

CUBAN STUDIES AND THE SIREN SONG OF “LA REVOLUCIÓN”

Yvon Grenier

This article examines the use and abuse of the term “revolution” in Cuba and in Cuban studies. The official narrative in Cuba blurs the contours of *La Revolución*, both across time (it continues to this day) and across actors and institutions (revolution = government = nation). Curiously, the term revolution is generally not the object of rigorous scrutiny in Cuban studies. Yet, it is probably the most widely used term in Cuban politics.

According to the Cuban official narrative, the Cuban revolution started in the 1950s, if not earlier, and continues to this day, long after Fidel Castro seized power (1959), firmly established his authority over both the government and the economy (1960–1), formed the Communist Party (1965), organized its first party congress (1975), and adopted a new constitution (1976).¹ After the revolution triumphed, the revolutionary process continued, deepening its commitment toward the revolution, in a spiral where the revolution is both subject and object. What is more, as historian Rafael Rojas suggested, since 1959, “revolution” in Cuba has become coterminous with government and nation, and functioned as “una metáfora más del poder—Fidel, Raúl, el Partido—, o como otro nombre del régimen, de la comunidad o del país.”² If the contours of the Cuban revolution

are blurred, there can be no doubt about its defining focal point: the leadership of Fidel Castro, first in the insurrection against the Batista dictatorship, starting with the Moncada attack in 1953, and second, in shaping and embodying the regime and policies of the last fifty-seven years. The Cuban revolution is “*la revolución de Fidel*.”

Though the term revolution is widely used in Cuban politics, it is curiously not the object of much scrutiny in Cuban studies. Many Cuba scholars outside Cuba use the definition (or non-definition) currently used in Cuba. Some do believe that the revolution ended at some point, but without making that clear or adequately questioning the unusual amalgam of revolution, government, and nation.

MYTHOLOGY AND CONCEPTUALIZATION

The term “revolution” has strong positive connotation in the West. It conjures up historical episodes of painful but necessary changes that bring about liberation, justice and progress to the many. The great historian of the French revolution, François Furet, pointed out that revolutions are characterized by the “epic reinvention of their history.” Furet talks about the “revolutionary reconstruction” of the past, thanks to “an immense message inseparably liberating and

1. To find abundant examples one could start with hundreds of Fidel Castro’s speeches, available on “Castro Speech Database,” Latin American Network Center (LANIC). For academic perspectives from the island, see the 2008 issue of *Temas* (no.56, October-December) with special focus on the 50th anniversary of the revolution.

2. Rafael Rojas, *La máquina del olvido, Mito, historia y poder en Cuba* (Mexico City: Taurus, 2012), p. 170; see also the excellent analysis by Marlene Azor Hernández, “La izquierda y su relación con la revolución cubana,” *Nexos*, January 1, 2011. Available: <http://www.nexos.com.mx/?p=17349>

remistifying, *which one would be wrong to take for an historical analysis.*³ This message, one could argue, is at work not only in the official re-interpretation of the past, but also in the legitimization of the present of regimes born of a revolution. Past or present, one would be mistaken to take the official interpretation of any revolution as an historical analysis.

While the presence of a certain political mythology is typical of countries that have experienced a revolution, it is unusual to think of revolution as *permanent*.⁴ No similar habit can be found in other countries (or country studies) that have experienced revolutions in the twentieth century.

It is essential to recall the importance of revolution as a repertoire of ideas, symbols and myths in Cuba's political culture. Since the wars of independence, every single generation of political leaders, either in Cuba or in exile, has called itself revolutionary. In his classic history of Cuba published in 1971, British historian Hugh Thomas wrote: "For at least a generation Cuban politicians have been passionately in love with the word 'Revolution'."⁵ And yet, even though Cuba experienced three successful revolutions in about sixty years (1898, 1933 and 1959), the case could be made that in fact, Cubans' revolutionary aspirations have been compensated by conservative instincts. Cuba was the last Spanish colony in the Americas. The formal independence was achieved decades after other former Spanish colonies, largely because of the United States' self-interested assistance. Then the Platt amendment limited Cuba's sovereignty for three decades. The 1959 revolution was not a large mass event, and the country experienced none of the upheavals that shook many other communist countries in the 20th century, to say

nothing of the past few months in Venezuela. For all the revolutionary rhetoric in the country, Cuba has not been changing radically and continuously since the early 1960s. To paraphrase Lampedusa's *bon mot*, one could say that everything has changed in Cuba so that everything could remain the same. Or to quote Cuban academic Ambrosio Fornet: "Few countries have changed as much as Cuba has since then [end of USSR] while remaining essentially the same."⁶ He could have said "since 1961" or "since 1976" as well.

In Orwellian fashion, thanks to the revolutionary myth, the defense of the status quo is "revolutionary". In Cuban schools, generations of Cubans have been told to "be like Che", meaning to be rebels or revolutionaries. Carlos Rafael Rodríguez once invited the Cuban youth to cultivate "un espíritu de inconformidad diaria."⁷ Except that the rebellion is directed against the government's nemeses, not against the government itself, its values, policies, leaders or institutions. "Revolution" is the fig leaf of an authoritarian regime that fosters the opposite of revolution: depoliticization, apathy and conformism.

Definitions of revolution are many, but they generally involve mass violence and regime change in the name of liberation.⁸ Radical change is also a necessary condition: without it, one may have at best a revolutionary situation, or just a rebellion, revolt, or insurgency. Rapid change is another one: changes that occur over decades are no less important (cultural changes for instance), but to talk about "fifty years of revolution" is arguably an oxymoron.⁹ The concept of revolution—like the related concepts of "crisis" or "transition"—should be reserved for transient phenomena, not for power arrangements that are

3. François Furet, *Penser la révolution française* (Paris: Gallimard, 1985), p. 181.

4. In Marxist theory, permanent revolution does not mean that a successful revolution never ends.

5. Hugh Thomas, *Cuba or the Pursuit of Freedom* (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1971), pp. 1491–1492.

6. Ambrosio Fornet, "Introduction," *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 96:1 (Winter 1997): 3.

7. Carlos Rafael Rodríguez, *Problemas del arte en la Revolución* (Havana: Editorial Letras Cubanas, 1979), p. 26.

8. See Martin Malia, *History's Locomotives, Revolutions and the Making of the Modern World*, Edited and with a Foreword by Terence Emmons (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), especially Appendix 1: "Revolution, What's in a Name?" pp. 287–301.

9. Soraya M. Castro Mariño and Ronald W. Pruessen, *Fifty Years of Revolution: Perspectives on Cuba, the United States and the World* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2012).

successfully institutionalized and reproduced over decades (i.e. not for a regime or a government).

Determining when a revolution starts or ends is not easy. It may not be reasonable to expect observers to agree on periodization beyond the date of the revolution’s epicentre: Mexico in 1911, Russia in 1917, China in 1949, Cuba in 1959, Nicaragua and Iran in 1979, and so on. In Cuba the overthrow of Batista and its immediate aftermath is commonly referred to as “the triumph” of the revolution. For some authors, the triumph of the revolution and the revolution are one and the same. For instance, Cuba specialist Samuel Farber talks about the “Cuban Revolution of 1959”, and uses the term “Cuban government” when he means the Cuban government (i.e. instead of “revolutionary government” or “the revolution” as other authors have done).¹⁰ Like Farber, some authors talk about the aftermath of the triumph as the “post-revolutionary” period. This conceptualization retains the reference to the revolution as the defining—even if undefined—moment. It is worth noticing that contemporary politics in Mexico, Russia, China, Iran and even Nicaragua are not as routinely defined as post-revolutionary.

There is no consensus on when the post-revolutionary period started in Cuba, or much interest in discussing that issue. It may seem like an oxymoron to claim that the revolution could continue to progress long after it has “triumphed”, but the multifaceted Cuban revolution has reasons that reason ignores.

The only plausible avenue to define revolution as endless is to leave comparative politics and institutional analysis aside, and embrace political theology. The claim here could be, following French philosopher Alain Badiou for instance, that there is such a

thing as a revolutionary spirit that never dies, one that manifests itself at different “moments” of history, in one place or another. In the Cuban case, it could support the suggestion that from the *Mambises* to the 1959 revolution, a single quest for freedom and independence has manifested itself at various times of history, before finding a home in the regime built by Fidel Castro. Few opportunities are missed in Cuba to link *la revolución de Fidel* to the Wars of Independence (1868–98) and the “apóstol” José Martí (1853–95).¹¹

There are many problems with the blurring of the historical contours of the revolution. An obvious one is that it is non falsifiable. Another is that fifty-seven years is a rather long “moment”. Furthermore, when the revolution embodies a certain spirit born with the first manifestation of self-determination in the island—sometimes starting with the legend of Taíno chief Hatuey in early 16th century¹²—and continuing in the face of a continuing siege by the forces of colonialism, neo-colonialism, and imperialism, to be against it (or against the “revolutionary government”), or to question it, is tantamount to treason. Permanent revolution is similar to permanent war. Permanent existential threat—a “Girón cotidiano” to use Rafael Rojas’ expression¹³—requires suspension of liberties and mandatory unity behind the “revolutionary” leadership.

More than an historical process, the revolution is, according to the official myth in Cuba and to many Cuba scholars, personified as a formidable force. Rafael Rojas tells the story of how in 1960, the Minister of Education Armando Hart and Foreign Affairs Minister Raúl Roa, following orders from Prime Minister Fidel Castro, commissioned the US writer

10. Samuel Farber, *Cuba Since the Revolution of 1959, A Critical Assessment* (Chicago, Ill: Haymarket Books, 2011).

11. “What does 10 October 1968 mean to our people?” Fidel Castro asked rhetorically in a speech celebrating “100 years of struggle for independence” in 1968. “What does this glorious date mean to our country’s revolutionaries? It simply means the beginning of 100 years of struggle and the beginning of the revolution in Cuba because there has only been one revolution in Cuba—the one that Carlos Manuel de Cespedes began on 10 October 1968! [Applause].” Speech by Fidel Castro, October 11, 1968, La Demajagua National Park, in Castro Speech Database, LANIC, University of Texas. <http://lanic.utexas.edu/project/castro/db/1968/19681011.html>

12. See Larry Catá Backer, “From Hatuey to Che: Indigenous Cuba Without Indians and the U.N. Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples,” *American Indian Law Review* 33 (2009): 199–236.

13. Rafael Rojas, “Venezuela y la izquierda Latinoamericana,” *Confidencial*, 26 June, 2017. <https://confidencial.com.ni/venezuela-la-izquierda-latinoamerica/>.

Waldo Frank to write a “portrait” and a “biography” of the new Cuba. For Rojas, “lo que buscaban Hart, Roa y los interlocutores de Frank era que éste narrara la naciente Revolución cubana como la recuperación del verdadero rostro o del yo profundo de una nación.”¹⁴ For the first president of the Cuban Institute of Cinematographic Art and Industry (ICAIC), Alfredo Guevara, *La Revolución* became the number-one actor in Cuba: “La revolución es el personaje central y debe vivir. Es este amado personaje el que nos importa: ¿Quién le acecha? ¿Qué obstáculos debe vencer para alcanzar sus objetivos? ¿Quién le traiciona? ¿Quién lo sostiene? ¿Cuáles son sus perspectivas?”¹⁵ Most importantly, the revolution has “rights” that trump individual rights. As Fidel Castro enunciated in his famous “Words to Intellectuals” speech in 1961, “Against the Revolution nothing, because the Revolution also has its rights and *the first right of the Revolution is the right to exist and nobody can be against the right of the Revolution to exist.*”¹⁶ One can therefore talk about a revolutionary *inflation* in Cuba, a profusion of signs, which conceals the ossification of politics and civil society.¹⁷

SPREADING THE MYTH

It is probably fair to say that all Cuba specialists who embrace the Cuban regime are seduced by the siren song of revolution. A few illustrations will suffice. In her book *A History of the Cuban Revolution* (2011), Aviva Chomsky writes: “In Cuba ‘the Revolution’ refers to a 50-year process of consciously creating a new society with many different phases, twists and

turns.”¹⁸ By “in Cuba” she means the government and the nation as a whole, without distinction. For her, “Clearly the Cuban revolutionaries, and Cuban historiography, emphasize a long tradition of anti-colonial struggle on the island leading up to 1959.”¹⁹ She does not ask herself why there does not seem to be much difference between official ideology and historiography.

British author Antoni Kapcia is a well-established Cuba scholar whose numerous publications focus on the Cuban revolution understood in the most enchanted terms. In one publication he asks, “What exactly do we mean by ‘the Revolution’ and what might ‘Cuban socialism’ mean, now as in the 1960s, 1970s or 1990s.”²⁰ For him: “To attempt to answer this question, we should start by looking back to those key moments, posing the same question: what was ‘the Revolution’ about at that time?”²¹ In a book published in 2008, Kapcia provides many illustrations of how a loose and ideological use of the term revolution can thwart sound analysis. His account of the Cuban revolution leans heavily on colonial and neo-colonial past, so that 1959 and subsequent years can emerge not merely as a chronological succession of events but as evidence of a very long revolutionary struggle for liberation. Every chapter has the word revolution in the title: “Emergence of a Revolution”; “Benefiting from the Revolution: The 1960s”; “Living the Revolution: Participation, Involvement and Inclusion”; “Thinking the Revolution: The Evolution of an Ideology”; “Spreading the Revolution: the Evolution of an External Profile”; “Defending the

14. Rafael Rojas, *Traductores de la utopía, La Revolución cubana y la nueva izquierda de Nueva York* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2016), p. 81.

15. First published in *Cine Cubano*, 1 (2): 12–16, Havana (1960), and reproduced in Alfredo Guevara, *Tiempo de Fundación* (Sevilla: Iberautor Promociones Culturales, 2003), p. 77.

16. Reproduced and translated in “Castro Speech Database,” LANIC, University of Texas. <http://lanic.utexas.edu/project/castro/db/1961/19610630.html>

17. See Yvon Grenier, *Culture and the Cuban State, Participation, Recognition, and Dissonance under Communism* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2017), chapter 2.

18. Aviva Chomsky, *A History of the Cuban Revolution* (Chichester, England: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), p. 43.

19. Chomsky, *A History of the Cuban Revolution*, p. 18.

20. Antoni Kapcia, “Celebrating 50 Years—But of What Exactly and Why is Latin America Celebrating It?” In Par Kumaraswami ed., *Rethinking the Cuban Revolution, Nationally and Regionally: Politics, Culture and Identity* (Chichester, England: Wiley Blackwell, 2012), p. 58.

21. Antoni Kapcia, “Celebrating 50 Years,” p. 59.

Revolution: Dealing with Dissent”; “Rescuing the Revolution in the 1990s: Crisis, Adaptation and the Return to Basics.” Kapcia chooses to focus on what he calls “critical themes” rather than chronology, a choice that allows him to focus on what he calls the various “crises” faced by the revolution. He starts the book by declaring, without providing evidence, that between two-third and four-fifth of the Cuban population is (or at least was in the years 2000s) “loyal” to “the Revolution.”²² In 1976 “the Revolution’s first Constitution was duly approved, replacing the ad hoc Fundamental Laws which had codified the rapidly changing process of change since 1959.”²³ In Chapter 6, entitled “Defending the Revolution: Dealing with Dissent”, Kapcia immediately elides the fact that many, perhaps most acts of dissent since the early 1960s were not carried out in opposition to the 1959 revolution. The fact that these opponents, real or imagined, are called counter-revolutionaries by the regime does not ipso facto means that they actually are. Criticism of Fidel Castro and his government is automatically a counter-revolutionary act only if one assumes that revolution and Fidel Castro are essentially one and the same.

In a book Kapcia co-authored with Par Kumaraswami, entitled *Literary Culture in Cuba*, the term revolution is ubiquitous, like a mantra.²⁴ It is subject and object, actor and policy area, action and psyche, institutions and policy recipients, in a swirling and enchanting *bricolage idéologique*. The revolution affects revolutionary leaders who are part of the revolution, while revolutionary policies shape the revolution as well as the revolutionary context, which produces the revolutionary policies, and so on in concentric circles. The revolution has a “social strategy”; the revolution has “relations with the Vatican.” In the 1970s the revolution had a “growing commitment to cultural decolonization.” Revolution is one and many.

Thus, “the whole social revolution was fundamental to support for the Revolution.” One becomes dizzy reading this account of how the revolution, like God, is omnipresent and omniscient. Though it can make mistakes, it is always infallible in its mission and motivations.

In *Sexual Revolutions in Cuba*, author Carrie Hamilton makes a distinction between the use of the term within and outside Cuba, noticing that only outside do observers look for a closure date. She is happy to employ the perspective adopted “in Cuba,” again without examining critically the parameters within which such it is used on the island. “Throughout the book,” she says, “I use the terms ‘revolutionary government,’ ‘revolutionary leaders,’ and ‘revolutionary regime’ to refer to politicians, policy makers, and other officials in power after 1959.”²⁵ Well then, why not saying politicians, policy makers, and other officials in power after 1959?

When the revolution is seen as an actor, the result is often to conceal *who* is in power. For instance, commenting on Raúl Castro’s decision to stay one more term as President, Al Klepak writes that the General had been “looking forward some day to retirement and spending more time with his four children and eight grandchildren,” but “once more [he] took on added responsibilities rather than lesser ones because the Revolution needed him and his capacities at a difficult time.”²⁶ No need to explain that dictators always pretend to rule because they are answering the call of the people, the nation, history, or the revolution. It is worth recalling that in 2013, surrounded by septuagenarian and octogenarian loyalists who like him have been in power for more than half a century, Raúl Castro proposed a new ten year two-term limit on public office, and proclaimed that 60 years be fixed as the age limit for entering the party’s central committee and up to 70 years as the maxi-

22. Kapcia, *Cuba in Revolution: A History since the Fifties* (London: Reaktion Books, 2008), pp.44–45.

23. Kapcia, *Cuba in Revolution*, p. 38.

24. Parvathi Kumaraswami and Antoni Kapcia, *Literary Culture in Cuba: Revolution, Nation-Building, and the Book* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012).

25. Carrie Hamilton, *Sexual Revolutions in Cuba: Passion, Politics and Memory* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), p. 23.

26. Hal Klepak, *Raúl Castro and Cuba: A Military Story* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012), p. 91.

mum age to perform duties in the party leadership. He then offered himself a second term of five years, at the end of which he will be almost 87 years old. Resorting to the time-honoured trick of *La Revolución*, Klepak turns a nakedly self-serving decision into an epochal act of patriotic self-abnegation.

Another example can be found in the work of Kepa Artaraz, a British sociologist who seems particularly enchanted by the Cuban revolution. For Artaraz the revolution has political will, it “rationalizes itself,”²⁷ it evinces preferences and places demands upon itself. His book *Cuba and Western Intellectuals Since 1959* “explores intellectual and solidarity exchanges in the 1960’s between the Cuban Revolution, or specific actors within it, and the New Left...”²⁸ The distinction between the Cuban Revolution and “specific actors” is apropos: for this author, most of the time, Cuban Revolution does not refer to specific actors, or even to a specific period. For him: “By 1963, the main economic concern of the Revolution saw a return to agriculture as opposed to the initial industrialization drive that took place between 1961 and 1962 with disastrous consequences.”²⁹ Or again: “The Revolution itself has changed, no longer willing to ‘export’ the type of armed insurrection that cost Guevara his life in 1967.”³⁰ Oblivious to the rather disquieting parallel with European interwar years, Artaraz talks about “the importance that the Revolution attached to the concept of youth, the ‘purest’ form of human prototype and potential New Man of

the future.”³¹ Was it Fidel Castro who valued the concept of the youth, and changed his mind on agricultural policy and foreign policy? Or Castro and a group of collaborators? Or Castro and the entire Cuban people? No answer is needed since “the Revolution” rules. In another passage Artaraz makes the rather bizarre claim that “One of the most enduring characteristics of the Revolution has been the power of political men to determine the fate, and indeed the definition, of the intellectual. Because the Revolution developed among a unique set of historical and political circumstances, it could think of itself in novel ways; indeed, the very existence of the Revolution demanded it.”³² Leaving alone the cryptic statement about how Fidel Castro (ever) allowed Cuban intellectual to determine their own fate, it is typical here of Artaraz’s magic thinking that the Revolution *demands itself to think of itself* in novel ways.

To compound the problem of blurriness, one often encounters uses of the term revolution to designate a mystical experience, as if Cuba was indeed what Antoni Kacpia calls an “Island of Dreams.”³³ For instance Odette Casamayor-Cisneros talks about the “cosmology” of the Cuban Revolution.³⁴ Tom Astley muses about the “Imagination of the revolution.”³⁵ Kumaraswami and Kacpia examine the “Revolution’s collective psyche.”³⁶ They also imagine revolution as “space”.³⁷ For them, the revolution exudes “desire.”³⁸

While it is always hard to attribute motivations, the loose usage of the term revolution in Cuban studies is

27. Kepa Artaraz, *Cuba and Western Intellectuals since 1959* (London: Palgrave, 2009), p. 10.

28. Artaraz, *Cuba and Western Intellectuals*, p. 2.

29. Artaraz, *Cuba and Western Intellectuals*, p. 22.

30. Kepa Artaraz, “Cuba’s Internationalism Revisited: Exporting Literacy, ALBA, and a New Paradigm for South-South Collaboration,” in Kumaraswami ed., *Rethinking the Cuban Revolution*, p. 35.

31. Artaraz, *Cuba and Western Intellectuals*, p. 28.

32. Artaraz, *Cuba and Western Intellectuals*, p. 37.

33. Antoni Kacpia, *Cuba, An Island of Dreams* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2000).

34. Odette Casamayor-Cisneros, “Floating in the Void: Ethical Weightlessness in Post-Soviet Cuba Narrative,” in Kumaraswami ed., *Rethinking the Cuban Revolution*, p. 38

35. Tom Astley, *Outside the Revolution, Everything: a Redefinition of Left-Wing Identity in Contemporary Cuban Music Making* (Alresford, UK: Zero Books, 2012), p. 15.

36. Kumaraswami and Kacpia, *Literary Culture in Cuba*, p. 203.

37. Kumaraswami and Kacpia, *Literary Culture in Cuba*, p. 50.

38. Kumaraswami and Kacpia, *Literary Culture in Cuba*, p. 80.

conceivably due to either to an ideological commitment in favour of the Cuba regime, or to a habit, an automatism built over decades of group-thinking and commentaries on Cuba. The same kind of automatism leads many colleagues to talk about “transition” as a permanent state of affairs in Cuba—the ASCE’s proceedings, published annually since 1991, is entitled *Cuba in Transition*—in spite of considerable evidence of continuity and rigidity in Cuban political development. In 2015 the Pope called on Cubans to live a “revolution of tenderness,” plausibly because he wanted to convey his message in a language he thought Cubans would understand. Whether this is part of everyday language in Cuba is far from certain, but in official discourses the ubiquitous reference to the revolution is mandatory.

Carelessness in the use of the term revolution is also fairly common among scholars who are otherwise disposed to deploy critical thinking when examining recent political development in Cuba. The great historian Hugh Thomas calls the Castro regime a “revolutionary government.”³⁹ Jorge Domínguez’s comprehensive analysis of contemporary Cuban politics uses the most common chronological template, with 1959 as its epicenter: i.e., “pre-revolutionary Cuba” for the pre-1959 period, and “revolutionary Cuba” for all subsequent periods.⁴⁰ In a recent publication on the state of the Cuban economy, Carmelo Mesa Lago talks about Raúl Castro’s economic reforms as “las más importantes bajo la Revolución.”⁴¹ Historian Louis A. Pérez seems comfortable with the official terminology as well. For instance, he writes that by

the 1970s, “the stability and security of the revolution had been established...”⁴² Or: “Four decades of revolution in Cuba can be characterized as a combination of success and failure, change and continuity.”⁴³ To designate Fidel Castro’s ability to impose himself as the uncontested leader of the new regime, Pérez says: “The revolution established itself in a remarkably short space of time.”⁴⁴ Pérez contends that “After the Cuban revolution in 1959, the island was subjected to a new round of invasion, depredations, and harassment.”⁴⁵ After pointing out that the “revolution also transformed the character and content of higher education,” Pérez adds, “conditions changed radically after the revolution.”⁴⁶ Again, when he claims, “The deterioration of health services resulted largely from the dislocation caused by the revolution,”⁴⁷ he presumably means the 1957–59 period of insurgency, but when he writes “Cuban women participated decisively in the revolution,” he means throughout the following decades.⁴⁸ After the revolution comes the revolution; revolution is both actor and process, past and present. One of the greatest historians of modern Cuba does not mind adopting a polysemous and slippery definition of perhaps the most important concept in his work.

As a matter of fact, perhaps the most revealing practice in the literature is the polysemous use of the term, with different definitions or use of the term by the same author within the same publication. For instance Pierre Sean Brotherton, in a book entitled *Revolutionary Medicine: Health and the Body in Post-Soviet Cuba*, starts with a critical perspective when he

39. Hugh Thomas, *Cuba or the Pursuit of Freedom* (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1971).

40. Jorge I. Domínguez, *Cuba: Order and Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978).

41. Carmelo Mesa-Lago, “Las reformas estructurales de Raúl Castro: análisis y evaluación de sus efectos marco y micro,” in Velia Cecilia Bobes ed., *Cuba ¿ajuste o transición? Impacto de la reforma en el contexto del restablecimiento de las relaciones con Estados Unidos* (Mexico City: Facultad Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales, 2015), p. 42.

42. Louis A. Pérez, Jr., *Cuba: Between Reform and Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 4th ed. 2011), p. 267.

43. Pérez, *Cuba: Between Reform and Revolution*, p. 257.

44. Pérez, *Cuba: Between Reform and Revolution*, p. 252.

45. Pérez, *Cuba: Between Reform and Revolution*, p. 9.

46. Pérez, *Cuba: Between Reform and Revolution*, p. 274.

47. Pérez, *Cuba: Between Reform and Revolution*, p. 276.

48. Pérez, *Cuba: Between Reform and Revolution*, p. 281.

suggests: “in Cuba today a deep discontent runs beneath the reiteration of revolutionary catechism.”⁴⁹ Then revolution is synonymous with the triumph of the revolution in 1959: “Shortly *after the revolution*, Santería was dismissed as a folkloric practice...”⁵⁰ Or: “*The postrevolutionary government’s strategy* to create healthy bodies...”⁵¹ Revolution also means the Cuban government or regime since 1959: “Ulloa made clear that *during the first thirty-five years of the revolution*, that is, until the mid-1990s, one could not readily admit in public to being both a creyente and a *militante*.”⁵²

In her book entitled *Cuba, What Everyone Needs to Know* (2009), Julia Sweig answers 126 short questions on Cuban politics and history, with an emphasis on the current regime and its relations with the United States. Only six questions deal with the revolution: What were the origins of the Cuban Revolution? How did the revolution organize Cuban society? How did women fare under the revolution? How did the revolution handle religion? Why did the revolution make such a big deal out of sports? Why did Fidel, Che, and the other revolutionaries think they would succeed in spreading revolution in the third world? In these questions and answers, revolution is both a process and an actor. In answering the question on sports, Sweig writes: “Yet for the Revolution, investment in organized athletics assumed a new level of priority. Cuban authorities devoted significant financial resources to provide high-quality training facilities and competitive leagues.”⁵³ Revolution and Cuban authorities are synonymous; in other answers revolution means an historical process more generally. None of the questions deal with

periodization of revolution, which is astonishing in an introductory book on Cuban history and politics. Wouldn’t the reader be interested to know when the revolution started and finished (if it ever did)?

REVOLUTION AS PAST EVENT

An alternative perspective is to state that the Cuban revolution ended—but when? If revolution ends with a new ruling elite seizing power and adopting policies that radically alter the political, economic and social structures of society, then the case can be made that the Cuban revolution ended at some time between 1961, when the Marxist-Leninist character of the regime was proclaimed, and 1968, the year of the Revolutionary Offensive.⁵⁴ For many, the years 1968–71 marked the death of the revolution as an “utopia.” Thus Eliseo Alberto comments: “El asesinato de Ernesto Guevara en una escuela rural de Nancahuazú, la ofensiva revolucionaria de 1968, el fracaso de la zafra de los diez millones y la guillotina que resultó ser el Primer Congreso de Educación y Cultura representan, para mí, los cuatro infartos que anunciaron el colapso de la utopía rebelde.”⁵⁵ Rafael Rojas also wrote: “Si tuviera que señalar el año en que se apaga el *entusiasmo* de la Revolución cubana, elegiría 1968. No sólo porque ese año marca, como ha dicho Jean Baudrillard, una ‘catarsis final que parece haber agotado toda la energía revolucionaria de Occidente,’ sino porque, para Cuba, es el momento de definición entre un socialismo alternativo, nacional y autónomo, y un socialismo dependiente ortodoxo, adscrito al bloque soviético.”⁵⁶ If the year 1968 was pivotal for symbolic reasons, it did not witness a radical change in the structure of power. Even economically, expropriating (or closing) thousands of small

49. Pierre Sean Brotherton, *Revolutionary Medicine: Health and the Body in Post-Soviet Cuba* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), p. xvi.

50. Brotherton, *Revolutionary Medicine*, p. 37. My emphasis.

51. Brotherton, *Revolutionary Medicine*, p. 59. My emphasis.

52. Brotherton, *Revolutionary Medicine*, p. 36. My emphasis.

53. Julia Sweig, *Cuba, What Everyone Needs to Know* (Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 64–65.

54. In one text Jorge Domínguez talks about “la revolución de 1959–1963”. Jorge Domínguez, “La cultura: ¿clave de los problemas en las relaciones cubano-norteamericanas?” *Encuentro de la cultura cubana* 20 (Spring 2001), p. 244.

55. Eliseo Alberto, *Informe contra mi mismo* (Madrid: Alfaguara, 1997), p. 80.

56. Rafael Rojas, “Entre la revolución y la reforma,” *Encuentro de la Cultura Cubana*, 4/5 (Spring/Summer 1997): 128.

remaining private properties did not radically alter the political system or even, arguably, the economic model.

In a written communication with the author, Harvard political scientist Jorge Domínguez wrote: “I think that a plausible argument may be made that the revolutionary regime—if you prefer, the Revolution—ended sometime around 1970, while a different form of authoritarian regime replaced it, far more bureaucratic and less demanding of intrusion in the personal lives of people.”⁵⁷ Leaving aside whether or not the Cuban state became less bureaucratic and demanding around 1970, the relevant point here is that for him the revolution ended when the regime ceased to be *totalitarian*. His interesting response also mentions two other key points. First, he reflects on how there is no consensus on how and when the revolution ended: “For some perspective, I believe it was not until the 1950s that Stanley Ross, historian of Mexico, published a book entitled *Is the Mexican Revolution Dead?* These things take time, especially when the incumbent government has a stake in the Revolution continuing. The notion that the revolution may have ended is thus politically contentious, or worse from the official perspective.” Stanley Ross’s question is puzzling though. When is a revolution dead? When the revolution is over, or when the revolutionary project has been implemented or terminated? A revolution may end before its objectives are met. The impacts of a revolution can be felt for centuries; it does not mean that the revolution itself lasts for centuries. Domínguez also says “When I have represented the official use, it is capitalized Revolution; when I have represented my own views, it is revolution in lower-case.” He admits that he may not have been consistent on this. In fact, few authors are. Who really needs to be consistent since so few seem to care about how the term is used?

If revolution means a period of military competition for the control of a national population and territory,

until the state’s monopoly of the legitimate use of force is restored (what sociologist Charles Tilly called “multiple sovereignty”), then it started either in March of 1952 (with Batista military coup), July 1953 (the M26 Moncada attack), December 1956 (Granma landing), or in the Spring of 1958, when real battles started to take place between the insurgents and the Batista dictatorship.⁵⁸ “Single sovereignty” was established in 1959 (in January, February [when Fidel Castro became Prime Minister] or July [when President Urrutía was pushed out of office], or perhaps, as an interesting alternative, in 1965–66, when the actual civil war ended. This last episode is generally overlooked in the literature, even though it mobilized more peasants than most other Latin American guerrillas. In probably the best comparative analysis of guerrillas in Latin America and the Caribbean, author Timothy Wickham-Crowley barely offers one line on the “anti-Castro guerrillas” and “counterrevolutionary movement against Castro.”⁵⁹

A variation on Tilly’s “multiple sovereignty” interpretation is to say that the revolution ended when the final touch on the legal structure of the new power was completed. Castro’s Cuba went through a long period of institutional fuzziness following the triumph of the revolution, after claiming for years that the goal was to restore the Constitution of 1940. From 1959 to 1975 the Cuban political system operated under the ad hoc Fundamental Laws, without rule of law or due process. In 1976, the regime adopted a Soviet-style constitution (Stalin’s 1936 version), amending it twice since (in 1992 and 2002), thus institutionalizing the revolution. A possible counter-argument could be made that if legality was so unimportant for the Cuban leaders that they could wait sixteen years before settling for a constitution, perhaps it means that the legal form is not the most critical variable in analyzing this regime. What if they

57. Communication with the author, July 13, 2017.

58. Charles Tilly, *From Mobilization to Revolution* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Publishing, 1978), p. 191.

59. Timothy P. Wickham-Crowley, *Guerrillas and Revolution in Latin America, A Comparative Study of Insurgents and Regimes since 1956* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), p. 99.

had waited until 1986, or 2016, with the same leaders and policies in place?

Among the authors who choose 1976 as the year that saw the end of the revolution, Rafael Rojas is interesting because he is probably the one who questions the most the propagandistic use of the term revolution in Cuba. For him “Para avanzar críticamente, la nueva historiografía cubana tendrá que operar con un nuevo concepto de ‘revolución’ que quiebre las sinonimias del discurso oficial.”⁶⁰ His *Historia mínima de la revolución cubana* (2015) identifies the adoption of the first Constitution in 1976 as marking the end of the revolution, though interestingly, he recognizes that the regime was built “en lo fundamental, entre 1960 y 1961.”⁶¹ In his numerous publications on Cuba, his use of the terms revolution and revolutionary can be inconsistent. In *La vanguardia peregrina* Rojas divides the history of Cuba in three periods: colonial, republican and revolutionary (since 1959).⁶² One could object that a government may continue to be “revolutionary” after the revolution ended, but then, what would be the analytical justification for that? Should we call revolutionary all the US and French governments since the Atlantic revolutions? Or perhaps only as long as the revolutionary leaders are in power, which would then lead to the questions: did the Cuban revolution end in 2006? Will it end in February of 2018?

Another historian of the Cuban revolution is historian Luis Martínez-Fernández. For him, “The term ‘revolution’ evokes images of violence, movement, change, raid and profound transformations, one social class losing power to another, a group of leaders

replacing another, institutions destroyed and institutions created, statues demolished, new ones erected. Revolutions bring new laws, new aesthetics, new values, new textbooks and sacred texts: in short, a new ideological superstructure, to use Marx’s term, to support a new social and economic structure.”⁶³ The seventies were years of “institutionalization”, evoking “images of stability, inertia, absence of change; the freezing in time of an established ruling elite; the end of experimentation and improvisation; conservatism and reaction—in short, the opposite of revolution.” In short Cuba “ceased to be revolutionary.”⁶⁴ And yet, the earlier period (1959–1970) is called “idealist” and the period following the collapse of the Soviet Union (1991-), “survival”, all three phases being part of what he calls the Cuban Revolution.⁶⁵ The only logical conclusion is that the Cuban revolution kept going after the country ceased to be revolutionary.

An important book on the Cuban revolution is Marifeli Pérez-Stable’s, *The Cuban Revolution, Origins, Course, and Legacy*, which ran a third edition in 2012.⁶⁶ Though Pérez-Stable is a sociologist, her book is a history of Cuba rather than a history of the Cuban revolution per se, with no concern for the sociological theories of revolution. In fact the book contains no discussion of the term itself. “After Batista’s coup in 1952,” she writes in chapter 3, “few Cubans imagined that seven years later the country would be swept away by *social revolution*. There was, however, nothing predestined or inevitable about the revolution of 1959 or, for that matter, the closing of constitutional democracy on March 10, 1952.”⁶⁷ She

60. Rafael Rojas, *La máquina del olvido: Mito, historia y poder en Cuba* (Mexico City: Taurus, 2012), p. 170.

61. Rafael Rojas, *Historia mínima de la revolución cubana* (Mexico City: Turner, 2015).

62. Rafael Rojas, *La vanguardia peregrina: El escritor cubano, la tradición y el exilio* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2013), p. 127.

63. Luis Martínez-Fernández, *Revolutionary Cuba, A History* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2014), p. 162.

64. Martínez-Fernández, *Revolutionary Cuba*, pp. 162–63.

65. Within the “idealist” period, the years 1959–1962 are called the “revolution’s foundation” whereas the years 1963–1970 were “expanding socialism.” Martínez-Fernández, *Revolutionary Cuba*.

66. Marifeli Pérez-Stable, *The Cuban Revolution, Origins, Course, and Legacy* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 3rd edition, 2012).

67. Pérez-Stable, *The Cuban Revolution*, p. 41. My emphasis.

also says this: “After 1959, a social revolution unfolded in Cuba.”⁶⁸ The distinction between revolution (1959) and social revolution (post-1959) is interesting, but it is not deployed consistently throughout the book. She talks about the Cuban government, the Cuban revolutionary government, Cuban leadership, but she also uses revolution as a subject, presumably alluding to the same actor: “By 1961”, she suggests, “the revolution had embraced socialism and a new politics that disallowed civil liberties, separation of powers, and competitive elections”;⁶⁹ and “From the start, the revolution distinguished between the industrialists and other sectors of the *clases económicas*.”⁷⁰ When she writes, “The revolution’s initial program was not particularly radical in form,”⁷¹ she conceivably refers to the M26, but since it was not the only group opposed to the Batista dictatorship, it would have been clearer to say so explicitly. In chapter 6, covering the period 1971 to 1986, she suggests that the “radical experiment” of the 1960s “had ended badly.”⁷² If the revolution could be “not particularly radical” in the late 1950s, does it mean it could continue after it ceased to be radical? Isn’t revolution “radical” by definition? In fact, we learn in chapter 7 that the period of “Rectification and Reconstitution,” from 1986 to 1998, was one when “Cuba was no longer in revolution.”⁷³ Presumably the revolution ended between 1971 and 1986, though she aptly suggests the “Fidel-*patria*-revolution” narrative continued unabated. “As the 1990s came to a close, Havana served the world an unexpected outcome. The Cuban *government* had survived.”⁷⁴ I wrote to Professor Pérez-Stable to ask for clarifications. Her answer: the revolution ended in

1970: “My argument is the following. Though the idea of revolution is one thing; the daily lives of citizens quite another. After the 1970 harvest failed to reach the 10 million mark, the leadership embraced the Soviet Union, created institutions such as Popular Power, trade unions functioned more attuned to workers, the PCC expanded its reach and members, etc. In the 1970s, the idea still had a grip in the national imagination but not necessarily in the daily life. Did the Bolshevik Revolution survive until 1989? Does the Chinese Revolution until today? Neither does the Cuban Revolution. After 1970, socialist institutions took over. In 1970, the revolution *per se* ended.”⁷⁵ In another book entitled *The United States and Cuba* (2011), Pérez-Stable writes: “Cuba was a domestic issue in Mexico in terms of the support and sympathy of some groups toward the Cuban revolution, or as a means to redefine the nature or the direction of the Mexican ‘revolutionary’ government.”⁷⁶ Why use quotation marks for the Mexican ‘revolutionary’ government and not for Cuba’s?

In her book *Political Disaffection in Cuba’s Revolution and Exodus* (2007), another sociologist, Silvia Pedraza, examines one of the major impacts of the revolution, the exodus. She takes the time to discuss the concept of revolution, which is uncommon. She identifies distinct revolutionary “phases,” following a typology developed by Nelson Amaro: democratic (first few months of 1959), humanist (April to October 1959), nationalist (until October 1960), socialist (until December 1961), and Marxist-Leninist (to this day?).⁷⁷ These shifts in public orientation effectively lead, from the first phase to the last, to logical steps in the construction of a personalistic authoritarian re-

68. Pérez-Stable, *The Cuban Revolution*, p. 83.

69. Pérez-Stable, *The Cuban Revolution*, p. 66.

70. Pérez-Stable, *The Cuban Revolution*, p. 69.

71. Pérez-Stable, *The Cuban Revolution*, p. 69.

72. Pérez-Stable, *The Cuban Revolution*, p. 104.

73. Pérez-Stable, *The Cuban Revolution*, p. 124.

74. Pérez-Stable, *The Cuban Revolution*, p. 145. My emphasis.

75. Communication with the author, June 18, 2017.

76. Pérez-Stable, *The United States and Cuba: Intimate Enemies* (New York: Routledge, 2011), p. 151.

77. Silvia Pedraza, *Political Disaffection in Cuba’s Revolution and Exodus* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

gime with rapidly growing affinity to the Soviet model (incidentally, not unlike the “natural history” theory of revolution from moderate to radical, in early comparative theories of revolution). Pedraza writes: “The changes—political, social, economic—that took place in Cuba at the end of the 1950s and beginning of the 1960s were so dramatic, profound, and irreversible that they truly deserve the name ‘revolution’ in the original sense of ‘taking a full turn’.”⁷⁸ “Beginning of the 1960s” seems to mean, in fact, the year 1960. After Huber Matos’ imprisonment in December 1959, and the collapse of civil society in 1960, she proclaims “the revolution effected its definitive turn.”⁷⁹ In May of that year, Fidel Castro publicly announced that elections were no longer necessary in Cuba (“This is democracy”, he said: “The Cuban revolution is democracy...”).⁸⁰ In a written communication with the author, Professor Pedraza’s date for the end of revolution is 1970.

Clearly, one could have different positions on when the revolution ended, depending on what event (and what *type* of event: political, economic, cultural) turned out to be a watershed moment in one’s analysis. Among the other colleagues who were personally contacted to answer this question, Samuel Farber said that the revolution is “still alive and therefore not dead”; Carmelo Mesa-Lago that it ended during the Special Period (early 1990s); Cecilia Bobes said 1976; Armando Chaguaceda and Marlene Azor Hernández said 1970; Haroldo Dilla said “mid-1960s” and Lillian Guerra, 1965; Enrico Mario Santí argued that “there was never a revolution, only a coup in 1959.”⁸¹ If a median position can be found, it would probably be that while the Castro regime was firmly in place by the early 1960s, the revolution continued for about a decade. Clearly this is not a matter that can be settled “objectively.” Still, the in-curiosity on this question in Cuban studies is rather puzzling.

78. Pedraza, *Political Disaffection*, p. 35.

79. Pedraza, *Political Disaffection*, p. 68.

80. Pedraza, *Political Disaffection*, p. 69.

81. All were personal communication with the author in June and July 2017.

82. Rojas, *La máquina del olvido*, p.170.

CONCLUSION

Rafael Rojas is right that “la idea de ‘revolución’ debe ser aplicada de un modo preciso y, a la vez, flexible.”⁸² It is not impossible to produce good academic work while deploying a loose definition of revolution or making concessions to Cuba’s official revolutionary mythology. Using a purely propagandistic definition is another story altogether. If one assumes that the Revolution (with capital R) is omnipresent as a thoughtful agent, making historical decisions for the common good and firmly tying all public policies to a time-honored quest for national liberation, then critical thinking has to go, and along with it, any capacity to analyze power, who wields it, when and how. Arguably, when handling the term revolution, Cuban studies generally fall somewhere between loose automatism and magical thinking. Much could be gained by just streamlining the language. What would we lose by saying government instead of revolutionary government or the Revolution? Or communist Cuba (or simply Cuba) rather than revolutionary Cuba? It is not even clear that the analysis would lose much by dispensing with the term altogether. We could do well with less enchanted terms like insurgency, multiple sovereignty, mass mobilization, seizure of power, radical change, political culture, socialism, communism, ideology, dictatorship and totalitarianism. While the term revolution is useful to characterize a certain type of short-term political process, as long as it does not become a substitute for this characterization, it is very misleading when construed as a political force or actor. Dictators have an excuse to mislead; academics don’t.

The implication for Cuban studies needs to be measured in the context of the plight of social sciences and humanities in Cuba, where some subjects cannot be addressed at all “within the Revolution.” Strict parameters limit public expression and lead to a subtle form of depoliticization, in the sense that politics is

seemingly everywhere, but as a totem, or even a veil. Political science has disappeared in Cuba since the early 1960s; to this day, it is tricky for scholars to examine who gets what, when and how in their country. Most of the analysis of Cuban politics since 1959 has been performed outside Cuba, often by Cuban

Americans.⁸³ Cubanists from outside the island have a special responsibility to get it right. That will be all the more difficult if we satisfy ourselves with conceptual frameworks that impede rather than foster clear and rigorous thinking.

83. Cf. Yvon Grenier, “*Temas and Anathemas: Depoliticization and ‘Newspeak’ in Cuba’s Social Sciences and Humanities,*” *Revista Mexicana de Análisis Político y Administración Pública* 10 (July-December): 155–182; Grenier, “*Ciencias sociales, despolitización y el elefante azul,*” *Revista Convivencia* (Pinar del Río, Cuba) 56 (March-April 2017). <http://www.convivenciacuba.es/index.php/sociedad-civil-mainmenu-53/1459-ciencias-sociales-despolitizacion-y-el-elefante-azul>.