

H-Net Reviews

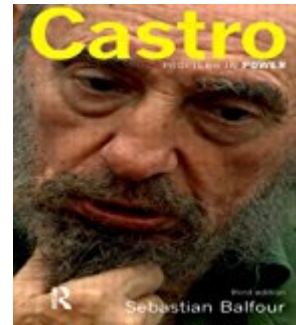
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

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

Reviewed by Frank Argote-Freyre (Kean University)

Published on H-LatAm (April, 2011)

Commissioned by Dennis R. Hidalgo



Evolution of the Cuban Revolution

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

What Balfour does not do, however, is to update, in any significant way, earlier chapters to include new scholarship. A comparative review of the footnotes from the second and third editions indicates that they are nearly the same for the first eight chapters. In fact, the first eight chapters of the two editions are almost identical. A second shortcoming is the absence of Raúl Castro from much of this study, except for occasional mentions when describing key events. The epilogue analyzing the

legacy of Fidel Castro would have been enhanced greatly by an analysis of the relationship between the two brothers, their differences of policy and temperament, and the extent to which his brother's past actions may restrain Raúl Castro.

Notwithstanding these critiques, the strengths of this work greatly outnumber the weaknesses. Balfour's book is an excellent and concise synthesis most suited to university students or those seeking a primer on the political strategies employed by Castro to survive more than fifty years in the face of unrelenting opposition by the United States and the Cuban exile community. In analyzing the struggle between Havana and Washington, he is careful to try and steer a steady course through the murky political waters that frequently turn scholarship into polemics. This approach allows readers to see the complexity of the conflict and develop their own interpretation without having to sift through pages of vitriol.

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

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

This centralized model of governance, guided by Castro, led Cuba to exert disproportionately far-reaching influence on the international scene, particularly in the 1970s, while internally creating an educational and health system that was the equal of many industrialized nations. However, the revolution failed to achieve economic independence and continues to rely on foreign subsidies to stabilize the economy. This reliance ultimately poses a threat to Cuban sovereignty and is the reason that even after fifty hard fought years the achievements of the revolution and its very survival are at risk. In the 1970s and 1980s, it was the Soviet Union subsidizing the Cuban revolutionary experiment, while today it is Hugo Chavez's Venezuela. Balfour's overview of current trading partners and the way the Cuban government uses its highly educated populace to trade for economic benefits with those nations requiring trained medical personnel is a particular strength of chapter 10. And as Balfour notes, despite intense hostility, the United States remains Cuba's seventh largest trading partner because of a "covert relaxation of the embargo" in 2000 with regard to the sale of certain foodstuffs to Cuba (p. 171). Balfour argues that Cuba's economic viability would be greatly enhanced by the complete lifting of the U.S. embargo. His observation is particularly timely given the fact that in January 2011 President Barack Obama lifted some U.S. travel restrictions to Cuba and allowed an increase in cash remittances to Cubans not affiliated with the Communist Party.

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

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

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

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-latam>

Citation: Frank Argote-Freyre. Review of Balfour, Sebastian, *Castro: Profiles in Power*. H-LatAm, H-Net Reviews. April, 2011.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=31445>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.