Revolutionary Cuba Review Article

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There is a widespread belief that the Cuban Revolution is mainly the work of Fidel Castro, abetted by his brother Raul and their comrade Che Guevara. This belief is behind the many attempts on Castro's life by the CIA and their associates among the extreme right-wing terrorists in the Miami exile community. But the idea of the Castro brothers as the master puppeteers of the Revolution is much more widespread than this.
How many times have you heard something like ‘I would like to visit Cuba before Castro dies and the Americans get back in control’.

Luis Martínez Fernández is a firm proponent of such ‘Fidel-centrism’, repeatedly referring to Castro as ‘the master triangulator’. This is not to say that this author is a rabid-right winger, indeed he goes out of his way to admit the successes of the Revolution and clearly has no time for the Miami ultras; he just firmly believes that Castro manipulated everyone. Tony Kapcia, on the other hand sees a much more complex situation with a wider circle of leadership that changed over time. Of course, the Castro described by Kapcia is a skilled political operator, but one who operates in a milieu where there are loyalties and personal relationships as well as political differences and economic interests, a milieu where there was considerable disagreement and debate from which a consensus and a collective leadership has emerged.

An example of the difference approaches of these two books is their treatment of the relationship between the July 26th Movement (Movimiento Revolucionario 26 de Julio, MR-26-7), of which Fidel himself was founder and leader, and the Partido Socialista Popular (PSP) as the Cuban Communist Party was called. There was a poor relationship between the leaders of the MR-26-7 and the PSP for most of the period of the struggle against the Batista dictatorship (1953–8). The communists were committed to a policy of promoting mass action against the regime, such as strikes and demonstrations, and condemned the armed struggle conducted by the fidelistas as terrorism. Martínez describes Castro's strategy for dealing with the communists, as well as accusations of communism directed at him by his enemies, as being ‘good cop, bad cop’, giving Raul and Ché the task of attacking the right wing of the MR-26-7 and pursuing alliances with the PSP, while distancing himself from any association with communism. After the revolutionary victory, the ‘master triangulator’ cunningly played off the PSP against the mostly moderate MR-26-7. This is be a gross oversimplification of much more complex situation which fails to recognise the dynamic and changing nature of the revolutionary process.

While the PSP was much more disciplined than the July 26th Movement, it was not monolithic and there were regional, political and personal differences. Thus Carlos Rafael Rodríguez was the member of the Communist Party leadership most sympathetic to the Rebel Army, while Aníbal Escalante represented the more orthodox hard-line Stalinist wing of the party. There were also regional differences, with the PSP militants in Oriente province, far to the east of the capital, being much closer to the local July 26th movement than their comrades in Havana. The MR-26-7 was equally diverse, many in the Rebel Army based in the mountains of the Sierra Maestra were far to the left of the middle-class underground in the cities. This situation was made even more complex by the existence of an underground working-class movement based in the provinces, that was also quite hostile to the Communist Party, but largely from a left-wing perspective, seeing the PSP as too moderate. However, once the PSP had accepted the need for armed opposition to the regime, it was this rebel working-class movement that worked most closely with the communists.

In the period before the January 1959 ‘Triumph of the Revolution’, the internal political differences within the MR-26-7 remained below the surface, unity in the face of the brutal dictatorship being seen as more important than differences about the shape of the society which was to follow. This would all change in January 1959 when Batista fled and the Rebels arrived in Havana; the moderate wing of the movement argued that the overthrow of tyranny was the final goal, while the left among the rebel fighters felt that this was just the beginning of a radical change to the whole social and economic base of the country. Kapcia spends a lot of time discussing the events of the insurrection and the first few years of the Revolution, arguing that this period is crucial to understanding the structure of the leadership thereafter. He is particularly interested in the various crises that affected the course of events; as he puts it: ‘a revolution without crisis may not be revolutionising anything’. Compared to the left of the MR-26-7, the PSP leadership were relatively moderate, having adopted an orthodox Stalinist view of the progression of history by stages. The idea of progressing directly from a ‘bourgeois democratic’ revolution to Socialism was far too revolutionary for most of the communist old-guard.

Fidel Castro had to keep this disparate movement together without giving the United States government the
excuse to call them ‘Communists’ and launch an invasion before the Cubans had the means to defend themselves. Whether you see this as trickery and manipulation, or as sensible discretion, depends on your political viewpoint. Luis Martínez Fernández, the son of an anti-Castro exile who includes a long section in his book about the trauma of leaving Cuba and going into exile, clearly advances the former position, while Tony Kapcia presents us with a much more nuanced argument. Martínez Fernández's contempt for Castro is such that he cannot see that anyone could willingly support him, so his success must be the result of manipulation and brainwashing. The ‘literacy campaign’ and the education reforms, while recognised as achievements, are nevertheless also cited as examples of political propaganda. This fails to recognise that, in all societies, education contains an element of socialisation to the prevalent political, moral and economic values. If you agree, this process can be called education in civic responsibility, if you disagree it is propaganda and brainwashing.

The situation became much clearer following the invasion of Playa Giron (Bay of Pigs), the ‘Cuban Missile Crisis’. It was out of these two trials that the shape of the revolutionary leadership would emerge. Kapcia sees three roughly concentric circles of such leadership, with a hierarchy of respect and influence, centred on those who had been with Fidel in the attack on the Moncada barracks in 1953 along with those fought in the Rebel Army in the Sierra Maestra. The next level was formed from members of the MR-26-7 underground in the cities and furthest from power were the ex-PSP. The bond created in those early days would endure for the next 50 years. Here we find many names that do not figure highly in the standard ‘Fidel-centric’ historiography. Take, for example, Carlos Rafael Rodríguez, seen by Martínez Fernández as Castro's ‘yes-man’ who would adopt any socio-economic formula that Castro required. This neglects his often minority position within the PSP in favour of the rebels, his time spent in the Sierra Maestra in 1958 and the way in which he campaigned, and eventually won the argument, for ‘material incentives’ against Ché Guevarra's approach that relied much more on voluntarism and ‘moral incentives’. He finally retired though ill-health in 1986.

The women in the revolutionary leadership are often neglected, Celia Sánchez as ‘Fidel's secretary’, Vilma Espín as ‘Raúl Castro's wife’ and Haydéé Santamaría as ‘Armando Hart's wife’. However, Célia Sanchez, who had organised much of the preparational groundwork for the Granma landing and who fought in the Sierra, went on to play a crucial role and was central to the whole political process. Haydeé Santamaría had been been involved in the Moncada attack and thence was active raising support and funds in the United States. She would go on to play an important role in the cultural life of the revolution as head of the Casa de las Americas, which provided a breathing space for many artists and intellectuals who had been marginalised by the heavy censorship which operated from 1968–76. Vilma Espín had a history of opposition to the dictatorship preceding the outbreak of the guerilla war and, having been forced to flee the reign of terror that Batista unleashed on her home town of Santiago de Cuba, fought in the rebel army as part of Raúl Castro's Second Front. She was already a recognised leader within the anti-Batista movement before she even met Raúl. After the rebel victory she founded and led the Federación de Mujeres Cubanas (FMC, Federation of Cuban Women), which was probably the most successful of the ‘mass organisations’. All of these fit Kapcia's criteria for inclusion in the inner circle of power, through their involvement in Moncada and the guerilla struggle. Perhaps a conspiracy theorist could see the relationship between Haydeé Santamaría and Armando Hart the other way round and suggest that he got his advancement by being Haydeé’s husband. His origins in the middle-class urban underground without having seen guerrilla military action would not seem to fit him for the inner circle role that he has always played, from being the Minister of Education in the first revolutionary government, to his actions in promoting the 1976 thaw as the Minister of Culture who ended the quinquenio gris (5 grey years) of artistic orthodoxy under the Stalinist-dominated National Cultural Council. He still provides respected opinion pieces for the Cuban press.

Therefore, we should not take the concentric circles based on pre-revolutionary activity to be an iron rule, nor should we see people stuck in the political categorisation with which they started. Alfredo Guevara, a PSP member, was a student friend of Fidel Castro who had been one of the leaders of the communist students in the University of Havana in the late 1940s. In 1959, he set up the film institute ICAIC, from
which he was able to exercise great influence on the cultural development of the revolution, often championing independent-minded artists and operating outside the control of the National Cultural Council, which was run by his more orthodox communist erstwhile comrades. Of course, one could also see him as being manipulated by the ‘great triangulator’ to balance against the PSP, but he seems to be too independent a spirit to fit this restricted mould.

A particularly useful section in ‘Leadership in the Cuban Revolution’ is the account of the careers of those ex-guerrillas who became important second rank leaders. Names that crop up from time to time in other books and articles, without an account of their background, receive useful pen portraits of their origins and career development. But again this is open to two interpretations, were these people appointed because they had earned their trust through proven reliability in the struggle, or was it a form of nepotism with known yes-men being manipulated. Perhaps the difference between the approaches adopted by these two books can be best shown by their views on the trial and execution of Arnaldo Ochoa. In June 1989, General Arnaldo Ochoa was arrested, charged with corruption and executed. Martínez sees this as the removal of a pro-
glasnost opponent of the Castro brothers who was threatening their position. Kapcia recognises the existence of this view, but prefers an explanation that, in his role as head of a special unit charged with circumventing the US blockade, Ochoa had allowed Colombian drug traffickers to use Cuban airspace and thereby threatened Cuban security by giving the US an excuse to intervene as they did against Noriega in Panama. There was no suggestion that he was personally profiting from the abuses, but that he failed to act against corruption amongst his subordinates and thereby placed national sovereignty at risk. For what it is worth, I personally find the Kapcia explanation much more plausible, but it must remain a matter of opinion.

This is indeed the problem with so much writing on Cuba, the way the history is recounted depends on the author’s personal and political view of the Cuban economic and political system. It is a pity that Luis Martínez Fernández includes so much ‘editorial comment’ in this book, as most of the actual content is fairly described. He credits the educational advances and condemns the ‘shockingly lenient treatment’ by the US authorities of Luis Posada Carriles, the author of the 1976 bombing of a Cuban civilian airliner with the loss of all its passengers. He mainly draws attention to the Cuban government's failings and repressive behaviour in a measured way and this ought to be the balanced account which he claims to be writing in his introduction. Indeed, his ‘Fidel-centric’ view of the leadership of the Cuban revolution is logically argued. However, a book that could be a useful restating of the middle-class moderate centre-right view of Cuba is, however, marred by the frequent carping and sneering tone of the writing. It could also be improved by removing the occasional ludicrous and unsubstantiated allegation against Fidel Castro, such as repeating the suggestion that he may have ‘played an active role in the demise’ of Che Guevara.

On the other hand, Tony Kapcia has written a book that is of considerable use to people already knowledgeable of the course of events; indeed much is taken for granted that the general reader would probably not know. But within the context of the title ‘Leadership in the Cuban Revolution’, it does exactly what it says on the tin. The depth of detail about the personalities involved and their personal and political relationships paints a convincing picture of a collective leadership, a vanguard collective certainly, but much wider than most commentators recognise. Perhaps, at a time when President Obama's overtures to the Cuban government have renewed interest in the history of the country, reading both books together would be a useful insight into the different sides of debate about Cuba.

Tony Kapcia is happy to accept this review and does not wish to comment further.

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