

rather than neoliberal pseudo-empowerment handed down from above – is not only the most desirable way forward, but is the only way to break the NGOization that Canada and other imperial powers have imposed on the Global South.

Farber, Samuel. 2011. *Cuba Since the Revolution of 1959: A Critical Assessment*. Chicago: Haymarket Books. ISBN 978-1-60846-139-4. Paperback: 24.00 USD. Pages: 369.

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Samuel Farber's *Cuba Since the Revolution of 1959: A Critical Assessment* is bound to change the way we think about Latin America's most important socialist experiment. Farber, a US-based academic who left Cuba in the 1950s, focuses on the politics and ideology of the revolutionary leadership – its ideas. "The single most important factor that explains the uniqueness of Cuba's development," Farber writes, "was the political leadership of Fidel Castro, which made a major difference in the triumph against Batista and in determining the course taken by the Cuban Revolution after it came to power" (10). While acknowledging the challenges the Revolution faced and the unrelenting character of US imperial aggression, he sets out to demonstrate that the repressive nature of the Cuban government is general and systemic and not merely a justified response to specific security threats. Farber thus seeks to debunk the myths, fallacies and misunderstandings perpetuated by the revolutionary leadership and its apologists in a wide-ranging work that focuses on the social, cultural, political and economic dimensions of the Revolution from its early days to the present.

Farber does not deny the popularity of the Cuban Revolution among wide segments of the masses prior to the mass apathy of the 1990s. Drawing upon the "classical Marxist tradition," however, he puts forward a simple criterion in a detailed introduction that sets the tone for the rest of the book: "to be a fully participatory democracy," Farber writes, "it must be based on the self-mobilization and organization of the people, and the rule of the majority has to be complemented by minority rights and civil liberties" (4). In this sense, the Cuban Revolution never empowered its supporters to develop their "own autonomous political consciousness so that they could cease being the objects, and become the subjects, of history" (39).

In Chapter One, we are given an account of the decision-making style of the government that emerged following the revolution, its tendency to announce major

policy shifts without discussion or consultation beyond the revolutionary inner-circle and the drive to subordinate all aspects of social, political and cultural life to the state under the Cuban Communist Party (which absorbed all the main revolutionary parties and movements in 1965). The mass organizations that were established by the government such as the Committees for the Defence of the Revolution (CDS) were intended primarily to serve as transmission belts to implement party policy (and spy on the population). One-party rule and the government's complete monopoly of the media cemented the ability of the revolutionary leadership to enforce a monolithic vision of society. Despite some important democratic reforms in the 1970s and 1980s, candidates are still prevented from presenting and campaigning on political platforms or points of view in provincial and national elections, and the assemblies are given very little input into the formulation of policy. All this, Farber argues, amounts to a radical departure from the vision of revolutionary democracy and socialism from below envisioned by the classical Marxist tradition and practiced by the Paris Commune of 1871 and the Russian Revolution of 1917 in its initial days.

Farber meticulously documents the government's suppression of any opposition through draconian laws, such as the outlawing of "contempt" for authority and provisions that allow the government to punish without trial citizens engaged in "pre-criminal" behaviour. Without diminishing the many attempts staged by the United States to undermine the Revolution and personally assassinate Castro, Farber argues that there was no reason why revolutionary unity could not have been achieved through discussion and debate in genuinely democratic institutions. After the defeat of the right-wing guerrilla campaign from the Escambray Mountains in 1965, moreover, counter-revolutionary forces were all but vanquished from the island.

In Chapter Two, Farber rehashes a familiar critique in detailing the waste and inefficiencies of Cuba's command economy, where – until recently – even the smallest "hole in the wall" was owned by the state and subject to centralized planning. Cuba's health and education accomplishments, however, are put into perspective; while the country has scored high when it comes to the United Nations Development Programme's Human Development Index, the measure fails to take into consideration important factors determining the quality of life, such as the complete inadequacy of food rations. Similarly, in Chapter Three on Cuba's foreign policy, Farber argues that some of the government's more progressive campaigns – such as its extraordinary contribution to the South African liberation movements of the 1970s and 1980s, particularly in Angola – were compromised by its support for the communist dictatorship of Mengistu Haile Mariam in Ethiopia, which responded to reasons of state and the need to manage the relationship with the Soviet Union.

Chapter Four explores the government's labour laws and its relationship to workers, demonstrating that it has never attempted to establish genuine worker's control of the means of production. Instead, the government has used trade unions to discipline

workers while morally exhorting them to increase productivity. Chapters Five and Six on Blacks Cubans and gender, respectively, debunk claims made by the revolutionary leadership that it has eradicated racism and sexism. Although the position of Black Cubans and women may have improved in some respects, both are underrepresented in the most prestigious occupations and at the highest echelons of government and the party, and both have been prohibited from organizing independently to advance their interests. The discussion on homosexuality in Chapter Six is particularly devastating given that the government has never taken responsibility for its campaigns against gays in the 1960s and 1970s prior to the partial cultural and social liberalization of the following decades.

The more recent economic reforms of Raul Castro's government – most of which have been decreed with no participation from below – are largely viewed critically. With Cuba gradually moving towards a capitalist economy, Farber fears that military hardliners in the government will eventually preside over a protracted transition to capitalism along the lines of the Sino-Vietnamese model (possibly with the support of the US and Miami's reactionary Cuban right). Chapter Seven provides an interesting account of the different dissident tendencies, most of which are individual-based and none of which has coalesced around an alternative socialist vision. Perhaps to avoid succumbing to despair, Farber puts his faith in the burgeoning youth movement, which by his own account lacks consciousness and direction.

Cuba since the Revolution provides a devastating critique of the Castro government in an historical synthesis rich in theoretical and empirical detail. Most importantly, Farber's account provides a revolutionary theory of democracy demonstrating that the practices and institutions of "formal democracy" must form the basis of any form of socialism worthy of the name. Perhaps the main weakness of the book is that it avoids relating the Cuban experience to Latin America's current Left, its transformational potential, and the current prospects to create democratic socialism from below. This would have provided the work with a wider contemporary relevance, as its discussion on revolutionary dilemmas is confined almost exclusively to the distant past. But this hardly diminishes the importance of a provocative work full of historical insight that transcends both the narrow dogmatism of the anti-Castro right and Cuba's apologists on the left.