

Cuba's challenge to Soviet socialism

The pipe dream that socialism can be achieved with the help of the dull instruments left to us by capitalism (the commodity as the economic cell, profitability, individual material interest as a lever, etc) can lead into a blind alley. And you wind up there after having travelled a long distance with many cross-roads, and it is hard to figure out just where you took the wrong turn. —Che Guevara, 1965.

With the collapse of socialism in most of eastern Europe and the deep crisis besetting what remains of the Soviet Union, there is no shortage of 'we-told-you-so's'. Much of this comes from the usual right-wing, pro-capitalist chorus. But there are also left-wing, Marxist 'we-told-you-so's' with their own pedigrees.

The *Revenge of History*, for instance, is the title Alex Callinicos gives his latest (and often thought provoking) book on contemporary east European developments. It could as well have been entitled: *The Revenge of Trotskyism* (or at least, of Trotskyism as developed and interpreted by Tony Cliff and Alex Callinicos). I suppose we should concede Callinicos's right to smirk, just a little.

There is another Marxist tradition, associated with the Cuban revolution and with the names of Fidel Castro and Che Guevara, that might well now also be saying to eastern Europe and the Soviet Union: 'We-told-you-so'. But the Cubans, for their part, are not smirking.

The collapse of Comecon and recent political developments in the Soviet Union pose grave problems for their beleaguered and heroic attempt to build socialism in a third world island, in the face of nearly 30 years of economic blockading from the American superpower just 90 miles off their coast. Yet Cuba's unfortunate geographical location — unfortunate for the construction of socialism, that is — may have something to do with one of its singular contributions to Marxism.

'We are building socialism in a context which is very different from eastern Europe,' a Cuban comrade explained to me some years ago. 'We cannot afford to make mistakes, or to lose our mass base for one single day. With Yankee imperialism on our doorstep, if there are mass disturbances here, we can be sure that the first tanks to arrive will not be those of the Red Army. Perhaps this is why we have understood correctly the importance of mass ideological work.'

Che Guevara: *Economics and Politics in the Transition to Socialism* by the Cuban economist, Carlos Tablada, is a timely intervention into today's debates. The book presents the socio-economic perspectives of Che, as culled from writings, speeches, interviews and seminars that he gave in the years immediately after the revolutionary victory in 1959. In these years Che held various senior economic posts, including president of the national bank and minister of industry.

Not that Che, an Argentine by birth and a passionate internationalist, remained in these posts for long. One of the key source documents for this book, incidentally, Che's pamphlet, *Socialism and Man in Cuba*, was completed here on African

soil. By 1965 Che had left Cuba and his prestigious official positions to participate directly in revolutionary struggles abroad. He went first to the Congo and later to Bolivia, where he was murdered in 1967 after being captured in a CIA organised operation.

Cuban perestroika

Tablada's study of Che's economic and political thinking was first published in Cuba in 1987. It served as a major intervention into Cuba's own perestroika, or rectification programme. But if there are obvious echoes between Soviet perestroika and Cuban rectification (both were reacting to a certain stagnation, a malaise that had set in), the Cuban rectification went in a diametrically opposite direction. It was restructuring to lessen the grip of market forces, not to increase them. It was restructuring that was able to rely upon revolutionary mass mobilisation. It was not restructuring from above, in the teeth of an indifferent or even hostile population. It was a restructuring that called for an increased (not diminished) role of the party.

The Cuban rectification process was a response to serious danger signals for their socialist project. These included a growing black market in food and consumer goods; the evaluation of economic performance by state enterprises measured by their profitability in money terms, not by their output of socially necessary goods; growing competition and market relations between state-owned enterprises; and increasing reliance on bonuses and individual material incentives, while expenditure on housing, health, education, creches, etc. was stagnating.

These deviations all derived from what Castro described, at the time, as 'the stupid notion that [economic] mechanisms would do the party's work for it, that they would build socialism, that they would promote development.' (p21) Narrow technical mechanisms resulted in numerous anomalies. One of which, recounted here by Castro, was the tendency for state building enterprises to meet their annual production targets by 'earthmoving and putting up a few foundations because that was worth a lot and then not finishing the building because that was worth little; that tendency to say, 'I fulfilled my plan as to value but I didn't finish a single building''. (p46)

By contrast, Castro told the 1986 Cuban Communist Party congress, 'we have achieved our best results working with the pride and honour of people with their consciousness...These are not illusions, they are examples which are clear to all.' And, pointing to one congress delegate who had twice fulfilled internationalist missions in Angola, Castro added: 'I wonder, what bonus could we give him, what mechanisms could we utilise with him and the many thousands of others like him who have done their duty there?' (p25)

Moral factor

This theme, the importance of the moral factor, of mass revolutionary consciousness in the building of socialism was central to Che's thinking ('A socialist economy without communist moral values does not interest me...If communism

neglects facts of consciousness, it can serve as a method of distribution but it will no longer express revolutionary moral values' — p77).

For both Che and Castro this perspective is, in part, a more or less explicit criticism of the way in which socialism was being constructed in eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. As Castro said in 1982: 'There are some countries much richer than ours — there are some. I don't want to make comparisons of any kind; that would not be correct. But we do know of revolutionary countries where wealth has advanced more than consciousness, leading even to counter-revolutionary problems and things of that sort' (p95).

The Cubans, then, have a legitimate claim, a claim backed up by a real history, to be able to say in 1991: 'We told you so'. But what exactly are the theoretical grounds for this?

Che's perspective needs to be anchored, argues Tablada, within a specific theory for the management of the socialist economy. This theory Che called the 'budgetary finance system' (as opposed to the 'economic accounting system' which prevailed in eastern Europe and the Soviet Union). The essence of his approach is, in Che's words, to 'view the entire economy as one big enterprise. In the framework of building socialism, our aim is to establish collaboration between all the participants as members of one big enterprise, instead of treating each other like little wolves' (p114).

In Che's budgetary system each individual enterprise turns all its revenues over to the national budget, it does not retain them in the form of cash in an account of its own. Che attempted to apply the modern techniques of economic organisation, accounting and administration used by multinational corporations in establishing relations between the parent company and its subsidiaries. These relationships, he argued, have precious little to do with the 'free market'. They are planned relationships.

While there has to be overall profitability of the socialist national economy, the prices of a particular enterprise's goods may be deliberately held lower (or higher) within the socialist economy (or, for that matter, within a capitalist corporate empire). Building socialism on the basis of the 'entire economy as one big enterprise' enables workers to assume control of and responsibility for the economy as a whole, and not just for their own enterprise.

Emulation vs competition

Castro: 'The workers own all the factories in the country and it is in the interests of all workers to have all factories, schools, and services functioning well... We are not going to have our socialist enterprises competing with each other, because that has nothing to do with the idea and conception of socialism; it has nothing to do with Marxism-Leninism. They can emulate each other but that's not competition in capitalist fashion, with its dramatic consequences' (p23-4).

By contrast, in the Yugoslavian system, with its enterprise-

level workers' self-management, working class power is atomised and weakened. Che writes in 1959 after a brief visit to Yugoslavia that this approach results in a 'managerial capitalism with socialist distribution of the profits. Each enterprise is viewed not as a group of workers but as a unit functioning more or less in a capitalist manner, obeying laws of supply and demand, and engaged in violent struggle with its competitors over prices and quality ...' (p11).

Allowing socialist enterprises to relate to each other in terms of narrow economic and technocratic mechanisms posed, according to Che, a severe threat to socialism. This was not to say that market relations or material incentives could be abolished overnight. 'The process must be directed more towards the withering away of material incentives than towards suppressing them. Establishing a policy of moral incentives does not imply a total rejection of material incentives. The aim is simply to reduce their field of operation, and to do so through intensive ideological work rather than through bureaucratic means' (p193).

In anchoring Che's emphasis on the moral factor within his budgetary finance system, Tablada seeks to undercut the criticism that Che is presenting a purely voluntaristic perspective. In other words, Che is not contrasting the economic and the ideological, or production and consciousness. Rather, he is emphasising the significance of the moral factor within socialist production. In short, he is seeking to avoid a narrow technical, economic reduction of Marxism. Social relations of production are not narrowly reducible to economic relations; the material base is not identical to economic wealth; material life is more than consumer goods.

Challenging 'post-modern' cynicism

What, if any, is the relevance for South Africans in 1991 of all of this? It would certainly be wrong to see in Che's 'budgetary finance system' some kind of blueprint for socialism, let alone for the post-apartheid mixed economy into which we are likely moving. Tablada's exposition of the system itself remains relatively general. What the book does do is to throw at us some challenging questions.

For instance, is there not a tendency within our movement at present to collapse what is possible at the given moment with what is desirable in the longer term? I am thinking of the market mechanism for instance. The fact that it is not possible to abolish the market mechanism in any immediate future, doesn't mean that we should become lyrical about the market. I am also thinking about a certain tendency towards moral cynicism. Concepts like 'revolutionary morality' or 'voluntary labour' are seen as unfashionable, as naivetes with no place in the real, hard-nosed world of the 1990s. This book and indeed the Cuban revolution itself challenge this kind of 'post-modern' cynicism.

Whatever its enormous problems, the Cuban revolution has maintained its mass revolutionary base. In comparison with eastern Europe and the Soviet Union there is a genuine revolu-



**CHE GUEVARA:
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tionary clan. It is manifested in huge popular rallies; in mass participation in and support for internationalist duties in Angola and elsewhere; and in the mini-brigade voluntary work system pioneered by Che and rediscovered during the rectification process. 'Before rectification only five new day-care centres in Havana had been planned over a five-year period...one per year. Through the mini-brigades, more than fifty were constructed in one year!' (p27).

Nevertheless, the Cuban revolution is today under greater threat than at any time in its existence. The US economic blockade and wide-ranging sanctions and destabilisation measures continue. The Soviet Union is scaling down its military presence drastically, while the United States, which has a naval port enclave on the island, is not. Above all, the Cuban revolution has depended until now upon the economic solidar-

ity of the Soviet Union and other former Comecon countries. The Cubans are not utopians, they have never relished the prospect of building and defending socialism in isolation (socialism in a single island). Their economic life-line is now threatened.

The outlook, then, is serious. There are plenty of smug, anti-Cuban 'we-told-you-so's' lining up in the wings. But don't write off the Cuban revolution too quickly! And, above all, understand that the difficulties are essentially extrinsic (a lousy international balance of forces). They take nothing away from the great contribution the Cuban revolution has made, and is making, to the struggle for a better world.

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