Cuban Internationalism, Che Guevara, and the Survival of Cuba’s Socialist Regime

by

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Two of the most important factors that have contributed to the survival of Cuba’s socialist regime are its commitment to its socialist ideals and its policies of internationalism. Cuba’s socialist regime has provided substantial support for national liberation struggles against imperialism in every region of the world, humanitarian assistance to people in at least 90 countries, and solidarity with progressive governments and a wide array of progressive international movements and organizations around the globe. Cuba’s socialist regime, like Che Guevara’s ideas and example of socialist internationalism, will survive if the regime continues to support socialist revolutions and to struggle against imperialism. Moreover, Cuba’s revolutionary example and its internationalist support for the Bolivarian Revolution in Venezuela will be a fundamental factor in determining the outcome of the current trends toward the radical left in Latin American politics.

Keywords: Internationalism, Socialism, Che Guevara, Cuba, Venezuela, Revolution

Since 1959, the Cuban government has created an unparalleled international web of relations with states, intergovernmental organizations, nongovernmental organizations, and progressive social movements around the world. Moreover, it has sustained this remarkable web despite the continuing efforts to isolate and defeat it by the most powerful state in the history of humanity—the United States of America. Over the past half century, Cuba’s socialist regime has survived a military invasion, an unrelenting economic, commercial, and financial blockade, a variety of covert measures (countless acts of sabotage, assassination attempts on its leaders, and so on), and an ongoing propaganda war, all organized and directed by the U.S. government. As a testament to the Cuban regime’s success in defending itself, every year for the past 15 years the United Nations General Assembly, at the request of the Cuban government, has called upon the U.S. government to end this bellicose behavior (United Nations, 2006: 14). Moreover, today the government of Cuba has diplomatic relations with 178 countries—almost four times as many as when the new revolutionary government was established in 1959 (Mazola, 2005). This historic achievement is especially remarkable in that far more powerful self-proclaimed socialist adversaries of the United States such
as the former Soviet Union and the People’s Republic of China have either collapsed or come to terms with this global superpower.

Two of the most important factors that have contributed to the survival of Cuba’s socialist regime are its commitment to its socialist ideals and its policies of internationalism. Because of these ideals and policies, Cuba’s socialist regime has provided substantial support for national liberation struggles against imperialism in every region of the world, humanitarian assistance to people in at least 90 countries (regardless of whether their governments maintain friendly or unfriendly relations with socialist Cuba), and solidarity to progressive governments and a wide array of progressive international movements and organizations around the globe. In return, these internationalist measures have earned the support, gratitude, and admiration of governments, intergovernmental organizations, nongovernmental organizations, progressive movements, and hundreds of millions of people worldwide.

CUBAN INTERNATIONALISM

Internationalism is founded on the belief that cooperation between the peoples of all nations serves the common good of humanity. However, it is important to distinguish between two forms of internationalism in contemporary world politics: liberal (bourgeois) and socialist (proletarian). The Cuban regime’s internationalism is arguably the best example of socialist or proletarian internationalism in the world today.

Liberal internationalism at its best is concerned with “strengthening, expanding and deepening international institutions in order to foster cooperation against common problems and to bring the globe closer to the long held liberal ideal of a world governed by a reasonably just, well-enforced set of rules” (Yglesias, 2008: 23). The fundamental problem with this form of internationalism (rooted in European cosmopolitanism) is that it does not provide an effective critique of the exploitative nature of the existing international order and even its most ardent advocates are prone to accept the self-interested and/or hegemonic actions of (their) nation-states when these actions are taken in the name of internationalism and/or to defend their so-called national security.

This form of internationalism generally fails to effectively critique and oppose the great inequality of wealth and power that exists within as well as between the existing states in the international system. Its advocates do not actively oppose the exploitative relations of production, the unequal international division of labor, the global stratification of power and privileges, the unjust distribution of income and wealth, and the hegemonic domination that are inherent in the existing international order.

As John Bellamy Foster (2000) makes clear in his analysis of the internationalism in Karl Marx’s later writings, there are two key elements that distinguish socialist or proletarian internationalism from liberal internationalism. These elements are the critique of international exploitation and the development of a largely working-class movement against capitalism that is both national and
international in its ideals and organization. The ideals and policies of the leaders of Cuba’s socialist regime have encompassed these two elements. Their strategies and policies have supported national liberation struggles against capitalist imperialism as well as a variety of international efforts directed against the numerous forms of exploitation, inequality, and social injustice that the leaders of Cuba’s socialist regime rightly associate with the existing world capitalist system. Foster makes it clear that from a genuine Marxist perspective, “there can be no genuine internationalism that does not have anti-imperialism at its heart.”

Socialist Cuba’s internationalism has had anti-imperialism at its heart from its earliest origins. While the leaders of the new revolutionary regime that was established in Cuba in 1959 were inspired by Marx’s and Lenin’s anti-imperialist conceptions of internationalism, they were also inspired by the anti-imperialism of José Martí, Antonio Maceo, and Simón Bolívar (Risquet, 2005). Nearly every Cuban today knows Martí’s famous saying “Our homeland is humanity,” but fewer know what he said on the eve of his death (quoted by Risquet, 2005):

Every day I am in danger of giving my life for my country and my duty—a position that I understand and I intend to carry out—to prevent, through the independence of Cuba, the United States from extending into the Antilles and falling—with even more force—over the lands of our America. Everything that I have done until now, and will do, is for that cause.

This anti-imperialism is rooted in the historical experience of Cuba’s struggle for independence and the larger Latin American struggle against imperialism that can be traced back to the great liberators and has been combined with Marxist and Leninist conceptions of anti-imperialism and socialist internationalism by the leaders of the Cuban Revolution and embraced by the majority of the Cuban people.

The attending physician at the birth of Cuba’s socialist internationalism was none other than Comandante Ernesto Che Guevara, the foremost internationalist among the leaders of the new revolutionary regime. Che personified the internationalist ideals and policies of Cuba’s new revolutionary regime during its first years, and the heroic example of internationalism that he set has been a continuing source of inspiration for the Cuban regime’s socialist internationalism.

Although he was an Argentine, he joined the Cuban revolutionary movement because he saw the liberation of Cuba as the first step in the liberation of Latin America from U.S. imperialism and capitalist exploitation (Harris, 2007: 37–50). One of the most intellectual of the leaders of the revolutionary July 26th Movement, he was a student of Marx, Lenin, and Martí (Dreke, 1997). In his “Notes for the Study of the Ideology of the Cuban Revolution” (Guevara, 1997 [1960]) he made it clear that Marxism had an important influence on the ideology of Cuba’s new revolutionary regime, and his speech at the hostile August 1961 conference of the Organization of American States (OAS) in Punta del Este, Uruguay, provided one of the earliest and most important public declarations of the anti-imperialism that has been a fundamental element of the regime’s political ideology and foreign policy (Guevara, 1997 [1961]: 229):
It is necessary to explain what the Cuban revolution is, what this special event is that made the blood of the world’s empires boil, and that has also made the blood of the dispossessed of the world, or of this part of the world at least, boil with hope. It is an agrarian, anti-feudal, and anti-imperialist revolution that under the imperatives of its internal evolution and of external aggressions became transformed into a socialist revolution, and that declares itself as such before the Americas: a socialist revolution.

Significantly, he also argued that the Cuban Revolution was “in solidarity with all the oppressed peoples of the world” and consequently would “struggle for the independence of other countries.”

This important speech took as its frame of reference the First Havana Declaration (Castro, 1960), which was approved on September 2, 1960, by more than 1 million Cubans convened by Fidel Castro as a National General Assembly of the People. At this unprecedented mass assembly, Fidel Castro presented a clear statement to the Cuban people and the world of the internationalist ideals of the new revolutionary regime. This declaration denounced U.S. imperialism in Latin America and proclaimed revolutionary Cuba’s solidarity with all “oppressed and exploited nations” fighting for their liberation.

As Comandante Manuel Piñeiro Losada (see Suárez, Zuazo, and Pellón, 1997) has pointed out, there is clear evidence of Fidel’s anti-imperialism in his early writings and actions:

Ever since he wrote “History Will Absolve Me” in 1953, Fidel has made it clear that [the Cuban] revolution was seeking the liberation and integration of all of Latin America. He himself had participated in the “Bogotazo” [a popular uprising in Bogota, Colombia], and in actions on behalf of Puerto Rican independence, for the sovereignty of the Malvinas, and for the recovery of the Panama Canal.

Piñeiro reports that Fidel was in Bogotá representing a Cuban student organization when the Bogotazo erupted following the murder of the Colombian leader Eliécer Gaitán on April 9, 1948. According to Risquet (2005), Fidel joined in “the reigning indignation and took up arms as an internationalist who voluntarily united with the struggle of that fraternal people.” Over the next decade, his internationalist and anti-imperialist convictions only became stronger. In 1958, in the midst of the revolutionary struggle he was leading against the Batista dictatorship, Fidel wrote Celia Sánchez, “When this war ends, my other longer and bigger war will begin, the war that I am going to wage against them (the Yankees). I realize that that is going to determine my real destiny” (Hart, 2004a).

CHE GUEVARA AND CUBA’S INTERNATIONALISM

Consistent with the ideals set forth in the First Havana Declaration, the new revolutionary government of Cuba was the first Latin American country to recognize the provisional government established by the Algerian national liberation movement, and it immediately provided both political and material assistance to this movement despite the difficulties this presented for its relations with France (Mazola, 2005). According to Risquet (2005), while they
were in the Sierra Maestra “the Cuban revolutionaries had followed the epic struggle of the Algerian Revolution in their heroic struggle for independence from the yoke of French colonialism,” and they closely identified with this revolutionary struggle. It is no accident, therefore, that Cuba’s new revolutionary regime’s first internationalist venture involved providing support to the national liberation movement in Algeria, which Piero Gleijeses (1996: 159) calls the regime’s “first love” in Africa.

The first emissary it sent to the Algerian liberation movement was a friend of Che Guevara named Jorge Masetti, an Argentine journalist who had been persuaded by Che to move to Cuba after the revolutionary triumph in 1959 and join the revolutionary regime. Shortly after Masetti arrived in Algeria the Cuban leaders sent the Algerians a shipload of U.S. weapons that had been captured from the Cuban exiles involved in the abortive U.S.-backed invasion at the Bay of Pigs, and, in one of the first acts of Cuban internationalist humanitarianism, when the ship returned it brought wounded Algerian guerrilla fighters and orphans back to Cuba.

After Algeria won its independence from France in July 1962, the leaders of the Cuban and Algerian governments established close relations. In fact, Fidel and Raúl Castro and Che Guevara became close friends with Ahmed Ben Bella, the president of the new socialist government of Algeria. This relationship was strengthened by the military assistance the Cuban government gave to the Algerian government in 1963, when the latter was threatened by the aggressive moves of the reactionary Moroccan monarchy backed by the U.S. government. According to Risquet (2005), “an advance party of troops was dispatched by air to Algeria and an armored force of 700 troops was sent” by sea, and “for six months, Cuban officers trained Algerian soldiers in the handling of tanks, mortars, and terrestrial and air artillery.”

An account of this early example of Cuban internationalism has been provided by former president Ben Bella (1997):

Fidel Castro, Che Guevara, Raul Castro, and the other Cuban leaders sent us a battalion of 22 tanks and several hundred troops. . . . The tanks were fitted with infrared equipment that allowed them to be used at night. They had been delivered to Cuba by the Soviet Union on the express condition that they were not to be made available to third countries, even communist countries . . . in any circumstances. Despite these restrictions from Moscow, the Cubans defied all the taboos and sent their tanks to the assistance of the endangered Algerian revolution without a moment’s hesitation. The United States was clearly behind the Tindouf campaign. We knew that the helicopters transporting the Moroccan troops were piloted by Americans. The same considerations of international solidarity subsequently led the Cubans to intervene on the other side of the Atlantic, in Angola, and elsewhere.

According to Ben Bella, these circumstances “illustrate better than any commentary the nature of our special relations with Cuba.” He goes on to describe Algeria’s side of this relationships as follows:

During one of his visits to Algiers, Che Guevara informed me of a request from Fidel. Since Cuba was under close surveillance, there was no real chance of organizing the supply of arms and military cadres trained in Cuba to other Latin American countries. Could Algeria take over? . . . I agreed without hesitation. We immediately began to establish organizational structures, placed under
the direct control of Che Guevara, to host Latin American revolutionary movements. Soon representatives of all these movements moved to Algiers, where I met them many times together with Che.

During the 1960s and 1970s, Cuba provided support to revolutionary socialist movements and leftist governments in Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, Colombia, the Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Grenada, Guatemala, Nicaragua, Panama, Peru, and Venezuela (Risquet, 2005; Gott, 2005: 221), as well as to liberation movements and leftist governments in Africa, the Middle East, and Asia. Fidel Castro, Raúl Castro, Che Guevara, and most of the other leaders of the new revolutionary regime in Cuba believed that the survival of the regime and the success of Cuba’s socialist revolution depended upon the success of similar revolutions and anti-imperialist struggles in Latin America and the rest of the world (Woods, 2007). Che, in particular, firmly believed that the only way to defend and save Cuba’s socialist revolution was to make sure that similar revolutions and similar regimes were established elsewhere. If Cuba tried to survive on its own, he felt, it would by defeated by the U.S. government and its allies just as the progressive Arbenz government in Guatemala had been defeated. Since Cuba’s revolutionary regime was clearly a major threat to the world capitalist system, especially to U.S. hegemony and the capitalist regimes in Latin America and the Caribbean, he recognized that it would have to secure substantial international support if it was to have any chance of survival (Woods, 2007).

Guevara and most of the other leaders of Cuba’s revolutionary regime realized that the U.S. strategy of isolating and blockading the Cuban revolution was, with the exception of an outright military invasion, the greatest threat to the survival of the revolutionary regime (Mazola, 2005). To prevent the isolation of revolutionary Cuba, they quickly allied Cuba with the Soviet Union, the People’s Republic of China, and the other countries in the socialist bloc and with left-leaning governments, national liberation movements, and revolutionary movements throughout the Third World.

Revolutionary Cuba’s support for leftist governments, national liberation movements, and revolutionary movements was initially modeled on the international assistance Cuba received in its confrontation with the U.S. government. Early in the life of the revolutionary regime, the Soviet Union gave it “the necessary weapons to defeat the military aggression organized and financed by the United States at Girón” (Mazola, 2005). The Soviet Union and other socialist countries also provided vital economic assistance that enabled the revolutionary regime to resist “the economic aggressions stemming from the sudden cancellation of supplies, the elimination of the sugar quota with its preferential price in the market, as well as the imposition of the economic, financial and commercial blockade” imposed on Cuba by the U.S. government (Mazola, 2005).

However, Fidel, Che, and the other Cuban leaders were furious over the unilateral decision of the Soviet Union to withdraw its nuclear missiles from Cuba in October 1962, when the U.S. government threatened the Soviet Union with nuclear war unless it did so. They considered the decision a betrayal of the Soviet Union’s commitment to defend its socialist allies in Cuba (Hudson, 1988). When, after the missile crisis, the Soviet leaders pressured the Cuban
government to stop supporting revolutionary movements in the Caribbean and Latin America, it continued to provide clandestine support—weapons, training, financial support, and sometimes advice and/or direct military involvement—to a variety of revolutionary movements throughout the Western Hemisphere. This support was coordinated by the Dirección General de Inteligencia (General Directorate of Intelligence—DGI) under the Ministry of the Interior. Fidel Castro appointed Piñeiro DGI chief (Hudson, 1988; George, 2005: 17), and he worked closely with Che Guevara in promoting anti-imperialist struggles and revolutionary movements throughout Latin America and Africa (Suárez, Zuazo, and Pellón, 1997). Three regional liberation committees were created by the DGI—one each for the Caribbean, Central America, and South America—and grouped into the Liberation Directorate (Hudson, 1988). In the early 1960s this directorate (which in 1974 became the America Department) also took responsibility for organizing and coordinating the support for liberation movements in Africa (Suárez, Zuazo, and Pellón, 1997).

On January 31, 1962, at the urging of the U.S. government, the OAS expelled Cuba for supporting a revolutionary guerrilla movement in Venezuela. Four days later, on February 4, Fidel Castro issued the Second Declaration of Havana, in which he called the OAS “a Yankee Ministry of Colonies, a military alliance, and an apparatus of repression against the liberation movements of the Latin American peoples” (Castro, 1962):

To the accusation that Cuba wants to export its revolution, we reply: revolutions are not exported, they are made by the people. . . . What Cuba can give to the people, and has already given, is its example. And what does the Cuban Revolution teach? That revolution is possible, that the people can make it, that in the contemporary world there are no forces capable of halting the liberation movement of the peoples.

In essence, the declaration called on the people of the continent to follow Cuba’s example by undertaking revolutionary warfare against the corrupt and repressive regimes in their countries.

During this period, the Cuban government also provided support to national liberation movements in various parts of Africa as well as to pro-Cuban revolutionary movements throughout Latin America, and Che Guevara was involved in one way or another with most of these operations. He was particularly interested in Africa and established close relations with most of the progressive leaders in the region, including Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana, Julius Nyerere of Tanzania, Abdel Nasser of Egypt, Amilcar Cabral of Guinea-Bissau, and Antônio Agostinho Neto of Angola (Harris, 2007). During a three-month state visit from December 1964 to March 1965, he made arrangements to provide military and civilian assistance to the armed guerrilla movements fighting for national independence in Angola, Guinea-Bissau, Mozambique, Rhodesia (Zimbabwe), and Congo (Taibo, 1996: 514–515). Among the Congolese leaders whom he met were Gaston Soumailot and Laurent Kabila, who headed a leftist rebel movement that was then in control of the eastern part of the country. Acting on the authority that he had received from Fidel Castro, Che offered to send this movement Cuban arms and military advisers, and he also secretly made up his mind to head one of the contingents of advisers (Harris, 2007: 70–81).
Near the end of this trip, Che attended the Second Economic Seminar of the Afro-Asian People’s Solidarity Organization in Algiers, which assembled representatives of 63 African and Asian governments and 19 liberation movements. At this meeting, on February 24, 1965, he made an impassioned call for proletarian internationalism (Guevara, 1997 [1965]: 302):

There are no borders in this struggle to the death. We cannot be indifferent to what happens anywhere in the world, because a victory by any country over imperialism is our victory, just as any country’s defeat is a defeat for all of us. The practice of proletarian internationalism is not only a duty for the peoples struggling for a better future, it is also an inescapable necessity. If the imperialist enemy, the United States or any other, carries out its attack against the underdeveloped and the socialist countries, elementary logic determines the need for an alliance between the underdeveloped and the socialist countries. If there were no other common uniting factor, the common enemy should be it.

He went on to say that every time a country was liberated it would be a defeat for “the world imperialist system” and that for the socialist countries it was “our international duty, a duty determined by our guiding ideology, to contribute our efforts to make this liberation as rapid and deep-going as possible.”

Che criticized the socialist countries for not giving enough support to the liberation and development of the underdeveloped Third World countries: “We must agree that the socialist countries are, in a certain way, accomplices of imperial exploitation” because they trade with the underdeveloped countries on the existing unequal terms and in terms of unfair world market prices (Guevara, 1997 [1965]: 303): “The socialist countries have the moral duty to put an end to their tacit complicity with the exploiting countries of the West,” and their “foreign trade should be subordinated to a fraternal policy toward the peoples” of the underdeveloped countries. He argued that there was no “valid definition of socialism other than the abolition of the exploitation of man by man” and that until this was achieved “we cannot even speak of building socialism” (304).

Because of his internationalist convictions and the global scope of his commitment to the support of revolutionary movements, upon his return to Cuba in March 1965 Che resigned from his positions in the Cuban government to devote all his efforts to the armed struggle against imperialism (Harris, 2007: 72–73). Since he had played such an important role in the Cuban Revolution without being Cuban, he assumed that he would be able to do the same elsewhere, and he realized that it would be impossible for him to involve himself directly in a revolutionary struggle outside of Cuba if he continued to hold a high position in the Cuban government. Fidel supported Che’s decision to lead one of the Cuban contingents that were being formed to go to Africa. He knew that Che had become increasingly restless in his official responsibilities in Cuba and wanted to devote his life to the global struggle against capitalism and Western imperialism that he had come to consider his main mission in life (Anderson, 1997: 628).

Consequently, Che left Cuba in April 1965 to lead a contingent of Afro-Cubans from the Cuban army that had volunteered to go to Congo to support the leftist rebels against the U.S.-backed neocolonial regime installed there
after the assassination of its popular leader Patrice Lumumba (Guevara, 2001). He believed that Africa had enormous revolutionary potential and that the struggles against the neocolonial governments backed by Western imperialism, the remaining colonial regimes, and the racist apartheid regimes in southern Africa were the weakest link in the structure of the imperialist world order (Ben Bella, 1997). Unfortunately, his mission to create a training base for revolutionaries from all over Africa in Congo was a failure. He and his comrades soon realized that the Congolese rebels they were assisting could not win because of their corrupt and weak leaders, failure to organize the local population, distrust of one another, and lack of discipline (Guevara, 2001).

In November 1965 he left Congo as secretly as he had entered it. It was a bitter blow for him to return to Cuba with nothing to show for his efforts. In the end, he and his comrades had been forced to withdraw from their base camp in eastern Congo and escape into Tanzania (Guevara, 2001). The experience made him more determined than ever to undertake a successful revolutionary mission in Latin America (Harris, 2007: 81).

He found solace in the fact that one of his grandest dreams, an intercontinental organization representing the underdeveloped countries of the world with its headquarters in Cuba, had been established by Fidel Castro only a few months before his return (Harris, 2007: 86). In fact, the first conference of the Organización de Solidaridad con los Pueblos de Asia, Africa y América Latina (Organization of Solidarity of Asian, African, and Latin American Peoples—OSPAAAL)—referred to as the Tricontinental—was held in Havana January 3–15, 1966, with some 400 delegates from the underdeveloped world attending. Che’s revolutionary ideas were the central topic of discussion among the delegates, and this undoubtedly reinforced his determination to realize one of his oldest dreams: the liberation of Latin America’s oppressed and exploited masses (Harris, 2007: 86).

This dream was bolstered by his belief that Cuba would become truly independent and its socialist revolution successful only when additional revolutionary and socialist governments were established in Latin America that could provide support to one another (Harris, 2007: 86–87). With the full support of the Cuban government, Che secretly made preparations to establish a revolutionary guerrilla base in Bolivia that was to be a guerrilla madre, a base for developing a series of revolutionary guerrilla forces that would carry out a continental revolution. Fidel supported this mission because of his confidence in Che and his comrades and because if it succeeded it would greatly strengthen Cuba’s revolutionary position in the Americas and throughout the world. Indeed, he was willing to risk incurring the Soviet Union’s displeasure by doing so (Anderson, 1997: 677).

The creation of OSPAAAL (an expansion of the Afro-Asian People’s Solidarity Organization) and the hosting of a series of major international conferences in Havana between 1966 and 1968 strengthened Cuba’s international support and its internationalist ties. The Tricontinental Conference was attended by delegates from 83 Third World governments, radical movements, and leftist parties. Fidel Castro promised the delegates that “any revolutionary movement anywhere in the world can count on Cuba’s unconditional support” (Castro, 1966). By the end of 1966 the Cuban government had established more than a dozen international camps to provide military
training to the members of revolutionary groups and national liberation
movements (Hudson, 1988).

In April 1967, shortly after Che’s guerrilla force had been discovered by
the Bolivian army, a message from him (written from “somewhere in the
world”) to OSPAAAL was published in the organization’s magazine
TRicontinental under the title “Create two, three, many Vietnams” (Guevara,
1997 [1967]). In this last public message he called for international support
for the Vietnamese liberation struggle against the United States and for the
oppressed peoples of the Third World to take up arms and create “many
Vietnams” (325–326):

Let us develop a true proletarian internationalism; with international proletari-
armies, the flag under which we fight would be the sacred cause of redeeming
humanity. To die under the flag of Vietnam, of Venezuela, of Guatemala, of Laos,
of Guinea, of Colombia, of Bolivia, of Brazil—to mention only the current scenes
of today’s armed struggle—would be equally glorious and desirable for an
American, an Asian, an African, even a European. Every drop of blood spilled in
a land under whose flag one has not been born is an experience gathered by the
survivor to be applied later in the struggle for the liberation of one’s own coun-
try. And every people that liberates itself is a step in the battle for the liberation
of one’s own people.

The strategic goal of this international struggle, he argued, was “the real lib-
eration of the peoples [of the world], a liberation that will be the result of
armed struggle in the majority of cases, and that, in Latin America, will,
almost unfailingly, turn into a socialist revolution.”

Since this message was published, Cuba’s socialist regime, armed with the
ideals and convictions Che articulated, has fought countless battles and sent
Cuba’s sons and daughters to serve as soldiers, teachers, doctors, nurses,
technicians, and humanitarian construction workers in more than 100 coun-
tries around the world (Risquet, 2005). Few people could have imagined in
1967 that the government and people of this small country only 90 miles from
the world’s most powerful state, which has done its best to isolate and defeat
them, would accomplish the most remarkable achievements of international
solidarity in world history and enter the twenty-first century as the only
country on the planet with a genuine socialist ideology and a regime still
committed to socialist revolution. Among its achievements must be men-
tioned at least the following (see Risquet, 2005; Duenas, 2007; Huish and
Kirk, 2007):

As of 2006, there were Cuban humanitarian aid workers in 39 countries in
the Americas, 29 African states, 18 countries in Asia and the Middle East, and
15 nations in Europe. More than 35 percent of these volunteer internationalists
were doctors or health workers.

Cuban doctors and health workers have provided health care in 94 coun-
tries. After the massive earthquake in Kashmir in October 2005, some 2,400
Cuban physicians and paramedical staff worked in 44 locations, established
32 field hospitals, treated more than 1 million people, dispensed 235 tons of
medicines and supplies, and brought 275 tons of medical equipment that they
left behind and taught the Pakistanis how to use. As a result of this humanitar-
ian assistance, Cuba and Pakistan have resumed diplomatic relations, which
had been discontinued in 1990.
As of 2005, the total number of Cuban internationalists who have assisted people in 160 countries around the world was nearly 200,000.

Since the world’s worst nuclear accident took place at Chernobyl in April 1986, Cuba has provided continuing health care to the children from the Ukraine, Belorussia, Russia, and the regions of the three Slavic Republics affected by the radioactive cloud that was created by this disaster.

Through providing scholarships that cover the full costs of transportation, board, and education, by 2005 Cuba had provided secondary and university education to over 50,000 students from 44 countries and graduated more than 40,000 foreign professionals from Cuban institutions in some 12,000 specialties.

Since September 1999, the Latin American School of Medicine has provided free medical education and board to youth from Latin America and the Caribbean, Africa, the United States and Puerto Rico, East Timor, and Pakistan. For the most part, these have been individuals who could not afford to attend the medical schools in their own countries. Every year, between 1,400 and 1,700 new students, representing more than 100 ethnic groups, enroll in the medical school. After they graduate, they are prepared and expected to return to their countries of origin to serve the poorest and most isolated sectors of the population. In 2004–2005, there were over 10,500 students registered.

Between April 1965, when Che Guevara first promised Antônio Agostinho Neto that Cuba would assist the liberation struggle in his country, and May 1991, when the last Cuban combatants left Angola, some 450,000 Cubans (7 percent of the Cuban population) helped the Angolan government defeat two South African military interventions, a bloody U.S.-backed insurgency, and an invasion from Zaire (the Democratic Republic of the Congo) in the longest and largest military campaign in Africa since World War II.

Cuban internationalist support played a key role not only in the liberation and defense of the independence of Algeria and Angola but also in the liberation of Guinea-Bissau and Cape Verde from Portuguese colonial domination, the defense of the newly independent government of the Congo Republic (Brazzaville) from neocolonial forces, the liberation of Mozambique from Portuguese colonial rule, the liberation of Rhodesia (Zimbabwe) and Namibia, and the downfall of the apartheid regime in South Africa.

Cuba’s fraternal support for the Bolivarian Revolution in Venezuela includes more than 10,000 doctors (and more than 15,000 health care workers), 8,000 educators, and some 2,000 athletic trainers, agricultural experts, military advisers, and technicians, most of whom are working in the poorest and most rural areas of Venezuela and training local citizens to replace them.

Former President Nelson Mandela of the Republic of South Africa is among the many leaders who have praised Cuba for its internationalism. At the opening of the Southern Africa–Cuba Solidarity Conference in 1995, Mandela (1995) said:

Cubans came to our region as doctors, teachers, soldiers, agricultural experts, but never as colonizers. They have shared the same trenches with us in the struggle against colonialism, underdevelopment, and apartheid. Hundreds of Cubans have given their lives, literally, in a struggle that was, first and foremost, not theirs but ours. As Southern Africans we salute them. We vow never to forget this unparalleled example of selfless internationalism.
THE SURVIVAL OF CUBA'S SOCIALIST REGIME

The survival of Cuba’s socialist regime is due in large part to its unparalleled internationalism, its continuing struggle against imperialism, and its commitment to socialist ideals and socialist policies at home. As Saul Landau (2008) says, the Cuban Revolution “has been a success. It achieved independence and sovereignty, educated and made healthy its population, provided them with basic needs and educated its people to dance on the stage of world history.” But the survival of the regime is not an unexplainable “miracle.”

As Marce Cameron (2005) has noted, when Cuba’s leaders called on the people to endure the hardships of the economic crisis their country faced in the early 1990s because of the collapse of the Soviet Union and the socialist bloc, they made it clear that the first principle of their strategy for surviving this “special period” was to continue the struggle against imperialism and the pursuit of a socialist society. They appealed to the socialist and internationalist ideals of the Cuban people and promised to defend the achievements of the revolution in health care, education, science, culture, and international solidarity. Cuba’s socialist regime has survived because it has done this. Unlike the Chinese and Vietnamese regimes, it has not fundamentally compromised its socialist ideals and achievements, nor has it opened the Cuban economy to the widespread involvement of transnational capitalist corporations and global capitalist relations of production.

According to Celia Hart (2004a), “the cornerstones of a socialist revolution are its internationalist project and uncompromising social (class) struggle,” and these are the cornerstones of Cuba’s socialist regime. They are essential elements of Marxist theory and practice that date back to the Manifesto of the Communist Party (Marx and Engels, 1848), which contains the phrase that has become emblematic of socialist internationalism: “The workers have no country.” The relationship between class struggle and internationalism is posited by Marx and Engels as follows: “In proportion as the exploitation of one individual by another will also be put an end to, the exploitation of one nation by another will also be put an end to. In proportion as the antagonism between classes within the nation vanishes, the hostility of one nation to another will come to an end.” Hart (2004a) contends that Cuba has “the only living socialist revolution in the West” and that it has survived by almost two decades the collapse of the self-proclaimed socialist regimes in Europe through “continuing to uphold an all-out struggle against American imperialism” and waging an ongoing struggle against class divisions, capitalist values, and class relations in Cuban society. She goes on to say (2004b):

From my experience in the GDR [the former East Germany] and in Cuba I have reached the conclusion that “socialism in one country” is impossible. The spreading of the revolution across the Latin American continent is essential for the survival of revolutionary Cuba. Cheap Venezuelan oil alleviates the energy crisis in Cuba; and Cuban doctors and teachers provide assistance to the poor population in Venezuela to develop dignity and self-esteem. The present-day special relations between Cuba and revolutionary Venezuela give us a glimpse of the enormous possibilities and progress that a network of democratically planned economies throughout Latin America—freed from imperialist paternalism and interference—would allow. In the long run, an isolated revolutionary Cuba cannot survive.
Hart believes that there is a real danger that all the achievements of the past five decades could be destroyed and a capitalist counterrevolution could take place in Cuba, even though there is a centrally planned economy, the state still exercises a monopoly over foreign trade, the means of production are still owned by the state, and most of the country’s joint ventures with foreign corporations are controlled by the state. She suggests that some of the changes in Cuba’s economy that were made during the Special Period have created conditions in certain sectors that favor a transition to capitalism similar to that taking place in China:

Dollarization has already had its negative effects. The management of joint ventures and the officials in foreign trade are at risk of being bought and they are also susceptible to bourgeois ideas. If the exiled Cuban capitalists return and try to usurp the country with the aid of pro-capitalist and pro-imperialist forces, there will be the menace of a counter-revolution and a capitalism of the worst sort.

There are, however, as Hart contends, counter trends that are gaining importance in Cuba: “The Bolivarian revolution finds a lot of support not only among longstanding communists in Cuba, but also in the ranks of the youth.” The Bolivarian Revolution launched by the Chávez government in Venezuela has moved increasingly in a radical left direction, and Chávez and his supporters say that they are committed to creating “twenty-first century socialism” in their country. Odeen Ishmael (2007) observes that this Venezuelan approach to socialism is as yet relatively undefined:

There is no mention of Marxism-Leninism, even though Chavez has stated that people must read Marx and Lenin to understand what socialist ideology means. A clearer view emerged on January 18 [2007] when Chavez explained in Rio de Janeiro . . . that his vision of “twenty-first century socialism” is different to the failed Soviet model, which he said was unsuccessful because it was not democratic and did not give power to the people. He added: “In a democracy, in an authentic socialism, power must be given to the people. We have to construct a truly socialist model that does not copy models from other countries.”

As Ishmael notes, this statement is significant because “Chavez’s opponents vociferously claim that he wants to set up a Cuban type of socialism in Venezuela.”

At any rate, as Hart (2004a) contends, it is likely the Venezuelan elite and the U.S. government will try to overthrow the Chávez regime, and if this takes place it will likely involve Cuban military intervention. As the Bolivarian revolutionary process moves increasingly to the left, she contends, it is pulling Cuba with it: “Many Cubans who stopped talking about socialism and chose instead ecumenical, alternative worldist terms like ‘social justice’ or ‘a better world’ are now seeing that Venezuela talks quite naturally about socialism and want to follow suit” (Rey, 2007). In this respect, the destiny of the Cuban Revolution now appears to be increasingly linked with that of the Bolivarian Revolution and, to a lesser degree, the radical shift to the left in Bolivia and Ecuador. Of course, if Chávez’s Bolivarian Revolution is defeated or fails of its own accord and the leftist regimes in Bolivia and Ecuador suffer a similar fate, Cuba’s socialist regime will be faced with a very dangerous situation.
CONCLUSION

Neoliberal capitalism has had a devastating impact across the Americas, and it has created the conditions for a socialist revolution that can spread throughout the hemisphere. Cuba’s revolutionary example and its internationalist support for the Bolivarian Revolution in Venezuela as well as the leftist governments in Bolivia, Ecuador, and Nicaragua has been and will be a fundamental factor in determining the outcome of this historic conjuncture in world history. As Piñeiro (quoted by Suárez, Zuazo, and Pellón, 1997) has said,

If the Cuban Revolution had abandoned Che’s ideals, it would not be the bastion it is for the popular anti-imperialist, anti-capitalist, pro-socialist struggles that are still being carried out in the world. Even under the harsh circumstances of economic, political and ideological aggression by imperialism, the Cuban people today exhibit the heroism that Che called for, and that Fidel—whom Che referred to as his “father and guide”—still calls for every day.

Cuba’s socialist regime, like Che’s ideas and example of socialist internationalism, will survive as long as “there are oppressed and oppressors, social injustice and imperialist domination” and “hope for a more just world, with fraternity and solidarity among men and women, people and countries” (Suárez, Zuazo, and Pellón, 1997).

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