

**WHEN FEMINISM MEETS INTERNATIONALISM:
*Dimensions of U.S.-Cuba Relations 1965-1975***

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Introduction

The histories of the United States and Cuba have been inextricably linked by geographical proximity, a tumultuous *cercanía* that over the last two centuries has had profound political, economic, and social repercussions. There is a natural scholarly tendency to examine the dynamics between these countries in terms of geopolitical strategic interests, economic trade relationships, or ideological conflict, the value of which certainly cannot be ignored.

Nevertheless, the complexity of U.S.-Cuban relations cannot be fully understood apart from a wider engagement with the interactions that have taken place between the two countries outside the purview of government policy. Throughout their respective histories, interactions involving ordinary citizens from diverse backgrounds have led to enriching mutual understanding even during periods of extreme political crisis and hostility between Cuba and the United States. In addition to their impact at the individual and cultural level, these encounters have also sometimes contributed to shifts within social movements and spurred new forms of international activism.

One period that exemplifies both of the aforementioned effects of citizen-level interactions came following the triumph of the Cuban Revolution in 1959. In the context of the Cold War, the resulting social and economic changes in Cuba and its growing relationship with the Soviet Union heightened the United States' concerns about the new Castro regime, leading to a rapid escalation of tensions and a suspension of formal diplomatic relations between the two

countries in 1960.¹ However, this break in official government relations hardly signaled an end to the interactions that would occur between citizens from the two countries over the coming decades. In fact, the growth of social movements—anti-war, civil rights, etc—in the United States in response to political events at home and abroad would ensure just the opposite.

While the history of the women's movement in 1960s and 1970s in the United States is well-chronicled², what is less well-known is that the women of Cuba were also gaining ground during this period due to institutional changes implemented by the new revolutionary government. Among other things, these changes dramatically expanded women's participation in the workforce as well as their level of educational and health care opportunities.³ As feminists in the United States sought to carve out new spaces of activism and resistance in order to achieve many of those same rights, their struggle was enriched and informed at least in part by their direct interactions with Cuban women between 1965 and 1975. This paper explores some of these encounters and the new ways of understanding feminism and internationalism that emerged as a result, demonstrating some of the subtle complexities in the dynamic between the two countries at the often overlooked level of civil society during this decade.

Movements in Context: Situating Cuban and U.S. Women

Despite important legal gains by the 1930s, the situation of Cuban women had rapidly deteriorated in the decades preceding the Revolution of 1959. Through the efforts of an array of

¹ Jane Franklin. *Cuba and the United States: A Chronological History* (Melbourne, Australia: Ocean Press, 1997)

² See, for example, Gamble (2001), Valk (2008), and Gilmore (2008).

³ Margaret Randall. "'We Need A Government of Men and Women...!'" Notes on the Second National Congress of the Federacion de Mujeres Cubanas." *Latin American Perspectives* 2, no. 4 (1975): 111-117.

women's organizations, Cuban women had secured the right to own and control property (1917), the right to divorce (1918), the right to vote (1934), and equal pay for equal work (1934), among others.⁴ However, in many ways these laws were little more than "*papel mojado*" because the larger societal conditions of illiteracy, unemployment, and *machismo* did not change.⁵ While in 1930 there were an equal number of men and women studying in the universities, in 1958, only one in eight workers were women, one fourth of the country was still illiterate, and "more than half the population lived in sub-human conditions, in which racial discrimination, vice, and prostitution⁶ flourished."⁷ Of the women that did work, 70% were domestic workers.⁸ While in these intervening years (1940-1959) women's rights organizations ceased to play a prominent role in Cuban society, women themselves were very active participants in the urban clandestine operations that occurred during the struggle to remove Batista from power; women like Celia Sanchez, Haydee Santamaria, and Vilma Espin would later become national heroes and symbols of women's strength and their important contribution to Cuban society.

Meanwhile, in the United States, while women had secured the right to vote in 1920, many other forms of discrimination persisted. In 1950, for example only one in four students receiving college degrees was female and women comprised only 34% of the total workforce.⁹ In 1968, almost half of college graduates were female, but "these millions of well-educated women faced a very low glass ceiling," deprived of advancement opportunities in the form of

⁴ Luisa Campuzano. *Las Muchachas de Habana No Tienen Temor de Dios*. Ciudad de la Habana: Ediciones Union, 2004: 122.

⁵ Ibid, 4.

⁶ According to Murray (1979: 61), there were 270 brothels, 100 hotels renting rooms by the hour and 700 'bars' in Havana by 1958.

⁷ Margaret Randall. *Women in Cuba: 20 Years Later* (New York: Smyrna Press, 1981), 53.

⁸ Nicola Murray. "Socialism and Feminism: Women and the Cuban Revolution, Part I." *Feminist Review* No. 2, 1979: 61.

⁹ United States Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2000. <http://www.bls.gov/opub/ted/2000/feb/wk3/art03.htm>

graduate training or professional advancement.¹⁰ Within the context of the national civil rights movement in the early 1960s, there was thus a growing urgency on the part of women to address their particular legal concerns as well. This so-called “Second-Wave feminism” in the United States was marked by several key events, including the publication of *The Feminist Mystique* by Betty Friedan (1963), the passage of Title VII of the Civil Rights Act outlawing discrimination against women in employment (1964), and the formation of the National Organization of Women (1966).

If the first half of the 1960s was characterized by a coalescing of this “liberal feminism” around the achievement of legal and labor rights¹¹, the second half of the 1960s featured the emergence of a more radical feminism influenced by Marxist thought that was concerned not just about rights but about “liberation.”¹² These younger women, often already a part of other civil rights, anti-war, and student organizations, “felt deeply alienated from their mother’s traditional roles and were inspired by women fighters in Third World liberation movements.”¹³ Radical feminists, who became known for the phrase, “the personal is political”¹⁴, were also characterized by a high level of distrust of hierarchy, leading to a proliferation of extremely decentralized organizations which “engaged in creative protests and consciousness raising¹⁵ groups.”¹⁶

¹⁰ Van Gosse. *Rethinking the New Left: A Movement of Movements* (New York: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2006), 155.

¹¹ According to Goss (2006: 76), labor feminists believed that unionization and legal reforms that benefited the majority of workers should be prioritized because they would also benefit women.

¹² Gosse, 157.

¹³ Ibid, 155.

¹⁴ Though widely used throughout the period, the phrase is specifically attributed to Carol Hanisch (1969) in the Yale Book of Quotations (Yale University Press, 2006). It generally refers to the idea that personal and social experiences are interconnected.

¹⁵ “Consciousness-raising was a process carried out by a small group of women meeting regularly for months, sometimes years, to talk about the conditions of their lives, and about men.” (Gosse, 159)

¹⁶ Ibid.

Another related current within the radical wing of the feminist movement was concerned with the relationship between capitalism and patriarchy. While a hybrid mass movement of these liberal and radical feminists did emerge in 1968, serious differences in political strategy and priorities remained, evidenced by the wide range of organizations formed by black, Latina, and Asian women during the same timeframe.¹⁷ This highly fragmented movement was quite different than the more centralized one occurring in Cuba at the same time.

The Federation of Cuban Women

Following the triumph of the Cuban Revolution in 1959, one of the immediate considerations of the new government was how to organize Cuban women. With over 800 different existing organizations, the Castro regime decided to “unify these groups into a single organization whose objectives would be to strengthen and advance the revolution while also making women conscious of the important role they were to play in the nation’s new path, a role that would be on equal footing with me.”¹⁸ The *Federación de Mujeres Cubanas* (FMC) was thus established on August 23, 1960 under the leadership of Vilma Espin, wife of Raul Castro. Philosophically, the FMC rejected so-called “bourgeois feminism” and the idea of a separate struggle for women—rather, they believed that women’s liberation would be achieved within the overall context of the revolution itself.¹⁹ U.S. feminist and author Margaret Randall, who lived in Cuba during this period, added:

“I think it is important to understand the general criteria of the Communist parties at that time, which as that class was the greatest contradiction, and once education and

¹⁷ Becky Thompson. "Multi-racial Feminism: Recasting the Chronology of Second Wave Feminism." *Feminist Studies* Vol. 28, No. 2, 2002: 337-360

¹⁸ Randall, “Women in Cuba”, 125.

¹⁹ Sheryl Lutjens. "Reading Between the Lines: Women, the State, and Rectification in Cuba." *Latin American Perspectives* Vol. 22, No. 2, 1995: 108.

opportunities for work and salaries were the same for women as for men, many of the rest of the gender inequities would be resolved.”²⁰

Initially comprised of women affiliated with the victorious 26th of July Movement, the Student Directorate, the old Communist Party and the labor movement, the FMC grew dramatically following its first Congress in 1962, with a membership that exceeded 2 million by 1975.²¹

The FMC’s status as the sole organization of women permitted “comprehensive planning” and guaranteed it a certain set of state resources to accomplish its tasks.²² Essential among those became engaging women in the labor force. “As the revolutionary process unfolded, it became clear that women’s participation in social production was essential to development,” which led the FMC to organize a host of “training and development programs for women to acquire the skills necessary to participate in the workforce.”²³ As Vilma Espin explained:

“Cuba was an underdeveloped country and our women had even less political consciousness than the men...people had to be educated first, brought out of their isolation. We started soon after the triumph of the revolution with sewing classes. These served as a reason to meet. And here the education of women began.”²⁴

These sewing classes were part of the Ana Betancourt Program for peasant women, which engaged 14,000 women from all over the country in four months of skill development and revolutionary education.²⁵ Another one of the very first projects designed to benefit women was the Literacy Campaign of 1961 in which thousands of *jovenes* went to rural areas to teach

²⁰Margaret Randall, interview by Pamela Neumann. (November 9, 2009).

²¹ Murray, 64.

²² Ibid.

²³ Randall, “Women in Cuba”, 132

²⁴ Terri Shaw. "Status of Women in Cuba: Progress v. Tradition." *Washington Post*, January 26, 1975: 27.

²⁵ Ana Ramos. *Cuba Resource Center Newsletter*, Vol. II, No. 2, March 1972. The Ana Betancourt Program was converted into a 9-grade unified school in 1963.

campesinos how to read; in return, they received scholarships to study in the university, which dramatically increased the percentage (40% by 1972) of women receiving higher education.²⁶

The FMC recruited many of these newly educated women to enter the workforce; between 1965 and 1968, the number of women workers in Cuba exclusive of the agricultural sector had risen from 90,000 to 370,000; moreover, women held 64% of jobs in the health care field and 31% in supervisory positions.²⁷ In order to facilitate these women's participation in the labor force, the FMC also sought to design programs that would reduce women's workload at home (the so-called "second shift"). One of these programs was a national network of *círculos infantiles*, or day care centers; by 1974, there were 610 day care centers caring for more than 50,000 children.²⁸ Another initiative developed to assist women was the *Plan Jaba*, in which working women could drop off their shopping list in the morning and pick up their bag of groceries in the evening.²⁹ Furthermore, unlike in the United States, in Cuba, "women's reproductive autonomy was won early on and easily. Birth control was available to anyone who wanted it, and abortion was also available and covered just as any other health procedure would be."³⁰ Women were also granted up to eighteen weeks of maternity leave.³¹

Intersections: The Venceremos Brigades

Throughout the 1960s there was a high degree of interest in the situation in Cuba; early expressions of grassroots support in the United States included the formation of a Fair Play for

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ *New York Times*. "Cuba Steps Up Mobilization of Women for Jobs." December 15, 1968: 2.

²⁸ "Women in Transition." *Cuba Review*, Vol. 4, No. 2.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Margaret Randall, interview by Pamela Neumann (November 9, 2009).

³¹ Murray, 62.

Cuba Committee³² as well as other groups who produced and distributed in-depth information about social and economic developments in Cuba as an alternative to the mainstream media.³³

While individual visits did occur during that time, it was not until towards the end of the decade that a significant number of North Americans had an opportunity to interact directly with the new revolutionary society. The main impetus for this new level of engagement was Fidel Castro's announcement of a 10 million ton sugar harvest goal for 1970.³⁴ Eager to find a practical way to support and learn from the Cubans, a group of U.S. organizations on the left sought and received approval from the Cuban government to send groups of volunteers to participate in the sugar cane harvest.

The first group of 216 American “*brigadistas*” left for Cuba in November 1969; altogether more than 1,500 Americans would participate in the harvest during the year that followed.³⁵ This experience of working alongside Cubans in the harvest and seeing the way the new revolutionary society functioned up close had a number of important implications for participants. It would alter not only their perceptions of Cuba and its people but also their understanding of themselves and the movements they were a part of in the United States. Due to the hostilities between the two countries, there was a great deal of propaganda produced by the media and the government on both sides which perpetuated a large number of stereotypes—for example, that Cuban socialist society was dull and conformist, or that American society was

³² The Fair Play for Cuba Committee was formed in 1960 in order to provide grassroots support for the Cuban Revolution. It was officially disbanded in 1963, though since that time numerous other similar organizations have formed with similar purposes.

³³ For example, *Noticias Catolicas* and the *Cuban Resource Center Newsletter* cited herein.

³⁴ Sandra Levinson and Carol Brightman, eds. *Venceremos Brigade: young American sharing the life and work of revolutionary Cuba*. New York: Simon and Shuster, 1971.

³⁵ Venceremos Brigades have continued to make annual trips to Cuba over the last four decades. Current information on their work can be found at: <http://www.venceremosbrigade.net/>

consumed by drugs and materialism.³⁶ Through the Venceremos Brigades, these stereotypes would be radically challenged, and the complexities of each society brought into clearer focus.

In terms of Cubans themselves, U.S. participants observed several noteworthy characteristics, including perseverance and optimism in the face of great obstacles. “What really touched North Americans most deeply about [the Cubans] was not their military heroism in the face of U.S. aggression, but their fundamental respect and faith in people, which contrasted with the pessimism of the North American militants.”³⁷ *Brigadista* and feminist Leslie Cagan added, “There was a feeling that it was important for people to speak openly with each other and to respect one another... That possibility of a more humane interaction among people... was just mind-blowing.”³⁸ Furthermore, while the contrast between their social contexts was evident, the U.S. participants also discovered common ground and a wider sense of the meaning of their own movement-related struggles. As one participant said, “We began to see our particular movements within a larger historical dimension, which gave meaning to our individual histories, just as it brought home the meaning of the national liberation struggles.”³⁹

In terms of women’s issues, Cuban women’s high level of participation in the economy combined with persistent chauvinism challenged the North Americans’ notions of what women’s liberation looked like. One North American woman observed,

“The economic status of women has changed, and her historic Cuban role as a passive, unproductive human being is rapidly disappearing. But... why aren’t the psychological myths about women being changed? Or maybe they are, in ways we can’t see.”⁴⁰

³⁶ Margaret Randall. *To Change The World: My Years in Cuba* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2009)

³⁷ Levinson, 23.

³⁸ Dick Cluster. *They Should Have Served That Cup of Coffee* (Boston: South End Press, 1979), 242.

³⁹ Levinson, 19.

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 250.

These perceptions were challenged directly by the Cuban women who participated alongside the North Americans in the work of cutting and stacking cane. Myra, one Cuban woman who worked with the *brigadistas*, told them, “I read all your Women’s Liberation pamphlets, but I don’t understand. Here we are already liberated—we do all kinds of work, we do what we want. Compare the situation now with before the revolution.”⁴¹ The American women seemed challenged by the seeming contradiction that women could be such productive members of society while maintaining some of what radical feminism in the U.S. might have called the tyranny of male expectations and yet not express any sense at all of feeling enslaved. To the contrary, American Glenda Camino observed that perhaps the Cuban women were actually freer than their American counterparts.

“I admired the growing independence of Cuban women. American women, in spite of the efforts of Women’s Liberation, are on the whole still expected to make life and career sacrifices for their husbands...Cuban men and women, especially the youth, seem to be developing remarkable personal strength and independence.”⁴²

Another American participant put it this way:

“I believe, with the Cuban women, that it’s not counterrevolutionary, to want to get dressed up on Saturdays after a week of work, that there’s nothing wrong with feeling good about yourself and the way you look.... I came away inspired by the Cuban experience—less eager to put labels on Cuban women, more eager to use some revolutionary energy to try to build a women’s movement for our liberation here.”⁴³

In short, “Good, bad, liberated, non-liberated—our categories didn’t work.”⁴⁴

In the midst of the sugar cane fields themselves, the group experienced a growing sensitivity to the dynamics of individual versus collective struggle and its relationship to gender issues. As Cagan recalled, “At first we saw our problems as individual ones. We felt on our own

⁴¹ Ibid, 264

⁴² Ibid, 249.

⁴³ Ibid, 250.

⁴⁴ Ibid, 249.

against the cane, since we were competing with both men and women comrades...some of us tried to prove that we were individually as good as the men....”⁴⁵ This competition arose among the Americans in part because the Cuban leadership had announced that within the harvesting process, the men would cut cane and the women would stack it. This led to some controversy within the group because the North Americans had been told everyone would do the same work, and they felt that the division of labor represented a form of discrimination against the women. What followed were three days for discussions and meeting between the North Americans and the Cubans at the end of which the North Americans decided that they “were not going to try to tell the Cubans how to cut their own sugar cane.”⁴⁶ Instead, as Cagan recalls, “we would agree to do whatever jobs they gave us, on the condition that we would continue to talk about the issues.”⁴⁷ Rather than trying to impose their point-of-view, dialogue and consensus were the touchstones.

Some American women did ultimately participate in cutting cane, and struggled to prove that they were physically equal to their male counterparts. Those involved in stacking, meanwhile, described how they developed a new sense of collective struggle and an understanding of how their work related to the wider principles of socialist society:

“Our separation from men [became] a basis for collective strength and friendship...and from this we began to build a collective attitude toward the work. We saw the warmth and strength of a socialist struggle must develop around day-to-day work. And this was the way many of us began to understand the potential of the Cuban revolution.”⁴⁸

There was no doubt that the experience had an impact on the Cuban women as well, through their exposure to the ideas and attitudes of the American women. Seeing the North American

⁴⁵ Cluster, 242.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Levinson, 264.

women cutting cane affected their sense of their own abilities (“one [woman] who had worked ten harvests and had never cut cane before...said she would never stack cane again”⁴⁹), and the daily conversations between the two groups gave the Cubans an opportunity to interact with a tangible expression of another social movement from another country. “They were taking our movement back home, the left very seriously.”⁵⁰

While the North American participants clearly developed great solidarity with and appreciation for Cuba’s situation, there were larger lessons that they took away as well. *Brigadistas* Lucy Marx and Adelia Moore put it this way: “From our revolutionary sisters we found a new consciousness... we see clearly that in the fight against injustices to women we are learning a new strength and must take on a new responsibility in the fight against injustices to all people.”⁵¹ Implicit in this and other testimonials from the Venceremos Brigades is how the Americans’ understanding was transformed over the course of their experience to encompass a much more internationalist perspective on the nature of social struggles, particularly in terms of class and gender, and the diversity of ways that the historic injustices could be remedied.

Though far from accepting Cuban gender relationships as ideal⁵², the American women participants in particular were also clearly challenged to consider the value of a different approach to the liberation of women (i.e. within the context of socialism, where participation in economic production rather than sexual freedom is prioritized).

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Cluster, 245

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² There were various critiques by women brigadistas about male chauvinism and the portrayal of women in the media, for example.

The Growth of International Women's Solidarity

The Venceremos Brigades were unique in that they provided sustained opportunities for meaningful interaction and collaboration between ordinary Cubans and Americans—neither movement leaders nor politicians. Each was exposed to an ethnically and socioeconomically diverse cross-section⁵³ of the other's society, with demonstrable impact on the personal understandings that developed between the participants on a variety of issues. As noted above, many of these *brigadistas* adopted a broader perspective on the significance of the social movements occurring simultaneously in the United States. In some cases, the new knowledge and awareness generated by these encounters had indirect repercussions in terms of their subsequent activism. Likewise, the presence of a small group of American activists at the 1968 Cultural Congress in Havana would prove to be a symbolic manifestation of a growing undercurrent, especially among women of color, toward a more internationalist form of women's solidarity which gained strength at the beginning of the 1970s.

By the late 1960s, Cuba's internationalist foreign policy⁵⁴ had made it a natural host for an event like the Cultural Congress of Havana in 1968, held from January 4-11th. The event united intellectuals representing seventy countries from Latin America, Asia and Africa in Havana to discuss the "cultural problems of the so-called underdeveloped Third World"⁵⁵ In attendance from the United States were a small delegation from the Student Non-Violent

⁵³ The Venceremos Brigades includes whites, blacks, Puerto Ricans, and Chicanos, men and women from big cities as well as small towns (Levinson, 18).

⁵⁴ Jorge Domínguez offers an extensive discussion of Cuban foreign policy, including its involvement in Africa and Latin America and the global Non-Aligned Movement during this period in *To Make a World Safe for Revolution: Cuba's Foreign Policy* (Harvard University, 1989).

⁵⁵ *Cultural Congress of Havana: Meeting of intellectuals from all the world on problems of Asia, Africa, and Latin America*. Havana: Instituto del Libro, 1968.

Coordinating Committee (SNCC)⁵⁶, feminists like Susan Sherman and Margaret Randall, and musician Barbara Dane, among others.⁵⁷ The work of the Congress was organized through five Commissions, who discussed various topics related to the formation of culture in a neocolonial setting and developed specific resolutions around these issues. For example, one of the Commissions was dedicated to the “Integral Formation of Man” and specifically considered the conditions required for the emancipation of women. The final resolution reveals the consensus of the intellectuals present on this matter, namely that the liberation of man would depend on profound social and economic structural changes, and that the liberation of women would only come through the provision of “material and cultural instruments” that would enable women to incorporate more fully into “diverse creative social activities.”⁵⁸

Even more significant than the proposals produced, though, was the effect of these interactions on participants themselves. Dane described the import of the Congress this way:

“[It] helped to unite these opinion-makers in a network of mutual support, and in a common understanding of the need to resist cultural penetration and domination of national cultures in whatever country while at the same time uniting in the culture of resistance....all over the world and in every art form.”⁵⁹

For Susan Sherman, as a result of being in Cuba,

“I began for the first time to recognize a real alternative, the tangible existence of other people, the possibility of lasting change...what it meant to struggle together with other

⁵⁶ Juan De Onis. "Cultural Parley Opens in Havana: 300 at Congress will study revolutionary aspirations." *New York Times*, January 5, 1968: 16.

⁵⁷ Barbara Dane was the first U.S. musician to tour in post-Revolutionary Cuba (1966); some of her thoughts on that experience and the ways music and art built cultural understanding between the United States and Cuba are reflected here: http://cubamigo.org/temacuba/cuba_beatles.html

⁵⁸ *Cultural Congress of Havana*, 1968.

⁵⁹ Barbara Dane. *Cuba, the Beatles, and Me*. 2002. http://cubamigo.org/temacuba/cuba_beatles.html

people, with people different from myself, to change not only myself ...but the world...to change it with and for other people.”⁶⁰

Dane and Sherman’s sentiments are reminiscent of many of the *brigadistas*’ reflections discussed in the previous section and suggested an imminent turn within certain branches the U.S. feminist movement.

This shift becomes more apparent through a closer look at the trajectory of the SNCC, which was affected by international engagement with Cuba, as well as other liberation struggles taking place around the world (Vietnam, Africa) during this period.⁶¹ During the late 1960s, African-American women activists within the SNCC had grown increasingly concerned by the organization’s hierarchical, male-centered, and militaristic style of leadership, and opted to form a separate Black Women’s Alliance (BWA) as an alternative space of resistance.⁶² At the same time, there was an increasing level of awareness of the situation women faced around the world; particularly shocking to many was the revelation of poor women in and outside the U.S. being sterilized.⁶³

In 1970, the BWA expanded its membership to encompass Latina and Asian women, renamed itself the Third World Women’s Alliance (TWWA), and reframed its agenda to include a tripartite struggle against racism, sexism, and imperialism.⁶⁴ Examining other revolutionary struggles and the role of women therein, they drew “a direct link between the historical experiences of Third World nations and people of color in the in the United States, seeing

⁶⁰ Susan Sherman. *America’s Child: A woman’s journey through the radical sixties* (Willimantic, CT : Curbstone Press, 2007) , 24.

⁶¹ Stephen Ward. “The Third World Women’s Alliance” in *The Black Power Movement: Rethinking the Civil Rights-Black Power Era*, ed. Peniel Joseph, 125 (New York: Routledge, 2006).

⁶² Gosse 2006.

⁶³ Joseph 2006.

⁶⁴ Bhavnani, 69.

American racism and European colonialism as two sides of the same coin.”⁶⁵ Echoing principles articulated at the 1968 Cultural Congress, TWWA leader Frances Beal argued, “I think that a woman will not be free until she becomes a productive member of society.”⁶⁶

Unlike other strands within the feminist movement who insisted on the separation between gender and class struggle, TWWA took a wholistic perspective that, while ideologically informed by the nature of the process in countries like Cuba, also staked out new ground:

“We feel that there is no contradiction in being nationalists, in being feminists, and in being socialists.... The Third World woman must always be fighting against and exposing her triple exploitation in this society.”⁶⁷

As the TWWA expanded to the West Coast, many of its new members came from the ranks of the Venceremos Brigades, whose previous experiences in Cuba no doubt played a role in their decisions to get involved with wider Third World struggles.⁶⁸ Meanwhile, the work of the TWWA did not go unnoticed in Cuba. During TWWA’s advocacy on behalf of civil rights activist Angela Davis⁶⁹ in 1971-1972, there were many expressions of Cuban solidarity, including protests, posters, and even poetry.⁷⁰

Davis herself had also visited Cuba in 1969 as part of a delegation; she returned numerous times in subsequent years, and noted some of the changes she witnessed: “I noticed during a later trip that they were talking about very serious problems such as absenteeism from the workplace among women and women quitting jobs.”⁷¹ Davis was impressed by the strategies

⁶⁵ Ward, 134.

⁶⁶ Ibid, 130

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Women of Color Resource Center. *Paving the Way: A Teaching Guide to the Third World Women’s Alliance*, 2008:7. Online at: <http://www.coloredgirls.org/downloads/Paving%20the%20Way%20Study%20Guide%20-%20FREE%20CHAPTER.pdf>

⁶⁹ Angela Davis was arrested and charged with being an accomplice to the abduction and murder of Marin County (California) Judge Harold Haley in 1970. She was acquitted in 1972.

⁷⁰ Joseph, 142.

⁷¹ Kum-Kum Bhavnani and Angela Y. Davis. "Complexity, Activism, Optimism: An Interview with Angela Y. Davis." *Feminist Review*, No. 31, 1989: 77.

utilized in Cuba to combat these problems in order to give women greater opportunities to work, particularly through the passage of the new Family Code in 1974⁷², which for her illustrated how “one can use the basis of socialism in order to advance the cause of women’s equality.”⁷³

While the Cuban Communist Party was obviously more sympathetic to people like Davis and certain streams of feminist socialist thought, it is important to remember that U.S. visitors to Cuba on this and other occasions “were not only or primarily ‘radical feminists’ but in fact feminists of a variety of ideological stripes.”⁷⁴ Thus, an important exchange of ideas was indeed occurring at the level of Cuban civil society during this period, even if in some cases certain alternative feminist ideas presented were ignored or rejected by party or FMC leadership at the time.⁷⁵ In fact, far from being isolated from the world community or controlled from above, by 1974 it was clear that Cuban women too had developed their own deep internationalism, rooted in a sense of common struggle with people around the world. As Randall described it,

“Sixteen years have taught them that they are part of a world community, fighting for final liberation from colonialism, imperialism...searching for and reclaiming their own cultures, their real cultures. And within this, they are women struggling for total liberation along with the liberation of their countries.”⁷⁶

That year 1,916 Cuban women participated in the 2nd National Congress of the FMC, where they had the opportunity to dialogue with delegations from more than 50 other nations while discussing such topics such as: the peasant, women and the role of the FMC, the role of the family in socialism, the working woman, the young woman, and organizational statutes.⁷⁷ These topics had been specifically chosen through a grassroots process in which thousands of women at

⁷² The Family Code of 1974 wrote men’s participation in housework and childrearing into law. For the most part, however, it has not been enforced. (Murray, *Part II*, 1979; Randall 2009)

⁷³ Bhavnani, 77.

⁷⁴ Margaret Randall, interview by Pamela Neumann. (November 9, 2009)

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Randall, “We Need a Government,” 113.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

the local level submitted their ideas and concerns, which were subsequently compiled and organized for the Congress. Contrary to popular U.S. perceptions at the time, Randall observed that certain democratic processes were quite strong in Cuba⁷⁸; at the same time, the American women who attended “were impressed with the enthusiastic participation of the women delegates and the attention given their suggestions by the government leaders who attended.”⁷⁹

In terms of the United States, although many of the ideas specifically associated with socialism remained on the margins of American political thought and would become increasingly marginalized in future decades⁸⁰, it was during the late 1960s and early 1970s that the general principle of international solidarity (and a corollary, skepticism of government) became firmly rooted in the American social and political consciousness. This strong internationalist spirit is perhaps the most important legacy of the various forms of engagement that occurred between U.S. and Cuban women (and men) during this period.

Conclusion

American-born and longtime Cuban resident Gail Reed once said, “In terms of U.S.-Cuban relations, “I think Cubans are real soul mates to Americans.”⁸¹ Although the relationship between the two governments has often been unduly dominated by the United States, the people of the two nations have enriched one another immensely through diverse forms of social and cultural exchange throughout their history. While food, sports, music, and language are the most

⁷⁸ Randall, *To Change the World*, 2009.

⁷⁹ Shaw, 27.

⁸⁰ Max Elbaum. “What Legacy from the Radical Internationalism of 1968?” *Radical History Review* 82, Winter 2002: 37-64.

⁸¹ Common Ground Radio Program 9852. “Cuba: The People.” December 29, 1998. Online transcript: <http://commongroundradio.org/transcript/98/9852.html>

tangible examples of this dynamic, the preceding analysis shows that this mutual influence has extended powerfully into the world of ideas as well. At the height of the polarization between the two countries,⁸² ordinary citizens from Cuba and the United States demonstrated that it was still possible to work side by side, share distinct perspectives, ask questions, and listen to one another. Moreover, the social and political understanding that came out of these encounters played an important role in certain key sectors of the feminist movement and encouraged new forms of internationalism and solidarity that would endure well beyond the height of the civil rights movement.

Given the persistent tensions between the two governments in the current post-9/11 context, new spaces for constructive engagement between U.S. and Cuban citizens—men, women, teachers, doctors, musicians, artists—remain imperative for the improvement and renewal of mutual understanding between the two countries. While changes in government policy still appear *lejanos*, ordinary citizens have an important continuing role to play in the future of U.S.-Cuban relations.

⁸² While relations between the two countries today are far from normal, the years immediately following Playa Girón (1961) and the Cuban Missile Crisis (1963) were arguably the tensest of the last century.

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