

Cuba in the World, the World in Cuba

Essays on Cuban History, Politics and Culture

edited by

Alessandra Lorini
Duccio Basosi

with a preface by

Ronald Pruessen
Rick Halpern
Max Guderzo

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A. Lorini
D. Basosi

Introduction

Cuba in the World. The World in Cuba

In the 16th century, Cuba was known as *la llave del Nuevo Mundo* (the “key to the New World”). In the 19th century, before the *Cuba Libre* movement helped the country gain its independence with the intervention of the United States in 1898, it was known as the “pearl of the Antilles”, “the richest jewel in the royal crown” and *la siempre fidelísima isla* (the “ever-faithful isle”). Indeed, the “Caribbean sugar bowl” populated by Spanish colonists and African slaves had already developed a complex relationship with its North American neighbor by then. This only got tighter with the end of Spanish rule, the subsequent US military occupation and the birth of the fragile republic in 1902 in the shadow of the Platt Amendment that allowed the US to intervene on the island at its discretion¹. At the beginning of the 20th century, the US-Cuba connection was strategic and intimate, taking on the shape of real neocolonialism that would last until the outbreak of Fidel Castro’s Revolution in 1959. Cuba would then enter the orbit of the Soviet Union, “the other” superpower of the Cold War, once again following rather complex dynamics.

A virtual laboratory of imperial strategies on the one hand and revolutions on the other, Cuba played a key role in a world divided between two superpowers. At once physically close and politically distant from the

¹ See: Louis A. Pérez Jr., *Cuba and the United States. Ties of Singular Intimacy* (Athens, GA: Georgia University Press, 1990); Id., *The War of 1898: The United States and Cuba in History and Historiography* (Chapel Hill: North Carolina University Press, 1998); Id., *Cuba in the American Imagination. Metaphor and the Imperial Ethos* (Chapel Hill: North Carolina University Press, 2008); Rafael Hernández, *Mirar el Niágara. Huellas culturales entre Cuba y los Estados Unidos* (La Habana: Centro de Investigación de la Cultura Cubana Juan Marinello, 2000); Alessandra Lorini, *L’impero della libertà e l’isola strategica. Gli Stati Uniti e Cuba tra Otto e Novecento* (Napoli: Liguori, 2008); Id., ed., *An intimate and Contested Relation: The United States and Cuba in the late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries* (Firenze: Firenze University Press, 2005).

United States, it was also able to carry out important international initiatives in relative autonomy from Moscow². For Cuba, the end of the Soviet Union implied the need to rethink its independence. Unlike the former Soviet bloc countries, Cuba has continued the socialist revolution, and it has paid a high price for it. Their strong national identity rooted in three centuries of history is undoubtedly the source of the Cuban people's capacity for survival. At the heart of this identity is the ideal of a universal nation "for all and for the good of all", in the words of José Martí, which survived by transforming itself through the complex anthropological process Fernando Ortiz called *transculturación*³.

This ideal of a global nation was one of the most important issues that emerged during the workshop "Cuba, a Strategic Island: New Perspectives on History, Politics and Culture" held at the University of Florence in November 2007. This multi-disciplinary conference hosted scholars from various countries to discuss the specific encounters they have had with Cuba along their distinctive paths of research⁴. The present volume took its cue from that conference and takes a step further by proposing to approach Cuba as an example of a nation that hosts a convergence of extraordinary global developments and in turn projects itself onto the world's major cultural, political and economic processes. Such an approach embraces relations between colony and motherland during the 19th century, conflicts between imperial strategies and the formation of identities and political cultures and a reading of architectural and artistic documents as well as strategies and economic policies from the Cold War to the first decade of the present century. Without any pretension to completeness, the seven parts of this book focus on moments, events and characters that are more or less well-known and together indicate a new path for "global history". From each of these points of view, the Cuban experience seems to reveal the limits of the long-held equation according to which "globalization" could not exist without capitalism, containers or the internet⁵. On the one hand, the recent experience in Cuba is that of a socialist country that was

² Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 158-249; Piero Gleijeses, *Moscow's Proxy? Cuba and Africa 1975-1988*, «Journal of Cold War Studies», 2 (2006), 3-51.

³ On Martí, Ortiz, and other Caribbean intellectuals who forged ideals of free nations see: Consuelo Naranjo Orovio, Miguel Á. Puig-Samper y Luis Miguel García Mora, eds., *La Nación Soñada: Cuba, Puerto Rico y Filipinas ante el 98* (Madrid: Doce Calles, 1996). On nineteenth-century Cuban political culture also see: José Piqueras Arenas, *Sociedad civil y poder en Cuba. Colonia y poscolonia* (Madrid: Siglo XXI de España, 2005). The most recent and multifaceted history of Cuba up to the first half of the 20th century is the volume edited by Consuelo Naranjo Orovio, *Historia de Cuba* (Madrid: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, 2009).

⁴ The conference was the first cooperative effort of a group of historians working at the University of Florence and the University of Toronto to develop an international research group on Cuban studies.

⁵ For some general thoughts on this subject: Jürgen Osterhammel and Niels Petersson, *Globalization: A Short History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

left economically isolated after the collapse of all its main eastern European allies in 1989 and has since built new global networks that range from economic to political relations, from cultural to social exchanges. Today, tourism brings millions of visitors to the island every year, putting Cubans vis-à-vis with the lifestyles of the rest of the world. The island's "medical diplomacy", which covers some seventy-five countries, brings thousands of Cuban doctors abroad, presenting a veritable "Cuban social model" to large portions of the global South. On the other hand, the Cuban experience confirms the theoretical fragility of the paradigm that wants to see globalization only as a recent fact. On the contrary, a quick overview of the island's history is sufficient to trace the signals of many previous "globalizations": from the mixed composition of the population to the country's long-held role in the world sugar market; from political migration and intellectual hybridization during the wars for independence to the global impact of the Revolution of 1959.

This book aims at portraying, at least in part, the long duration, the complexity and the multidimensional nature of Cuba's interactions with the world. Spanning two centuries of history, the essays collected here analyze the continuous interplay between what is Cuban and what is global. "Cuba in the world", then, for the island's ability to project its own culture, economy, and politics beyond its borders. But also "the world in Cuba", for the island's repeated hybridization with the cultural, political and economic stimulation from outside the country. First there is the centrality of slavery and emancipation. Ada Ferrer's essay focuses on the impact of the slave revolution in Haiti on Cuba at the beginning of the 19th century, a time when Cuba itself was becoming an increasingly slave-based society. The contribution by Irene Fattaciu reconstructs instead Cuba's presence in the African Spanish colony of Fernando Po in the second half of the 19th century as an example of the complex interactions between Africa, Europe and the Americas. In the aftermath of Cuban independence from Spain, the legacy of slavery and the racialization of social conflicts in US terms profoundly affected definitions of racial identity and nationalism among Cuban "leaders of color", as Loredana Giolitto discusses in her essay.

By analyzing how Cuba, still a rich Spanish slave colony in the second half of the 19th century, was a crucial hub for the transatlantic telegraph system financed by US capital, Marta Blaquier Ascaño shows how the island was at the center of the commercial networks between Europe and the Americas. However, while the telegraph and other technologies were developed during the colonial period, scientific debate and higher education remained backward, because of first colonial and then neo-colonial dependence until the second half of the 20th century. As highlighted in the essay by Angelo Baracca, the great leap forward in scientific and higher education only happened as a result of the Revolution of 1959.

Although the Revolution sanctioned the ideal of a free and independent nation, presenting itself as the realization of Martí's ideals, forms of popular resistance and nationalist opposition against US occupation had already started appearing in the Cuba "between two empires" – the period of 1899-1902. As demonstrated by Marial Iglesias Utset's contribution to this volume, a strong national identity and a symbolic construction of the nation based on the institutionalization of patriotic memory was built in those years one that found strong bases in festivals and other popular traditions. However, tensions also existed among various expressions of nationalism and images of Martí, and between popular and elite culture, which both radicalized in subsequent years. In the semi-independent Cuba of the Platt Amendment years (1902-1934), turbulence and political corruption culminated in the dictatorship of Gerardo Machado and the birth of an opposition against the dictatorship, which was extremely varied both socially and ideologically, as demonstrated by Alessandra Lorini. As described by Amparo Sánchez Cobos' contribution, in the Cuban labor movement, brutally repressed by Machado, a major component was constituted by the Spanish anarchists, who sought to integrate and organize the Cuban working class by raising the level of education, though they failed to reach the majority of colored workers. The student movement, which had an important role in the overthrowing of Machado and the quasi-revolution of 1933 that led to the repealing of the Platt Amendment, left a legacy for the student generation of the 1950s whose role would culminate in the Revolution, as illustrated in the essay by Michael Lima.

The triumph of the Revolution of 1959, the epochal event that attracted dozens of intellectuals from the US and Europe to Cuba in the very early years to participate in the revolutionary transformation, is analyzed in the essay by Gabriella Paolucci, who explores projects of radical change with regards to Havana's urban space. The history of Havana contains the meaning of Cuba as a crossroads of the world. In his contribution, Raffaele Paloscia traces the history of its monuments, its residential geography and its radical transformation during the first US occupation and the entire first half of the 20th century. The architecture and the transformations of the territory of *Habana del Este* during the second half of the 20th century are described by Luca Spitoni, with a particular emphasis on the priority given by the Revolution to architectural and urban projects with significant social content.

Cuban cultural expressions embrace traditions that come from near (the Caribbean and the Americas) and far (Europe, Africa, Asia). As Coral García shows in her essay, there were "pure" poets like Dulce María Loynaz, born in 1902 at the same time as the Cuban republic. Loynaz's process to define Cuban identity involved asserting the importance of a bourgeois culture and her strong connection with Spain. There were also artists like Julio Girona, the Cuban-born painter who spent most of his life outside

the island, between New York, Mexico and Europe, and yet maintained a visceral connection with Cuba by exulting in the Revolution of 1959, as described in this volume by his daughter Ilse Girona. There are also Cuban musicians whose music, as well-known as the Revolution itself, was rooted in the process of *transculturación* that mixed musical genres from different countries and continents, as demonstrated by Vincenzo Perna in his essay on the bright and dark sides of the famous film *Buena Vista Social Club* by Wim Wenders.

In addition to the spread of Cuban cultural forms throughout the world, the other side of Cuban internationalism during the Cold War was the Revolution's commitment to the liberation movements of the Third World. Cuba's intervention in Africa is examined from different angles and points of view in the essays by Pablo Arco Pino, who inserts Cuba's presence in Africa into the Latin American tradition of selfless solidarity among poor countries; Candace Sobers, who focuses on the reasons for the success of the first Cuban intervention in Angola in 1975; and Maria Stella Rognoni, who analyzes the effects of the Cuban intervention in Angola on the process of nation-building in that country.

The end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union has caused an unprecedented crisis in Cuba, which has been called the "special period", also marked by increased strain on the country's already-negative relationship with the United States. But as Duccio Basosi shows in his essay, far from merely surviving in a world turned economically and politically unipolar, Cuba has reacted to the changes by seeking to actively promote cooperation with the countries of Latin America. Certainly, the cost to maintain the socialist experiment alive has been, and still is, very high, leaving the question open as to the future of "21st century socialism", as Davide Gualerzi asserts in his contribution to this volume. However, such alternatives have already begun taking shape amid the many difficulties: in her essay, Filomena Critelli discusses Cuban programs in "community medicine" and "capacity building" (including the exchanges of Cuban doctors with Venezuelan oil) that, in addition to demonstrating Cuba's "resilience", represent an alternative foreign-policy strategy for the 21st century, based on an innovative concept of human and national security.

Finally, during the long history of Cuba in the world and the world in Cuba, the island's relationship with the United States, both as meeting and confrontation, has been crucial. According to some cautious public positions, the recent election of Barack Hussein Obama to the presidency of the United States seems to open a door to potential change in that long-asymmetrical relationship. The normalization of diplomatic relations, the elimination of a long series of punitive laws and a blockade that dates back to 1961, and the return of the Guantanamo enclave to Cuban sovereignty seem more plausible today than they have seemed in over half a century.

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Should this happen and, with such normalization, were Cuba able to maintain its social achievements, it would represent an important message for the world of the 21st century.

During the final editing of this volume we received the sad news that Pablo Arco Pino, one of our contributors, suddenly died. We feel to dedicate this volume to his memory.

Florence, 9 June 2009