher levels (Provincial and National), candidates are screened by nominating committees. The stated purpose is to assure wide representation of each constituency and to have the expertise to inform all debates. They want a National Assembly to be as representative as possible of all sectors. But "sectors" means occupations, skills, ages, etc., not political ideologies. It was considered a major achievement in the last elections that the representation of women, Afro-Cubans, and youth increased. The whole process is more like elections in professional societies or our local food co-op than a national political election under capitalism. If you see the election as a process of selecting a diverse group that is well informed and committed, the system seems to work well. But if you look to elections for a battleground of ideologies, it is terribly deficient. While there is no legal obstacle to a dissident running and even being elected, we all know that it would not happen. The elections are all within socialism, not about socialism, except in the sense that participation and voting are a kind of referendum. People look at the rates of participation and blank or damaged ballots as measures of disaffection. By this measure, opposition runs at less than 10 percent, although Party member friends have told me their estimate is closer to 20 percent.

The National Assembly generally considers very few bills in its semi-annual sessions. There are no pork-barrel bills, legislation introduced to embarrass the government, or tomes so vast that representatives vote on them without reading the contents. By the time a major bill comes to a vote, it has recycled through the Commissions of the National Assembly, meetings with constituents, and consultations with concerned organizations. Deputies receive a draft at least twenty days before it comes to a vote. Laws are usually approved unanimously. To the suspicious observer, this looks like the ceremonial rubber-stamping by a docile assembly of decisions already made elsewhere (by the Party? By the chief of state?). However, the legislative process is, in fact, far more complex. Peter Roman studied the working of the National Assembly by tracing the development of the Agrarian Law of 2006. The initiative for the law came from ANAP, the Association of Small Farmers. In 2008 a new Social Security law, which raises the retirement age from sixty to sixty-five for men and from fifty-five to sixty for women, was discussed at 85,301 meetings organized by the labor movement, attended by 3,085,798 participants. Of these, ninety assemblies and 28,596 members voted against the law. The Federation of Cuban Women, spearheaded by the Center for Sex Education, is now working on updating the family code to recognize many kinds of families and strengthen lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender rights. Deputy Mariela Castro is planning to introduce the legislation in a forthcoming session.

The structures of Cuban government have been evolving since the mid-1970s and are still evolving. The invention of socialist democracy is a complex process. Its deficiencies and unresolved problems are its own, measured by its own goals, rather than seen as deviations from capitalist democracy. Among the unsolved problems are:

A. Political Leadership and the Associated Producers. Membership in the National

Assembly is not a full-time job. Deputies have regular jobs, and if they were nominated, it is likely that they also participate in a number of local organizations. They are very pressed for time and do not have staffs assisting them. In a society where a sexist division of labor survives in many homes, this is especially a problem for women. The position has no privilege. It is very demanding, and often frustrating when all the delegate can do is explain why a problem cannot be solved for now. There is a high turnover rate, both because people choose not to run again and because of a highly demanding and critical constituency.

It is desirable to have in the National Assembly both community people with strong ties to their neighbors and experts in the various matters in which the Assembly is involved. These two goals cannot always be met by the same people. The experts are often national leaders in their spheres. In a society where mass education is historically new, there is a great value placed on expertise, which may mean nominating heads of organizations. Thus, the people's parliament is not made up mostly of workers but of leaders of workers. (Somewhat less than half the deputies, mostly those who are also municipal deputies, are workers.)

To a visiting American, who sees leadership as antagonistic to rank and file, in a "them and us" relation, this is suspicious. A gap in life conditions and ideology between leaders and rank and file could be seen as undermining the democratic nature of the process. During the Special Period, inequality increased in Cuba, although not along the division between leaders and constituents. Rather, the new rich are those who receive money from relatives in Miami or work for hotels or foreign companies where they have access to dollars, or those who have the new small businesses that have been permitted, or who run the informal (black market) economy.

But if national leaders with necessary expertise are not always linked to their districts and the rank and file, they may not for that reason be known by or connected to a majority of the voters. I have heard some loyal communists declare that they will not vote for people they do not know. Therefore, as in many European elections, in order to lessen these contradictions, the voters are urged to vote for the nominated slate rather than individual candidates. These have been screened by the nominating committees for their expertise, but it is likely that people who are deemed too critical will be screened out.

Cuban ideology sees its society as becoming increasingly democratic through broad participation and striving for consensus. From the earliest grades, children elect class representatives, and, in all of the mass organizations, the leadership is elective. In some sense, the consultive process undermines the distinction between government and civil society, an unexpected twist to "the withering away of the state" that Lenin anticipated. It makes more sense to look at all mass organizations as organs of society.

Peter Roman describes the National Assembly as follows:

The Assembly (Asamblea Nacional del Poder Popular or ANPP) operates on the basis of five principles. First, it must be representative of Cuban society. Thus there are deputies from most sectors of society and walks of life, including experts in economics, farming, health, education, sports, and other areas under the purview of the National Assembly. Second, there must be close contact and connection with the population. This is achieved in great part by having almost half of the deputies also be municipal assembly delegates. Third, it must consult with constituents, deputies, experts, interested parties,

government officials, the Cuban Communist Party (Partido Comunista de Cuba or PCC), the Federation of Cuban Workers (Central de Trabajadores de Cuba or CTC), and mass organizations regarding proposed legislation and to determine lists of candidates. Fourth, it must allow for the expression of opposition with regard to measures under discussion, such as items within proposed legislation, but not as an organized opposition or as an opposition attacking the system. And fifth, its goal is to reconcile differences in order to reach consensus prior to presenting measures to its plenary sessions.<sup>4</sup>

The relation between local organizations and higher bodies is highly variable. One friend of mine refuses election to secretary of his Communist Party *nucleo* in his workplace because he said the post is limited to conveying instructions from higher bodies about tasks. Another, a diplomat, said that the *nucleo* in his diplomatic mission mostly discusses the tasks of the Mission and has little time to discuss politics. When I reported this to friends at another workplace, they were indignant. Their *nucleo* always discusses politics, and had led the way in demanding the removal of the director of the enterprise because of his neglect of the workers' needs. I attended a discussion with members of the *nucleo* at yet another workplace, while they planned how to present their ecological approach to development at a national meeting and were anticipating the opposition, who remained fascinated by "advanced" technology and regarded ecology as nostalgia for a mythical golden age. One student described to me the debates in his junior high class about rock and roll: the issue was, could you separate the music from the lifestyles of its practitioners?

For all their difficulties, the formal structures of Cuban government are adequate for the running of society by the associated producers. The limiting factors are more ideological than formal. Among these is the first: the siege mentality in response to three generations of aggressive hostility on the part of the United States. This is not an excuse for shortages and inefficiencies but a real live factor in Cuban life.

B. Identity and Difference. A second unsolved problem is that Cuban history is rich with examples of revolutionary upsurges destroyed by disunity among the revolutionaries. Hence, the very high priority placed on unity, which does not always make the distinction between enemy action and disagreement, and thus encourages timidity in expressing sharp differences of opinion. The military metaphor for the siege is widespread. A billboard in Havana, common in the Special Period, showed a portrait of Fidel in uniform and the slogan "¡comandante, ordene!" which surely did not encourage critical thinking.

Fidel Castro is referred to in many ways. Before his retirement, the press would give his string of titles as president of the council of state and council of ministers and first secretary of the party. He is now referred to as the leader of the revolution. Fidel's role in Cuba is dual, as a symbol of the revolution and as the country's most able politician. But the former role predominates and discourages criticism. It also encourages stereotypes, sloganeering, and routinized expressions of approval. Most grating are the speeches read by very young children at open air *Tribunas del Pueblo*, speaking words they could not possibly have written by themselves, and perhaps barely understand.

The premium on unity also sets limits on debate, since people do not want to be marginalized by appearing to be too negative. People would perhaps fear not being listened to seriously, and then passed over for promotions or for access to goodies in short supply, awarded to those who make "contributions to society." Deference toward

respected leaders often deters whistle blowing.

I was present at one forum where a participant mocked participation by reciting: I participate. You participate. He and she participate. We participate. They decide.

This is unfair as a generalization, but does identify the problem of top-down decision-making. Progressives have an aversion to "top-down" as against "bottom up" decision-making, and what is often the same thing, centralized as against decentralized power. Besides offending our notion of democracy, we criticize centralization because it too often leads to wrong decisions by attempting to apply a single rule everywhere, by lack of responsiveness to criticism, by failure to take into account the peculiarities, needs, and possibilities of each situation, and because it under-utilizes the great creativity of communities and the talents of individuals. However, the uniqueness of the particular is also an argument for centralization, since what might be optimal for a locality may not be good for the country. In Yugoslavia, workers' control of the enterprises often led to collectives behaving as capitalist corporations, seeking profit maximization.

In agriculture, the criticism of centralization is also the criticism of industrial scale monocultures. However, they are not exactly the same. It is only under capitalism that we have the category of full ownership, the right to alienate land, determine how it is used, and dispose of its product, all in the same hands. But it need not be so.

In some societies the land belongs to the community but is divided up for production, sometimes periodically, among households according to their need or ability to use it. In other societies, one household has cultivation rights and another has grazing rights, etc. In discussing how farming should be organized, we have to distinguish the units of planning, cultivation, and remuneration. The units of planning depend on the scales at which the plans are relevant. The watershed is a natural unit for some purposes, with crops selected according to their seasonal demands for water and labor and the diversity required to support the consumption and nutritional needs of the population. The desirable size of a field is more related to the kind of crop and the mobility of pests. For instance, I would recommend that a sweet potato field be some forty meters wide and flanked by bananas so that lion ants living in the bananas can forage throughout the sweet potatoes and then move in to nest around the growing tubers and repel the sweet potato weevil. The unit of remuneration cannot depend on the value of the crops harvested, because there is no necessary relation between food value and economic value of a crop. It is not fair to ask farmers to sacrifice part of their income so that their land increases production on their neighbors' land or serves the needs of school lunches. There has to be some redistribution of income among production units to reward equally difficult labor equally. What is obviously needed is planning on multiple levels, according to the scales of the problems.

The appropriate division of authority between local and higher bodies is not something to settle abstractly but depends on circumstance. Once, in the 1960s, a Cuban friend of mine, a seamstress with many years of experience in the anti-Batista struggles, was asked to direct a chicken-breeding farm. She knew nothing about chickens beyond some recipes, but at that time she was a good appointment because they could be sure that she would not sabotage production. She was given very detailed instructions from higher-ups, and welcomed every bit of it. At that time, the lack of trained people made centralization the lesser evil. But sometimes instructions can be stultifying. There is the illusion that central planning means uniform directions for each place, regardless of

conditions, when it can mean the coordination of diversity.

This facet of central planning is similarly present in medicine. It is obvious that each patient is different, and the doctor has to be able to deal with the patient as a whole human being, combining physical examination, history, lab tests, and impressions from talking. But it is also true that inexperienced doctors need backup. Their typical errors come from lack of experience, especially with less common diseases. Long-distance consultation with specialists can be helpful to the young clinician. But the typical error here would be judging by a list of findings from the laboratory or the clinician's reports that might miss the subtle uniqueness of each patient. How to integrate the two kinds of knowledge is a major issue for primary care that cannot be solved abstractly.

For example, the town of Yaguajay decided in 1995 to organize its whole development strategy around health. This was defined broadly, and soon they were evaluating housing, age structure, morbidity and mortality, available health care, the rate of dysfunctional families, and other aspects of the life of the community. In order to do this, they brought in specialists from the various national ministries, not to run the show but to provide the expertise needed, and all was coordinated by the municipal assembly. It turns out that the facile categories of centralized versus local distort our understanding. The problem is how to integrate "bottom up" and "top down," not to decide between them.

The unions are among the mass organizations that play a vital role in running the country. But are they "independent unions," in our sense, or "controlled by the state"? And, if they are independent, how come we don't see strikes in Cuba?

Once again, the visitor is tempted to apply perfectly good criteria to the wrong situation. The relations between the unions and the state are various. Unions may propose legislation in the National Assembly. Many deputies are union members. Twice a year, the unions meet with the cabinet ministers to discuss matters of mutual concern. Unions sponsor nationwide discussions on labor matters and have occasionally rejected proposals from the National Assembly. The state and the unions jointly monitor compliance with labor law (there are many of these violations, caused sometimes by ignorance of the law, sometimes by indifference, or not wanting to make waves when there is urgency to produce, sometimes opportunism). If we do not see workers picketing the National Assembly, it is for the same reason that we do not see bankers or CEO's picketing Congress or sitting in at the White House: it is theirs already, and even if they are dissatisfied with particular decisions, they know they share a common interest.

C. Bureaucracy and Innovation. A common complaint both among Cubans and foreign visitors is bureaucracy. Too much of everyday life is constrained by rules and procedures often applied in rigid and inhumane ways. Many documents, for instance, have to be obtained in order to do some construction on your home, and the offices where you have to go for those documents may be in different places, or not working when you get there—although you arrive at an hour when they should be open—and meanwhile you have taken off from work to go there, and are not attending your own responsibilities. Or the staff at the government office may be deep in conversation and indifferent to your needs, and when all is finally done you can't just go to the market and buy a sack of cement. An innovator with a bright, new half-baked idea cannot dash around the corner to buy a spring and three batteries. (These are the sorts of complaints that figure prominently in the letters section of *Granma* on Fridays.)

But this is not simply orneriness. Bureaucracy arose historically as the bourgeois antidote to feudal caprice in awarding privileges and imposing penalties. The ideal of a uniform application of "the rule of law" without regard to who you are is very attractive and an important part of U.S. consciousness in response to the lawlessness of the frontier. Furthermore, recognized procedures are needed to maintain priorities and fairness. The frustration that someone can't just walk into a store and buy a sack of cement assures that a clinic or school has first call on scarce resources. So the lack of resources itself makes formalized procedures necessary.

Our own rejection of bureaucracy is that it interposes many procedures between a need and its resolution, applies the same measure to all inhumanely, without regard to individual circumstance, or else is violated by the bureaucrats for callous or opportunist reasons. Furthermore, the bureaucratic mentality resists criticism, change, and complaint. The ideal would be a flexible rule of law, applied in ways that treat each according to her or his needs. But this requires a high level of consciousness and commitment on the part of the bureau staffs, and close community monitoring. It is achieved only unevenly in Cuba, although the movement toward "attention to the individual" is a step in that direction.

D. Socialism and the Media. *Democracy is, first of all, the mobilization of the collective intelligence for the solution of shared problems.* How this is accomplished is itself a major challenge. In ancient Athens, a model of democracy (for free men only), there was, of course, no press. The theater was a major organ of opinion formation, and the classic Greek works of theater were often political polemics and satires about well-known public figures. The verses of medieval troubadours, nursery rhymes, and other art forms also served as foci of commentary and opinion formation.

Observers searching for democracy often focus instead on particular indicators that may or may not be appropriate. The mass circulation Cuban press does not fit our image about what the press ought to be, but has long not been, in our country. Its news coverage is sparse, and many articles recount historical occasions or formal events, visits of diplomats, and such. Thus, it is a cross between a newspaper and a magazine. There has been an increase in investigative reporting in the last few years, mostly examining why an enterprise is not accomplishing its mission. Letters to *Granma*, published on Fridays, not only complain about the many frustrations of daily life but also respond to these complaints from the criticized enterprise. Other publications, such as *Havana Times* and *Temas* publish a greater range of opinion.

By and large, the Cuban press is not the organ of opinion formation that liberals think of in their idealizations of the press under capitalism. Once, in the thirteen colonies, when there was a printer on every corner and every printer was a publisher and every publisher had vivid opinions, "freedom of the press" was freedom to oppose British rule and debate the roads to independence. That happy time is long gone. When the media are effectively monopolized, when commercial advertising is "free speech" and psychological warfare and manipulation have become a science, when the costs of publishing have zoomed out of reach for unpopular causes, freedom of the press has become a caricature of what it pretends to be. Psy-Ops warriors can label themselves journalists, don a mantle of objectivity, and demand the protections that that calling has traditionally demanded and sometimes attained. Thus, I discover that I am not for "freedom of the press"! I am for the right of working people and the oppressed to have access to information and the opportunity to debate their concerns. How to implement

this is not a trivial problem, but it is not solved by blanket appeals to "freedom of the press." In Venezuela and Argentina, new laws are aimed at allocating the national broadcast band among the state, community and peoples' organizations, and private enterprise. This contradicts the freedom of the marketplace but expands the new kind of democracy that is being invented before our very eyes.

E. Democracy in Substance and Form. Many other democratic slogans are similarly flawed when turned into absolute principles instead of valid means to humane ends. For instance, in the struggles for civil rights in the United States, people denounced "segregation" and "discrimination." In the context of the prevailing racism, it was an obvious and just and inspiring demand. Then the other side invented "reverse discrimination" to undermine affirmative action. Thus, traditional black colleges and all-women college courses came to look formally like segregation. Whereas, in reality, all-white and all-male institutions are organs of racism and sexism, and all-Afro-American or all-women schools or classes are safe environments for those of the oppressed group who do not want to spend their school years justifying their existence. Some will want to challenge the monopoly of the whites or men and venture into the lion's den, while others need supportive safety to flourish and replenish themselves and then foray out again. So then I learn that I am not against "segregation" but against racism and sexism. It is a common mistake to turn an effective means into a matter of principle and then seem hypocritical when it turns out that that is not what we really want after all.

In Latin America, there have been revolutionary movements in a number of countries, with varying success. Some won government office alone (Guyana) or as part of coalitions (Chile, Uruguay, Brazil). Others achieved state power (Cuba, Venezuela, Bolivia, Ecuador). Each is different, both because of different political situations and because of somewhat different ideologies. It is possible to examine these differences under high magnification and counterpoise them with some criterion, such as whether they came to govern by way of winning elections, mass mobilizations, armed struggle, or combinations of these. Thus, Mark Cooper in *The Nation* sees Salvador Allende and Fidel Castro as opposites, supporting the first and denouncing the second. But these leaders themselves did not see it that way. Allende was always an ally of Cuba, and assisted in the escape of the survivors in Che's Bolivian guerrilla cadre after their defeat. Cuba honors Allende as a revolutionary hero. The important thing about all of them is that they led popular rebellions against the old oligarchies that ruled their countries in alliance with U.S. imperialism. Each has its own history and develops within its own constraints.

They all had different relations to "the rule of law." But the "rule of law" cannot be endorsed unequivocally without first asking, "Whose law?" Thus, in Brazil, where the Workers' Party rules only through a coalition, the Movement of the Landless seizes land in frank violation of property rights that the government is obliged to uphold. In Cuba, the agrarian reform was carried out by law. In Bolivia, Ecuador, Venezuela, and Honduras progressive governments called for new constitutions and a "refounding" of each country on the basis of some combination of representative and participatory democracy, so that the rule of law will conform, as much as possible, with the demands for justice and equality.

### Revolutionary Criticism

As C. Wright Mills famously said in *Listen, Yankee!* "I am for the Cuban revolution. I do

not worry about it, I worry for it, and with it.”<sup>5</sup> We can take this as a general principle. The starting point for looking at an emerging socialist society is 100 percent solidarity with the revolution, an appreciation of its world historic significance, and a deeply felt enjoyment of its achievements. This requires unconditional defense of the revolution, against all attempts to reestablish capitalist exploitation and imperialist domination.

A 100 percent commitment to the revolution does not require agreement with all its decisions or satisfaction with everything going on there, nor even a full appreciation of all its leaders. Criticism is an integral part of the revolutionary’s commitment, and the willingness to look critically should be regarded as one of the requirements for membership in revolutionary organizations. But criticism of the revolution has, as its main purpose, the correction of its weaknesses. It should not be avoided, but neither can it become someone’s main way of participating. The visitor should support, learn from, and enjoy the revolution.

There are three main prerequisites for meaningful, revolutionary criticism:

Criticism must come out of supportive participation. To the extent that one participates as an ally and has actually helped achieve shared goals, critical insights from visitors can be useful and welcome. Remember two things at the same time: that it is their revolution, being undertaken by people much like ourselves, confronting tasks that nobody is ever fully prepared to confront, and facing long-term chronic hostility and immediate, day-to-day hardship and frustration. We look at their efforts with admiration, sympathy, and love. But remember also that it is our revolution too, part of a global process in which we all have a stake, obligations, and rights.

Criticism has to be grounded in knowledge and understanding of the place and times. The first element of understanding is knowledge of the country’s history and culture, where it is coming from, what it is attempting to accomplish, what are its major obstacles. We have to know if what we see is a hangover from the past, a partial advance, a concession to retrograde forces, or an unrecognized problem. And if it is a concession, is it recognized as such or paraded as creative socialism? It is important to know the contexts for each decision. Criticism has to be grounded in the social, historical, and intellectual realities of a country, so that observations can be placed in context and the silly and arrogant errors of ignorance can be avoided. The deeper the knowledge and sympathetic understanding, the ability to distinguish between long-term socialist development and the zigzags of fortune—the more accurate and useful the criticism.

Criticism has to be informed by theory to protect us from being overwhelmed by, but not indifferent to, the immediate. The Cuban experience will allow us to look more skeptically at the slogans of liberal democracy, not in order to trash them, but to see them in their relative validity and ultimate limitation. Helping to place incipient socialism in the context of world history and the survival of our species, seeing both the continuity and discontinuity of our social evolution, will also inform our own struggles for our own country.

Bon voyage!

Notes

↪ Circles Robinson, *Havana Times*, September 2008.

↪ Bill McKibben, *Deep Economy* (New York: Times Books, 2007), 41.

- ↪ This is an example of a pair of propositions, each of which is false separately but which together are true. Another example is "Health is socially determined...You are responsible for your own health."
- ↪ Paper presented at the symposium "Cuba Today: Continuity and Change since the 'Periodo Especial,'" Cuba Project, Bildner Center for Western Hemisphere Studies, Graduate Center, City University of New York, October 4, 2004.
- ↪ C. Wright Mills, *Listen, Yankee!* (New York: Ballantine, 1960), 179