



The Cuba Reader: History, Culture, Politics

Aviva Chomsky (Editor) , Barry Carr (Editor) , Pamela María Smorkaloff (Editor)

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Cuba is often perceived in starkly black and white terms—either as the site of one of Latin America’s most successful revolutions or as the bastion of the world’s last communist regime. *The Cuba Reader* multiplies perspectives on the nation many times over, presenting more than one hundred selections about Cuba’s history, culture, and politics. Beginning with the first written account of the island, penned by Christopher Columbus in 1492, the selections assembled here track Cuban history from the colonial period through the ascendancy of Fidel Castro to the present. *The Cuba Reader* combines songs, paintings, photographs, poems, short stories, speeches, cartoons, government reports and proclamations, and pieces by historians, journalists, and others. Most of these are by Cubans, and many appear for the first time in English. The writings and speeches of José Martí, Fernando Ortiz, Fidel Castro, Alejo Carpentier, Che Guevara, and Reinaldo Arenas appear alongside the testimonies of slaves, prostitutes, doctors, travelers, and activists. Some selections examine health, education, Catholicism, and santería; others celebrate Cuba’s vibrant dance, music, film, and literary cultures. The pieces are grouped into chronological sections. Each section and individual selection is preceded by a brief introduction by the editors.

The volume presents a number of pieces about twentieth-century Cuba, including the events leading up to and following Castro’s January 1959 announcement of revolution. It provides a look at Cuba in relation to the rest of the world: the effect of its revolution on Latin America and the Caribbean, its alliance with the Soviet Union from the 1960s until the collapse of the Soviet bloc in 1989, and its tumultuous relationship with the United States. *The Cuba Reader* also describes life in the *periodo especial* following the cutoff of Soviet aid and the tightening of the U.S. embargo.

For students, travelers, and all those who want to know more about the island nation just ninety miles south of Florida, *The Cuba Reader* is an invaluable introduction.

The Cuba Reader: History, Culture, Politics Details

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From Reader Review The Cuba Reader: History, Culture, Politics for online ebook

Jeffrey Sylvester says

“The Cuba Reader: History, Culture, Politics” by Chomsky, Carr and Smorkaloff is a comprehensive anthology of everything Cuban. The book is mostly a series of selected essays of the general historical and cultural developments that have taken place in Cuban society. Topic areas include “Indigenous Society and Conquest”, “Sugar, Slavery and Colonialism”, “Independence” and everything revolution and post-revolution.

The bulk of the essays I chose pertained to indigenous society, conquest, and revolution. I am interested primarily in Cuba’s pre-Columbian societies, the exploits of Columbus, the ensuing genocide and resistance, manifests by Castro and the evolution of the U.S. rules regarding Cuba. The essays I read were short, well-written and very informative and there a multitude of topics and formats to choose from. Some essays read like a text whereas others are forms of literature whether a classic story, poem or interview. I should caution however that the copy I borrowed was a used text from a 400-level political science class so the works do have some substance.

This book is good for travelers and those looking to develop a comprehensive understanding of the island’s socio-political and economic evolution.

In my case, I am traveling to Cuba and have read several travel guides that provide cursory overviews of Cuba’s history and present experience but wanted to develop a deeper understanding of the context surrounding that which I see while there. This book provides that and much more.

4 stars for the Editors!

Barbara says

An excellent book of articles, stories, poems, etc. on Cuba. An excellent resource book for those interested in this island nation.

Emily Komp says

Such a great overview! Learned so much about so many aspects, this book covers so much and although it is long and may seem daunting, it is actually an easy read!

Pamela J says

A decent selection of primary sources, e.g. US govt. docs, Fidel Castro's speeches, poetry, & Cuban writings unavailable in English. I appreciate the interdisciplinary approach to the collection. If read with Sanchez's

blog or Havana Real, readers can determine on their own if the Revolution has succeeded...

Christa says

I had to read this book for my History of Cuba course. Very interesting perspectives and great information about the history of Cuba

Sher says

I'm giving this book a 5 star review, because it's a remarkable survey of Cuban history and culture using a vast variety of primary sources from poetry, images, songs, essays, excerpts from novels and short stories, news events, biography, memoir. The down side of the book for me, is that I should have read straight chronological history of Cuba first and then come in and read the primary sources second so that they would enhance what I already knew about Cuba. I don't think this book is a first choice if you need a history of Cuba- better to get background first, then read this terrific collection.

Meghan says

Absolutely exhaustive in it's timespan and breadth, with plenty of primary-sourced historical documents, this text is an excellent starting point to understand Cuba's people and culture.

Sergio says

Wow. After reading most of this book my understanding and appreciation for the "Cuban" condition has increased tenfold. It can be a laborious read and the breadth of material would make most readers cringe at the prospect of trying to finish it. But it's worth in for the most part.

Viriam says

A great and in depth world tour of Cuba. This book taught me quite a bit about the history and culture of Cuba, about which i knew very little.

The book has many sections, written by subject matter experts, which really convey a multiperspective and multifaceted view of Cuba. it is not propaganda, either American or Cuban, but rather a range of views. The only thing i found a little hard to follow was traversing from one viewpoint to the next. Worth reading if you want to know Cuba.

Mary Jo says

It is a little dense, but if you are planning a trip to Cuba, it is a wonderful intro to the history of Cuba based on contemporary published pieces.. Also a great companion read to "The Cuba Libre" story on Netflix.

Purple Iris says

Parts I through IV seem to be organized chronologically. Then by theme after the Revolution. Literary pieces seem to be grouped together. They seem to be used to illustrate specific themes or historical moments. Meaning the logic behind their use is not motivated by literary history.

Introductory remarks for each piece vary from one to three or four paragraphs. Very little to no secondary sources or citations in introductory remarks. 1 - 1 1/2 page introductions per section.

Very interesting. Lots of different testimonials.

Shawn says

I chose this book in preparation for a cultural exchange trip to Cuba that I hope to do later this year. This book is a delightful odyssey through the history of a unique island country that has been significantly influenced by the United States.

The presentation of this history is made via an assemblage of excerpts from writings that span everything from the log of Columbus to the speeches of Kennedy and Castro. Each is prefaced with an informative introduction. This manner of presentation allows the reader to experience the incidents directly from the historical character relating it. In many ways, this is the best way to present history because it forces a synthesizing of diverse opinions, as opposed to an entire narrative dominated by the ideology of a single author.

I must say that, after reading this, I feel like I've already been to Cuba! This book motivated me to download and listen to Cuban musicians, like Celia Cruz and Gloria Estefan. I had the whole family singing "Guantanamera", a highly popular Cuban song made popular in the U.S. by Pete Seeger, with lyrics from the Cuban poetry of Jose' Marti. I spent pretty much a whole Saturday preparing Cuban recipes for picadillo, empanadas and papas rellenas. I even found myself corresponding with Cuban writers by email.

Pete Seeger - Guantanamera

The Spanish:

Cuba was first dominated by the Spanish; who subjected the native Indians to servitude. As elsewhere in the Americas, the indigenous population declined by 90 to 100 percent wherever Europeans settled. The indigenous Indians were forced to work in gold mines; and their religion was ridiculed by the Spanish, who sought to convert them to Catholicism. Their leaders were murdered and they were harassed and humiliated.

This book presents the judicial testimony of Vasco Parcallo de Figueroa, who in 1522 was asked if he had ordered the cutting off of testicles, members, and other body parts of some of the native Indians, ordered

others be burned, and ordered the victims to eat the severed parts. He testified that he had done so. Remarkably, his deposition shows that he was always careful to order mass to be said before torturing the Indians.

A story is presented about an Indian named Hatuey who crossed over to Haiti with a basket of gold in his canoe to show the Haitians the only God the Spanish adored. Hatuey was eventually burned at the stake by the Spanish; but before they set fire to him, they told Hatuey that if he were baptized he would go to heaven with the Christians. Hatuey responded that if that was where the Christians were going then he'd prefer to go to hell!

This persecution by the Spanish resulted in the near extinction of the Indo-Cuban population, although it is reported that some few (with family names of Rojas and Ramirez) have sustained themselves. However, whatever Indians are left, are now absorbed into the population. The race that originally populated the Cuban archipelago is predominantly extinguished. European, African, and Asian peoples have since migrated to Cuba, creating a radically new culture. It is a process known as "transculturation" and is distinguished from the U.S., where immigrants tended to acculturate into the mainstream or 'melting pot'. In contrast, Cuba maintains alternative cultural and ethnic identities that are unique and distinct. Nevertheless, the tree of Cuban multi-ethnicity has a definite Ibero-African trunk.

By the 1500's the Spanish has established plantations in Cuba on which they exploited imported African labor to produce sugar.

Environmental Exploitation:

Because wood was required to fuel the boiling, of sugar cane juice, large tracts of land became barren of trees. Huge stands of precious wood – mahogany, cedar, ebony, and giant palms were destroyed. Sugar was planted in cleared areas until the soil lost its productivity and then new forests were destroyed for sugar planting. Sugar exterminated the forests. The loss of the forests caused soil erosion and the drying up of thousands of streams of fresh water.

Man continues to exploit his planet and such exploitation will continue until transitory interests are somehow subordinated to the greater and eternal interests of all humanity. Of Cuba's legendary mahogany forests, virtually nothing remains today. Cuba is, in many ways, an Eden destroyed.

Slavery:

Slaves that could escape the plantations would join indigenous inhabitants in the forests under the common idea of freedom. Black migrants gave eastern Cuba much more of an Afro-Caribbean identity than western Cuba. The largest city in eastern Cuba is Santiago de Cuba and it continues to be the center of Afro-Caribbean culture.

When the African slave trade was abolished, Caribbean sugar planters imported Mexican and Chinese workers, under a contractual arrangement that was simply slavery in disguise.

In contrast to the sugar plantation, the coffee estate was a perfect garden, with evenly pruned shrubs intersected by broad alleys of palms, oranges, mangoes, lemons, pomegranates, fragrant flowers, roses, lilies, pineapples, and beautiful trees. The coffee tree attains a height of 12-18' if left to nature. It has a gray bark. The flower blossoms are white and abundant. The berries are first green, then white, then yellow and finally a bright red. Besides coffee, the coffee cultivator plants his grounds in maize, sweet potatoes, yams, and rice, for his own consumption. The coffee plantation does not amass as large a fortune as the sugar plantation, but it witnesses no over tasked labor of slaves. Coffee plantations were first introduced in the Caribbean by the

French; initially on Martinique and then on Jamaica.

U.S. Intervention:

The Cubans began a War of Independence against the Spanish in 1895. The U.S. intervened and went to war with Spain in 1898 (The Spanish-American War). The U.S. quickly defeated the Spanish in only 112 days and Cuba became a U.S. protectorate. The U.S. also obtained Puerto Rico and the Philippines from the Spanish. The U.S. had the support of many people in the upper and middle classes, because they sought greater political stability amidst the sea of blacks. Spain claimed that the war was a race war. Euro-Cuban elites consolidated their hold on political and economic power after the war.

The vast majority of Cuban blacks were ignorant of the state of racial conflict in the U.S. and it wasn't until ten years after the war (1908) that black political resistance in Cuba would coalesce to form a group called the "Independents of Color". Education and property qualifications for jobs and public office excluded Afro-Cubans. The "Independents of Color" sought to allow anybody born in Cuba to participate in public administration, to abolish the death penalty, to create correctional school-ships for youthful offenders instead of prison, free education, vocational schools, and an eight-hour work day. In 1912 the Independents were crushed by armed attack by government troops with white militias. Thousands of Afro-Cubans were massacred.

Cuba became a Republic in 1902, but its independence was interrupted by U.S. military interventions. U.S. troops entered Cuba and occupied the country from 1906 to 1909, in 1912, and from 1917 to 1920. The Platt Amendment to the Cuban constitution was incorporated under U.S. dominance to provide for the U.S. base at Guantanamo Bay. Cuba was granted access to the U.S. sugar markets and U.S. manufactured goods flooded the Cuban economy.

Music:

Cuban rumba music and dance originated among the Cuban blacks. It has African antecedents and likely began as remembered fragments of songs and steps from Africa. It was eventually transported throughout the world, where it further evolved in various forms, even becoming a form of ballroom dancing called rhumba. Today, the Rumba is one of Cuba's most potent national symbols. The flavor of the music remains evident in popular modern performance from Cubans like Gloria Estefan and clearly exhibits the influences of African-derived elements, extending potently into American music culture. Rumba is one of the four representative creations from Cuban social dance of the 19th century, along with Conga, Danzon, and son.

Son music became popular from 1910-1920 and arose in the poor Cuban neighborhoods among the illiterate. Son involved a fusion of both African and Iberian cultures. Initially Son was viewed as "barbaric" or vulgar, by the upper classes, who called it the senseless pounding of children. The instrument that aroused the most antagonism was the bongo and municipalities actually passed laws against its use. However, between 1925 and 1928 son was transformed from a marginal genre into one considered the epitome of national expression. Son eventually attracted the middle classes and spread throughout Latin America. By 1930, son had achieved widespread popularity in Cuba but began to lose ground to big horn bands by the end of the decade. Genres that emerged later, such as the mambo, were a fusion of son and North American big bands. African influence is still observable today in Cuban music.

Gloria Estefan

Underpinnings for Communism:

Social movements in Cuba were exacerbated by the Mexican Revolution of 1910. Extreme inequalities made people wonder how anyone could contend to be Christian and yet support oppressive political ideologies. For them, denying freedom to a segment of society was evil and, when left unopposed, it resulted in oppressive governmental forms such as monarchy, apartheid, and slavery. These social movements contended that such oppressions are best alleviated through the spiritual growth of mankind.

In 1920, the wild rise in sugar prices ended with mass unemployment and bankruptcies. The Wall Street crash in 1929 was disastrous to world capitalism. The world was producing more sugar than it was using so prices eventually collapsed. Depression is the result of over-production, which is a failure of Adam Smith's "invisible hand" to properly reduce supply. As the contemporary Columbia professor and economist, Joseph Stiglitz, so eloquently says: "the reason the 'invisible hand' often seems invisible is that it is often not there."

After the 1920's, tourism and real estate investment came to the fore. Prohibition in the U.S. brought wealthy Americans to Cuba to drink and gamble, including the Florida mafia. Even so, sugar prices continued to drop, the economy as a whole floundered, unemployment rose, and wages plummeted. The government responded to the complaints of the citizenry with violence, beggars filled the streets, and prostitution employed tens of thousands of women.

The dictatorship of Gerardo Machado arose in 1925 but lost U.S. support during a wave of worker mobilizations in 1933. The Machado government eventually collapsed. People flooded the streets and began killing members of the Machado government and their families. The Machado palace was looted as well as the home of every cabinet member. Following the orgy of killing, a squadron of cavalry moved in with machine guns to restore order; but it was the same army that had served Machado. The insurrection alarmed business interests because of the emergence of an insurgent working class and a Communist party. Workers revolted and took control of some of the sugar companies. The servants of some households revolted. The U.S. response was hostile because American property holdings in Cuba were threatened. The politics of Cuba degenerated into a vortex of political violence, gangster-ism, and corruption. Assassinations and street battles were common. The gangster groups became fierce opponents of the Communists.

Fidel Castro:

In 1952 Batista gained power by coup d'etat. Batista suppressed the gangster groups and banned the communist party. Fidel Castro fought against Batista. Castro assaulted the Cuban Army in Santiago de Cuba in 1953 but was defeated. However, at his trial, he delivered his most famous speech: "History will absolve me", which catapulted him into the limelight. In this speech, Castro revealed that 85% of the small farmers in Cuba paid exorbitant rents, lived under constant threat of eviction, and that more than half of all the land in Cuba was owned by foreigners. So much of the history of the peasant class, in all countries, is the prohibition of having even a simple garden to raise personal sustenance without having to provide the bounty to a wealthy land owner or protector. Castro revealed that 2.8 million of the rural Cuban populace lacked electricity, 30% could not write their names, and 99% knew nothing of Cuba's history.

Castro returned to Cuba from exile in Mexico in 1956 and overthrew Batista in 1959. The communists prevailed in Cuba precisely because no other governmental form addressed the plight of the impoverished population. The Cuban Revolution was part of worldwide anticolonial and revolutionary ferment that followed World War II.

A new left had emerged in the U.S. that was initially supportive of Castro. It was part of the anti-war movement of the 60's. Castro had landed to conquer the Cuban homeland from Batista in the same year that Martin Luther King led the successful Montgomery bus boycott. Fidel was greeted by ecstatic crowds in

New York, Washington, D.C., Princeton, and Harvard during his triumphal U.S. tour in April of 1959. However, the admiration generated by Fidel Castro is completely absent from accounts published after the U.S. broke with Cuba; and in its place emerged a new witch-hunt for anyone with pro-Castor inclinations. Fidel, who had initially enjoyed support from the intellectual left, was now portrayed as the master of deceit.

The collapse of the Batista dictatorship created confusion in the U.S. State Department. The paramount concern of the Eisenhower administration was to deny political power to Fidel Castro and replace him with a pro-capitalist government. The CIA penetrated Cuban institutions, security forces, and labor movements with its propaganda. The CIA was unsuccessful due to the extent to which Castro had mobilized his working-class constituency.

In response to U.S. policies and actions opposing the revolution Castro stated the following in a speech:

“The authorities of the powerful nations are careful not to permit aggression against other powerful nations, and yet they permit these actions against nations like us. They are threatening us with economic strangulation with the intent of terrorizing us into renouncing our magnificent revolutionary reforms and give up our hope of creating social justice here in our island. The problem is that if we plant rice, we interfere with foreign interests; if we produce cotton, we interfere with foreign interests, if we cut down electric tariffs, we interfere with foreign interests; if we make a Petroleum law, we interfere with foreign interests, if we carry out land reform, we interfere with foreign interests; if we make a mining law, we interfere with foreign interests; if we try to find new markets for our country, we interfere with foreign interests. If we attempt to sell at least as much as we buy; we interfere with foreign interests. In the past we have been allowed to harvest only evil. We do not wish to do harm to anyone; we do not wish to jeopardize any other people in any part of the world; we wish only to live by our own labor; we wish only to live from the fruits of our own intelligence and wish only to live by the work of our own hands.” –Fidel Castro

Castro granted generous tracts of land to 100,000 or so tenant farmers, sharecroppers, and squatters, which freed them from having to hand over nearly half of their crops to absentee landlords. Basic social services became free for everyone, including schooling, medical care, medicines, social security, water, burial services, sports facilities, and public phones. The costs of electricity, gas, and public transport were reduced significantly. Gambling and the numbers racket that preyed on the incomes of the poor were outlawed.

Castro implemented price controls and the wholesale food business was nationalized. Retail stores that insisted on hoarding and profiteering were taken over by the government. Eventually, food rationing was implemented. The former upper classes viewed the profound redistribution of their society's resources with horror, as Castro redistributed income away from foreigners and upper-income groups to the lowest-income groups and the lower middle classes, through price freezing, rent reductions, forced wage increases, forced employment, land transfers, and agrarian reform. Ignorant, backward people, living in miserable thatched huts suddenly had schools, medical aid, and better sustenance. Because such changes were immediate and radical, such people supported everything the Revolution did.

Before the revolution, the lives of the Cuban poor were dominated by foreign sugar companies that held most of the land. Castro took this land from the companies. Land rents were abolished. Tenant farmers, sharecroppers, and squatters were given title to the land they worked. Peasants were given a minimal of 67 acres plus the right to buy another 100 acres. But the larger estates were converted to state farms and cooperatives. A massive literacy campaign was initiated.

In 1961, Castro outlawed prostitution and instituted a system to rehabilitate prostitutes. In 1975, the revolutionary government passed a comprehensive set of laws guaranteeing equality for women. The Cuban government went through periods in the later 1960's and 1970's of harsh and sometimes violent repression against homosexuals. Homosexuals were hauled off to re-education camps.

Che Guevara:

Castro was aided in the revolution by Che Guevara, an Argentinean who is a martyr and persisting myth in Cuba. Guevara called for the manifestation of “a new man”, motivated by moral incentives instead of monetary incentives. Guevara contended that heroes of capitalism, like Rockefeller, were only able to emerge through suffering and depravity, which was instrumental to the accumulation of fortune. Guevara viewed capitalism as “a contest among wolves”, wherein one can win only at the cost of the failure of others. Guevara spoke of the development of a social consciousness, wherein men increasingly understand the need for incorporating themselves into society as a whole, to walk in unity, and to commune with one another. Guevara saw man as reflected in the creativity and the worthiness of his work effort. Guevara said that work must change from being “labor power sold” and instead become “an emanation of the man, his contribution to the common life, and the fulfillment of his social duty”. Guevara grasped the injustice inherent when human beings are excused from work because of birthright or pedigree; and that such process essentially retards the privileged from achieving self-actualization. Guevara believed that a man truly reaches his full human condition when he produces without being compelled by physical necessity to sell himself as a commodity. Guevara saw his philosophy as the idea of making “love of the people” ones most sacred cause.

****Continued in Comments Section Below****

AskHistorians says

These are a series of country studies that provide a valuable overview of various Latin American countries. They use both primary and secondary sources by eyewitnesses and important scholars respectively to illuminate key periods of each country’s history. They also include a trove of images, maps, and fine art. Each volume focuses on a single country. Currently, Duke has published readers about the Dominican Republic, Chile, Paraguay, Guatemala, Ecuador, Perú, Costa Rica, Cuba, México, Argentina, and Brazil

Bill says

Everything you could have possibly ever wanted to know about Cuba--and a whole bunch of stuff you never wanted to know. "Exhaustive" would be an understatement in describing this book. You'll need to replenish your electrolytes after reading this book.

Dick says

Excellent! Worth staying with, Lit..Politics...and History.
