**SUMMARY - CHAPTER 8**

**A Decade of Revolution in Cuba**

Interpretations of the Cuban Revolution, with its twin iconic figures of Che Guevara and Fidel Castro, have become increasingly malleable depending on what historical narrative one chooses to slot the event in. For a real understanding of the Cuban Revolution and its historical actors, it needs to be situated, contextualized, *in time*—in its time.

The Revolution began as a guerilla movement led by Castro and figures such as Guevara who were bent on deposing Fulgencio Batista as leader of Cuba. Castro defined his leadership in opposition to the tyranny that Batista had stood for, creating an iconic image of himself as a messiah of peace and prosperity.

Arguably, what Castro did after ousting Batista was to enshrine the moment of revolutionary change and turn it into the symbol of his regime, even as that regime very quickly reverted to authoritarian and oppressive governing tactics reminiscent of the those which Castro had claimed to have fought against. Nonetheless, Castro could combat any criticism of his political program by invoking the moment of revolutionary change as its foundational symbol.

Castro has been able to keep the revolutionary narrative malleable enough so as to extend the symbol of revolutionary change indefinitely according to the socio-political economical conditions that Cuba finds itself in. On the other hand, the US embargo has been a permanent fixture in that narrative because it has always served to sustain it.

**Making a Revolution**

When Castro came to power in 1959, Cuba was not poor, but it was almost entirely dependent on export economy of limited goods, and on foreign capital.

It was the convergence of many internal and external factors that weakened Batista enough to allow Castro to come in and take over. But when he did take over he proved himself a savvy politician, capable of balancing wildly disparate demands in the post-revolutionary fervor. The Urban Reform Law and The Agrarian Law contributed to the reduction of poverty almost immediately in the wake of the Revolution.

Castro also proved very adept at casting the US in the role of the Cuban enemy. He engaged in polemical showdowns on US soil and advertised to his people the thwarted assassination attempts he faced from the US. He laid claim to being the first military leader to rebuff an American invasion, at the Bay of Pigs. He also nationalized 85 percent of Cuban industry.

Castro’s next step was to mobilize all elements of the Cuban population in a national project aimed at strengthening revolutionary Cuba through the creation of a widespread popular base.
**Utopias**

Che Guevara took on the economic reins of Cuba post-revolution, and was determined to push it into full communist mode by eliminating the *law of value*, which dictated that resources be used where they were most productive and not where they were most needed. Guevara sought to reverse the scales of the economy, basing the idea of gain not on financial gain, but on moral gain.

The utopian nature of the revolutionary changes were gendered in nature, as the rough qualities of the strong-backed and strong-willed man were fast becoming the symbols of strength in revolutionary Cuba, in opposition to the feminine decadence of the US.

**Dystopias**

The reforms of Guevara (aimed at changing, wholesale, the consciousness of the masses and transforming the moral balance of economic production) failed to pass the test of reality. Indeed it even led to a sharp decline in productivity that pushed Cuba into a dangerous dependence on its sugar export economy. The decline in productivity, plus massive projects of nationalization of domestic businesses, and land reforms that transferred land form the peasants to the state, led to popular anti-government sentiment as the tides began to change in revolutionary Cuba. Moreover, with the failure of government initiatives aimed at revitalizing the popular base, the government fell into a state of disrepair, where lack of logistical expertise threatened to plunge the nation into complete chaos.

When Castro offered to take responsibility for the catastrophe by resigning, the people would not accept his resignation. Perhaps this was due to the charisma of Castro, or to the identification of the Cuban people with noble ideals of the revolutionary project that their leader had set for them. Castro had given his people an image of themselves that they could be ideologically proud of.

**The Documents: Narrating a Revolution**

The narrative of the Cuban revolution is unique to the environment of the 1960’s—a time in which people believed in utopian ideals and were willing to invest in these ideals. Thus, figures such as Castro and Guevara appealed deeply to the oppressed masses, who were looking for change not only for the better, but also for *the good*.

1. Castro speech given during the May Day celebrations in the wake of the Bay of Pigs incident.
2. Cuban exile author Reinaldo Arenas’ take on the Bay of Pigs incident.
3. Cuban writer Jesús Díaz’ view of the Bay of Pigs incident as narrated through a chapter of his book *The Initials of the Earth*, about a middle-class man active in the revolutionary fervor around the time of Castro’s ousting of Batista.
4. An interview conducted by historian Elizabeth Dore with a Cuban woman named Alma Rivera, bespeaking the diversity of experiences undergone during the Revolution, with Rivera revealing a negative experience of the Revolution.