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Published on *Reviews in History* (<http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews>)

A History of the Cuban Revolution

Review Number:

1088

Publish date:

Wednesday, 1 June, 2011

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ISBN:

9781405187732

Date of Publication:

2011

Price:

£45.00

Pages:

224pp.

Publisher:

Wiley-Blackwell

Place of Publication:

Chichester

Reviewer:

Steve Cushion

Following an initial irritation, I found myself warming to this book. At first sight, it seems to uncritically support the Cuban Revolution. However, as one progresses the tone becomes much more nuanced. There emerges a basic sympathy for the aims and objects of the revolution, clearly announced in the introduction, without hiding areas where Cuba has not lived up to these expectations.

It is difficult for a European audience to appreciate the level of venomous hostility towards Cuba displayed by US 'public opinion' and this is the author's starting point, explaining the divergence of public opinion from scholarly attitudes. Thus, most US and Cuban scholars see the relationship between the USA and Cuba as being dominant, while most politicians and journalists used to see Cuba as a cats-paw for the USSR and now the last vestige of a defeated system. This comes, she argues, from different views of the concept of 'freedom', with one side of the debate interpreting this as 'free enterprise', while the other side stresses notions of 'national independence'. Therefore, given the widely received wisdom in the USA that Castro is the last of the Stalinist dictators with no redeeming features, there must be a great temptation to bend the stick, and it will probably be useful for American teachers to have the Cuban side of the argument expressed simply and without rhetoric. This could be particularly useful as the anti-Castro view is given a fair hearing in the process.

The weakest part of the book is the section leading up to the victory of the rebel forces in January 1959, with

several unfortunate formulations and simplifications which could lead to confusion if this was the only source used. However, this merely serves as an introduction to the principal *raison d'etre* of the book, which improves considerably as it proceeds chronologically.

The second chapter is entitled 'Experiments with socialism' and considers the relationship between politics and economics in the years up to the fall of the Soviet Union. The overwhelming importance of the United States blockade of the island clearly emerges here and the approach of linking politics and economics works well. In particular, the section entitled 'Cuba in the 1970s: how it worked' explains simply but in sufficient detail the balancing act between state control of the economy and small scale market incentives, always running back and forth along a sliding scale. This came to an end with the 1986 Rectification Campaign and the book presents the opposing views of this episode. Was it a hard-line crack-down in response to *perestroika* and *glasnost* in Russia or was it a return to the roots of the revolution to avoid the growing inequality, poverty and corruption in the failing USSR? This is the book at its best, presenting both sides of the debate in a manner that will be useful for teachers wishing to provide students with the wherewithal to reach their own rational conclusions. Less useful is the section on democracy which, rather than explaining how the political system actually functions, contents itself with a criticism of the lack of democracy in the US system. While many would agree with this assessment of the US version of democratic procedures, it hardly advances our understanding of the Cuban version of politics, which is far more complex than the simple dictatorship so dear to the world view of the Miami exiles, Fox News and the CIA. There is a later section on 'Political culture' which does give a much fuller explanation of the fascinating way politics works in Cuba. In this instance, Luis Suarez of Havana University is cited to advance the explanation from a Cuban perspective and this is a good example of the way in which the book uses less widely known scholars to introduce students to voices outside the western mainstream. The editor would have been well advised to have moved that section further forward and to have deleted the irrelevant criticism of US politics, for that country's record in its dealings with Cuba is sufficiently shameful to need no embellishment.

The history of the implacable hostility displayed by the US government towards revolutionary Cuba is well known. Nevertheless, the details of the twists and turns, the use of economic and military action and the outright support for terrorism still makes shocking reading when outlined in chronological order. There is little attempt at balance here and I would argue that this is justified, given the fact that most of the anti-Castro action had to be done in a covert fashion as it was extreme even by the standards of right-wing America. There is nothing new in this section of the book, but it is useful to have it all in one place. In particular, we can clearly see the relationship between periods of heightened US hostility and Cuban internal repression of dissent, as a siege mentality developed. This is brought into the 21st century with the appointment of James Cason as head of the US Interests Section, as the pseudo-embassy is known. His role in financing dissidents is probably less well known, particularly in the USA, the country whose interests he is supposed to be representing. The book uses Cason's activities to illustrate how US interference has hindered rather than helped democratic reform in Cuba by giving the impression that those engaged in demanding change are traitors and pawns of imperialism. This discussion leads in turn to a consideration of the contradictions between freedom and repression that co-exists in Cuban art and culture, comparing and contrasting the imposed orthodoxy of the 'four grey years' of the 1970s to the opportunities and spaces provided by the film institute ICAIC. These developments are placed in an international political context and thereby become more explicable, even to those who disapprove.

These cultural restrictions sent many artists and sports personalities into exile. Some seeking the possibility of greater expression, others, particularly the athletes and baseball stars, seeking the economic advantages not available to them in Cuba. The book contains an interesting discussion of migration which, after all, is one of the author's specialities. In addition to the standard arguments about exporting dissent, it treats the subject to a wider ranging enquiry, placing Cuban emigration in its regional context, pointing out the way in which Cuban migrants are treated so much more favourably by the USA than other *Latinos*. Thus the 1962 Migration and Refugee Act allowed virtually all Cubans to obtain refugee status on entering the United States. This compares unfavourably with, for example, Salvadorians and Guatemalans fleeing right-wing death squads in the 1980s. However, when the Cuban government opened the port of Mariel to any who

wished to leave, US hypocrisy was revealed as they immediately put on pressure for the port to be closed. The question of migration leads to a discussion of Cuba's role in Africa. It is useful to compare the Cuban army's role in Angola and Mozambique, with its activities in Ethiopia. In the former case they inflicted a defeat of the South African Defence Force, which is widely credited with playing an important part in the final overthrow of the Apartheid state. Conversely, their involvement in Ethiopia was to help shore up an unpleasant dictatorship that just happened to be allied with the Soviet Union.

Africa leads on to a discussion of the question of 'race' in Cuba. There is practically no common ground between those like Terry Coleman and Johnetta Cole, who see the problem of racial discrimination being practically solved, compared to Carlos Moore who stresses what he sees as the marginalisation of black Cubans.⁽¹⁾ Both viewpoints are fairly stated, but the writings of Alejandro de la Fuente are used to give a more nuanced and balanced view by crediting the state with projects that created significant opportunities for black people, while pointing out that racial inequalities returned during the 'Special Period'; a period when much of the previous progressive work on the subject of diversity generally was undone by harsh economic conditions.

The 'Special Period' merits a chapter of its own; the story of the way in which the Cuban revolution survived the fall of the Soviet Union, wounded but still in existence. The contradictions resulting from this struggle for survival are spelled out in detail, the increased inequality and the growth of prostitution are contrasted with the efforts to maintain the health and education infrastructure in the face of a situation she describes as a classic structural adjustment programme, but without the loans to sustain it. On the one hand we see the corrosive effects of dollarisation and tourism, with the resulting internal 'brain drain' whereby highly trained engineers and medical staff found better economic opportunities in foreign owned hotels. On the other hand, the system survived against all the odds and despite the dire predictions of the western media.

Understanding the Special Period is indispensable to a sensible analysis of the Cuba of today. The treatment here is inevitably brief, given the size and scope of the book, but it does give an introduction and overview, while the author has an interesting way of challenging received wisdom. I particularly like the way she expresses the economic relationship with the old Soviet Union. Rather than speaking of the Russians buying Cuban sugar at inflated prices to subsidise a satellite, she speaks of 'fair trade', arguing that the USSR paid Cuba a price for sugar that reflected the true cost of producing it; a much more understandable definition of properly 'fair trade' than the rather woolly notion currently in use by the large supermarkets.

Indeed this ability to express matters in a way that questions standard assumptions more than compensates for the stylistic inadequacies which I bemoaned earlier. When discussing the seemingly intractable problem of dealing with the dual currency, she explains that some see the convertible peso as a tax on enterprise and the economic restrictions as a punishment that is visited upon those who have profited from the new, semi-capitalist, economy which has developed as the country emerges from the Special Period. However, others see these measures as an important means to attempt to restore a measure of equality. The discussion reminds us that the oft-repeated refrain, that the development of an entrepreneurial middle class is a positive development, is not unchallenged. There is an alternative point of view which sees that middle class as a grasping petit-bourgeoisie overly concerned with their own material advancement and lacking proper feelings of solidarity.

Such diametrically opposed positions are typical of attitudes to Cuba and it is arguably always necessary to be aware of an author's standpoint when considering their writings on the subject. I am not arguing that those who espouse views contrary to those of the reader should be ignored, far from it, but that an understanding that writing on Cuba is almost always politically charged and foreknowledge of the author's bias is useful in making an assessment of the work. The author of this book writes from a position of obvious sympathy for the aims and objects of the Cuban revolution, but combines this with an honest approach to the many situations where they have failed to live up to those expectations. This is combined with a nice eye for contradictions and a balance in fairly outlining the arguments of those opposed to her views.

The *Viewpoints / Puntos de Vista* series claims to 'introduce students to the most significant themes and topics in Latin American History'. In the case of the Cuban revolution, this book fulfils that intent and appears as a useful addition to the available teaching material. Its division in chapters that can stand alone, based around the themes of economy and politics, relations with the United States, migration, culture, diversity, the special period and Cuba in the 21st century, would allow teachers to use particular sections as class material in a wide range of courses. Tighter editing for the next edition could make it more useful still.

Notes

1. Carlos Moore, *Castro, the Blacks and Africa* (Los Angeles, CA, 1988); Johnnetta Cole, *Race toward Equality: the Impact of the Cuban Revolution on Racism* (Havana, 1980), pp. 2-24. [Back to \(1\)](#)

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