

Review

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Review by: Al Campbell

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# BOOK REVIEWS

**Alejandro de la Fuente (ed.), *Cuban Studies* 45 (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2017), hb 418pp. ISBN 13: 9780822944638**

**Reviewed by Al Campbell**

As with the two previous once-a-year editions of *Cuban Studies* under the partially new editorial team that has guided it since its three-year hiatus earlier in this decade, 2017's number 45 is 'rich' (See the review of number 43 by this reviewer in this journal, 7(2) Winter 2015, pp. 265–269.)

In total, 18 'normal articles' are presented in four groups; Dossier 1: Hacia una nueva Constitución; Culture and Society; History; and Dossier 2: New Approaches to the History of Health, Medicine, and Disease in Cuba. Then, in addition to a one-page reproduction of the work that won the 2015 Premio Nacional de Artes Plásticas, two 'non-normal' articles are grouped as 'Primary Sources': 14 pages excerpted from a much longer unpublished autobiography of a businessman from the 1940s and 1950s, and an interview of Edith García Buchaca. The 14 book reviews are divided into two groups; History, and Culture and Society.

I want to say a few words about the two 'dossiers'.

As suggested by the term 'dossier', these two collections of articles have an intended (and this reviewer feels achieved) coherence beyond the useful procedure a journal is able to do when it groups individually submitted articles. This was the result of the contributors being aware that their works would be part of a focused set of articles before they wrote them.

As the introduction to 'Dossier 2: New Approaches to the History of Health, Medicine, and Disease in Cuba' explains, in this case, this resulted from two people who were researching the history of medicine and public health in early twentieth-century Cuba reconnecting almost a decade ago. Over the following years, they drew several other people into the process of interacting on the subject. But, what makes this particularly interesting, beyond the level of interest it would yield just from that sort of connected work, is that they were interested in, and worked to develop, a new approach to the history of medicine in Cuba. As they express it,

The three articles on the history of medicine and public health in early twentieth-century Cuba presented in this issue constitute a long-overdue reorientation of the

history of medicine in Cuba, one that looks beyond medical institutions and the lives of great doctors to understand the interrelationship of science, medicine, and the social context in which knowledge was accumulated and was applied. (p. 275)

A fourth paper published in the previous *Cuban Studies* fits as part of this dossier as well. They make clear both that the significant work done in the previous approach was not only useful but necessary to be able to build on, and that they are making no claim to inventing this new approach, but rather that it is the approach that has come to dominate work on histories of medicine and public health in Latin America over the last decade. These two observations in no way diminish the innovative value of these works. They are academically high quality, done in what this reviewer considers the way one should approach histories of knowledge- and science-related topics, and simply enjoyable to read.

'Dossier 1: Hacia una nueva Constitución' arose from a panel coordinated for, and presented at, the 2015 Latin American Studies Association conference. The introduction presents an overview of the five articles from four perspectives. First, the location of any constitution as an implicit conversation between the present and the future. Second, how the various fundamental parts of any constitution, and Cuba's in particular, relate to each other. Third, how Cuba's constitution and its changes compare to other constitutions adopted or amended in the last quarter of the previous century and the beginning of this one. And finally, a comparison of the current constitution with its predecessors, with a focus on the measures used to deliberate on its initial adoption.

All these considerations are both interesting and informative, and the author of the introduction has done a scholarly job of considering the five articles in these four dimensions. This reviewer argues, however, that the introduction misses the forest of the deeper importance of these articles, as a result of its sharp focus on these detailed trees of 'constitutionalism'. As is universally recognised, Cuba is undergoing very profound economic and social changes. Although there have also already been important political changes, those changes have to date not been as deep. The government, its supporters and its opponents, (almost) all understand that corresponding very profound political changes are necessitated by the economic and social changes that have been, and will be further, made. There is a broad and contentious debate on what those political changes should be, both on the Island and off it, very parallel to the debate about further economic and social changes. This issue of the *International Journal of Cuban Studies* includes a contribution from the Island to this debate on appropriate political changes. Changes in the constitution are a particular part of the political changes that have occurred since the current prolonged process of deep change began in 1990, as would be future constitutional changes, large or small

(including adopting a new constitution). All five articles make clear that they intend their work and considerations to be contributions to this broad and essential debate on political change in Cuba today.

Stressing their conscious contribution to what is arguably the deepest and most contentions point in the debate on Cuba's political future, if the official position of continuing and improving the construction of socialism will continue or if that will be abandoned to revert to capitalism, must not be confused with arguing that these articles can be reduced to their contribution to the debate on that issue. Their richness indeed includes all the dimensions discussed in the introduction to the dossier indicated above, as well as others. This review will, however, end with a terse indication of this extremely important dimension of these works, which the introduction of the dossier did not discuss.

In 'The "Engine Room" of the Constitution (with Some Particular Attention to the Cuban Case)', Roberto Gargarella argues that 'the rights section of our constitution has changed and grown dramatically, but this fundamental innovation has not been accompanied by equivalent, consequent changes in constitutions' organization of powers' (p. 15). His article therefore recommends constitutional changes in the organization of power in Cuba, and in particular, a reduction of the executive power of what he considers a 'hyperpresidential' system, with power to be transferred to 'Cuba's civil society'. A centrally important part of his argument that he does not clarify, however, is what he means by 'civil society'. If he takes the words to have their normal understanding of 'society other than the government,' one can see the implications of the argument are very different for the issue of improving the building of socialism than if he takes them to mean, for example, workers councils or communes as experimented with in Venezuela, or if he lets them take on their applied meaning in capitalist political practice of the business community. Amalia Pérez Martín takes up a similar concern (again, among others) in 'El lugar del derecho en el orden político de la reforma económica en Cuba: Entre la república y el reino'. Her concern is with 'the problems that currently prevent participation in decision making and the control of government action' (p. 46). She presents this as requiring fundamental change, requiring a whole new constitution, rooted in a new understanding of the law. But she too has no discussion of the fundamental issue of what such a change would mean for Cuba's socialist project, even though the goal is claimed by both those who want to build a better socialism more authentic to the views of its early advocates which include Marx and Engels, and by those who want to revert to capitalism.

In 'Una Constitución para Cuba: La necesidad de una nueva constitución: El enfoque técnico y el enfoque político', Julio Antonio Fernández Estrada also calls for a new constitution. However, his approach to, and concern with, the issue is more social-political than just technical, as indicated by his title. He stresses the

need for the new constitution to be the result of a broad public debate and a Constitutional Assembly, as opposed to just focusing on what its contents must be. He understands that the result of such a broad political exercise in establishing the fundamental legal backbone of the entire system would 'serve as a starting point for a change in Cuba that goes even beyond the creation of a new constitution' (p. 36). In '¿Es posible ampliar los derechos civiles y políticos en Cuba sin revocar el socialismo?', Rafael Rojas directly poses the socialism/capitalism issue from the title onward. Can one effect the broadly desired expansion of the civil and citizenship rights contained in the Cuban Constituent of 1976 with its modifications in 1992 and 2002 'without altering the ideological and political core of Cuban socialism?' (p. 28). Of course, provided one finds the answer to his title's question to be positive, the linked question that goes beyond the considerations of his article are what sorts of expansions of such rights would be compatible with, or at a deeper level, most beneficial to, the construction of the most socially desirable socialism possible, and what 'expansions of rights' would be conducive to a reversion to capitalism. A concrete example of the latter would be the socially unrestricted expansion of property rights in the means of production, prioritising them as under capitalism above democratic social rights. Even the final article by Julio César Guanche, nominally about the 1940s Constitution, is very clear that beyond being a fascinating social interpretation of an important piece of Cuban history, it considers that its results have relevance for Cuban debates today. Labelling the 1940 Constitution 'populist', he then argues his work sheds 'light on the popular sectors in the creation of such "populist" order' (p. 66). Furthermore, this 'populism' needs to be understood in its historical context, as an alternative to the fascism and communism of Cuba of that time, and that it 'constituted an alternative of its own of mass democracy' (p. 82), the subject of one of Cuba's most important debates today.

While as noted in this author's review of *Cuban Studies* 43 mentioned above, despite its high academic standard and broad coverage of the many dimensions of Cuban reality, *Cuban Studies* has historically been strongly biased in its coverage of economic and political topics (unlike its coverage of most other topics, and with a small sprinkling of exceptions), not only against the government of Cuba and its actions, but more broadly against Cuba's declared project of building some sort of socialism, in favour of a restoration of capitalism. This reviewer finds this dossier the strongest break from that historical bias that I have ever observed in the long history of the journal. These five pieces themselves reflect a broad spectrum of different opinions, in the context of a discussion of constitutionalism, of the importance of the socialist project to Cuba. They go from those with a clear desire for constitutional improvements because they would be important for making improvements that Cuba's socialist project needs, to those

whose desire for constitutional reform indicates no concern with the goal of building socialism, which is officially designated by Cuba as the centre point for all social policies. As such, this dossier reflects the real, essential and contentious debates going on in Cuba, from the perspective of constitutionalism, of its political future. It is hoped this dossier is indicative of a changed policy of *Cuban Studies* on its coverage of economic and political debates in Cuba. It is hoped that the journal will now go beyond offering scholarly excellent contributions and will also reflect the breadth of the debate on these issues going on in Cuba, and among the Cuban Diaspora and scholars of Cuba around the world, and no longer continue to (almost) only present the (historical) position of the majority of the Cuban–American community (regardless of the actual nationality of the authors) that has been dominant in the United States.