

Review – Community and Culture in Post-Soviet Cuba

Written by Jennifer Lambe

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JENNIFER LAMBE, JUL 20 2015

Community and Culture in Post-Soviet Cuba

By: Guillermina De Ferrari

New York: Routledge, 2014

How did the Cuban state survive the 1991 collapse of the Soviet Union, its primary economic patron? The disintegration of the Soviet bloc brought dire circumstances to its island partner, which entered what Fidel Castro euphemistically dubbed the “Special Period in Time of Peace.” Widespread scarcity—and the state’s inadequate response to it—ushered in broad disaffection and should, the argument goes, have portended the collapse of the revolutionary state. So why didn’t it?

That question has driven more than a few monographs in fields as diverse as political science, anthropology, sociology, and literary criticism. Guillermina De Ferrari’s *Community and Culture in Post-Soviet Cuba* offers another take on the question from the vantage point of the latter discipline, and, in particular, through a critical analysis of Cuban writers and artists and their response to the crisis. De Ferrari argues that the much-commented “disenchantment” of the post-Soviet period stems from the severing of a fundamental bond between ethics and politics, “expectations and reality,” “theoretical conscience” and “daily conscience” (1). In the “Socialist social contract,” she argues, a loyal populace is built through the delivery of crucial services by the state and thus accedes to the relinquishing of certain rights: specifically, as articulated by Albert Hirschman, the right to “voice” and “exit.” This contract had especially ambivalent implications for a revolutionary intellectual class, which had access to official patronage and therefore forms of travel and self-expression unavailable to the majority. At the same time, however, an intellectual was required to make “full use of his or her voice” to articulate “full allegiance to the state” (5).

As De Ferrari points out, the Socialist social contract dramatically unraveled in the post-1991 context, when the state was no longer able to provide basic services. The official role narrowed, she suggests, to the “nominal” defense of sovereignty, while the populace was expected to endure “unlimited hardship” (6). And yet, the state survived. De Ferrari’s analysis of that paradox guides her through a persuasive analysis of the cultural production of the post-Soviet period, an exemplary window onto a persistently “opaque” reality. In particular, she is concerned with the question of ethics in cultural representation, the varied ways in which writers and artists responded to the exhaustion of the revolutionary symbolic order—what De Ferrari, following Alain Badiou, calls its “truth process.” An expanded voice for Cuban artists was a direct consequence, she suggests, of the evanescence of government support, even as it dramatically shifted the terms of cultural engagement: from national to international publics, from state patronage to the free market, and from revolutionary belonging to conflicting loyalties.

De Ferrari characterizes two broad camps of response. The first, typified by writers like Jesús Díaz, Leonardo Padura, and Abel Prieto (all analyzed in Chapter 2), tended to operate, she asserts, within the “rules of revolutionary engagement” (23). Through a convincing analysis of what she calls the “friendship plot” in the works of those authors, De Ferrari arrives at the conclusion that even their ostensibly critical work inhabits the same ethics as the official order. Four salient themes—excellence, loyalty, honor, stoicism—locate the dramatized friendships between men within the logic of the revolutionary social contract. In this sense, Díaz and Padura articulate a critique from within, what De Ferrari polemically casts as a “timid attempt on the part of the intellectuals to renegotiate on new and better terms the rules that have governed the formation of social bonds as well as the production of art for over five

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decades” (59).

The author counterposes this ethically cognate critique with an ethically dissident one, exemplified by the work of authors like Ena Lucía Portela, Abilio Estévez, Antonio José Ponte, Guillermo Rosales, Wendy Guerra, Pedro Juan Gutiérrez, as well as artists, photographers, and filmmakers including José Manuel Fors, Abigail González, and Fernando Pérez. Observers of Cuban culture might be surprised to see those names sitting alongside each other, but De Ferrari is characterizing a broadly oppositional stance manifesting in different ways in different contexts. Departing from generational markers of cultural blocs, she insists that this group is united by fluidity and postmodernity, in contrast to the obdurate modernity of the other group. In this regard, and in dialogue with the official “masculinist” ethos, gender and sexuality represent a particularly important venue of postmodern dissent. De Ferrari paints this broad group as, variously post-utopian, neo-individualist, disidentifactory, queer, “perverse,” anticomunal, antagonistic, destructive, hyperreal, and self-referential. This alternative ethos (particularized in ways that cannot be spelled out here) turns away from, deconstructs, and atomizes the discredited social contract.

As an analysis of the intellectual class and its reaction to the Special Period, *Community and Culture* is convincing and often perceptive in its readings of individual works. Though the authors treated here have received ample coverage elsewhere, De Ferrari’s take is novel and synoptic enough to justify their reappearance. Admirable, too, is the broader framing in which she situates her literary analysis. Like other scholars who have examined this period, the author takes on big questions about hegemony, belonging, and the vicissitudes of the official symbolic order, and nimbly interweaves close readings with theoretical and philosophical ruminations. The book is less convincing, however, in its claims (muted after Chapter 1) about the persistence of the revolutionary state. Literature may well be, as De Ferrari insists, a “radical vocation of perpetual antagonism” (103), a “perfect laboratory for the testing of alternative worlds” (124), or even a profound ethical object. It is not, however, a straightforward representation of the revolutionary, post-Socialist subject, dissenting or otherwise. Unlike other works on the Special Period, De Ferrari does not incorporate popular culture as a source base, nor is mention made of actual rebellion here (neither the 1994 Havana protest known as the Maleconazo nor the exodus of migrants in the subsequent “balsero” crisis). A more limited frame of analysis is not only justified but also understandable, given the wide body of work available on these other topics. But I am not sure that arguments about the persistence of the revolutionary state can be made without reference to them.

Nevertheless, as a literarily grounded analysis of the intellectual class and its response to the Special Period, *Community and Culture* provides a compelling, astute, and thoughtful take on the political and ethical framing of post-Soviet cultural production. In dialogue with other works in this vein, De Ferrari offers a theoretically nuanced account of what it meant to live and create in a suddenly exhausted symbolic order. On that score, it also offers tantalizing material for comparison as present day Cuba confronts yet another “transition” of vast epistemological and ethical consequence.

About the author:

Jennifer Lambe (PhD, Yale University) is an Assistant Professor of Latin American and Caribbean history at Brown University. Her current book project, *Madhouse: Cuban History from the Margins*, traces the history of mental illness and mental healing in Cuba from the colonial period through 1980.