
This volume of essays, planned in the aftermath of historian Alistair Hennessy’s death, is intended to pay homage to his work. As Antoni Kapcia’s brief Preface points out, Hennessy’s research covered a wide range of subjects even as it demonstrated a depth of analysis. Moreover, he encouraged scholars to take interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary approaches to their historical inquiries. The essays address topics in Cuban history including abolitionist debates, labor, cinema, journalism, and discourses about emigration, among others. As the title suggests, they are efforts to understand Cuban history and its present with novel approaches. Inasmuch as they reveal little-known historical figures or trace the genealogy of historical categories such as socialism, they contribute in significant ways to the literature on Cuban pasts and presents. Some of the authors frame the connections to Hennessy more explicitly than others, which may be useful for younger scholars who are less familiar with his work. Sadly, three of the ten authors passed away after submission and before publication, so this volume serves as a memorial to them as well.

While many of the authors are British or North American, there is also one chapter by the brilliant Cuban philosopher and historian Fernando Martínez Heredia, whose elegant and concise essay on the history of Cuban socialism traces its rise through two historical figures, Julio Antonio Mella and Antonio Guiteras Holmes. Martínez argues that these socialist revolutionaries mobilized Cubans long before 1959 with anti-imperialist and nationalist calls for social justice, and that while they were active in the 1920s and 30s they were more powerfully and authentically the voices of revolution as opposed to the Cuban Communist Party, of which they remained wary. As an implicit critique of the Cuban Communist Party and its claims to ideological hegemony even prior to the Revolution, this is both subtle and bold, a challenge to official narratives about the historical importance of the Cuban Communist party in 15 short pages.

Other essays question conventional or journalistic tropes about Cuba and the Cuban Revolution in a variety of ways. Kapcia’s precise study of the discourses of emigration and exile demonstrates the fluid nature of discursive identification and its relationship to the political winds that encouraged or discouraged emigration over the years. He suggests that more recent developments belie notions of Cuban exceptionalism, and that post-1980s diasporas can be understood in the context of hemispheric patterns of migration and transnationalism. Along the same lines, Catherine Krull and Jean Stubbs’s essay
on Cuban migration to Europe, particularly after 1989, serves as a welcome counterpoint to U.S.-focused discussions of Cuban migration and their relationship to cubanidad. Krull and Stubbs engage both Hennessy’s work and that of the Cuban writer Fernando Ortiz. Expanding on forward-looking arguments that Hennessy made in an essay published on the occasion of the Revolution’s 30th anniversary that predicted growing connections between Europe and Cuba, they note the influx of Cuban migrants to Western Europe that was also part of this dynamic. Their analysis of this migration concludes by invoking Ortiz and the vital if somewhat elusive notions of cubanidad and cubanía. Cubans find ways to create and recreate that sense of cultural belonging no matter where they are, they argue, and that merits analysis even in places with fewer emigrants, such as Western Europe.

Some chapters, on the other hand, introduce new historical actors and underscore their relevance to broader narratives. Irish immigrants, the journalist Justo de Lara, and the Cuban abolitionist Rafael María de Labra receive attention in three of the chapters. Historian Louis A. Pérez makes a compelling argument, in his contribution, about relationships between gender, consumerism, and anxieties about modernity and about the freedoms that some women exercised. He argues that understanding the cultural contours of everyday life and the power embedded in gender relations is essential to comprehending the Cuban past.

Notably absent are issues that have come to dominate other strands of recent scholarship on Cuba. This might include issues of race, environmental conservation and crisis, or the role of the internet, media, and artists with regard to political mobilization. As such, this volume serves as a point of entry to paths of inquiry that are not necessarily in dialogue with these concerns. But the complexity of the Cuban past allows for multiple perspectives, and the shifting present demands a capacious approach to scholarship.

Alejandra Bronfman
Department of Latin American, Caribbean and US Latino Studies, University at Albany-SUNY, Albany NY, U.S.A.
abronfman@albany.edu