The ubiquitous billboards in Cuba featuring the emblem of the Young Communist League (UJC) are part of the landscape of the revolution. The profiles of Che Guevara, Camilo Cienfuegos, and Julio Antonio Mella, staring into a blissful future under the slogan “Estudio, Trabajo, Fusil” (Study, Work, Rifle) are among the most recognizable motifs of communist Cuba. Such organization came from the first three years of the revolution; its existence cannot be taken for granted. The enthusiasm of the early years is not in doubt, but a closer assessment of the search for stability and meaning is timely. Youth is a case in point. The high expectations, uncertainty, and excitement for young people become evident through an examination of the evolution of youth organizations between 1959 and 1962. Initiatives aimed at unity largely coordinated by the Young Socialists (JS), the ascendance of a culture of mass participation with the meteoric rise of the Association of Young Rebels (AJR), and the creation of the UJC in 1962 show the move to selectivity and youth politics as opposed to other, broader initiatives. The story of the youth organizations not only reveals the reasons behind the failure to sustain a mass organization for young people, but also the rapid change and levels of uncertainty to which young Cubans were exposed in the early years of the revolution as they sought to be and become young rebels and young communists within an evolving social revolution.¹

The starting point of a study of youth organizations is to examine the Cuban obsession with the theme of los jóvenes (the youth). In the first three
years of the revolution, this fixation was caused by the youth’s high levels of participation in the construction of the revolution (Fagen 1969). A new form of participation was created through the building of new institutions and a new leadership, and through a renewed culture and revolutionary discourse, so that the “Cuban man” could be transformed into a “revolutionary man” (ibid., 2). The story of this transformation is not merely one of being acted upon. Young people were actors in their own right in these years and played a part in determining revolutionary definitions of youth. The notion that young people were controlled by the system reveals itself to be overly simplistic.2 Studies examining this notion have arrived at more nuanced conclusions. Jorge Domínguez, for instance, argues that by 1965 “important changes occurred simultaneously with structural changes and preceded government policies designed to change beliefs” (1978, 478; my emphasis). The picture becomes more complex if the myth of generations, dominant in 1959, and the renewal of this myth in revolutionary Cuba as the myth of youth are added to Domínguez’s interpretation (Kapcia 2000, 181-182, 201-202).

Though “youth” refers to young people or a stage of life, the term acquired a mythical quality during the revolution. With regard to youth organizations in Cuba, that myth has been perpetuated by studies of the AJR (Rodríguez Rodríguez 1989; Centro de Estudios sobre la Juventud [CESJ] 1986; Martín Fadragas 2009).3 However, the politics of the first three years of the revolution show a different story, challenging the idea found in Cuban historiography that the AJR “sirvió como escuela revolucionaria donde se formaron los jóvenes en las ideas marxistas-leninistas, para consolidar así la integración de todos en una sola organización denominada comunista”4 (Martín Fadragas 2009, 46). The lives of young Cubans in those effervescent early years of the Cuban Revolution were much more uncertain than such historiography implies. The actual story of the youth organizations indicates a greater continuity from the 1950s, largely via the JS, and uncertainties by all youth organizations over the hows, what’s, and whos of a youth politics. The underlying complexities of the interior lives of these organizations also become evident. Therefore, the story of the development of the youth organizations traces how and why such organizations moved from crisis to crisis and why attempting to create a type of stability in this period was so difficult.

**Juventud Socialista: From Unidad to Vanguardia**

Despite a relatively low profile during the 1950s rebellion, the JS emerged in 1959 as the most significant youth organization. This significance was based on two factors: its fixed institutional structure and its own publication, Mella. The JS, founded by the Popular Socialist Party (PSP) in 1944, took control of Mella, a magazine first launched in January 1942 (Martín Fadragas 1998,
19, 26). Despite being outlawed, both the JS and its magazine survived in the 1950s (Thomas 1971b, 846).³ In addition to the JS, the student-based Revolutionary Directorate (DR), founded in 1955 under the leadership of the Federation of University Students (FEU), and the youth-oriented 26th of July Movement (M-26-7) were intact in January 1959.⁴ The task in the early days of the revolution was to promote unidad (unity) among different groups, and it was on this task that the JS particularly focused.

In the early months of the revolution, the JS displayed a clear sense of strategy and destiny. In April 1959 the JS executive committee sent a letter to all youth organizations in Cuba, urging the unidad of these organizations:

Nosotros, los jóvenes socialistas, estamos dispuestos a trabajar con todos ustedes por la integración de un movimiento unido revolucionario de toda la juventud por una especie de confederación revolucionaria de la juventud, en la que estén integradas las organizaciones y movimientos nacionales, las organizaciones y movimientos de sectores: obreros, campesinos y estudiantes y las instituciones de localidades y poblaciones: clubs deportivos y culturales, sociedades etc.⁵ (Comité Ejecutivo del JS 1959, 20)

The JS was not attempting to impose a rigid structure on a new unified youth organization. The notion of confederation, which it favored, was an entirely different structural possibility for integration. The JS saw its role as broadly cultural rather than narrowly political. The letter stated that the JS would not only support the objectives of the revolution, but also would serve as a “lucha diaria por las demandas y anhelos juveniles y realización diaria por nosotros mismos de todas aquellas cosas que llenan—with el trabajo y la política—la vida del joven: deportes, arte, cultura y recreo”⁶ (ibid., 21). Achieving unity, however, was a complicated task since some leaders of the M-26-7 rejected the JS’s letter and the idea of a merger of youth organizations. JS leader Ramón Calcines was highly critical of those in the M-26-7 who rejected unity, accusing them of sectarianism (Calcines 1959a, 12–13). Calcines then made a further call to all youth groups to participate in the short-lived Juventud Cívica Unida (Civic Youth United).⁷

In September 1959, a significant shift occurred in JS policy. It moved away from unidad as its key aim and replaced it with the discourse of vanguardia (vanguard). This was clear at the JS plenary meeting at Yaguajay in Sancti Spiritus Province:

Luchemos por estrechar, cada vez más, las filas de toda la juventud en el combate por defender a nuestra revolución y hacerla avanzar! Los jóvenes socialistas deben ser vanguardia en aplicar estas orientaciones, en divulgarlas, y luchar por su ejecución.⁸ ("Editorial: llamamiento de Yaguajay" 1959, 25)
This was endorsed by PSP president Juan Marinello, who stated that “la JS debe ser en estos momentos la vanguardia de la lucha de la acción constructiva, de la unidad indispensable” (Marinello 1959, 15). A further JS plenary was held in Santiago in November 1959, where another call to Cuban youth was made:

Los Jóvenes Socialistas, junto a nuestros hermanos del “26 de Julio,” del Directorio Revolucionario, etc., alzan a la vanguardia de la juventud cubana, los principios y los hechos revolucionarios que están transformando, ya, a nuestra amada Patria…. La unidad es hoy más vital que nunca antes. ("Machadando" 1960a, 48–49)

The principles of unidad and vanguardia were now fused. This was the first joint declaration with other youth organizations, except for the AJR, which was in its infancy at this time. However, the JS made sure it asserted its identity by also promoting its logo, showing a star containing an image of Julio Antonio Mella in the center (“Llamamiento de Santiago” 1960, 46).

In the lead-up to its Fourth National Congress in April 1960, the JS placed itself in a strong position. Its president, Ramón Calcines, emphasized the unique nature of the JS:

Como todos sabemos, la Juventud Socialista es la única organización política juvenil que existe en nuestro país. El 26 de Julio y el Directorio Revolucionario, por ejemplo, son organizaciones revolucionarias con gran cantidad de jóvenes en sus filas, pero de carácter general, es decir, no específicamente juveniles…. Podemos decir con orgullo, que este será el Congreso de la única organización política que emergió de la clandestinidad con vida y con honor y la gloria de haber contribuido con su esfuerzo al derrocamiento del sangriento régimen batistiano. (Calcines, quoted in Escalante 1960, 28)

This reassertion of the role of the JS in the history of the 1950s rebellion was part of the larger struggle for dominance by a communist movement that was suffering from its reluctance in the early years of the rebellion to be involved with the M-26-7. This was the time when the AJR, which had closer links to the 1950s than the JS, was gaining ground. The JS was devoted to asserting itself as the only political organization for young people. It was moving away from its traditional (and broader) sphere, incorporating culture, the arts, sports, and the like, which had been an integral part of its search for unidad.

The JS Congress of April 1960 marked an important—and perhaps extraordinary—moment in the history of youth organizations in Cuba.
key outcome of the Congress was the promise to dissolve the JS when a single revolutionary youth organization could be formed (“Un congreso de unión” 1960, 18). Given the JS’s radical history, its demands for unity, and its attempts to situate itself as the youth organization, this was a surprising declaration that pointed to the complexities of the interior life of this organization. This decision is celebrated in Cuban historiography as a demonstration of “[la madurez política de esta organización y la confianza que en ella tenían los dirigentes revolucionarios]” (Rodríguez Rodríguez 1989, 27). In this view, its decision “convirtió a dicho congreso en uno de los actos más trascendentales y el gesto más bello de la vida de una organización política” (Martín Fadragas 1998, 80).

A secondary resolution of the Congress stated that the JS’s constituency should be persuaded to join the milicias revolucionarias (revolutionary militias) created in October 1959, stipulating in its appeal to young people that “la juventud tiene el deber ineludible de aprender el manejo de las armas y de formar parte masivamente, de las milicias populares” (“Llamamiento a todos” 1960, 20). The JS also encouraged its members to join the Brigadas Juveniles de Trabajo Voluntario (Youth Brigades of Volunteer Work), an initiative of the AJR, and to undertake activities that were the responsibility of the AJR, showing that the first stage of the merger had been planned at the conference (“Inscríbete Hoy!” 1960, 2). By expanding its scope in this way, the JS was allowing its members to develop a closer link with the evolving aims of the revolution. This organization of essentially politically motivated young people was asking its membership to shift their radical activities from the political to the broadly participatory, helping pave the way for the JS to unify with the AJR.

THE AJR: FROM LOS HUMILDES TO MASS PARTICIPATION

The creation of the AJR was first proposed in a document of August 30, 1959, published by the Departamento de Instrucción del Ejército Rebelde (Department of Instruction of the Rebel Army) (Rodríguez Rodríguez 1989, 8–11). The rebelde (rebel) ethos of the new organization, in line with the discourse of heroization of the rural/peasant/guerrilla, was indicated in its proposed program, which included organization into brigades, marching exercises, and sports programs, as well as exchanges between young people from the campo (countryside) and the llano (city) (ibid., 8–9). The glorification of the campo was a part of the rebel ethos, and in this line the first tasks to be performed by the AJR were to help with agrarian reform and a literacy campaign aimed at workers/peasants (ibid., 8–9). The new organization was thereby linked to the early objectives of the revolution. In this sense, it was a more practical organization than the JS, possessing a clearer vision of what it could do and
making it attractive to young people who wished to express their support for the revolution.

The AJR was officially launched on January 28, 1960, although it already counted 7,000 members by then (ibid., 22). The launch was a high-profile event to celebrate the anniversary of José Martí’s birth, as well as the tenth anniversary of the first major march against Batista. During the event, Che Guevara gave a speech extolling the virtues of the young Sierra Maestra hero Comandante Joel Iglesias, who would be placed at the helm of the new organization. The organization then became active with the formation of the brigades (which were named after the recently deceased hero of the Sierra Maestra mountain range, Camilo Cienfuegos), which Fidel Castro—in a television appearance in May 1960—urged young people to join. Members of the brigades underwent military-style training in the Sierra Maestra. In order to enter the brigade, each member had to climb the Pico Turquino five times over a three-month period. This was seen as a “prueba de tesón, preparación física y formación revolucionaria” (Gómez 2003b, 19).

The brigades were each made up of 100 young men, and the leadership of each comprised a jefe (chief) and segundo jefe (second in command), who were members of the Ejército Rebelde, and a maestro adoctrinador (political commissar).

In May 1960, Fidel Castro clarified that the aims of the new organization were as follows:

Organizar, bajo los auspicios del Ejército Rebelde, todos esos muchachos de familias humildes, que no van a la escuela porque por la edad ya no tuvieron oportunidad de ir a un centro de segunda enseñanza, que no tienen trabajo, que andan mal vestidos, mal alimentados, que son un problema y preocupación para la familia. (Castro, quoted in Rodríguez Rodríguez 1989, 53)

The main constituency of the AJR was undereducated or unemployed youth, and the location of training would be the Sierra Maestra. In a letter accompanying the membership application form, dated May 20, 1960, Castro’s TV appearance was cited and the aims, terms, and conditions of the brigade to which entry was being solicited were clearly expounded: “Miles de jóvenes deben ir a las sierras a trabajar en la reforestación, en la construcción de escuelas, hospitales, caminos, etc. Recibirán instrucción, adiestramiento militar, alimentación, ropas y todo lo necesario para vivir” (CESJ 1986, 167). At this stage, the AJR was an organization dominated by the ideology of the Rebel Army and the aims of the early revolution.

Shortly after June 1960, the JS urged its members to join the AJR brigades. In supporting the AJR both in thought and deed, the JS was actually altering
the former’s support base. Almost all political commissars were members of the JS, which is not surprising, as the JS had a long history of incorporating political training and so possessed the personnel to fulfill such a role (ibid., 31). The brigades demonstrated how the two organizations could work together, despite the fact that the AJR housed some anticommunist elements (Martín Fadragas 2009, 66).

From October 21 to 24, 1960, the AJR held its first national plenary. At this meeting, the AJR became independent of the Ejército Rebelde and extended its functions beyond its original semimilitary mandate (CESJ 1986, 63). It was also agreed that the AJR would incorporate all other youth organizations and become the single youth organization (ibid., 65). Central to membership in the AJR was compulsory participation in the brigadas and the milicias revolucionarias. The JS held to its promise made in its April Congress to dissolve itself and to send its members to the unity youth organization. JS president Isidoro Malmierca sent a message to members of the JS justifying this intent:

> Cuando llamamos a todos los jóvenes socialistas a incorporarse a la Asociación de Jóvenes Rebeldes, cuando anunciamos la determinación de disolver nuestra organización, lo hacemos conscientes de que la AJR es ya, y lo será más cada día, una organización capaz de ocupar la vanguardia de la juventud en la lucha por impulsar las tareas de la revolución.26

(Malmierca 1960a, 15)

This is an interesting statement, because Malmierca was asserting the vanguardia nature of young members, a position carried over from the Yaguanjay meeting of October 1959, while also associating himself with the rebelde nature of the AJR, even to the extent of incorporating the language of the lucha (fight). The plenary did not set out with absolute clarity the terms of the transfer from JS to AJR, and so Malmierca afterward wrote an open letter to Joel Iglesias urging the latter to continue publishing Mella (Malmierca 1960b, 33). By the following edition, Mella had become the Órgano de la AJR, under the editorship of one of the AJR leaders, Fernando Ravelo, and with an expanded editorial board including Malmierca and Ricardo Alarcón of the FEU (“Mella órgano” 1960, 15). After eighteen months and the creation of a new organization, the effort to achieve unidad had finally begun in earnest.27

**The Triumph of Vanguardia**

In terms of recruitment to the literacy campaign and the militias, increasing contact with youth groups in the Communist bloc, and promoting leisure
and sports, the early months of the AJR as a unified organization appear to be a catalog of successes (“La juventud dimitroviana” 1961, 26–29; Soto and Casanova 1961, 24–27; “Seis meses después” 1961, 3–5). Broadly speaking, the AJR was attempting to fulfill its aim to be a mass organization for all young people; its magazine circulation in 1961 was at 100,000, and rose to 150,000 copies and 100,000 members in early 1962 (Domínguez 1978, 321). Despite these obvious successes, there was evidence that the AJR was failing to capitalize on its own success, and the cracks that were appearing in the year following the October 1960 plenary began to become apparent. Its difficulties are recognized in Cuban historiography: “Fueron las primeras experiencias que, a la luz de hoy, se nos presentan con la natural inmadurez y lógicas imperfecciones de lo que se hace por primera vez, pero no por ello dejan de ser valiosas”28 (Rodríguez Rodríguez 1989, 5).

In October 1961, the AJR suffered serious criticism from PSP leader Blas Roca Calderío about its organizational fragility and problems within its membership:

El problema principal que tiene la Asociación de Jóvenes Rebeldes es el de organizarse en la base, el de constituir fuertes y eficientes comités municipales, el de agrupar a cada joven en alguna institución de base, de modo que se acaben los miembros sueltos, los afiliados sin organización, los que se llaman Jóvenes Rebeldes, sin estar sujetos a ningún control, a ninguna disciplina, a ninguna responsabilidad. La situación permite que individuos aislados, muchachos sin ninguna preparación ideológica, revolucionaria ni política y elementos anarquizantes que confunden la revolución con la indisciplina y la malacrianza hagan muchas cosas inadecuadas y erróneas que comprometen el nombre de la Asociación de Jóvenes Rebeldes.29 (Roca Calderío 1961, 24–25)

He went on to cite the youthful tendency toward extremismo izquierdista (leftist extremism), and criticized the AJR for adopting the motto “Izquierda, Izquierda, siempre Izquierda” (Left, Left, always toward the Left) rather than a slogan that referred, for example, to estudio or unidad (study or unity) (ibid., 27). The criticism by Roca Calderio was directed at both constituencies of the AJR—those young people coming from the rebelde and/or nonpolitical backgrounds and those from the JS background.

Castro reiterated this criticism in an important speech directed at young people in preparation for the 1962 Youth Congress. The Revolución headline on March 14, 1962, reporting this speech, read “Hay que crear en la juventud un mayor espíritu comunista”30 (“Hay que crear” 1962, 1). In a eulogy to revolutionary martyr José Antonio Echeverría, youth leader (and Sierra Maestra hero) Ravelo was criticized for leaving out the section of the eulogy...
Youth organizations in revolutionary Cuba, 1959–1962: From Unidad to Vanguardia

It referred to his own Catholicism, leading Castro to accuse Ravelo of sectarismo (sectarianism). Ravelo was held up as an example of what was wrong with the youth organization:

¿Qué juventud? ¿Acaso una juventud que simplemente se concreta a oír y repetir? No, queremos una juventud que piense, que aprenda por sí misma a ser revolucionaria, que se convenza a sí misma, que desarrolle plenamente su pensamiento, y esta juventud tiene todas las condiciones para lograrlo.

(Castro 1962, 1)

On March 20, 1962, Roca Calderío reiterated this criticism after Ravelo admitted his “error” of sectarismo:

La denuncia que hizo Fidel del error y el reconocimiento público que hizo Ravelo de su responsabilidad, contribuirán grandemente a contrarrestar la influencia del sectarismo, del subjetivismo y del extremismo izquierdista en las filas de la juventud en general y de la AJR y del movimiento estudiantil en particular.

(Roca Calderio 1962, 2)

These criticisms help to explain the decision to make substantial changes in the organization.

In early March, AJR president Joel Iglesias announced the significant changes to the AJR in a television show when he stated that the AJR was the vanguard youth wing of the Integrated Revolutionary Party (ORI) (“Dirigan la patria” 1962, 6). Iglesias was indicating a change in the orientation of the AJR away from an independent youth organization, and by incorporating the concept of vanguardia, the AJR was moving away from its October 1960 incarnation as a mass youth organization, and closer to the JS vanguardia ethos. This position was explained in the invitation to members of the AJR to the April 1962 Congress, which stated

Nuestro Congreso adoptará los Estatutos que regirán la nueva vida de nuestra organización … con los cuales, nuestra organización por sus ideas y por su acción se convierta en la organización marxista-leninista de la juventud cubana, en la organización juvenil del futuro Partido Unido de la Revolución Socialista.

(CESJ 1986, 134–135)

The Congress of April 1962 was a high-profile event that received coverage in one form or another in the national press (daily papers Revolución and Noticias de Hoy) on the days preceding its opening. It was opened by President Osvaldo Dorticós on March 30, and closed on April 4 in a mass event in the Parque Latinoamericano Stadium in Havana, presided over by

45
Fidel Castro. The Congress was attended by 596 AJR members from across Cuba, as well as fifty-two representatives of other youth organizations from twenty-six countries (“Mil delegados” 1962, 1; “Abren congreso” 1962, 12). Mella was produced daily during the Congress to keep the delegates informed of events and developments. Ten committees were established to discuss all aspects of the role of young people.35

Although much of the Congress was positive and forward-looking in terms of the role of youth in the revolution, it is clear that one function of the Congress was to deal with the deficiencies into which the AJR appeared to have fallen. The criticism formerly directed at the AJR was effectively internalized, in a self-critical statement by the National Committee of the AJR. This was subtly different from Roca Calderio’s criticism and Ravelo’s “confession,” in that the AJR accused itself of overconfidence and complacency:

Ha comenzado a manifestarse en nosotros, un espíritu de conformidad con las tareas realizadas y se ha comenzado a ver solamente lo positivo. Este auto-elogio, nos ha ido matando el espíritu auto-crítico y nos ibamos convirtiendo en críticos de los demás, pero no en críticos de nosotros mismos, de nuestra labor, de la labor de nuestro Organismo, de nuestra provincia, de nuestra Organización, se encontraban manifestaciones que al matar el espíritu crítico igualmente mataban el trabajo colectivo.36 (“Comité nacional: informe” 1962, 5)

The Congress gave birth to a new organization, the UJC, quite different in scope and character from the AJR, but to which, nonetheless, the AJR would send all its 80,000 members and transfer Mella magazine, with a circulation of 300,000 (Rivero 1962, 48–49). New statutes for the UJC stated that the UJC, while being structurally independent, would serve as the youth organization of the successor of the ORI, called the United Party of the Cuban Socialist Revolution (PURS). The statutes stipulated that anyone between the ages of fourteen and twenty-seven who demonstrated a vanguard attitude toward study, work, and defense, accepted the revolutionary program for the construction of socialism, and agreed to carry out the aims of the UJC could apply for membership. Each application had to be backed by the signatures of two existing members of the UJC or one member of the parent party (Rivero 1962, 51). The top-level organization of the UJC would be the biennial National Congress, which would elect an executive to run the UJC in the interim years (ibid., 52).37

This examination of the youth organizations during the first three years of the revolution allows us to identify critical moments that elucidate the key dilemmas faced by those organizations: should they be broadly participatory or narrowly political; should they be independent or part of a larger
Youth organizations in revolutionary Cuba, 1959–1962: From Unidad to Vanguarda

(parent) organization; and should they be mass or vanguard? These critical moments of change also give an indication of the internal workings of the youth organizations in the lead-up to announcements of substantial changes by the organizations.

The first critical moment was the JS’s decision in April 1960 to join the mass participatory drive by deciding to dissolve itself once a unity youth organization could be formed and to encourage its members to participate in mass initiatives. At this stage in its history, the JS was reacting to the popularity of mass initiatives while still using the language of the vanguard, and, influenced by the search for unity, it began embracing participatory initiatives. The JS knew its strengths—the political domain—and saw that a broader organization would allow it a significant role in that domain. The JS chose, at this moment, to take its focus away from broader cultural and leisure initiatives. Its internal developments in part reflect a broader reorganization of politics in revolutionary Cuba. In 1959, it was by no means clear what role the PSP, the parent organization of the JS, would play, and consequently the politicking between and within existing youth organizations did not take place in a vacuum. The implication of this search—or even struggle—for identity was an uncertain environment for young people. Many young people were eager to support the revolution, but the question of how they should do this, given the presence of two organizations with very different cultures, plagued youth activism.

The second critical moment was in October 1960, when the AJR declared it was independent from the Ejército Rebelde. The issue of where a central youth organization should stand with respect to the other revolutionary organizations was, for the moment, solved. The ethos of the AJR in its new phase was still broadly participatory, and despite its disaggregation from the Ejército Rebelde, its program still focused on defense. But the AJR, as the unity organization of youth, had the task of bridging two different organizational cultures. The difficulty of doing this should not surprise us when we consider the membership: young people who had joined the AJR to work and climb Pico Turquino and now found themselves in an organization with a more political function, and young members of the JS who saw themselves as an enlightened vanguard but now found themselves expected to join militias and work brigades. The question of whether the AJR could be both a mass organization promoting broad revolutionary participation and a vanguard political organization plagued it from October 1960 onward.

These difficulties led to the third critical moment, in April 1962, when the AJR was transformed into the selective UJC, demonstrating the ascendancy of the belief that a youth organization should be vanguard rather than mass, and political rather than of a broadly cultural and/or participatory character.
The concept of vanguardía had traveled from the JS, survived the organization’s incorporation by the mass AJR, and reemerged at the creation of the UJC. Youth activist Adolfo Rivero wrote at the time, with some contradiction, that “si la UJC es en cierto sentido una organización de masas, no es menos cierto que, al mismo tiempo, es una organización afín a la vanguardia política de la clase obrera” (Rivero 1962, 49). Only in a utopian vision—where the mass of Cuban youth occupy the vanguard position in society—could the organization be both mass and vanguard at the same time. The reality, particularly bearing in mind the criticisms leveled at the AJR by the revolutionary leadership, was far from this ideal, and the new entry criteria would severely limit the numbers of members and aspirantes. The UJC was not in any sense a mass organization, and the relationship between the organization and young people evolved into one where the UJC had a crucial mobilization role to make a success of the many revolutionary tasks for which it was deemed responsible. The emergence of a vanguard role for the organization, however, would exclude those young people neither studying nor working, toward whom the AJR had originally been directed, and the mass membership the AJR had sought following the second critical moment.

The newly established UJC had rather more in common with the JS than with the AJR, given the re-establishment of the concept of the vanguard and the use of the term “communist” long before the parent party was named as such in 1965. But to view this as a straight takeover is oversimplistic, and it would be more accurate to see this new organization as a hybrid one, attempting to merge the rebelde ethos of the AJR with the vanguardía ethos of the JS. The new logo and motto were cases in point. This incorporated, from the JS’s logo, a star and picture of Mella, to which was added, from the AJR’s logo, a picture of Cienfuegos and the motto “Estudio, Trabajo, Fusil.” What is surprising about the UJC is that—unlike either the JS or the AJR—it had a narrow focus as a political organization. Youth politics, rather than youth culture, became the dominant way of talking about youth, and the independence of the youth organization was lost at this critical moment.

Arlie Hochschild wrote that “Young people in Cuba ... are celebrated as a ‘chosen people’” (1970, 57). Being a chosen people is not easy. In the first three years of the revolution, political changes were taking place, as one Cuban (young at the time) put it, at a “velocidad vertiginosa” (vertiginous speed) (Martín Fadragas 2009, 66). The attempt to merge the rebel ethos with the communist ethos in a single youth organization while garnering the power of youth popular participation was a rocky road. Criticism from outside and self-criticism from within added to the sense of uncertainty and instability. Once the youth organization became a highly selective, politically focused body, the question arose of which young people should be counted.
Youth organizations in revolutionary Cuba, 1959–1962: From Unidad to Vanguardia

as among the “chosen.” Youth as a mass movement became atomized into multiple initiatives, and los jóvenes continued to exist as a united force only in the discourse rather than the organizational reality of the revolution.

NOTES

1. Such research also adds to our understanding of the origins of Cuban communism, complementing such works as Farber (1983; 2006), Enzensberger (1976), and Goldenberg (1970).

2. This position is evident in Bunck (1994); see also Baloyra, who argues that “Cuban youth bear the brunt of a sustained and systematic effort at socialization in revolutionary values” (1989, 429), and D. Fernández (1993; 2000), although his position points to the flexibility of the state with regards to youth.

3. Cuba is not alone in mythologizing the 1960s; Townsley, with reference to the United States, calls it the “Sixties Trope,” the function of which is “to compress and inscribe historically developed collective understandings in a very short space” (2001, 99).

4. “served as a revolutionary school where young people were trained in the Marxist-Leninist ideas in order to consolidate the integration of all into a single organization called Communist.”

5. The JS seems to have played a more significant role than the parent party in the 1950s, which “before 1958 . . . had viewed Castro’s rebellion with suspicious distance, at best, and, at worst, outright hostility” (Kapcia 2000, 117).

6. Rather than a youth organization with a structure such as the JS, the M-26-7 was itself “una organización política integrada fundamentalmente por jóvenes” (a political organization formed fundamentally for the youth) (CESJ 1986, 68n1).

7. “We, the young socialists, are prepared to work with you all to create a united revolutionary movement of all young people, for a youth revolutionary confederation, which will include national organizations and movements and sectoral organizations and movements: workers, peasants, and students, as well as institutions from towns and villages: sports and cultural clubs and societies, etc.”

8. “daily struggle for the demands and desires of the youth and the daily achievement, by our own efforts, of all those things which—along with work and politics—fill the life of the young: sport, art, culture and leisure”

9. The Havana meeting of the Juventud Cívica Unida incorporated a broad range of organizations, including representatives of “la Sección Estudiantil del 26 de Julio, el Directorio Revolucionario, la Juventud Socialista, la Cámara Nacional Ajeista, los Estudiantes Evangélicos Universitarios, del Instituto de La Habana a nombre de toda la 2ª Enseñanza, del Comité pro-Reforma Agraria de Luyanó del CRIS, del Conservatorio de Música, de las Sociedades Culturales y los artistas, y de la Unión Cívica Revolucionaria de Lawton” (Students from the July 26th Movement, the Revolutionary Directorate, the Young Socialists, the Ajeista National Chamber, University Evangelical Students, from the Institute of Havana on behalf of secondary education, the Luyanó pro-agriculture reform committee of CRIS, Conservatory
of Music, from cultural societies and artists, and from the Revolutionary Lawton Civic Union) (Calcines 1959b, 12). The organization petered out as the revolution radicalized and the JS changed its focus of activity. Cuban historian Luis Gómez explains the decay of the organization as follows: "Dada su heterogénea composición socioclasiasta, en cuanto las leyes revolucionarias comenzaron a afectar los intereses de los grupos que la integraban, estos fueron desgajándose paulatinamente hasta su desaparición definitiva" (Given its heterogeneous social class composition, as the revolutionary laws began to affect the interests of the groups that were involved, they were broken off gradually until its final disappearance) (2003b, 14–15).

10. "Let us fight increasingly to close the ranks of the whole of youth in the struggle to defend and take further our Revolution! Young socialists must be in the vanguard in applying these guidelines, in disseminating them and in the battle to have them followed."

11. "the JS must, at those times, be the vanguard of the fight, of constructive action and of the unity that is so essential."

12. "The Young Socialists, together with our brothers of the “26th July Movement,” of the Directorio Revolucionario, etc., must bring to the vanguard of Cuban youth the revolutionary principles and deeds that have already become part of our beloved nation…. Unity is more important today than ever before."

13. Shortly afterwards, the pages of Mella were opened to contributors who were not members of the JS, notably Rolando López del Amo and Alfredo Calvo, with the aim of making the magazine of and for all young Cubans ("Machadando" 1960a, 27). Nevertheless, the editor continued to be Isidoro Malmierca, secretary and later president of the JS (Gómez 2003a, 1).

14. "As we all know, the JS is the only political organization for youth in the country. The July 26 and Directorio Revolucionario, for instance, are revolutionary organizations with a large number of young people in their ranks, but they are general in nature, that is, not specifically youth organizations…. We can proudly state that this will be the Congress of the only political organization that emerged from the underground alive and with its honor intact, and with the glory of having contributed with all its might to the overthrow of the bloody Batista regime."

15. It is important not to overstate this potential “threat”—at this stage the AJR was primarily established for the purpose of educating or finding employment for young people; its aims could thereby be complementary to those of the JS. That said, being affiliated with the Ejército Rebelde, the AJR clearly had a closer link to the fight in the Sierra Maestra than the JS.

16. Participating alongside JS members and leaders were guests from the M-26-7, the DR, and the AJR, as well as smaller organizations, and the opening was presided over by PSP dignitaries Aníbal Escalante (executive secretary) and Juan Marinello (president) (“Un congreso de unión” 1960, 21).

17. "the political maturity of this organization and the confidence the revolutionary leaders placed in it."

18. "changed that Congress into one of the most important acts and the finest gesture in the life of a political organization."
19. “the youth has the inescapable duty of learning how to bear arms and to participate massively in the popular militia.”


21. For young Cuban women, the Centro Clodomira, a school teaching transferable skills to underprivileged girls, was established (INRA 1961, 34–41).

22. More than 20,000 young Cubans underwent this challenge (Quintela 1962, 31).

23. “test of determination, physical fitness and revolutionary training.”

24. “To organize, under the aegis of the Rebel Army, all those young men from poor families, who don't go to school because due to their age they have lacked the opportunity for secondary education, who have no work, who are badly clothed and poorly fed, and who are a problem and source of concern for their families.”

25. “Thousands of young people must go up into the hills to work in reforestation, in the building of schools, hospitals, roads, etc. They will be given education, military training, clothes and everything they need to live.”

26. When we ask all young socialists to join the Association of Young Rebels, when we announce the decision to dissolve our organization, we do so in the knowledge that the AJR is already—and will increasingly be—an organization able to occupy the vanguard of youth in the struggle to promote revolutionary activity.

27. It never achieved the aim of unidad in its entirety, as the FEU retained its organizational independence and was never incorporated into the AJR.

28. “They were the first experiences that, in hindsight, appear to have all the predictable immaturity and inevitable imperfections of something being done for the first time, but they are no less valuable for all that.”

29. “The main problem for the Association of Young Rebels is organizing at grass roots level: building strong and efficient municipal committees, involving each young person in some grass roots institution, in a way which gets rid of freewheeling members, members with no organization, 157 people calling themselves Young Rebels without being subject to any control, discipline or responsibility. It is a situation that enables isolated individuals—kids with no ideological, revolutionary or political training, and anarchists who confuse revolution with indiscipline and bad behavior—to do many inappropriate things and make many mistakes that damage the good name of the Association of Young Rebels.”

30. “We must create in the youth a greater communist spirit.”

31. This speech is important in the broader context of the revolution as it effectively marks the onset of the “Escalante affair.” The accusation of sectarismo was made toward Aníbal Escalante shortly afterwards, in a speech on March 27 (Thomas 1971b, 1379).

32. “What sort of youth? Perhaps a youth that merely listens and repeats? No. We want a youth that thinks, that learns revolutionary behavior for itself, that convinces itself, that develops its thinking fully—and this youth has everything it needs to achieve that.”

33. “Fidel’s criticism of the error, and Ravelo’s public acknowledgment of
his responsibility, will go a long way to counteract the influence of sectarianism, subjectivism and left-wing extremism in the ranks of young people in general and of the AJR and of the student movement in particular."

34. “Our Congress will approve the rules to govern the new life of our organization … with which our organization, through its ideas and its actions, will transform itself into the Marxist-Leninist organization of Cuban youth, the youth organization of the future United Party of the Socialist Revolution.”

35. These were agricultural production, industrial production, high-school students, universities, sports, work with children, culture, organization, propaganda, and revolutionary instruction (“Comité nacional: informe” 1962, 5).

36. “We began to show signs of a spirit of complacency in what we were doing, seeing only the positive side of things. This self-congratulation crushed our spirit of self-criticism, and we were gradually becoming critics of other people but not of ourselves, of our work, of the work of our body, constituency or organization—attitudes, which deadened our critical faculties and prevented us from working collectively.”

37. However, the Second National Congress did not happen until 1972.

38. “if the UJC is in a certain sense a mass organization, it is equally certain that it is also an organization related to the political vanguard of the working class.”


40. An aspirante was an applicant who was going through the pre-membership preparation period at the end of which a decision was made as to whether full membership could be conferred.

41. A picture of Che Guevara was added to the logo after his death in October 1967.