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The Absolution of History: Uses of the Past in Castro's Cuba

In his famous defence speech at the trial for his attack on the Moncada barracks in 1953, Castro declared: 'History will absolve me.'¹ The attempted storming of Moncada was the first act of armed struggle in the Cuban revolutionary war, which resumed at the end of 1956 with Castro's return from exile to launch a rural guerrilla movement against the dictatorship of Fulgencio Batista (1952–58). The guerrillas, supported by organized resistance in towns and cities, achieved a relatively quick victory two years later when Batista fled to the USA, enabling the revolutionaries to march triumphantly into Havana on 1 January 1959. Throughout the war, 'History will absolve me' functioned as the manifesto of the revolution, the founding text of what it promised for Cuba's future. Aside from that speech, which is mainly an indictment of the past, Castro made very few specific policy statements, preferring to mobilize as broad a constituency of support as possible by talking only of social justice and a restoration of the democratic and reformist Constitution of 1940. That Constitution, in one of many ironies of Cuban history, had been promulgated during the first presidency of Batista himself (1940–44), when he had operated in populist, rather than repressive mode. After the revolution, when the leaders opted to legitimize their government on the basis of 'direct' rather than procedural democracy, it was quietly dropped as a basis for policy. The centrality of 'History will absolve me' to the revolutionary struggle meant that history, rather than constitutionalism or ideology, was the key legitimating force behind the Cuban revolution.

Like most revolutionary regimes, Castro's government immediately took several highly-visible measures to signal its rejection of the past: the US-owned Havana Hilton was nationalized and renamed the Habana Libre; the barracks of Batista's henchmen were converted into schools; the casinos and brothels that had attracted wealthy (male) US tourists were closed; and formerly private beaches and recreation areas were opened up to the general public. Revolutions have often tended towards the puritanical, but in Cuba's case the clamp-down on vice was overtly political, signalling that the nation was no longer prepared to play the prostitute to the desires of US imperialists and their local lackeys. The government also pursued policies of both retribution and restoration in the name of history. Batista's armed forces were dissolved,

1 Fidel Castro, 'History Will Absolve Me' in Fidel Castro and Régis Debray, *On Trial* (London 1968).

as were all political parties implicated in the dictatorship; predictably, Batista supporters were purged from the state administration and the trade union hierarchy. Furthermore, the revolutionary leaders chose to dispense with civil liberties in their treatment of prominent members of Batista's notoriously brutal Rural Guard. These agents of Batista's repression were summoned before impromptu courts of 'revolutionary justice', indicted for their crimes against the Cuban people, and sentenced, usually to summary execution, without being permitted the formal procedures of a legal defence. For the first time, declared Castro, 'the torturers and murderers who have victimised so many good patriots throughout our history' were being 'called to account for their misdeeds'.² These revolutionary trials caused outrage in the USA, but met with widespread popular approval within Cuba. The government also confiscated goods misappropriated by Batistianos — 'This, too, for the first time in our history',³ returned them to their owners where possible, and restored jobs to workers who had been sacked by order of the dictatorship. Thus, the revolutionary government took its revenge, in the name of the people, against Batista supporters, who were depicted as the incarnation of all the oppressors in Cuban history. It further pursued the metaphor of a settling of accounts by means of necessarily limited but high-profile measures to right some of the wrongs done by the previous regime.

Having thereby consigned Batista and all his works to history's voracious dustbin, the revolutionary government embarked on a large-scale propaganda effort to represent itself as the culmination of Cuban history. This idea was employed by Castroites to convey a vision of socialism in which history was no longer a question of politics, or even of ideology, but primarily of morality — dedicated to the creation of a 'new person' committed to selfless solidarity and patriotic loyalty. It is this version of history (rather than Marxist-Leninist accounts) that has actually been dominant in the public arena (print, film, broadcasting, political speeches) for most of the post-revolutionary period. It depicts the wishes of the oppressed people as made historically manifest through the heroic martyrdom of a pantheon of revolutionary heroes. It is anti-capitalist in orientation and rhetoric but not Marxist in methodology. Its determinism is moral rather than economic; its emphasis on action rather than theory.

As a result of this revival of a loose Hegelianism, in several senses history did indeed effectively stop in Cuba on 1 January 1959. An annual series of commemorative events, often with re-enactments of key episodes in the revolutionary struggle such as the attack on Moncada and the Granma landing, and the celebration of anniversaries of the births and deaths of selected national heroes, both served to reinforce the impression of stasis. It is a telling detail that the Ministry of Culture recommended the use of a spoken chorus of

2 Fidel Castro, 'Análisis histórico de la Revolución' in Comité Central del Partido Comunista Cubano, *Informe al primer congreso* (Buenos Aires 1976), 6–51, 30.

3 *Ibid.*, 31.

six to twelve voices to familiarize people with historical events, recalling the moralistic functions of the Greek chorus.⁴ When Cubans refer to 'the Revolution' (always capitalized) they mean, customarily, everything that has happened since Castro came to power, so that more than four decades of change are condensed into a single process, subject to the same dynamics.⁵ History is thought of as what took place before the revolution, or *antes*, as it is popularly known. Likewise, the rich academic historiography produced by the many highly-talented Cuban historians working on the island under the revolutionary government has barely touched upon the post-1959 period. Virtually all the available material on it has been written by academics and activists from abroad — several of the most prominent of whom are Cuban exiles based in the USA, but the substantial body of which is the work of US and European scholars. When it eventually comes to *después* [after], Cuban historians will have to start virtually from scratch in trying to come to terms with the history of the Castro government, and there will surely be a renewed process of cultural decolonization as the Cubans seek to reclaim this latest part of their past from the usually able, often well-meaning, but almost invariably policy-oriented historical research of US Cuba-watchers. The situation will be complicated even further by the fact that about one-tenth of Cuba's population now lives in the USA, nurturing their own — also divided — versions of the nation's history.⁶ Sebastian Conrad's notion of 'entangled memories' could well help to illuminate the complex relations between varieties of Cuban history written on and off the island, although it would be premature to attempt such an undertaking. For the present, within Cuba itself the official version of the inexorable progress of the revolution, holding steadfast to its ideals despite the vicissitudes of superpower politics, continues to prevail, as it has done since the early 1960s, albeit increasingly by default.

To a large extent, then, at least until the late 1980s, the Cuban revolutionary regime devoured its own past, continuously reprocessing it in the form of new, enhanced recipes for a more appetizing future. Concomitantly, and wholly unsurprisingly, the government kept a watchful eye on precisely which morsels of pre-revolutionary history were to be consumed and digested by the population. Understandably perhaps, given his Jesuit education, Castro has never shown much inclination to leave the matter of his absolution to chance. From the outset, the revolutionary regime saw the teaching of history as a key element in mobilizing support, raising revolutionary consciousness and enforc-

4 Cuba, Ministerio de Cultura, Dirección de Orientación y Extensión Cultural, *Documentos normativos para las Casas de Cultura* (Havana 1980), 75.

5 See the results of fieldwork carried out from 1988 to 1990 by anthropologist Mona Rosendahl, in her *Inside the Revolution: Everyday Life in Socialist Cuba* (Ithaca, NY and London 1997). Rosendahl worked in one Cuban town, of 30,000 people, so her survey is clearly limited, but data of this kind is so rare as to be highly valuable.

6 For an attempt to find common ground between Cubans on the island and those in the USA about what it means to be Cuban, see Ruth Behar (ed.), *Bridges to Cuba* (Ann Arbor, MI 1995), although it contains little treatment of history, focusing mainly on literary and musical explorations of Cuban identity.

ing the identification of the Cuban nation with the revolutionary state. The first major vehicle for inculcating a sense of history was the much-imitated Cuban literacy campaign of 1961, when nearly three-quarters of a million uneducated Cubans were taught basic literacy and numeracy. Primers for this endeavour included extracts from the writings of national heroes and descriptions of their epic adventures in the cause of 'Cuba Libre' (Free Cuba). In an elementary propaganda device, acts of heroism and battles in the revolutionary war were introduced in place of the more customary apples and bananas as the elements of simple arithmetical problems. For example, a school workbook of 1962 posed the following question: 'On December 6, 1956, Fidel Castro and 81 other expeditionaries disembarked . . . at Las Coloradas beach, facing the Sierra Maestra. By land and by sea the forces of the tyranny bombarded them; 70 men lost their lives. How many expeditionaries from the [yacht] *Granma* began the epic struggle for the liberation of Cuba?'⁷ The teaching of national history was placed at the heart of the regime's propaganda effort, especially in primary and secondary schools, and remained there throughout the various educational reforms that have been undertaken (albeit in reduced form during the 1970s, when the history of the international workers' movement was given precedence). If anything, Cuban history became even more important after the withdrawal of Soviet aid in 1990, after which the regime had even more need to promote itself as an authentic manifestation of *cubanidad* (Cubanness).⁸

All of the above is familiar to historians of Cuba, and supports Louis A. Pérez Jr's well-known conclusion that history has acted as 'handmaiden to the revolution', '[serving] as a major source of moral subsidy [and] conferring . . . a sense of continuity'.⁹ In what follows, I shall not try to suggest — as academic convention might dictate — that it was all far more complicated than Pérez has claimed, because I think it is hard to make a convincing case that it was, at least with respect to the 1960s and 1970s. Instead, I will develop two main themes. First, as Pérez noted, there already existed a body of revisionist historiography challenging the liberal-positivist view of Cuba as having been led out of the darkness of Spanish superstition and barbarism into

7 Cuban Ministry of Education, 'Producir, Ahorrar, Organizar' (1962), translated in Richard F. Fagen, *Cuba: The Political Content of Adult Education*, Hoover Institution Studies, no. 4 (Stanford, CA 1964), 57–71, 63. The desired answer of 12 was mathematically correct but historically inaccurate. In fact, several more men survived the *Granma* landing and accompanied Castro up into the mountains to embark on guerrilla warfare, but the revolutionary mythology has always preferred to retain the echo of twelve disciples dedicated to the cause of revolution.

8 One of the stated aims of the Ministry of Education in the early 1990s was to re-establish the priority of teaching the history of Cuba in 'all fields of study', especially for teachers. Cuba, Ministry of Education, Report of the Republic of Cuba to the 44th International Conference on Public Education, *Organization of Education 1992–1994* (Havana 1994), 11 and 21.

9 Louis A. Pérez, Jr, 'In the Service of the Revolution: Two Decades of Cuban Historiography, 1959–79' in idem, *Essays on Cuban History: Historiography and Research* (Gainesville, FL 1995), 144–52, 148 and 145. Pérez was referring to the 1960s and 1970s, but the subsequent two decades offer even less evidence for any challenge to his main contention.

the bright dawn of enlightened progress and prosperity by the benevolent USA. The stock elements of post-revolutionary official history, namely anti-imperialism, the idea of the pseudo-republic from 1902 to 1958 and the *longue durée* of Cuba's struggle from the early nineteenth century onwards for true independence, had all been established by revisionists during the 1940s.¹⁰ The revolutionary leaders had read their works, and once in power took full advantage of the 'ideological conviviality between the revolution and revisionism'.¹¹ In many cases, all the government had to do was to reprint and distribute key texts that had been unavailable under Batista. So far so good, but more needs to be said here, especially about the conditions of production of this revisionist historiography, which emerged, I will argue, from a civil society that became sufficiently well-developed from the 1920s through to the 1940s to survive the intense if inefficient onslaught of the Batista regime.

For at least the first decade after the revolution — and this leads on to my second theme — Castro's government actively sponsored and promoted historical research, resulting in an efflorescence of Cuban historiography and the publication of several key works that were widely acclaimed not only in Cuba itself but also in the wider academic world. In that respect the revolution gave a new lease of life to the Cuban historical community. This section of civil society received sponsorship in return for allowing itself to be drawn in under the umbrella of the state, and the dangers of that became all too manifest as the regime began to cast a long shadow over intellectual freedom in the early 1970s, largely because of the implementation of Soviet-style economic and political organization. However, this should not detract from the fact that the initial results were highly creative. Moreover, the policies of the 1960s facilitated the training of a new generation of historians which, having endured the ideological restrictiveness of the period from the early 1970s until the late 1980s, emerged in the 1990s to offer the bases of a critique of the regime's monopoly over Cuba's past. We are dealing with two transitions here, neither of which fits entirely comfortably with the discourse associated with the term 'transition', which in the post-Cold-War world tends to imply a change from dictatorship to liberal democracy. The first one took place in 1959, from Batista's regime — undeniably a dictatorship — to the revolutionary government. The term dictatorship is not particularly illuminating in reference to Castro's rule, for it implies a level of coercion and arbitrariness of governance which is not fully supported by the relatively limited evidence available. However, the revolutionary government has offered no scope for any kind of accepted opposition, and has certainly been authoritarian in many key respects. The second transition to be discussed will be triggered when Fidel

¹⁰ Indeed, most of the revisionist themes could be identified as early as 1940 in an encyclopedia intended for a general audience, which noted that the errors and contradictions of Cuba's history as a nation state could be attributed largely to 'imperialism of an essentially economic nature, which made the country into an appendage' of the USA. Esteban Roldán Oliarte (ed.), *Cuba en la mano: Enciclopedia popular ilustrada* (Havana 1940; repr. Miami 1969).

¹¹ Pérez, op. cit., 147.

Castro either resigns or dies. Its outcome is highly uncertain, and as a prospective event it is, of course, strictly speaking out of the purview of historians. I introduce it briefly, however, because it is clearly a prospect that is informing the thinking of many of Cuba's historians. For several reasons, therefore, the Cuban case study does not quite fit the standard paradigm of transition from dictatorship to democracy. Nevertheless, I hope to show that it can offer interesting perspectives on the broader comparative questions addressed in this issue, not least in the evidence it provides that changes in historical perspective can precede and perhaps anticipate political transition.

Political engagement was a prominent feature of Cuban historiography from many decades before the revolution. Pérez dates it from the start of the republic in 1902, but it goes back far further than that. Like many post-colonial states, Cuba had long been acutely conscious of the role of history in struggles for independence. Unlike other Latin American countries, Cuba had already developed a powerful vision of national identity before becoming a nation state in 1902. Its failure to win independence along with Spain's other American colonies during the 1820s, the defeat of the first independence war of 1868–78 and the eventual compromised victory over the Spanish as a result of military intervention by the USA at the end of the second war of independence (1895–98) had all lent Cuban history an epic dimension well before 1959. From the outset, all the various constitutions of the Cuban republic made reference to history and called upon it as their witness and their sanction. The Constitution of 1901 contained the notorious Platt Amendment allowing for US political, economic and military intervention in Cuban affairs and explicitly attributing a key role to the USA in liberating Cuba from Spain. This claim was reiterated in the constitutional law following the revolution of 1933, its anti-imperialist rhetoric notwithstanding.¹² In the new Constitution of 1940, however, all reference to the US role in effecting Cuba's independence was eliminated, and a markedly nationalist tone was adopted. It was specified that Cuban history, geography and literature should be taught by native-born Cubans with texts written by native-born Cubans. Another article stipulated that all Cuban education, whether public or private, was to instil a spirit of *cubanidad* and human solidarity.¹³ Batista played a key role in drafting this constitution, but in 1952, having launched a coup, his revised document declared that the Constitution of 1940 had been betrayed, hence the need for a new version in accordance with 'the sacred principles of our true history'.¹⁴

It is a small irony in a history full of ironies that the institutions creating a

12 Academia de la Historia de Cuba, *Constituciones de la República de Cuba* (Havana 1952), 'Ley constitucional, 1934', 137–57, 137.

13 Academia de la Historia, op. cit., Constitution of 1940 [in facsimile], 195–241, Articles 51 and 56, 202.

14 Academia de la Historia, op. cit., Constitution of 1952, 245–354, 245.

solid basis for the promotion of the revisionist historiography that proved to be so useful to the revolutionary government were built during the pseudo-republic, particularly during Batista's first government in the early 1940s. It was under the first US military occupation (1898–1902) that a National Archive was organized, and a director appointed to run it. An Academy of History was established in 1910, and although it became a bastion of the conservative, positivist 'scientific' historiography that adopted the line that Cubans needed the USA to save them from themselves, it also functioned as an important institution for training historians at a time when history was scarcely even taught in the universities. It was from within the Academy that the first revisionists emerged, only to break away from it in the 1930s and 1940s. A Society of Cuban Folklore was founded by the Cuban state in 1923, followed by a Society of Afro-Cuban Studies, both of which sponsored important work on Cuba's African heritage. The state also funded a National Board of Archaeology and Ethnology, which helped to promote a series of significant findings about Cuba's pre-Columbian peoples, and convened a landmark meeting of Caribbean archaeologists in 1950. During Batista's first period in power (unofficially, 1934–40; as elected president, 1940–44), the Cuban state took several important measures to support historical research, establishing a municipal archive in Havana in 1937 with a permanent post for an official historian of the city, passing a much-needed law on the conservation of public documents in 1942, creating a permanent body to run the Cuban archives, and — most importantly — giving the main national archive a permanent purpose-built home after its years of peripatetic existence around various unsuitable locations in Havana. Batista also provided funds for the national archive to start publishing documents on Cuban history, which ran to 52 volumes by 1961, and for the Ministry of Education to publish the archival papers of national hero José Martí.¹⁵

The main institution for revisionist historiography, the Cuban Society for Historical and International Studies, was founded in 1940 by a group of historians led by Emilio Roig de Leuchsenring, who was famous for his pioneering history of the Platt Amendment (1935), and by then ensconced as the official historian of the City of Havana. The initial impetus to revisionism had come from the 1920s, when increasing concern about the dominance of the USA (which had returned for a second military occupation from 1906 to 1909, landed marines in 1912 and 1917, and intervened at the heart of Cuban government from 1920 to 1923) and disillusionment with Cuba's own political leaders prompted an intense debate about the state of the nation. Encouraged by Batista's national-popular government, in 1942 the Society launched a series of annual National Congresses of History, which aimed to bring together all those involved in researching and teaching history in order to reaffirm 'Cuban faith in the historical evolution of its nationality and [to]

¹⁵ Robert Freeman Smith, 'Twentieth-Century Cuban Historiography', *Hispanic American Historical Review*, XLIV, 1 (February 1964), 44–73, 53.

stimulate a healthy patriotism'.¹⁶ Twelve of these congresses were held (from 1942 to 1952), the second of which was inaugurated by President Batista himself. Each produced a set of resolutions on how the history of Cuba should be interpreted, and made recommendations concerning how history should be taught throughout the educational system. Many of their revisions were incorporated into official textbooks, especially but not solely after the revolution.

It was through the resolutions of these congresses that the key tenets of the revisionist version of Cuban history were established. Their main objective initially was the vindication of the second independence war of 1895–98, now known in Cuba, thanks to the efforts of the revisionists, as the Liberating Revolution. Before the 1940s, the corruption and collusion with US dominance displayed by Cuba's politicians, many of whom were veterans of the war of independence, had led to a widespread perception of all those who had survived as self-seeking traitors to the patriotic cause. The war was fundamentally misunderstood by the generations of the 1920s and 1930s, who had no conception of life under colonial rule, claimed Roig de Leuchsenring.¹⁷ The revisionists argued that the war had not been a failure, as its detractors claimed, and that the corrupt nature of the resulting republic did not in itself vindicate the arguments of those who had preferred autonomy for Cuba under continuing colonial rule from Madrid, on the grounds that Cubans were incapable of governing themselves. The war could not be blamed for the problems after 1902, they insisted, which they attributed to a series of factors, including the poor example of governance set by the Spanish, US intervention in the war and the subsequent military occupation, continuing economic dependence on the USA and the failure to implement effective educational reform. The war of 1895–98 should be seen as the direct continuation of the war of 1868–78 (the Ten Years War), indeed the whole period should be regarded as one single process, to be known as the Thirty Years War (1868–98). Noting that the second war had continued despite the deaths of two of its greatest leaders, Martí in 1895 and Antonio Maceo in 1896, Roig de Leuchsenring argued that this fact conclusively disproved the 'great men' theory of history and that the Liberating Revolution had been a 'movement of the Cuban people towards the realisation of its historical destiny'.¹⁸ The USA, far from being the benefactor that had brought independence to Cuba, had always been an enemy of Cuba's independence and freedom, it was claimed, and a litany of documents was cited in support of that argument.¹⁹ In 1946, Cuba's legislative body endorsed a resolution from the historical congress of 1943 that the Spanish-American War should henceforth be referred to as the Spanish-Cuban-American War.²⁰ The title of Roig de Leuchsenring's book,

16 Oficina del historiador de la ciudad de La Habana, *Revaloración de la historia de Cuba por los congresos nacionales de historia* (Havana 1959), 14.

17 See Roig de Leuchsenring's prologue, *ibid.*, 7–16, esp. 11–15.

18 *Ibid.*, 15.

19 *Ibid.*, 78 and 143–69.

20 Freeman Smith, *op. cit.*, 49.

Cuba Does Not Owe its Independence to the United States (1949),²¹ became a leitmotiv of official pronouncements.

The resolutions of the first congress in 1942 on the teaching of history provided the basis for Cuban educational policy until well into the 1960s. History should be taught as social history, it was stipulated, to show 'the integral evolution of society'.²² The positivist legacy in teaching should be eradicated, giving students of history a grasp of broad developments rather than minute detail and innumerable facts; a residue of scholasticism should also be eliminated, with no more rote learning or recitation, and schools should supplement their curriculum with visits to museums and historical sites.²³ The syllabus should be divided into three areas: General History, 'to develop the feeling of human solidarity'; History of the Americas, 'to foster a sense of continental union and brotherhood'; and History of Cuba, 'to consolidate the spirit of our nationality'.²⁴ Martí's *Manifiesto of Montecristi*, which was the founding text of the Second War of Independence, should be 'the basis of Cuban ideology' because it brought together 'a profound sense of nationality, an embrace of the whole American continent and a universal inspiration and reach'.²⁵ As recommended, it was reproduced by the Ministry of Education in cheap editions for use in schools, as was the Constitution of 1940.

By the time the revolution came to power, then, historians in Cuba had already done much of the work involved in decolonizing the nation's history. Positivist and Hegelian approaches to history had been decisively challenged, and the influence of the *Annales* school had been felt through Cuban historians who had studied in Mexico. Social and economic historians had started looking at new sources to uncover what Juan Pérez de la Riva called, in the title of a landmark work, the history of those without history.²⁶ During the 1940s, Marxist methodology had been incorporated into Cuban historical analysis, the case for which was argued by Carlos Rafael Rodríguez in his classic essay, *El marxismo y la historia de Cuba* (1943). Even political liberals such as Roig de Leuchsenring wrote about US–Cuban relations in terms of imperialist exploitation. A pantheon of heroes from the struggles for independence had been created by historians, with José Martí firmly established as the nation's founding father. The work of commemorating Martí had started with the National Congresses of History, and culminated in the tributes paid on the centenary of his birth in 1953, when the Plaza José Martí was built in Havana, a conservation order was placed on his house and other places relating to his life, and commemorative stamps and medals were issued, along with popular editions of his works.²⁷

21 Emilio Roig de Leuchsenring, *Cuba no debe su independencia a los Estados Unidos* (Havana 1949).

22 Oficina del historiador, op. cit., 17.

23 Ibid., 22.

24 Ibid., 18.

25 Ibid.

26 Juan Pérez de la Riva, *Para la historia de las gentes sin historia* (Barcelona 1976).

27 Oficina del historiador, op. cit., 113–17.

Pre-revolutionary historians had also addressed the question of where in the past Cubans were to look for authenticity and integrity, given the country's experience of dual colonialism (the formal rule of Spain and the informal domination of the USA). The main solution to this difficulty was proposed by ethnographic historian Fernando Ortiz, who introduced the idea of transculturation, based on Cuba's long historical experience as a point of transition for travellers into and out of the whole Americas.²⁸ In a metaphor reminiscent of the US melting-pot, Ortiz represented Cuban culture as an *ajiaco*, or stew seasoned with chilli sauce (*aji*), which had originated with the Taino Indians and been added to by Spaniards, Africans, Asians, French and even Anglo-Americans. Cuba was a 'thick broth of civilization bubbling away on the Caribbean stove', he suggested.²⁹ In response to Ortiz's work, the first National Congress of History in 1942 called for research into the ethnic evolution of the Cuban people, and the significance of all the cultures that had contributed to its formation 'from Indian to republican times'.³⁰ In 1945, a Congress resolution sought to rectify the image of the Indo-Cubans as cowardly, arguing that much of the evidence for their rebellions against Spanish rule had been suppressed by the Spaniards.³¹ It was declared that the process of transculturation characteristic of the Cuban people dated back to the contacts between the dominant pre-Colombian Cuban culture, the Ciboney, and the Spanish invaders.³² Revisionist historians called upon the Ministry of Education to avoid terms such as 'racist revolutions' or 'black rebellions', for, it was argued, such uprisings 'always had a political rather than a racial character'.³³ Slave revolts of 1812 and 1844 were inserted into the history of the struggle for independence, and by the time of the first War of Independence in 1868, it was stated, independence had become a 'common ideal for both black and white Cubans'.³⁴ Indeed, it was 'the crucible that fused the two great ethnic components of Cuban nationality', uniting black and white, young and old, women and men in the cause of *Cuba Libre*.³⁵

After the Revolution came to power, history was assigned the dual role of scapegoat and saviour. All that was wrong in Cuba, from illiteracy to illiberalism, was represented as a product of imperialist exploitation; at the same time, history was identified as a crucial source for evidence of a deep-rooted Cuban tradition of resistance to tyranny. As indicated earlier, existing historiography

28 Fernando Ortiz, trans. Harriet de Onís, *Cuban Counterpoint: Tobacco and Sugar* [1940], (Durham and London 1995).

29 Fernando Ortiz, 'Los factores humanos de la cubanidad' [1940] in *Orbita de Fernando Ortiz* (Havana 1973), 149–57, 154 and 156.

30 Oficina del historiador, op. cit., 26.

31 Ibid., 32.

32 Ibid., 37.

33 Ibid., 27.

34 Ibid., 64.

35 Ibid., 71–2.

provided a degree of vindication for both claims. Arguably, although there is no space to make the case here, the Cuban revolutionary government forged a distinctive ideology through its use of history.³⁶ The revolutionary government published revisionist works in large print-runs. It also took a number of important measures to promote further the study of history. History faculties were established for the first time in Cuban universities, and provincial archives founded. The revolutionary leaders' continual evocation of the historical roots of Cuba's revolutionary traditions in itself acted as a stimulus to historical research. The regime was particularly keen to promote studies illustrating the role of workers and peasants, especially women and blacks, in the social struggles of the past. Internationalism was also stressed, and later — especially after Cuba's military involvements in Angola (1975) and Ethiopia (1978) — the history of its indebtedness to African culture. During the 1960s, professional historians working outside the official bastions of the Revolutionary Armed Forces or the Cuban Communist Party focused on issues of culture and national identity, employing 'new methodological approaches, including oral history, ethnohistory and folklore studies . . . Greater emphasis was given to the history of the inarticulate.'³⁷ These years saw a climate of creative freedom that was stifled — but only temporarily — by the implementation of the Soviet model from the early 1970s to the mid-1980s. During the 1990s, evidence emerged that the legacy of the 1960s had been lasting.

Despite the huge obstacles to historical research in Cuba during the 'Special Period' of the 1990s to date, including the mundanities of trying to acquire basic stationery supplies, some remarkable work has been done. Moreover, the opening of a series of small windows, like those on an Advent calendar, suggests that academics in the humanities are positioning themselves to take their place in a potential civil society that is gradually assembling its cumulative force for when it can emerge from the shadow of an increasingly authoritarian state. I will mention just three instances of coded critique, which make no claim to be systematic (more the result of material that I have chanced upon, reflecting the necessarily fragmentary nature of any research undertaken in Cuba), but which have some illustrative force. The first two are from cultural journals. As many individuals trying to resist the vicious cycle of censorship and self-censorship have shown throughout history, commentary on literary developments can offer the possibility of making an oblique critique of historical issues that might be deemed to be out of bounds to historians. Anniversaries — which can be commemorated with official blessing — provide the most usual pretext for a discreet reassessment of the past.

My first example is taken from a response to the fortieth anniversary of Fidel Castro's famous 'Words to the Intellectuals' of 1961, during which he pronounced thus on the issue of intellectual freedom: 'Within the Revolution

36 Grail Dorling makes this case, and offers detailed analysis of historiographical debates during the 1960s in his 'The Representation of History in the Cuban Revolutionary Press during the 1960s', MPhil. thesis (University of Wolverhampton 1998).

37 Louis A. Pérez, Jr, 'In the Service of the Revolution', op. cit., 144–52, 150.

everything, against the revolution nothing.’ A series of articles in the periodical *La Gaceta de Cuba* of June 2001 re-examined those ambivalent words and the incident that lay behind them, namely the regime’s suppression in April 1961 of a film called *PM* that showed Cubans frivolously enjoying the night-life of Havana. The writers concerned are cultural critics rather than historians, but they mobilize history behind a cautious critique of the regime’s policies of cultural repression. In standard apologetic vein, Roberto Fernández Retamar argued for a historical perspective on the *PM* incident (it took place, after all, at the time of the Bay of Pigs invasion, when it was hardly surprising that the regime was jittery). But he went on, more controversially, to suggest that not everything published in two publications that had run foul of the regime, namely *Revolución*, edited by the subsequent dissident Carlos Franqui, or its cultural supplement, *Lunes de Revolución*, edited by the subsequent dissident Guillermo Cabrera Infante, was contemptible; in time, its value would be seen, he argued, heretically.³⁸ He then went on to denounce socialist realism — ‘that monstrous deformation . . . which caused incalculable harm’ — and to adduce Soviet influence as the explanation for the Cuban government’s over-reaction to *PM*. The criticism of the Soviet Union is implicit but strong; after acknowledging its contribution to the defeat of nazism, and expressing ritual gratitude for aid to the Cuban revolution, he adduced socialist realism, which, as he noted, was attacked by Che Guevara, as a metonym for all the Soviet regime’s ‘grave political errors, arbitrary measures and intellectual deformities’.³⁹ Lisandro Otero’s contribution to this discussion also made a thinly-disguised call for greater intellectual freedom, arguing that if *PM* had been released at any other moment it would have been forgotten the following week.⁴⁰ His generation saw itself as heir of the vanguard intellectual tradition of the 1920s, he claimed: ‘Those who created the *Revista de Avance*, who introduced the African heritage into our culture and forged links with Marxism, and also [those in the 1940s who founded] *Orígenes*, a group that understood the strength of our roots in the nineteenth century, explored the question of what was Cuban, and dedicated themselves seriously to artistic creation.’⁴¹ These articles add up to a decided rejection of Soviet influence on the Cuban revolution.

My second example, taken from a literary review of 1997, is an article about the writings of women participants in the literacy campaign of 1961. Framing her argument around the wish to claim a position for post-revolutionary Cuban women in the field of the Latin American women writers who became the object of so much attention from critics in the 1990s, Luisa Campuzano sought to explain why two women who produced notable texts based on their experiences during the campaign then abandoned writing. Her conclusion is that women were invited to participate in the campaign only

38 Roberto Fernández Retamar, ‘Cuarenta años después’ in *La Gaceta de Cuba*, June 2001, 49.

39 Ibid., 50.

40 Lisandro Otero, ‘Cuando se abrieron las ventanas a la imaginación’, *ibid.*, 53.

41 Ibid., 55.

because they were needed as an emergency measure, rather than because the government recognized their potential contribution to public life. The space apparently opened up for women by the campaign was in the event 'historically marked and closed', rather than being 'an open space that had been permanently conquered' by women, and as a result it proved to be a trap from which these two writers found themselves unable to escape.⁴² Thus, she continues, 'what could have been the first chapter in the construction of *diversity* in the literature of the Revolution, was converted into an episode of the *unitary* history of culture of a people that for a variety of reasons was not in a condition to take on board difference'.⁴³ It is tempting — perhaps too tempting — to read this as a critique of the overall lack of opportunities for women to express themselves under the revolutionary government. But if that is a correct reading, then her ultimate conclusion — squirrelled away in a discreet last footnote — is even more damning, for she draws attention to the persistent lack of women novelists of the Revolution, noting that scarcely a score of novels by women had been published during the period 1984–95, a fact which she could not wholly attribute to the effects of the economic slow-down suffered by the country.⁴⁴

My third example is a critique of the practice of academic history during the period 1970–85, when the Soviet model was applied in Cuba. In a survey of historiography before and during the revolution, historian Jorge Ibarra argued that from 1970 to 1985 the School of History at the University of Havana imparted a strongly ideological and 'monolithic vision of history'.⁴⁵ The government issued lists of authors banned from publication; very few were allowed to go abroad, even to attend conferences; key figures deemed by the regime to be controversial were prevented from receiving their doctorates. There were no Congresses of History, despite the existence of a Union of Historians, and no new historical journals were founded. Teaching of the history of Cuba was supplanted by history of the international workers' movement — or, rather, of its activist leaders — at pre-university and university level. Nowadays, Ibarra noted, there was more awareness that 'history is not the servant of politics, but its most learned teacher', and he cited Marx and Engels in support of his argument. Ibarra's article was a severe indictment of 'Sovietization', both in the practice of history and, by implication, in other areas. But he was by no means wholly negative about the relationship between the revolution and historiography. Despite the fact that academic doors were closed to historians during this period, a new generation of researchers, influenced and guided particularly by Hortensia Pichardo, one of the few historians

42 Luisa Campuzano, 'Cuba 1961: los textos narrativos de las alfabetizadoras — Conflictos de género, clase y canon', *Unión, Revista de Literatura y Arte* (Havana), no. 26 (1997), 52–8, 57.

43 *Ibid.*, 57, emphases in the original.

44 *Ibid.*, 58, fn. 38.

45 Jorge Ibarra, 'Historiografía y Revolución', *Temas* (Havana), 1 (January–March 1995), 5–17, 8.

of the 1960s to continue teaching at the University, 'dedicated themselves to working in silence'.⁴⁶ The result, argued Ibarra, was that

Independently of the policies dictated by state officials, [a combination of] the path marked out by the masters of Cuban revolutionary historiography [in] the institutions created during the 1960s, the scientific interests and revolutionary attitude of the researchers, and the new spaces created by the founding of the Ministry of Culture [in 1976], together frustrated the [state's] plans to convert historians and social scientists into the servants of its dictates.⁴⁷

In other words, the practice of critical history, once established, could not be wholly suppressed.

Since Ibarra's article, and particularly in the context of the fortieth anniversary of the revolution, several debates about the role of history and historians in Cuba have been published, especially in two key journals which were launched in 1995: *Temas* and *Contracorriente*. Many of the participants invoke the Annales school, which seems to serve as a signal for a critique of crude nationalist history. During these discussions, most of the key features of post-revolutionary Cuban historiography have been challenged: the ahistoricism of the idea of 'one hundred years of struggle'; the use of Marxist theory at the expense of archival work; the lack of analysis of social structure (groups such as the workers tended to be studied in isolation); the emphasis on 'objective' factors and heroic action to the neglect of the history of ideas and values. Cuban historians are calling for a return to the documents, with minimal pre-determined mediation by any theoretical perspective. It is not that they are rejecting Marxism altogether, but rather that they are seeking to redress the balance between theory and evidence in favour of the latter, and indeed claiming that this in itself is the authentically Marxist approach. Some of them are arguing for a more complex appreciation of the relationship between past and present, abandoning the idea that the past can ever be a finished product, promoting the idea that history is the outcome of a continual reinterpretation of social processes, and questioning the assumption that distance from an event necessarily lends objectivity. Some question the idea that history can deliver any absolute truth, emphasizing the relativity of knowledge, and celebrating interdisciplinary approaches. Most crucially, most of them are calling for the study of contemporary history, despite their awareness of the inherent difficulties, especially in relation to sources, which are either not organized or wholly inaccessible. Indeed, their argument is that it is partly because of the problems of documentation that it is crucial that historians who have lived through the revolutionary experience record it. 'Each day we lose a little more history', noted one. 'We should not leave the understanding of our era to the generations of the next century . . . There are circumstances [such as aspects of the Cuban Missile Crisis] that will go unnoticed if we do not record them. I feel sorry for the historians that will succeed us. In barely 40 years, how much

46 Ibid., 9–10.

47 Ibid., 10.

of our history has been lost because nobody has taken the trouble to preserve living memories?⁴⁸ There are suggestions that Cuban historians should start to resolve the tension between their self-appointed role as creators and defenders of national consciousness and their professional commitment to historical truth more in favour of historical truth, on the grounds that creation of a false memory is ultimately more damaging to national consciousness. In other words, Cuban historians are calling for a return to critical history.

What will the legacy of the revolution be, then, for the study of the past in Cuba? Undoubtedly, there are glaring omissions in the historiography produced under the revolutionary regime, not least, as mentioned earlier, analysis of the revolutionary experience itself. The revisionist rejection of the republic of 1902–58 has also been perpetuated, with very little in-depth work on what used to be regarded as key turning-points, such as the revolution of 1933, Batista's populist phase or the anti-corruption campaign of 1950–51. Indeed, periodization in general is a key issue, for the insistent teleology of official history has eclipsed debate about rupture and continuity in all periods of Cuban history. Another major omission is US–Cuban relations. This issue has been exhaustively discussed within the USA, although largely within the restricted fields of diplomacy and superpower politics. But little work has been done on either side of the straits of Florida on the cultural history of US–Cuban contacts, which must surely be crucial to any accurate understanding of the undeniably peculiar fascination that these two peoples have exercised upon each other. As Louis Pérez has observed, during the early twentieth century Cubans and North Americans 'seemed to possess the capacity to meet each other's needs well, finding in one another fulfillment of their fantasies'.⁴⁹ More concretely, as he also notes, 'the US had set out purposefully to "Americanize" Cuba, but never considered the consequences of success: a First World frame of reference within Third World structures'.⁵⁰ We might cavil at the language used here, but we surely cannot gainsay the basic point that he is making.

Despite all these problems, however, it remains the case that the revolution has overseen the development of a community of able professional historians, committed to the critical evaluation of their sources. Of course there have been ideological constraints, large areas have remained out of bounds, and debate is at present highly muted, although that has not been the case throughout the revolution. But at least history is deemed to be important in Cuba, not only by state officials but also at the popular level. Indeed, history is a salient part of day-to-day life and of Cubans' sense of their identity, to an extent that is unusual perhaps even in post-colonial societies.

It is all the more regrettable, then, that history has featured little in the field of post-colonial studies, which tend to focus on the role of literature and popu-

48 Raúl Izquierdo Canosa, 'Mesa redonda: ¿Por qué la historia?', *Contracorriente* (Havana) 11–14 (1998), 184–207, 196.

49 Louis A. Pérez, Jr, 'The Circle of Connections: One Hundred Years of Cuba–US Relations' in Behar, op. cit., 161–79, 173.

50 *Ibid.*, 176.

lar culture in the process of cultural decolonization. Even books which have the word history in their title usually turn out to address history as represented by fiction. Moreover, the national liberation movements of the 1960s (Cuba, Algeria, Vietnam) are currently being re-evaluated as the manifestation of élite desires for power rather than the empowering of the powerless, and as fatally flawed by their commitment to the maintenance of grand narratives with all their authoritarian implications. In the case of Cuba,⁵¹ this academic reassessment undeniably has its political counterpart in the increasing authoritarianism of the Castro regime, especially since the withdrawal of Soviet aid. But, as I hope I have suggested, the revolution's legacy is more ambivalent. The grand narrative of liberation was developed to counter the grand narrative of imperialism, as Edward Said and, long before him, Frantz Fanon pointed out.⁵² The promotion of historical research, even by a government set upon controlling both its output and its conclusions, opens up a Pandora's box, at least in a society in which a tradition of dissenting from the official version of the nation's past was already well-established. History probably will absolve Fidel Castro, but only partially, and that — in a final irony — will be partly the result of his own government's commitment to history.

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51 There is considerable debate about whether the term 'post-colonial' is appropriate to Latin America. Some of its opponents maintain that it is yet another manifestation of western impositions on the region; others that the long experience of independence of most Latin American nations changes the picture considerably — a valid point but not one that applies to Cuba. For these debates, see Alfonso de Toro and Fernando de Toro (eds), *El debate de la postcolonialidad en Latinoamérica* (Frankfurt and Madrid 1999). My own view is that postcolonial studies will not fully confront the issues they address until they take the Latin American experience into account.

52 Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London 1993); Frantz Fanon, trans. Constance Farrington, *The Wretched of the Earth* (Harmondsworth 1967).