

Revolutionary Positions

Sexuality and Gender in Cuba and Beyond

Michelle Chase and Isabella Cosse

This issue's publication coincides roughly with the sixtieth anniversary of the Cuban Revolution. Now, as sixty years ago, we find ourselves in a dramatic time for Cuba. The revolutionary generation is fading and the promises of socialism seem to have failed. The market reforms that began in the 1990s have gradually deepened, contributing to the resurgence of gendered and racialized inequalities. The recent decline of the so-called Pink Tide in Latin America and the rise of a more aggressive foreign policy in the United States have put the revolutionary government on the defensive. The utopian promises of the revolution's early years now routinely evoke either nostalgia or disdain. And yet Cuba still provokes heated global debates.

Ever since the revolutionary victory more than a half-century ago, those debates have often centered on Cuba's attempts to reform gender and sexuality. Utopian ideals of the "New Man," emancipated women, and revolutionary love have inspired intense curiosity and scrutiny on an international scale. This widespread influence has long been recognized. And yet the extant scholarship on the global impact of the Cuban Revolution still focuses mainly on diplomatic relations, Cold War military conflicts, or the Cuban-inspired rise of Latin America's armed revolutionary Left.¹ Meanwhile, recent scholarship exploring Cuba's halting transformations of gender, sexuality, or the family has often employed a national framework.² The global reverberations of Cuba's transformative aspirations for gender, sexuality, and the family have yet to be fully explored in the literature.³

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This issue of *Radical History Review* centers the sexual and gendered dimensions of Cuba's 1959 revolution—topics now being explored in new historiography on Cuba—but pushes the analysis toward a global scale. The issue asks how these aspects of the revolution were interpreted, debated, appropriated, and reimagined globally. We weave together heretofore-unconnected scholarly and analytical threads to arrive at a new assessment of the Cuban Revolution's complex transnational legacies regarding gender and sexuality. In so doing, the issue yields several fresh insights about the Cuban Revolution, the New Left, and the utopian and transformative spirit of the sixties.

First, the essays here illuminate the range of “revolutionary positions” that Cuba prompted, and which we refer to in the issue's title. Scholarship on the Cuban Revolution's global influence has most often focused on Cuba's direct military interventions or on the New Left's romance with armed insurgency, which Cuba encouraged. Yet this issue views revolutionary positions on gender, sexuality, and family as equally influential, serving as touchstones and central arenas of struggle that helped define the new sensibilities of the Global Left over the course of the next few decades. In line with other recent scholarship, the issue brings “public” debates about revolution, socialism, and decolonization into the same scholarly frame as ostensibly “private” questions of gender and sexuality. Doing so reveals that the debates over gender and sexuality in Latin America, which we often assume emerged first in the Global North, were in fact deployed simultaneously in the Global South, albeit with their own inflections. It also reveals that gender, sexuality, and family were central to Cuba's internationalist politics, not peripheral to them. The issue therefore insists on the centrality of questions of gender and sexuality to the internationalism and global politics of the period.

Second, the issue offers nuanced analyses of the cultural, subjective, and affective dimensions of the revolution and its outward impact. The Cuban Revolution inaugurated new political and military strategies, but also new styles and sensibilities, as embodied by the bearded and fatigue-clad leadership. It nurtured the promise of a New Left, capable of shaking off the rigidity of the Old Left, and was in tune with the dawning global youth rebellion. Focusing on the lived experiences and practices of revolutionary and leftist actors in this period takes us beyond their more programmatic manifestos and communiqués, giving us deeper insight into how the New Left was lived.

Third, by adopting a transnational perspective, this issue seeks to problematize common perceptions of Cuba as static and isolated—an island both literally and metaphorically. Scholarly accounts of Cuba's international relations frequently reduce the country to a mere victim of US aggression or client state of the Soviet Union.⁴ Yet the image of revolutionary Cuba that emerges here is of a dynamic country that waged its own diplomacy and influence through cultural forms such as journalism, cinema, music, or poster art; through military and diplomatic missions to

other countries in the throes of revolution; and through relationships with other revolutionary leaders. Cuban revolutionaries sought global allies and influence, especially in the Western Hemisphere and Africa, and the connections Cuba prompted involved the circulation of people as well as ideas. Recovering these transnational debates over gender and sexuality—and the concrete effects these had on people’s lives—contributes to a fuller historic accounting of the Cuban Revolution’s transnational impact and legacy.

Finally, this issue rejects depictions of the revolutionary Left as monolithic. Exploring the conversations and tensions that took place on the Left remind us that the Cuban Revolution’s influence was never static or impervious to outside pressure. Among the most important tensions of the period were the revolutionary Left’s infamous *machismo* and homophobia and the trenchant critiques these generated. No less important were the different ideas expressed by leaders and others about what revolutionary forms of love, marriage, and family might look like. The Left was also in dialogue with its opponents, responding to conservative forces’ rejection and manipulation of the Left’s perceived moral transgressions. These tensions and conflicts, which cut across the political landscape, demonstrate that gender and sexuality became crucial terrains of struggle during the Cold War—in the Global South as well as in the Global North.

The issue covers the history of an era with important implications for current political struggles. We contribute to understanding the period in several ways. First, attending to the truly global impact of the Cuban Revolution helps us transcend the limits of area studies, illuminating parallels and connections between Latin American revolutionary movements and decolonization efforts elsewhere in the same period. As discussed above, the Cuban Revolution formed part of a broader landscape of struggles of Third World and anticolonial movements that challenged racial and imperial exploitation. Second, seeing the era’s transformative aspirations for gender and sexuality from the perspective of the Cuban Revolution and the debates it generated contributes to histories of the Left, focusing on its relation with the global sexual revolution. This issue argues that personal politics, identity politics, and the politics of gender and sexuality also formed part of revolutionary and leftist projects in the 1960s and beyond, albeit as an arena of conflict. Third, the essays in this issue offer fine-grained sociocultural and political histories that embrace a global scale. This more transnational and interconnected approach to the history of the Left in the Cold War offers new insights, particularly concerning the areas of gender and sexuality.

The issue takes up the challenge of reassessing the history of the Cuban Revolution’s outward impact with the conviction that we can learn from this history only by considering its full complexity. The authors included here represent a new generation of scholars who make strenuous attempts to transcend the polarized approaches that often characterized studies of Cuba in the past. This enables

them to explore new directions, providing more nuanced analyses. Thus this new wave of scholarship forms part of the first truly post–Cold War historiography on the Cuban Revolution and its global impact. Finally, hoping to contribute to ongoing conversations that extend beyond the US academy, this issue includes scholarly visions from the Global South, including Cuba, in an attempt to decentralize as well as globalize histories of the Cuban Revolution.

The first group of essays, “Internationalism and Solidarity,” captures the full range and complexity of Cuba’s transnational engagements, decentering standard approaches to Cuban international relations that focus on the United States or the Soviet Union. The essays here offer some of the first social and cultural histories of Cuba’s engagement with the Global South or subaltern actors of the north—from military interventions in Angola to civilian internationalism in Nicaragua to public support for the black freedom struggle in the United States—and the ways that gender inflected each of these experiments. These essays demonstrate unequivocally that women took active part in internationalist work; that internationalist campaigns had ramifications for family formation; and that gender, race, and family figured prominently in the symbolism of internationalist campaigns.

Sarah J. Seidman’s “Angela Davis in Cuba as Symbol and Subject” provides an in-depth exploration of the encounters between the Cuban Revolution and Angela Davis in the late 1960s and early 1970s. For Davis, the Cuban Revolution provided a powerful example of a socialist state attempting to eradicate long-standing racial and gender inequalities. For Cuba, Davis’s status as an African American woman, an anti-imperialist activist, a victim of US governmental repression, and a card-carrying member of the US Communist Party all made her a fitting subject for an intense campaign of support. Seidman shows how Cuba’s state propaganda contributed to Davis’s growing status as a global icon, challenging US government depictions of her as a dangerous subversive, and how Davis, as a woman, enjoyed certain platforms within Cuba not afforded to the many black radical men who also visited the island. While the encounter between black radicals and the Cuban state has often been told as a story of mutual disillusionment, by focusing on Davis, Seidman shows how the African American freedom struggle and the Cuban Revolution occasionally reinforced one another on a transnational stage.

Lorraine Bayard de Volo’s article, “Tactical *Negrificación* and White Femininity: Race, Gender, and Internationalism in Cuba’s Angolan Mission,” takes an intersectional approach to Cuba’s internationalist efforts in Angola in the late 1970s and 1980s, interrogating the racial and gender politics of the campaign’s public justification. She finds that the Cuban state selectively employed certain discursive tropes, moving beyond a long-standing “raceless” nationalism to emphasize Cuba’s historic African ancestry and its character as a “Latin-African” nation. Yet women—while highlighted in contemporaneous domestic defense campaigns—figured little in

the state's discourse on Angola. And when women did figure, they often were depicted as light-skinned. Thus the Angolan campaign involved strategic "blackening" and whitened femininity.

The final article in this section, Emily Snyder's "Internationalizing the Revolutionary Family: Love and Politics in Cuba and Nicaragua, 1979–1990," provides one of the first social histories of Cuba's attempts to support the Nicaraguan Revolution of 1979–90. Snyder explores the way Cuban state discourse promoted ideals of a self-sacrificing internationalist who could transcend ties of love and family obligations. She contrasts this with the messy realities of internationalist practice, which often resulted in divorces, "mixed" Cuban-Nicaraguan marriages, or Cuban children left with grandparents. Snyder argues that these transnational family formations show how Cubans and Nicaraguans created alternative understandings of solidarity and internationalism on the ground.

The section "New Men, New Women" interrogates the way Cuba's idealized constructions of revolutionary subjectivity, gender relations, and sexuality were interpreted transnationally on both the Left and the Right. As these essays show, local actors forged their own creative interpretations of what the Cuban Revolution meant, from the anticommunist movement in Chile to the margins of the Mexican Left. Cuba's example and influence allowed some New Left activists to imagine simultaneously ending capitalism, colonialism, gender inequality, and heteronormativity. It also fueled the mobilization of anticommunist actors, who saw in Cuba an apocalyptic vision of the destruction of the family and femininity. Thus the Cuban Revolution became an essential factor in the formation of political subjectivities in the 1960s and 1970s, especially in the Western Hemisphere.

Robert Franco's article "Transgressing Che: Irina Layevska Echeverría Gaitán, Disability Politics, and Transgendering the New Man in Mexico, 1964–2001" takes a biographical approach, exploring how one Mexican transgender and disability rights activist pushed Che's concept of the "New Man" far beyond its original conceptualization. Echeverría Gaitán viewed the New Man as an aspirational but gender-neutral identity that could encompass and give meaning to sexual minorities and those with disabilities. In contradistinction to recent scholarship on Cuba, which emphasizes the more restrictive and disciplinary aspects of the New Man, Franco's exploration of the concept in a transnational frame stresses its plasticity and sustained potential for human liberation.

Chelsea Schields's "Insurgent Intimacies: Sex, Socialism, and Black Power in the Dutch Atlantic" de-centers the Global North in our understanding of the history of sexual liberation. She shows that in the late 1960s and early 1970s radical youth in the Dutch Antilles drew on contemporary movements, including the Cuban Revolution and the black freedom struggle in the United States, to simultaneously demand sexual revolution, racial equality, and decolonization. In a surprising

counterpoint to the revolutionary masculinity embraced by New Left militants elsewhere, Shields contends that Antilleans pioneered an intersectional interpretation of sexual revolution.

This section concludes with Marcelo Casals's essay, "Chilean! Is This How You Want to See Your Daughter?" The Cuban Revolution and Representations of Gender and Family during Chile's 1964 Anti-Communist 'Campaign of Terror.'" Casals offers an important intervention by examining the interplay between Left and Right in the 1960s, and the important role that Cuban women's perceived politicization and militarization played in the elaboration of the anticommunist imaginary in Chile and beyond.

The sections "Cultural Diplomacy and Mass Media" and Curated Spaces examine film, music, and the media as important spaces in which meanings were attributed to the Cuban Revolution. As the essays here show, Cuban leaders, cultural figures, and cultural institutions consciously operated on a transnational stage, informing global audiences about the transformations to gender and sexuality purportedly taking place within Cuba during the Cold War and beyond. Against the still-common tendency in scholarship and popular discourse to assume that Cuba's greatest influence on the Global New Left were the turn to arms and dissemination of "foco" theory, the works in this section suggest Cuba's more complex legacy in contributing to the sensibility and subjectivity of the New Left.

The "Cultural Diplomacy and Mass Media" section begins with Ximena Espeche's essay, "Between Emotion and Calculation: Press Coverage of Operation Truth (1959)," on the mass media and the Cuban Revolution. The author focuses on Operation Truth, an early intervention in the international media carried out by the revolutionary leadership in the context of the trials and executions of members of the prerevolutionary security forces. Espeche offers a new perspective on this campaign, reconstructing the positions of both Latin American and US journalists. She explores subtle differences between them, including the way they constructed ideas of gender and ethnicity in relation to emotion and reason. The essay decenters the US media in our understanding of the symbolic battles that began as early as January 1959 and illuminates the complex interplay between the revolutionary leadership's projections and journalists' responses.

Aviva Chomsky's essay, "Rewriting Gender in the New Revolutionary Song: Cuba's Nueva Trova and Beyond," explores the way Cuban Nueva Trova composers challenged gender conventions in their lyrics and their visions of love, sexuality, and gender relations. Cuban singer-songwriters Silvio Rodríguez and Pablo Milanés were perhaps Cuba's most important global ambassadors, especially in Latin America, at a time when military dictatorships tortured, disappeared, and killed thousands, and when the Nicaraguan Revolution opened a new wave of optimism for the Global Left. Chomsky argues that Cuban Nueva Trova represented a renovation of politics and sensibilities in this period, and opens a window onto the subjectivities of new generations of youth in the 1980s and 1990s.

Paula Halperin's article, "Between Politics and Desire: *Fresa y Chocolate*, Homosexuality, and Democratization in 1990s Brazil," analyzes the reception of the famous Cuban film *Fresa y Chocolate* (*Strawberry and Chocolate*) in Brazil. The film received wide recognition for heralding a more accepting stance toward homosexuals, who had been routinely persecuted in revolutionary Cuba. Yet, as Halperin shows, Brazilian critics largely avoided the issue of sexuality, instead using the film as a prism through which to debate Brazil's own legacies of authoritarianism and its transition to a neoliberal economy.

In the Curated Spaces section, Lani Hanna traces the origin and circulation of a repertoire of visual images for the Global New Left as it imagined national liberation and internationalist solidarity. She focuses on the posters produced in the aftermath of the Tricontinental Conference in 1966, a high-water mark for Cuban solidarity with the decolonizing world and the nonaligned movement. Moving beyond masculinist or exclusively military imaginings, Hanna highlights women as central actors in this visual panorama, and family roots and generational linkages as central concepts in global struggles for socialism and self-determination.

The Interviews section presents different individual visions of Cuba interlaced with questions of gender, sexuality, and women's history, and how these interacted with the transnational circulation of people and ideas. The first two interviews recover two distinct accounts of a shared experience. Elizabeth Quay Hutchison interviews Margaret Randall (one of the most emblematic US intellectuals of the 1960s), who lived in Cuba from 1969 to 1980, while Isabella Cosse interviews Randall's son, Gregory Randall, who moved to Cuba with his family as a child. Margaret Randall reflects, from her own experiences, on the Cuban Revolution's policies toward women and the evolving role of feminism in her analysis. Gregory Randall shows the way these transitions impacted his own life experience and those of other youths. He offers detailed memories about daily life and the visions of his mother, his fathers (he recognizes that he had more than one), and his generation. These are the insightful reflections of an individual who found himself among the "children of the revolution," in the most direct and metaphorical senses of the term. Michelle Chase interviews two young Cuban scholars, Ailynn Torres Santana and Diosnara Ortega González, about their forthcoming book of oral histories with Cuban women, *Mujeres en Revolución*. They reflect on the significance of women's history, feminism, and oral history within Cuba's intellectual traditions. The interview also serves to illustrate the various ways in which feminism has challenged and renovated historiographical production within Cuba.

The issue closes with Jennifer L. Lambe's essay, "Historicizing Sexuality in the Cuban Revolution: The Spectral 'Before.'" Lambe provides a lucid rumination on the way scholarly understandings of sexuality in revolutionary Cuba are shaped by assumptions about Cuba's historical periodization. She suggests that scholars question the extent to which 1959 was a historical watershed, remaining attentive to continuities as well as breaks, and that they employ a *longue durée* analysis to

more fully understand questions of sexuality and sexual practice in Cuban history. This long historical perspective provides a fitting closure to the issue by probing the various ways in which we make sense of Cuba's present through its past.

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Notes

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1. An influential study of Cuba's impact on the Latin American Left was Castañeda, *Utopia Unarmed*. Recent notable publications include Brands, *Latin America's Cold War*; Brown, *Cuba's Revolution World*; Gleijeses, *Conflicting Missions and Visions of Freedom*; Harmer, *Allende's Chile and the Inter-American Cold War*; Keller, *Mexico's Cold War*; and Marchesi, *Latin America's Radical Left*. There is also a significant body of scholarship on Cuba's impact within global intellectual and cultural circles during the Cold War, including Franco, *The Decline and Fall of the Lettered City*; Gilman, *Entre la pluma y el fusil*; Markarian, *Uruguay, 1968*; Rojas, *Fighting Over Fidel*; and Iber, *Neither Peace nor Freedom*. The Cuban Revolution is considered a watershed in Latin American history, particularly for the emergence of the New Left, and it would be impossible to cite all of the relevant literature here.
2. See especially Guerra, "Gender Policing"; Hamilton, *Sexual Revolutions*; Hynson, "'Count, Capture, and Reeducate,'" and *Laboring for the State*; Serra, *The "New Man" in Cuba*; and Sierra Madero, "El trabajo os hará hombres." Pioneering studies of the history of homosexuality in modern Cuba include Bejel, *Gay Cuban Nation* and Lumsden, *Machos, Maricones, and Gays*.
3. Partial exceptions include Gosse, *Where the Boys Are*; Gronbeck-Tedesco, *Cuba, The United States, and Cultures of the Transnational Left*; and Gorsuch, "'Cuba, My Love.'" Many studies focus on revolutionary subjectivity, the "New Man," and the figure of Che. See, for example, Mallon, *"Barbudos, Warriors, and Rotos"*; Tinsman, *Partners in Conflict*; Oberti, *Las revolucionarias*; and Carnovale, *Los combatientes*. On women's internationalist institutions and the relationships between the Global South and the socialist world, see Ghodsee, *Second World, Second Sex*.
4. The numerous publications on Bay of Pigs and the Missile Crisis, for example, often foreground either the United States or the Soviet Union as historical actors. For a criticism of this paradigm, see Leffey and Weldes, "Decolonizing the Cuban Missile Crisis."

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