

Susan Eva Eckstein, *Cuban Privilege: The Making of Immigrant Inequality in America*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022. xxvi + 361 pp. (Cloth £29.99)

Elizabeth Dore, *How Things Fall Apart: What Happened to the Cuban Revolution*. London: Head of Zeus, 2022. 341 pp. (Cloth £27.99)

Susan Eckstein and Elizabeth Dore document two sides of a disputed coin. Both U.S. sociologists (though Dore, until her untimely death this year, was long resident in the United Kingdom), they meticulously craft their work from very different angles, aptly summed up in their two titles: Eckstein's *Cuban Privilege* and Dore's *How Things Fall Apart*. Building on her earlier work on Cuba and Cubans in the United States, Eckstein draws on archival, interview, and survey data to chart how, from the outset of Cuba's 1959 Revolution, U.S. policy privileged Cuban immigrants for political ends. Dore, known for her work on Nicaragua and Cuba, gleans from 124 longitudinal in-depth interviews conducted in Cuba over 2004–18, allowing seven Cubans to narrate their life stories on the island—though two end up doing so from Miami.

Eckstein documents the multiple ways in which the United States has granted Cubans unique entitlements. Where other immigrants faced detention, deportation, and no legal rights, Cubans entered the country without authorization and with access to work, welfare, and citizenship. Cold War policies designed to undermine the Revolution continuously extended entitlements to Cubans, creating a prosperous domestic enclave and bolstering a politically powerful force, in turn influencing policy. She recounts how integration and social mobility came easily to Cubans in an interplay of foreign policy and an unequal immigration system, embedded with political and racial biases. She opens with two instances: the U.S. Coast Guard in 1991, under George H.W. Bush's presidency, stopping a Haitian fishing boat carrying 161 Haitians and two Cubans that the Haitians had picked up at sea, and two years later, under Clinton, a boat carrying seven Cubans and ten Haitians landing in Florida. The Cubans were admitted, while the Haitians were sent to detention facilities and almost all repatriated. Fast-forward to 2016, under Obama: 56,000 Cubans entered the United States without authorization, when lawful immigration from any single country was capped at 20,000 a year and nearly half a million from other countries were deported.

The reasons for privileging Cuban migrants changed over time, though not, ever since the early years of Eisenhower and Kennedy, in the overarching aim—in keeping with the 1960 U.S. embargo on Cuba that is in place to this day—to bring the Cuban economy and regime to the brink of collapse. A marked turning point was in 2017 when Obama, after visiting Cuba, and in his last week

in office, ended entitlements such as the “wet foot, dry foot” policy of welcoming Cubans once they reached U.S. soil. Trump aggressively clamped down and put Cuba back on the U.S. terrorist list, and when Biden came to power he made no effort to reverse this. The impact on Cuba, compounded by the Covid-19 pandemic, was devastating, and 2022 witnessed unprecedented numbers of Cubans attempting to reach the United States overland through Central America and Mexico, or by sea. Echoing earlier migratory crises such as the 1980 Mariel Boatlift and that of the Rafters in 1994, U.S. authorities finally came to the negotiating table in the summer of 2022 and agreed to restart the Cuban Family Reunification Parole Program, to process family visas at the U.S. Embassy in Havana (though all others would still be processed in Guyana, where they had been relocated in the wake of the “Havana Syndrome”), and to lift the cap on remittances. As long as Cuba remains on the U.S. terrorist list, however, meaningful openings for Cuba’s economy remain elusive.

Eckstein explains that her motivation for writing her book was that the full extent of Cuban privilege is not well known. She is the first to recount this in such detail, with its intended and unintended consequences—from the orchestrated 1961 Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba to the multiple ways Cubans have devised their own migration strategies. Individual chapters signal the many ups and downs: from the early making of Cuban immigration exceptionalism through delinking Cubans from Haitians after 1980 to Obama’s unraveling of Cuban privilege. The U.S. immigration system is widely held to be broken and in need of reform, and the book’s final chapter revisits the use and abuse of discretionary power to favor certain immigrants and disfavor others, calling for a more inclusionary policy for all.

Eckstein concludes that Cuban immigration exceptionalism failed in its aim for Cuban regime change and, paradoxically, resulted in fewer Cuban migrants than, for example, Dominicans and Haitians, many of whom were subsequently deported. Yet soft-power strategy to convince Cubans of the virtues of capitalist democracy versus socialism, alongside hard-power covert and overt policies to tighten the pincers on the island to the point of economic collapse and social and political unrest, have undoubtedly undermined experiences and perceptions on the island. Dore poignantly demonstrates this, combining her own commentary with stories of triumph and hardship in a Cuban unraveling of a utopian dream that boldly sought to change Cuba and the world.

Dore first visited Cuba as a student in 1972 and, in her own words, wanted ever since to conduct life histories on the island, inspired by the late 1960s anthropological work of a U.S.–Cuban team led by Oscar Lewis. Under a cloud of possible CIA involvement, Lewis and his team were stopped in their tracks

in 1970, at a time when the historic ten-million-ton sugar harvest was about to miss its target, and their study was only later published by Lewis, Ruth Lewis, and Susan Rigdon (1977, 1978). Fidel Castro—Dore recounts—reputedly still wanted an oral history of the Revolution, and in 1975 asked Gabriel García Márquez to write one. After a year, García Márquez abandoned the project, apparently because “what Cubans said did not fit the book he wanted to write” (p. 9).

In 2000, Dore set out to get approval for a team project, working with Cubans. She succeeded in 2004, was later stopped by the authorities, and then managed to get the project back on the road. She and her team interviewed Cubans primarily in Havana, but also Artemisa, Santiago, Matanzas, Holguín, Sancti Spíritus, Bayamo, and Granma. From the start, Dore doesn’t mince her words: “Cuba is not the country it used to be” (p. 1). With the promise dissipated that market openings would leave no one behind, egalitarianism was cast to the wind, a fortunate small few became—albeit by Cuban standards—*los nuevos ricos* (the new rich), and in an agonizing decline of ideals the new leadership relied on “repression and emigration to maintain control” (p. 3).

Her interlocutors are seven Cubans living in and around Havana. Born in the 1970s and 1980s, their coming of age was marked by the crisis 1990s, triggered by the disintegration of the Soviet Union, then Cuba’s main partner, and a tightened U.S. embargo. Gender- and racially-diverse, they include a director of digital technology; an “iconoclastic” member of the Communist Party; a filmmaker who documented squatter settlements; a school drop-out, jack-of-all-trades, raconteur; a black-marketeer political rebel, who on a third attempt made it to Florida; a woman grappling with her husband’s machismo and aspiring to join the Party; an industrial engineer who worked in the rum industry, ran a small underground digital economy business, and in 2015 moved to Miami for a better life; and a once-fervent Fidelista turned opposition activist, fired from his job, writing for online opposition platforms to support his family.

The book is set out chronologically, with sections on the 1980s, 1990–2006, and 2006–20. In each, the chapters are told successively through the eyes of the seven, traversing the tumultuous 35 years from Fidel Castro opening the country to international tourism, then Raúl Castro allowing market forces to operate, and finally to Trump’s policies and the Covid-19 pandemic. Each speaks of learning to survive in a changing reality: having grown up in the relative comfort and equality of the 1980s, and having been catapulted into a less equal reality in which a small minority benefited, eroding what had given meaning to their lives, leading them to question the ideology that had shaped their lives, and in some cases jumping at opportunities to join the *nuevos ricos* and/or strategizing how to emigrate.

The testimonies of seven Cubans can't, of course, tell the full story, but they do paint a picture of a radically changing post-1990s Cuba that led Dore to conclude: "Socialism in Cuba is over, at least for the time being. At this point in its history a measure of social democracy would be good for the country, but it is hard to imagine how the government and its people would get there. The memories of the post-Soviet generation might serve as a beginning" (pp. 320–21).

Whether or not Dore is right in her assessment, and while it's impossible to do justice here to all the nuances in these two books, it is important to note how together they help explain why Cuba is today teetering on the brink and to signal the urgent need to chart a new way forward.

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