BOOK REVIEWS


Reviewed by Stephen Wilkinson

Following on from one of the most interesting and stimulating panels at the 2018 Latin American Studies Association Congress in Barcelona, the participants now publish an equally engaging and original book that undoubtedly fulfils its stated purpose of making an important contribution to the field of Cuban Studies. To some extent, one would agree with its editors’ claim that the 15 chapters articulate the complexity of the 1970s and move beyond the tendency to simplify the changes during this period by subsuming them under the catchall noun: ‘Sovietisation’.

Indeed, throughout this book, the term is reproduced in speech marks, to suggest perhaps that such a process never occurred at all. Moreover, in some contributions, for example, in the one on the political and economic relationship between Havana and Moscow, it is expanded into the ‘Sovietisation thesis’, to which is also added the hypothesis that the relationship was one of ‘superclient/surrogate’. While the ‘superclient’ approach is undeniably a Cold War postulation of the right to comply with its Manichean discourse of seeing the hand of the Soviet Union behind every insurgency in the then ‘Third World’, ‘Sovietisation’ is rather more accurately descriptive, one would argue, of a definitely discernible shift in Cuban socialist practices and policies that may still be defended and which, this book, try as it might, does not entirely lay to rest.

There is an underlying tension in the contributions that seems to be wrestling with a subtext of trying to distance Cuba from the Soviet Union, when in fact, this is impossible to do. It would be far better, in my view, to accept that Cuba was deeply influenced by the Soviet Union and indeed benefitted greatly from this association rather than to seek ways of saying that it was not influenced as much as some of the Revolution’s detractors like to emphasise. To my mind, no matter how one tries to differentiate Cuban socialism from the Soviet system, there can be no escaping, nor is there anything to be gained from denying, the fact that without the Soviet Union, Cuba would not have been able to make any
of the incredibly progressive advances or achieve its admirable victories in this formative decade.

For example, while Cubans may have constructed their own national and ‘Third World’ liberation narrative around the heroic and historic Angolan intervention, as one chapter cogently argues, there is nowhere in this volume a full acknowledgement that the Cuban Army was equipped by the Soviet Union, that it could not have achieved the victory at Cuito Cuanavale without the air superiority provided by the latest generation of MiG-29 fighters, or that indeed during the Angolan civil war, the Soviet Union had its own advisers on the ground helping the MPLA. One can readily agree that Cuba was not a surrogate in Africa. More accurately, it could be argued that it was the tail that wagged the Soviet dog, forcing the superpower benefactor’s hand into performing a more progressive role than it might otherwise have done in the name of ‘peaceful coexistence’. But even if they did not commit any combat troops, nonetheless Soviets served in Angola too, and the victorious forces of anti-colonialism owe it a debt of gratitude as well.

At times, the contributors contradict themselves. For example, the chapter on health presents a masterful overview of the development of Cuban healthcare but fails to recognise that its own description of the original Cuban revolutionary health system resembles almost exactly the ‘Semashko’ model that it explains was developed in the Soviet Union. That Cuban healthcare was adapted later along lines taken from other systems elsewhere is clear, and well explained, but that it owes its basic form (policlinics – a Soviet input – are still a crucial element), and the training of its medical personnel, to the Soviet Union and Eastern Europeans, goes unacknowledged.

This book does contain high-quality scholarship with chapters analysing evidence on International Relations, Race, Women, Sex education, Culture and Youth that add much that is new to our understanding of the decade and the Revolution, but there are no chapters on religion or sport.

Sport is a pitiful omission because the 1970s was the decade in which Cuba burst onto the Olympic scene. Not since 1904, when a 17-year-old prodigy won two of four gold medals in fencing, had Cuba won a gold until the 1972 Munich games, when a young heavyweight boxer called Teofilo Stevenson was among three gold medallists that year in which Cuba finished 14th in the medals table. Four years later, at Montreal, Alberto Juantorena became the only man to win both the 400 and 800 metres in the same games, adding to Cuba’s six-gold haul and placing them eighth in the final table. How tiny Cuba could achieve a top-ten finish in the Olympic Games within 18 years of the triumph of the Revolution is an achievement that merits
investigation. The role of Soviet coaching in both boxing and athletics should not be overlooked.

With regard to religion, even a cursory glance at the 1976 constitution ought to be enough to realise that its affirmation of Cuba as a ‘scientific atheist’ state was Soviet inspired. Cuba made amends for this in the 1980s, but there was almost a decade of deep religious intolerance within the Party and society that drove believers underground. Another group driven underground were of course homosexuals. One suspects the editors of this volume felt as though enough has already been published on this stain on the revolution’s past but the fact that there is no chapter devoted to a discussion of homophobia here is a deafening omission.

Another caveat would be that there is also a tendency in this volume to assume knowledge that the reader may not possess. For example, there are some sweeping references to the Padilla Affair, without properly explaining either its actual nature or its full context, which involved a spy story worthy of John le Carré, where none other than Jorge Edwards, Allende’s ambassador to Havana, betrayed both his employer and the Cuban revolution.

Moreover, much as one would wish to accept arguments that it was Raúl rather than the Soviets (or indeed Carlos Rafael Rodríguez) who was the larger influence in the ‘institutionalisation’ process (read as a euphemism for ‘Sovietisation’) or the explanation that it was anti-colonialism, as much as Zhdanovism, that was the impulse behind the censorship of the grey 5 years, there is still the glaring and unavoidable fact that the Culture and Education Congress of 1971 had, as Guy Baron admirably reports, the slogan: ‘Art is a weapon of the Revolution’ – what more evidence of ‘Sovietisation’ does one need?

To summarise, I must underline that this book serves well as a counterweight to much that is intended against the revolution in bad faith. However, it fails somewhat in not accepting the extent to which Cuba did ‘Sovietise’, that it was inevitable that it did when it did, and that it derived great benefits as well as huge problems as a consequence. A number of contributors seem to want us to believe that Cuba did not ‘copy’ the Soviet Union, but is this not really a forlorn endeavour? Cuba undoubtedly did copy some things (one only has to look at the architecture). What is more, in my experience, the Cubans themselves admit that they copied and accept they erred in doing so too slavishly. I remember on my first visit to the island, during the Rectification campaign of the late 1980s, asking a senior ranking official why Cuba was not copying Gorbachev’s perestroika and glasnost after they had adopted so much else from the Soviet Union in the past. His reply (vehemently off the record) was forthrightly candid: ‘We have discovered that we have been copying shit!’
Of course, I do not believe the outburst was meant as a comprehensive overview of all that the Soviet Union gave to Cuba, I am sure on reflection the official would accept that not all of what they copied was mierda. He went on to elucidate: ‘Their ideology is no good. Fidel says they will be capitalist within five years and we have decided we will not.’ In my view, the anecdote is evidence (qualitative as it may be) that the underlying premise of this book is broadly correct but imperfectly realised. Cubans (the Castros if you wish) have had a clear conception of what they perceive socialism to be, and they have had sufficient confidence in themselves to stick to it no matter how much they have been forced to take from elsewhere.

_Science Wilkinson, The University of Buckingham, UK_