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History in Motion: Seeing Cuba's Future Through the Past and Present

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Foreword:

History in Motion: Seeing Cuba's Future Through the Past and Present

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For 400 years, the beautiful Caribbean island of Cuba, and especially its port city Havana, was Europe's doorway to the New World. The new guests decided to stay; they made their presence well known. In his landmark book, *Open Veins of Latin America*, world-renowned Uruguayan journalist Eduardo Galeano writes:

The division of labor among nations is that some specialize in winning and others in losing. Our part of the world, known today as Latin America, was precocious: it has specialized in losing ever since those remote times when Renaissance Europeans ventured across the ocean and buried their teeth in the throats of the Indian civilizations.¹

For another 100 years, a different visitor, one located closer and slightly to the north, elbowed its way through the ornate Spanish door in Havana, into the pockets of successive puppet leaders, and laid claim to Cuba's sugar, tobacco, beaches, and more. The acclaimed Cuban historian, Louis Pérez, Jr. writes in his masterful work, *The Structure of Cuban History: Meanings and Purpose of the Past*,² that when a band of idealistic revolutionary guerrillas began to make headway from mountain hideouts, through villages and eventually into Havana in 1959, "The very proposition of Cuba for Cubans, that is, Cubans no longer disposed to accommodate the primacy of North American interests, was preposterous. The sheer effrontery of the Cuban challenge was breathtaking—the impertinence of it all."³ The Castro brothers, Camilo Cienfuegos and other Cuban leaders, along with the help of the Argentine Ernesto "Che" Guevara, read the political landscape of the 1950s in historical terms. In short, centuries of European then North American

dominance in their land necessitated emancipation. Perez writes that “The past was put to a purpose. This was about forging a consensus on the matter of Cuba being wronged as the basis from which the leadership claimed moral mandate to make things right.”⁴ Thus was launched the Cuban socialist revolutionary project nearly 60 years ago.

My first encounter with Cubans was in the streets of Managua and in the central mountain jungles of Chontales, Nicaragua in 1982. As a recent college graduate, I had ventured to Central America to learn from and work with citizens of that “other revolutionary” country south of the U.S. border. Prior to my arrival, thousands of Cubans (and many others) had responded to the invitation of the young Nicaraguan *Sandinista* leaders to help build their revolution. In Nicaragua, I not only participated in that country’s inspirational alphabetization campaign with poor, illiterate *compesinos*, but also learned about Cuba’s similar literacy efforts 20 years earlier, in the early 1960s. After more than two years of living through the early period of Nicaragua’s socialist endeavor, I witnessed a country full of energy, inspiration and creativity, as well as one saddled with a ruthless “*Contra*” war of attrition on two borders, financed largely by U.S. taxpayer dollars. I experienced many contradictions: good political intentions gone awry during implementation of sometimes repressive economic or political policies, all in the name of “the Nicaraguan people.” Despite the odds, I saw many citizens persist with unshakable revolutionary zeal, especially in the cities. I also saw peoples’ hopes turn to disappointment, then frustration, especially in the poor rural mountains where I lived. I learned first-hand that context and political history matter. And, relevant to our present project, I met a lot of committed, fast-talking and fun-loving Cubans. Many seeds were planted.

Fast forward 30 years, the dream for the creation of a graduate course focused on comparative governance in Cuba finally sprouted. The major impetus for offering “Cuba: Governance, Community and Contradiction” was to provide students with the opportunity to experience a significantly different political-economic system than in the U.S. and analyze for themselves the Cuban policy processes and on-the-ground outcomes relevant to their specific area of study. Fortunately, this course attracted students from multiple Colleges and diverse disciplinary areas at Portland State University. Mirroring our course discussions, the select research articles included into this special issue of the Hatfield Graduate Journal of Public Affairs provide diverse perspectives. All five articles focus on governance, or how the Cuban government and its people navigate public space “for the good of all.” Nodding appropriately to Perez’s historical view, each author in this issue briefly outlines the historical and current context in which their research is set. The authors outline specific, often nuanced, contradictions that arise between

political/policy vision and implementation. Through a variety of lenses, the writers' analyses illuminate Cuba's impressive public record, especially in terms of educational and health outcomes attainment. Authors also address persistent challenges, especially economic, while acknowledging Cuba's sometimes repressive past. More contradictions.

In "The Effects of Policy on Cuban Transnational Families,"⁵ Zoë Flanagan discusses how "the history of migration between [the U.S. and Cuba] consists of a web of push and pull factors, through significant events, world politics, and direct public policy. While these factors play out between nation states, their impacts are felt at the individual level amongst and within families, often creating a microcosm of global and ideological disputes between kin."⁶ She adeptly discusses the factors that pejoratively labeled the "first wave" of migrants as *gusanos* (worms, i.e., traitors of the revolution) and the change in revolutionary policy 20 years later that allowed migrants to be seen as important global-Cuban community members.

Laura Lyons' article entitled "The 'Necessary Evil': State and Non-State Sector Interactions in Cuba and Effects on Public Services"⁷ addresses head-on one of the major questions in front of any student of Cuba today: how has Cuba, and economic life for Cubans, changed since the ownership of private (non-state) enterprises was legalized less than a decade ago? Further, she probes important questions about the impact of competition and collaboration on both the state and non-state sectors. Will emerging non-state (private) enterprises positively influence public institutions toward greater productivity and service delivery? Will state-sector (revolutionary) values be embedded into emerging Cuban business practices? How will the state continue to attract and retain the highest quality workers when private employment opportunities can provide significantly higher economic benefit to the individual? These, among others, are important 21st century questions to explore as Cuba, in its unique way, slowly traverses the path toward economic liberalization similar to other socialist states such as China and Vietnam.

In "Exploring the Cultural and Infrastructural Impacts of Consumerism on the New Cuba,"⁸ Grace Stainback takes a serious look at the material of life: stuff, and how it is used and reused, or not. Exploring "technological disobedience,"⁹ she helps us understand the creative spirit emblematic of the Cuban people as they convert random things like melted Bic pen caps into useful toilet bowl chains. More importantly, Stainback explores the potential negative impacts of tourism on this island nation (it's big and growing!) and challenges us all to consider what happens when home-grown attractions turn into tourist consumerism. Like her fellow authors, she asks big questions, including about Cubans'—and about our own—ecological footprint.

Adriane Bolliger, in “Education and the Economy: The Rising Private Sector’s Impact on University Enrollment and Post-Graduation Employment in Modern-Day Cuba,”¹⁰ explores the Cuban higher education system in historical context. She walks the reader through an abbreviated history lesson of what a state-structured university system looks like when a socialist state is functioning relatively well: in short, get a free education, get a job. But that era ended a decade ago; in just three years, the university student population declined by 50%. What caused the decline? And what can the state, and others, do to adjust the significant investment in education to match the regularly changing educational needs of both the state and non-state sectors? Connecting to previous authors, Bolliger asks big questions about the role of the state, vis-à-vis higher education, as Cuba inches forward in its 60-year revolutionary project.

Lastly, Sarah Dryfoos¹¹ investigates the Cuban health paradigm in her analysis through the lens of HIV/AIDS and LGBTQ populations. To begin, she discusses the Cuban health paradox, i.e., how can it be that a relatively poor country in Latin America has as good, or better, health outcomes than its developed neighbors? Next, Dryfoos helps us understand how and why Cuba made a seismic shift in health care delivery—toward preventative, neighborhood-based health care delivery, for everyone. Finally, the author explicates Cuban leaders’ aggressive policies to address the 1980s HIV/AIDS crisis with the use of forced removal of infected individuals from society. She ends with a general discussion, and key questions about, Cuba’s new policies and social change toward more acceptance of its LGBTQ community.

All of these articles are set in the political-economic history of modern Cuba. The persistent questions of the state’s rights vs individuals’ rights are on the table—policy responses manifest in the education, economic, health, environmental, agricultural, creative, and many other sectors. Cuba’s history, especially its home-grown economic liberalization, is in the international spotlight as this is written. Under the guidance of its new president Miguel Diaz-Canel, in late December, 2018, Cuban lawmakers unanimously approved a revised draft of a new constitution; it is scheduled to go to referendum in late February, 2019. The force of history is unstoppable. As students of the world, we are fortunate to have before us a short volume of insights focused on the citizens and public affairs of Cuba. May these scholars’ efforts challenge us to be more rigorous yet flexible in our analysis, and may they help us all make sense of our own, and others, particular historical contexts.

Notes

- ¹ Eduardo Galeano, *Open Veins of Latin America: Five Centuries of the Pillage of a Continent* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1973), 1.
- ² Louis A. Pérez, Jr., *The Structure of Cuban History: Meaning and Purpose of the Past* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2013).
- ³ *Ibid.*, 230.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, 231.
- ⁵ Zoe Flanagan, "The Effects of Policy on Cuban Transnational Families," *Hatfield Graduate Journal of Public Affairs* 3, no 2 (2018).
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, 5.
- ⁷ Laura Lyons, "The 'Necessary Evil': State and Non-State Sector Interactions in Cuba and Effects on Public Services," *Hatfield Graduate Journal of Public Affairs* 3, no 2 (2018).
- ⁸ Grace Stainback, "Exploring the Cultural and Infrastructural Impacts of Consumerism on the New Cuba," *Hatfield Graduate Journal of Public Affairs* 3, no 2 (2018).
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, 2.
- ¹⁰ Adriane Bolliger, "Education and the Economy: The Rising Private Sector's Impact on University Enrollment and Post-Graduation Employment in Modern-Day Cuba," *Hatfield Graduate Journal of Public Affairs* 3, no 2 (2018).
- ¹¹ Sarah Dryfoos, "The Cuban Health Paradigm: An Exploratory Analysis Through LGBTQ and HIV/AIDS Individual Perspectives," *Hatfield Graduate Journal of Public Affairs* 3, no 2 (2018).

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