

Review - Cuban Revolution in America

Written by Sean L. Malloy

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SEAN L. MALLOY, AUG 4 2018

Cuban Revolution in America: Havana and the Making of a United States Left, 1968–1992

By Teishan A. Latner

Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2018

With *Cuban Revolution in America*, Teishan A. Latner makes an important contribution to our understanding of both U.S.-Cuban relations and the way in which the island nation influenced dissident movements within its larger neighbor. Latner's work joins studies by Van Gosse, Cynthia Young, John A. Gronbeck-Tedesco, Rafael Rojas, Kepa Artaraz, and others in examining the powerful hold that the Cuban revolution has had over the American Left since 1959. *Cuban Revolution in America* distinguishes itself from much of the previous literature not only by focusing on previously understudied groups and individuals, but also by following this story into the 1990s and beyond. While most accounts of the relationship between the U.S. Left and Cuba focus on the dramatic period of the 1960s, in adopting a wider chronological lens Latner is able to show how events ranging from the air piracy epidemic of the early 1970s to anticolonial struggles in sub-Saharan Africa, Reagan-era interventions in Latin America, the end of the Cold War, and the post-9/11 "Global War on Terror" have affected both U.S.-Cuban relations and the often complicated relationship between American activists on the Left and the Cuban government. As such, the book is relevant not only to scholars of the U.S. Left and Cuba, but also to those interested in transnational organizing and rethinking the Cold War through the lens of the Third World.

At the heart of *Cuban Revolution in America* are profiles of a series of groups and individuals, most of which have received little previously scholarly attention. The work opens with a lengthy study of the Venceremos Brigade, groups of Americans who travelled to the island starting in 1969 and continuing to the present with the aim of contributing their physical labor (first to the sugar harvest and later to other projects) in service of the revolution. Conceived of as "a kind of radical Peace Corps for the civil rights and antiwar generation, the Venceremos Brigade hoped to undermine the atmosphere of Cold War mistrust by allowing Americans to witness Cuban society with their own eyes" (28). Latner deftly explores the ways in which the Brigades not only built bridges between American radicals and the Cuban government and people, but also helped the US Left to work through its own challenges and contradictions at the end of the 1960s. Though the project initially emerged out of the predominantly white New Left, the early organizers of the Brigades made a conscious effort to appeal to people of color within what scholar Cynthia Young dubbed the "U.S. Third World Left." They also sought to move away from dry debates over theory and towards more concrete action in support of revolutionary change.

Though the early Brigades were often marked by internal tensions over race, gender, and sexuality that mirrored those within the broader U.S. Left, by following their evolution and institutionalization in the decades that followed, Latner effectively challenges the declensionist narrative that characterizes much of the scholarship on the post-1960s Left. He also captures the sometimes ambivalent relationship between the Brigades and their hosts. Though Cuba welcomed Americans who challenged their own government's unrelenting hostility to the revolution, "the propensity of the Americans to emphasize their ethnic and racial identities over political ideology was puzzling. . . . The Cubans were generally uneasy with the use of race as a political organizing principle in the camps, an attitude that was also reflected in the Cuban press" (60). The ongoing story of the Venceremos Brigades thus offers in microcosm an example of the ways in which American Leftists and the Cuban revolution sought to grapple with changing domestic and international conditions as well as historical legacies around issues such as race, gender,

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and sexuality as they pursued their respective projects in the decades following the 1960s.

Two other chapters in this work are worthy of particular focus given their unique contributions to thinking about diplomatic history and international relations in the period under consideration. In “Revolution in the Air: Hijacking, Political Protest, and U.S.-Cuba Relations” Latner explores the air piracy epidemic of the late 1960s and early 1970s, which included at least 90 attempts to reach Havana in this fashion. As Latner notes, “Scholarship on hijacking has often been limited by an unwillingness to imagine hijackers as anything more than terrorists, mentally ill idealists, and common criminals” (126). It is only recently that a small group of scholars, including Latner and Paul Thomas Chamberlin, have given serious attention to hijacking in this era as exposing the soft underbelly of an increasingly globalized economy as well as a powerful tool for political dissidents and guerrillas. This chapter also explores the ongoing tension between the hijackers and their sometimes reluctant Cuban hosts. While committed to welcoming U.S. dissidents and political prisoners, the Cuban government had a low opinion of many of the hijackers, some of whom it suspected of being CIA plants. Cuban discomfort with the island’s status as the preferred destination for American hijackers helped bring about a rare moment of cooperation with Washington that culminated in a bilateral agreement intended to curb air piracy signed in February 1972. Latner’s study of hijacking as both a tool of revolution and a spur to cooperation between rival states is an important contribution to a subject that remains ripe for further study.

In “*Joven Cuba* inside the Colossus: The Antonio Maceo Brigade and the Making of a Cuban American Left”, Latner complicates the traditional picture of Cuban émigré politics, which has typically focused on that community’s unrelenting hostility to Fidel Castro’s government. Focusing on “the buried history of Cuban American leftism,” (153) he examines the Antonio Maceo Brigade, a group of mostly younger Cuban Americans who in 1977 rejected their parents’ reflexive opposition to the Revolution in favor of direct engagement through travel. Immigration scholars have explored the complex generational and political tensions within the Cuban American community, but there have been few attempts by diplomatic historians to trace how these divisions played out in the realm of U.S.-Cuban relations. In addition to exploring the informal, transnational diplomacy of the Maceo Brigade and similar efforts, Latner also does a service by highlighting the corresponding history of violence unleashed by the more conservative elements of the Cuban American community. There were over 100 politically-motivated bombings in the Miami area alone during the 1970s and other areas with substantial exile populations (including Union City, New Jersey and New York City) also saw right-wing political violence aimed at those perceived as too friendly to Castro’s Cuba. At a time when many in the United States are bemoaning what they see as an unprecedentedly “uncivil” political discourse, this work is a useful reminder that as recently as the 1970s, political violence from both the right and left (in the cases of groups such as the Weather Underground and the Black Liberation Army) was a routine fact of life.

There are a few areas worth explicitly critiquing in this generally excellent work. The most obvious omission is the lack of documentation on the Cuban government’s side of the story. Though this is no fault of the author’s—such documentation remains difficult if not impossible to access in most cases—it is worth noting that any work that seeks to explore the U.S.-Cuban relationship is going to remain provisional pending access to documents that more fully flesh out decision making within Castro’s government. More pointedly, Latner perhaps spends too much time and space in Chapter 2 (“Missiles, in Human Form: Cuba and the Specter of Foreign Subversion in America”) on analyzing the outlandish charges of subversion that the FBI relentlessly pursued against Americans who took part in the Venceremos Brigade and other such efforts. Unsurprisingly, Latner concludes that “no material Cuban support for armed revolution inside the United States has ever been proved” (96) and that the Cuban government was in fact deeply skeptical of Americans seeking such aid and training. Latner justifies his lengthy engagement with this subject by noting that “FBI files are undertheorized in their function as historical archives, and the FBI has been under scrutinized in its role as archivist and historical biographer” (80). He goes on to suggest that scholars have overlooked “The productive, regenerative, and re-humanizing potentials of state surveillance, however inadvertent. . . (90). Scholars of the 20th century American Left have long recognized that the FBI’s vast surveillance network generated a potentially useful set of archival sources at the same time it distorted both the contemporary and historical record by relentlessly smearing and in some cases actively destroying these movements. There could well be room for a nuanced examination of how historians should wrestle with such documents, but Latner does not follow through on this difficult question (nor, to be fair, was that the aim of this book) and the result is a lengthy recitation of almost entirely false charges that probably could have been better handled as footnotes to the previous chapter on

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the Venceremos Brigades.

Conversely, Latner could have perhaps devoted more space to his examination of Cuba as a “Palenque,” a reference to “the clandestine communities of escaped enslaved Africans and indigenous people that existed in the Caribbean during the era of slavery” (201) in his concluding chapter on Black radicals who sought asylum on the island. The individual profiles of exiles in this chapter, ranging from Eldridge Cleaver and William Lee Brent in the late 1960s, to Assata Shakur and Nehanda Abiodun who both remain in Cuba to this day, illustrate both change and continuity in the long-standing relationship between Black radicals and the Cuban government. They are particularly useful in tracing the tensions brought about by the “Special Period” following the end of the Cold War, as well as the post-9/11 shift in US foreign policy that brought renewed attention to these handfuls of individuals. But while these profiles (particularly of understudied figures such as Abiodun) are a valuable contribution to this historical record, the concluding chapter feels more like a collection of individual stories than a fully-realized whole, and the intriguing notion of a Cuban Palenque, which might have helped these accounts to better cohere, is under theorized. These small complaints aside, *Cuban Revolution in America* is an important book that hopefully will prod other scholars to follow Latner’s example in pushing our study of U.S. radicals and transnational revolutionary connections beyond the comfortable terrain of the 1960s and into the harsh but not unyielding territory of the neoliberal and post-Cold War age.

About the author:

Sean L. Malloy is an Associate Professor of History and Critical Race and Ethnic Studies (CRES) at the University of California, Merced. He is the author of *Atomic Tragedy: Henry L. Stimson and the Decision to Use the Bomb Against Japan* (Cornell University Press, 2008) as well as articles dealing with nuclear targeting in World War II and the radiation effects of the atomic bomb. His most recent book, *Out of Oakland: Black Panther Party Internationalism During the Cold War*, was recently published by Cornell University Press in 2017. His current research project examines the battle in the United States over BDS (Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions) in response to the Israeli occupation of Palestine.