

Living Ideology in Cuba. Socialism in Principle and Practice.

Katherine A. Gordy

Viviendo la ideología en Cuba. Socialismo en principios y práctica

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RESEÑA

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This book represents an important contribution for studies on ideology. Katherine Gordy, professor of Political Science at San Francisco State University, develops an excellent analysis of ideology and the production of subjects and subjectivities. Her book challenges traditional negative approaches to study the concept of ideology, offering a more positive interpretation of the concept. Her main argument is that critical thought and critical contestation are central features of Cuban socialism, rather than a threat to it. In this way, against the official anti-Cuban idea of “lack of debate” in the Revolution, Gordy shows how open and intense have been the political debates in Cuba in the last decades.

In the first chapter, the author studies the ideological links between the independence at the end of nineteenth century and the Revolution that started in 1959 in Cuba. In this way, she analyzes the links between nationalism and socialism within the narrative of the Cuban Revolution. In the second chapter, Gordy addresses the relationship between culture and Revolution in Cuba, analyzing the nature of political thought and its different contexts during the Revolution. Specifically, she addresses the famous speech “Words to Intellectuals” by Fidel Castro in the first years of the Revolution. Against the traditional narrative that stresses that this speech marked the end of political debate in the young Cuban Revolution, she convincingly argues that this speech actually opened the debate about culture and the role of intellectuals in the Revolution. According to her, this speech invigorated the political debate about the meanings of Cuban socialism in the island.

In chapter three, the author addresses the economic ideas of Ernesto Che Guevara. Using the debate about the choice between (Soviet) economic calculus and (Guevara) budgetary system to build a socialist economy that the Cuban state confronted during the 60s, Gordy analyzes the *socialist principles* of the Cuban Revolution. Gordy points out that, according to Guevara, the differences between the Soviet alternative and his budgetary system were not in the means but in the ends. Thus, Gordy shows how the traditional and apparent dichotomy between idealism (Guevara) and pragmatism (Soviet) is

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a good example, and a fundamental part, of the negative narrative about socialist ideology in Cuba. Gordy demonstrates how there was not a dichotomy at all. As a matter of fact, Guevara's budgetary system was sometimes even more pragmatic than economic calculus. Therefore, Gordy highlights the socialist principles, like Guevara's moral incentives for example, that explain the resilience of the Cuban Revolution. In addition, analyzing the economic ideas of Che Guevara and their role in socialist ideology, Gordy examines the dynamic of ideological production and ideological negotiations between the Cuban state and different intellectual institutions in Cuba. According to her, ideological negotiations make political actors, like the press or the academic world for instance, no less accountable for the way they choose to navigate a particular ideology.

Following this dynamic, Gordy addresses the tensions between academic neutrality and the calls for national unity in the island. In chapter four, the author studies some events during the 90s when intellectuals of the Centro de Estudios sobre América (CEA) in Cuba confronted the censorship of the Cuban state. During the Special Period a group of sociologists and economists, defending the principles of the Cuban Revolution, criticized the Communist Party and the government. After describing these events, she examines the tensions and the differences between *intellectuals* and *functionaries* in the island. In this way, the author analyzes the dynamic between academic work and political discourse, highlighting that academic production in Cuba goes beyond any kind of political discourse and cannot be reduced to propaganda.

Thereby, using different events as examples in chapter five, Gordy offers an interpretation of socialism as a "living ideology, where different subjects challenged the state's monopoly on socialist ideology". In other words, socialist ideology produced new subjects and new subjectivities that, at the same time, developed their own idea of socialism beyond, and sometimes against, the Cuban state. As happened with these new subjects, Gordy's own concept of ideology represents a different and more powerful understanding of ideology's meaning. She examines how the state tended to *fetishize* ideology in Cuba and elsewhere. According to her, the leadership treated ideology as distinct from practice. Popular articulations of ideology, however, saw socialism as something contingent and sometimes even contradictory to the state's interpretation; as something lived and living.

In this way, contradictions in daily life in Cuba, contradictions between principles and practice, are the core of Gordy's investigation. She exposes the contradictions between official rhetoric coming from the state and the daily life of Cuban people. Using Walter Benjamin to read *dialectical images* (photographies, slogans, songs) Gordy offers another view of ideology. In her book, Cuban socialist ideology no longer appears monolithic. Therefore, Gordy's important work gives us "an alternative way to criticize the Cuban state". She points out that the greater threat to socialism is not dissidence, but the absence of discussion. Also, she offers a more positive meaning of ideology. According to her, "it is ideology that enables us to make political judgments. Moreover, it facilitates not just judgment but action." Finally, her book is an excellent and necessary example of the urgency of "understanding Cuban society as diverse and multifaceted, both in spite of and because of, its socialist legacy."