Stephen Cushion

A Hidden History of the Cuban Revolution: How the Working Class Shaped the Guerillas' Victory. New York: Monthly Review Press, 2016. 272 pp. (Paper US\$ 27.00)

Stephen Cushion's *A Hidden History of the Cuban Revolution*, the result of extensive archival and oral history research, is one of the most important books (in any language) on the history of the Batista regime and its opponents during the 1950s to appear in the last three or more decades. It is also an openly revisionist account that challenges much research and writing produced by both Cuban and foreign scholars.

The literature on the history of Cuba in the 1950s is extensive—with a focus on Fidel Castro, urban resistance movements, relations with the United States, tourism, the sugar economy and sugar workers, and of course the guerilla struggle in the eastern and central provinces of the island between late 1956 and the victory of the Revolution in January 1959. Scholars have tended to privilege attention to the armed struggle movements that developed in the Sierra Maestra and later in northern Oriente and Las Villas provinces, a focus that reproduced the dominant narratives generated by the Sierra leadership of the July 26 Movement (MR-26-7) led by the Castro brothers, Che Guevara, and other guerrilla figures. In general, the role played by urban middle-class and student opposition movements has been insufficiently documented, though more conservative scholars have always insisted on the importance of middle-class and business organizations in undermining the Batista regime. The Cuban working class in urban areas and in the sugar mill towns and plantations has received much less attention in spite of occasional calls for this “gap” to be filled.

Cushion's impressive account is the first general study of Cuban workers and their political allies in the anti-Batista mobilizations of 1952–58. His research throws new light on numerous issues and provides a richly documented, nuanced survey of the structure of the Cuban work force, with particular attention to regional peculiarities and sectoral characteristics. Cushion is especially good in his analysis of the importance of Oriente province and its two leading cities, Santiago and Guantánamo. Attention to regional specificities allows him to demonstrate how the strategies and political stances adopted by national-level groups like the MR-26-7 and the Partido Socialista Popular (PSP, Cuba's Communist Party) underwent significant transformations as they were received at the local and regional level. For example, the anti-Communism of the national leadership of the MR-26-7, concentrated in Havana, made cooperation with Cuban Communists difficult in many areas. In Oriente province, however, distance from the island's capital and a long local history of labor militancy and collaboration with PSP grassroots cadres encouraged practical cooperation on

a daily basis. This growing convergence between policies of the PSP and the MR-26–7 meant that formal ideological differences between Cuban Communists and July 26 Movement cadres were less important than shared experiences and needs generated in workplaces as well as the informal and unofficial structures through which grassroots workers defended their interests in an increasingly repressive regime.

The book also breaks new ground in its reconstruction of the labor strategies of the three main “poles of political attraction” operating in the Cuban worker milieu. The corrupt and violent “official” trade union movement associated with Eusebio Mujal is frequently mentioned in accounts of the Batista government, but Cushion provides one of the very few detailed examinations of how *mujalismo* operated and the ways in which it lost credibility and ceased to be useful to the regime. The second worker current was the Sección Obrera of the July 26 Movement. Cushion explains how its labor militants built an impressive base among sections of the Cuban working class with a vision of politics that emphasized armed action and insurrectionary struggle. This generated tension with the third pole of attraction in the labor movement, the Communists of the PSP who had a long history of engagement with worker organization but with a greater emphasis on unarmed mass struggle addressing immediate economic needs of workers. However, Cushion convincingly demonstrates that during the last eighteen months of Batista’s rule, there was a growing convergence between July 26 Movement activists and Communists in spite of political differences expressed by national leaderships. His overall conclusion, then, is that working-class involvement (of the PSP and July 26 Movement) in the anti-Batista struggle was much greater than previously recognized.

Cushion, a labor activist and bus driver for twenty years, undertook five research trips to Cuba for his doctoral research, and his book draws on national and provincial archives, as well as an extraordinarily thorough search for local eyewitness and testimonial accounts, the personal records preserved by local worker militants, and unpublished material gathered by university students in the 1980s and 1990s. The result is a book that will certainly change the ways we understand how the Cuban Revolution came about.

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