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978-1-107-08308-0 - Cuba, the United States, and Cultures of the Transnational Left, 1930–1975

John A. Gronbeck-Tedesco

Excerpt

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Introduction

Our relationship with Cuba is so intimate, and so ambiguous, that every omission or commission of the American Mission in Cuba, no matter how innocent, is invested with some deep political significance.

Harry Guggenheim, former US Ambassador to Cuba, 1934¹

If France launched Napoleon, the Soviet Union Lenin, the United States Superman, India Gandhi, Great Britain the gentleman, China Mao, Spain Don Quijote, and Vietnam Uncle Ho – our America has produced Che. So we enter the saturated iconographic world of contemporary history.

Edmundo Desnoes²

Reporting in February 1959 that the Cuban revolution was a “people’s victory,” communist journalist Joseph North believed that Fulgencio Batista was rightfully overthrown by a working-class interracial political bloc whose aim was to produce a new nation based on socialist principles and progressive legislative reform. This revolution, North wrote, was for “freedom first, and an end to the torture and terror and bloodshed suffered by the people all the long years.” Enthusiastically conveying “the rare privilege of seeing the heart of a people’s revolution throbbing in victory” under the magnanimous leadership of Fidel Castro, North’s mission was to deliver the significance of the Cuban triumph to his left-wing audience: “From them I bring you this report because I want all Americans to know the truth. Not merely to know it, but to *act* on it, to realize

¹ Harry Guggenheim, *The United States and Cuba: A Study in International Relations* (New York: Macmillan, 1934), 240.

² Edmundo Desnoes, “El Che y los ojos del mundo,” *Cuba Internacional*, April 1971, 16.

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our stake in it, to understand that *our* national honor and welfare are affected by what the Cubans did.”³ North’s admiration for the revolution became inscribed in his *Cuba: Hope of a Hemisphere* (1961) and was seconded not only by others of the Old Left bloc but by younger liberals and radicals who were eagerly watching revolution unfold, some curious, some cautious, but many exuberant about the political possibilities of the broad-based resistance movement taking place ninety miles from the United States. They were not alone, for in early 1959 a considerable portion of the US public observed the drama with an air of entertainment. Much of this shared excitement, however, would be muted within months when what appeared to be a thrilling and amusing revolt evolved into a formidable reworking of long-standing US-Cuban relations ushered in by the vivid realities of the cold war.

North’s 1959 trip to Cuba was not his first, however. Twenty years earlier he had reported for the communist magazine *New Masses* on a prior revolutionary period.⁴ Beginning in the early 1930s, a mass mobilization of Cubans championing anti-imperialist politics, racial plurality, and economic sovereignty coalesced into a nationalist impulse that sought a “new Cuba.” The ouster of the president-turned-dictator, Gerardo Machado, on August 12, 1933, highlighted the brief but watershed moment of what the Cuban historical record refers to as the “1933 revolution” and the young people that led it as the “Generación del 30.”⁵ It was during this time that a group of Cuban officers, led by a young and upcoming leader, Fulgencio Batista, waged a successful coup, known as the “Sergeants’ Revolt,” and toppled Machado’s replacement, Carlos Manuel de Céspedes, leaving a power vacuum in the government. The revolution installed a pentarchy government led by the progressive Ramón Grau San Martín and his Marxist Secretary of Interior, Antonio Guiteras. Grau’s presidency would not last long, however, because the revolutionary instability continued under ineffectual leadership backed by US influence.

In his memoir published in 1958, North recalled his life as a committed Old Left communist that began with a “political education” in

³ Joseph North, *Cuba’s Revolution: I Saw the People’s Victory* (New York: New Century, 1959), 5–7.

⁴ Joseph North, “Cuba’s Typhoid Cartel,” *New Masses*, August 27, 1940, 3–4.

⁵ I use *1933 revolution* to refer to the entire decade of the thirties, beginning in 1930 with the first major student-led strikes and protests and culminating in 1940 with the election of Fulgencio Batista to the presidency and the passage of a new constitution. This follows the custom of Cuban scholars who use the term “*la revolución del 30*” to define the 1930s as a revolutionary period, with 1933–5 representing the height of political volatility.

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International Labor Defense in Philadelphia, where he worked on the Scottsboro case and the campaign to free southern labor leader Angelo Herndon, which eventually led North to throw himself into the Loyalist cause in the Spanish Civil War. At that time, he wrote, Spain was the “center of the world.”⁶ At the end of the thirties, North traveled to Cuba after *New Masses* received a letter written by Cuban Marxist intellectual Juan Marinello, who described the crimes of Machado and beckoned support from anti-imperialist sympathizers. North journeyed to Manzanillo, where the US-owned Electric Bond and Share company was negligently controlling the town’s electricity and water reservoir, which resulted in contaminated water for local residents. From there, North made the jaunt to Santiago de Cuba and interviewed the city’s first Afro-Cuban mayor, which seemed to prove that revolution could bring a more equitable society.⁷

Following North’s lifelong interest in Cuba that spanned four decades, this book examines US-Cuban political and cultural exchange around the Cuban revolutions of 1933 and 1959. Drawing from US and Cuban sources, it documents the ways in which politicians, intellectuals, artists, and activists used revolution in Cuba to craft new claims about race, class, gender, empire, and nationhood that crossed borders. This discussion centers on the failures and triumphs of two Left generations that saw revolution as a touchstone for campaigns of racial equality, anti-imperialism, and women’s liberation. Cuba was a literal and figurative terrain for US radicals and revolutionaries in the generational transition from the Good Neighbor Policy to cold war containment. In the United States, the revolutions fell between the onset of New Deal liberalism and the rise of the Old Left, on the one hand, and the dawning of cold war modernization and the New Left, on the other.⁸ In Cuba, these events redesigned social

⁶ Joseph North, *No Men Are Strangers* (New York: International Publishers, 1958), 53, 79–81, 124.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 158, 160–2.

⁸ On the Old Left’s constitution, see Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Verso, 1998); Judy Kutulas, *The Long War: The Intellectual People’s Front and Anti-Stalinism, 1930–1940* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995); and Alan Wald, *Writing from the Left: New Essays on Radical Culture and Politics* (New York: Verso, 1994). For the revolution’s bearing on the New Left, see Todd Gitlin, *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage* (New York: Bantam Books, 1987); Van Gosse, *Where the Boys Are: Cuba, Cold War America and the Making of a New Left* (New York: Verso, 1993); Timothy Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie: Robert F. Williams and the Roots of Black Power* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999); and Elizabeth Sutherland (Martínez), *The Youngest Revolution: A Personal Report on Cuba*, with photographs by Leroy Lucas (New York: Dial Press, 1969).

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institutions, government bureaucracies, and cultural industries, just as they restructured nationalist narratives and political ambitions based on anti-US sentiment that bore a new nation self-fashioning itself into a leader of the third world. Conceiving of the Cuban revolutions as a historical period – bridging what is usually historicized separately as the “thirties” and the “sixties” – illustrates how a longer revolutionary commitment in Cuba fueled changing developments in geopolitics, national statecraft, and cultural expressions traversing the Florida Straits in the transition from hemispheric modernism to postmodernism, the effects of which are still felt today.

Significantly, this book argues that this voluminous exchange was inseparable from the longer history of US empire in Cuba. If US leftists and progressives found inspiration in revolution, other US Americans believed the revolutionary triumph of 1959 represented the tragic – and exceptional – “loss of Cuba,” which irrevocably undid what President William McKinley famously quipped in 1899 were “ties of singular intimacy.”⁹ By 1959, it was glaringly apparent that those ties of intimacy also had produced a bind that made for its own unraveling because those threads were cut from a cloth stretching back generations patterned from the lineaments of modernity. The work of revolutionaries and radicals, therefore, was duly fraught with antagonisms culled from the uneven history between neighbors. At some level, the way US radicals imagined Cuba was inextricable from Cubans’ associations with empire and their desire to break from the northern hegemon. While the 1933 and 1959 revolutions did trigger new transnational programs of dissent, they also sponsored unanticipated cavils due to the history of intimate ties. Radicals were forced to harmonize their pro-Cuban support with an anti-US nationalism that made up the bedrock of revolution, which meant that Yankee supporters could become associated with the very North American hegemony they hoped to conquer with their Cuban comrades. Modernity’s legacies factored into US-Cuban coalitional work, creating disjunctures and gaps, even as the movement by Cuban and US subjects across national borders set up a collaborative circuitry of women’s rights activism, anti-imperialist coalitions, racial alliances, and new creative expressions that drew from the aesthetic catalogs of modernism and postmodernism in contested narratives of empire and revolution.

⁹ Louis A. Pérez, Jr., *Cuba and the United States: Ties of Singular Intimacy* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1990).

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The 1933 revolution occupies an important space in post-1959 Cuban historiography, located as the midway point between the failures of 1898 and the fruits of 1959. This massive rewriting of Cuban history predominantly has followed a Marxist model to describe Cuba's dialectical progression toward independence based on class antagonisms, a centuries-long struggle that eventually, and inevitably, produced the material conditions necessary for the *clase obrera* to vanquish the local and foreign bourgeoisie.¹⁰ In order to understand the revolution of the 1950s, Cuban historians argue, one must grasp the germane politics of the 1930s. Historian Lionel Soto summoned this collective memory when he wrote

The 1933 revolution marked a powerful advancement in the fight for national liberation and social progress of our country, and it signified the most immediate precedent to the Cuban socialist revolution. Without understanding that background, it is not possible to understand the closest origins of the social revolution of the proletariat that happened in Cuba and its first-of-a-kind status in America.¹¹

Soto and other Cuban intellectuals of the post-1959 era have placed the 1930s on a longer trajectory of (neo)colonial and imperial resistance: the Ten Years War (1868–78), the “Little War” (1879–80), and the War of Independence (1895–8) make up the thirty-year struggle for sovereignty. Yet, because sovereignty was granted with substantial US oversight, the revolutions of 1933 and 1959 become punctuated markers in what is remembered as the continued struggle for independence, first against colonial Spain followed by opposition to the neocolonial United States.¹² In broad strokes, the tripartite history consists of the Wars of Independence (1868–98), Republic (1902–58), and Revolution (1959–present).¹³ In this formulation, the generation of the thirties was in the end “national-reformist” but not “revolutionary” enough to bring the portents of Karl Marx and José Martí to fruition.¹⁴ The rebellion of the

¹⁰ See Jorge Ibarra, *Prologue to Revolution: Cuba, 1898–1958*, trans. Marjorie Moore (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1998); Lionel Soto, *La revolución del 33*, 3 vols., 2nd ed. (Havana: Editorial de Ciencias Sociales, 1979); and José A. Tabares del Real, *La Revolución del 30. Sus dos últimos años*, 2nd ed. (Havana: Editorial de Ciencias Sociales, 1973).

¹¹ Soto, *Revolución del 33*, 1:7.

¹² Tabares del Real, *Revolución del 30*, 67.

¹³ Julio César Guanche, *La imaginación contral la norma. Ocho enfoques sobre la república de 1902* (Havana: La Memoria, Centro Cultural Pablo de la Torriente Brau, 2004), 15–16.

¹⁴ Soto, *Revolución del 33*, 1:181.

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thirties produced the 1940 Constitution, which was not followed to its letter. Only the 1959 revolution fulfilled this vision and exceeded it and, in the process, invited worldwide fascination and consternation. If many held Cuba to be an aberrant threat in the western hemisphere, others deemed it to be a glorious example of what social resistance could bring. For its supporters, it marked the moment when the Cuban David finally defeated the US Goliath, a tale of failed US triumphalism when Uncle Sam's Ahab-like obsession to conquer the Cuban white whale floundered, thus causing it to become red. But, as was already evident by the 1930s, the political and cultural interconnectivity that had historically shaped these national mythologies in terms of one another also reaped an unsettling coexistence that began to tear them apart.

Thus, beginning this story in the 1930s allows for a deeper excavation of Cuba's violent disidentification with its northern neighbor and the well-known account of US-Cuban fallout that the world still eagerly consumes: the pastiche narrative of Kennedy, Khrushchev, Guevara, and Castro; the legendary fight between imperial domination and subaltern opposition; astonishing moments of clandestine operations by the CIA, the Bay of Pigs failure, and the near-apocalyptic October Cuban Missile Crisis that was *the* apex of the cold war. It was not that the politics of 1959 simply continued those of 1933 in any predestined way, any more than interest in Cuba by the New Left, third world nationalists, and second-wave feminists was merely an extension of Depression-era communists or interwar suffragists. These indeed were different generations, but the 1933 revolution remains pivotal for understanding what came later. It created an overhaul of the Cuban national psyche and rattled US control in the region. It made the controversial career of Fulgencio Batista, whose presidential victory in 1940 was the result of thirties populism. When he again took the presidency in 1952, his was the face of an embattled dictatorship confronting masses of opposition, the majority of whom were young disaffected Cubans. Thus those African-American renegades, countercultural spokespeople, and feminist crusaders who blossomed in the 1960s remained, directly or indirectly, indebted to the generation prior.

Because Cuba and the United States stand at different yet connected points on the larger map of modernity, and because episodes of both harmony and discord make this story occupy a special position in hemispheric affairs, this binational relationship is dramatically distinct from other US–Latin American pairings. The numerous US cultural vectors crossing the island have prompted some scholars to argue that no other

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Latin American country became so “Americanized” in the twentieth century. They point to the generations of Cuban elites who received their educations in the United States, technological advancements that made Cuba exceptional compared with other American republics, and to the selection of baseball and boxing, rather than soccer, as Cuban national sports.¹⁵ While Cuba’s postindependence nationalism grew out of three decades of war, abolitionism, and waves of Cuban exiles assembling resources in the United States, it also entered the twentieth century under vast US patronage and interference, which included omnipresent US business and political interests, to the extent that by 1920, 73 percent of Cuban imports came from United States, making 1924 a year when US investment in Cuba climbed to \$1.2 billion.¹⁶ By the time Fidel Castro and his compatriots were setting their crosshairs on Yankee influence in Cuban affairs, Cubans published 58 daily papers (fourth in Latin America behind Argentina, Mexico, and Brazil) and boasted 23 television stations and 160 radio stations. Cuba’s radio market ranked eighth in the *world*, ahead of France and Great Britain.¹⁷ The vast transnational space nourished over several decades of border-crossing traffic spawned the circulation of Desi Arnaz, Bacardi rum, jazz music, and academic study, as well as the extensive cultural circuitry of Fidel Castro and Che Guevara commercialism, sounds of hip-hop and reggaetón, and the exclusive movement of Cuban cigars. It was within the time-tested routes of capital, entertainment, technology, and education that friends and foes of revolution found their expressive vehicles.

Accordingly, the hyphen in US-Cuban revolutionary Lefts is important because Cuba has operated in a particular way in the US cultural imagination and has prompted numerous transgressions to the island in the name of dissident solidarity. So too did Cuban exiles sculpt this relationship in their sojourns to the United States. As several scholars have shown, the evolution of Cuban nationhood has taken place in part offshore and often in the United States. Louis Pérez, Jr., has written that the politics of exile hugely informed Cuban national formation in the nineteenth

¹⁵ See Louis Pérez, Jr., *On Becoming Cuban: Identity, Nationality and Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999).

¹⁶ Robert Whitney, *State and Revolution in Cuba: Mass Mobilization and Political Change, 1920–1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 24; Louis A. Pérez, Jr., *Cuba under the Platt Amendment, 1902–1934* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1986), 187–9.

¹⁷ Yvonne M. Conde, *Operation Pedro Pan: The Untold Exodus of 14,048 Cuban Children* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 7.

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century, when many left Cuba and returned or left permanently. The experience of exile made the condition of *destierro* (uprooted) an important element in Cuban nationalism that bonded communities of *los emigrados*. The experience abroad, he shows, made visible the dissatisfaction with the home country, producing “a peculiar Cuban angst, a deepening disquiet having to do with a sense of thwarted self-fulfillment.”¹⁸ This was an unstable but productive (dis)location, as Rodrigo Lazo notes, and it must be understood in its deeper historical development, especially because it has directed the trajectory of Cuban nation building over the past 150 years.¹⁹ By the 1930s, familiar corridors, institutions, and affiliations in the United States afforded Cubans, particularly sons and daughters of elites, unparalleled access to privileged educations and/or sanctuary from political persecution. While exile politics continued to affect revolutionary work of the mid-twentieth century, after the triumph of the 1959 revolution, the condition of *destierro* morphed into a place of ignominy because those Cubans seeking a life in the United States were now considered counterrevolutionary and antagonists in the new narrative of national liberation.

The 1959 revolution effectively overturned the long-held assumption that Cuba and the United States were predestined by nature to remain “good neighbors.” The belief, more forcefully voiced by US spokespeople, was that both nations remained locked in a special American bond that was violently and unexplainably broken in 1959. Writing in that year, Latin Americanist Donald Dozer, who was critical of the history of US policy in Latin America, still believed in the power and importance of a hemispheric neighborhood. “Merely knowing one’s neighbors creates a bond of sympathy with them,” he wrote. He concluded, “The indispensable thing is to strengthen the mystic cards which bind together these men and women of good will.”²⁰ Dozer was not alone in seeing Cuba as a historically faithful neighbor that lay in the crux of hemispheric solidarity. The metaphysics of an enlightened Americas, which northerners lined from Columbus to Franklin Roosevelt, was illuminated by the great project of modernity, which realized a regional configuration that would gain ground where Europe faltered.

¹⁸ Louis A. Pérez, Jr., *The Structure of Cuban History: Meanings and Purpose of the Past* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013), 50, 53.

¹⁹ Rodrigo Lazo, *Writing to Cuba: Filibustering and Cuban Exiles in the United States* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 14.

²⁰ Donald Marquand Dozer, *Are We Good Neighbors? Three Decades of Inter-American Relations, 1930–1960* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1959), viii.

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US and Cuban nationalisms remained tethered over the course of the 1933 revolution, when US influence was tested but not overcome, so that US subjects still saw in Cuba a mirror that affirmed their own triumphal, exceptional subjectivity, even as they aspired to strengthen and make equitable their ties. US exceptionalism in its hemispheric form had originated in the Monroe Doctrine, which effectively consigned the Americas to the domain of the United States, appreciating in value with the opening of the Spanish-American War and later endorsement of the Roosevelt Corollary. Cuba became the key symbol of US empire and catalyzed a new sense of exceptionalist mission making because relations with the island were central in the creation of an imperial selfhood that crystallized in the core of post-1898 US national identity. Cuba was foregrounded in the expression and deployment (military, economic, and cultural) of US exceptionalism because Cuba was the nerve center where it began in its modern form, when US intervention in 1898 transformed a war for Cuban independence into a justification for laying the foundation of neocolonial management.²¹ The paradoxical, though not ironic, result of US exceptionalism was that the desire for national sovereignty and democracy in Cuba made up the discursive and material basis for US empire, a mandate established in the intervention of 1898 and one that did not diminish but became more urgent with the onset of the cold war.

Yet, through revolution, Cubans ratified their own form of exceptionalism in building a new national identity that posed a decisive challenge to US supervision of the Americas. The revolution drew from a historical script whereby the fruits of 1959 would fulfill the deferred dreams of liberation from 1898. That Cubans had not enjoyed true sovereignty since their beginning in 1902 meant lasting disillusionment and a moral imperative to bring to fruition the independence envisioned by great forefathers such as José Martí and General Antonio Maceo. The decades of graft, corruption, and foreign intervention that became a dominant feeling by the 1930s spurred calls for revolution. Cuban history was enlisted in this cause and, as Louis Pérez, Jr., shows, made immorality into the enemy so that Cuba's problems could not be separated from the looming and covetous United States.²²

An effective hemispheric foil to US exceptionalism, the 1959 revolution rewrote the script of *cubanidad* or *cubanía* (“Cubanness”), which now demanded a daily commitment by everyday Cubans who were hailed

²¹ I thank an anonymous reviewer for this important point.

²² Pérez, *Structure of Cuban History*.

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as soldier-architects of a new state. Lillian Guerra has pinpointed this mass enlistment as part of the “grassroots dictatorship” that depended on civil society transforming itself and the revolution into a communist project. Cubans signed up for the callings of Castro and Martí and readied themselves for their mass “deputization” by the state, even if it meant surrendering certain civil liberties. What Guerra terms “millenarian expectations” called for millions of revolutionaries to build a better Cuba via the proverbial second coming: socialism, which meant the everyday molding of worker consciousness; unions; and organizations such as the Federation of Cuban Women and Committees for the Defense of the Revolution.²³

Accordingly, Havana capitalized on a state discourse that occupied exceptional standing as an anomaly in Latin America, which struck a blow to US *Pax Americana*. Cuban exceptionalism depended on a disidentification with the United States, which yielded a discourse that positioned Cuba as superior to its wayward enemy in new formal arrangements granted by postmodernity and postcolonialism. Its political framework was the Tricontinental – the global identification of people in Asia, Africa, and Latin America – that proved both a cultural language and a geopolitical strategy in which the Cuban state emerged an international leader in the racial struggles and the cultural objectives of the third world. Radicals and revolutionaries were attracted to Cuba for its seeming embrace of a 1960s Left humanism that strove to dismantle authoritative structures of inequality and to create new transnational communities of gender, class, and racial parity.

This discussion investigates the thinking and cultural production of US Left followers of this exceptionalism throughout the 1960s and early 1970s, when Left movements changed substantially and seemed to be guided by the paths of Cuba’s revolution, which itself had to negotiate domestic and international exigencies and shifting debates over third world Marxism, feminism, and racial and ethnic nationalisms. In the United States, as Max Elbaum notes, by 1968, “one million students saw themselves as part of the left, and 368,000 people ‘strongly agreed’ on the need for a ‘mass revolutionary party.’”²⁴ Chicano, Puerto Rican, and black nationalisms exerted a force across urban centers and university campuses so that in 1970 the *New York Times* reported that 40 percent of

²³ Lillian Guerra, *Visions of Power in Cuba: Revolution, Redemption, and Resistance, 1959–1971* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 13–14, 171.

²⁴ Max Elbaum, *Revolution in the Air: Sixties Radicals Turn to Lenin, Mao and Che* (New York: Verso, 2002), 17.