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An Ambivalent Revolution: A Review of Capitalism, God, and a Good Cigar

Any analysis of postrevolutionary Cuba, the first socialist republic to rise in Latin America, is inherently political. The volatile and lively debates surrounding the island nation's successes and failures spark up with new vigor each time a study is published, like a flame fed gasoline. Lydia Chávez, a professor at the University of California, brought a group of journalism students to Cuba to teach them how to report on foreign affairs in 2001.¹ This visit became the basis for this book. It portrays Cuba as still in the midst of a transition that should have been concluded soon after the end of the revolution in 1959. To merely say Cuba is between capitalism and socialism would not quite capture the complex reality on the ground. Socialism developed unevenly in the decades following the revolution; aspects of capitalism disappeared and reappeared in new forms as the US embargo and fall of the USSR took its toll on the country. Chávez sees this uneven development best embodied in her memory of poor children with eyeglasses begging for dollars.² People who are starving still receive other types of healthcare. Cuba is full of seeming contradictions. This book, a collection of impressions of Cuban society written by her students, has much to contribute to the debate but falls short of providing a complete view of Cuban society in the twentieth century.

The book is divided into four sections, entitled “Inventing,” “Breathing,” “Surviving,” and “Searching.” The first describes the inventive ways in which people live and even thrive in limiting circumstances. Juliana Barbassa's article, “The New Cuban Capitalist,” eloquently

1 Linda Chávez, ed., *Capitalism, God, and a Good Cigar: Cuba Enters the Twenty-first Century* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2005), 1.

2 Chávez, *Capitalism*, 3.

situates the every day lives of Cubans in a larger sociopolitical context. She notes that while Castro's Cuba is indeed different from the one under Batista, tourism, private enterprise, and the US dollar have slowly become accepted in the postrevolutionary society as what Castro calls “necessary evils.”³ While socialism has utterly transformed Cuban society, the legacy of underdevelopment and imperialism stunts even now the progression of the revolution. People have invented new forms of capitalism as a means of survival. The government's policies toward small, capitalist ventures has done pendulum swings over the years. *Paladares*, tiny illicit restaurants sometimes run in people's backyards, were shut down for a mere few weeks in 1994 only to become legalized the next year.⁴ These private enterprises are necessary when government rations are uncertain and the dollar is king. Cuba is in a strange state in which capitalism is reviled, but tolerated. One interviewee, a sociology professor who ran an illicit bed-and-breakfast at her home, states that small, illegal businesses in Cuba are not part of the black market—they are the market.⁵ Barbassa explores the realities of Cuban capitalists who make sense of their place in a socialist republic. Most thought-provoking in this section is Alicia Roca's article, “Four Women Survive Manzanillo.” She provides written snapshots of four women engaged in the struggle to endure. In a particularly striking moment, an old, eighty-pound old woman known only as Rosa lovingly reminisces about the early years of the revolution as she toasts bread with watered-down fuel and sweetens her coffee with sugar from a jar swarming with ants.⁶ The revolution was indeed beautiful. However, it remains incomplete. Cuba still remains economically dependent on other countries—most apparent in the Cubans' coveting of the US dollar—though politically sovereign.

3 Chávez, *Capitalism*, 17.

4 Ibid., 20.

5 Ibid., 24-25.

6 Ibid., 33-34.

A weaker section is “Breathing.” Ezequiel Minaya's “Authors Who Knew or Know the Limits” had the potential for greatness, but fails to examine the issues of censorship beyond a simple analysis. Minaya seeks answers about the exiled poet Herberto Padilla from the elusive author Pedro Juan Gutiérrez, but he purposely avoids him in fear of “starting trouble.”⁷ The article is eery and full of intrigue. However, it makes no attempt to explain the motivations for and meaning of censorship in postrevolutionary Cuba. The most Minaya implicitly asserts is that artists are persecuted and individual rights are pushed aside—a shallow analysis at best. The Cuban Revolution transformed the role of intellectuals and artists in society. Castro's censorship laws were more than attempts to force these men and women to create pro-revolutionary propaganda. Contextualizing the Herbert Padilla Affair in 1971 in history would have added the dimension this article lacks. The CIA's involvement in propaganda campaigns and covert operations elsewhere in Latin America in the latter half of the twentieth century show that the Cuban government passed these censorship laws in a tense and complex international political environment. Still, “Dancers Who Stretch the Limit” by Ana Campoy redeems the section. Campoy traces the life of ballerina Alicia Alonso to look at the effects of the postrevolutionary government's policies on the Cuban School of Ballet—from Castro's generous grant to the Alonsos to start a ballet company a few months after the ousting of Batista to the period of homosexual persecution in 1966 that forced ten male dancers to defect to France.⁸ She provides a nuanced view of the ways in which the postrevolutionary government both fostered growth and expansion of the arts at the same time it limited artists.

The international community is politically polarized over the case of Cuba. This is why analyzing the problems and achievements of the socialist republic is difficult to do without

7 Chávez, *Capitalism*, 81.

8 *Ibid.*, 98-99.

raising controversy. The most glaring problem of this book is its narrow focus on the ways in which the revolution has failed the people. In some cases, the students come dangerously close to portraying poor Cubans who believe in the revolution as deluded. It is also easy to condemn human rights violations of the Cuban government without considering the egregious corruption under Batista, the legacies of underdevelopment and Cold War politics, or the sad state in which other underdeveloped, capitalist Latin American countries were in the late twentieth century. The inclusion of articles on what have been hailed victories of the revolution, such as the strong Cuban healthcare system and the numerous daycare centers, would vastly improve this book. Nevertheless, *Capitalism, God, and a Good Cigar* has much to contribute to the conversation surrounding Cuba and the tenability of socialism in Latin America. It would greatly compliment and contradict speeches by Vilma Espín, Fidel Castro, and Ernesto “Che” Guevara on the successes and failures of the revolution and be useful for a comparative study of Cuba and other Caribbean countries.