

# Does Cuba Fit Yet or Is It Still ‘Exceptional’?

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*Abstract.* Much of the external literature on the Cuban Revolution has been characterised by two dichotomies between ‘exceptionalism’ on the hand and the application of non-Cuban paradigms on the other, and that between Fidel-focussed interpretations and more systemic perspectives. This article examines the evolution of these dichotomies, from initial enthusiasm or condemnation, through an emerging awareness of a historical dimension, a focus on the social revolution, and new disenchantments, to the emergence of a less polemical attention to detail before the post-1991 return to type. In the light of this trajectory, new approaches are suggested to break with these patterns, while acknowledging the challenges for exogenous research.

*Keywords:* Cuban Revolution, Fidel Castro, social revolution, political process, political structures, polemic, historiography

Fidel Castro’s temporary transfer of power on 31 July 2006 to his brother Raúl generated predictable speculation about ‘succession’ and ‘transition’, a debate which, regardless of the accuracy of its expectations, reminds us forcefully of one continuing truth about our perspectives of the Cuban Revolution. This is that, while many Cuba specialists continue to approach the study of Cuba through ‘exceptionalist’ eyes, most lay interpretations continue to assume that non-Cuban paradigms should be applied. However, while ‘exceptionalism’ is typical of all academic work that is country-specific, and while those in search of easy political or journalistic explanations will inevitably gravitate towards existing templates, we should be especially wary in the Cuban case. Our view has been so heavily influenced by simplistic political interpretations and superficial judgements of sometimes half-understood events.

The case for ‘exceptionalism’ in the study of Cuba, explored by a recent conference and book, has been stimulated by the contradiction between Cuba’s seemingly inexorable movement towards transition and the continuing evidence of the system stubbornly bucking the trend.<sup>1</sup> The concept

<sup>1</sup> Bert Hoffmann and Laurence Whitehead, *Debating Cuban Exceptionalism* (London, 2007).

itself owes much to Che Guevara's 1961 article, which argued that the revolution had a continental relevance while demonstrating exceptional elements that led to success.<sup>2</sup> Thereafter, of course, Guevara did the converse of the subsequent norm. Instead of fitting paradigms to the Cuban case, he fatally 'Latin Americanised' his subjective reading of Cuba. Nonetheless, at the time he wrote, the revolution already offered much evidence of the unusual: in its guerrilla genesis, its radicalisation (towards a Communism without a 'leading' party), and its defeat of US-backed invasion. Five decades on, that claim to exceptionalism seems to have been enhanced rather than lessened: by the revolution's extraordinary survival, and by the evidence that definitions of it have never fitted comfortably within wider patterns, whether in Latin America, the Socialist Bloc, or the Caribbean. Hence we are faced with one consistent truth: the need to recognise Cuba's frequent variation from other norms.

However, the trajectory of what has been called 'the literature of explanation' of the revolution shows that while few have viewed it explicitly through an 'exceptionalist' lens, and while perhaps more have sought to apply other paradigms, most of the literature has tended to fuse (and confuse) elements of 'exceptionalism' with what we might call 'the paradigmatic'.<sup>3</sup> Until 1961 that literature tended to react somewhat superficially to a still puzzling phenomenon, through either uncritical enthusiasm or unsubtle opposition, often unclear about the genesis, politics or direction of 'The Revolution'. Indeed, those years established a dichotomy that characterised many subsequent interpretations: between enthusiastic sympathy on the one hand and a rejection based on *a priori* positions about 'Communism' or disenchantment on the other.

The 'literature of enthusiasm' mostly appeared after two years, emanating largely from an embattled US left, keen to herald an already unusual radical phenomenon. This produced two 'classics' from C. Wright Mills and Waldo Frank, the former condemning US opposition to an attractive and dynamic model of change committed to neither East nor West, the latter welcoming 'the birth of a nation' and a home-grown process that gave Cuba back to the Cubans.<sup>4</sup> This literature included Jean-Paul Sartre's paean, which, influencing a generation of European leftists, saw an unorthodox revolution with 'an absence of ideology'.<sup>5</sup> It also encompassed the more analytical approach of

<sup>2</sup> Ernesto Che Guevara, 'Cuba, ¿excepción histórica o vanguardia en la lucha anticolonialista?', in Ernesto Che Guevara, *Obras 1957–1967*, vol. 2 (Havana, 1977), pp. 403–19.

<sup>3</sup> Antoni Kapcia, *Cuba: Island of Dreams* (Oxford, 2000), p. 4.

<sup>4</sup> C. Wright Mills, *Listen Yankee: the Revolution in Cuba* (New York, 1960); Waldo Frank, *Cuba: Prophetic Island* (New York, 1961).

<sup>5</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre. *Sartre on Cuba* (New York, 1961); the quotation is from the 1974 edition (Westport, Conn.), p. 149. Sartre's account first appeared in a series of sixteen articles in

the *Monthly Review* Marxists, Leo Huberman and Paul Sweezy, who somewhat uncritically adopted the rebels' own explanations, and thus focussed on the Revolution's agrarian roots and policies. This reflected the initial consensus, shared by Sartre, that the guerrilla-based process grew out of the parlous rural conditions of the period before 1959, and hence had an essentially 'peasant' character.<sup>6</sup>

The objective of this article is first to trace how external interpretations of the Revolution as an event and as a process have changed over the fifty years since Batista fled and the early enthusiastic interpretations of the Revolution appeared. The first part of the article considers the ways in which interpretations became politicised, how they developed during the period of radicalisation and consolidation, and then how the literature was affected by the crisis that followed the collapse of the Soviet bloc and the unexpected survival of the regime. The final sections reflect upon the development of the literature and upon the ways in which, despite the problems of ideological commitment, at times polemical writing, and access to the island, the tension between 'the exceptional' and 'the paradigmatic' has produced a rich body of interpretative literature by Cuba specialists in the United States and Europe.

### *The Triple Politicisation of Interpretations*

The turning point in external interpretations was 1961, when the revolution became formally socialist. The Bay of Pigs generated a need to explain an exceptional dissidence, and the literacy campaign highlighted the social revolution and the wider revolutionary process. However, a salient characteristic of almost all of the interpretations published immediately after 1961 was still that they were all essentially 'political' in different ways.

First, many analyses still arose from the same *a priori* political positions, either justifying or opposing the changes. This arose from the fact that most early writing on Cuba was North American, and in the contemporary United States few could be really objective about a nearby Soviet-linked socialist revolution or about the 'loss' of Cuba.<sup>7</sup> One prominent exception was

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*France-Soir*, under the title of 'Ouragan sur le sucre', between 28 June and 15 July 1960: see Nicholas Hewitt, 'Images of Cuba in France in the 1960s: Sartre's "Ouragan sur le sucre"', *Sartre Studies International*, vol. 13, no. 1 (2007), pp. 62–73; Kepa Artaraz, 'The Cuban Revolution and the New Left in the 1960s: a Study of Intellectual Cross-Fertilisation', unpubl. PhD diss., University of Wolverhampton, 2001.

<sup>6</sup> Leo Huberman and Paul M. Sweezy, *Cuba: Anatomy of a Revolution* (New York, 1960).

<sup>7</sup> See especially Nathaniel Weyl, *Red Star over Cuba: The Russian Assault on the Western Hemisphere* (New York, 1961); Daniel James, *Cuba: The First Soviet Satellite in the Americas* (New York, 1961); I. P. Pflaum, *Tragic Island: How Communism Came to Cuba* (Englewood Cliffs, 1961); E. C. Stein, *Cuba, Castro and Communism* (New York, 1962). As discussed later

Herbert Matthews' 1961 account. This, although journalistic in its focus, showed an unusual awareness of the complexity of Castro and a 'Communism' – described by Matthews as 'Communistoid' – which he later famously saw as 'not a cause of the Revolution [but] a result'.<sup>8</sup> Matthews also represented another feature of this early propensity for political analysis by writing from an essentially liberal perspective, rather than from that of a supportive socialism or that of anger. While liberalism kept Matthews broadly sympathetic to the revolution, perhaps justifying his earlier advocacy, it led Theodore Draper in 1966 to reject both the left's 'myths' and the anti-Communist right's narrow focus on 'nothing but Communism'.<sup>9</sup> Second, the early literature was political in its use of the paradigms of (largely North Atlantic) political science, explaining the Revolution through familiar models. Third, many such analyses were political in their focus on the Revolution's causes precisely because it did not accord with current models that highlighted social or economic conditions. Those 'political' explanations covered a wide range: from the venality of the old Cuba (Matthews), through the politics of 'national-revolutionary' rebellion (Draper), and the repeated weaknesses of pre-1959 reformism (Suchlicki), to Goldenberg's picture of a history of failures both of the old Cuba and of the United States.<sup>10</sup>

Few writers at this time identified the Revolution's nationalist or anti-imperialist roots. In 1963 Alistair Hennessy had characteristically foreshadowed later scholarship with his acute eye for the processes of radical thought, and in 1968 came Ramón Eduardo Ruiz's perceptive – if remarkably still overlooked – study of the Revolution's roots in nationalism, in a 'splintered society', and in relative development rather than underdevelopment.<sup>11</sup> Hugh Thomas's monumental 1971 work drew attention to the Revolution's vast historical hinterland, reflecting Cuban historical readings of a post-1762 modernisation, and influencing Cuban studies for years, until eventually challenged by Sherry Johnson in 2001.<sup>12</sup> This helped to stimulate a

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in this article, the first wave of émigré literature on the new revolution contributed significantly to the nature, drive, and level of this perspective.

<sup>8</sup> Herbert L. Matthews, *The Cuban Story* (New York, 1961); the quotation is from Herbert L. Matthews, *Castro: A Political Biography* (Harmondsworth, 1969), p. 162.

<sup>9</sup> Theodore Draper, *Castro's Revolution: Myths and Realities* (New York, 1967), p. 34.

<sup>10</sup> Theodore Draper, *Castroism: Theory and Practice* (New York, 1969 [1965]), pp. 50–2; Jaime Suchlicki, *Cuba: From Columbus to Castro* (New York, 1974), later republished as *Cuba: From Columbus to Castro and Beyond* (4th edition, Washington, 1997); Boris Goldenberg, *The Cuban Revolution and Latin America* (New York, 1965).

<sup>11</sup> Alistair Hennessy, 'The Roots of Cuban Nationalism', *International Affairs*, vol. 39, no. 3 (1963), pp. 345–59; Ramón Eduardo Ruiz, *Cuba: The Making of a Revolution* (Amherst, 1968).

<sup>12</sup> Hugh Thomas, *Cuba, or the Pursuit of Freedom* (London, 1971); Sherry Johnson, *The Social Transformation of Eighteenth-Century Cuba* (Gainesville, 2001); see also Mario Llerena, *The Unsuspected Revolution: The Birth and Rise of Castroism* (Ithaca, 1978).

wider examination of the nationalist aspects of the Cuban past, as displayed by Sheldon Liss's catalogue of the Revolution's roots in radical thought, rather than action.<sup>13</sup>

The object of that nationalism, the United States, provided one element of these early 'political' approaches: the US responsibility for the 'loss' of Cuba, which some initially blamed on Kennedy's 'betrayal' of the Bay of Pigs and on US pusillanimity.<sup>14</sup> However, a more reasoned (and progressive) argument came from Robert Scheer and Maurice Zeitlin, who catalogued the intelligence, diplomatic and political failings of the United States before January 1961.<sup>15</sup> Their perspective was subsequently echoed by Philip Bonsal (who urged the United States to learn from the episode and recognise Castro's popularity), Samuel Farber and Edward Boorstein, although the implications of the latter's explanation was that the Revolution, with its endogenous roots, could not be explained away by US incompetence.<sup>16</sup> All of these, nonetheless, shared a view with others: that one underlying cause of the Revolution lay in the pre-1959 patterns of US attitudes and behaviour, a theme taken up much later by two 'classic' analyses of US-Cuban relations.<sup>17</sup>

Finally, the 'political' descriptor also applied to those analyses that addressed Castro's political significance, ideas and practice. Almost all observers appeared mesmerised by his personality and leadership, his undoubted importance being presumed to be proof of the Revolution's exceptionality and either a force for good or the element explaining the 'loss'.<sup>18</sup>

### *The 'Paradigmatic' Approach: Explaining Radicalisation*

This brings us back to the question of 'exceptionalism', for most of these explanations shared one thing. In seeking the roots of an apparently exceptional case, they curiously had recourse to non-'exceptionalist' paradigms.

<sup>13</sup> Sheldon Liss, *Roots of Revolution: Radical Thought in Cuba* (Lincoln NE, 1987).

<sup>14</sup> Earl E. T. Smith, *The Fourth Floor: An Account of the Castro Communist Revolution* (New York, 1962); Mario Lazo, *Dagger in the Heart: American Policy Failures in Cuba* (New York, 1968); Suchlicki, *Cuba* (1997 edition), p. 167.

<sup>15</sup> Robert Scheer and Maurice Zeitlin, *Cuba: Tragedy in our Hemisphere* (New York, 1963).

<sup>16</sup> Philip W. Bonsal, *Cuba, Castro and the United States* (Pittsburgh, 1971); Samuel Farber, *Revolution and Reaction in Cuba, 1933–1960: A Political Sociology from Machado to Castro* (Middleton, CT, 1976); Edward Boorstein, *The Economic Transformation of Cuba: A First-Hand Account* (New York, 1968).

<sup>17</sup> William Appleman Williams, *Cuba, the United States and Castro: An Essay on the Dynamics of Revolution and the Dissolution of Empire* (New York, 1962). The 'classic' analyses are Jules R. Benjamin, *The United States and Cuba: Hegemony and Dependent Development, 1880–1934* (Pittsburgh, 1977); Morris H. Morley, *Imperial State and Revolution: The United States and Cuba, 1952–1986* (Cambridge, 1987).

<sup>18</sup> For the former view, see Frank, *Cuba*; Matthews, *The Cuban Story*; for the latter, Enrique Meneses, *Fidel Castro: siete años de poder* (Madrid, 1966).

Even the personalistic focus on Castro reflected that. Many of those who identified him as the critical element, either to explain the Revolution's success or its subsequent radicalisation, in fact tried to fit him into existing paradigms.

One such approach was to adapt 'Latin Americanist' perspectives of personalism. While it might have perhaps been logical to pursue this line of argument through populism, none did so at the time, although in 1974 Edward Gonzalez eventually suggested a *fidelista* populism as one possible outcome.<sup>19</sup> Much later, Samuel Farber located Castro within that tradition, as a 'left-wing authoritarian populist', while D. L. Raby posited Castro as developing a revolutionary populism.<sup>20</sup> Instead, these personalist interpretations referred anachronistically to the *caudillo*, an epithet whose cultural assumptions meant less need to define a system or a philosophy. Many observers were thus tempted. Meneses bitterly termed him the 'eccéntrico caudillo cubano', while Gonzalez called him 'the dominating *caudillo*', 'the national *patrón*', and 'the socialist *caudillo*'.<sup>21</sup> Indeed, much of the extensive literature which talks of 'Castroism' continues to imply some sort of 'Latin Americanist' reading.

However, Gonzalez had already developed a more sophisticated paradigm in the notion of charisma. Although Richard Fagen had already talked of 'charismatic authority', Gonzalez studied the 'systems' of personalist control under a leader subordinating all institutions to his authority, political skills and personal loyalty.<sup>22</sup> While Fagen saw this charisma as positive, Gonzalez saw it as an obstacle to consolidation. However, Gonzalez also reflected another angle within this 'Fidel-centric' approach, with many, often the polemical or disenchanting, seeing the system's durability as a consequence of ruthless political machinations by a Machiavellian Castro. According to this view Castro had manipulated politics, including even the pre-1959 Communists (the PSP), to shift the revolution to the left and consolidate his position. For Gonzalez *fidelismo* was the 'radicalizing force in Cuban socialism'.<sup>23</sup> This Fidel-centrism necessarily includes the consistent tradition of biography in writing on the revolution, which, while producing some sophisticated political biographies, with analysis of processes and context, has also

<sup>19</sup> Edward Gonzalez, *Cuba under Castro: The Limits of Charisma* (Boston, 1974), p. 230.

<sup>20</sup> Samuel Farber, *The Origins of the Cuban Revolution Reconsidered* (Chapel Hill NC, 2006), p. 168; D. L. Raby, *Democracy and Revolution: Latin America and Socialism Today* (London, 2006), pp. 113–21. <sup>21</sup> Meneses, *Fidel Castro*, p. 93; Gonzalez, *Cuba under Castro*, p. 168.

<sup>22</sup> Richard Fagen, 'Charismatic Authority and the Leadership of Fidel Castro', in Ronaldo E. Bonachea and Nelson P. Valdés (eds.), *Cuba in Revolution* (New York, 1972), pp. 154–68.

<sup>23</sup> Gonzalez, *Cuba under Castro*, p. 147; Suchlicki, *Cuba*, pp. 153–72; Andrés Suárez, *Cuba: Castroism and Communism, 1959–1966* (Cambridge, Mass, 1967).

produced many 'psychological' or journalistic depictions of Castro's supposed failings.<sup>24</sup>

As the revolution survived invasion and crisis and it became clear that it was not slavishly following a Soviet model, attention shifted from its genesis to its seemingly exceptional radicalisation. The more sympathetic sought answers not just in the present but in a reappraisal of the past, going beyond poverty or the peasantry to more structural causes, and essentially seeing 1959 as starting rather than completing revolution. This path had been indicated by Waldo Frank's picture of US domination and by Huberman and Sweezy's focus on foreign capital.<sup>25</sup> Now, however, it had a clearer ideological focus on the economics of imperialism rather than the politics of failed democracy, tracing the Revolution's 'organic' roots in historic inequalities and dependence (in the process anticipating 'dependency theory'), and reflecting assumptions emerging empirically inside Cuba. For all their weaknesses, these explanations provided a valuable service by breaking the intellectual impasse posed by the fact that before 1959 Cuba appeared, at least statistically, to be more 'developed' than most Latin American countries, which argued against the likelihood of revolution. Huberman and Sweezy were again in the vanguard, talking of 'the need for socialism'.<sup>26</sup> Boorstein echoed this, while O'Connor talked explicitly of 'the air of inevitability'.<sup>27</sup> However, the real pioneer of this approach was Robin Blackburn. His seminal 1963 article, for all its misreading, remains one of the most influential explanations of the Revolution's origins, referring to the peculiar juxtaposition of an essentially weak society and 'revolutionary intellectuals'.<sup>28</sup>

For those not on the left, the radicalisation process had other avoidable causes: US mistakes, Castro's acquisition of control, or 'international Communism'.<sup>29</sup> However, although the Revolution was now clearly identified with 'Communism', few observers drew obvious conclusions to examine the political structures and processes inside Cuba, preferring still to focus on leadership and personality. Indeed, those who did examine the ruling post-1965 Communist Party still tended to consider it Castro's personal instrument.<sup>30</sup> Even Goldenberg's study of the party's history stopped

<sup>24</sup> Matthews, *Castro*; Tad Szulc, *Fidel: A Critical Portrait* (London, 1986); Robert E. Quirk, *Fidel Castro* (New York, 1997). The latter category includes Peter Bourne, *Castro: A Biography of Fidel Castro* (London, 1986), and Georgie Anne Geyer, *Guerrilla Prince: The Untold Story of Fidel Castro* (Boston, 1991).

<sup>25</sup> Huberman and Sweezy, *Cuba*.  
<sup>26</sup> Leo Huberman and Paul M. Sweezy, *Socialism in Cuba* (New York, 1969), p. 17.

<sup>27</sup> Boorstein, *Economic Transformation*; James O'Connor, *The Origins of Socialism in Cuba* (Ithaca, 1970), p. 280.

<sup>28</sup> Robin Blackburn, 'Prologue to the Cuban Revolution', *New Left Review*, no. 21 (October 1963), pp. 52–91.

<sup>29</sup> Smith, *The Fourth Floor*, p. 224.

<sup>30</sup> Irving L. Horowitz, 'Political Sociology of Cuban Communism', in Carmelo Mesa-Lago (ed.), *Revolutionary Change in Cuba* (Pittsburgh, 1971), pp. 127–44.

in 1961, while Suárez essentially saw ‘the Party’ as individuals within the leadership rather than the institution or the grass-roots.<sup>31</sup> In part, this reading reflected the prevailing image of a newly created party, denied a national Congress till 1975, marginalised by the welter of mobilisations, and serving as a formal vehicle for the ex-guerrillas’ idiosyncratic version of socialism. This view, however, neglected two realities: the functioning of the party *núcleos* as mechanisms for activist politicisation, and the whole experience of participation. Indeed, the latter was not seriously addressed until Richard Fagen’s still pertinent 1969 analysis of the Literacy Campaign (as political participation), the *Comités de Defensa de la Revolución* (CDRs), and the *Escuelas de Instrucción Revolucionaria*.<sup>32</sup> This was followed by Maurice Zeitlin’s study of workers’ involvement in, and politicisation by, the revolutionary process.<sup>33</sup>

Part of the reason for this neglect was that few saw the revolution as a process rather than an episodic narrative or a personalist trajectory, although Matthews was one exception.<sup>34</sup> The lateness of this development was curious, because what had initially attracted many writers had essentially been the very *process* of revolution and the seeming lack of a recognisable *system*, something which appeared to distinguish Cuba from the stultifying models of the Socialist Bloc. One prominent exception was the volume edited by Dudley Seers in 1964.<sup>35</sup> Adopting what was essentially a crusading and progressive ECLA-style ‘developmentalist’ focus on an already unusual approach to underdevelopment, with wider implications, this volume was especially notable for its unequalled study of the education reforms, and its recognition of the Revolution’s genesis in monoculture and dependence.<sup>36</sup> Others now began to include the social in their wider analysis, notably Huberman and Sweezy (on education and health) and O’Connor (on land reform), although René Dumont had already provided a critical first-hand account of the latter in 1964.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>31</sup> Boris Goldenberg, ‘The Rise and Fall of a Party: the Cuban CP (1925–59)’, *Problems of Communism*, vol. 19, no. 4 (1970), pp. 61–80; Suárez, *Cuba*. See also Andrés Suárez, ‘Leadership, Ideology and Political Party’, in Mesa-Lago (ed.), *Revolutionary Change*, pp. 3–22; Marifeli Pérez-Stable, ‘“We Are the Only Ones and There is No Alternative”’: Vanguard Party Politics in Cuba, 1975–1991’, in Enrique A. Baloyra and James A. Morris (eds.), *Conflict and Change in Cuba* (Albuquerque, 1993), pp. 67–85.

<sup>32</sup> Richard R. Fagen, *The Transformation of Political Culture in Cuba* (Stanford, 1969).

<sup>33</sup> Maurice Zeitlin, *Revolutionary Politics and the Cuban Working Class* (New York, 1970).

<sup>34</sup> Matthews, *The Cuban Story*. Matthews later repeated this in *Revolution in Cuba: An Essay in Understanding* (New York, 1975).

<sup>35</sup> Dudley Seers (ed.), *Cuba: The Economic and Social Revolution* (Chapel Hill NC, 1964).

<sup>36</sup> Richard Jolly, ‘Education’, in Seers (ed.), *Cuba*, pp. 161–280.

<sup>37</sup> Huberman and Sweezy, *Socialism*, pp. 22–64; O’Connor, *Socialism*, pp. 90–134; René Dumont, *Cuba: Socialisme et Développement* (Paris, 1964), translated and published as *Cuba: Socialism and Development* (New York, 1970).



Indeed, as the Revolution's tenth anniversary passed, it generated a standard in the literature on Cuba: the large 'overview' anthology of studies, focussing especially on that social revolution. Carmelo Mesa-Lago's 1972 volume, for example, one of the best pictures of the first decade, included excellent studies of education and the literary world, while the contemporaneous Bonachea and Valdés collection included an analysis of Cuba's radical educational experiment and the first serious study of health<sup>38</sup>. Although Mesa-Lago's volume included critical studies (and he himself remained ideologically opposed to the Revolution, although studiously balanced in his edited collections), a pattern was emerging whereby those studying the social achievements were more sympathetic, something that was also true of what was becoming another common genre: the first-person accounts of what we might call a 'progressive travel literature'.

### *The Emergence of a Radical Critique*

The late 1960s had already seen the development of this genre, mixing first-hand – and often questioning – accounts of a process glimpsed through critically sympathetic eyes with a desire to 'let the people speak' through conversations with ordinary Cubans. In 1967 Lee Lockwood gave a journalistic account based on visits and interviews with Castro, describing him as 'an extraordinary man who has created an extraordinary revolution', and on his own politics, which led him to admiration of the revolution despite all its dutifully recounted faults.<sup>39</sup> This was followed by Elizabeth Sutherland's subtle and quasi-ethnographic study of social changes, problems and attitudes.<sup>40</sup> Similar characteristics were seen in four other later 'classics' of the genre: José Yglesias's reaction to the revolution's pluses and minuses (including an unusual focus on homosexuality and the notorious *Unidades Militares de Ayuda a la Producción*, UMAP, camps); Barry Reckord's sensitive Jamaican perspective of the revolution's problems and achievements; Margaret Randall's study of Cuban women; and K. S. Karol's exhilarating 1970 picture.<sup>41</sup> The latter, indeed, offered much more than a

<sup>38</sup> Carmelo Mesa-Lago (ed.), *Revolutionary Change in Cuba* (Pittsburgh, 1972); Rolland G. Paulston, 'Education', in *Ibid.*, pp. 375–98; Lourdes Casal, 'Literature and Society', in *Ibid.*, pp. 447–70; Bonachea and Valdés (eds.), *Cuba in Revolution*; Nelson P. Valdés, 'The Radical Transformation of Cuban Education', in *Ibid.*, pp. 422–55; Richard Leyva, 'Health and Revolution', in *Ibid.*, pp. 456–96. Other anthologies published at this time included Jaime Suchlicki (ed.), *Cuba, Castro and Revolution* (Coral Gables, 1972), and Ronald Radosh (ed.), *The New Cuba: Paradoxes and Potentials* (Andover MA, 1975).

<sup>39</sup> Lee Lockwood, *Castro's Cuba, Cuba's Fidel* (New York, 1969), p. 340.

<sup>40</sup> Elizabeth Sutherland, *The Youngest Revolution: A Personal Report on Cuba* (New York, 1969).

<sup>41</sup> Although not much is known about the UMAPs, they seem to have been set up between about 1965 and 1968, probably by the Ministry of the Interior, formally to provide

personal account. Mixing an emotional attraction to a somewhat chaotically heterodox anti-Stalinist process with a justifiable ideological caution about the guerrilla vanguard's concentration of power, it represented a particular moment between the French left's early love affair with Cuba (brokered by Sartre) and the left's first doubts about apparent 'Sovietisation'.

Karol in fact reflected an already discernible tendency on the left. Its early uncritical enthusiasm was giving way to more sophisticated and conditional support for a process with much still to admire, but also something to lament. Dumont, while closer to the 'old' left in his prescriptions, set this pattern in 1964, more in sorrow than in anger, though piqued at Cuba's rejection of his advice, when he criticised 'romantic anarchy' in the impractical haste to adopt socialism, and also the 'bureaucratisation of anarchy' through the preference for centralisation and collectivism.<sup>42</sup> He later added the sin of 'protosocialism with a military bureaucracy'.<sup>43</sup> That same centralisation was also condemned on socialist grounds by those who read it as Stalinism. This was especially true of Sam Dolgoff's 1976 anarchist perspective, and Joseph Hansen's Trotskyist reading, the latter reflecting the US-based Socialist Workers Party's somewhat idiosyncratic position on Cuba.<sup>44</sup> This body of literature should also include the perspective of the British Socialist Workers Party, which inevitably dismissed the revolution as 'state capitalism'.<sup>45</sup> Indeed, all three of these studies shared a common interest in expounding *a priori* ideological positions rather than in studying the revolution *per se*.

This leftist critique also included the position adopted after 1970 by Irving Louis Horowitz, whose eleven edited collections (all entitled *Cuban Communism*) between 1970 and 2005 became a mainstay of the literature.<sup>46</sup>

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alternative forms of compulsory service for those whose beliefs or health prevented them from being conscripted. In practice they became camps for 're-educating' (through labour) many – mostly young – Cubans whose lifestyle, sexuality or religious practices were seen as deviant or even counter-revolutionary. They were closed after protests from the Writers' and Artists' Union (UNEAC). José Yglesias, *In the Fist of the Revolution: Life in Castro's Cuba* (Harmondsworth, 1968); Barry Reckord, *Does Fidel Eat More than Your Father? Conversations in Cuba* (New York, 1972); Margaret Randall, *Cuban Women Now: Interviews with Cuban Women* (Toronto, 1974); K. S. Karol, *Les Guérilleros au Pouvoir* (Paris, 1970), published as *Guerrillas in Power* (New York, 1970). Other accounts include Andrew Salkey, *Havana Journal* (Harmondsworth, 1971); Joe Nicholson, Jr., *Inside Cuba* (New York, 1974); Lee Chadwick, *A Cuban Journey* (London, 1975).<sup>42</sup> Dumont, *Cuba*, pp. 27 and 58.

<sup>43</sup> René Dumont, *Cuba: est-il Socialiste?* (Paris, 1970). The quotation is from the translated version, *Is Cuba Socialist* (London, 1974), p. 130.

<sup>44</sup> Sam Dolgoff, *The Cuban Revolution: A Critical Perspective* (Montreal, 1976); Joseph Hansen, *The Dynamics of the Cuban Revolution: The Trotskyist View* (New York, 1978).

<sup>45</sup> Peter Binns and Mike Gonzalez, 'Cuba, Castro and Socialism', *International Socialism Journal*, vol. 2, no. 8 (1980), pp. 1–36.

<sup>46</sup> Irving Louis Horowitz (ed.), *Cuban Communism* (New Brunswick, 1970).

Each edition expanded beyond its immediate predecessor (by 1977, the third edition had grown from seven to fifteen chapters), and each showed a shift from an anti-Stalinist critical sympathy (reflecting discussions in *Society*) to firm opposition to Cuba's Communism.

What these perspectives also opposed was, of course, the revolution's apparent loss of exceptionality and drift towards a more recognisable Communism, and even possibly to satellite status.<sup>47</sup> This was significant, since other studies had begun to return to 'exceptionalism', with analyses of what made Cuba different from other 'socialist' systems. For example, James Malloy's attempt to locate the revolution within Latin American and socialist paradigms of demand satisfaction concluded that a Cuba led by 'radical renovationists' was actually quite different.<sup>48</sup> Mesa-Lago offered an unusual anti-'exceptionalist' perspective in 1974. While no friend of the 'Sovietisation' which he saw, he nonetheless echoed Dumont in reserving his greatest criticism for unrealistic 'Sino-Guevarism', seeming almost to welcome the end of chaos and the post-1972 shift to pragmatism under the ex-PSP.<sup>49</sup>

*Taking Stock: The Shift to Overview and Systemic Analysis*

Mesa-Lago's 1974 book in fact contributed to the literature in two separate ways. First, it brought serious, if highly critical, attention to an economy now stabilising after a decade of tumult and crisis. In this Mesa-Lago was followed by other equally critical and rigorous approaches, notably by Sergio Roca and Heinrich Brunner.<sup>50</sup> Second, Mesa-Lago pioneered the division of the revolution's trajectory into defined periods, establishing a template for 'periodisation' that influenced subsequent chroniclers. In the process, this reinforced the tendency to see the whole trajectory as essentially chaotic and changeable, something already identified by Hugh Thomas.<sup>51</sup>

With the Cuban process apparently now following familiar lines, the 25-year mark in 1984 saw the inevitable crop of anniversary volumes. Most notable was the first of the Halebsky and Kirk collections, which followed the earlier models with an overview through a series of detailed, often

<sup>47</sup> Maurice Halperin, *The Rise and Decline of Fidel Castro: An Essay in Contemporary History* (Berkeley, 1972).

<sup>48</sup> James Malloy, 'Generation of Political Support and Allocation of Costs', in Mesa-Lago (ed.), *Revolutionary Change*, pp. 23–42. The quotation is from p. 30.

<sup>49</sup> Carmelo Mesa-Lago, *Cuba in the 1970s: Pragmatism and Institutionalization* (Albuquerque, 1974).

<sup>50</sup> Sergio Roca, *Cuban Economic Policy: the Ten Million Ton Sugar Harvest* (Beverly Hills, 1976); Heinrich Brunner, *Cuban Sugar Policy from 1963 to 1970* (Pittsburgh, 1977). A staple theory perspective came from Archibald R. M. Ritter, *The Economic Development of Revolutionary Cuba: Strategy and Economic Performance* (New York, 1974).

<sup>51</sup> Mesa-Lago, *Cuba in the 1970s*, pp. 1–10; Thomas, *Cuba*.

fieldwork-based, studies of specific social, political and economic aspects.<sup>52</sup> This volume also included an invaluable bibliographic overview by Louis J. Pérez, who had meantime continued to develop his historical *oeuvre* on pre-1959 Cuba, making the revolution's roots eminently clear.<sup>53</sup>

By this time, the earlier tentative focus had become a flourishing fieldwork-based literature on the whole social revolution, a pattern largely set by the several, if contestable, volumes of oral history undertaken by Oscar Lewis.<sup>54</sup> However, the Halebsky and Kirk collection also demonstrated that new research subjects were beginning to emerge. This included popular culture, religion, or foreign policy beyond US-Cuban or Soviet-Cuban relations, although the results of some of this research really only began to emerge much later.<sup>55</sup> What had clearly happened was that 'Cuba' had lost some of its fashionable sheen, having apparently reverted to type, and having been replaced in the affections of a model-seeking left first by Chile and then by Nicaragua. This left the field to the growing number of specialists, who now eschewed the bigger picture for a sharper focus on the detail. The exception was economics, which continued to be treated at the macro rather than micro level, with a notable shift from the critical to the more approving.<sup>56</sup>

What was also becoming clear was that much of that literature had shaken off its propensity for polemic, although two works showed that this tradition

<sup>52</sup> Sandor Halebsky and John M. Kirk (eds.), *Cuba: Twenty-Five Years of Revolution, 1959–1984* (New York, 1985).

<sup>53</sup> Louis A. Pérez, Jr., 'The Cuban Revolution Twenty-Five Years Later: a Survey of Sources and Scholarship, and State of the Literature', in *Ibid.*, pp. 393–412; Louis A. Pérez, Jr., *Cuba: Between Reform and Revolution* (Oxford, 1988).

<sup>54</sup> Oscar Lewis, Ruth M. Lewis, Susan M. Rigdon, *Four Men: Living the Revolution. An Oral History of Contemporary Cuba* (Urbana, 1977); *Four Women: Living the Revolution. An Oral History of Contemporary Cuba* (Urbana, 1977); *Neighbors: Living the Revolution. An Oral History of Contemporary Cuba* (Urbana, 1978); Douglas Butterworth, *The People of Buena Ventura: Relocation of Slum Dwellers in Post-Revolutionary Cuba* (Urbana, 1980).

<sup>55</sup> John M. Kirk, *Between God and the Party: Religion and Politics in Revolutionary Cuba* (Tampa, 1989); Morley, *Imperial State and Revolution*; Jacques Lévesque, *The USSR and the Cuban Revolution* (New York, 1978); Peter Shearman, *The Soviet Union and Cuba* (London, 1987); Cole Blasier and Carmelo Mesa-Lago (eds), *Cuba in the World* (Pittsburgh, 1979); Martin Weinstein (ed.), *Revolutionary Cuba in the World Arena* (Philadelphia, 1979); Jorge I. Domínguez (ed.), *Cuba: Internal and International Affairs* (Beverly Hills, 1982); Jorge I. Domínguez, *To Make a World Safe for Revolution: Cuba's Foreign Policy* (Cambridge MA, 1989); Debra Evenson, *Revolution in the Balance: Law and Society in Contemporary Cuba* (Boulder, 1994); Julie M. Feinsilver, *Healing the Masses: Cuban Health Politics at Home and Abroad* (Berkeley, 1993); Thomas C. Dalton, *Everything within the Revolution: Cuban Strategies for Social Development since 1960* (Boulder, 1993).

<sup>56</sup> Arthur MacEwan, *Revolution and Economic Development in Cuba* (London, 1981); Claes Brundenius, *Revolutionary Cuba: The Challenge of Economic Growth with Equity* (Boulder, 1984); Andrew S. Zimbalist, *Cuba's Socialist Economy Towards the 1990s* (Boulder, 1987); Andrew S. Zimbalist and Claes Brundenius, *The Cuban Economy: Measurement and Analysis of Socialist Performance* (Baltimore, 1989).

continued: Marta Harnecker's study of the political system, and one collection of papers, which, although clearly from a 'solidarity' stable, nonetheless included some new topics.<sup>57</sup> Indeed, the birth of *Cuban Studies* in 1985 indicated both the decline of polemic and the development of closer research. Although initially reflecting some of the politics of US 'Cubanology', the journal began its tradition of providing space for genuine academic debate, including Cuba-based perspectives, and invaluable information on emerging research. Similarly, two events in 1989 (Halifax, Nova Scotia, and Warwick, UK) indicated the same. The former was the largest Cuba conference ever, highlighting the quality of the evolving research and generating further 'overview' studies.<sup>58</sup> The latter emphasised the developing contribution of British Cuban studies, beyond the politicised hothouse of United States-based 'Cubanology'.<sup>59</sup>

If the social was attracting new attention, the revolution's politics, however, seemed to be taken for granted, with an apparently familiar Communist structure under Castro.<sup>60</sup> This offered one clear advantage in its recognition of a system meriting systemic study. Jorge Domínguez had laid the basis for this approach with his historical study of political evolution and of the functioning of the system's component parts, followed by Max Azicri's similarly invaluable reference tool in 1988.<sup>61</sup> What both books shared was an interpretation of the revolution's roots in Cuba's political, as opposed to its social or economic, configurations before 1959. Indeed, one curiously ignored 1993 study took this further. Using Theda Skocpol's paradigm of the state as both the theatre and engine of change, Brian Meeks returned us to the bigger picture, analysing pre-1959 structures, elite cleavages and the ('permissive') global context.<sup>62</sup>

By then, however, that very context had altered irrevocably with the collapse of the Soviet Union, changing the academic literature once again in the process. In 1984 Pérez had written accurately of the 'development of great maturity in the literature', but this latest turn of events made that judgement

<sup>57</sup> Marta Harnecker, *Cuba, Dictatorship or Democracy?* (Westport, 1979); John Griffiths & Peter Griffiths (eds.), *Cuba: The Second Decade* (London, 1979); John Griffiths, 'Sport: the People's Right', in *Ibid.*, pp. 247–60; Antonio José Herrera and Hernán Rosenkranz, 'Political Consciousness in Cuba', in *Ibid.*, pp. 36–52.

<sup>58</sup> Sandor Halebsky and John M. Kirk (eds.), *Transformation and Struggle: Cuba Faces the 1990s* (New York, 1990); Sandor Halebsky and John M. Kirk (eds.), *Cuba in Transition: Crisis and Transformation* (Westview, 1992).

<sup>59</sup> Richard Gillespie (ed.), *Cuba after Thirty Years: Rectification and the Revolution* (London, 1990).

<sup>60</sup> Hugh S. Thomas, Georges A. Fauriol and Juan Carlos Weiss. *The Cuban Revolution: 25 Years Later* (Boulder, 1984), p. 53.

<sup>61</sup> Jorge I. Domínguez, *Cuba: Order and Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass, 1978); Max Azicri, *Cuba: Politics, Economics and Society* (London, 1988).

<sup>62</sup> Brian Meeks, *Caribbean Revolutions and Revolutionary Theory: An Assessment of Cuba, Nicaragua and Grenada* (London, 1993).

seem rash, for the collapse inevitably changed the focus of interpretations.<sup>63</sup> However, since the crisis coincided with the Revolution's thirtieth anniversary, 1989–94 also saw another crop of 'overview' studies. Jean Stubbs, Janette Habel and Marifeli Pérez-Stable successively produced their own perspectives, each combining the personal and the analytical in explaining the past and also the present strengths, although less so with Habel's disenchanted view of Stalinism and 'Castroism'.<sup>64</sup> Meanwhile, some of the new literature sought to explain the internal (rather than global) drivers of a specifically Cuban but seemingly terminal crisis. The best was undoubtedly Susan Eckstein's sensitive study of the complexities of crisis and adaptation, showing that even some of the more subtle analyses mixed the 'exceptional' with the paradigmatic.<sup>65</sup>

### *Reassessing the Survivor: After the Crisis*

Most of the new studies that appeared in the early and mid 1990s depicted an aberrant phenomenon in its death throes, focussing on intractable problems (youth, alienation or inefficiency) and predicting imminent collapse.<sup>66</sup> Even some later, more approving, studies also tended to assume either an inevitably problematic future, or a need for fundamental re-thinking.<sup>67</sup>

However, when the 'next domino' refused to fall, despite the scale of the problems, observers began to explain that survival. For some, its roots were to be found in the past and the system's exceptionality. Damián Fernández saw it in a continuity of Cuba's politics of affection, solidarity and loyalty, while Antoni Kapcia emphasised the system's underlying ideological cement, picking up a theme which had been largely unchallenged to that point.<sup>68</sup> Sartre's judgement about the 'absence of ideology' had been echoed by Maurice Zeitlin's 'revolution without a blueprint', and several sympathisers had seen a uniquely Cuban ideological path, whether ideology-free (in the case of Suárez), or ideologically flexible, not least for putting praxis before

<sup>63</sup> Perez, 'Twenty-Five Years', p. 402.

<sup>64</sup> Jean Stubbs, *Cuba: The Test of Time* (London, 1989); Janette Habel, *Cuba: The Revolution in Peril* (London, 1981); Marifeli Pérez-Stable, *The Cuban Revolution: Origins, Course and Legacy* (New York, 1993).

<sup>65</sup> Susan Eva Eckstein, *Back from the Future: Cuba under Castro* (Princeton, 1994).

<sup>66</sup> Carmelo Mesa-Lago, *Cuba after the Cold War* (Pittsburgh, 1993); Enrique A. Baloyra and James A. Morris (eds.), *Conflict and Change in Cuba* (Albuquerque, 1993); Juan M. Del Aguila, *Cuba: Dilemmas of a Revolution* (Boulder, 1994).

<sup>67</sup> Geraldine Lievesley, *The Cuban Revolution: Past, Present and Future Perspectives* (Basingstoke, 2004); Max Azicri, *Cuba Today and Tomorrow: Reinventing Socialism* (Gainesville, 2000).

<sup>68</sup> Damián J. Fernández, *Cuba and the Politics of Passion* (Austin, 2000); Antoni Kapcia, *Cuba: Island of Dreams* (Oxford, 2000).

ideology (in the case of O'Connor).<sup>69</sup> Fagen and Valdés had, however, already seen a clear ideological pattern, the former in terms of inwardly-oriented values, although others had seen more top-down processes of 'indoctrination'.<sup>70</sup>

For most observers, however, survival meant a return to the old focus on personality, which was seen as causing Cuba's structural problems and also holding together an otherwise frail and moribund system, as though Cuba were not an exception to the global rule, since collapse was only postponed by the exceptional.<sup>71</sup> Hence, much of this new literature simply took us back to the initial Fidel-centric focus on the personal rather than the systemic; the wheel did indeed seem to have gone full circle. This was curiously confirmed by one development in the post-crisis literature, namely the perspectives written by those taking advantage of material newly released in Russia following, first, the rise of Gorbachev, and then the collapse of the Soviet Union. Some new analyses brought genuinely new light to bear on old realities.<sup>72</sup> However, some seemed regrettably to be peddling old material, confirming old prejudices or political positions and, retrospectively, re-fighting Cold War battles, or seeking to prove that the old canard about Soviet subversion – or Castro's secret Communism – was true all along. Generally, this literature disappointed and added little to our understanding, leaving a rich field to plough for the future.<sup>73</sup>

This new material was paralleled by an increasingly evident retrospective spirit inside Cuba, occasioned by a desire to reassess the early revolution in the light of both the post-1986 process of 'Rectification' and then the post-1989 collapse of the Socialist Bloc, and also, perhaps, by a degree of nostalgia and stock-taking among the ageing guerrilla vanguard. The early 1990s, for example, saw official conferences involving Cubans and non-Cubans held in Moscow and Havana on both the Bay of Pigs/Playa Girón episode and the

<sup>69</sup> Maurice Zeitlin, 'Cuba: Revolution without a Blueprint', in Horowitz, *Cuban Communism* (1970), pp. 117–30. Suárez, 'Leadership'; O'Connor, *The Origins*, p. 310.

<sup>70</sup> Richard R. Fagen, 'Revolution – for Internal Consumption only', in Horowitz, *Ibid.*, pp. 37–51; Nelson P. Valdés, *Ideological Roots of the Cuban Revolution* (Glasgow, 1975); Nelson P. Valdés, 'Cuban Political Culture – Between Betrayal and Death', in Halebsky and Kirk (eds.), *Cuba in Transition*, pp. 207–28; Tzvi Medin, *Cuba: The Shaping of Revolutionary Consciousness* (Boulder, 1990); Julie M. Bunck, *Fidel Castro and the Quest for a Revolutionary Culture in Cuba* (University Park, PA, 1994).

<sup>71</sup> Miguel A. Centeno and Mauricio Font (eds.), *Toward a New Cuba? Legacies of a Revolution* (Boulder, 1998); Baloyra and Morris, *Conflict*; Mesa-Lago, *Cuba after the Cold War*.

<sup>72</sup> Shearman, *The Soviet Union and Cuba*, was one of the first to benefit from the Gorbachev opening. See also Mervyn Bain, 'The Glasnost Effect on Soviet/Cuban Relations in the Gorbachev Era', *Journal of Transatlantic Studies*, vol. 2, no. 2 (2004), pp. 125–42, and *Soviet-Cuban Relations, 1985 to 1991: Changing Perceptions in Moscow and Havana* (Lanham, 2007).

<sup>73</sup> Alexandr Fursenko and Timothy Naftali, 'One Hell of a Gamble': *Khrushchev, Castro and Kennedy, 1958–1964* (New York, 1997).

Missile Crisis, with participants or key players gathering to reminisce and reassess. These meetings sparked similar events inside the United States, with some public results.<sup>74</sup> Both processes led to some shifts in judgement about these pivotal events, in particular questioning the advisability and levels of US support for the former and Cuba's freedom of action in the latter.

The same mood also generated some reassessment of the immediate genesis of the Revolution, shifting away slightly from the almost monopolistic focus on the Sierra guerrillas, which had been traditional. Inside Cuba valuable new attention was paid to the wider insurrection, with some focus at last on the so-called *clandestinidad* of the *llano*, partly legitimised by Enrique Oltuski's 2000 defence of the somewhat forgotten contribution of that essential element of the whole insurrection.<sup>75</sup> This was preceded by Gladys Marel García-Pérez's remarkable and detailed study of the Matanzas struggle.<sup>76</sup> This openness also resulted in one outstanding piece of research, remarkable for its level of access to hitherto inaccessible Cuban sources: Julia Sweig's rigorous and painstaking study of the two years of the urban struggle and of the seminal political negotiations between the 26 July Movement and other opposition forces.<sup>77</sup>

By the early 2000s, the survival of the Revolution also eventually saw another wheel turn full circle: in the attention of an admiring Left. After years in the wilderness, having partly fallen out of fashion with the western European and North American Left in the mid-to-late 1970s, having been eclipsed by the attention paid to the Sandinista experiment and the Chiapas-based Zapatistas, and having suffered from the general malaise on the Left following the collapse of 'actually existing socialism' as any sort of model, Cuba returned to centre stage. It did so with the rise of a discourse of 'globalisation' which began to see Cuba as both a survivor and an example of alternative resistance from the margins. While this new focus tended for a while to be journalistic, polemical and occasionally superficial, by the early 2000s, it did produce some thoughtful analysis of Cuba's besieged and faded social experiment as part of a continental phenomenon.<sup>78</sup> Curiously, however, this new attention tended not to see the Revolution as especially unique (defying somewhat the evidence of a completely unpredicted survival) but,

<sup>74</sup> James G. Blight, Bruce J. Allyn, and David A. Welch, with the assistance of David Lewis, *Cuba on the Brink: Castro, the Missile Crisis, and the Soviet Collapse* (New York, 1993); James G. Blight and Peter Kornbluh (eds.), *Politics of Illusion: The Bay of Pigs Invasion Reexamined* (Boulder, 1998). <sup>75</sup> Enrique Oltuski, *Gente del Llano* (Havana, 2000).

<sup>76</sup> Gladys Marel García-Pérez, *Insurrection and Revolution: Armed Struggle in Cuba, 1952–1959* (Boulder, 1998), later expanded and published as *Insurrección y Revolución (1952–1959)* (Havana, 2006).

<sup>77</sup> Julia E. Sweig, *Inside the Cuban Revolution: Fidel Castro and the Urban Underground* (Cambridge, Mass, 2002). <sup>78</sup> See especially Raby, *Democracy and Revolution*.



rather, as reflecting a regional or even global 'alternative' resistance to unipolarity and the irresistible drive of neoliberalism.

*Thematic Patterns: Dichotomies and Fidel-Centrism*

Seeking to characterise the five decades of analysis, it is evident that a number of themes have been consistent. Most obviously – because of the passions aroused, personal involvement and entrenched positions – much of the literature has tended to be polemical, or based on wishful thinking or preconceptions. It has led occasionally to clouded judgements or omission. Even those works outside the opposing camps (admiration or condemnation) have usually appeared somewhere on that spectrum, with partial admiration perhaps tempered by democratic regrets.

A variation of this dichotomy has, therefore, been the division between studies written from a vantage point too close to the subject to be usefully objective or analytical, something that is true of both ends of the spectrum, and those written at too great a distance to understand its complexity and processes. In this respect it is perhaps interesting to reflect that the literature's 'golden age' seems to have been between 1967 and 1974, when many of the often still unsurpassed 'classics' were written. If true, then this may be explained by two factors. First, that period caught a particular moment both in the Revolution's trajectory (given that many of the studies in the 1970s expounded earlier research) and in attitudes and opportunities inside the United States, whose scholars, then allowed to research in Cuba, dominated Cuban studies until the late 1980s. In Cuba, the Revolution, having survived a decade, seemed to be generating a deep and fascinating transformation (unlike after 1975), while in the United States the effects of various processes of radicalisation had created a willingness to depart from the old Cold War perspectives without the need for the frenetic enthusiasm of the first few years after 1959. Second, that period saw the publication of fieldwork carried out in Cuba, driven by the belief that the whole process was somehow exceptional, and therefore seeking to examine what made it so. After the mid-1970s, as the Cuban system seemed to follow other paradigms, attention moved away from Cuba. When that was followed by the hardening of US attitudes, limiting travel to the island, and then by the collapse of the socialist paradigm itself, the Cuban Revolution seemed somehow less inherently interesting than before.

A further consistent dichotomy has been between interpretations that stress either discontinuities or continuities. The former has especially characterised the more critical and polemical studies, particularly early on, which saw the Revolution as an unnatural, and thus often necessarily exogenous, break with Cuba's historical traditions. Thomas's underlying argument

pointed in that direction. The same pattern of discontinuities, however, has also been detectable in those studies examining the post-1959 processes, which see an almost whimsical zig-zag path from phase to phase and policy to policy. Essentially, both these arguments for discontinuity have seen the Revolution as inconsistent (either with the past or since 1959), personalist, failing or factional. The alternative reading has seen an essential continuity between the Revolution and the political or economic past, or between pre-1959 US attitudes and post-1959 US policies. Indeed, one indication of this interpretation has been the preference for the vocabulary of ‘roots’, implying – and tracing – organic links between past patterns and present thinking. This literature has also largely tended to see continuities between otherwise bewildering phases, usually explaining these deeper and structural continuities in terms of ideology or political culture.

The question of continuity also of course brings us to one consistent pattern: the focus on Fidel Castro. At every stage, the study of the revolution has had to confront the symbolic hegemony of the *líder máximo*. Earlier studies often exaggerated his role, and his (good or bad) intentions, attributing everything to him. Later studies (in the 1990s) returned to that focus. However, the intervening years, though offering studies of systems and wider themes, also continued to offer a string of biographies. These were all still mesmerised by charisma, power-lust or survivability, confirming the judgement that, while it is always erroneous to ignore ‘the Fidel factor’, the greater the focus on Fidel, the less analytical and perceptive the study, the lesser the focus, the more valid the perspective.

Finally, of course, we come back to the question of ‘exceptionalism’, one side of a dichotomy which has never disappeared where much of this literature examines a process that has continually defied conventional explanation and prediction tending to fall either into the ‘exceptionalist’ camp or the paradigmatic. Curiously, this seems especially true of one question consistently treated according to other paradigms: culture under the revolution. Here, early ‘exceptionalism’ gave way after 1961 (and certainly after 1968–71) to a reading of Cuba according to the paradigms of 1945–89 Eastern Europe. Generally, however, we have to conclude that ‘exceptionalism’ has tended to predominate over the years.

### *The Emigré Perspective*

The underlying role of émigré perspectives pervades the literature on Cuba. Undoubtedly and understandably this was one of the critical elements in establishing dichotomies from as early as 1959–60, and was critical in sustaining research interest on Cuba as fashions came and went over the decades. This perspective began with a vengeance from the earliest months after

January 1959, seeking to justify the otherwise universally condemned past, or to highlight the threat that Cuba's still unclear revolution posed to the United States.<sup>79</sup> After 1961–62, this literature became more coherent and less frenetic, as patterns within Cuba became clearer – the emergence of 'Communism' legitimised positions that might not have been taken so seriously before – and as the émigré population in the United States began to take recognisable social and political shape, providing a more receptive audience for the critics.<sup>80</sup> As a new émigré publishing industry emerged and academic centres began to be established in southern Florida, there was a shift from open polemic to committed academic analysis.<sup>81</sup> Occasionally the obsession with Castro repeated the patterns of the first months, but there were also more nuanced studies of the emergence of Communism or personalist dictatorship.<sup>82</sup> One prominent exception to this pattern (of anti-Castro academia) was the post-1971 work of Nelson Valdés, already establishing himself as someone writing against the émigré grain by seeking to explain 'from within' a Cuban political culture.<sup>83</sup>

By the 1980s, however, a new pattern was discernible, with a new generation emerging, less focussed on the past, the personal, and the polemical, feeling much less the need to lament the 'loss' of the old Cuba, but still writing from a position that was essentially critical of the revolution. The way here had already been shown by Mesa-Lago's thoughtful and essentially social democratic studies of the economy (a more rightist but still rigorous perspective being adopted by people like Roca); indeed the economy tended to be a favourite focus of analytical literature among émigrés or second-generation Cuban-Americans.<sup>84</sup> Briefly (in the small window opened by Carter's abortive détente after 1977 and closed by Reaganism) there was the prospect of a more dissenting voice from the new generation.<sup>85</sup> However, this largely failed to grow against the pressures of renewed US-Cuban

<sup>79</sup> Leopoldo Pío Elizalde, *La Tragedia de Cuba* (Mexico City, 1959); Florentino E. Rosell Leyva, *La Verdad* (Miami, 1960); Fulgencio Batista, *Cuba Betrayed* (New York, 1962).

<sup>80</sup> Teresa Casuso, *Cuba and Castro* (New York, 1964); Manuel Urrutia Lleo, *Fidel Castro and Company, Inc.* (New York, 1964).

<sup>81</sup> The many works of Jorge I. Domínguez from 1971 (especially *Cuba. Order and Revolution*) are the outstanding example of this phenomenon, as indeed are those by Carmelo Mesa-Lago; see also Mario Llerena, *The Unsuspected Revolution: The Birth and Rise of Castroism* (Ithaca, 1978).

<sup>82</sup> Goldenberg, *The Cuban Revolution and Latin America*; Suarez, *Cuba*; Suchlicki, *Cuba*.

<sup>83</sup> Bonachea and Valdés (eds.), *Cuba in Revolution*.

<sup>84</sup> Jorge F. Pérez-López, *Measuring Cuban Economic Performance* (Austin, 1987); Jorge F. Pérez-López, *The Economics of Cuban Sugar* (Pittsburgh, 1991); Jorge F. Pérez-López and Sergio Díaz-Briquets, *Conquering Nature: The Environmental Legacy of Socialism in Cuba* (Pittsburgh, 2000).

<sup>85</sup> See especially Grupo Areíto, *Contra viento y marea* (Havana, 1978), and Román de la Campa, *Cuba on my Mind: Journeys to a Severed Nation* (London, 2000).

hostility and the orthodoxy of the remarkably unified émigré community, still (and even increasingly) dominated by the ‘historic’ generation of 1961.

Indeed, a curious pattern now emerged among younger Cuban-Americans. Now clearly living ‘on the hyphen’ rather than being politicised émigrés, their attention to Cuba tended to move away from the political, the social or the economic, towards culture, perhaps reflecting their awareness of their own cultural Cuban-ness.<sup>86</sup> This led to a wealth of specialisation on literature and then, later, cultural studies, that preserved the old dichotomy of 1961–71. This portrayed the post-1959 relationship between culture and revolution as necessarily, inevitably, and almost universally repressive, in reading it as the writer against the state, the individual against the monolith. The reasons were clear. Still largely unable to benefit from travel to Cuba, their views tended to be shaped by a particular perspective of that relationship dominated by émigré memoirs and accounts. The first wave of cultural ‘exiles’ (Cabrera Infante and others) had not really had a great impact on the general thinking on Cuba, with the exception of stalwart academics like Roberto González Echevarría. However, the post-Mariel emigrants were far more successful since they coincided with the coming of age of this new generation (shaped by their parents’ politics but fascinated by their heritage), with Reaganism, and with an emerging ‘cultural studies’ focus on paradigms of ‘resistance’.<sup>87</sup> This was all enhanced by the newer writing (and memoirs) on the experience of the 1971–76 *quinquenio gris*, when harassment and often outright repression of ‘dissonant’ writers (dissonant in aesthetics or sexuality) was especially evident, perhaps even more than in other spheres of Cuban activity.

Thus what emerged was the ‘Arenas phenomenon’, a view of culture on the island that departed from the earlier anguished ambivalence of Lourdes Casal to a more coherent, but still occasionally ambiguous, perspective that was determined by ‘exile’ memory.<sup>88</sup> Since then, in fact, US-based views of culture (and especially of literature) – very largely dominated by Cuban-Americans of the second and third generations, but constantly enhanced by further cultural exiles – have tended to retain an essentially Cold War perspective of Cuba that is less often found in studies of politics, society or the economy. While this may often be expressed in the discourse of progressive

<sup>86</sup> Gustavo Pérez Firmat, *Life on the Hyphen: the Cuban-American Way* (Austin, 1994).

<sup>87</sup> In 1980, as a response to domestic tensions, some 125,000 Cubans were allowed to leave Cuba through the port of Mariel. This emigration, the largest since 1971, was notable for being less ‘political’ than the early exodus, and for including more black and working-class Cubans, as well as some prominent cultural figures whom some saw as having ‘transgressed’ through their work or sexuality.

<sup>88</sup> Especially Lourdes Casal, ‘Literature and Society’, in Mesa-Lago (ed.), *Cuba in Revolution*, pp. 447–70, and Grupo Areíto, *Contra viento*.

cultural studies, seeing Cuba as part of a wider Latin American paradigm of repression and popular cultural resistance, it retained, and often still retains, more than a germ of old attitudes, with talk of the monolithic or the repressive 'system'. Hence Arenas is now somewhat iconic, representative of a wider repression that recalls the post-1946 Socialist Bloc, but updated to acknowledge his sexual as opposed to political 'transgression'.

### *Lessons for the Future?*

How, therefore, should researchers henceforth approach this evidently unusual and apparently baffling phenomenon? The first step, curiously, might be to return to some of those seemingly failed paradigms, to seek elements that might help explain, without necessarily providing the elusive holistic explanation. For example, while early interpretations of populism and personalism, and talk of the 'limits of charisma', may have missed deeper structural and historical forces, they may still contribute to our understanding. This is especially true now, for two reasons; first, when Castro's personal intervention in August 1994 turned a dangerous moment of popular discontent into a pivotal moment of popular support, it reminded us that structural explanations alone cannot suffice. Second, Castro's protracted departure from the active political equation may make such approaches more relevant than before.

Furthermore, those analyses that explained Cuba through the prism of eastern European systems may, curiously, now help us focus on the systemic factors of a five-decade long political culture, especially since, if 'The Revolution' survives Fidel Castro, it will have been guaranteed by that underlying 'system' and not personalism. Hence, the party (one critical element of continuity) and the FAR (the Revolutionary Armed Forces) are necessary objects for study, now more than ever. We had to wait until 2006 for the first book-length analytical study of the FAR, as a political actor and also as an institution in its own right, different from both other Latin American and Socialist Bloc militaries.<sup>89</sup> However, the party as a structure has never really been given the attention which it merits. Moreover, beyond that, the whole network of 'mass organisations' awaits thorough analysis, especially those taken more for granted by outside observers, such as the little studied students' federations (FEU and FEEM), which were so central to the post-2000 'Battle of Ideas', and the post-1993 veterans' body, the *Asociación de Combatientes de la Revolución Cubana* (ACRC). Indeed, only the

<sup>89</sup> Hal Klepak, *Cuba's Military 1990–2005: Revolutionary Soldiers during Counter-Revolutionary Times* (London, 2006); see, however, Louis A. Perez, Jr., 'Army Politics in Socialist Cuba', *Journal of Latin American Studies*, vol. 12, no. 2 (1976), pp. 251–71.

CDRs, the women's organisation (FMC), and the trade unions have ever been systematically analysed, although the electoral system has received useful detailed attention.<sup>90</sup>

The second approach to Cuba is, of course, to avoid the perils of analysis from afar and to engage in fieldwork on the island. This does, however, raise its own challenges, not least Cuban resistance to external research, an attitude rooted in a penchant for defensiveness, especially on sensitive topics (notably race, social problems and sexuality), and especially at times of 'siege', isolation or internal tension. In the past this has most affected US researchers, compounded by Cuban fears arising from Clinton's 'twin track' policy (of sustaining the embargo but seeking to destabilise through increased contact between academics and a supposedly dissident 'civil society'). This, indeed, contributed to the infamous *caso CEA*, when the researchers of the path-breaking *Centro de Estudios sobre América* were publicly criticised and then dispersed, mostly due to their work on delicate domestic political and social issues with overseas researchers. However, recently shifting EU policies have spread the effects of this nervousness more widely.

Moreover, Cuban caution has been compounded by US restrictions on academic contact, isolating Cuba from those best placed geographically to study it in detail. While this has driven much US research to focus on Cuban history or the bigger picture (including US-Cuban relations or the economy – the latter especially producing much work from afar, with occasional problems in terms of matching theory to reality on the ground), it has created some space for non-US researchers, which is evident in emerging research on participation. However, they too must confront the same resistance and the relative lack of exogenous fieldwork on which to build. Thus, if US limitations are lifted and if European and Canadian researchers continue to travel with the relative ease of recent years and to grow in number, there is a real risk of 'academic carpet-bagging', of a flood of new researchers arriving on short visits, staying in the capital or engaging in impressionistic research, but above all bringing preconceived notions into a complex reality and therefore discovering what they largely expect. This augurs ill for the hope of new perspectives or for Cuban willingness to cooperate, unless great care is taken.

One solution therefore may be to begin acknowledging the quality of existing Cuban researchers, whose work is often overlooked as 'contract

<sup>90</sup> On the CDRs, see Fagen, *The Transformation*, pp. 69–103; on the FMC, see Maxine Molyneux, *State, Gender and Change in Cuba's 'Special Period': The Federación de Mujeres Cubanas* (London, 1996); on unions, see Carmelo Mesa-Lago, *The Labor Sector and Socialist Distribution in Cuba* (New York, 1968); Linda Fuller, *Work and Democracy in Socialist Cuba* (Philadelphia, 1992); on the electoral system, see Peter Roman, *People's Power: Cuba's Experience with Representative Government* (Lanham, MD, 2003).

research' for internal consumption, and to begin collaborating with them. This means, of course, a need to work with, rather than against or outside, the system, with the implication that there will be a new set of challenges posed by differences in methodology and theory and in academic discourse. This approach will also raise further implications for funding agencies which might look askance at projects that depart from norms of theoretical framework and disciplinary methodologies or assumptions. Thus all research disciplines must come to terms with aspects of the Cuban reality that do not easily fit paradigms. Economic researchers face an evolved pattern which defies easy categorisation into formal and informal sectors (the latter, despite its importance, having rarely been researched); cultural studies paradigms of 'resistance' face a baffling complexity of attitudes towards apparently dissident forms; and political scientists face a 'civil society' that is much more complex and contradictory than one expects from media coverage or North Atlantic paradigms.<sup>91</sup> In short, researchers must continue being aware of how 'exceptional' Cuba seems to be, in part if not in the whole.

This introduces another point in this discussion: the nature of 'Cuba'. For this survey of the literature has thrown up yet a further pattern: the tendency for studies either to be focussed on 'Cuba' (as idea or as myth, as something larger than the reality), usually meaning a sympathetic and continuing focus on 'The Revolution', or alternatively on 'Fidel' or to analyse Cuba as a political, economic, social and geographical reality. Indeed, it is revealing how many studies of the revolution have carried a single-word main title ('Cuba'), with a more precise and explanatory subtitle. This would confirm the continuing magnetism of the myth, not least for reader-conscious publishers. Generally, in fact, we might say that the 1960s and the 1990s saw the predominance of 'Cuba', with the intervening years seeing a greater preference implicitly to abandon the inverted commas.

Whatever the case, the fact is that, because 'the Revolution' at 50 remains a rich vein for researchers to mine, it is high time for something of a return to the approach that characterised the 1968–89 period, especially as deep, analytical and dispassionate studies of many aspects of the revolution are long overdue. Moreover, it is not impossible that, in a Fidel-less Cuba which would remove the element which most consistently generates the focus on 'Cuba' and prevents study of the reality of the island, we may move into a new period of research. That said, however, it is of course equally possible that the disappearance of one of the most favoured explanations of

<sup>91</sup> Alexander I. Gray and Antoni Kapcia (eds.), *The Changing Dynamic of Cuban Civil Society* (Gainesville, 2008); Margaret E. Crahan and Ariel C. Armony, 'Rethinking Civil Society and Religion in Cuba', in Hoffman and Whitehead (eds.), *Debating Cuban Exceptionalism*, pp. 139–64; see also a characteristically challenging view from the island by Rafael Hernández, *Looking at Cuba: Essays on Culture and Civil Society* (Gainesville, 2003).

'exceptionality' will be replaced by others, if something called 'The Revolution' succeeds in surviving him, making 'Cuba' yet again remarkably exceptional.

This brings us back to the title: does Cuba fit? Clearly, the answer must be that Cuba has offered a judicious mixture of the exceptional and the paradigmatic: exceptional at times and for long periods, exceptional in its genesis, development, leadership and survival, but curiously paradigmatic in its systems, and in its patterns of participation, loyalty and ideology. This means inevitably that researchers approaching Cuba (while remembering the constant truism about Cuba, that it is always worthwhile considering the Revolution as a 'revolution', i.e. as a process, rather than as a static system) now must balance the one with the other. This is because, while an excess of either approach inevitably misses vital elements offered by the other, the tension between the exceptional and the typical has clearly also produced fine research, fierce debate and shifting interpretations: the lifeblood of good academic study.