Rafael Rojas

Fighting over Fidel: The New York Intellectuals and the Cuban Revolution. Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015. 300 pp. (Cloth US\$35.00)

Fighting over Fidel is a compelling tale of two cities, Havana and New York, during the 1960s when both were undergoing intellectual upheaval. Rafael Rojas disentangles the connections between these upheavals, looking in particular at how the many leftish strands within New York cultural life interpreted what was happening in Cuba during the first ten years of the Revolution. Welcome new attention is therefore paid to distinguished older U.S. writers such as Waldo Frank and Carleton Beals, who had done so much to help their compatriots understand the puzzling Hispanic world to the south during the first half of the twentieth century, as well as to the maelstrom of beat poets, Marxist economists, and black activists swirling in those heady days through the clubs and cafés and publishing houses of Manhattan. Rojas's material consists of a generous sampling of the books, essays, and newspaper articles produced during this turbulent decade.

The major Cuban events of those years are well-known—the Bay of Pigs, the Missile Crisis, the setting up of the UMAPs, the death of Che Guevara, the rapprochement with the Soviet Union. Against that backdrop the book's eight chapters cover the period from eight different but overlapping perspectives. The structure works well enough, even if the inevitable repetitions could have been handled more economically. Chapter 1 contrasts the engagements with the Revolution of the *New York Times* and the *Village Voice*. The former, in the person of Herbert L. Matthews, had been the first to introduce the figure of Fidel Castro to the New York public as early as February 1957, but Matthews's long engagement with the Revolution is given disappointingly short shrift by Rojas. Frank and Beals, the subjects of Chapters 2 and 8, were both drawn into the orbit of the Fair Play for Cuba Committee by journalists Robert Taber and Richard Gibson, though Beals turned down the cochairmanship. Frank was actually contracted by the new Cuban government to write a book about the island based on his travels, but his doubts about the direction the Revolution was taking ensured that *Cuba: Prophetic Island* (1961) was never published in Cuba. Chapters 3 and 4 deal with those writers more sympathetic to the increasingly socialist dimension of the Revolution in the early 1960s: first Paul Sweezy and others associated with *Monthly Review* magazine and then the renowned sociologist C. Wright Mills, whose scandalous *Listen, Yankee: The Revolution in Cuba* (1960) provided the clearest defense of the Revolution, voiced as an attack on the long-standing U.S. inability to comprehend Cuba's interests and concerns.

The Revolution was—at least to its New York friends—as much a cultural as a political phenomenon, and as such it attracted poets and novelists from around the world. Chapter 5 focuses on Allen Ginsberg, whose almost farcical sense that any true revolution must inevitably lead immediately to complete sexual liberation and legalization of drug-use led to his expulsion from Cuba in 1965. Chapters 6 and 7 are perhaps the most interesting. “Negroes with Guns” deals with the intriguing relationship between the African American Left and the Revolution, the chapter named after the title of Robert F. Williams’s book, itself dictated in a room of the Hotel Capri in Havana to Marc Schleifer, the beat journalist and revolutionary sympathizer wanted by the FBI who would later convert to Islam, teach at the American University in Cairo, and be consulted by the U.S. State Department over its Middle East strategy, in one of the strangest personal trajectories of a strange time. Here, as elsewhere, the strength of Rojas’s book lies in its willingness to patiently separate out the different strands: how Huey P. Newton’s take differed from Stokely Carmichael’s, and how both differed from Eldridge Cleaver’s, and how all three changed over time. And did time move quickly in those days. The Revolution was no respecter of publishers’ schedules and these writers often found that their views had shifted while their books were in production, leading to many a hasty appendix or second edition. “The League of Militant Poets” is named after an ephemeral movement led by José Yglesias and Elizabeth Sutherland Martínez (the latter still an active Chicana scholar on the West Coast) which was organized around underground magazines such as *Kulchur* and (the single issue of) *Pa’Lante*. Both wrote compelling ethnographies of Cuba in the early 1960s, but both were soon critical of the Sovietization of Cuban socialism.

Fighting over Fidel was written in Spanish and has been translated by Carl Good. On the whole the translation reads well, although the insistence on rendering Rojas’s key phrase “*encuentros y desencuentros*” as “encounters and disencounters” will probably fail to introduce the latter word into the English language. The index is disgracefully slipshod for a publisher of Princeton’s quality.

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