

CÓRDOVA, EFRÉN. *Castro and the Cuban Labor Movement. Statecraft and Society in a Revolutionary Period (1959-1961)*. University Press of America, Lanham, New York, London 1987. xii, 341 pp. \$ 28.50. (Paper: \$ 15.75.)

This volume consists of three main elements: I) a brief discussion of the nature and structure of Cuban unionism before the 1959 Revolution, II) a detailed account of the Castro regime's takeover and transformation of the unions in the period 1959-1960, and the resistance to this takeover, and III) an attempt to uphold the conspiratorial view of how Castro established Communism in the island.

I) Córdova's discussion of Cuban trade unionism immediately preceding the 1959 Revolution is inadequate not only because of its brevity but, more importantly, because of his fundamentally uncritical approach to this period. It is true that there were many unions, particularly at the local level, that managed to remain independent. Moreover, many of these organizations were led by people who were relatively honest officials. Nonetheless, the union movement as a whole had become thoroughly bureaucratic and corrupt, and while headed by a gangster ridden clique led by Eusebio Mujal Barniol, became an appendage to the brutal Batista dictatorship. There is no hint of this in Córdova's complacent analysis of this labor leadership. Instead, Córdova blandly tells us that Mujal and his associates "moved from a position of neutrality to one of support of the Batista regime. Whether this evolution was a political error on the part of the leadership or the result of the prevailing economic orientation of trade unions, is difficult to ascertain. But the temptation is strong to think that business unionism and "economist" feelings were of primary importance" (pp. 58-59). Likewise, Córdova claims that "almost all organizable sectors had been largely organized" (p. 54), a clear apology for the union leadership's unwillingness to do anything for the tens of thousands of workers in small firms. In these places, labor legislation was routinely and flagrantly violated, frequently in collusion with corrupt Mujalista labor leaders.

II) Córdova does offer us a very good and detailed account of the process that eventually led to Castro's takeover and transformation of the unions into the familiar Soviet model. He analyzes very well the political nature of the labor leadership that overthrew the Mujalista apparatus in early 1959, and provides us with a careful analysis of the political composition of the fateful Tenth Congress of the unions that took place in late 1959. We also learn of the specific mechanisms utilized, subsequent to this Congress, by the Communist Party unionists and those close to them inside the 26th of July Movement, to win through forceful methods what they had failed to win through open union elections. We are also told in detail of the resistance carried out by certain union sectors, particularly by the electrical utility workers union. Finally, Córdova describes many of the specific changes introduced as the unions were being transformed, e.g., the disappearance of the right to strike. However, Córdova failed to explore a curious paradox. Unlike other authors who have written on this subject, Córdova recognizes that at this time (late 1959 and 1960) Castro

enjoyed widespread support among Cuban workers. That means that he *could* have called for new general union elections and have most of his own people democratically elected to union office. Yet, he chose instead to overthrow the duly elected union leadership through the use of every conceivable undemocratic trick (e.g., packed assemblies where only those who were politically acceptable were allowed to attend). I would suggest that Castro did not follow the democratic road because this would have committed him far more than he would have wished to the institutional autonomy of the unions, and to a leadership that although politically indebted to him would have still been *independently elected* to office.

III) Córdova is most disappointing when he argues that the Communist transformation of Cuba was the outcome of a conspiracy. This is also the main thesis of Tad Szulc's *Fidel. A Critical Portrait* (New York: William Morrow and Co., 1986). Szulc claimed that Fidel Castro made a secret decision to convert Cuba to Communism while in the Sierra Maestra mountains in mid-1958 (Szulc, pp. 444, 453). Córdova, who seems to have finished his manuscript before the publication of Szulc's book, does not pin down specific dates or places. However, neither Szulc nor Córdova make any effort to confront and analyze evidence that may possibly conflict with the conspiracy theory. To cite just one historical example, neither author tries to explain how the frequent criticisms of Communism by the daily *Revolución* at least until September of 1959 can be reconciled with the existence of a conspiracy. After all, it was one thing for the early liberal supporters of Castro to be critical of Communism, but it was quite a different matter for *Revolución* to do so, given that this was Fidel Castro's own publication and his single most important media vehicle.

Córdova's defense of the conspiracy theory is based on simplistic dichotomies that are neither exhaustive nor mutually exclusive in logical or historical terms. Thus, he asks: "Was the shift to Marxism in Cuba due to external causes or was it engineered by Castro? Was the establishment of a full-fledged Communist regime an accident of history or the outcome of a preplanned operation?" (p. VII). Moreover, Córdova cites the work of this reviewer to point out that Castro frequently manipulated the Cuban people. But this merely demonstrates that Castro was something other than a convinced democrat, not that he was a secret Communist all along. Neither does one need to assume that when Castro took power on January 1, 1959 he was *either* a democratic nationalist *or* a secret Communist. In other words, it is not sufficient to cite evidence pointing to Castro's "from the top" view of politics. After all, the Communist system is hardly unique in relying on rule "from the top" rather than "from below". Finally, Córdova also dismisses, without attempting to evaluate, the important argument that in later years Castro emphasized his supposed long-standing support for "Marxism-Leninism" as a way of legitimating and strengthening his upstart credentials in the international Communist movement.

My own view, which unfortunately I cannot fully defend in this short review, is that before 1959 Castro was a political radical with clear authoritarian *caudillo* tendencies, but was no "secret Communist". Furthermore, due to the complete collapse of the traditional armed forces and the fragmentation and lack of political organization of the Cuban bourgeoisie, Castro found himself

with far greater power than he, or anybody else, ever expected. In light of this unusual situation, Castro felt free to move towards radical programs which were strongly opposed by U.S. imperialism. In the context of these primarily external pressures, he then made a conscious and not inevitable choice, probably in the early Fall of 1959, to move towards the establishment of some sort of Communist system in the island. However, he made this choice only when he was fully certain that he could do so independently from, and with full control over, the old Cuban Communists, and while retaining a significant degree of autonomy from the USSR. In this latter aim, Castro was helped by the development of polycentrism in the Soviet bloc and particularly by the split between Russia and China.

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