

NEWS RELEASE

A Surprising View of Cuban Neighborhood Life Described in Book

Outsiders don't see the profound community development that sustains Castro's government

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BUFFALO, N.Y. -- A new book based on 15 years of on-the-ground research in Cuba describes two Cubas -- one for Cubans, one for outsiders -- that co-exist but do not mix, and explains how the Cuban culture we do not see was critical in sustaining the Castro regime while other socialist countries collapsed.

"Inside El Barrio: A Bottom Up View of Neighborhood Life in Castro's Cuba" (Kumarian Press, 2009) is by Henry Louis Taylor, Ph.D., professor of urban and regional planning in the University at Buffalo School of Architecture and Planning.

It charts the legacy of the last 15 years of Fidel Castro's Cuba through the lens of Cuban household life and offers new insights into the bottom-up, neighborhood-based participatory democracy that helped support Castro's regime.

Because he knew many Cubans well and could pass for Cuban himself, Taylor was able to conduct extensive research in Havana neighborhoods during the final and most complex era in Fidel Castro's dictatorship: *Periodo Especial* (the special period), during which Castro called upon the masses to prepare for a sustained period of hard times.

In his research Taylor found two Cubas: one, the simplified, one-dimensional Cuba that many people "discover" through the tourism or from the writings of political propagandists of an anti-Castro bent.

"The other," Taylor says "is a more complex and multi-dimensional Cuba, where people live in a highly stable and deeply organized society and exercise considerable control over the development of neighborhoods (*el barrios*) and communities that are imbued with participatory democracy, reciprocity, collaboration and cosmopolitanism."

It is this Cuba that continues to sustain the government, despite severe economic hardship, Taylor says. "No iron wall exists between these two Cubas," he explains, "but people rarely get insight into the world inside *el barrio*." It is that aspect of Cuban life that the book explores.

Taylor spent a great deal of time visiting Havana's neighborhoods between 1989 and 2006, a period marked by the abrupt collapse of the Soviet Bloc that plunged Cuba into economic catastrophe marked by unprecedented financial hardship, a marked increase in social tension and the emigration of thousands.

"One of the most important things I learned is that it takes time before most Cubans will befriend you, speak to you in frank terms and carry you into their world. Without this frankness, it is easy for a foreigner to be misled, misinterpret conversations and/or form false impressions," Taylor



A new book by Henry Louis Taylor looks at a part of Cuba that few foreigners ever get to see.

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says.

"I learned the importance of neighborhoods in shaping everyday life and culture and found that the social networks and neighborhoods, so important to the way the socialist system operates on the ground in Cuba, were critical in sustaining the Castro regime while other socialist countries were collapsing in the late '80s."

In 1989, when the Soviet Union and the East European Community Bloc collapsed, Cuba was plunged into a catastrophic economic crisis that spawned unprecedented hardship and generated great social tensions.

Taylor points out that, despite this, Cuban society did not collapse and there were no demands for regime change and a resurrection of capitalism. "Not only did the Castro regime survive," he says, "but the bearded one remained as defiant as ever. I wanted to understand why and sought the answer by examining everyday life and culture in the poorest neighborhoods."

"What I discovered is that the Cubans developed a strong system of community development, which was informed by a strategy of building communities that were highly developed social units that must function in an efficient and effective manner in order to produce desirable social outcomes," Taylor says.

To make this happen, Taylor says the government encouraged the development of participatory democracy inside the neighborhoods to unleash the creative powers of residents and to make them partners in the quest to recovery from the economic crisis.

"The result," he says, "is that Cuban neighborhoods are hyper-stable and hyper-organized communities, where ordinary residents exercise considerable control over neighborhood life and culture, albeit in an environment of scarcity."

Taylor's entrée into Cuba was a Summer Study Abroad Program operated by UB for many years and a master's degree program run by UB and the University of Havana.

"Because of our academic status, the government gave us the freedom to visit any institution or organization we desired," Taylor says. "These things in addition to traditional research, gave me a unique view into the society and how it operates. Moreover, to gain deeper insight into the ways that ordinary Cubans see their society, my research team conducted 398 household interviews."

Taylor is the director of the Center for Urban Studies at UB, a research, neighborhood- planning and community-development institute that focuses on distressed urban communities. He also is the coordinator of the community development and urban management specialization in the UB Department of Urban and Regional Planning. Taylor is the editor of three books and a monograph and has written more than 80 articles, book reviews, commentaries and technical reports on urban and regional planning.

The University at Buffalo is a premier research-intensive public university, a flagship institution in the State University of New York system and its largest and most comprehensive campus. UB's more than 28,000 students pursue their academic interests through more than 300 undergraduate, graduate and professional degree programs. Founded in 1846, the University at Buffalo is a member of the Association of American Universities.