

EDITORIAL

THIS ISSUE

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The articles published in this issue of the journal cover a wide range of topics: contemporary economic reforms; popular education; anti-embargo activism in the US; personal experiences of North Americans who lived and worked in Cuba in the 1960s; and natural and traditional medicine in Cuba. At first glance it would seem that this diversity, while rich in information and analysis, shares little common ground. Closer reading of the contributions however reveals a theme running through them which is uniquely demonstrated by the Cuban revolutionary experience; the existence of an alternative ideological formation to the dominant codes and hegemony of the global neo-liberal era. Lamrani's article on Cuba's economic reforms presents a valid case for change that involves moving away from certain socialist principles, but begs the question: Could there also be a different approach which emphasises deepening participation and community empowerment, rather than turning to markets and individual motivation? The subsequent article by Friedman, while dealing with education rather than contemporary reforms, directly addresses this issue and suggests that building a socialist hegemony is a vital part of revolutionary development. In her study of anti-embargo activism, Rampersad does not deal with internal issues in Cuba. However her conclusion concerning the US groups she analyses suggests that they are less motivated by individual gain, as some neo-liberal theorists would seem to suggest, but by a sense of commitment and solidarity. It would seem that the construct of the utility maximising, materialist individual is even on shaky ground when put to the test in a fully developed capitalist nation. Strug's analysis of North Americans in Cuba in the 1960s serves to remind us how the early years of the Revolution encouraged participation and popular action to achieve collective goals; ideas which influenced the New Left in the developed Western nations. Finally, Wright explains how natural and traditional medicine has been integrated into the Cuban health care system. This is interpreted not simply as a policy choice for pragmatic reasons, but because the Cuban approach to health is

holistic. Suggesting therefore that they are more concerned with emphasising the collective and social experience of humans rather than presuming, as neo-liberals do, that people have a rational functionality as consuming individuals who expect scientific and measurable solutions to their problems. The alternative ontological understanding in Cuba of what it is to be human, may seem trivial in the context of a wider world whose hegemonic structure is antithetical to the Cuban experience. However a global crisis is now fraying the edges of the functionalist and rationalist certainties of our age. Few today remember the ‘Great Debate’ between Charles Bettelheim and Che Guevara in which the former argued for a material route for building socialism while Guevara called for one based on the formation of a collectively responsible individual whose consciousness was shaped by wider social objectives rather than personal gain. As we see masses around the world today seeking to make their voices heard against the ‘rule of money’, that debate now holds a renewed relevance.

Salim Lamrani, ‘Reforming the Cuban Economic Model: Causes and Prospects’

This article analyses the external and internal pressures on Cuba which are behind the process of change and reform that is taking place in the island. It concentrates however on the internal problems and how these are to be addressed. In this spirited and informative study, Lamrani describes convincingly such issues as corruption, bureaucratic inertia, poor productivity, excessive dependence on foreign imports of basic commodities like food and fuel, the black market and poorly conceived economic policies. He then considers government decisions, and aspects of their implementation, that have been taken to rectify these ills. Importantly he makes reference to how the Cuban leadership and the population have identified and interpreted these problems, presenting his analysis as more of a report from Cuba rather than a prescription from outside. It is doubtful that many Cubans would disagree with the situation he identifies. However while his argument is strong, one might ask in a wider context, given that it is almost impossible under neo-liberal globalisation for a fully developed economy to implement a form of Keynesianism in one country: Can a small developing one be successful with this mixed economy approach? Clearly Cuba intends to keep effective state control over the key sectors of the economy and the political and social system, but the global pressures on national capital is inexorable. One must also ask: Can the market in any manifestation ever be an appropriate mechanism for building socialism? Faced with the unprecedented and unique problems of the only remaining predominantly socialist country in the world, the Cuban leadership and its people face some tough choices and what is happening now

represents a series of popular policy decisions to address the immediate evils that are undermining the Revolution. Most external observers will welcome this limited market orientation, as understandably will many Cubans. But in a context in which global market fundamentalism is collapsing, it is Cuba's successful socialist achievements that will provide inspiration for ordinary people around the world in the future, not its pragmatic, but risky, flirtations with the market. Cooperation, participation, social and communal responsibility are also powerful processes that have brought efficiency and success, and are a counterbalance to corruption and bureaucratisation etc., as Che Guevara understood and articulated.

Douglas Friedman, 'Popular Education and Politics in Cuba: The Centro Memorial Dr Martin Luther King Jr and the Gramscian Civil Society Ideal'

This article provides an interesting juxtaposition to the previous one, as while Lamrani describes a pragmatic economic response to the Cuban crisis, Friedman examines the role of the Gramscian notion of hegemony as a means to embed socialist ideals in society to counteract the growing materialist and individualistic values that are the consequence of crisis and reforms. The example chosen to present this 'great debate' of the twenty-first century in Cuba is the work of the Martin Luther King Jr Centre which seeks to provide popular education along lines similar to the Black Theology of Liberation in the US and the work of the Brazilian educationalist Paulo Freire. Interestingly the Centre's founder has a religious background and is therefore well placed to address the problematic relationship between religion and the socialist state. However the objective of the Centre and its founder is to go beyond this debate to incorporate faith into the revolutionary project as a means to strengthen socialist hegemony. A concept initiated by Latin America's first Gramscian Marxist, José Carlos Mariátegui in the 1920s and later developed by the Latin American liberation theologians in the 1960s and 70s. The second more general contested space is the relationship between the state and the private sector in a socialist economy. This 'dual alienation', state/religion, state/market, it is argued is being fought out in 'civil society', resulting in an intense discussion in the island concerning the status and role of non state actors in a socialist framework. Friedman points out perceptively that part of Washington's policy of 'democracy promotion' is to use the vehicle of civil society to promote internal resistance to governments which it looks to undermine, making this an arena in which there is a contestation of hegemony, as we are also seeing now in the 'Arab Spring'. Among all socialist countries past and present, the Cuban Revolution has produced the most consistent and enduring attempt to develop a 'socialist consciousness', but this ran parallel to a form of typical bureaucratic

authoritarianism one associates with Soviet-style socialism of the twentieth century. This type of ossified socialism set against the siren call of market liberalism is a fatal combination for the Cuban revolutionary project. Friedman and the Centre which he analyses are correct in identifying the need for a ‘counter hegemony’ embedded in really lived socialist experience and values. Education as a political and ideological force plays a key role in this process.

Indira Rampersad, ‘Anti-Embargo Activism and US Cuba Policy: A Rational Departure’

This article seeks to explain why the ‘anti-embargo movement’ in the US has continued to vigorously challenge its government’s policies towards Cuba since the late 1960s, despite meeting with little success. The movement, comprised of over 100 organisations, is located mainly in Washington, New York and Miami and falls into three main categories: established large organisations that have taken the Cuba cause as part of their portfolio of activities (e.g. Oxfam America); those with a broader Caribbean/Latin America remit but have a Cuba project (e.g. the Latin America Working Group); organisations concerned only with US–Cuba relations (e.g. the Centre for Cuban Studies). Rampersad deals principally with the second two groups. These organisations use a diversity of tactics to pursue their cause, but tend to network and interact amongst themselves to achieve maximum impact. Rampersad’s approach to her research topic is to use a variety of academic theories to explain the actions of this broad movement. The first is the Rational Model which, rather like its economic equivalent, argues that individual actors do not commit on political or ideological grounds alone but will seek to draw on some material incentive such as finding employment in or through the organisation. While this approach is deemed to provide some insights, the author believes that it fails to explain the operations of ‘public interest groups’ and ‘altruistic sustained group activism’. To address these issues, non-material motivation theories are explored such as ‘tactical frames’, ‘solidarity networks’ and ‘co-option’. Each is explored in some detail. The author concludes that the rational approach is limited in its ability to explain the persistence of the ‘anti-embargo movement’, but reference to other theories which are more willing to accept altruistic, social and cultural motivations provide deeper insights.

David L. Strug, ‘Witnessing the Revolution: North Americans in Cuba in the 1960s’

This study examines North Americans from Canada and the United States whose sympathies with the Cuban Revolution led to them living and working in the island in the 1960s. Using mostly an oral history approach, one is reminded of

Ronald Fraser's seminal work based on interviews with those who fought in the Spanish Civil War which brought a new set of valuable perceptions into the study of that event. Similarly Strug's study is an alternative approach to understanding the early years of the Revolution through personalised experiences. Clearly the popular participatory spirit, the experimentation and the creative chaos which characterised the first decade of the Revolution, which has been described by many observers of Cuba at that time, is reflected in the first hand experiences of the North Americans interviewed for this study, but their subjective recollections add a richness and texture to this history. That they were not Cubans did not matter because the transformation was about human enlightenment as much as it was an unfolding of Cuban history. More than observers, these individuals became involved as participants through their work, which while diverse rendered similar emotional and ideological effects. As one interviewee suggested to the author, 'she pluralised her personal identity and thought in terms of "we" rather than "I", because she identified with the goals of the revolution...'. Strug argues, based on his findings, that the activities and experiences of his interviewees in some cases fed back into the US and corresponded with the thinking and writing of the New Left at that time. As David Cauter (1988) notes in his book on '1968', 'the legend of Cuba was inscribed on the hearts of the New Left'. But unlike written accounts of the Revolution which become frozen in time, these living subjects are able to scope Cuba's history and their own and reflect on the past while being conscious of the present. Understandably they measure their early exposure to the Revolution with the changes that have taken place and the difficulties the island now faces since the collapse of Soviet-style communism. Some developments they find disappointing but this appears not to have tarnished the glimpse of human creative potential and solidarity they experienced in those early years of the Revolution.

Samantha Wright, 'Natural and Traditional Medicine in Cuba: Outmoded Quackery or a Legitimate Tributary to Sustainable Healthcare'?

Wright begins by noting the scepticism with which 'natural and traditional medicine' (NTM) is viewed by the mainstream Western medical profession. Cuba however, while having established its healthcare system on empirically based conventional practices, is a world leader in integrating NTM into this dominant structure. The author notes that NTM in Western nations is more often categorised as 'complementary and alternative medicine' (CAM). However there is an important difference in that while CAM is seen to be outside of the allopathic medical structure, NTM as practised in Cuba is more 'integrative' with two way flows which seek to improve medical practice in general. While NTM is now largely

accepted in Cuba, its introduction on a large scale was the result of the economic crisis that followed the collapse of Soviet-style communism and the intensification of the US embargo in the early 1990s. At that time the government sought to maintain healthcare standards as a priority but there were shortfalls, especially in medicines, and NTM was increased initially to treat less serious and non-life threatening conditions. However consistent with Cuban management of healthcare in general, this modality was integrated into mainstream practice in a systematic and professional way, including the establishment of the Traditional Medicine Programme and an Office of Natural and Traditional Medicine. Consequently by 2001 NTM, in some form, was used by 60 per cent of Cubans, 86 per cent of family practitioners and 100 per cent of hospitals. It is now also taught in all 23 medical schools, so that every native and foreign doctor trained in Cuba has some knowledge of its uses. Concerning the type of NTMs practised, Cuba has drawn on a wide international range, but of particular influence has been the ethnomedical systems of the island's indigenous Taino and Caribe Indians as well as the traditions of peoples from West Africa and China who now make up large sections of the Cuban population. As in Western medical systems there is a desire in Cuba to find empirical evidence to support the use of NTM, but unlike in the former this is an ongoing line of enquiry rather than a conflictive engagement. Essentially much of the Cuban medical profession is willing to use NTM as an adjunct to allopathic medicine, especially in cases of chronic and less severe conditions. This inclusion is based on experiential evidence, patient psychology and the beneficial effects of medical self-management and creating a general sense of 'well-being'. This accords with Cuba's emphasis on a holistic approach to healthcare which includes, along with NTM, such factors as 'non-health determinants' like community support, sports training and education etc.