



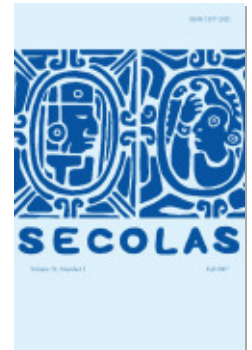
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*The Origins of the Cuban Revolution Reconsidered* by Samuel Farber (review)

Ben Earwicker

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**THE ORIGINS OF THE CUBAN REVOLUTION RECONSIDERED. By Samuel Farber. Chapel Hill: U North Carolina P, 2006, p. 212, \$19.95.**

In his book on the Cuban Revolution and its antecedents, Samuel Farber attempts to deconstruct dichotomous left-right interpretations of reform v. revolution in Cuba, citing the need for a more precise way to describe political change on the island prior to and after the events of the 1950s Revolution. Farber uses de-classified State Department documents and other primary sources from Cuba and the former Soviet Union to present a balanced and relevant treatment of the subject. Key works by Marifeli Pérez-Stable, Jorge Domínguez, Carmelo Mesa-Lago, and others are accompanied by lesser-known writings by first-hand observers and state officials from the three primary countries involved in some way in the Cuban conflict. Using recently de-classified Russian documents, for example, Farber outlines a complex relationship between Cuba and the Soviet Union in which Castro's adoption of a Communist ideology was neither automatic nor inevitable, but rather an indication of the volition and "agency of Cuba's revolutionary leadership" (4).

Throughout the text, Farber presents a nuanced view of pre- and post-1959 economic, social, and political contexts, addressing some of the blind spots in various schools of thought. Discussing predominant left-right views of pre-revolutionary Cuba, Farber claims that "Both of these camps have self-serving and distorted views" (33). Importantly, he argues that Cuban political dynamics must be understood internally, using Cuban paradigms as models, rather than merely comparing Cuban politics with U.S. or other Western European systems. In response to different economic analyses of pre-revolutionary 1950s Cuba, Farber looks in detail at whether or not economic factors inevitably fostered radical political change. He begins with a systematic analysis of the single-crop economy between the late 18<sup>th</sup> Century and the mid-1950s before concluding that the growth of popular revolution in Cuba ought to be seen as an intentionally selected response to inequality, rather than an inevitable result of economic disparity.

The author writes a balanced assessment of Fidel Castro's political and intellectual development. He perceptively compares Castro's leadership with the tradition of *caudillismo*, noting, however, that "Fidel Castro is a caudillo with political ideas" (63). He neither lionizes nor marginalizes Castro, presenting him as a shrewd political strategist who responded instinctively and pragmatically to growing Cuban discontent under Batista, while at the same time securing his own position as commander-in-chief. Rather than acting in accordance with an established political ideology or an intentional long-term strategy, Farber claims, Castro determined his early actions and later policy decisions in a pragmatic and unrehearsed manner.

In the first two chapters, Farber presents a convincing discussion of reasons for armed revolution and the Cuban Populist Tradition, beginning with José Martí and the first Cuban Revolution at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. He cites uneven development, colonialism, and rapid industrialization as factors that

left ordinary Cubans in the mid-1900s with high expectations for change and development that could not be reasonably fulfilled in a short period of time. For Farber, Cuban Populism was rooted in the colonial experience and opposed to a systematic ideological formulation, unlike the Cuban Communist Party, which Castro disagreed with on more than one occasion leading to the early 1960s. Populism emphasized heroic and romanticized views of Martí, encouraging adventure and appealing to a sense of honor, sacrifice, and service to Cuba. Farber criticizes Cuban Populism as crude and ill-conceived, even when compared with Stalinist Marxism in 1960s Cuba. He contends that it was populism—not communism—that directed the July 26<sup>th</sup> Movement, and that Castro's adoption of a communist politic was another example of a pragmatic and strategic response to post-revolutionary realities.

In the remaining chapters, Farber presents additional reasons for the advent of revolution in Cuba and the Cuban leadership's eventual adoption of what he describes as communism with nationalist tendencies. External pressures clearly impacted the political choices available to Castro and the revolutionary leadership. The United States' imperialist policies for more than a half century prior, coupled with tensions resulting from (perceived or real) Soviet ascendancy in the hemisphere created a situation in which Cuba's political climate had to respond to international relations and the U.S.-Soviet conflict. At the same time, Farber suggests, Cuba's post-revolutionary political adaptations were not conspiratorial, pre-meditated plots to introduce communism in Cuba, but rather ad-hoc decisions based on practical and contextual considerations *after* Batista's ouster in the final days of 1958.

Ultimately, Farber's attempt to present a concise and accessible account of the origins of the 1950s Cuban Revolution is successful, even if the brevity of the chapters prevents a more extensive analysis of each point. Brevity does not keep Farber from providing solid support for his arguments, though, and he carefully weaves in responses to critics. One of the strengths of the text is the roughly equal use of U.S., Cuban, and Soviet sources, and Farber's own youthful experiences in pre-revolutionary Cuba (see footnote 36, p. 181). *The Origins of the Cuban Revolution Reconsidered* is an important addition to existing literature in Cuban studies, and adds primary source, archival research to the continuing debates surrounding Fidel Castro and the Cuban Revolution. Farber's text provides a concise overview of his subject that is appropriate for upper-division university topics courses dealing with Cuban studies. The text will also certainly be of interest to a broader scholarly readership, as well.

Ben Earwicker  
Department of Modern Languages  
Northwest Nazarene University