

Book Review

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***Paths for Cuba: Reforming Communism in Comparative Perspective*, edited by Scott Morgenstern, Jorge Pérez-López, and Jerome Branche. 2018. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press.**

Much has happened in Cuba in recent years, from the end of decades of Castro leadership to gradual reforms. This compilation is a welcome contribution that updates us on the many changes and challenges the island nation faces. It covers a lot of ground in its three sections on economic reforms, policy reforms, and citizens and society. In the last several years, Fidel Castro passed on the torch to his brother Raúl, who in turn retired, and in the process, gradual reforms were implemented that relaxed the operation of small business firms and eased travel abroad, among other significant changes.

In 2014 the US and Cuba announced their intentions of normalizing relations. Attempts by the Obama Administration to renew diplomatic contacts provided a boost to more market-friendly initiatives to reboot the state-controlled economy, but these are now stalled after the Trump Administration has tightened sanctions and reversed those policies, essentially resurrecting a failed Cold War policy.

Cuba is a country in evolution, as the socialist government continues to promote timid economic reforms to steer the economy away from central planning and slowly toward the market. In spite of reform efforts, a state-centered approach still predominates, though it has not performed efficiently enough to generate growth and prosperity. Moreover, Cuba can no longer rely on the generosity of its former radical friends such as the Soviet Union and Venezuela. The book shows the problems and potential by comparing reform efforts in Cuba with countries such as Vietnam, China, and others.

The main focus of the book is putting into a comparative perspective the reforms that have been taking place in Cuba, which have gone further in terms of economics than politics. The book aims to analyze potential directions for change and the costs and limitations to implementation. It examines aspects of Cuba's economy, investment, political leadership, and foreign policy, and the

impact of the post-Soviet collapse. But departing from earlier literature that mainly focused on political issues and Cuba-US tensions, this collection gives a voice to racial identities and inequalities, social security reform, and other simmering issues in Cuban society and culture, including domestic violence, youth music and art.

Paths for Cuba provides a good overview of reforms and where Cuba has been heading. Domestically, Cubans now can be self-employed, operate their own businesses, purchase homes, and travel abroad. Despite the changes Cuba still faces contradictions and growing inequalities between those who have access to hard currency and those who do not, which has led to a growing racialized inequality. Despite the strengths Cuba displays in some areas, weaknesses are becoming more glaring as Cuba has opened up to tourism in order to earn hard cash. One question that is raised from the beginning of this book is whether Cuba can build on the values and cultural shifts stemming from the revolution, such as questioning the excesses of capitalism, emphasizing the value of a relatively more equal distribution of income, and the stated, albeit unattained, goal of ending racism. As described by Scott Morgenstern and Jorge Pérez-López, while the outside pushes for wholesale changes, many inside Cuba seem averse to opening markets and the political system if it comes at the cost of losing the country's revolutionary heritage. The overarching question is whether Cuba can follow, for example, in Vietnam's footsteps and build a stronger economy within a one-party state.

This book is essential reading for anyone interested in Cuba. It is current and provides a wealth of information even though new developments always make it difficult to keep up with an evolving economic system. Using a comparative approach, it presents the different scenarios that might emerge as Cuba's centrally-planned economy and its political system undergo slow reform.

The introductory chapter, by editors Pérez-López and Morgenstern with Jerome Branche, provides an overview of economic reforms since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the normalizing of relations with the United States under the Obama Administration, and the increasing strains Cuba faces because it is not self-sufficient, and assistance from its allies is no longer available.

Chapter 1, by Morgenstern and Pérez-López with Carlos Alzuguray and Kevin Morrison, focuses on the applicability of a standard capitalist or "Washington Consensus" model to the Cuban context. These policies have not always had positive impacts, and the country's revolutionary history leads to resistance.

James W. McGuire in the second chapter uses the model of South Korea and Taiwan which embarked on fast track economic growth by adopting an outward orientation. An interesting take in his argument is that the initial conditions of both Korea and Cuba were similar at about the same time in the early 1960s for the former and 2018 for the latter. Cuba has the potential to take off just as Korea and Taiwan did, but would need to take a market-friendly approach, to include trade and foreign investment, and have a well-managed industrial policy.

Chapter three by Pérez-López and Yu Xiao draws interesting comparisons on policy initiatives between Cuba and China in their pursuit of economic reform. One reason why Cuba has not been as

successful is that the Chinese diaspora has been eager to invest in China, while Cubans who left the island have not. Cuba also failed to attract other investors to its nationalized economy, while its government lacks its own resources and saddles businesses with a byzantine process for approvals.

Chapter four by Matías F. Travieso-Díaz deals with ongoing litigation of American firms that were expropriated right after the revolution and demand compensation. The resolution of these claims is considered a precondition for US firms to eventually invest in Cuba. The author presents three possible alternatives to be considered.

The next set of articles falls under policy and politics. In Chapter five Martin K. Dimitrov presents the “socialist social contract” by analyzing letters to the editor of the country’s official newspaper, *Granma*. He asserts that these letters tend to improve the quality of governance as people air their grievances. He notes that the letters have become increasingly critical, which is a sign of glasnost.

Next, Larry Catá Backer studies Cuba’s Communist Party, which is seen as an outlier among former communist parties. The Cubans were more internationalist and reached out to liberation movements irrespective of what the Soviets thought. Moreover, the party has yet to show much pragmatism, as the parties of Vietnam and China have done, and has maintained tighter state control on economic activity.

Aníbal Pérez-Liñán and Scott Mainwaring present the prospects for democracy in the post-transition era. The main question they pose is: What kind of democracy is likely to emerge? They develop a statistical analysis, based on the transition experience of other Latin American countries, to predict the likelihood of democratization. The key variable in the analysis is the history of democracy, and thus Cuba’s prognosis is not positive. However, the authors argue that historical legacies are not fully determinant.

Carmelo Mesa-Lago’s chapter compares social security systems of Latin American countries to those of Cuba, Vietnam, and China. The author argues that Cuba’s system compares favorably. He suggests reforming the tax system and reallocating resources in favor of elder care. Javier Vázquez-D’Elía provides a follow-up on the future of social protection. He argues that although Cuba has made impressive achievements in social policies, the process has been due to economic difficulties. Expanding benefits for all might not be a realistic option, given current economic limitations.

Ronald H. Linden’s chapter is about postpolitical dynamics after the collapse of Soviet-type economies. Linden argues that the openness of democratic processes has presented challenges for new market economies, with lessons for Cuba. He notes, importantly, that some countries such the Czech Republic and Poland have done relatively well, while others have not. The comparisons allow reformers to understand some of the keys to success or failure.

The third section of the book deals with citizens and society. Alan West-Durán focuses on how Cuba’s reforms have affected the “racial contract.” While the revolution brought about less inequality, racial inequality persists. In fact, reforms have accentuated the divide between the haves

and the have nots, which follows a clear racial division. The next chapter, by Ana Belén Martín Sevillano, uses a popular soap opera to present the issue of domestic violence and the severity with which police and security forces have acted to repress dissent. The last chapter of the section, by Tanya Saunders, analyzes the culture of “artivism” by looking at the hip-hop scene on the island and its utilization in taking issues to the public. Morgenstern and Linden wrap up the book by providing some comparative lessons for understanding Cuba’s possible paths.

The book, based on a conference held at the University of Pittsburgh in 2014, provides a wealth of information on Cuba’s reforms, and by putting the issues into a comparative framework, it is very useful for anyone interested in comparative systems and Latin American Studies.

Dr. Rubén Berríos is Associate Professor of Economics at Lock Haven University. He is the author of *Contracting for Development* (2000) and *Growth Without Development: Peru in Comparative Perspective* (2019). He has also published more than three dozen articles in specialized journals and chapters in books.
