

2013

H-Diplo

H-Diplo Review ESSAY

<http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/essays/>

Published on **11 September 2013**

H-Diplo Review Essays Editors: Thomas Maddux and Diane Labrosse

H-Diplo Web and Production Editor: George Fujii

Commissioned for H-Diplo by Thomas Maddux

H-Diplo Review Essay on **Vanni Pettinà. *Cuba y Estados Unidos, 1933-1959: del compromiso nacionalista al conflicto***. Madrid: Los Libros de la Catarata, 2011. ISBN: 978-84-8319-627-4 (€18.00).

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/essays/PDF/Buscaglia-Salgado-Pettina.pdf>

Reviewed for H-Diplo by **José F. Buscaglia-Salgado**, University at Buffalo

This impressive book is a well-documented and clear narrative on the political history of the Second Cuban Republic, an interregnum between the revolutions of 1933 and 1959 when the destiny of the young nation was mostly tied to the figure and will of the insurgent Sergeant turned President and Dictator Fulgencio Batista. Until now, this period had remained obscured by the attention paid by scholars to the otherwise more momentous events that flank it, mainly the Cuban Wars of Independence from 1868 to 1898 and the Cuban Revolution of 1959. This gap has fostered a deviation in two fronts. On the one hand, it has promoted a sense of discontinuity in a tradition of *caudillismo* (military dictatorships lead by a single strongman) that can be traced almost uninterruptedly from Gerardo Machado in the late 1920's through Fulgencio Batista to the Castro brothers. On the other, especially in Cuba, where official censorship still holds to a single possible and totally Manichaeian view of the Second Republic, it has allowed the authorities to demonize and downplay the importance of the entire epoch in order to promote a revolutionary pedigree that places Fidel Castro as the exclusive heir to the heroes of the struggle for independence and the student leaders of the Revolution of 1933. Beyond Cuba, the period has been mostly misunderstood by U.S. scholars with little understanding of the nuances of Cuban political culture and mostly wronged by Cuban-U.S. writers who have tended to use the period as a quarry to throw stones in the continuing vendetta against the present rulers of the island.

Vanni Pettinà is in a unique position to shed light on this obscured history. He was formed in a significant way by the first generation of post-Franco peninsular scholars dedicated to the study of the Antilles. This is a small group that has made impressive contributions that in large measure remain sadly unknown to American scholars, especially in the U.S. His unbiased approach, so atypical to the field of Cuban studies, moved Pettinà to go beyond the Cuban and U.S. sources that tend to dominate the field, searching for documents, literature, and testimonials in the former USSR and most notably in Spain. The addition of the diplomatic correspondence of Spanish Dictator Francisco Franco's ambassadors to Cuba is particularly

enlightening and timely. It soon becomes evident that, given their understanding of *caudillismo* and the nature of guerrilla warfare, not to speak of their four-centuries of Spanish colonial experience in Cuba, Franco's representatives always had a much better sense of what was going on behind the scenes than the U.S. authorities in Washington and Havana, especially during the years between 1956 and 1959 when Castro's Rebel Army was up in the sierras.

The first half of *Cuba y Estados Unidos, 1933-1959* is a carefully dissected explanation of the intricate succession of events that followed the disintegration of the First Republic, focusing on the directly proportional relationship between the rise and fall of the economy and the different permutations in the Cuban political tradition during the period. Here Pettinà pays particular attention to the special interest and concessions given to Cuba by the United States, especially during the Franklin Roosevelt presidency and World War II.

In the second half of the book Pettinà argues quite correctly -- and contrary to the still dominant notions that enshrine Cuban contemporary history, both in the island and abroad -- that the tutelary role played by the U.S. during the Revolution of 1933 was quite different from the general disinterest and outright incompetence that the U.S. authorities displayed during the last years of the Batista dictatorship. Pettinà argues that the miscalculations and mismanagement on the part of the U.S. authorities and intelligence services during this period can be directly attributed to the start of the Cold War that led the U.S. to shift its international agenda to the nascent Third World beyond its traditional sphere of influence of the Monroe Doctrine. His discussion of the weariness of U.S. policymakers and intelligence services concerning the cooptation of nationalist and decolonization movements by the USSR successfully integrates the Cuban scenario into the broadest field of global geopolitics, breaking once again with common misconceptions, especially the myth of Cuban exceptionalism that is so prevalent on the island, both at the level of official discourse as well as in popular lore. He also makes clear in his last two chapters that Fidel Castro was able to skillfully outmaneuver the internally competing and for the most part mutually incongruent calculations of the U.S. State Department (DOS) and the U.S. Embassy in Havana through a politics of ambiguity that reflected the tactical maneuvers and strategic objectives of his guerrilla army in the field.

The book explains in a very sophisticated and masterful way what has always been known and never fully understood. Pettinà begins the work by telling how, soon after the triumphal entrance of Fidel Castro into Havana on January 8, 1959 and certainly by the time of Castro's visit to the U.S. in mid-April of that year, President Eisenhower came to realize how poor and late the advice and intelligence that he had received concerning recent developments in Cuba had been. By the end of the book the evidence to that fact is overwhelming, as Pettinà weaves it through three chapters that tell of the errors in judgment and the discrepancies in their assessment of the multiple scenarios between the DOS, the CIA and the U.S. ambassadors to Cuba. That discussion unfolds against the backdrop of the multiple and constantly shifting alliances in the then very colorful Cuban public sphere. As he does from the very beginning of his discussions of the Revolution of 1933 and its immediate precedents in the First Republic, Pettinà displays an unwavering command of the facts and the sharpest erudition.

This book is mandatory reading for all those who are interested in the diplomatic and military history of the Western Hemisphere, in the early stages of the Cold War and, of course, for all those students and scholars in the fields of Latin American, Caribbean and Cuban studies. Given the scarcity of unbiased and objective narratives on the period and the mounting questions concerning the future of Cuba after the Castro brothers' reign of terror, it is imperative that this book be promptly translated into English.

José Buscaglia-Salgado received his B.A. from Princeton University and Ph.D. from University at Buffalo where he is professor in the Department of Transnational Studies and director of the Master's Program in Caribbean Cultural Studies. His work explores the complexities of Caribbean space, political ideologies and aesthetics leading to his theory *mulataje* and his critique of what he calls *Usonian* (USA) ideology. His books include *Undoing Empire, Race, and Nation in the Mulatto Caribbean* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003) and the definitive critical edition of Carlos de Sigüenza y Góngora, *Infortunios de Alonso Ramírez: Edición crítica de José F. Buscaglia* (*Misfortunes of Alonso Ramirez: A Critical Edition by José F. Buscaglia*), José F. Buscaglia Salgado, ed., intro. (Madrid: Polifemo/Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, 2011).

Copyright © 2013 H-Net: Humanities and Social Sciences Online.

H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for non-profit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author(s), web location, date of publication, H-Diplo, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For other uses, contact the H-Diplo editorial staff at h-diplo@h-net.msu.edu.