

Ensayos de Reseña/Review Essays

Reading the Revolution: Where Has the Literature Taken Us in Understanding Cuba?

Antoni Kapcia

- *Cuba. A New History*, by Richard Gott. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2004.
- *The Cuban Revolution. Past, Present and Future Perspectives*, by Geraldine Lievesley. Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004.
- *People's Power. Cuba's Experience with Representative Government*, by Peter Roman. (Updated edition) Lanham, Boulder, New York, Toronto, Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers Inc.
- *Cuba. A Revolution in Motion*, by Isaac Saney. Black Point, Nova Scotia: Fernwood Books; London: Zed Books, 2003.

The arrival of four new books on Cuba reminds us that, since 1959, the Revolution has been treated voluminously but not always well. While Lievesley exaggerates when observing that 'There is a huge literature on Cuba and none of it is neutral' (p. 3), it is undeniably true that Cuba defies objectivity. Indeed the sheer scale of the literature on Cuba reflects the Revolution's enduring significance, its challenge to several orthodoxies, and the strength of a Cuban diaspora that has ensured a steady but disproportionate flow of scholarly (and less scholarly) works. Hence, the literature has followed its own trajectory, passing through as many 'phases' as the Revolution itself, but often responding to the vicissitudes, concerns and global interests of those for whom Cuba is a subject of interest. The initial scholarly and journalistic attention inevitably sought to explain the rebellion and the unexpected radicalisation towards socialism. In the 1970s the focus shifted towards Cuba's supposed unorthodoxy, some denying it (seeing continuing patterns of Stalinism) but others evidently bewitched by a 'new' model. Both of these 'phases' set a pattern, a tendency to simply reinterpret 'old' facts, though an ideological prism, as true of the Revolution's critics as of its admirers, both approaches selecting information from familiar secondary sources; occasionally, this produced a genuinely new perspective, but often resulted in a rehashing of old prejudices and information. By the 1980s, a new approach came with the fieldwork-based study of a specific aspect; after the previous generalisations and overviews, this approach brought many of the classics to the literature, providing real data and close knowledge to our debates.

With the 1990-94 crisis and beyond, a glut of works inevitably emerged, focusing on the crisis and its meaning. For some, this was the expected moment of collapse, as they explained its causes (totalitarianism, Soviet dependence, personalism, and so on) and predicted a post-Castro Cuba. For others, this was disaster,

leading to internal explanations (such as the stultifying 1970s and 1980s, or even Castro's obduracy and excessive personalism), often more with regret than bitterness or anger. Thus, the literature became either apocalyptic or elegiac about the inevitable end of a known Cuba. In this context, the 'micro' approach disappeared, almost as though it was a waste of time analysing the detail of a system whose days were clearly numbered.

From about 2000, however, a new breed of literature seems to have emerged. Although predictions of collapse continue to be published, attention has shifted to a new reality: that 'the Revolution' has survived. Hence, while some have made that their main explicit focus, most have addressed issues that implicitly contribute to that explanation. Yet all generally have a double purpose: to explain survival and address the (still apparently inevitable) 'end' of the system as we know it, a correct approach, given the reality of a survival which defied the confident predictions from those who desired collapse, from those who believed the 'end of history' teleology, and from those on the European Left who, fleeing towards a new neo-liberal social democratic consensus, saw Cuba as an embarrassing anachronism.

Yet, what might those explanations actually be? By 2000, of course, it was clear to all but the most blinkered that coercion alone could not suffice to explain. However convincing that case in the 1960s 'siege' or the 'Sovietised' 1970s and 1980s, after a decade of economic collapse and of mass emigration, the Cuban state's control (of economy, mores, expression and dissidence) was palpably weaker than ever before. Even if the Cuban system had ever been monolithic, it clearly was not so by 1998. There had of course been clampdowns (as in 1997), in response to an increasingly open dissidence, an external threat and leadership fears of the effects of reform; but, overall, the Cuba of the 1990s felt more open, and vulnerable, than ever before.

Yet, in January 1998, the visit of an anti-Communist and interventionist Pope John Paul II put that survival to the test, in a seemingly fragile and anachronistic relic of an outdated Communism. Cuba clearly passed the test, as the visit became a national celebration of survival rather than, as in Poland, the launching pad for popular dissidence. That was then followed by the seminal Elián González campaign, from November 1999, fundamental in cementing some of the surviving values and breathing new life into the system, in ways not seen since the early 1960s.

So if not coercion, what are the possible explanations? The most obvious was the question of popular involvement (participation or mobilisation), systems and patterns which had clearly passed the test of time and crisis, and, unlike the pre-1989 Socialist Bloc, continued to involve enough Cubans regularly. Equally obvious is the enduring motive power of the ideological cement of the *nación*, that curious fusion of a radical nationalism, a sense of community and a practical belief in social solidarity, rooted in the historical traditions of *cubanía* and evolving into a revolutionary 'world view'. Within this, there is also the underlying imperative of unity driving leaders and led since 1959, hardened by prolonged 'siege', deepened by achievement and national pride and challenging older collective self-perceptions. Then there are the benefits experienced by enough Cubans to ensure a loyalty, through belief, pragmatism or inertia, to the benefactor state which guarantees basic levels of protection and social provision; certainly, the system's continuing commitment to such provision throughout the 1990s 'Special Period' helped

retain the active support or passive tolerance of the majority at a time of hopelessness. Finally, one should consider the system's intrinsic flexibility (rather than its reputed monolithism), and the leadership's willingness to adapt pragmatically, especially evident in the 1990s reforms (hitherto unthinkable), but also detectable at most stages from 1959, even during the supposedly 'ideological' phases and in the more apparently impractical policies. Within this, one can detect a further explanation: the continuing space for (usually delimited) 'debate' and reassessment, the collective self-examination which has invariably followed crises and led to sustained periods of political confidence and a forced consensus. These then are what we might expect of new books on Cuba, while always using a 'Fidelometer': the more Fidel-centric the literature, the less perceptive it has been, and the less focused on him, the more analytical.

These four books come from different directions (although all display an underlying sympathy) and have different purposes: Gott offers a 'big picture' overview of Cuba's historical trajectory (following the path trodden by Thomas in 1971 but now clearly surpassing that classic in the relevance of the detail, in perceptiveness, and in readability), Roman is the most narrowly focussed, while Saney is the most committed, proving the effectiveness of a paradigm that works, and Lievesley offers a more generalist set of perspectives of the Revolution. Hence, while three offer somewhat traditional 'overviews', Roman offers a refreshing return to the 1980s models of fieldwork-based study, a useful study because it addresses the much misunderstood electoral and representative system of *Poder Popular* (OPP), usually either extolled by Cubans or sympathisers or condemned as a powerless irrelevance in a one-party totalitarianism.

Roman's book therefore merits the first treatment. The focus is both historical (tracing the system's roots in the 1960s *Poder Local* and its subsequent evolution, through experience and design and after 'debate', in the post-1970 reassessment), theoretical (based on ideas dating back to 1871 Paris), and scientific, based on extensive and careful fieldwork and providing a mass of invaluable data. It is also refreshingly honest, admitting the system's failings, dilemmas and tensions, especially the assemblies' powerlessness and essentially administrative function, and usefully addresses the vexed question of the relationship between the OPP and the Party, and the problematic drive towards consensus. One of its highlights is the chapter on the *Consejos Populares* (which the other three generally neglect), rightly seeing them as one of the most significant recent developments, addressing (if not solving) the lack of accountability and communication, although he only perhaps misses their role in restoring a *barrio*-level representation lost with the end of *Poder Local*. Also useful, but frustratingly limited in time-scale, is the appendix on the 1994 *parlamentos obreros*.

Beyond this detail, the book also usefully distinguishes between the evolving Cuban system and the apparently similar Soviet structures, while the Introduction, an excellent explanation of the whole OPP structure, is followed by a helpful if excessive peroration on the system's genealogy in the theories and experiences of socialist systems of representation. Generally, therefore, Roman passes the test: his study implicitly explains survival, but through the kind of study long missed which contributes invaluable to our understanding of the mechanisms and complexities. Its precise focus means that it necessarily ignores the other explanations, and com-

pletely ignores Fidel, preferring system to personality, analysis to biography. One hopes that it signals the end of the post-1990 'broad sweep' approach and the start of a new narrower focus.

What of the other three, 'broader', approaches? Saney clearly relies on Roman's efforts and covers some of the same ground. Less detailed and more wide-ranging in his focus, he offers an account of a Revolution that, while being less analytical and more openly sympathetic, is nonetheless a useful reference source for the student. It is inevitably derivative in its information, especially in the conventional historical sweep of the Introduction (the 33-page 'From Columbus to the Revolution') which adds little and relies heavily on Cuban and sympathetic interpretations. 'Governance in Cuba', however, is a good overview of the political structures, although strangely, and seriously, neglecting the Party, the CDRs and the Consejos Populares. The detail on dissident activity, while clearly partisan, is nonetheless welcome and frank, as is the treatment of 'Race, Inequality and the Revolution', addressing the new problems posed by the crisis and the reforms. However, the chapter on 'Crime and Criminal Justice', while again detailed, seems somewhat extraneous, and the chapter on the United States and Cuba tends to the conventional and one-dimensional, focussing on US actions and pressures and ignoring Cuban responses and ambiguities.

The book's overall purpose becomes clear in the final 'Lessons and Footprints', which lists the achievements. Perhaps surprisingly, the book pays little attention to 'civil society'; this is surprising because some of the literature on which it relies tends now to address this question and because anything which looks at that notion (however unhelpful it may be in the Cuban case) can cast light on the system's contradictions, tensions, and survival. Yet this is possibly because some key sources on Cuba are ignored, even when they are less than critical. On balance, therefore, Saney offers nothing really new but the compilation approach of the 1970s model, albeit in the process making judgements about the survival, past and future.

Lievesley's account is all together less openly sympathetic but just as generalist in focus. Seeking to present a different perspective, it seeks to address the Revolution less through conventional chronology than through themes, opening with a chapter on Cuba and the world. While the justification for this initial topic is not explicit, one senses an underlying argument that Cuba's trajectory should best be understood in that context rather than in internal structures and pressures. Here, however, the preference for a thematic approach, while refreshing, leads to a tendency to squeeze topics uncomfortably into inappropriate categories; seeing Cuba's external dimension through the prism of 'encounters' works well with 'encounters with empire' but falls down in categories such as 'cultural encounters', which are treated more superficially and fragmentarily. Moreover, the thematic approach is only really true for this chapter and the final 'The Cuban State and the Cuban people', which, unfortunately, disappoints somewhat; despite the author's clear expertise in politics, the treatment is less analytical than Roman's and becomes a catalogue of subsidiary topics gathered under the heading of 'civil society'. For the rest of the book, chronology clearly dominates; the 1960s are largely dealt with in 'Generations of Protest', and the following thirty years (including the 1990s) are uncomfortably squeezed into 'The Revolution Matures', telescoping a world of evolution, complexity and change in one single chapter.

The overall impact of the book is that it is a worthy and thorough overview, which belongs rightly on any standard Cuba booklist, not least with its welcome virtue of accessibility. However, one cannot help observing that it is an opportunity missed rather than a new perspective; indeed, the title accurately talks of ‘perspectives’, for she gives us a series of reflections on different aspects rather than one single unifying argument. Hence, although she argues initially that national identity is a key to understanding, her tracing of the trajectory of the question tends towards the conventional, using the range of familiar sources (although not always explicitly so); moreover, after that initial focus, the theme tends to disappear. This missed opportunity is regrettable as one hopes for new light, new perspectives and new comparisons when non-Cubanists approach Cuba. Unfortunately, although the implicit focus is on the present, the perspective is fragmentary, more in the style of the 1970s compendia than a new approach.

Besides this, the book also suffers from a niggling carelessness in orthography and the accuracy of its Spanish (e.g. *Colosio del Norte* rather than *Coloso, el Cuba de ayer* rather than *la Cuba*), and in its detail; thus Prio is often Prió, the *Danza de los Millones* (given as *Millonés*) is given as 1925 rather than 1920 (a serious error), Grau is given as president in 1941 despite becoming president in 1944, Montecristi is given as Montecristo (an error Gott repeats), Mella’s real name is given as MacPhelland rather than Macpartland, Ochoa’s trial as 1987 rather than 1989, the Family Code as both 1975 and 1976, and Padilla is said to have won the 1968 Casa prize instead of the much more politically significant UNEAC prize. While they are just niggles, they do unfortunately imply an underlying story of a possible haste of production and unfamiliarity with the details.

Gott’s book, on the other hand, is clearly the masterpiece of the quartet, not least for its scope and achievement. He brings a journalist’s eye for human detail and the ‘feel’ for an issue, but retains the historian’s sense of deeper processes, thus serving the literature well in two respects. The book has an admirable ambition, getting the balance of historiography just right, dividing the book more or less equally between pre-1959 Cuba and the Revolution. Indeed, its scope extends beyond the conventional 1762 starting-point, addressing the historiographical neglect of the surviving Amerindians and also, rightly, seeing that year as less the moment of opening (the orthodoxy from Cubans and Thomas alike) than the impetus for reform.

Gott’s iconoclastic tendency is in fact a hallmark of his perspective, throughout, as he pays proper attention to topics usually neglected: slave revolts, British abolitionism, Spanish politics, the *voluntarios* of 1869. Furthermore, he successfully untangles some of the thornier questions of pre-1959 Cuba: the 1898-1902 US occupation, the 1933 revolution and Guiteras, the enduring importance of the race issue, the confusion and fusion characteristic of the 1950s radicalism. Since his sweep is broad, there are inevitable, but regrettable omissions: the 1879 Guerra Chiquita, the radicalising effect on José Martí of the Florida workers, the mobilising role of the CDRs, the Great Debate (a neglect which denies an explanatory context to the pro-sugar decisions of the 1960s), the liberating effects of the 1976 *Ministerio de Cultura*, and so on. There are also inevitably errors: *Centro Galiciano* for *Centro Gallego* (p. 120), the exaggerated claim about the numbers of Spanish immigrants (p. 119), the *Ortodoxos* wrongly given as the *PRC-Ortodoxo* (rather than the *Partido del Pueblo Cubano*), and it is regrettable that he repro-

duces the disproved canard about mental patients at Mariel.

Uniquely of the four, Gott also addresses the question of personality: the complexities of Fidel and his role, the relationships and tensions within the leadership (rejecting any notion of a pre-1965 antagonism between Fidel and Che), the key decisions made. Yet, although this places him dangerously close to some of the more superficial accounts of the Revolution, he is too good a journalist and too perceptive to be mesmerised by personality, and uses this focus to make astute judgements, not least reminding us of Fidel's occasional marginality rather than personalistic control.

However, one recurring problem with his perspective is his penchant for seeing the Soviet role in Cuba as colonial: while acceptable as a passing shorthand descriptor, this reading really has no place in a serious study, ignoring the structural, cultural and political hegemony of real colonialism (which, indeed, Gott recognises well in pre-1898 and Republican Cuba). Indeed, he compounds this by attributing Cuba's acceptance of Soviet domination to Fidel and to the lack of ideology; not only is the latter now generally rejected as a notion, but Gott too implicitly denies that, with his awareness of the weight of tradition and nationalism. Yet, overall, Gott clearly gets the 'overview' approach right, bringing new perspectives to old facts and using his close familiarity with Cuba to good advantage. Along with Roman, this is a genuinely new contribution to our understanding and something of a milestone in the literature. Perhaps a new corner has been turned in the literature with these two studies.

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Antoni Kapcia is Professor of Latin American History, Department of Hispanic and Latin American Studies, University of Nottingham.
<A.Kapcia@nottingham.ac.uk>