Listen, Yankee. By C. Wright Mills.

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BOOK REVIEW


There is a curious ambivalence in American coverage of controversial international developments. Most of the newspapers and periodicals tend to be conservative in their evaluation of new movements in underdeveloped countries. Trends towards free enterprise are lauded. Left-wing tendencies of all shades are viewed with reserve, if not outright hostility. And the "national interest" is tacitly defined as if it meant the indefinite continuation of past American policies. On the other hand, books on the same subjects are apt to favor radical movements, to be suspicious of unrestrained capitalism in underdeveloped areas, and to be critical of the direction of American foreign policy in these areas.

One of the most recent examples of this ambivalence is the treatment of the Castro revolution in Cuba. While the bulk of newspaper reporting on Castro has been hostile since early 1959, most of the books on the subject have been friendly. C. Wright Mills' Listen, Yankee is the latest, and, in some respects, the most interesting of this friendly series. Most of this brief, easily readable book is a presentation of the pro-Castro case from the point of view of a fictitious composite Cuban. Only in the last chapter does Mills make it clear that, with one or two reservations, he agrees with the analysis he has outlined.

The argument in Listen, Yankee can be summarized briefly. In the first place, while the United States has, for many decades, made its power felt in Cuba, it has used this power for the short-run interest of its strategic commitments, its private investors, and its tourists. In implementing these goals, it has supported men like Batista who have thwarted the realization of Cuban aspirations.

Secondly, the Castro revolution was originally a rebellion of middleclass intellectuals who wanted both political freedom from Batista terror and a socio-economic overhauling of Cuba which would make the natural wealth of Cuba available to its people. It was the contact with the "peasantry," especially of eastern Cuba, that made them more radical in their agrarian program. And the early industrial expropriations were directed against industries owned by Batista men, whose capital had been corruptly acquired from government sources and whose interests lay in grabbing fast, dishonest profits from these industries rather than productive expansion. But it was the counter-revolutionary effort, stimulated by the policies of the United States, which caused most of the unexpected tendencies of the Fidelists.

Thirdly, while Castro's movement has been socialism or Marxism of a sort, it has been a Cuban type, not Chinese or Russian or communist at all. Unlike China, the agrarian reform moved quickly and painlessly into collectivization,
because most of the Cuban "peasants" were not interested in being farm proprie\-tors. Unlike Russia, it has increased agricultural production because under the old *latifundia* system, huge areas of land lay idle, awaiting a boom in the sugar market. Unlike both China and Russia, the plans for industrialization called for more consumer industries before heavy industrialization. The revolu\-tion was consummated without conscious adherence to communist or other Marx\ist ideology, and the small Communist Party of Cuba jumped on the Castro bandwagon only after years of dismissing him as a hopeless romantic. If Castro was ready to conduct friendly relations with the communist bloc, it was in pursuit of a neutralist rather than a pro-Communist policy.

Fourthly, if the Cuban revolution has not yet taken on settled forms of political institutions, it is because the revolution itself is not yet over. In such a situation, political institutions for protection of minorities can only serve the purpose of protecting counter-revolutionaries before the consummated revolu\-tion can produce its own form of politics. It is, therefore, better to keep the present fluid politics, so that the social momentum can be maintained. Besides, the expansion of educational facilities for so illiterate a people is a more press\-ing need than holding elections. Hence the emphasis on school expansion and experiments like the "school cities" and youth "brigades.”

Finally, whatever the intentions of the Fidelists to combine socialism with political freedom and to pursue an independent neutralist foreign policy, the realization of these goals has been made virtually impossible by the attitude of the United States government. Instead of taking the initiative in reorienting its Latin American policy by offering aid to the Castro regime when it first came to power, the United States withheld aid while our non-official attitude reflected outright hostility. In the chain of events that followed, each of our acts or failures to act produced retaliation on Castro’s part, while the Soviet Union played its cards shrewdly enough to reap the major benefits. The consequence has been the postponement of political freedom and a foreign policy which has moved away from neutralism to friendly relations with the communist bloc.

So brief a summary of Mills’ book cannot, of course, do justice to the argument presented there. Many of the analyses are worth pondering over at some length; and the whole thesis is so different from the popular American image of Castro that honest scholarship can only welcome it as an antidote to an otherwise one-sided picture.

But this is far from saying that the argument in *Listen, Yankee* is conclu\-sive. On the contrary, the book opens more lines of inquiry than it closes. Take some of the economic questions for example. Is it true that the total effect of the Castro revolution will be a net economic gain for Cuba? Will Cuba be able to compensate through stepped-up economic contact with the rest of the world (including the communist bloc) for the loss of the American sugar market? Can Cuba make up with Communist aid for the cessation of American
industrial capital or was the outflow of American dividends from Cuba so much
greater than the inflow of capital investment as to negate its value? Can one
really expect that Russian or Chinese aid to Cuba will have "no strings"
attached (as Mills' composite Cuban states)? Is there reason to think that the
communist countries will put Cuban interests ahead of their own any more
than the United States did? How serious a setback has the emigration of com-
petent technical personnel been for the prospects of more rapid industrializa-
tion? On these and a dozen other major economic questions Mills' Cuban
touches only briefly and with partisan optimism but with little in the way of a
substantial, economic analysis. Yet if the prospect of better economic develop-
ment is a major justification of Castro's revolution, then answers to such ques-
tions are imperative.

On the subject of communist influence within the Castro movement, the
book makes some pertinent general arguments which dispose of certain super-
ficial charges, but again there are serious omissions. Nothing is said of Castro's
brother Raul and Guevara who usually figure at the center of arguments about
Cuban communism, but about whom little in the way of clear, comprehensive
analysis has appeared.

Is it really so clear that all blame for present relations must go to the
United States and none to Castro? While there is nothing in Listen, Yankee
in the way of a chronology of American-Cuban relations, the earliest (negative)
event on which interest is centered is the American refusal to grant aid to
Castro when he visited the United States. But was Castro not all to blame
when he set compensation for expropriated land at tax assessment value?
Might it not be that the extra money it would have cost Cuba would have been
far less than the present cost of the rupture with the United States; and is it
so clear that American policy would have been exactly the same had the
compensation policy been different?

It is pointless to go on multiplying the relevant questions. Suffice it to
say that Listen, Yankee has unsatisfactory or no answers for a host of questions
which are crucial to its thesis. This is not to say, however, that anyone else
has presented more satisfactory answers than Mills. Nor is it to say that
Mills' position is clearly wrong. I am saying simply that the book stimulates
more than it satisfies. But if this is not a good reason to read a book, then we
had better close our libraries and printing presses.

The worst possible attitude to take, however, towards the problems raised
by this book would be to dismiss them as closed, now that Castro's commit-
ment to the communist bloc has become well-nigh conclusive and irreversible.
The most interesting implication of the book, in relation to American foreign
policy, is the possibility that we might have prevented Castro's alignment with
the U.S.S.R. and China if we had gone out of our way to aid Castro with a
substantial program when he first came to power. While it is clear that this
possibility has now become irrelevant in relation to Cuba specifically, it may
well be of vital significance in a future instance similar to the 26th of July Movement in Cuba. That being the case, it may be even more crucial than before to pursue the avenue opened by the book. It may be more crucial precisely because it is so very difficult to avoid projecting present attitudes and conclusions into the historical past.

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