

## **Theory and Introduction**

### **What Do Historians Do?**

Writing about a dead president hardly qualifies as cutting edge history in a field consumed with producing microhistories, feminist histories, ethnic histories, economic histories and even linguistic and psychological histories. So how can the story of a dead white male politician compete with more sophisticated styles? Certainly not as a biography or “complete” history of his administration, but perhaps by adopting some of the intellectual assumptions of the most challenging post-modern thinkers. “Challenging” in that sense that they undermine some of the West’s most sacred assumptions. Like them, I will challenge Machado’s assumed position as Cuban anti-hero and hopefully open a path toward undermining current thinking about Cuba’s history. Maybe that goal is too high, but at least it is worth thinking about. This “radical” approach to Cuban history mimics other’s far more ambitious than mine, studies which undermine conventional histories about the West itself. For historians, once we understand too much about ourselves, an awkward self-consciousness can produce a kind of insecurity when one concludes that all “histories” are stories, differing only the set of rules used in making the stories up. Once the rules are challenged, producing “the” history of something is more than one can ask. Knowing this, I hope to persuade the reader to “suspend disbelief” for a moment as he reads a revisionist history.

For many, the writings of Michel Foucault and others who work within a similar relativistic schema are important because their insights pose serious obstacles to a belief, or faith, in objective, rational theories of knowledge which have presupposed intellectual traditions since the Enlightenment age. The net effect of

these thinkers, who have followed the logic of their own tradition to its ironic end, is to induce some thinkers to refer to this present age as a “post-Enlightenment era.”<sup>1</sup> This bold, yet internal, criticism of the Enlightenment embodied under the general umbrella of post-modernism, posits an idea-based concept of reality. This argument challenges twenty-first century histories to understand their own role in a humbler, less authoritative manner than Enlightenment historians attribute to themselves. If, as Hayden White suggests, history is a form a literature (if not fiction), and that no history is not an innocent representation of fact,<sup>2</sup> are we not to some extent, professional story tellers? Are we creators of text within the grand tradition of the Enlightenment to which we ascribe authority based on our techniques? Our techniques are sound, but the belief that it leads to “Truth” in an Enlightenment tradition succumbs to a growing suspicion that one day we shall be considered storytellers of the past of only a specific genre – not the keepers of the actual past – as we have sometimes perceived ourselves.

Historians exhume, read, create, and re-interpret and pass on tales of the past. Stories are written about the way things used to be. They may be grand and fascinating, or dull and gray, but all tie the more recent generations to those of the past. Stories build continuity and identity with those who lived long ago. This story telling process forms the identity of living generations, it tells them who they are and where they came from, and the reasons for the way things are today. This is so of Cuban history – given the paucity of competing visions of Cuba’s past (at least for those still living on the island).

---

<sup>1</sup> Herbert L. Drefus and Paul Rabinow, “What is Maturity?: Habermas and Foucault on ‘What is Enlightenment?’” *Foucault: A Critical Reader*, David Couzens Hoy, ed., (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1994), 121.

<sup>2</sup> Hayden White, *The Content of the Form*. Pp: ix, 44, 75, 176.

In a medieval sense, cannot historians be considered as those who perform priestly functions? Both priests and historians receive specialized knowledge, interpret it, and then pass it on to the untutored who depend upon this closed chosen caste to interpret the seemingly indecipherable events of the past and help guide them during the perilous present and the uncertain future. Competing cults (or political parties) simply differ on interpretations of the past – both agree that history contains the key to interpreting the present. Essentially, university professors have replaced religious priests as intermediaries of truth in the modern world.

This process of story telling is older than any written language, and as common as grandmothers and priests and children. Because humans have the ability to remember, there is always a natural curiosity about the past. The past is something we can know and pass on, unlike the future and the fleeting present. Knowledge of the past conveys a sort of immortality upon the living, giving them the ability to live vicariously through the millennia of time, learning from the experiences of others, and inheriting the identity of past great civilizations and peoples.

The past is also the key to our identity, whether individual or corporate, including national identity. Identity requires us to ask “where did we come from?” Modern professional historians have tried to answer that question within the strict interpretational confines of a materialist, Enlightenment worldview. They acquire knowledge and pass in on to others and thereby profoundly shape the self-identity of a people, nation, or culture. They are, in a sense, passing on values and standards, creating a new world view for a new generation.

This process is fairly mundane until a new story teller comes along and presents a past that differs from what previous historians have said. A new story means a new identity, and a new identity can profoundly upset the mental security of a

people. This has drastic implications for society. If the story is sufficiently different from what was told in the past, then it may be that people will question the current assumptions used to formulate contemporary government, family, religious, and other policies. Policy changes can directly affect the economic and power balance in any society or subset thereof. Therefore, storytelling is inherently political. If you change the past, you change the present and the future.<sup>3</sup> The past is uniquely malleable: we change it by telling a different story.

In the context of Cuba, the political nature of history is especially relevant. Marxist thinkers and leaders (Fidel Castro's government) explicitly follow a policy of "changing" the past in order to indoctrinate their people into new, more "correct" way of thinking. Non-Marxist westerners also understand the importance of the controlling power of history (illustrated by their objections to "revisionist" history), but claim not to manipulate history for their own political ends. This of course is nonsense if one accepts the premise that historical production (the writing of history) is ultimately an outworking of "faith" or presuppositions. This latter view is becoming more and more accepted and thus the self-delusion of an "objective" history is lifting.

Governments depend upon the proper telling of stories to young children and adults in order to legitimize their hold on power. Opposition leaders might tell a different story about a country's past in order to reinforce the political agendas they pursue. In the context of this study, I will revise the story of a particular period in Cuba's past and jeopardize some of the common assumptions about the development of Cuban society in the twentieth century.

---

<sup>3</sup> George Orwell made this observation in his novel 1984: "Who controls the past, controls the future..."

The stories told about the past escape absolutist proof. The “true” past will always be lost to the present. The best we can do is assimilate many different and smaller stories left to us by those from the past in hopes of constructing a new, better, more appropriate history (as determined by those creating a new past – historians). Because of our tenuous connection to the past, history cannot become absolute or final. Claims that history “really actually demonstrably happened” in a certain specific way are appeals to dogma and orthodoxy. Thus, Joan Scott notes "My first premise is that history is not purely referential but is rather constructed by historians."<sup>4</sup>

### **Who Writes History?**

History probably began when grandparents began telling grandchildren about what the world was like when they were children. Kings employed chroniclers to record the events of their own times (favorably) while priests legitimized their rule and role by claiming specialized knowledge not available to everyone -- knowledge usually coming from the gods. Prophets and wise men have done the same. In this sense, the Bible is the pre-eminent history book of the west – it creates a tradition of origins and identity. Moving well into the late Enlightenment period, historians have acquired the post of creating histories with the effect of re-creating a past that suits the values and needs of autonomous man. Professional historians are intermediaries of truth, claiming specialized knowledge from sources unavailable to the average person. In the Enlightenment tradition, we are trained to uphold the orthodoxy of the faith (objectivity, neutrality, belief in facts and rationalism) and closely guard membership

---

<sup>4</sup> Joan Wallach Scott, "AHR Forum: History in Crisis? The Other's Side of the Story," American Historical Review, June 1989, page 681.

in our ranks by weeding out those not trained in our seminaries (graduate institutions) by restricting professional employment to those who have proven their orthodoxy.

### **What is History?**

History is the mediation and definition of a social group presented through the creation of ideas of origin. 'Where did I come from' is the first thought of transcendent or universal consciousness for an individual or a group. Without answering this question, identity is illusive or unobtainable. Groups, as well as individuals, require an identity and an origin. Self identity requires a past. No group can exist without a past because the past justifies and legitimizes the self or group. Historians mediate a past.

Writers of books, scripts, poems, news stories, and histories, all form an influential part of a culture's mediation of knowledge. They pass on a social heritage and consciousness, impress moralities, and set parameters for the discussion of current events.

### **Cuban History**

Over the last 140 years, Cuba has seen at least eight violent rebellions against its government, averaging an armed revolt about every twenty years. Some revolutions were successful, such as those in 1898, 1933, and 1959. Others were snuffed out and play only minor roles in history such as the rebellion of blacks in 1912, or Fidel Castro's first failed attempt at the Moncada Barracks in 1953. The Revolution of 1933 offers a unique perspective on Cuban events because it was not the revolution of Independence, nor was it the revolution that put Fidel Castro in

power. It was something in between. It was an interregnum -- something significant that was both a continuation of past revolutions, and something that set the stage for subsequent political upheaval in that the successors to Machado legitimized armed rebellion by their very success.

Like the histories of all revolutions, the events of 1933 had its heroes and villains. The heroes were the brave young people who gave their lives to defend Cuban liberty against the dictator, President Gerardo Machado. Or so goes the story. Successful revolutions are usually recorded favorably. Why? Because the victors get the chance to use the spoils of power to impress upon its people the favorableness of their changing fortunes. Sympathizers are elevated to positions of influence and antagonists flee, keep quiet, or are ignored. A revolution that fails to protect its favored position in history will soon be overturned. The changing of a story is a revolutionary act in itself -- it shifts the ground of legitimacy for someone who has a stake in the status quo. This, of course, is obvious.

This study is about Gerardo Machado, who served as Cuba's president from 1925 to 1933, and the events and people surrounding his public life. This study will tell a different story about Cuba's past. It will tell that those who opposed Machado really were not the heroes of this revolution and that Machado was not as bad as most historians portray him to be. This paper also will explain why Machado's position in Cuban history has resisted reinterpretation for three quarters of a century.

Why is this important? It is important because it calls into question the revolutionary ethos of Cuban political activism, the very ethos that infuses proponents and opponents of Cuba's current regime.