

## **Book Review: The Cuba Reader: History, Culture, Politics**

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Chomsky, Aviva; Carr, Barry; and Smarkaloff, Pamela Marie, eds. *The Cuba Reader. History, Culture, Politics*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2003. 723 pp. \$26.95 (paper).

Ever since C. Wright Mills squared off with Theodore Draper more than forty years ago, there has generally been but two perspectives on Fidel Castro and the Cuban Revolution. From Mills, author of the popular *Listen, Yankee* in 1960, Castro was fundamentally a Cuban nationalist, out to make the sweeping changes that national sovereignty and social justice required; if he moved toward closer ties with the Soviet Union, it was only in self defense against the hostility of the United States. Draper diametrically disagreed. In his 1962 *Castro's Revolution. Myths and Realities*, Fidel purposely turned to communism and the Soviet orbit to consolidate his personal power, thereby betraying the proclaimed goals and ideals of the 1959 Revolution. Four-plus decades and whole shelves of books on the subject later, little of that debate has been resolved. *The Cuba Reader. History, Culture, Politics*, edited by Aviva Chomsky, Barry Carr, and Pamela Maria Smorkaloff, is a case in point.

In their volume, the editors, two historians and a professor of literature, make no claims that theirs is a balanced treatment. The three, accomplished scholars in the field all, announce from the start a shared "commitment to social justice" (p. 2) that produces a sympathetic treatment of the Cuban struggle for change. What results is a collection of over 120 readings of every genre, from memoirs to poetry, to sociological analysis, to cartoons, arranged chronologically, first in four sections that describe the Cuban conquest, colony, independence movement, and ensuing neocolonialism prior to the Revolution, followed thematically by another four that illustrate post-1959 social, cultural, and international themes, as well as a final segment on the challenges of the Special Period. Throughout it all, the message is that, prior to Castro's Revolution, Cuba was controlled and exploited by outside forces and that afterwards the changes wrought were rational, justified, and welcomed by the vast majority of Cuban citizens. Take, for example, the section on The Cuban Revolution and the World. It portrays a heroic Cuba facing a malicious United States by juxtaposing diary entries and photos of the idealistic Venceremos Brigade with declassified documents from Operation Mongoose, the secret U.S. plan to overthrow the Castro regime. Likewise, as various U.S. administrations

plotted to assassinate Fidel, thousands of Cubans, including children cruelly separated from their families, were lured to Florida exile by "substantial [U.S.] government largesse" (p. 557). Meanwhile, Cuba became admired throughout the Third World for the thousands of physicians and health-care workers that it has sent out since 1963. Nowhere in this section is there suggestion of Cubans fleeing increasing political repression, of increasing economic dependency on the Soviet Union, or of the Revolution's military interventions in Africa and Latin America.

Despite its overall length, 712 pages of text, suggestions for further reading and acknowledgments, this anthology curiously pays little attention to Fidel himself, the central figure of Cuban history and politics, if not culture as well, since 1959. There is his "History Will Absolve Me" speech from 1953 and excerpts from a revolutionary speech delivered only days after assuming power. But afterwards there is only occasional and fleeting mention of him, as if he were but a piece of the background rather than a looming presence. Missing consequently is inclusion of readings from any of the many political biographies that contribute critically to the story of Cuba and its Revolution. Nothing from the self-defensive Herbert Matthews, the academic Peter Bourne, the journalistic Tad Szulc, or even the breezy Georgie Anne Geyer —any of these might have contributed significantly to the overall picture of the nation and its times.

Whatever the openly admitted imbalance and despite any gap in the presentation, *The Cuba Reader* is nevertheless an impressive and worthy addition to the series of similar readers on Peru, Brazil, Argentina and Mexico, published by Duke University Press. In this latest addition, the editors have gathered an engaging assortment of readings, some of them from classics, like Miguel Barnet's *Biography of a Runaway Slave*, Che's *Reminiscences*, the essays of Guillermo Cabrera Infante and the poetry of Nicolas Guillen, others from sources less well known, translated by one of the editors herself and apparently appearing in English for the first time. The outcome is a rich variety of voices, most of them Cuban, which, when read together reveal a nation and people of complexity and charm, pathos and poignancy, quite unlike the stark categories in which the warring ideologies usually place them. With few exceptions, the excerpts are kept short; without exception they are free of academic jargon and dense theory. Indeed, this is a volume that can be read with benefit and enjoyment by student and faculty scholars alike.

