

The Cuban Revolution: Origins Course and Legacy, 3d ed. Marifeli Pérez-Stable. New York: Oxford University Press, 2012. ISBN 978-0-19-536708-9

The Cuban Revolution holds a significant historical place in defining the contours of a society that moved from slavery, through colony, into Cold War, and now into a new global order. Marifeli Pérez-Stable's concise and thoughtful examination of Cuban society as it shed, replaced, and shattered its colonial fetters, only to remake them anew, offers scholars and students a valuable resource. Pérez-Stable comes from between worlds, a Cuban-American disenfranchised by both the exile community and the Cuban regime alike. Likewise, Cuba lay often in a mixed and contradictory space of comparison between Latin America and its American neighbor. In policy, contradictions also abound in a country that has absorbed anti-racism during slavery, postcolonialism during neocolonialism, and a complicated client-victim relationship with the United States. Pérez-Stable's analysis ably demonstrates how Cuba's many complexities emerged from a broken or ill-formed political culture that never found its unity among those with power. Understanding the legacies of Independence, the course of revolutions, the role of economic structures, and the actors behind political discourses affords the reader a profound vision of Cuba between the 19th and 21st centuries.

In this newest edition, Pérez-Stable has shifted her attention to new venues. The evident failures of the Revolution have led her, in her own words, to the "letting go of illusions" and a rethinking of the future of a Cuba in the throes of socialist decay. Revolution as a highly charged symbol she now sets aside for a more realist approach that examines how protections of individual rights and social or economic welfare has not been met for citizens. As such, she has moved this edition away from privileging radical nationalism as prime mover for change, to the interactions of small groups within elite coalitions that sought the support of social sectors. She also has offered further weight to the role of the United States after 1959 and to the ways that this altered political choices for Cubans. Using numerous periodicals and official government sources, augmented with carefully selected secondary works such as Ada Ferrer and Louis Pérez Jr., she demonstrates how colonial and independence relationships led to a limited range of political expressions, often worsened by economic weakness. She argues for the primacy of Cuban politicians in understanding the reasons behind failures or missteps that prevented José Martí's dream from fruition—that of an independent, just, egalitarian, and dignified (*patria digna*) nation of opportunities.

Beginning from the early 19th century, Pérez-Stable identifies three factors as crucial in setting up 20th century politics in Chapter One. First, Havana's (and habaneros') place in Madrid's imperial system gave pride of place to its limited and largely Criollo population, who dominated the so-called *sacarocracia* (or rule-by-sugar). This set habanero elites into conflict against producers and workers, and rural owners such as *colonos* and *hacendados*, and increased the divisions of the country between rural and urban and east and west. Secondly, the persistence of slavery overshadowed discourses on egalitarianism and modernizing, as elites either attempted to

incorporate the Afro-Cuban or felt threatened by the “*peligro negro*” (“black peril”) that racial strife could bring. Thirdly, Pérez-Stable points to how the relatively late 1895 Independence movement set Cuba directly against the emerging modern imperialism of the United States. In combination these factors set Cuba on a path that frustrated attempts at becoming a “tropical dependent capitalist” nation, a Caribbean variant of Brazilian or Mexican successes. She points out that Cuba suffered from uneven modernity, not traditional backwardness, in overcoming the usual Latin American obstacles to progress. At the same time, she admonishes scholars who resort to placing the blame solely on the U.S. imposition of the Platt Amendment and its interference in building Cuban national development. The Plattist model gives too much credit to the United States, while robbing Cuban actors of agency in determining the national future.

In the second chapter, Pérez-Stable examines the period of 1902-1940s and how the sequential failures in forging a governmental consensus with the masses led to “mediated sovereignty” and an impotent elite associated (in popular sentiments) with corruption. This led many people to adhere to a view of anti-politics, since normal institutional governance consistently failed to impress. Confusions between civil and military authority, electoral fraud, and a divisive political gambit called *cooperativismo*, alongside the growth of a vocal and volatile labor sector, led to weak and instable governments until the 1950s. Opposition movements turned quickly to violence since politics had failed. The United States awkwardly and often indelicately intervened in the system, with everything from diplomatic notes to economic threats and military saber-rattling. In this context, Fulgencio Batista appeared on the political stage in various forms: the humble sergeant and savior of US interests in 1933, the WWII president who dealt fairly with unions and gave up power through electoral defeat, and the outright caudillo dictator of the 1950s. The latter incarnation eventually horrified the “better classes,” left unions simmering in volatility, alienated his officers, and crucially, lost U.S. State Department confidence in his ability. His heavy handed approach to quell student activists evolved in only a few years from the early 1950s when Pérez-Stable refers to Batista as a “kindergarten dictator.” The author sees the polarizing effects of this political chaos, along with Batista’s unwillingness to negotiate, as the reason why pro-violence factions eventually came to run amok among what she calls “decent patriotic Cubans,” -- presumably those of the upper and middle-classes in Havana. The only alternative political leadership, one that appealed to labor and students, and stayed outside of the *ortodoxo/auténtico* debates, emerged from the hills of the Sierra Maestre in the form of Fidel Castro, who marched into Havana in 1959.

Pérez-Stable’s real strength comes through in these last chapters of the book as she examines the Revolutionary regime, its relations with the United States, its experimentation with capitalist variations in the economy, and its ultimate failure as a socialist society. As one of few works that systematically analyzes this era, this book persuasively shows how import-substitution crises broke revolutionary aspirations, how a socialist feminism could not survive the double burden of work in the home, and how rule by committees proved as nightmarish as one might well expect. Castro’s presence tainted all further attempts at building a new society.

Lack of productivity, and lack of flexible markets, undermined institutional legitimacy and with weak economic terms of trade, many Cubans resorted to an informal gray market to fulfil their needs. Given a chance, still more fled the island. The remainder endured the bureaucratic yoke of an increasingly out of touch government. Real change, with support of the masses, did not materialize after the 1960s. Pérez-Stable's disillusionment becomes more and more evident to the reader by the final parts of the book, which sometimes reads as a poignant "what if" for the failed socialist experiment.

She has, nonetheless, produced an important and useful analysis of political-culture in Cuban history. Yet as historian, I felt that in a few areas I would like to have more details. First, in her attempt to impose the primacy of political elites in the many failures of regime-driven state formation she leaves aside the United States and common Cubans, deliberately, but too much so. My suspicion is that perhaps she grew weary of the voluminous scholarship on the former, and felt that latter have already taken all the actual punishments and deserve no academic blame. The common Cubans also prove much harder to document and good sources more elusive. Still, I think that one can only credit the Cuban political class with so much, as nicely as that may fit with a sociological focus and multi-part hypothesis. A first example, the U.S. State Department did indeed give up on the Platt Amendment when pressure from President Ramón Grau and the context of the Great Depression allowed them to do so. More broadly however, this represents not a brief success in Cuban elite political consensus so much as broadening shift in American policy towards a less formalized, less militarized, neocolonial understanding. Sugar quotas and absentee owners could protect U.S. interests better without bad publicity—and Grau and others in the elite knew this well enough. The *dependistas* that Pérez-Stable refers to also would point to this—the local elite did have agency and choice, but within the restrictive structures of a world system where enclave economies dealt at a perpetually unfair disadvantage against industrial powers. In other words, the frequent boom-and-bust cycles of monoculture sugar undermined the potential to effect real changes or to enact actual economic diversity, nor would the sugar elites have allowed such despite its sensibility. This was not accidental. Its economic relation with the United States had defined the place of Cuba within the world economy early on, and in most cases, Cuban elite actors did what they could with what they were left. They had little room to maneuver. Equally as often, plantations and utilities and many mines did not have local ownership, and the transnational power structure dominated without consideration of local politics. In contrast to Raul Prebisch' and ECLA's prescriptions for economic growth from within, this could never happen when Cuba produced for the U.S. quota and on behalf of absentee U.S. owners. The uneven modernity, not simply a relation of Havana and the countryside, was also between Havana and Wall Street.

The Cuban middle-classes also played their part in this politics, although not numerous enough to shape formal party policy on the ground. Their vocal support for a democratic and modern nation, for real changes and consensus among the people, gave way to cynicism early on the 20th century and they remain in wait for "their Sumner Welles" to rescue their interests from

Castro. As the United States continues to disappoint the largely exiled community, their effect on politics continues as mere howls in the wilderness (of Southwest Miami). Their absence from ortodoxo or auténtico or even PSP (Communist Party) politics does not abrogate their responsibility—the vacuum that resulted from their patience in awaiting a U.S. rescue opened the space for various other social sectors to push the political sphere towards a violent antipolitics. These common folks, whom Pérez-Stable does not often discuss, also represented a serious class and racial divide far away from the aspirations of Martí, and one that manifested in support of some labor sectors or some political figures. In this work, a reader might forget the presence of Afro-Cubans after 1902, yet Castro depended a great deal on them while the fantasies of those exiles like Willie Chirino dismissed any notion that the Afro-Cubans might still be relevant when the middle-classes returned from exile.

In terms of economics, this is an excellent work, although on a few points I would like to have seen acknowledgement of an unjust accusation against Fidel Castro. Batista, staunch capitalist though he seemed, sold refined oil to the U.S.S.R. in previous years without any backlash from the United States. When Castro did it, suddenly catastrophe loomed. On another note, the nationalization of sugar land received compensation in bonds that did not satisfy the former owners—but the number the government claimed came from the previous year's tax accounts. If the sugar companies had not cheated on taxes they would have done fine. The U.S. government response to these affronts came as a gentle warning, but in the context of Cuba's justifiable anxieties regarding imminent invasion this was received as deadly threat. The politicians of the island interpreted the situation in a historically rooted culture of caution.

Indeed, Pérez-Stable clearly states that the real radicalism of the nation came not simply from economics but also via culture and politics—yet some cultural elements of this work did not deliver. No doubt, the concision of the text does not permit everything to be included by the author. A reader might wonder, nonetheless, how the feelings of *malestar difuso* actually diffused. By what media and artistic expressions and other communication forms did these ideas of national ill-feeling spread? How did workers discuss and experience the continued use of peonage-era company stores into the 1950s? Where did religion fit into this, since Cuba is, after all, a pious country? The reference to the wanderings of Sánchez Arango went unexplained after a mysterious and intriguing mention. Perhaps oddest, to me, is a study of elite political culture where the ill-timed public suicide of Eduardo Chibás over the radio, so powerful and influential for later ortodoxo politicians, receives no direct discussion by Pérez-Stable. Was this not a transforming moment? How does this, and other violence, come to be known as *gangsterismo* and how was that understood? On a cultural side, this book leaves many questions.

At times Pérez-Stable also makes odd historical comparisons to other Latin American nations, for instance, to Mexico under Porfirio Díaz at the turn of the 19th century and later under Lazaro Cárdenas in the 1930s. In both cases, the comparison seems a stretch given the specific historical trajectory of Mexico, the relative size of it, the different racial and geographic diversity

of the two, and most significantly, the fundamental differences for Cárdenas stemming from Mexico's enormously bloody social revolution of 1910. I think this is where the book falls into a related issue in seeking a comparison for Cuban experiences. Many times scholars and politicians have pointed to the many ways that Cuba ranks highly among Latin American (and definitely Caribbean) nations by the 1950s. High levels of ownership for televisions, radios, and cars, along with high health rates, good literacy, and decent education all marked the island near the top of development among the twenty republics of the south. Yet Cubans did not see comfort in relative wealth to Venezuela or better car ownership than Ecuador – they keenly felt the relative poverty to Miami. Or even to Mississippi. Habanero Cubans grew up with “I Love Lucy” and sloppy joes, and would rather have favorable comparison to the United States than be grouped with developing nations. To call all of this to attention is not to diminish the value of this exceptional work of historical sociology.

My few criticisms aside there is a great deal to recommend in Pérez-Stable's excellent work. I appreciate that this is one of few works that systematically and thoughtfully explores Cuban political life, and how she pays sharp attention to its economic structure over a long period. Alongside newer but more narrowly focused works, like Gillian McGillivray's *Blazing Cane*, this work serves to offer readers a much needed examination of the little understood Cuba of Fidel Castro and his brother, particularly now when ferry service has been restored and the American president forgiven. So as we enter a new period in the history of Cuba, this book remains a required read that will provoke discussion among scholars, students, and the wider public. With many others, I eagerly await what will happen next, and where Cuba's Revolution will venture, and Pérez-Stable has given us an excellent guide for the journey.

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