

“Trying to Address the Cuban Paradox” by John M. Kirk and Peter McKenna (book review), in *Latin American Research Review*, Vol. 34, No. 2 (1999), pp. 214-226.

Reviewed Work(s):

Bridges to Cuba: Puentes a Cuba. by Ruth Behar

New Art of Cuba. by Luis Camnitzer

Cuba: Dilemmas of a Revolution. by Juan M. del Aguila

Revolution in the Balance: Law and Society in Contemporary Cuba. by Debra Evenson

Cuban Communism, 1959-1995. by Irving Louis Horowitz

The State, Bureaucracy, and the Cuban Schools: Power and Participation. by Sheryl L. Lutjens

Essays on Cuban History: Historiography and Research. by Louis A. Perez Jr.

Law and Religion in Marxist Cuba: A Human Rights Inquiry. by Margaret I. Short

Cuba: From Conquistador to Castro. by Geoff Simons

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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 cubania 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 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 revolution 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 Americas (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 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 Jose Marti 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.