

Cuba in Revolution – A History Since the Fifties

By Antoni Kapcia

Douglas Hamilton

Much has been written about Cuba over the past fifty years of its Revolution. However, it's difficult to think of another country where such writing has generated so many crude and clichéd representations. On a daily basis newspapers and magazines churn out distorted, negative and highly superficial articles based on at best selective and at worst incorrect information. Across the range of establishment political opinion, from the liberal left to the neo-liberal right, a conventional wisdom has built up, depicting Cuba as a corrupt dictatorship under the ruthless, power hungry, unpopular and even megalomaniac Fidel, and more recently Raúl, Castro. We are told repeatedly that Cuba is characterised by: one party rule, thus offending conventional Western notions of a functioning democracy; a society without freedom of expression in its media; a country with hundreds to thousands of political prisoners (numbers vary considerably between sources); and a people in severe economic and social hardship. Of course, mention is typically made of the generous health and education systems, and the damaging impact of the United States' (US) embargo, but these are normally add-ons in an attempt to provide some 'liberal' balance. However, if all these allegations are true, then how has the Cuban Revolution managed to survive for fifty years? Is the answer simply political repression, as we are so often led to believe?

In his deeply informed, concise, well-written and above all refreshing book, *Cuba in Revolution – A History Since the Fifties*, Antoni Kapcia provides a highly credible explanation for the Revolution's remarkable endurance that eschews simplistic analysis. Instead, the author adopts a necessarily complex and analytical framework which emphasises both internal and external factors, in particular historical colonial processes dating back to the 19th century. He argues that pre-1959 Cuba had deep ideological and political roots, what he terms *cubanía*, a radical and at times revolutionary nationalism. Kapcia shows that the Cuban Revolution has passed through a series of cycles rather than phases, with each cycle being defined by a repetitive process of crisis, debate, decision and certainty, until the next crisis. Thus, a state of crisis is regarded by Kapcia as something

inherent to the revolutionary process. Using this framework, he analyses why Cuba turned to socialism after 1959; how its economic strategies developed and changed over time; how it survived the fall of the Soviet Bloc; and how it has managed to respond to the ever-tightening US economic blockade. Most importantly, he shows how the system has managed to retain the support of a loyal but not uncritical 'silent majority' - that significant part of the population who are neither unquestioning loyal activists nor opponents of the system who have sought emigration.

In a highly informed and fascinating discussion, Kapcia takes the reader through a range of crucial issues:

- the huge social benefits of the Cuban system, in particular the development and maintenance of comprehensive education and health systems;
- the cultural divisions and debates which have taken place, involving far more inclusion than is commonly depicted;
- the adoption of a 'Third Worldist' approach to culture and foreign policy;
- the development of popular mobilisation through a series of hugely significant institutions and mass campaigns;
- the origins and changing role of the Cuban Communist Party;
- the implementation of formal popular participation through the Organs of Popular Power;
- the way in which the system has dealt with dissent;
- the role of the Catholic Church and religion more generally;
- the role of trade unions;
- the defining beliefs and values he identifies as underlying the Revolution, including activism, unique culturalism, moralism, youthism and ruralism;
- the functioning of the press and media; and
- the changing nature of the émigré community, especially in Florida.

From a developmental point of view, Kapcia highlights Cuba's highly distinctive new role, status and meaning in the world. For Cuba, revolutionary foreign policy has always meant more than just the normal processes of relating commercially or diplomatically to other countries. Rather, Cuba redefined itself in the world by actively emphasising its independence from both the US and the Soviet Union, and placing itself as

the revolutionary vanguard of Latin America and the ‘Third World’ more generally, a position most clearly reflected in its leading role within the Non-Aligned Movement. Kapcia shows how Cuba took the lead in resisting US imperialism; and even when Cuba had close economic links with the Soviet Union in the 1970s, it continued to be a frequent critic of Moscow because of the latter’s need to keep Cuba on board as part of its own ‘Third World’ strategy. A key and continuing aspect of Cuba’s foreign policy has been its ‘internationalism’ and its unique form of development aid, sending not only financial resources but thousands of doctors, nurses, teachers and expert advisors to some forty countries, an example from which ‘developed’ countries could clearly learn.

In conclusion, Kapcia uses his explanatory framework to show why there was such a smooth and orderly transition of leadership when Raúl recently took over as President from Fidel, a process totally at odds with the anticipated popular unrest and chaos that most external observers expected and the Revolution’s critics and enemies had sought.

Antoni Kapcia has written a hugely rewarding and accessible book, completely free of the prejudice and political bias typically associated with accounts of the Cuban Revolution. He openly addresses vexed questions and answers many of the criticisms aimed at the Revolution by its opponents, but without resorting to glib and dogmatic justifications. This book should be the starting point not just for anyone wishing to get a truly informed understanding of the Cuban Revolution, but also for those who want to learn about a truly radical, just and ongoing developmental process.

Kapcia, A (2008) *Cuba in Revolution – A History Since the Fifties*, Reaktion Books, London.

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