Ilan Ehrlich

Eduardo Chibás: The Incorrigible Man of Cuban Politics. Lanham MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015. viii + 315 pp. (Cloth US\$ 85.00)

For understandable reasons, the historiography of Cuba is weighted on two historical periods: the late-nineteenth to early-twentieth century, and the Cuban Revolution from 1959 to today. Between 1868 and 1902, Cuba experienced two wars of independence (1868–78 and 1895–98), the abolition of slavery (1886), the development of technologically advanced sugar production, and, by 1902, the transition from colony to semi-independent republic under American hegemony. After 1959, of course, Cuba underwent one of the most important social revolutions of the twentieth century. Yet one negative consequence of highlighting these two periods is that 1900–59 has received comparatively little attention. Fortunately, the past couple of decades have seen a new generation of historians correcting the imbalance. Ilan Ehrlich's *Eduardo Chibás* is an important addition to this new scholarship on republican Cuba (1902–59).

The book provides much needed insight on one of the most important, yet neglected, figures of modern Cuban history, Eduardo Chibás. Virtually no Cuban historian would deny that Chibás decisively shaped Cuban politics between 1944 and his suicide in 1951. Yet with the exception of Luis Conte Agüero's 1955 political biography, *Eduardo Chibás*, and a few small (and usually excellent) monographs published in Cuba, there is a striking absence of scholarship on a person who, everyone agrees, changed Cuban politics. Indeed, the figure of Eduardo Chibás provides us with one of the great "what ifs" of history. It is impossible to imagine how a young Fidel Castro could have emerged as a national figure without Chibás laying the discursive foundations for what would become the revolutionary message of the 26th of July Movement and other anti-Batista forces during the 1950s. Chibás was no revolutionary, at least in the sense that he did not want a fundamental transformation in the social and economic structures of Cuban society. But for millions of Cubans he became the conscience of the nation, the spokesperson for Cuban national dignity and honor in the face of the moral and political decadence that plagued Cuban neocolonial society. *If* Chibás had not committed suicide in 1951, and *if* he had continued to be the most popular spokesperson against the country's corruption and gangsterism, would a Fidel Castro have emerged as a national political figure? *If* Chibás had led the struggle against Batista after 1952, would there have been a revolution at all? *If* Chibás had lived, would he have found a more moderate alternative to Cuba's problems, thus avoiding over 50 years of relative political isolation and a U.S. economic blockade? Of course these questions are unanswerable, but in one form or another they have been on the lips

of scholars and politically aware Cubans for over sixty years. Ehrlich does not pretend to answer—or even hint at answering—such questions; what he does do is give much needed historical detail, nuance, and analysis about a period and a man whose life (and death) decisively changed Cuban history.

The book is organized in ten well-written chapters which chronicle the decisive moments of Chibás's struggle against corruption and gangsterism. Each one is rich with detail about his activities, how and why he cultivated personal (and therefore political) ties with followers, allies, and enemies, and how his unique and charismatic political style captivated a nation. There is a double-edged sword to the sheer mass of detail provided on these topics. On the one hand, because of our lack of knowledge about this important phase of Cuban history, such detailed accounts of both the man and his times provide us with a nuanced, multidimensional picture of Cuban political culture at a particular time in the country's history. Too often this period of Cuba's history is glossed over with simplistic generalizations about the ubiquitous corruption and gangsterism, while ignoring the complex "microhistories" of key events that changed the ways Cubans viewed their political system and country generally. By telling these stories—by focusing on the choices particular people made at particular times—Ehrlich shows us that nothing was inevitable in Cuban politics, least of all the revolution of 1959. On the other hand, for the nonspecialist, such detail can become overwhelming and some readers could easily lose the forest for the trees. The book would have been stronger if it had provided a more extensive introduction, placing Chibás within the context of Cuban national history and Latin American history generally. Because Chibás was one of many Latin American populists in the 1940s, a few comparative references to similar figures would have helped readers better appreciate his historical significance.

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