Explaining Cuba

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The urge to ‘explain Cuba’ has not only been a constant of much of the literature on Cuba since 1959 but has also relied heavily on a set of assumptions that fundamentally emanate from the Cubans’ evolving perspectives of their own history, most notably notions of exceptionalism, cubanidad, and the seminal contribution of key events. It is therefore no surprise that three new books on Cuba should fall within this ‘explanatory’ pattern. However, it is indeed a pleasant surprise that all three seek, explicitly or implicitly, to challenge those assumptions: one (Fernández) seeks to explain the peculiarities of modern Cuban political history within a wider model, the second (Pérez) seeks to assess the role of key phenomena in determining the particularities of a Cuban identity, and the third (Whitney) challenges conventional views of the 1933 revolution.

The most controversial of the three ought to be the Fernández study, which targets both political science and our views of Cuba with its imaginative premise that an understanding of Cuba should be sought in the politics of emotion, and above all in the ‘affective’ dimension and lo informal – an approach (informed by recent thinking in cultural studies) which takes us deliberately away from ‘scientific’ system-oriented explanations. Fernández argues that Cuban politics has always revolved around two poles: the politics of passion and the politics of affection, the former generating the rhetorical, crusading aspects of formal twentieth century political life and the latter expressing the traditionally autonomous personal and family networks.

The exposition is compelling and always fascinating. It opens with a theoretical discussion which usefully challenges the flaws in existing theories, not least the conventional dichotomy between ‘modern’ and ‘non-modern’ societies, and reductionist notions of dual society. It then tests the Cuban case, arguing that Cuban politics has operated historically within three paradigms: liberalism (which established ‘the ideal’), corporatism (which, inherited from Spanish colonialism, stressed structure, stability, and the state, making the later adoption of Marxism-Leninism less of a cultural watershed), and the informal. Fernández then reassesses twentieth-century Cuban history through this prism, exploring the – not unique but
especially pronounced – dichotomy between ‘the ideal’ (the passion-driven tradition of *cubanidad* and the impulses for independence, democracy and revolution) and ‘the real’ (the affection-driven patronage, despotism and corruption), making disillusion increasingly the norm for Cuban politics and generating a growing recourse to, and strength of, the informal. This establishes an essential continuity between 1902-34, 1934-58 and 1959-2001, in which the 1959 Revolution is central; as an ‘affair of the heart’, it has created its own emotional infrastructure, almost as a political religion, combining passion and affection and exploiting charismatic bonds. Fernández then embarks on a series of ‘essays’ on Cuban political culture – on youth (a chapter already published elsewhere), on *lo informal* in language and popular attitudes, on civil society, and on the politics of emotion in Miami’s émigré political culture.

The study is certainly challenging in essence and scope, and, in the process, brings welcome attention to notions of belonging and community as integral elements of Cuban political traditions and to the special role of popular attachment, or loss of attachment, to the prevailing system. It offers astute observations on the post-1959 fusion of the formal and informal, especially on the extent to which the latter has replaced the former since 1990, and the early discussion of *cubanidad* is as clear and imaginative as any exposition of this much discussed, but little understood, concept.

However, for all the attractions and audacity of the model, and however valuable the accompanying observations may be, doubts remain about whether Fernández’s comprehensive explanation is really either as convincing or as challenging as it seems. For example the theoretical exposition of ‘liberalism’ is a little sweeping, covering a bewilderingly wide range of ideas and positions, as is the judgement of ‘corporatism’, which, if we accept it as broader than the specific early-century philosophy, can perhaps best be seen as a mechanism of governance rather than a comprehensive world-view. Moreover, one senses that the arguments about *lo informal* are not perhaps always really new and maybe repeat the Cuban penchant for *idiosincracia* and exceptionalism. Equally, it can be argued that, over four decades, the formal-informal relationship has become less one of simple antagonism and more a complex fusion, enabling individuals and the system to evolve and negotiate survival; in which case, the applicability of conventional state/civil society models is indeed problematic in Cuba. Two final regrets are, firstly, that the amusing chapter headings – taking lines from popular American songs – perhaps undermine the seriousness of the argument, and, secondly, that, if Miami’s ‘mirror-image’ society is as intriguing as Fernández convincingly argues, more was not made of this in what becomes a frustratingly short final chapter. Indeed, overall, this latter judgement is pertinent for the whole book, which, ultimately, comes across more as an extended essay (or series of essays) on an idea that is indeed potentially challenging but which is not always given the opportunity to prove itself. One often searches for more evidence than is offered for some of the more critical assertions, occasionally illustrated by anecdote or reinforced by repetition. This is greatly to be regretted as Fernández clearly does have something very profound to say and does offer perspectives that threaten to change our view of Cuba. What the argument therefore needed is greater substance, without which this otherwise exhilarating thesis risks being simply a tantalizing extended essay;
Fernández is too astute and too knowledgeable on Cuba to leave it there, and one logically expects – and hopes – that subsequent work will fill these gaps. Expectations of ‘challenge’ are, of course, predictably high with Pérez, not least given the book’s thesis. For Pérez argues that, by taking hurricanes for granted in Cuba, we easily miss their economic and political impact; instead, with his meticulous grasp of detail and capacity for insight, he presents them as occasionally decisive, generating a destructive power that must, perforce and because of their recurrence, have affected social and economic patterns and attitudes, and must have contributed to ‘forging a people into a nation’ (p. 11).

His case study is perfect: the 1844-46 period, which saw two appalling hurricanes devastate Cuba, coinciding with a long moment of growing economic confidence and racial fear. He sets the scene with two chapters that, respectively, catalogue the awe which these phenomena produced among early settlers (and the indigenous population) and outline the colony’s spectacular economic and social development after the 1760s, conveying well the excitement and drama of the transformation (although a glossary of terms might have been useful here). The third chapter then recounts the two hurricanes San Francisco de Asís (October 1844) and San Francisco de Borja (October 1846), primarily using graphic contemporary accounts of the devastation – of settlements, agriculture, shipping, Havana and more besides. The next two chapters present the essence of the argument: the effect of both events on key agricultural crops (irrecoverable for some, such as coffee), on the colony’s fragile equilibrium, and on the most densely populated areas, all coming at a critical juncture, coinciding with competition, falling prices and declining slave imports. In the aftermath, sugar’s relentless march continued, especially taking over coffee’s land and surplus slaves, and increasing its share of production from 26 per cent (1827) to 61 per cent (1860). Pérez’s final argument is that this all affected the Cuban psyche, disrupting the routine on which colonial authority depended and helping to forge a communal ethos of solidarity, despite the system and the steady social disintegration – partly confirming Fernández’s formal-informal tensions.

The book’s approach is characteristically rigorous, assertions always being supported textually or statistically, but the argument’s ability to convince hangs ultimately on its force and logic. Pérez is too good a historian to exaggerate the hurricanes’ role in the rise of sugar or the decline of coffee or slavery; instead, he demonstrates that they were a significant contributory factor in accelerating an already advanced process, in particular reinforcing entrepreneurs’ awareness of the need to replace slave labour not by expensive imports but by internal transfers from coffee. He is also convincing on the effects on the Cuban social structure – many slaves fleeing opportunistically and those transferred to sugar suffering far worse conditions than on the cafetales, and with Havana’s predominantly black population of extramuros suffering particularly. After reading this we are left in no doubt that these two hurricanes played a fundamental part in accelerating shifts and reinforcing economic and social patterns.

However, the other side of his basic argument – the hurricanes’ effect on cubanidad – is, surprisingly, less convincing. Certainly Pérez’s survey of the inclusion of hurricane images into the lexicon and iconography of cubanidad is well detailed, with a familiar elegance, eloquence and scope. Yet it is a matter of regret
that this critical element of the argument is left until a relatively short final chapter. One feels that, if a strong case were to be made that hurricanes helped shape notions of ‘nation’, then a lengthier proof might have been more convincing; instead, it seems almost an afterthought after the detail and conviction of the earlier narrative and analysis.

Overall, however, while the study may not give us deep insights into a hidden truth, it certainly challenges our assumptions about the significance of factors we otherwise take for granted. With his usual eye for detail and customary rigour, Pérez paints a picture which certainly adds to our understanding of a critical set of socio-economic developments at a critical time in Cuba’s history. In a sense, indeed, this book is less about hurricanes specifically, than an opportunity to use contemporary sources creatively to present a picture of a changing Cuba at a seminal time; quite simply, the hurricanes were so destructive because, by then, there was so much – agricultural and human – to destroy, and the effects of the events and the recovery were compounded by the colonial system’s evident inability to cope. One always welcomes a new study by Pérez, and this one does not disappoint.

However, it is the Whitney volume which proves to be the really challenging study of the three under review here, offering the sort of detail lacking in Fernández and the final exposition lacking in Pérez. Whitney’s basic premise is that, while conventionally historians view the 1933 revolution almost teleologically from the perspective of post-1959 events, one should start from 1920 and see a different outcome – not the 1959 Revolution but the 1940 Constitution. Hence he seeks to explain the hopes invested in the Constitution, and why either 1920 or 1940, rather than 1933, are the turning-point in modern Cuban history.

The argument opens with an analysis of what Whitney calls ‘oligarchic rule’ in 1902-24, taking issue with conventional reductionist labels such as ‘Plattist’ or the ‘pseudo-Republic’, which, he rightly argues, miss the complexity of power relations; instead, he argues, the period should be seen as based on two things: a multi-layered network of caudillos and caciques (based on ties forged through kinship, friendship or war) and a contest between liberals and conservatives, mediated by the US Embassy, all set against the growing dependence on US capital and the reality of a changing society. In this context, 1920 was clearly critical, seeing the collapse of Cuban-owned sugar and banking and the emergence of dissent. Here Whitney interestingly reassesses the importance of the Movimiento de Veteranos y Patriotas, whose reformist alliance of young radicals and genuine veterans, moralistic impulse, broad critique and regenerative aims, and final 1923 defeat pushed the younger elements into the ‘crisis of radicalism’ (1920-4) – the subject of the second chapter, rich in detail on the intellectual and political dissidence of those formative years. This is followed by an analysis of the ‘crisis of the state’ (1927-32), posed by Machado’s use of the prórroga and his inability to realise in cooperativismo the promised share-out to other parties – leading him to resort to either coercion or patronage and leading the dissident elite to resort again to the Platt Amendment by rebelling. The crisis posed by the 1929 Crash was thus even deeper, splintering a fragile consensus and creating unrest from new groups, a double crisis which, Whitney suggests, led to the ‘collapse of the state’ after 1932, recounted in a chapter which constitutes an excellent narrative of the accelerating process.
However, it is the following chapter, on mass mobilization, which is the most eloquent, taking us through the breathless pace of events of 1933-4, painting an excellent picture of their chaos, spontaneity and volatility, with a richness of detail on the players, the protests, the machinations and the contradictions, all of which helps us understand exactly why Batista and the Communists found themselves on a collision course and why Batista (in 1934-6) was able to embark on ‘the disciplining of the masses’. Here again, Whitney is excellent, highlighting the contradictions of the one politician who recognised both the mood and the needs of the system and established a new corporatism out of both the old (here echoing Fernández) and the new. One contributory factor was the splintering of the Left into the grausistas (in the new Auténticos), Guiteras’s Joven Cuba (until his death in 1935) and also the action groups (both eventually fusing with the Auténticos), and finally the Communists (whose 1935 shift Whitney rightly attributes as much to Cuban conditions as to Comintern pressure). After 1937, the new state was constructed, above all by Batista, who, unlike the sugar-growers (who saw it as a purely military threat to be repressed), saw labour as a political problem to be harnessed.

The book’s strengths are many. Its narrative is enthralling and effective, and it successfully unravels the complexities of a highly confusing period and, thus, gives us one of the best analyses of two seminal decades. In the process, it also provides us with a wealth of ‘micro-analyses’ of a number of often neglected or misunderstood issues, in particular the 1923 Universidad Popular, the influence of Aprismo, the curious role of Sergio Carbó, the peculiar relationship between Guiteras and the left (in 1933-4) and the special fear he aroused in both the elite and Batista, ABC’s often-overlooked popularity, the Ala Izquierda Estudiantil, the reborn student radicalism, and the DEU’s role as a forum for, rather than leader of, dissent. His insights are often sharp: on the Unión Nacionalista’s failed 1931 Río Verde uprising (seen both as the last throw of an outdated caudillismo and a seed-bed for the 1933 radicalism); his observation that only after 1940 did Cuban labour became truly organised; his judgement of the Auténticos as a fusion of the DEU, New Deal liberalism and the remnants of aprimso; and on the nuances of the whole Cuban-United States relationship.

There are few aspects to criticise. Perhaps the most serious is Whitney’s unconvincing preference for a particular characterization of class in pre-1940 Cuba. He uses the all-encompassing term ‘oligarchy’ to describe what he himself portrays as a variegated, fragmenting and rarely unified elite, or set of elites, acting within a fundamentally weak state; given his argument about caudillos and caciques, it might perhaps be more useful to talk of a caciquista state. Equally, he prefers to use the somewhat vague Cuban term clases populares for a complex of evolving social groups. Beyond this, however, the sins are minor ones of omission – perhaps we are spoiled by the presence of so many fascinating, detailed passages on other issues; in particular one regrets the relative neglect of the 1935 general strike, the Hotel Nacional incident, the Atarés rebellion, the removal of Gómez, the 1939 elections, or indeed the Constitution itself – which, given its central importance as the culmination of the period, is rather surprising.

Yet these faults are minor in what is overall a challenging and readable study, which does not so much contest the conventional view of 1933 as the turning-
point, as extend that role to the whole period. In the process, it performs a valuable role in rehabilitating the forgotten aspects of the 1920s and contributes well to the gradual rehabilitation of the ‘first’ Batista (1934-40) as a complex and critical actor in the reformist movement. Certainly Whitney’s underlying argument – that 1920-40 saw a shift from an ‘oligarchic’ weak state to a mass mobilization ‘strong’ state – is, pace terminological reservations, demonstrated convincingly. Before 1920, the Platt Amendment ensured that the Cuban state had no need to be strong; after 1940, it had every reason.

The three books are therefore all timely and welcome; what they share, regardless of different perspectives and focal points, is a contribution, imaginatively and critically, to our understanding of a political culture which has too often been the subject of simplifying polemic or equally simplifying cliché. What all three give us is a new way of looking at this subject – which is no mean achievement.

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