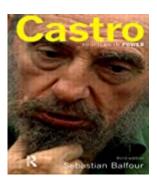
## H-Net Reviews in the Humanities & Social Sciences

**Sebastian Balfour.** *Castro: Profiles in Power.* Third Edition. Harlow: Pearson Longman, 2009. Illustrations. 211 pp. \$39.80 (paper), ISBN 978-1-4058-7318-5.



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## **Evolution of the Cuban Revolution**

The greatest strength of Castro: Profiles in Power, now in its third edition, is the authorâs careful study of the evolution of the revolution from a policy perspective and Fidel Castroâs crucial role in those developments. In this latest installment, Sebastian Balfour resumes his careful review of the winding pathways of revolutionary policy decisions up through the formal handoff of power from Fidel Castro to his brother Raúl Castro in February 2008. The title might lead some to think that this is a work of biography, which it is not. There are biographical elements but many of the key relationships in his life are touched on just lightly. It is, rather, a study in the use and misuse of power. The new edition includes a chapter on Castroas final years as unquestioned leader of the Cuban Revolution (chapter 10, âAutumn of the Revolutionary Patriarchâ); an epilogue on Castroâs legacy; twelve glossy photos; and a short, but useful bibliographical essay on the works about Castro, including compilations of his speeches, in English and Spanish.

What Balfour does not do, however, is to update, in any significant way, earlier chapters to include new

scholarship. A comparative review of the footnotes from the second and third editions indicates that they are nearly the same for the first eight chapters. In fact, the first eight chapters of the two editions are almost identical. A second shortcoming is the absence of RaÃol Castro from much of this study, except for occasional mentions when describing key events. The epilogue analyzing the legacy of Fidel Castro would have been enhanced greatly by an analysis of the relationship between the two brothers, their differences of policy and temperament, and the extent to which his brotherâs past actions may restrain RaÃol Castro.

Notwithstanding these critiques, the strengths of this work greatly outnumber the weaknesses. Balfourâs book is an excellent and concise synthesis most suited to university students or those seeking a primer on the political strategies employed by Castro to survive more than fifty years in the face of unrelenting opposition by the United States and the Cuban exile community. In analyzing the struggle between Havana and Washington, he is careful to try and steer a steady course through the

murky political waters that frequently turn scholarship into polemics. This approach allows readers to see the complexity of the conflict and develop their own interpretation without having to sift through pages of vitriol.

Balfour notes that Cubans on the island and those in exile frequently view each other as the âother.â In a related point, he notes in his bibliographical essay that the Spanish-language scholarship produced by each side fails to engage the other, therefore, resulting in the creation of either âhagiographies or demonologiesâ (p. 202). This struggle between the two Cuban communities has been utilized by both Havana and Washington to further their internal and international policy agendas.

Efforts by the United States to destroy the revolution fostered a siege mentality within Cuba that led Castro and other leaders to centralize power in the hands of the few, Balfour notes. âPolitical centralisation and state control in Cuba, therefore, were above all a response to a deep sense of national insecurityâ (p. 191). And Balfour does not end there. He notes that regardless of bad intentions by Washington, Castroâs instincts were not to share power with the masses, but rather to concentrate it in his hands: âHis interventionism was at times intended to reorient economic and political policies. At other times it could be interpreted as a means of generating tension and competition to prevent the development of any power base independent of his authorityâ (p. 192). Balfour argues throughout the work that in addition to Castroâs desire for power and control he distrusted the concept of democracy and repeatedly argued for the need of a revolutionary elite to instruct and mold the masses.

This centralized model of governance, guided by Castro, led Cuba to exert disproportionately far-reaching influence on the international scene, particularly in the 1970s, while internally creating an educational and health system that was the equal of many industrialized nations. However, the revolution failed to achieve economic independence and continues to rely on foreign subsidies to stabilize the economy. This reliance ultimately poses a threat to Cuban sovereignty and is the reason that even after fifty hard fought years the achievements of the revolution and its very survival are at risk. In the 1970s and 1980s, it was the Soviet Union subsidizing the Cuban revolutionary experiment, while today it is Hugo Chavezâs Venezuela. Balfourâs overview of current trading partners and the way the Cuban government uses its highly educated populace to trade for economic benefits with those nations requiring trained medical personnel is a particular strength of chapter 10. And as

Balfour notes, despite intense hostility, the United States remains Cubaâs seventh largest trading partner because of a âcovert relaxation of the embargoâ in 2000 with regard to the sale of certain foodstuffs to Cuba (p. 171). Balfour argues that Cubaâs economic viability would be greatly enhanced by the complete lifting of the U.S. embargo. His observation is particularly timely given the fact that in January 2011 President Barack Obama lifted some U.S. travel restrictions to Cuba and allowed an increase in cash remittances to Cubans not affiliated with the Communist Party.

The author touches on all the major debates regarding Castroâs long career. He deals skillfully with the issue of Castroâs conversion to communism, noting that Cuban socialism was always part of a ânationalist project,â which was influenced more by Jose Martà and Cuban revolutionary traditions than by Karl Marx. Balfour describes the influence of Martà on Castro from his days at the University of Havana to the present. He takes the position that at the time of the Moncada attack on July 26, 1953, Castro was not a Marxist concealing his true intentions, but rather a devotee of MartÃ. He argues that by the time of the revolutionas triumph on January 1, 1959, Castro was convinced that a confrontation with Washington was inevitable and that socialism was the way to achieve the nationalist aim of economic independence and political sovereignty for Cuba. However, the conflict with the United States accelerated the revolutionâs swing to the Left and forced it to rely more heavily than desired on the Soviet Union for protection. The author goes on to delineate the policy differences with Moscow that would eventually drive them apart in the mid-1960s, then back together again in the early 1970s, and divide them again in the mid-1980s.

With regard to the prerevolutionary period, while Balfour does a solid job of describing Castroâs years as a student activist/gangster at the University of Havana in the late 1940s, he makes a couple of errors about details in the 1930s, which should be corrected if this work sees a fourth edition. He incorrectly notes that the dictator Gerardo Machado fled to the United States in August 1933, when in fact he departed for the Bahamas. He also writes that Fulgencio Batistaâs foe, Antonio Guiteras Holmes, was âcornered in a house in Havana with a few supporters and shot dead after a long gun battle,â when he actually died trying to flee Cuba from an abandoned fort known as âEl Morrilloâ in the city of Matanzas on May 8, 1935 (p. 15).

Assessing a career as complicated as that of Castroâs

is a monumental endeavor and one that will continue for many generations. Balfourâs contribution serves the important and useful task of introducing the subject in a concise and readable manner. It opens the door to greater exploration by asking fundamental questions and interpreting the course of the revolution and the motivations of its principal architect.

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