
Historians of Cuba, on the island and off, have long known this book in its original (2003) Spanish edition. The English version (translated admirably by Russ Davidson) happily ensures that it will have a wider audience. Marial Iglesias analyzes small and large changes in everyday life during the transition from Spanish rule to independence in the period 1898-1902. These years coincide with a U.S. occupation as well, but she resolutely decenters the U.S. presence through a compelling analysis of the spaces and practices of the “nationalist imagination” that she argues were “both the cause and effect of a political and cultural process of great complexity” (p. 7). The book accomplishes a great deal with subtle arguments that work at many levels: it is at once a methodological challenge to Benedict Anderson’s (and many followers’) yoking of nationalism to print capitalism, a thoughtful and well-documented reformulation of the unproductive dichotomy “resistance and accommodation” that has powerfully shaped Cuban historiography on both sides of the Straits of Florida, and a deft portrayal of loyalties and tensions that run through the seemingly impenetrable historiographic walls separating the colonial from the republican periods. But best of all perhaps are the stories she has managed to elicit from the broad array of sources with which this book was written. Tales of statues toppled and replaced, flags baptized, and bodies exhumed and reburied animate the pages of this wonderful book.

Nationalism, argues Iglesias, is lived and embodied through a series of rituals and representations. Looking to municipal councils and associations in an effort to move beyond Havana and official discourses, she dwells on fraught microhistories. The renaming of streets over the course of three years speaks volumes. In Havana, U.S. officials tried and failed to control rampant renaming in the provinces. Municipal councils took it upon themselves to eliminate names reminiscent of Spanish colonialism and replace them with those of the heroes and martyrs of the recently fought wars of independence. But, as she also points out, this patriotism was not immune to exclusionary racist or gendered practices. Contrary to official discourses about equality among Cubans of all races, the Cuban patriotism that renamed urban spaces marginalized black men and all women in its
emphasis on a pantheon of white male military heroes. The concrete analysis of reconstruction as nationalism both breaks new evidentiary ground and refuses simplification. In a marvelous discussion of objects as purveyors of nationalism, she notes the elevation of items like pins, cuff links, fragments of uniforms, or any other shard left behind by soldiers and heroes of the wars of independence to dual statuses as relics and souvenirs. The logics of religion and the marketplace collude and blend into one another as these tangible bits of memory make their ways to museums or the display cases of private homes. Like so much of this book, this is at once an entertaining story and a serious intervention in discussions about nationalism as practice and in relation to spirituality or capitalism.

The book deflates stalwart assumptions about the role of the U.S. occupiers. It demonstrates, for instance, that contrary to frequent claims about the U.S. role in banning cockfights, it was often town councils or other local officials concerned with the image of Cubanness that cockfights exuded who were responsible for their prohibition. Thus questions of “culture” and “civilization” underwent debate and contestation as much among Cubans as between Cubans and Americans. But this does not mean that Iglesias lets the U.S. occupation off the hook. Rather, it is one among several complex narratives. As a guiding framework, the multivocal nature of historical processes allows for a fresh approach, exemplified by the episode of Cuban schoolteachers sent to Harvard University for pedagogic training. She is able to sustain an argument that acknowledges the schoolteachers’ admiration for the United States and simultaneous clear-sightedness about imperialism without neglecting the reality of American racism or widespread American support for Cuban independence.

Like many of the episodes that Iglesias narrates with such precision and subtlety, the book itself speaks with many voices. What resonates with historians based in North America will differ from what is most striking to historians working in Latin America or the Caribbean, where the stakes vary and the unspoken matters a great deal. The politics of loyalty and citizenship within regimes striving for legitimacy may be familiar ground, but it is far from settled. Iglesias’s brilliant work unsettles it even more, and then sows clarity.

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