Jennifer Ruth Hosek

Sun, Sex, and Socialism: Cuba in the German Imaginary. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012. xvi + 266 pp. (Cloth CAD 60.00)

Sun, Sex, and Socialism presents an ambitious and well-accomplished analysis of representations of revolutionary Cuba in German cultural production from the 1960s to the present. Through a competent close reading of a wide array of media—films, poems, travel narratives, essays, biographies, theater plays, novels and even a rum advertising campaign—Jennifer Ruth Hosek carefully examines the complex roles played by depictions of the socialist Caribbean island in different German political projects and nationalistic visions, especially in the two prereunification Germanies. She shows that, beyond official discourses of socialist friendship, German Democratic Republic (GDR) citizens often used images of Cuba to craft alternative ideals of a more enthusiastic, dynamic, independent, and nonaligned state socialism. The book also discusses how leftist activists in the pre-1989 Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) found in the socialist island a revolutionary subaltern nationalism that escaped both the conservative overtones of German nationalism and the problems of a less attractive Eastern European state socialism. As such, Cuba emerges in this book as an unlikely mirror that allowed Germans to change their own self-conceptions and domestic utopias.

Because of its heavy emphasis on the GDR, this book is, from a Cubanist point of view, an important contribution to the literature on the connections between the island and the Eurasian socialist bloc. It also brings a new perspective to cultural studies of the Cold War, challenging the dominant focus on the United States and the Soviet Union and analyzing representations of a southern socialist country in semiperipheral socialist and capitalist contexts. More broadly, it is a welcome statement on the cultural dimensions of transnationalism demonstrating that “strong colonial, migrant, and politico-economic ties are not necessary conditions for transnational connection” (p. 4). Hosek goes beyond the usual scholarly focus on northern orientalization and exoticization of the Global South to explore how northern intellectuals have eagerly looked for inspiration in southern emancipatory political movements. But this point is made without downplaying the exoticizing dimensions of these “German Cubas.” One of Hosek’s greatest accomplishments is precisely to show how visions of a sexualized tropical island have intertwined with revolutionary and emancipatory utopias—that is, how “sun and sex” have helped imagine a more liberating socialism.

Following an introduction that presents the book’s main arguments, Chapter 1 analyzes Germany’s post-1989 fascination with Cuba. This is mainly a story

of persisting differences between eastern and western Germany, as exemplified by its comparison of films produced in the two regions. Hosek reads Wim Wender's *Buena Vista Social Club* as a metaphoric celebration of German reunification that contrasts with the perspective of two movies made in contemporary eastern Germany. One of them portrays Cuba as an idealized view of what a still-socialist GDR might have been today; the other narrates the romance between a German man and a Cuban woman as a metaphor for a German reunification that disempowers a feminized GDR. The following two chapters bring readers to the 1960s. Chapter 2 examines how GDR intellectuals in that period tended to portray a vibrant, energetic, and grassroots Cuban socialism as a counterpoint to their own mature, stable, and bureaucratic socialism, but evaluated them in different ways. For instance, whereas a 1962 film portrayed GDR socialist subjects as politically more advanced than their joyous Cuban counterparts, a 1963 novel looked to Cuban fledgling socialism as a source of enthusiasm for young GDR citizens devoid of emotional commitment to socialism. Both pieces used sexuality as a fundamental language through which to think Cuba and Germany, which contrasts to the less sexualized representation of Cuba that Chapter 3 documents in the 1960s FRG. This short chapter discusses how West Berlin radicals found in the Cuban Revolution a legitimate form of emancipatory nationalism as well as promising guerrilla tactics that they tried to adapt to their northern urban setting.

Chapter 4 narrates a shift toward political disillusionment in both Germanies' appreciation of Cuba throughout the 1970s. While FRG authors went from seeing the Cuban state as an embodiment of legitimate political violence to criticizing governmental control in both capitalism and socialism, GDR producers replaced their visions of a democratic non-aligned Cuban state socialism with a consumerist gaze that portrayed the island as a sexualized exotic location. Chapter 5 analyzes German—mainly GDR—representations of two Cuba-related transnational revolutionary figures: Che Guevara and Tania *la Guerrillera*. Official GDR representations tried to stabilize these figures as youthful and romantic socialist heroes, but their biographies and filmic references, according to Hosek, enabled nonconformist readings that offered the GDR public “vicarious pleasures and alternative lifestyles even in tension with socialist values” (p. 160), especially related to sexual and travel freedoms.

Hosek's dizzying kaleidoscope of close readings sometimes makes the reader lose sight of the book's central arguments, but it has a clear overall message: *German* cultural producers have repeatedly imagined Cuba in order to recreate and transform *German* national imaginations. This reveals the power of nationalism to frame transnational connections, a point that Hosek does not make explicit. But such a message also means that Cubans play an extremely

limited role either as authors or receivers of these cultural products, and in their rare appearances in the volume they have far less agency than German actors. Therefore, the argument of Cuba's (or the South's) supposed "influence" on Germany (or the North)—posited in the introduction and epilogue as a central contribution of the book (e.g., pp. 4, 180)—is not demonstrated at all. However, the book makes even more important and sophisticated statements about northern imaginations of Cuba and the Caribbean, and on nationalism and transnationalism in general, and will be of great interest to students of those topics.

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