

A New Cuban History

Introduction

Every Cuban government and political movement between the fall of Machado and today justifies its existence by tracing their own origins to the fight against Machado. Grau San Martin and the Pentarchy and then Carlos Mendieta were immediate successors to Cuban leadership after Machado's ouster. Colonel Fulgencio Batista staked his claim to power by backing the student revolt against Machado. The *Ortodoxos* and *Autenticos* of the 1940s and 1950s were two wings of a political movement started by young people opposed to Machado. When Batista stepped back into power in 1952 and failed to unify the nation, revolutionaries organized and fought against him until his ouster in late 1958. Castro allies himself with the youthful revolutionaries of 1933.

A "foundational fiction" of post 1933 Cuban political life is the casting of Machado as an enemy of the Cuban republic. Why? Because everyone in power since 1933 identifies themselves with parties and movements who opposed Machado in 1933. They claim he was dictatorial, broke the "democratic process," violated human rights and otherwise undermined constitutional government in Cuba. Therefore given those assumptions, anyone who stands against Machado (even decades after the fact) portrays themselves as freedom loving pro-democratic defenders of Cuban liberty. There is no political party in Cuba which traces its own roots to the support of Machado because the stories of Machado's bad reputation is so deeply entrenched. If President Machado's role in Cuban history were to be rewritten in a more favorable light, what would that mean to the legitimacy of all post Machado governments and political movements?

In Cuba's past, Machado is the historical enemy of Cuban democracy and progress. He serves a purpose much like the British do in Revolutionary American history or Joseph McCarthy does to the history of the Cold War -- evil influences threatening free democratic progress. Those who stood up to them, whether or not they survived, are heroes or martyrs in the cause of freedom. Machado provided a "grand cause" against which Cubans could rally while building the future of Cuban politics. Those who opposed him passed the test of legitimacy (which of course was set by those who opposed him). So central is the role of Machado in the historical construction of Cuban politics (and Latin American historiography, as we shall see later), that there has been no effort in over sixty years to rehabilitate this Cuban president. This study will explain why Machado's role is so resistant to change and will argue for changing the characterization of his place in the Cuban nation.

The revisionist nature of this study rests upon the premise that Gerardo Machado is typically cast by historians as someone who was a bad influence on Cuban society. This is done by using words such as "dictator" and "tyrant" to describe him. His opponents are usually described as those that "opposed his dictatorship." Naturally, this is an oversimplification, but it is legitimate because it is the simplification that one repeatedly finds in books and articles on the era and accurately reflects the general impression left with a student after studying Cuban history. The reasons for this good/bad view of Machado are reviewed elsewhere, but it leaves an interesting proposition to consider if one rejected the conventional view:

Looked at in reverse¹ -- or at least by refusing to pre-place Machado in the role of anti-hero -- we imagine a much different Cuban history. If Machado was a

¹ A technique suggested by Michel Foucault, the eminent French sociologist and philosopher. See Michel Foucault, "The Discourse on Language," Appendix, The

net positive force in Cuban development, then his opponents must have had a net negative influence on Cuba. If Machado made significant progress in advancing and reforming Cuba's economy, were his opponents Cuba's enemies? If Machado pushed hard at limiting the influence of foreigners in Cuba (both politically and economically) does that change Machado's role in Cuban history? If Machado's enemies called for American forces to intervene militarily, are those who opposed Machado imperialists? If Machado limited American imports, undermined the economic viability of foreign owned railroads, protected Cuban industry from American competition, diversified Cuba's industrial and agricultural output, are theories that Machado was merely a stooge of American political interests valid? How does Machado become the things speculated above? The answer is by telling a new story about Cuba's past.

The Uses of Cuban History

Approaching Cuba's past from another perspective undermines strongly held and crucial assumptions about Cuba's history (and therefore its present identity). Machado's position as a "bloody tyrant" is a pre-requisite to the justification of the political movements that have controlled Cuba's history since 1933. Why? Ensuing political systems and parties justified their existence and activities by telling the story of how they saved Cuban democracy from an evil tyrant. Their identity depends upon a very particular story being told about Cuba's past. There is an inverse correlation between the perceived "rightness" or morality of Machado and his opponents.

For some, a question immediately arises regarding Machado: “Was he or was he not a “bloody tyrant?” Keep in mind, that what Machado “was” or “is” depends on whose history you read. For example, was Abraham Lincoln a great democratic leader who ended slavery? Or, was he a bloody tyrant who jailed his political opponents, shut down oppositionist newspapers, declared martial law to maintain his hold on power, and waged a gruesome military campaign on America soil which resulted in the death of over 500,000 citizens? The short answer is “to the victor belong the spoils” and historians of the victorious side (in Lincoln’s case, those legitimizing the preservation of the Union, comparable to those of Machado’s opponents) have controlled the dialog on Lincoln’s role in American history since then and choose to emphasis his role in “preserving the Union” and freeing the slaves. There is no credible political movement in the United States which refutes the heritage of Abraham Lincoln even though a case can be made that he subverted the constitution and waged a violent war against American citizens. So too in Cuba, historians have sided with the victors on the 1933 revolution; historically, this is how things usually come about, at least in the short run. Had Machado thoroughly defeated his foes and continued to modernize Cuba’s infrastructure and economy, perhaps he would be remembered as like Abraham Lincoln at best or Mexico’s Porfirio Diaz² at worst.

The worse Machado was, the better the Generation of 1930 is -- and by implication its heirs (Castro and the exiles). If the Generation of 1930 was historically “right,” then Castro can justify a military insurrection against Batista by recasting him as another Machado. And, if the Generation of 1930 was justified in

² Porfirio Diaz, another “dictator” is remembered for improving Mexico’s infrastructure, the stability he brought to government, and strengthening the Mexican economy.

ousting Machado (by preparing military actions originating in both Cuba and the United States), then certainly exile opponents are justified in using violence and paramilitary actions against Castro's present government. Conversely, efforts to rehabilitate Machado in Cuban history threaten to undermine the historical legitimacy of governments, such as Castro's, based upon armed rebellion. Concurrently, building a "conservative³" history undermines the ability of revolutionaries to justify acts of violence against Castro's government. There are no Cuban politicians who trace their heritage to support for Machado. Rather, all Cuban political movements claim authority and legitimacy by acting in the spirit of the Generation of 1930, who selflessly sacrificed themselves against Machado (the stereotypical tyrant without which a revolutionary movement cannot justify itself or gain support) for the cause of the Cuban *Patria*.

Can History be Heresy?

The view of Machado presented in this paper is to be understood as unorthodox. It is unorthodox because it deviates from the common view of Cuban history by presenting Machado in a relatively favorable light and his opponents in a bad light. From 1933 to 1952, both political parties of significance, the *Ortodoxos* and the *Autenticos*, traced their legitimacy to the ouster of Machado. The Cuban

³ "Conservative" in the sense of preserving an older order – a conservatism which renounces the use of armed rebellion to overturn governments because that is not a means of change which a conservative would wish to institutionalize in a nation's political heritage. Rather, a "conservative" may rely upon more traditional means of change such as voting, politics, propaganda, demonstrating, and waiting one's turn to take power in spite of perceived irregularities in "constitutional" processes.

Communist Party also counts as their "foundational fiction"⁴ a heritage of opposing and overcoming Machado's government. Current opponents of Castro lay claim to the heritage as well -- exiles who left Cuba in the early 1960s identified with the *Ortodoxos* or *Autenticos*. Few Cubans openly confess to supporting Batista in the late 1950s; the political generation that succeeded Batista was born in the crucible of rebellion against the established government, not in the struggle to support it. Therefore, it is difficult no matter where one looks to find a support for an alternative view for Machado -- one that removes the burden he bears in Cuba's history.

Because Machado "lost", the history of his era (1924-1933) is very much a history of the victors, and a history by players close to the revolution. This isn't unusual. Every revolution has its historians. Soon after the American Revolution in 1776, men felt the necessity of writing down a great story about a great people who threw off the chains of oppression represented by the British government. These men understood the central role of stories in the creation of a national identity and carefully guarded the reputations of the Founding Fathers. Writers of Cuban history are no less subject to the political pressures (usually imposed by themselves) of writing a history that supports their view of a revolution. The pressures increase as historians consider the risk to their own reputation among their contemporaries and peers.

Three forces keep the image of Machado as that of an anti-hero: he lost and history is written by victors, subsequent Cuban political movements depend upon the

⁴ Doris Sommer, Foundational Fictions: The National Romances of Latin America, (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1991).

image of Machado as the enemy to justify their own role as protectors of Cuban liberty, and the “influence” of economic and historical theories which almost require a pro-American dictator suppressing freedom and national autonomy in order to justify reformative or revolutionary action. Some of these issues have been touched on already and we will look at the role of economic histories later.

Cuban History Justifies the Generation of 1930

In some sense, there are no Cuban conservatives -- all accept the necessity and justness of open rebellion as played out in the Revolutions of 1868, 1898, 1933, 1952, 1959. Those who lament the rebellion of 1959 are disappointed in the way Castro governs, not that he got there by force of revolution.

Cuban history extols the student revolutionaries of the early 1930s. Justo Carrillo,⁵ Jaime Suchlicki,⁶ and other Cuban expatriates have written extensive and favorable accounts of these young people. Some of these author's lives, families, and friends have been fundamentally affected by murder or torture suffered under Machado's secret police, the Porra. The Machado government is a very personal and direct contributor to their lives, thoughts, and academic contributions.

⁵ Justo Carrillo, Cuba 1933: Students, Yankees, and Soldiers. (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1994).

⁶ Jaime Suchlicki, University Students and Revolution in Cuba, 1920-1968 (Coral Gables, Florida: University of Miami Press, 1969).

Exile Politics

Cuba's revolutionary ethos, of which the Revolution of 1933 plays a key part, upholds efforts by Cuban expatriates to overthrow Machado by whatever means necessary, including violence. Because Cuba has a tradition of overthrowing its leaders through violence, revolutionaries do not need to justify the use of violence. That work has already been done by historians who have written convincingly of the justness of overthrowing a variety of Cuban leaders in the past.

Machado plays the archetype of a brutal bloody dictator who must be opposed by all means. The example of Machado and his ouster provides a precedent and justification for revolting against Castro. Castro's enemies justify overthrowing his government in the same way the Generation of 1930 justified removing Machado in 1933, the Spaniards in 1895, or other Cuban presidents in 1906 and 1917. Any attempt to modify Machado's role in Cuban history threatens to undermine justifications for Castro's revolution and attempts to revolt against Castro.

Machado and his government also represent United States imperialism to Castro. Castro's primary stronghold over the minds of Cubans remains his claim that he is protecting them from the Yankee enemy. Castro claims to be the sole heir to the *Ortodoxos* and *Autenticos* -- parties whose founders actively opposed Machado. Machado means historical continuity and legitimacy for Castro because that late president represents the twin evils of world capitalism and American imperialism. After Castro adopted a Marxist framework for explaining the revolution, Machado's historical position as a pro-American capitalist dictator treading upon the human rights of all Cubans became even more entrenched.

History of Machado

Published historical accounts of Gerardo Machado y Morales universally recognize him as one of the worst presidents in Cuba's history. Mario Menocal's political corruption and subversion of elections is mentioned only in passing, along with Zayas graft, while certainly, Cuban blacks hold no love for President Jose Miguel Gomez who dispatched troops to quell their rebellion in Oriente. Histories describing Machado's term in office breeze over positive developments between 1925 and 1933, and instead focus on his close ties with US capitalists, and the brutal repression of the political opposition in the early 1930s. Initiatives undertaken by Machado benefiting the island such as health care and education reform, and the creation of a central highway, are overlooked or downplayed because the theoretical frameworks used to describe Cuban history demand that Machado play the role of the enemy of Cuban political and social development. Yet revising Cuban history can easily produce a far more favorable view of Machado, summarized as follows:

Inheriting a bankrupt national treasury from former president Zayas and his notorious "honest cabinet," Machado set out to strengthen Cuba's economic situation in 1924. He called for the nullification of the Platt Amendment, insisted on adopting Spanish as a co-equal diplomatic language with English, established a public works program, reformed the national education system, improved health care training and access for all Cubans, and presided over the construction of the Cuban national highway which unified the island's transportation system for the first time. Machado changed the tariff schedules on manufactured goods in order to protect domestic light industry. His import substituting industrialization policies aimed at reducing dependence on the United States were successful and later recommended to and imitated by developing nations world-wide. Statistical evidence demonstrates that

these programs had a profound and positive effect in Cuba, and some contemporary observers noted that he was quite popular with the rural poor. Machado was re-elected with the support of all three major political parties and with the support of the Cuban press and the voters. However, Cuba's economy, already suffering from a decade of depressed sugar prices, collapsed with the onset of the Great Depression. Disgruntled out-of-office politicians sought to eliminate Machado with the help of unruly university students who stirred up the revolutionary fervor of the 1920s and 1930s. Responding to terrorist attacks on government targets, the Cuban police waged war on the rebels with insufficient regard for constitutional protections. Machado's presidency ended when the US government refused to support him against this opposition and the US ambassador actively conspired with the revolutionaries to put him away.

Machado's political enemies were not the poor; they were members of his own class. They represented interests not significantly different than his own, nor, despite Grau's liberal social policies and the rhetoric of communists, was the Generation of 1933 able to fundamentally advance Cuba's political life.

Yet the portrayal above is absent because of the influences mentioned earlier. A more complete description of this era could occur if one was willing not to construe Cuban history in relatively narrow terms. The Revolution of 1933 need not occupy a sacred site of Cuban political and historical life. A fresh perspective that does not rely upon this point of view produces a significantly different understanding of Cuba's past.

Economic Interpretations

The growth of historical information regarding Cuba exploded following the installation of a Marxist government on the island in 1959. Latin American Studies programs at graduate institutions all over the United States emerged thanks to liberal funding from the U.S. government. Surprised at the anger, shocked by the loss of Cuba, and then humbled by the failure to reverse Castro's revolution, policy generators went back to the drawing board to figure out why and how such a failure of the containment policy could occur in its own back yard. Historical studies of Cuba grew in volume, and quality, most of which placed a heavy emphasis on the international and economic character of Cuba's situation.

The framework (field views) governing Latin American history and political science emphasize economic interpretations of historical development. This is true for many reasons, first of which a materialistic approach to history is the most consistent interpretation of western "Enlightenment" thought. The second reason is because of the success of economic history in western universities.

Machado's contributions to Cuba's development do not emerge in economic interpretations of this era because an economic framework has little ability to account for a leader like Machado in positive terms. Historians working within accepted economic frameworks thus have limited flexibility in placing him. Perhaps one should turn to newer "unorthodox" theories to find ways to re-interpret Machado. These thoughtful "Marxist" understandings place considerable weight on systems of thought (Antonio Gramsci, Jackson Lears, Benedict Anderson), as opposed to

economic “facts.” These thinkers, though claiming to operate within the Marxist tradition, are more useful in this project because they accord to political consciousness a power greater than the "material facts" of the case.⁷ Thus, it could be argued that how Cuban history is perceived mentally and how it is constructed has a far more influential effect on events today than the "material" facts of "what actually happened" based on the “facts of economics or past occurrences.”

Contemporary Cuban politics and ideology depend upon maintaining Machado's current position in Cuban history; any fundamental change in understanding Machado's position in Cuban history would signal the emergence of another form of political understanding.

The Use of History in State Building

The use of history, traditions and literature in the creation of the nation-state has been duly noted by writers including Perry Anderson, Eric Hobsbawm and Terrence Ranger.⁸ Even the less avante gard Robert Freeman Smith argues that "written history has a definite influence on subsequent historical developments."⁹ For Smith, the Americans wrote the history of Cuba in their own terms as a means of

⁷ In a deeper sense, thinkers like Jackson Lears, Antonio Gramscii, and Benedict Anderson undermine Marxist interpretations because they focus on issues of the mind. They attempt to justify it within a materialistic framework, but in the long run, they will be judged as late materialists looking for a more basic human political framework than the material world. In this sense, they are early post-Enlightenment thinkers.

⁸ Eric Hobsbawm and Terrence Ranger, Editors, The Invention of Tradition, (London: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

⁹ Robert Freeman Smith, Background to Revolution: The Development of Modern Cuba, Revised Edition, (Huntington, New York: Robert E. Krieger Publishing Company, 1979), 15.

"preparing the historical justification for control, tutelage, and influence."¹⁰

Inventing traditions and creating a past forms contemporary political consciousness.

This process often goes unnoticed until accepted assumptions of the past are challenged. The past is not relevant for its own sake; there is no history distinct from politics (power).

The portrayal of the past is not a scientific enterprise: it is fundamentally a political act,¹¹ disguised as (social) "science." This illusion makes it all the more persuasive as the hearer of the stories believes that the teller passes only objective, unbiased information. History is portrayed as a science because those who have investments in this tradition appeal to the respect accorded "science." History is fundamentally a work of literature, a creative act, that however scientifically informed or constructed can never escape from its presuppositional foundation. Those foundations, those belief systems that usually remain beyond conscious analysis, form the fundamental act of history. Why is this important to address? The answer is because most histories do not address it and thus protect and pass on an illusion of knowledge where there is none. The production of literature, which historians refer to as a "history," are creations of a past that no longer exists. They are new imaginations. The political power of professional historians lies precisely in the ability of the historian and his profession to disguise or deny this understanding.

¹⁰ Robert Freeman Smith, Background to Revolution: The Development of Modern Cuba, Revised Edition, (Huntington, New York: Robert E. Krieger Publishing Company, 1979), 15.

¹¹ Politics is fundamentally the outworking of a life philosophy, or a faith in the way things ought to be. History is a political act -- creators of history (history books) reflect philosophical presuppositions.

History becomes revolutionary when the political implications of different interpretations threaten established positions. By not assuming that Machado was a roadblock in Cuban development, Cuban history is inverted. Benedict Anderson¹² credits the formation of nation-states in Latin America to the act of imagining new communities. History, the profession, is involved in the process of "imagining" the past, and any fundamental reworking of the past, and any fundamental reworking of how we conceive the past results in or proceeds from a fundamental reordering of the political world.

Conclusion

This study offers another view of Cuba's past. Readers hopefully will learn as much about the art of story telling and its relationship to power and philosophy as they will learn about the history of Gerardo Machado.

¹² Benedict Anderson, Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism, Revised Edition, (New York: Verso Press, 1991).