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THE ROLE OF THE URBAN WORKING CLASS IN THE CUBAN REVOLUTION - INSURRECTIONAL STAGE

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The issue of the class bases of the Cuban revolutionary movement during the insurrectional stage has been highly controversial. In the early literature on the Cuban Revolution, the "revolutionary class" was considered to be the peasantry,[1] young intellectuals radicalized by their contact with the peasantry,[2] the "enormous and heterogeneous mass of the economically rootless from all classes,"[3] the middle class,[4] or an alliance of peasant and workers, according to the Cuban revolutionaries themselves. Other authors, such as O'Connor[5] and Amaro,[6] have stressed marginality cutting across classes as a variable. Others, still, have labeled the Cuban insurrection a "declase" revolution.[7]

To a large extent, the controversy stems from a lack of conceptual clarity. What is, after all, a "peasant" or a "middle class" revolution? Are we talking about the class origins of the revolutionary elite or vanguard; or of the class roots of support for the revolutionary leadership; or of the class membership of the active participants in the revolutionary struggle; or of the class for whose benefit the revolutionary program is designed or whose ideology informs the revolutionary program? Or a combination of these and other factors?

At any rate, it must be kept in mind that the actual participants in violent politics (with the exception of particular circumstances or strategies, such as a general strike) are relatively few.

From our standpoint, we are concerned with the role of the urban working class in the revolutionary movement. Why is it that, with the exception of the Cubans (who emphasize the peasant-worker alliance in the Revolutionary struggle), the role of the working class is considered as minimal by many scholars in the field? After all, Cuban scholars and leaders may be emphasizing the role of the workers for ideological reasons. But foreign observers and academicians may be underplaying the role of the workers for ideological reasons too.

To be able to place the discussion about the role of the urban working class in a meaningful context, it is necessary to discuss the pre-revolutionary social class structure and particularly the numerical strength, historical development and political ideology

of the Cuban working class. Of course, a full analysis would require a book-length manuscript.

According to the last pre-revolutionary Census, conducted in 1953, Cuba was a highly urbanized nation, with 56.3 percent of the population rated as urban. But Cuba's urbanization dates back to the XIXth Century and actually the percentage of urban dwellers had increased only moderately during the Republic. Table I summarizes the Censal information since 1899.

Table I

Cuban Population - Urban and Rural
1899 - 1953

Censal Year	Total Population	% Urban	% Rural
1899	1,572,797	47.1	52.9
1907	2,048,980	43.9	56.1
1919	2,889,004	44.7	55.3
1931	3,962,344	51.4	48.6
1943	4,778,583	54.6	45.4
1953	5,829,029	57.0	43.0

Source: República de Cuba, Oficina Nacional de los Censos Demográfico y Electoral, Censo de Población, Viviendas y Electoral, 1953, p. 20.

The definitions of "urban" and "rural" were not altogether consistent throughout the different Censi. In 1899, 1907 and 1919, the criterion for "urban" was if the person lived in towns with more than 1000 inhabitants. In 1931 and 1943, "urban" dwellers were those who lived in a house with a street address; while in the 1953 Census, those persons living in nuclei of 150 persons or over, which met certain qualitative criteria such as electricity and medical services, were considered "urban." In spite of these differences, the trend towards a slow growth in urbanization during the Republic seems well established. For 1953, we have data to compare the "new" and the "old" criteria and the differences in "urban" population resulting are minimal: 57.0 percent if the "new" criterion is followed, 56.6 percent according to the "old" criterion.

However, the Cuban urban population cannot be taken as an indicator of the size of the urban working class, particularly if the latter is defined in a strict sense, as the percentage of the population engaged in industrial production, i.e., manufacturing, transforming raw materials.

In Cuba, the labor force before the Revolution, represented a relatively small (less than 35 percent) of the total population, which is usually taken as an index of lack of economic self-sufficiency.[8] In the same study, the percentage of unemployed and underemployed was estimated at 30.2 percent of the total labor force, by 1957.

The level of unemployment oscillated between 8.5 and 21.1 percent (according to the time when the survey was taken, given the seasonal nature of the sugar industry) between 1943 and 1957.[9]

Table II summarizes the information about the distribution of the Cuban labor force in agriculture and industry according to the different Censal years since 1899.

Table II

Cuban Labor Force Employed in Industry and Agriculture 1899 - 1953

Censal Year	% Labor Force in Agriculture	% Labor Force in Industry[1]
1899	48.1	14.9
1907	48.5	16.3
1919	48.7	20.0
1931	52.7	16.4
1943	41.5	20.0
1953	41.5	20.8

[1]"Industry" includes, besides manufacturing, mining, construction and electricity.

Source: Zeitlin, Maurice, Working Class Politics in Cuba: A Study in Political Sociology, Ph.D. Dissertation, University of California, Berkeley, 1964, p. 7.

Thus, until the Revolution, the working class in a strict sense, constituted a minority within the Cuban labor force, oscillating - during the Republic - between 15 and 20 percent of the total labor force.

There was little change in the proportional composition of the Cuban labor force throughout the Republic until 1958. On the eve of the Revolution, we still find the distribution of the labor force roughly 40 percent in the primary section, 40 percent in the tertiary sector and only 20 percent in manufacturing.[10] The slow reduction in the agricultural labor force had not meant an increase in the proportion of industrial workers, but rather an expansion of the already hypertrophied services sector.

Historically, Cuban urban growth was not particularly tied to industrialization. The growth of the cities since colonial times (and this was particularly true of Havana, point of concentration for the Spanish fleet) had been associated with the development of commerce and services to a seafaring, transient population: businessmen, sailors, tourists and other travellers, and to the absentee landlords of the Cuban countryside who preferred a Havana residence.

The Cuban urban labor force was thus characterized by a large tertiary sector. The population of the cities included a large percentage of people who provided services to visitors and to the rest of the citizenry, very frequently through one-man (or woman) operations. This quasi-marginal people would be engaged in a variety of precarious businesses, from street vending to car washing, and truly constituted a lumpen-proletariat which had stopped looking for stable work, although in terms of their actual activities, they could be called a lumpen-petit-bourgeoisie.

Depending on the perspective taken and the set of statistics used, segments of this large urban sector might be counted as "unemployed" members of the working class, as members of the petty bourgeoisie, or as marginals outside the formal labor force and market economy.

To further complicate matters, given the seasonal nature of Cuba's main production item - sugar - the borderline between urban working class and agricultural proletariat is difficult to establish. It was customary for men who worked in the countryside during the harvest to cut and lift sugar cane ("a hacer la zafra") to go back to the cities during the dead season. Then, they either engrossed the ranks of the unemployed, joined the quasi-marginal urban services sector described earlier, or if lucky, obtained another job: most commonly (particularly during the Havana building boom of the fifties) in construction work.

Any traditional class analysis of pre-revolutionary society, given the peculiarities of the Cuban class structure and its tortured historical development, is bound to oversimplify and distort reality.[11]

The Cuban Working Class in Historical Perspective

The Cuban working class emerged, during the second half of the XIXth Century, as a consequence of the development of capitalism in the island -- primarily in the two basic export industries during colonial times: tobacco and sugar. Each of these illustrates a different process in the development of the working class. In the case of tobacco, the modern workers emerged as a result of the transformation of production from artisanal to industrial: the consolidation of chinchales (small one or two men production units) into large manufacturing enterprises; and the proletarization of former artisans who are forced to close their small shops and join the larger enterprises as wage-earners, since they become unable to compete with the large manufacturers. The latter had developed marcas (trade names) which became increasingly important in the process of concentration of exports; they had introduced new machinery (i.e., for the production of cigarettes) which gave them output, cost and standardization advantages; furthermore, the large manufacturers developed the international connections which provided capital and markets to which the small producers had no access. By 1861 already we find 516 tobacco factories in Havana, with a total of 15,128 workers. Of these factories, 158 had 50 or more workers.[12]

In the case of sugar, there is a dual process: the transformation of slave labor into salaried labor and the recruitment of non-slave labor for the more complex operations demanded by the increased mechanization of the sugar industry and the gradual concentration of production in large centrales.

The proletarization of artisans is the historical origin of the modern Cuban urban working class, while the transformation of slave labor into paid work is the basis of the development of the larger sector of the agricultural workers. The balance of the agricultural proletariat developed from the virtual extinction of the rural middle class of small owners as the result of a variety of factors -- primarily, the protracted, guerrilla-like struggle for independence (which in its final stage, even included the invention of the "strategic hamlet concept" by Spanish General Weyler) and the penetration of capital in the countryside.

The urban working class was traditionally at the vanguard of Cuban proletarian agitation. It is the tobacco workers who organized themselves first. For many years, they provided leadership in the struggles of Cuban labor.

At least 86 strikes took place in Cuba from 1879 to 1900,[13] while the island was still under colonial rule, all of them involving urban workers. Roughly one third (27 of them) of these strikes involved tobacco and cigarette workers.

Political and social agitation among the tobacco laborers was initially spurred by Saturnino Martínez, of reformist ideology, who founded La Aurora, the first Cuban working class paper, in 1865. Martínez promoted the very interesting Cuban institution of the tobacco shop reader, believing as he did that the lack of education of the workers was the main barrier to overcome.

Tobacco workers paid out of their own salaries to hire a reader who would sit at the shop and read to them all day while they labored at the boring, repetitive tasks of hand-rolling cigars. Typically the reader would first go through the daily newspapers, and then he would proceed to read from a book or periodical chosen by the workers. Thus, the latter were informed and entertained. They were also radicalized. Important worker-oriented literature was made available to the tobacco shop workers by this institution, which must be considered an important factor in the militancy and vanguard role of this sector of the urban working class in the development of Cuban organized labor.

From reformist leaders, such as Satirnino Martínez, who were primarily interested in ameliorative measures and education for the workers, and who preached class collaboration and conciliation, the leadership of the Cuban working class passed to revolutionary socialists. Already by the time of the first Workers' Congress held in Cuba (1887), the working class movement was under anarchist control. Enrique Roig San Martín (1843-1889) became a prominent leader, editor of the working class paper El Productor, founded in 1887.[14] After him, anarchist leaders, mostly Spanish-born, predominated in the Cuban workers' movement until 1925, when the first Cuban Communist Party was founded.

Communists were to hold the positions of leadership during the crucial period 1925-1935 in which Cuba came close to having a successful radical revolution, finally thwarted by the U.S. and its internal allies.

This long history of radical dominance in the Cuban working class movement, first under the anarchists and then under Marxist-Leninist leadership, has great bearing on subsequent developments. In spite of the deep crisis ushered in by the collapse of the revolutionary movement in 1935 and the many controversial decisions taken by the Communist Party in the following period (including the adoption of quasi-reformist strategies and a united-front approach which led them to a temporary truce with a Batista now turned into

a full-fledged populist leader and to the control of the Cuban labor movement from 1939 to 1947) the ideology of the Cuban working class had been thoroughly rooted in the socialist revolutionary tradition. Furthermore, the iconology of the Cuban labor movement, its best remembered leaders and martyrs, such as sugar worker Jesus Menendez and dock worker Aracelio Iglesias had been Communists. Thus, in spite of the pervasive anti-Communism with which the ruling entente saturated Cuban society from 1947 to 1958, the working class remembered the Communist union leaders as personally honest (no mean achievement in a society where public office of any sort, personal enrichment and corruption were almost synonymous and seriously committed to struggle in favor of the workers.

After the 1933 Revolution which toppled the Machado dictatorship, the fabric of Cuban society remained under serious strain throughout several years. The workers, which had become mobilized against the dictatorship, in an unstable alliance with the students, the Army and some sectors of the petty bourgeoisie, kept pressing for traditional workers' demands (eight hour day, unionization, etc.) but also for a more radical agenda -- as shown by the establishment of "soviets" in various sugar mills.[15]

Out of this deep social crisis, a new political order would emerge, different from the first republic (1902-1933). The second republic (1933-1958) was characterized by government regulation and distribution of economic and social goods within the constraints imposed by U.S. hegemony.[16] The Cuban State had very peculiar characteristics: it was, to a large extent, independent and above the local classes and interest groups. In a sense, it could be seen as an instrument of domination by an extra-national class, the U.S. capitalists. While the incumbents respected the rules of the game, in so far as the hegemonic relationship with the U.S. was concerned, they could exercise considerable autonomy with respect to the local classes, dispensing favors among the various components of the ruling entente, which comprised fragments of various classes.

Thus, the ruling entente could not be readily identified with one class. Every Cuban social class was divided against itself: there were profound, sectoral cleavages within each class which made it very difficult to develop cohesive class consciousness.

Sectoral allegiances and divisions within the Cuban bourgeoisie itself have been carefully documented. It has been argued that this class was structurally weak, due to many historical fractures in its development.[17] Another aspect was that its different components were so deeply divided and intent upon pursuing particularistic sectoral interests which prevented it from developing a cohesive class perspective. The traditional divisions between

hacendados (sugar mill owners) and colonos (sugar cane growers)have been painstakingly documented by Martínez Alier.[18] A study by Alfred Padula, Jr., about the fall of the Cuban bourgeoisie (1959-1961) shows that the historical divisions within this sector were exacerbated by the challenges posed by the Revolution.[19] The Cuban bourgeoisie remained unable to launch a coordinated response and eventually they opted to pack their bags and leave, while they waited for the U.S. to take care of the "Castro problem."

In so far as the working class is concerned, there were profound cleavages. First, between the employed and the unemployed (and those who would not even figure in the unemployment statistics because they had given up looking for work). Then, among the employed, there was a wide chasm between the industrial proletariat and the agricultural workers; within the industrial workers, there were divisions between those who were unionized and those who were not; and even further, between those workers in modern, expanding sectors of the economy and those in older, shrinking sectors of the economy.

Zeitlin[20] has also noted the "distinctions in standard of living and style of life" which existed among the workers, and he has described at least five subgroups of workers:

1. "The workers in modern plants" (dairy, canning, beverages, textile, cement) and "employed in the well-developed rail, port, communications and power facilities."

2. "The mass of urban workers employed in numerous unmechanized industries" (shoemakers, hand-made cigars).

3. "The poorest and most irregularly employed casual workers in Havana and other large cities."

4. "The agricultural laborers in the sugar and tobacco industries" -- seasonally employed according to the harvest cycle.

5. "The industrial workers employed in the sugar mills and refineries" and other installations around the sugar mill complex.

The CTC (Confederación de Trabajadores de Cuba -- Cuban Workers Federation) had become a part of the ruling coalition in 1939, as the result of a complex set of factors which included Batista's desire to secure labor peace (after the turmoil of the first half of the decade); the Communist Party's conviction that conditions were not ripe for a revolutionary strategy and their decision to settle for union control and amelioristic goals (at least

temporarily); the U.S. - U.S.S.R. alliance against the Axis powers and the politics of collaboration associated with it; the united front strategy adopted by the Communist International during this period and the influence of the U.S. Communist Party upon the Cuban Party.

Thus, a sector of the workers (particularly those unionized and in expanding modern industries), benefited from governmental largesse and a share in the spoils of the system. The lucky member of a union in a modern sector (i.e., electrical industry, beer, oil refining, etc.) truly belonged to a "labor aristocracy." He enjoyed the protection of highly advanced labor legislation (embodied in the 1940 Constitution and supplementary legislation) and salaries which compared very favorably with white collar workers' salaries. Powerful unions and pension plans stood behind him.

However, it is easy to overemphasize the organized workers' cooptation into the pre-revolutionary system.[21] In dealing with the Cuban working class, it is necessary to accept that there are several layers of truth, which may superficially seem contradictory. For example, contrary to a "labor aristocracy" type of conception, Zeitlin[22] found that the skilled workers in his sample were more likely to have sympathized with the Communists before the Revolution (or at least more likely to report so). The explanation is probably complex and Zeitlin does not have enough data to decide between alternative hypotheses but it may be related to the fact that although skilled workers were more likely to have benefited from the distributive policies of the populist State under Batista, the Autenticos and then Batista again, it was also the sector more likely to have been exposed to Communist organizers, leadership and political education activities. Furthermore, it was the sector with the longest history of involvement with labor organizations and struggle.

Labor and the Anti-Batista Struggle (1952-1958)

As pointed out at the beginning of this paper, most scholarly writers on pre-revolutionary Cuba have tended to minimize, ignore or deny the role of the urban working class.[23] There are objective bases for such an interpretation but it is our contention here that this "evidence" tells only part of the story. What kind of evidence are we talking about?

1. The failure of the working class to support the general strike called by Prio to prevent Batista's takeover in 1952.[24]

2. The fact that the CTC under Mujal became not only "an appendage of the regime, but also often a weapon of the regime against the workers themselves."[25]

3. Most and above all, the failure of the April 1958 strike called for by the 26th of July Movement.[26]

4. The relatively low representation of workers among the leadership and cadre of the Rebel movement.[27]

5. The high benefits accorded to the labor movement by Batista including compulsory check-off of union dues by employers, and a relatively high level of real wages, particularly for Havana workers, which did not actually deteriorate until very late (Nov-Dec) in 1958.[28]

Concerning the class origins of the anti-Batista forces, Blackburn has concluded that: a) the Rebel Army was the "decisive revolutionary organization" when compared to the urban resistance; b) the Rebel Army at no point exceeded 2000 men and that its small size "makes it almost impossible to read a real significant representativity out of it"; c) the social origins of the rebel leaders were mixed, best described perhaps as revolutionary intellectuals; d) the base of the Rebel Army consisted of peasants, although given its size it cannot be said to "represent" the peasantry; e) the interaction between the revolutionary leadership and the mountain peasantry had considerable impact on both sides; f) the urban resistance was also small in size and basically composed of students and workers; and, g) the rebel leadership was successful in quickly mobilizing the exploited classes of Cuba during the period immediately after 1959.[29]

To Blackburn's interpretations, I would like to add some comments: although it can be agreed that the bulk of the Rebel Army consisted of peasants, the term probably evokes the wrong associations in the Cuban context. Somehow, "peasants" conjure an image of small landowners, deeply rooted in the soil and attached to their piece of land, which does not correspond to the reality of Cuban peasantry. Particularly in the deep of the Sierra Maestra, the Rebels encountered landless guajiros, many of them outside of the market economy, others involved in coffee production more as hired hands (pickers) or in precarious sharecropping arrangements. They were, really, the poorest of the poor agricultural workers. As Wood has argued, Cuban "peasants" were in fact "proletarians who longed for and fought for essentially working class objectives."[30]

Thus, the base of the Rebel Army should be considered as having consisted of the rural proletariat and remnants of an old peasantry well on its way to proletarization.

With respect to the Rebel leadership, the label of "revolutionary intellectuals" can be applied, but to understand what this really means in the Cuban context, it is necessary to describe some

of the peculiarities of the Cuban middle sectors and its paradoxes. On the one hand, an abundance of professional organizations, merchant groups and colegios (professional associations, fulfilling dual roles as scientific societies and quasi-unions which regulated entrance into practice, controlled retirement funds, etc.). Thomas has reported[31] 203 colegios in existence on the eve of the Revolution. However, side by side with the established middle classes who had established professional practices or solid businesses, there was a larger, precarious middle class, composed of over-educated liberal arts, law, etc., graduates without opportunities for employment, and whose claim to middle class status depended on obtaining a bureaucratic position by playing the game of politics. After the Machado overthrow, it was in this highly volatile sector of the middle classes from which members of the student action groups were recruited. They were gangster-style factions of self-styled revolutionaries who battled for control of the university, but more than anything else, for control of some part of the government payroll.[32] Some of the leaders of the Rebel movement were recruited from this precarious middle class, limited to unstable bureaucratic positions in government, subject to the vagaries of political change, or to poorly paid and scarce white collar jobs in the private sector.

Furthermore, this leadership was inserted in the Cuban revolutionary tradition, which was deeply nationalistic and anti-imperialist, since the turn of the century and the works of Jose Marti, Cuban independence hero. Furthermore, this leadership found its immediate role models and ideological guides in the great leaders of the 1933 Revolution, Julio A. Mella and Ruben Martínez Villena, both of whom were Communists.[33]

With respect to the failure of the April 1958 general strike, the full history of this episode of the revolutionary struggle is yet to be written. Events were more complex than just a failed general strike. In Santiago, Oriente's provincial capital, the strike was a success, while in Havana it never did get off the ground. There were many problems of coordination and planning, lack of unity between the 26th of July and the old Communist Party, or P.S.P. (Partido Socialista Popular), lack of probable support for strikers in Havana, as opposed to Santiago, which had the Rebel Army nearby, and a more pervasive underground. Furthermore, the population of Havana, with its previously described lumpen-petit-bourgeoisie, its labor bureaucracy, its status and conditions as main beneficiary of Batista's mini-economic successes, was an unlikely candidate for a general strike. Besides, the full machinery of Batista's terror was unleashed in the capital. Furthermore, Domínguez had argued that the deterioration in real wages which was to characterize the last two months of the Batista regime for the Havana workers, had started sooner in the province of Oriente, making the working class there more prone to follow the general strike strategy.[34]

On the other hand, it must be pointed out that the general strike called by Fidel Castro during the early days of 1959, to prevent the attempts by the U.S. Government, together with some military quislings, to establish a caretaker government which would stop the Rebel Army from taking power, was a resounding success. But by then, the unity of the PSP and the 26th of July was beginning to be forged, the repressive apparatus of Batista's Army and Police were in disarray and demoralized, and a powerful avalanche of revolutionary sentiment was developing with the slow march of the Rebel Army led by Fidel Castro, throughout the length of Cuba, on its way to Havana. The insurrection had ended. The Revolution was about to begin.

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[10]See Grupo Cubano de Investigaciones Económicas, op. cit., p. 808; also O'Connor, J., op. cit., pp. 22, 31.

[11]Two of the best attempts to analyze Cuban society and its pre-revolutionary class relations and history are Blackburn, Robin, "Prologue to the Cuban Revolution," New Left Review Oct. 1973, pp. 52-91 and Wood, Dennis B., "The Long Revolution: Class Relations and Political Conflict in Cuba, 1869-1968," Science and Society, Vol. XXXIV, No. 1, Spring 1970, pp. 1-41. O'Connor, op. cit., helps to place the analysis of the social class structure within the context of the pre-revolutionary political economy. Domínguez, op. cit., is particularly useful in its first two chapters, in helping to understand the characteristics of the State and its relationships to the U.S. imperial and hegemonic policies; this in turn, clarifies how socio-economic realities were reflected in the political sphere.

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[14]See "Enrique Roig San Martín y el periódico "El Productor." In Instituto de Historia del Movimiento Communista y la Revolución Socialista de Cuba, op. cit., pp. 61-71.

[15]About the "soviets" and particularly for a description of the activities of the Mabay sugar mill soviet, in Manzanillo, see "Preguntas y Respuestas sobre los años 30: Fabio Grobart en la Escuela de Historia," Universidad de La Habana No. 200 (1973), pp. 140-55.

[16]See Domínguez, op. cit., pp. 54 and following.

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[22]Zeitlin, Maurice, Revolutionary Politics and the Cuban Working Class (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), pp. 92-119. The published version of Zeitlin's dissertation differs significantly from the original. The dissertation contains historical and background material deleted from the published version. Together with Charles Page's unpublished dissertation on The Development of Organized Labor in Cuba (University of California, Berkeley, 1952), Zeitlin's dissertation provides the best historical survey available in English on the history and ideology of the Cuban working class.

[23]For an extreme view, see Woodward, op. cit., p. 27, who argues that "Much of the support which Castro received in his movement against Batista came, not from labor, but from middle and even upper class business groups who hoped for an end to the growing power of the CTC and a freer, but pro-business, political atmosphere."

[24]Ibid., p. 24.

[25]Zeitlin, M., Working Class Politics in Cuba, p. 81.

[26]Ibid., pp. 92-101; see also Domínguez, op. cit., pp. 121-2.

[27]See Blackburn, op. cit., pp. 75-83.

[28]See Domínguez, op. cit., p. 122.

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