

Turning Points

Revolutionary Cuba: 1959, 1968, and 2009

On January 8, 1959, Fidel Castro triumphantly arrived in Cuba's capital, Havana city, to a euphoric welcome from a population celebrating the departure of the Batista dictatorship and looking forward to a more just, free and independent Cuba. As with other struggles to overcome dictatorial regimes, this was a popular Revolution with a charismatic leadership, including but not limited to Fidel Castro. The triumph of the Cuban Revolution was the result of a successful armed guerrilla struggle, led by Fidel, Ernesto "Che" Guevara, Camilo Cienfuegos and others, but its success was underpinned by the much larger 'July 26 movement', whose activists and supporters in the cities and in rural areas were crucial actors in this Revolution.

By 1961, in the midst of a CIA backed invasion by Cuban exiles from Miami seeking to overthrow the Revolutionary government, Fidel announced the "socialist character" of this Revolution, formally moving it to a new phase. In contrast to popular representations outside the country that were quick to position Fidel Castro as a Soviet pawn, this phase of Cuba's Revolution remained an independent project of national, and now socialist, liberation. A period of public debate about alternative models of socialism followed. Trade and diplomatic links with the Soviet Union did gradually increase in this period, replacing the loss of U.S markets, but not yet at the expense of independent Cuban domestic and foreign policy.

Recorded in newspapers, magazines and academic journals, the "great-debate" explored social and economic policy alternatives in an attempt to define and build an authentically independent model of Cuban socialism. In this context, Che Guevara accused Moscow of being an accomplice to imperialist exploitation in its trade relations with developing countries, in one of his last public speeches in February 1965. The following year Castro ruled out alignment with the Chinese during the Sino-Soviet split, but withheld unconditional support for the Soviet Union. At a time when Moscow was advocating a parliamentary strategy for communist parties and peaceful co-existence with the West, Cuba was supporting and publicly encouraging guerrilla struggles. Indeed, in 1967 Cuba was backing guerrilla fighters in Venezuela who were simultaneously fighting government forces and the Soviet-backed Venezuelan Communist Party.

In early 1968 a pro-Soviet "micro-faction" of the Cuban Communist Party was expelled and some members arrested, amidst claims of direct interference by Soviet advisors. By this time, however, around half of Cuba's foreign trade was with the Soviet Union. Che Guevara's death in Bolivia symbolised the lack of success of regional revolutionary movements, and the U.S. economic embargo was tightened. When the Soviet Union slowed the delivery of oil supplies, in response to Cuba's boycott of an international meeting of Soviet aligned communist parties held in Budapest, a major turning point was reached.

In August 1968 Cuba offered official support for the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia, marking this shift symbolically, in sharp contrast to the independent line that was such a characteristic of this popular revolution in the 1960s. 1968 is described by some as the year of a "world revolution", citing protests and social upheaval across the globe that rejected both United States imperialism and the Soviet model of socialism in favour of 'New Left' alternatives. Driven largely by accumulated economic pressures, made worse by U.S policy, Cuba turned definitively toward the Soviet Union and the 'Old Left'.

The popular and independent foundations of Cuba's Revolution, and the social achievements it made in terms of public housing, health care and education, help to explain how it survived the collapse of the Soviet Union and Eastern Bloc countries, despite the post-1968 alignment and economic integration. Massive economic dislocation resulted, with inevitable social and political upheaval, as the national economy dramatically contracted and hard currency alternatives needed to be found for some 80% of the country's international trade. Defying neo-liberal prescriptions, the central government maintained social programs on which its legitimacy rested.

In 2008 Fidel Castro formally stood down as President of the Cuban government, for health reasons, replaced by his younger brother Raul Castro who is seen as a more pragmatic leader. Forty-one years after the world revolution of 1968, and Cuba's turn to the Old Left, the Cuban Revolution at 50 faces perhaps another turning point. However, the challenges Cuba confronted in 1959, 1968, 1991, and now are similar to those faced by all nations: How can the State deliver ongoing and sustainable

national economic growth and development, sufficient to provide social and economic security for all, within the constraints of the existing world-economy?

New developments are again emerging across Latin America, led by Venezuela, combining liberal democratic mechanisms with popular social movements to explore 21st century alternatives to neoliberal capitalism and Old-Left socialism. With diverse world leaders apparently agreeing that the days of the so-called 'Washington Consensus' are finished, it is perhaps not just Cuba, but the world-system itself that is in a process of transition towards an uncertain, but potentially more just, democratic and equal, future.

Dr Tom Griffiths is a senior lecturer in comparative and international education at the University of Newcastle. He is currently researching the expansion of public education, and social change, in Venezuela.