

Oscar Zanetti Lecuona, *Cuba: El largo siglo XX*. Santo Domingo: Archivo General de la Nación, 2021 (paper)/Havana: Ediciones Temas, 2021 (digital, US\$12.49)

This monumental volume (1029 pp.), by one of Cuba's most respected historians, is something of a masterpiece. Ambitious in length and scope—covering a twentieth century elongated (Hobsbawn-style) by two decades at each end and unusually covering both the post-1902 Republic and the Revolution—it is a major addition to the literature on modern Cuba, bringing balance, depth, and new insights into Cuba's unique story of colonialism, neocolonialism, and socialist revolution.

Oscar Zanetti gives us a beautifully detailed and coherent narrative, widely referencing Cuban and non-Cuban sources, but his own voice is seen in the continuous strand of overview analysis, each period being treated in the same pattern: overall reflections, followed by the political narrative, and then chapters analyzing the underlying and evolving economic and social structures. Those chapters show fully the perceptions of a real expert, often taking issue with conventional readings.

Examples abound. At the outset, Zanetti reflects on Cubans' constant search for "modernity" from the 1800s, a theme that implicitly recurs thereafter. He also argues, usefully, that the late 1800s industrialization of sugar gave Cuba a genuine bourgeoisie, and then reminds us that the new Republic was structurally weakened by the war's economic and social costs, the factionalism of ex-1895 *caudillos*, a postcolonial inexperience in electoral politics and in law-making, and the costly learning process of nation-building under neocolonial control. The chapters dedicated to economic and social processes are a *forte*, with extensive detail, a coherent narrative reflecting an eye for subtlety and contradiction, essential reading for anyone seeking underlying explanations of the otherwise puzzling politics: on the economy, Zanetti always weighs up the external determinants and changes against the internal dynamics and weaknesses, and his periodic pictures of a changing Cuban society always highlight the tensions of an unequal modernization process.

One small regret is that Zanetti's comprehensive treatment of the 1933 "revolution" does not fully unpack its many different and countervailing strands, but he does make two excellent points: first, that the Republic's inherent weaknesses did not produce a perhaps expected revolution; secondly, that the episode was not, as is often argued, a "failure," since it ended the 1895 generation's power, laying the foundations for the 1934–58 regulatory state. His account of that state is then a model of clarity, elucidating its mix of negotiations, ideological stances, politicking, and tensions (while throughout lacking the glue of the Platt Amendment), and thereby explaining well the popularity of Batista's

progressive populism of 1936–44 and the Communist Party’s collaboration. Indeed, Zanetti explains how the old faulty “liberalism” was replaced by a fusion between nationalism and socialism (witnessed especially in the 1940 Constitution), and also how the new state’s regulatory nature gave presidents more power, enabling both institutional corruption and Batista’s 1952 coup; equally, he argues that regulation succeeded in realizing many of the longstanding demands for social modernization, although its only partial success intensified Cuba’s essential inequalities.

Zanetti is thus able to create a clearer picture of the roots of the 1959 Revolution in growing discontent that built on traditions of radical dissent. The insurrection itself is well narrated, Zanetti usefully stressing the fundamental contribution of the urban resistance in 1957 and commenting that the April 1958 general strike debacle owed as much to rebel suspicions of the (communist) PSP as to the latter’s reluctance.

The rest of the volume logically covers the Revolution’s six decades, wherein Zanetti succeeds in clarifying with subtlety the many contradictions of the processes of reform (recorded in welcome detail, an invaluable reference point for students of the Revolution’s early years), the continuing internal tensions, the underlying weaknesses of a drive for economic development, and a continual thread of the constant challenges created by progressive social change and reform. Indeed, he gives us clear evidence that those challenges created new tensions at every step, while other structural challenges led to ostensibly faulty decisions, such as the UMAP camps, the Mariel exodus, and the “absurd” vilification of U.S. culture at certain points. As a result, we are better able to understand episodes like post-1986 “Rectification,” the system’s remarkable survival after 1991, and the balance of continuity and change represented by the Raúl Castro and Díaz-Canel presidencies, the latter two treated with Zanetti’s characteristic subtlety.

Overall, this is a masterpiece of clarity, sensitivity, comprehensiveness, subtlety, and narrative, bringing us a necessary combination of accuracy, depth, and nuance. An English-language version is much needed to educate a wider audience more used to a diet of stereotypes and politicized perspectives.

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