

## BOOK REVIEW

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**Elizabeth Dore, *How Things Fall Apart: What Happened to the Cuban Revolution*. Durham NC and London: Duke University Press, 2023. 344 pp. ISBN 9781478020332**

Reviewed by Jorge I. Domínguez

“Cuba is not the country it used to be. If you were a Cuban born on the island in the vicinity of 1975, you grew up with the promise of equality. You remember watching your classmates eating identical sandwiches and feeling: ‘We are all part of the whole’” (p. 1). These are the opening words of the late Elizabeth Dore’s splendid last book. They highlight cross-time empirical comparisons as well as moods of loss. She argues that “The government’s pro-market policies culminated in a historic declaration. Raúl Castro announced that egalitarianism, widely considered the Revolution’s greatest achievement, was in fact one of its greatest errors” (p. 2). Your wealthy family fellow student’s sandwiches had become much better than yours.

Dore conceived the project as an oral history; the book enables individual Cubans to speak for themselves. In presenting the spoken testimonies of ordinary Cubans, Dore marshals a powerful critique of government policies from the egalitarian Left. Much of the text quotes from the interview transcripts. Readers may, thus, decide for themselves.

Starting in 2004, Dore’s research spanned over 15 years, including Raúl Castro’s entire presidency. She and her team interviewed and observed 124 people in eight provinces, though half were from Havana. Dore appears to have made provisions for the audio and the transcripts to become available at some point.

Faithful to the norms of oral histories, Dore selected seven individuals out of the 124, born between the late 1960s and the mid-1990s, to report their views in extensive *verbatim* detail regarding three moments. They were interviewed multiple times across the years. The text first portrays the 1980s as a time of revolutionary success and equality. The 1990–2006 years featured the Soviet Union’s collapse and ended with an ill Fidel Castro turning over the presidency to his brother Raúl. Those pages explore what Dore calls “the collapse”, which connects the end of communist regimes in Europe with Cuba’s hardships and the flagging of the revolutionary spirit. The third part, on 2006–2020, explores the

consolidation of inequality, as a lived experience and as a consequence of Raúl Castro's decisions, which the Cuban Communist Party endorsed. Dore insists that "the majority of the people we interviewed expressed similar hopes and grievances", arguing that the divide between supporters and opponents of the government is "greatly exaggerated" (pp. 10–11).

The risk of official censorship shadowed the project. Dore's initial efforts to launch it got nowhere: "remember Oscar Lewis. In Cuba oral history is taboo", a friendly vice-minister told her. In 1968, Fidel Castro invited Oscar Lewis to undertake a large-scale oral history project but terminated it 18 months later. At a time of economic hardship, having failed to reach the goal of 10 million tons of sugar for the 1970 harvest, the leadership did not want a record of Cubans complaining.

Dore appealed to Mariela Castro, Raúl Castro's daughter and the director of the National Centre for Sex Education, who secured approval after a year. However, upon listening to black-marketeer Esteban's interview, Mariela Castro suspended the project. Following a six-month interval, the project was reauthorised. Nevertheless, Dore decided not to report the real names of the seven star-interviewees, even though one – a self-identified regime opponent – wanted his name mentioned because he was public in his opposition. In the end, neither Dore nor his interviewees were intimidated; we hear her respondents in their eloquence, hope, and sadness.

Mario, a black IT expert, director, and Communist Party member, may have expressed the views closest to Dore's own. Mario celebrates the school snacks (*la merienda*) of the 1980s when, he reported, there was "prosperity and equality" while "dressing the same as everyone else was a source of satisfaction and equality." However, decades later, "now it's the opposite" (pp. 24–26). "The thread of equality is broken" (p. 212), Mario regretted, although he remained a loyal communist party member, even deploying the new official language against egalitarianism – prompting Dore's comment, "and this I find unsettling" (p. 228). Dore and Mario agreed on much, however; she lists "openness, rights, free debate, consensual politics, accountability and difference", though she adds, "all the things Cuba's leaders regarded as subversive" (p. 221). Through Mario, Dore reveals herself as an egalitarian socialist and as a democrat.

Other interviewees fill out the opinion range. Esteban, a black man and a black marketeer, described himself as "a Cuban anarchist" (p. 164) and behaved accordingly. Juan, black and poor in 2005, by 2016 had become president of his neighbourhood's Committee for the Defense of the Revolution, echoing official slogans, yet also reporting "the biggest problem [is] the lack of food" (p. 258). Barbara, also black, agreed with Mario that "economic changes were generating inequality" (p. 71) and "considered voluntary labour and solidarity fun, and

lamented their demise” (p. 74). Her loyalty strengthened when the government gave her family a new home (p. 287).

Alina, a documentary filmmaker focused on illegal migration within Cuba, had been hassled repeatedly by state security, which first banned her film; in due course, her film won an official award – a trajectory of official repression and official endorsement. Pavel had come from a revolutionary family but changed his views to become a public opposition activist. Asked about “his dreams for the future he answered with one word: steak” (p. 94). Alejandro, an industrial engineer at a state job who had graduated first in his university class, joined the Communist Youth Union, yet also launched a side black-market business selling pirated digital entertainment (p. 187). Alejandro agreed with Raúl Castro that egalitarianism and universal social provision were mistakes; he criticised “dissident nonsense” (p. 314) because “what matters is putting food on the table each and every day” (p. 315). He emigrated in 2016.

This brief summary illustrates various conflicting themes. There is evidence of social mobility – Juan rises to lead a local CDR, Mario is promoted to IT director, and Barbara gets a house. And yet, the constraints on daily living routines, especially the nearly incessant worries about food, leave everyone uncertain and frustrated. There is evidence of official repression but also of official amends: Alina’s film went from being banned from winning a prize. The word “contradictions” is insufficient to capture this social complexity.

Among Dore’s many career accomplishments, she was an incisive scholar of race and gender. However, she found it nearly impossible to persuade her Cuban interviewees to discuss racism. Barbara even stood up to stop the interview when asked about racism (p. 174). Not even Mario could connect inequality with racism, notwithstanding his analytical skills. Racism in contemporary Cuba, Dore observed, is a social fact, but also the one topic not to be discussed.

Gender issues appear infrequently, typically through Dore’s analytical commentary that brings out persistent patriarchal features of Cuba’s society (pp. 175, 194), even though the interviewees do not raise these issues. Part of this lack stemmed from Dore’s decision to feature five men but only two women among her narrators.

One criticism of the book is its jumbled account of national policy trends. On the Prologue’s first page, Dore writes, “the leadership that came to power after Fidel introduced market measures.” That is true but is also true that Fidel introduced many market measures, including those that Dore appears to pin exclusively, and inaccurately, on Fidel’s successors – tourism, the encouragement of small private businesses, and accepting the diaspora’s remittances. It is true that Fidel set limits to the market openings that he initiated, but it is equally true that Raúl Castro did the same from late 2015 through 2019. Greater nuance – a trait that long

and laudably marked Dore’s scholarship – would have led her to report the historical trajectory with greater care.

The book’s conclusions on page 320 are searing. “The magic that kept the Cuban system going has evaporated”, asserting that the capital-R Revolution had given many Cubans “their life meaning” through “the struggle for national dignity”, including foundational features such as Fidel Castro’s role, the 1961 literacy campaign, and the defeat of the 1961 US-sponsored exile invasion at Playa Girón. In contrast, the book’s interviewees were younger Cubans who did not live through those foundational moments. Dore writes that her respondents were more familiar with blackouts, shortages, low pay, inequality, and friends who emigrated.

“Cuba had lost the promise of equality and Cubans lost their desire for it.” Dore had noted one example of an odd consensus: “Mario, a Party member, and Pavel, a dissident, both espoused the Communist Party’s new policy of equality of opportunities” (p. 301), albeit for differing reasons – Mario’s loyalty to the Communist Party, Pavel’s opposition to the legacies of Fidel and Raúl Castro.

Her own critique of the Cuban government and Communist Party, let it be clear, focuses on the policy shift toward greater reliance on freer markets and private undertakings. For some, that economic freedom worked. However, for many Cubans, she tells us, “They were free to be poor and hungry.” “When it became clear that market forces would not improve the lives of more than a tiny minority of the population, the leadership relied on repression and emigration to maintain control” (p. 3), referring to the repression of protests in 2020 and 2021.

As a result, “Socialism in Cuba is over ...” This is surely not how Dore once might have wished to finish her book, and a hint of that comes from completing that sentence: “... at least for the time being” (pp. 320–321). Socialism and democracy in Cuba had been part of her vision, a vision that many Cubans once shared and vigorously defended, a vision that she says has faded and perhaps vanished.