

Critical Debates

Cuba in Transition: Perspectives on Reform, Continuity, and Culture

Rubrick Biegón

- Aviva Chomsky, Barry Carr, Alfredo Prieto, and Pamela Maria Smorkaloff, eds., *The Cuba Reader: History, Culture, Politics*. 2nd ed., revised and updated. Durham: Duke University Press, 2019. Figures, notes, index, 744 pp.; hardcover \$129.95, paperback \$32.95, ebook \$32.95.
- Sujatha Fernandes, *The Cuban Hustle: Culture, Politics, Everyday Life*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2020. Figures, notes, 184 pp.; hardcover \$94.95, paperback \$24.95, ebook \$23.70.
- Carmelo Mesa-Lago, ed., *Voices of Change in Cuba from the Non-State Sector*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2018. Abbreviations, appendixes, figures, tables, notes, bibliography, index, 178 pp.; paperback \$29.95, ebook \$28.76.
- Scott Morgenstern, Jorge Pérez-López, and Jerome Branche, eds., *Paths for Cuba: Reforming Communism in Comparative Perspective*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2018. Tables, figures, bibliography, index, 408 pp.; paperback \$37.95, ebook \$29.57.
- Louis A. Pérez, Jr., *Rice in the Time of Sugar: The Political Economy of Food in Cuba*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2019. Tables, figures, bibliography, index, 264 pp.; hardcover \$90, paperback \$29.95, ebook \$22.99.
- Margaret Randall, *Exporting Revolution: Cuba's Global Solidarity*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2017. Notes, bibliography, index, 270 pp.; hardcover \$99.95, paperback \$26.95, ebook \$25.60.

Cuban politics and society are in a period of extended transition. From 2006 to 2008, Fidel Castro transferred authority to his brother Raúl, who subsequently sought to “update” Cuba’s economic model. The younger Castro stepped down in

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2018, not long after Fidel's death in 2016. Miguel Díaz-Canel, born after the Cuban Revolution, became head of state. Raúl retired from his position atop the Partido Comunista de Cuba (PCC) in April 2021. As the country settles into the post-Castro era, it wrestles with a myriad of social and cultural issues intertwined with ongoing processes of reform and modernization. Academic research has sought to make sense of these developments while situating new trends in the wide sweep of Cuban history.

Cuba's foreign relations have also seen profound (if uneven) change in recent years. Most prominently, the dramatic events of December 2014, when Barack Obama and Raúl Castro simultaneously announced their intent to reestablish diplomatic relations, ushered in a new dynamic with the United States, as leaders pledged to move beyond decades of animosity. The two countries formally reestablished full diplomatic ties in 2015. The following year, Obama became the first sitting US president to visit the island in nearly a century. Donald Trump was elected after pledging to cancel Obama's "deal," however. The Trump administration retightened Washington's embargo on the country, which had been relaxed under Obama. Even as Havana has forged new international partnerships, scholars have been compelled to scrutinize the twists and turns in Cuba's all-important, highly asymmetrical relationship with the United States (Biegon 2020; Hershberg and LeoGrande 2016).

The six books under review offer a variety of perspectives on Cuba's contemporary reality, the historical contexts structuring recent political and economic shifts, and the international currents shaping the country's post-Castro trajectory. Published after the 2014–16 rapprochement with the United States, they reflect a broadly forward-looking atmosphere in Cuban studies. Written as the generation of revolutionary *históricos* exited the leadership scene, the texts reinforce the notion that Cuba's transition is both real and ambiguous. Instead of painting a uniform picture, they offer critical and, at times, competing insights on the intersection of the political and economic reforms undertaken by Cuba's leadership and the social, cultural, and global dynamics beyond the scope of state authority. The authors cover a breadth of interrelated topics sure to motivate scholarly discussions of Cuba for the duration of the 2020s and beyond.

CUBAN EXCEPTIONALISM

It may be intuitive that a selection of books on one particular country emphasizes the special attributes of the place or polity under inspection. In the case of Cuba, however, there is a tradition of exceptionalism that is itself unique (Hoffman and Whitehead 2007; Kapcia 2008). Cuba's history, proximity to the United States, island geography, revolutionary legacy, and personalized government were thought to militate against paradigmatic comparisons to other countries. At the risk of mythologizing or essentializing Cuba, the fact that its socialist system survived the downfall of its superpower patron and the death of its *líder máximo* suggests that the exceptionalist argument may contain some truth. This raises the question, how does this exceptionalism impact interpretations of the current transition?

The books reviewed here do not focus on Cuban exceptionalism per se. Yet debates on the “special” attributes of the Cuban case constitute an important thematic backdrop to assessments of the country’s past and present. One prominent strand of exceptionalist thinking has its origins in the island’s rich culture, which is assumed to reflect, condition, and coalesce with wider sociopolitical dynamics. This is illustrated by the subtitle of *The Cuba Reader: History, Culture, Politics*, revised following its initial publication in 2003. Part of Duke’s excellent series of Latin America readers, the book weaves together the writings, experiences, and analyses of individuals from an array of backgrounds and perspectives, giving voice to a diverse multitude of Cubans (and non-Cuban observers) across more than five hundred years of history.

Organized chronologically, the selected writings begin with the periods of (pre-) conquest and colonialism and move through the independence, Cold War, and postrevolutionary epochs. Cultural issues are integrated into the reader’s kaleidoscopic chronicling of Cuban history, which is intended for nonspecialist as well as academic audiences. A brief selection from the early-twentieth-century Cuban intellectual Fernando Ortiz puts it succinctly: the country’s history, he asserts, “more than that of any other country in America, is an intense, complex, unbroken process of transculturation of human groups, all in a state of transition” (25). It is interesting, then, that the theme of exceptionalism is not foregrounded more explicitly across the book’s contributions. Instead, exceptionality tends to function at the level of supposition, helping to highlight the contingencies that are inherent in the Cuban experience.

Exceptionalism is not limited to the cultural sphere, even if it appears to originate in the peculiar mixtures of Cuban transculturation. Moreover, given the longstanding obsession with the figure of Fidel Castro, this sensibility is partly residual, left over from Cold War anxieties that were acutely felt in the United States (Kapcia 2008, 644; Pérez 2002). The complicated relationship between Cuba and the United States plays into the exceptionalist thesis. Because Cuba’s postcolonial development was so intimately entwined with US power, Cuba’s hegemonic neighbor rightly looms large over analyses of its history and present condition. An accounting of US policy and hegemony helps center the discussion on matters of political economy. Although Cuba’s material conditions are not beyond compare, its political-economic system is distinct enough to warrant close attention.

In this context, *Rice in the Time of Sugar: The Political Economy of Food in Cuba*, by Louis A. Pérez, Jr., is a fascinating study into the structures of dependence that have long defined the island’s position in the international political economy. The book is a welcome addition to Pérez’s *oeuvre*. It begins with a discussion of cuisine as an expression of nationality. “What confers distinction on *la cocina cubana* has less to do with what makes *up* the cuisine than what was made *of* the cuisine,” he writes, “that is, the efficacy with which food served as a usable discursive framework through which to articulate aspirations to nationhood” (7, emphasis in original). Rice, for example, has been not just a staple but a “way of life” and a “condition” of Cuba’s identity (13–14). But the country has always struggled to produce enough of this staple to feed itself.

The story of rice cannot be told without exploring the export economy built around Cuba's cash crop *par excellence*—sugar, which dwarfs even tobacco and coffee in its historical import to Cuban development. Pérez's rich analysis, based on archival records (and cookbooks), illuminates the connections between the cultural, political, and economic facets of Cuban dependency. From the colonial and early republican periods through the onset of the Cuban Revolution, the book catalogues the interplay of rice and sugar in relation to "global market forces" and "transnational networks of power brokers" (23). Although the historical role of Asian rice exporters is particularly noteworthy in light of the country's burgeoning relationship with China, the book concludes by noting that even "under circumstances of a punitive economic embargo," the United States has re-emerged as the dominant outside player in Cuban agriculture (183).

Indeed, the pull and power of the United States was never distant—as exporter of rice, importer of sugar, and geopolitical force underpinning the structural asymmetries that constitute the book's core tension. At the same time, the book is deeply attuned to the idiosyncrasies of Cuba's economy. It achieves this balance by unpacking the many layers of Cuban agency in this area, as manifest in domestic producers, government agencies, agricultural associations, and everyday patterns of ordinary life. It is peppered with various allusions to "the complexities of the Cuban anomaly," as Pérez writes in the introduction (24). This is true even though, the country's insatiable appetite for rice notwithstanding, Cuban cuisine "is not substantially dissimilar from the gastronomy of the Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, Venezuela, and Colombia" (7).

Of course, sugar was critical to the evolution of the Caribbean region as a whole. Even so, Cuba always stood out. Eric Williams refers to the island as the "anchor" in the "sugar kingdom" of the "American Mediterranean" (1984 [1970], 419–62). Unsurprisingly, references to sugar are sprinkled throughout the aforementioned *Cuba Reader*, from the time of plantation slavery to the Special Period. That book also connects "this historically significant sector" to "Raúl's reforms." The Cuban economist Omar Everleny Pérez writes that "investment in sugar and better incentives for producers, managers, and their work teams" would help address the industry's uneven performance. "Taking better advantage of its sugar potential will enable Cuba to access billions of dollars for investment purposes," allowing for expanded production of key products like ethanol (587).

The previously unpublished manuscript by Everleny is one of 20 new entries in the second edition of *The Cuba Reader*, organized thematically in a section titled "Cuba After Fidel: Continuities and Transitions." The use of the plural *transitions* is especially apt. The section spans contemporary pieces on the economy and society; US-Cuba relations; and "perspectives on Cuba's new realities," which include song lyrics and reflections on film, popular culture, and the internet. These texts reveal a sense of uncertainty about the direction of the country and the opportunities and pitfalls in the paths opened up by recent events. Whether "exceptional" or not, Cuba's culture, with its tendency for hybridity, is highly adaptive. What this means for the shifts in the country's political-economic system remains to be seen.

UPDATING THE CUBAN MODEL

Against the grain of exceptionalism, some scholars have sought to understand Cuba's transition by way of comparison. *Paths for Cuba: Reforming Communism in Comparative Perspective*, edited by Morgenstern, Pérez-López, and Branche, does just that. The "communism" under investigation here encompasses economics, government and policy, and society, corresponding to the book's three sections. Contributors evaluate recent changes to the Cuban model through comparative examinations with other Latin American countries, China (chaps. 3 and 8), Vietnam (chap. 8), the East Asian "tigers" (chap. 2), and former Soviet states in Central and Eastern Europe (chap. 10). Of particular import are the tensions thrown up by the recent wave of reforms (officially an "updating" of the Cuban model). These contradictions stem primarily from the drive to boost investment and modernize key industries, but they extend across the three broad sectors that structure the book's contribution.

As summarized in the conclusion, "in the postrevolution era, Cuba's political and economic systems have evolved, but generally the pace of change has been slow" (369). So too with the Raúl-era reforms, which in some respects echoed those of the 1990s. "Reforms have been limited and haphazard," write the editors. "At the same time, private employment has skyrocketed, there is new international investment, Havana opened a free trade zone, and Raúl Castro stepped away from power in April 2018" (369). Although they acknowledge that "Cuba's unique history, culture, and geography will undoubtedly impact the pace and direction of change" (371), the editors defend the utility of a comparative approach to shed light on everything from property rights and investment rules to developments in social security and the health sector.

Although not as prominent as the modifications to the economy, changes in the upper echelons of government and within the ruling PCC have produced some noteworthy political openings. Chapter 5, for example, details the government's efforts to enhance accountability by fostering critical input from the public through letters to *Granma*, the party's newspaper of record. Although there is some speculation about the likelihood of a "posttransition" move toward the kind of liberal democracy seen elsewhere in the region (chap. 7), debate centers on the degree to which Cuba is moving toward a "Chinese" model of some kind, with greater separation between the party apparatus and the administrative and legal functions of the state (chap. 6). This could have implications for pensions, social assistance, and social protection (chaps. 8 and 9).

Additionally, new instabilities and insecurities, created through changes to Cuba's political economy, are likely to interact with existing social divisions, including matters of race and gender. An increase in poverty and unemployment would not be felt equally across the island, and a decline in health coverage would hit some groups harder than others. The ongoing transition has thus set in motion a series of "moving targets" for analysts to consider. "The experience from other countries is useful for exploring issues that Cuba will face and alternative paths for Cuba's policy," the edi-

tors write (371). They also note that reforms have oscillated in part because of the swings in US policy: “The dynamics of economic growth may become moot if Cuba is unable to resolve its economic conflicts with the United States” (375).

A complementary text, *Voices of Change in Cuba from the Non-State Sector*, also provides considerable insight into the changing trajectory of Cuba’s economy. Compiled by Carmelo Mesa-Lago, who also writes a chapter on social security in *Paths for Cuba*, the study was conducted in collaboration with Sofía Vera Rojas and Aníbal Pérez-Liñán, as well as two researchers based on the island, Roberto Veiga González and Lenier González Mederos. The work builds on 80 intensive interviews with self-employed workers, usufruct farmers, members of nonagricultural and service cooperatives, and individuals involved in the private dwellings market. Compensating for the dearth of existing data, the study illuminates the heterogenous attitudes of those most directly implicated in the shifts stemming from Raúl Castro’s structural reforms.

Although the study’s methodology does not allow for generalizable findings, it provides an incredibly granular view of what the authors see as the “most important” set of changes to the Cuban economy in the post-Fidel era (133). First implemented in the late 2000s and reinforced in the mid-2010s, these reforms reduced the size of the state sector through the expansion of private and cooperative enterprises. The data show relative satisfaction among those working in the nonstate sector. However, for the sector’s protagonists, Cuba’s market-based reforms continue to confront obstacles associated with limited access to inputs and an overly burdensome bureaucracy. Perhaps surprisingly, internet access did not register as a major issue of concern. Respondents’ reported desires matched their perceptions of existing problems, with participants calling for greater access to inputs, including state-backed incentives and guarantees, as well as more freedom from state interference.

Mesa-Lago and his collaborators acknowledged difficulty in assessing the overall economic impact of the reforms “due to the lack of statistics.” They confidently conclude, however, that the nonstate sector has “achieved advances but not sufficiently enough to have considerable effect on macroeconomic indicators,” except in terms of job creation by self-employed workers (133–34). They offer specific recommendations to bolster Cuba’s incipient nonstate enterprises. These include the elimination of excessively bureaucratic procedures and various mechanisms to expand self-employment activities. The picture presented in *Voices of Change in Cuba from the Nonstate Sector* is of a process of meaningful change unfolding at a deliberate pace, circumscribed not only by history but by Cuba’s uncertain present.

FROM THE GLOBAL TO THE EVERYDAY

Like *Voices of Change*, Margaret Randall's *Exporting Revolution: Cuba's Global Solidarity* gives voice to individual Cubans, probing the personal and political dimensions of the country's commitment to internationalism. Written by a North American poet who lived, worked, and raised a family in Cuba in the 1970s and who has previously examined the lives of Che Guevara and Haydée Santamaría, this eclectic book takes seriously the principles of generosity and solidarity that help define the Cuban Revolution for its partisans, beneficiaries, and sympathizers on the island and worldwide. The book deftly weaves together elements of memoir, history, political analysis, and journalism. It features interviews and excerpts from the writings of Cubans involved in the country's "multifaceted interdisciplinary approach to internationalism," including the "domestic experiences" that underpin such commitments (19).

"From the beginning," Randall writes, "the Revolution's internationalism has been a part of its political identity" (101). Beyond the practices and calculations of foreign policymaking, Cuba's internationalism has taken on a distinctive style, spanning the realms of culture, education, public health, and sport. While the titular notion of "exporting revolution" conjures images of Cuba's support for Marxist guerrillas, it has a deeper meaning for Randall. Cuba's overseas initiatives provide its citizens with concrete connections to the revolutionary project. For those participating in internationalist missions, "there is no mercenary edge to what they contribute. They feel privileged to have been able to take their revolution's values of selflessness and sacrifice to people less fortunate" (217). This is on display in their writings and statements, which show a creativity that belies the typecasting of Cuba as a society stagnating under the weight of an ossified political system.

Randall is realistic about Cuba's "rapidly changing reality" (17) and the various problems that may inhibit the country from maintaining its "consistently generous" internationalist posture (19). She acknowledges problems of censorship (38–39), inequities on issues of race and gender (78), political duplicity (78–79), and "official marginalization," as gleaned from the author's firsthand experience (16). And yet the overall story here is one of persistence. In Randall's telling, Cuba's internationalism can be traced through a culture that predates the revolution and that continues to nurture an outward-facing attitude that sets the country apart from other small nations. As she quotes an interlocutor, when it comes to global influence, and at the risk of harboring "an illusion of grandeur," Cubans have always thought of themselves as "exceptional" (19).

In *The Cuban Hustle: Culture, Politics, Everyday Life*, Sujatha Fernandes explores Cuban creativity in the decades since the collapse of the Soviet Union. As the island moved toward the global market during the Special Period, it saw various inequalities (re-)emerge. The essays pay particularly close attention to issues of race, gender, and sexuality, which are examined through the lens of Cuba's vibrant and incredibly diverse artistic terrain. Everyday experiences are accessed through interviews and conveyed via the author's extensive reporting.

Through the motif of the “hustle,” colloquially called *jinetismo* (which can also refer to sex work), Fernandes relates the social-cultural sphere to political and economic developments in Cuba and at the international and global levels. Everyday struggles fuel parallel efforts to transcend circumstance. Afro-Cuban activism, to highlight one example, cannot be understood without reference to the transnationalism of the Black Lives Matter movement (127). This finds echoes in the Cuban hip hop scene, which has been increasingly analyzed as both a harbinger of social tension and a site of political-cultural transformation (Baker 2011; see also Saunders 2015 and her chapter in Morgenstern et al.). “The openings between Cuba and the United States created greater need for . . . antiracism organizations on the island,” Fernandes notes, “as an expanding market economy generated increased racial and economic inequalities” (128).

As Fernandes concludes, “the forms of cultural expression” at the heart of the book “have been marked by two features. One is their engagement and dialogue with global networks. . . . The second is their negotiation with state institutions, which has made available new channels for accessing power while delineating the boundaries of acceptable criticism” (167). Fernandes does not shy away from the impact of domestic and international political constraints, broaching incidents of censorship in the areas of public and visual art (46, 50), film (56), and music (67, 89). Also of importance are the implications of the US embargo and the vacillations in US policy. She notes the “embargo-related obstacles to expanding digital access” on the island (113), for example, and discusses the somewhat ham-fisted attempts by the United States to damage the Cuban government through social media and the infiltration of the hip hop movement (90–92).

Among other insights, Fernandes’s focus on everyday concerns yields a fascinating portrait of the Cuban internet, which is characterized not only by a heavy-handed state presence but by “grassroots cultures of connectivity” featuring “horizontal and open-source methods of information sharing” (117). The book’s final section, on “Cuban Futures and the Trump Era,” brings the reader up to date on the impact of recent geopolitical tumult. Amid the growth of the global far right and the waning of Latin America’s Pink Tide, principles of egalitarianism continue to have considerable purchase with Cubans of all stripes. “Cuba still stands as a symbolic pole,” Fernandes writes, “reminding us that human society can be organized on the basis of solidarity, cooperation, and respect” (166).

CONCLUSIONS

As Fernandes remarks, there is often an assumption in North America and the West that “the progression of Cuban society is its journey toward capitalism, the evolution of Cubans to become more like us” (2). It would be a mistake to presume that the recent spate of reforms will produce outcomes to match those in countries with similar systems. As argued by William LeoGrande (2015), Cuba’s post-Fidel transition has been multidimensional, complex, and perilous—for the country’s leadership but also its people. Change has been slow. Uncertainty reigns. A vast literature

on Cuban “transitology” stretches back decades, and it is littered with erroneous prognostications (LeoGrande 2015, 378). Borrowing from Fernandes, it is likely that the Cuban “hustle” will endure in one form or another for the near to medium term. Beyond this, it is hard to predict where Cuba’s political and economic reforms will lead. Given the numerous moving parts, there is no obvious destination.

Certainly, the country’s transition will involve a host of issues beyond the scope of this brief essay. Some of these are discussed in the reviewed texts, if not in great detail, and all deserve additional research. They include the importance of the Cuban diaspora and exile politics, the country’s demographics and ageing population, emigration and the “brain drain,” controversies surrounding the country’s dual currency, and the future of global tourism, an issue that will come to the fore in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic.

There is some consensus that political and economic changes on the island will create new tensions and contradictions. This is partly a continuation of trends initiated in the 1990s that have grown more pronounced in the post-Fidel period. Researchers differ on the utility of comparative analysis to ascertain the depth and nature of these reforms, not to mention their normative implications in relation to the evolution of Cuban socialism. But there is agreement that these fissures will shape creative expression in the country’s art, culture, and everyday life. The widespread interest in Cuban hip hop is telling. It reveals the growing salience of race and identity in Cuban society while serving as a reminder of the strong bonds that connect Cuba to the United States. Analysts would do well to address the interplay of internal and external factors as a new generation of authorities confronts the country’s challenges.

In a sense, the very idea of transition invites contestation—for supporters and detractors of the revolutionary regime and for analysts and observers from distinct disciplinary backgrounds. Whether or not the country is “exceptional,” Cuba’s status as an ideological outlier will ensure that commentary on the country remains polarized. Scholarship has the benefit of offering nuance. The diversity and sophistication of views provided in the reviewed works hint at the kinds of questions, disagreements, and concerns that will characterize debate on Cuba moving forward.

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