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Making Revolutionary Cuba, 1946-1959

Objectives and Relevance of Research: I am applying for an NEH fellowship in order to complete the full draft of a book currently under contract and due to Yale University Press by September 2015. Focusing on the radicalization of Cuban politics from the end of WWII through the US-backed dictatorship of Fulgencio Batista in the 1950s, Making Revolutionary Cuba is based on four years of research and oral histories gathered in Cuba, Puerto Rico and the US. Addressing critical gaps in our knowledge of the political conditions and experiences which gave rise to the Cuban Revolution of 1959, my research overturns standard narratives that reduce the story of Batista’s downfall to creative guerrilla strategies and the magical charisma of one man, Fidel Castro. Weaving archival accounts with intimate personal stories, this book gives voice to the very human experiences behind the dramatic events that made Cuba revolutionary and inspired most Cubans to support radical change. By allowing Cuba’s history to speak for itself through previously ignored, censored and unknown sources, this study will enable Cubans and Americans to redefine their vision of the past, present and the future for themselves.

Until now, only a handful of books have explored this period and even fewer have attempted to explain the populist policies that underpinned Fulgencio Batista’s dictatorial style of rule: none are based on Cuban archival sources and most are purely descriptive, rather than interpretive in nature. The "best" books exploring key aspects of Batista’s rule were either written by Batista himself or are based on interviews with Batista’s family. Moreover, whether published in Cuba or abroad, standard narratives of this period have three elements in common. First, these studies ignore the complex strategies by which Batista legitimated his rule, strategies that ironically included active engagement of the Cuban Communist Party [Partido Socialista Popular, PSP]—a move normally associated with Fidel Castro and the revolutionary regime after the fall of Batista. Second, these works take the supremacy of Fidel Castro’s leadership and the role of his tiny guerrilla force in defeating Batista for granted. And third, most authors leave largely unexplained the support of the middle class for the socially radical program adopted by Fidel Castro’s 26th of July Movement long before 1959.

In challenging such assumptions and silences, Making Revolutionary Cuba promises to be a ground-breaking book. Unlike other approaches, my research locates the origins of a radical program for national regeneration in the anti-imperialist, pro-equalitarian economic policies championed by the messianic figure Senator Eddy Chibás, a muckraking politician-turned-radio-talk-show-host from 1946 until the time of his death in 1951. Broadcasting to a country with one of the highest per capita rates of radio ownership in the world at the time, Chibás electrified the Cuban public’s outrage over corruption, producing unprecedented mass mobilizations in his name and impressive policy shifts. As my analysis shows, publicity stunts and effective manipulation of the mass media by Chibás’ Orthodox Party [Ortodoxos] played a central role in galvanizing cross-class support for a radical platform that jeopardized US business interests and put citizen welfare first. Additionally, through internal PSP documents, I find Ortodoxos forged convenient, often undisclosed alliances with Cuba’s Communists for particular ends, even as Chibás regularly denounced them as anathema to his long-term, strictly nationalist goals. While the meteoric rise of the Ortodoxos clearly prompted Batista’s military coup of 1952, I propose that Chibás’ tactics also had a more significant effect: both Batista and leading opponents like Fidel Castro would mimic Chibás in style, presenting themselves as national messiahs and adopting Chibás’ use of spectacle to legitimate their moral authority and claim political control.

On the one hand, Batista recognized that image and image-making lay at the heart of public perceptions of the state. Thus, in addition to censorship of the independent media, Batista hired publicity agents and dramatically orchestrated mass political rallies that ironically foreshadowed similar events under Fidel Castro after 1959. On the other hand, lessons learned from the Chibás phenomenon also led Batista to cultivate ties to the PSP even as he justified bloody repression of
dissent and sought military aid from the US on the charge that all opposition to his rule was "Communist".

Although Batista attempted to gloss all of his opponents as “Communists”, the people he most feared were Cuba’s growing, influential middle class. Comprising roughly 35% of the population, the most dynamic elements of this sector; including doctors, lawyers, educators and students, had flocked to the Orthodox movement at the close of WWII when a flourishing print and radio press identified corruption as the primary impediment to Cuba’s economic development and continued democratization. In fact, the middle- and upper-class ranks of the Orthodox Party went on to produce the most extreme wing of anti-Batista fighters, including all of the men and women with whom Fidel Castro assaulted the Moncada Barracks on July 26, 1953, an event that launched the ultimately victorious 26th of July Movement.

As Making Revolutionary Cuba will show, unarmed civic activists and the underground urban movement that backed Fidel Castro’s organization of an armed guerrilla undermined the stability of the state through a campaign of protest based on impressive acts of civil disobedience, the publication of a diverse clandestine press (including radio broadcasts and political cartoons) as well as precisely targeted bombs meant to shatter the illusion of normalcy in affluent areas without causing unnecessary civilian loss of life. While few of these acts were massive in scale, their nature and impact proved impossible for the international media and local (if censored) press to ignore. Thousands of unarmed former Ortodoxos, most of whom were killed by Batista’s forces, catalyzed public outrage against Batista through small, mostly forgotten acts of daily sabotage against US-owned properties and organized consumer boycotts of shops, restaurants and movie theatres as national signs of mourning for Batista’s atrocities. These same activists promoted Fidel Castro and his guerrillas as morally driven, legendary leaders of a revolutionary struggle while protecting them from direct, violent confrontations with Batista’s military forces until the last three months of the war. Although this strategy helped defeat Batista by uniting Cubans behind a single, heroic narrative and image, it also helped Fidel Castro monopolize credit for the triumph and effectively steal the show. Lost in the shadow of the larger-than-life figure Fidel became after 1959 were the many stories of personal courage, survival in the aftermath of torture by Batista’s forces and inversions of gender roles that were intrinsic to the moral and tactical defeat of Batista. Thousands of urban activists on the front lines against Batista, from Havana to Cuba’s smallest towns, eroded the legitimacy and the political will of Batista’s military and police. While now a political taboo, it was Ernesto "Che" Guevara who first noted that, by comparison to the urban underground, "one could count the number of guerrillas who died fighting in the mountains on one hand."

Undoubtedly, one of my work’s most surprising and illustrative revelations lies in the pragmatic relationship it plots between Batista and the PSP, despite Batista’s constant declarations to the contrary. Specifically, I demonstrate how and why Cuban Communists justified—in both 1954 and 1958—the election of Batista for president on its own ticket. Thus, I find that while Batista denounced Fidel and all other opponents as "Communists" in order to discredit them, Fidel and other critics charged Batista with courting and defending the PSP behind the back of the US, in part because of the utility of the PSP’s intelligence apparatus to Batista’s forces. Ironically, Cuban Communists saw Fidel Castro, his armed guerrilla and the 26th of July Movement as enemies to the cause of Soviet-style revolution that the PSP hoped to lead. Thus, Fidel’s ultimate embrace of the Communists after 1959 was arguably as much an echo of Batista’s own strategies of rule as a betrayal of the many hundreds of anti-Batista activists who gave their lives for Fidel’s cause.

Whether in Cuban histories published in the US or in Cuban political discourse today, evidence that the PSP served as complicit or active allies of the dictator represents as much of a taboo as recalling Che Guevara’s honest assessment of the secondary role played by his and Fidel’s own forces in toppling Batista militarily. In this sense, Making Revolutionary Cuba will reveal how deliberate and perhaps necessary the erasure of complex memories and events became to those who would seek an easier, more coherent and more comforting explanation for one of the greatest
historical and political ruptures of the Twentieth Century, the Cuban Revolution of 1959. Undermining this easy story by humanizing Cuba’s path of radicalization and by seeking a deeper historical truth are the goals of this book.

**Methods, Work Plan & Dissemination:** All research for this book has been completed; only the writing of a full draft and submission to Yale University Press remain. During the fellowship year, I will devote six weeks to writing each of five chapters; one month to completing the introduction and conclusion; and remaining time to revisions. The first chapter, “The Orthodox Party and Eddy Chibás’ Messianic Nationalism, 1946-1951” explores the discursive nature and political success of Chibás’s moral crusade against state corruption at the height of Cuba’s democratic age. Chapter Two, “Batista, the Communists and the War on University Youth, 1951-1955” analyzes Batista’s paradoxical tolerance for open Communist organizing in the first years after his coup as well as the brutal repression of elite youth who launched highly public unarmed protests with the goal of "awakening" Cubans’ revolutionary consciousness. Chapter Three, “The Rise and Rivalry of the 26th of July Movement and the Student Directorate, 1955-1958,” tells the history of Fidel’s urban underground and the popular student-led movement through the personal accounts of its survivors, including the family of José Antonio Echeverría, a bold, Catholic architecture student who plotted a nearly successful commando raid on Batista at the Presidential Palace in March 1957. Analyzing the pivotal role of media through the activities of Andrew St. George, a free-lance journalist who spent an unprecedented eight months with Fidel’s forces in the Sierra Maestra Mountains, Chapter Four (“Hidden Heroes, Public Spectacles and How Fidel Stole the Show”) reconstructs the dissemination of Fidel Castro’s image as a modern-day, anti-Communist Robin Hood: while Fidel’s forces rarely saw battle, they bided their time acting out the role of an already consolidated, authoritarian state among peasants in Cuba’s far eastern mountains. A final chapter, “Reconciling Unreconcilable Revolutions: Memories of the Struggle against Batista from 1959 until Today” recounts victorious guerrilla leaders’ immediate and consistent campaign to control interpretations of the war and memories of the past, first through cooptation and then by means of museums, commemorations and deliberate surveillance of public discourse.

*Making Revolutionary Cuba* is based on an array of sources gathered from Cuba’s National Archive, the Biblioteca Nacional José Martí, the Library of Congress, the private papers of PSP militant Antonio Nuñez Jiménez in Havana; previously unexplored sources on the anti-Batista struggles held by Yale University Manuscripts and Archives; reports on daily acts of civic protest in UF’s Braga Brothers Collection; and more than a dozen personal interviews as well as materials from private archives. Because most of these archival and newspaper sources are highly inaccessible to researchers, I will contribute thousands of digitized documents as a separate subcollection devoted to this research within the [Digital Library of the Caribbean](http://www.caribdlib.org), a collaborative international digital library program which received more than two million views in the first quarter of 2013. This project’s goal is to open up Cuba’s highly policed history as well as my own interpretations of it to inspection and debate across political divides.

*Making Revolutionary Cuba* will be my fourth book, coming on the heels of a twelve-chapter study of the Cuban Revolution published in October 2012, *Visions of Power in Cuba: Revolution, Redemption and Resistance, 1959-1971*. Because I wrote most of *Visions of Power* over the course of a year in which I taught full-time, I am confident having a whole year free of teaching will ensure the completion of this manuscript with ease. According to island colleagues, *Visions of Power* is a boon rather than a brake on my engagement of the Cuban academy: it has emerged at a time when historians’ contributions to public debates about civil society and the political system have never been sharper. This book also takes traditional narratives to task by connecting elided, human memories to archival sources whose veracity is difficult to deny. If *Making Revolutionary Cuba* can excavate how a populist military dictatorship and resistance to it functioned on a day-to-day basis, then its findings may prove more relevant to today’s Cuba than ever.
Making Revolutionary Cuba: Select Bibliography

Archives
Archivo Nacional de Cuba, Havana, Cuba
• Fondo Personal de Eduardo Chibás
• Fondo Personal de Carlos Márquez-Sterling

Fundación Antonio Nuñez Jiménez, Havana, Cuba
• Fondo Personal de Antonio Nuñez Jiménez

Yale University Manuscripts and Archives, New Haven, Connecticut
• Andrew St. George Papers
• Cuban Revolution Collection

University of Florida, Gainesville, Florida
• Braga Brothers Collection
• Ernesto Chávez Collection
• Al Burt Collection
• Pierce Collection
• Neill & Nancy Macaulay Collection (interviews by Lillian Guerra)
• Manolo Ray & Aurora Chacón de Ray Collection (interviews by Lillian Guerra)

Cuban Heritage Collection, University of Miami, Miami, Florida
• Carlos Hevia Collection
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• José Miró Cardona Collection
• Roberto Agramonte Collection

General Records of the Department of State, US Embassy in Havana
• Correspondence, 1946-1959, Record Group 59, microfilm

Oral history interviews already conducted and transcribed:
San Juan, Puerto Rico
Carlos Franqui
Emilio Guede
Ismael Suárez de la Paz
Vicente Baez

Miami, Florida
Lucy Echeverría Bianchi
José Puente Blanco
Fernando Beltrán

Cuba
Angel Graña (Havana)
Berta Martínez Paez (Artemisa)
Pilar Amores Rosado (Cienfuegos)
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## Published primary sources


## Secondary sources


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Education
Ph.D. 2000 University of Wisconsin-Madison
M.A. 1994 University of Wisconsin-Madison
B.A. 1992 Dartmouth College, Summa cum Laude, Phi Beta Kappa

Academic Positions
2010-present Associate Professor of Cuban & Caribbean History, Department of History, University of Florida (promotion expected fall 2013)
2004-2010 Assistant Professor of Caribbean & Latin American History, Department of History, Yale University
2000-2004 Assistant Professor of Latin American History, Department of History Bates College, Lewiston, Maine

Select Publications


Chapter in US Department of the Interior and Organization of American Historians Latino Theme Study: "Late 20th Century Immigration and US Foreign Policy: Forging Latino Identity in the Minefields of Political Memory," publication in hard copy by OAH and published on-line 2013 through the website of the National Parks Service:
http://www.nps.gov/latino/latinothemestudy/newlatinos.htm


Archival guide: *Cuban Revolution Collection, Manuscripts & Archives, Yale University Library; 254-page on-line guide* consists of single-spaced interpretive descriptions and identifications of 5,000 photographs and 57 raw documentary films taken in Cuba by Andrew St. George and David Stone between 1958 and 1969. Project funded by the Seaver Institute.


Awards
- Faculty Enhancement Opportunity Fellowship, University of Florida, College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, Summer 2012.
- The Sidonie Miskimin Clauss Prize for Teaching Excellence in the Humanities, awarded by the Yale College Faculty, Yale University, 2009.
- Seaver Institute Grant awarded for authoring of a guide to the Cuban Revolution Collection, Manuscripts & Archives, Yale University Library (2005-2007)
- Woodrow Wilson Foundation-Andrew W. Mellon Career Enhancement Fellowship (2004-05), rescinded as a condition of my decision to move to Yale.