

Cuba! Cuba! Cuba!

by
William I. Robinson

It was Fall 1980. I had recently returned to New York from a three-year stint in Africa and would shortly be heading to Nicaragua, where I would spend the next 10 years. At the time I did not know much about the Cuban Revolution, but my political awakening had taken place on a continent that was still in the process of overthrowing the shackles of colonialism. Only a few years before, a timely intervention by thousands of Cuban troops—many of them of African descent—had beaten back a U.S.-backed invasion of Angola by apartheid South African and surrogate forces on the eve of its independence. Fidel Castro, who had presided a year earlier over the sixth Non-Aligned Summit in Havana, was perhaps the leading international voice for the aspirations of liberation movements that were raging in Africa and the Americas and for the calls for a New International Economic Order. The Cubans were held in high esteem among my African friends and mentors.

Closer to what was momentarily home to me that fall, right-wing Cuban-exile terrorists had murdered several members of the Cuban community in New Jersey and Miami who had campaigned for a normalization of relations between the United States and Cuba. Activists in New York had called for a rally in front of the UN to condemn the killings. As I approached the crowd to take part, the first thing that came into view was the huge sign held high by one protester: “Cuba! Cuba! Cuba!” In subsequent years I would befriend many Cubans, participate with them in many struggles, and visit the island a number of times. Exactly why, nearly three decades later, it is the image of that sign in 1980 that stands out I cannot say.

Those were different times. We were at the “rosy dawn” of the globalization age. Those liberation movements and the revolutions they produced would later unravel, the cold war would come to an end, and neoliberalism would ravage Latin America and the rest of the former Third World. This testimonial is not an acritical “hurrah, hurrah.” We are all familiar with the many mistakes and limitations of the Cuban Revolution. Yet despite all of these, even in our darkest hours over the past half a century there was Cuba—its diplomats an unwavering voice in defense of small countries, struggling peoples, and just causes everywhere, its academics in international forums opening up space for counterhegemonic thought even in the most oppressive years of the neoliberal heyday in the 1990s, and its government defending the dignity of a socialist alternative to the savagery of a dehumanizing world capitalism, an enduring counterweight to the arrogance of empire and elites.

Cuba is today awash in its own material limitations. The global meaning of its revolution is to be found not in its material achievements (such as universal health care), no matter how significant they are, but in the ideological and psychological impact of its survival and defiance in the face of a relentless world capitalist system whose leading agents have from the start been bent on its destruction.

To that I say: Cuba! Cuba! Cuba!

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