



**APDUSA VIEWS**

**Issue No 78**

**May 2005**

**A TOURIST PEEK  
INTO CUBAN  
SOCIALISM**

**APDUSA VIEWS**

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## INTRODUCTION TO “A TOURIST PEEK INTO CUBAN SOCIALISM.”

When Mark informed us that he had been to Cuba for a short visit, we invited him to do an article for APDUSA VIEWS about his immediate reactions to what he experienced whilst there. His article does not claim to be anything near an analytical expose of Cuban Socialism in all its complexities. It is no more than what it says it is – “a peek”.

The Cuban Revolution and its uphill struggle towards socialism is the story of how a poverty-stricken people, led by a leadership which has dedicated itself to upliftment of the lives of their people, can achieve wonders.

For 45 years, Cuba has been the object of intense hatred by US imperialism. There was no dirty trick that US imperialism has not used to destabilise and overthrow the leadership of the Cuban Revolution. That Fidel Castro is still the president is proof positive that Imperialism has failed.

The Cuban Revolution and its strivings towards socialism is what lawyers would call something quite different from other things – *sui generis* – a class of its own.

1. The Cuban Revolution was the creation of the 26<sup>th</sup> of July Movement led by concerned Cubans in their struggle to overthrow the hated dictatorship of Fulgencio Batista. At the time of the overthrow, not much attention was paid to it. Latin America was well known for numerous overthrows of government by persons and organisations that based their actions on the need to combat corruption and to implement various freedoms. Almost all these overthrows ended in nothing new or substantial. Once in power, the victorious “revolutionaries” soon assumed the habits and vices of those they had overthrown. The masses, i.e. the workers and peasants only received empty promises. Hence the initial lack of real interest in the happenings in Cuba. To make matters worse, US imperialism was generous in its praise of Fidel Castro. One found “LIFE MAGAZINE”, the powerful pictorial propaganda tool of US imperialism, saying complimentary things about Fidel Castro and his

organisation of revolutionary guerillas. Castro was flatteringly referred to as “the soldier-scholar” who had overthrown a corrupt, oppressive and crooked regime.

2. But even before a year had passed, Castro was already referred to in disparaging terms by US imperialism, He was then described as a demagogue who was leading Cuba into chaos

Why the change of attitude? What had taken place to bring about a *volte face* in approach by US imperialism?

3. For a start, Fidel Castro and his fellow revolutionaries were not made in the mould of those who used the masses to feather their own nests. They were committed fighters for social justice. They did not engage in the overthrow of Batista so that they could enjoy the lust of power and the material comforts of life. Their primary concern remained the material, social and mental welfare of the workers and peasants.
4. In seeking to implement social and economic reforms, Castro and his colleagues came up against the huge obstacles of US imperialism and the local comprador class.
5. The wealth of Cuba (land, trade, industry and property) was effectively in the hands of US imperialism.
6. In order to utilise the wealth of Cuba for the benefit of its citizens, that wealth had to be reclaimed from US imperialism.
7. That is precisely what Castro and his colleagues did.
8. For seeking to serve their people, a noble intention by any standard, Castro and his colleagues earned the undying hatred of US imperialism.

#### THE UNIQUE NATURE OF THE CUBAN REVOLUTION.

1. For the first time in history, a revolutionary party which was neither communist nor socialist took the road to socialism and all that the latter implies.
2. If truth be told, the earlier Cuban Communist Party, which became discredited, had taken a position against the 26<sup>th</sup> of July Movement.
3. That Communist Party, on instructions from the Soviet Union, made sure that it did nothing to promote the victory of communism/socialism in Cuba.

4. This paradoxical position was a direct result of the deal hatched between Stalin and representatives of Anglo-American imperialism towards the end of World War II. Between them, the world was carved into zones or spheres of influence of the victorious world powers. And it was agreed that no party to the agreement would engage in any activity in a territory inimical to the interests of the party in whose zone of influence that territory was.
5. In keeping to the agreement all the Latin American and Caribbean political parties which gave themselves the name of Communist Party and who were aligned with the Soviet Union submitted themselves meekly to be defanged. This meant that no Communist Party in Latin America and the Caribbean would engage in activity to the detriment of the United States of America. All the Communist Parties in the regions mentioned adhered strictly to the “Zone of Influence” agreement. It is for this reason that no Communist Party in these regions sought to initiate and wage a social revolution.
6. Concerning the earlier Cuban Communist Party<sup>1</sup>, a leading member of Castro’s government articulated its role as follows:

“...this party ( the earlier Communist Party) did not play any part in the making of our revolution. The revolution ..was made in the Sierra Maestra; and it is there that we really won out over the tyranny. For over five years, in fact – before we won- the Communists, when they didn’t ignore us, were political rivals of our movement. We owed them nothing when we triumphed over Batista’s tyranny. They didn’t help.”<sup>2</sup>

What this person omitted to mention is that the original Communist Party (renamed in 1944 the People’s Socialist Party) had “collaborated with the Batista regime in the 1940s and early 1950s, its members even being rewarded with posts in government and labour.”<sup>3</sup>

7. When the leadership of the 26<sup>th</sup> of July Movement sought to implement the radical changes for the benefit of the workers and peasants, they knocked head with US imperialism and the Companies

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<sup>1</sup> The present Communist Party of Cuba was formed in 1965 by Fidel Castro and his fellow revolutionaries.

<sup>2</sup> C.Wright Mills: CASTRO’S CUBA, Secker and Warburg , 1960 page 105

<sup>3</sup> Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2002, Windows Version: Communist Party of Cuba

which owned the bulk of the Cuban economy. This led to nationalisation of local commerce and industry; the expropriation of US businesses and agricultural estates. Thus revolutionary Cuba made a life-long enemy. US imperialism has never forgiven Cuba for what it believed to be the most heinous crime possible – the violation of the sanctity of PRIVATE PROPERTY !

8. For that “violation” Cuba has had a fearful price to pay, including the US sponsored Bay of Pigs invasion.

9. Cuba may be a small nation, but its people have the hearts of giants. Victory, when the odds are heavily weighed against them, is nothing new. According to the Encyclopaedia Britannica, the Cuban revolutionary force of just 800 guerrillas defeated Batista’s professional army of 30 000!!

It was to this land of people with hearts of giants that Mark Arsiradam went to visit as a tourist and now shares some of his impressions with us.

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## **A Tourist Peek into Cuban Socialism**

**by**

**Mark Arsiradam**

### **Introduction**

Cuba is an independent Caribbean island off the coast of Florida, U.S.A., flanked by the Atlantic Ocean on the north-east and the Caribbean Sea in the south-west. It has been the hub of socialism in the western hemisphere ever since the Cuban Revolution began in 1959, invoking a relentless and vicious campaign of hatred against it by the U.S. government. The former Soviet Union (U.S.S.R.) provided much needed moral, military and economic support and expertise during the Cold War. Since 1990 however, with the collapse of the Soviet Bloc, Cuba has had to endure a double economic blockade - from both Russia and the U.S. Tourism has been promoted with the help of foreign companies in 50/50 ventures. Given the extreme cold temperatures in the northern hemispheric winters and Cuba's Caribbean sun and pristine beaches throughout the year, tourism has become the foremost industry in Cuba.

### **1. Getting to Cuba**

Interestingly, Americans visit Cuba as tourists from other countries such as Canada and Mexico but not directly from the U.S. Others, including North Americans and Europeans, fly directly to Havana, Varadero or Holguin. Visitors from the Caribbean or Latin America do the same.

### **2. Cuban Population**

The population numbers around 11 million, mainly Spanish – speaking descendants and African peoples. 0.14% is Chinese. The aboriginal population was exterminated by the Spanish conquerors.

### **3. How was socialism achieved in Cuba?**

On January 1, 1959 the dictator Fulgencio Batista was overthrown by armed struggle in what is known as the start of the Cuban Revolution. Fidel Castro led the uprising, becoming its president till today. People fighting alongside included the famous Argentinean born doctor and revolutionary Che Guevara, who became a Cuban citizen and became, inter alia, its first Minister of Industry. Agrarian reform was a big initial priority that gave ordinary people access to the land, hitherto owned by a wealthy few. Government seized ownership of most property on behalf of the people rather than the rich minority, who mainly fled to the U.S. Compensation was according to the values declared on income tax returns.

### **4. What does socialism mean for Cuba?**

Cuba has been the first socialist country in the western hemisphere. Government owns almost everything. There is no buying and selling of houses. Families pass on their homes to following generations. 85% of the homes are owned by the families that occupy them.

Furthermore, there is no taxation on housing. Extended families are common. Education and health care are provided at no charge. The average income ranges between 200 and 400 Pesos. These convert to US\$ at about 25:1. There was a time in the 1990s when the conversion was about 250:1. Tertiary education is similarly provided free of charge. People receive a food allowance. Other food and goods may be purchased, but are severely restricted because of scarcity and cost. There is no widespread advertising as we have in capitalist economies. There is virtually no billboard advertising. The only noticeable billboards were of Che Guevara and another of a website about the Bush genocide. A trillion dollars is apparently spent annually in the world promoting consumption as opposed to development and production that is vitally needed in the third world. Consumerism and consumption is downplayed a lot – an inevitable result of the trade embargoes as well.

### **5. What are some of the achievements of Socialist Cuba?**

- Unlike most of Latin America, Cuba has no international financial debt. Compare this to the early 2005 figure of the 7.7 trillion dollar

debt of the U.S., owner of the most powerful but also most precarious economy in the world today.

- Adult literacy is high (**97%** in 2000 according to UNICEF) compared to **57%** in India, the largest bourgeois democracy in the world. Cuba also boasts a very high school retention rate compared to its immediate neighbours.
- The infant (under one year of age) mortality rate was **6 per 1000** in 2003 (down from 39 per 1000 in 1960) – **slightly better than even the U.S.** (7 per 1000 in 2003) and compared to a **64 per 1000** average in the Third World.
- The HIV/AIDS prevalence rate in Cuba for 15-49 year olds was **0,1%** in the year ending 2003. South Africa's was **21,5%** - **215 times that of the Cuban rate or 21 500% more than that of Cuba.**
- Life expectancy at birth in Cuba in 2003 was **77** years compared to **47** years in South Africa.
- ***Cuba earns more Olympic gold medals per capita than any other country in the world!***

## **6. A Caring Society**

The statistics are breath taking. What kind of society exists in Cuba which takes special care of its young so as to achieve a lesser infant mortality rate than the richest country in the world? Or take the prevalence of HIV/AIDS in the age group 15 – 49 years. It was 0.1% - 215 times less than in South Africa, the most powerful industrial country in the whole of Africa. One thing is certain. HIV/AIDS denialists do not find Cuban soil flourishing! The low prevalence indicates a high degree of consciousness, a trusting relationship with the government and an effective communication system between government and the people.

But it is the caring of its people which is most striking.

Recently an educationist from the University of KwaZulu Natal, Pietermaritzburg, ***Volker Wedekind***, visited Cuba. He was bowled over



by its education system. His description of it is so well captured by newspaper columnist, Sharon Dell that we consider it worthwhile quoting a whole section of it:

“In terms of all recognised indicators, the tiny communist country has one of best educational systems in the world... ‘There may be potholes in the streets of Havana, but education is a priority in Cuba.’ There are no more than 20 children in a class and no child is allowed to walk for more than 20 minutes to get to a school. There is a television, video recorder and computer in every class room and pupils are given the opportunity to explore all facets of their talents including music and less academic subjects. While Wedekind concedes that because there is no real (capitalist) market in Cuba, many graduates leave the country to work elsewhere, but there are many who stay and a significant proportion of the best school leavers turn to teaching, which is perceived as a a high status profession. ‘This is something we have lost in South Africa.’ says Wedekind”<sup>4</sup>

The answer to the question: What type of society exists in Cuba which places such a high premium on the care of its children? The society which exists in Cuba is deeply imbued with the ideals of socialism. After all, the quintessence of socialism is **humanism!**

## **7. How has Cuba contributed to the Third World?**

Cuba has supported liberation struggles against colonialism in Africa, most notably in Angola and in the Congo. Namibia owes its liberation in significant part to the defeat of hostile South African forces in southern Angola, one of the most famous battles being that at Cuito Cuanavale. In the early 1960’s, Cuba trained a number of guerillas with the help of other nations to fight for freedom from colonialism in the Congo. Thousands of Cuban doctors work in Latin America serving millions of patients. 30% of all medical students in training are from foreign countries and who return to their home countries in five years as doctors

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<sup>4</sup> “**Wanted: more teachers**” by SHARON DELL The Natal Witness, 22<sup>nd</sup> April 2005

– and at no charge too. Cuba has offered Africa the use of its doctors to set up infrastructure for the distribution of anti-retroviral drugs used in the management of HIV/AIDS. In other words, they have created and exported human capital to third world countries that need it badly, whilst the Imperialist bloc has mastered the art of finance capital export only, and generally imports foreign human capital.

#### **8. What are the challenges of being so close to the U.S.?**

The U.S. has a military base at Guantanamo Bay which is on the farthest south-eastern enclave of Cuba and will retain control over that land for another thirty years at least. They have written cheques to Cuba for rental payments but none of these cheques have ever been cashed by Cuba.

There have been three waves of migration since the revolution, the first two being mainly for political reasons and the third one mainly for economic opportunities. The U.S. also harbours and tolerates activities planned against Cuba. The recent trial involving five Cubans in the U.S. is testimony to this.

Historically, 1962 was the year of the Cuban Missile Crisis when agreement was reached that Cuba would not be attacked by the U.S. - in exchange for a withdrawal of Soviet missiles being stationed in Cuba. What followed though was an unrelenting economic blockade against Cuba. Since the fall of the Soviet Bloc, Cuba has survived a double economic embargo.

#### **9. How has the economy adjusted with the collapse of the Soviet Bloc?**

From sugar exports being the main source of income, tourism has been developed as the main industry now. The government has entered into 50/50 ventures (equal partnerships) with foreign hotel chains to develop tourism in Cuba. Restoration of historical architecture in Havana is a project undertaken by at least two companies. There are also oil exploration ventures with foreign (e.g. Canadian) companies. Cuba is also famous for sisal and its Royal Palm trees (which provide wood for a

number of uses). Agriculture is well developed for subsistence. Pork is the national meat and it is illegal to slaughter cattle. Beef is imported.

### **10. Cuban People**

Workers at the hotels, bus drivers, tour guides and people on the street on tours were most genuine and sincere, polite and courteous – a people who are highly educated, responsible and who have a high dignity about them. They are creative, hard-working and provide good service without great expectations of anything in return. Few begged and asked for unusual items such as pencils and soap - reflecting a scarcity of, or range of, commodities that are available.

### **11. Finance and Currency**

There were no automated teller machines (ATM's) that are a familiar site in the capitalist economies. One has to change to local currency at the hotels or bureaus. Tour companies are able to take payment by credit card on the older manual systems.

### **12. Russian Connection**

After the revolution in 1959, Cuba was able to engage the support of the Soviet Union politically, economically and militarily. Russia provided housing expertise, the relics of which are prominently visible in the form of the apartment blocks with a very flat layered architectural style. There are also a number of old Russian motor vehicles that run alongside the old American models from the 1930's to 1950's.

### **13. Architecture**

Havana has a remarkable skyline similar to many other cities around the world. Old and new sections are in evidence. There are a number of churches in Havana and the predominant religion is Roman Catholicism along with a few other faiths.

There is an impressive array of government buildings in downtown Havana to be seen. The capitol building is a replica of the one in Washington D.C. and which that was built before the 1959 revolution. Revolution Plaza is similarly an impressive building across Revolution

Square where about a million people assemble each time Fidel Castro addresses the Cuban people. About three million lined these areas when the pope visited a few years ago. Then there is a massive statue of Jose Marti, revered throughout Latin America as poet, patriot fighter for liberty and a martyr. In Cuba, Jose Marti “became the symbol of Cuba’s struggle for independence from Spain.”

#### **14. Sustainable Development**

One cannot escape the drive for, and level of, sustainable development and energy consumption in Cuba. The tourist hotel bungalows are equipped with solar heating panels and the main mode of transport in some of the smaller cities is horse-and-carriage. In a small town we visited, there were as many horse-and-carriages on the road as there were cars - and many more bicycles than there were motorcycles.

#### **15. Representative National Assembly**

On arrival in the immigration section of the airport, we were greeted by Fidel Castro on television addressing the National Assembly - in Spanish, a daily routine. Almost half of the National Assembly is made up of district delegates who are nominated and elected by the people, with no intervention by the Cuban Communist Party. The only role played by this Party is in guaranteeing the observation of the procedures set forth in the constitution and the laws for the electoral process. There is a very high level of participation in elections.

#### **16. Police and Security**

Tourists need not fear. There are ample police cars visible and the occasional roadblock. Security for all is vitally important for any country that wants to promote tourism as its main industry. There are many people who can well afford to travel and who are only too keen to travel and discover new places if this can be done safely.

#### **17. Books and Literature**

There are a large number of books on sale at the hotels and shopping complexes as well as at book fairs in Havana. Apart from the works of the world’s greatest revolutionaries, some of these dealt with the Cuban

struggle, Missile Crisis, the Cuban Five arrested and unfairly imprisoned in the U.S. for working against terrorism towards Cuba – terrorism planned and executed by Cubans based in the U.S. Castro’s recent famous speeches are available in English as well as his “History Will Absolve Me” a riveting self-defence at the trial about the failed Moncada attacks in 1953.

## **18. Arts and Music**

Nightly entertainment is provided by local musicians and dancers who have fine training in Havana. When the trade embargoes got worse in the 1990’s, there was no curtailment of funding for the arts.

## **19. Cuban Well-Knowns**

Cuba is well known for tobacco and cigars. They hold the Guinness Record for the longest cigar rolled – 15m. There is a fair alternative market for cigars that are much cheaper than at the approved vendors. Tourists are warned against buying these as it is illegal and may not even be rolled with tobacco. The national medicine is rum, the tour-guide jokes.

Che Guevara is highly revered by the people of Cuba. He appears on their local coins and there are paintings and billboards of him around Cuba. T-shirts, caps and songs are some of the ways his memory is kept alive. On the other hand, there are no such allusions to Fidel Castro himself. Nobel literature prize winner Ernest Hemingway is similarly a legend in Cuba, famous for his novel “The Old Man and the Sea.”

## **20. Political Opposition**

There did not seem to be a daily English newspaper. Neither did there seem to be any robust political debate in the National Assembly. But as stated, I do not understand the Spanish language. Furthermore, I had no idea what the agenda was and what was being discussed when I viewed the Assembly in progress on television. However, it is a profound truth that Cuba has been in a state of siege since its revolutionary inception and that illegal political dissent is managed harshly. Those who are aided and abetted by the U.S. are tried and imprisoned. Some have faced

the death penalty. The official position is that those who are not linked to the U.S. are allowed to voice their opposition.

## **21. Freedom of Expression**

We requested the pianist at our hotel to play the Cuban national anthem – this was declined as it was supposed to be too political. Presumably, this approach was adopted to ward off criticism that tourists get bombarded with pro-Cuba politics. Language was a big barrier to engagement in intricate political conversations. However people avoided talking politics unless asked very pointedly about aspects. What people voice more easily is their yearning for greater economic freedom, wealth and access to a wider range of affordable foods and goods. The tour guide was a very charming and articulate ambassador for Cuba and its government including Fidel Castro. She spoke very fondly about their strengths and quipped about their problems – and also referred to Western misperceptions about Cuba to be due to propaganda. An elderly retired doctor felt that things were much better now than before the revolution but that the youth feel frustrated that much more can be improved – them not having experienced the times of hardship before the revolution.

## **22. Making an Objective Assessment**

I found making an assessment of such a different country and economy as that of Cuba to be a real challenge. Many tourists make quick judgements about different issues without much thought or investigation. Most opinions were based on their own experience or those of their own countries which have had very different courses in history. Some compared Cuba to the U.S., others to the other Caribbean countries – how they appeared to them as tourists. Some lamented the value of the local peso compared to a few years ago. Others commented on the lack of freedom of Cubans to travel. Waiting lists in health care for eyewear as an example is an issue. People simply have to wait endlessly in certain cases. I found it useful to read about the history of Cuba by those who fought for its liberation and to listen to the people about how they felt about issues in the country. Some were free to speak whilst others were more reserved. Interaction with tourists is discouraged as is tipping as it is alleged to interfere with the level of service provided. Cuba's achievements are well outlined in Fidel

Castro's various speeches, some of which are online at [www.marxists.org](http://www.marxists.org). There are a number of books by an Australian publishing house at [www.oceanbooks.com.au](http://www.oceanbooks.com.au). In order to make an objective assessment, one has to be able to look at issues from a variety of points of view - and not just from one or two, which invariably lends itself to subjective as opposed to objective assessments.

### **Conclusion**

Today we may have an opportunity to visit and assess for ourselves the socialist experience in Cuba. According to those who fought for its liberation, there is no other way forward - to empower the masses in such a country and free them from economic class exploitation - other than through socialist democracy. It is an example of a different way that has proven itself viable and sustainable despite the most uneven battle in all of history with the U.S. right next door. It will serve as inspiration to those all over the world who strive for liberation from the yoke of imperialist domination.