THE CUBA READER

HISTORY, CULTURE, POLITICS

SECOND EDITION, REVISED AND UPDATED

Aviva Chomsky, Barry Carr, Alfredo Prieto, and Pamela Maria Smorkaloff, editors

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DUKE UNIVERSITY PRESS *Durham and London* 2019

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper ∞
Typeset in Monotype Dante by BW&A Books, Inc.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Names: Chomsky, Aviva, [date] editor. | Carr, Barry. editor. |
Prieto, Alfredo, [date] editor. | Smorkaloff, Pamela Maraîa, [date] editor.
Title: The Cuba reader : history, culture, politics.
Description: Second edition / Aviva Chomsky, Barry Carr, Alfredo Prieto,
and Pamela Maria Smorkaloff, editors. | Durham : Duke University Press, 2019. |
Series: The Latin America readers | Includes bibliographical references and index.
Identifiers:
LCCN 2018041251 (print)
LCCN 2019005713 (ebook)
ISBN 9781478004561 (ebook)
ISBN 9781478003649 (hardcover : alk. paper)
ISBN 9781478003939 (pbk. : alk. paper)
Subjects: LCSH: Cuba—History.
Classification: LCC F1776 (ebook) | LCC F1776 .C85 2019 (print) |
DDC 972.91—dc23
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2018041251

Cover art: Havana. Photo by Alejandro Menéndez Vega. Courtesy of Cuba
Travel Network (www.cubatravelnetwork.com).

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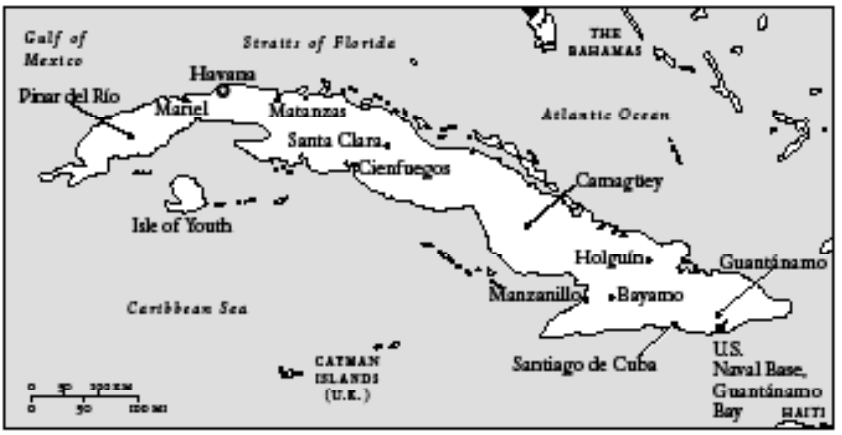
Acknowledgments

If we really tried to thank everyone whose help and support contributed to the compiling of this book, the acknowledgments would probably be as long as the book itself. Most of all, we are grateful to the authors, artists, and photographers whose work appears here. Many of them were extraordinarily generous with their time and their work, and we are happy if we can contribute to bringing it to a wider public.

We are very appreciative of Duke University Press and its commitment to both editions of this reader. The support and encouragement of Valerie Millholland (for the first edition) and Miriam Angress (for the second) have been absolutely essential to this project. We thank them profusely for helping us to conceive the book, for shepherding it through its seemingly infinite phases, and for putting up with us over all these years!



Map of Cuba

Introduction

The following joke, circulating in Cuba at the end of the 1990s, pokes fun at the ways that ideology colors interpretation of events on the island:

> When Pope John Paul visited Havana in 1998, he was personally welcomed by Fidel Castro, who invited him to tour the city. They rode in the Popemobile and, since it was a warm day, they opened the roof. Everything was fine until they reached the Malecón, when suddenly a gust of wind blew up and swept the Pope's *zuchetto* off his head and out into the sea. There it floated, bobbing on the waves.
>
> "Don't worry, Your Holiness," exclaimed Fidel. "I'll get it for you!" He jumped over the side of the Popemobile, leaped over the seawall, and sped out over the water. Yes, he actually walked on top of the water, all the way out to where the zuchetto lay floating on the waves. Then he turned and dashed back, still skimming over the surface, leaped over the seawall, and jumped back into the Popemobile, without getting a drop of water on his clothes. "Here, Your Holiness," he panted.
>
> The next day, newspapers all over the world reported this amazing incident.
>
> In *Granma*, the Cuban Communist Party newspaper, the headline read, "Fidel Is God; He Walks on Water."
>
> In *L'Osservatore Romano*, the Vatican newspaper, the headline read, "Pope Performs a Miracle: Makes Fidel Castro Walk on Water."
>
> And in the *Miami Herald*, read by the Cuban exile community in Miami, the headline read, "Castro Doesn't Know How to Swim."

When someone picks up a book on Cuba, inevitably the first and decisive question is "Which side is it on?" A reviewer who praises a book on Cuba as balanced probably means that it acknowledges certain successes of the Cuban Revolution (especially in areas such as education, health, sports, and international relations) and critiques U.S. policy toward Cuba as counterproductive, while at the same time criticizing the Cuban government's top-down and repressive policies. Books that support the revolution tend to concentrate on the areas of success; those that oppose it tend to focus on the latter issues.

Is there, then, anything new to say about Cuba and its revolution?

The editors of this Reader began to compile the first edition at the end

of the 1990s, when Cuba was struggling to recover from the collapse of its economy in the wake of the breakup of the Soviet bloc. Some were predicting radical political and economic transformations in Cuba as well, following the reforms in socialist countries from the USSR to China and Vietnam. But Cuba continued to follow its own Latin American path. Far from dying away, the Latin American left enjoyed a resurgence at the beginning of the new century, and socialist Cuba found new partners and supporters. Fidel Castro, inevitably, suffered infirmities of age and stepped down from power in 2006. There was no leadership vacuum: his brother Raúl moved smoothly into his place as president, first on a temporary basis and then, in 2008, elected by Cuba's National Assembly for a five-year term. When he was reelected in 2013, he announced that this would be his final term. Indeed, in 2018, Raúl stepped down, and the assembly nominated Miguel Díaz-Canel to replace him. At fifty-seven, Díaz-Canel represented a new generation of leadership, though politically and ideologically he remained close to the path of gradual reform implemented over the past decades. Meanwhile, in December 2014, President Obama announced that the United States was prepared to reestablish diplomatic relations with Cuba and in March 2016 made the first U.S. official presidential visit there in almost a century. Fidel's death in late 2016 certainly marked a historic occasion, but since he had ceded control of the revolution a decade earlier, its political implications were minimal. Nevertheless, Cuba has of course continued to change and develop in numerous ways, some of them quite radical, since our first edition was published in 2003, and we have tried to reflect these changes in a new section added for this edition of the Reader.

We came together in part because of our shared perspective on a range of social, intellectual, and political issues, which this reader necessarily reflects. All of us share a commitment to social justice, which has shaped our study of the peoples of Latin America and the Caribbean and which gives us considerable sympathy for the social, cultural, and economic goals pursued by successive generations of Cubans who have fought for a fairer, more egalitarian, and sovereign Cuba. We see Cuba as a Latin American and a Caribbean country, structured by a common history of colonialism and resistance, neocolonialism and poverty.

We also came together as a group of scholars who share a long-term commitment to the study of Cuba. Barry Carr is an Australian historian and emeritus professor at La Trobe University who has worked on Mexican and Cuban history since the late 1960s. He has authored numerous articles and book chapters dealing with the history of work and workers in the Cuban sugar industry in the twentieth century, as well as several books on Mexican labor history and the history of the Left—including *El movimiento obrero y la política en México*, *Marxism and Communism in Twentieth-Century Mexico*, and *The New Latin American Left: Cracks in the Empire*. Aviva Chomsky is a

U.S.-based historian who has studied Central America and the Caribbean for thirty years. Author of *West Indian Workers and the United Fruit Company in Costa Rica*, *Linked Labor Histories: New England, Colombia, and the Making of a Global Working Class*, *A History of the Cuban Revolution*, and several books on immigration, she has taught Latin American history since 1990. A new editor recruited for this edition, Alfredo Prieto, is a Cuban writer, researcher, editor, and journalist, and author of *La prensa norteamericana y la agenda interamericana* and *El otro en el espejo*, among other works. Pamela Maria Smorkaloff is a Cuban American scholar who has been researching Cuban literary history since the 1980s. She has published *Cuban Writers on and off the Island: Contemporary Narrative Fiction* and *Readers and Writers in Cuba: A Social History of Print Culture, 1830s–1990s*, among other works.

Do our scholarly credentials mean that we have produced a Reader that is balanced? We sought to give the book a chronological and thematic balance, rather than a schematic political balance. Thus, our goal was to offer a comprehensive, multifaceted vision of Cuban society, politics, and culture throughout the last five centuries. This is, intentionally, not a Reader whose main focus is the Cuban Revolution, though inevitably the revolution occupies an important space. The first four parts focus on topics prior to the 1959 revolution; and the revolution per se is one of several topics we focus on in the post-1959 parts.

Another goal was to interweave scholarly analyses with the voices of Cubans and other actors in, participants in, and firsthand commentators on the events and times. The latter, called primary source documents by historians, make up the bulk of this Reader's selections. Outside observers, however, also contribute an important perspective. Many of them are Cubans themselves—historians, anthropologists, sociologists, and creative writers who have devoted their lives to the study of different threads of the Cuban tapestry. Some are scholars from other countries who have done the same.

We have granted equal importance to the three themes of the Reader: history, culture, and politics. A chronological narrative structures the first four parts. But history is more than a series of dates and events. Although the part titles reflect a generally agreed-on chronological periodization—the pre-Columbian period, the colonial period, the independence period, and the neocolonial period—the creative work lies in whose voices, whose interpretations, and whose analyses we choose to reflect these periods. We have been guided by the belief that there is no history without culture and politics. Slave testimonies and excerpts from novels that grapple with the question of race and slavery are interwoven with discussion by intellectuals of the time, poetry, and recent scholarly and historical analyses of Cuba's colonial period. All these documents make up history.

Thus the Reader includes many different kinds of voices. Well-known political documents included in the book's first half are José Martí's 1891 "Our

America," which became a rallying cry for generations of Latin Americans attempting to define their national and cultural identities; the Platt Amendment, which structured the U.S. relationship with Cuba between 1902 and 1934; Julio Antonio Mella's "Where Is Cuba Headed?," a foundational document for the revolution of 1933; and Fidel Castro's celebrated "History Will Absolve Me" speech, which played a similar role in the 1959 revolution. Among the political documents included in the second half of the book is John F. Kennedy's 1962 speech announcing the presence of Soviet missiles in Cuba.

Many of the selections, however, are relatively unknown; some appear here for the first time in English. Included in earlier parts of the book, excerpts from Renée Méndez Capote's *Memories of a Cuban Girl Who Was Born with the Century* give a vivid account, from a female perspective, of everyday life during the period of Martí and the Platt Amendment; a waiter (Cipriano Chinea Palero) describes his life in the context of the corruption and inequality decried by Mella; in the latter parts of the book, author Humberto Arenal evokes the crumbling of the lifestyle of the bourgeoisie after 1959; and Cuban American fiction writer Roberto Fernández comments wryly on the humor and tragedy of the experience of emigration. We have sought to create an ongoing counterpoint between history from above, through the voices of the powerful, and history from below, through the sometimes harder to uncover voices of the poor, the marginalized, and the excluded.

For the 1959–89 period, we have organized the parts by theme. Part V, "Building a New Society," looks at how the Cuban Revolution tried to break with Cuba's past and construct something fundamentally new. Animated by nationalism, utopianism, and a belief that human nature was fundamentally malleable, revolutionary leaders and tens of thousands of followers set about abolishing the corruption, inequalities, and economic dependence of the past. The documents in part V explore aspects of the social and economic reforms that contributed to the ongoing process of the Cuban Revolution. A broad understanding of Cuban culture during the revolutionary period is the focus of part VI, "Culture and Revolution." Revolutionizing culture itself—both creating a radically original culture and democratizing access to what had previously resided in the realm of high or elite culture—was another political goal of the revolutionary leadership. The revolution created innumerable opportunities for cultural production and participation, and an effervescence of cultural experimentation. It also, however, imposed restrictions on what kinds of cultural production were considered appropriately revolutionary, restrictions that frustrated and even destroyed some Cuban artists. Popular religion and culture evolved according to their own rhythm and manner, sometimes in conjunction with official policy, sometimes with stubborn independence.

A key theme throughout this volume is the global nature of Cuban history

and society. But globalization goes beyond politics and economics: it involves every aspect of life and culture. In part VII we explore Cuba's global connections and significance in the revolutionary period with this broader view in mind. Literature, religion, music, art, and Cuban ideas about race, gender, and national identity—as well as more explicitly political ideologies—formed over the centuries in the context of international links and relationships. The revolution inspired and worked with social movements around the world. As Cuba took on major commitments in the international sphere, its involvement in Africa and Latin America gave it a significance far outweighing its size. Cuban internationalism became a foreign policy obsession in the United States for more than forty years. Hundreds of thousands of Cubans came to the United States during that time, transforming Miami and creating their own complex culture while also becoming important players in U.S. politics.

Because the collapse of the Soviet bloc in 1989 was a watershed in the history of Cuba's revolution, we included a separate section, part VIII, that focuses on the post-1989 period, in the first edition. For this new edition, we have also added a final section, part IX, that looks at the changes and transitions Cuba has experienced since Fidel Castro stepped down from power in 2006. The history of these two periods is still being written, but we try to impart the flavor of the existing contradictions through songs and fiction, as well as through personal accounts and scholarly analyses. Like most of the authors of the selections we include in this part, we reserve final judgment on the direction of events. Instead, we feel ourselves humbled by the dizzying pace of change and by the intensity with which Cubans continue to debate and hope to mold their future.