

Introduction

Most studies of the Cuban Revolution since the mid-1960s (when its emerging shape began to allow the first serious considerations of the transformation (Seers, 1964; Fagen, 1969; Huberman and Sweezy, 1968; O'Connor, 1971), as opposed to polemical responses, either for (Frank, 1961; Sartre, 1961; Mills, 1960) or against (Pflaum, 1961; Weyl, 1961), have tended to focus on the political, economic or social patterns of the process of change. As a result, apart from the periodic collections of essays that offer a broad 'compendium' of the Revolution's many dimensions (Mesa-Lago, 1971; Bonachea and Valdés, 1972; Suchlicki, 1972; Halebsky and Kirk, 1985; Chomsky et al, 2003; Brenner, 2005), which usually include a section on culture, most approaches have tended to neglect the cultural dimension or to accord it a secondary status. In the latter case, culture is often seen as an interesting, if perhaps revealing, side issue, usually acknowledging the more outstanding post-1959 cultural developments (in cinema or music) or, alternatively, highlighting one of the better-known *causes célèbres* of the expected conflict between communist state and intellectual freedom (the *caso Padilla* (Padilla affair), or Reinaldo Arenas, most typically). Conversely, studies of modern Cuban culture have often tended to consider the Revolution's political, economic or social transformation as a backdrop to the cultural patterns analysed, as the context for a specific development or as a restrictive environment, creating opportunities but also tensions and conflicts (see Chapter 2). In other words, rarely have such studies seen culture as central to the other transformations.

However, this neglect is puzzling, not least because previous revolutions (notably those in Russia and Mexico) included significant attempts to build a cultural revolution into the whole process of change. Moreover, two of the Revolution's first institutions (the Instituto Cubano de Artes e Industrias Cinematográficas (ICAIC), and Casa de las

Américas, created in March and April 1959 respectively) were cultural, indicating that, by some leaders at least, culture was considered a priority. Subsequent cultural developments bringing positive international attention to Cuba (cinema or popular music, for example) might also suggest the Revolution's success in creating an infrastructure and environment for cultural expansion.

In fact, any examination of the relationship between culture and the motives, patterns, effects and underlying ideology of the wider transformation shows clearly that that relationship has been neither accidental nor incidental, but at the very least reflecting a deeper inter-connection. After all, the official centrality accorded to the ideas, writings and example of the *héroe nacional*, José Martí (visible everywhere), and the ubiquitous repetition of his words, *el único modo de ser libre es ser culto* (the only way to be free is to be educated, and cultured) would suggest that he believed (as, presumably, do at least some of those following his footsteps since 1953) that culture was fundamental to a genuine social liberation.

However, if that seems true of culture in general, it is clear that, within that context, literature seems to have enjoyed a special place of prestige, authority and centrality. Not only were the Imprenta Nacional (national printing house) and the Editorial Nacional (national publishing house), also officially known as the Editora Nacional, early creations of the Revolution, but the leading cultural protagonists of the first few years (apart from Alfredo Guevara in cinema and Alicia Alonso in ballet) who helped to shape the contours of the whole cultural revolution, were mostly writers, such as Alejo Carpentier, José Lezama Lima, or Nicolás Guillén. Moreover, as culture developed in the 1960s, literature seemed to be especially privileged; the remarkable initiative of the *instructores de arte* (cultural teachers) – the Revolution's cultural 'shock troops', sent out into the fields, schools and factories to train Cubans to develop their artistic or musical talents (in the belief that any Cuban had both the right and ability to be culturally skilled) – excluded literature, implying that literary talent might be uniquely innate, rather than teachable. Indeed, as this study explains, it was only after a decade of change that the same principle began to be applied to literature as well, in the form of the *talleres literarios* (literary workshops).

However, here we find another apparent reality, seeming to contradict that 'special place': over the decades, it has often seemed to be writers (rather than musicians, dramatists or artists) who have been singled out by the political authorities for close attention, strict regulation and

even punishment. These included the main protagonists of the *Lunes* affair of 1961 (see Chapter 3), the young activists of the Puente group (Chapter 4), and the main *cause célèbre* of the late 1960s and early 1970s (presaging the clampdown of the *quinquenio gris* (the grey five-year period) of 1971–76), the marginalisation and eventual detention and ‘confession’ of the poet Heberto Padilla (Chapter 4). That clampdown seemed mostly to target writers, while the next generation suffering from discrimination on grounds of artistic or sexual preference included the well-known case of Arenas. While this impression might of course simply reflect our own limited knowledge or the success of studies highlighting those cases – since theatre did in fact see several actors and playwrights suffer in the *quinquenio* (Gallardo, 2009) – this propensity for literature to draw special critical attention and fear of those in authority does seem to have confirmed expectations, arising from our perceptions of culture under communism, where writers (such as Milosz, Pasternak and Solzhenitsyn) were especially targeted.

Given this apparently contradictory landscape, therefore, some key questions arise: why does this contradiction exist (if what we see is in fact accurate) and what does it mean for our understanding of the role of literature in the Revolution and also of the nature of the Revolution? This study attempts to provide some possible answers, by following a particular line of argument.

Because of the need to develop such answers, going to the heart of the intimate relationship between literature and the Revolution, that line of argument is to examine the subject within very clear contexts. The first context is the need to understand post-1959 Cuban literature not as represented by those authors or texts traditionally attracting external attention (not least because such attention may well reflect external preconceptions, as much as the reality of what is being examined), but rather to consider such conventional subjects for analysis as the tip of an iceberg, below which lies the vast majority of the other texts and other writers not attracting this attention, as much the outcome of the Revolution–literature relationship as Arenas, Padilla or the best-known contemporary writers, Leonardo Padura Fuentes or Pedro Juan Gutiérrez. For the sheer volume of writing talent which has emerged in Cuba says something about the context in which writers have written and operated, but it also reminds us that, beyond the famous, lies a huge hinterland of hidden stories, experiences and decisions – not least the decision to stay in Cuba and continue working within a revolutionary project.

Secondly, we need to understand literature in Cuba as, anyway, going beyond text or author, regardless of the latter's identity, and, instead, to see it in a wider context: of what we see here as literary culture, namely the whole set of processes, institutions, policies, spaces and the 'circuit of culture' (Du Gay, 1997) affecting writing, reading and books. Indeed that is clearly the subject of this study.

Finally, we need to understand this literary culture within the context of the Revolution's trajectory from 1959, with all its ideological underpinnings, imperatives, debates and tensions, although, within that, we need to understand that this culture had its own trajectory, evolution, imperatives, debates and tensions, bearing some direct relationship to the Revolution's wider patterns of evolution but also to its own momentum. For this reason the authors' different disciplines (cultural studies and history) have been brought into play, to create what we believe is a necessary interdisciplinary approach and focus, specifically mixing cultural studies' use of interviews (especially in Chapters 4, 5 and 8) and cultural theory, on the one hand, with historiography's empirical awareness of a historical dimension and use of documentary evidence.

Structure of the book

This therefore explains the structure of this book. Chapter 1 outlines the Revolution's wider trajectory, as a process of political and social change over fifty years, suggesting how we might view the cultural trajectory within that. Chapter 2, set against the dominant patterns of interpretation in analyses of Cuban literature and culture since 1959, outlines the theoretical framework in which this study is located, emphasising the process's ideological continuum, the existence, nature and function of different spaces within a constantly changing context, and, most importantly, the idea of a different notion of value which, we suggest, is the essential framework for understanding the whole question.

Three chapters then examine the evolution of Cuban literary culture from 1959 to 2011. Chapter 3 examines just three years of the initial Revolution, the years of redefinition when the new literary culture emerged from experience and the developing ideological consensus. The pace, scale and depth of the early changes were so significant that they warrant detailed attention, and, in the light of the book's approach, that first period stood clearly apart from the following three decades.

Chapter 4 then covers the history of literary culture over the next

twenty-eight years, since, after those initial years and despite differences between phases within those three decades, 1961–89 showed more of a common internal pattern than that whole period shared with the opening years. Nonetheless, those differences also matter, for each phase's character did mark it out from the preceding and following phases: 1961–67 saw the cultural authorities' main focus on the reader, rather than the writer (the latter having been, *de facto* if not officially, the prime focus in 1959–61); in 1967–76 the focus shifted to literature's social context (and purpose), namely both an internal Cuban context and an external context, in the Third World; in 1977–89, the focus shifted to the book itself, and to publishing, while correcting the neglect of the writer. However, despite these differences, nothing changed the overall emerging emphasis of the strategy for a literary culture, largely determined from 1961 and following the same principles until the crisis of 1989–94, following the collapse of the Soviet Union. Chapter 5 addresses, extensively, the mixed effects of that crisis: rapid and painful adjustment but also unexpected opportunities and development, and eventually, after 2000, a surprising and productive return to the principles of 1961, with a postscript anticipating the effects of reform under the leadership of Raúl Castro.

Three 'case studies' then follow this history, each seen as reflecting the patterns, processes and thinking of the trajectory traced, although all three refer principally to the post-1989 context. Chapter 6 (written by Meesha Nehru) analyses the unusual writers' training workshop, the Centro Onelio Jorge Cardoso, seen here as a 'case' because it arose from the characteristic *talleres literarios* of the 1970s and 1980s, and also because its development reflected the post-1991 emphasis on the infrastructure and opportunities for 'professional' writers. Chapter 7 narrates, in the context of the complexities of the Cuban publishing infrastructure of 2008–11, the story of one possibly typical work of fiction, tracing its passage from conception to reception and revealing, in the process, the many complexities, pressures and negotiations which all actors in Cuba's literary culture constantly have to confront. Finally, Chapter 8 studies the annual Havana Book Fair (the Feria Internacional del Libro de La Habana, hereafter the Feria), seen here as a revealing microcosm of that literary culture, not just for 2000–11 (to which it mostly refers) but also of the whole post-1959 project, with its special unchallenged value placed on literature, on the book and on reading.

Before examining processes after 1959, however, it is important to emphasise that the post-1959 developments did not happen in a political

vacuum, and that the new valorisation of literature, writers and the book was not a totally new departure, but, instead, had a clear basis in the patterns, experiences and the thinking evident in Cuba before the Revolution.

The pre-1959 background

Most studies of literature under the Revolution tend to assume that pre-1959 Cuba was a cultural desert, with literature and writers given few opportunities and little respect. As Lourdes Casal put it, literature was seen as 'a pastime for good-for-nothings and homosexuals' (Casal, 1971: 456). While this overview was not completely inaccurate, it somewhat overstates the case, ignoring the reality that Cuba was, in this respect, not so different from most of contemporary Latin America, with some prominent exceptions; in Mexico and Argentina, for example, state initiatives and a lively literary culture, high literacy and a large internal and continental public (since their publishers dominated the wider Latin American market) combined to create a range of outlets for would-be writers. Elsewhere, however, the picture was as bleak as in Cuba, publishing being based on small-scale operations, often subsidised by writers themselves or rich patrons, leading many writers to live or publish abroad or through supportive groupings at home.

In Cuba, that was true. There were relatively few bookshops – one for every 60,000 inhabitants (Smorkaloff, 1997: 146) – and even the prestigious Biblioteca Nacional José Martí (José Martí National Library (BNJM)), unable to buy its books, relied on authors' own donations [GP].¹ Equally, there were no large-scale publishing enterprises outside the media, and those that did exist were small presses, producing geographically limited and small print-runs, or the specialist university presses in Havana, Santiago or Santa Clara [RFR]. The most prestigious small press was the Havana-based Editorial Lex, but others included two operations owned by Spanish exiles: the educational publishers Editorial Cultural, whose output – usually for private schools – included some literature [MSM], and Manuel Altoaguirre's Editorial La Verónica [LC]. In all, fewer than one million books were published annually in the 1950s, around 200 titles, mostly textbooks (Rodríguez, 2001: 65). Therefore, what existed on 1 January 1959 was 'a printing and binding industry consisting of small artisan-style letterpress printers and hand binderies, and one large modern plant producing *Selecciones*, the Spanish-language *Reader's Digest*, about a million copies of which

were printed in Cuba for distribution throughout all of Latin America' (Shatzkin, 1985: 36).

Hence, Cuban writers did what their counterparts did elsewhere. Firstly, they used small publishers, often funding small print-runs themselves (usually 500–750 copies: Shatzkin, 1985: 36); while this was more common among aspiring writers, keen to launch their literary careers, it even applied to the most established and internationally renowned writers [RFR]. Secondly, many chose to leave Cuba, for what was subsequently perceived as a self-imposed exile but which was both a pragmatic and intellectual strategy. It was pragmatic because only abroad could large-scale publishing opportunities be found, allowing writers to be professional or semi-professional; this was obviously more likely in Spanish-speaking countries, especially Spain, Mexico [RFR] or Argentina, although both Carpentier and Virgilio Piñera lived in Caracas. This emigration also had another purpose: to become part of the wider, and more prestigious, cultural community formed by European or North American culture, whose leading exponents had always determined intellectual and artistic currents, constituted the prestigious vanguard and were generally seen as the arbiters of taste. Hence, by living in Europe (especially Paris) or the United States (especially New York), a Cuban writer had access to the ideas and models of that community and could thus be as up to date as possible with the latest fashions, and, ideally, aspire to gain recognition by that community (Kapcia, 2005). This emigration also included study abroad, bringing greater prestige than graduation from a Cuban university for those whose family circumstances allowed it, or who gained a scholarship [RFR; GP]. While many chose this option in a US college or university [RFR] (Pérez, 1998: 406–11), others chose France [GP] or Spain [CL], the latter proving especially welcoming to young Cubans in search of study.

Those remaining in Cuba sought outlets and support through the well-established tradition of the groupings around *tertulias* (organised literary and philosophical gatherings) and cultural magazines. Cuba's literary culture had long been based on this tradition, usually relying on the prestige bestowed by a well-known writer (effectively the group's mentor) or on the funds and spaces provided by a moneyed patron. That had been true of the nineteenth-century *tertulias*, and also, in the twentieth-century Republic, with Fernando Ortiz and the *Grupo Minorista* (Kapcia, 2005: 45 and 77–9). Magazines arising from these groupings were by definition usually short-lived and always of limited

circulation, although two – *Cuba Contemporánea* and *Revista de Avance* – had enjoyed longer lives and achieved some well-earned prestige (Wright, 1988).

In the years immediately before the Revolution, the most famous group was that around the magazine *Orígenes*, whose artistic mentor was Lezama Lima but whose material patron was José Rodríguez Feo, until the two fell out, the latter then founding *Ciclón*, with Piñera, in 1955. For Lezama, *Orígenes* was the latest of a long series of ephemeral magazines, but it became the most successful, lasting eight years and gathering most of Cuba's established and promising poets in a collective statement of aesthetic views which sought to reject the ideas of politically or socially committed art and seek a genuinely Cuban art in an approach that partly echoed the 'art for art's sake' ideas of Hispanic *modernismo*. Indeed, the place of *Orígenes* in the evolution of a literary culture before 1959 was unmatched, because not only did the group gather together many of Cuba's leading poets of a particular generation but it also created – among those of the next generation who remained associated with the group (Fernández Retamar, Pablo Armando Fernández, Fayad Jamís) – what effectively constituted one basis of the Revolution's *primera promoción* (first wave) (Goytisolo, 1970).

Ciclón was the other major magazine of the time. Filling a gap left by the disappearance of the two magazines associated with the communist party (known as the Partido Socialista Popular (PSP) from 1944) in the late 1930s and 1940s, *Mediodía* and *Gaceta del Caribe*, it largely adopted a politically committed approach, albeit never as explicit as the earlier PSP organs, which – together with the popular radio station Diez-Mil – had contributed to some public awareness of the importance of culture.

The other major grouping – of direct relevance to the Revolution's first cultural generation (and especially to ICAIC and *Lunes*, many of whose founding members came from the group) – was *Nuestro Tiempo*. Created in 1950 (largely out of the more informal Cine-Club of 1948) and based in a group of like-minded, politically aware, young writers and *cineastas*, this group not only adopted a very different posture to *Orígenes*, but was also increasingly influenced by Marxist aesthetics and by notions of the popularisation of art.

As a result, despite the evident failings of the context in which literature struggled to survive, Cuba did possess something of a literary culture by the 1950s. Indeed, the Universidad de la Habana's Escuela de Artes y Letras in the 1950s acted as a valuable forum for the

appreciation not just of literature in general (and Spanish-language literature in particular) but even of Cuban literature, already studied seriously [EDL; RFR; GP]. Moreover, this culture included a strong tradition of seeking to spread appreciation of art beyond the narrow confines of the educated middle class and elite.

However, this reminds us that this literary culture was always rather narrowly defined, always somewhat exclusive – especially to the educated bourgeoisie [EDL; CL] – and generally little appreciated by the wider public, especially among the middle class where either a kind of perceived philistinism reigned [AAM] or where reading tastes tended to be driven more by North American models, increasingly publicised – in translation – by popular weekly magazines or the Spanish translation of *Reader's Digest* (Pérez, 1999). In a Cuba where the ability to read English enjoyed considerable intellectual and social prestige – perhaps more than anywhere else in Latin America – there was an inevitable gravitation towards those models, even in cultural circles; if, in the first thirty years of the century, Paris had been the Cuban writers' cultural Mecca, by the 1950s Faulkner and Hemingway were the models and New York the magnet.

That said, however, literature and literary figures did enjoy considerable prestige among Cuba's educated and cultured classes, more than any other cultural form. There were several reasons for this special place in the cultural hierarchy, starting with the historical prestige bestowed by Martí, whose status as *héroe nacional*, as well as being one of the Hispanic world's leading exponents of *modernismo*, enhanced the relationship between literature and national identity; if a poet such as Martí could enjoy the status of an *Apóstol* and die leading a cavalry charge in Cuba's final War of Independence, then poetry, and literature, might after all be more than just a pastime for effete intellectuals. Hence, as every Cuban child learned to read and quote Martí, as his verses were reproduced in textbooks, magazines or monuments – especially after 1953 (his centenary, when over 500 works on him were published (Hennessy, 1963: 354) –, a *literato* at least, if not literature per se, enjoyed a special esteem in Cuban perceptions of culture. This meant that the important exception to the general neglect of literature was the widespread awareness that, where literary activity and renown had some relationship with 'the nation', it had a social, political and national value beyond its aesthetic merit.

Literature's special place was then further enhanced as some of Cuba's writers became famous beyond the island, enjoying a prestige rarely

enjoyed by Cuba's musicians, for example (although the international fame enjoyed by Wilfredo Lam and René Portocarrero potentially put the visual arts on the same plane). Thus, in addition to Martí (and, to a lesser extent, his fellow *modernista*, Julián del Casal), Cuban literature was recognised by the outside world through the work of the *negrista* poet Guillén, and the novelists Carpentier and Lezama. In a postcolonial and nationalist society, where external recognition of national expertise was especially valued, their fame added to literature's prestige.

Finally, Cuba's high levels of literacy by regional standards (although lower than the Southern Cone countries), coupled with the 'Americanised' urban middle class's willingness to engage in some sort of recreational reading, meant that appreciation of literature – even if not necessarily Cuban literature – existed in potential.

Therefore, pre-1959 might not have been the cultural desert which is often painted in broad-brush strokes. Indeed, literature enjoyed some advantages over other genres, and the makings of a literary culture did exist, however small, limited and distorted by cultural colonialism. The basis already existed, therefore, for literature to be accorded an unusual place within the Cuban cultural hierarchy and canon, and even within the processes of cultural revolution and decolonisation. The events to follow were to throw all of this into question and begin a radical and often fraught search for definitions of literary culture and revolution that created all kinds of tensions, but also opened up new opportunities.

Notes

- 1 References within square brackets are used throughout this study to indicate material provided in the interviews conducted by the three authors, and correspond to the list of interviews at the end of the book.