

A Total History?

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Regarding the notion of world history, I am much like Molière's bourgeois gentleman speaking in prose without knowing it. Having recently read Marshall G. S. Hodgson and Alfred Crosby, and, of course, rereading André Gunder Frank and Immanuel Wallerstein, I have become conscious of the fact that, like M. Jourdain, I had been in certain respects practicing world history without knowing it. I believe that this probably could happen to the majority of those who have written history in Cuba, since this decentered perspective of the national-local has not only proven a methodological necessity but rather a general interpretive premise in order to account for many events of so-called national history. How does one study the history of the plantation economy, the multinational dimension of the revolution of national independence (1868–98), the invasion of foreign capital in the island between 1898 and 1920, capitalist development, and the socialist revolution without starting from a world vision? How does one tell the history of Cuba without including accounts of the participation of Cuban troops in the North American revolution or the presence of Cubans in the Spanish civil war; without telling of the taking of Havana by the English in 1762 or the missile crisis in 1962? How does one tell Cuban history without an account of our involvement in communist movements in Latin America and the Caribbean much before 1959, without acknowledging Afro-Cuban religions and the influence of Cuban musical rhythms around the world? Or, in my particular case, how does one explain the development of conflict between Cuba and the United States without addressing the guerrilla campaigns in the Congo, Bolivia, Venezuela, or the Dominican Republic, the war in southwestern Africa, or the alliance with the USSR? Are Che Guevara and Fidel Castro just top-

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ics of a local history? In other words, it is virtually impossible to consider Cuban history without a world perspective.

Nevertheless, surely the numerous scholars of the Caribbean, of migrations, of international security, and of North American foreign policy or socialism could claim the same thing—at least that has been my experience in investigating these issues. Actually, insofar as I am to describe my own experiences, it is much easier for me to do so and outline my research in these terms than it would be to narrate how I have gone about building my own interpretations. Perhaps I can explain myself better if I try to regard it as a process of cultural acquisition. I studied French literature and philosophy at the University of Havana in the 1960s, and then political science and Latin American problems in Mexico in the mid-1970s. I wanted to understand Cuban problems—so I decided to study the United States. I now feel that I have managed to develop my interpretation of the conflict between Cuba and its neighbor to the north through having to explain it to students from Columbia University and the University of Nehru, to young cadets at the Royal Canadian Institute of Kingston, to officials at the United Services Institution of India, by listening to Andrei Gromyko and Sergo Mikoyan in Moscow, having the opportunity of discussions with Robert MacNamara and Arthur Schlesinger on a beach in Antigua, and having to examine it before members of the Central Committee of the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party during the cold war. I was not able to appreciate the role of Cuba in Africa until a Guinean laborer at Heathrow Airport in London gave me his version. I did not realize how important this role was in the Caribbean view of Cuba until I spent three hours on an open-microphone radio talk show on the North American Virgin Island of Saint Croix. I have to confess that I was not really able to understand the global significance of Fidel Castro until I met a group of young people in Chandigarh, in the Punjab.

These experiences have helped me decenter my interpretation of the conflict; in other words, they have enabled me to construct logics of analysis that revealed the conflict according to a rationality that is not merely Cuban or merely North American. They have also allowed me to go beyond the strictly rational confines of geopolitics, which are consistent with Western notions of realism. This is not only because of diverse geographic scenarios, pointed out above, in which the conflict has unfolded historically, nor because of the international nature of the actors involved, but rather because of the depth of focus afforded by consideration of its global significance.

This question of focus has played a central role in the growth of all my work—and it continues to do so. Practicing social science as a technical exercise—in the same way an engineer constructs a bridge—is not very interesting. The most that one can manage to do is to learn to construct bridges very well. What is truly most exciting about social science, or about science in general, is the moment at

which one believes to have managed to surpass the *normal form*—in other words, the learned form—of looking at a phenomenon. I realized that I began to understand key aspects of the conformation of the Cuban nation while visiting Tzotzil and Tzeltal villages in the mountains of Chiapas and talking with the chief of the Lacandones fifteen years before the Zapatista uprising. For a Cuban in Cuba, it is virtually impossible to experience the indigenous condition—the separation deeply entrenched in *another* culture, *another* nation, *another* way of thinking. (Paradoxically, we Cubans are more a single Western nation than other Latin American states and even some European ones.) The opportunity to think about the Cuban nation from another cultural perspective proved crucial for me. Without this knowledge, I would never have been able to develop a cultural perspective of the relationship between Cuba and the United States. An understanding of what separates us requires knowing above all what ties us together.

During the past decade and a half, some postmodern currents have dedicated themselves to declaring the end of the national, instead of examining it as an exponent of the world equation. This dichotomy has produced a number of Byzantine debates. Replacing the provincial national approach with a North-centrist global focus has not carried us very far. Now, is it enough to insist on denouncing the predominance of a North-centrist vision of history (and of everything else)? Or is it rather a matter of pulling apart and recombining our categories of analysis, not only reinterpreting world history from a southern perspective but also from a perspective of a cultural rehistoricizing of the North? I am not only referring to social or cultural history, a history of subaltern groups, or one of “people without history,” as it was called by the Cuban historian Juan Pérez de la Riva. In spite of what social science—not just history—has proposed in the last decade and a half, I do not know of any approach that goes beyond identifying world objects—as in the pattern of capital accumulation, the global market, transnational communities and human movement, and the dispersion of ideologies and technologies.

I am talking about a *total* history. I use this term cautiously, because as far as I know we do not yet have a word to name this phenomenon: a kind of understanding that critically reconstructs the representation of the historical by means of cultural codes that restore their multiple meanings, both synchronic and diachronic. I am talking about a history capable of integrating narratives of the conquerors and the conquered into one analytical discourse that includes their different ethical, religious, and political values. I am talking about a history that integrates their sense of liberty and justice; their imageries of time,¹ humankind, the afterlife, and, above all, of the meaning of the events in question to each different community. One does not have to travel to India or China in order to reconstruct this type of focus in historically significant terms.

To this end, a total history should not limit itself to incorporating the resources and *weltanschauung* of anthropology and social psychology—from the subjective view of one group or one social-cultural tradition. Naturally, it will become necessary to extract information from traditional knowledge and from collective representations, from myths and cultural constructions of human groups. One could do, let's say, what Marvin Harris did when he began to study North American society by using the intellectual instruments invented in order to study so-called primitive communities. Immanuel Wallerstein has talked about a “historical sociology” or a “sociological history.” For me, this epistemological reconstruction goes far beyond inter- or transdisciplinarity; it is necessary to dediscipline academic knowledge, change old habits and disciplinarily correct approaches, not by tossing them out of the window, but by critically historicizing them. A world perspective would prove strategic if we were to understand it this way—and not as a summation of regional visions or of a stratified aggregate of knowledges.²

At the beginning of these notes, I recognized my own ineptitude at fulfilling a request to critically analyze the deficiencies in world history. I think that in general, the social sciences have much to consider in order to reach a world perspective. Some weeks ago, a political science professor in northern India asked me what the predominant religion was among Cuba's elite and how many different languages we spoke in my country. Accustomed to answering predictable questions from Western audiences (like “What is going to happen when Fidel Castro disappears?”), I found myself perplexed for a few seconds. From that point on, I began to believe that it would be scandalous for a Cuban not to know more about India, China, and all those conglomerations of nations that make up the real world—the world whose perspective we would like to adopt for the history to come.

Translated by Victoria Martinez, Union College.

Notes

1. The Spanish word is *imaginarios*, which describes a system of cultural representations and notions.
2. The Spanish word here is *saberes*, and it does not represent just a repository of accumulated knowledge, but rather refers to a system of responding to historical changes. For that reason, the word has been translated as *knowledges*.