Interview - Antoni Kapcia

https://www.e-ir.info/2016/11/17/interview-antoni-kapcia/

E-INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS, NOV 17 2016

Antoni Kapcia is a Professor of Latin American History and Head of the Centre for Research on Cuba, University of Nottingham. He has been researching aspects of modern and contemporary Cuban history since 1971 and has published extensively on this subject. His books include *Leadership in the Cuban Revolution: The Unseen Story* (2014, Zed), *Cuba in Revolution: A History Since the Fifties* (2008, Reaktion) and *Cuba: Island of Dreams* (2000, Berg).

Where do you see the most exciting research and debates occurring in your field?

The most interesting debates are, without doubt, those taking place in the Cuban 'blogosphere', especially among those bloggers who see themselves as clearly supportive of the Revolution (rather than the more high-profile dissident bloggers, who have a wider audience outside Cuba than inside), who try to speak to Cubans on the island and to find a medium position, between orthodoxy and dissidence, recognising the need for controlled economic reform but questioning the implications of current policies for what they see as the 'essence' of the Revolution.

Given the speed of détente, research outside Cuba has not really had time to absorb, investigate and reflect on the post-2014 situation seriously, rather than follow the widespread rush to journalistic judgements. Hence, most of the research which has emerged has tended to continue the patterns of recent years, i.e. based on the expectation of change, rather than on objective on-the-ground investigation. This is perhaps inevitable (a real understanding of the Cuban reality has long suffered from interpretations being made which reflect either *a priori* positions – on both sides of the political divide – or views of Cuba which authors expect to see), but is nonetheless regrettable now, when we need to have reliable evidence and thoughtful interpretation of what is actually going on at the grass roots. However, there are some fascinating projects being undertaken slowly in some areas of grass-roots Cuba: studies of the micro-economy, of low-level political representation and of popular and unorthodox culture which promise to throw genuinely new light on aspects of the Cuban system which have been ignored by the prevailing tendency to look at the 'big picture'.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

There seems little doubt that, if the Cold War – into which I was born and in which I grew up – shaped the world as I knew it for some three decades, the end of that world seemed to confirm for me that some of those apparent certainties were ultimately not so certain after all. In that context, my reading of the Cuban Revolution (I started by doctoral thesis on Cuba in 1971, only twelve years after the rebel victory) turned out to be not so far from the truth as I had been told was the case: I had always argued that Cuba was not to be judged on eastern European terms, and, in 1989-91, I felt confident in predicting the survival of the system in Cuba. Since then, over the years, with over 50 visits to the island and getting to know the internal workings of the system much better, I would hope that I have managed to refine that initial caution into a realisation that, as I often say, glibly: if you think you understand Cuba, then you probably don't, but, if you think you don't understand it, then you probably do. So I am less sure that my thinking shifted – I am aware that my background, in all respects, shaped my views of the world – than that it deepened in some respects and became more confident.

Is the recent thawing of relations between the governments of Cuba and the USA as significant as many news outlets claim it to be?

Much has been written about the supposedly substantial shift since December 2014, but little of that discussion is really based on solid evidence; instead, it tends to be based more on assumptions and expectations. The bottom line is that, although the tenor of those relations has indeed changed and although the post-2014 shifts do have a symbolic importance (given the scale, longevity and bitterness of the preceding 63 years of mutual hostility and isolation), the crucial element in US-Cuban relations – the economic embargo – remains firmly in place and seems likely to remain so for a while yet. And that shapes those relations fundamentally: not only does it formally continue to enshrine the hostility – after all, the embargo was originally created under the terms of the Trading with the Enemy Act, and the 1996 Helms-Burton legislation gave the embargo the force of a treaty -, but it also still affects daily life in Cuba and prolongs any chance of economic improvement on the island. Even the measures decreed by President Obama on 17 December 2014 remain unrealised, given US banks' and companies' reluctance to risk breaching the embargo and incurring massive fines. In addition, both Obama and John Kerry made it clear during their respective visits to Cuba that, while the form of US policy has had to change (solely, as they both observed, because it patently had not worked), the basic aims of that policy – to change the Cuban political system – have not. The point about all this is that, for all the expectation – and visible evidence in Havana (but in few other places on the island) of people preparing for an economic change by opening retail and catering outlets – , the priority for the Cuban government is to dampen down Cubans' expectations, on the one hand, and also manage the speed and scale of any real improvement in commercial relations, not least to prevent destabilisation. There is, however, another motive in such caution: the arguments inside Cuba (and almost certainly inside the political system) about the risks of 'throwing the baby out with the bathwater' continue to rage, and any groundswell of Cuban opinion, and especially of Havana opinion, to accelerate the economic reforms and the end of the embargo is more than counter-balanced by a powerful body of opinion that sees such reforms as threatening the essence of the whole post-1959 system.

The idea that Revolutionary Cuba has followed a cyclical pattern of 'crisis-debate-certainty' frames much of your authorship. Given the apparent control that the one-party system exerts over the state, the media and education, to what extent does genuine 'debate' exist, and does it have a substantial influence on outcomes?

The first point here is to advise caution about reading Cuba as some sort of anachronistic Caribbean version of the eastern Europe of 1948-89: the system's very survival beyond the collapse of the Socialist Bloc and the Soviet Union, and beyond the traumatic collapse of the Cuban economy in 1990-95, should be proof enough that the Cuban system – and even 'Cuban communism' – was always quite different from East Germany or Bulgaria or Poland. Those differences lie in both the definition – and conditionality – of 'communism', as it was defined and redefined in Cuba from 1961, and also in the nature of internal structures and processes of politics. On the former point, while the socialist element of the Cuban Revolution's ideology was always organic and home-grown, firmly based in Cuban radical traditions, the shift to a communist (and Soviet-linked) version of that socialism arose substantially from the particular conjuncture of 1960-62: internal radicalisation, external isolation and siege, Soviet support – and almost inevitable conclusions being drawn from Cuba's situation and the need for rapid social and economic change, in the face of US opposition. On the latter point, the Party (finally created in 1965 – some four or five years after the creation of the several 'mass organisations', which really constituted the political basis of the emerging system) has rarely controlled everything to the extent that outsiders expect or expected: generally, the Party and the government/leadership have experienced a rocky relationship over the decades: while the Party has sometimes exercised real authority and power, at other times it has been neglected and relegated by the leadership.

However, within that Party – and within all of the mass organisations, which, between them, do cover almost the whole population of Cuba – , debate has indeed operated consistently, albeit within well-defined parameters: through a complex matrix of both vertical and horizontal processes of decision-making and negotiation, parallel organisations and consultation mechanisms, one key to the system's survival has long been the capacity of the leadership to gauge the public's mood, concerns and complaints, together with the constant processes of negotiation which always precede and then follow recommendations from above. The experience of Raúl Castro's 2008 dramatic policies for immediate reform is salutary: not only were his original, somewhat draconian, ideas substantially diluted and slowed

down (not least by the objections of the trade union confederation), but his demand for an immediate Party Congress to decide and legitimise such reforms was resisted for three years, with internal debate continuing to act as a brake on rapid change.

In *Leadership in the Cuban Revolution* you suggest that common experiences of three key early events between 1953 and 1959 characterises the membership of the Revolution's 'inner circle' (the attack on Moncada, the Granma landing, and conflict in the Sierra). Is this still the case, and if so, are there any comparable reference points for younger members of the 'inner circle'?

The passing of time (and retirement and death) have made the earlier (1953-56) experiences less relevant, but Sierra service – and, more than before, activism within the urban underground of 1956-58 – continues to play a role in defining reliability: there is still a solid group of ex-guerrillas in both government and the upper reaches of the Party, and the elected National Assembly continues to be a repository for the 'guiding hand' of other ex-combatants who are no longer in the active politics of government and Party, but whose experience remains relevant and respected. As things stand, there seem not to be similar reference points for those younger politicians rising through the system: service in Angola and other 'internationalist' campaigns does play a role for many, but, increasingly, what counts are trustworthy, effective and sensitive management and leadership within crucial ministerial posts and within the less visible provincial ranks of the Party.

While some may assume that the Cuban State's coercive apparatus is key to the Revolution's longevity, you have argued that ideology is central to this survival. Given the changes both within Cuba and in world order since the end of the Cold War, how has this ideology evolved over recent years?

The question of ideology continues to be crucial, not least the capacity of the system to ensure that that that ideology remains adaptable and 'organic': the explanation for that lies in the reality that 'ideology' was always more than Marxism-Leninism or communism, as we understand both terms, and was for most Cubans embodied in the always vague notion of 'the Revolution'. In the 1990s, once the debate about 'how can we save the Revolution' was settled (essentially between 1989 and 1993, with the unprecedented package of reforms which did precisely that from 1995), a second debate began – and continues – on the costs of those reforms, which was essentially addressing the next question: 'But what do we mean by 'the Revolution'?' By the late 1990s – which then fed into the brief 'Battle of Ideas' of 2000-2005 -, the answer seemed to most to be that it always meant the programme of radical nation-building which was visible in 1959-61, until the Cold War shaped it in particular directions – US hostility forcing certain alliances and positions, and Soviet aid, sugar purchases and advice making other choices either acceptable or inevitable. That original programme had clearly belonged to the decolonising world of the 1950s and 1960s (sharing with other post-colonial regimes a definition of socialist governance, a desire for economic planning and a belief in welfare), but, after 1991, going back to that exact model was deemed anachronistic in its detail; hence, the post-1993 debates and ideas have tended to focus on keeping faith with those original goals, while adapting them to the world of the 2000s – defending a decisive state role in the economy, while allowing small-scale private and cooperative enterprise alongside the state, defending a welfare system that continues to be comprehensive but affordable, ensuring as much equality of opportunity as feasible and preventing unacceptable levels of inequality, and resisting external pressure to limit national sovereignty. Those 'ideals' seem to be shared by enough Cubans right now to ensure a degree of tolerance and patience in the slow process of change.

As economic reforms are enacted by a nominally Communist government, assertions that Cuba is gradually following the path of China seem to have become fairly common. Do such claims hold water, or are they lacking in substance?

I think that no-one who really knows Cuba sees any likelihood of Cuba following the so-called 'Chinese road'; that has been discussed continually inside Cuba and, while some argue for it, the majority of decision-makers seem cautious about that idea at the very least and hostile at best. The reason is because the Chinese success is seen in Cuba to have been built on a tolerance of inequality (with a wide range of income levels, an astonishingly wealthy economic elite and a growing middle class) and of corruption: given the importance of inequality and corruption in shaping the policies and tenor of the original Cuban 'project', and given the dangers of any widespread and visible emergence of

both problems in such a small and tightly-knit society as Cuba, no Cuban leader can afford to let such problems get out of hand. So Raúl Castro's mantra of 'without pause but also without speed' seems designed to ensure that a Chinese model will not be adopted in Cuba.

The negotiations which have brought a tentative peace between the Colombian state and FARC guerrillas were facilitated by the Cuban government and hosted in Havana for several years. This role as peace-maker stands in stark contrast to Cuba's policy of encouraging armed revolutions during the 1960's—how can we explain this turnaround, and has the Cuban government had any influence over the FARC's decision to enter negotiations?

Quite simply, both Cuba and the world changed between the 1960s and the present day. In the 1960s, the Cuban leadership encouraged armed revolution in Latin America (by training, arming and supplying guerrilla groups all over the continent), partly because those leaders were committed to opposing actively what they saw as US imperialism in the region and partly because, after the US pledge not to invade Cuba (made after the 1062 Missile Crisis agreement with Moscow), they could do so with impunity and perhaps, in that way, break their continental commercial and diplomatic isolation; that policy also helped distinguish the Cuban variant of communism from a more staid Soviet Union, whose leadership sought peaceful coexistence. However, by the late 1970s, regional isolation had been broken, by changes in government across the continent, and the insurrectionary policy had not delivered (apart from in Nicaragua in 1979). Hence, Cuba's policy abroad thenceforth was 'internationalism': a policy of human and material aid to a range of countries in the developing world, which helped build allies against the US embargo; it was accompanied by a policy of seeking diplomatic recognition and cooperation with any country that was willing to have normal relations with Cuba. It was in that context that a new spirit of cooperation reigned supreme in the region, especially as the post-1990s 'pink tide' emerged: before the end of the Cold War, Havana had already brokered recognition and understanding in Moscow of left-wing wing governments in Nicaragua, Grenada and Angola, and, after 1991, that approach continued with the Cuban leadership helping to broker peace deals between left-wing rebels and the respective governments opposing them. The FARC deal was one such approach, with the Cubans using their influence to persuade and their mediation ability to get the two sides talking.

Many Cubanists have argued that Raúl Castro faced substantial resistance to the reforms enacted under his leadership. Given his intention to stand down as President in 2018, who would you suggest are the likely contenders to succeed him, and do their opinions differ on the direction that Cuba should take?

Predictions of the likely successor to Raúl Castro should always be shrouded in caution, especially after, in 2008, two of the high-flying and seemingly most likely successors – the *de facto* 'prime minister', Carlos Lage, and the Foreign Minister, Felipe Pérez Roque – were both summarily dismissed, apparently for overstepping the mark with their expectations of that succession. Currently, the most commonly identified favourite seems to the be senior Vice-President, Miguel Díaz Canel, who seems to fit the bill for Raúl Castro's preferred type: a reliable, quietly efficient and respected 'system' politician, rather than a charismatic 'high-flier'; hence it is likely that, in February 2018, after the elections for the National Assembly and Council of State, he will emerge as the choice. Even if that is not the case, there is no evidence of any of the others in the circles of power differing significantly in their approach to the question of reform: the mantra of 'without pause but also without speed' seems to be widely shared in the wider leadership, and no politician in Havana really wants to risk stability and support by allowing expectations or fears to get out of hand.

What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars of History?

What a question! When I am trying to persuade reluctant and fearful non-students of history (obliged to take my modules) that history as a subject is not something to be feared and that it is more than just knowing a string of facts, dates and names, I always try to persuade them to look for processes and not events, and to look for complexity and not simplicity. Whether that persuades them or not is a moot point, but it seems to me to be the best advice I can give: in the case of Cuba, it has always been my mantra that 'it's actually a little more complex than that', and it seems to me to be true of any historical period, event, system or phenomenon. Since 'history' is made up of a complexity of social and individual processes, of events and episodes, and of causes and effects, all of which

contradict each other continually, it seems logical to advise students of history to always look for the contradictions and not the easy answers, to look for the perplexing processes and not the facile overviews, and to remember that it is always people – collectively and individually – who make, and make up, what we see as 'history'.

—

This interview was conducted by Laurence Goodchild. Laurence is Deputy Features Editor at E-IR.