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The Architect of the Cuban State: Fulgencio Batista and Populism in Cuba, 1937–1940*

ROBERT WHITNEY

Abstract. This article examines how Fulgencio Batista y Zaldívar emerged as the ‘strong man’ of Cuba. Historians have pointed out that from 1934 to 1940 Batista’s primary support came from the army and the police. We also know that, like many other Latin American leaders at the time, Batista went through a ‘populist phase’. Populists acknowledged the reality that ‘the masses’ were a new force in society and that ‘the people’ were at the centre of the nation and the state. Populist discourse functioned to construct a ‘people’ out of fragmented and scattered populations. Batista was very aware that in order to rule Cuba he had to appeal to ‘the people’ and to the revolutionary sentiments of 1933. But we need more information about exactly what Batista’s political ideas were and how he put them into practice. This article shows how Batista became, in his own words, the ‘architect’ of the post-revolutionary state between 1937 and 1940. Batista supervised Cuba’s transition from a military dictatorship in 1934 to a nominal constitutional democracy in 1940. The aim is to shed some light on how this remarkable transition took place.

Between the 1920s and the early 1940s the combined pressures of mass mobilisation, revolution, economic crisis and the threat of foreign intervention from the United States compelled Cuban politicians from across the ideological spectrum to come to terms with the *clases populares* as a factor in national and international politics.¹ In 1920 a small,

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¹ The term *clases populares* was commonly used by journalists, politicians and social commentators to describe the two social groups within Cuban society during the first 40 years of this century. The *clases populares* comprised all social sectors outside the political elite and large sugar, commercial and industrial classes, such as the urban and rural wage labourers, peasants, the lower middle-class groups of students, low level government employees and those involved in petty commerce. For an analysis of the concept of the popular sectors or ‘el pueblo’ or ‘lo popular’, see Guillermo O’Donnell, ‘Tensions in the Bureaucratic-Authoritarian State and the Question of Democracy’, in David Collier (ed.), *The New Authoritarianism in Latin America* (Princeton, 1979), pp. 288–91.

powerful oligarchy had a tight grip over national politics, and the idea that the state should be ‘popular’ was anathema to the ruling groups. By the early 1930s, however, social protest from the *clases populares* became so widespread that the established mechanisms of social and political control no longer functioned. Yet, at the time, it was by no means clear how ‘the masses’ were to be incorporated into the political process. It was one thing for political elites to recognise that the popular sectors were a force to be reckoned with; it was quite another matter to create new political institutions and discourses that could harness their energy. Before anyone could accustom themselves to the idea of ‘the masses’ as political actors, Cuba exploded in social revolution in the summer of 1933.²

The revolution of 1933 undermined the institutions and coercive structures of the oligarchic state.³ The young and relatively inexperienced revolutionaries found themselves pushed into the halls of state power by worker and peasant mobilisations. Between September 1933 and January 1934 a loose coalition of radical activists, students, middle-class intellectuals, and disgruntled lower-rank soldiers formed a Provisional Revolutionary Government. This coalition was directed by a popular university professor, Dr Ramón Grau San Martín. The Grau government promised a ‘new Cuba’ with social justice for all classes, and the abrogation of the Platt Amendment. While the revolutionary leaders certainly wanted diplomatic recognition by Washington, they believed their legitimacy stemmed from the popular rebellion which brought them to power, and not from the approval of the United States’ Department of State. To this end, throughout the autumn of 1933 the government decreed a dramatic series of reforms. The Platt Amendment was unilaterally abrogated, and all the political parties of the *machadato* were dissolved.⁴ The Provisional Government granted autonomy to the University of Havana, women obtained the right to vote, the eight-hour

² General surveys of Cuban history between roughly 1900 and 1940 include Jorge Ibarra, *Cuba, 1898–1921: clases sociales y partidos políticos* (La Habana, 1992); Jorge Ibarra, *Prologue to Revolution: Cuba, 1898–1918* (Boulder, 1998); Jules R. Benjamin, *The United States and Cuba: Hegemony and Dependent Development, 1880–1934* (Pittsburgh, 1977); Jules R. Benjamin, *The United States and the Origins of the Cuban Revolution: An Empire of Liberty in the Age of National Liberation* (Princeton, 1990); Louis Pérez, Jr., *Cuba Under the Platt Amendment, 1902–1934* (Pittsburgh, 1986); Hugh Thomas, *Cuba, or the Pursuit of Freedom* (New York, 1971).

³ On the ‘oligarchic state’ see Laurence Whitehead, ‘State Organization in Latin America since 1930’, in Leslie Bethell (ed.), *Cambridge History of Latin America*, vol. VI, Part 2 (Cambridge, 1994), p. 9. For the purposes of this essay, the term ‘oligarchy’ refers to the Cuban political and sugar-growing elite and not to foreign capitalists resident in Cuba.

⁴ The *machadato* refers to the regime of General Gerardo Machado y Morales (1925–33).

day was decreed, a minimum wage was established for cane-cutters, and compulsory arbitration was promoted. The government created a Ministry of Labour, and a law was passed establishing that 50 per cent of all workers in agriculture, commerce and industry had to be Cuban citizens. The Grau regime set agrarian reform as a priority, promising peasants legal title to their lands.⁵ For the first time in Cuban history the country was governed by people who did not negotiate the terms of political power with Spain (before 1898), or with the United States (after 1898).

The Provisional Government survived until January 1934, when it was overthrown by an equally loose anti-government coalition of right-wing civilian and military elements. Led by a young sergeant, Fulgencio Batista y Zaldívar,⁶ this movement was supported by the United States' State

⁵ The major works on the revolution of 1933 are: José Tabares del Real, *La revolución del 30, sus dos últimos años* (La Habana, 1973); Leonel Soto, *La revolución del 33*, 3 vols (La Habana, 1977); Raúl Roa García, *La revolución del 30 se fue a bolina* (La Habana, 1969); Luis E. Aguilar, *Cuba 1933: Prologue to Revolution* (Ithaca N.Y., 1972); David Raby, *The Cuban Pre-Revolution of 1933: An Analysis* (Glasgow: Institute of Latin American Studies, 1975); Samuel Farber, *Revolution and Reaction in Cuba, 1933-1960* (Middletown Conn., 1976); Justo Carrillo, *Cuba 1933: Students, Yankees and Soldiers* (New Brunswick N.J., 1994); Ricardo Adams y Silva, *La gran mentira: 4 de septiembre 1933 y sus importantes consecuentes* (Miami, 1947/1986); Enrique Lumen, *La revolución cubana, 1902-1934* (Mexico City, 1934); Enrique Fernández, *La razón del 4 de septiembre* (La Habana, 1935); Charles Thomson, 'The Cuban Revolution: the Fall of Machado', *Foreign Policy Reports*, 11: 21 (18 December 1935); Charles Thomson, 'The Cuban Revolution: Reform and Reaction', *Foreign Policy Reports*, 11: 32 (1 January 1936).

⁶ A scholarly biography of Batista is sorely lacking. Fulgencio Batista was born in 1901 to lower-class parents. He spent his early life working as a barber, carpenter, cane-cutter, bartender, tailor, railroad worker and army stenographer. He joined the army in 1921 and became a sergeant in 1928. In the latter role he worked for General Machado's Chief of Staff, General Herrera. As a sergeant, he led the mutiny of non-commissioned officers on the 4 September 1933. Batista had been a member of the right-wing corporatist ABC Society [see note 18 below] in late 1932 and early 1933, but, in opposition to the ABC, he supported the Grau government from September 1933 to January 1934. At that point, with the support of President F. D. Roosevelt's personal emissary, Sumner Welles, Batista shifted his allegiance to Carlos Mendieta. Batista ruled from behind the scenes between 1934 and 1940. In 1940 he was elected president of Cuba and served until 1944. From 1944 to 1952 Batista retained a loyal following within the army and the police, though he was never a mass leader like Grau San Martín. Batista's political skill rested on his ability to make alliances with people and factions who did have a mass following. This skill, coupled with his strong support within the army, converted Batista into a permanent factor in Cuban politics. Batista engineered a coup against the *auténtico* government of Prío Socarrás in March 1952. Thereafter Batista and the young radicals of the 1950s, led by Fidel Castro, entered into prolonged struggle. For biographical sketches of Batista see: Edmund A. Chester, *A Sergeant Named Batista* (New York, 1954); the section on Batista in Joseph C. Tardiff and L. Mpho Mabunda (eds.), *Dictionary of Hispanic Biography*, (Washington, 1996); and the entry for Batista in Robert J. Alexander (ed.) *Biographical Dictionary of Latin American and Caribbean Political Leaders* (New York, 1988). For Batista's political thought between 1933 and 1944 see Fulgencio Batista,

Department. To many Cubans at the time it seemed as if the country would revert to the traditional methods of state domination. Previously, whenever the struggle for state power got out of hand, US diplomats worked out a compromise among competing factions: there was no indication that things would be different this time around.

Yet Cuba after 1933 was a very different country from a few years earlier. The experiences of revolutionary struggle and mass mobilisation became a part of the Cuban political landscape.⁷ The revolution of 1933 politicised Cuban society in fundamentally new ways. Between 1934 and 1940 a new political and economic consensus emerged, one based on authoritarian and reformist principles. After the revolution of 1933 most political groups in Cuba – from the far right to the Communists – drew the conclusion that a new and modern state should intervene in society in order to modernise the country's political and economic structures. This reformist impulse culminated in 1940, when a new constitution proclaimed political democracy, the rights of urban and rural labour, limitations on the size of sugar plantations and the need for systematic state intervention in the economy, while preserving the supreme role of private property.⁸ Ironically, many of the demands of the failed revolution of 1933 became the constitutional edicts of 1940. The 1940 Constitution signified a collective acknowledgment by the economic and political elite, the *clases*

Revolución social o política reformista (La Habana, 1944). A useful sketch of Batista's regime of 1952–58 is Jorge Domínguez, 'The Batista Regime in Cuba', in H. E. Chehabi and Juan J. Linz (eds.), *Sultanistic Regimes* (Baltimore, 1998), pp. 113–31.

⁷ For recent contributions on the subject of mass mobilisation and political change in Cuba see: Barry Carr, 'Mill Occupations and Soviets: the Mobilisation of Sugar Workers in Cuba, 1917–1933', *Journal of Latin American Studies*, vol. 28, (1996), pp. 129–58; Oscar Zanetti, 'The Workers' Movement and Labour Legislation in the Cuban Sugar Industry', *Cuban Studies*, vol. 25, (1996), pp. 183–205; Abel F. Losanda Alvarez, 'The Cuban Labour Market and Immigration from Spain, 1900–1930', *Cuban Studies*, vol. 25, (1996), pp. 147–64; Alejandro de la Fuente, 'Two Dangers, One Solution: Immigration, Race, and Labour in Cuba, 1900–1930', *International Labour and Working Class History*, no. 15 (Spring 1997), pp. 30–49; Robert Whitney, 'What Do the People "Think and Feel"? Mass Mobilisation and the Cuban Revolution of 1933', *Journal of Iberian and Latin American Studies* vol. 3, no. 2 (December 1997), pp. 1–31; Marc C. McLeod, 'Undesirable Aliens: Race, Ethnicity, and Nationalism in the Comparison of Haitian and British West Indian Immigrant Workers in Cuba, 1912–1939', *Journal of Modern History* vol. 31, no. 3 (Spring 1998), pp. 599–623; Barry Carr, 'Omnipotent and Omnipresent: Labor Shortages, Worker Mobility, and Employer Control in the Cuban Sugar Industry, 1910–1934', in Aviva Chomsky and Aldo Lauria-Santiago (eds.), *Identity and Struggle at the Margins of the Nation-State: The Laboring Peoples of Central America and the Hispanic Caribbean* (Durham, 1998), pp. 260–91.

⁸ The full English text of the Constitution of 1940 can be found in Russell H. Fitzgibbon, *The Constitutions of the Americas* (Chicago, 1948), pp. 226–96.

populares, the army led by Batista, and the United States, that they had to live together – no matter how much they disliked this fact. Although Cuba had several civilian presidents from 1935 to 1940, it was clear to all that ‘the strong man [Batista] was ruler of Cuba while the shadows flitted across the political stage in his direction’.⁹ After seven years spent controlling Cuban politics from behind the scenes, Batista himself became president of Cuba in 1940.

Historians have pointed out that from 1934 to 1937 Batista’s primary support came from the army and the police. We also know that, like many other Latin American leaders of the 1930s and 1940s, Batista went through a ‘populist phase’ from 1937 to 1940.¹⁰ Populism arose as a political and economic response to the growth of a mass work force which had been released from traditional personalistic and clientelist ties of bondage and dependence. Populists acknowledged that ‘the masses’ were a new force in society and that ‘the people’ were at the centre of the nation and the state. Populist discourse, in other words, functioned to construct ‘the people’ out of fragmented and scattered populations.¹¹ Batista was very aware that in order to rule Cuba he had to appeal to ‘the people’ and to the revolutionary sentiments of 1933. Although scholars agree that Batista’s populism was not unusual in the context of the times, more information is needed about the precise nature of Batista’s political ideas and how he put them into practice. Batista’s political practice between 1937 and 1940 is of particular interest because it was one of the first, if less

⁹ Rene Rayneri, ‘Colonel Batista and Cuba’s Future’, *Current History* 95 (April 1939), p. 51.

¹⁰ In addition to the works cited in note 3 above, see: Louis Pérez, Jr. *Army and Politics in Cuba, 1898–1958* (Pittsburgh, 1976); Irwin F. Gellman, *Roosevelt and Batista* (Albuquerque, 1973); Harold Sims, ‘Cuba’ in Leslie Bethell and Ian Roxborough (eds.), *Latin America Between the Second World War and the Cold War, 1944–1948* (Cambridge, MA., 1992), pp. 217–42.

¹¹ My perspective on populism is influenced by the following works: Alan Knight, ‘Populism and neo-populism in Latin America, especially Mexico’, *Journal of Latin American Studies*, vol. 30, Part 2 (May 1998), pp. 223–48; Simon Collier, ‘Trajectory of a Concept: “Corporatism” in the Study of Latin American Politics’ in Peter H. Smith (ed.), *Latin America in Comparative Perspective: New Approaches to Methods and Analysis* (Boulder, 1995), pp. 135–62; Roberto Schwarz, *Misplaced Ideas: Essays on Brazilian Culture* (London, 1992), especially chapter 1, ‘Brazilian Culture: Nationalism by Elimination’; Carlos Vilas, ‘Latin American Populism: A Structural Approach’, *Science and Society* vol. 56, no. 6 (Winter 1992–1993), pp. 389–420; William Rowe and Vivian Schelling, *Memory and Modernity: Popular Culture in Latin America* (London, 1991), especially chapter 3, ‘Popular Culture and Politics’; León Enrique Bieber, *En torno al origen histórico e ideológico del ideario nacionalista populista latinoamericano* (Berlin, 1982); Stanley Stein, *Populism in Peru* (Madison, 1980); Ernesto Laclau, *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory* (London, 1977); Adam Anderle, *Algunos problemas de la evolución del pensamiento anti-imperialista en Cuba entre las dos guerras mundiales: comunistas y apristas* (Szeged, 1975).

enduring, attempts to construct a populist state.¹² It is, of course, possible to dispute whether or not such a thing as a ‘populist state’ ever existed, but there is no doubt that Batista and those like him thought it should exist.¹³ The young commander-in-chief was explicit about his role in the Cuban political process: ‘many want to forget that I am the chief of a constructive social revolution, and see me as a mere watchdog of public order. My idea of order is that of an architect rather than that of a policeman. Real order is like a symmetrical edifice – it does not require propping-up to hold it in position.’¹⁴ This article aims to show how Batista became the ‘architect’ of the post-revolutionary state between 1937 and 1940. Virtually all the scholarly literature on Batista classifies him as a counter-revolutionary and a reactionary. But as justified as the label ‘counter-revolutionary’ might be, if Batista’s political practice between 1937 and 1940 is to be understood, his claim to be a revolutionary leader must be taken seriously. Batista supervised Cuba’s transition from a military dictatorship in 1934 to a nominal constitutional democracy in 1940. The aim here is to shed some light on how this remarkable transition took place.

Fulgencio Batista and Cuban Political Economy

In the spring of 1937, Grant Watson of the British Embassy observed that ‘Colonel Batista has attained a dominant position by his work to establish order throughout the island and this brusque transition from the role of Military Governor to that of advanced social reformer has taken people by surprise’.¹⁵ At first sight, it is understandable why the British described

¹² Batista probably has more in common with Chilean presidents Arturo Alessandri (1920–24) and Carlos Ibáñez (1927–31) than he does with the ‘classic’ populist figures of the 1940s and 50s such as Getulio Vargas, Juan Perón and Víctor Haya de la Torre. As we will see below, however, the fact that Batista’s emergence coincided with the rule of Lázaro Cárdenas in Mexico proved to be important.

¹³ Important works on populist movements, leaders, and state organisation are Michael Conniff (ed.), *Latin American Populism in Comparative Perspective* (Albuquerque, 1982); Ruth Berins Collier and David Collier, *Shaping the Political Arena* (Princeton, 1991); Paul Drake, *Socialism and Populism in Chile, 1932–52* (Urbana, 1978); Francisco Corrêa Weffort, *O populismo na política brasileira* (Rio de Janeiro, 1980); John French, *The Brazilian Workers’ ABC: Class Conflict and Alliance in Modern São Paulo* (Chapel Hill, 1992); Joel Wolfe, *Working Women, Working Men: São Paulo and the Rise of Brazil’s Industrial Working Class, 1900–1955* (Durham, 1993); Barbara Weinstein, *For Social Peace in Brazil, Industrialists and the Remaking of the Working Class in São Paulo, 1920–1964* (Chapel Hill, 1996); Robert M. Levine, *Father of the Poor?: Vargas and His Era* (Cambridge, 1998); Daniel James, *Resistance and Integration: Peronism and the Argentine Working Class, 1946–1976* (Cambridge, 1988).

¹⁴ Batista quoted in the *Havana Post*, 23 June, 1937, p. 10.

¹⁵ Mr Grant Watson to Mr Eden, Havana, 30 June 1937. FO/A/4946/65/14. British Foreign Office Papers: Public Record Office, London. Hereafter all British Foreign

Batista's apparent transformation from reactionary to reformist as 'brusque'. Batista restored order through systematic military repression, and in 1936 there was no indication that things would change.

Until January 1937, traditional political leaders who had backed Batista in the name of 'order' expected that they could control a poorly-educated mulatto with little political experience. Because of his humble origins Batista was largely excluded from Cuban 'high society'.¹⁶ For the sugar industry the problem of social control on sugar estates had always been a local concern to be dealt with on a mill-to-mill basis. Prior to 1933 authorities from the central government in Havana were rarely asked to intervene to maintain order on plantations because regional caudillos or locally-based caciques and rural guards were up to the task. In 1937 political leaders were still confident they could let the army, commanded by a poorly educated ex-sergeant, handle this problem while they went about their business as usual. But they were mistaken.

The oligarchy's mistake was to view the problem of labour discipline as simply a local policing issue. What they did not understand was that after the revolution of 1933 labour discipline became a complex political matter with national ramifications. If most of the oligarchy did not appreciate that labour relations were a political problem, Batista did. By leaving labour discipline to the army under Batista, the sugar industry – and the United States – unwittingly provided him with considerable room to manoeuvre. A 1937 British report on 'The Labour Situation in Cuba and the British West Indies' noted that 'the political and economic issues ... remained [after 1933] inextricably mixed, with the result that successive Administrations, if they were to retain popular support, had to show that they were bent on improving the material conditions of the Cuban people, as well as on helping to restore normal constitutional government'. The report went on to say that Batista, like Grau, understood that to hold on to power it was necessary to 'remove the political grounds for economic discontent'.¹⁷

Office Documents will be cited by the initials FO, followed by the Foreign Office registration numbers and then by the dispatch number, if provided. This article makes extensive use of the British Foreign Office Papers, because while it is true that US diplomatic correspondence is far more detailed than the British, the latter often reveals greater analytical distance from events. The US diplomats often lost sight of the forest for the trees, whereas the British were more adept at analysing Batista's objectives and tactics.

¹⁶ Chester, *A Sergeant Named Batista*, pp. 1–25; Thomas, *Cuba, or the Pursuit of Freedom*, p. 845.

¹⁷ Mr Rees to Mr Eden, Havana, 20 February 1937. Enclosure Document 21, 'The Labour Situation in Cuba and the British West Indies'. FO/A/1864/65/14 (hereafter referred to as 'The Labour Situation in Cuba' (no page numbers)).

In order to mobilise mass support, Batista tapped into the nationalist sentiment that had fuelled popular aspirations in previous years. In early 1937, Grau's nationalisation of labour decree – known as the '80 Per cent Law' – was put back into force; the eight-hour day and the minimum wage were re-established; and social security, pensions, workers' compensation, maternity leave and paid vacations were reinstated. One law stipulated that shops selling women's items must have 50 per cent women employees.¹⁸ Other initiatives would soon follow. The overall intention was to achieve 'economic balance' after 35 years of excessive foreign investment and a weak internal market. One government statement declared that these measures addressed 'all the problems which have been disturbing the nation's peace during the past years'.¹⁹ Urban workers typically earned up to two or three dollars a day, while rural labourers earned a minimum wage of 80 cents a day. As a result urban workers could purchase goods, though they were usually foreign made; rural people, meanwhile, rarely earned enough to purchase more than food.²⁰ The government declared it wanted to put a stop to this situation.

The intent behind these measures was to replace foreign workers with Cubans wherever possible, especially in rural Cuba.²¹ In the sugar zones the government reduced the requirement for 80 per cent of employees to be Cuban to 50 per cent. In the short term the government knew that there were insufficient Cuban workers and that foreign workers were still needed. Nonetheless, Haitian, Jamaican and other West Indian workers became the target of a campaign for mass repatriations to their countries. On 19 January 1937 the government announced plans to expel British West Indian and Haitian workers.²² By the end of February, three large resettlement camps in Camagüey and Oriente provinces held several thousand Haitian and Jamaican workers.²³ The British Embassy complained about the treatment of their Jamaican and Barbadian subjects in these camps, though it was 'a debatable point whether the British West Indians would be worse off roaming the countryside without food or shelter, or in a camp, fed and sheltered, but more or less a prisoner and probably subject to deplorable sanitary conditions'.²⁴

Batista ordered the Rural Guards to expel Haitian and Jamaican workers from the sugar estates, while 'encouraging' mill managers to hire

¹⁸ 'Labor Law Must be Enforced', *Havana Post*, 22 May 1937, p. 1.

¹⁹ 'Codify Labor Laws is Plea', *Havana Post*, 6 April 1937, p. 1.

²⁰ This argument was presented by the Labour Secretary, Portuondo. See 'Labour Secretary Analyses Cuba's Economic Troubles', *Havana Post*, 4 March 1937, p. 1.

²¹ 'The Labour Situation in Cuba'.

²² *Havana Post*, 20 January 1937, p. 1; *Havana Post*, 28 January 1937, p. 12.

²³ 'The Labour Situation in Cuba'; *Havana Post*, 23 February 1937, p. 1; *Havana Post*, 6 April 1937, p. 1.

²⁴ 'The Labour Situation in Cuba'.

Cubans in their place. By March 30,000 Haitians had been repatriated, with an expected 50,000 to follow shortly. Thousands of Jamaicans, Barbadians and other British West Indians were subject to the same measures. According to the British report on labour conditions these expulsions were justified by the Cuban government primarily on economic terms, but, the Embassy said, 'there can be little doubt that there is an underlying ethnic motive also'. Unemployment was as much a problem for West Indian workers as it was for Cubans: one quarter of the estimated 40,000 British West Indians in Cuba was out of work, and the situation was far worse for the approximately 100,000 Haitian labourers. Moreover, the report argued, very few Jamaicans were cane-cutters since most of that arduous work was done by Haitians and Cubans. If the Jamaicans were a social problem in Cuba it was not because they took away jobs from Cubans, but rather because they drifted to the towns and cities precisely because there was so little work.²⁵

In the eastern provinces a 'Campaign Against Voluntary Idleness' was initiated to force Cubans who could not prove that they were employed elsewhere to work in the mills. On 10 February 1937 police in Santiago de Cuba rounded up more than 100 men in bars and brothels: local authorities claimed that the men were avoiding registering at the Labour Exchanges, and they were promptly sent to nearby mills.²⁶ Referring to the entire 50 Per cent Law, the British report on labour conditions declared 'sugar mills are being obliged willy-nilly to refuse employment to British West Indians'.²⁷ Because of the general labour shortage, there was apparently considerable pressure on local exchanges to register foreign workers. Many of the officials at the exchanges were friends of local mill managers or were themselves former employees of sugar companies. These personal ties were often more compelling than directives from Havana. Some mills bribed exchange officials, paying them to overlook the regulations. When the Minister of Labour discovered that some foreign workers were on exchange lists, the local authorities were told in no uncertain terms that there were to be no exceptions.²⁸

Despite the overall shortage of labour, the available evidence suggests that, while mill owners were displeased with the loss of cheap migrant

²⁵ Mr Grant Watson to Mr Eden, Havana, 22 July 1937. FO/A/5610/65/14 No. 108.

²⁶ 'The Labour Situation in Cuba'; 'Idle in Camaguey Forced to Work', *Havana Post*, 11 February 1937, p. 1. In 1935, the Batista-Mendieta government established Labour Exchanges, which had been another initiative of the Grau government. The idea was to provide a clearing house for information about available workers and to register those seeking employment. By May 1935 the Mendieta government established labour exchanges in all five provinces.

²⁷ 'The Labour Situation in Cuba'.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

labour, they were not willing to lobby the government to reinstate foreign labour migration. Much of the anger directed at the labour laws focused on the laws' impact on skilled American and British workers, not on Haitians or British West Indians. The labour requirements of the sugar companies had to be weighed against the political realities of mass unemployment and the rise of popular nationalism. The British report on labour conditions concluded 'the greatest amount of evil has generally speaking not been wrought by the actual provisions of the 50 per cent law, but rather by the effect of the latter in poisoning the relations between Cubans and foreigners, and thus creating a favourable atmosphere for oppression by other means.'²⁹

Migrant labour continued to enter Cuba after 1937, but not in the same numbers as before. The sugar companies continued to complain about the shortage of cheap labour and the higher taxes, but they could no longer ignore the fact that unemployment was a political problem.

Within this larger context, Batista was skilful in taking advantage of the options open to him. On 25 July 1937, in keeping with the international trend of state-sponsored social reform, both within the United States and in Latin America, Batista released a more systematic plan of social and economic measures. This programme was published under the title *Líneas básicas del Programa del Plan Trienal* (Three Year Plan).³⁰ The announcement of the Plan was not unexpected. Throughout the spring of 1937 rumours abounded concerning the measures Batista would include in his programme. Indeed, most people had a good idea of what to expect given the deluge of legislation in the six months leading up to July. In late June, the *Diario de la Marina* and the *Havana Post* devoted considerable coverage to the Plan's rumoured provisions. Among the measures mentioned by Batista were the recovery and survey of land owned by the state, survey of communal lands (*realengos*), abolition of large estates, a new national banking system, crop diversification, and co-ordination of the sugar industry through a profit-sharing mechanism among mill owners, *colonos* and labour. Social provisions, such as health and old age insurance, new schools and a literacy campaign, and the construction of urban and rural libraries, cultural centres for the performing arts, and sports facilities, would be included in the Plan.³¹ The cornerstone of the Plan was the Sugar Coordination Law. As will be shown, Batista hoped to promote a more balanced sugar economy by organising a profit-sharing system among producers (both large and small), labour and the state. The

²⁹ *Ibid.* ³⁰ *Líneas básicas del Programa del Plan Trienal* (La Habana, 1937).

³¹ *Diario de la Marina*, 20 June and 27 June 1937, p. 1 in both editions. Also see *Havana Post*, 23 June and 25 June 1937, p. 1 for both editions.

state anticipated paying for the social aspects of the Plan with the revenue generated from its share of the profits.

Keeping within the façade of civil control, Batista promised that the Plan would be submitted to Congress for approval. Congressional committees, all-party committees, and Cabinet ministers discussed the Plan's real and rumoured content throughout the spring of 1937. Watching this debate from the sidelines, Batista permitted considerable public criticism of the Plan. At the same time, he reminded people that he was the person ultimately responsible for the maintenance of order in Cuba: 'I will be impartial but not indifferent. These words should be coordinated with my responsibilities and duties'.³² What was needed, according to Batista, 'was an efficient and rigorous intervention by the state' in society.

The political fanfare surrounding Batista's Three Year Plan was a good example of populist demagoguery. Batista promised to redistribute what was not yet produced. In the short run, however, popular expectations for reform were real, and Batista took advantage of this fact. He promised the *clases populares* what they wanted. On 14 December 1937 the Bill for the Colonisation, Reclamation, and Distribution of State Lands was passed by Congress. According to the bill, all land belonging to the state that was unoccupied or unregistered would be turned into smallholdings and given to agricultural labourers. About 50,000 poor were to benefit from this measure. More than 33,000 acres were to be distributed by early 1938, with more grants to follow. Those who received the land were to cultivate it for at least six years before title deeds would be granted. Peasants squatting on unclaimed land could remain without fear of expulsion. The state was to provide US\$1,000,000 for the purchase of seeds, livestock, and agricultural implements. All these provisions were intended to alleviate the hardships of workers during the dead season.³³ These commitments went largely unfulfilled, mainly because of depressed economic conditions in early 1938, a poor sugar crop for the same year, lack of US economic assistance and a shift of political energies toward the elections for a future constituent assembly.³⁴ Between 1937 and 1939 Cuban exports fell from 99 million dollars to 60 million dollars, while, for the same period, imports dropped from 53 million dollars to 45 million dollars. Government revenue for these years fell from 36.4 million dollars to 31 million dollars.³⁵ But, with the political commitments to the popular

³² Batista quoted in Mr Grant Watson to Mr Eden, Havana, 1 June 1937. FO/A/4239/65/14 No. 86.

³³ Mr Grant Watson to Mr Eden, Havana, 27 December 1938. FO/A/262/262/14 No. 178; Thomas, *Cuba, or the Pursuit of Freedom*, pp. 708–9.

³⁴ Gellman, *Roosevelt and Batista*, p. 162.

³⁵ Mr Grant Watson to Viscount Halifax, Havana, 30 August 1939. FO/A/5823/165/14 No. 96.

classes on public record, state expenditure was not curtailed and new taxes were imposed, especially on the sugar industry. Meanwhile, 'Batista uses to the full his promise of the distribution of "state" lands'.³⁶

Throughout the spring of 1937 the sugar companies waited to see how much the state would interfere in their business. By September 1937 the speculation was over. In mid-August Congress passed the Sugar Co-ordination Law as part of the Three Year Plan. The law stipulated that as long as the small *colono* cultivated the land and delivered the agreed quantity of cane to the appropriate mill, he would not lose his land. *Colonos* who rented land had their leases underwritten by the state.³⁷ The yearly crop restrictions imposed on producers – a feature of the industry since the late 1920s – would continue, but only large growers would have to respect these limitations. Small *colonos*, by contrast, were allowed to keep 52 per cent of their crop and sell it for their own profit. This meant that whereas prior to the legislation *colonos* delivered most of their crop to a large company mill for it to be ground and taken to market, the new sugar law allowed them to control most of their production with the assurance of state support. Mill owners, *colonos*, unions and the government together would work out the regulations that would govern the sugar industry. Arbitration boards were created to carry out this function. Another provision declared that freedom of trade at the *bateyes* should be permitted. This measure aimed to break the stranglehold that many plantation stores held on workers and their communities, especially during the dead season. The objective here was to promote the expansion of petty-commodity production in the countryside. The measure was also a clear populist appeal to merchants who resented the domination over rural wage earners by plantation stores. 'Unbelievable as it might sound', noted an editorial in the *Revista Semanal Azucarera*, 'the inhabitants of many rural districts in Cuba buy their poultry, eggs and vegetables in city markets – an anomalous situation that would disappear under the plan here outlined'.³⁸ Wage rates and working conditions were to be regulated and a housing code for plantation workers was to be written.³⁹

Batista's intention with the Three Year Plan was to use profits from the sale of sugar to improve the lot of agricultural labourers and small *colonos*. The purpose behind the Sugar Co-ordination Law and the Three Year Plan, in the words of Guerra y Sánchez, was to '[convert] the sugar industry of Cuba into a huge national enterprise'. By assuring that small,

³⁶ Mr Grant Watson to Mr Eden, Havana, 2 December 1937. FO/A/9019/65/14 No. 171.

³⁷ Thomas, *Cuba, or the Pursuit of Freedom*, p. 708.

³⁸ 'Free Colonos', (editorial), *Revista Semanal Azucarera*, (16 April 1938).

³⁹ José Antonio Guerra y Dében, 'Recent Evolution of the Sugar Industry', appendix to Ramiro Guerra y Sánchez, *Sugar and Society in the Caribbean* (New Haven, 1964).

medium, and large producers all receive an equitable share of production and profits, the legislation 'will gradually create a well informed and intelligent public opinion, not only about the sugar question but also about the economy of the nation in general. Thus will be laid a more solid base for democracy in Cuba.'⁴⁰ The Sugar Coordination Law, therefore, was not simply promoted as an economic necessity, it was the central political objective of a populist strategy of capital accumulation. This populist strategy involved the reorientation of capitalist relations of production away from the unrestrained and unsupervised oligarchic capitalism of the previous 37 years and toward a state-sponsored and state-mediated process of capital accumulation.

Given the new political situation confronted by the sugar industry, it is not surprising that the sugar law was greeted by many mill owners with hostility. Indeed, given the near complete freedom that sugar producers had enjoyed in past years, it is easy to see why many felt uneasy about any form of state intervention in their affairs. Because of the crisis in world sugar production during the late 1920s, most producers had grudgingly accepted state regulations over the quantities of sugar produced. But their acceptance was cushioned by the idea that state regulations were an anomaly not to be repeated. Consequently, the congressional debates and public statements by Batista and his supporters leading up to the passage of the sugar law provoked sharp responses from some producers. As early as April 1937 a long and detailed internal memorandum of the Cuba Cane Sugar Company set out the main concerns of some in the sugar industry. After describing the trend in early 1937 'when sentiment was growing in favour of new social legislation to improve the lot of labour', the memorandum went on to say 'the social implications of this bill are evil. It means a step toward the denial of the right of free contract'.⁴¹

Later, in 1940, the Cuban Association of Sugar Manufacturers – looking back on the previous three years – outlined its grievances in an 'Open Letter' to the new President of the Republic, Fulgencio Batista:

the industry has been lately taxed with social and fiscal legislation arising from the revolutionary period 1933–1940, and it is permissible to state, therefore, that while a higher price [for sugar] will somewhat relieve the condition of cane planters and workers, the industry itself is on the verge of a crisis as acute as that prevailing in 1933 which ... led to a total disruption of the politico-economic regime then in existence ... [At] a time when the Chief Executive happens to be

⁴⁰ Ramiro Guerra y Sánchez, 'Sugar: Index of Cuban-American Cooperation', *Foreign Affairs* (July 1942), p. 751.

⁴¹ 'In Regard to a Proposed Law Regulating the Relations Between the Hacendados and the Colonos', 13 April 1937. Braga Collection, Box 31, File: *Colonos* of Manati, Francisco and Elia.

a man born to the noble, generous bosom of Cuba's common people, ... we feel sure ... that no situation based on exception and privilege for the few, at the expense of the majority, can find support and consecration.⁴²

Flattery got the sugar producers nowhere. Until a thorough study of the Cuban sugar industry in the twentieth century is completed, any general conclusions about the industry's political influence within the Cuban state are provisional. It is an obvious truth that every Cuban government had a symbiotic relationship with the sugar oligarchy. But a symbiotic relationship does not imply a harmonious one. It was one thing for Batista to dominate the repressive apparatus of the state through his control of the army and the police; it was quite another matter for him to move from the shadowy background of the military into the political limelight. By late 1937 the political pressure on the Cuban oligarchy to bring an end to the provisional nature of Cuban governments was mounting, both from within Cuba and from the United States. Preparations were made for general elections to lay the basis for a constituent assembly. With this objective in mind, political factions and parties set about realigning themselves for the struggles to come. Within this new context of political debate, Batista, like everyone else, needed to stake out his political territory. Of course the military commander was already claiming the status of a social reformer when he presented his Three Year Plan. Batista's Plan, however, mentioned little in the way of political reform, concentrating instead on social and economic problems. Batista's political problem after 1937 was that Grau and his followers were still around to reclaim their role as Cuba's most advanced social reformers. One purpose of the Three Year Plan, as one British dispatch put it, was to 'take the wind out of his [Grau's] sails'.⁴³

It did not help Batista's political prospects as a reformer that lack of money and congressional deadlock delayed implementation of his Plan. A bad sugar crop, rising unemployment, unfulfilled revenue expectations and the reduction of salaries of government employees all fuelled growing political tensions in late 1937 and early 1938. Nor did it help his reputation when people discovered that, despite the economic problems of the country, Batista refused to cut military spending. An illustration of the fragility of Batista's support occurred on 20 November 1937. Batista's backers, calling themselves the Association of the Heralds of the Three Year Plan, organised a rally in Havana's Tropical Stadium. Between

⁴² Asociación Cubana de Fabricantes de Azúcar, 'Open Letter', Havana, 6 November 1940. Braga Collection, Box 18, File: Asociación Nacional de Hacendados de Cuba. The letter was widely published in both Spanish and English. The quotation is taken from the English version.

⁴³ Mr Grant Watson to Mr Eden, Havana, 30 June 1937. FO/A/4946/65/14 No. 98.

60,000 and 80,000 people attended the meeting. The organisers received the official backing of the Department of Labour, and government employees were obliged to attend the rally. Trains, cars, trams, buses and trucks were commissioned by the government to bring people to the stadium. However, many unions refused to attend 'thereby showing a considerable amount of courage'. Tobacco workers, laundry workers and many transport workers were among those who stayed away.⁴⁴ The memory of the violent repression of 1934–1936 was fresh in many people's minds, and it would be an up-hill battle for Batista to regain the confidence of even some sections of the working class.

Just how was Batista going to win over the working classes after three years of army violence directed at organised labour? If the colonel was to solve this problem he would have to move quickly. With the long-delayed general elections looming in March 1938, Batista needed to forge stable political alliances to ensure popular support.⁴⁵ He was faced with the ironic situation that, if he was to legitimise his rule after having so successfully repressed the organisations of the *clases populares* he now had to court their support. He could not do this on his own authority: he needed to make alliances with people who were willing to embrace his corporatist vision of the state without demanding too much autonomy in return.

In Search of Allies: Batista, the Communists and Cuban Democracy

In order to understand why Batista and the Communist Party of Cuba formed an alliance it is necessary to emphasise that mass politics was a new phenomenon for all Cuban political actors, including the Communist Party, the National Confederation of Cuban Workers (CNOC) and the National Union of Sugar Industry Workers (SNOIA). The political existence of 'the masses' was a recent phenomenon for everyone on the ideological spectrum. No one really knew who 'the masses' were, though many leaders claimed to represent them. The basic questions about the social composition and inclusiveness of 'the people' or 'the masses' could not be answered with precision because the interwoven processes of class, state, and national formation outpaced people's ability to explain what was happening around them.

The communists, trade unions and unaffiliated radicals who claimed to be the 'vanguard' of the working classes were therefore as much the

⁴⁴ Mr Grant Watson to Mr Eden, Havana, 2 December 1937. FO/A/9019/65/14/ No. 171.

⁴⁵ They were delayed again until general elections for a constituent assembly were held in November 1939, with presidential elections following in February 1940.

products of mass mobilisation as they were the leaders. The CP and CNOCA were founded in 1925 and SNOIA was created in 1932. These organisations recruited most of their members in late 1932 and 1933 and they were in no position to lead the complex and intense class struggles throughout the island. No sooner had they established a tentative foothold in the mass movement than they became the victims of Batista's repression, from 1934 to 1937. The CP continued to work underground after the failed general strike of 1935, but it was no longer a significant threat to Batista or to the sugar companies.⁴⁶ The Cuban communists and their trade union organisers were a defeated group. What, then, were the forces which induced Batista and the communists to forge an alliance? The answer can be found in the changing political atmosphere of the mid-1930s.

For the communists, the decision to seek an alliance with Batista fits the pattern of the worldwide turn of the communist movement toward popular front tactics.⁴⁷ The political line of the Cuban Communist Party followed this pattern. The Cuban party had been illegal from 1934 to September 1938. Why Batista decided thereafter to permit the party to function openly is discussed below. As a preliminary it should be noted that before the party could build a popular front, the communists needed to mend some badly damaged bridges with other 'progressive forces'. Following the lead of the Seventh Congress of the Comintern, the party entered discussions with other leftist and radical groups in 1936, with the hope of forging greater unity among all anti-oligarchic groups. Nothing came of these meetings, and by late 1938 it was clear that the Cuban party was not going to form a popular front with Grau's Partido Revolucionario Cubano (Auténtico) nor with any of the smaller nationalist groups. In large part these negotiations failed because of the bitter legacy of 1933.

⁴⁶ It is striking, for example, that in the Braga Brothers' collection very little mention is made of CNOCA or SNOIA, even for the period from 1932 to 1933. Most of the 'contracts' the Cuba Cane Company signed with workers between 1933 and 1940 referred to the 'unions' by such names as 'the General Union of Workers at Manati' and the like. The general tone of the company's correspondence indicates concern, but it was far from panic stricken. The impression one gets from reading the company's documents is that while union organising could be troublesome, things were expected to return to normal, given time. Until more systematic work is done on the history of the union movement in Cuba little of substance can be offered on this issue.

⁴⁷ The most important studies of the Batista-Communist alliance are: Jorge García Montes and Antonio Alonso Ávila, *Historia del Partido Comunista de Cuba* (Miami, 1970), especially chapters 9 and 10; Thomas, *Cuba, or the Pursuit of Freedom*, especially chapter LX; Boris Goldenberg, 'The Rise and Fall of a Party: The Cuban C.P. (1925-1959)', *Problems of Communism*, vol. 19, (1970), pp. 61-80; Farber, *Revolution and Reaction*, especially pp. 84-7; and Harold D. Sims, 'Cuban Labor and the Communist Party, 1937-1958', *Cuban Studies/Estudios Cubanos*, vol. 15, no. 1 (Winter 1985), pp. 43-58.

The CP had resolutely opposed Grau's government, labelling it 'social-fascist' and 'reactionary'. The change of the party's line after 1935 did nothing to assuage the resentment felt by Grau's backers. Whatever the theoretical arguments used by either side to justify their lack of unity after 1935, and despite the CP's self-criticism of its past sectarianism, the *auténticos* and other independent factions could not stomach an alliance with the CP. As a result, a popular front of all progressive forces in Cuba never got off the ground.⁴⁸

What did take place, however, was a successful alliance between the Communist Party and Fulgencio Batista. The political logic of the popular front was the same as in other countries, even if in Cuba the partners were ill matched. Batista and the CP needed allies for their respective projects, and from 1937 to 1940 political circumstances pushed them together. On Batista's side, he needed to build a political base in a hurry in order to make the transition from military leader to a civilian leader. On the party's side, the need to find allies was not only a political duty imposed by the Comintern; there was also the reality that Cuba's closeness to the Spanish events (politically and historically) made the threat of fascism seem closer. Pro-Falangist and Francoist elements were active in Cuba and, whatever their real strength, their presence fuelled the CP's sense of urgency about broadening its alliances.

In December 1938 the Communist Party was still looking for allies to form a popular front. According to an article published in *World News and Views*, the official organ of the Comintern, there were two possibilities on the horizon: Grau and Batista. The best prospect, the article stated, seemed to be Grau. Juan Marinello, a leading Communist and the head of the party's legal front organisation, Unión Revolucionaria (UR), had met Grau in Miami to discuss forming a 'unity party' which would include their two organisations and the smaller Partido Agrario Nacional (PAN). The objective of this 'unity party' would be to bring together all progressive forces into one bloc to fight for a genuinely popular and democratic constituent assembly. The Communists recognised that Grau 'stands high in prestige among the Cuban population and has a reputation for sincerity ... but he appears to be haunted by fears that he might be ruled by communists in the unity party'. If the article in *World News and*

⁴⁸ For the Party's position on why the negotiations with the PRC-A and other groups failed see Marcos Díaz (Blas Roca), *El PRC y los Frentes Populares* (La Habana, 1938). For the party's self-criticism see Manuel Ventura, 'The Second Party Congress of the CP of Cuba', *International Press Correspondence, World News and Views*, vol. 14, no. 34 (15 June 1934) and 'Report of Comrade Marin', *World News and Views: International Press Correspondence* vol. 15, no. 62 (21 November 1935), p. 910. For a sample of the bitter anti-communism of Grau's followers, see Alberto Baeza Flores, *Las cadenas vienen de lejos: Cuba, América Latina y la libertad* (Mexico, D.F., 1960), especially pp. 100-112.

Views was cautiously optimistic about future relations with the *Auténticos*, it was equally positive about what it called Batista's recent 'change of attitude'. The author maintained that the reason for Batista's progressive turn was the economic crisis in Cuba: rising unemployment and high prices for consumer goods, coupled with failure to implement many of the Three Year Plan initiatives, had damaged Batista's populist pretensions. 'Batista', the article continued, 'seems to remember the lesson taught by Machado's fall and is striking out in a new direction'. The article pointed out that throughout 1938 the sugar oligarchy and Francoist/Falangist forces were more hostile to Batista.⁴⁹

There are two reasons why a 'unity party' was not formed. First, because of the long-standing antipathy between the communists and the *auténticos*. A second reason was that Batista did not permit the *auténticos* to regroup in Cuba. Batista's main political competition was Grau, not the CP, and the communists were easier to control than were the *auténticos*. Provided Batista kept the *auténticos* organisationally off balance until elections could be scheduled, and provided he could maintain the image of a social reformer, he would hold the political initiative.⁵⁰ By permitting the UR to function legally, while still keeping Grau in Miami, Batista drew one faction of the mass movement closer to him, while keeping the more popular *auténticos* at bay.⁵¹

At the end of September 1938, much to the dismay of the upper classes, Batista legalised the Communist Party. The signs that Batista was considering this move had been evident for some time. As early as 15 January 1938 Batista had met with two members of the party's politburo, Blas Roca and Joaquín Ordoqui. Following the meeting, Batista declared that the CP would receive the same legal protection as all legally recognised political groups. The colonel reiterated his view that 'extremist tendencies' were 'fatal for Cuba', but he emphasised that all social classes comprised 'the people', and since the party represented a section of public opinion, it should be permitted to participate in drafting a new constitution. After stating that he disagreed with the Communists on

⁴⁹ This point is supported by the British Embassy: see Grant Watson to Viscount Halifax, Havana, 26 May 1938. FO/A/4618/262/14 No. 52.

⁵⁰ From 1937 to 1939 the *auténticos* were sharply divided along both political and personal lines. Gradually, in response to their defeat and isolation after 1935, two wings emerged: the 'realists', who wanted to compromise with Batista in order to become legal and participate in the up-coming elections, and the 'revolutionaries', who thought that militant and even armed action was the only way to defeat Batista. Grau was vigorously courted by both sides, but he seems always to have been a 'realist'. On these events see Rubén de León, *El origen del mal: Cuba, su ejemplo* (Miami, 1964), pp. 328–36. For the acts of violence and police raids against the PRC-A see Mr Grant Watson to Mr Eden, Havana, 18 November 1937. FO/A/8603/65/14 No. 168.

⁵¹ On these events see Raúl Roa García, *15 años después* (La Habana, 1950), p. 219.

fundamental issues, Batista said he believed Roca and Ordoqui when they committed the party to obey the laws of Cuba.⁵²

Batista's next move was equally shocking for traditional politicians. After obstructing union organisation for years, Batista permitted 1,500 delegates to attend the founding meeting of the Confederation of Cuban Workers (CTC) in January 1939. This move also encouraged the Communists in their belief that Batista was moving to the left. As with the legalisation of the Communist Party, there were prior indications that Batista was open to alliances with the unions. The colonel's willingness to entertain this initiative was dictated by his need to build inroads into the mass movement before the coming elections in November 1939.⁵³ From the Communist perspective, Batista's change of direction was another indication of his 'progressive' position. It was indeed a striking change in Cuban politics to see a legal mass meeting presided over by communists and international observers. Lázaro Peña, an Afro-Cuban tobacco worker and Communist was elected as the CTC General Secretary.⁵⁴ Guests of honour at the congress included the Secretary of Labour, J. M. Portuondo Domenech, both Vincente Lombardo Toledano and Fidel Velázquez from the Mexican Confederation of Workers (CTM) and Joseph Kowner from the American Confederation of Industrial Organizations (CIO).⁵⁵ From its very beginning the CTC was a state-sponsored union.

The Mexican connection to the CTC meeting was no casual act of solidarity, and it is another illustration of how Batista engineered events. In early 1938 the Mexican government, through its Chargé d'Affaires in Havana, actively supported CTM organisers in Cuba. The CTM provided money and organisational experience for the struggling Cuban union movement. The objective of the Mexican action was to secure influence in the oil distributing and refining industry in Cuba. The Mexican government, under the populist and nationalist Lázaro Cárdenas, was preparing for a major conflict with the United States over the nationalisation of the oil industry in that country. Since Mexico had limited refining capability, any influence the Mexicans could gain within that strategic sector could be vital in any future confrontation with the USA. In exchange for CTM assistance, Cuban unions sent workers to Mexico to study organisational strategy. Initially, the Cuban government

⁵² *Diario de la Marina*, 16 September 1938, p. 1; Mr Buxton to Viscount Halifax, Havana, 22 September 1938. FO/A/7743/262/14, No. 93.

⁵³ García Montes and Alonso Ávila, *Historia del Partido Comunista de Cuba*, pp. 234–7; Mario Riera Hernández, *Historial obrero cubano, 1574–1965* (Miami, 1965), pp. 122–3.

⁵⁴ Sims, 'Cuba', p. 221.

⁵⁵ R. A. Martínez, 'The Latin American Significance of the Cuban Democratic Upsurge', *World News and Views*, vol. 19, no. 18 (April 1939), p. 367; Evelio Tellería Toca, *Congresos obreros en Cuba* (La Habana, 1973), p. 302.

did not look kindly on what they regarded as Mexican interference in Cuba's internal affairs. For months Cuba had rejected repeated requests by CTM leader Lombardo Toledano to visit Cuba. In April 1938 they issued a diplomatic protest to the Mexican government, and the Cuban police detained Cuban workers returning from Mexico.

By late 1938 the situation had changed considerably. With the Three Year Plan seriously behind schedule, and with political tensions among Cuban political leaders reaching serious proportions because of the upcoming elections, Batista was anxious to raise his political profile as a social reformer. With this in mind, in October 1938 he accepted an invitation by the Mexican government to visit that country in January 1939. This gesture was frowned upon by the Cuban oligarchy. With tensions between the USA and Mexico at a high point because of the recent nationalisation of the Mexican oil industry, and with Batista promoting the idea that Cuba should expand trade with Mexico to help diminish Cuban dependence on the USA, Batista's Mexican visit was seen by conservatives as a deliberate snub to the USA. Furthermore, traditional politicians were still angry that Batista had legalised the Communist Party in September, though he assured the conservative, anti-Mexican and pro-Francoist editor of the *Diario de la Marina*, Pepín Rivero, that communism would not be given a free hand in Cuba.⁵⁶ Still, in replying to the Mexican invitation, which promised to show the Cuban military leader 'the undisputed reality of revolutionary Mexico, where the protection of the majorities rules' and 'where nationalism has been adopted as the basis of constitutional aims', Batista expressed his 'respectful admiration and sincere sympathy' for President Lázaro Cárdenas and his government.⁵⁷ This kind of statement made the Cuban elite very nervous about the colonel's political intentions. This was also the context in which Batista permitted the formation of the CTC.

Meanwhile, Batista was sensible enough to plan a visit to the United States before he went to Mexico. His objective was to negotiate a lower duty on Cuban sugar. He went to the USA on 29 October and returned to Havana on 25 November. He failed to secure a lower duty on Cuban sugar, but he hinted that a new reciprocity treaty was in the works and he further suggested that Cuba would gain important concessions from the USA. Nothing concrete came from Batista's visit to the USA, except that his political profile both within Cuba and abroad was raised.⁵⁸ The mass

⁵⁶ Mr Grant Watson to Viscount Halifax, Havana, 26 May 1938. FO/A/4618/262/14 No. 52.

⁵⁷ Batista quoted in Mr Grant Watson to Viscount Halifax, Havana, 1 November 1938. FO/A/9688/8684/14 No. 118 (confidential).

⁵⁸ Gellman, *Roosevelt and Batista*, pp. 167–8.

rally organised by the government to welcome Batista back to Cuba included 3,000 Communists who, waving red flags and holding clenched fists in the air, chanted 'democracy! democracy!'. By playing off all sides against each other, wrote Grant Watson of the British Embassy, 'it is impossible to foretell whether as a presidential candidate he will seek to lead the forces of the "Centre" or those of the "Left". This is the great problem at the moment'.⁵⁹

Sure enough, after the Commander-in-Chief's return from Mexico, the Cuban political class did indeed have a problem on their hands. Even before his return on 16 February 1939, rumours about the colonel's rather 'intemperate' speeches reached Havana. On one occasion Batista spoke about the idea of nationalising the Cuban sugar industry. At a rally of 100,000 people in Mexico City the Cuban leader proclaimed his support for Republican Spain and for a continent-wide anti-fascist front. Back in Havana, the Minister of Labour, Lázaro Peña from the CTC, and Blas Roca, Secretary General of the Cuban Communist Party, welcomed Batista home: the list of speakers also included the President of Cuba, Laredo Bru.⁶⁰

Shortly after the Havana rally, however, Batista tried to reassure the conservative elements by saying 'Mexico has not changed me' and that 'capital will have all the guarantees which it needs and the workers will have the justice which they claim'. He reminded people that his political philosophy was to promote balance and harmony between capital and labour; his only intention was to form a united force called the 'Cuban people'.⁶¹ Such reassurances did little good, but since it was clear to all that the elections were Batista's to win, Cuban leaders had little choice but to take sides in a political battle that would greatly determine the environment in which they would do business.

When congressional elections were finally held – on 15 November 1939 – political alignments did not correspond to ideological differences between left and right. Rather, two electoral coalitions emerged in the course of 1939, each with its own broad vision of how to strengthen the Cuban state after the revolution of 1933. What divided politicians between 1939 and 1940 was not whether the Cuban state needed strengthening, but who would accomplish this task and what methods they would use. What united them – including the Communists – was their common desire to

⁵⁹ Mr Grant Watson to Viscount Halifax, Havana, 1 December 1938. FO/A/9688/8684/14 No. 118 (confidential).

⁶⁰ William Z. Foster, 'The Congress of the CP of Cuba', *World News and Views*, vol. 19, no. 7 (February 1939), p. 147; Mr Grant Watson to Viscount Halifax, Havana, 4 March 1939. FO/2109/1586/14 No. 28 (confidential).

⁶¹ Mr Grant Watson to Viscount Halifax, Havana, 4 March 1939. FO/2109/1586/14 No. 28 (confidential).

strengthen the capitalist state by mobilising the population in support of state-sponsored reform. One coalition believed that civil authority, as opposed to Batista's military power, should be strengthened and institutionalised. The other group was made up of parties and individuals who claimed that they too wanted to strengthen civil power, yet they argued that Batista was the best guarantor of civil and popular power. The pro-civil authority coalition included the Republican Action Party of Miguel Mariano Gómez, the Democratic Republican Party led by the old conservative caudillo Mario Menocal, the ABC, represented by Dr Joaquín Saénz, and the *auténticos*, led by Ramón Grau San Martín. The *batistiano* group included the Liberal Party, the Unión Nacionalista, the Partido Realista and the Communist Party. Both coalitions spoke out firmly for democracy. In a world nearing a state of war between the forces of dictatorship and democracy, and with Cuba in the United States' backyard, no Cuban political leader could afford to be labelled 'anti-democratic'. Indeed, promoting democracy and strengthening the state were seen as the same thing and no political group could strengthen the Cuban state without appealing for mass support. The congressional elections were generally considered to be fair, and Batista's group came out the loser, with 35 seats to Grau's 41. Following the defeat of his coalition, Batista graciously accepted the results. Then, on 6 December 1939, Batista announced his candidacy for president and he promised to resign from his post as army commander.

The central importance of the elections of late 1939, the presidential elections of 1940, and the Constitutional Convention of 1940, was that they represented the culmination of seven years of authoritarian rule. These events signified a new phase in the relationship between the state and society in Cuba. It is true that Batista was still the strongman of Cuba: in many ways Batista was the issue in both elections. When people spoke about military power versus civilian authority, they were speaking about Batista. At the same time, everyone knew that open military rule was no longer possible in Cuba. The *clases populares* now counted for something, and the political problem facing all groups was how to mobilise and control mass support. Consequently, in his struggle to retake state power by political means, the colonel approached the Communist Party as the one group from the *clases populares* willing to support him.

Cubans concerned about the political process were very aware of this change. The British Embassy reported that 'though Colonel Batista has lost his controlling influence over Congress, and though the economic bodies in Cuba oppose his radical policies, he is still a social leader, that is to say, a leader of the masses, and with their support, and with his control over the army, he has the power, if he cared to exert it, to sweep

aside Congress and make himself president'.⁶² The internal correspondence of the Cuba Cane Sugar Company re-inforces the British view. One company analysis, written in September 1939, noted that while Cuban political opinion was divided between '*civilistas*' and '*militaristas*', the 'vast majority' of the population was 'indifferent to the political process'. Then, contradicting itself, the report said that 'public opinion in Cuba is openly anti-militarist, which has usurped civilian aspirations for power'. This situation, the company letter went on to say, was bad for the sugar industry, and that 'somehow the sugar industry will have to find its way through this inexplicable confusion that constitutes Cuban politics today'.⁶³

By March 1940, the American Ambassador in Cuba, George Messersmith, was cautiously optimistic about what he viewed as a growing conservative trend in Batista's camp. He drew this conclusion because the conservative caudillo Mario Menocal decided to back Batista for President. A few months later Messersmith was less optimistic. Writing to Undersecretary for State Sumner Welles, the Ambassador said 'it doesn't make much difference who will be elected President on July 14th'. Grau, in Messersmith's estimation, while far less anti-American than in 1933, was too weak and indecisive to avoid 'the worst influences around him ... and he would be a slender reed on which to lean'. Batista, meanwhile, was another problem.

The chances are that Batista will be elected, or at least in some way become president of Cuba. He is a curious individual and difficult to analyse... In his conversations with me he has pretended great friendship for us and an understanding for the need for the closest co-operation in every respect. Basically, I do not believe that he likes us or ever will. He has been difficult to deal with while ruling from behind the scenes, and my guess is that the chances are that he will be much more difficult to deal with once he is president.⁶⁴

The Communists, Messersmith reasoned, were of no great concern because they were under Batista's control. Batista won the presidential election, with 800,000 votes to Grau's 575,000. Despite these worries, however, from Washington's perspective the successful completion of both elections gave the USA its long sought objective of a stable and quiet Cuba. They could even describe the country as 'democratic', something even Washington had been hard-pressed to do between 1933 and 1939.

⁶² Mr Grant Watson to Viscount Halifax, Havana, 5 April 1939. FO/A/2969/1586/14 No. 43.

⁶³ Carta, 'Situación política', 18 September 1939, Braga Collection, Box 33, File: Cuba, Political Conditions.

⁶⁴ George Messersmith to Undersecretary of State Sumner Welles, (personal and confidential), Havana, 12 July 1940. Records of the United States Department of State, 1930-1944, 711/379.

Conclusion

In a recent article in this journal, Alan Knight described Batista in the 1930s as a ‘slippery populist’.⁶⁵ This description is an apt one and most of the writing on Batista for this period shares this view. What this article has attempted is to explain why the Cuban leader was so ‘slippery’. A couple of points are worth emphasising. First, Batista emerged at a time when politicians were compelled to adapt their political practice and discourse to the realities of mass mobilisation. Thoughtful observers of the Cuban scene felt that something important had happened after 1933. As early as January 1934 Grant Watson of the British Embassy described the scene at Havana harbour as Grau went into exile:

A crowd of his adherents gathered at the wharf and, as the vessel steamed down the harbour, they ran along the sides. They belonged to the poorer classes and were very enthusiastic. They regarded the impractical, consumptive doctor as their champion. He had been in office for only four and a half months, and yet he made reforms, some of which will last. Students of Cuban history will remember his term because a great change came over Cuba. The rule of the sugar magnates was shaken, at any rate, for the present – perhaps for ever.⁶⁶

Watson’s insight was remarkable given that few people appreciated the historical significance of the final chaotic months of 1933. Another person who sensed that a ‘great change’ had come over Cuba was Fulgencio Batista.

Which leads to the second point worthy of emphasis. The tendency of historians – especially in light of the revolution of 1959 – to view Batista solely as a counterrevolutionary figure has obscured the reasons behind his populist phase of 1937–40. Batista saw himself as a leader of the revolution of 1933, and though we can certainly dispute his revolutionary credentials, we should not underestimate the fact that Batista was a *product* of revolutionary upheaval. Batista’s understanding that ‘a great change came over Cuba’ helps explain why he was so skilful at recruiting allies and satisfying their concerns while preparing the conditions for his rise to the presidency in 1940. For Batista, a return to pre-1933 conditions was unacceptable:

There has been a profound revolution in Cuba, with its consequent social commotions, during the last four years. That revolution was conceived and materialised within the army. Co-operation of civil elements followed, which was a result of social indiscipline. The revolution needed a figure at its head to assume responsibility. That is how it developed to me to embody the movement... In a situation where the national institutions are crumbling, in which there was almost

⁶⁵ Knight, ‘Populism and neo-populism’, p. 231.

⁶⁶ Mr Grant Watson to Sir John Simon, Havana, 29 January 1934. FO/A/1127/29/14 No. 13 (confidential).

a state of anarchy, the chief of the army established contact with civil factions to re-establish social discipline. This contact initiated the reconstructive tendency classified as civil-military... This co-operation of civil and military elements, which originated in that chaotic state, succeeded in re-establishing discipline in the country, making elections, and the consequent reestablishment of normality possible.⁶⁷

What was remarkable about the early Batista was how he at first emerged as an isolated and apparently subservient military figure, then, taking advantage of the popular nationalist sentiment, how he built alliances with sectors previously excluded from state politics. This explains why Batista made his alliance with the Communist Party and why he permitted the formation of the Cuban Confederation of Workers. At the same time, he managed to keep his main political competitor, Grau San Martín and the *auténticos*, as well as the sugar companies, off balance while he implemented his populist project. For the first time in Cuban history, important segments of the *clases populares* were incorporated, willingly or not, into the 'public domain' organised by the state. But this incorporation was not a one way street: working class Cubans had fought for years to have the state take their demands and rights seriously. Grau's short-lived government had tried to satisfy popular aspirations, but it would be Batista, not Grau, who would become the 'architect' of the Cuban state.

The importance of the 1940 consensus, as we know from subsequent history, did not lie in what it actually accomplished, but rather in what it promised and why those promises had to be made in the first place. After years of crisis and struggle, Cubans from all social classes *expected* and *demande*d that the state represent them. For a few years Batista skilfully adapted to this new reality. After 1944 a different kind of political crisis gripped Cuba. Throughout the late 1940s and 1950s political debate was fuelled by a widespread feeling that corrupt politicians had 'betrayed' and cynically manipulated the popular sentiments and expectations of 1933-40. Politicians were increasingly seen not just as parasites living off the institutions of state (this was nothing new to Cubans) but after 1940 they were also viewed as abusing a collective patrimony which belonged to the entire nation. In large measure this is what the struggles of the late 1940s and the 1950s were all about. The 'symmetrical edifice' Batista himself was so instrumental in building would crumble around him.

⁶⁷ Batista quoted in the *Havana Post*, 15 January 1937, pp. 1 and 7.