

Review - A Hidden History of the Cuban Revolution

Sunday 11 August 2019, by [BUSTAMANTE Michael J.](#) (Date first published: 25 June 2016).

At an academic symposium I attended a few years ago, a well-known scholar from Havana used his allotted twenty minutes to explore the link between labor activism and revolutionary politics in Cuban history. Complicating his task was the lack of available source material, particularly for the years prior to Fidel Castro's triumph in 1959. For the Western Hemisphere's preeminent workers' revolution, my colleague asked cheekily, should not the tomes of its labor history already be written? Ironically, for a transformative political process "of the humble, by the humble, and for the humble," as Castro famously intoned, the details of workers' actions, conflicts, and contributions have long played second fiddle to more top-down guerrilla myths. [1]

For the post-1959 era, the challenge of historicizing workers' agency (or lack thereof) remains unresolved. After the island transitioned to socialism between 1960 and 61, labor's autonomy receded before a nationalizing revolutionary state. For the phase leading up to Fidel Castro's victory, however, we now have Steve Cushion's revealing study, the first to place working people at the center of a political project forged in their name. Drawing on exceptionally rare, difficult-to-access collections of underground publications, pamphlets, and oral testimonies—more difficult to access than the author admits [2]—Cushion pushes back against several traditions of argumentation that have tended to cast labor struggle in the 1950s to the historiographical margins. Importantly, these lacunae in explaining the Cuban Revolution's origins have remained equally persistent among Cuban and non-Cuban historians, the Revolution's admirers and its fiercest critics.

Beyond Guerrilla Heroes

Chinks in the armor of Cuba's state-endorsed hagiography have been accumulating for some time. In 2004, Julia Sweig published *Inside the Cuban Revolution*, a prizewinning account of the internal politics of Castro's 26th of July Movement between late 1956 and Batista's ouster on New Year's Eve, 1958. [3] (Full disclosure: I worked with Sweig at the Council on Foreign Relations between 2006 and 2009.) Contrary to official and popular legend, Sweig revealed that the 26th of July Movement's urban underground, or *llano* ("the plains"), had played a far more than supporting role to Fidel Castro's forces in the mountains, or *sierra*. Where classic texts like Carlos Franqui's *The Book of the Twelve* cast outnumbered rural guerrillas as the "decisive front" in line with Che Guevara's *foco* theory of guerrilla war, Sweig showed that, up until the spring of 1958, the heart of most anti-Batista mobilizations and the movement's organizational power lay in the cities. [4] There, clandestine activists like Frank País risked their lives daily by arranging protests and disruptive "sabotage" actions, all while supervising supply lines to the guerrillas and helping to manage contentious relationships with other anti-Batista organizations. By no means was the 26th of July Movement perfectly cohesive, Sweig demonstrated. Nor was its eventual predominance in the broader anti-Batista front preordained.

In upending several of revolutionary history's sacred cows, however, Sweig also partially echoed an

older truism—namely, that the Revolution was primarily the work of a relatively small group of radicalized middle-class and student activists. Her account did treat the failure of the March 1958 General Strike, an attempt by the 26th of July to land a decisive blow against the Batista regime by paralyzing the country with mass action. But for the most part, her groundbreaking analysis of previously classified internal correspondence housed in the archives of Cuba's Council of State revealed the intra- and inter-factional politics of movement leaders. Fidel Castro and many likeminded rebels' original devotion to the anti-Batista cause drew less upon direct experience in labor unions or face-to-face immersion in Cuba's rural peasantry than messianic political currents that had long promised national deliverance through boldly nationalist/populist, but never orthodox socialist means. [5] For years, this fact—not for Sweig, but among disgruntled exiles and their sympathizers—abetted an analysis of the Revolution triumphant as initially more moderate than what it ended up being. The “true” revolution, argued historian Theodore Draper in a too narrow version of the theory adopted by the Kennedy administration, had been fundamentally “middle-class” in composition, outlook, and goals, only to be “betrayed.” [6]

Labor to the Fore

To such accounts circumscribing grassroots involvement and some activists' more sweeping ambitions, Steve Cushion answers with an illuminating look at the role of organized labor in the Batista period—both the Confederation of Cuban Workers (CTC), the island's state-dependent national labor umbrella organization, and dissident factions who broke free from CTC head Eusebio Mujal's increasingly brazen sycophantism to the Batista regime in the 1950s. He thus joins historians like Sweig, Michelle Chase, Gillian McGillivray, and Lillian Guerra in shining fresh light on these already much-parsed years of upheaval. [7] The aim is not to deny Castro's guerrillas or the urban underground their due, but to give labor activists and political groups that supported them their own. Even when undertaken independently of insurgent organizations, Cushion contends, or in unclear relation to their aims, workers' actions both responded to and fueled the broader climate of crisis that eventually led to Batista's fall.

Importantly, labor upheaval under the Batista regime predated the emergence of guerrilla fronts as such. Prior to Fidel Castro's return to Cuba from exile in Mexico, [8] an important series of strikes rocked the island across 1955 and 1956 as government planners and employers endeavored to impose efficiency measures in response to declining sugar prices and their ricocheting effects across all areas of the economy. The strikes' failure set the stage for a groundswell of anti-Batista feeling, while their mere existence attests to an economics of contraction that portrayals of pre-Castro Cuba as prosperous U.S. playground still seek to deny. Nonetheless, we would be wise to ask whether such activities count as part of “the Cuban Revolution” if workers themselves did not address their petitions to employers in those terms. If anything, the focus on immediate demands among official and dissident labor activists in the early- to mid-50s (i.e. for a 20 percent increase in the minimum wage nationally) might have endeared them to simultaneous attempts among Cuba's traditional political parties to secure a negotiated solution to the constitutional crisis provoked by Batista's 1952 coup—a possibility Cushion does not explore. [9]

Cushion, though, also traces labor activism into the years when armed resistance became the dominant mode of anti-Batista struggle, and when insurgent groups like the 26th of July endeavored to create their own “workers' fronts.” It is here where the book inevitably wades into the polemical memory wars that have trailed Cuban politics and Cubans ever since. Crucial in this regard is the contested role of Cuba's traditional communist party, the Popular Socialist Party (or PSP), an influential player in the ranks of organized labor traditionally, yet purged from control of the CTC in the late 1940s. Because the Party was late to embrace the 26th of July's insurgent strategy in the 1950s, significant sectors of the broad anti-Batista movement, particularly the 26th of July's Havana

wing, lambasted the PSP as a straggler in the necessary war. For these voices, the communists were revolutionary pretenders, hangers-on undeserving of a central voice. PSP leaders had called members of the 26th of July Movement “putschist,” even “terrorist” (36, 192). In some ways, then, they were arguably just as “conservative” as those early Fidel Castro supporters who would later claim that the “real” Revolution had gone off the rails. [10]

But Cushion insists that the PSP has gotten a bad rap, a victim of hackneyed Cold-War anti-communism harbored by some of the Revolution’s early allies, many of whom would eventually fall afoul of socialist rule and go into exile. While not denying that the Communist leadership long opposed the strategy of armed resistance to Batista—in truth, access to underground PSP newsletters allows him to be strikingly detailed on this score—he nonetheless argues that a political “convergence” occurred between the PSP and the 26th of July over the course of 1957 and 1958. More than a stroke of realpolitik, Cushion contends, this tactical, if tardy alliance built on significant grassroots collaborations between labor activists associated with either group, at times in opposition to the mandates of their high-ups.

Factional Disputes Run Deep

There is no doubt something important to this line of argument, even if it conspicuously echoes the case PSP leaders themselves made for their revolutionary legitimacy after Batista’s fall. [11] The deferred pact between the 26th of July and the PSP reflected, at least for some, a meeting of the minds and not simply the prelude to a deceptive communizing plot. As Cushion notes, at no point did the PSP state before 1959 that its aim was the installation of a full-on socialist regime. Like all sectors of the 26th of July Movement, it, too, advocated an “egalitarian nationalist solution to the social and economic crisis, assuming the necessity of a cross-class alliance” (216). A united 26th of July and PSP workers congress held in the waning days of Batista’s rule called explicitly for the “restoration of constitutional guarantees.” Following the establishment of a provisional government, they proposed, “democratic elections” would be held “in which all groups and parties opposed to the dictatorship may participate” (185). (Of course, that such elections never transpired only fed some Cubans’ feelings later on that the original revolution, “green as the palms” in Fidel’s phrase, had gone unforgivably “red.”)

And yet, to portray anti-PSP sentiment among some sectors of the 26th of July as primarily a question of Cold-War bias also undercuts the depths of the historic dispute between both groups. As Cushion acknowledges too briefly, the PSP’s reputation suffered at a national level not only due to its staunch criticism of anti-Batista insurgencies for much of the 1950s, but because of its popular-front alliance with Batista during the strongman’s first, more populist period in power in the late 1930s and early 40s. In this sense, some good-faith, rather radical 26th of July activists (like the aforementioned Franqui) felt the PSP had been complicit in Batista’s early rise. During its pro-Batista years, the PSP had also created the organizational structure of a CTC highly dependent on government largesse. It is a wonder, then, that more workers in the 1950s did not hold the Party responsible for fostering precisely the kind of state-client relationship that Batista acolyte Eusebio Mujal (himself a former Communist) would use in his attempt to neutralize labor’s independent mobilizing potential.

But if the PSP was able to ride the coattails of Fidel Castro’s popular insurgency into a considerable position of power, the 26th of July also gained a stronger foothold in the ranks of an organized labor movement where PSP influence, though driven underground, remained strong. (The lack of collaboration into early 1958, notably, contributed to the failure of April’s General Strike.) Beyond national-level calculations, meanwhile, region- and industry-specific dynamics shaped alliances in real time. Among workers like stevedores for whom a moderate defense of pecuniary interests remained possible via non-violent protest, support for the restrained tactics of the PSP for much of

the 1950s stayed firm. In sectors like sugar, by contrast, Cushion shows how strike failures propelled a search for more drastic anti-government strategies advocated by the 26th of July. As the 1950s progressed, in eastern cities like Manzanillo, Santiago de Cuba, Holguín, and Guantánamo, underground anti-Batista and labor activists (increasingly one and the same) forged working relationships across political affiliation, economic sectors, and strategic dogmas due to practical necessity and local solidarity in the face of state violence. Notwithstanding Cushion's occasional tendency to employ an abstract, category-heavy variant of Marxist analytics—"the class struggle" did this, the "bourgeoisie" did that—his study boldly reminds all historians of Cuba that locality and contingency matter (43, 45).

Conclusion: Beyond the Rebels' Triumph

It is a shame that Cushion's textured analysis of working class politics in the 1950s does not continue apace into the post-Batista period. For while he relays the reemergence of factional rivalries between 26th of July and PSP cadre in the new, "revolutionary" CTC during 1959, his concluding account of the Cuban Revolution's transition to socialist politics suggests that workers, like the bulk of the Cuban public, were simply "swept along" by the course of events (206). This is a surprising end point for a book that admirably succeeds in restoring workers' agency in the anti-Batista struggle, while also arguing pointedly that, before 1959, neither the PSP nor the 26th of July articulated demands incompatible with capitalism. One hopes more answers as to how Cuba's socialist transition unfolded, and, more specifically, what it meant at the laboring grassroots, may also be "available in the archives for any researcher who cares to look," as Cushion describes his until-now unearthed evidence of working class mobilization against Batista (212). Yet on an island where archival access remains politicized, and where, in Cushion's words, "independent workers' democratic institutions capable of holding the government to account" never developed, significant clues as to how labor relations evolved still remain shielded from researchers' view (208).

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P.S.

[A Hidden History of the Cuban Revolution: How the Working Class Shaped the Guerrillas' Victory](#) By Steve Cushion, New York: Monthly Review Press, 2016

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Footnotes

- [1] "Discurso pronunciado por Fidel Castro Ruz, Presidente de Doble República de Cuba, en las honras fúnebres de las víctimas del bombardeo a distintos puntos de la república, efectuado en 23 y 12, frente al cementerio de Colón," April 16, 1961, <http://www.cuba.cu/gobierno/discursos/1961/esp/f160461e.html>, accessed June 16, 2016.
- [2] Much of the documentation Cushion consulted is housed at Havana's Institute of Cuban History. Access to the small library and general periodicals collection is somewhat straightforward. Consulting manuscripts and underground periodicals, by contrast—especially politically sensitive materials relating to factional politics among insurgents in the 1950s—requires a series of approvals often difficult for even local historians to secure.
- [3] Julia Sweig, *Inside the Cuban Revolution: Fidel Castro and the Urban Underground* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004).
- [4] Carlos Franqui, *El libro de los doce* (Havana: Instituto del Libro/Ediciones Huracán, 1968), map insert, n.p.
- [5] Of course, another analytical tradition, supported by the Cuban revolutionary government in the 1960s and echoed by international Marxist observers like Leo Huberman and Paul Sweezy, focused on the rank and file of Fidel Castro's rebel army as a "peasant army," and thus the Revolution itself as a "peasant revolution." Even, however, in the virtual mini-state that Fidel Castro's guerrillas created in the remote Sierra Maestra mountains, the bulk of rebel leaders descended from urban, often well-to-do families and/or student political traditions. See: Leo Huberman and Paul Sweezy, *Cuba: Anatomy of a Revolution* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1961); Lillian Guerra, "Searching for the Messiah: How Hollywood and Havana Met in the Sierra Maestra, 1956-1959," in "New Histories of the Cuban Revolution," eds. Jennifer Lambe and Michael Bustamante, manuscript in preparation.
- [6] Theodore Draper, "Castro's Cuba: a Revolution Betrayed?," *The New Leader*, March 27, 1961, 3-27.
- [7] Michelle Chase, *Revolution within the Revolution: Women and Gender Politics in Cuba, 1952-1962* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015); Gillian McGillivray, *Blazing Cane: Sugar Communities, Class, and State Formation in Cuba, 1868-1959* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), Lillian Guerra, *Making Revolutionary Cuba, 1946-1958* (New Haven: Yale University Press, forthcoming).
- [8] Castro's first attempt at dethroning Batista occurred in 1953, when he led an ill-fated attack on Santiago de Cuba's Moncada Barracks. He and other surviving Moncada attackers were imprisoned until May 1955, when Batista granted them amnesty. Castro promptly left the island for Mexico, to return aboard the yacht *Granma* in late 1956.
- [9] For a sanguine take on such efforts, see: Marifeli Pérez-Stable, "La transición pacífica que no tuvo lugar, 1954-1956" *Encuentro de la Cultura Cubana* 24 (Spring 2002): 283-305.
- [10] In other areas, like the denunciation of racial discrimination and disparity, the PSP was consistently more progressive. See: Devyn Spence Benson, *Antiracism in Cuba: the Unfinished Revolution* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016), 75.

[11] See, for example: Carlos Rafael Rodríguez, “Un necesario esclarecimiento,” *Noticias de hoy*, April 15, 1959, 3.