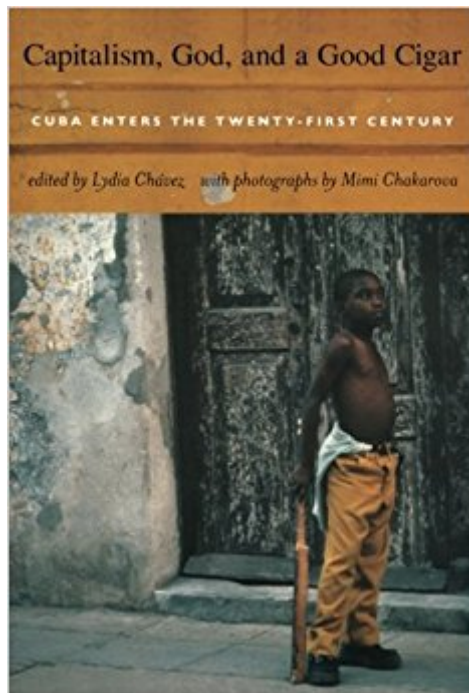




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Capitalism, God, And A Good Cigar: Cuba Enters The Twenty-first Century



Synopsis

When the Soviet Union dissolved, so did the easy credit, cheap oil, and subsidies it had provided to Cuba. The bottom fell out of the Cuban economy, and many expected that Castro's revolution—the one that had inspired the Left throughout Latin America and elsewhere—would soon be gone as well. More than a decade later, the revolution lives on, albeit in a modified form. Following the collapse of Soviet communism, Castro legalized the dollar, opened the island to tourism, and allowed foreign investment, small-scale private enterprise, and remittances from exiles in Miami. *Capitalism, God, and a Good Cigar* describes what the changes implemented since the early 1990s have meant for ordinary Cubans: hotel workers, teachers, priests, factory workers, rap artists, writers, homemakers, and others. Based on reporting by journalists, writers, and documentary filmmakers since 2001, each of the essays collected here covers a particular dimension of contemporary Cuban society, revealing what it is like to have lived, for more than a decade, suspended between communism and capitalism. There are pieces on hip hop musicians, fiction writing and censorship, the state of ballet and the performing arts, and the role of computers and the Internet. Other essays address the shrinking yet still sizeable numbers of true believers in the promise of socialist revolution, the legendary cigar industry, the changing state of religion, the significance of the recent influx of money and people from Spain, and the tensions between recent Cuban emigrants and previous generations of exiles. Including more than seventy striking documentary photographs of Cuba's people, countryside, and city streets, this richly illustrated collection offers keen, even-handed insights into the abundant ironies of life in Cuba today. Contributors: Juliana Barbassa, Ana Campoy, Mimi Chakarova, Lydia ChÃ¡vez, John CotÃ©, Julian Foley, Angel GonzÃ¡lez, Megan Lardner, Ezequiel Minaya, Daniela Mohor, Archana Pyati, Alicia Roca, Olga R. RodrÃ­guez, Bret Sigler, Annelise Wunderlich

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Customer Reviews

"Capitalism, God, and a Good Cigar addresses in an original and insightful way the question so many have asked themselves for so long: how is it that Fidel Castro and his regime are approaching half a century in power under extremely adverse conditions, many of them of their own making? This book may not provide the answer, but it offers many answers, all of them intelligent and imaginative."

—Jorge Castañeda, Global Distinguished Professor of Politics and Latin American and Caribbean Studies at New York University and former foreign minister of Mexico

"Capitalism, God, and a Good Cigar is engagingly written, nuanced, sensitive in political perspective, and innovative and broad-ranging in its choice of subject matter. This freewheeling and intimate account of life in Cuba today gives a close-up view of the rapid-fire changes overtaking the island, from the new economy to Internet access to issues of freedom of speech to Cuban ballet. It provides a welcome, fresh perspective that goes far beyond what American audiences tend to hear about Cuba."

—Aviva Chomsky, Professor of History and Coordinator of Latin American Studies at Salem State College and coeditor of *The Cuba Reader: History, Culture, Politics* "[A] sense of immediacy, of whispered truths, of possible spies permeate this round-up of voices. . . . Lydia Chavez's reporters and assistants have amassed plenty of evidence, in vivid journalese, that lets the reader work out what will happen when Castro lets go of the tight reins." (Jason Wilson *Times Literary Supplement*)

"[A]ccented by beautifully evocative photographs by Mimi Chakarova of this most photogenic of lands, the book is a collection of first-person investigations into a terrifically wide array of social strata on the island and in its diaspora. The earnest essays included . . . all share the virtue of putting individual Cubans at the center of the story, in letting the voices, stories and lives of their subjects determine their content and conclusions. . . . [O]ne of the most useful and nuanced portraits of contemporary life on the island in years." (Joshua Jelly-Schapiro, *San Francisco Chronicle*)

"Capitalism, God, and a Good Cigar" is engagingly written, nuanced, sensitive in political perspective, and innovative and broad-ranging in its choice of subject matter. This freewheeling and intimate account of life in Cuba today gives a close-up view of the rapid-fire changes overtaking the island, from the new economy to Internet access to issues of freedom of speech to Cuban ballet. It

provides a welcome, fresh perspective that goes far beyond what American audiences tend to hear about Cuba."--Aviva Chomsky, Professor of History and Coordinator of Latin American Studies at Salem State College and coeditor of "The Cuba Reader: History, Culture, Politics"

"Capitalism, God and a Good Cigar" by Lydia Chavez (editor) is a collection of 14 essays about life in contemporary Cuba. The book provides an intimate look at the experiences of ordinary Cubans as they struggle to define themselves in what appears to be a country that is positioned somewhere between socialism and capitalism. In that light, the book tantalizes the reader with the possibility of Cuba's transformation into a new and unique kind of socialist or capitalist state, depending on one's own perspective. The authors present some of the many contradictions that abound in contemporary Cuba. For example, while articles such as "Four Women Survive Manzanillo" by Alicia Roca makes it clear that many citizens live impoverished lives, "Life on the Margins" by Julian Foley discusses how Cuban entrepreneurs are profiting from an underground economy that feeds off the officially-sanctioned tourist trade. Yet, the dollars earned by the government through tourism helps to finance popular universal educational and medical programs that benefit all of Cuba's citizens to a degree not found elsewhere in Latin America. One wonders if it will be possible for Cuba to finance its social programs through for-profit tourism without individualism and the lure of profit resulting in a breakup of the social compact. As in any collection, there is variability in quality. Possibly the weakest article was "Hip Hop Pushes the Limits" by Annelise Wunderlich. In my view, the author's bemoaning of the difficulties that young rap artists experience while trying to cash in on their talents tends to trivialize the debate about capitalism versus socialism. More problematically, she recognizes that Cuban rap music has gained critical and popular international acclaim but misses the point that this success is attributable to the fact that Cuban music is produced by artists living within a socialist country and therefore is viewed, rightly or wrongly, as a more authentic expression of rage against the capitalist machine compared with rap music produced elsewhere. Fortunately, the "Hip Hop" article is a rare moment in a book that is otherwise abundant with excellent content. The Introduction entitled, "Adrift: An Introduction to Contemporary Cuba" by Lydia Chavez provides excellent context and analysis to prepare the reader for the many articles that follow. Some of my favorites include: "Dancers Who Stretch the Limits" by Ana Campoy presents the triumphs and heartbreaks of ballet as practiced in revolutionary Cuba; "Socialism and the Cigar" by Daniela Mohor discusses the success of Cuba's socialist cigar factories in producing world-renowned products while providing benefits to its workers; "Authors Who Knew or Know the Limits" by Ezequiel Minaya draws on interviews with prominent writers who have struggled with

Cuba's sometimes Stalinist repression of free expression; "Cubans Log on Behind Castro's Back" by John Cote describes how Cubans gain access to the Internet in a country with limited technological resources and government controls; and "The Spanish are Back" by Megan Lardner discusses the volatile but increasingly necessary relationship between Spain and Cuba, with an emphasis on the effect Spanish investment is having on reviving the Cuban economy. I highly recommend this intriguing book for anyone interested in contemplating the question of whether the contemporary Cuban experience represents a glass that is half full or half empty -- and whether that glass might ultimately prove to be socialist or capitalist.

I very much enjoyed the simplicity and ease with which the various authors skated through the many cities and shared such encounters of colorful locals. Interspersed is a little history that is easy to grasp and enjoyable. The many articles provide varied perspectives of life in Cuba today.

Cubans are under communism a.k.a SLAVERY. Cubans are not allowed to be independent in any way including economically, they are forced to depend on a very useless government despite how mediocre it may be, is a control tactic. After Castro outlawed (stole) all private property and with this destroyed the Cuban GDP and economy he solely depended on the money the U.S.S.R gave him directly which at the end amounted to billions to keep Cuba a Russian satellite nation, when this disappeared in '89 Castro was scared and in mid 90's opened Cuba to tourism to bring in money. Everything is state owned still, so his grip is the same, he allows Cubans to make and receive SOME level of money since he owns all stores and necessities it will be his money at the end, as soon as Cubans start to operate outside the government, show independence and start creating a needed industry he strikes. Again, it is slavery, once you realize this everything is so clear. Lets recall that in '58 just a year before Castro, Cuba had the largest middle class per-capita not only in the Caribbean but in Latin America. Just a look at today's crumbling Havana more than reveals that this was a first world style metropolis unlike any other in a long radius; also, all those Chevrolets to Cadillacs still around from its capitalistic days more than shows proof of a past strong middle class. Cubans have been submerged in necessity and poverty and Cuba has been falling to pieces ever since Castro took power. So ask yourself, where did all the Russian billions of \$\$\$ go? They went to his Swiss bank account and in efforts to export his revolution; remember Grenada, Angola, the Salvadorian Civil War, etc. And where did the Colombian guerrilla get trained and supplied in the 60s and 70s? Cuba was the name. Is not about the embargo is about who is in control and truly embargoing the Cuban people. Is not about a cup half-empty or half-full is about go

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