

Breaking through the Cane-Curtain: The Cuban Revolution and the Emergence of New York's Radical Youth, 1961–1965

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INTRODUCTION

On 4 July 1963, only about nine months after the Cuban Missile Crisis, Premier Fidel Castro in his green beret and combat jacket defeated four American students at table tennis on Veradero Beach in Cuba. Reuters reported that it was a “surprise visit” by Castro to fifty-nine American students who were visiting the island despite the U.S. State Department’s travel regulations.¹ The trips, organized by the Student Committee for Travel to Cuba (SCTC) in 1963 and 1964, were groundbreaking events in the development of student radicalism in the sixties. The U.S. government and the media of the time paid special attention to those students by regarding their activities as marking the emergence of a New Left wing in the U.S.

The American sixties can never fully be understood unless the period is situated in the international context of the post-World War II era, including not only the Cold War relations between the First and Second Worlds but also the entangled web of post-colonial relations among all three worlds. The activities of the SCTC were organized as a publicity

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campaign of the Progressive Labor Movement (PLM) in New York City, which was a Maoist group that split from the Communist Party USA in the beginning of the sixties. This split not only reflected the international change of Communist leadership but also symbolized the generational shift of American radicalism from the Old Left to the New. The city of New York served as a site for intellectual, cultural, and political interactions that spurred this transformation and enabled the SCTC to send students to revolutionary Cuba. Cuba was a window to the Third World through which radical youths absorbed the rhetoric of anti-imperialism and national liberation. When it was incorporated into the American tradition of civil disobedience, the course for political developments on the streets in the latter half of the sixties was set.

Nevertheless, the movements of Third World-inspired New Leftists, including the PLM and the SCTC, have been neglected by research focused on youth activism in the sixties. The main reason for this is that those stories have never found a comfortable place in the prevailing narrative of the sixties, which is now called the “New Left Consensus.” Intellectuals of the anti-Vietnam War generation defensively reacted to the assault by conservatives in the eighties and the nineties that the New Left had had a destructive effect on the American political tradition. Ex-radical scholars, in many cases, veterans of the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), asserted their view of the sixties as an era of authentic American protest.² Among them, James Miller argues that the movement’s central idea “owed little to Marxism, anarchism or the mainstream liberalism of John F. Kennedy,” but was derived from “the tradition of civic republicanism that links Aristotle to John Dewey.” The American New Left was born not from such bastions of traditional leftism as New York or San Francisco but from Middle American soil.³ However, the existential humanism represented in the SDS’s founding manifesto, *The Port Huron Statement* (1962), was replaced by violent irrational turbulence in the latter half of the sixties. In Todd Gitlin’s words, advocacy for Third World national liberation was a “romance with the other side” that caused an increased isolation of white liberals and an excess of militancy.⁴ Thus, in the New Left Consensus, the influence of Third World struggles on American youths’ political activities is directly linked to the unfortunate demise of the movement and largely neglected in the conventional accounts.

This view of “the good sixties” versus “the bad sixties” has recently been challenged by younger scholars, notably those who study African-

American liberation movements. Robin D. G. Kelley accuses it of being a “neo-enlightenment” view blind to the radical humanist traditions and dismissive of what is typically labeled “identity politics.”⁵ In “Black Like Mao,” Kelley, with Betsy Esch, opens a new horizon for understanding the impact of non-European political discourse on the movement and shifts scholarly attention to the latter half of the sixties and early seventies.⁶ In the same fashion, Cynthia Young depicts the formation of what she calls “the U.S. Third World Left” by tracing the developments of African-American cultural politics and such organizations as the Third World Newsreel and the Puerto Rican Young Lords Party.⁷ As Young argues, the term “Third World” became “a shorthand for leftists of color in the U.S. signifying their opposition to a particular economic and racial world order” at the end of the decade.⁸ Nevertheless, there is no legitimate rationale for historians to limit their subjects to “leftists of color” when exploring the historical process in which the peculiar conditions of American Third World movements developed.

The term “Third World” was less racially confined in the early sixties United States. Historian Van Gosse pays special attention to revolutionary Cuba for inciting American radicalism in the sixties. In *Where the Boys Are*, Gosse “rediscovered” the “forgotten” history of the Fair Play for Cuba Committee (FPCC), an organization of both white and non-white liberal journalists and intellectuals who showed their solidarity with the Cuban Revolution from 1961 to 1963. Although the FPCC included some influential figures of the New Left movement, such as LeRoi Jones and C. Wright Mills, it was an adult organization that belonged to the late-fifties liberal intellectual circle. Gosse points out that the “quest for solidarity” was a “root impulse” of the New Left and that was already seen in the activities of the FPCC.⁹ But he does not provide a detailed analysis of student radicalism in relation to the Cuban Revolution, including the SCTC, except to treat the legacy of the FPCC as an open-ended beginning that led to the activities of the Committee in Solidarity with the People in El Salvador, of which he was a “comrade” from the late seventies. Therein lies a gap between historical accounts of the liberal activities of the FPCC and the upheaval of American radicalism in the latter half of the sixties, which clearly became pro-Third World in its rhetoric in terms of political revolution, racial liberation, and anti-imperialism.

It was not the early SDSers in the Midwest but members of the PLM and the SCTC in New York who inherited the ideas of the FPCC and

provided students with a political platform of anti-war and racial liberation movements. With the success of its Cuba trips and anti-War mobilization in 1964, however, the PLM transformed itself into a Party (PLP) with a tight organizational structure. Then it went underground, in accordance with its original intention, as early as 1965. The political commentator Paul Berman points out that the PLP became “the antithesis of every rebellious instinct of the SDS.”¹⁰ This rivalry is a root cause of the lack of historical accounts covering the early PLP and its activities. Recently, Leigh David Benin has investigated the PLP’s garment worker organizing effort in New York in the late sixties. In many ways, his work provides a very valuable counter-narrative to the SDS-centered history of the American sixties, but the activities of the SCTC was only mentioned as prehistory for the PLP’s main activities of labor organization.¹¹

This paper provides an alternative view of sixties radicalism based on an incorporation of the Third World in conceptualizing American radicalism. The core members of the PLM believed they were following a Maoist style of revolution; however, the majority of students who joined the SCTC were far from militant. Nevertheless, they were still very sensitive to the self-determination of oppressed peoples, including blacks in the South and farmers in Vietnam. These were the student radicals who came to understand the structure of oppression and projected it in protest movements by using a Third World lexicon. By carefully reading organizational materials, personal accounts, newspaper coverage, and congressional reports, this paper reveals the process by which American youths imported and translated the idea of anti-imperialism and national liberation to forge a rhetoric of dissent that launched an era of mass mobilization.

I. “BREAKING THROUGH THE CANE-CURTAIN”: THE STUDENT TRIP TO CUBA IN 1963

On 26 June 1963, American students, who had left New York’s Idlewild International Airport for Europe en route to Cuba the day before, issued a statement to the American press. It declared that students and recent college graduates across the nation from institutions including Columbia University, New York University, the City College of New York, Harvard University, Wesleyan College, the University of Indiana, the University of Michigan, the University of North Carolina, the University of California, San Francisco State College, and Oakland City

College, had accepted an invitation from the Cuban Federation of Universities for an all-expense paid trip to “see and evaluate Cuba for themselves.” It also noted that they expected to meet Castro and Robert Williams, an African-American exile in Havana, while it emphasized the “non-political” nature of the trip. Then it referred to the State Department’s travel regulation that prohibited unauthorized trips to Cuba and claimed that “freedom to travel was a basic American right.”¹² The regulation made the students spend five days flying from New York through London, then on to Paris, Prague, Ireland, Newfoundland, and finally Cuba, an island that was only ninety miles away from Florida. In another statement issued in Prague, members of the group declared, “We intend to break through the Cane-Curtain imposed by our State Department to limit travel to Cuba. A free, democratic society need have no fear from the truth.”¹³

This regulation, which was referred to as “the travel ban,” was issued in December 1960 in the form of a State Department notice to the press, based on Section 215 of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1952. Because it was issued and enacted along with the inauguration of a new president, the ban symbolized John F. Kennedy’s stark policy of non-tolerance toward the Cuban Revolution. Since its enactment, only journalists and government officials were authorized to visit Cuba.¹⁴ The State Department occasionally warned that students who were “willfully and knowingly disobeying the law” would be punished with a five thousand dollar fine or a sentence of five years imprisonment.¹⁵ Yet, in the face of this open defiance of the ban, an officer generously commented that the State Department hoped the students would have an opportunity for “frank exchange with Cuban students.”¹⁶

The members of the group consisted of men and women mostly in their twenties, including African-Americans, Asian-Americans, and Puerto Ricans. As they claimed that they were not the “tools of any ideological bloc” nor were they “even in ideological agreement” among themselves, the majority of them did not belong to any particular political organizations.¹⁷ Phillip Abbott Luce, a spokesperson for the group, later recalled that most participants were “independent leftists” who were even ignorant of “the underlying reasons for the trip and the identity of the real organizers.”¹⁸

Some students were obviously disappointed by what they saw in Cuba. Among them, Clinton M. Jenkins, a twenty-year-old student from Louisiana, said to a reporter on his return in Madrid on August 27, “I

don't know how they lived before in Cuba, but I am sure the people of Cuba never lived worse than they do now" after which he shaved the beard that he had grown in imitation of Castro.¹⁹ Yet the majority of the students had a positive impression of the Cuban Revolution. Jose Maria Lima, a Puerto Rican student from UC Berkeley, said that nearly all the students realized that "everything which the North American newspapers say about the Cuban Revolution is false and distorted."²⁰ Due to the difficulties of arranging a return flight home, their stay lasted two months in Cuba. Nevertheless, the Cuban government loyally hosted the travelers by planning visits to hospitals, factories, schools, and universities to talk with people and revolutionary leaders including Castro and Che Guevara.

An unfortunate accident during the trip made these students even more critical of the U.S. government. On 15 July, Hector Warren Hill, a twenty-nine-year-old black artist studying at the Brooklyn Museum, accidentally drowned in the pool of the Versailles Motel in Santiago. In Luce's words, Hill joined the trip:

not because he was a Communist, but because he wanted to see what was happening to the children of Cuba . . . He wanted to carry their essence back to his children in the U.S.A. and show them that Cuban children were really not much different from us.²¹

While American newspapers reported that the Cuban government rejected a generous American plan to transport his body back to the U.S., the students learned that it was the American government that had turned down a Cuban offer and forced the Cuban Red Cross plane carrying his remains to land at a military base in Florida. They were further irritated by the fact that U.S. officials refused to release the casket and ship it to New York immediately. Black journalists raised the needed money and a Catholic priest named Flex McGowan persuaded the military to transport the remains to New York.²² American officials' "callous" behavior toward a fellow American citizen in this affair only added to the travelers' anti-U.S. government sentiments.²³

Due to the controversial nature of the State Department's travel regulation and the adventurous activities of the youth, American newspapers reported the groups' trip to Cuba almost every day and some even supported the students' claim that American citizens have the right to free travel. Initially the *New York Times*, for instance, comments in an editorial that, although the students were "wrong" to break the State

Department regulation, the ban itself would “make for even more dangerous anti-American propaganda and also put a romantic flavor on the idea of going to Cuba.” It also urged readers to “trust intelligent adults” to find out that the Cuban Revolution was “mostly bad” and concluded with Kennedy’s remarks in Berlin on 26 June: “freedom has many difficulties and democracy is not perfect, but we have never had to put a wall to keep our people in, to prevent them from leaving us.”²⁴ Yet the *Los Angeles Times* was explicitly critical of the students, calling them “gullible” and saying they were “recruited as tools to [be] used by Red propaganda agents.”²⁵ Thus the question of citizenship and basic rights of travel tended to be easily reduced to a Cold War dichotomy which unequivocally portrayed those who showed their sympathy to the other side as Communist enemies.

II. CONFRONTATIONS WITH CONSERVATIVES

The U.S. Congress and the administration immediately assumed a simple but forceful conservative stance. As early as 4 July, Edwin E. Willis, chairman of the House Un-American Activities Committee, and Rep. William C. Cramer named the Student Committee on Travel to Cuba as the organization responsible for the trip and identified it as an offshoot of a Communist front group. Cramer criticized the Kennedy administration’s “milk-toast position” on Cuba and attacked the “fuzzy headed misconception” of the State Department.²⁶ President Kennedy responded at a press conference held on 1 August, complaining that some students who visited Cuba might be “just young men and women who were interested in broadening their horizons,” but they needed to be more concerned about “the security and foreign policy objectives” of the U.S. He noted that their passports would be revoked and that further steps would be considered in reference to some of the leadership that seemed to the President to be “definitely Communist.”²⁷ Now that the President took a tough stance on the travelers’ actions, HUAC displayed no hesitation in calling those “Communist” leaders to public hearings. On their arrival at Idlewild Airport, ten students, including Luce, were served subpoenas to appear before the committee in Washington on 12 and 13 September 1963.

The purpose of the hearings was to investigate whether the U.S. needed to consider further legislation to tighten the State Department’s regulation banning travel to Cuba. But the real aim was to prove that

these leaders were Communists and that anti-American activities by the Cuban government had penetrated U.S. society. With the help of an informant in the travel group, the committee identified twelve members of the Progressive Labor Movement in New York as ringleaders. For many of the participants and supporters, the hearing was their first confrontation with conservatives at the national level, an experience which led them to identify themselves as a new radical leftist force. The hearings became a turbulent affair during which police forcefully ejected 31 supporters of the trip. Most of them were students who conducted sit-ins outside the hearing room demanding seats inside, while fifteen American Nazi party members were granted front row seats. Some screamed, "Fascists!" and "racists!" and were subsequently handcuffed and ironically put in the pressroom. In the caucus room, about three hundred in the audience stood on chairs to observe the hearings.²⁸ This atmosphere was reminiscent of "Black Friday" in San Francisco on 13 May 1960, which constituted the first massive confrontation between citizens and HUAC.

The students who appeared before the committee refused to answer questions regarding other members by appealing to their rights under the First and Fifth Amendments to the Constitution, but they did proceed to eloquently tell their own stories evoking traditional American values. Levi Lee Laub, a 24-year-old student at Columbia College, was a leader and recruiter of the SCTC. Laub joined the PLM right after the Cuban Missile Crisis and founded a study group named the Progressive Labor Club at Columbia. Then he started a nationwide recruitment for the trip. *The Golden Gater*, a student newspaper at San Francisco State College, reported on 3 May 1963 that he "spoke to a jammed classroom" about the one-month trip to Cuba.²⁹ At the hearings, Laub claimed that he had been participating in a demonstration against the "ridiculous" state regulations "in a very old American tradition of civil disobedience."³⁰ On the next day, Phillip Luce insisted that his understanding was that the State Department travel ban was a "public notice, not a law" and asserted, "If there was a law, which there is not, I believe along with Thoreau, Emerson, and other people throughout American history that certain rules and regulations must be broken."³¹ The evocation of tradition was thus an effective tactic for these student actors to contextualize their movement in a national narrative.

The students also connected their activities to the Civil Rights movement in the South. Catherine Jo Prensky, a student at the City College

of New York, explained why she joined the PLM: "Socialism is the way to end racism, and under socialism we could have Congressmen and Representatives that are truly representative of the people."³² Wendie Suzuko Nakashima, 23-year-old CCNY student, was very conscious of her own ethnic background, which was a source of her political awareness. Asked her birthplace, Nakashima replied that she did not know the exact location in California because she was "thrown into these concentration camps" with her parents and "the rest of the yellow people and the Japanese people." Then she criticized the U.S. policy in Vietnam by showing her strong identification with "my people in Asia."³³

The fire of confrontation between the travelers and conservative politicians soon ignited activism on the streets of New York. On 15 September 1963, the SCTC organized a rally at the Town Hall on West 43rd Street. Cuban exiles called for a demonstration against the rally, where more than one hundred policemen wearing steel helmets controlled the crowd of approximately 3,000 anti-Castro demonstrators and 1,400 supporters of the student trip to Cuba. When the SCTC members ejected some thirty anti-Castro sympathizers from the Hall, there were skirmishes in which a few members of the Anti-Castro Cuban Student Directorate were injured.³⁴ Facing the hostility of conservatives and the anti-Castro groups, the Cuba travelers and supporters came to understand that they were a group of new radical agents for social change. Yet even though the SCTC presented their trip as a traditional display of civil disobedience, these radicals came to be labeled as Communists because of the existence of their supporting organization, the PLM.

III. THE EMERGENCE OF A NEW COMMUNIST AMERICAN LEFT WING

A series of incidents on Capitol Hill and in Manhattan stirred further curiosity about the identity of the "real organizers" of the trip. On 14 September 1963, the *New York Times* ran an interview article about the leadership of the PLM, which was entitled "A New Left Wing Emerging in the U.S." Although the Students for Democratic Society had already been founded in June 1962, at Port Huron, Michigan, its image of liberal social reform with the idea of participatory democracy did not yet constitute the definition of American New Left. The article reported that the Progressive Labor Movement, whose views "parallel many of those of the Chinese Communists," had more than 1,000 members including a few hundred blacks and 6,500 readers for its monthly *Progressive Labor*,

published since January of 1962.³⁵ What appeared to be a New Left to the public eye was a product of the sea change in the international political situation and the situation in the U.S. as well.

The international schism in the Communist world, which originated with the denunciation of Stalin by Khrushchev at the 20th Party Congress in 1956, intensified around 1960 and resulted in transfers of power between generations of Communists across the globe. American Communists were no exception in that a new political wing split off from the CPUSA. The party was already weary after the era of McCarthyism and had turned itself into a "defense organization." Younger generations of Marxists-Leninists had come to complain that the CPUSA followed mainstream politics by embracing the idea of class collaboration for social reform and "peaceful coexistence" in the world. In 1959, after their defeat in a CPUSA committee member election, Milt Rosen, a forty-year-old labor leader of the CPUSA, and Mort Sheer, a forty-year-old CP organizer in Buffalo, New York, created a faction that sought to be identical to the "Albanian line." At the time of the Sino-Soviet split in the late fifties, Albania, a small Communist country in Europe, broke with Soviet Russia and stood with the People's Republic of China. When Rosen and others were expelled from the CPUSA in 1961, they suddenly found similar Communist defectors in the Western world, including Belgium, New Zealand, France, Italy, Australia, England, and Canada.³⁶

In June of 1962, the PL held its first nationwide conference with "more than 50 delegates from Progressive Labor groups in 11 cities" at the Hotel Diplomat in New York. Milt Rosen declared that "The new world relationship of forces, favoring socialism, national and colonial liberation, and peace, has not fundamentally altered the basic characteristics of U.S. imperialism." But they decided that they would "not be stampeded into the party stage" until they achieved "three fundamental prerequisites," including the development of a revolutionary program, the organizing of new forces with public acknowledgement, and the development of leaders "capable of guiding all aspects of political development."³⁷ The delegates elected Rosen chairman and Scheer vice-chairman. In September they promoted the first action program that was to rebuild the national labor movement on the basis of "a Negro-Labor Alliance" with the unity of the unemployed "6,000,000" and indigent "77,000,000" workers.³⁸

The ideological position of the PLM was outlined in its pamphlet, *Road to Revolution*. The PLM leadership repeatedly criticized the

CPUSA's revisionism, which it denounced as "an evolutionary path to socialism" based upon "American exceptionalism," a concept which qualified that development of capitalism in the U.S. was unique enough to reject revolutionary change.³⁹ The CPUSA was "a hopeless apologist for imperialism" because it abandoned "the central theory of Leninism," stated as "the continuous revolutionary process" and was engaged in Khrushchev's "peaceful co-existence" that had led to the cruel treatment of the people of Hungary, Albania, and Cuba since the late fifties.⁴⁰

The PLM leaders instead turned to the Chinese Communist Party as a leader of Marxist international revolutionary struggle. Philip Luce later ridiculed the PLM's blunt advocacy of Maoism and cynically called the group "White Chinese."⁴¹ Praising the role that the Chinese government had played in Third World politics since the Bandung Conference in 1955, the PLM frequently quoted remarks and statements made by the Chinese government and echoed its argument on colonial struggles, declaring that:

the anti-imperialist struggle of the people of Asia and Latin America is definitely not merely a matter of regional significance, but one of overall importance for the whole cause of proletarian world revolution.⁴²

The PLM saw the black liberation movement at home as part of a global Third World struggle against U.S. imperialism. It pointed out that the movements initiated by the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee in the South and the Freedom Now movement in the North called forth a new stage that began questioning the two-party system and re-evaluating non-violent tactics in favor of "armed self-defense." Yet the PLM's position was very clear that those movements should be treated as class struggles. In this regard, they were puzzled about the emergence of the Black Muslims' principle of separatism, even though it had "developed the idea of Negro identity and dignity" and could be favorably compared to the Chinese Revolution. The PLM claimed that the Cuban Revolution was successful because it was "led by Negro and white" and insisted that the Chinese people were the advocate of "the unity of all oppressed peoples regardless of color as the means to destroy imperialism internationally."⁴³

Nevertheless, the PLM was an organization less for theoretical analysis than for militant revolutionary actions. In early 1963, some members went to Kentucky to start organizing local coal miners, which was unsuccessful because their idea of armed struggle was too militant for those

workers. On the other hand, an effective campaign was carried out in the urban setting of New York City beginning in the summer of 1963. The PLM launched a campaign for the candidacy of Bill Epton for city councilman as their “first step in the long march to political power.” Epton was a thirty-one-year-old electrical worker and a former shop chairman of Local 431 of the International Union of Electrical Workers.⁴⁴ He opened a new office on Lenox Avenue and 127th Street in Harlem and started organizing the residents. Although Epton could not get enough signatures to become a candidate, he established his leadership in the area by promoting rent strikes for poor residents, especially Puerto Ricans, most of whom were not registered voters.⁴⁵

The students’ trip to Cuba was another effective way for the PLM to get considerable publicity for the organization. In the fall of 1962, Fred Jerome, who had spent months in Cuba in 1960 as a member of a CP youth front, Advance, approached the Cubans and started planning a trip for December 1962, with funding from the Cuban government. The PLM immediately set up a coordinating committee with Levi Laub as their public leader. The originally scheduled December trip was postponed because the Canadian government would not allow a Cuban plane to land at one of its airports. In the spring of 1963, Philip Luce, an editor of *Rights*, the magazine of the Emergency Civil Liberties Union, joined this Communist New Left circle. Laub approached Luce and told him that LeRoi Jones would elaborate the proposed trip to Luce. Luce was struck with the “brashness and boldness of the idea.” Since the Revolution, he considered himself a “Fidelista” and was “chock-full of romantic images about the country and the Revolution,” even though he did not share the ideological path of communist development.⁴⁶

The ideas of “Yankee Fidelista” and “fair play” were clearly elaborated in a telegram that C. Wright Mills wired to the 22 April 1961 Fair Play for Cuba Committee rally protesting the Bay of Pigs invasion by the U.S. military force, that read:

Kennedy and Company have returned us to Barbarism. Schlesinger and Company have disgraced us intellectually and morally. I feel a desperate shame for my country. . . . I would at this moment be fighting alongside Fidel Castro.⁴⁷

As his *Listen Yankee* shows, Mills’ support for Cuba was derived not from dogmatic analysis of the Revolution but from his sympathetic imagination of the justice it brought to the people. The FPCC was established

in 1960 to represent such humanitarian liberals who challenged what William Appleman Williams later called “empire as a way of life.”⁴⁸ Before the State Department issued the travel ban, the FPCC sent hundreds of American citizens to the island. For LeRoi Jones, a Beat poet living in Greenwich Village, travel to the revolutionary site had a profound influence on his life. Cynthia Young argues that Jones came to identify himself with both a “real” and “imagined” Third World and with a “belief in the central importance of culture in precipitating revolution.”⁴⁹ What he saw in Cuba was published as an essay entitled “Cuba Libre,” which enticed youth with a romanticization of revolution. The FPCC’s connection to the SCTC was repeatedly reported in the congressional hearings.⁵⁰ Then the FPCC was fatally forced to close its office in New York in December of 1963, because of the Warren Commission’s charge that Kennedy’s assassin, Lee Harvey Oswald, was a card-carrying member of the FPCC.

IV. THE 1964 TRIP AND RADICALIZATION OF THE MOVEMENT

With the success of the 1963 trip, during the following fall the SCTC launched another trip for the summer of 1964. The Oswald case positively affected the plan because the Warren Commission reports were controversial and seemed implausible to many Americans. A committee official, Albert Maher, a Harvard student from a wealthy Texan industrialist family, proudly announced that they had received more than 1,000 applications and interviewed no less than 400 persons by May 1964.⁵¹ On June 12, seventy-three American students arrived at Havana by way of Europe for a one-month stay and nine more Americans joined the group in July. A total of eighty-four passports were revoked by the State Department upon their return on 14 August 1964.

The leaders of the group were self-proclaimed Communists, but most participants were just liberals or leftists and others who attended simply out of curiosity. Edward Lemansky, a group leader from PLM and a 23-year-old graduate of Antioch College in Ohio, admitted to reporters that there were participants who did not want to be labeled as supporters of the Cuban Revolution and complained that “they just think it’s a pretty cool thing, but they just don’t know yet.” The group also included one individual who possessed a strong identity with Third World Revolution resulting from his background. Manuel Colón, a 33-year-old student from the New School in New York, was a member of the independence

movement of Puerto Rico. He evaluated the Cuban Revolution as “the most important development in Latin America since Simon Bolivar.”⁵² Some other participants became famous for their later activities. Allen Krebs, a 30-year-old assistant professor in sociology at Adelphi College, was later fired from the college for the trip and founded the Free University of New York in 1965. Jerry Rubin, a graduate student from Berkeley at the age of 26, later co-founded the Youth International Party (Yippie) with Abbie Hoffman in 1967.⁵³

The group who went on the 1964 trip obviously increased its militancy in two directions: one was toward the national liberation movements at home and abroad, and the other was toward the struggle against U.S. imperialism. At the HUAC hearings held on 3 and 4 September 1964, the committee reported that Radio Hanoi in North Vietnam broadcast a statement of solidarity issued by a group of African-American travelers on the second trip:

As we live in the heart of the U.S. imperialism and colonialism, and racism, we have clearly seen that U.S. democracy is the greatest deception in history. That is why we support the national liberation movements of our brothers in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. We support all that U.S. imperialism opposes, and oppose all that it supports. It is necessary to thoroughly and completely annihilate U.S. imperialism.⁵⁴

The House committee also pointed out that the group was accompanied by the militant black activist Robert Williams when they issued the statement.

The argument for armed self-defense of oppressed people by Robert Williams had a significant impact on the formation of revolutionary radicalism. When he returned from the Marines after WWII to Monroe, NC, Williams found that the Ku Klux Klan again went on the rampage, persecuting blacks with renewed vigor. With his experience in the Marines and in revolutionary Cuba which he visited as a member of the FPCC, he began to urge armed self-defense to combat the brutality of the police and the KKK. During a riot related to the Freedom Riders in 1961, Williams was charged with kidnapping a white couple, and he fled to Cuba. From its start, the PLM had nurtured Williams as a “darling” of the New Left. The April 22 issue of *Progressive Labor* published his last interview in the U.S.⁵⁵ Williams continued inciting blacks in the U.S. to “meet violence with violence” in the same vein as Mao Zedong’s call for a worldwide anti-racist campaign in favor of people of color.⁵⁶ The

militancy that the PLM supported inevitably led many activists toward an extremist position. In July 1964, Harlem PLM chairman Bill Epton faced a criminal charge of agitating a riot in Harlem. Almost six months later in February 1965, New York police arrested members of the Black Liberation Front, which was organized by some of the Cuba travelers in 1964, for planning bombings of the Statue of Liberty.⁵⁷

The other issue that became a touchstone for the radical values of the sixties was the war in Vietnam. A statement issued on 27 June 1964 with the signatures of 61 travelers had a tone of irritation that was caused by U.S. aggression in Indochina:

We the undersigned young Northamericans [sic] visiting Cuba, offer these statements of support for the people of South Vietnam in their just fight for liberation from the Imperialist oppression directed by our government. Today our government is unleashing one of the most brutal and criminal wars in history.⁵⁸

It went on to explain how the U.S. government supported “racist and reactionary regimes” in Spain and Portugal, in South Africa, and in Latin America. Then it referred to the May 2nd Movement (M2M) as their anti-Imperialist effort at home.

While the majority of self-identified American New Left students were concentrating their efforts on the Freedom Summer or Johnson’s War on Poverty, veterans of the 1963 Cuba trip, including Phillip Luce and Levi Laub, had shifted their attention to the issue of the Vietnam War. The M2M originated at the Yale Socialist Union’s conference on “Socialism in America,” where representatives from 20 campuses across the east coast agreed to “support Viet Nam” and oppose “McNamara’s War.”⁵⁹ Then, on 2 May 1964, hundreds of students, mostly from Columbia, NYU, and CUNY, took to the streets around 110th Street and Central Park West in New York City to demand the immediate withdrawal of all American troops from Vietnam.⁶⁰ *Progressive Labor* claimed that it was “the largest single demonstration against U.S. intervention in Viet Nam” ever, with simultaneous demonstrations in San Francisco, Seattle, Madison, Miami, and San Juan, Puerto Rico. At the rally, Conrad Lynn, a Civil Rights lawyer of the Freedom Now Party claimed that “the same U.S. policy-makers responsible for the War in Viet Nam are the ones responsible for the violence against civil rights fighters in Birmingham and New York.”⁶¹ During the summer of 1964, M2M held two massive rallies against Johnson’s action in the Gulf of

Tonkin at Times Square where the police had previously prohibited any political demonstrations, both of which turned into riots.⁶²

The M2M successfully raised the issue of Vietnam by presenting it as an issue that affected American citizens. A movement pamphlet with the banner of “Viet-Nam or Auschwitz,” with the letter “z” depicted as a swastika, argued:

The war in Vietnam will be won by the FLN. No matter how much “aid” we pour into the country and no matter how many American men give up their lives in a useless and futile war, we will never defeat the Vietnamese people who are struggling for their independence from all forms of colonialism and imperialism.⁶³

It pushed American students to recognize that they were as much a part of American imperial oppression against the great cause of national liberation in the Third World, as they were accountable for black oppression in the United States. The M2M effectively carried out an anti-draft campaign that initiated the mass mobilization against the war that expanded across the nation in the latter half of the sixties.

The leadership of M2M overlapped with that of the SCTC. The SCTC argued that the two trips to Cuba by 142 youths provided American students with an “impetus” for a new peace organization because the travelers learned “the concept of American imperialism” as an “existent FACT” and as a “MAJOR stumbling block to world peace.” It was also because Cuba revealed, first, “an alternative to the present situation in Latin America, and the role that” the U.S. had played “in oppressing the people” and, second, why they had “racial discrimination, poverty, alienation” in the U.S.⁶⁴ Yet the most significant reason for the success of the SCTC and M2M might be that they avoided dogmatic style as much as possible to explain the Cuban Revolution and Vietnam War, even though they were controlled by the pro-Peking PLM. Most participants were motivated by their sympathy with oppressed peoples and a passion for social change. A statement of the SCTC, published in the M2M pamphlet, denounced the HUAC investigation of members and declared that “we who are not communists are not afraid to stand with communists in proclaiming what we believe, and we intend to do so in a united fashion.”⁶⁵

In the fall of 1964, the central leadership of the PLM felt that it was time to transform their movement into a party for revolution. In April of 1965, national delegates gathered in New York to adopt a platform that

confirmed its Maoist line, strict organizational structure, and support for revolutionary actions with armed insurrections for social change. All the efforts of the SCTC, including a plan for another trip and a campaign for Cuba travelers who were indicted for breaking the State Department travel regulation, were suspended to give way to the anti-war issue. Then the PLP suddenly disappeared from the public eye and went underground. On this militant turn of the group, Phillip Luce decided to leave the PLP because he could not “be a part of a movement based on deceit and illegal activities.” He recalled, “My ‘bourgeois radicalism’ rebelled at continuing an association with people desirous of destroying individual initiative, character, and the future of the membership.”⁶⁶

CONCLUSION

Devised during a changing of the guard for the American Communist leadership that reflected the international tectonic changes in the politics of the Cold War, the activities of the SCTC developed a sympathetic and imagined sense of solidarity with the Third World linked with the mass anti-war movement and racial liberation movements in the United States. The success of this process seemed rather unintentional for the core PL members who wished the participants to learn the Marxian discourse and to be revolutionary comrades. The majority of Cuba travelers were simply more sensitive to the human struggle under oppression than possessed of any affinity for dogma. The terms “liberation” and “anti-imperialism” were imported via the Third World but never acquired static meanings. They were translated in many ways ranging from the traditional conceptualization of civil disobedience to the militant strand of racial separatism. This equivocality was key to political mass mobilizations bastioned with a vague sense of solidarity with the peoples of the world.

Significantly, in the mid-sixties, most Americans vaguely imagined the Third World as a homogeneous entity standing in opposition to the imperial aggressions of the First and Second Worlds. Thus it was not a coincidence that the Sandpipers’ *Guantanamo* and the film *The Battle of Algiers* captured American popular interest in the Third World during the same period. This perceived homogeneity was another key element that allowed radicals to identify themselves with the global liberating force in Cuba as the most successful example. Since the SCTC opened a way for radical pilgrimage to Cuba with the two trips, totaling 143

participants in 1963 and 1964, Cuba functioned as a window to the Third World for the American radicals. This was possible because the Cuban government tried to make Havana the center of Third World struggle and American leftists wished to absorb revolutionary fervor from it. The supporters of Robert Williams kept their channel open with Havana through Canada, and radical intellectuals and artists brought back the literature and arts produced in Cuba, North Vietnam, China, and African nations.⁶⁷ Indeed, while the Chinese Revolution was a remote event both in time and space and its conflict with Soviet Union could be understood only abstractly, the Cuban Revolution had enough relevance to provoke reflection on the imperial aspects of American life. Thus, through Cuba, American students acquired a language to recognize the meanings of the Vietnam War in terms of U.S. aggression.

The sixties in America was embedded in the three worlds political relations. This paper illuminates a significant trajectory of Third World-inspired leftists in New York. In the beginning of the sixties, while the SDS was being formed by liberal students in the Midwest, militant Communists turned their eyes to China for an alternative to Soviet revisionism, as did young communists in many other countries. While SDS radicals found their *raison d'être* in the Civil Rights movement, SCTC participants started attacking America's foreign policy by connecting American racism with imperialism. Then, in 1964, while the majority of the New Left engaged in the Freedom Summer and the community organizing efforts of Johnson's War on Poverty, the Cuba travelers initiated an anti-war mobilization. The SDS finally attracted tens of thousands of students in the mid-sixties when they joined the anti-war campaign. In the late sixties, however, when radicals sensed that they could not challenge the essential structure of authority through democratic demonstrations, disillusioned contingents turned toward the violence of a total revolution. Simultaneously, non-white radicals exclusively identified themselves as evidence of the existence of the Third World in the U.S., in many cases, with Mao's Red Book in their hands. Thus, it was not the case that the rhetoric of revolution and national ("racial" in the American case) liberation in the movements suddenly emerged in the end of the sixties, as related in the scenario put forth by the New Left consensus. Rather, the revolutionary language had already existed from the beginning in the PLM and SCTC's activities that gave birth to a significant element of those movements.

NOTES

- ¹ *Chicago Tribune*, "Castro Beats U.S. Students at Pingpong," 4 July 1963.
- ² For the "New Left Consensus," see John McMillian, "'You Didn't Have to be There': Revisiting the New Left Consensus," in *The New Left Revisited*, eds. John Campbell McMillian and Paul Buhle (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2000), 1-3.
- ³ James Miller, "*Democracy is in the Streets*": *From Port Huron to the Siege of Chicago* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987), 16.
- ⁴ Todd Gitlin, *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage* (New York: Bantam Books, 1987), 210.
- ⁵ Robin D. G. Kelley, "Identity Politics and Class Struggle," *New Politics* 6, no. 2 (1997), <http://www.wpunj.edu/~newpol/issue22/kelley22.htm> (accessed 5 May 2006).
- ⁶ Robin D. G. Kelley and Betsy Esch, "Black Like Mao: Red China and Black Revolution," *Souls* 1, no. 4 (Fall 1999): 6-41.
- ⁷ Cynthia Ann Young, "Soul Power: Cultural Radicalism and the Formation of a U.S. Third World Left," (Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 1999); "Havana Up in Harlem: LeRoi Jones, Harold Cruse and the Making of Cultural Revolution," *Science and Society* 65, no. 1 (Spring 2001): 12-38.
- ⁸ Young, "Soul Power," v.
- ⁹ Van Gosse, *Where the Boys Are: Cuba, Cold War America and the Making of a New Left* (New York: Verso, 1993), 9, 137.
- ¹⁰ Paul Berman, *A Tale of Two Utopias: The Political Journey of the Generation of 1968* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1996), 84.
- ¹¹ Leigh David Benin, "A Red Thread in Garment: Progressive Labor and New York City's Industrial Heartland in the 1960s and 1970s," (Ph.D. diss., New York University, 1997); *The New Labor Radicalism and New York City's Garment Industry: Progressive Labor Insurgents in the 1960s* (New York: Garland Books, 2000).
- ¹² House, Committee on Un-American Activities, "Violation of State Department Travel Regulations and Pro-Castro Propaganda Activities in the United States, Part 3, September 12 and 13, 1963," (Washington, DC: GPO, 1965), 674.
- ¹³ Phillip Abbott Luce, *The New Left* (New York: D. McKay, 1966), 69.
- ¹⁴ There were only a few individuals who defied the ban before the students' trip. Rose S. Rosenberg, a 57-year-old lawyer in Los Angeles, traveled to Cuba by way of Mexico in April 1961 and was called before HUAC on 1 and 2 July 1963, while the students were visiting Cuba. Gene Blake, "Cuba Travel Probe in Stormy Session," *Los Angeles Times*, 2 July 1963; House, Committee on Un-American Activities House, "Violation of State Department Travel Regulations and Pro-Castro Propaganda Activities in the United States, Part 2, July 1 and 2, 1963," (Washington, DC: GPO, 1965).
- ¹⁵ *New York Times*, "Passports to Be Withdrawn," 2 July 1963.
- ¹⁶ *Chicago Tribune*, "Trips to Cuba Probed by House Group," 5 July 1965.
- ¹⁷ *New York Times*, "59 U.S. Students Start a Visit to Cuba, Defying Washington," 1 July 1963.
- ¹⁸ Luce, *The New Left*, 69.
- ¹⁹ *New York Times*, "Castro is Hailed by U.S. Students," 28 August 1963.
- ²⁰ *Los Angeles Times*, "3 American Students Praise Castro Regime," 2 July 1963.
- ²¹ Luce, *The New Left*, 76-77.
- ²² McGowan's support derived from his missionary experience in Bolivia where he observed serious poverty and lack of medical attention. He consistently backed the students when they were under congressional investigation. *New York Times*, "Catholic Priest Backs Students Who Visited Cuba," 14 September 1963.

²³ *New York Times*, "Cuba Bars Red Cross Plane to Return Dead U.S. Youth," 17 July 1963; *Washington Post*, "Drowned Man's Body Flown, Cuba to U.S.," 18 July 1963.

²⁴ *New York Times*, "The Students in Cuba," 2 July 1963. The *Washington Post* followed this line in an editorial entitled "The Cuban Wall" on the next day. *Washington Post*, 3 July 1963.

²⁵ *Los Angeles Times*, "They're Not Martyrs, Just Gullible," 3 July 1963.

²⁶ *Chicago Tribune*, "Trips to Cuba Probed by House Group," 5 July 1965.

²⁷ *New York Times*, "Transcript of the President's News Conference on Foreign and Domestic Matters," 2 August 1963.

²⁸ *New York Times*, "Hecklers Battle Police at House Inquiry on Cuba Visit," 13 September 1963; "16 More Ejected at House Hearing on Travel to Cuba," 14 September 1963.

²⁹ *Golden Gater*, "Summer Cuba Trip Costs \$100: Not in Travel Folders," reprinted in House, "Violation of State Department Travel Regulations, part 3," 718.

³⁰ House, "Violation of State Department Travel Regulations, part 3," 718-735.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 755-766.

³² *Ibid.*, 779.

³³ *Ibid.*, 761, 767.

³⁴ *New York Times*, "Anti-Castro Crowds Disrupt Times Sq.," 16 September 1963.

³⁵ Peter Kihss, "A New Left Wing Emerging in the U.S.," *New York Times*, 14 September 1963.

³⁶ Luce, *The New Left*, 83-84.

³⁷ "PL Conference," *Progressive Labor* 1, no. 7 (July-August, 1962): 5.

³⁸ "PL Trade Union Program: Part I," *Progressive Labor* 1, no. 8 (September, 1962): 3-10.

³⁹ The Progressive Labor Movement, *Road to Revolution: The Outlook of the Progressive Labor Movement* (New York, 1964), Tamiment Library and Robert F. Wagner Labor Library Archives, New York University [hereafter, Tamiment], 10-11. The pamphlet is a collection of articles that appeared in PL's *Marxist-Leninist Quarterly* from 1962 to 1964.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 31, 63-86.

⁴¹ Luce, *The New Left*, 85-86.

⁴² The PLM, *Road to Revolution*, 101.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 35-45. The PLM was rather supportive of Black Muslims led by Malcolm X, minister of Mosque 7 in Harlem, as long as they opposed the "forms of gradualism and tokenism" of the existing Civil Rights organizations and attacked the federal government for racism and cold war policies. Mort Scheer, "Negro Freedom: A Comment," *Progressive Labor* 2, no. 4 (April, 1963): 10-12.

⁴⁴ "Epton Challenges All Big Business Parties to Debate on Freedom," *Progressive Labor* 2, nos. 7-8 (July-August, 1963): 1-2.

⁴⁵ Epton collected 6,500 signatures, among which only 3,000 were those of registered voters. Bill Epton, "PL Election Campaign: An Analysis," *Progressive Labor* 2, no. 12 (December, 1963), 15. The Columbia chapter of the Congress of Racial Equality played a significant role in the strike. Martin Cooper, "Columbia CORE Promotes Rent Strike in East Harlem," *Columbia Spectator*, 4 March 1964.

⁴⁶ Luce, *The New Left*, 65.

⁴⁷ Schlesinger himself reprinted it in *A Thousand Days: John F. Kennedy in the White House*, Arthur Schlesinger Jr. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1965), 286. Schlesinger wrote that the Kennedy administration had determined not to make Cuba an Algeria of France.

⁴⁸ For the history of FPCC, see, Gosse, *Where the Boys Are*, especially Introduction and Chapter 5.

⁴⁹ Young, "Soul Power," 18.

⁵⁰ The HUAC charged that Vincent Lee, a founder and national director of the committee, attended PLM meetings in the fall of 1963. House, "Violation of State Department Travel Regulations, Part 3," 765.

⁵¹ "100 U.S. Students Plan to Defy Cuba-Visit Ban," *New York Times*, 24 May 1964.

⁵² Richard Eder, "75 Americans on Visit to Cuba Show Wide Variety of Motives," *New York Times*, 15 June 1964.

⁵³ For the name list of the participants, see House, "Violation of State Department Travel Regulations, Part 5" (Washington, DC: GPO, 1965), 2194-2208.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 2101.

⁵⁵ Camilo de Chispa, "A Progressive Labor Exclusive, Robert Williams' Last Interview in the U.S.," *Progressive Labor* 1, no. 4 (April 1962): 4-7.

⁵⁶ "Answering a Request from Robert Williams: China's Mao Writes on Negro Freedom," *Progressive Labor* 2, no. 9 (September, 1963): 17; Tad Szulc, "Expatriate, on Cuban Radio, Calls on U.S. Negroes to Meet Violence with Violence," *New York Times*, 28 July 1964.

⁵⁷ Will Lissner, "Leftists Behind Harlem Protest Step Up Work Under Close Eye," *New York Times*, 26 July 1964; *New York Times*, "Sketches of Figures and Groups in Dynamiting Plot," 17 February 1965.

⁵⁸ House, "Violation of State Department Travel Regulations, Part 5," 2087-90; "With the 84 Americans in Cuba," *Progressive Labor* 3, nos. 8-9 (July-August 1964): 16-17.

⁵⁹ May 2nd Movement, "Stop McNamara's War in Vietnam!" pamphlet, Vertical File, Publications Relating to May 2nd Movement, 1964-1965, Tamiment.

⁶⁰ *New York Times*, 3 May 1964.

⁶¹ Fred Jerome, "May 2 Protests Hit U.S. War in Viet Nam," *Progressive Labor* 3, no. 5 (May 1964): 2-3.

⁶² See, Luce, 110-113; Benin, "A Red Thread in Garment," 76-84, for the PLM's structural transformation to the Party.

⁶³ May 2nd Movement, "Viet-Nam or Auschwitz," pamphlet, Vertical File, May 2nd Movement, Tamiment.

⁶⁴ Michael Brown, "SCTC Comments," *Progressive Labor, Special Travel Issue* (December 1964): 8-11.

⁶⁵ The Student Committee for Travel to Cuba, "Statement by the Students Who Visited Cuba," pamphlet, Vertical File, May 2nd Movement, Tamiment.

⁶⁶ Luce, *The New Left*, 41-42.

⁶⁷ The Cuban government held a series of Third World conferences in the latter half of the sixties, including the Tricontinental Conference of Havana (January 1966), the First Conference of the Latin American Solidarity Organization (August 1967), the Cultural Congress of Havana (January 1968) in which dozens of American radical intellectuals participated as delegates.