

*Fighting Over Fidel: The New York Intellectuals and the Cuban Revolution*. Rafael Rojas.

Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016. ISBN: 9780691169514

From Beatniks to journalists, Black nationalists to sociologists, Rafael Rojas' *Fighting Over Fidel: The New York Intellectuals and the Cuban Revolution* tells the story of how various members of the Leftist intelligentsia in New York City responded to events on an island nation some 90 miles south of Florida. Rojas' assemblage and engaging discussion of newspaper articles, books, magazines, and poems illustrates how the potential of the Cuban revolution was at first celebrated by many on the Left. However, Rojas argues that as Castro and the Cuban government moved further away from creating a new socialism, and moved closer to alignment with the Soviet regime, the celebration quickly turned to disillusionment. A large section of New York's intellectual left all but abandoned the Cuban Revolution.

The book is divided into eight chapters and, rather than employing a chronological approach, it explores the back and forth banter of intellectual dialogue within a large cross-section of New York's intellectuals. The analysis of intellectual discourse as represented in publications such as *The New York Times*, socialist and beatnik publications *Monthly Review*, *Pa' Lante*, and *Kulchur*, and books by novelists, sociologists, and Black Power Movement activists provides a survey of divergent opinions within the Left. For some on the Left, the Cuban Revolution represented hopes for a true popular leftist and humanist revolution, free of the repressive totalitarianism often associated with communist one party states. For others, it was a chance for Cuba to assert sovereignty, even if it came through a Soviet alliance.

The front cover of a January, 1959 edition of the *New York Times* showing the well-known photo of Fidel Castro and his group of guerillas triumphantly taking control of Havana

© 2019 and 2020 *The Middle Ground Journal* Number 19, 2019-2020 school year

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highlights the narrative being projected by one of the nation's largest newspapers in the early stages of the revolution. But the liberal *New York Times*' sympathetic portrayal of Castro as the "Robin Hood of the Caribbean" (34) and comparisons of the struggle to the Mexican and French revolutions would indeed be short lived. By 1960, a photograph published in the paper showing Castro and Nikita Khrushchev embracing in New York would mark the beginning of the paper's distancing from Castro, and Castro's move forward towards alliance with the Soviet Union.

The complexity and uncertainty of the immediate post-revolution period is underscored by Latin American novelist Waldo Frank's 1961 book: *Cuba: Prophetic Island*. Touting Cuba's revolution as anticolonial, nationalist, and humanist (that is to say, not communist), the book noted that the Cuban government should be careful not to move towards communism, and implicitly, an alliance with the Soviet Union. As a result, the book would never be published on the island, but would be printed in New York and Buenos Aires, creating a space for pan-American intellectual dialogue about the new regime in Havana. Frank would be attacked by both the hardline communist Left for discouraging Cuba's alignment with Moscow and by the Socialist Democratic Left for painting a mostly favorable picture of what was seemingly becoming an increasingly totalitarian regime.

Rojas uses this theme of Cold War repositioning within the Left to continue his exploration of several magazines and publications including *Monthly Review*. The Marxist magazine *Monthly Review*, founded by Ivy League professors Paul Sweezy and Leo Huberman, published pieces advocating for Cuba's turn to Marxist-Leninist socialism, including translated pieces from Che Guevara and other Latin American Marxist intellectuals such as history professor Adolfo Gilly. In contrast to others on the Left, the magazine's publishers affirmed

early on that the revolution was indeed firmly grounded in socialist ideology and defended Castro's right to align his government with Moscow, albeit through a critical lens of the Soviet bloc. Rojas' portrayal of *Monthly Review* as an important sounding board for the various factions of the Left to facilitate intellectual debate about Cuba, underscores how the publication created a public space to both "accompany and critique the island's socialist experiment." (114)

The chapter dedicated to beatnik poets, "Moons of the Revolution," offers a change of pace from the sometimes hard-to-follow mapping of Socialist Democratic, Trotskyite, and Marxist-Leninist ideological divisions by placing a large group of bohemians together into a category of New Left beatnik poets. LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka), Lawrence Ferlinghetti, and Alan Ginsberg make up the cast of characters, united by a hope for a Cuban socialism that would incorporate human rights, gay rights, gender rights, and racial equality. Rojas posits that the beat poets became increasingly disengaged and disillusioned with the revolution as the government in Havana solidified its relationship with Moscow, silenced dissent, and quashed human rights for segments of the population. Within months of Castro taking power, Ginsberg's poetry critically positions capitalism and communism as equivalents in Cold War politics, and as Castro as a leader who had the potential to become another Latin American strongman.

Rojas also chooses poems from El Puente, a group of Cuban poets including homosexuals, Blacks, and women. The Spanish verses of the poems (with English translations) provide a space for the reader to experience the anxieties of the revolution through the eyes and language of populations that would become increasingly repressed and marginalized. A poem by Isel Rivero, *La marcha de los hurones* (The March of the Ferrets,) asserts that despite the Cuban government's efforts to build a collective identity, all that one is left with is utter solitude. Beat

poets, along with many others on the New Left, would come to reject totalitarian communism, while embracing the idea of international anti-imperialist struggle as increasingly exemplified (in their opinion) by Che Guevara.

The Black Power Movement is put into dialogue with Cuba through “Negroes with Guns,” a chapter that takes its name from a book by Robert Williams. The chapter explores the divisions within the Black Nationalist movement and the movement’s connections to international socialism (Cuba, Africa, and Asia.) By examining the writings and ideas of figures such as Robert Williams, Stokely Carmichael, Huey P. Newton, and Eldridge Cleaver, Rojas spells out how the dialogue about the Cuban Revolution would impact leaders of the Black Power movement. Reciprocally, Rojas shows how intellectuals on the island were also engaged in conversations at the intersection of Black nationalism and Marxism through the publication of articles and interviews with Black Power movement leaders in the Cuban magazine *Pensamiento Critico*. Ultimately, topics of race, nation and socialism would create a distance between Black nationalists and Cuba. Rojas argues, for example, as the Cuban government was striving to achieve racial equality (and thus racial homogeneity), leaders of the Black Left sought to instill a distinctive Black pride in the movement.

Published at a time when the United States opened its embassy in Havana for the first time in fifty-five years and with the easing of certain travel and economic embargo restrictions, Rafael Rojas’ *Fighting Over Fidel: The New York Intellectuals and the Cuban Revolution* asks us to consider the impact of New York intellectuals in the fostering of pan-American dialogue. As an intellectual history, the work is wonderfully written and employs a rich assortment of print publications from a diverse group of intellectuals. However, the sometimes hard to follow

ideological divisions between the various factions (particularly in the first few chapters) can prove difficult if one is not well versed in Leftist theory. Also, Rojas fails to provide adequate background information of some people and events, leaving the reader confused as to their significance in the larger story. The book serves well for graduate students and scholars of intellectual history and the Cuban Revolution, and, is indeed a solid contribution to the field.

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