Discussions of international aid now commonly frame relations between a Global North and South, focusing on the complex of institutions founded in the wake of World War II, or the swarm of nongovernmental organizations that have proliferated around landmarks of poverty such as Haiti. Yet socialism offers another legacy of solidarity and exchange, one that, following an older lexicon, connected the Third World with the Second. Perhaps the most famous example is the Cuban international medical brigades, which in the aftermath of that island’s revolution sought to export the cause through healthcare. Following in the footsteps of Che Guevara, they spread across Latin America and Africa to run community clinics and further medical education. They also mounted emergency relief operations, if rarely featured in media accounts of disaster.

In *Revolutionary Doctors* Steve Brouwer takes up this remarkable story, with an eye firmly fixed on its inspirational potential. Cuba, after all, is a relatively small country and not particularly wealthy. Nonetheless the revolutionary regime not only built a new health care system for its own citizens, but also exported that model elsewhere. Its medical training programs have succeeded in lowering the country’s physician/patient ratio well below that of the United States and Western Europe, while also welcoming foreign students (p. 56). Whatever else the revolution may or may not have accomplished, it has produced an impressive public health system. Brouwer’s entrée into this world of medicine comes through Venezuela, where the government of Hugo Chávez entered into an ambitious alliance with Cuba to offer care to poor populations. This massive effort, involving tens of thousands of Cuban personnel and some 30,000 Venezuelan trainees over the last decade, serves as the centerpiece of his story. Whether or not that effort ultimately produces an enduring system remains to be seen. For Brouwer, however, its very existence constitutes a triumph, offering an alternative vision of solidarity for our collective future.

Three of the book’s chapters outline the history of the Cuban system, four describe the Venezuelan venture, and three more address the ideological struggle around this socialist approach to social change. There is also a brief introduction and a conclusion. Brouwer wears his politics on both
sleeves, lavishing the Cubans with praise and denouncing all who would deride them, particularly in the United States. Indeed, the work adopts something of the tone of socialist realism, offering a parade of uplifting anecdotes, positive statistics, and inspirational slogans. Many chapters open with a quotation from Che himself, and those that do not still feature his legacy through the words of others, including Nelson Mandela, Martin Luther King Jr, and José Martí. Guevara’s 1960 speech “On Revolutionary Medicine” both introduces the book and serves as a motif throughout as well as an allusion for the title. Brouwer misses no opportunity to remind his readers that this story is part of a greater noble struggle for liberation. If initially refreshing in its honesty, the approach soon grows wearying, and ultimately relentless at a rhetorical level. As the procession of virtuous doctors, worthy patients, and impressive achievements march by, one begins to yearn for some trace of internal debate or expression of doubt.

It may not be fair to criticize a book for what it is not, and Brouwer’s text makes little claim of academic detachment. His is ultimately a work of heartfelt inspirational journalism, focused more on the conceptual struggle for the future than on unruly details of present or past. The real goal is to imagine “twenty-first-century socialist revolutions” that can free themselves from the failed bureaucratic forms of Soviet and Eastern European models (p. 219). However, the transformation in Cuban economic conditions after the Soviet collapse floats hazily in the background, and the policy shifts toward renewed international involvement remain largely unexamined. The “challenges” facing Venezuela’s experiment actually grow clearest through the secondhand description of its ideological opponents. For example, only in the chapter outlining “conflict with the past” does Brouwer present a list of potential shortcomings to Venezuela’s signature Barrio Adentro (“inside the neighborhood”) program (pp. 166-68). Here one gets a brief glimpse of tensions, disruptions, and changing needs—the stuff of everyday struggles that might have informed a more ethnographic account of politics. By that point in the text I felt sated with speeches and yearned for more detail about the actual practice of medicine in the name of revolution. If the legacy of state socialism teaches anything, it is that the real politics of equality emerges less in formal ideological claims than in the negotiations of everyday life. Including a joke or two might have proved acutely revealing.