Louis A. Pérez Jr.


_The Structure of Cuban History: Meanings and Purpose of the Past_ is a project even more ambitious than the title suggests. Louis A. Pérez Jr. explores both the way history is told and the way it affects the population at large. The book attempts to explain history’s capacity to forge the present and future, showing how Cuban history influenced not only the individual and/or family unit, but also the collective. Pérez goes beyond commenting on the cause and effect, taking into account the purpose of historical writings.

There are already plenty of well-researched Cuban historiographies. What makes this one stand out is its focus on how history is utilized by political forces and how history shapes the present. The book begins with the events following the last Cuban war of independence against Spain (1895–98), as Pérez recounts the turmoil and destruction it left behind. “Few Cubans in 1898 found home as they remembered it—if they found home at all” (p. 22). The theme of sacrifice is introduced here and continues throughout the book. Cubans have endured suffering only to sacrifice once more during the next government or happening. Another crucial notion in the first chapter is Cubans’ adoration for their history. History affected the population intellectually, politically, and emotionally. Thus, history served a higher purpose than simply evoking the past.

Following the opening chapter on the devastation brought on by war, the book offers a discussion of the Cuban historical narrative. The Cuban historian and the remembering of history, in general, provided society with a sense of purpose. The push for love of one’s _patria_ was intentionally created to act on behalf of the sovereign nation. The text also deliberates on the manner by which history is relayed, touching, for example, on the concept of _patria_ as an artistic manifestation.

_The Structure of Cuban History_ investigates the Cuban psyche throughout history, particularly with regard to the promise of a sovereign nation. An independent Cuba meant more than self-government; it was the assurance of providing a better future. An autonomous Cuba would allow the population to address their collective grievances and societal pressures, and correct any shared dissatisfaction. The book also discusses racial and gender issues as well as the role of families and children (in contrast to previous Cuban historiographies, which rarely even considered children), and the prevalence of political violence from antigovernment groups during the 1950s.
Pérez explores the notion of what it means to be Cuban and the role of history on the Cuban psyche. He argues convincingly that the concept of a true Cuban signifies a summons to endure hardships and sacrifice. Although this idea is not novel, the way Pérez relates it to historiography is refreshing. The book concludes with a discussion of the influence of history on modern Cuba, touching on the utilization of history by the Machado, Batista, Auténtico, and Castro governments, with each regime using history not only to validate itself, but also to manipulate the population into whatever course it preferred. However, readers are left questioning how history will be utilized by future governments and whether they will follow the lessons from the past.

The book is well researched and provides plenty of support for each argument. The examples are from prominent figures in Cuban history and would be of interest even to the casual reader. If the book has a downside, it is the weightiness of the text, not in terms of page numbers but in subject matter.

Pérez is a gifted author and historian and this book is, overall, a masterpiece, a worthy read not only for Caribbean historians, but for historiographers in general. The casual reader, too, would find value in the book due to its ability to provide a general survey of prominent historical figures and events while at the same time covering historiography.

Francisco José Tudela
Department of Modern Languages and Cultures,
University of Leeds, LS2 9JT Leeds, U.K.
ftud56@hotmail.com