Continuity and Change in the Cuban Revolution

Review essay by Menno Vellinga


For more than forty years, the Cuban Revolution has continued to be one of the twentieth century’s most challenging phenomena, maintaining a powerful hold over people’s imaginations. Its dynamics feed a never-ending story that – as we enter the twenty-first century – continues to defy easy explanation and comprehension. Questions abound and the academic discussion about their possible answers remains unsettled: How did the revolution begin and how did the Cuban situation differ from that of other Latin American countries? Furthermore, how did the revolutionary process evolve and how and why did it radicalize so rapidly? How was it able to maintain momentum in the face of constant pressures generated by the United States embargo and the need to adapt to the changes in the international economic and political conjuncture? How does one interpret the confusing process of change since the beginning of the Revolution and the succession of stages, phases, rectifications’ and ‘special periods’? Is there an underlying thread of consistency? How does one interpret its present search for direction in an increasingly globalizing world? How has the Revolution managed to survive as a system against overwhelming odds and how has it been able to continue to generate considerable support among the Cuban population despite the sacrifices and conditions of austerity this same population has had to endure for over four decades? Finally, what must one expect of the inevitable transition that will accompany the succession of its present – aging – leadership? The books reviewed here are a testimony to this continuing debate. They all touch – in one way or another – on subjects related to these questions. Pérez-Stable offers a general account of the revolutionary process, its origins, development and present state. Kaufman and Rothkopf deal mainly with the perspectives of a regime transition, with an emphasis on the possible consequences for the relationship with the United States. Kapcia offers an integrated, all-encompassing approach with an effort to offer a perspective of the entire revolutionary process, its origins and background, while focusing on developments in the realm of ideology. He sketches the emergence
of the ideological complex of cubanía. This includes the development of a politico-historical mythology directed towards the origins of the Revolution, the how, what and why of its present predicament, and the whereto of its future course, thus establishing the link between Cuba’s heroic past and the socialist Cuba libre of the future. The book authored by García and Sola combines pictures and text, giving more portrayal than explanation, but in its description of Che Guavara’s life, it connects neatly with the analysis of the revolutionary mythology offered by Kapcia. Finally, Castañeda’s exceptionally well-documented and well-written book offers the analysis and explanation that García and Sola are lacking. He gives a profound analysis of Guevara mythology, Guevara’s place in the pantheon of the Cuban Revolution and his contribution to the politico-historical myths that form part of the ideological complex of cubanía. In fact one should read both books in combination.

As to the origins of the Cuban Revolution, Pérez Stable as well as Kapcia do not follow very different interpretations. They focus on the generally identified macro factors, such as: a mediated sovereignty, the sugar-centred development, uneven modernization, the crisis of political authority, the weakness of the bourgeoisie and the relative strength of the popular sectors. Kapcia relates these to the search for a national identity and the presence of a political culture characterised by a history of frustrated rebellions that, instead of producing apathy, generated revolutionism. This element of revolutionism is well integrated into the rest of cubanía. It has raised the awareness that complete national sovereignty could only be brought about by breaking with the dependency towards the United States. In addition, it created a renewed political discourse focusing on radical societal reform. Finally, it required the refusal of any compromise on these questions.

This development generated the ideological complex of cubanía rebelde. This complex combined a dimension of internationalism, also prescribed by Marxist-Leninism, with a strong nationalism, fuelled by frequent appeals to the patriotism of millions of Cubans in the face of United States hostility. Pérez-Stable agrees with Kapcia on the pressure of powerful motivating ideological factors, although she has little faith in their development towards a new conciencia. The commitment to lofty ideals and the hope of building a better future, apparent in the mobilizations of millions of citizens in the past decades and in the participation in international activities, eventually has proven unable to motivate labour and to renovate socialism. She maintains that the ‘Fidel-patria-revolución’ formula for governance has lost its dynamics and has led to schizophrenic situations for growing numbers of citizens who, in public would express conformance to a regimented public discourse, while privately dissenting, without, however, the security of possible alternatives. The size of that segment of the population could be estimated at roughly one third. These people seem to retain their loyalty to ‘la Revolución’ and to Fidel Castro as its leader, sufficiently enough to participate in the mass-mobilizations, demonstrations and the like that we have witnessed through the years. The segment of those actively committed to the Revolution could also be estimated at one third. This includes the older generation (with memories of the pre-1959 situation), party members, U.J.C. and CDR activists, workers in the education and public service sectors and the population in the rural areas in the provinces outside Havana. The opposition – those unquestioningly opposed to the sys-
tem – may also roughly amount to one third. These are, of course, approximations, and, with changes in the political and economic conjuncture, shifts within and among sectors may occur. Since 1994 the Cuban economy has experienced a number of years of impressive growth (from an admittedly very low baseline in 1993), followed by slowdowns that may have generated the ‘familiar rising-expectations-frustration’ phenomenon. In addition, the increasing dollarization of the economy and the stagnating purchasing power of those completely dependent upon the peso-based system may be creating tensions, undermining communal solidarity and causing Cubans to shift to the ‘opposition’ camp. However, the extent of such development is not known, and it may even be that the slight improvements of the last few years have helped to maintain the active and passive support for the system. There is at least little evidence as yet that the Castro-led system is any more threatened now than it was ten years ago.

Kapcia explains this continuity from the important role the ideological network of cubanía has fulfilled through the years in sustaining the system with all its complexities and contradictions. Part of it is the code of solidarismo, including systems of reciprocity and mutual help that – on the local level – have cushioned the impact of economic downturns and the ensuing scarcities. The urge to persevere and to survive as a system has been supported by the guerrilla myth: the story of battles against all odds, snatching victory from apparent defeats and the emergence of a growing community of shared struggle, suffering and victory, through acts of daily and often unsung heroism and sacrifice. The life of Che Guevara offers many exemplifications of this myth – as Castañeda explains – as well as Fidel Castro’s continuous references to the guerrilla past in his speeches, evoking the David and Goliath metaphor.

Kapcia’s book is excellent and his approach through the analysis of discourse and ideology is very innovative. At the same time, he has the tendency to overemphasize the impact of the cubanía complex and the strong influence it has – in his perspective – on the greater part of the Cuban population and their decision to persevere through all the trials and tribulations of the various phases of the revolutionary process. He may underestimate the pragmatism with which many Cubans have learned to survive, adapting to la situación, without – as should also be noted – weakening their intense feelings of patriotism, which have remained surprisingly strong among all sectors of the Cuban population, irrespective of their personal attitudes towards the Revolution. Pérez-Stable underlines the importance of this element in discussing the reaction of the Cuban population towards the embargo and the Torricelli and Helms-Burton acts. In the eyes of the Cuban people, these foreign dictates will never be the motor of a change toward democracy. Kapcia also underestimates the impact of the elaborate system of political control that will act immediately in the event actions pass the limits of solidarity to the Revolution as defined by the revolutionary leadership. In that situation, any dissidence will operate against almost insurmountable odds.

So, where does Cuba go from here? Kaufman and Rothkopf direct themselves to the various economic, social and political dilemmas that Cuban society and its leaders are faced with when considering the necessary changes and adaptations to the new conditions created by Cuba’s insertion in the world economy after the collapse of the Soviet bloc. The overall economy has been compartmentalized through the emergence of three distinct ‘sub-economies’,...
each operating according to a different economic logic. These are, a) the traditional public sector, characterized by central planning, state controlled enterprises and regulated markets; b) the external sector, operating through state ownership and joint state-foreign ventures, export oriented and strongly dependent on foreign capital and technology, and c) the informal and market sector, consisting of the self-employed and the several markets outside state control. The relationship between these three ‘economies’ has been changing continuously, mostly under the influence of non-economic factors forming part of the politico-institutional context and ideological considerations as described by Kapcia. On a long-term basis, Cuba appears to be moving towards the growth of a mixed economy, but constant political interference has made this an agonizingly slow process.

It is not easy to imagine what Cuba would look like after a transition. The various authors in Kaufmann and Rothkopf discuss the possible scenarios and review the United States policy options toward Cuba. Their contributions represent a wide range of political views. The two editors represent opposite sides of the political spectrum: Kaufmann defending the embargo, Rothkopf attacking it, the other authors taking intermediate positions. While discussing future options of economic change, all authors agree that Cuba’s potential as a market economy should not be exaggerated. Years ago, the Economist, in an analysis of Cuba’s economy, discussed the possibilities of a future role as ‘Caribbean tiger’. Once the transition towards a market economy would have acquired momentum – according to optimistic analysts – foreign investment would rise quickly, international trade and tourism would start booming, high quality human resources would provide a solid basis for long-term growth, and the end of the United States embargo would open the door to eager (Cuban) American investors. Years later, this optimism does not seem to be justified. The various authors in Kaufmann and Rothkopf analyze the various scenarios and foresee considerable problems that would frustrate such development. Economic liberalization as part of a transition may not be matched by substantial political change. Charismatic leaders like Fidel Castro have been known to be notoriously reluctant to organize their succession. A transition may entail intra-elite struggles, problems in the military, social protest, and may result in micro-economic shifts in the sphere of markets, people and the distribution of wealth. In absence of proper safety nets, the certain equity in the distribution of assets, opportunities and income, which corresponds to the seemingly widespread egalitarian commitment among the Cuban people, may not hold up well. Finally, most Cubans dread the return of the exiles from Miami, which may cause widespread conflict. In addition to the impact of the other factors, this certainly would not help to create an attractive investment climate.

Most contributions to the Kaufmann-Rothkopf book have been written from a point of view that identifies with United States interests. They are not free from the distorted perspective that so often takes hold of members of big nations when analyzing the problems of a small country. This attitude, undoubtedly perceived by the Cubans as another manifestation of the arrogance of power, is not very helpful when discussing transition scenarios. The eagerness with which United States analysts focus on the signs of a possible transition (of course, toward a market economy and a pluralistic liberal-democratic political system along United States lines) may lead to an underestimation of the
strength of the forces that stand for political continuity on the island. An understanding of the vital role of the military is essential. They are a highly professional force, have strong roots in the political system and have elaborate – and expanding – economic interests, in addition to an important role in the general management of the overall economy. It is a force supporting the complex of cubania, above all the high degree of patriotism that goes with it. As such, they are the guardians of strictly controlled change, unlikely to advocate a return to the United States orbit. At the same time, however, they may become – as members of a more technocratically-oriented institution – supporters of less ideological prescriptions in policy making. They may also be expected to be more positively inclined towards reform. The changes resulting from the unavoidable by-products of Cuba’s insertion into the global economy and the moves toward a mixed economy may be accompanied by a transfer of responsibilities at the various ministries and state institutions to a new generation of well-trained, more pragmatically oriented managers. All these considerations fuel the transition debate, which maintains, however, a high degree of speculation. Amidst the discussions about possible scenarios, one should realize that Castro – his health permitting – will remain the gatekeeper of the process for the years to come, which means that the present irregular pace of reform, of ups and downs, will continue for at least the immediate future. At this moment, it is the most important element of stability amidst the apparent instability in change and transition.

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