

## Cuba in Revolution: a History since the Fifties

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**Reviewer:** Steve Cushion

Given the division of opinion over the nature of Cuban Revolution, it has always been hard to find a general work on the subject that does not merely tell half the story. However, Toni Kapcia has now provided us with a book which, while comprehensible to a general audience or a useful introduction for students, will nevertheless provide insights for the more specialist reader. Furthermore, the author does not select the facts that fit a particular point of view, so that wherever you stand, you should learn some unpalatable truths. The approach takes a critical view of the conventional periodisation, dividing the story into a series of cycles rather than discrete periods. These cycles of 'debate', 'decision', and 'move on' are centred around revolution's ability to survive five major crises, those of 1961, 1962–3, 1970, 1980–5 and 1990–4.

The first crisis centres on relations with the United States as, faced with a surprisingly moderate process of agrarian reform which nevertheless threatened US commercial interests, the CIA, flush from its success in overthrowing the Arbenz regime in Guatemala, started to train a force of exiles with the aim of overthrowing the new regime. The crisis deepened as the refusal of US companies to process Russian oil led to nationalisation and a tit-for-tat escalation which culminated in the invasion at Playa Giron. The book quite clearly sees the Cuban people as active participants in the revolutionary process and describes how the majority became radicalised by a series of mobilisations, starting with the preparations to repel the invasion, and how this radicalisation in turn moved the leaders of the revolution to the left. This provides us with a view of the relationship between Castro and the communists that is not seen through the optic of the Cold War, but which has its own dynamic.

The *Movimiento Revolucionario de 26 de Julio* (M-26-7), led by Fidel Castro, which had organised the insurrection that brought down the Batista dictatorship, was a very broad-based movement ranging from Liberals to Trotskyists, while the other major organised political force at the triumph of the Revolution was the communist *Partido Socialista Popular* (PSP). Castro's increasingly close relationship with the PSP is often painted as one of the drivers of the Revolution, but the book makes clear that the situation was much more complex than this, as the various different actors changed their positions over time and in the light of circumstances. Thus, the first united political organisation, unveiled in March 1962, had a PSP representation on its leading committee that far outweighed their political importance, but which suffered an almost immediate purge when the new party's organiser, Anibal Escalante, who came from the communist side of the marriage, was exiled on a diplomatic mission to Eastern Europe, with his downfall supported by

some of his ex-comrades.

As the secret deal between the USSR and the USA after the missile crisis ended this particular cycle, the great debate on the economy was about to start and the description of the way in which such debates are carried out is as useful as the details of the discussions and conclusions themselves. The PSP's 'stages' theory is pitted against Che Guevara's 'great leap forward' based on moral incentives and the latter won out in the end. As a result, the new communist party (PCC) would be dominated by militants from the old M-26-7, a domination that would last until the failure of the attempt to achieve a ten million ton sugar harvest in 1970.

The real failure of the ten million ton harvest was not in failing to reach the target (after all, it was still one of the biggest harvests ever) but rather in the fact that it cost more to produce than it was worth. The subsequent debate led to the end of Guevarist voluntarism and a rapprochement with the USSR as Cuba joined Comecon and tried to diversify the economy using Soviet consumer goods to partly replace moral incentives. However, the conscious prioritising, over the preceding period, of social revolution at the expense of economic efficiency had not only created a firm base of loyalty but, more importantly in economic terms, this prioritisation of healthcare and education paid off as the economy improved in the 1970s and could rely on a healthier and better educated workforce. This economic change was reflected in political life as the first congress of the Cuban Communist Party (PCC) in 1975 adopted a bureaucratic, hierarchical structure and former PSP members were rehabilitated. However, this rapprochement with the USSR would not last long as the election of an aggressively hostile Reagan in the USA, matched by Gorbachov's perceived retreat, led to a fourth debate and 'rectification' in the mid 1980s.

The most important debate, however, was the final one with which the book deals, the fall of the Soviet Union and the 'Special Period'. On the one hand, there was the fear of the alternative as the consequences of the collapse of welfare and employment in Eastern Europe provided a dreadful lesson, while on the other the tradition of mass mobilisation was reinvented, but this time through more local organisation and cultural events at barrio level. In many ways, the most remarkable story in this book is this chapter on the special period, with its description of the survival of the system and the patience, tolerance and basic loyalty of the overwhelming majority of the population.

The fact that Cuba was not the 'domino' that many pundits predicted implies deeper ideological roots. The book traces revolutionary ideology back to the ideas of social liberation and equality that were inherent in the notion of 'Cuba Libre' of the 1860s. It shows how Marxism entered the equation in the 1920s through growing anti-imperialism and explains that ideology as a potent set of beliefs and values expressed as 'activism', 'struggle' and 'sacrifice'. We see how this was woven together in Castro's 'History will absolve me', which itself forms part of a revolutionary nationalist tradition that has nothing in common with the sterile passivity of Soviet Stalinism.

In ideological terms, however, the communists had brought ideas of 'class' into Cuban nationalism and gave intellectual backing to the revolutionary leadership's support for the poor against the rich, which led those who represented middle and upper class interests, including many former members of the M-26-7, into opposition and exile. As time progressed, the regime turned increasingly to the workers and peasantry, a move that was expressed ideologically by seeing these two classes as representing 'the People' and identifying them as the source of patriotic feeling.

The Marxism of the PSP was of the orthodox variety which argued that society could not move from one stage to another until the internal contradictions of each stage had been reached. Therefore, as Cuba was 'underdeveloped', it had to wait until capitalism was fully developed before moving to the next stage of socialism. This council of caution and patience sat ill with the M-26-7 grass roots who had been radicalised by the struggle and Che Guevarra's most significant contribution was, perhaps, his role in giving theoretical underpinning to the young revolutionaries' impatience.

If ideology is important, it can best be investigated by its manifestation in cultural matters. In 1961, as part of the first cycle of crisis and debate, Castro gave the speech known as 'Words to Intellectuals', which contains the significant phrase '*Inside the Revolution, everything; outside, nothing*'. This manifested itself in increasing control of artistic life, while growing shortages led to a hierarchy of cultural priorities. The 1971–6 grey years, the notorious *quinquenio gris*, was characterised by an increasing Stalinisation of culture, although even then, the film institute ICAIC was able to preserve a space where cultural innovation such as "Nueva Trova" could shelter. However, while the concept of everything being permissible *within* the Revolution might look hypocritical during the grey years of the 1970s, the margins of what is defined as the Revolution have varied enormously from surprising leeway to irrational intolerance; periods normally delimited by security considerations. The importance of culture within the nationalist paradigm is expressed by the concept that every Cuban has the right to acquire cultural skills and, following the success of the literacy campaign, this resulted in a programme which used young '*instructores de arte*' to carry artistic training to schools, factories and the countryside. Such 'vulgar popularisation' alienated and alarmed many established artists as much as 'Stalinisation' and, seeing their once privileged position being devalued, drove many to leave to an exile where they felt more valued.

Emigration has siphoned off most of the political opposition as well as many intellectuals, but those who remain have nevertheless had a relatively active forum within which to debate the way the country is run, albeit within fairly strict parameters. One of the themes of the book is a series of 'debates' and it goes to some length to outline how the system works and how decisions are taken, both explaining the form and interpreting the content. The picture that emerges here tells us of the space in the middle where political activity takes place and how different interest groups can use the system to defend their interests.

The behaviour of the political class of the pre-revolutionary era, who took part in spurious elections in order to fight over the crumbs from the dictatorship's table, led the rebels to believe that the whole system had been responsible for Batista, which in turn led to mass mobilisation replacing representative democracy as the basis of political life. However, this mass mobilisation went in cycles that reflected the cycles in politics and society. '*Voluntarismo*' characterised the 1960's but crashed in 1970 with the failure of the 10 million ton harvest. This early voluntarist approach was given form in the Committees for the Defence of the Revolution (CDR) and the National Revolutionary Militia (MNR). The CDRs started as a security network to watch and round up opponents of the regime in the event of invasion, a role they carried out with slightly excessive zeal at the time of the Bay of Pigs. They were an undoubted success and became the basic unit of political involvement in the early days. Even today, their role as a neighbourhood watch is responsible in no small measure for the low crime rate in the country. However, as the revolution became more institutionalised in the 1970s, the Party started to overtake the CDRs in importance.

The political influence of the CDRs declined formally with the setting up of the 'Organs of People's Power' in 1976 and the book provides a useful explanation of this decision making structure, based on 'progressively indirect election', in which it is not formally necessary for candidates to be Party members, but, nevertheless, Party membership became increasingly likely as the Party became more powerful. The Organs of People's Power replaced the political activist role of the CDR, but were more distant and less responsive, although the CDRs retained a social role in health, education, crime prevention and general neighbourhood activity. There is an intertwining of the state and civil society to which neither Western nor ex-Eastern block notions apply. To those of us brought up on Montesque's ideas of the separation of powers, such a system is incomprehensible and inherently flawed, but the explanation given here gives us an understanding which enables us to consider the matter in context and might also lead us to question our own assumptions. Clearly another way is possible, but the survival of this different approach does rely upon the system's ability to reinvent itself at times of crisis.

The institutionalisation of the 1980s came in for a rude shock as the economy started to pull itself out of the special period and there was an outbreak of street protests in Central Havana in August 1994. Fidel Castro's response of directly addressing the demonstrators was largely successful in containing the anger and

reminded the leadership of the importance of mass mobilisation, a lesson they put to good effect in the Elian Gonzalez affair, when the massive demonstration organised by the Federation of Cuban Women (FMC) did much to restore the regime's battered legitimacy and paved the way for the recent 'Battle for Ideas' starting in the year 2000. This campaign, largely unnoticed in the West, was a typical mixture of the ideological and the practical, ranging from the drive to combat dengue fever through to setting up emergency training schools to tackle skill shortages and reach out to disaffected youth, all linked with a massive poster campaign for the return of the Miami Five. Thus, when Fidel Castro's ill health provoked a transfer to his brother Raul, the long predicted collapse did not occur, yet again confounding the consensus in the Western media.

The book wisely does not make predictions for the future; for the history it recounts demonstrates that any such predictions are extremely unlikely to bear any relation to reality. Those who have already made up their minds about the nature of the Cuban Revolution should not waste their time or money on this book. However, if you are looking for a readable overview that offers a cogent analysis of the last 50 years of Cuban history, Kapcia's volume is to be recommended.

The author has not responded to this review.

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