

The Transformations of the Cuban Revolution

July 1, 2022



Although the Cuban Revolution of 1959 had enormous popular support, especially in its early years, that support did not express itself in any autonomous initiative and control from below. That was not the case in the 1933 Revolution, when the working class played a much more important role than in 1959. As the Foreign Policy Association pointed out in 1935 in its celebrated study *Problems of the New Cuba*, a great number of strikes took place in the island in August and September of 1933 when at least 36 sugar mills were occupied by its workers who also formed “soviets” in several of them, like those at the Mabay, Jaronú, Senado and Santa Lucía sugar mills.(183) These were autonomous struggles from below similar to those that took place in the Mexican and Bolivian revolutions among others in Latin America, as well as in the Russian Revolution of 1917, and the Hungarian Revolution of 1956.

It is significant that when in the early days of the 1959 Cuban Revolution, some Cuban Communists members of the Partido Socialista Popular (PSP, Popular Socialist Party), which was still keeping a certain distance from the revolutionary government, encouraged land occupations by the peasants, Fidel Castro energetically and publicly condemned those actions. In a televised interview on February 19, 1959, the Maximum Leader clearly expressed his opposition to any “anarchic” land distribution and warned that the people involved in any kind of land distribution before the new agrarian reform law was decreed would lose their right to obtain any benefit granted by that law. At the same time, he denounced as criminal any independent initiative to distribute land that ignored the revolutionary government and the future agrarian reform law.

It was during the weeks immediately prior to the law being decreed those other aspects of what would become the *modus operandi* from above of the revolutionary regime became evident. On one hand, almost all Cubans, without class distinctions, came out in support of the announced, although

still unknown, agrarian reform law. That included the great sugar mill owners and the sugar landowners who donated tractors and other agricultural implements with the avowed purpose of supporting the new agrarian order, even though they maintained as a matter of course that it should preserve their huge agricultural properties. On the other hand, nobody knew what would be included in the new law and how radical it would be. When it was finally decreed, on May 17, 1959, it had not even been discussed by the official revolutionary government—much less by any of the revolutionary groups and organizations. In fact, the law was drafted by a small group of leaders of the Communist Party (PSP) and the wing of the 26 of July Movement friendly to the PSP in a series of meetings that took place in Ernesto “Che” Guevara’s home located in Tarará beach. It was undoubtedly a radical law in the sense that it eliminated the *latifundia* (large landholdings) with one blow. The radicalness of this law was particularly evident when compared with the very modest Law # 3 on agrarian reform that Fidel Castro decreed on October 10, 1958, in the Sierra Maestra. That law was a brief declaration of principles that promised that the future government would confront the agrarian problem that existed in the island, and that its first step would be to grant the peasants their right to permanently stay in their land. Beyond that, every pronouncement in that declaration avoided any kind of specific promise, as well as thorny issues such as whether or not to compensate the owners of the lands expropriated by the government, the same issue that had split the drafters of the 1940 Constitution less than twenty years earlier. That lack of specificity characterized the moderate social policies adopted by the revolutionary leaders in that period – from 1956 to 1958 approximately – in order to avoid disagreements and conflict within the broad coalition opposed to Batista’s dictatorship. It was during that period that Fidel Castro also distanced himself, for the same tactical reasons, from the more radical social and economic pronouncements of his *History Will Absolve Me*, in order to accommodate the growing Cuban middle-class support, and even the support of some important capitalists, for the movement he led. At the same time, he intensified his political militance against Batista, which resulted in a politics that combined armed militancy with a moderate posture on socioeconomic questions. It is significant that his brief moderate turn in socioeconomic matters was generally accepted by the whole armed opposition. In this context it is worth noting that when the Workers’ Bureau of the supposedly more leftist Second Front led by Raúl Castro in Oriente came out in support of an agrarian reform, it also expressed that support in very general terms.

The Agrarian Reform law decreed on May of 1959, enjoyed enormous support from a population that had become increasingly radicalized by the measures that the revolutionary government had recently taken, like the notable urban reform law that had substantially reduced rents, and by the growing antiimperialist sentiment engendered by the hostility towards the Cuban revolution in Washington and in most of the US mass media. The enormous popularity of the Agrarian Reform law does not detract, however, from the fact that it was a reform from above exactly like other reforms had been: announced suddenly as a *fait accompli*, and without any previous open discussion, be it organized by the revolutionary organizations or by the government, about the law’s content. The government also made sure to maintain its control over the implementation of its law, designating the Rebel Army and the National Institute of Agrarian Reform (Instituto Nacional de Reforma Agraria, INRA) to fulfill that role, thus making sure to prevent the autonomous activity of the peasants eager to obtain their own land, even if they followed to the letter what the new law stipulated. The great popularity of the Agrarian Reform, as well as of the other early measures adopted by the revolutionary government, was expressed in the giant demonstrations of a plebiscitarian character that also characterized the revolutionary process. All of this underscores the fact that, while the Cuban revolution counted with a very broad popular support and participation, this did not in any way involve any democratic control of that revolution from below. It was the government that decided each step and made sure to prevent any independent action organized

from below; the people supported the decisions of the government but did not participate in the decision-making process.

The Agrarian Reform of 1959 was a very important step in the consolidation of the *modus operandi* from above of the revolutionary government. It provided Fidel Castro and his group with enormous power and the freedom to exercise it with a minimum of limiting obligations. The enormous political capital the new regime accumulated since the first months of the revolution not only allowed it to consolidate its agrarian policies, but also to radicalize and to reorient it towards the nationalization of agricultural property with the second agrarian reform law, decreed four years later on October 3, 1963. This new law further limited the amount of land that private farmers could hold from 402 to 67 acres, at the same time that it considerably extended the Peoples' Farms (state farms) that were soon converted into the principal form of agricultural organization in the country. However, while the agrarian reform law of 1959 responded to the long-standing peasant and popular wishes and dreams, the same cannot be said about the 1963 agrarian reform, a reform that signified, more than anything else, the bureaucratic turn of a regime that had already declared itself "socialist" and was openly trying to implant a Caribbean version of the Soviet model of a collectivized agriculture.

This does not mean that the peasants, workers and the people in general were opposed the state monopoly of agriculture and industry. As long as most of them felt that they were benefitting from the actions of the revolutionary government - through social mobility and the urban reform, for example - they continued to identify with the antiimperialist politics of the government and kept on supporting it. Those who opposed the regime ended up paying a high price with penalties such as their exclusion from higher education and being discriminated against in terms of jobs by the main employer, the state. And if these measures were insufficient to silence the discontented, more draconian punishments were used, involving the systematic repression by State Security, prison and the execution wall.

Transition of the political system towards control from above

It is true, however, that in 1959, Fidel Castro, along with his close collaborators still had to deal with a series of individuals and groups that did not easily adjust to his political orientations. Skillfully taking advantage of the opportunities as they presented themselves, he proceeded to remove them, one by one, from the political scene. That is what happened in the case of president Manuel Urrutia, who was forced to resign in July of 1959, and of Comandante Huber Matos, accused of having betrayed the revolution for having dared to resign from his position, and condemned, in October of 1959, to twenty years in prison; or as in the case of the press and the independent mass media, which disappeared in mid-1960 as the government took over almost all the newspapers and radio and television stations in the island.

Even more important was the revolutionary government's take-over of the union movement. In this case, Fidel Castro personally intervened in the elections for the national union leadership in the X Congress of the CTC (Confederación de Trabajadores de Cuba, the trade union central) that took place in November of 1959, to insure the victory of the procommunist elements in the union

movement. The electoral process in the union movement of the island had begun in the spring of 1959 with free elections at the local level, followed by elections at the provincial level. From the very beginning, it was clear that the candidates associated with the 26 of July Movement were the big winners, while the communists only obtained about ten percent of the union posts (although it must be acknowledged that some of the elected 26th of July candidates were sympathetic to the PSP).

The results of the elections at the national level for delegates for the November congress were very similar. It was clear that the communists would be defeated and excluded from the national union leadership. That was when Fidel Castro intervened to avoid this outcome, imposing his own slate, which did not yet include the best-known communist unionists but placed the control of the CTC in the hands of the so-called “unitarian elements” of the 26th of July Movement favorable to the communists, headed by union leader Jesús Soto.

After the conclusion of the X Congress, the Ministry of Labor, in collaboration with the communist and “unitarian” unionists now at the head of the CTC, purged about 50 percent of all union leaders who, as it turned out, happened to be those that had opposed the communists. This was not done through the holding of new elections, but through purge commissions and carefully prepared and manipulated union assemblies. This was the first great step to establish a union movement totally controlled by the state.

The XI Congress of the trade union central (CTC), held in November of 1961, could not have been more different than the one celebrated two years earlier. In the absence of real competition among candidates who represented different autonomous currents in the workers movement, the new leaders, previously approved by those at the top of the government, were elected by acclamation. At the head of them was Lazaro Peña, the old Stalinist union leader, who assumed the position of Secretary General.

The ideological origin of power exercised from above

The politics that Fidel Castro was implementing was coherent with the ideas about power and revolution that he had articulated when he was imprisoned in the Isle of Pines (today the Island of Youth), from 1953 to 1955, after his failed attack on the Moncada Barracks on July 26, 1953. As a probable reaction to what he described as the chaos, disorder and lack of discipline that he witnessed as an activist in the failed expedition of Cayo Confites, organized with the purpose of overthrowing dictator Trujillo in the Dominican Republic in 1947, and in the great social and political explosion (the *Bogotazo*) in Colombia in 1948, he adopted the opposite organizational extreme that led him to his monolithic vision of what a revolutionary organization should be. Thus, for example, in the diary he maintained in his prison cell in the misnamed Model Prison in the Isle of Pines, he wrote, on August 14, 1954:

A movement cannot be organized where everyone believes he has the right to issue public statements without consulting anyone else; nor can one expect anything of a movement that will be integrated by anarchic men who at the first disagreement take the road they consider most

convenient, tearing apart and destroying the vehicle. The apparatus of propaganda and organization must be such and so powerful that it will implacably destroy him who will create tendencies, cliques, or schisms or will raise against the movement.

Years later, Carlos Franqui, a journalist working for Radio Rebelde, reflecting about the undemocratic and individualistic leadership of Fidel Castro that he had experienced through his collaboration with the leader in the Sierra Maestra, wrote, towards the end of 1958:

I have observed how many of our meetings are rather a kind of consultation. Or a conversation, almost always Fidel's prodigious conversation, in which a decision is taken for granted, but almost never is an agreement amply discussed by all present. A situation for which we are all responsible because of [his] action and [our] inaction.

There is no doubt that Fidel Castro's revolutionary authoritarianism from above was neither original nor limited to his person. In fact, it facilitated the development of a group close to the Cuban leader that shared his politically authoritarian revolutionary vision, a vision whose members had acquired, or at least reinforced as a result of their experiences near or inside the Communist movement. Thus, for example, Raúl Castro had been a member of the Juventud Socialista (the youth wing of the PSP) at the beginning of the fifties; and Che Guevara developed a pro-communist orientation highly favorable to Stalin during his stay in Guatemala, although he never joined the Communist party during his stay in that country. It is also obvious that there was a kind of "elective affinity" between the Stalinist ideology of the PSP (the Cuban party close to Moscow) and the authoritarian ideas and practices of Fidel Castro and his close collaborators.

The Socio-Political Context of Fidel Castro's Power from Above.

Yet, the great popularity of Fidel Castro and his unquestionable political ability would not have been sufficient to successfully impose his political perspectives and organizational controls in the absence of a series of political conjunctures that ended up working in his favor. To begin with, he came to power enjoying the undisputable hegemony over the revolutionary forces: neither the Revolutionary Directorate nor the PSP—the two main alternative revolutionary groups still functioning on the eve of the victory of the revolution — were in no condition to question, and much less oppose, his decisions and pronouncements, because they did not enjoy his overwhelming popularity.

For their part, the political parties that had been important on the eve of Batista's Coup D'Etat on March 10, 1952, like the Ortodoxos and the Auténticos, had collapsed several years before 1959. By way of contrast, let us consider the political revolution that took place in Venezuela exactly a year earlier than in Cuba, in January of 1958, that overthrew the dictatorship of Marcos Pérez Jiménez. Unlike Cuba, Venezuela, on the eve of its political revolution had significant and stable political parties like Acción Democrática (Social Democratic) and Copei (Social Christian), organizations that soon after the victory over Pérez Jiménez reached an agreement at Punto Fijo, in October of 1958, precisely to guarantee the political and economic status quo of the country and avoid a social revolution. Those Venezuelan parties had no equivalent in Cuba of 1959, which meant that Fidel Castro had no political adversaries with sufficient strength to extract from him any concession or force him to negotiate any agreement.

In addition, until the eve of the revolution, Cuba lacked any oligarchic formation linking the higher levels of the bourgeoisie, the Catholic Church and the high officialdom of the Armed Forces that could have functioned as a bulwark against the revolutionary forces. As it was mentioned earlier, up until the 1959 Agrarian Reform was decreed, the sugar mill owners and the sugar landlords, conscious of their lack of political power to prevent a radical reform, unsuccessfully tried to seduce the revolutionary government. With respect to Batista's army, it was led by a group of officers of lower- and middle-class origin that had turned into a privileged and corrupt caste without any ideology that could justify their power. When Colonel Ramón Barquín, along with various career officers, denounced the corruption in the army at the 1956 Court Martial to which they were subjected because they had conspired against Batista, they were mockingly labeled as "the pure ones," which clearly illustrates the cynical attitude prevailing in the armed forces during Batista's rule. An army such as this is weak by nature and will only fight as long as the benefits they receive justify the sacrifices that combat entails. That is why Batista's armed forces collapsed when they confronted the really motivated Rebel Army.

Another factor that scholars sometimes refuse to consider, is the plain and simple "good luck" that Fidel Castro had, which allowed him to come out unscathed from very difficult and dangerous situations. The "good luck" in this context refers to a series of concrete events that happen outside of the control of the political actors and that have a great impact on their political life and on their society. In the case of Fidel Castro, one example of his good luck was the death in combat of José Antonio Echevarría, the leader of the Directorio Revolucionario, and of Frank País, one of the principal leaders of the 26th of July Movement. Their death removed from the revolutionary political scene two figures that could have competed against him for the leadership of the revolutionary movement. Even more impressive was the fact that, of the 82 combatants that had departed from the Mexican port of Tuxpan on the *Granma* in late 1956, approximately less than twenty survived the landing in the southwest of the Oriente province in Cuba. That represents a rate of survival of less than twenty five percent compared to, for example, the survival rate of the tens of thousands of troops that invaded Normandie in 1944, which varied from 34 to 50 percent depending on the functions of the fighting units.

The Two Periods of the Revolutionary Government and the Pressures from Below

It is important to note that in the case of Cuba there is a significative difference in the way the government has behaved regarding concessions between the period that started in 1959 and ended with the collapse of the Soviet bloc in 1990, and the period that began immediately afterwards.

During the first period, the Cuban government agreed occasionally to some concessions, like the opening of the peasants' markets in the eighties. But in general, the material aid provided by the Soviet bloc compensated in great part for the serious damages caused by the U.S. economic blockade, allowing the government to hold on firmly to power and avoid getting into any kind of concessionary mode. The government presided over an austerity that generally satisfied the most basic needs of the population, and allowed for a significant degree of social mobility, in part

generated by the emigration of wide sectors of the middle and upper classes. However, since the chronic and profound economic crises began in the island as a result of the disappearance of the USSR and the Soviet bloc, which led to a substantial loss in the popular support and political legitimacy of the regime, the government has been forced to make a series of concessions, some of them quite important in terms of relinquishing some of its controls, like having significantly relaxed the conditions allowing for the possibility of traveling and emigrating abroad (except for the hundreds of “regulados,” persons who have openly opposed the government who are not permitted to travel abroad at all).

It was therefore foreseeable that if on one hand the economic and political crises made the regime more vulnerable to certain types of social and economic pressures, its relative political weakness (accompanied by its great police strength) made the regime decidedly more repressive, as demonstrated by the very long prison sentences given to hundreds of Cubans accused of participating in the mostly peaceful protests of July 11, 2021.

It must be stressed that Cuba’s social and political structures are very far from the degree of pluralism that is implicit in many of the notions regarding the supposed power of the “pressures from below,” both in the early as well as in the current stage of the revolution. This does not mean that the regime does not care about what people want or think, or that it will not do everything possible to manipulate the population to avoid not only popular explosions, such as the one of July 11, 2021, but also any other public expression of discontent no matter how peaceful it might be. It is precisely because the government wants to influence and control popular opinion, that before the new Constitution was approved by the National Assembly of Popular Power in 2019, it organized discussions so that people could express their opinions and make suggestions about the constitutional text. However, these discussions were characterized by two key features: It was the authorities that decided by themselves, and without any kind of democratic consultation, which suggestions would be adopted, and which would be rejected, a typical feature of bureaucratic cooptation from above. Even more important is the fact that the Cuban people who attended those discussions lacked any possibility and power to coordinate their proposals with that of other Cubans attending those discussions in other places, much less to use the mass media to agitate and propagandize in favor of their proposals or to object to others. We only need to compare this type of cooptation with the wide-ranging public debate that took place in the newspapers, magazines and radio stations, and the free election of delegates among the candidates of all political parties, notably including the Communist Party, that occurred before the Constitutional Convention of 1940, to appreciate the enormous difference between the two constitutional processes.

The Agrarian Reform of 1959: was it radicalized by pressures from below?

Perhaps because the Law of Agrarian Reform of 1959 marked a point of inflection in the radicalization of the revolution, some scholars have argued that it was the “pressure from below” that explains the radical direction taken by the revolutionary government. This is the main argument of a study conducted in 1972 by social scientists Juan and Verena Martínez Alier who, based on the archives of the National Institute of Agrarian Reform (INRA), they concluded that it was the rural working-class demand for land and work that created an enormous pressure on the newly

established government that led to its radicalization.

It is important to note that the researchers did not report anything showing impatience, discontent or lack of trust by the peasants regarding the actions and politics of the revolutionary government, which generally happens when a restless and demanding peasantry confronts moderate, cautious or vacillating governments be it of a reformist, liberal or conservative cast. And in any case, the main revolutionary leaders had become radicalized long before they took power, although they largely kept that under wraps in the years prior to their overthrowing Batista. Even more important is the fact that Fidel Castro and his close collaborators counted, especially in those days, with an enormous amount of political credit with the Cuban people, particularly with the most dispossessed, so they had little cause to worry about demands or pressure “from below”, at least then, when there was no significant political force, especially after May of 1959, that could outflank Fidel Castro and his close associates on the left by proposing a more anti-capitalist policy than the new government.

To be sure, both the revolutionary leaders and the great majority of Cubans were highly conscious of the overwhelmingly popular expectations of being able to achieve an appreciable improvement in their overall standard of living, an improvement that was already occurring to a significant degree in 1959 and the early sixties, before the economic and especially agricultural crises broke out in the country. Those popular expectations could be seen as a kind of pressure on the government, except that it was not exercised as an external force that changed the goals and methods of the revolutionary regime, the key contention of Juan and Verena Martínez Alier in their “ ‘Tierra o trabajo’: Notas sobre el campesinado y la Reforma Agraria, 1959-1960,” in *Cuba: Economía y Sociedad*, Paris, Ruedo Ibérico, 1972, 109-208).

Joining that article is a recent publication authored by Sarah Kozameh, that also proposes that popular pressures changed the direction of the revolutionary leadership (“Agrarian Reform and the Radicalization of Revolutionary Cuba,” *Cuban Studies*, #51, 2022, 128-46.) Kozameh argues that the advances of the Agrarian Reform after it was decreed in May, 1959, were a result of the pressures that the Cuban peasants exerted on the government provoked by, what she calls, the latter’s “moderate” behavior (although she never explains what would have constituted a “radical” behavior.)

Based on the letters sent to the offices of INRA, Kozameh concludes that the peasants pressured the government to grant the benefits promised by the agrarian reform law, and pressured INRA to act against the interests of the landlords, thereby propelling the radicalization of the revolution. There is no doubt that the author studied the INRA archives. Unfortunately she does not seem to have paid careful attention to the newspapers and magazines of that era, which would have informed her about the government’s radicalism before and after May 1959, and especially of the important role that the Rebel Army played in the process of the agrarian reform, something that she either ignored or gave little importance. (Incidentally, it was the Rebel Army that in 1958, while still in the Sierra, called on the peasants to get organized under the Rebel Army leadership, and not the other way around, as Kozameh maintains.)

It is clear, as the author affirms, that the landlords and *latifundistas* tried to obstruct, if not eliminate, the agrarian reform by every available means. But it was INRA, obviously supported by the government and the Rebel Army, that, for example, took the initiative to fire Manuel Artime, a Catholic leader who had tried to “moderate” the agrarian reform from within INRA itself. And as it was pointed out earlier, it was the Rebel Army and INRA functionaries, and not the peasants themselves, who in practice carried out the so-called “intervenciones” of lands that established the fundamentals of the revolution in the countryside.

Finally, the great majority of complaints sent to INRA cannot be considered pressures of a political kind. Complaints about possible corruption, mistaken and poorly implemented decisions, inefficiency, and what surely constituted numerous administrative errors given the absence of experienced agricultural functionaries, cannot in any way be construed as “political pressures” in the sense that Kozameh claims radicalized the revolutionary leaders. In fact, the first example she cites of a protest concerned a farmer in Matanzas called Juan Triana Fernández, whose oxen, that were indispensable to transport his crops, were confiscated by the INRA functionaries who, in addition, allowed a herd of 200 cows to stomp on Triana’s land causing him to lose his entire rice crop.

Triana was clearly the victim of incredible incompetence, negligence and bureaucratic abuse which would have required at the very least the immediate replacement of the responsible functionaries. But his complaint had nothing to do with the supposed pressure from below that would have radicalized the agrarian legislation. None of this means that there was no real conflict between peasants and landlords. But what is relevant is how did the INRA functionaries and officials of the Rebel Army act in those cases. It is very unlikely that they supported the landlords. But if that would have been the case, a letter from the aggrieved peasant to INRA complaining and protesting the incident and demanding that the government address it would have been a true case of “political pressure.”

The motivation of these interpretations

Several students of the Cuban Revolution have been following the trend of what could be called “History from Below standing on its head.” There are two explanations for this: The first is of an academic nature. The intellectual influence of the relatively new approaches “from below,” which in general have been very positive in enriching and radicalizing the field of history, may have nevertheless created academic pressures on scholars to try to apply them in an uncritical fashion to conjunctures where they are largely not relevant.

The second is of a political nature. Scholars understandably bring to bear their own standards and political-ideological preferences to their academic and intellectual tasks. That is the case of those scholars sympathetic with the Cuban regime who have tried to demonstrate that the Cuban government has throughout its history submitted to popular control from below. But since that cannot be demonstrated for obvious reasons—there has never been any democratic control from below in Cuba—these scholars now recur to the notion of popular pressure from below as having

shaped the political decisions of the government, trying to create in this manner a more positive and apparently more democratic view albeit an unreal one, of the Cuban government.

This article originally appeared in Spanish in the Cuban left-wing critical blog *La Joven Cuba* on June 20, 2022.