

Helen Yaffe, *We Are Cuba! How a Revolutionary People Have Survived in a Post-Soviet World*

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Ernesto Domínguez López

University of Havana

There is a saying among Cuban historians and scholars: 'If a person spends a week in Cuba, she can write a book. If the same person spends a month, she can write a 15-page article, maybe. If the same person spends six months in Cuba, she will write nothing, because at that point she will realise that she had understood nothing, that she is just starting to understand a little bit.' Helen Yaffe's book *We Are Cuba! How a Revolutionary People Have Survived in a Post-Soviet World* is not the outcome of a week-long visit, but the result of many years of study and invaluable first-hand experiences, continuous exploration and dedicated and well-structured research.

The field of Cubanology – a term not well regarded in Cuba, as it is charged with the weight of decades of conflict with the United States and centuries of colonial history – is filled with works that attempt to explain the current reality and the history of Cuba, the successes and failures of its political projects and governments, from different perspectives and by using tools and referential frameworks that more often than not do not fit their object of study.

There are ideological biases that drive a large part of that work, as it largely addresses the history, nature and results of a revolution in a 'Third World' country that broke with traditional ties of dependence and projected itself as an active member of the international system. Very few of those who had any contact with the process and the country were left indifferent. Hence, the Caribbean nation has gathered a large number of supporters that idealise it, and a large number of critics that demonise it, often losing sight of the fact that they are dealing with a real country, with a real people, that faces real problems in the midst of extremely complex circumstances and in an asymmetric conflict with a hegemonic power like the United States.

But the problem runs deeper. As Yaffe points out, theoretical and analytical tools and strategies developed and operationalised for European or North American conditions cannot be applied without major adjustments. It is, in many ways, the result of a traditional Western-centric perspective that until today dominates the world of social sciences and is embedded in many scholar's worldviews and theoretical and methodological frames to the point that it is applied unintentionally and without even noticing. The book attempts to rebalance the field as much as possible, thus joining the ranks of a relatively small but significant academic community that tries to enrich the conversation. The author looks for the views that Cubans hold on their reality, their history and their future, as she advances towards a

comprehensive explanation of the durability of the social, political and economic system created by the Revolution of 1959.

As important as the change in perspective, her work also steps away from oversimplifications. These are far too frequent, in fact it seems to be a natural trend among scholars, as they often try to boil down a process to a single explanatory factor. Yaffe operates in a different way, as she tries to capture the complexity of her object of study, and thus offer a multidimensional and nuanced approach. It is particularly valuable that in her work internal factors and variables are in permanent interaction with external ones. This is extremely significant, as those are not just two important yet separated fields, but interdependent parts of a common and extremely complex network that cannot be analytically divided into isolated compartments. Rather, the parts form specific clusters that crystallise the dynamics of the underlying system of relations that they shape and that in turn shapes them.

A merit of the book is that it begins by addressing the problem of socialism and socialist development. This is a fundamental step, as the socialist orientation of the Cuban Revolution created significant difference when compared to other national projects that evolved within other modes of production. It is a question of the political economy that shapes Cuba's economy and society, but it is also a key factor for its international relations, and the production of a symbolic structure based on a different set of premises than that of Western countries.

Another important contribution of the book, and of the research that supports it, is that it considers the diversity of opinions and the long-running debates that took place at every turn of the country's history since the Revolution. The author's familiarity with Che Guevara's ideas and work put her in contact with the early discussions about how to organise and manage the economy, for instance. This is very distant from the top-down, monolithically centralised structure that is often assumed in some literature and even more often in public speech.

This is part of the stated goal of focusing on the real Cuba, that of political leaders, managers of enterprises, scientists, but also that of any regular Cuban. How the people of the Caribbean nation have lived and coped with challenges and limitations, how they have innovated, and failed, and succeeded, and tried again. The many adjustments and the sequences of tries and errors occurred almost always under stress and with very little room to manoeuvre, when we add to the analysis the permanent external pressure and the need to overcome structural issues emanating from the country's history as a peripheral, dependent member of the modern World-System.

It is not uncommon that public discussion about Cuba's domestic problems, its democracy or lack thereof, the efficiency of its institutions or lack thereof, the role of corruption, among many other issues, starts by brushing away those sources of increasing pressure and limiting factors. Even during the brief period of improved relations with the United States triggered by Barack Obama's change of policy, the fundamental constraints and challenges remained in place. The complete reversal of the policy by Donald Trump's administration not only swept away the limited benefits produced during the roughly two years of *reapproachment*, but effectively made the situation much worse than it had been. We can contend that any attempted explanation that neglects these dimensions would be limited at best, or outright failed at worst.

Is it the definitive book on the topic? No, and certainly it is not the intent. It is a contribution to a discussion that is far too widespread and far too ideologically conditioned to be solved so easily. It offers an alternative view to those advanced by typical Cubanologists, and gives the reader an opportunity to look at Cuba through different lenses. Does this mean that it encapsulates *the* right approach? The answer in this case is less clear-cut. As in any other complex topic, the best approach is probably to combine the merits of different perspectives, overcome their limitations, and produce a comprehensive, dynamic and nuanced view. The book is an important, well-thought-out step in the right direction, a must-read for those looking to understand the inner workings, conditions, history and projections of one of the most interesting cases in contemporary history.

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Elizabeth N. Arkush, *War, Spectacle, and Politics in the Ancient Andes*

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Hugo C. Ikehara-Tsukayama

Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

The topic of warfare is a complicated one. On the one hand, we do not want to glorify such demonstrations of violence. On the other hand, history has demonstrated on multiple occasions how such violence can lead to, or is related to, profound societal changes. In other words, ignoring the role of war in ancient and historical societies, even with the best intention – such as avoiding negative views of Indigenous people, sticking with pacifist philosophies, etc. – can lead only to partial, if not skewed, reconstructions of the past.

The scholarly tradition in the Central Andes – Peru, Bolivia and Northern Chile – has dealt with the issue of violent conflict, creating the concept of ‘ritual battle’. Based on ethnographic sources, this model of violence has been considered an Andean form of warfare in which people fight for cosmological reasons, with no territorial or political gain. For decades, scholars have used this model to explain the conflict in the Andes, ignoring or forcing the data – such as fortifications and signs of violence in human remains – to fit the model. Sadly, this led to theoretical stagnation and a lack of explanation for the variety and complexity of Andean warfare throughout history.

The discussion on Andean warfare had a sharp turn in the last two decades. The previously dominant – but still used – model of ritual warfare was challenged by scholars arguing that violent conflicts in the region may be similar to those observed in other parts of the world. A dichotomy between ‘real’ and ‘ritual’ warfare emerged. Elizabeth N. Arkush was among the most critical voices in this discussion.