Historical Studies B-64

The Cuban Revolution, 1956-1971: A Self-Debate

Enrollment is open only to Harvard College undergraduates. This course has no prerequisites. While the professor cares deeply about the study of Cuba, this course is more about an approach to thinking and learning than it is about Cuba — even though you will surely learn a lot about Cuba. Readings, the course calendar, and course requirements are listed on the basic course handout. No pass/fail.

Purpose of course: This course should induce you to think like a historian and to think of the study of history as a form of inquiry and understanding. Historians often focus their work on a short period of time. They work with primary documents, such as private correspondence, government documents, the public speeches of politicians, and numbers, as well as with the memoirs some have written about the events under study. Historians often generate a secondary literature that features controversies about how to interpret the facts. We will study and discuss materials that represent each of these kinds of writing.

Focus of the course: The course will focus on a “transforming event” — the Cuban revolutionary war and the immediately following period of radical revolutionary rule. The study of the revolution has itself become a subject of controversy. Our aim will be to develop an understanding of the complexity of this revolutionary process and “of the way in which a variety of forces —economic, cultural, religious, political— have interacted with individual aspirations and with the deliberate efforts of individuals to control and shape events.” (The words in quotation marks are taken from the Core Curriculum Guidelines for Historical Studies B courses.)

Purpose of the lectures: Each lecture will present a self-contained interpretation about a body of evidence. The argument of each lecture will be contradicted by at least one other lecture (and some times by several lectures, each of which will present a different argument). The body of facts will not change much — what will differ the most will be the interpretations. Thus you will hear the professor’s voice but, in lectures, you will rarely hear what he thinks himself (if curious, jump ahead to the reading period assignment).

Nature of readings: There are several kinds of readings. The items assigned for week 1 (which recur in other weeks) are textbooks. The following items include only primary documents; you will read them as they were written or said by participants: Franqui, Guevara, Lockwood, Silverman, the second half of Harnecker, and the Fidel Castro speeches as well as his correspondence with Khrushchev. The following are memoirs written by two U.S. and one Soviet ambassador, some time after the events that they describe: Smith, Bonsal, and Alexeev. We will also read part of President Batista’s memoirs, the memoirs of former political prisoner
Jorge Valls, and part of the memoirs of a Cuban business executive (J. J. Domínguez). All others constitute secondary literature, that is, the interpretations that authors put on the evidence along with the evidence they use (a subcategory here: the Sutherland reading is semi-analytical, semi-memoir, semi-travel report). The authors of the several kinds of readings disagree among themselves.

Purpose of readings: To acquaint you in greater detail with important disagreements among participants and among scholars. Some disagreements in the readings parallel those presented in lectures; others add new dimensions. You will need to learn to work across the several kinds of readings. The readings are at times deliberately repetitive (this should enable you to read them quickly) in order to enable you to understand that thoughtful people can come to different conclusions on the basis of “the same set of facts.”

Purpose of films: To see and hear about the same matters that we will read and discuss. The PBS documentary is an overview of the entire period. “Memories of Underdevelopment” and “One Way or Another” are feature films made in Cuba. They affirm the revolution’s worth but explore the public and private ambiguities faced by ordinary people. “Nobody Listened” is a documentary focusing on political imprisonment in Cuba.

Purpose of general sections in lecture hall: To get you to do some section work with the professor. Some of these sessions will get you to use your imagination for analytical purposes. These sections will draw on the readings but they will draw mainly on your ability to “play the role” of being someone else.

Purpose of sections with Teaching Fellows: The Teaching Fellows will work with you to sort out the arguments presented in readings and in lectures and will help you connect the secondary literature to the primary documents, the films, and the memoirs.

Other sections with Domínguez: Domínguez will teach in every section in the course once during the semester.

Purpose of the papers: To get you to work with primary materials, to formulate alternative arguments about the same set of facts, and to induce you to use your imagination for analytical purposes. For the first paper, you should work mainly with declassified U.S. government documents and with once-private correspondence exchanged between Cuban rebels. For the second paper, you will have wider choice; in one option, you will work mainly with “raw” or “primary” numbers to assess whether the Soviet Union provided a subsidy to Cuba’s economy.

Purpose of the exams: To get you to synthesize your knowledge. The exams will ask you to draw from all of the materials in the course and to formulate alternative arguments.

Language of instruction: The professor will lecture in English. Some sections of the course will
be conducted in Spanish, with the remainder in English. Students are free to enroll in either
English- or Spanish-language sections.

**Spanish language** option: Students may enroll in a section taught in Spanish. Students in
Spanish Sections should 1) get the list that identifies several readings in Spanish (mainly primary
documents and letters); 2) buy the Sourcebook with readings in English and Spanish; 3) do not
buy the English-language books by Harnecker or the Selected Speeches of Fidel Castro.

Formal course requirements are identical for all sections of the course. In the Spanish Sections,
the instructor will speak in Spanish, several readings are in Spanish, and the questions on the
instructions for papers and on the hour test and final exam will be in Spanish. You may write
papers and exam answers in English or in Spanish. You will be encouraged (but not required) to
speak Spanish in these sections.

If you are in doubt about whether to enroll in a Spanish Section, turn to the description of course
requirements in Spanish at the end of the Spanish Section reading list. If you cannot read it with
ease, do **not** enroll in the Spanish Section. The Professor will say a few words in Spanish in
lecture; if you cannot understand him with ease, do **not** enroll in the Spanish Section.

**Core Curriculum:** Students may receive Foreign Cultures or Historical Studies B credit for this
course but not credit for both Core requirements. You may enroll in either English- or Spanish-
language sections for either Foreign Cultures or Historical Studies B credit. You are urged, but
not required, to enroll in Spanish sections if seeking Foreign Cultures credit.

**General Education:** The course meets two General Education requirements. It meets the
requirement for Societies of the World. It also fulfills the separate requirement that one of the
student’s eight General Education courses should engage substantially with Study of the Past.

**Government concentration:** The course counts as a Government course for concentrators in
Government at the same time that it meets Core Curriculum or General Education requirements
for such concentrators.

**History concentration:** The course counts as a History course for concentrators in History at the
same time that it meets Core Curriculum or General Education requirements for such
concentrators.

**Language Citation:** If enrolled in a Spanish language section, the course counts toward the
requirements for those who choose to earn a Language Citation.

This course will likely be omitted during 2010-2011.