Par Kumaraswami (ed.)


This volume presents rehashing of previously published material more than scholarly contributions for revised comprehension of the Cuban Revolution. The recently proposed economic and political changes in Cuba are barely mentioned, even though they were being discussed prior to the book’s publication.

There are two articles on literature: Par Kumaraswami’s “Peripheral Visions? Literary Canon Formation in Revolutionary Cuba” and Odette Casamayor-Cisneros’s “Floating in the Void: Weightlessness in Post-Soviet Cuba Narrative.” The latter also discusses the problem of youth, as does Anne Luke’s “Creating the Quiet Majority? Youth and Young People in the Political Culture of the Cuban Revolution.” The purpose of Kumaraswami’s article is to understand the canons of literature during the Cuban Revolution. However it is written in an almost incomprehensible and inaccessible style, and lacks definitions for the vocabulary used. What does it mean to say that “the formation of the canon is dependent on the Bourdieusian notion of ‘consecration’ of a number of literary works by various ‘disinterested’ mechanisms and agents” (p. 95)? Or again, “for a nation to be considered literarily mature, it must demonstrate in its literary production its evolving disregard for its political objectives” (p. 96).

Casamayor-Cisneros is far more comprehensible, introducing us to young authors of the post-Soviet Union/Special Period generation who, in comparison with older generations, express feelings of alienation and/or indifference toward the revolutionary process: “these young Cubans have been unable to find an epic meaning to their existence” (p. 39) and lack “community identity” (p. 46). Historical events such as Playa Girón and the missile crisis are “obsolete and incoherent” (p. 50). However, she uses very few literary examples to define a whole generation and presents no basis for her generalizations.

Anne Luke’s article focuses on the history of youth during the Cuban Revolution. “The first decade of the twenty-first century saw a new emphasis on youth unparalleled since the 1960s” (p. 130). Initiatives have been introduced to reintegrate young people into society, providing neither work nor study, and therefore not contributing to building socialism. Luke attributes youth-related problems to the lack of a mass youth organization. Yet the high school and college student organizations serve as such. She laments that the Union of Communist Youth has been unable to nudge young people to meet a standard of behavior (p. 142). But why is it unattainable? Furthermore she fails to update the article by including current statistics and surveys regarding Cuban youth.
John M. Kirk’s article, “Cuban Medical Internationalism under Raúl Castro,” provides valuable insights and data regarding Cuba’s history of sending medical doctors to other countries and training their doctors. It also explores the international trade potentials for Cuba’s pharmaceutical products.

In “Cuba’s Internationalism Revisited: Exporting Literacy, ALBA, and a new Paradigm for South-South Collaboration,” Kepa Artaraz examines how Latin American countries have attempted to replicate the achievements of the Cuban Revolution: the literacy campaign, meeting basic human needs, universal and free education and health systems, and medical diplomacy. Cuba has regained prestige, demonstrated by the rejection of U.S. attempts in the United Nations to condemn Cuba’s human rights record, and the overwhelming support for Cuba to rejoin the OAS. Artaraz should have added the U.N.’s continued overwhelming rejection of the embargo against Cuba, and mentioned that the United States is the only country in the Western Hemisphere lacking diplomatic relations with Cuba.

“Celebrating 50 Years—but of What Exactly and Why is Latin America Celebrating It?” by Antoni Kapcia, expands Artaraz’s theme regarding Cuba’s accomplishments influencing Latin America. The early years brought the agrarian reforms, mobilization of and participation by the population, militias and the CDR, the literacy campaign, the Cuban Cinema Institute (ICAIC), and Casa de las Americas. Kapcia dates the change from nationalism to socialism to 1961, but fails to mention, in this context, several key events: the United States cutting the sugar quota and breaking diplomatic relations, the nationalization of the oil refineries, the Bay of Pigs invasion, and the Second Declaration of Havana. While he correctly notes that economic centralization followed, he makes no mention of the nationalization of almost all economic activity in 1968. Contrary to Kapcia, it was Cuban voters, not the National Assembly, who gave final approval for the 1976 Cuban Constitution. Furthermore, he fails to point out that the new parliamentary system established in Cuba had important differences with the Soviet model (p. 66; see Roman 2003:61–103). In the 1990s Cuba again stressed nationalism and localism (pp. 69–71). Lacking in both Kapcia’s and Artaraz’s articles is the fact that overcentralization, far from being a model to emulate, is being recognized in Cuba as a cause of the current economic crisis.

Elvira Antón Carrillo’s “Ideas of Race, Ethnicity and National Identity in the Discourse of the Press During the Cuban Revolution” traces the changing ways the Cuban government has dealt with the problem of racism. Until the end of the twentieth century racism was officially considered solved by socialism and not discussed in the press. “At the current moment, there is a wider acceptance of the existence of discrimination in Cuban society” (p. 16). Discrimination is
manifested in jobs, living conditions, and the prison population. She reviews some of the literature, but offers no backup to her claims of persistent discrimination. Without explanation she asserts that the elites “play a crucial role in the creation, maintenance and reproduction of stereotypes, prejudice and discrimination” (p. 20). She fails to note that President Raúl Castro’s address to the 2011 Communist Party Congress clearly acknowledged the problem of racism (Castro 2011).

Steve Ludlam’s “Regime Change and Human Rights: A Perspective on the Cuban Polemic” consists of a rehash of Cuba’s interpretation of human rights, the U.S. campaigns against Cuba, backing groups committing terrorist acts against Cuba and those favoring regime change in Cuba, and the U.S. embargo against Cuba.

I do not regard this book as essential reading for understanding and gaining new perspectives on the Cuban Revolution.

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**References**