CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc in the early 1990s and the strengthening of the United States’ economic blockade, many ‘experts’ have predicted the imminent or inevitable collapse of the Cuban Revolution. However, defying the conventional wisdom of so many specialists not only has the Cuban Revolution and the socialist regime managed to survive one threat to its existence after another—and the 1990s saw the most serious threat to date—but it successfully tacked to the turbulent winds of change that toppled one socialist regime after another and that brought diverse capitalist regimes to the brink of financial disaster in a global (dis)order of neoliberal globalization. Not only has the Cuban Revolution and the socialist regime survived but its notable and widely acknowledged achievements at the level of social or human development, particularly as regards health, education and international solidarity, continues to baffle analysts and Cuba watchers across the world. On this issue, the begrudging comments of James Wolfensohn, President of the World Bank, acknowledging that ‘Cuba has done a great job on education and health’ and that ‘it does not embarrass me to admit it’, are telling. Indeed, he added, ‘they [Cubans] should be congratulated on what they’ve done’ (quoted by Lobe 2001).

Yet, as noted by Saney (2003) in his brief but well-informed reconstruction in ‘Cuba: A Revolution in Motion’, notwithstanding substantive achievements at the level of human development, ‘the island continues to be ignored by both development theorists and the technocrats in charge of implementing and administering programs that are supposedly designed to lead to the improved wellbeing of the world’s people’. For example, he notes, a 1997 World Bank Discussion Paper, ‘Poverty Reduction and Human Development in the Caribbean’, contains not a single mention of Cuba. Neither does Bigman (2002) in Globalization and the Developing Countries or Gray (2002) in Latin America: Its Future in the Global Economy give Cuba even a solitary comment. In Society, State and Market (Martinussen,
2004: 230), a widely used text on international development, Cuba warrants one parenthetical remark. In a New Internationalist issue on the topic ’The Liberation of Latin America’ (May 2003), focused on the region’s burgeoning challenges to neoliberalism, Cuba is not discussed at all (May, 2003). And in The Myth of Development Oswaldo de Rivero (2001: 183) dismisses Cuba as marginal in today’s world.

In opposition to this widely held view this book argues that the Cuban Revolution is far from marginal in today’s world and warrants a closer look as a model of socialist human development. A re-reading of the Cuban Revolution from this angle allows us to confront several unresolved issues in the theory of socialist humanism and the notion of human development popularized by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) as a way of saving capitalism from its internal contradictions. The notion of human development is predicated on capitalism, even though no mention is ever made of it. The concern of the economists at the UNDP and other agencies of international cooperation for development is to give a human face to a capitalist development process that is anything but human—to determine the best policy mix and institutional reforms needed to sustain the process.

It is argued that two features of this model, namely the construction of a socialist ethic (revolutionary consciousness) and popular participation in public policy formulation (people power), were critical factors in Cuba’s successful navigation of the turbulent sea of global capitalist development and the survival of the Revolution in the face of unprecedented economic and political challenges. Precise forms and particular conditions of socialist human development, it is argued, explain the survival of the Cuban socialism against all odds, and warrant taking another close look at the history of the Cuban Revolution.

Not only does the recent and current trajectory of the Cuban Revolution challenge the conventional wisdom of bourgeois social science as well as the UNDP’s approach to human development, but it highlights the debate surrounding the conditions and instrumentalities needed to achieve human development (e.g. capitalism, a strong and interventionist state versus the free market, privatization and neoliberal prescriptions, production versus distribution). Our brief analysis of the conceptual and ethical foundations of the Cuban Revolution also throws some light on the problem of socialist development—how best to proceed in a project to rebuild socialism in the twenty-first century.