

African American Radicals and Revolutionary Cuba from 1959 until the Black Power Years

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This paper offers a concise examination of the political and cultural exchanges between various African American radicals and Fidel Castro's Cuba in the sixties and seventies.

The relations between the radical wing of the black freedom movement and revolutionary Cuba arose at a crucial time for non-white people in the United States and around the world. On the one hand, the civil rights protests were gaining momentum as a consequence of the success of the Montgomery Bus Boycott and of the nation-wide reactions to the Little Rock crisis; on the other hand, the 1955 Bandung Conference marked the beginning of the non-alignment movement, which profoundly affected African Americans. Many historians have already shown that in the aftermath of the Second world war, the black freedom movement in the United States and the decolonization process in the Third World were strictly tied up with "the rise of the dark races" that W. E. B. Du Bois, Marcus Garvey and Hubert Harrison had predicted decades before (Borstelmann; Plummer; Bush). Following the path of this historiography, the relations between African Americans and revolutionary Cuba need to be studied within the historical context of decolonization.

Even though the wars of independence in the Third World attracted much attention among African Americans, Castro's rebels did not immediately arouse the interest of black Americans during the years of the guerrilla war in the Sierra

Maestra (1956-58), where they were fighting against the United States-backed dictator Fulgencio Batista. This was probably due to the fact that since the end of the thirties Colonel Batista, who was a mulatto, had been reported by the popular and influential black newspaper *New York Amsterdam News* as a civil rights champion, and his presidency in the fifties was considered an important achievement for the Afro-Cuban population (“Discrimination”; “Cuban President”). Despite this initial lack of interest, when Castro’s rebels defeated the Batista army, the black press in the United States welcomed his revolution, and revolutionary Cuba soon became an inspiration for many African Americans. This came about for at least four reasons. The first one is that the revolutionaries included whites, blacks and mulattos and they promoted racial integration. The Afro-Cuban Juan Almeida Bosque, for example, was one of the foremost generals of the rebel army. The second one is that many African Americans considered the Cuban revolution as a war of independence from the interference of the United States. As a matter of fact, Fidel Castro had immediately stated that revolutionary Cuba refuted its political and economical dependence on the United States. The third reason is that only two months after the revolution, the Cuban leader publicly announced that one of the principal aims of the new government was to eradicate segregation and racism from Cuban society.¹ Finally, the Cuban revolution was a Third World revolution and Castro’s Cuba was aligned with the movements of the Afro-Asian countries that had emerged after the Bandung Conference (Castro 118).

In January 1959, only a few days after the success of the revolution, black congressman Adam Clayton Powell—who at the time supported Fidel Castro—flew to Havana to discuss with the Cuban leader the future relations between the United States and Cuba and about the killings of *batistianos*, which were attracting adverse publicity from the mainstream American press (“Adam Powell”). Powell, who was positively impressed by Castro during their meetings, was assured by the latter that the revolution was nationalist-oriented and non-communist and that the Cubans wanted to maintain good relations with Washington. Powell’s encounters with Castro did not, however, result in the success of the attempt made by the black congressman to organize a meeting between the *líder máximo* and president Dwight Eisenhower (Powell 196).

Despite the fact that the black press unanimously welcomed the Cuban revolution, at the beginning of 1960 several civil rights leaders distanced themselves from the Castro government. Indeed, even though McCarthyism was over, a critical attitude toward United States foreign policy was often associated with “un-Americanism”, and several black organizations—such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP)—shared Washington’s claim that Castro was a pro-Soviet Communist (Lissner; Cruse, “Cuba”). In this sense, the case of the African American former heavy weight boxing champion

¹ Racial segregation in Cuba was not institutionalized as it was in the South of the United States, however there were forms of racial segregations in some public areas and in the job sector before the revolution. De la Fuente 18.

Joe Louis was a case in point. In December 1959 Louis met with Castro in Havana to attend the celebration of the first anniversary of the revolution. As a result of that meeting, Louis became instrumental in a campaign to promote African American tourism in Cuba and the Cuban government planned to spend 287 thousand dollars on advertisement in the African American press (“Racial Integration”; “Register Joe”). When Louis returned to the United States, he was strongly criticized by the mainstream press which accused the former boxing champion of backing a communist government (“Joe Louis”; “Louis Works”). As a consequence of the media campaign against him, Louis decided to break his agreement with the Cuban government.

The prudent stance adopted by many civil rights leaders was not shared by black radicals in the North and East Coast urban areas, who continued to praise Fidel Castro, Ernesto Guevara and the revolution. In Harlem, for example, pro-Cuba sentiments were particularly widespread among African American nationalists and several of them joined a multiracial organization called the Fair Play for Cuba Committee (FPCC), which had its headquarters in Manhattan (Mealy). Despite the fact that the initial goal of the committee was not radical—its activists wanted “to speak the truth about the revolution” and to promote a “good neighbor policy” toward Cuba—the FPCC was immediately considered by United States institutions and media as a communist inspired organization (Fair Play; “How the Fair Play”).

In order to establish good relations with the FPCC, in the summer of 1960 Castro invited some black delegates to attend the July 26 celebrations. Among those who accepted the invitation were several important black radicals who later inspired the ideology of the Black Power Movement such as Robert Williams, Harold Cruse, John Henrik Clarke, LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka) and Julian Mayfield. When the delegates arrived in Havana, they were welcomed by Castro and Juan Almeida Bosque and during the event they shared the stage with the Cuban leader. After their Cuban trip, they were even more convinced that the revolution was promoting racial equality and became vocal in the defense of the Cuban government (Cruse, “The American Negro”; Jones).

In September 1960 the fifteenth United Nations General Assembly functioned as the “stage” for the historic meeting between Fidel Castro and the Nation of Islam rising star Malcolm X. When Castro and the Cuban delegation arrived in Manhattan on September 18, several Mid-town hotels refused to offer them accommodation because they did not want to host a delegation from a “hostile” country. After hours of tension—which included Castro’s threat to camp in Central Park—the Cubans gladly accepted the invitation of Malcolm X to stay at the Theresa hotel in Harlem. On his arrival in the black ghetto, Castro was welcomed by thousands of people who felt that they were more fairly represented by him, a Third World leader, than by their own government. Moments after his arrival at the Theresa, Fidel received Malcolm X in his room (Frankel). During the half hour long meeting, the two leaders discussed the black struggle in the United

States, the Congolese leader Patrice Lumumba (who was under arrest after winning the Congolese elections in May 1960) and Castro's intention to focus his speech at the General Assembly on decolonization and the Third World (Matthews; Gleijeses). The meeting between Castro and the most prominent leader of the black militants had a highly symbolical meaning and ratified the alliance between black radicalism and revolutionary Cuba.

Some months later, in April 1961, in response to the United States-sponsored invasion of the Bay of Pigs, a group of thirty African American intellectuals and activists—sponsored by the FPCC—wrote a document entitled “A Declaration of Conscience by Afro-Americans” (“Declaration”). The authors (among them W. E. B. Du Bois) denounced the government of the United States for adopting a neo-colonial attitude toward Cuba and a paternalistic attitude toward the Third World in general. They argued that the political and social forces which were reluctant to recognize civil and human rights for black Americans were the same forces that had supported the proposed invasion of the island.

One of the most illuminating examples of the kind of dynamics operating between black radicalism and revolutionary Cuba in the early sixties was embodied by Robert Williams. In October 1961 Williams, a former NAACP activist and self-defense advocate, decided to go into exile in Cuba after being (wrongly) accused of kidnapping a white couple in Monroe, North Carolina (Williams, *Negroes*). At the time of his arrival in Cuba, Williams was already renowned on the island and he was welcomed by both Castro and Ernesto Guevara. The Cuban government also allowed Williams to broadcast on a radio station (Radio Free Dixie) and to publish a newsletter (*The Crusader*), which became two important channels for the diffusion of black internationalism across the United States. Despite the fact that Williams maintained good relations with Castro and Guevara, many Cuban communists ostracized his work. The communists—who were gaining influence within the Cuban government as a consequence of the alliance between Cuba and the Soviet Union—feared that Williams, who was a non-communist black revolutionary, would inspire separatist sentiments among Afro-Cubans, in particular in the Oriente province, which had a numerous black population. Moreover, the Cuban communists believed that the only possible revolution was a communist proletarian (and multiracial) revolution: with the defeat of capitalism—they argued—racial problems would disappear (Cohen). The ideological incompatibility between Williams' revolutionary and separatist approach and the Cuban communists was the main reason why Williams left Cuba and moved to China in 1966.

Most of the black radicals who supported the Cuban revolution in the sixties praised Guevara's *foquismo* and considered a guerrilla strategy as a possible response to daily racial oppression (Williams, “USA”; Williams, “USA” part II). Guevara, as some historians have argued, was sympathetic to African American radical ideologies and he also gave his personal support to the struggle of Malcolm X during his 1964 trip to New York, when he represented Cuba in the Gen-

eral Assembly (X 102). Hence, when Guevara left Cuba in 1965, African American militants lost their most enthusiastic supporter within the Castro government: from that time on, only those who declared themselves socialists or communists had relations with Cuba (with the important exception of Stokely Carmichael in 1967).

During the Black Power Movement, the African American organization that established the most significant relations with Cuba was the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense (BPP). The BPP was a radical Marxist organization which was inspired by the Cuban revolution and Guevara's *foquismo*. Huey P. Newton, co-founder with Bobby Seale of the BPP, wrote in his autobiography: "For Castro guerrilla warfare was a good form of propaganda. Walking armed through Richmond was our propaganda" (*Revolutionary Suicide* 153). For many Black Panthers Cuba symbolized a perfect example of how a socialist system could succeed in offering equal opportunities to all its citizens (Newton, "Message of Solidarity"). Socialist Cuba also became a safe place for those panthers who wanted to escape from the illegal activities of John Edgar Hoover's Counter Intelligence Program, and starting from 1967-68 dozens of BPP members went into exile in Cuba. Among the African Americans in exile in Cuba there were some of the most prominent leaders of the Black Power Movement such as Eldridge Cleaver, Huey P. Newton and Assata Shakur. Cleaver came to Cuba in 1968 to avoid arrest and spent eight months on the island. His story is particularly interesting because, as the Minister of Information of the BPP, he had high expectations from the alliance with the Cuban government: he hoped that the Cubans would organize a military camp for the training of African American revolutionaries. The project failed because the Cubans decided not to transform their political support for the African American liberation struggle into a military one (in particular because of the international implications of such a choice) (Cleaver, "On Exile"; Cleaver "Slow Boat"; Reitan 91-94). Huey P. Newton went into exile in Cuba in 1974 after being charged with the murder of a prostitute in Oakland. Even though Newton withdrew himself from public life in the town of Santa Clara, he continued to lead the BPP through his daily telephone conversations with the new leader of the organization Elaine Brown (Walker; Brent 222-40). Assata Shakur, a former BPP militant and Black Liberation Army member, also escaped from prison in 1979 and reached Cuba five years later, in 1984, when she was given political asylum by the Castro government (Shakur 266-74).

During the Black Power struggle, other activists went to Cuba as official guests of Fidel Castro. This was the case of the Black Power advocate Stokely Carmichael, who was the only non-communist African American to receive an official invitation by the Cuban government after 1965. In July 1967 Carmichael attended the Organization of Latin American Solidarity Conference, an international meeting which celebrated Guevara and praised Guevara's activities as a source of inspiration for Third World revolutionaries—and also for Black Power advocates ("Envia"; Meluzá). Finally, the communist party member and black freedom fighter

Angela Davis toured the island after being released from jail in 1972 to demonstrate her solidarity with the revolution. Her trip to Cuba, where the previous year hundreds of thousands of people had supported the “Free Angela Davis” campaign, was a huge success and helped to consecrate Davis as one of the most prominent figures of the black freedom movement worldwide (“Ofrecen”; Pita).

CONCLUSION

As this short paper has shown, many black radicals in the early sixties considered the Cuban revolution as a Third World revolution which fought against United States “imperialism” on the American continent. On the one hand, these black militants embraced ethnic *nationalism* at home, but on the other hand, they also supported Third World *internationalism* abroad. John Henrik Clarke called this group of black intellectuals “new Afro-American nationalists.” Some historians have argued that the Black Power protests took their inspiration from the ideologies of early black (inter)nationalists such as Robert Williams, Harold Cruse, LeRoi Jones and Malcolm X, and that the movement grew alongside the civil rights struggle (Woodard; Joseph). Following the path of this historiography, I would argue that the 1959 Cuban revolution was crucial in the development of several internationalist ideologies—e.g. socialism, third-world-ism, anti-imperialism—which characterized, influenced and determined the growth of the Black Power movement at the beginning of the sixties.

If we consider a brief outline of African American relations with revolutionary Cuba, it is undeniable that these relations led to important consequences for both sides. Fidel Castro, by endorsing the African American protest, focused the attention of the Third World on the Achilles’ heel of the United States—racial discrimination—and achieved an important propaganda victory at a time when the Cold War was primarily a war of propaganda. This was particularly evident during the United Nations General Assemblies of 1960 and 1964, when Fidel Castro and Ernesto Guevara accused the United States of discriminating against their African American citizens. As a result of his alliance with black-American radicalism, Castro also strengthened his position among Afro-Cubans, who considered the *líder máximo* not only as the liberator of Cuba, but also as an advocate of black people’s rights worldwide. In addition, the alliance with black America and the striking difference between the United States regime of racial segregation and the Cuban trans-racial society, enabled Castro to promote a positive image of Cuba in the Third World, which certainly had an impact on Cuba’s relations with several African countries.

For many African Americans, the Cuban revolution proved that the racial problem could be solved by top-down decisions which even if they did not immediately end racial discrimination, at least ensured equal rights for all American citizens. The alliance with Cuba also enabled many black radicals to internation-

alize their struggle by linking the African American quest for human rights to the worldwide struggle of the “dark races” against imperialism and colonialism. Thanks to their alliance with the Cuban government, several black Americans (e.g. Eldridge Cleaver, Robert Williams, and Stokely Carmichael) met and collaborated with Third World leaders: Cuba represented, for some of them, a “bridge” between Africa and Asia. Moreover, the relations between African Americans and Cuba attracted the attention of the Third World to United States racial problems and exerted pressure on the civil rights agendas of several American presidents. (e.g. Eisenhower, Kennedy, Johnson). Finally, for dozens of African Americans Cuba provided a safe haven from COINTELPRO at a time when the illegal activities of Hoover’s organization were a major cause of the undermining of most of the black power organizations.

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