

BOOK REVIEW ESSAYS

## To Disquiet a Giant: Cuba, the United States, and the World

Louis A. Pérez Jr.

University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, US  
[perez@email.unc.edu](mailto:perez@email.unc.edu)

---

This essay reviews the following works:

**From Lenin to Castro, 1917–1959: Early Encounters between Moscow and Havana.** By Mervyn J. Bain. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2013. Pp. vii + 159. \$55.99 hardcover. ISBN: 9780739181102.

**Cuba's Revolutionary World.** By Jonathan C. Brown. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017. Pp. vi + 586. \$35.00 hardcover. ISBN: 9780674971981.

**Cubans in Angola: South-South Cooperation and Transfer of Knowledge, 1976–1991.** By Christine Hatzky. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2015. Pp. v + 386. \$39.95 paperback. ISBN: 9780299301040.

**Exporting Revolution: Cuba's Global Solidarity.** By Margaret Randall. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017. Pp. x + 272. \$25.95 paperback. ISBN: 9780822369042.

**U.S.-Cuba Relations: Charting a New Path.** By Jonathan D. Rosen and Hanna S. Kassab. Baltimore, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2016. Pp. vii + 164. \$36.99 paperback. ISBN: 9781498537759.

---

How small things may annoy the greatest! Even a mouse troubles an elephant; a gnat, a lion: a very flea may disquiet a giant.

—Joseph Hall, *The Works of Joseph Hall: Latin Theology with Translation* (1839)

To contemplate a body of scholarship dedicated to the subject of Cuban foreign relations is at first blush to ponder an unlikely field of study. It is to come upon a literature of improbable proportions on a subject of uncertain significance. It is almost an oxymoron to pair “Cuba” with “foreign relations,” Cuba being a country that before 1959 was hardly thought of as anything more than exotic tropical island, a place of easy virtue and loose morals, frequented by tourists in pursuit of illicit pleasures and risqué amusements: a brothel, a casino, a cabaret, a good liberty port. Not a country to be taken seriously—a country, US Ambassador Arthur Gardner wrote in 1956, thought of only “in terms of fun, rum and nightclubs.”<sup>1</sup>

Among the many changes wrought by the revolution was to change the way the world thought about Cuba, to change too the ways that Cubans thought about themselves and about their place in the world. The revolution brought Cuba to the attention of the world and rendered Cuba a subject worthy of serious study. In fact, the Cuban revolution rendered all of Latin America a subject worthy of serious study.

The revolution came bearing another meaning: a political exuberance, a moral audacity, an exalted purpose. The men and women of the revolution were young, attractive, fearless, charismatic. They wore combat fatigues (portentous implications, indeed), exuded self-confidence, and possessed a swagger perhaps

---

<sup>1</sup> Arthur Gardner to Henry F. Holland, January 13, 1956, File 570295, Confidential U.S. Department of State Central Files, Cuba, Internal Affairs, 1955–1958, General Records of the Department of State, Record Group 59, National Archives, Washington, DC.

never before seen in Latin America. They went by first names—Fidel, Celia, Camilo, Vilma, Raúl—and by nickname, “el Che.” No one doubted they were different.

The exhilaration of revolution did not remain confined within the island for long. A nationalist phenomenon almost immediately assumed internationalist dimensions. The example of Cuba overturning a US-backed military dictatorship reverberated across the Americas: few indeed were the countries in Latin America that did not share with Cuba the midcentury experience of life under a US-backed military dictatorship. The example of revolution, a real revolution “under the nose of the United States,” Fidel Castro taunted, suggested inspiration for revolution elsewhere in Latin America, often with the moral support and material assistance of Havana but just as often without. The summons to make the Andes the Sierra Maestra of the Americas echoed across much of continent. The categorical imperative, “the duty of the revolutionary is to make the revolution,” was to challenge the legitimacy of ruling political parties and dispute the credibility of communist parties. The Cuban revolution emerged from the history that had conditioned its interior logic of a people advancing a claim to national sovereignty, self-determination, and social justice, one no less relevant to the Americas. And the Cubans, not known for modesty, were not reluctant to proclaim their revolution worthy of emulation across the continent and in the world at large.

Almost immediately Cuba inserted itself into the problematic of the Third World. By example and as exponent, Cuba emerged as a commanding presence in the anticolonial movements of national liberation in the Global South. The Cubans presumed to challenge the existing order of things all over the world and all at once, including and especially North American imperialism, Soviet leadership of communism in Latin America, and European colonialism in Africa.

How utterly improbable this was, coming from the country of “fun, rum and nightclubs.” For one brief moment Cuba was the center of the universe of Third World revolutions: “to make a world safe for revolution,” in Jorge Domínguez’s turn of phrase. Cuba sponsored the Tricontinental Conference in 1966, founded the Organization of Solidarity with People of Africa, Asia, and Latin America (OSPAAAL) in 1966 and the Organization for Latin American Solidarity (OLAS) in 1967; assumed leadership of the Non-Aligned Movement during the 1970s; and projected a presence in Africa in support of the Zimbabwe African People’s Union, Namibia’s South West African People’s Organization, and the African National Congress. Cubans were in Algeria, the Congo, Ethiopia, Guinea Bissau, Mozambique, and of course in Angola.

The category “Cuba Foreign Relations” is thus entirely plausible—indeed, compelling—around which has emerged a formidable corpus of scholarship.<sup>2</sup> The Library of Congress World Catalog lists almost thirteen thousand titles in the search category “Cuba Foreign Relations.” Only “Mexico Foreign Relations” (thirty thousand titles) and “Brazil Foreign Relations” (twenty-two thousand titles) surpass Cuba in Latin America.

The literature possesses sufficient breadth to accommodate several discernible genres of scholarship, spanning distinct epistemological traditions, different methodological approaches, and diverse analytical biases. Much of this scholarship hews to formulaic traditions of bilateral, state-to-state political relations and diplomacy, in this instance to include the study of relations between Cuba and other individual countries: with Canada, with Spain, or with Mexico, among many others. The vast preponderance of this literature, of course, is dedicated to the study of Cuba-US relations past and present, for perhaps no interaction with any country has mattered more to Cuba than its relations with the United States, and few countries have obsessed the Americans more than Cuba.

But a close examination of this genre reveals a scholarship dedicated less to foreign relations with Cuba than to foreign policies toward Cuba: the island in a context of contingency and chance; Cuba as spoil of war, an island coveted by rival colonial powers, between England and Spain in the eighteenth century, for example, or between the United States and Spain in the nineteenth century and between the United States and the Soviet Union in the twentieth century.

The prevailing subjectivity has established something of a discursive ascendancy in the scholarship. Much of what passes for “Cuba Foreign Relations” is in fact Cuba depicted as a country acted upon and without agency; Cuba as object of history, not a subject. This is Cuba as colony of Spain, as client of the United

<sup>2</sup> The early scholarship to address the expanding role of Cuba in the world, which emerged in the late 1970s, includes Martin Weinstein, ed., *Revolutionary Cuba in the World Arena* (Philadelphia: Institute for the Study of Human Issues, 1979); Cole Blasier and Carmelo Mesa-Lago, eds., *Cuba in the World* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1979); H. Michael Erisman, *Cuba’s International Relations: The Anatomy of a Nationalistic Foreign Policy* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1985); Jorge I. Domínguez, *To Make a World Safe for Revolution: Cuba’s Foreign Policy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989); H. Michael Erisman and John M. Kirk, eds., *Cuban Foreign Policy Confronts a New International Order* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1991); H. Michael Erisman, *Cuba’s Foreign Relations in a Post-Soviet World* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2000).

States, as proxy for the Soviet Union, rendered as an object of strategic importance and commercial value in function of the history of another country.

Much of the literature on Cuba-US relations is similarly less about bilateral relations than about US policy toward Cuba, a scholarship steeped in a long intellectual tradition that serves to entitle the gaze from the North as the preponderant point of view, the way that the presumption of hegemony insinuates itself into the premise of scholarship. The perspective is more than adequately reinforced through research practices that privilege consultation of North American archives and government records, with scant if any attention to Cuban sources. The study of US policy does not often contemplate the need to study Cuba.<sup>3</sup>

*U.S.-Cuba Relations: Charting a New Path* by Jonathan Rosen and Hanna Kassab emerges out of this tradition. “Relations” in the title is a misnomer. The book is about policy. “This book has provided a brief history of Cuba, focusing on U.S. foreign policy toward the island,” Rosen and Kassab explain (145). The reader pauses to ponder a non sequitur. Rosen and Kassab have assembled a hurried and often confused survey of two hundred years of Cuban history, mostly in the form of a cursory summary of the extant English-language literature. No matter, however, for this is a history designed principally to serve as a screen upon which to project US policy, and especially to examine matters of domestic politics attending the change of the Cuba policy under the Barack Obama administration.

Rosen and Kassab demonstrate that knowledge of Cuba is not a requirement to write a book about US policy toward Cuba. They confuse a warning by José Martí (d. 1895) concerning colonial trade as a critique of the Republic (established 1902). They identify Martí as a “Cuban-Marxist scholar” (30). Fidel Castro’s 1953 speech is incorrectly identified as “Condemn me, it does not matter. History will resolve me” (52). Rosen and Kassab have Che capturing the cities of Santiago de Cuba and Sancti-Spíritus in December 1958. They surely meant to say Santa Clara. “Castro let his anti-American sentiment loose” in October 1958, they write (58). Actually, it was October 1959. Typos, perhaps. Sloppy editing, no doubt. But the lapses serve to betray a deeper disregard for the canons of plausibility, where indifference to the accuracy of detail begets inattention to the credibility of generalization. “For many years the U.S. has been seen as an imperialist power, seeking to create an empire for itself. The Castro’s [*sic*] have benefited from this yarn,” Rosen and Kassab write (xiv–xv). “In a sense, the U.S. was partly responsible for Cuba going red” (23). And: “The heavy reliance on sugar also destroyed the small working class” (30). By 1961, Rosen and Kassab pronounce, Cuba had become a “rogue state” (60). The “*New Course*” in the subtitle alludes to the prospect of a new means to an old end: regime change. The new US policy, Rosen and Kassab predict, “will empower [Cubans] to explore different ideas and learn about different concepts” (76), thereby provide “an excellent way to delegitimize the Castro government,” and in the end serve as “the best way to destroy communism and topple the Cuban government” (150–151). The United States as subject; Cuba as object.

Mervyn Bain, *From Lenin to Castro, 1917–1959: Early Encounters between Moscow and Havana*, provides another perspective on Cuban foreign relations. Bain initially eschews the genre of state-to-state relations in favor of party-to-party “encounters” between the Cuban Communist Party (PCC) and the Third International (Comintern). The roots of the socialist tradition in Cuba reach deeply into the nineteenth century, emerging out of the larger ideological amalgam that coalesced around the *independentista* project within the Cuban émigré communities in the United States. The Cuban communist party is linked to Carlos Baliño, who, while living in Key West and Tampa, joined with José Martí to found the Partido Revolucionario Cubano (PRC) in 1892, thereupon to associate the founding of the PCC with the founding narrative of the nation. Returning to Cuba in 1898, Baliño organized the Agrupación Socialista de La Habana in 1907 and affiliated with the Second International. Baliño subsequently collaborated with Julio Antonio Mella to organize the first Cuban Marxist-Leninist party, the Agrupación Comunista de La Habana. Similar *agrupaciones comunistas* were established in Guanabacoa, Manzanillo, Media Luna, Palma Soriano, Guantánamo, and San Antonio de los Baños, among other cities. In 1925, the *agrupaciones comunistas* consolidated into the Partido Comunista de Cuba and subsequently affiliated with the Third International to promote the worldwide revolution.

Bain examines relations between the newly formed PCC and the Comintern as the party struggled to establish a credible presence through which to extend its influence within an expanding trade-union

<sup>3</sup> Recent Cuban contributions to the literature on Cuba-US relations include Néstor García Iturbe, *De Ford a Bush* (Havana: Editora Política, 2008); Ramón Sánchez-Parodi, *Cuba-USA: Diez tiempos de una relación* (Mexico City: Ocean Sur, 2011); Elier Ramírez Cañedo and Esteban Morales Domínguez, *De la confrontación a los intentos de “normalización”: La política de los Estados Unidos hacia Cuba* (Havana: Editorial de Ciencias Sociales, 2014); Tomás Díez Acosta, *La derrota de la Guerra Sucia: La administración de Lyndon B. Johnson contra la revolución cubana* (Havana: Casa Editorial Verde Olivo, 2014); Esteban Morales Domínguez, *Aproximaciones al conflicto Cuba-Estados Unidos* (Havana: Editora Política, 2015); Francisco López Segrera, *The United States and Cuba: From Closest Enemies to Distant Friends*, trans. Margot Olavarría (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2017).

movement. The formative years of the PCC coincided with the government of Gerardo Machado (1925–1933), years of political repression and economic depression. The party was outlawed and subject to blistering persecution, with communists deported and disappeared, harried and harassed at every turn, an experience that seared itself into the institutional memory of the PCC. Bain provides a thoughtful account of the interaction between the PCC and the Comintern, but leaves unclear the degree to which Moscow determined the political conduct of the PCC and the extent to which the PCC acceded, or did not accede, to Comintern direction. The willingness of the PCC to negotiate with Machado during the August 1933 general strike did irreparable harm to the credibility of the PCC; the decision, Bain indicates, was determined by Moscow in the form of “Comintern directives” (45). The “revolutionary opportunity in Cuba [i.e., 1933] quickly passed,” Bain correctly notes (45).

The trajectory of the Cuban communist party makes for woeful reading. The history of ideological turnabouts and political about-faces—opportunism, some would argue—forms part of the opaque past of the party, including its evolution into the Partido Socialista Popular (PSP), the years of the Popular Front, and its participation in the government of Fulgencio Batista (1941–1945). The PSP was slow to recognize the revolutionary potential of the Movimiento Revolucionario 26 de Julio (MR-26/7). “Putschist methods ... characteristic of bourgeois political factions,”<sup>4</sup> the PSP denounced the attack on the Moncada barracks. For the second time in three decades the PCC/PSP failed to recognize the “revolutionary opportunity” (45).

The principal strength of *From Lenin to Castro, 1917–1959* lies in the insight Bain offers into the interactions between the PCC/PSP and Moscow, specifically the capacity of a substate actor to insinuate itself into domestic politics—sometimes from the margins, other times from within the mainstream—thereby influencing the course of foreign relations. Bain would have better served his reader had he carried the party-to-party analysis forward into the post–World War II years. After 1945, Bain’s narrative turns toward a conventional treatment of state-to-state relations between the Soviet Union and Cuba bearing principally on diplomacy, cultural exchange, and bilateral trade arrangements. The shift turns almost entirely to Soviet interests in Cuba, almost all in function of Soviet foreign policy. The Soviet Union as subject; Cuba as object.

The adoption of the state-to-state narrative sets Bain inexorably on a path toward a dead-end in 1952, when General Fulgencio Batista severed diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union. The result is a yawning gap in the treatment of the years between April 1952 and January 1959. Vital questions pertaining to the political strategies of the PSP during the years of an expanding revolutionary process are hardly addressed at all. Not until late 1958 does the PSP cast its lot with the Movimiento Revolucionario 26 de Julio, a momentous decision indeed. The eventual absorption of the PSP into the revolutionary coalition under the direction of the MR 26/7 had far-reaching implications, for the connection of the PSP to the Soviet Union provided the Cuban political leadership after 1959 with a usable conduit to Moscow. It is regrettable that these years are passed over in a matter of few sentences.

Margaret Randall, *Exporting Revolution: Cuba’s Global Solidarities*, provides another context from which to approach Cuban foreign relations, one that most closely corresponds to the phenomenon characterized as “soft power.” In the case of Cuba, soft power implies medical internationalism, humanitarian aid, international literacy education, and disaster relief—an “ongoing and spectacular” commitment of international solidarity, Randall persuasively argues (3). Indeed, Cuban humanitarian internationalism stands as one of the signal achievements of the revolution. Since 1960, an estimated two hundred thousand Cuban health-care workers, including physicians, dentists, nutritionists, and nurses, among others, have served in more than one hundred countries. Randall’s observation that the Cuban “variety of internationalism is disinterested” (100) can hardly be gainsaid, of course. But it is also true that the discharge of disinterested internationalism is wholly compatible with the defense of national interests. Facets of Cuban internationalism function fully within realms of hard-edged realpolitik, as a matter of political necessity and economic need, endeavors often transacted as a means of *divisas* (convertible currency), both as a matter of national economic development and personal survival strategy. While Randall privileges altruism as the master narrative of Cuban internationalism, she acknowledges if only in passing that it was not “altruism alone” (21). Cuba had urgent needs. Because Cuba had “not yet managed to industrialize,” Randall concedes, it began “offering the work of its experts for convertible currency” (209). Indeed, foreign exchange receipts obtained in 2006 for the services of Cuban health-care providers abroad surpassed US\$2 billion, equivalent to nearly 30 percent of total export earnings. During the early 2000s, Cuba received from Venezuela ninety thousand barrels of oil daily for the services of thirty thousand health-care workers.

<sup>4</sup> “Batista Opens Terror Drive on Unions, CP,” *The Daily Worker*, August 5, 1953, 3.

Randall situates Cuba in a moral universe defined by stark Manichaean dichotomies: wrong/right, evil/good, injustice/justice. On one hand: “The United States believes it has the right to go where it wishes, killing hundreds of thousands, destroying cultures and economies, and wreaking a devastation that may never be reversed” (91). And on the other: “In contrast little Cuba represents the dreams of peoples struggling for independence from the world’s major powers” (92). This is a curious book to review. In part it is offered as a memoir (“I had lived in Cuba for eleven years, raised four children there, shared in the Revolution’s great accomplishments and painful failures,” 15) and in part it is presented as critical scholarship (to “ask the hard questions . . . to explore a reality that has not received the attention it deserves,” 20–21). Nothing ambiguous about Randall’s sympathies. She is a fierce defender of Cuba. She writes from the heart, unabashedly partisan and at times unflinchingly polemical. It is hence odd that approaching the end of the book Randall offers a curious afterthought, of being “mindful of the need to separate personal bias from overall experience and factual information” (205). *Exporting Revolution: Cuba’s Global Solidarities* is all about bias, heartfelt devotion to all that is good about the Cuban revolution, in praise of noble intent and reverence for honorable purpose. The book would have “worked” better had it given itself over to the conventions of the memoir, as testament and *testimonio*, as a chronicle of a time when the belief in will and commitment to voluntarism ruled the day. Most readers of *LARR* will no doubt share many of Randall’s sentiments; certainly this reader does. But shared sympathies do not preclude the necessity of rigor of analysis and requirements of evidence. Too many of Randall’s arguments are sustained by faith (“I believe . . .,” 219), emotion (“I felt . . .,” 17), precognition (“I intuited . . .,” 16), speculation (“I suspect . . .,” 204), and poetic rumination (“Cuba is a country, but it has also shown itself to be a state of mind,” 215).

Christine Hatzky, *Cubans in Angola: South-South Cooperation and Transfer of Knowledge, 1976–1991*, examines Cuba foreign relations as a deep case study of internationalism in the practice.<sup>5</sup> The impact of Cuban participation in the war in Angola, and especially the decisive battle of Cuito Cuanavale (1987–1988), is well known and uniformly acknowledged as decisive “to secure the territorial integrity of Angola,” Hatzky writes (281). But the impact of the Cuban presence extended far beyond military assistance. Hatzky’s account fits well within the larger internationalist paradigm outlined by Randall, examining the Cuban commitment to military assistance, economic development, educational programs, and humanitarian endeavors in Angola. Between 1975 and 1991, an estimated four hundred thousand Cuban soldiers and fifty thousand civilians served in Angola. Whereas Randall surveys Cuban internationalism mostly from above and afar, as a matter of motives and intentions, Hatzky examines from below and within, as a matter of outcomes and consequences. What makes Hatzky so compelling is the depth of detail within finely granulated analysis of the day-to-day workings of the Cuba-Angola collaboration, of the ways that Cubans from all walks of life—soldiers, engineers, construction workers, teachers, and health-care practitioners—interacted with/within Angolan society, to change—or not—Angola, to be changed—or not—by Angola.

Steeped in archival records in Havana and Luanda, and richly informed through scores of interviews with Angolans and Cubans, Hatzky penetrates deeply into the substrata of this unique South-South collaboration. She offers a keen analytical framework in which to juxtapose Cuban and Angolan actors, within the context of a shared Third World sensibility, not as a Cuban “intervention” in Angola but as an “involvement,” a collaboration Hatzky writes “based on reciprocity” (170). Not all went well all the time, of course, and Hatzky acknowledges that the best of intentions often produced the worst of outcomes. Blurred lines of civil-military authority, ideological rifts, and cultural misunderstandings produced frequent friction. Collaboration was often impeded, Hatzky suggests, as a result of “Cubans’ conception of themselves as representatives of a superior culture” (285). Angolans were often the Cubans’ Other. Readers familiar with *cubaneo* would have no difficulty recognizing—indeed, anticipating—the hubris expressed by one of Hatzky’s Cuban interviewees: “[Angolans] lacked the concept of nationality that we have. They didn’t even have a clue as to what a province was. . . . We started to develop as a nation as early as Cespedes, if not earlier” (278). But it is true, too, Hatzky recognizes, that vast numbers of the nearly half-million Cubans who served in Angola between 1975 and 1991 “were neither prepared for the conditions they faced nor familiar with the cultural, ethnic, and linguistic peculiarities of Angola” (210).

<sup>5</sup> The Cuban presence in Africa early called the attention of scholars. The ground-breaking work of Piero Gleijeses, *Conflicting Missions: Havana, Washington, and Africa, 1959–1976* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), served as the signpost for future scholarship. Early works of Cuba in Africa include William LeoGrande, *Cuba’s Policy in Africa, 1959–1980* (Berkeley: Institute of International Studies, University of California, 1980); June Belkin and Carmelo Mesa-Lago, eds., *Cuba in Africa* (Pittsburgh: Center for Latin American Studies, University Center for International Studies, University of Pittsburgh, 1982); Edward George, *The Cuban Intervention in Angola, 1965–1991: From Che Guevara to Cuito Cuanavale* (London: Frank Cass, 2005); and Christabelle Peters, *Cuban Identity and the Angolan Experience* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

No need to idealize the Cuban presence in Angola. The Cuban rationale of its racial past as the logic of duty to Angola, Hatzky argues, represented a brilliant effort at creating an “interactive transatlantic space” (11) within which to transact Cuban foreign relations, but in the end was “political propaganda that served the ambitions of the Cuban government on the foreign political stage” (279–280). Nor does Hatzky suggest that the Angolans lived happily ever after. Cuban efforts at nation building produced mixed results. The asymmetries associated with the disparate development between Cuba and Angola allowed Cubans to exercise disproportionate authority in the organization of administrative infrastructures. The lack of qualified Angolan teachers, education specialists, and administrators, for example, allowed Cubans easily enough to establish a preponderant presence in the Angolan education system, to the detriment of the development of a cadre of Angolan educators.

In Cuba, the experience reached deeply into unsettled memories of the men and women, and their families, who served in Angola. Cuba paid dearly for its internationalist commitment in Angola. The number Cubans who perished in Angola has never been confirmed, but estimates range as high as ten thousand. The Cuban experience in Angola remains largely within the realm of official silence, which Hatzky describes as a “culture of silence” (280). Very unsettled memories indeed.

This is a serious book that warrants serious reading. It is not meant for the faint of heart. There is something of a relentlessness to the narrative, which in turn is sustained with an equally relentless documentation. It probes deeply and ranges widely. Its authority resides in the power of details meticulously assembled in the service of an argument to which the reader must inevitably render homage. For the time being, Hatzky’s is the definitive study on Cuba in Angola.

Jonathan Brown, in *Cuba’s Revolutionary World*, examines another form of Cuban foreign relations, calling attention to the impact of the Cuban revolution in Latin America, specifically the degree to which the revolution acted to summon restive spirits to the lofty task of social change. Brown is most assuredly correct to note that “the Cuban revolution caught the imagination of Latin America’s youth” (452), that Playa Girón “electrified university students throughout the hemisphere” (192), and that Cuba “inspired the restless youth of Venezuela” (256).

Havana was not slow to recognize the implications of the yearnings aroused by the triumph of the revolution. Cubans were themselves infatuated with the allure of their revolution, persuaded that it could serve to provide a usable theoretical model through which to replicate revolution elsewhere. The leadership did not hesitate. Within one year of the triumph of the revolution, Che had completed the manual “La guerra de guerrillas,” with the first chapter propounding “Principios generales de la lucha guerrillera.”<sup>6</sup> Not to leave anything to chance, Brown notes, the Cubans “devoted valuable resources to promote the spread of their revolutionary example” (194).

Brown is concerned less with Cuba as example than with Cuba as exponent, specifically of the “export of revolution.” Both Brown and Randall deploy the construct “to export revolution,” but from very different perspectives. Randall understands the phrase to have served as mischievous pretext devised by the Americans “to justify U.S. Cuba policy and every covert and overt act of aggression against the smaller nation” (90). Brown argues that the export of revolution “amounted to a religious calling. A mission” (195). Where Randall describes the idea of the export of revolution as the Cuban commitment to social justice, Brown characterizes the export of revolution as “foreign adventures” (195).

Making superb use of declassified records of the US Central Intelligence Agency and the Department of State, as well as the rich manuscript collections housed in multiple US presidential libraries, Brown details the encounters between Cuba and the United States at close quarters in faraway places, where both countries confronted one another by way of third parties in the form of allies, proxies, and surrogates. Through a series of well-crafted case studies of Venezuela, Brazil, Peru, Panama, Argentina, and Bolivia, Brown meticulously unravels many of myths and misconceptions of the secret wars in Latin America during the 1960s, a dense drama of bewildering intricacies and contradictory complexities: insurgency/counterinsurgency, espionage/counterespionage, overt subversion/covert operations, Cuban-trained guerrillas vs. US-trained Rangers, the Dirección General de Inteligencia vs. the Central Intelligence Agency. A reasonable reader cannot but pause to ponder the utter incongruity of these aspects of Cuban foreign relations; the United States and “little Cuba,” in Randall’s words, squaring off against one another in a continental struggle for “hearts and minds” in Latin America, and (it should be noted in passing) with Cuba also challenging the Soviet Union for leadership of the worldwide revolution. Brown is wholly persuasive in suggesting that the Americans did indeed take Cuba seriously. “Opposition to Cuba trumped all other [US] policies for Latin

<sup>6</sup> Ernesto Che Guevara, “La guerra de guerrillas,” in *Ernesto Che Guevara: Obra revolucionaria*, ed. Roberto Fernández Retamar (Mexico City: Ediciones ERA, 1967), 27.

America" (455), he explains. In response to Cuba, the United States "moved to treble and quadruple the number of intelligence agents in American embassies through the region" (200) and moved also to expand the number of military advisors and to increase military assistance. And at least twice, in Brazil and Uruguay, the United States deployed trained instructors to teach the methods of torture.

The Americans also understood that the challenge of revolution lay in the example of Cuba, specifically the degree to which the Cuban experience seemed to suggest a remedy to conditions of structural inequality, unyielding poverty, and arrested economic development—all eminently plausible reasons for men and women of good will to contemplate new strategies of social change. If the Cuban revolution did indeed capture "the imagination of Latin American youth" it was because youth, among others, perceived in the Cuban experience the means with which to redress historical grievances. The Alliance for Progress tacitly acknowledged what the Cubans explicitly propounded: Cuba was not the threat to the status quo in Latin America. History was. That the Cubans appeared to have confronted History, and prevailed, served to expose the vulnerability of political systems resting precariously atop dysfunctional institutions. For the Cubans the "principios generales de la lucha guerrillera" were always predicated on the proposition that *la guerrilla* was "el motor pequeño para echar a andar el grande."<sup>7</sup>

Brown offers a splendid assessment of the failure of the guerrilla to "sweep all Latin America toward the revolutionary anti-imperialist triumph" (456). US intervention contributed to the failure of the guerrilla, of course. The Americans did indeed mobilize mightily against "little Cuba." But the failure of guerrilla warfare as a method, to paraphrase Che, also had much to do with the flawed model on which it was based. On the matter of the efficacy of the guerrilla—the *foco*—as a means of social change, to which so many men and women tragically committed themselves after 1959, it turns out that Che got it all wrong. "No one could affirm that in Cuba the political and social conditions were totally different from those of other countries of [Latin] America," Guevara pronounced in "Cuba: ¿Excepción histórica o vanguardia en la lucha anticolonialista?"<sup>8</sup> Well, actually, they were. The historical context of "political and social conditions" in Cuba did indeed make the island an "exceptional case." Some of the most prominent conditions that served in the aggregate to make Cuba different were a weak Catholic church; preponderant foreign participation in the economy; a vast rural proletariat; a corrupt army and police—"officers were more interested in corruption and enjoying the opportunities for graft," US Ambassador Earl E. T. Smith later wrote; a collapsing monoculture economy; massive cyclical un- or underemployment; a deep-seated nationalist frustration buoyed by an equally deep-seated anti-*yanqui* sentiment; and historic racial divisions. In the end, Che the Argentine was not in a position to appreciate fully the interior histories from which the Cuban revolution emerged or to understand the traditions that had summoned Cubans to heroic action as a matter of legacy, or, for that matter, even to recognize the unique social environment of Oriente Province, in which the Ejército Rebelde established so secure a hold so early.

But it is more complicated still. The theory of *la guerrilla* as a means to reproduce the success of the Cuban experience also neglected—and indeed, much of the historiography continues to neglect—the decisive importance of the men and especially the women of *la clandestinidad*. Brown's description of *la clandestinidad* as "sympathizers variously organized in groups of poorly armed urban activists" (2) fails to acknowledge the breadth or appreciate the depth of the urban resistance. Brown notes that Guevara's "writings discounted the role played by the urban middle class in the Cuban revolutionary war" (450). To be sure. But this not an issue about the role of the urban middle class. Cubans of all classes enrolled in the ranks of *la clandestinidad*. The Frente Obrero del MR 26/7 organized units of Acción y Sabotaje to hamper production within factories, industrial plants, and sugar mills. Across the island, in large provincial cities and small interior towns, deep within the labyrinths of the urban underground, a far-flung network of many thousands of *combatientes* engaged in acts of sabotage and subversion to disrupt communication, interrupt transportation, and undermine the economy, to disseminate propaganda, to harry and harass "behind the lines" the repressive apparatus of the *batistato*.

The survival of the *combatientes* depended on concealment, of course. That same concealment has not served historians well, for it endured long after the triumph of the revolution, continuing to conceal their presence and obscure their participation in the revolutionary war. The men and women of *la clandestinidad* were unlikely to chronicle their deeds or record their acts, unlike members of the Ejército Rebelde, who recorded—and celebrated—each ambush and every skirmish. The soldiers kept diaries and journals. The civilians did not. There is, moreover, an internal politics to the obscurity to which the *combatientes* have

<sup>7</sup> Guevara, "La guerra de guerrillas," 70–71.

<sup>8</sup> Ernesto Che Guevara, "Cuba: ¿Excepción histórica o vanguardia en la lucha anticolonialista?," in *Ernesto Che Guevara: Obra revolucionaria*, ed. Roberto Fernández Retamar (Mexico City: Ediciones ERA, 1967).

been consigned. The master narrative of the triumph of the revolution is deeply inscribed in settled myths of the revolutionary war waged and won by the heroic guerrilla columns that swept out of the east—out of History—to liberate the island. Heroic narratives do not readily accommodate counternarratives. The “factor” of la clandestinidad is essential to understand Santiago de Cuba in November 1956, Cienfuegos in September 1957, and the general strike of April 1958. The factor of la clandestinidad is essential to understand the victories of Che Guevara in Santa Clara and Camilo Cienfuegos in Yaguajay. In sum, the factor of la clandestinidad is vital to understanding the complexities of the Cuban revolutionary war, thereupon truly to understand what we thought we already knew. And informed with that understanding, in the end, to come to appreciate how tragically flawed the *foco* was.

The achievements of the scholarship on the subject of Cuban foreign relations portend an auspicious future. The books under review, with their strengths (and weaknesses), serve to point the way forward. One can only anticipate with eagerness the day when relations between Cuba and the United States assume some semblance of normal, when Cuban and North American scholars are able to enjoy the opportunity to engage one another in respectful collaboration and together cooperate to expand a space adequate to accommodate the proposition of Cuban agency. A time too when Cuban scholars are free to consult the rich archival records and manuscript collections in the United States, without which much of Cuban history cannot be written. And, of course, to anticipate the day when North Americans gain wider access to Cuban archives and manuscript collections, thereby enhance the possibility of Cuba as subject in North American scholarship. Reliance on US government documents, Brown properly acknowledges, is not without hazard and cannot but serve to render inevitable the status of Cuba as object. US records can only tell one side of the story. But even that one side of the story is often incomplete. US government agencies declassify records selectively, often incompletely, at times arbitrarily, and sometimes not at all. Brown is persuaded that “most of Washington’s smoking guns [i.e., documents] are exposed” (453). Perhaps. But we know, too, that vast quantities of government records as old as the late 1930s and early 1940s remain subject to heavy redaction. On the larger point, however, Brown is most certainly correct to counsel discretionary caution, for until wider access to Cuban records is obtained the historical chronicle will continue to privilege the scholarly gaze from the North.

To examine the Cuba–United States confrontation in Latin America during the 1960s, moreover, implies the need to examine the archives of Venezuela, Brazil, Peru, Panama, Argentina, and Bolivia, among others. Surely these governments have something to contribute to an understanding of the conflicts waged within their national territories. Failure to consult these records cannot but make for anomalous epistemological hierarchies: United States as subject; Cuba as object; Venezuela (et al.) as scenery.

Researchers would do well to heed Brown’s counsel, to expand venues for dialogue between Cuban and North American scholars, to exchange perspectives, of course, but also to exchange knowledge of sources and access to those materials. No less important, to anticipate the time when the publications of Cuban scholars are routinely included among the books selected for review in important US journals, a practice necessary to take full measure of the “state of the scholarship.” Large questions persist, of course, suggesting the need to come to terms with a complicated and often contentious big history, one that endures riddled with a host of unsettled issues.

## Author Information

Louis A. Pérez Jr. is J. Carlyle Sitterson Professor of History and Director of the Institute for the Study of the Americas at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

**How to cite this article:** Pérez, Louis A., Jr. 2019. To Disquiet a Giant: Cuba, the United States, and the World. *Latin American Research Review* 54(4), pp. 1039–1046. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25222/larr.603>

**Submitted:** 03 May 2018

**Accepted:** 03 May 2018

**Published:** 11 December 2019

**Copyright:** © 2019 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

**LARR**

*Latin American Research Review* is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by the Latin American Studies Association.

**OPEN ACCESS** 