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Jose A. Cobas, Jorge Duany. *Cubans in Puerto Rico: Ethnic Economy and Cultural Identity.* Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1997. x + 156 pp. $39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8130-1499-9.

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Accounting for the Middleman

The presence in Puerto Rico of other Caribbean peoples, most notably Cubans, Dominicans and Haitians, has been a subject of heated political debate and crude popular humor for some time. As Cobas and Duany point out, however, scholarly concern with these populations and their role in Puerto Rican society is of rather recent vintage. In most treatments, Puerto Rico continues to be regarded solely as a supplier of migrants, with the island rarely mentioned as a recipient of migratory flows from elsewhere. The contribution of *Cubans in Puerto Rico* should be gauged with that consideration in mind.

Rather than a study of migration patterns in the classic sense, Cobas' and Duany's volume offers an account of the economic and social strategies employed by Cuban exiles in San Juan, focusing for the most part on the period since the Cuban revolution when exiles arrived in massive numbers for the first time. Two introductory chapters also offer: (1) a synopsis of the various phases of migration, which in Puerto Rico reached its peak in 1971 when nearly 30,000 exiles resided in the island (p. 41); and (2) a chronology of U.S. policies and their impact on Cuban exiles. Both chapters are based largely on surveys of published literature and official statistics.

In some respects *Cubans in Puerto Rico* is better described as a tightly ordered anthology than as a monograph *per se*. The chapters, many of which can be read independently as essays, are the result of separate studies conducted by the authors in the early 1980s. Cobas, a U.S.-based sociologist, carried out a survey of urban Cuban communities in 1981-82. Using a sample of residential clusters in San Juan and the surrounding metropolitan zone, Cobas identified fully-employed adult Cuban males and gathered data on residential patterns, occupation and employment, educational attainment and other indicators relevant to the analysis of the Cuban "ethnic economy." Duany, an anthropologist working in Puerto Rico, conducted his fieldwork in 1983 and 1984. He aimed to document Cuban activities in various social and business settings and to "discover the principles that guided the exile's social relations" (p. 5). Duany also examined Cubans' marriage statistics and studied exile publications.

Cobas and Duany are themselves Cuban immigrants and this makes for a book that in the authors' words "reflects professional analyses as well as personal experiences" (p. 4). Perhaps this also accounts for the demythicizing and apologetic impetus behind many of the discussions. Indeed, challenging at least some of the prejudices and unflattering half-truths that surround Puerto Rican perceptions of Cubans figures prominently within the volume's broad agenda.

The chapters in *Cubans in Puerto Rico* are linked cogently, if not seamlessly, under the rubric of a modified "middleman model," a concept whose formulation the authors trace to Weber. In the classic iteration, the authors note, middleman groups are thought to be constituted by sojourning, migrant peoples such as medieval European Jews, whose special skills (including language), international connections and interest in "portable" enterprises make them particularly adept at commerce within their host societies. These societies, for their part, are usually non-industrialized. But they offer opportunities to middleman-groups because they tend also to be dominated by local elites that for various reasons (often status) shy away from the concerns in which the middleman's ethnic groups carve their niches. Classic middleman groups, moreover, are "clannish" in their internal dealings, even as they specialize in the provision of goods and services to the out-group. Their relationship with the elite is ambivalent, at once privileged and also marked by varying measures of hostility and disdain (pp. 11-14).

Cobas and Duany argue that although Cubans in Puerto Rico do not exhibit all of the traits of classic middleman groups, a modified version of this model serves to understand their adaptation to the host society. They propose that Puerto Rican attitudes to Cuban exiles are

best understood in terms of the middleman/host society dynamic and that unlike other such groups, Cubans in the island will not remain a permanent middleman group. Rather, Cobas and Duany assert that Cubans' present status will prove transitory and that the signs of their incorporation into the upper and middle-sectors of Puerto Rican society are already visible (p. 3).

This characterization contrasts markedly with the authors' understanding of the position of Cubans in the United States. Cobas and Duany argue that rather than being middlemen, U.S. Cubans have developed ethnic enclave economies more typical of large migrant populations. These economies concentrate co-ethnics and services in a given geographical area and tend to serve the in-group above the out group (p. 15). Cubans in the United States, moreover, exhibit a higher degree of occupational diversity and are comparatively less successful financially than Cubans who occupy Puerto Rico's middleman sector. These comparisons, it should be noted, offer the general reader some of the most provocative discussions in the volume and may provide the basis for lively scholarly and classroom debates on migration, identity and class among U.S. Latinos (pp. 40-48).

For Cobas and Duany the deviations of Cubans in Puerto Rico from the classic middleman model are a matter of the discrepancy between "abstract" and "ideal" types and actual manifestations (pp. 16, 21). The authors propose that even if Cubans in Puerto Rico have a tendency to marry out of group (p. 61), exhibit relatively low levels of "clannishness" (p. 62) and experience comparatively "minor" hostility from their host society (p. 66), to name only a few seeming discrepancies, "the socio-economic profile of Cuban exiles in Puerto Rico fits the middleman group pattern" (p. 65). Cubans as a population, they argue, have a higher educational attainment than most Puerto Ricans; they are over-represented in prestigious and well-paid occupations; they tend to work for themselves, for co-ethnics or for foreign-owed firms; they are mostly traders and managers; and when entrepreneurs, they seem to rely on the in-group for support.

Although a number of questions or objections may be raised in regard to the specific items in Cobas and Duany's modified middleman model [1], *Cubans in Puerto Rico* does paint a plausible picture of the economic space Cubans occupy in Puerto Rican society and of the strategies they have pursued to gain their rather privileged position. Where the model seems far less successful is in its characterization of Puerto Rican and Cuban relations and especially in its capacity to illuminate Cuban cultural identity in exile. The binary focus on clannishness v. openness, hostility v. acceptance, positive self-promotion v. hostile stereotyping, assimilation v. collective self-affirmation, etc., proposes a narrowly limiting conceptual apparatus incapable of addressing or even recognizing the concerns that a vast literature of recent cultural studies have brought forth.

In the last chapters of the book, the authors offer a very useful and rare ethnographic account of the structure and activities of a variety of Cuban voluntary associations and their publications in Puerto Rico. But the interpretive apparatus does not allow for a thoroughgoing consideration of the issues. The voluntary associations emerge as a "central axis of the community," as channels for information flux, interpersonal and business contacts, and even as repositories of idealized memories of pre-revolutionary Cuba (p. 106). The publications, for their part, "promote a sense of common origin and destiny among Cubans in Puerto Rico and the United States"; they instill ethnic pride; they counter noxious stereotypes and mobilize support (p. 121). But ultimately these observations shed little light on the questions surrounding Cuban identity, one of the purported objects of study.

Cubans in Puerto Rico, the authors note, view themselves as sharing three basic values–God, fatherland and family–and two great national symbols–Jose Marti and Our Lady of Charity–both of whom have been recruited into the camp of Castro's detractors. But contrary to appearances, these traits lack "Cuban" specificity. After all, Puerto Ricans too claim that the family is the foundation of their culture and society, that they are a deeply religious people, and that they are profoundly patriotic. The point, of course, is not that two distinct cultures cannot resort to the same discursive repertoire–although that presumption of distinctiveness along national-cultural lines is itself worth investigating–but to interrogate how self-perception, culture and "Cubanness" are constructed in a society where the majority group is not all that different from the out-group.

The treatment of the devotions surrounding Our Lady of Charity in Puerto Rico, for instance, point at some of the shortcomings of the middleman model. According to the authors, Cuban feasts honoring the Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre serve to "legitimate the exile's moral values" and to construct the exiles as "a spiritual community that is distinct from the receiving society" (p. 99) And, admittedly, this may well explain many of the exiles' intentions. But this analysis does not assist us in understanding the limits of the "difference" or "distinctive-

ness" thus asserted nor the impact of the Cuban presence on Puerto Rican self-perceptions. In Puerto Rico, where municipalities, neighborhoods, families and even individuals identify themselves with particular advocations of the Virgin, how is the Cuban devotion to "Cachita" understood? What can we make of the growing popularity of the Virgen de la Caridad among Puerto Ricans? of her cult among Cuban and Puerto Rican practitioners of Santeria (whose increasing appeal is worth investigating as a possible instance of Puerto Rico's "Caribbeanization")? [2], or of her role in Puerto Rican folk Catholicism and *espiritismo*?

These criticisms aside, *Cubans in Puerto Rico* makes a number of valuable contributions. Cobas and Duany usher in a discussion of Puerto Rico as an immigrant destination; they propose an agenda for comparative work on the Cuban exile experience moving to separate the tangle of misperceptions and evidence that has shaped inaccurate notions of "gusanos" and "golden exiles"; and, finally, they invite us to consider the impact that the migration of Caribbean peoples may have for others within a region already shaped by countless diasporas. As noted above, the volume should also prove a valuable teaching tool offering students a synthesis from which to launch discussions regarding the variety of Latin American migratory experiences and varying constructions of group identity, among other topics.

Notes

[1]. It should be noted, for instance, that the study is not always clear as to whom is considered Cuban. Cuban-born exiles are a rather clear-cut category; but second and third generations are far more problematic to classify. At times the authors appear to consider the exile's Puerto Rican-born children "Cuban." But on occasion, this same population seems to be called Puerto Rican. Their exclusion from the ranks of Cubans deserves explicit discussion, particularly because it tends to minimize "Cuban" political power in Puerto Rico and the influence of the "Cuban" press in the island (pp. 78,108). Is ex-governor Ferre, for instance, a first-generation Puerto Rican, a Puerto Rican of Cuban ancestry, or a second-generation Cuban? How should Ferre's progeny, which includes the editor of *El Nuevo Dia*, Puerto Rico's most influential daily, be categorized?

On economic matters, several cautionary notes are necessary: (1) Cobas' study considers only Cuban males in formal employment; (2) the sources for Cuban capital on the island are not known, thus making some determinations regarding Cuban support networks difficult; and (3) much of private business in Puerto Rico is foreign-owned, and this coupled with the impact of a state-sector that is also the single largest employer may tend to overstate the Cuban propensity to work with/for non-Puerto Ricans.

[2]. The authors point out that Santeria grew dramatically in Puerto Rico as a result of the massive influx of Cuban exiles in the 1960s. But they also note that by the mid 1980s, half of Puerto Rico's sixteen main *babalawaos* (priests) were Puerto Ricans.

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