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Cuba book review

The revival of a political tradition

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The fact that Celia Hart can now write freely about Trotsky and Trotskyism, and discuss many of the historical crimes of Stalinism appears to reflect a much more relaxed attitude from the Cuban CP leadership which is now freed from any shackles of Moscow control.

[<https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/fidelche.jpg>]

When George Bush latched on to the illness of Fidel Castro, and the temporary handing of power in Cuba to Castro's brother Raul, as a pretext to urge regime change, on the island, he revived memories of a long and inglorious history of US intervention in the affairs of Latin American countries.

In no instance during more than a century of involvement has the USA sided with popular, democratic forces against a military dictatorship: instead, time and again, the US has dispatched troops or pulled strings to repress any movement that might unseat vicious, corrupt, but pro-US, regimes.

In the case of Cuba, the history of US intervention goes back to the end of the 9th century. In 1895 the US made a bid to buy the island. Three years later, after defeating Spain in war, the US took over Puerto Rico, Guam and the Philippines. And American troops occupied Cuba for three years. In that time they took the opportunity to alter the constitution with the 1901 Platt amendment, giving the US perpetual rights to intervene in Cuban affairs, and limiting its independent action.

Only when Cubans elected a president to the liking of Washington was the US military presence scaled down in 1902, but US Marines were back for three years from 1906 to suppress riots. The country was run by a succession of brutal and dictatorial regimes, culminating in a coup in 1934 led by former sergeant Fulgencio Batista, whose blend of authoritarianism, violence and brazen corruption established him as the military strongman and dominant figure in Cuban politics for 25 years.

Batista was shrewd enough to recognise the potential benefits to him of legalising the (Stalinist) Communist Party in 1938 (then embroiled in the collaborationist politics of building Popular Fronts with so-called democratic bourgeois formations) and trade unions in 1939, and was rewarded by CP endorsement of his election campaign in 1940.

In 1942 two leading Stalinists took office as ministers in Batista's government. But the other key prop to Batista's rule was the USA, and especially the financial groups which grabbed the chance for rich pickings from Cuban investment, and the US Mafia, which stepped up its operations on the island with the arrival of top mobsters including the Mafia's banker, Meyer Lansky, who lived in Cuba from 1937 to 1940, establishing a growing empire of casinos and hotels. When Batista handed over the presidency in 1944 to the corrupt leaders of the Autentico party, the Mafia was already well established in the top circles of power.

By 1948 the Presidential palace openly took a share of the huge profits from selling cocaine, skimming the National Lottery and milking the country's Customs revenues. While US banks and corporations had largely sewn up the profits from monopoly control of Cuba's sugar and extractive industries, transport, telephones, energy and infrastructure, the Mafia had by the early 1950s achieved a dominant role in tourism, casinos, nightclubs, prostitution, drug traffic, gambling, trade in precious stones, smuggling, money-laundering, import and export businesses, finance and banking, and had extensive influence in the Autentico party and with Batista and his circle of supporters.

The US government, and especially the CIA had worked closely with the Mafia during the War, and many links

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remained in place afterwards. Even the high profile expulsion of mob boss “Lucky” Luciano from Cuba in 1947 as a result of US pressure was in fact a means to divert attention from the booming Mafia business, involving top US-based mobsters, which had been set up before his arrival and continued to flourish on the island after his enforced departure.

For the US government, which had already sidelined the embarrassing revelations of the 1950 Kefauver report into mob activities in the USA, the Mafia's Cuban empire was seen, if anything, as an additional lever of control over the political regime. However the blatant corruption of Autentico presidents led in 1952 to the real danger than the opposition Ortodoxo party (whose radicalising membership included Fidel Castro) could win the elections: twelve weeks before polling day, Batista staged a bloodless preemptive coup which had been widely predicted in advance, and with evident acquiescence from Washington.

It is worth recalling that this was a period at the height of the Cold War, with war still raging in Korea, and heightened US fears of popular movements which later brought CIA-backed military coups against radical nationalist leaderships in Iran (1953) and then Guatemala (1954). The Batista dictatorship deepened its alliance with the Mafia, while escalating its repression of popular movements. It sealed off any .normal. avenue of opposition.

The paralysis of bourgeois politics triggered Castro's now famous attack on the Moncada barracks in Santiago on July 26 1953, backed by about 150 supporters, including two women. The raid itself was abortive and some of the rebels were killed: others were put on trial and jailed, but not before Castro, defending himself, had put forward the accusing statement- cum-manifesto “History will absolve me”, which called for action to break up the holdings of the big landowners, nationalisation of electricity and telephone companies, and a variety of democratic and other reforms.

Released from jail early under an amnesty in 1955, Castro went into exile in Mexico. He secured support and funding from a variety of oppositional and disgruntled forces. including sidelined former Autentico President Prio Socorras, whose donation purchased the Granma, the boat in which Castro's Rebel Army, with its ramshackle policies, sailed on November 24 1956 to fight a 3-year guerrilla war based in the Cuban countryside.

The eventual success of what at times seemed a tenuous battle by small numbers of rebels against an apparently large and ruthless army rested both on the popular support for any genuine opposition to Batista, and on the disintegration of the dictatorial regime itself, which by the middle of 1958 had lost the confidence and support of the USA.

When Batista and his cronies ran for the planes and fled the country on New Year's Eve, Castro's forces were welcomed into Havana by a massive general strike. Revolutionary Cuba has since been a beacon for many revolutionaries of various political traditions: but for over 20 years from the late 1960s to the early 1990s its economic and military dependence upon the Soviet Union resulted in a visible avoidance by many of its supporters of any explicit discussion of the politics of Stalinism, and some highly questionable policy statements by Fidel Castro. such as backing the invasion of Czechoslovakia, endorsing the grisly Ethiopian dictatorship, and opposing the trade union movement in Poland.

However the same period also saw Cuba break ranks from the Kremlin's policy, to mount the decisive military intervention in support of the Angolan liberation struggle, which in turn helped weaken and overturn apartheid in South Africa. After the heavy-handed repression and incarceration of the small body of Cuban Trotskyists in the immediate aftermath of the 1959 revolution, we have waited over 40 years for a specifically Cuban critique of the politics of Stalinism.

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The emergence of such writings at this time, in a new volume by Celia Hart offers tremendous basis for optimism that as Castro's physical strength ebbs away there is a core of committed and critical Marxists within the Cuban CP willing to fight in defense of the gains that have been made and against a CIA orchestrated democratisation. by a vicious Miami-based expatriate restorationist mafia.

Celia first discovered the writings of Trotsky while studying in East Germany in the 1980s and the essays and articles in this volume show her increasing awareness of the corrosive effects of Stalin's theory that it was possible to build "socialism in a single country" and the Stalinist rejection of Trotsky's interpretation of the concept of "permanent revolution" (i.e. uninterrupted and international) first put forward by Karl Marx in the 1850s.

Celia argues that the core revolutionary concepts in Trotsky's approach were close to those of early Cuban revolutionary Julio Antonio Mella, and also embraced by Che in his quest to internationalise the revolution. She also poses the question which we might have expected more Trotskyists to have posed over the many years in which they uncritically endorsed a Cuban regime which excluded their current from political debate: why was it forbidden for so many years to put Leon Trotsky in relation to the Cuban Revolution? (p21).

Celia insists that she has not managed to find out - but the answer is not too difficult to uncover. Castro's July 26 Movement, which had fought and defeated Batista in the teeth of opposition from the Stalinists of the Popular Socialist Party., was strong enough to oust the old regime, but was not based in the working class and did not have enough links or expertise in the trade unions to secure stable control over the whole economy.

And Castro's new regime, immediately under pressure from the USA, felt that it needed international economic and military support. For its part the relatively new Soviet bureaucracy under Khrushchev was looking to strengthen its hand against the USA: deals were done in which the July 26 Movement merged with the Stalinist party, with the Castro brothers in overall control, but considerable political influence handed to the Stalinists.

In exchange the USSR extended military and economic support to Cuba. Moscow was prepared to allow Castro a degree of leeway in nationalising the Cuban economy, and for some years ignored Cuban efforts to export its model of revolutionary change by endorsing guerrilla struggles and left currents in Latin American countries.

[<https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/celiahart.0.jpg>]

But the new Kremlin regime under Brezhnev took a harder line. and from the late 1960s until the collapse of the USSR in the early 1990s Castro's Cuba was required to operate within the boundaries of Soviet foreign policy. The fact that Celia can now write freely about Trotsky and Trotskyism, and discuss many of the historical crimes of Stalinism appears to reflect a much more relaxed attitude from the Cuban CP leadership which is now freed from the shackles of Moscow control. However there are still constraints and it is not accurate to claim that the Cuban leadership was Trotskyists in practice.

Che may have been the one to free the imprisoned Cuban Trotskyists on his return from Africa, and may well have read Permanent Revolution and had Trotsky's History of the Russian Revolution in his knapsack in Bolivia (p25), but his guerrilla exploits in Latin America, however heroically inspired, never set out to lead a process of permanent revolution in which the working class would take the lead. But as a treasure trove of ideas and neglected facts past and present, and a reminder of the historic legacy that helped give us the Cuban Revolution, Celia Hart's writings are very important. We also need to see how these ideas can be further developed in the context of the Cuban political situation in the closing years of Fidel's rule.

*Selected writings by Celia Hart Edited by Walter Lippmann.
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