Review Articles

Positioning Cuba

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Charles McKelvey, *The Evolution and Significance of the Cuban Revolution: The Light in the Darkness*. Basingstoke, U.K.: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018. xiii + 277 pp. (Cloth US\$149.99)

Stephen M. Fay, *Liminality in Cuba's Twentieth-Century Identity: Rites of Passage and Revolutions*. Martlesham, Suffolk, U.K.: Tamesis, 2019. vii + 244 pp. (Cloth £60)

Michael J. Bustamante & Jennifer L. Lambe (eds.), *The Revolution from Within: Cuba, 1959–1980*. Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2019. vii + 332 pp. (Paper US\$27.95)

Helen Yaffe, *We Are Cuba!: How a Revolutionary People Have Survived in a Post-Soviet World*. New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 2020. viii + 363 pp. (Cloth US\$28.00)

Together, these four books make for interesting comparative analysis chronologically, thematically, and from different geographical vantage points. Charles McKelvey, now retired and dividing his time between his native United States and Cuba, takes us from the late nineteenth century through the post-1959 revolutionary period to the present day, applying a “Marxist epistemological

method" of "cross horizon encounter" combined with a Wallersteinian world-systems approach. Stephen Fay, who is based in the United Kingdom, situates the Cuban Revolution in two key twentieth-century historical periods, 1923–33 and 1953–65, applying the concept of "liminality." Michael Bustamante and Jennifer Lambe include in their edited collection contributors largely of Cuban origin, located in the United States, Cuba and Mexico, as well as one from the United Kingdom—all aspiring to a more nuanced understanding of the 1959–80 years from a range of sociocultural, as well as transnational, historical perspectives. And Helen Yaffe, who is a British economic and social historian, documents in depth political, economic, and social strategies adopted in Cuba for surviving "in a post-Soviet world," with the emphasis more on domestic continuities than on ruptures.

McKelvey's study is part of the Rutgers University Series in Critical Political Theory and Radical Practice, which expressly aims to engage alternative political theories and practice. In this vein, he states clearly at the outset his aim to expand "popular understanding of the global structures of domination and the possibilities for a social transformation that would be the foundation for a more just world" and "to raise the consciousness of the English-speaking peoples of the North" (p. v), especially the United States, foregrounding Cuba's history of struggle. He draws on, and identifies with, the anticolonial and postcolonial worldviews of past and present Third World leaders to unpick the ethnocentrism of the North. In the Cuban case, his point of departure is one of appreciation for the revolutionary project of national and social liberation, from seeking to challenge Spanish colonial and U.S. neocolonial power (1868–1959) through the effort to transform neocolonial structures by the revolution in power (1959 to the present).

His is a grand narrative, which he sets out to "write from below" and "without pretence to objectivity" based on the speeches and writings of Third World charismatic leaders, reflecting the dialectical relation between theory and practice, to formulate a theoretical understanding. In doing so, he projects a possible future for humanity, in which he sees the Cuban Revolution as central. He argues that the neocolonial world system is in structural crisis, with a marked incapacity for reform, and that Third World projects of national and social liberation are held back from achieving socialism in the twenty-first century, a trend Cuba valiantly attempts to defy. He ends with an appendix that sees a world out of control, falling increasingly into darkness, situating in this vein both Trump's populism and the Left's failure in the United States, while positing Cuba as a light indicating an alternative road toward a world where justice and peace will reign. While his metanarrative treads much tried and tested ground, draws mainly on secondary sources, and is somewhat apocalyptic in its approach, it is highly readable and informative on its own terms.

Fay's study, by contrast, delves into Cuba's twentieth-century trajectory not as a linear progression but rather as a repeating circularity defined by "limen," or thresholds, at key moments in time. He looks not only at the better-known moments such as 1933 ("*Un dérèglement de tous les sens*") and 1959–60 ("The turning of all tides"), but also 1923 ("*Annus mirabilis*"), 1927 ("*Nihil admirari*"), 1953 ("José Martí and Cuba's centennial *conciencia*"), 1957 ("In and out of time"), and 1965 ("Post-liminal Cuba?"). Each moment is analyzed as a turning point of almost obsessive reflection on national "identity" and "destiny" against a backdrop of what is set out in simple lay terms in the book's opening pages as the tussle between "*la lucha*" (the laudable struggle of the nation) and "*la luchita*" (the everyday struggle of people in society). Alongside revolutionary fervor there is also ambivalence; conversely, nihilism is undercut by remembrance, with discursive dichotomies of the liminal lexis surrounding the ever-present transitional "*venceremos*" (we shall overcome)—always in the future as a harbinger of potential.

Fay unpicks texts by political and intellectual figures, some better known than others, for each of his chosen moments in time. He groups them into the "reaggregationists" (à la Arnold van Gennep), those who perceive and fight for a postliminal promised land, and the "liminalists" (cf. Victor Turner), who see the introspection and ambivalence at liminal turning points not as a phase but as an irrevocable condition. Those who gain the hermeneutic high ground are those who seem more in tune with the oscillations of the time. Without detailing the many intellectual figures subject to in-depth textual analysis in each period, suffice it to juxtapose the writings of "reaggregationists" such as Fidel Castro and Ernesto Che Guevara in the post-1959 period with the contemporary return to the earlier writings of "liminalists" such as Jorge Mañach and Fernando Ortiz in the more uncertain times of the present day. While not an easy read, and while evidencing a gender and racial bias in the all-White-male cast of those chosen for study, and a narrow focus on Cuban thinking with scant reference to the breadth of thinking across the Americas during the same periods under scrutiny, Fay has nonetheless produced an original and meticulously illuminating study of major Cuban figures and times that is both thoughtful and thought provoking.

The edited volume by Bustamante and Lambe grew out of a 2014 conference on new histories of the Cuban Revolution at Yale University. The collection does not pretend to be representative or comprehensive, but rather signals new departures in the historiography covering the years 1959–80. Its title claim to historicizing the Revolution "from within" lies less in the location of those writing about those years and more in the "Cuba-centric" choice of topics, such as the "internal dynamics of the revolutionary process" so

as “to further pluralize our understanding of the revolutionary state beyond its most public leaders” (p. 5).

The Revolution Within Cuba is divided into three sections: “Stakes of the Field,” “Case Studies,” and “Concluding Reflections.” The “stakes” refer to the politics of the historical paradigms: the uses made of Cuba’s past by the revolutionary state, the impact of official narratives on what is known and knowable about the Cuban Revolution, and the way “the construction of a revolutionary and counterrevolutionary canon of historical knowledge has thrown even purportedly ‘neutral’ scholars into a polarized minefield” (pp. 5–6). The question posed is how to characterize Cuba in terms of revolution (singular) or revolutions (plural), outlining depictions of Cuba transitioning from democratic-bourgeois and anti-imperialist to socialist in nature in its early years, and from “permanent revolution” to “revolution betrayed” (cf. Trotsky) and latterly “the end of revolution” (Rafael Rojas). The difficulty also spelled out is how to write the Revolution’s history out of closed archives, when access to information is circumscribed by archival laws (Jorge Macle Cruz).

Oral history, it must be said, does not seem to be writ large in this collection as a tool of history to overcome this. And yet, while by no means the first attempt to rise above a “top-down” approach, the volume does include case studies that bring to light new documentary evidence and analysis on a range of topics. These span the reportage of Andrew St. George in constructing a “messianic” staging of revolution in the Sierra Maestra (Lillian Guerra); the transition from a “we demand” to a “we give” in the turbulent fast-moving Year 1 of the Revolution (María del Pilar Díaz Castañón); the bold, though not always materialized, geotransformational plans of Cuban geographers for the Cuban landscape (Reinaldo Funes Monzote); the class paradox of “high-culture” ballet rising as a symbol of revolution as against the almost denigration of “low-culture” cabaret (Elizabeth Schwall); the Africa dream of Che Guevara and Julius Nyerere in shaping the roots of Cuba’s Latin-Africanism (Christabelle Peters); fashion and consumer product change in the promised socialist modernity (María A. Cabrera Arús); anniversary memory fatigue in the 1970s (Bustamante); and nationalism, sexuality, and violence in the 1980 Mariel Exodus (Abel Sierra Madero). Interesting, if not altogether new, international departures can be found in chapters on a comparison between the Cuban Revolution of 1959 and the Haitian Revolution of 1804 (Ada Ferrer); Latin America, the Mexican Revolution of 1910, and the historiographies of politics, race and popular culture (Alejandro de la Fuente); and the shadow of the omnipotent U.S. Empire (Lambe).

Bustamante and Lambe ask at the outset, “can even the most rigorous accounts ... evolve beyond a game of opposed mirrors, one standing in the dis-

cursive and ideological space of Havana's Revolution Square, the other planted in front of Miami's Freedom Tower?" (p. 6). That is perhaps not so easy for most of their volume's contributors, but what of others located outside Cuba, for whom Havana-Miami is not the main axis, even when their own discursive ideological space plays a part. This certainly holds for Yaffe, who sets out to document from an openly sympathetic stance how Cuban socialism has managed to survive after the Soviet implosion of the 1990s and within the international strictures spearheaded by the U.S. embargo. She asks: "What strategies are best to build socialism in a blockaded and trade-dependent island? How can production and productivity be stimulated while maintaining a development process focused on human well-being? How can growth be obtained alongside equity and social justice?" (p. 20).

Drawing on interviews with key players in Cuba, Yaffe documents in great detail development strategies that have been adopted. Lacing her account with more personal first-hand anecdotes from having visited and lived in Cuba, she provides glimpses of how these strategies were perceived and experienced by Cubans. The main thrust, however, is on the strategies themselves, and with an eye to continuity rather than rupture. Her account is more seamless when it comes to less controversial social policy, such as health and education, and more problematic when it comes to more contentious arenas such as political boundaries and economic policy, which have themselves undergone significant changes over time. Writing this review as I am in the midst of the global Covid-19 pandemic, Cuba's health gains and health internationalism must surely be lauded, though the incongruence of advanced biotechnology alongside shortages of simple medicines available to the population is less easy to explain. The history of Cuba's energy policy is not without its enigmas: why, for example, in the context of overseas oil dependence, did early domestic initiatives for renewables such as solar energy fail to prosper? And what of the Achilles heel of the Revolution, the tightrope between the plan and the market?

Packed with detailed information, as Yaffe's account is, it is perhaps almost inevitable that there should be some inaccuracies. Suffice it to cite two, for which I have first-hand experience: the first meningitis epidemic was not in 1976 (p. 132) but in 1973, when my own son, only months old at the time, caught it and was quarantined, along with me, for a month in a Havana hospital, as doctors raced to find an antidote; and the 2016 recession (p. 229) might have been a reflection of earlier hurricanes but not Hurricane Irma, which hit in September 2017 and is the topic of analysis in the documentary *Cuba: Living Between Hurricanes* (www.livingbetweenhurricanes.org).

None of this should detract, however, from the fullest account we have to date, of the ups and downs of valiant attempts to build, adapt, and defend

a socialist development approach, including the many internal political, economic, and sociocultural fallouts in the process. My own experience of trying to grapple with this 30 years ago came at what, with hindsight, was to be a crucial turning point for Cuba and the world. My approach then was akin to that of McKelvey, “from within” as posited by those contributing to the Bustamante and Lambe collection, as much on the lived experience as on the strategies detailed by Yaffe, and attempting to balance “la luchita” within “la lucha” along the lines of Fay’s liminal approach. At the time, I was criticized by some of my fellow historians for what they saw as my ahistorical title, *Cuba: The Test of Time* (1989). However, it has been against all the odds that Cuba in the decades since then has almost miraculously weathered the test of time. Despite all the problems, and having added an environmental approach to its agenda, Cuba in 2015 proudly topped the global Sustainable Development Index (SDI, www.sustainabledevelopmentindex.org), which is no mean feat. In the uncertain world that awaits us as and when we emerge from Covid-19, facing global imperatives of environmental and social justice, the Cuban experience is surely one we would be unwise to discount.