

# Political Struggle and Fixing Cuba's Economy

By Tom Whitney

July 26 is Cuba's National Day of Rebellion. Speaking in Bayamo, President Miguel Díaz-Canel honored rebels led by Fidel Castro who on that day in 1953 attacked military installations of the Batista dictatorship. He outlined current economic challenges and political tasks lying ahead.

Economic problems weigh heavily. Cuba's people continue to face shortages and their incomes remain low, despite recent pay raises. The government's foreign debt is growing and access to credit is limited. Cuba is overly dependent on food imports despite land tenure reforms. The U.S. economic blockade targets foreign investors through implementation for the first time of Title III of the 1996 Helms-Burton Law.

As explained by Díaz-Canel, "The Revolution now needs us to unleash a great battle for our defense and economy so we can break the enemy's plan to destroy and asphyxiate us."

But the Revolution requires also that "we strengthen spirituality in our people, plus civility, decency, solidarity, social discipline, and a sense of public service ... There will be no long-lasting progress if the social fabric breaks down morally." He portrayed the 1953 rebels as fighting with "more moral authority than [with] weapons." He praised the Cuban people for "their moral reserves, and aspirations for growth with beauty."

The Cuban president was reminding Cubans of resources at their disposal as they defend their Revolution. He outlined a mode of political struggle fit for both solving economic problems and dealing with political imperatives.

Political theorist Ellen Meiksins Wood explained what's at stake: "There is perhaps no greater obstacle to socialist practice than the separation of economic and political struggles which has typified modern working class movements. ... The tenacity of working class 'economism', however, derives precisely from its correspondence to the realities of capitalism and the ways in which capitalist appropriation and exploitation actually do divide the arenas of economic and political action ... This 'structural' separation may, indeed, be the most effective defense mechanism available to capital."

What follows is, first, a look at historical instances of fixation on economics harmful to the working class and following that, exploration of the potential for revolutionary politics to determine what happens economically in Cuba.

## Putting economics first

The term "economism" has been used since Lenin's time to characterize a situation of political prerogatives losing out to economic ones and of trouble for the working class on that account. Economism shows up under the auspices of either capitalists or working class movements, but damage at the hands of capitalists is extreme.

Argentinean political commentator Atilio Borón stated recently that capitalists, these "economic materialists," employ "an aborted incomplete, deformed kind of Marxism.

They absorbed only one part of our argument, the one emphasizing the decisive importance of economic factors in the structuring of social life.” Theirs is a “crude sort of economism. It makes sure that what’s good or evil in society is measured strictly according to economic data.”

That’s clear from the history of white supremacy in the United States. The pre-Civil War economic fortunes of both South and North rested on profit and credit owing to slavery. Slavery ended and Reconstruction led to institutional reforms. But as noted by historian Vincent Harding (*There was a River*, 1983), “federal authorities took care to see that they would not be revolutionary.” Those in charge, custodians of wealth in North and South, remained in place after Reconstruction. Their heirs do now, as does racial oppression.

In his 1902 book *What Is To be Done?* Lenin points out that when working-class leaders abandoned political work because of concentration on economic demands, many worker organizations dropped out of the struggle to remove the Tsar’s government. Gaining state power was no longer on their agenda. Political leadership fell into the hands of the liberal bourgeoisie. Lenin, responding, called for a political party with expertise and will enough to make the revolution. That party, of course, was the Bolshevik Party, which Lenin led until his death in 1924.

Scholar and intellectual W.E.B. Du Bois described another version of economism in his essay “The Souls of White Folk.” It appeared in final form in 1920. Du Bois shows how the imperialism unleashed by the European powers (and by implication the United States) preferentially afflicts the world’s brown and black peoples. The imperialists took pains to blot out any temptation by the European white working classes to extend solidarity to workers in the colonies.

Du Bois maintains that Europe had to find “a way out of long-pressing difficulties,” specifically that “subjection of the white working classes cannot much longer be maintained.” The remedy “lies in the exploitation of darker peoples. It is here that the golden hand beckons. Here are no labor unions or votes or questioning onlookers or inconvenient consciences.” The profit goes “not simply to the very rich, but to the middle class and to the laborers.” Indeed, “High wages in the United States and England might be the skillfully manipulated result of slavery in Africa and of peonage in Asia.”

Bribery thus became the means to persuade U.S. and European workers to refrain from defending fellow workers elsewhere in the world. Anti-imperialist agitation was off limits. The pill was easy to swallow, courtesy of the emerging welfare state.

## **In Havana?**

Cuba’s enemies perhaps look forward to prioritization there of economic solutions over revolutionary politics. The future they envision might be one of middle-roaders in charge and of evolution toward their version of social democracy.

Presently Cuba’s socialist revolution is on course. State and society still work to fulfill goals of social justice. And there is more. With his speech the Cuban president created

a vision of well-being, generosity, and solidarity aimed, as it seems, at promoting a culture of resistance. He speaks of intangibles like human values, justice, morality, and loyalty to a cause.

This line of thinking may be a uniquely Cuban contribution to the building of revolutionary consciousness. Leaders like José Martí, Che Guevara, and Fidel Castro communicated messages of high purpose, generosity, solidarity, and cultural enrichment that drew people into struggle. What they did, and what Díaz-Canel is doing, is called leadership.

Here's José Martí — master political organizer, anti-imperialist, and national hero: “There's an accumulation of essential truths that's key to public peace, spiritual elevation, and the homeland's greatness.” And, “People have to live in the peaceful, natural, and inevitable enjoyment of freedom the way they live in the enjoyment of air and light.” (*Maestros Ambulantes*, 1884)

For Che Guevara (*Socialism and Man in Cuba*, 1965), the challenge is “to choose the correct instrument for mobilizing the masses and this instrument must be moral in character ... [I]n moments of great peril it is easy to muster a powerful response with moral incentives. Retaining their effectiveness, however, requires the development of a consciousness in which there is a new scale of values. Society as a whole must be converted into a gigantic school.”

Or, as recalled by Fidel Castro: “I came to view abuse, injustice, and even the humiliation of a fellow man as unthinkable.” I developed “a certain set of ethical values ... A sense of personal dignity, honor, and duty forms the main foundation that enables people to acquire a political consciousness. This was especially so in my case.” (*Fidel and Religion – Conversations with Frei Betto*, 1985)

So Cuba is home to a politics that attends to material realities, to the changing phenomena of social life. But it's a politics also that articulates values and moral precepts. Some might say that those aspects, the concrete and the abstract, have to remain apart, like oil and water. True, Marxist thinking has no place for the idea that ethics and values descend from on high and exist unaltered for all time. And yet, conceived of as evolving within a vortex of conflict and changing realities, they long ago entered into the fabric of Cuban anti-imperialism and Cuban socialism.

Maybe in their synergism these two aspects of political life in Cuba guarantee that revolutionary politics will prevail. Maybe this combination of two kinds of politics will fend off the siren song of “fix the economy first.” In the agricultural sphere, it's called “hybrid vigor.”