

TRYING TO ADDRESS THE CUBAN PARADOX

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- BRIDGES TO CUBA: PUENTES A CUBA.* Edited by Ruth Behar. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995. Pp. 421. \$44.50 cloth, \$16.95 paper.)
- NEW ART OF CUBA.* By Luis Camnitzer. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994. Pp. 400. \$45.00 cloth, \$24.95 paper.)
- CUBA: DILEMMAS OF A REVOLUTION.* Third edition. By Juan M. del Aguila. (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1994. Pp. 222. \$35.50 cloth, \$14.95 paper.)
- REVOLUTION IN THE BALANCE: LAW AND SOCIETY IN CONTEMPORARY CUBA.* By Debra Evenson. (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1994. Pp. 235. \$65.00 cloth, \$21.95 paper.)
- CUBAN COMMUNISM, 1959–1995.* Eighth edition. Edited by Irving Louis Horowitz. (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction, 1995. Pp. 873. \$29.95 paper.)
- THE STATE, BUREAUCRACY, AND THE CUBAN SCHOOLS: POWER AND PARTICIPATION.* By Sheryl L. Lutjens. (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1996. Pp. 239. \$69.00 cloth.)
- ESSAYS ON CUBAN HISTORY: HISTORIOGRAPHY AND RESEARCH.* By Louis A. Pérez Jr. (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1995. Pp. 306. \$44.95 cloth.)
- LAW AND RELIGION IN MARXIST CUBA: A HUMAN RIGHTS INQUIRY.* By Margaret I. Short. (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction, 1993. Pp. 207. \$18.95 paper.)
- CUBA: FROM CONQUISTADOR TO CASTRO.* By Geoff Simons. (New York: St. Martin's, 1996. Pp. 416. \$29.95 cloth.)

Trying to understand Cuba is not an easy undertaking. The country reminds one of Churchill's 1939 definition of Russia as "a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma." This complex society can fool inexperienced Cuba-watchers with the superficial simplicity and at times predictability of its revolutionary government. Cuba is far from a straightforward entity, a fact that complicates any attempt to decipher its often contradictory reality. It is also a society that evokes strong visceral passions on both sides of the ideological divide. Louis A. Pérez Jr. has commented

on this key variable, noting delicately “the degree to which the revolution influences approach, emphasis, balance and judgment” (p. 170). As a result, “balance” must often be supplied by the beholder. A third difficulty in commenting on studies of contemporary Cuba is that the dizzying pace of change (particularly since 1993) has already rendered most books badly out-of-date. Although a veritable cottage industry has been churning out works on Cuba, most of them are not that helpful.

The demise of the Soviet Union and the former socialist camp in Eastern Europe led many to predict a speedy end to the Castro government and revolutionary Cuba. As bumper stickers in Dade County, Florida, proclaimed: “First Manuel, then Daniel, and next Fidel.” This expectation is also illustrated in the title of Andrés Oppenheimer’s eminently informative (if occasionally biased) work, *Castro’s Final Hour* (1992). Yet Cuba’s revolutionary government has survived the “final hour” by introducing a number of sweeping reforms to keep the revolution afloat—just. Unimaginable even five years ago would have been the opening of the farmers’ markets, turning of the badly flawed system of state farms over to cooperatives, legalization of hard currency, introduction of a system in which artisans in 150 trades can work “*por cuenta propia*,” the opening of the *paladares* (small home restaurants), and the veritable invasion of joint ventures with foreign companies (340 of them worth more than two billion dollars in various stages of negotiation). Fundamentally capitalist approaches have thus been adapted to fit Cuba’s unique socialist system and to help it survive. A high price has been paid for these reforms, however: prostitution has returned to the city centers; the gap between those with access to dollars and those without has increased noticeably; corruption at the lower levels has flourished; and a polarization between the old and the new guard over these reforms has led to a hardening of ideological positions on the island.

It is difficult to remain neutral about Cuba, particularly if one’s major source of information consists of the mainstream U.S. media, which do a poor job of analyzing this complex sociopolitical reality (European, Canadian, and Latin American media generally do a better, more balanced job). For academics of Cuban-American origin with varying cultural influences, it is often even more difficult to distance themselves from this passionate reality (but not impossible, as seen in the work of Jorge Domínguez). A Manichean understanding of Cuba has often resulted, leading to a one-dimensional interpretation of a multidimensional reality. To take but one example, José Martí, the leader of the Cuban independence movement in the nineteenth century, has been portrayed through shifting ideological optics. Martí was no doubt a revolutionary, an anti-imperialist, and a radical political thinker, with grave suspicions about U.S. intentions toward Cuba. British analyst Peter Turton has termed him “the forerunner of the present Cuban revolution.” Yet Cuban-American observer Carlos Ripoll has denounced any such interpretations passionately, characterizing Martí’s

thought as “incompatible with Soviet-style dictatorship and proletarian internationalism” (Pérez, p. 292). Clearly, little room exists for the nuances badly needed to present the historical record accurately.

Another key variable to be borne in mind is the rapid pace of change in Cuba since 1990. Debra Evenson acknowledges this fast-moving scenario in her thoughtful study, *Revolution in the Balance: Law and Society in Contemporary Cuba*. She notes that in the current crisis, “reform and experimentation must be accelerated out of necessity, and the ability to project even a one-year national plan is impossible” (p. 201). Academics know that at least a year will pass before their manuscripts will see the light of day, a delay that makes writing about current events in Cuba particularly challenging. In sum, balance, distance from the material, and an appreciation of the rate of change are more difficult to cultivate when working on Cuba than on most other Latin American countries. The difficulty in meeting these challenges can be perceived in some of the works discussed here.

Because detachment and objectivity are key goals for academics and because the study of Cuba provokes such an impassioned response, it is useful (if a little simplistic) to divide the books between those that are “sympathetic” or “unsympathetic” to the revolutionary process. Ideological orientation is the most basic variable in most works examining contemporary Cuba and must be weighed in analyzing a controversial theme like the Cuban Revolution. This concern is not limited to academics in North America, however. From the official perspective in Havana, it is clear that Fidel Castro’s maxim some thirty-seven years ago remains the primary filter for academics in Cuba: “Within the revolution, everything; against it, nothing.” The problem is that a broad interpretation of precisely what is “within” was not provided, leading to a process of self-censorship. The Western liberal academic approach appears to be far more open, but several of these works show that North American colleagues can easily fall prey to their own lack of balance.

The books under review can be grouped into three categories: political or historical; cultural (including literature and art); and “social” (educational, legal, and religious). But the works in each category all tend to flow back into political aspects. Given the nature of the revolutionary process and the diametrically opposed U.S. system, it would be naive to expect anything different. Yet while all the works under review reveal weaknesses resulting from the three variables just described, their differing intellectual contributions to a better understanding of Cuban studies are worth noting.

Political and Historical Accounts

For those interested in studying Cuban history, the work of Louis Pérez Jr. is the essential starting point. Pérez is the dean of research histori-

ans on Cuba, and he is highly regarded professionally on both sides of the Florida Straits for his seminal works in Cuban history. His well-organized study *Cuba: Between Reform and Revolution* (1995, 2d ed.) provided a superbly informative and balanced overview of Cuban history and serves as an excellent text for related courses. Among his many works, *Essays on Cuban History: Historiography and Research* is a prime source of bibliographical material on key periods in Cuban history. Pérez writes lucidly, providing an extraordinary amount of information in the three sections on history, historiography, and research. The last section is the most esoteric yet in many ways the most useful in its detailed analysis of sources of archival material. The section on history consists of seven well-focused historical essays on key areas of Cuban history. Among these the best are "Intervention and Collaboration: The Politics of Cuban Independence, 1898–99," and "Army Politics in Socialist Cuba, 1959–1969." The second section of five chapters assessing Cuban historiography is replete with gems of information for specialists and generalists alike.

More controversial are three other works under review here that analyze the evolution of Cuba from colonial times to the 1990s, each with an ideological stance that is clearly staked out. All three provide useful insights into Cuban history and reality. Yet all are excessively dependent on their particular ideological filter and are therefore flawed to various degrees. Each book makes a scholarly contribution, but all three should be read with their ideological predispositions in mind. The conservative perspective can be found in both Juan del Aguila's scholarly treatment, *Cuba: Dilemmas of a Revolution* (now in its third edition) and the eighth edition of Irving Louis Horowitz's encyclopedic *Cuban Communism, 1959–1995*. An opposing viewpoint can be found in *Cuba: From Conquistador to Castro* by Geoff Simons.

Aguila's book promises to examine Cuban history, economic and social development, the political system and the country's international engagements. It also seeks to evaluate the performance of the revolution and its prospects. Aguila's book delivers on these promises for the most part but remains hamstrung by its consistent bias against the revolution. A Cuban-born academic who undertook graduate training in the United States, Aguila unabashedly reveals his angle on Cuba in the preface in advocating "the transition that will put an end to communism in Cuba. That is what the society so desperately needs." If that does not happen, "Cuba will lurch from crisis to crisis and remain an impoverished nation well into the twenty-first century" (Aguila, p. xiii). The book purports to be balanced yet consistently criticizes the revolution and especially Fidel Castro. Many achievements of the revolution are given cursory treatment and downplayed, while the more negative aspects and Castro's rule are given greater prominence. For example, Castro's disastrous goal of harvesting some 10 million tons of sugar in 1970 receives almost six pages of explanation and

critical comment. In contrast, Aguila notes only in passing, "Free health care, adult education programs, scholarships for their more intelligent offspring, and other social services make life bearable, but workers cannot expect quantum improvements in the quality of life" (p. 178). The final chapter is replete with negative comments: members of Cuba's Asamblea Nacional del Poder Popular are "little more than thoughtless automatons" (p. 189); "nepotism, greed and feather-bedding" are enjoyed by the *nomenklatura* (p. 190); "political inertia and permanent austerity" are the order of the day (p. 191); and Cuba is a "society exhausted by ideologically driven deceptions" (p. 197). While there is much of value in Aguila's book, it badly needs a sense of balance. The glass is not automatically half-empty, a thesis that Aguila appears unprepared to accept. The book has dated quickly since it was published in 1994.

That said, if one can penetrate the ideological bias of Aguila's approach, the book contains some important insights into revolutionary Cuba that make it a useful place to start in interpreting the paradoxical reality of Cuba in the 1990s. For instance, the material on Cuba's revolutionary policy and its relations with the United States is nicely handled. The best chapters of the book may be found in the final section, "Performance and Prospects." In this fairly thorough account of the country's process of "institutionalization," the various dilemmas facing the government are well treated. Aguila takes a consistently pessimistic approach to the Castro government and the revolution itself. He is on the mark, however, in arguing that "the main political achievement of revolutionary rule is the apparent crystallization of a strong national consciousness buttressed by a history of struggle and defiance" (p. 187). What Aguila seems to overlook is that it is precisely this "strong national consciousness" (strengthened by disastrous U.S. policy since 1960) that has served Fidel Castro so well in his struggle to ensure the survival of the revolution and his government.

A similar ideological position permeates *Cuban Communism, 1959–1995*, a collection of essays edited by Irving Louis Horowitz. The concluding paragraph of the epilogue reveals his point of departure: "History will not absolve Castro. It will punish him for the torments inflicted on the people of Cuba" (p. 864). Anyone unfamiliar with Cuba's political, historical, social, and economic evolution would do well to consult this collection, which provides a good, albeit extremely conservative, overview of Cuba's multifaceted development. At the same time, readers should be wary of the political spin on most these forty-five pieces. Yet the collection contains many solid academic pieces. Most are well written (despite frequent typographical errors), and many offer insightful observations on the evolution of contemporary Cuba.

A number of the pieces stand out in clarity of analysis and explanatory value. Worth noting from a historical standpoint are "Guerrillas at

War" by Marta San Martín and Ramón Bonachea; "Eisenhower, Castro and the Soviets" by Alan Luxemburg; "The Cuban Missile Crisis Revisited" by James Blight, Joseph Nye, and David Welch; and "Cuba and the Soviet Union: What Kind of Dependency?" by Robert Packenham. Each one sheds much-needed light on areas of contemporary Cuba that have been underemphasized or misunderstood in the literature.

In terms of the economy, the best articles are "Cuba's Economic Policies and Strategies for the 1990s" by Carmelo Mesa-Lago; "Cuba's Underground Economy" by Jorge Pérez López; and Archibald Ritter's "Challenges and Policy Imperatives to the Economy." The strength of these contributions derives from the authors' ability to weave together a shrewd understanding of Cuba's historical economic development and the Herculean challenges and options confronting the Cuban government and its economy after the Soviet collapse of the early 1990s.

On Cuban society, some articles tend to rise above the others, such as Benigno Aguirre's "The Conventionalization of Collective Behavior"; the late Enrique Baloyra's "Political Control and Cuban Youth"; and Julie Bunck's "Women's Rights and the Cuban Revolution."¹ The section on the role of the military in Cuba is disappointing, however, in failing to address accurately the power exercised by the armed forces, now also an economic powerhouse because of their investments in tourism and their role in the agricultural cooperatives.

The most impressive section of *Cuban Communism, 1959–1995* is the last, "Polity," which contains many solid pieces. Deserving special mention are Jorge Domínguez's "Why the Cuban Revolution Has Not Fallen"; Wayne Smith's "Castro: To Fall or Not To Fall?"; and Edward González's "Cuba Adrift in a Post-Communist World." Most of the contributions in this section are understandably speculative in nature, but they highlight many of the difficulties as well as internal and external scenarios that Castro's Cuba will soon have to confront.

In sum, Horowitz's anthology provides a significant, if one-sided, contribution to Cuban studies. Each essay is comprehensive and analytical, providing greater understanding of the Cuban revolutionary process as perceived largely through a right-wing filter. The lack of balance remains a major concern, however, given the already polarized debate in the United States on the "Cuban question." Because the collection consistently advances the same ideological interpretation, it does not encourage a holistic debate on the subject. This critical anthology should not be ignored, but readers should be aware of its biases. Although it is badly outdated, those interested in Cuba would find it useful to read along with *The Cuba Reader*:

1. For a solid and well-researched treatment of the situation of women in Cuba, see the recent work by Lois M. Smith and Alfred Padula, *Sex and Revolution: Women in Socialist Cuba* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).

The Making of a Revolutionary Society (1989), edited by Philip Brenner, William LeoGrande, Donna Rich, and Daniel Siegel. The latter anthology offers a useful perspective on Cuban foreign policy and social development—but from a contrasting perspective. Together the two anthologies provide a more well-rounded perspective on developments in Cuba.

If the glass is always “half-empty” for Aguila and Horowitz, it is half-full for Geoff Simons in *Cuba: From Conquistador to Castro*. The author of five other books (on Iraq, Korea, Libya, and the United Nations), Simons approaches the question of Cuba from a position that is diametrically opposite to that of Aguila. Simons’s preface states his ideological starting point: “The United States is today committing crimes against humanity. . . . This is the stark fact, the moral bankruptcy, behind all U.S. talk of democracy and human rights” (Simons, p. xii). Although this book is the least scholarly of the works under discussion, it is no less informative and engaging than the others. While light on footnotes and bibliography, the book offers useful insights into Cuban history and serves as a counterpoint to the more detailed works by specialists on Cuba. It is a “good read,” and the fact that Simons is not a longtime Cuba specialist gives his account a freshness that is often lacking among those long accustomed to the traditional polarized debates over things Cuban.

The major fault with Simons’s book is that he is too favorably disposed toward the Cuban revolution and the Castro government. On numerous occasions, the book loses its punch and its point by going over the top in its anti-U.S. bent. Almost everything that has gone wrong in Cuba since 1959 is explained in terms of U.S. policies and responses, with little or no reference to policy miscalculations by the Castro government. Simons spends far too much time extolling the virtues of the revolutionary government’s radical program of social reform, thus failing to achieve a sense of balance.

The real strength of Simons’s book can be found in the chapters covering U.S. involvement in the Spanish-Cuban-American War and Cuba’s “special period” of the 1990s. Also noteworthy is the final chapter, “A New Era,” which provides an excellent, if critical, account of U.S. intervention in Cuba. Simons’s skillful use of source material, along with the intricate details provided of the policy-making process in Washington and the machinations of the Central Intelligence Agency, capture vividly the spirit of longstanding U.S. hostility about Cuban aspirations toward sovereignty. The sections on the Bay of Pigs fiasco and the Cuban Missile Crisis are particularly well done. But Simons harks back consistently to his overused main theme: the trials and tribulations of Cuba’s socialist revolution in the context of unceasing U.S. hostility. Yet for all these caveats, Simons has captured well the essence of Cuban political history.

Religion, Education, and the Legal System in Cuba

The three books that fall into this broad category are Margaret Short's *Law and Religion in Marxist Cuba*, Sheryl Lutjens's *The State, Bureaucracy, and the Cuban Schools*, and Debra Evenson's *Revolution in the Balance: Law and Society in Contemporary Cuba*. The most interesting is Evenson's comprehensive study, which supplies a deft understanding of the Cuban government's interpretation of human rights and political democracy. A critical supporter of the Cuban Revolution, Evenson finds it "undeniable that there are limitations on freedom of expression and political association of those who oppose the socialist system in Cuba today" (p. 3). Her critical support of the revolutionary process is a well-developed perspective. Of all the works under review, *Revolution in the Balance* may offer the most perceptive analysis of the dynamics of Cuba in the 1990s. It is well worth reading for its specialist references to the socialist legal system and its general interpretation of contemporary Cuba.

Special mention should be made of chapters such as "Transformation to Socialism," "Democracy and Human Rights," "Law and Equality," and "Economic Regulation." Although Evenson is not an apologist for the Cuban government, she tends to accept the standard responses of Cuban officials, including their references to collective rights in the revolutionary socialist model prevailing over individual rights in a liberal capitalist society. Evenson is at least prepared to weigh the revolutionary interpretation of these emotion-laden terms and does so convincingly. Her analysis is generally sound and persuasive, particularly on socialist legality, socialist democracy, and equal rights. In terms of equality, while she praises the Cuban government for its commitment to promoting women's and racial equality, Evenson does not shy away from pointed and well-deserved criticism. Women's equality may have been proclaimed by the socialist revolution, but she points out bluntly that "paternalism and machismo persist as formidable barriers to change." Evenson concludes, "the day is yet to come when Cuba has a party, leadership, and government of men and women" (p. 108). Racial divisions are also noted, as is the lingering bias against black and mulattos: "Until Cubans are able to publicly recognize the issue and discuss it openly without creating antagonism, Cuban society will not overcome the vestiges of its past" (p. 114).

What sets *Revolution in the Balance* apart is Evenson's ability to identify the finer points of Cuban sensitivity and nuance and to outline the various changes that have taken place in Cuba in recent years. Especially useful is her analysis of reforms in the Cuban legal system, direct elections to the National Assembly, and legislation on joint economic ventures. Evenson correctly points out that these investments are essential to national economic survival and to the government's ability to supply food, medicine,

and other necessities for the Cuban people. At the same time, she notes the negative influence of these changes for the polity of revolutionary Cuba: "The introduction of such capitalist ventures in the midst of a socialist system raises the potential for the reemergence of class differences. Whether and how Cuba will be able to mediate this contradiction will be of great interest both to Cubans and to outside observers" (p. 214).

Like Evenson, Sheryl Lutjens examines the revolution in a fairly positive light in *The State, Bureaucracy, and the Cuban Schools: Power and Participation*. What she admires about Cuba is the country's refusal to embrace the neoliberal model so in vogue today. Lutjens is also impressed by the Cuban government's determination to survive, its tenacity in the face of unending economic crisis and sustained U.S. pressure. This commitment to socialism, especially in the area of education, is the focus of much of her work, and she attempts to come up with an appreciation of the problematic of democracy Cuban-style. Lutjens's analysis is based on two fundamental tenets: socialist democracy is more deeply rooted and effective in Cuba than is widely thought abroad; and the Cuban people are major players in the decision making, as witnessed by their key role in education and the schools. Democracy, in sum, is not to be limited to just the Western approach.

The State, Bureaucracy, and the Cuban Schools can be taken to task for its overly broad focus, providing chapters on the relationship between democracy and bureaucracy, the role of the educational system in Cuba, the decision-making process (as manifested in the educational arena), community participation in the school system, and the impact of the rectification campaign on the education system. But while too broad, the book is also the most thought-provoking of all those reviewed. Fundamental to Lutjens's work is the concern with democratic participation and the degree to which it is encountered in revolutionary Cuba. This rather dry analytical study seeks to go beyond its analysis of the education system to embrace broader concerns of democratization in the macro sphere, and it makes the jump fairly well. Democracy revolves around the greatest possible active and free participation in the social, economic, and political framework of a country, and Lutjens is to be commended for raising questions about the meaning of democracy while analyzing and weighing how a socialist society justifies its own approach to this question.

The least intellectually stimulating work is Margaret Short's *Law and Religion in Marxist Cuba: A Human Rights Inquiry*. It also tries to pass from the micro level (law and religion) to broader concerns (human rights issues in general) but fails to convince. While Short acknowledges that her study is preliminary in nature, it could easily have gone further in providing empirical evidence of how Castro's Cuba handles religious participation. The book is further weakened by relying excessively on extant sources, clearly no substitute for fieldwork in Cuba. In addition, Short's fervently anti-

Marxist biases are never far below the surface, and they limit what might have been a needed assessment of law and religion in Cuba.² Her analysis of the reasons for tension between the revolutionary government and the Catholic Church is superficial, as is her knowledge of the evolution of the church. Human rights abuses undoubtedly occur in Cuba (as in virtually every country on the planet). A serious detailed study of these abuses and how the law of the socialist constitution is applied to religious matters would have been a welcome addition to the few works treating the religious question in Cuba. Unfortunately, this disappointing work falls far short of its goals.

Cultural Themes

The last two works examine contemporary Cuban culture. Both present a somewhat loosely organized cultural overview of contemporary artists and writers. Behar, a Cuban-American, has also included the work of several others. Behar offers many examples of various literary genres in *Bridges to Cuba*, while Camnitzer's *New Art of Cuba* presents two hundred black-and-white illustrations. Both works provide welcome relief from the arid prose commonplace in social science studies.

Both texts are invaluable in providing the "feel" of contemporary Cuba, largely the result of the authors' personal reflections on the state of culture on the island. Their insights, combined with the works of Cuban artists and writers in Cuba and in the diaspora, reveal a common *alma*, a spirituality and awareness of their common *cubanía* that is so often overlooked by academics and politicians. These two works thus remind social scientists that dry political or economical analysis, data gathering, and empirical observations need badly to be supplemented by a genuine understanding of what Cubans feel in a more personal sense.

Camnitzer's *New Art in Cuba* is a scholarly overview of the evolution of the three generations of artists in revolutionary Cuba, but it goes far beyond this neat summary. Camnitzer analyzes their work in some detail, provides insights into the censorship and self-censorship operating in Cuba, and discusses in detail the life of artists surviving in rather precarious conditions on the island (and increasingly in Mexico). Behar, in contrast, lets the writers speak for themselves, through their own work and in

2. According to Short, "For three decades, Cuba has been one of the world's leading police states. The legal system was methodically transformed into an inherently atheistic and repressive force in revolutionary Cuba. . . ." She ends by quoting "Jesus of Nazareth" and requesting that the Cuban government, religious and secular groups in Cuba, and the international community call on Havana to respect human rights as outlined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights: "These internationally accepted standards, as well as the heart of a merciful God, cry out for an end to the persecution of theologically conservative Christians and other peaceful nonconformists in Cuba" (p. 151).

a series of interviews with some of them. This excellent anthology with several dozen entries is divided into three basic sections entitled "Reconciliation," "Rupture," and "Remembering." Readers interested in Cuba will welcome such profound intuition of the spirit of the island. These two works will remind social scientists of the value of using literature, art, and cinema in their courses as means of illustrating other facets of Cuban reality that cannot be explained by dry facts.

In particular, the collage of Cuban culture on the island and in Miami in Behar's work is to be appreciated. Interviews, photographs, extracts from various genres—poetry, essays, personal reflections, conversations, and drama—can all be found here. It is also encouraging to discover the gamut of political positions expressed, with works by writers in Cuba being juxtaposed with those of Cuban writers living elsewhere. Behar's *Bridges to Cuba* is essential reading for Cuba-watchers who want to go beyond traditional social science research to appreciate the extraordinary cultural talent of Cubans.

Concluding Remarks

Recent LASA conferences have demonstrated that panels on Cuba are extremely popular, and they will remain so for the foreseeable future. It is also clear that awareness of Cuba in the body politic of the United States (and in Washington in particular) is woefully limited. While special interest groups (often funded by Washington) have at times choked off meaningful debate on Cuba, the academic community is not altogether blameless. Specialists in this area have not done enough to shape the debate over Cuba, allowing ideological convictions to obscure the reality of Cuba. The result has been a confusing picture, with both ideological camps determined not to cede. This situation has retarded the debate over what is really happening in Cuba today.

Such a conclusion does not ignore the obvious difficulties outside the realm of ideology that make the desirable balanced appreciation difficult to achieve, at least through academic channels. Additional factors have been the fast pace of change in Cuba and publishers' concern over losing money on books that have a limited shelf life. Publishing houses are weighing closely any new works on Cuba, and the U.S. public consequently has limited information (and often misinformation) on what exactly is happening just ninety miles away.

Yet the main reason for the unbalanced debate over Cuba is the conglomerate of conflicting political elements. While Cuba is a relatively small country of eleven million people, its stature has long been inflated by the U.S. fixation on exerting influence over the island. The Monroe Doctrine of 175 years ago can be taken as a useful starting point for analyzing U.S. designs on the island. Because the essence of the Cuban socialist rev-

olution constitutes a fundamental rejection of U.S. hegemony in Latin America and the Caribbean, Washington has been fixated on Havana for almost four decades. Fidel Castro has consistently foiled attempts to co-opt or destroy the revolution, surviving many U.S. attempts to assassinate him or to wreak economic havoc on Cuba. The fact that nine presidents since 1959 have vowed to be the first to set foot in a “free and democratic Cuba” can only rub salt in the wounds of U.S. policy makers. The essence of U.S. policy in the late 1990s revolves around waiting for an old man to die—hardly an innovative approach.

This situation is complicated by the powerful Cuban-American lobby, which has hijacked the Cuban issue in the United States by turning a question of international policy into a domestic political issue. The result has been a veritable obsession with Cuba in some quarters, which has translated into a super-polarized treatment of the Cuban question. Balance, impartiality, objectivity—the hallmarks of good scholarship—have often been damaged by these circumstances, in both Miami and Havana. Inside Cuba, the treatment of some academics at the Centro de Estudios sobre las Américas (CEA), the lamentable wave of roundups of journalists and dissidents in 1997, and the ascendancy of government hard-liners have made balanced debate hard to find there too. With such a powerful enemy so close at hand (and given the track record of the United States in the region), it is understandable, if not justifiable, that Havana acts in a paranoid fashion. The lack of U.S. initiatives to find a solution to the ongoing tension has only fueled the flames. The cold war is long gone, but the tense relationship between Washington and Havana remains white hot.

These ideological divisions make obtaining a solid understanding of what really is happening in Cuba extremely difficult, even for academics with relatively privileged channels of communication.³ Rumors about the death of Fidel Castro in August 1997 and his “severe illness” in the summer of 1998 led to widespread concern in North America about the implications for Cuba—much of it badly uninformed. The situation is all the more troubling because few Cuban voices from the island are heard in the United States, while dissidents in Havana have been harassed by security forces. The results are a surplus of rumor and a paucity of understanding about the reality of Cuba. Input from observers on the island expressing a truly Cuban perspective is desperately needed in North America to appreciate

3. Three useful recent works with different approaches deserve mention. Although already significantly out-of-date, all three offer insightful analyses of the dilemmas facing Cuba as the new millennium approaches. In combination with the works of Cuban scholars noted in this review, they represent a useful starting point for assessing Cuba's current condition. See Tom Miller, *Trading with the Enemy: A Yankee Travels through Castro's Cuba*, 2d ed. (New York: Basic Books, 1996); Susan Eva Eckstein, *Back from the Future: Cuba under Castro* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1994); and Carmelo Mesa-Lago, *Are Economic Reforms Propelling Cuba to the Market?* (Miami, Fla.: North-South Center, University of Miami, 1994).

the Cuban process, warts and all—not more interference from a powerful minority of the Cuban-American community, which is largely out of touch with sentiments on the island. Although Cuban academics have participated in LASA conferences, their work unfortunately has not been published in the United States, leaving the range of views on Cuba extremely limited.⁴ This problem needs to be addressed to achieve a balanced understanding of Cuba.

As can be seen from this overview of the nine works covered here, tremendous interest continues in various facets of Cuban life. Unfortunately, the basic ideological divisions require readers to possess detailed background knowledge to assess the strengths and shortcomings of individual specialists. Too often in the realm of Cuban studies, a complex and multifaceted reality is flattened in a simplistic way, a terrible disservice to all sides. Conferences are organized without the proper balance, anthologies feature only the work of like-minded contributors, and visas are issued based more on political considerations than on academic contributions.

In the introduction to her anthology, Ruth Behar summarizes the goal of the collection: “*Bridges to Cuba* is a meeting place, an open letter, a castle in the sand, an imaginary homeland. It is a space for reconciliation, imaginative speculation, and renewal” (p. 5). This is precisely the kind of approach that needs to be pursued if Cuba is to be dealt with fairly, an approach emphasizing reconciliation, speculation, and renewal. Surely, it is time for common sense to prevail, as has occurred in other troubled areas of the globe. Academics have a responsibility for promoting such a fair and balanced approach. As José Martí noted more than a century ago, “Los libros sirven para cerrar las heridas que las armas abren.” Much remains to be done. Forty years after the Cuban Revolution, emotions still run high. Perhaps it is time for academics to take a more proactive role and lead the way toward a more informed and balanced debate.

4. Of particular value in this regard are the following recent works: Julio Carranza, Pedro Monreal, and Luis Gutiérrez, *La reestructuración de la economía: Una propuesta para el debate* (Havana: Editorial Ciencias Sociales, 1995); Silvia Domenech, *Cuba: Economía en periodo especial* (Havana: Editorial Política, 1996); and *La economía cubana en 1996: Resultados, problemas y perspectivas*, edited by Omar Everleny Pérez Villanueva (Havana: Centro de Estudios de la Economía Cubana, 1997). Also worth reading are two works by Juan Antonio Blanco: *Tercer milenio: Una visión alternativa de la posmodernidad* (Havana: Centro Félix Varela, 1995); and *Cuba Talking about Revolution: Conversations with Juan Antonio Blanco by Medea Benjamín* (Melbourne: Ocean, 1994). At the Universidad de Havana, a talented team of social scientists at FLACSO-Cuba have contributed to the analysis of change in Cuba, but their work has not been given the recognition that it deserves in the United States. Of particular interest is *CartaCuba (1997): Essays on the Potential and Contradictions of Cuban Development*. FLACSO-Cuba has also published eight “Documentos de Trabajo” on various topics: Cuba’s “periodo especial,” Cuban quality of life, the impact of the economic crisis, biotechnology and environment, women and families, scientific development, economic restructuring, and foreign policy.