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Socialist Voice #90, April 10, 2006

## **Which Road Forward for the Cuban Revolution?**

**'Unique strengths provide a foundation for the future**

**By John Riddell and Phil Cournoyer**

Addressing students at the University of Havana on November 17, 2005, Cuban president Fidel Castro asked two questions central to the future of their country and the struggle for socialism worldwide:

1. "Do you believe, yes or no, that our revolutionary process can be overthrown?"
2. "What ideas and what level of consciousness can make the overturn of a revolutionary process impossible?"

Fidel's speech was widely recognized as a turning point for the Cuban revolution. *Socialist Voice* #67 and 69 presented central ideas from this speech and from related addresses by Foreign Minister Felipe Perez Roque and National Bank director Francisco Soberon. (See references at the end of this article.)

The most extensive discussion outside Cuba of Fidel's speech has taken place in the Spanish-language socialist Internet news service *Rebellion*. Several writers have raised pointed criticisms of the Cuban government's policies, to which a prominent Cuban Marxist has responded. Of particular importance are the views of Heinz Dieterich, an influential Marxist and defender of the Cuban revolution based in Mexico, who argues that Cuba's "historic project," based on state ownership of the economy, is exhausted, and that Cuba must strike out in a new direction. (Dieterich's article is included in his forthcoming book, *El futuro de la revolucion cubana*.)

This article will review the opinions of Dieterich and other contributors to the *Rebellion* debate, and then suggest three questions that receive little attention in the *Rebellion* articles that are critical of the Cuban leaders:

- What are the central institutions that define Cuba's character as a state serving the interests of working people, and how can they be strengthened?
- How can the power of workers and farmers be affirmed and expanded in the contest against other social layers within Cuba?
- What is the influence on Cuba's development of its involvement in struggles for social progress beyond its borders?

### **Bankrupt model?**

Fidel's November address, Dieterich writes, is nothing less than a "preamble to a second 'History Will Absolve Me,' " referring to Castro's historic address in 1953 that provided the initial program for the Cuban revolution. (Dieterich's views appear in three *Rebellion* articles, dated December 12, 2005, and January 3 and March 19, 2006.) The central idea of Fidel's November talk, Dieterich says, is his call: "Let there never be a USSR situation here"—a collapse of the revolution that would usher in imperialist rule.

But in Dieterich's view, the Cuban leaders fail to recognize that the "historic project" based on state property and represented by the USSR is exhausted. Cuba must move forward to "21st century socialism," which will assure the population "a more democratic society and a higher standard of living." Dieterich identifies three forms of property: private, state/public, and social. In the "socialist countries" like the USSR, he says, "state and social property have been wrongly identified." The term "social property" is not defined, but appears to mean a much wider delegation of economic power throughout the society, without necessarily eliminating public ownership. The heart of 21st century socialism, in Dieterich's view, must be a shift from state to "social property."

Dieterich sees Cuban society as basically similar to the social order that collapsed in the Soviet Union in 1991. True, Cuba stands on "extraordinary achievements": its resistance to imperialism, its dignity, its excellence in health, education, and science. But these strengths "also existed in the Soviet Union and the GDR [East Germany], in a socio-economic-political framework essentially the same as in Cuba." (The Soviet Union changed profoundly after Lenin's death. Dieterich and others do not mention this, but they are clearly referring to the Soviet Union in its final decades.)

Dieterich does not see the longstanding Cuban emphasis on the ethical character of socialism as offering an effective alternative to the Soviet model. Indeed, he faults the Cuban leaders for excessive confidence in the power of socialist ideas. "The idea of a 'new man' can win the masses only in transitory phases," he says, referring to Che Guevara's conception that socialist construction will be based on a citizenry that has embraced socialist ethical concepts. In Dieterich's view, the extent of corruption and theft described by Fidel shows that "given extreme conditions of life, firm ethical conceptions will provide armor for only a minority"—possibly 10%-15% of the population.

The world's "dominant pattern of consumption, that of the First World's middle class, exerts an irresistible attraction," and this level of consumption is far beyond the resources of the Cuban economy, Dieterich says. This contradiction can be met, he says, "by an intense public debate, especially with the youth, to build a consensus around a model of consumption that is viable." Cubans should discuss, for example, whether they prefer "more hospitals, or better transport, or more housing, or more private consumption."

Dieterich agrees with Perez Roque that control of the social surplus is crucial to the revolution's survival. "But what is crucial is not only who receives this surplus but who makes decisions [on how to utilize it] and how this is done."

Developing his comparison of the Cuban with the Soviet order, Dieterich asserts that a “public arena of strategic discussion is lacking” in Cuba, and “the citizen is converted into a spectator of the economic-political process.” This problem is eased, he says, by the unusual role played by Cuba’s president, who, in the words of Gabriel Garcia Marquez (also quoted by Perez Roque), “simultaneously heads the government and leads the opposition.” But how will this dialectic be institutionalized when Fidel is gone?

### **Social vs. state property**

Several other writers in the *Rebellion* discussion hinge their arguments on similar references to “social property” and “21st century socialism.” The closest approach to an explanation of these terms is found in an article by Roberto Cobas Avivar (January 13, 2006), a Cuban social scientist based in Brazil, which advocates a “mixed” and “inclusive” system of social property; government regulation of labour, business, and finance; acceptance of individual wealth as a source of national prosperity; decentralization of economic decision making to the enterprise level; and limitation of planning to strategic questions of economic development.

Although Cobas Avivar does not point to any existing society as a model, his blueprint seems similar to the social democratic model that, in countries as well-endowed as Sweden, has proven incapable withstanding the tempests of “neo-liberal” attacks on working people.

Narciso Isa Conde, a longstanding leader of the Dominican revolutionary left, has also joined this discussion with an analysis that parallels Dieterich’s arguments. But he stresses the importance of avoiding any effort to copy the perestroika process in the former USSR. “The changes that many revolutionary socialists think Cuba needs have nothing to do with capitalist economic reforms, nor with a capitalist type political liberalization.”

Rather, he argues, the challenge is “to recover the whole originality of the revolution and turn it towards the formation of a great Bolivarian homeland within a clearly socialist renewal. On that course we can overcome the great risks involved in any attempt to perpetuate bureaucratic statism that contradicts the essence of genuine socialism.” His concept of forming a “great Bolivarian homeland” conveys the hope that 21st century socialism will spread across Latin America and the Caribbean.

### **Rectification and the Soviet model**

The most extensive reply to Dieterich’s articles so far is that by the Cuban Marxist Jesus Arboleya Cervera (*Rebellion*, January 19, 2006). Arboleya contests the identification of Cuba with the Soviet and East German models, viewing Fidel’s November 17 speech as “a confirmation of a theoretical stand that historically has differentiated the positions of Cuban revolutionaries from those of the leaders of real socialism in Europe.” (“Real existing socialism” was the term used by Soviet and allied East European government leaders during the 1970s and 1980s to describe their societies.) This distinction can be traced back to “Che’s arguments on the need to shape a ‘new man’ as a prerequisite for the socialist process.”

Octavio Rodriquez Araujo (December 30, 2005), a Mexican socialist writer, makes the same point, underlining that the late Soviet Union was marked by “a privileged bureaucracy that

enriched itself through corruption,” jailing and executing its critics. “The supposed socialism of these countries was defeated not by imperialism but by a counterrevolution from within.”

Dieterich himself notes that the “Stalinist party-state” responded to “every attempt to discover the historical reality” of these societies with “sanctions including death.” Cuba’s revolutionary record is free of such atrocities.

Indeed the Cuban revolution beat back attempts to force it onto a repressive and bureaucratic course. The character of this extended struggle was illustrated by Cuba’s “rectification” process of the 1980s, cited as a model for today by Cuban Foreign Minister Felipe Perez Roque (*Socialist Voice* #69).

Inaki Etaio of the Basque nationalist organization Askapena defines rectification as the correction of the “more than questionable aspects of ‘real socialism,’ ” including “excessive material incentives, progressive construction of a bureaucratic caste, privileges, subsidies to enterprises running at a loss, etc.” (*Rebellion*, February 2, 2006)—all of which were prominent features of post-Stalin Soviet society.

As Argentinian Marxist Nestor Kohan noted in *Rebellion* in another context, “The [Cuban] revolution opened up and created political and cultural alternatives” to the Soviet model, some of which are “forgotten and unknown.”

### **Political and ethical values**

As we have seen, Dieterich recognizes a contradiction between the “irresistible” attraction of the consumption level of the privileged in imperialist (“First World”) countries” and the limited productive forces of a country like Cuba. “Dieterich’s solution is to collectivize economic decision making, so that each person can choose ‘democratically’ from the First World basket,” Arboleya says.

This proposal is actually not so different from Cuba’s present approach, Arboleya notes, but it removes “the political and ethical values bound up in Che’s proposal for the formation of the new man.” It also fails to criticize the “injustice and economic/ecological irrationality” that enables a privileged few to enjoy this pattern of consumption.

Moreover, Arboleya challenges Dieterich’s assertion that “the lack of individual responsibility for collective property, and, consequently, the cause of corruption”—problems highlighted in Fidel’s speech—results from the fact that “productive property is in the hands of the state, not in the hands of the majorities.” Here Dieterich “with a stroke of the pen disqualifies the popular nature of the Cuban revolutionary state,” Arboleya says.

Arboleya agrees with Dieterich that “the better organized the people’s participation is, the better the socialist state will function.” But the legitimacy of a state, throughout history, depends “not on its democratic functioning but on the interests it serves.” Socialist democracy, he states, “does not depend on the fact that each individual can decide whether the country purchases a bus, builds a hospital, or repairs a baseball field, but rather on the collective capability ... to preserve its class nature and its proper functioning.” He warns that Dieterich’s view could lead the masses

outside Cuba to “reject the idea of building their own state,” leaving them “unarmed in the face of the bourgeoisie and imperialism.”

### **How the Soviet Union fell**

The danger of such a negative approach to public ownership and economic direction by the state is evident in the failure of the Soviet working class to play an independent role during the final crisis the Soviet Union, an experience graphically described in David Mandel’s *Labour After Communism*.

The USSR collapsed during a time of labour upsurge, when workers were well placed to rally support for a socialist alternative to the wave of “free-market” pillaging that devastated the Soviet economy in the 1990s.

“Most Soviet workers remained wedded to the values of social justice, egalitarianism, and popular democracy,” Mandel writes. But in the absence of any alternative, “the liberals’ concept of economic freedom appeared [to them] as a logical response to the oppressive bureaucratic regime.... Workers found ideas like the reduction of the social wage in favour of a promised higher individual wage quite attractive.” Even the most left-wing labour currents “could not conceive of democratic planning” and did not contest privatization, through which ownership of the enterprises was stolen by Russia’s present rulers. (pages 20-21)

The outcome was a rude awakening: members of the bureaucratic caste gained legal ownership of enterprises; enormous wealth was transferred into their hands; the strength of labour was shattered; workers’ social rights and living standards were devastated; economic disaster swept across the post-Soviet countries.

Cuban leaders warn against this prospect today, pointing out that the revolution’s overthrow would bring the Cuban people not European living standards but Haiti-style oppression and impoverishment.

### **The pillars of Cuba’s workers’ state**

How was it that the Cuban economy, small, poor, and under unremitting assault, was able to survive and recover from the ravaging effects of the Soviet collapse? Clearly, the key reason why the Cuban revolution was stronger is that Stalinism never triumphed there. The leadership remained committed to the interests of the working class and peasants of Cuba, and more broadly to the interests of anti-capitalist forces around the world.

But more concretely, Cuba is protected from the hurricanes of imperialist economic devastation by the Cuban people’s successful defense of institutions that together form the fundamentals of a workers’ state. Specifically:

- While no one would suggest that Cuba’s system of political democracy is perfect, it assures decisive weight to workers, peasants, and their organizations, and excludes corrupt political machines financed and directed by imperialism. Socialist democracy in

Cuba stresses the vital role of a highly educated and cultured population. (See *Cuba, a Revolution in Motion*, by Isaac Saney, reviewed in *Socialist Voice* #15)

- Military force in Cuba rests in the hands of an armed people and a Rebel Army that, through 50 years of existence, has acted consistently to defend the workers' state and the interests of oppressed peoples internationally.
- Cuba's government retains full control of the country's foreign trade and permits foreign investment only in joint ventures subject to strict conditions. In particular, Cuba's farmers are protected from the impact of competition with highly subsidized imperialist agribusiness.
- Public ownership of the decisive sectors of the economy places a large portion of the economic surplus at the government's disposal, giving it broad scope to shape investment and direct the economy's evolution.
- Cuba's publicly owned enterprises form part of a network of national economic planning that directs investment according to politically determined priorities.

These institutions are under intensive, permanent assault by international capitalism, which is not without points of support within Cuba. It would be helpful if Dieterich, Cobas, and other anti-capitalist critics of the Cuban leaders' present policies would specify whether these institutions should be maintained, and if not, what protective walls can be erected that will provide equivalent defense and autonomous scope of action for Cuban working people.

The Cuban leaders are the first to affirm that Cuba's social system is flawed and needs improvement. But surely Cuba's anti-capitalist critics must agree that if these and other foundations of its workers' state are dismantled, there would soon be little left of Cuba's vaunted achievements in health, education, sports, popular culture, and human solidarity and dignity. The problem is bureaucracy and privilege, not public ownership as such.

Whatever there may be of value in Dieterich's call for political and economic changes in Cuba can be totally lost because of his unclarity around the vital role of the pillars of the Cuban workers' state.

### **Strengthening workers' power in Cuba**

The speeches of Cuban leaders discussed in *Socialist Voice* #67 and #69 described the growth during Cuba's "Special Period"—the economic crisis triggered by the fall of the USSR in 1991—of inequality, economic privilege, and corruption. The lives of working people grew more difficult, especially in comparison with those drawing benefits of some sort from the surrounding dollar economy and its points of presence within Cuba. Social tensions in Cuba grew. To some extent, working people were forced to fend for themselves in securing an adequate livelihood, weakening bonds of class solidarity.

In this context, the measures proposed by the Cuban leaders have a consistent class bias: defending workers against capitalist pressures; strengthening the publicly owned economy;

reining in private business and corruption—in Arboleya's words, acting to preserve the class nature and proper functioning of socialist democracy.

Dieterich himself gives a good example of such measures: Cuba's "workers parliaments" of the 1990s, when workplace assemblies played the key role in shaping Cuba's response to the Special Period. Among the achievements of these assemblies is the fact that workers' salaries in Cuba are today exempt from income taxes. Many similar initiatives can be found in the history of revolutionary Cuba.

Without prejudging what measures might be appropriate in Cuba today, clearly it is workers' and farmers' democracy in Cuba that must be protected and strengthened. This appears to be precisely the aim of current Cuban government policy: their proposals are imbued with a spirit of class struggle.

### **Cuba in the world**

The Cuban Revolution's unique commitment to socialist internationalism, humanitarian aid, and cooperation has always been a cornerstone of Cubans' efforts to strengthen workers' power in their country. Tens of thousands of Cuban citizens are today posted abroad, giving direct expression to their personal commitment to socialist goals of international cooperation. Through these initiatives, millions of people in other countries learn that there is something in Cuba worth cherishing and defending. Cuba has since the 1960s been in the forefront of mobilizing political support and solidarity with anti-imperialist and anti-capitalist struggles around the globe. This flows from an understanding that workers' power and socialism cannot thrive unless the struggles of working people and the oppressed move forward on a world scale.

Today a new wind is blowing across Latin America, as movements for democracy and autonomous national development gain strength in many countries. Cuba now has new possibilities for collaboration with progressive governments, as in Bolivia and Venezuela, as well as with more conservative and fully bourgeois governments who are in partial conflict with imperialism, as in Argentina and Brazil.

Cuba has seized these openings and embraced the goal of regional economic integration, independent of imperialism.

Partisans of the Cuban revolution need to integrate this process into the discussion of the challenges and options Cuba now faces. It offers the Cuban people the greatest current opportunity to strengthen their revolution. Moreover, its success can have great consequences for the world's future.

Socialist Voice #90, April 19, 2006

## **Review: Mike Davis, *Planet of Slums***

reviewed by Derrick O'Keefe

Later this year, from June 19 to 23, Kofi Annan and company will converge on Vancouver for the third World Urban Forum, a grandiose-sounding gathering of United Nations bureaucrats, academics, and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs). Were the esteemed gatherers really planning to sink their teeth into the problems of the 21st century city – rather than staying in luxury hotels, enjoying the early summer weather and issuing platitude-laden proclamations – they might take as their starting point *Planet of Slums*, the latest insightful book by radical urban theorist Mike Davis.

The author of *City of Quartz* (the definitive critical examination of Southern California's urban landscape) delivers, once again, his trademark scorching polemic. An honest portrayal of the disastrous plight of the world's urban poor, as is presented in *Planet of Slums*, calls forth no less than indignation, and Davis – unlike too many obfuscating scholars – is blunt and meticulous in assigning blame for the current state of affairs.

Mike Davis has never been shy in broadcasting the urgency of a situation; for this, in fact, critics have branded him a Chicken Little (his other recent book also happens to deal with the threat of Avian Flu). Last fall's abandonment of hurricane-stricken New Orleans, however, should be enough to once and for all acquit Davis of scare-mongering charges. In 2004, he wrote a prophetic article about the dangers of neglecting to adequately prepare for disaster on the Gulf Coast:

New Orleans had spent decades preparing for inevitable submersion by the storm surge of a class-five hurricane. Civil defense officials conceded they had ten thousand body bags on hand to deal with the worst-case scenario. But no one seemed to have bothered to devise a plan to evacuate the city's poorest or most infirm residents. The day before the hurricane hit the Gulf Coast, New Orleans's daily, the *Times-Picayune*, ran an alarming story about the "large group ... mostly concentrated in poorer neighborhoods" who wanted to evacuate but couldn't. ("Poor, Black, and Left Behind," Mike Davis. *Mother Jones*, September 24, 2004.

The conditions described by Davis, of course, are not some potential future scenario; they are a brutal, contemporary reality. *Planet of Slums* (Verso, 2006) begins with a survey of the phenomenon of urban growth, concentrating on the mega-cities of the underdeveloped world where inequality rates and economic segregation dwarf even those of a city like New Orleans. The facts are staggering; the squalor and suffering created over a generation of neo-liberal globalization is truly Dickensian:

There is nothing in the catalogue of Victorian misery, as narrated by Dickens, Zola, or Gorky, that doesn't exist somewhere in a Third World city today. I allude not just to grim survivals and atavisms, but especially to primitive forms of exploitation that have been given new life by postmodern globalization – and child labour is an outstanding example. (P.186)

Child labour is a reality, in fact, for tens of millions of the estimated one billion slum dwellers worldwide. Davis dispatches the arguments of the apologists for the interests of capital with a mountain of evidence. For instance, he exposes the glorification of the ‘informal sector’ as dynamic entrepreneurialism. In fact, the devastation of the formal, not to mention unionized, employment sector has created a mass reserve army of labour forced to eke out their survival hawking wares, scrounging through trash, begging, being prostituted, or otherwise trading their quality of life for a semblance of a livelihood.

Davis’s prose can be dizzying, jumping as it does from example to example of slum living conditions across the continents of the Global South, from Rio de Janeiro to Kinshasa to Mumbai, and many points in between. Responsibility is pinned on the workings of international capital and its institutions like the IMF and World Bank, and on myriad governments. The NGO sector, whose advance has been concurrent with the retreat of the state during the neo-liberal era, also comes in for sharp criticism, being described as “soft imperialism”:

...Third World NGOs have proven brilliant at co-opting local leadership as well as hegemonizing the social space traditionally occupied by the Left. Even if there are some celebrated exceptions – such as the militant NGOs so instrumental in creating the World Social Forum – the broad impact of the NGO/ “civil society revolution,” as even some World Bank researchers acknowledge, has been to bureaucratize and deradicalize urban social movements. (P.76)

*Planet of Slums* concludes with some preliminary assessments of the implications for humanity in the 21st century of the radically expanded landscape of urban poverty. The traditional emphases of the political Left – landless peasantry in the countryside and formal sector labour movements, for example – will need to shift along with the social and geographic locations of the poor majority. Indeed, some of the most inspiring political struggles of recent years have been waged by those making up the bloated and marginalized ‘informal sectors’ of the world’s major cities, from the hillside barrios of Caracas, to Port-au-Prince’s rebellious slum of Cité Soleil, to the segregated banlieues of Paris.

The powers that be have already begun preparing for the new urban theatre of poverty, war, and resistance. Davis details the importance that Pentagon military strategists now place on MOUT, or Military Operations on Urbanized Terrain. Stressing realistic training (including in North American cities), the MOUT doctrine is a brutally rational perspective for the planners of empire. The battle lines of an unequal urban world are clearly drawn in the unreconstructed poor neighbourhoods of Baghdad, where the young militia fighters in the slum of Sadr City “taunt the American occupiers with the promise that their main boulevard is ‘Vietnam Street’” (P. 205).

A rare academic who refuses to soft-pedal his anti-capitalist analysis, Mike Davis has, with *Planet of Slums*, reinforced his standing as one of our most important public intellectuals. He has indeed produced a must read for anyone seeking to understand and change the vast inequalities that scar our world and its cities.

(This review was first published in the webzine [Seven Oaks](#).)