
*Reviewed by Michael E. Latham, Grinnell College*

As John Gronbeck-Tedesco argues in his new book, revolutionary ambitions in Cuba caught the imagination of North American radicals from the 1930s through the 1960s, bridging the Popular Front of the Old Left to the New Left’s quest for radical authenticity. Yet transnational engagement and genuine solidarity across the Caribbean proved elusive, as imperial assumptions and practices often remained well entrenched, and nascent coalitions fractured along lines of race, gender, and class. The result is a fascinating and well-written book in which “disillusionment makes up a central motif” (p. 275). The hopeful revolutionaries, both in Cuba and the United States, wind up sadder and wiser. The political and cultural historians who reflect on this insightful analysis, however, will find themselves engaged and enlightened.

Gronbeck-Tedesco’s exploration of the period spanning the Cuban political upheaval of the early 1930s through the revolutionary transformation of the 1960s is one of the book’s greatest strengths. In contrast to many interpretations of Cold War history that begin with the emergence of U.S.-Soviet conflict after 1945, this wider lens produces two distinct benefits. First, it places the broader history of U.S.-Cuban cultural and political engagement in an explicitly imperial context, allowing for a much more effective discussion of the anticolonial history of the Cuban left and the way that North Americans engaged with it. Second, the book’s reach from the era of New Deal liberalism and Old Left critiques through the period of Cold War visions of modernization and New Left dissent allows the author to draw striking parallels and comparisons.

Gronbeck-Tedesco interprets a compelling range of sources to make his case. Although he discusses the diplomacy of Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s Good Neighbor policy and the U.S. intervention that ultimately helped shore up the dictatorship led by Carlos Mendieta and Fulgencio Batista, the book devotes the greatest attention to the way North American writers and activists of the 1930s sought to document labor exploitation, racism, and political oppression under the harsh Cuban regime. For writers like Clifford Odets, Carleton Beals, and John Dos Passos, along with the photographer Walker Evans, exposing the brutality of a Cuban government backed by U.S. military and financial interests was part of a global, popular front struggle. In an intriguing discussion of the poet Langston Hughes and his experience in Cuba, Gronbeck-Tedesco also reveals the extent to which North American radicals envisioned...
the struggle there as part of a broader anti-fascist movement with parallels to the Spanish Civil War, Italy’s invasion of Ethiopia, and Japanese aggression in Manchuria. Yet they also viewed Cuba through a paternalistic lens, dwelled on the exotic, and betrayed imperial assumptions of their own. As Gronbeck-Tedesco writes, they frequently portrayed a “primitive population in need of liberation not only from US domination but also from its own backwardness” (p. 77).

A rupture of another kind then unfolded in the 1960s. Radical intellectuals from C. Wright Mills to Paul Baran, Leo Huberman, and Paul Sweezy were enthralled with Fidel Castro’s revolution, anticipating that new labor policies, healthcare advances, and popular education would eradicate inequality and provide a compelling socialist model. Searching for revolutionary authenticity and an alternative to a sterile, confining U.S. society, Beat poets, musicians, and painters flocked to the island along with the 1,500-plus members of the Venceremos Brigades, aligned with the far-left Students for a Democratic Society. African American activists, including Amiri Baraka, Stokely Carmichael, and Angela Davis, also imagined that Cuba’s revolution presented a powerful anti-racist, anti-capitalist vision. Yet once again genuine solidarity proved elusive. Even though Cuba’s government insisted that racism had been abolished, Afro-Cuban contributions to the revolution were eclipsed by the veneration of leaders such as Castro and Che Guevara. As university attendance, professional jobs, and tourist spaces remained largely white, figures such as Harold Cruse and Robert F. Williams came to criticize a revolution that declared legal integration while outlawing black societies and clubs. The Cuban government’s “revolutionary maternalism” also made feminist alliances problematic. Some North American visitors rejected government claims that the provision of vastly improved social services made feminism irrelevant, but Cubans came to perceive Yankee feminists as intrusive and culturally ignorant.

Gronbeck-Tedesco frequently invokes Cuban perspectives, and his juxtaposition of the poetry of Nicolás Guillén with that of Hughes is especially effective. At other times, however, the Cuban side of the story does not receive enough depth. Cubans, Gronbeck-Tedesco argues, framed an exceptionalism of their own in opposition to the United States, claiming a “new national identity that posed a decisive challenge to US supervision of the Americas” (p. 9). By the 1960s, the concept of the “Tricontinental,” a global vision of solidarity linking Asia, Africa, and Latin America, with Cuba at the forefront, he argues, was also an integral part of the revolutionary claim. Yet, surprisingly, Gronbeck-Tedesco does not devote nearly as much room to a close examination of the Cubans’ political arguments and their implications as he does to North American interpretations of the island and its people, culture, and government. In a book that provides such an incisive cultural and political analysis of the challenges of transnational solidarity, this seems a missed opportunity. The book’s fifth chapter, which leaps from a 1968 play by Terrence McNally to the rap and hip-hop music of Wyclef Jean in the 1990s, also seems largely unconnected to the rest of the argument.

On the whole, however, historians interested in transnational activism and the political and cultural history of the Left will find this an enlightening and compelling book. Gronbeck-Tedesco’s sensitivity to the anti-imperial roots of the Cuban revolution
enables him to produce an exceptionally thoughtful analysis of the way North Americans so often failed to recognize their own neocolonial assumptions. His discussion of the shortcomings of that revolution, and the biases that U.S. visitors brought with them, moreover, demonstrates the barriers that prevented a deeper kind of solidarity.


Reviewed by Felipe P. Loureiro, University of São Paulo, Brazil

In April 1963 the Cuban leader Fidel Castro bluntly asked James Donovan, the U.S. representative of the Cuban Families Committee for the Prisoners of War (CFC), responsible for negotiating the release of prisoners of the U.S.-backed Bay of Pigs invasion on the south coast of Cuba, “if any relations were to commence between the U.S. and Cuba, how it would come about?” An expert Cold War negotiator, Donovan replied by questioning whether Castro knew how porcupines make love. Castro said he did not know, and Donovan explained, “well, the answer is ‘very carefully’, and that’s how you and the U.S. would have to get into this” (pp. 66, 67).

Probably neither Donovan nor Castro imagined back in 1963 that caution would not be sufficient to bring about normalization in relations between the United States and Cuba. Fifty-five years would pass before diplomatic relations were restored and the trade embargo imposed by President Dwight D. Eisenhower in 1960 was partly lifted. The extent to which the measures taken by the Obama administration toward Cuba starting in December 2014 will stand the scrutiny of the U.S. Congress and the intentions of the next U.S. president remains to be seen. But William LeoGrande and Peter Kornbluh make clear, in their exceptional Back Channel to Cuba, that the path to normalization of U.S.-Cuban relations is not necessarily irreversible.

Drawing on ten years of research, LeoGrande and Kornbluh marshal an extraordinary amount of primary sources, most of them confidential materials obtained from U.S. archives and first made public through their work. The authors also carried out dozens of interviews with Cuban and, particularly, U.S. officials responsible for back-channel initiatives between Havana and Washington from the early days of the Cuban revolution to the present. If Lars Schoultz’s That Infernal Little Cuban Republic shows that U.S. administrations since Eisenhower attempted to topple Castro, or at least to destabilize the Cuban regime, LeoGrande and Kornbluh present multiple and convincing evidence that Washington has repeatedly attempted, to different degrees, to negotiate with Havana on pressing themes and issues of common interest, such as migration, drug trafficking, maritime boundaries, and anti-hijacking schemes. Washington also reached out to Havana to discuss broader topics, including the release of political prisoners and a path for normalization of bilateral relations.