
*The Cuban Hustle* is a collection of essays that sociologist Sujatha Fernandes wrote over two decades, beginning with her first trip to Cuba in 1998 and ending in 2017. Her goal is to understand daily life in the post-Soviet era—a period marked by varying levels of economic isolation and material deprivation, but also, she argues, grassroots cultural transformations rooted in the collectivist ideals of the Revolution. The essays take various forms. Some emerge from Fernandes’s ethnographic observations or from interviews with artists and filmmakers. In others, she looks to Cubans’ own attempts to grapple with the post-Soviet period; her discussion of a concert series that famed Cuban singer Silvio Rodríguez undertook in 60 informal neighborhoods along Havana’s periphery to draw attention to the residents’ plight is noteworthy in this regard. Other essays examine important political developments, such as the impacts in Cuba of the recent spread of right-wing governments in Latin America. “The state has ... adapted to new times by relaxing economic and political controls. But what has truly maintained the spirit of the Cuban people across these turbulent decades has been a culture of invention and everyday hustle,” Fernandes concludes (p. 167). It is this shared ability to creatively adapt to shifting material and economic realities in an uncertain landscape, while simultaneously drawing on a shared conception of community, she argues, that has allowed Cubans to weather the storm.

Fernandes’s ethnographic descriptions are enthralling and provide readers with a true sense of what it is like to begin to see Cuba as Cubans see it. The book’s first essay, for example, describes her 1998 trip to Matanzas to meet the celebrated sculptor Agustín Drake. After she tells Drake of her initial impressions of Cuba—that there is more poverty than she anticipated, that the best musical performances are expensive and only accessible to tourists—Drake tells her, “if you want to understand more about Cuban society, don’t rely on surface impressions. Go out and talk to ordinary Cuban people” (p. 12). And so she does, going into the city and meeting two local women with whom she gets pizza. Her description of what to most people would appear to be a mundane activity—finding pizzerias—expertly conveys within a single vignette the experience of beginning to understand Cuba’s urban landscape. In general, the stores, restaurants, and markets that Cubans frequent are not readily visible to outsiders and frequently go unnoticed by tourists. Indeed, the process of learning to “see” these places is a critical part of making sense of the island and its inhabitants on their own terms. Fernandes’s ability to do this work is at the...
heart of her analyses, and her capacity to describe this process to uninitiated readers is remarkable.

At times, Fernandes’s emphasis on the changes wrought in Cuba by the disintegration of the Soviet Union obscures historical continuities that might have enriched her overall analysis of the Revolution. For example, she frames the state’s appropriation or co-optation of ground-level cultural transformations, such as Cuba’s hip-hop movement, as an adaptation to the post-Soviet world. But in fact, this process of appropriation and adaptation has been a feature of the revolutionary project since its inception. In one essay Fernandes discusses the feminist organization Magín, which formed because of the inability of the Federation of Cuban Women [FMC], Cuba’s state-sponsored women’s advocacy organization, to adequately respond to new pressures in the post-Soviet era. Magín was ultimately disbanded. Historian Michelle Chase, whom Fernandes cites, details in Revolution within the Revolution: Women and Gender Politics in Cuba, 1952–1962 (2015) how the 1960 formation of the FMC itself resulted from the dismantling of prerevolutionary women’s advocacy groups and the state’s appropriation of portions of their agendas. In this way the FMC is a symbol of the sort of state appropriation that, as Fernandes astutely notes, has been prevalent in the post-Soviet era. The fact that the same strategies of adaptation the state employed in the 1960s, when there was nearly universal support for the Revolution, remained effective in the 1990s, a moment of widespread disaffection, is not examined. This might have led to interesting revelations about aspects of revolutionary political culture that transcend the Soviet/post-Soviet divide. Nonetheless, The Cuban Hustle provides an insightful overview of post-Soviet Cuban life. It would be an excellent addition to any graduate or undergraduate syllabus, and is well suited to general readership, particularly in this moment when the protests that have emerged within the San Isidro Movement have raised many questions about the history of cultural and artistic activism in Cuba.

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