BOOK REVIEW

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Reviewed by Al Campbell

Most readers of this book review, in this journal, will be sympathetic to the position of this reviewer that “revolutionary Cuba does many things differently”, regardless of if they find those things good, bad, or just interesting. This is true for health care, education, disaster preparedness, the economy, social participation, their system of government, and on and on … and in particular relative to this book, its international relations. This edited collection of 14 chapters came out of the conference “Cuba’s Revolution at 60” at Dalhousie University in the fall of 2019. On the one hand, the material in this book thoroughly supports the position that “Cuba’s international relations are different”. On the other hand, the works in this collection are each rich in detail on their specific topic.

A fundamental question in the background of this and all studies of revolutionary Cuba’s intentional relations is why Cuba has “such [a] disproportionally large international profile” (p. 277) for a relatively small (11.2 million) and economically weakly developed country, why “Cuba’s level of engagement with the world throughout its sixty-year revolutionary period is extraordinary” (p. 275). This is an example of exactly what was brought up in the opening paragraph of this review, of Cuba doing something different from “the norm”. What I will argue here, using a frame for thinking about Cuba’s international relations from the introduction to this work, is that what makes Cuba’s international relations so different from the norm for a country of its size and level of economic development is exactly what is at the root of most of “the things that revolutionary Cuba does differently”. This is the 60-year revolutionary process within which it carries out everything that it does.
In their introduction, Mervyn Bain and Chris Walker consider five concepts used by Michael Erisman in his book *Cuba’s Foreign Relations in a Post-Soviet World* from 2000 to talk about different theses as to what is “the principal determinant in Cuba’s foreign policy” (p. 4). These are the superclient/surrogate, *Fidelista personalismo*, the revolutionary crusade, counter-dependency, and realist pragmatism. These are all useful concepts exactly because they all have had some influence at different times on specific aspects of Cuba’s international relations – the influence and pressure by the Soviet Union, the weight given to Fidel’s opinions, and so on. Without denying that these are all indeed important influences, Bain and Walker carefully argue that many commentators on Cuban intentional relations “overstate” one or another of these, often for ideological reasons. I will use a very abbreviated summary of some of their arguments to maintain that, with relevance to our concern with why Cuba’s foreign policy is different, four of these contributing factors are not distinguishing. The fifth one, however, “revolutionary crusade”, and more specifically the same concept renamed by this reviewer with a different label and a different implication, “support for the world socialist revolution”, is key to Cuba’s different international relations.

While of course no single paragraph with an abbreviated presentations of four points can begin to capture the richness of the arguments presented over six pages (pp. 2–8), here are a few basic reasons that Bain and Walker give indicating why these four contributing factors to determining Cuba’s international relations cannot be considered central for explaining its unique nature.

- **Superclient/surrogate** (of the USSR) thesis. Anyone even vaguely familiar with the Cuban Revolution will be aware of the tremendous role that Cuban nationalism has played in it, both leading up to the 1959 Revolution, and in building a new and different society since then. This central factor is inconsistent with the superclient/surrogate thesis. Additionally, by definition this thesis could not be correct for the full second half of the Revolution to date, 1991–2023.

- **Fidelista personalismo** (as they point out, this is simply “the Great Man Theory of History” idea applied to the Cuban Revolution). The authors agree that Fidel and his ideas certainly were very important to all aspects of the Revolution, and hence to the Island’s international relations. What they stress, however, is that the Revolution and its foreign policy “were never Castro’s personal fiefdom” (p. 4). Furthermore, only ten years into the 60 years of the Revolution Cuba began an “institutionalization process” designed to make a number of large institutions “increasingly significant players in the Cuban political system” (p. 4): The Cuban Communist Party
(PCC), the National Assembly (ANPP), the Cuban Armed Forces (FAR),
the Ministry of Revolutionary Armed Forces (MINFAR), and six very large
“mass organizations” which had their role specifically recognized in the
Constitution and enacted into laws on political decision making in the
country – the Workers’ Central Trade Union (CTC), the Federation of
Cuban Women (FMC), the Committees for the Defense of the Revolution
(CDRs), the Association of Small Farmers (ANAPP), and the high school
and university student organizations. Both the completely smooth transi-
tions of the presidency after 2006 to Raúl and again in 2018 to Díaz-Canel,
and the continued smooth operation of the government and political system
after the step-down and later death of Fidel, naysay the Fidelista personal-
ismo thesis.

- **Counter-dependency.** The leadership of the Cuban Revolution indeed
  has “continuously endeavored to prevent forms of Cuban dependence
  materializing” (p. 6), including vis-à-vis Russia. But this cannot be con-
  considered the root of the uniqueness of Cuba’s foreign policy, since a
  significant number of other countries in the Developing World since
  WWII, whose foreign policies did not resemble Cuba’s, also had coun-
  ter-dependency policies – two high-visibility examples from near the
  time of the Cuban Revolution being Egypt under Nasser and Indonesia
  under Sukarno.

- **Pragmatism.** This is indeed one important determinant of some of
  Cuba’s international relations, and the authors point out a number of
  high-visibility examples of decisions apparently determined this way.
  But like counter-dependency, this just cannot be at the root of Cuba’s
  different foreign policy since many countries throughout the Developing
  World often use pragmatism and their foreign policies do not resemble
  Cuba’s.

Consider now finally as a candidate for “the principal determinant of Cuba’s
foreign policy” what they call “a revolutionary crusade”, and I will relabel as
“support for the world socialist revolution”. Bain and Walker give numerous
examples of this (including from different time periods in which the nature of
what Cuba did was different) in their two paragraphs (pp. 5–6) on this issue. I
argue that just as it is at the root of the difference of so many things that Cuba
does differently, Cuba’s Revolution (including in particular its goals) is at the
root of what makes Cuban international relations unique.

Given the huge weight of the US government’s permanent hyper-aggression
against Cuba on all aspects of the Cuban Revolutionary project, the first six
chapters – two keynote addresses to the conference and four essays – concern
Cuba–US relations. The final eight essays then concern Cuba’s international relations with six other countries or regions of the world, its external economic sector, and the tremendous difference to its international situation that would have resulted if the then promising exploration off its northwest coast had significantly “struck oil”, which it subsequently completely failed to do. A more specific indication of what topics this edited collection addresses can be given by simply listing all 14 chapters, with their authors.

Part I: Cuban–US Relations

2. US–Cuban Relations – Personal Reflections: Remarks by Ambassador (ret.) Jefferey DeLaurentis, Saturday, November 2, 2019, by Jefferey DeLaurentis
4. The President has the Constitutional Power to Terminate the Embargo, by Robert L. Muse
5. (Re)Searching for the “Havana Syndrome”, by Peter Kornbluh

Part II: Cuba on the Global Stage

7. Cuba is Africa, Africa is Cuba, by Isaac Saney
8. Cuba–Canada Relations: Challenges and Prospects, by John M. Kirk
9. Cuba–China Relations and the Construction of Socialism, by Adrian H. Hearn and Rafael Hernández
11. Havana and Moscow: Now, the Future, and the Shadow of the Past, by Mervyn J. Bain
12. Havana and Caracas: Counter-Hegemonic Cooperation, by Chris Walker
13. Cuba’s Struggling External Sector: Internal Challenges and Outside Factors, by Paolo Spadoni