

CHAPTER 10

IMPERIALISM AND THE TRANSITION TO SOCIALISM IN CUBA

Al Campbell

ABSTRACT

The function of imperialism in the world economic system is to transfer wealth produced by the workers of the Periphery to the capitalists in the Core. From this, it follows that for all countries in the Periphery, (1) imperialism impedes their economic and social development and (2) imperialism will intervene to reduce any limitations on its desired process of exploitation. These explain the nature of the Core's relation with the majority of the countries of the Periphery, which are capitalist. By officially deciding in 1961 to pursue a non-capitalist path of development, Cuba (1) completely ended the ability of the Core to exploit its workers and (2) (much more problematic for the Core) threatened to set an example other countries might reproduce. The second part of this chapter briefly reviews the often-documented aggression by the Core against Cuba, and the third part reflects on the less-reflected-on issue of the effect of that aggression on Cuba's project to build socialism.

Keywords: Imperialism; socialism; transition; Cuba; US blockade; US aggression

INTRODUCTION: THE INHERENT CONFLICT BETWEEN IMPERIALISM AND A TRANSITION TO SOCIALISM

The starting point for an analysis of the conflict between imperialism and the process of a transition to socialism in the case of Cuba must be their adversarial goals.

Imperialism and Transitions to Socialism
Research in Political Economy, Volume 36, 163–178
Copyright © 2021 by Emerald Publishing Limited
All rights of reproduction in any form reserved
ISSN: 0161-7230/doi:[10.1108/S0161-723020210000036010](https://doi.org/10.1108/S0161-723020210000036010)

The actions of these two systems, and especially their interaction that will be the subject of this chapter, flow from their attempts to execute their goals.

It is not possible to meaningfully define the goals of imperialism and the process of building socialism without first defining what one means by the terms “imperialism” and “socialism.” Modern “imperialism” is a social phenomenon whose detailed manifestations in the real world vary significantly, both between instances, and over time for the same instance. Because of this, there can be no illusion of presenting a unique and universally socially accepted definition for “imperialism,” as one has, for example, for the objects of study in mathematics. On the other hand, and accepting that many somewhat differing formulations of an operational definition of “imperialism” are possible, there can be no illusion of “terminological relativism” – that one can define such a social object “however one wants,” as long as one’s definition is clear. To be useful, the definition must sufficiently correspond to (“capture the essence of”) the phenomenon, *in regard to the questions and issues about the real world that are being analyzed*. The definition of “socialism” involves all these considerations, plus a major additional one. Unlike imperialism, it is not something currently in existence,¹ but rather an envisioned and projected future social phenomenon. Socialism’s “future nature,” however, is actually very limited in one essential sense: all the many different concepts of socialism throughout history have been thoroughly rooted in the past and present of the time that they were formulated. The disparate concepts of socialism then must be understood as various possible alternatives to capitalism that are intended to promote their desired goals, which capitalism prevents. However, any such definition of socialism will again only be able to promote its proposed goals if it rests on both a correct understanding of how the current social-economic-political order causes the problems that socialism aims to eliminate, and also on a correct understanding of what the result would actually be of the implementation of these proposals in the real world.

In this chapter, the word “imperialism” is defined as an international characteristic of modern capitalism’s system of production. Historically some countries, called imperialist, oppressor, advanced, the core, the metropolis, the center, or the First World, have come to have relatively large amounts of capital per capita owned by the capitalists among their citizens. Other countries, called dependent, oppressed, underdeveloped, the periphery, or the Third World, have much lower amounts of capital per capita owned by the capitalists among their citizens. Many of the productive chains by which the capital in the imperialist countries executes its self-expansion have links located in the dependent countries. Capital’s operations in the oppressed countries allow it to extract more surplus value there in that step of the production process than if it carried out those operations in its home country.² Imperialism is simultaneously an aspect of the relation between capital in core countries and peripheral workers (and even peripheral capital) that promotes the accumulation of capital in the imperialist countries, and an economic-political-social relation between First World countries and the Third World countries that is established to promote that economically exploitative relation.³

From this statement of imperialism’s goal, it follows that it will attempt to replace any Third World government that does not allow its capital to operate in

that country in the way its capital desires, with a government that will. This holds for any peripheral capitalist country that imposes restrictions on the operation of international capital in favor of either its working people or its capitalists, and even more assuredly for any country that largely refuses to allow international capital to operate within it.

The need for Cuba to radically rethink how to go about building socialism after 1991 necessarily brought with it a rethinking of what the goal of that process was, that is, how Cuba defined the socialism that it continued to declare itself committed to building. A first major change in how the Island thought about or “defined” socialism was that it was no longer conceived of as some known recipe that one simply had to socially apply. Rather, the nature of the new understanding of how a particular socialism’s specifics must be determined is something reflected by two phrases that arose in the worldwide discussion on socialism at that time, often associated with the Zapatistas: “we make the path by walking,” and “we walk asking.” The following two famous quotes reflect this new and official conception in Cuba.

On November 17, 2005, in a lengthy speech on the Cuban Revolution in the Aula Magna at the University of Havana, Fidel Castro said⁴:

Here is a conclusion I’ve come to after many years: among all the errors we may have committed, the greatest of them all was that we believed that someone really knew something about socialism, or that someone actually knew how to build socialism. It seemed to be a sure fact, as well-known as the electrical system conceived by those who thought they were experts in electrical systems. Whenever they said: “That’s the formula,” we thought they knew. (Castro, 2005)

On December 18, 2010, in a speech during the closing ceremony of the Sixth Session of the Seventh Legislature of the National Assembly of People’s Power, Raúl Castro compared the building of socialism to the original flights into outer space, using the poetic expression of *un viaje a lo ignoto*:

While we have counted on the theoretical Marxist-Leninist legacy, according to which there is scientific evidence of the feasibility of socialism and the practical experience of the attempts to build it in other countries, the construction of a new society from an economic point of view is, in my modest opinion, also a journey into the unknown – the undiscovered. (Castro, 2010)

Following two decades of a wide-ranging discussion in Cuba’s government, in academia, in the general population, and in the Communist Party of Cuba (PCC), the PCC and the Cuban Parliament⁵ issued five socially fundamental documents over the decade of the 2010s. A first version of official guidelines for building the political economy of the new and still continually evolving concept of socialism appeared in 2011, the *Lineamientos de la Política Económica y Social del Partido y la Revolución* (PCC, 2011a) (commonly called the *Lineamientos*).

Three new documents in 2016/7⁶ both updated and extended the *Lineamientos*: the *Conceptualización del Modelo Económico y Social Cubano de Desarrollo Socialista* (PCC, 2017a) (hereafter *Conceptualización*), the *Plan Nacional de Desarrollo Económico y Social hasta 2030: Propuesta de Visión de la Nación, Ejes y Sectores Estratégicos* (PCC, 2016a) (hereafter *Plan 2030*), and the *Lineamientos de la Política Económica y Social del Partido y la Revolución para el Período 2016–2021* (PCC, 2017b) (hereafter *Lineamientos 2016–2021*). In 2019, Cuba adopted a

different type of document that is very important in defining its socialist goals, a new “highest law of the land,” the new Constitution (NAPP, 2019).

These documents officially define what Cuba means by the word “socialism,” whose construction they declare is the country’s economic–social–political goal. While the documents contain socialism’s common humanistic goals as part of their definition of the term, they do much more than that to define what Cuba means by the word. The large majority of the documents consist of guidelines for the mechanics of building (primarily the economic aspect of) socialism in Cuba. These guidelines as much as the common broad humanistic goals also constitute an integral part of Cuba’s definition of socialism. The great extent of these guidelines then arguably presents a more concrete official definition of a country’s goal of socialism than has ever been presented before by any country that has declared itself engaged in its construction.⁷ In line with their new conception of how to define socialism which was just indicated above, the documents also state repeatedly that they are to be understood as guidelines for building socialism specifically in Cuba, and in accord with the existing situations in both Cuba and the world today, and as such they will be repeatedly modified as both those situations continuously change:

The updated Model, which is in accord with the present *Conceptualización* and is based on the advances in the theory of socialist construction and its interaction with practice, is not conceived of as a finished and static archetype, but rather as an active and perfectible prototype. (PCC, 2017a, p. 13)

The nature of many of the guidelines and abstract references to various goals of their socialism make clear the incompatibility of their concept of socialism with capitalism. But even more specifically, the conceptually most abstract of these five documents, the *Conceptualización*, states explicitly in its first approved version that Cuba considers it necessary to transcend (*superar*) capitalism to build their socialism: “Cuban society is in the historical process of building socialism, as a viable alternative for transcending capitalism” (PCC, 2016a, p. 4, point 8). This is again unequivocally stated in the definition of the first term carefully discussed in the terminological appendix to the documents published in 2016, “sustainable and prosperous socialism”: “[Our socialist society] is oriented to definitively transcend the capitalist system” (PCC, 2016a, p. 28, point 1). In the third term defined there, “socialist development,” the same requirement is expressed by characterizing socialism as “the historically alternative mode to capitalism” (PCC, 2016a, p. 28, point 3).

A fundamental conflict between imperialism and the process of building socialism is inherent in the natures of these two social structures.

Following this introductory section, the rest of the chapter discusses two different aspects of this inevitable conflict in the case of Cuba. The following section addresses the much more discussed and documented aspect of the conflict – imperialism’s aggression against Revolutionary Cuba for six decades. The next section addresses a topic at least as important to the concern of this chapter of the interaction of imperialism and Cuba’s project of building socialism, but one much harder to document, because it necessarily involves counterfactuals: what was the effect on the process of building socialism in Cuba of that unrelenting

imperialist aggression? How would what would have had to be an extended process of construction of socialism anyway have been different, absent the imperialist aggression? What choices and policies did Cuba feel compelled to make and execute over these decades that it would not have made, if it was allowed to try to build socialism as it chose to, absent that unrelenting aggression? The final section concludes.

SIX DECADES OF IMPERIALISM'S AGGRESSION AGAINST CUBA'S PROJECT TO BUILD SOCIALISM

As indicated above, one aspect inherent to modern (capitalist) imperialism is that it must attempt to eliminate any political/economic system that prevents it from operating as desired in any country in the world. For small underdeveloped countries, imperialism has two fundamental approaches: the carrot, "hug-them-to-death," or the stick, "beat-them-to-death" (with a plethora of possible mixes and variations of these in their applications, of course). The former approach consists of sharing a small but not insignificant share of the total wealth that imperialism obtains from the relevant country with a narrow group of subordinate local capitalists and political agents, giving them a standard of living far above the national average in exchange for their services in maintaining imperialism's operations in the country. The latter approach consists of threatening or removing any local government not willing to serve imperialism's interests, to the extent and in the way that imperialism decides for that country, to generate a government that will.

As the possibility that the forces led by Fidel Castro would gain power became first a concrete prospect and then increasing likely over the second half of 1958, a debate unfolded in the US government over how to best respond in order to protect US capital's extensive interests in Cuba. As with all such important political debates, there were many different currents, which differed and agreed among themselves on many specific issues. The politically most important division among them, however, was the binary one between imperialism's two approaches to radical and progressive currents in Third World countries just indicated: embrace the new Cuban leaders in order to incorporate them as the new local representatives of imperialism, or destroy at least their power, which if necessary (or even convenient) could be achieved by destroying their physical existence.

During the 1950s capital's preferred label for its aggression against any forces that threatened its operations anywhere in the world was "the war against communism." In the first place, the label suggested capital's fight against all political influence of the Soviet Union in both the First World (much of it then recovering from WWII) and the Third World, as such influence tended to limit or even eliminated the ability of capital to operate as it wished in such countries. But the label was also commonly used more broadly by capital for its opposition to any progressive or radical movements that threatened its prerogatives, regardless of their independence from the Soviet Union. The US engineered overthrow of the Árbenz government in Guatemala in 1954, including the pro-forma presentation of it as part of the war against communism and baseless charges of strong

influence by the Soviet Union, is not only a prototypical example of this, but also one with a very strong influence on the developing Revolution in Cuba.

Various parts of the US government – the CIA, the FBI, both the Bureau of Intelligence and Research and the Latin America Bureau of the State Department, the US Embassy in Havana, etc. – carried out a ceaseless and thorough investigation of both Fidel Castro and the July 26th Movement throughout the 1950s with regard to the issue of influence by the Soviet Union or its local Communist proxies. They concluded consistently and unanimously that there was no more than minimal presence of Communists in the July 26th Movement, they specifically rejected Batista's claims that the Communists had any significant influence, and they agreed strongly that Fidel was definitely not a Communist.⁸ Concerning US capital itself, when "Castro came to power, ... the US business community had little basis for regarding the turn of events with grave misgivings," and "U.S. net investment of \$63 million during [1959] was even larger than it had been in most of the years since WWII" (Johnson, 1965, pp. 443, 444).⁹

As just argued, however, the determination of imperialism's attitude then toward any political force went beyond its concern with communism. The question for the United States was: would its imperialist interests be served better by the Batista dictatorship or the insurgent forces? Despite the clean bill of health that they gave to the insurgents concerning communism, the various US government agencies were also unanimous that they did not want the insurgents to win power. At the same time, their support for Batista, which had been solid from the time of his coup in 1952, rapidly unraveled from mid-1958 onward,¹⁰ as Batista's loss of social control and his accompanying brutal and very visible repression escalated.

By the end of 1959, the situation had changed completely. The new government's acts in favor of working people during its first year in power (Johnson, 1965, p. 444) caused the business community to turn solidly against it, while US government agencies worked on changing the new government's direction. On March 17, 1960, the administration of Dwight Eisenhower formally decided for the second approach discussed above, to overthrow the Revolutionary Government (Lamrani, 2013, p. 23), which has remained US imperialism's policy ("regime change") from then to today.

The plethora of economic, political, and military aggressions by US imperialism against Cuba for 60 years in line with this adopted approach have been extensively and carefully documented by many authors. Franklin (2016) is a scholarly, much-referenced, barebones, extensive listing of aggressions from 1959 to 1995.¹¹ Two terse works by Murray (1992) and Lamrani (2013) give politically broader considerations of the incessant aggressions.

THE EFFECT OF IMPERIALISM'S UNRELENTING AGGRESSION ON CUBA'S ABILITY TO CHOOSE HOW TO TRY TO BUILD SOCIALISM

For all studies of the conflict between imperialism and Cuba, be they for promoting the country's goal of a transition to socialism or for preventing it,

once the historical record of that conflict is established, the deeper question arises – how has imperialism’s unrelenting aggression caused Cuba to make choices in its efforts to build socialism that are different from what it might have chosen absent the incessant hostility? Being thus a counterfactual inquiry, it can never have a simple or hegemonically accepted answer. Further, given imperialism’s extremely large number of aggressions against Cuba over 60 years and the complexities necessarily involved in considering counterfactuals for such a national social process, it would require a much larger work than this chapter to even address this question in depth. Here three effects will be considered as illustrations of the type of investigations that would need to be carried out relative to many major decisions, and scores of smaller ones, that the Revolution made in its efforts to build socialism. Following a short point on a standard monetary evaluation of the cost of the US blockade,¹² this study will look at two evaluations by the leadership itself on the effects of the imperialist aggression on two major decisions made by the Revolution at different times in its history; the “hyper-centralization” that began in the 1960s, and the greatly expanded use of “capitalist-like methods” to build socialism that started in the 1990s. Note that the material in the limited space here is not intended to address the huge and debated issues of the effects of these decisions on Cuba’s efforts to build socialism, but rather only to document that the incessant imperialist aggression has prevented Cuba from attempting to build socialism as it would have if that aggression did not exist.

The Cost to Cuba of the US Blockade

Every year in the fall since 1992, the United Nations has overwhelmingly passed a non-binding resolution calling on the United States, in accord with international law and the Charter of the United Nations, to end its economic, commercial and financial blockade of Cuba. In preparation for this debate, Cuba calculates¹³ the losses to its economy over the history of the blockade, and over the previous year. As of fall 2019, Cuba calculated its cumulative losses from the blockade at 138.8 billion dollars at current prices, and the loss for the previous year (April 2018–March 2019) at 4.3 billion dollars (Palomino García & Pichardo Pérez, 2019). Given that part of all past costs could have been invested generating additional wealth, the 139 billion cost is a significant understatement of the how much additional wealth Cuba would have enjoyed over the last six decades absent the embargo. To put those losses in perspective, the World Bank estimate of Cuba’s GDP in 2018 was 100.023 billion dollars (World Bank, 2019).¹⁴ For the recent past, absent the blockade, Cuba would have had between a four and five percent higher GDP every year to invest or consume.

The “Hyper-centralization” of the Process of Transition to Socialism

The degree of centralization versus decentralization best suited for a particular phase of any concrete attempted transition to socialism has always been one of the central issues debated by those engaged in or supporting such processes. A necessary consideration for analyzing this issue in any case is that one fundamental aspect of almost all specific visions of the broad concept of socialism has always

been the collective control by the members of society of all the institutions that they are part of.¹⁵ Such collective control of all social institutions, however, is actually affected more by the *nature* of any centralized or decentralized decision-making process than by its *degree*. Centralization does not preclude popular social control, that depends on the nature of the centralization. Similarly, decentralization does not guarantee social control, or necessarily even promote it (though it obviously could, again depending on the nature of the decentralization). A concrete example of this is capitalism, a system that is decentralized in many dimensions but not socially controlled, in that it is fundamentally controlled by the capitalist class. Some factors, among others, that will enter into deciding the degree of centralization versus decentralization most appropriate for a given concrete case of attempting to transcend capitalism, include the balance of forces between the defenders of capitalism and the advocates of socialism on both the national and world scales, the level of political consciousness of the population, and, particularly in numerous Third World countries, the level of technical ability of working people to be able to operate the economy at the beginning of a transition.

The interest of this chapter with the issue of centralization versus decentralization is informed by, but much narrower than, the above broad concern. Here it is only being considered in the 1960s as a concrete example of imperialist aggression pressuring Cuba to make particular choices in how it would attempt to build socialism, which it might have made differently absent imperialism.¹⁶

In a much reproduced and commented on speech from 1974 referring to the early and mid-1960s, Raúl Castro clearly indicated the strong contribution of imperialist aggression to the creation of a governing structure that subsequently was considered to be overly centralized:

In those first years there was the need to face successive and ever-growing violent aggression by imperialism and the internal counterrevolution. To work in such a situation and to face the tasks of that moment, there was a need for an operative and agile state apparatus that would exercise the dictatorship in the name of the working people, that could concentrate the legislative, executive and administrative powers simultaneously in one sole organ and that could make fast decisions without much delay. (Castro, 1974, cited in August 1999, p. 214)

The Use of “Capitalist-like” Methods to Build Socialism

Given the scale of production necessary for efficiency for many products today, no country except those large enough for a continental economy (China, India, the United States, etc.) can generate economy-wide efficient production (and the corresponding high standard of living) without extensive trade. To achieve efficient production, smaller countries must specialize on specific steps in product value-chains, and be able to buy the necessary inputs from, and sell its outputs to, other countries.¹⁷ This is true even for highly developed countries that have the capability to produce a much broader spectrum of the modern goods they consume than underdeveloped countries. Relatively small Belgium and the Netherlands achieve their high levels of productivity, and from that their high standard of living, by being small components in a larger productive economy. They export and import 82 and 77 percent of their GDP, respectively.¹⁸ As a general trend (interacting with other factors), the larger that a country is, the

more steps of various value-chains can all be carried out in the country, and therefore the lower the percent of GDP that must be directly involved in trade. But even larger developed countries like Germany (42 percent), and France and the United Kingdom (29 percent), need to be able to trade a large part of their domestic production to be able to produce efficiently (EuCham, 2020). This is an even more binding requirement on underdeveloped countries that do not have the technological ability to carry out some of the steps in the value-chains that their economic activities are part of.

Additionally, underdeveloped countries generally have insufficient social savings available for investment to achieve a rate of growth and development necessary to close the gap with the developed world, or even to keep that gap from increasing. Integration into a larger economic production system therefore is also generally necessary if a small country is to obtain investment resources beyond what it can generate domestically.

To the extent that a country that wants to move beyond capitalism must trade with, and also would like to receive investment inflow from, the world capitalist system, important limitations are created on what types of choices that country can make in its efforts to build socialism. If the country trying to build socialism is part of the underdeveloped Third World, its trade and investment relations with the world capitalist system are part of the latter's imperialist relations. From the early 1960s to (about) 1990, Cuba had the option of carrying out its necessary productive integration, through trade and other economic relations, into a larger economy different from the world capitalist system, the structure anchored on the Soviet Union.¹⁹

The end of the integration into the Soviet-anchored trading block after 1990 forced Cuba to begin carrying out much of its necessary trade with the world capitalist system.²⁰ Some degree of functional compatibility with capitalism must exist for a country to trade with the world imperialist system.²¹ Economic structures and institutions that until 1990 had no need for such compatibility with capitalism had to be rapidly changed to allow for the necessary increased trade with, and the desired increased foreign investment from, the world capitalist system.

There is a deep discussion going on now in Cuba about what, if any, "capitalist-like" mechanisms could serve the process of building socialism in Cuba today. Can markets serve building socialism if they are reduced to being mechanisms for implementing an economic plan, as opposed to being parts of circuits of capital that determine production? Can foreign investment serve the process of building socialism in Cuba, or must it necessarily undermine it? If the former, how must it be regulated so that it both remains attractive to foreign investors and yet does not undermine the process of socialist construction? Can not only "capitalist-like" mechanisms be used in the domestic economy but also actual capitalist relations, if they are restricted to being of secondary importance to the socialist economy, in both their nature and their extent?²²

Like the last subsection, this one has a much more limited concern than a discussion of the enormous issue for building socialism to which it is related; in this case the use of "capitalist-like" methods, and even limited capitalist relations, as part of trying to build socialism. The intention here again is to give a

documentable example of imperialism causing the Cuban Revolution to make choices on what to do to continue its process of building socialism, which it would not necessarily have made absent imperialism.

In the summer of 1995 as Cuba was just beginning to emerge from the worst of the Special Period, Fidel Castro discussed in a number of speeches the capitalist-like institutions and practices that had been developed and adopted in Cuba in response to the collapse of the Soviet-anchored economic system that they had been part of.²³ Always reiterating that “There will be no return to capitalism” (Castro, 1995, p. 11), he said on August 23:

We had to establish joint ventures in a relatively short time period . . . accept foreign investment, we had to do what we did in respect to the decriminalization of convertible currency (...). We are aware of the inequalities that it created, the privileges it created, but we had to do it and we did it. (Castro, 1995, p. 9)

In 1996 talking to the Cuban trade union organization (CTC), Fidel Castro again stated clearly that the Revolution had been forced to make choices it did not prefer on how to proceed to build socialism once it could no longer operate as a component of the Soviet-anchored supranational non-capitalist economy:

Clearly these were not the methods we had used before, when we could distribute pork, chicken, eggs, milk and other foodstuffs at minimum prices, which was a better way ... [I]t is not an ideal solution, far from it. But it was a measure that had to be taken, with its advantages and disadvantages. (Castro, 1996, p. 162)

CONCLUSION

Imperialism is the aspect of the world capitalist system of production and distribution by which capital in the countries in the core of the system super-exploits workers in peripheral countries. Given capital's drive for profits, this causes imperialism to oppose any attempts by a government of a peripheral country, regardless of if it is pro-capitalist or not, to either restrict or prevent this super-exploitation of its workers. One aspect of the project of building socialism has always been to end the exploitation of anyone by anyone, to end anyone appropriating for their benefit the products of the labor of others. Cuba's project to build socialism requires it to prevent capitalism from re-establishing itself as the dominant political-economic system in Cuba. Imperialism's inherent drive to open the Cuban economy to its exploitation leads it to continually promote the overthrow of the Cuban government and the reestablishment of capitalism, and with that to end Cuba's project to build socialism. A fundamental conflict between imperialism and the process of building socialism (in Cuba or elsewhere) is inherent in the natures of these two social structures.

The extraordinary degree of the aggression against Cuba by imperialism, and US imperialism in particular, is (excepting military invasion) unparalleled in modern history. The blockade that is extremely costly to the Cuban economy is one of the best-known aspects of this continual assault. But the belligerence spans every dimension of possible interactions that the US government and state have been able to conceive of. A sponsored proxy military invasion and longer-lasting

support for armed resistance groups in Cuba, permanent support and protection in opposition to international law for terrorists in Florida (and other linked places) who act against the Island, attempts to assassinate members of the Cuba's government and Fidel Castro in particular, a major restriction of accurate reporting and linked disinformation campaigns concerning everything about the country through imperialism's control of most of the world's international media (the "information blockade"), biological attacks on the Island's crops and its people, and attempts to modify the weather to harm Cuba, are just a small sample of the extraordinary diversity of this unrelenting offense. There are a significant number of careful academic studies that have demonstrated thousands of acts of aggression against the Revolution over its 60 years.

A final question concerning the interaction of imperialism with Cuba's project to build socialism is: how has Cuba's need to defend itself from imperialism's unrelenting assault affected the Island's ability to try to build socialism as it chooses? Given the thousands of aggressions against Cuba (and thousands more potential ones that had to be prepared for even if in the end they were not enacted), a serious examination of this question would require a book length study, at a minimum. This chapter considers three illustrations of the effects of imperialism's aggression on Cuba's choices. Beyond the massive loss of resources from the blockade and resulting reduced or delayed activities in its project to build socialism, it examines two important actions which Cuba concluded that it would have done differently absent the unremitting aggression: the hyper-centralization of Cuba's government structures that began in the 1960s, and the currently unfolding incorporation of first "capitalist-like methods," and now most recently under careful regulations on its size and role in the economy, actual capitalist production.

NOTES

1. Notwithstanding past and present attempts to begin to construct it.
2. While this has changed significantly in the last half century, though far from completely, historically much production for international capital in peripheral countries consisted of mining and the production of crops such as sugar, coffee or tobacco that could not be produced in the home country. The role of this "super-exploitation" in the world capitalist system remains the same today, even as an increased share of total world manufacturing occurs in the Third World countries themselves. See [Amin \(2018, Introduction to the English Edition and Chapter 4 of Part One\)](#).
3. Note this does not deny that development occurs in the oppressed countries, a strawman argument constructed and then attacked by defenders of imperialism. The development that occurs, however, is shaped to further serve the accumulation of capital in the metropolises. As such, it is both "distorted development," and development that does not have a dynamic of its own but rather always depends on the needs and the dynamics of the center. This whole idea is often indicated by the terse expression "the development of underdevelopment," usually considered to have been introduced by [Frank \(1966\)](#).
4. Although expressed more pointedly in 2005, the roots of this idea were present in 1984 and 1985 when Fidel Castro gave a series of speeches ([Castro, 1989](#)) indicating the same dissatisfaction with copying the model for building socialism from the USSR, even with the significant modifications to it that Cuba had made. By 1986 Cuba launched a process of "rectification of errors and negative tendencies" that went on for several years,

and presumably would have continued longer had it not been interrupted by the new and overwhelming needs that arose with the collapse of the East Bloc and then the Soviet Union at the end of the 1980s and beginning of the 1990s. For insightful terse comments on various dimensions of the “Rectification Process” as it was unfolding, see [Azicri \(1988, pp. 246–250\)](#). For a valuable contemporary political evaluation of the process from the perspective of the subsequent changes since 1990, see [Yaffe \(2020, pp. 27–36\)](#).

5. All of these five fundamental documents (listed next) were also submitted to extensive social “consultation” during their formulation, involving massive popular feedback on preliminary drafts that significantly changing the final products. For the extent of the participation and the resulting changes on the 2011 document, see [PCC \(2011b\)](#). See [Granma \(2017\)](#) for the extent of the participation in the consultations on the three 2016/7 documents. See [Cubadebate \(2018\)](#), [IPS \(2018\)](#), [Baustamante Molina \(2019\)](#), [Thale and García Castro \(2019\)](#) and [Baer \(2019\)](#) for the extent of the participation and resulting changes from the popular consultation on the new Constitution, and its overwhelming required popular ratification before being enacted by parliament.

6. While these documents were famously adopted at the 7th Party Congress in April 2016, it is less often noted that it was not until 2017 that two of them were ratified in their final form. See [PCC \(2016a\)](#) and [PCC \(2016b\)](#) for the versions of the three documents approved by the 7th Party Congress. After that congress the documents underwent an extended popular consultation and discussion in many locations throughout the country, in which a total of 1.6 million Cubans participated. From these discussions, numerous modifications were made to the three documents. In May 2017, the updated forms of “the three guiding documents on the updating of the Cuban economic and social model were approved by the Third Plenum of the Communist Party of Cuba Central Committee” ([Granma, 2017](#)). That Plenum then informed the deputies of the National Assembly of People’s Power, the highest body of state power, of the ongoing updating of the *Plan 2030*, and submitted the updated *Conceptualización* and the *Lineamientos 2016–2021* to them for approval as “the guiding foundations of the work of all state and government entities and officials, our workers and the people in general” ([NAPP, 2017](#)). For a newspaper report on subsequent developments in relation to the *Plan 2030* prior to the writing of this article (and the evaluation of the implementation of the *Lineamientos 2016–2021* as of then), see [Granma \(2019\)](#).

7. Further, since the specifics of what Cuba intendeds to do are established not just by the guidelines, but also at a more detailed level by how these are concretely implemented, a still fuller consideration of how Cuba currently defines its declared goal of socialism would require one to also look at all the enabling legislation. As that is far beyond what is possible in this chapter, it will simply be indicated here that the author considers the legislation enacted to implement the guidelines to be fundamentally consistent with what the guidelines indicate should be done.

8. The facts on US imperialism’s attitude toward Cuba in the 1950s, including the Revolution’s first year in 1959, that are given in this paragraph and the next are, unlike so much about the Cuban Revolution, agreed on widely by historians. One source that presents all the information given here both tersely and with carefully documented support is *That Infernal Little Cuban Republic* by [Schoultz \(2009, chapters 3 and 4\)](#).

9. This study by Johnson is made from the perspective that imperialism is beneficial to all involved, and from a concern for the losses to US capital, for which reason it extensively documents US imperialism’s holdings at the time.

10. To differing degrees in different agencies, and different parts of the same agencies. Being most exposed to the reality of Batista’s brutality, much of the staff of the US Embassy in Havana became quite sympathetic to the July 26th Movement and the position that it and Fidel Castro could be won over to replacing Batista as imperialism’s local representatives. While the US patronage-appointed ambassador Earl Smith remained actively favorable toward Batista right to the end, even he did not see Fidel as a systemic threat. He famously suggested as late as mid-1958 that Batista could end the insurrection simply by giving Fidel a large sum of money and making him a senator, reflecting the strength of the position in the US government then that there was no reason to believe Fidel could not

become a dependable local agent of imperialism, even among those who were extremely partisan supporters of Batista.

11. This 2016 edition is a reprint of the 1997 edition with a single chapter added, “Cuba and the United States in the 21st Century.” Hence its detailed coverage, with a chapter on each year, stops in 1995.

12. Technically, the sweeping set of sanctions that the United States has imposed against Cuba constitutes an “embargo.” Given the measures’ extensive extraterritoriality beyond a standard embargo’s purpose to prohibit particular trading from the embargoing country, the sanctions are often referred to as a “blockade.” See for example, the frequent use of this term by government officials from around the world during the annual debate on it in the United Nations, and the interchangeable use of the two terms by the United Nations itself in its press releases on this debate (U.N., 2019a, 2019b). These US measures against Cuba will be referred to as a blockade in this chapter.

13. It is important to note that the amount is calculated by “standard economic procedures.” Such procedures rest on particular counterfactual assumptions about what the costs would have been absent the blockade, about which there is much room for disagreement. Opponents of the Revolution of course claim the government figures are exaggerated. Support for the reasonableness of the figures comes from their use by the UN’s regional economic body, ECLAC (Reuters, 2018).

14. While there are certainly questions one could ask about how the World Bank arrives at its figures for the GDP of Cuba, the major economic data source from Cuba, the *Anuario Estadístico de Cuba*, publishes its GDP figures in Cuban pesos. Since there is extensive controversy about how to meaningfully convert those numbers into equivalent US Dollars (especially in the current situation of multiple exchange rates in Cuba), using those figures would also be open to many questions on their dollar equivalents. The concern here is only a rough number to measure the yearly loss from the blockade against, and the author finds the World Bank figures not significantly different from a 1 to 1 peso to dollar conversion of the Cuban official GDP figures.

15. There are many contemporary popular expressions for this concept, such as “power to the people,” “grass roots control,” and so on. In Marx’s terminology, the “associated producers” would control all the institutions that they were part of and the socialist society they lived in.

16. Here this issue of centralization is considered only in the 1960s, in line with the purpose of this section to give a few concrete examples of how imperialism has caused Cuba to at times make choices in its attempt to build socialism that it might have made differently absent imperialism. It should be noted, however, that the issue of both the degree and nature of centralization versus decentralization is also one of the most central aspects of the discussion going on in Cuba today about the new model for building socialism that is being developed, and the discussion today is informed by both Cuba’s experiences in the 1960s, and by its experiences from 1970 to 1985 that were partially a reaction to the problems of the 1960s.

17. Further, since it cannot efficiently produce the entire spectrum of final products it consumes, it must also be able to trade to obtain the final consumption goods it does not produce.

18. The standard trade data “openness index” is the sum of exports and imports as a share of GDP, which for example for Belgium is 165 percent. Here I present their average, which is an economically more intuitively meaningful number for, conceptually, “the approximate share that both exports and roughly equal imports are of the national product.”

19. During this time Cuba always felt it useful to carry on some trade with the world capitalist system – sometimes to get better technology, sometimes (especially considering geography) because costs were lower, etc. The point here, however, is that during this time the threat and actual execution of disrupting Cuba’s trade and investment relations with the world capitalist system did not constitute nearly as severe problems as they were to become after 1990.

20. While Venezuela remained capitalist, and the capitalist-versus-socialist nature of China is a strongly debated issue, many of the trade relations that Cuba went on to develop with these two countries were not standard capitalist trade arrangements, and thus constituted an alternative to trading with the world imperialist system. These countries, however, did not become an important part of Cuba's trade until the new millennium, and even then a larger part of Cuba's total trade had to be carried out with the world capitalist system.

21. A large economy like the Soviet Union could develop specialized institutions for the trade with imperialism that constituted a small part of its total economic activity, and at the same time run most of its economy in a way incompatible with such interaction. As long as Cuba was part of the Soviet-anchored larger economic system it could do likewise. Running the domestic economy in a way incompatible with trade with capitalism becomes much more difficult when much larger parts of the imports and exports necessary for the operation of the domestic economy come from the capitalist world-system. Cuba's on-again off-again maintenance since 1990 of a state monopoly controlling all foreign trade is an example of how difficult it is to maintain what was possible as part of the Soviet-anchored block, once trade with capitalism is needed throughout the economy.

22. The much-discussed self-employment (*cuenta propia*) is often misrepresented as a capitalist sector of the economy. To the extent that it is really self-employment, it is not. Self-employment involves no appropriating the labor of others (exploitation), and hence is not capitalist. However, the private hiring of wage-labor is already legal in specified work, and it is scheduled to be expanded with the coming legislation for small and medium private enterprises, all that is capitalist production.

23. For a slightly longer statement of his views on the necessity of these reforms than are in the two short quotes mentioned, see the section of his speech to the International Youth Festival on August 6, which the editor labeled "The necessity of market economic reforms" (Castro, 1996, pp. 71–74).

REFERENCES

- Amin, S. (2018). *Modern imperialism, monopoly finance capital, and Marx's law of value*. New York, NY: Monthly Review Press.
- August, A. (1999). *Democracy in Cuba and the 1997–98 elections*. Havana: Editorial José Martí.
- Azicri, M. (1988). *Cuba. Politics, economics and society*. London: Pinter Publishers.
- Baer, J. (2019, April 11). Cuban constitution of 2019. *Council on Hemispheric Affairs*. Retrieved from <http://www.coha.org/cuban-constitution-of-2019/>. Accessed on May 1, 2020.
- Baustamante Molina, V. (2019). Upcoming referendum exemplifies citizen participation in the new Constitution. *Granma*, January 31. Retrieved from <http://en.granma.cu/cuba/2019-01-31/upcoming-referendum-exemplifies-citizen-participation-in-the-new-constitution>. Accessed on May 1, 2020.
- Castro, F. (1989). *Por el camino correcto*. Havana: Editora Política.
- Castro, F. (1995). The More Cuba Resists, The More It Is Respected. *Granma Internacional*, August 23.
- Castro, F. (1996). *Cuba at the crossroads*. Melbourne: Ocean Press.
- Castro, F. (2005). Speech delivered by Dr. Fidel Castro Ruz, President of the Republic of Cuba, at the Commemoration of the 60th Anniversary of his admission to University of Havana on November 17, 2005. Retrieved from <http://www.cuba.cu/gobierno/discursos/2005/ing/171105i.html>. Accessed on May 1, 2020.
- Castro, R. (1974). Discurso en la Clausura del Seminario a los Delgados, celebrado en Matanzas el 22 de agosto de 1974. In *Algunas consideraciones sobre el funcionamiento de los órganos locales de Poder Popular* (pp. 4–6). Havana: ANPP.
- Castro, R. (2010). Speech delivered by Army General Raúl Castro Ruz, President of the Councils of State and of Ministers, during the closing ceremony of the Sixth Session of the Seventh Legislature of the National People's Power Assembly at Havana's Conference Center on December 18, 2010, 'Year 52 of the Revolution'. Retrieved from <http://www.cuba.cu/gobierno/rauldiscursos/2010/ing/r181210i.html>. Accessed on May 1, 2020.

- CubaDebate. (2018, December 18). Presentan a los diputados resultados de la consulta popular del Proyecto de Constitución.. Retrieved from <http://www.cubadebate.cu/noticias/2018/12/18/presentan-cambios-en-el-proyecto-de-constitucion-derivados-de-la-consulta-popular/#.XHL8F7h7nDc>. Accessed on May 1, 2020.
- EuCham. (2020). *2015–11 Trade openness index*. European Chambers. Retrieved from <https://eucham.eu/2015-11-trade-openness-index/>. Accessed on May 1, 2020.
- Frank, A. G. (1966). The development of underdevelopment. *Monthly Review*, 18(4), 17–31.
- Franklin, J. (2016). *Cuba and the U.S. Empire. A chronological history*. New York, NY: Monthly Review Press.
- Granma. (2017). Third Central Committee Plenum approves documents on the updating of the Cuban economic and social. *Granma*, May 22. Retrieved from <http://en.granma.cu/cuba/2017-05-22/third-central-committee-plenum-approves-documents-on-the-updating-of-the-cuban-economic-and-social-model>. Accessed on May 1, 2020.
- Granma. (2019). Communist Party of Cuba Central Committee holds IX Plenum. *Granma*, April 12. Retrieved from <http://en.granma.cu/cuba/2019-04-12/communist-party-of-cuba-central-committee-holds-ix-plenum>. Accessed on May 1, 2020.
- IPS. (2018, November 16). *Qué trascendió durante la consulta del proyecto constitucional cubano?*. Inter Press Service en Cuba. Retrieved from <https://www.ipscuba.net/politica/que-trascendio-durante-la-consulta-del-proyecto-constitucional-cubano/>. Accessed on May 1, 2020.
- Johnson, L. (1965). U.S. business interests in Cuba and the rise of Castro. *World Politics*, 17(3), 440–459.
- Lamrani, S. (2013). *The economic war against Cuba*. New York, NY: Monthly Review Press.
- Murray, M. (1992). *Cruel and unusual punishment: U.S. blockade against Cuba*. London: Ocean Press.
- NAPP. (2017). Report on the analysis of the documents of the 7th PCC Congress. *Granma*, June 2. Retrieved from <http://en.granma.cu/cuba/2017-06-02/report-on-the-analysis-of-the-documents-of-the-7th-pcc-congress>. Accessed on May 1, 2020.
- NAPP. (2019). *Constitution of the Republic of Cuba*. National Assembly of Peoples Power. Retrieved from www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Cuba_2019.pdf?lang=en. Accessed on May 1, 2020.
- Palomina García, A. L., & Pichardo Pérez, M. (2019). Cuba vs blockade. *Granma*, September 27. Retrieved from <http://en.granma.cu/mundo/2019-09-27/cuba-vs-blockade>. Accessed on May 1, 2020.
- PCC. (2011a). Lineamientos de la Política Económica y Social del Partido y la Revolución. Retrieved from <https://www.scribd.com/document/55084818/Folleto-Lineamientos-VI-Congreso-Partido-Comunista-de-Cuba>. Accessed on May 1, 2020.
- PCC. (2011b). Información sobre el resultado del Debate de los Lineamientos de la Política Económica y Social del Partido y la Revolución. Retrieved from <https://www.scribd.com/document/55084978/Tabloide-Debate-Lineamientos-VI-Congreso-Partido-Comunista-de-Cuba>. Accessed on May 1, 2020.
- PCC. (2016a). Conceptualización del Modelo Económico y Social Cubano de Desarrollo Socialista. Plan Nacional de Desarrollo Económico y Social hasta 2030: Propuesta de Visión de la Nación, Ejes y Sectores Estratégicos (two documents). Retrieved from [www.granma.cu/file/pdf/gaceta/Copia para el Sitio Web.pdf](http://www.granma.cu/file/pdf/gaceta/Copia%20para%20el%20Sitio%20Web.pdf). Accessed on May 1, 2020.
- PCC. (2016b). Actualización de los Lineamientos de la Política Económica y Social del Partido y la Revolución para el Período 2016–2021. Retrieved from <http://www.granma.cu/file/pdf/gaceta/01Folleto.Lineamientos-4.pdf>. Accessed on May 1, 2020.
- PCC. (2017a). *Conceptualización del Modelo Económico y Social Cubano de Desarrollo Socialista*. Partido Comunista de Cuba. Retrieved from [http://www.granma.cu/file/pdf/gaceta/Conceptualización del modelo economico social Version Final.pdf](http://www.granma.cu/file/pdf/gaceta/Conceptualización%20del%20modelo%20economico%20social%20Version%20Final.pdf). Accessed on May 1, 2020.
- PCC. (2017b). Lineamientos de la Política Económica y Social del Partido y la Revolución para el Período 2016–2021. Retrieved from [http://www.granma.cu/file/pdf/gaceta/Lineamientos 2016-2021 Versión Final.pdf](http://www.granma.cu/file/pdf/gaceta/Lineamientos%202016-2021%20Versión%20Final.pdf). Accessed on May 1, 2020.
- Reuters. (2018). U.S. trade embargo has cost Cuba \$130 billion, U.N. says. *World News*, May 9. Retrieved from <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-cuba-economy-un/us-trade-embargo-has-cost-cuba-130-billion-un-says-idUSKBN1IA00T>. Accessed on May 1, 2020.
- Schoultz, L. (2009). *That infernal little Cuban Republic*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press.

- Thale, G., & García Castro, T. (2019, April 10). *Cuba's new constitution, explained*. Washington Office on Latin America. Retrieved from <https://www.wola.org/analysis/cubas-new-constitution-explained/>. Accessed on May 1, 2020.
- United Nations. (2019a, November 6). Speakers in general assembly urge United States to repeal embargo against Cuba, criticizing Trump administration for intensifying restrictions over past year. *Meetings Coverage GA/12211*. Retrieved from <https://www.un.org/press/en/2019/ga12211.doc.htm>. Accessed on May 1, 2020.
- United Nations. (2019b, November 7). General assembly adopts annual resolution calling on United States to end embargo against Cuba, as Brazil rejects text for first time. *Meetings Coverage GA/12212*. Retrieved from <https://www.un.org/press/en/2019/ga12212.doc.htm>. Accessed on May 1, 2020.
- World Bank. (2019) Data. Cuba. Retrieved from <https://data.worldbank.org/country/cuba>. Accessed on May 1, 2020.
- Yaffe, H. (2020). *We are Cuba!* New Haven, CT: Yale University.