

This Issue

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## EDITORIAL

### THIS ISSUE

*Nils Graber, Jérôme Leleu and Blandine Destremau*

This special issue of the *International Journal of Cuban Studies* (IJCS) is concerned with the analysis and evaluation of changes that Cuba has been undergoing, from the empirical and methodological perspectives of culture and institutions.<sup>1</sup> The articles we are presenting highlight the need to widen historical and geographical scopes to grasp the depth of changes and their numerous ramifications, rather than stop at what comes out as *events* or common sense, often simplified, categories. Most contributions also illustrate the web of relationships between culture – material, revolutionary, religious, political – and institutions, the latter being understood both as organisations at macro and meso-levels, and as norms, behaviours, practices, representations, and imaginaries, addressed at individual levels.

#### **Dynamics of Continuity and Change**

For scholars engaged in Cuban research, it has become very common to hear or read assumptions about the pace of change on the island: the *events* and decisions that have been taking place since Obama's visit in March 2016 are indeed historical and are bringing about an acceleration of what is referred to as 'transition'. As is well known, however, this considerable event happened in a temporal context of reform – mainly economic and legal – that had been going on in Cuba since the beginning of the 1990s and more specifically since the change of leadership from Fidel to his brother Raúl Castro in 2006. It also took place in a geostrategic setting where most international relations of Cuba have been transformed, not only with the US, but also with the European Union and Latin America, and further with many countries of Africa and beyond. Finally, well beyond the state or the public spheres, the transformation of Cuba's international relations also concerns the Church as well as civil society organisations, enterprises, artists, etc.

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In the articles published in this issue of the IJCS, the dynamics of continuity and change are examined from two major interrelated perspectives: that of temporalities, and that of levels, or territorial/geographical scales.

On the first aspect, the articles presented here show that change is a continuous process, whose dynamics and temporalities are rooted in times well before the 1990 crisis. Present changes are building upon past accomplishments, institutions, political and cultural heritage. Thus, the past weighs on future temporalities, on the pace and scope of change and continuities or resistances, as well as on the tensions or contradictions that arise from the interlocking of various transformation processes. Ricardo Torres makes the methodological choice of considering changes in Cuba's relations with the US in the very long term, going back to the nineteenth century, before focusing on the weaving of events since the Revolution. In his study, he shows that the pace of change has accelerated since the second half of the 1980s, although not in such a dramatic break with the past as is usually represented: at close scrutiny, temporalities emerge as rather blurred. Interrogating the interlocks between continuity and change, Torres also discusses the interpretation of the change in Cuba, whether it is a radical transformation, a *de facto* transition, or a mere 'actualization'. For her part, Petra Kuivala questions the existence of a history of the Catholic Church in Cuba, in at least two perspectives: that of the articulation of the long-term continuity of the Catholic Church's existence on the island since colonial times, its quasi-invisibility in revolutionary times, and its coming to light as a major actor of change, enhanced by the *events* of the Pope's visits. But she also questions the possibility, and the means, to construct this history as a narrative, given the complexities to access sources. Maxime Toutain also chooses to frame his micro analysis of Orishas' cults in a sugar mill in the long-term history. The significant turn occurred in the 2010s, when the increase of tourism and the concretisation of a UNESCO programme on 'the slaves' route' triggered the will to 'patrimonialize' and promote local slave history. The past is explicitly mobilised as the backbone and the substance of a *project* that produces genealogy and constructs continuity between two bodies of heritage: that of slaves, on the one hand, and that of religious history, on the other. Thus, the project contributes to the making of Cuban national historiography on 'afrocubanism'.

Pablo Rodriguez proposes a reading of recent changes that rests on a different analytical scale, and articulates a series of circumstances, historical facts, and determinations, that draw a complex matrix not devoid of contradictions. Temporalities, as such, appear laden with challenges and risks, among which transformations of power and demographical structures, articulation of life-course times, as well as the sustainability of long-term investment in education and health, on the one hand; and the necessary flexibilisation of bureaucracy, on

the other. Marie Michèle Grenon also chooses to illustrate the medium-term temporality and continuity *cum* change of Cuban internationalism and humanitarianism, in three periods patterned to stages of Cuba's international relations and own institutional history, limited to the revolutionary period. Furthermore, she shows that Cuban conception of these missions goes far beyond the Western focus on emergency, to address participative support to the long-term development of local capacities. Similarly, Jenny Cruz Cabrera, María Regina Cano Orúe and Dmitri Prieto Samsónov adopt a specific approach to temporality, related to their object: that of the revolutionary decades, marked with intense flows of mobility between the countries of the former Soviet Union and Cuba. In his contribution on Cuba's public health, Enrique Beldarraín also goes back to the beginning of the revolutionary era to show continuity in the state's policies regarding the priority granted to health, in spite of drawbacks caused by the 1990 crisis and the reforms launched after Raúl Castro came to power and the sixth Cuban Communist party Congress formulated its orientations.

Regarding the second perspective, the articles of this special issue demonstrate that the dynamics of change entangle several geographical and territorial scales, from international relations to domestic institutions, and to individual interactions and subjectivities. Reconnection between international and domestic dynamics is clearly at work in the present times, although these movements often entail tensions, discrepancies, frustrations and contradictions. These appear to be particularly related to institutional performance, but also to individuals' and families' expectations, uncertainties and capacities for agency when faced with changes happening at institutional and political levels.

Looking at Cuba's relations with the US, Ricardo Torres shows how 'vicinity matters' in the making and the evolution of Cuba's international relations. He also illustrates how the territories and networks of international relations articulate, redeploy, and affect one another. Spatial dimensions are also at the heart of the conception and organisation of international humanitarian policies analysed by Grenon in this issue. She highlights how Cuba's internationalism and humanitarianism has contributed to and benefited from the transformations of international relations, but also how they closely articulate deterritorialisation and politics of territory both in Cuba and in the countries targeted by interventions. Cruz Cabrera *et al.*'s article is framed in a diasporic – thus also international – space, that they consider both from the perspective of international relations between Cuba and the former USSR, and with an eye on the Cuban territory. The national space is itself analysed from a plurality of interlocked territorial angles, at macro and micro levels – neighbourhoods, workplaces, all the way to individual subjectivities and imaginaries. In the Catholic Church history tackled by Petra Kuivala, the territorial factor is crucial as well. From a situation where

the Church had become marginalised in the Cuban society and isolated from the global Catholic community after the Revolution, reconnection has been taking place in the past two decades, both between the global Catholic institution and the Cuban Church, on the one hand, and on the other hand between the latter and the government, as well as various social institutions, and finally neighbourhoods and individuals. In a similar fashion, in Toutain's article, the local promotion of the sugar industry and slaves' history is clearly articulated with an international scheme – the UNESCO programme – with its translations in the national tourism policies and with the involvement of various institutions. Reversely, the aim of the local initiative he studies is clearly to build the sugar mill's visibility – and, beyond, that of slaves' culture – on both the national and international scenes.

Pablo Rodríguez's focus bears on the articulations between narratives of continuity and change at macro level, and subjectivities of individuals, confronted with contradictory requirements and adjustments, that trouble their production of sense and their commitment to values. Articulation and coherence of socio-productive spaces and their various property regimes appear to constitute major and specific challenges. In Enrique Beldarraín's article, in a comparable perspective, not only are the various levels of the Cuban health system intimately articulated in policy change. The level of international relations also plays a key role, mainly because it drains the supply of medical professionals towards external missions, generating tensions in health facilities, and contributing to the needs for adaptive changes in the organisation of health care access. In her article on her experience in conducting research on agriculture in Cuba, Julia Wright also gives interesting examples of institutional levels' entanglements.

## Culture and Institutions

As in most centralised political regimes, Cuban history has resulted in the construction of both a *culture of institutions* and *the institution of culture*, as the articles presented here illustrate. An integrate part of what may be considered a specific heritage and the foundations of a particular citizenship regime, cultures and institutions play a role in the advent of change, its temporalities and its spatial deployments.

Economic reforms analysed by Ricardo Torres include a decisive cultural component: they have been engrained in people's expectations, norms, strategies, and habits. Along with economic reforms, conveyed by market and private property developments, changes in economic culture and people's daily life are enormous: they are affected by, react to, adapt to, and cope with, changes decided at institutional levels, and are led to forge a culture of change, inspired by opportunities

but laden with uncertainty. Economics proves to be a major element of Cuban's revolutionary attainments, experience, and culture, but of its failures as well, and it represents a major challenge for political legitimacy. Pablo Rodríguez addresses configurations of representations and their 'battle fields', anchored in a constructed dichotomy: Cuba as a socialist paradise, *versus* a horrid totalitarian hell. These configurations are political, but they are deeply cultural in their manifestation and substance. 'Cubanity' thus appears grounded in practices, mentalities, positions, attitudes, strategies, and choices that were shaped in a framework of conflictuality between not only countries or models, but imaginaries as well. Rodríguez further shows how Cubanity as a culture is at stake in the present processes, coping with crises, threats, inconsistencies, and contradictions.

In Grenon's article as well, humanitarianism and internationalism definitely transpire as a culture forged by the Cuban Revolution – that she analyses in terms of ideal-type – deeply rooted in its ethics and its strategic orientations, and markedly different from Western countries' approach. In a similar way, as shown by Enrique Beldarraín, health in its various dimensions has become a central part of Cuban revolutionary culture, of its population's imaginary, consciousness, knowledge and entitlements. Far beyond mere health organisations *per se*, concern for health has penetrated all institutions, including neighbourhood facilities, schools and work centres. In the agricultural sector as well, Julia Wright exemplifies the cultural patterns underlying organisations in Cuba, but also the confrontation of her own research culture with that of the officials and interviewees she interacted with during her fieldwork.

Cruz Cabrera *et al.* illustrate how 'culture' may be a product of history, and specifically that of interactions and relationships between concrete individuals, embedded in a historically constructed gendered imaginary involving visibility regimes. They illustrate it by well-chosen examples of cultural practices (linguistic, religious, gastronomic, etc.) that tend to constitute the community they term as the 'Post-Soviet diaspora'. The cultural aspect of the Catholic Church institution is very salient in Kuivala's article as well. Not only has 'the past' heavily weighed in its contemporary political and social renaissance; its administration, diplomatic relations, oral histories, archives and publications are also all components of a history substantiated by narratives, albeit at times hardly visible. The revolutionary period has contributed to forge this specific historical culture of Cuban Catholicism, adding another decisive episode to its continuity. Finally, Toutain's contribution is explicitly framed in a cultural approach. However, he adopts a constructivist position, showing how promoting slaves' local history and religion as culture serves political as well as economic purposes. What is at stake here is the institutionalisation of culture, and its making into a commodified product, that serves a quest for recognition.

## Table of Contents: A Short Presentation

Eight articles compound this special issue. Four are developing a rather macroscopic approach. We open with an article of Ricardo Torres (University of Havana), ‘La reforma cubana y el acercamiento a Estados Unidos desde una perspectiva comparada’, which offers a geopolitical and economic analysis focused on the past decades but delving in the longer term as well. Pablo Rodríguez (Cuban Institute of Anthropology) then presents a very complementary analysis of the present transformation framework, this time with a sociological and anthropological perspective, under the title ‘La sociedad cubana antes los cambios actuales. Sus retos y complejidades’. The third article is written by Marie Michèle Grenon (University of Laval) and focuses on a specific empirical object deeply rooted in the Cuban state strategies, international relations, and institutional culture: that of ‘Cuban internationalism and contemporary humanitarianism’. We have chosen to have it followed by a comprehensive overview of the Cuban public health system and policies, focused on the past ten years, written by Enrique Beldarraín Chaple (Cuban National Center of Scientific Medical Information) under the title ‘La Salud Pública en Cuba: años 2005–2014’.

The four remaining articles have adopted a more microscopic analytical perspective. Jenny Cruz Cabrera, María Regina Cano Orúe, and Dmitri Prieto Samsónov (Cuban Chapter of the AC&SE Workgroup, Latin American Council of Social Sciences – CLACSO) offer an original study of ‘(Post)-Soviet Diaspora in Cuba’, while Julia Wright (Coventry University) shares and contextualises her ‘Methodological Considerations on the Experience of Undertaking Doctoral Research in the Agricultural Sector in Cuba during the Special Period (1998–2000)’. The following article is that of Petra Kuivala (University of Helsinki), who also adopts a methodological scope to tackle her interrogation ‘Is There Church History in Revolutionary Cuba?’ through an analysis of Cuban Catholic sources. The last article is written by Maxime Toutain (University of Toulouse II). Under the title ‘La influencia del culto a los orishas en la patrimonialización del Central Méjico (Matanzas)’, the author presents the making process of what comes out as a cultural institution: the patrimonialisation of a sugar mill, building on slaves’ and religious history.

## Note

1. It is the outcome of an international conference organised by the guest editors in Paris, in June 2015. Its topic was ‘Change in Cuba. A Social Science Perspective’, and it gathered over thirty European, Northern American and Cuban scholars.