MIGUEL A. CENTENO

THE EVER-STUDIED ISLE

Cuba Transnational. DAMIÁN J. FERNÁNDEZ (ed.). Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2005. xvii + 216 pp. (Cloth US\$ 65.00)

Cuba's Aborted Reform: Socioeconomic Effects, International Comparisons, and Transition Policies. CARMELO MESA-LAGO & JORGE F. PÉREZ-LÓPEZ. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2005. xx + 223 pp. (Cloth US\$ 59.95)

Cuba, the United States, and the Post-Cold War World: The International Dimensions of the Washington-Havana Relationship. MORRIS MORLEY & CHRIS MCGILLION (eds.). Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2005. xi + 286 pp. (Cloth US\$ 65.00)

There are perhaps few countries other than France for which the ratio of academic word per population is higher than Cuba. Notwithstanding its symbolic significance over the past fifty years, it is important to remember that we are talking of a small island of something over ten million souls exporting sand and sugar. Even the Cuban diaspora has benefited from this arguably undeserved notoriety, and hardly a week goes by without yet another exile memoir. Over the past two weeks (this is being written in mid-August 2006), the attention meter once again jumped as Fidel's illness and the temporary (?) transfer of power was documented by the global media. Given all this attention, new books on Cuba face a daunting challenge: to say something new about a place that has been much studied, but which, in many ways, has remained the same for the past half century. Is there something we don't yet know?

The three books in question make a valiant attempt to give us a fresh look at contemporary Cuba and sometimes succeed in doing so. Each in its own way provides a new perspective on the "Cuban phenomenon" broadly understood and each certainly deserves attention by interested scholars. Yet they also reveal the limits on our possible scholarly analysis of what remains a closed society, both at home and in exile. What makes Cuba tick, whether

in Havana or Miami, remains a mystery. As the Revolution comes to its next or perhaps even last stage, the key to its future remains critical, but elusive.

Cuba Transnational is a frustrating book. On the one hand, the whole is actually larger than the sum of its parts, offering a new and distinctive take on Cuban culture. On the other hand, many of the parts are not very good and may actually detract from the possible impact of the book.

The overall message of the volume is that Cuban culture is a perfect example of “transnationalism.” This concept, like much having to do with globalization, remains simultaneously interesting but obvious, recognizable but diffuse. As I understand it, it refers to the way local cultures or discourses are connected to and transform each other via global connections. It is now impossible to speak of the culture of place X without taking into account how this both was transformed by and is transforming broader global customs. In societies with concentrated diasporas that have access to media (a selective sample, to be sure, and one whose inclusion and exclusion deserves study) this creates a flow between home and destination societies that defines new ways of being national or local.

In the case of the Cuban global society, music and film in Havana cannot be understood without reference to the flow of U.S. media. The exile itself not only feeds off Cuban culture coming from the island, but also popular reactions to it. So for example, it is not just Los Van-Van or Buena Vista that shapes Miami music, but it is the often negative reaction to global approbation of these that helps define the exile’s view of self.

This is a critical point. Whether we are speaking of trends in art or succession crises, no part of “Cuba” broadly understood can be analyzed without at least reference to its various components. Within Latin America, the Cuban experience of the past fifty years was in the vanguard to the transnational links between New York and the Dominican Republic, between *las marras* of Salvador and South Central Los Angeles. The links between exiles and home countries are helping to define the twenty-first-century version of the Americas.

Cuba Transnational makes an important contribution by defining how these links make up “Cubanidad.” But with few exceptions, the individual chapters fail to go beyond this general insight into a deeper understanding of specific instances. Jorge Duany’s introductory chapter on the past fifty years of Caribbean migration does an excellent job of setting the stage and is the volume’s most successful essay. Anyone who has looked for a good concise summary of the various waves of migration and the subsequent developments of new national identities will welcome its publication. I am not convinced, however, by Duany’s argument against Cuban exceptionalism – Cubans enjoy a privileged media image and access to power in the United States unimaginable to Dominicans or Puerto Ricans. Sara Blue’s chapter on remittances uses a survey of Havana residents to show how the flows of money have created

a transnational community. Despite the lack of detail on methodology, this is an interesting, useful contribution. I only wish that Blue had explored further how the dependency on exiles has helped redefine Cuban pride in the accomplishments of the Revolution. Susan Thomas does an excellent job beginning to trace some of the links between Cuban music and global trends and also includes the brilliant characterization of Luis Barbería as a “Cuban version of Barry White” (p. 117). Alan West-Durán’s more focused take on Cuban rap shows how race has been depoliticized during most of the Revolution, but how this has been changing over the past decade.

The rest of the chapters delve much deeper into the pretensions of much of academic cultural theory. For example, Lázaro Lima’s account of the “*locas al rescate*” could have provided an excellent entry into some of the defining characteristics of Cubanidad. The mocking absurdity of the *locas* is a wonderful counterpoint to the often pompous pronouncements of both Fidel and Miami AM radio. But did he really need to bring up Foucault in the second sentence or, even worse, use the term “emotive sexile”? I looked forward to Denise Blum’s analysis of the “Nieman Marxisation” of Che, but again found the Baudrillardian analysis less than useful.

Cuba’s Aborted Reform suffers from the opposite set of problems. Under-theorized and lacking a central argument, it provides a wealth of detail on the evolution of the island’s economy over the past decades, but somehow fails to deliver a powerful defining statement. Yet, the authors are the recognized experts on the Cuban economy and there is no doubt that this volume should serve as the definitive record of the status of Cuba’s “aborted reform” through 2005.

The success and challenges of the book are clear in the first chapter, which combines an excellent periodization of economic policy on the island with an overly detailed categorization that might leave even the most attentive readers confused. It does serve as the foundation of the overall argument of the book: Cuba has never followed a consistent economic model and this, perhaps more than errors in any particular policy, has seriously hampered the island’s development.

The second chapter provides an in-depth view of the practically apocalyptic collapse of the Cuban economy in the 1990s. Even for a reader relatively familiar with the data, the picture of hardship and decline is astounding. Particularly worrisome is the fact that despite the changes of the mid 1990s (often contradicted a few years later), the economy in 2005 was nowhere near recuperating the position it enjoyed in 1989. The consequences for the delivery of services and for social justice on the island have been dramatic. Many of the accomplishments of the Revolution appear to be withering away. Long-term crises in sectors such as housing have worsened while even the health and education successes are hitting fiscal and infrastructural

brick walls. The analysis of income inequality is unforgiving. To be White in Havana is still to enjoy a structurally privileged position.

Perhaps the most damning chapters in the book compare Cuba to the Costa Rica and Chile of equivalent periods. They measure the various accomplishments while taking into account the status of the respective societies before policy changes. While such exercises are fraught with dangers of simplification and over-quantification, it is hard to disagree with the authors' conclusion that the Cuban Revolution was not the ideal path. The book finishes with a discussion of what Cuba needs to do to improve its economic performance. Largely based on the work of Cuban economists (including those who were part of the purged Institute of the Americas), this makes for sobering reading. One does not need to read very far between the lines to see that what Cuba needs is radical reform – much more than even the changes in the mid-1990s.

Where the book falls short is the authors' failure to take the next step to assess the possible ways Cuba could undertake these changes. For two scholars who know Cuba so well not to articulate an analysis of the political future of the island is surprising and disappointing. My conclusion from reading the book is that Cuba is at a dead end and that without political transformation, economic policy is at best a patina. Mesa-Lago and Pérez-López could usefully have provided a systemic analysis of these possible transformations.

The most disappointing of the three books under review is *Cuba, the United States, and the Post-Cold War World*. The first two sentences of the foreword announce that "The book will undoubtedly prove controversial. Its thesis – that the fate of the United States as a "lone cowboy" is misguided and counterproductive – is illustrated, and illustrated well, in its relationship with revolutionary Cuba." Certainly, very few people on either side of the political spectrum (outside of some parts of Miami and Capitol Hill) would find this statement "controversial." Few support the logic of U.S. policy toward Cuba and many would also see it as a worrisome precedent for the type of "diplomacy" practiced by the Bush administration.

So what is new about this book? I am afraid not much. William LeoGrande's chapter does provide a succinct and nuanced historical overview of U.S.-Cuban relations through Guantánamo. This will be very useful as a course reading or for those new to the catastrophe of the U.S. policy toward Cuba, but it does not delve deeply into the reasons for that policy.

The following chapters explore Cuban relations with a variety of other global players and analyze how these have interacted with U.S.-Cuban relations. While of some interest and clearly based on detailed research, these chapters are ultimately unsatisfactory. In the end, Cuba is simply not a sufficiently important international player to merit this much attention. It is precisely because of Cuba's inherent marginality that U.S. policy toward it is so truly absurd. The authors, ostensibly unaware of this, are left with noting

the contradictions between U.S. policy and American national interests and long-standing international commitments.

What is needed is a much more nuanced account that not only castigates the United States, but also notes how Cuba has used its continuing struggle with *imperialismo yanqui* to sustain itself politically. We also need a scholarly analysis of the motivations for Cuban foreign policy, which largely remains a black box. Most importantly, we need to understand better how the relations between the two countries have helped shape their domestic politics. The causal trail is clear in one direction – e.g., the Miami voting bloc helps explain U.S. policy. But we understand less how the mutual obsession has also driven domestic politics and produced unexpected consequences.

The message from these books is a depressing one. Everywhere we see bad intentions, silly misunderstandings, and mediocre results. After reading the three of them I could not help but think of the euphoria and expectations of 1959 and how far down the slope the Revolution has fallen.

MIGUEL A. CENTENO

Institute for International and Regional Studies

Princeton University

Princeton NJ 08544, U.S.A.

<cenmiga@Princeton.edu>