

VIEWPOINTS / PUNTOS DE VISTA

# A HISTORY OF THE CUBAN REVOLUTION

SECOND EDITION

AVIVA CHOMSKY



WILEY Blackwell



# **A History of the Cuban Revolution**

## ***Viewpoints/Puntos de Vista:***

### **Themes and Interpretations in Latin American History**

Series editor: Jürgen Buchenau

The books in this series will introduce students to the most significant themes and topics in Latin American history. They represent a novel approach to designing supplementary texts for this growing market. Intended as supplementary textbooks, the books will also discuss the ways in which historians have interpreted these themes and topics, thus demonstrating to students that our understanding of our past is constantly changing, through the emergence of new sources, methodologies, and historical theories. Unlike monographs, the books in this series will be broad in scope and written in a style accessible to undergraduates.

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# **A History of the Cuban Revolution**

Second Edition

**Aviva Chomsky**

**WILEY** Blackwell

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## Series Editor's Preface

Each book in the “Viewpoints/Puntos de Vista” series introduces students to a significant theme or topic in Latin American history. In an age in which student and faculty interest in the Global South increasingly challenges the old focus on the history of Europe and North America, Latin American history has assumed an increasingly prominent position in undergraduate curricula.

Some of these books discuss the ways in which historians have interpreted these themes and topics, thus demonstrating that our understanding of our past is constantly changing, through the emergence of new sources, methodologies, and historical theories. Others offer an introduction to a particular theme by means of a case study or biography in a manner easily understood by the contemporary, non-specialist reader. Yet others give an overview of a major theme that might serve as the foundation of an upper-level course.

What is common to all of these books is their goal of historical synthesis. They draw on the insights of generations of scholarship on the most enduring and fascinating issues in Latin American history, while also making use of primary sources as appropriate. Each book is written by a specialist in Latin American history who is concerned with undergraduate teaching, yet who has also made his or her mark as a first-rate scholar.

The books in this series can be used in a variety of ways, recognizing the differences in teaching conditions at small liberal arts colleges, large public universities, and research-oriented institutions with doctoral programs. Faculty have particular needs depending on whether they teach large lectures with discussion sections, small lecture or discussion-oriented classes, or large lectures with no discussion sections, and whether they teach on a semester or trimester system. The format adopted for this series fits all of these different parameters.

Now in its second edition, this volume was the inaugural book in the “Viewpoints/Puntos de Vista” series. In *A History of the Cuban Revolution*,

Avi Chomsky provides a compelling and fascinating synthesis of the Cuban Revolution. Drawing on historical literature and primary sources from Cuba, Europe, and the United States, the author takes the reader on a historical tour, from the beginning of the revolution in the Sierra Maestra up to the present day. Along the way, Professor Chomsky covers the emergence of Fidel Castro's rule, the dramatic confrontation with the United States that included the Bay of Pigs invasion and the Cuban Missile Crisis, before considering the revolution's course and its social and cultural legacies. The first edition of Professor Chomsky's text was a great success, and we are pleased to present a second edition. This new edition not only brings the story of the Cuban Revolution up to the present and adds a timeline and glossary, but it also updates Professor Chomsky's analysis as a result of the input from students, faculty, and new scholarship that has appeared in the last five years.

Jürgen Buchenau  
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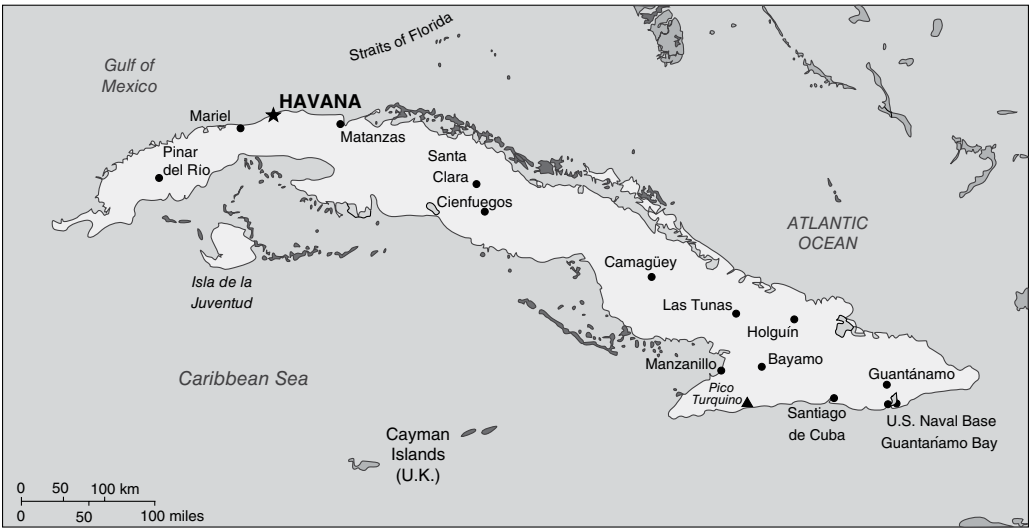
# Timeline

- 1493 Christopher Columbus lands in Cuba
- 1868 Grito de Yara sets off Ten Years' War (beginning of struggle for independence)
- 1879 Guerra Chiquita (second phase of war of independence)
- 1886 Slavery abolished
- 1891 José Martí publishes "Our America"
- 1895 Cuban War of Independence renewed
- 1898 U.S. intervention/Spanish – Cuban – American War
- 1901 Constitution incorporates Platt Amendment
- 1902 U.S. withdrawal
- 1912 Massacre of Afro-Cubans
- 1920 CNOOC founded; PCC founded
- 1923 FEU founded
- 1925 Gerardo Machado president
- 1933 Machado overthrown, Carlos Manuel de Céspedes installed, then replaced by Ramón Grau San Martín
- 1934 Constitution; Platt Amendment abrogated
- 1940 Fulgencio Batista president; 1940 Constitution
- 1947 Partido Ortodoxo founded
- 1952 Coup by Fulgencio Batista
- 1953 Failed attack on Moncada Barracks launches July 26th Movement
- 1958 Granma sails from Mexico to Cuba
- 1959 Cuban Revolution victorious; first Land Reform proclaimed; Casa de las Américas founded; ICAIC founded
- 1960 Urban Reform Law; CDRs established; FMC established; U.S. imposes economic embargo and travel ban
- 1961 Playa Girón (Bay of Pigs) invasion; literacy campaign; Fidel Castro declares Revolution socialist

- 1962 Missile Crisis
- 1963 First Cuban medical mission abroad, in Algeria
- 1965 UMAP established
- 1966 U.S. passes Cuban Adjustment Act
- 1970 Ten Million Ton harvest
- 1972 Cuba joins COMECON
- 1975 Partido Comunista de Cuba First Party Congress; U.S. Senate Committee (Church Committee) investigation of assassination plots against Fidel Castro; Cuba sends forces to Angola to help MPLA repel South African invasion; Family Code
- 1976 Constitution establishes Cuba as a socialist state
- 1977 Cuban troops support Ethiopia against Somalia
- 1980 Mariel Boatlift
- 1982 Foreign investment code
- 1986 Rectification campaign rolls back market openings
- 1989 Collapse of Soviet bloc leads to economic crisis
- 1991 Special Period in Time of Peace declared
- 1992 Constitutional Amendments allow foreign investment in joint ventures and declare Cuba a secular (rather than atheist) state; Torricelli Bill strengthens U.S. embargo
- 1993 Dollar legalized; UBPCs created to cooperativize state farms
- 1994 Farmers' markets reinstated; exodus of rafters
- 1995 Clinton implements Wet Foot, Dry Foot policy; *paladares* authorized
- 1996 Raúl Castro speech signals slowing of economic reforms; Helms-Burton Act strengthens U.S. embargo
- 1998 Cuba establishes Latin American Medical School; Pope John Paul II visits Cuba; Varela Project established; Hugo Chávez elected in Venezuela
- 2000 Exception to trade embargo allows U.S. agricultural exports to Cuba
- 2003 Convertible peso introduced; 75 dissidents arrested
- 2004 ALBA launched, beginning with petroleum-for-doctors exchange between Cuba and Venezuela
- 2006 Year of the Energy Revolution; Fidel Castro cedes presidency temporarily to his brother Raúl and steps down as First Secretary of the Communist Party
- 2008 National Assembly elects Raúl Castro President of Cuba
- 2009 Cuban authorities arrest USAID contractor Alan Gross

- 2010 Dissidents arrested in 2003 freed in accord brokered by Spain and Catholic Church; self-employment revitalized with new categories created and restrictions on size and employment of workers eased
- 2011 Sixth Congress of the Communist Party of Cuba elects Raúl Castro as First Secretary, approves *lineamientos* (guidelines) for economic and political reform; new housing law allows Cubans to buy and sell real estate
- 2013 New migration law allows Cubans to travel abroad without obtaining an exit visa
- 2014 Cubans permitted to purchase new, imported automobiles from state dealers





Map 1 Cuba with major cities.



**Map 2** Cuba with respect to the Caribbean and the Americas.

# Introduction

Rarely does popular opinion in the United States diverge so strikingly from scholarly analysis as in the case of the Cuban Revolution.

It's one of the few events in Latin American history that U.S. students have heard of. When I ask my students to come up with names of important figures in Latin American history, the only one that reliably emerges is that of Fidel Castro. And students are fairly unanimous in their opinions of Castro: "Dangerous," "evil," "bad," and "dictator" are the words they most commonly come up with to describe him. Survey results show that my students' positions are widely shared among the U.S. population: 98 percent of those surveyed in the United States had heard of Fidel Castro, and 82 percent had a negative opinion of him.<sup>1</sup>

Fidel Castro has certainly inspired his share of scholarly attention, including numerous biographies. Some are by historians. Some are by journalists. One is by a doctor. There is even a graphic novel recounting Fidel's life. In a "spoken autobiography" the Cuban revolutionary recounted his own story of his life.<sup>2</sup>

Most serious studies of the Cuban Revolution, though, focus less on the figure of Fidel Castro and more on the process, the politics, and the people of the Cuban Revolution. Here we find a giant gap between what scholars, including historians, have to say, and what U.S. political leaders and the general public seem to believe. Most historians frame the story of the Cuban Revolution with the long history of U.S. involvement in the island and in the rest of the Caribbean. But politicians and the general public have tended to see the USSR, rather than the United States, as the main factor explaining the nature of the Cuban Revolution. In this

respect, U.S. scholars today have more in common with their Cuban counterparts than they do with the U.S. public.

## Talking about Freedom

Both in Cuba and in the United States, the word “freedom” comes up frequently in describing Cuba’s history and current realities. It’s a word that incorporates many different meanings. U.S. policymakers tend to use it to refer to freedom for private enterprise, while for Cuban policymakers it generally means freedom from U.S. interference. This dichotomy is nothing new. “The Cuban people want to be free as much from the foreigners who abuse the flag as from the citizens who violate it and will end up burying it,” wrote a Cuban nationalist organization in the 1920s, referring to the U.S. political and economic domination of the island, and to the Cubans who collaborated with the foreigners.<sup>3</sup> Around the same time, Cuban Communist Party founder Julio Antonio Mella published his pamphlet entitled *Cuba, A Nation That Has Never Been Free*.

And today, a billboard in Santa Clara proclaims “O libres para siempre o batallando siempre para ser libres,” over a painting of two giant hands, one black and one white, breaking free of a shackle (Figure I.1). “Either free forever, or forever fighting to be free.” The contemporary use of the



**Figure I.1** Billboard quoting José Martí: “Either Free Forever, or Forever Fighting to be Free.” Source: Photo by Jackie McCabe.

image, and the quote by Cuban independence leader José Martí, clearly draws a parallel between Cuba's struggle for independence from Spain, its struggle for the abolition of slavery and for racial equality, and its struggle for national independence in the current era in the face of U.S. threats. "Freedom," a Cuban high school student at the "Martyrs of Kent" high school told U.S. educator Jonathan Kozol in 1976, "means when you are free of *international capitalistic exploitation!*"<sup>4</sup>

"Castro has taken no interest in international situation or in threat of international Communism," the U.S. Ambassador complained shortly after the Revolution. "I tried to explain significance of support of all peoples of free world in great struggle between freedom and slavery but do not believe he was particularly impressed."<sup>5</sup> The "freedom" that U.S. policy-makers worried about incessantly in the first months of the Revolution was what the new revolutionary regime would mean for private enterprise. Real U.S. goals in Cuba, Assistant Secretary of State Roy Rubottom reiterated, included "receptivity to U.S. and free world capital and increasing trade" and "access by the United States to essential Cuban resources."<sup>6</sup>

In late 2007, President Bush echoed the importance of private enterprise, the association of what he called "economic freedom" with political freedoms – and Cuba's failures on both counts. "One of the great success stories of the past century is the advance of economic and political freedom across Latin America," Bush explained in a major policy speech. "In this room are officials representing nations that are embracing the blessings of democratic government and free enterprise." However, "one country in our region still isolates its people from the hope that freedom brings, and traps them in a system that has failed them."<sup>7</sup> The one country, obviously, was Cuba.

In Barack Obama's first major speech on Cuba, before an audience of Cuban Americans in Miami in May 2008, he used the words "free" or "freedom" 33 times. "Never in my lifetime," he announced, "have the people of Cuba known freedom ... My policy toward Cuba will be guided by one word: Libertad." He even quoted José Martí, saying "every moment is critical in the defense of freedom." While explicitly distancing himself from Republican policies, Obama nevertheless vowed to maintain the U.S. embargo against Cuba.<sup>8</sup>

## Scholars Weigh In

Scholars of Latin America are less likely to share the U.S. administrations' infatuation with free markets. While economists are still divided on the issue, with the Chicago School holding fast to its free market principles,

historians tend to be a bit more leery of automatically equating free markets with political freedom. Economic liberalism, they remind us, was implemented in much of Latin America in the late nineteenth century through “liberal dictatorships” like that of Porfirio Díaz in Mexico, who maintained repressive, undemocratic governments while warmly welcoming U.S. investors. Since World War II, dictatorships in the Southern Cone and authoritarian democracies like Mexico have followed neoliberal economic advisers from the United States. And free market “economic miracles” in Latin America have often had disastrous effects on the poor.<sup>9</sup>

Latin Americanists have frequently found themselves at odds with U.S. policymakers regarding the region. The interdisciplinary field of Latin American Studies came about in part as a result of the Cuban Revolution, as the State Department sought to create cadres of experts who could guide and implement U.S. policy by funding new Latin American Studies programs at major U.S. universities. Historian Thomas Skidmore, in what Rolena Adorno called a “memorable and oft-repeated announcement,” suggested in 1961 that “we are all sons and daughters of Fidel.”<sup>10</sup> That is, the Cuban Revolution gave rise to an upsurge of government interest in Latin America, and funding for Latin American Studies programs in major U.S. universities. (Jan Knippers Black later revised this to suggest that U.S. Latin Americanists are Fidel Castro’s “illegitimate offspring.”<sup>11</sup>) In 1995 Stanford political scientist Richard Fagen echoed Skidmore’s sentiment when, upon receiving the Latin American Studies Association’s top scholarship award, he suggested “with my tongue only half-way into my cheek” that the Cuban revolutionary leader would be the most appropriate recipient because “at least in the United States, no one did more than Fidel Castro to stimulate the study of Latin America in the 60s and 70s.”<sup>12</sup> “Many members of my generation,” political scientist and former Latin American Studies Association (LASA) President Peter Smith reiterated in 2006, “went through graduate school with thanks to Fidel Castro.”<sup>13</sup>

“U.S. officials,” Smith continued, “expected the academic community to promote U.S. policy goals. The National Defense Education Act (note that name!) offered generous scholarships for the study of Latin America – on the mistaken assumption, of course, that newly trained area experts would figure out ways to prevent or defeat revolutionary movements.”<sup>14</sup>

As Smith and the others have suggested, the attempt largely backfired. Instead, LASA took a strong stand early on: “Scholarship must never become a clandestine arm of U.S. policy.”<sup>15</sup> New scholars trained in Latin American Studies who spent time working in Latin America as often as not turned into opponents of U.S. policy towards the region. LASA has

been particularly critical of U.S. policy towards Cuba, passing resolution after resolution condemning the trade and travel embargo and calling for free academic exchange with the island. LASA has been especially rankled that the State Department has refused to issue visas for Cuban scholars to participate in its Congresses, and in 2007 the organization moved its meeting from Boston to Montreal so that Cuban scholars could attend unimpeded, vowing to boycott the United States until the organization received a guarantee that its Cuban members would be allowed to participate.

Nevertheless, the study of Cuba in the United States has frequently been criticized for its ideological divides. Several essays in the *Latin American Research Review* – the journal of the Latin American Studies Association – have noted the weight of politics in Cuban studies. Marifeli Pérez-Stable argued in 1991 that the Cold War construct of the “Cubanologist,” modeled on monikers assigned to those who studied the Soviet bloc, should be replaced by “Cubanist,” taking Cuban studies out of the Cold War paradigm and returning it to Latin America and following the pattern of “Latin Americanist” or “Mexicanist.” Damián Fernández reiterated this stance a few years later, as did John Kirk and Peter McKenna in 1999.<sup>16</sup>

In addition to the ideological bent that it brought to the field, another drawback of the “Cubanology” approach has been an overemphasis on politics in studies of the Cuban Revolution. Historian Louis A. Pérez complained in 1992 that historians have woefully neglected the history of the post-revolutionary period. “After 1961, historians yield to political scientists, sociologists, economists, and anthropologists – to Cubanologists. The resulting anomaly is striking: for Cubanologists, there is no history before 1959; for historians, there is no history after 1959.”<sup>17</sup> Clearly, the Revolution was a political event. But it was also social, cultural, economic, artistic, and many other things. Every revolution seeks to bring about change, and the Cuban Revolution is no exception. In some ways, people’s everyday lives were fundamentally changed by the Revolution. In other ways, the Revolution grew out of, and drew on, longstanding aspects of Cuban history and culture. A social history of the Revolution grows from the intersection of structures, policies, and the actions of ordinary people.

## Why Revolution?

If historians’ main objective is to understand change over time, we tend to be especially attracted to the study of revolutions because, by definition, they offer concrete examples of a lot of change occurring in a rather

limited time period. We want to know when and why revolutions occur, why they take the forms they do, and what their results are. Social historians in particular want to know how and why ordinary people mobilize for revolution, to what extent they are actors and participants in revolutionary change, and how revolutions affect their lives. Both the Cuban revolutionaries themselves, and the historians who have studied the Cuban Revolution, have utilized historical understandings of what they know about other revolutions.

Uprisings by oppressed people – like slave and peasant rebellions – have existed as long as civilization has existed. But revolutions are more than just uprisings – they are concerted attempts to reorganize society.

Historians often categorize revolutions into political versus social revolutions. The former focus on changing the structures of governance and the access of the population to political institutions; while the latter emphasize creating a new social and economic order.

Cuba's revolution in 1959 drew on a long revolutionary tradition, both in Cuba and globally, at the same time that it responded to the immediate realities of Cuba in the 1950s. The revolutionary traditions included European political and social revolutions of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, American anti-colonial revolutions, and Cubans' own attempts from the mid-nineteenth century on to achieve national independence and social change.

The global "Age of Revolution" marked by the American and French Revolutions at the end of the eighteenth century also encompassed revolutions in thought and political philosophy known as the Enlightenment, when (primarily) European intellectuals began to argue that the social order is man-made, rather than God-given, and thus subject to human agency. Enlightenment thought invited people to question existing political and social systems and try to imagine better ones.

Out of this philosophical or intellectual movement grew a wide variety of political philosophies, and political and social movements to try to put the ideas into practice. The "Glorious Revolution" in England in 1688 established a constitutional monarchy with a bill of rights, while the American Revolution beginning in 1775 established national independence and did away with monarchy altogether. While these two were primarily political revolutions, the French Revolution in 1789 went further in challenging the social order as well as the political system. The Haitian Revolution may have begun as a political movement, but it quickly became a profound social revolution and war of national liberation in 1791, as slaves rose up and dismantled the slave plantation system and declared independence from France.



None of the Latin American wars of independence that followed the Haitian Revolution were quite as revolutionary. But it's also notable that in the colonies most heavily reliant on slavery – Cuba and the other islands of the Caribbean, as well as Brazil – there were no wars for independence in the early nineteenth century. Instead, the elites closed ranks with the colonial powers. The example of Haiti soured them not only on social revolution, but on any challenge to the political or social order. It took another 75 years – and the abolition of the slave trade and a global repudiation of the slave system – before national liberation and republicanism found any allies among the upper echelons of the slave colonies. Men like Washington and Jefferson fought for national liberation in Britain's northern colonies when they believed it could come about without threatening their social position, which rested on the slave system. Their counterparts in Brazil and the Caribbean, chastened by the Haitian example, decided that colonial status, and monarchy, were not so bad after all. Cuba would remain a Spanish colony until 1898, and even during and after its wars of independence, the threat of becoming “another Haiti” was raised repeatedly.

Many of the social revolutions of the twentieth century drew on the ideas of the German philosopher Karl Marx. The Communist Manifesto, which he authored in 1848 with Friedrich Engels, argued that the constitutional and representative political systems that were replacing Europe's monarchies were not universal ideals, but rather the manifestation of bourgeois rule. Feudalism and monarchy represented the rule of the landed elites, who were being overthrown by a new urban, industrial class that sought political power in order to enforce its new economic order, industrial capitalism. But, they argued, “all history is the history of class struggle.” Capitalism was based on the exploitation of the working class. These working masses were politically and socially excluded, and would be the next class to rise up and overthrow the system that oppressed them, creating a new socialist state that would represent their interests rather than the interests of their bosses. Instead of protecting the private property amassed by the industrial elites, the state would use the wealth created by industrialization – and by the labor of the working classes – for the benefit of all.

The Cuban Revolution, then, was made by people who believed they could change their society and their world. By overthrowing the old, unjust social order, and challenging the legacies of colonial rule, they could make history, rather than being passive victims of their history. National independence and social justice were two fundamental goals, and they were understood as two sides of the same coin: it was colonial