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A People's History of Cuba, 1492-Present

Social, Economic and Political
Perspectives

Rémy Herrera

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Global University for Sustainability Book Series

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Rémy Herrera
CNRS, Paris, France

ISSN 2752-7379 ISSN 2752-7387 (electronic)
Global University for Sustainability Book Series
ISBN 978-3-031-75043-4 ISBN 978-3-031-75044-1 (eBook)
<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-75044-1>

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Lau Kin Chi
Sit Tsui

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1

Introduction

With a population of just over 11 million inhabitants, Cuba is the largest island in the Caribbean, covering some 111,000 square kilometers, that is to say, almost the area of England. Obviously, its history shares with those of other Latin American and Caribbean countries many similarities, both culturally and at the socio-economic level. However, the clear originality of its trajectory over the long term, particularly in geopolitical terms, distinguishes it from the others by some very unique features. It is important to understand them, from the outset.

In 1492, Cuba was the first great land “discovered” across the Atlantic. “The most beautiful that the eyes of a human being had ever seen,” we can read in Christopher Columbus’ logbook.¹ It was also a land where the native Amerindian-Cuban population was almost totally decimated. From the years 1510–1511, that is, the date of the start of the conquest of the island, between colonial extreme violence and dramatic demographic chaos, it became in practice the main rear base for the *conquistadores*’ expansion on the American continent, as well as the maritime node or junction for transatlantic convoys in the Spanish Empire.

At the very end of the eighteenth century, Cuba was going to be specialized in sugar production and even, taking over from Santo Domingo

(future Haiti), rose as early as the beginning of the nineteenth century to the rank of the world's largest sugar exporter, then the leading producer of this key commodity in the world—and it will become so again later, under the hegemony of the United States, until the two world wars of the twentieth century.

Such a specialization was made possible thanks to an international alliance between the Cuban dominant classes and the super-dominant classes of the center (first Spanish, and then Anglo-American). It was revealed and materialized, under the combined effects of external shocks and internal factors liquidating the old relations of production and liberating new productive forces, through a strategy of insertion into the capitalist world system that placed the colony in a dominated but very dynamic position.

In contrast to a genuine development of society, this strong growth of the Cuban economy was only made possible by the overexploitation of local populations, and then by that of imported workers.

Cuba is the territory in the world where capitalist modern slavery has lasted the longest: almost four centuries. Although authorizations were not officially granted by the King of Spain (and future Emperor Charles V) until the year 1517, imports of African workers to Cuba had started in 1511, and probably began as early as 1503, from the neighboring island of Hispaniola (today divided between Haiti and the Dominican Republic). The second colony to introduce slavery, in 1511 or perhaps even in 1503, after Hispaniola, Cuba was the penultimate to abolish it, in 1886, just before Brazil.

What is more, Cuba is the place where the deportations of African enslaved workers were the most massive in all of Hispanic America. According to our own calculations, the cumulative flows of slaves very likely exceeded one million people.² The peak of this slave population was recorded in the 1841 census, with over 436,000 individuals, for a total population of Cuba at that date of one million inhabitants³—a 60 percent black population. While sugar was primarily intended for the taste pleasure of distant, rather wealthy consumers, its production required mobilizing of considerable masses of workers.

For centuries, before harvesting was mechanized, the working conditions of the workers in the cane plantations and sugar mills were simply

hellish. Sugarcane, which can grow up to five or six meters high, was cut by hand with a machete (as close to the ground as possible, that is, where the sucrose content is highest, but taking care not to damage the stump to allow regrowth, which thus meant bending one's back), then topped, and finally transported to the sugar mill (called *trapiche* or *ingenio*) by the strength of the arms and on men's backs (in part, but always as quickly as possible to prevent the plant from deteriorating); all this under an oppressive sun, in the suffocating heat and heavy humidity of the tropics, in the midst of rough terrains and swarms of mosquitoes ...⁴ It is important to keep this terribly concrete reality in mind.

Additionally, Cuba is also the territory where Spanish colonization lasted the longest in history, precisely from 1492 to 1898. Its outcome was a late, slow, particularly painful decolonization—a process which went through several wars of independence. The last of these, which took place between 1895 and 1898, saw the arrival of a Spanish occupying army of almost 300,000 men, that is to say, one soldier for every five inhabitants—a record then unmatched in the annals of world repression. It was at this moment of vulnerability that the United States chose to wage there the first imperialist war in its history, with the aim of securing total control of the island, trying to break the Cuban nationalist popular movement and confiscating its hard-won independence.

As a matter of fact, the period corresponded to a historic turning point: that of the emergence and rise to power of the major U.S. financial groups. However, the dependence of Cuba on the United States predates its military submission in 1898. From the end of the eighteenth century, the island, detached from the Spanish imperial monopoly by the English, was connected to the Anglo-American hegemonic classes' interests, and gradually anchored to the U.S. economy. As a consequence, particularly early on, under the form of the very political domination of Spanish colonization, it was positioned in close economic dependence on the United States⁵—itself also a slave-owning country, and this until very deep into the second half of the nineteenth century. This is a fundamental point. Shortly after the United States gained its own independence in 1776, Cuba became the leading foreign market for the U.S. commodities, while the island itself found in its northern big neighbor the main outlet for sugar exports. First mainly commercial, then industrial, and finally

financial, this dependence operated for a long time through the exchange of raw sugar for the means which made it possible to produce it, including slaves.

The 1898 military occupation of Cuba by the United States, at the end of the independence war, actually followed a very long series of U.S. aggressions throughout the nineteenth century, and was extended by several recurrent armed interventions until 1922—and even 1933. At the time, it guaranteed the penetration of the island's ownership structures and also, through public debt, that of its State, which *Yankee* capital came to dominate completely. The part of the territory that the United States then wrested from the island, that is, Guantánamo Bay, has still not been returned to the Cuban people.

Cuba is indeed the first—and to date, the only—victorious Communist Revolution in the Americas since 1959. As a product of a long process of formation of a national identity, solidly constituted, the Cuban Revolution is to be interpreted as the culminating point of the struggles of a proletariat—in the Marxist sense of the term—which finally succeeded in building a workers-peasants front in the convergence of demands for (1) the equality of all human beings, (2) national liberation and (3) social progress. It is the very fusion of these struggles that precisely defines the Cuban communist project. And it is from a centuries-old perspective, and in the continuity of the slave revolts and wars of independence, that we can better understand the profound motivations behind the multiracial, rebellious and resistant Cuban people's support for this project. In addition to its precocious and resolute combativeness, what characterizes this people is the deployment and concretization of radically anti-capitalist workers' demands that have been interwoven and always inserted, not without complexities, into anti-racist and anti-imperialist struggles.

This statement might surprise; it must however be taken seriously: not only do Cuba and the United States have closely linked histories, but the exploitation of the first played a very significant role in the process of the latter's accession to world hegemony. Therein undoubtedly lies one of the explanations for the special way in which Washington still treats Havana today—compared to Hanoi or even Beijing, among others. For, Cuba is the country that has suffered, and continues to suffer, the longest embargo

imposed by the U.S. administration in history: from 1962 to the present day. Condemned by an overwhelming majority of member countries of the United Nations, this embargo remains in force solely through the will of Washington, causing cruel and unacceptable suffering to the Cuban population.

In return, the revolutionary government and people of Cuba were able and have known how to respond to this imperialist hatred by bringing the ethics of solidarity to the highest level of generosity and courage thanks to their internationalist missions, sometimes by contributing decisively to the fight to put an end to apartheid in southern Africa, sometimes by making brigades of health professionals available to countries that wish to receive them—including, as we saw recently during the Covid-19 pandemic, in the heart of Europe.

Notes

1. Colomb (2003).
2. See: Herrera (2023). Also: Ortiz Fernández (1997) and Cooper (1876).
3. de la Sagra (1843).
4. Guillén (2005).
5. See: Herrera (2003), and more precisely the “Préface.”

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