Review Articles

Binaries and Stereotypes

Cuba on the World Stage

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Jonathan C. Brown, *Cuba's Revolutionary World*. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2017. viii + 585 pp. (Cloth US\$35.00)

Margaret Randall, *Exporting Revolution: Cuba's Global Solidarity*. Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2017. x + 270 pp. (Paper US\$24.95)

It has often been observed that, since 1960, Cuba has punched well above its weight globally. The Revolution reshaped international politics (quite apart from the 1962 Missile Crisis), bringing a “before and after” dimension to U.S. policies in Latin America, and later helping to reshape southern Africa's political map. Modern Cuba's external profile has certainly been remarkable.

However, when assessing it, we inevitably meet one bugbear of interpretations of the Revolution: the hotly contested nature of academic views of Cuba's recent history, and current politics, society, and economics, all still attracting polemic and easy binaries. That external profile is especially vulnerable to that contestation, since Cuba's global behavior continues to feed easily into our preconceptions; while the Cold War may be over, it still seems to shape our reading of Cuba.

Cuba's ability to challenge and resist the United States has long generated sympathy beyond political confrères, but interpretations of its relations elsewhere in the world have been bedeviled by binary approaches. Thus, Cuba's 1960–91 relationship with the Soviet Union is seen either as a leadership betray-

ing a revolution or national independence to become a satellite, with a new dependence, or, alternatively, a natural reaction to U.S. aggression, forcing an alliance that made economic and military sense. And in Latin America, early Cuban support for armed rebellion was either reckless troublemaking, seeking to “export revolution” or a selfless commitment to liberate the continent’s downtrodden from U.S. imperialism. Later, in Africa, Cuba was either a Soviet proxy or a valuable principled support for anti-colonial struggles and fragile decolonization. Finally, Cuba’s wider identification with the “Third World” (1960s) and (later) the developing world was, and is, either a reckless over-extending, a waste of energy, investment, and lives for ideological reasons, or selfless humanitarianism, based on deeply held principles.

However, that foreign policy has often been remarkable. In the 1960s, openly encouraging (and covertly supporting) armed revolution was daring, not so much in challenging the United States (since hostility was a given) as in risking Soviet neglect. It was also potentially costly, given Cuba’s fragile economy and the risk of alienating the population. The 1975–90 commitment to “internationalism” (the vast programs of human aid in medicine, education, administration, security and, most controversially, military action) proved politically significant for Cuba’s standing, and became even more remarkable after 1991, when the Soviet collapse destroyed Cuba’s main trading links.

Inevitably, both strategies—revolution and aid—have always been seen as ideologically driven, by a commitment to socialism and revolution, the latter reflecting Che Guevara’s belief in the possibility of achieving revolution through “subjective” (rather than objective) conditions, and then by a new anti-imperialist “Third-Worldism.” While there is some truth in those assumptions, they only tell part of the story: that Cuba’s approach to foreign policy differs little from that of other countries, geared to very practical considerations. Even the apparently ideological strategy of “exporting revolution” (a concept rightly rejected by Margaret Randall, despite her book’s title) was permitted by the combination of the 1962 U.S. undertaking not to invade and the reality that Cuba was in any case isolated in the region, by an embargo that most of the hemisphere supported, and by expulsion from the OAS, giving the Cuban leadership nothing to lose, and plenty to gain: any success would breach isolation, undermining U.S. power, and, even if it failed, the image of David against the imperialist Goliath might cement domestic unity. Internationalism has also brought benefits, winning widespread diplomatic recognition and support for Cuba’s campaign against the embargo (to confirm its illegality in international law), and giving many Cubans a chance to engage in life-changing volunteering in countries often socially poorer than Cuba (as well as access to hard currency).

There has also been a significant continuity between the two strategies: both reflect a constant focus on the United States, which, even when not specified, is always the proverbial “elephant in the room,” with Cuba seeking to resist, undermine, or outmaneuver the country that (Obama’s brief *détente* aside) is still determined to end the Cuban system. Hence, we can see Cuba’s foreign policy as often sensible and effective, rather than blindly ideological, impractical, and failed.

Given this, how do the two books under review shape up against this reality and given the tendencies to binaries? The answer is that they illustrate that minefield clearly: although very different texts, from different disciplines, and with very different target readerships, they come down on different sides of the fence. Randall admires and explains the moral basis of Cuban internationalism, while Jonathan Brown explains the nefarious motives of Cuba’s early support for international revolution.

For Randall, there is no doubt: the Cold War determined much of what happened to, and inside, Cuba after 1960, and still shapes U.S. policy. Indeed, the United States is unquestionably the villain of Randall’s book, while the Cuban leadership, although often making much-lamented errors, is to be praised for its achievements, resilience, and ability to sustain an essentially moral approach to many policies. The book is partly a *cri de coeur* from someone who knows the Revolution from the inside, but Randall’s approach is a novel one. Rather than following the well-trodden path of cataloguing the trajectory, motives, and effects of “internationalism,” she places it in a surprising context—that of a revolution whose cultural policies and production have long expressed a depth, versality, and persuasive power that, while shaping and expressing Cubans’ personal and collective commitment (all reflected in four oral histories) to a moral identification with the Third or developing world, has had a powerful impact beyond Cuba’s borders.

In what is a curious but sometimes effective mixture of personal testimony, oral history, and valuable data of Cuban aid programs, Randall presents Cuba’s external dimension through the prism of culture (and especially literature), which is often the book’s real focus; in doing so, she gives us a very different and thought-provoking approach, while reminding us incidentally that ideology (which is often effectively what she is describing) is not just the ideas embodied in written texts and imposed by persuasive individuals, but must necessarily involve the imaginary. Yet ideology does sometimes seem a weak point of her portrayal. Surprisingly (given her close familiarity with the Cuban cultural world), she repeats some old chestnuts: that the 1971–76 clampdown was the work of former Communists, rather than the particular militancy of ex-guerrillas; that Cuba “imported Stalinism” (the reality being much more

complex); and that, while Fidel Castro's 1961 speech on the parameters of cultural expression has often been misquoted, it does precisely that, referring to the binary of "inside" (the Revolution) and "outside," rather than the original "outside" and "against" (an error that Brown also commits). That is especially regrettable, as the misreading originally fed off Cold War-era fears of a rampant Stalinism.

The book works well overall, however uneven it may be, giving us very useful detail (especially on Cuba's military aid from 1963), and making two especially pertinent points. First, Cuba's "success" abroad should not be measured by "revolution" alone (succeeding only in Nicaragua in 1979), but rather as a long-lasting inspiration for those leading the eventual "Pink Tide" from the late 1990s. Secondly, there is a nationalist (national pride) dimension to Cuba's explicitly internationalist policies.

Jonathan Brown's study could not be more different, being focused exclusively on the external dimensions—rather than just foreign policies—over a defined period. It does so within four (not always clearly interrelated) aspects: a very thorough and useful survey of the Revolution's early interest in fomenting rebellion in the region; the less clear identification of Cuba's position in the Sino-Soviet dispute; a wealth of detail on the post-1959 internal (but externally backed) counter-revolutionary challenges, garnered from U.S. government and CIA sources (the book's real strength); and finally, substantial detail within the narrative of different Cuban-backed insurrections in Latin America of the 1960s, making it a valuable source for study. In this last section, Brown addresses the military particularly well, not least for pre-1964 Brazil.

Brown's overall argument never seems quite clear, and one particular theme (an alleged causal link between Cuba's early support for regional revolution and the unexpected radicalism of domestic policies) is never demonstrated convincingly. Given the lack of clarity on the Sino-Soviet connection, it sometimes seems that Brown has sewn together three or four separate studies. The book's excellence in parts makes it regrettable that an opportunity has perhaps been missed.

So, do these studies offer anything new? The Randall approach does make us stop and think about the imaginative dimension to ideology, and both studies offer welcome detail. But it is not really clear what either book is actually about. Given the usual binaries and lacunae in our readings of Cuba's external profile, that is indeed a pity: they give us a little, but not enough to change our perceptions, as both, in their different ways, feed into those binaries. They may, in the idiosyncrasy of their separate approaches, depart from the norm, but they both tell us that the binary line still exists. It seems that a nuanced or objective assessment still eludes us.