

Review Essay: Reconsidering the Scope and Trajectory of Cuban Studies

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Max Azicri and Elsie Deal. *Cuban Socialism in a New Century: Adversity, Survival and Renewal*. Gainesville, Fla.: University Press of Florida, 2004. 363 pp. \$65.00 (cloth).

Jorge I. Dominguez, Omar Everleny Perez Villanueva and Lorena Barberia. *The Cuban Economy at the Start of the Twenty-First Century*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2005. 430 pp. \$24.99 (paper).

For well over 40 years now, American scholars, pundits and policy makers have vigorously debated the scope and trajectory of the Cuban revolution. The critical questions have centered on debates that deal with the strategic importance of “retaining, eliminating and modifying” the ever-present U.S. embargo, and the extent to which the Castro regime represents an “anti-democratic blight on the deep undercurrents of changes that now characterize the hemisphere as a whole.”¹ This also includes a continuous flashing of warning signs, “*la crisis se profundiza*” (the crisis deepens) and the updating and revamping of the modalities that must be employed is Cuba is to be “effectively integrated” in the globalized world community. What has been missing from this variant of Cubanology has been a correspondence to an objective and apolitical analysis of all political and economic phenomena in Cuba as they are. Overwhelmingly, this body of work has been generated with a counter-revolutionary notion of repudiating and renouncing any scintilla of rationality and logic rendered by way of analysis related to Cuba, because to do so would imply some sort of allegiance with support for a regime that is content to survive with “islands of capitalism in a sea of socialism.”² What is missing from these criticisms and objections have been elements of reflection and insight as to how present developments on the island might impact the *present* and *future* status of governance in Cuba and how that might influence relations with its neighbor to the north, the United States, as opposed to analysis that issues prescriptions for fixing what the authors perceive as being shortcomings in the trajectory of developments on the island in the wake of the ending of the Cold War. This requires scholars to address “the major issues by applying to the task, timely and well-balanced scholarly studies,” so that the analysis, “provides a comprehensive picture of a multifaceted” Cuba.³

For this reason alone the two books in this essay are long overdue and welcome additions to the literature of Cuba studies for two reasons. First, one of the most egregious sins of omission by American scholars has been the absence of Cuban counterparts. Collaboration of this kind may have been all but impossible in the recent past and there can be little argument that the Cubans were free or willing to openly engage American scholars in a constructive dialogue about the future of the Cuban revolution. This dilemma was compounded on numerous occasions by Cuban government intervention aimed at scuttling and subverting nascent research projects, especially if the results contradicted official and unofficial priorities as they pertained to most if not all elements of the Cuban regime. Cuban scholars were also denounced and sometimes removed from important positions if the scope and objectives of their collaborations with foreigners strayed to far from the regime norm or somehow bucked some unwritten and unspoken protocol. Yet, the brief *apertura* (opening) made possible by the end of the Cold War and the easing of academic travel restrictions for U.S. scholars during the 1990s, perhaps, created the environment where trust and confidence between these scholarly communities reached a level sufficient to engender collaboration that produces the type of analysis that significantly adds to the depth and understanding of contemporary Cuban politics and economics. By almost any accounting, an entire generation of American scholars interested in Cuban issues has now had the opportunity to visit and interact with Cuban scholars, government officials and institutions in ways unimaginable during the Cold War.

Second, as a consequence of this closer interaction, this new generation of Cuba scholars (Cuban and American) has also had the benefit of vetting their research within their respective disciplines and professional associations. This has been instrumental in enhancing and boosting the validity of research in this area. Moreover, as this research has found its way into publication it has raised the bar for the entire scholarly community. This has meant that the overtly ideologically and politically motivated work that passed for research in the past, both for and against the regime, is now being held to a higher standard, and rightly so. This is not to disparage the meaningful research of the past but this development represents an entrée into a realm of research where hyperbole, reportage and prescription will no longer meet muster.

This is vitally important for a couple of reasons. First, social scientists should have learned an important lesson from the end of the Cold War. That is that no one accurately predicted, let alone could they account for the surprisingly rapid demise of the Soviet Union and the cataclysmic events that ended the 40 year East-West confrontation. This failure stems from the propensity of Cold War scholars and especially Kremlinologists, who as products of Cold War strategic thinking were unable to conceive of research agendas that could not reach beyond the bounds of analysis that relied upon interpreting policy statements and the seating arrangement of the Soviet *nomenklatura* atop Lenin's tomb during the May Day parade to assess the pecking order and priorities of the Russian elite. This was tantamount to the reading of tea leaves and left social scientists wholly unaware of the significant lack of capacity and legitimacy of the Soviet hegemon at the end of the 1980s. Similarly, without a significant shift or re-formulation of the research agenda vis-à-vis Cuba it suffices to say that social scientists and old guard Cubanologists may find themselves in a similar situation, unable to adequately assess or contend with dramatic changes on the island that perhaps have been years in the making or that have already taken place.

Second, given the fact that Cuba has survived the Soviet *denouement*, and that it is truly independent for the first time in its modern history, the scope and objectives of Cuba studies must be centered on these basic facts. Implicit in this realization is a need to accurately and unambiguously create a research agenda that deals with the Cuban reality as it is and not some fantastical departure or return to an accommodation that may have never existed. This speaks to the revisionist nature of pre-Revolution apologists and the anti-Castro rhetoricians that for overtly political and strategic reasons continue to posture and parade about moribund and mostly symbolic icons of a Cuba that no longer exists, or perhaps also never existed. In addition, this requires that these developments be analyzed within a rigorous theoretical and methodological framework further expanding the ambit of a base of objective and meaningful Cuba-related research.

In that vein, led by Jorge I. Domínguez and the David Rockefeller Center on Latin American Studies at Harvard University, *The Cuban Economy at the Start of the Twenty-First Century* comes at a crucial moment for all of the aforementioned reasons. The book begins with a simple statement, "Cuba's economic future has already begun."⁴ That statement alone set out an ominous task of situating that future within the international and transnational context that Cuba finds itself in at the opening of the 21st century. Specifically, the book seeks to explore four broad themes: (1) to focus on the salient macroeconomic questions relevant to Cuba's future; (2) to analyze the international economic context and Cuba's economic development strategy over time and comparatively across the region; (3) an examination of social policy and welfare issues as they pertain to poverty and income inequality debates, and the extent to

which the revolutionary model for social development is still relevant given the dramatic changes over the past decade and a half; and (4) a study of the development of important transnational networks and the responses by both the United States and Cuban governments as they effect the formal and informal constraints on people (remittances, family visits, academic travel, etc.) on both sides of the Straits of Florida. As if to set it self apart from the fray that engrosses any interaction between the United States and Cuba, the book is clear in its overall objective as it seeks to focus its attention on the Cuba that actually exists.

This is not a book about what may happen to bring about a change of Cuba's political regime, nor a fantasy about what may occur if such a political change were to take place. There are scholarly grounds for focusing on the world as we know it...to make suggestions about possible policy changes within the context of Cuba's existing political arrangements.⁵

This is particularly notable is the chapter on the economic challenges facing Cuba contributed by Cuban economist Omar Everleny Pérez Villanueva, and in a commentary on economic inequality and the future prospects for social policy in Cuba contributed by American scholars, Lorena Barbería, Xavier de Souza Briggs, and Miriam Uriarte. Both contributions are clear departures from anything that could be perceived as "coddling a dictator" as they set out rather vexing issues and deliberately and unambiguously lay out the *problematica* that must be addressed if Cuba hopes to begin working toward their respective solutions. Pérez Villanueva's chapter assesses the factors that have contributed to the transformation of Cuba into a service economy.⁶ The assessment includes policy recommendations including the necessity of increasing investment to correspond to "an industrial strategy that is needed to adapt to the increasing share of services as a part of the economy." As he states, "Otherwise, the trade deficit will continue to increase with the continued burgeoning of imports."⁷ This is a tacit realization that in the wake of the economic collapse of the 1990s, Cuba's demand is outstripped its supply and will be required to boost the capacity of industries specializing in consumer related products to meet that demand. Furthermore, he argues economic progress is presently constrained by numerous significant factors including structural deformities, internal inefficiencies and the depreciation or over-valuation of capital assets.⁸ He also includes the presence of the U.S. embargo (*bloqueo*) as a contributing factor but unlike the other factors mentioned, this highly contentious and politically motivated issue realistically lies outside the realm of those matters over which Cuban economic policy makers hold any sway under the present set of circumstances. Rightly, he points out that Cuba remains energy dependent and still relies to a large extent reliant on the import of intermediate good. While there has been some

excitement over the discovery of oil reserves off the north-west coast of Cuba, it is highly unlikely that the potential gains from this development can be realized in the near term as Cuba possesses few of the resources required to be a player in offshore oil drilling and exploration.⁹ That fact coupled with the unsteady nature of world oil markets heightens Perez Villanueva's concern regarding Cuba's external exposure that potentially could undermine some of the "irreversible" gains witnessed in Cuba since the mid-nineties. He adds to this analysis the parallel and negative impact on social equity vis-à-vis the resuscitation of the Cuban economy. He details the social distortions that many have used as a criticism of the regime and calls for a careful balancing of political, social and economic factors that undergird Cuban society and the on-going objective of social and human capital development that has long distinguished the Cuban model.¹⁰ That he waits until the conclusion to mention this vexing dilemma for the Castro regime is reason for our attention, but he adds that this discussion while warranted must be debated logically and within the understanding of the "revolutionary model of social justice"¹¹ that has animated Cuban planning for the past forty years. As a solo contribution, that may be sufficient, but within the milieu of Cuba studies, much more discussion of this critical point is needed and the commentary from Barberia, et al specifically seeks to deepen the discourse and to bring further attention to the relevance of the social development model in the face of numerous challenges.

The authors critically assess the extent to which (1) the Cuban welfare state is sustainable in the face of what they term "lackluster economic growth, (2) the viability of a standardized and universal social welfare delivery model in the face of growing diversification in Cuba, where the needs of people are beginning to vary widely, and (3) the implications of "spatial inequality" all due to the dramatic changes in the Cuban economy since the end of the Cold War.¹² They conclude that the Cuban objective of egalitarian social development faces the twin challenges of developing sustainability in lieu of economic growth and a variable social welfare delivery system. On both counts, this will necessarily force Cuba to acknowledge and address, the heretofore poorly understood consequences of economic restructuring and social access during this past decade. Moreover, the extent to which these internal effects from both domestic and external forces are understood will be vital to the legitimacy of the Cuban state as it moves onto the subsequent stages of a process of economic restructuring and revitalization.

What is unique about these two examples is that they base their perspective in carefully conceived spaces that seek to place these particular questions into a universe of similar and related processes not unique to Cuba. "Cuba is exceptional only in the particulars of its experience and in the ways in which earlier socialist commitments... tend to frame the current dilemmas."¹³ Moreover, that this is done within a context of interaction between scholars from "both sides" boosts that validity of the analysis.

Max Azicri and Elsie Deal's edited contribution, *Cuban Socialism in a New Century*, is similar in its outlook seeking to expand the ambit of Cuban studies as to simultaneously update the standard analysis of Cuba that has traditionally and broadly focused on inchoate studies of society, religion, economy, politics, military, migration and international relations, but by also focusing on recent developments on the island, such as the rebirth of religious institutions, newly approaches on international relations and trade, and correcting, as it were, mistaken assumptions regarding the present and future Cuba. The book's contributors include both the "official insiders" and academic scholars that offer a welcome depth and diversity of analysis to the subject matter.

In that light, Jose A. Moreno's contribution "From Capitalist to Socialist Culture, and Back to Capitalist Values?" echoes Susan Eva Eckstein's *Back From the Future*¹⁴ analysis of a structural and ideological changes from the 1960s to the 1990s and the challenge posed by strategies for development and survival in the post-Cold War context to the "matrix of values conducive to the emergence of a new man and the creation of a new society."¹⁵ Specifically, he openly ponders the implications of the creation of modalities that have produced differences and exclusions between various groups on the island as a consequence similar to those that existed prior to 1959. He concludes by issuing a warning of sorts to those who might misinterpret these developments:

Probably the most serious mistake one could make would be to assume that once the present government is replaced, the Cuban exile-elite presently ruling South Florida could return to business as usual in a pre-1959 Cuba. It would be a mistake comparable to the one that led to the failed Bay of Pigs invasion in 1961.¹⁶

But more interesting is the analysis by William LeoGrande as to what challenges await the post-transition leadership in Cuba. He clearly states that, "the new leadership faces tough policy choices, debate will surely intensify, spurred by those who favor a thoroughgoing economic reforms and greater political liberalization."¹⁷ Ultimately, the "right to govern" is contingent on "the legitimacy of the institutions" under the direction of this new leadership. The key piece of information in this assessment is that by the 1990s, the average age of the members of the Central Committee, Cuba's penultimate ruling body was fifty-three, and the average age of members of the National Assembly was forty-three. This was highlighted by a rather interesting quote by Cuba's forty-ish Foreign Minister, Felipe Pérez Roque, "There has already be a tangible transfer of power [to the next generation] and that has been done by Fidel."¹⁸

In this instance the authors' have rejected the idea of Cuban exceptionalism and have placed their analysis within the discourse of broader research agendas, which is to argue that while relatively unique within the history of post-revolution Cuba, these processes of change and renewal are

representative of larger projects and processes that have been in play across the globe for well over the past quarter century. That they are presently occurring in Cuba is of great interest in many circles and represents, as demonstrated by these authors, an opportunity to exercise elements of what can be termed a new Cuba studies regime. Moreover, developments of the past decade or so on the island reflect a new and distinct reality, and as such, the effort to research, distill, and analyze this new reality must similarly re-tool methods and approaches in the contributions to this field of study are to be meaningful and lasting.

Conclusion

Interestingly enough, these two books reflect a commitment to “take the academic high road” and to avoid the pitfalls of political expediency that for some have been rewarding, but at the end of the day, have only served to obscure our understanding of an important field of academic inquiry, and in some circles provided the grist of rationalities that only served to obscure or diminish the Cuban reality. This is echoed by Max Azicri when he states, “the island-nation is challenging us to learn why and how it refuses to succumb to adversity but chooses instead to chart its own destiny.”¹⁹ Appropriately, Dominguez concurs in stating, Cubans have begun to rebuild the bonds that rendered the Cuban nation apart as growing numbers of *diaspora* Cubans rally to assist their relatives in Cuba not just to survive but to build more productive lives. Government policies will have to change further, however for the full potential benefits of these new transnational ties to be realized.²⁰

In both cases, the blend of American and Cuban scholars reflects an ideal of sorts, in that it is through the intellectual interaction and collaboration between these groups that engenders both higher standards and deeper understanding of these complex realities. We may begin to develop meaningful modes of inquiry that acknowledge that the “bar has been raised” and that these works represent legitimate responses to “get over it,” in more ways than one.

Endnotes

1. Irving Louis Horowitz and Jaime Suchlicki, eds. *Cuban Communism*, 9th ed. (New Brunswick [U.S.A.] and London: Transaction Publishers, 1998), p. xvi.
2. Jorge Perez-Lopez, “Islands of Capitalism in a Sea of Socialism: Joint Ventures in Cuba’s Development Strategy,” in *Cuba at a Crossroads: Politics and Economics after the Fourth Party Congress*,

- ed. Jorge Perez-Lopez (Gainesville, Fla.: University Press of Florida, 1994).
3. Max Azicri, “Cuban Socialism in the Twenty-First Century,” in *Cuban Socialism in a New Century: Adversity, Survival and Renewal*, ed. Max Azicri and Elsie Deal (Gainesville, Fla.: University Press of Florida, 2004), p. 35.
4. Jorge I. Dominguez, “The Cuban Economy at the Start of the Twenty-First Century: An Introductory Analysis,” in *The Cuban Economy at the Start of the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Jorge I. Dominguez, Omar Everleny Perez Villanueva, and Lorena Barberia (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2005), p. 1.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 13.
6. Omar Everleny Perez Villanueva, “The Cuban Economy and Its Future Challenges,” in *The Cuban Economy*, p. 51.
7. *Ibid.*
8. *Ibid.*, p. 83.
9. Keith Epstien, “Cuba May Be On Verge of Oil Bonanza.” *Washington Dateline*, 19 January 2005, <http://washdateline.mgnetwork.com>.
10. Perez Villanueva, “The Cuban Economy and Its Future Challenges,” in *The Cuban Economy*, p. 85.
11. This term is commonly attributed to Jose Marti, the 19th century Cuban revolutionary and intellectual architect of Cuban nationalism.
12. Lorena Barberia, Xavier de Souza Briggs and Miren Uriarte, “The End of Egalitarianism? Economic Inequality and the Future of Social Policy in Cuba,” in *The Cuban Economy*, p. 287.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 313.
14. See Susan Eva Eckstein, *Back From the Future: Castro Under Cuba* (New York: Routledge, 2003).
15. Jose A. Moreno, “From Capitalism to Socialist Culture, and Back to Capitalist Values?” in *Cuban Socialism in a New Century* (Gainesville, Fla.: University Press of Florida, 2004), p. 61.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 63.
17. William LeoGrande, “The ‘Single Party of the Cuban Nation’ Faces the Future” in *Cuban Socialism in a New Century*, p. 198.
18. *Ibid.*
19. Azicri, “Cuban Socialism in the Twenty-First Century,” in *Cuban Socialism in a New Century*, p. 35.
20. Dominguez, “The Cuban Economy at the Start,” in *The Cuban Economy at the Start*, p. 14.