

# Book Review: Leadership in the Cuban Revolution: The Unseen Story by Antoni Kapcia

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Antoni Kapcia's *Leadership in the Cuban Revolution: The Unseen Story* is a book that provides a new perspective on the Cuban Revolution. It offers insightful views that challenge classic analyses of the Cuban leadership, writes Francesco di Bernardo. It is an essential reading for academics, students and experts on Cuba.

**Leadership in the Cuban Revolution: The Unseen Story by Antoni Kapcia. Zed Books. 2014.**

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In 2008, Raúl Castro officially assumed office as President of Cuba. Some commentators interpreted this historic moment as the beginning of a post-Castro phase of Cuban history. However, Antoni Kapcia's new book, *Leadership in the Cuban Revolution*, successfully demystifies "Fidel-centric" approaches, and provides evidence of participatory processes behind the formation of the Cuban establishment. The book offers a very detailed account of the transformations of the Cuban leadership through more than half a century of history, and lays the foundation for a re-evaluation of the role of figures of the Cuban revolution marginalised in conventional historical analyses.

Kapcia is Professor of Latin American History at the University of Nottingham. He is a leading expert on Cuba in Britain, director of the [Centre for Research on Cuba](#) and has published numerous works on the subject, among these: *Cuba: Island of Dreams* (Berg, 2000) and *Cuba in Revolution: A History since the Fifties* (Reaktion, 2008). He is also co-author with Par Kumaraswami of a volume published in 2012 on Cuban literary culture since 1959.

Kapcia affirms that 'Fidel was always aware of the need for an organisation beyond the leadership' and of its importance for the revolutionary process (p. 3). The author, in fact, affirms that despite the single party rule 'close examination reveals several instances where debate has been open, public and encouraged [...] and real differences of opinion have been evident' (p.18). The idea of "debate", claims Kapcia, has been always central to the 'Revolution trajectory' (p. 19). Debate is fostered by participatory decision processes developed through mass mobilisation and through the party structures (pp 19-20), and also by fostering the idea of participation to the construction of the concept of *patria* (motherland), linked to a sense of 'history of struggle' for emancipation of the Cuban population from colonialism and imperialism (p. 21).

After questioning the validity of Fidel-centric assumptions in the introduction, the author identifies the different phases of the Cuban leadership before, during, and after the revolution and provides their periodization. The book successfully sets the basis for an understanding of the complex and changing nature of the Cuban leadership. It provides a detailed and clear account of the transformations the Cuban leadership has undergone over more than five decades, successfully demystifying representations of it as a monolith. The different phases of the Cuban leadership are discussed in four dedicated chapters preceded by an analysis of the role of the "core" leadership of the revolution, the triumvirate Fidel, Che Guevara, Raúl. The chapter provides along with an account of the ideological formation of these leaders, a description of their role before and during the revolution and its early years.

Kapcia analyses in Chapter II the formation of a vanguard of revolutionaries who, after the failed Moncada attack, start the anti-Batista insurgency and the revolution with the *Granma* expedition. In this chapter, Kapcia explains that the prominence given to Fidel, Che Guevara and Raúl among the revolutionary ranks was due to the prestige associated with leading the guerrilla on the *Sierra*. However, Kapcia again demystifies the idea that the revolution gravitated exclusively around those three leaders, affirming that prestige was, since the first moments of the

revolution, shared with at least a fourth protagonist, Camilo Cienfuegos (p. 53).

Chapter III provides an account of the effort to consolidate the unity among the different components of the revolution and particularly between the 26 July Movement and the PSP (Partido Socialista Popular – People’s Socialist Party) and of the divisions within the movement, also triggered by internal and external pressure such as the expatriation of an entire professional class, and of course the embargo imposed by USA as early as 1960 (pp 62-86). In Chapter III the author analyses the formation of an “inner circle” of leaders, associated with the early revolutionary experiences of the movement and crucially with the guerrilla on the *Sierra*, and its relation with the *Llano* (militants in the urban areas) and the PSP. The author also sheds a light on the importance of three women of the “inner circle”, somewhat undervalued in conventional historic analyses, for both connecting the *Sierra* and the *Llano* but also for their influence on the processes of implementation of reforms: Celia Sánchez, Vilma Espín, and Haydée Santamaría.

The following chapters go through a fascinating narration and analysis of five decades of changes in the Cuban leadership in accordance with specific ideological waves and historical contingencies. For example the “new radicalism” of the years between 1963 and 1975, started with the “Great Debate” following the economic crisis of 1962-63. The debate originated from intellectuals’ public engagement and coincided with the emergence of the New Left in Europe (p. 118). Chapter five focuses on the period 1975-86 defined by stronger ties with the USSR (p. 132). However, Kapcia points out the differences between Cuban orthodoxy and Soviet system, and suggests Cuba’s relations with the USSR were rooted in external pressures such as the embargo imposed by the US Administration (p. 133). The chapter focuses therefore on the changes to the circle of power as a consequence of the tightening of the relations with Soviet Union (p. 145-52).

Chapter VI, on the other hand, describes the process of “rectification”, ‘a return to some of the ideas and models of the 1960s, especially resurrecting the ideas and principles of Che Guevara’ (p. 154). This process led to another change in the “inner circle” of the leadership, restoring those who had been more marginal in the pro-Soviet years. The chapter also addresses the years of the severe economic crisis (1989-94) and the effort to renovate the leadership through grass roots-based localism and *comunitario* movement that made a great contribution to save the system (p. 161), and subsequently through “The Battle of Ideas”, formally declared to have begun in 2000, which created ‘new spaces for debate in magazines, academic and research centres and so on’ (p. 161). These efforts were mirrored by further changes in the leadership.

Antoni Kapcia’s *Leadership in the Cuban Revolution: The Unseen Story* is a book that provides a new perspective on the Cuban Revolution. It offers insightful views that challenge classic analyses of the Cuban leadership. It is a fundamental reading for academics, students and experts on Cuba but also for a general audience who would like to understand more about the process of nation-building and about the fundamental role of several figures in this process, often hidden in conventional historical accounts in favour of a narration centred on Fidel, Che Guevara and Raúl.

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