

BOOK REVIEW by Peter Davis

Novković, S. & Veltmeyer, H. (Eds.) (2018) "Introduction: Updating the Cuban Model". In *Co-operativism and Local Development in Cuba*. Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill.

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This is a very important work of scholarship that deserves a careful and critical readership. Not least because of the unique place the Cuba revolution has in the 20th and 21st centuries struggle against imperialism, neocolonialism and capitalism. If Soviet-style communism seemed dull and dreary, the exuberant music and the charismatic leadership (not least, Che Guevara) gave the Cuban revolution a wider appeal. Then, there was the reality of a superpower, in fact, *the* superpower's blockade aimed to strangle the Cuban revolution, just as Salvador Allende's Chilean revolution was. In the Cuban case, the superpower failed. Can a people 'shackled by an oppressive centralizing Stalinist state' really take on such a huge enemy at such close quarters? Can such a people really produce the exuberance that is Cuban music? Can it really produce a leadership with the candor to be as self critical of its own cherished model and its attempts at reform as is Raul Castro's statement from *Granma*, 2017 quoted at the start of this book? What other third world country has a literacy rate, a mortality rate, equivalent or better, than the USA and the UK, with almost twice as many doctors per head and although poor, no actual poverty?

The book's 10 chapters try, in many ways, to come to terms with this past and present, but also and most importantly, the authors look to the future, as Cuba comes out of isolation into the global economy. This is not just a critical moment for Cuba, but for the whole of the southern hemisphere countries struggling with poverty, debt and unequal trade relationships dominated by super powers and multinational corporations. Can a co-operative economy provide an alternative business model that actually does what the co-operators of old dreamed of – deliver a just society without the state, inside a free market context, through voluntary associations who are open to all and are democratically accountable to their members?

This book provides a platform for a largely institutional economics approach, but one couched often in terms of a leftist agenda embracing of worker grass roots activism requiring a political motivation and leadership, but not a from a collaboration and support that could emerge for the big co-operatives operating in the money economy. Authors, like Marcelo Vieta, see Cuba as a basis for a non-agricultural co-operative model, as if this did not exist already and seem not to recognise that co-operation is a social movement, with many economic models, but a single value system. If its authors dream of a bottom-up economic democracy, the role of government policies and institutional context dominates the analytic frameworks of many of its contributors. Of course, such an institutional approach to economics is to be encouraged as more scientific than those who seem to approach economics as a sub-branch of mathematics, presenting a spurious exactitude of natural science to the discipline that has to be a central part of a social science.

"Introduction: Updating the Cuban Model" in *Co-operativism and Local Development in Cuba*

The book's opening chapter has a radical Marxist political economy perspective, which clearly cannot be implemented in current circumstances without prolonging and even intensifying Cuban isolation. (Gambina and Raffinelli, Ch1) A number of the book's authors are suspicious of the traditional co-operative model, seeing it as providing for small business development and farmer's commercial operations, with limited applications for a radical worker-based movement. The idea of a barter economy is raised, as both a growing fact of economic life and as an appropriate strategy, particularly among the rural poor. (Veltmeyer, Ch2) There is no reflection or sympathy for the idea of linkages between barter-based co-operation and commercial co-operatives as a coming together of classes in a wider social movement, bringing a solidarity economy combining the marginalized poor in a barter economy together with working class co-operatives, consumer and producer co-operatives and small business and middle class segments, together in a united anti-capitalist alliance for a sustainable, just and democratic economy. (Davis, 2000)

There is a lot of valuable historical background charting the impact of World Bank and IMF policies, the Washington Consensus on Latin America and the grass roots resistance movements that arose in response to the increasing poverty and economic dislocation of these policies, as well as documentation of different stages in Cuba's development (Veltmeyer, Vieta, Fernandez, Sanchez and Harneker). In the chapters by Royce, Campbell and Harneker, the author's look to the future prospects for Cuba's co-operative reforms. The Campbell chapter concludes with some interesting and practical advice for greater education of members and officials of state enterprises preparing for transformation to co-operatives and he recognizes the problems of creating a co-operative in name only. In doing so, he alone almost raises an issue missing overall from the analysis that this is the problem of agency and corruption versus co-operative values, principles, culture and identity. It's not simply institutional arrangements and market forces that can undermine co-operatives, but just as dangerous are those informal actor's power plays and the intervention of forces actually hostile to co-operatives inside the co-operatives themselves.

In particular, the authors fail to address the power and threat of organised crime in a poor community and the power and influence of organised criminals at the heart of the USA. For there is a sub plot in the history of Cuba involving the role of the Mafia and the murky relationship between organised crime and capitalism's struggle to destroy or control organized labour and the dramatic representation of this struggle being the film *On The Waterfront*, which could almost have been presented as a documentary. A neocolonialist dictatorship and the Mafia were all expelled from Cuba by the Castro-led revolution. Frustrated by their inability to bring the Cuban revolution down, the CIA launched its own Bay of Pigs invasion from the Florida mainland. It failed, due to Kennedy's refusal to be bounced into authorizing US air support. Was it this decision that cost him and younger brother Bobby their lives? The great advantage of the Mafia, for government intelligence agencies and big business, is that a hit by the former can be kept light years away from those who initiated it.

As Cuba is allowed and allows itself to become part of the global economy, these criminal elements will start to return. The co-operative model of governance, in all its forms, is not as robust as its advocates often pretend. A candid examination of co-operative democracy, in both the North and South, will bear out how easy it is for cliques and managerialism to dominate policy and practice and in many countries,

large and small, for the state to interfere and manipulate the sector for the power elite's own ends. The Cuban revolution has beaten all the odds so far. Many of the authors of this book seem to see co-operation as synonymous with a worker self-management model. Operating in a global market, such an aspiration seems problematic and even sectarian. Novkovic points out that co-operatives traditionally operate in capitalist markets. Certainly, the early definition of communism, prior to Marx and Engel's Communist Manifesto, saw it to mean merely the association of labour operating freely in a market economy. Some of this book's authors see socialism's central planning as the context and a tension for Cuban co-operative development. Will Cuba's evolving discussion of the meaning of socialism arrive back at this early definition in the end? Can Cubans come up with a co-operative model that looks outwards and actually fulfills the movement's foundational vision of a Co-operative Commonwealth? This book is an important contribution to addressing this question. In the end, the quality and integrity of the Cuban people's leadership and how this is reflected, at the micro level, within the management and governance processes in the emerging co-operative economy of Cuba may prove to be decisive in providing the answer. If so, it may be cultural values, rather than structures, that are the decisive element.