Richard Gott, Antoni Kapcia, and Samuel Farber each approach Cuba through a new lens. Gott does so by providing a broad-sweep history of Cuba, which is epic in scope, attaches importance to social as much as political and economic history, and blends scholarship with flair. Kapcia homes in on Havana as the locus for Cuban culture, whereby cultural history becomes the trope for exploring not only the city but also Cuban national identity. Farber revisits his own and others’ interpretations of the origins of the Cuban Revolution.

All three are driven by an interest in the Revolution, and yet are drawn to history – Gott from journalism, Kapcia from literature, and Farber from political science. Gott and Kapcia, both British-based, cover five centuries of history since the Spanish conquest, though their strengths lie in the more contemporary period. This is evidenced in the uneven balance of their treatment. Gott devotes less than one-quarter of his book to the pre-1868 period, and fully half to the post-1953 years. In Kapcia’s book, only one of the chapters is pre-twentieth century, and half is on the post-1959 revolutionary years. Farber – Cuban-born, U.S.-based – covers a much more limited time frame, 1868-1961, weaving together a pre- and immediate postrevolutionary analysis. Strikingly, none cites the others’ work.

Farber’s Origins might be viewed as an update of his 1976 book, Revolution and Reaction in Cuba, 1933-1960, in light of scholarship of the last thirty
years. What was the class character of the Cuban Revolution and what was the role of the Soviet and Cuban Communists? These are questions that have dogged Farber, who grew up in Cuba and after leaving became one of the Revolution’s critics from a revolutionary socialist stance. He sets out to solve the “puzzle” of why the Cuban Revolution traversed a path from “multiclass antidictatorial political movement” to “socialist revolution” in April 1961.

He argues that it is timely to re-examine conflicting treatments to date. “The inevitable passing of Fidel Castro from the scene is likely to open a substantial process of change in Cuban Communism as it is presently constituted. That process in turn will foster a need for ideological legitimation and encourage a reexamination of Cuba in history, particularly the history of the revolution” (p. 1). Those familiar with Cuban historiography will recognize the validity of this claim, but may be less persuaded as to the influence of current trends of ideological change in the Castro regime and the rise of neoliberal economic thought and hard-right idealization of prerevolutionary Cuba within the Cuban-American community.

Farber challenges commonly held left-wing views that U.S. policy pushed Cuba into the Soviet camp, with Soviet and Cuban reluctance. He argues the Soviet Union pursued a logic of state interests and deems the leftist dichotomy between reform and revolution inappropriate. He homes in on “unresolved issues and problems” in the rapid shift to communism, as he sees them, recognizing that he excludes other important issues, such as the histories of women and race relations.

His book explores the origins of the Revolution through the narrower lens of primarily political, and to a lesser extent economic, history: prerevolutionary economic progress and stagnation in creating a political climate favorable to radical social revolution; Castro’s trajectory in the context of the Cuban populist tradition; U.S. policy toward Cuba and how it might have been different; developments during the 1950s inside Cuba, from above and below; and the role of Soviet and Cuban Communists in the revolutionary process.

Farber’s argument is fivefold. (1) In the 1950s Cuban political economy was defined by uneven development, and Batista’s regime had little social base; (2) Castro’s group was a declassed populist movement in the Latin American caudillismo tradition, an active agent with its own aims and form of rule before choosing the Soviet camp; (3) U.S. policy emanated from its hemispheric imperial positioning and the cold war, and was consistent with its broader Latin America policy; (4) the Soviet Union pursued its own imperial interests from the early days of the revolutionary regime, promoted as a model by Cuba’s Popular Socialist Party (communist); (5) Cuba’s working class lacked the independence to fight for its interests, so that workers were neither the social force making revolution nor its prime beneficiaries.

The crux of Farber’s argument is that the structure of Cuba’s economy and politics in the first half of the twentieth century made the island ripe
for radical social and economic change – making revolution possible, but not inevitable – and the Soviet Union saw an advantage in providing early assistance. Using recently declassified U.S. and Soviet documents, as well as biographical and narrative literature from Cuba, he mounts a convincing case in demonstrating that revolutionary leaders, while acting under serious constraints, pursued their own ideological visions.

Little of this will strike scholars of Cuba as particularly new, but the analysis contains some insightful details. His characterization of Castro as a 1950s “populist caudillo ... detached from any significant institutional ties to Cuba’s principal social classes” is one that suggests an “affinity with Soviet-style Communism” (p. 67). Castro was able to manoeuvre adroitly, capitalizing on historical circumstance, to “manipulate and deceive” his supporters, whereby “the Cuban masses have remained the objects rather than the subjects of history” (p. 68), political radicalization notwithstanding.

Gott’s treatment is quite different. Best known for his journalism and early work on guerrilla warfare and Che Guevara, Gott regales us with an eminently readable narrative chronological history of Cuba. His thoroughly researched and annotated work of synthesis, written in quasi-journalistic, quasi-academic style, provides the historical and cultural context in which the 1959 Revolution took shape and which, in his view, is what has allowed it to survive for so long. He depicts it as driven by national defiance rather than Marxism-Leninism, and portrays Castro as a disciple of Cuba’s nineteenth-century founding father José Martí rather than Karl Marx. While celebrating the revolutionary gains in health and education, his focus is less on the domestic and more on the international, especially Cuba as a U.S. national security issue.

The prologue testifies to Gott’s long acquaintance with Cuba. He first traveled there in October 1963, to witness the devastation caused by Hurricane Flora and the mass outpouring of grief at the funeral of popular musician Beny Moré. It was then that he met Che Guevara. Years later, in 1967, he was able to confirm to the world it was indeed Guevara who lay dead in the mountains of Bolivia. While motivated by political history, Gott pays much attention to the social make-up of Cuban society – a welcome departure from most standard political histories. Hence, his introduction on the Cuban people signals class, race, and ethnic divides in an often conflictive and violent past that underlie the present unity of revolution.

The book’s chapters are arranged chronologically: 1511-1740, Spanish settlement, slaughter, slavery, and piracy; 1741-1868, Spanish empire challenged; 1868-1902, wars of independence and U.S. occupation; 1902-1952, the republican years; 1953-61, revolution in the making; 1961-1968, power consolidated; 1968-1985, the Soviet years; 1985-2003, Cuba out on a limb. From the nineteenth century on, his particular focus of interest is the intertwining of U.S. and Cuban politics. Significantly, his three appendices are
all extracts from key U.S. documents: the John Quincy Adams letter of 1823 likening Cuba to an apple which, in falling to a ground disjointed from Spain and incapable of self-support, “can gravitate only towards the North American Union, which, by the same law of nature, cannot cast her off from her bosom” (quoted on p. 326); the Platt Amendment of 1902 enabling the United States to intervene in Cuban affairs; and the 1996 Helms-Burton Act seeking sanctions against the Castro government and outlining U.S. support for the transition to a democratically elected government.

Gott writes that the 1902 Platt Amendment enabled ... Cuban governments to summon American military assistance whenever they were faced with powerful internal opposition – by workers or peasants, or simply by rival political factions. American soldiers often arrived to solve problems in Cuba that a genuinely independent government would have been obliged to sort out on its own. The resentment created was to explode in 1933 and again in 1959. (pp. 111-12)

The year 1961 saw the Literacy Campaign but also the U.S.-backed invasion at the Bay of Pigs, followed by early Soviet overtures, the 1962 October Missile Crisis, and the heady years of exporting revolution to Latin America in the 1960s and Africa in the 1970s. “Castro’s Revolution put Cuba on the map over a period of 40 years ... He engendered in the Cuban people an intangible but real sense of pride in their nation” (p. 319).

Gott’s epilogue addresses the oft-asked question: What after Castro dies? Chaos or velvet revolution? Mass return migration from Miami? Island defiance? U.S. occupation? Echoing revolutionary loyalist sentiment, he writes: “Cuba has been the victim of three empires [Spanish, U.S., and Soviet] and has rejected them all,” U.S. interest in Cuba long pre-dates the revolution and “will not simply disappear with Castro. Nor will the Cuban desire to be free and independent” (p. 324). In Gott’s judgment, “When [Castro] dies, there will be little change in Cuba. While few people have been looking, the change has already taken place” (p. 325).

Gott describes the Havana to which he arrived in 1963 as a “wealthy and prosperous capital” (p. 1). This was to change quite dramatically in the following years, as Antoni Kapcia makes clear in Havana, a sequel to his 2000 book, Cuba: Island of Dreams. Havana differs in content and approach from the books by Gott and Farber on two counts. First, Kapcia sets out to position Havana in Cuban history. Second, his prime locus of analysis is culture. Entering a cross-disciplinary world, he alerts us, is an “academic minefield” where “unfamiliar theoretical traps” may lurk. He begins by steering us through Havana’s distinctive “fusion of noises” and “confusion of images” in the ambivalent relation between capital and interior, and the contemporary trauma of a reversed centripetal capital/interior relationship. Thus, “chaos,
exaggerated by neglect since 1960, may be Havana’s own signature” (p. 4), and Havana post-1989 may be “less Cuba’s capital than a social, cultural and political entity in its own right” (p. 3).

An apposite conceptual frame, which serves as title for the introduction, is “The Havana Mosaic: Sweetness and Light” (taken from Matthew Arnold). The sweetness of sugar, but also bitter-sweet reality, and the harsh light of the sun, contrasted with the gloom of badly lit streets by night, are taken as counterpoint for Cuba’s national identity and cultural identity, “high” and “popular” culture. In the conclusion, Kapcia returns to this imagery, envisioning Havana as chiaroscuro, light and shade.

These themes recur throughout the book’s chronologically arranged chapters. The first covers the colonial period, from the 1550s-1760s pre-sugar “City in the Shadows” to the sugar “Boom City,” running from the 1760s through independence from Spain, and including the U.S. occupation of 1898-1902. The second chapter, on the prerevolutionary republican period of 1902-1958, has three parts: “A Nation without a Capital, and a Capital without a Nation” (1902-1933), “Havana as the Cultural Problem” (1934-1958), and a case study of the weekly Bohemia. The third chapter enters the post-1959 revolutionary period, charting the “new marginalisation of Havana” of 1959-1971 and “the Grey City” of the 1970s-1980s, up to the watershed 1989-1990 years, with the fall of the Berlin Wall, and offers a second case study of Bohemia (in a later time frame) and one of the daily Granma. Curiously, Kapcia applies the term “Grey Years” to the 1970s and 1980s, though it is more commonly applied only to the first half of the 1970s. The late 1970s and the 1980s produced a cultural effervescence quite distanced from any political orthodoxy, paving the way for greater opening in the crisis 1990s, as a survival strategy. This is evidenced in the fourth chapter, on the post-1990 years, which depicts Havana as a new cultural space and ends with a case study of community cultural centres, or Casas de Cultura.

The treatment is in places off the mark. In Cuba’s long nineteenth century (1762-1902), the role of sugar in the rise of the city is arguably over-stated. Cuba’s sugar historian par excellence, Manuel Moreno Fraginals, cautioned that right to the end of the nineteenth century tobacco outplayed sugar in the city oligarchy stakes, a point substantiated by my own work. Havana in the 1890s was the cigar city, dominated architecturally by palatial cigar factories, in which there was a thriving cultural tradition of reading. Kapcia embraces the essence of Havana, by the 1880s, “poised uncomfortably and disoriented between two Empires [Spain and North America] and three cultures ... a cautious emerging Cuban culture, which lacked any consensus ... on where and how Afro-Cuba might fit in” (p. 58). Race is a perceptible undercurrent throughout, though at times accorded a primacy it arguably did not have. Historical evidence does not substantiate that the “disappearance of radicalism in Havana [before 1920] indicated either a resigned pragmatism or
a general disillusion. Only Havana’s black population dissented radically” (p. 65). This is to ignore working-class radicalism (the 1902 and 1907 strikes brought the city to a standstill) and White liberal rebellion (1906 and 1917).

The case studies provide an interesting angle, but are not unproblematic. While Bohemia was widely read, it was hardly a cultural gatekeeper, and Granma, as the official party paper, was never much of a cultural contender beyond dissemination. Far more important revolutionary cultural markers were Carteles, Gaceta, Caimán Barbudo, Revolución y Cultura, the more specialist Cine Cubano (for film), Tablas (for theater), and the evening daily Juventud Rebelde. Kapcia is on track with the Casas de Cultura, however: they continue to serve the dual function of broadening access to cultural forms as well as capturing new talent, much as the talleres literarios and instructores de arte did earlier in the revolutionary period.

Such caveats aside, Kapcia has produced an ambitious study. Like Gott’s, it is an admirable work of synthesis. Each broadens our understanding of the more narrowly political scope of Farber’s book, whereby the political “isolationism” of revolutionary Cuba has to be counterposed with social and cultural cosmopolitanism, of Havana in particular. Ultimately, Gott and Kapcia serve to caution against a unidimensional view of a Cuba that has embraced peoples, cultures, and causes in a way that exposes the West’s current trend to introversion and the U.S. obsession with fashioning a Cuba in its own image.

REFERENCE


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