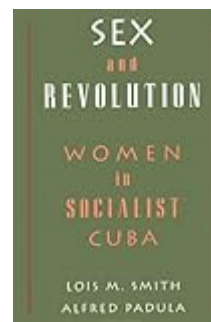




Lois M. Smith, Alfred Padula. *Sex and Revolution: Women in Socialist Cuba.* New York: Oxford University Press, 1996. ix + 247 pp. \$32.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-19-509491-6; \$22.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-509490-9.



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Women <cite>In</cite> Cuban History

As the authors note, *Sex and Revolution: Women in Socialist Cuba* was conceived in 1983 when the Women's Studies Committee at the University of Southern Maine asked Alfred Padula [1] "... to give a brief presentation on Cuban women" (p. vii). He and co-author Lois Smith [2] soon discovered that, "... there was no comprehensive history of women in revolutionary Cuba..." As the authors state, they attempted to remedy the void by "naively" deciding to write one (p. vii). Indeed, the void consisted of not only an unknown history of one-half of the Cuban population, but also of a history of Cuba largely devoid of an analysis of gender and its impact on Cuban development.

During the 1980s and into the 1990s, however, the research and literature on women in Cuba has expanded significantly. Moreover, the historiographical fields on which this book touches, Cuban history in general, the Cuban revolution, and the vastly expanding body of work on women, has ballooned since 1983 when this book was conceived. *Sex and Revolution: Women in Socialist Cuba*, therefore, is an important part of the surge in interest and scholarship on Cuba and the Cuban revolution. It

is also an important part of the surge in the fields of gender, sexuality, and social relationships that promises to reconceptualize and enrich our understanding of the past and present. More specifically, this well-written and thoughtful study of women in Cuba enriches the dynamic and growing scholarship on the contours and meaning of the Cuban past by examining "... the way three decades of social revolution transformed the lives of women in Cuba" (p. 3). It also contributes a great deal to the growing scholarship on women through the "... examination of one nation's effort to conceptualize, prioritize, and implement sexual equality," and provides an "...assessment of the successes, failures, and dilemmas of that process" (p. 3).

It is fascinating to place this book within the context of the sheer numerical surge in scholarship on Cuba, the Cuban revolution, and women. A simple statistical analysis of the dissertations indexed by UMI's Dissertation Abstracts dramatically illustrates the explosion of interest in these fields in recent years. [3] Dissertation Abstracts currently contains a total of 1,444,415 records. Of those, Dissertation Abstracts currently indexes 664

records which contained the keyword "Cuba." Of the 664 total, 475 were completed between 1983 and 1995, or 72 percent. The keyword "women" yielded 37,145 records. Of those, 28,855 were completed between 1983 and 1995, or 78 percent. The keywords "women and Cuba" yielded 37 entries alone. Of those, an astounding 33 were completed between 1983 and 1995, or 89 percent. Even more significantly, 19 of those 37, or 51 percent, were completed between 1990 and 1995. Finally, the keywords "Cuba and revolution" yielded a total of 101 records, of which 84, or 83 percent, were completed from 1983 to 1995. Undoubtedly, these are topics that are enjoying a tremendous surge in scholarship and reevaluation.

This project, therefore, emerged in the midst of the massive parallel expansion of the scholarship on the history of women and the revived examination of the Cuban revolution, its sources, meaning, and future. Consequently, *Sex and Revolution: Women in Socialist Cuba* is part of a much larger trend that is placing women at the center of the analysis of a society in an attempt to enrich or at least to question and reevaluate our understanding of a dynamic, engendered past. But the trend is also an explicit melding of history and activism: "For social historian Padula the basic question was: How did three decades of socialist revolution change the lives of Cuban women? Social scientist and activist Smith asked: What lessons did the Cuban experience offer regarding the revolutionary model and sexual equality?" (p. vii).

The result is the authors' analysis of what women were doing, not being allowed to do, and trying to do, during the course of Cuban history. It argues for the centrality of women and their changing roles in Cuban society as a central element in explaining the Cuban revolution, its sources and goals, achievements and failures. But it is precisely that approach which, according to some of the debates, simply turns a history of the role of women in a society into an exercise of inclusion and not a reconceptualization of the complete history itself—that is, a standard history of the revolution with women inserted in various points, what some could justifiably call a "wallpaper theory" of history: a piece is missing, so let's fill it in." However, there are occasions where that missing piece is also an important key to the entire pattern, and this book certainly fits in that category. But this book also goes well beyond "filling in" that missing piece of history and argues, implicitly and explicitly, that a balanced reevaluation of the Cuban revolution's successes and failures at this critical juncture must include an understanding of women's changing roles in Cuban society. Likewise, the book argues that an evaluation of

the changing roles of women in Cuba must include an analysis of the revolution's impact. As the authors point out, both "...approached the question of women and the Cuban revolution as feminists interested in exploring the complex interplay between culture, on the one hand, and economic, political, and social institutions, on the other, in the determination and manifestation of gender roles and values in society" (p. vii).

Sex and Revolution: Women in Socialist Cuba is a thoughtful, careful, well-written, concise, and very balanced work. Its sources range from periodicals such as *Granma*, *Bohemia*, *Mujeres*, and *Muchacha* to interviews, biographies, autobiographies, secondary works, and information from the Federacion de Mujeres Cubanas (FMC). As its authors note, however, the study of women in Cuba is problematic for a number of reasons: sources are scant; it is a politically sensitive topic in Cuba; Cuban statistics are contradictory and vague; and the enduring hostility between the United States and Cuba makes research extremely difficult and surrounded by suspicion (pp. vii-viii). In addition, the lack of resources in Cuba after the withdrawal of Soviet support also makes research extremely difficult because of scarce electricity, running water, photocopying, and other facilities.

In terms of organization, the book is well written, concise, and easy to read.[4] It consists of an introduction which provides a summary of each chapter, fourteen succinct chapters which tend to be topical, and a brief conclusion which evaluates the success, failures, and future of the Cuban revolution and the changing role of Cuban women. Each chapter has clear objectives and the remainder of the text flows logically. Because of its clarity, brevity, and lively text, it would be a welcome addition to any undergraduate course on Cuba or modern Latin America.

The internal logic of the book can be divided into three parts: the role of women before 1959, women in the revolution and power through the Federation of Cuban Women (FMC), and women attempting to participate in and influence the revolutionary agenda. In chapter one the authors define historical trends in the role of women in Cuba, which were both challenged and carried forward by the revolution. In essence, the chapter forms a baseline for comparison on the changing role of women before 1959 and argues that women were increasingly participants in the making of modern Cuba, from the nineteenth century to the 1959 revolution. The authors also argue that the situation of Cuban women before the revolution is much more complex than critics and supporters

of the revolution contend. It argues that between the extremes, “the ladies of the country club set” and “Yina the prostitute,” there was “... a substantial middle class which included a growing number of professional women: businesswomen, lawyers, doctors, journalists, teachers, and university professors, poets, and musicians. There were women who fought for and achieved feminist legislation; there were women holding political office and women arrested for their political views” (p. 8). The book argues that it was a complex, mixed situation that defies a stereotype because the varied roles of women depended on their demographic qualities: race, economic class, locale of birth, and religion.

Chapters two through seven form the second part of the internal logic of *Sex and Revolution*: women in the revolution through the Federation of Cuban Women (FMC). In chapters two and three, the authors argue that without women, “... Castro would never have succeeded” (p. 22), and that because of the important but often ignored role women played during the revolution, they were able to influence the revolutionary agenda after Castro’s victory. The authors argue that after the armed phase of the revolution ended, “Women were expected to be loyal implementers or grateful recipients of the male-determined revolutionary program. Women’s concerns were viewed as peripheral” (p. 23), but that “The significance of women’s participation in the Cuban insurrection was not lost on its male leaders. In 1960 Castro created the Federation of Cuban Women (FMC) to harness the political enthusiasm, talents, and energy of Cuban women for the revolution” (p. 32). Consequently, the FMC was created as the umbrella organization that represented all women and their interests in an attempt to institutionalize women as a force within the male-directed revolution, not as a separate or competing power. This idea is central to the rest of the book, which argues that although women achieved much in the revolution, their achievements were always instituted and directed by the patriarchal power structure, which yielded just enough to keep women in line with the revolution.

Chapters three through seven, therefore, examine the FMC and argues that the organization’s activities were essential elements used by the revolutionary government to destroy the old social order and establish a new revolutionary society. Women’s issues as promoted and defended by the FMC were promoted by the male-directed revolutionary leadership in order to break the old system and replace it with a new one in which women played a more prominent role in the economy and society. But the use of the FMC as a political tool had more to do with

achieving the male revolutionary agenda than with making real progress in women’s issues. That is, the FMC’s agenda and activities were a tool incorporated and institutionalized as part of the revolution which weakened its position as a forceful advocate for women. However, in the process the FMC was able to use and manipulate its influence, and indeed have an impact, in achieving important advances in economic opportunities dependent on expanded health and education systems. As the authors state, the FMC’s activities closely paralleled the revolution: in the 1960s the FMC’s activities were frenetic and innovative; in the 1970s, as the revolution stabilized, the FMC’s activities became routine, bureaucratic, and contained “... a certain measure of boredom” (p. 56); by the 1980s, “The FMC was becoming moribund and irrelevant because it had neither the freedom to find its own voice and explore varied interests and policies nor sufficient power to pursue them” (p. 56).

Chapters eight through fourteen form the third part of the book’s logic: women participating in and influencing the revolutionary agenda. The authors explain how the institutionalization of women’s issues led to women’s changing roles in the Cuban economy and in social relations. These chapters form perhaps the most interesting and detailed part of the book. They detail the barriers women faced in the society and economy and the FMC’s and the revolution’s attempts to remedy them. The authors closely examine education, employment, sexual discrimination, day care and other family services, the role of women in the family, women’s reproductive policies, and changing sexuality. They trace how pre-revolutionary ideals and forms were transferred to post-revolutionary Cuba, were eliminated, or were transformed in order to improve the condition of women in society.

However, the authors conclude that what had started as a peripheral interest and ideal at the beginning of the revolution remained unchanged during the course of the revolution and was largely discarded after the withdrawal of Soviet support in 1989. They argue that “To a large degree women in Cuba were lucky in that women’s advancement was of interest to the patriarch” (p. 183), but when other interests perceived more important arose, women’s issues assumed a highly peripheral status. In essence, the revolution was never about improving women’s lives. As a result, “The Federation of Cuban Women expressed an increasingly vocal frustration with formal and informal bias against women until the hour of crisis provoked by the collapse of the Soviet Union, when ranks closed, loyalty to the chief was re-

asserted, and the only powerful advocative tool available to the FMC, its magazines *Mujeres* and *Muchacha*, ceased publication in the paper drought of the early 1990s. In the end the serious systemic flaws of Cuba's male-dominated state impeded efforts to understand better the circumstance of women workers, and they rendered unlikely the possibility of resources being allocated to better address their needs" (p. 143). While the revolutionary agenda accomplished much, the goals and methods of the male-directed agenda were always modest and usually an attempt at modifications in both attitudes and support services for women from contraception to day care to education. That is, women could work outside the home as long as they kept making dinner, cleaning the house, and taking care of the children. While "... the revolution's banner was 'equality,' the revolution clearly used women as a reserve labor force.... By not giving organizations such as the union or any of the other employment-related bureaucracies institutional independence and clear powers, these groups nestled into disinterest and unresponsiveness" (p. 143). Changes in society to improve women's roles were instituted and enforced only to the extent that they alleviated the major problems and provided a glimmer of hope for change in the future.

As the authors argue, though efforts were made to integrate women into the heart of the economy and society, the efforts were often inadequate, half-hearted, or serving ulterior purposes. Women's issues were only a peripheral element of the revolution which sought to advance its male-dominated agenda. Patriarchy survived well into the revolution and constitutes an essential contour of the revolution. Women's roles in society changed and improved, but only insofar as they helped to keep women in line with the male-dominated revolutionary agenda.

Sex and Revolution: Women in Socialist Cuba provides not only a clear, concise, and easy to read history of women in Cuba, but also an extremely balanced and forceful critique of the Cuban revolution's efforts to improve the life of women in Cuba. It argues that women were active participants in the making of modern Cuba, but that at the same time they were often marginalized and their interests included only as peripheral elements of the revolution. In addition, *Sex and Revolution* argues that women's organizations and agendas, as promoted and defended by the FMC, were often institutionalized as a way of keeping them under control and under check when the patriarchal system was challenged. Although women in Socialist Cuba have achieved much, the achievements have always been what

the male-dominated power structure would allow. They argue that neither capitalism nor socialism determine, improve, or worsen women's roles in society; the problem lies within the traditional patriarchal society which remains largely unchanged, in Cuba as elsewhere, regardless of the form of economic organization. As the authors conclude, "Ironically, the ultimate test of the achievements of the Cuban revolution for women will be women's ability to maneuver and progress in a post-socialist Cuba" (p. 187). *Sex and Revolution: Women in Socialist Cuba* is a testament to balanced and forceful criticism and an important contribution to the reevaluation of the history of Cuba, women in Cuba, and the history of women.

Notes

[1] Alfred L. Padula is associate professor and chair of the History Department at the University of Southern Maine. He has been a student of Cuba since his dissertation at the University of New Mexico. Some of his past work includes: "Gender, Sexuality, and Revolution in Cuba," in *Latin American Research Review* 31 no. 2 (1996), 226-35; "Cuban Socialism: Thirty Years of Controversy," in *Conflict and Change in Cuba*, ed. Enrique A. Baloyra and James A. Morris (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1993); "The Revolutionary Transformation of Cuban Education, 1959-1987," in *Making the Future: Politics and Educational Reform in the United States, England, the Soviet Union, China and Cuba*, ed. Edgar B. Gumbert (Atlanta: Center for Cross-Cultural Education, 1988); "Twenty Questions on Sex and Gender in Revolutionary Cuba," with Lois Smith, in *Cuban Studies* 18 (1988), 149-58, "Women in Socialist Cuba, 1959-1984," in *Cuba: Twenty-five Years of Revolution, 1959-1984*, ed. Sandor Halebsky and John M. Kirk (New York: Praeger, 1985); and "The Fall of the Bourgeoisie: Cuba, 1959-1961" (Ph.D. diss., University of New Mexico, 1974).

[2] Lois M. Smith is National Science Foundation Fellow at the Department of Sociology at the University of Texas, Austin. Some of her past work includes: "Sexuality and Socialism in Cuba," in *Cuba in Transition: Crisis and Transformation*, ed. Sandor Halebsky and John M. Kirk with Carollee Bengelsdorf (Boulder: Westview Press, 1992); "Progress, Science and Myth: The Health Education of Cuban Women," in *Cuban Studies* 19 (1989), 167-96; and "Twenty Questions on Sex and Gender in Revolutionary Cuba," with Alfred Padula, in *Cuban Studies* 18 (1988), 149-58.

[3] University Microfilms International's (UMI) Dissertation Abstracts indexes all dissertations completed

in the United States since 1861. It was updated most recently on July 31, 1996. Since it represents some of the most recent research and interests of both faculty and graduate students it represents a good indicator of present and future patterns in scholarship.

[4]. Table of Contents: Introduction, 1. Women in Prerevolutionary Cuba, 2. The Struggle Against the Dictator, 1952-1958, 3. Making Social Revolution: The Federation of Cuban Women, 4. The Federation of Cuban Women: Activism and Power, 5. Women and the Health Revolution, 6. Reproductive Health, 7. Women and the

Revolution in Education, 8. The Campaign for Women's Employment, 1959-1980, 9. Progress and Problems in Women's Employment, 1980-1992, 10. Sexual Discrimination in the Workplace, 11. Day Care and Other Services, 12. Family and Revolution, 13. Family Dynamics, 14. Sexuality and Revolution, Conclusion, Notes, Bibliography, Index.

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