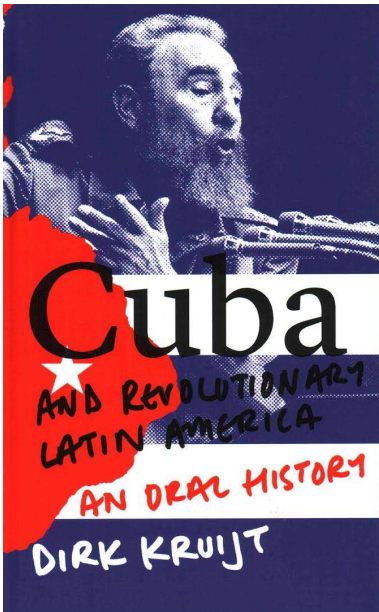


CUBA AND REVOLUTIONARY LATIN AMERICA: AN ORAL HISTORY

Review by Stephen McCloskey

Dirk Kruijt (2017) *Cuba and Revolutionary Latin America: An Oral History*, London: Zed Books.

This book was published a few months after the death of Fidel Castro on 25



November 2016 and, read in the context of his passing, represents a fine tribute to his considerable influence on Latin America society. The book is largely concerned with how a small island nation of 11 million people in the Caribbean, subjected to a devastating economic blockade for more than half a century, ‘came to be a referential country for nearly all Latin American revolutionary and post-revolutionary movements and insurgent generations’ (204). The remarkable story of the Cuban revolution and its hemispheric influence is told in part here first-hand by participants in what the author has demarcated as three distinct phases:

the ‘years of revolutionary fervour’ in the 1960s; the ‘mature years’ of the 1970s and 1980s as Cuba became more economically entwined with the Soviet Union and, yet, maintained a radical and independent foreign policy; and the ‘period of soft power’ from the 1990s to the present which begins with the implosion of the Soviet Union and the ‘Special Period’ of austerity and ends with the recent economic reforms that have expanded private enterprise and, at the same time, maintained the benefits of Cuba’s socialist system.

The oral history of Cuba and its relations with Latin America is based on 70 interviews conducted in Cuba and 20 interviews with former guerrilla representatives and peace negotiators in Colombia, El Salvador, Guatemala and Nicaragua. 30 interviewees were combatants from 1953 to 1962 who fought in the Sierra Maestra or were active in urban resistance groups. 24 interviewees were members of Departamento América, which ‘implemented Cuba’s policy with respect to the region, especially regarding the left and the armed left, Latin America’s rebels, guerrilleros and revolutionaries’ (3). The author also interviewed activists who joined Cuba’s literacy and health campaigns of the 1960s and supported the dissemination of revolution in Latin America, the Caribbean and southern Africa.

Given that Cuba’s revolutionary generation were born in the late 1920s, 1930s and 1940s and reaching the end of their lives, this project represents a valuable learning opportunity to gather first-hand recollections from those who helped to shape history in Cuba and the wider hemisphere.

Historical context

The opening chapters provide a necessary historical context to the oral testimony that follows. This includes Cuba’s colonisation by Spain and the extended periods of insurgency in the latter half of the 19th century. Revolutionary leaders, particularly José Martí, who gave his life to the war against the Spanish in 1895, were part of a strong legacy of struggle that greatly influenced the generations that followed. As Cuba was on the cusp of independence from Spain in 1898, the United States (US) intervened and controlled the island to 1959 either through direct military engagement or by proxy civil administrations and military dictatorships. This was a period when “[c]orruption, mismanagement, ‘gangsterism’, (*gangsterismo*, a Cuban slang term) and even control of student movements and trade unions, became ingredients of everyday politics’ (25).

US-backed dictator Fulgencio Batista dispensed with the pretences of democracy in 1952 when he staged a coup and ramped up oppression of students and political opposition. The insurgency movement in the 1950s

had both a rural and urban character with Fidel Castro's guerrilla force gathering support from the peasantry in the Sierra Maestra, Oriente Province, and the M 26-7 Movement leading an urban campaign mostly comprising students. They were inspired by an attack led by Castro on the Moncada Barracks in Santiago de Cuba on 26 July 1953 which resulted in his arrest and trial. Castro's famous written defence of the insurrection during his trial – *La Historia Me Absolvará* (History Will Absolve Me) - was essentially a political manifesto of 'nationalization and land reform' that informed the revolution that triumphed in 1959. The book argues that the insurgents were united by 'a common mindset: a fervent patriotism, strong anti-imperialist and anti-American feelings, pro-poor sympathies, and a conviction of urgency for social justice and social reform' (44).

Revolutionary origins

In probing where the insurgents' 'revolutionary impetus came from?', the author found that:

“Nearly all veterans reckoned that their patriotic ideals were transmitted by their parents, grandparents and great grand-parents, and that their patriotism had been fostered by nationalistic teachers during their primary or secondary education” (45).

One of the interviewees, Ramiro Abreu, was like many of the peasants who joined Fidel in the Sierra Maestra, functionally illiterate because of irregular education. 'After 1959 he studied sociology and diplomacy; he now holds a doctorate in history' and became 'Cuba's liaison with the Central American revolutionaries' for 30 years (46). Luis Morejón was a shoeshine boy at the time of the revolution who became active with M 26-7 and after the revolution took a course in anti-aircraft artillery. He later became Vice-Director General of the important foreign liaison body the Cuban Institute for Friendship with the Peoples (Instituto Cubano de Amistad con los Pueblos [ICAP]).

The book also documents the experiences of female combatants and how the revolution shaped their lives. María Antonia Figueroa Araujo was

a female militant who rescued six *compáneros* from the Moncada Barracks attack and later became a member of M 26-7 as treasurer. She went on to become Superintendent of Education in Havana until her retirement. Another female guerrilla member, Consuelo Elba Álvarez, served in the Sierra Maestra and recalled a total female fighting force of 300. She was a courier and teacher and after the revolution became a journalist and television documentarist.

These accounts remind us of the empowering impact of revolution when there is a genuine unity of purpose between the leaders and the people. Paulo Freire recognised that ‘Fidel Castro and his comrades’ were an ‘eminently dialogical leadership group’ because they endured with the people and victory ‘would belong not to the leaders alone, but to the leaders *and* the people’ (Freire, 1970: 145-146). For Freire and the Cuban revolution, liberation from the dictatorship of Batista had a transformative effect toward a ‘fuller humanity’ that enabled them to survive the physical trials of oppression and poverty to achieve self-awareness, agency and autonomy.

Revolutionary Fervour

The Socialist character of the revolution took shape immediately after the triumph of 1959: land reform was initiated, a social security system created, foreign enterprises expropriated, a national literacy campaign started, and discrimination on the basis of race and gender was outlawed. Banking, housing and salaries were also reviewed as a raft of new policies were announced and implemented. In December 1959, the Eisenhower administration approved ‘an action plan to overthrow Castro’ (66) thus initiating nearly 60 years of US aggression toward the Cuban revolution that has included direct military intervention, covert aggression and, above all, an economic and trading blockade designed to make the revolution unsustainable. Washington’s aggression forced Havana into closer diplomatic and economic relations with Moscow although never to the point that Cuba became a Russian vassal state. A recurring miscalculation by successive US administrations and Western powers was to regard Cuba as a

kind of Russian appendage in the Caribbean that would collapse after the Cold War.

In the 1960s, the influence of the Cuban revolution saw guerrilla movements emerge in nearly all Latin American countries as ‘they found hope in the creation and consolidation of a stable socialist economy and society’ (79). In most cases this influence was indirect and managed by Departamento América (DA) under the leadership of Manuel Piñeiro, a guerrilla *commandante* with the complete trust of Fidel. DA operated as ‘the liaison with the armed left and the monitoring instrument for Latin America’ (204). It is not within the compass of the book to address Cuba’s direct military engagement in Angola in the 1970s and 80s against the South Africa forces of apartheid which led Nelson Mandela to say that Cuba’s interventions ‘destroyed the myth of the invincibility of the white oppressor’ (Democracy Now, 2013).

In Latin America, Cuba’s role included the provision of training and guidance on the implementation of rural guerrilla focus points (*foquismo*) which were based on the idea that ‘revolutions can successfully start with a rural guerrilla force that will unite peasants against suppressive governments’ (81). In effect, this meant trying to replicate the strategy implemented in the Sierra Maestra and the book offers us a series of case studies where this was tried and failed despite Cuba’s assistance. Common failings were that: insurgent groups became splintered along ideological lines and personality differences; Soviet-oriented communist parties offered ‘tepid support’ to insurrections and the Soviet Union itself ‘was never a fervent devotee of guerrilla movements’ (120). Above all, the guerrilla movements were unable to win the trust of indigenous peoples that sometimes comprised 50 per cent of the total population and for the most part couldn’t speak Spanish. By contrast, the army was often the only state representative they knew and trusted, particularly army nurses and doctors. The rural *foquismo* did not stand up to practice and by the 1970s the political landscape was shifting with progressive social democracies beginning to emerge in Latin America and the Caribbean in countries such as Peru, Panama, Jamaica and Guyana.

The Mature Years

The 1970s and 80s were ‘years of relative prosperity’ for Cuba as it became more economically dependent on the Soviet Union for oil, coal and other important resources while remaining a ‘mono-product (sugar) agricultural exporter’ (124). However, close economic ties did not mean that Cuba became a ‘dogmatic subscriber to Soviet politics’ (126) particularly in the area of foreign policy which Fidel Castro personally monitored in detail (127). The political winds in Latin America were shifting in the 1970s and 1980s toward Dependency Theory when ‘poverty, exclusion, social conflict and political violence were seen as the consequences of Latin America’s dependent integration into the capitalist world system’ (128). ICAP became a key institution in creating and maintaining new relationships with intellectuals, campaign groups, political movements and labour leaders. Three labour leaders who were regular guests in Cuba subsequently became presidents of their countries: Lula (Brazil), Morales (Bolivia) and Maduro (Venezuela).

In this period, Cuba operated ‘more pragmatically and explicitly emphasized the necessity of revolutionary unity’ (170). Whereas in the 1960s, Cuba advocated rural *foquismo* by supporting guerrilla movements, it now broadened its alliances to include an array of political actors urging the need for unity and pacts seeking the unification of ‘all revolutionary actors’ (170). This was also a period of growing influence for Cuba’s medical services sent to countries in need irrespective of their political stripes. Kruijt argues that Cuba’s offering itself as a place of refuge was ‘without a doubt the most laudable, selfless and generous contribution to all insurgent movements, highly regarded by all who received medical treatment and could convalesce on the island’ (171). By contrast with the period of severed diplomatic relations in the 1960s in the aftermath of the revolution, in the 1990s and early 2000s ‘all Latin American countries had established or renewed their diplomatic relations’ with Cuba (140).

Soft Power

The collapse of the Soviet Union had a swift and devastating impact on the Cuban economy with Moscow's trade with the island dropping by 93 per cent between 1989 and 1993. This was compounded by Washington's passing of the Torricelli Bill in 1992 which tightened the US blockade. The revolutionary leadership reacted with the introduction of a 'Special Period in Peacetime' (179), a period of austerity in which the government 'prevented hunger and starvation by distributing packages of essential food and clothing' (179). Cuba survived this shock to the economic system by investing in tourism and securing foreign investment in joint venture companies which were jointly owned by the state and private sector. In 2006, Fidel transferred his powers to Raul Castro following a serious illness. Self-employment and micro-enterprises were introduced incrementally by Raul in a series of economic reforms and nickel came to replace sugar as the main export commodity. Cuba was also greatly assisted by the petro-dollars of Venezuela following the election of Hugo Chávez in 1998. Fidel never over-estimated the lasting influence of Cuba given its relative economic weakness in the hemisphere. He considered 'Cuba a revolutionary vanguard' always looking out for a country to take over the revolutionary baton. He found this political ally in Hugo Chávez and they forged a strong relationship based on a shared socialism and passion to wrest the hemisphere from the influence of Washington's hegemony. In return for subsidised Venezuelan oil, Cuba committed thousands of medical personnel to barrios and favelas in Venezuela as part of a programme known as 'oil for doctors'.

A large part of Cuba's 'soft power' diplomacy has involved the deployment of civilian missions in the form of medical and literacy teams overseas. Between 1959 and 2001, 156,000 Cubans worked as 'internationalists overseas as health professionals and educators', often in highly dangerous circumstances such as the Ebola outbreak in Haiti (190). There were 30,000 Cuban health personnel working overseas in 2007 alone and in 1998 Fidel launched a special medical school for Latin American students which had 3,000 graduates per annum by 2012 (190-91). Cuba assisted the establishment of medical schools in the Yemen and a raft of

Latin American countries including Venezuela thereby creating a more sustainable source of medical support at home.

Cuba's commitment to healthcare went further in 2004 when it launched 'Operation Miracle', co-financed by Venezuela, to cure cataract and other eye diseases and by 2015 it had 2.5 million beneficiaries (191). And, in terms of literacy, Cuba created a hugely successful anti-illiteracy methodology in 2000 which was standardised as an audio-visual campaign called *Yo, sí puedo* (Yes, I can) with adapted versions of the programme rolled out in thirty countries (192). As the author suggests: "Even in technical terms, Cuba's development aid is non-political, efficient, directly targeted at poor people, and based on the country's long experience in organising instant help" (210). It perplexes me that the international development non-governmental sector does not do more to learn from the highly effective Cuban health and literacy models, and the excellent work of the medical brigades that are regularly first on the scene and last to leave in disaster and emergency zones around the world.

Where next for Cuba?

This book went to print before the death of Fidel Castro and the election of the highly volatile popular nationalist Donald Trump as President of the US in November 2016. Fidel had already overseen an uneventful transfer of power to Raul in 2006 and confined himself to written reflections on the revolution and global affairs in the state newspaper *Granma* until his death ten years later. Raul has announced his retirement in 2018 and, significantly, will be passing the baton to a younger generation not directly involved in the victory of the revolution in 1959. As the author suggests, Raul has proven to be an effective pragmatist in office with a programme of 'structural and conceptual reforms' that represented an 'updating of the model without abandoning socialism' (201). However, Cuba and the entire Latin American hemisphere was rocked by the death of Hugo Chávez in 2013 following a long battle with cancer just a year after he had won a third six-year presidential term. His successor, Nicola Maduro, has struggled to maintain the influence and achievements of the Bolivarian revolution and, like

Chávez, is confronted by a militant opposition supported by Washington. It is naïve of Kruijt to suggest that the US ‘played an ambiguous role in the coup against elected president Chávez’ in 2002 (212). Washington was very much on the side of the coup plotters then (Vulliamy, 2002) and Donald Trump has openly embraced the Venezuelan opposition today (Woody, 2017).

There is understandable concern in Havana that Trump may seek to reverse a political rapprochement reached during the Obama presidency when Cuba and the United States resumed diplomatic relations under the auspices of Pope Francis and the Vatican. This agreement stopped short of addressing a lifting of the US blockade and the return of Guantanamo Bay to Cuba which is occupied by the United States against the will of the Cuban people and famously used as a prison camp for the use of torture and rendition. These are crucial points of contention that need to be addressed in any future agreement with the US. Meanwhile, Cuba continues to play a positive diplomatic role in the hemisphere, particularly in helping to resolve the conflict in Colombia. In September 2016, following four years of intensive negotiations in Havana, the Colombian government signed a peace agreement with the FARC (Rebel Armed Forces of Colombia – People’s Army) ending the longest running conflict in the region that claimed a quarter of a million people (*Guardian*, 2016).

In summarising Cuba’s influence in the region, Kruijt suggests that:

“Cuba is a country with high political significance and a reputable history as a revolutionary and influential power house, and an indestructible reputation as development donor for the poor and the under privileged... it is without doubt the most important country in the Caribbean” (208).

This influence has been felt in the non-aligned movement of nations not under the sway of any specific power bloc and very much an initiative of the global South. Cuba has been one of the dominant voices in this movement for decades given its legacy of support in so many domains to countries

across the world. In pointing to the island's overarching goal going forward, Kruijt argues that:

“Cuba’s explicit policy is to maintain the benefits of the country’s socialist system; free and accessible education and public health, elementary provisions for all and public security ensuring a crime-free society, the four basic differences that distinguish Cuba from all other Latin and Caribbean nations” (211).

This is not a definitive history of Cuba as the stated aim was to focus on Cuba’s relations with countries in Latin America and, therefore, omits the Africa campaigns, and a detailed exploration of Havana’s economic policy and social programmes. However, it very usefully captures the first-hand recollections of key actors in the period leading up to the 1959 revolution, some of those involved in nurturing and maintaining Cuba’s support of insurgent groups in the 1960s, and a broader canvass of political actors in the 1970s and 1980s. It also pays full tribute to Cuba’s humanitarianism both to political actors in the region and to those in need across the world. It oddly pays scant regard to the United States and how it influenced relations within Latin America and directly impacted on individual countries by way of covert and overt interventions. The ‘Washington Consensus’, for example, became just as insidious and devastating a US policy as the use of military proxies and often went hand in hand with military force. However, what we have here is an always interesting political history of Latin America over the last fifty years, a fascinating analysis of guerrilla movements and how they operated, and a tremendous example of how political will and tenacity can surpass just about any form of aggression, setback and nefarious meddling. Third level students and teachers of Latin American politics, development studies and related disciplines will find this book a very welcome aid.

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