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Return to Campus. (Mark Alfred/Daily Nexus)

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Revolution in Cuba and Guatemala: What did the Latin American Revolutionary Movements from the 1950s to the 1970s seek to Achieve, and How?

Santiago Rodriguez

Introduction

Revolutionary movements were a distinctive feature of twentieth-century Latin America, which surged as anti-dictatorial, nationalistic, and popular initiatives that took shape under the broader geopolitical context of the Cold War. Between the 50s and 70s, these movements appeared in response to complex sociopolitical conditions characterized by state repression, economic and social hardship, corruption, and foreign meddling in internal affairs. Through different means and varying degrees of success, revolutionary movements in Latin America sought to challenge the established order and offer a popular alternative to their respective nations' social, political, and economic reality. Despite having significant differences, most revolutionary movements shared the common desire to solve or address the many grievances felt by the popular masses and marginalized groups. In doing so, they put themselves in direct opposition to existing power structures. Such were the cases of Cuba and Guatemala, two revolutionary initiatives with similar demands (in their early stages) but dramatically different outcomes. Both the Cuban and Guatemalan revolutions surged as counter-establishment movements responding to periods of dictatorship and, in their early stages, pushed for relatively moderate claims related to social justice and welfare. The revolutionaries of Cuba and Guatemala sought to offer an alternative nation project which challenged the one carried out by the domestic ruling class and the foreign interests directly intertwined with it.

It is important to highlight that the Cuban and Guatemalan experiences are a suitable comparison, given both countries' shared history of dictatorial rule and relatively similar material conditions in the pre- and post-dictatorial stages (i.e., type of economic activity, relationship to U.S. regional interests, etc.). Moreover, both historical examples are worthy of comparison because of the divergent trajectories each revolutionary experiment achieved, despite their similar origins. After the end of Jorge Ubico's rule, Guatemala experienced a series of democratically-elected governments, culminating with the election of Jacobo Arbenz, who attempted to build peace between radical and moderate political elements within the institutional frameworks that existed during the dictatorship era. On the other hand, after successfully ousting Batista, the revolutionary government in Cuba quickly transitioned beyond a reformist approach, putting forth an alternative nation project outside the country's existing institutional and political framework. In Cuba, the collaboration between radical and moderate elements in the post-dictatorship period was short-lived. Revolutionary leadership quickly decided to prioritize the delivery of radical promises above the appeasement of moderate political sectors.

Whereas the Cuban revolution succeeded in breaking with the former establishment and moving towards a genuinely radical and transformative agenda, the Guatemalan experiment was stopped dead in its tracks via a U.S.-sponsored coup. In this sense, Cuba and Guatemala present two alternatives to achieve structural change; one would be internal reformism, as was the case of

Guatemala, and the other would be a radical break with the established order, as was the case of Cuba. Whereas the Arbenz government attempted to channel revolutionary and popular demands through existing power structures and institutions, the Cuban revolutionaries implemented a popular government utterly distinct from the former establishment. Said difference would prove key to each revolution's capacity to deliver on its promises of social change.

A common history

Both Cuba and Guatemala have a shared history of repressive dictatorial rule that inspired their revolutionary periods. Corruption, continual policing, and brutal repression of political dissent were the daily order under Ubico's Guatemala. To secure his thirteen-year rule, Ubico relied on "a far-flung network of spies, regular use of torture, arbitrary imprisonment, and public executions,"¹ which normalized violence in the country. Furthermore, the government used the legislative system to enforce laws "designed to secure cheap, often unpaid labor for plantation and public works,"² demonstrating how Ubico's regime institutionalized exploitative labor conditions, directly benefiting the domestic economic elite. Fulgencio Batista's Cuba was no different in this regard. After the 1952 coup where Carlos Prío Socarrás was deposed, Batista, who had already served as president between 1940 and 1944, returned to power undemocratically. Batista silenced political parties, such as the *Partido Socialista Popular*, which was banned and targeted by state forces after 1953. He also co-opted labor organizations, particularly the *Central de Trabajadores de Cuba*,³ neutralizing the labor movement's role as a potential critic of the regime. Multiple massacres took place under Batista's rule, and it is estimated that around 20,000 people were murdered in the years leading up to his overthrow.⁴

Cuba and Guatemala also shared plenty in terms of their economic activity, which was primarily defined by the export of commodities such as sugar, bananas, and coffee. The nature and implications of these production models created wealthy and influential actors who would profoundly influence both nations' political and social reality while simultaneously accentuating social unrest and discontent against the system in the cities and countryside. The use and ownership of land would be a decisive issue for both revolutionary movements. It was, in fact, the core element of Arbenz's decree 900 and a vital part of the so-called 'revolutionary laws' embraced by Cuban revolutionaries. The plantation-based economic model was vital in the theater of revolution. Inside the haciendas and plantations, most of the rural discontent with the established order was brewing.

Additionally, foreign interests, namely those of the U.S., are another common point between both countries. The backing of dictatorial figures, the protection of property and economic activity linked to the U.S., and the active response against the perceived threat of communism characterized Washington D.C.'s stance on Cuba and Guatemala. U.S. businesses, most notably the United Fruit Company (UFCO), were an integral part of both countries' existing economic and political

¹ Greg Grandin, "An Uncorrupted Life" in Greg Grandin (eds.) *The Last Colonial Massacre: Latin America in the Cold War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), p.49.

² Grandin, "An Uncorrupted Life," p.49.

³ John Roberts & Jorge Martín, *Permanent Revolution in Latin America* (London: Wellred Books, 2018), p. 39.

⁴ Roberts, *Permanent Revolution*, p.40.

establishment, with over 75,000 people being “indirectly dependent on the company's activities”⁵ in Guatemala alone. In this sense, with their reasonably moderate demands, the revolutionary movements were putting themselves in direct opposition to the local ruling class and, by virtue of the presence of U.S. business, in opposition to U.S. regional interests.

Characterizing the revolutions’ aims

Who were these revolutionaries, and what were their aims? In Cuba, institutional opposition to Batista grew as the regime attempted to secure its hold on power. A young Fidel Castro, member and candidate for Congress of the Orthodox party, saw his electoral aspirations thwarted as Batista’s coup canceled the June elections. Like Castro, many middle and upper-class intellectuals increasingly saw armed struggle as the only viable alternative against Batista. Said bourgeois intellectuals would become the leaders of the *Movimiento 26 de Julio*, hereafter referred to as M26-J. The movement was established after a group of insurgents led by Castro carried out the unsuccessful attack on the Moncada army barracks. Captured and on trial, Castro delivered his renowned speech *History Will Absolve Me*, a powerful text that embodies the M26-J vision for the future of Cuba through the proclamation of five Revolutionary Laws⁶, summarized as follows:

1. Reinstate the 1940 Constitution, with the revolutionary movement heading the legislative, executive, and judicial powers, deriving its legitimacy from popular support.
2. Implement agrarian reform. Granting land ownership to those working parcels of less than 170 acres, compensating owners with the equivalent of 10 years of rent.
3. Industrial workers receiving 30% of company profits.
4. Sugar plantation workers receive 55% of sugar production profits.
5. Confiscation of capital, property, and any gains obtained through fraud during previous administrations to be used to fund social programs.

At this stage, the M26-J lacked mass popular support and had few links among peasants or workers. However, the attack on the barracks and Castro’s subsequent court defense made him and the M26-J movement famous throughout Cuba. The five revolutionary laws were by no means a socialist program. Still, they did outline a clear divide between the illegitimate institutions and authority of the Batista regime and the coming revolutionary power which drew its legitimacy from the Cuban masses. This being said, the popular demands made by the M26-J did not call for a structural transformation of Cuba’s economic system; at this stage, the movement sought to redistribute the massive wealth and power held by the domestic elites rather than openly calling for the abolishment of Cuban capitalism as a whole. In this sense, the M26-J denounced Batista and its political establishment. Still, it fell short of seriously questioning the broader economic and productive institutions that perpetuated exploitation and inequality in Cuba, at least in its early stages.

⁵ Alejandra Batres, “The Experience of the Guatemalan United Fruit Company Workers, 1944-1954: Why Did They Fail?” *Texas Papers on Latin America*, 1995, <http://lanic.utexas.edu/project/etext/llilas/tpla/9501.html>.

⁶ “History Will Absolve Me”, 16 October 1953, online at Fidel Castro Internet Archive, <https://www.marxists.org/history/cuba/archive/castro/1953/10/16.htm>.

Guatemala fell along similar lines. Dissent and resistance against Ubico's systematic repression progressively grew throughout the country. Student activism was central to the urban struggle; from the explicit rejection of government appointees in university faculties to the organization of general strikes,⁷ Ubico found that students, and the Guatemalan people in general, were increasingly opposed to the regime's repression. Facing growing pressures from the student and labor movement, the dictator suspended the constitution in 1944, eventually resigning, but only after appointing a military *junta* (understood as the government of a state by high-ranking military officers) that continued his repressive policies. Amidst sustained protests and strikes calling for the end of the *junta*, a coup organized by opposition groups, political leaders, and members of the armed forces, including would-be president Jacobo Arbenz, toppled the government in what is now remembered as the October revolution. Elections were held, and Juan José Arevalo was elected president, carrying out a moderate program of social reforms. More radical aspirations came with Arbenz's presidency, elected in 1950. Arbenz had broad backing, from the moderate *Partido de Integridad Nacional* to the leftist Revolutionary Action Party and the support of the trade unions. Arbenz's 'radical' character can be partially attributed to his inclusion of notorious Guatemalan communists into the government,⁸ such as José Manuel Fortuny, Victor Manuel Gutierrez, and Silva Jonam, who acted as advisors during his presidential rule. But more relevant was Arbenz's proposed agrarian reform, Decree 900, which called for a significant transformation of the Guatemalan countryside. The aims of the decree are best summed up in its first two articles, as follows:

Article 1°— The Agrarian Reform of the October Revolution intends to eliminate the feudal property structure in the countryside and the relations of production that originate it in order to develop the means of exploitation and capitalist modes of production in agriculture, preparing the path for Guatemala's industrialization.

Article 2°— All forms of servitude and slavery are abolished, and hereby any form of labor as payment for rent, and 'free' personal benefits for laborers, are now prohibited...⁹

The objective of the law cannot be any less radical; Decree 900 was a mechanism to develop Guatemalan capitalism, not the path to a socialist state. Overall, Arbenz's land reform sought to "Develop the peasant capitalist economy [...] Distribute land to landless peasants [...] facilitate new capital investment through the rent of nationalized lands [and] increase agricultural credit for peasants in general."¹⁰ That being said, the mechanisms through which said objectives would be attained (i.e., nationalizations and expropriations) were a direct challenge to the powerful and wealthy landowners of the country, including the UFCO. The rationale behind land reform was also a vindication for rural

⁷ Heather A. Vrana, "The Republic of Students, 1942-1952" in Heather A. Vrana (eds.), *This City Belongs to You: a history of student activism in Guatemala, 1944-1996* (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2017), p.36-39.

⁸ Bureau of Public Affairs; Office of the Historian. "Foreign Relations, Guatemala, 1952-1954." U.S. Department of State Archive. <https://2001-2009.state.gov/r/pa/ho/frus/ike/guat/20171.htm> (accessed December 29, 2019).

⁹ "Ley de Reforma Agraria de Guatemala." *El Trimestre Económico*, vol.19, no.75 (July 1952), pp.540-63.

¹⁰ Douglas W. Trefzger, "Guatemala's 1952 Agrarian Reform Law: A Critical Reassessment", *International Social Science Review*, vol.77, no.1/2 (2002), pp.32-46.

workers and the native population of Guatemala, who had suffered under ‘feudal’ exploitation and whose wellbeing would be achieved, as per Arbenz, through a modern, capitalist Guatemala.

Arbenz’s popular initiative was conceptualized and carried out through the same power structures that served previous governments. In this sense, the means through which Arbenz’s program would be carried out put the government at odds with the local elite and, increasingly, at odds with the United States. However, the proposed agrarian reform law rooted its legitimacy within the existing Guatemalan constitution and institutional framework. Arbenz’s reform took place within existing institutions and power structures means that the popular mass movement represented by the government remained constrained by the boundaries of the Guatemalan state apparatus, meaning that there was no break between the political force representing the masses and the existing Guatemalan establishment. This was not the case in Cuba. The M26-J operated outside the scope of the so-called illegitimate Cuban state and, once in power, created novel institutions outside the scope of the former political system.

Mass support for the revolutionary programs

Because of its popular appeal and emphasis on labor rights, it is understandable that the program outlined by the M26-J and the Arbenz government resonated among the rural and urban working class. The haciendas and plantations acted as a melting pot for labor organization and resistance to the established order, proving key for both revolutions. Sugar cane plantations in Cuba, many of which were U.S.-owned, witnessed mass strikes before the general uprising against Batista. Between 1995 and 1995, “most of Cuba’s 500,000 sugar workers were on strike”,¹¹ showing that the growing anti-Batista sentiment was tied to labor conditions and that the feeling of unrest and dissatisfaction in the countryside was generalized, which would prove vital for the success of the coming guerrilla tactics employed by the M26-J. By 1956, the movement had “successfully established a network of (urban) worker’s cells in areas ranging from banking to railways,”¹² which enabled the realization of coordinated actions against the Batista regime in preparation for the arrival of *The Granma*. This vessel would transport Fidel’s group of guerrilla fighters returning from Mexico.

In Guatemala, labor support was equally fundamental, although its role was different, as the country was not undergoing an all-out rebellion against the government. UFCO unions attempted to strengthen their bargaining positions by collaborating and, in doing so, became relevant supporters of the Arevalo and Arbenz governments. In 1951, the *Comité Coordinadora de la Acción de los Trabajadores Bananeros y Portuarios* was formed after the three main *bananero* unions decided to merge, seeking to “coordinate and lead the fight against UFCO in a stronger manner by uniting ... denouncing UFCO and the tactics it used to weaken the worker movement”.¹³ The 1946 strikes, supported by UFCO unions, were vital in the push for creating a new labor code, their relevance growing to the point that both Arevalo and Arbenz attempted to secure their support by directly involving themselves in the settlement of labor disputes.¹⁴ In this sense, rural and urban worker support for the M26-J and the

¹¹ Roberts, *Permanent Revolution*, p.46.

¹² Roberts, *Permanent Revolution*, pg. 49.

¹³ Batres, “The Experience.”

¹⁴ Batres, “The Experience.”

Arbenz government proved fundamental as each revolution attempted to secure power and implement their respective reforms.

Delivering the promises of the revolution

However, the degree of effectiveness when delivering on their revolutionary promises did vary greatly. Despite being openly pro-workers, the Guatemalan government still had to abide by constitutional and political restraints, failing to fully deliver the assistance and protection it promised to the Guatemalan masses. Under Arevalo, strikes were even outlawed until a new labor code was negotiated. When said document came into force, it proved to limit the worker's ability to organize, with the U.S. government conceding that "this code was really no more liberal than the U.S. code, and that in some ways it even limited workers in their ability to strike."¹⁵ Under Arbenz, the government was pressured to deliver on its land reform. In their struggle to accelerate the land distribution process, the Arbenz government offered "considerable amounts of unregulated power to local agrarian activists [who] drew on their authority as community leaders, politicians or patriarchs,"¹⁶ and in doing so, many took personal advantage of the reform process. Such is the case of 'Pancho' Curley, a descendant of an Irish migrant family who became infamous in the region of Alta Verapaz, given his repeated charges of fraud, patronage, and coercion.¹⁷ Figures like Curley demonstrate how the Arbenz government inadvertently undermined the implementation of its policies in its desperate need for results. Simultaneously, the Guatemalan establishment, embodied by opposition parties and the landed elite, opposed any serious reform, fearing that a radical transformation of the countryside "might trigger economic chaos [and] The awakening of the rural masses - largely Indians - [which] alarmed administration politicians content with the rewards of political life."¹⁸ Overall, the Arbenz government struggled with policy implementation, openly challenging the domestic elite and attempting to avoid a total break with the U.S. while being constrained by legal and constitutional boundaries. Under such pressures, the future of the Guatemalan revolution was uncertain.

Cuba deviates from Guatemala because the aspirations of the M26-J became increasingly radical throughout the struggle against the Batista regime. Those who came to power after capturing Havana were not the same (neither ideologically nor politically) as those who stood by the five revolutionary laws declared by Castro in his trial. Initially led by middle-class intellectuals, the struggle to overthrow the regime grew into a popular movement that unequivocally sided with the popular masses. The M26-J further distanced itself from moderate actors, with the definitive break under the newly established revolutionary government. The new agrarian reform law declared in 1959 sought to "eradicate landed estates and foreign ownership of rustic property; eliminated all forms of non-proprietary ownership; and gave ownership of the land to those who worked it,"¹⁹ and it effectively

¹⁵ Batres, "The Experience."

¹⁶ Grandin, "An Uncorrupted Life", p. 62.

¹⁷ Grandin, "An Uncorrupted Life", p. 62.

¹⁸ Piero Gleijeses, "The Agrarian Reform of Jacobo Arbenz", *Journal of Latin American Studies*, vol.21, no.3 (October 1989), pp. 453-80.

¹⁹ Juan Valdés Paz, "The Cuban Agrarian Revolution: achievements and challenges", *Instituto de Estudos Avançados da Universidade de São Paulo*, vol.25, no.72 (August 2011), pp. 73-86.

pitted the new government and its mass base against the domestic economic elites, including cattle ranchers, plantation owners²⁰, and even moderate politicians within the government. The divide was so significant that four cabinet members, including the Minister of Agriculture, resigned and fled to the U.S. after the law was declared.²¹ In this sense, the post-revolutionary government in Cuba made a fundamentally different decision than the Arbenz government made in Guatemala. The initial government coalition, presided by Dr. Manuel Urrutia, included moderates, conservatives, and even anti-communists. The prime minister at the time, José Miró Cardona, resigned as the contradictions between the revolutionaries and moderates rose, which allowed Fidel Castro to step in. The coalition progressively broke down as more radical policies were implemented, such as the 1959 Agrarian Reform Law.

By deciding not to appease the moderate political sectors, and implementing increasingly radical policies aimed at delivering on the promises made during the fight against Batista, the revolutionary government in Cuba eliminated dissenting voices and consolidated its power. Radical reforms were perceived as the only way to deliver on the promises of the revolution. This rationale antagonized moderate voices while galvanizing mass support for the former guerrilla fighters. Rather than appointing moderate voices in power positions to appease other political sectors, the revolutionary government in Cuba doubled down in its consolidation of power, selecting figures that aligned with the revolutionary rhetoric embraced by the Cuban masses. The situation in Guatemala took shape in the opposite manner. When struggling to deliver on the revolutionary promises, the Arbenz government delegated power to questionable individuals residing in the countryside and chose to appease the moderate elements that actively blocked radical legislation, which greatly limited the extent to which the government could deliver on its transformative policies.

Conclusion

The Cuban and Guatemalan revolutions emerged from a deeply felt desire for social transformation. The overthrow of dictatorial power was an immediate concern that enabled a diverse set of political actors to cooperate towards a common goal. However, as the anti-dictatorial struggle developed, calls for the transformation of social, political, and economic power structures became the fundamental promises of the more radical sectors, a promise built over the collective grievances of the Cuban and Guatemalan masses. These anti-dictatorial initiatives were reasonably moderate in their early stages, but they still embodied a direct challenge to their respective domestic elites, specifically by targeting the issue of land. In this sense, the Arbenz government struggled to deliver on its revolutionary promises. The structures it attempted to work through were not supportive of the profound transformations needed to achieve structural change in the country. Without putting forth a radical program, Arbenz was framed as a Communist, and his government was terminated via a U.S.-sponsored coup, leading to years of conflict and instability in Guatemala.

In Cuba, the M26-J attempted to put forth their progressive demands but rejected the existing power structures and institutions deemed illegitimate by the M26-J movement. By declaring

²⁰ James O'Connor, "Agrarian Reforms in Cuba, 1959-1963", *Science & Society*, vol.32, no.2 (January 1968), pp. 169-217.

²¹ Roberts, *Permanent Revolution*, p. 36.

themselves in opposition to the whole of Cuba's political and economic establishments, the movement only needed to make concessions to its base members, which allowed the revolutionary government, once in power, to push its reforms without worrying about forming a consensus with moderates and the domestic elites. It is important to highlight that the Cuban revolution was not limited to guerrilla warfare, and this was not the sole component that led to its success. Instead, it was the combination of subversive action paired with solid mass support both in the countryside and the cities which created a situation of dual power, where the revolutionaries became the legitimate power on the island. Guatemala never experienced this double power situation. It could not deliver on the monumental (and some would argue, impossible) revolutionary promises without breaking with domestic elites and foreign interests.