

Book Review

– *The Cuba Reader: History, Culture, Politics*, by Aviva Chomsky, Barry Carr, Alfredo Prieto, Pamela Maria Smorkaloff, Duke University Press, 2019

This revised and updated second edition of the *Cuba Reader* forms part of the ambitious and generally excellent Duke University Press series of books that provide collected readings on individual Latin American and Caribbean countries. The series covers the sweeping histories of Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Guatemala, Haiti, Mexico, Paraguay, and Peru. In this new volume on Cuba, the four co-editors have produced a collection that more than lives up to the expectations of any reader who has already enjoyed and profited from an encounter with any of these earlier publications.

Drawing on the writings of both foreign observers and Cubans (many available here for the first time in English), along with excerpts from novels and poems, artwork, photos, cartoons, book and magazine covers, song lyrics, and speeches ranging from the abolitionist, Fr. Félix Varela, to Jose Martí, Ché Guevara and Fidel Castro, the selections are variously inspiring, moving, instructive and often entertaining. In 727 pages, the editors thoroughly cover the “history” and “politics” in the book’s subtitle, while also giving significant attention to “culture” as, for example, when they reproduce writings that provide compelling descriptions of the spread of rumba as Cuba’s “national dance” growing, as it did, out of the festive celebrations of both free blacks and enslaved people in the 1850s, followed, in the 1920s and 1930s, by the embrace across social class lines of the new, quintessentially Cuban musical genre, *son*.

As in the first edition, this latest version of selected readings takes us on a journey from pre-Columbian indigenous society, through the conquest and the period of colonial rule that produced the “great dying” – to use Eric Wolf’s characterization of the near total destruction of the indigenous population in Spanish America which, in the case of Cuba, occurred within the first 50 years after contact with Europeans. Following this tragedy, the narrative moves on to the construction of a plantation society on the backs of enslaved Africans. Drawing on excerpts of the writings of some of the most significant interpret-

ers of this period from Bartolomé de las Casas to Fernando Ortiz, the editors offer a picture of colonial and postcolonial Cuba marked by the development of an export oriented economy based on sugar and tobacco that produced great wealth for the creole elite and, in later centuries, for the United Fruit Company and other United States corporations, even as it created widespread misery for the vast majority of the post-emancipation population.

Subsequent sections of the book take us through the Cuban struggle for independence from Spain and the neo-colonial political and economic domination of the island that the United States established through military intervention. It is emblematic of the way in which the editors contrive to tell this story that they provide the archival material that reveals the exchange between the United States Secretary of State and the United States Ambassador to Cuba in which they plot the overthrow of an economic and politically nationalist government of Ramón Grau and collude with Fulgencio Batista, a strongman who would rise through the military, seize power and rule as a dictator until overthrown by the Revolution in 1959.

The relatively brief historical section that follows covers the period of Cuban history that will be far more familiar to readers: Fidel Castro's 1953 mobilization of fellow student radicals in what became a failed attack on the Moncada barracks, his imprisonment, asylum, return from exile in Mexico and launch of the revolutionary struggle from the mountain redoubt of the Sierra Maestre of Oriente province – related in the most compelling imaginable voice through an excerpt from Che Guevara's *Reminiscences of the Cuban Revolutionary War*. This same section takes us through the optimistic, idealistic, and highly inventive early years of the revolution which, with the voluntary exodus to Miami of a large number of rich and upper middle class Cubans, left behind a population that, in the great majority, supported the new regime. Here the editors provide excellent source material on the literacy campaign, along with the efforts to build racial and gender equality, break down the isolation of the "interior" from Havana, offer educational and cultural opportunities to every Cuban, and develop a corps of medical doctors to deliver universal health care.

To provide a complete picture, the editors reproduce the lyrics of singer-song writer Pablo Milanés's *El pecado original*, and offer a discussion of Tomás Gutiérrez Alea's film *Strawberry and Chocolate* both of which critique the regime's persecution of homosexuals. In this way, they draw on cultural production to set before us the dark and repressive side of the Cuban regime, an obligation from which the editors do not shrink. Indeed, one of the great strengths of this collection is the manner in which, through perceptive selection of writings that give expression to the Cuban thinkers who have lived the best and worst of the revolutionary experience while *based* in Cuba, we readers are offered the opportunity to process for ourselves how it can be that an achievement as promising as the overthrow of a repressive dictatorship and the triumph of a movement committed to building an economic and social system based on equality could turn out so badly.

To answer this question, the co-editors have provided us with closing chapters that help us assess the long term impact of the United States embargo on social and economic conditions in Cuba, the “special period” of shortages and suffering that followed the withdrawal of all Soviet support in 1990, the retreat of Cuba from its role as an international military actor, the turn to tourism and legalization of small private enterprises, the likelihood that the internet can break down the isolation of Cubans, the resumption of diplomatic relations under Obama, and what might be the prospects for improvement in the lives of ordinary Cubans across the island.

Judith Adler Hellman, York University
jhellman@yorku.ca