

CALL FOR PAPERS

In the shadow of the superpowers? Revisiting the relations between Cuba and Europe (20th century)

University of Poitiers (France)

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Dates: March 18-20 (Poitiers); March 21-22 (Paris)

Relations and mediation processes between Cuba and Europe during the 20th century have not been the subject of detailed historiographical analysis. European-Cuban ties have often been overshadowed by the Cold War dynamics and the long history of external influences exerted on the island by the United States and the Soviet Union after 1959.

Although historians have addressed some aspects of the relationships between Cuba and Europe before and after 1959 – the year Fidel Castro came to power –, the geostrategic importance of Cuba during the Cold War has led most scholars to focus primarily on relations with the superpowers and, although to a lesser extent, with the socialist countries of Eastern Europe. Except for the book *The Fractured Blockade: West European-Cuban Relations During the Revolution*, edited by Alistair Hennessy and George Lambie and published in the early 1990s, there are virtually no publications that provide an overview of Cuban-European relations (including the oversea European colonies). These limitations contrast with the actual relevance of Cuban-European ties (particularly with France, England, Italy, Spain, Germany and, from 1960, with Eastern Europe), in the political, economic, and cultural fields.

We aim at exploring these “forgotten” and poorly investigated relationships during a long-term historical period that (20th century) that, unlike most works on Cuban history, does not divide our chronology before and after Castro’s rise to power (1959). This expanded chronological framework should allow us to discern possible continuities and ruptures, thereby encouraging us to assess the “founding character” of 1959.

The international conference “In the shadow of the superpowers? Revisiting the relations between Cuba and Europe (20th century)” will enrich the contributions of a previous conference focused only on French-Cuban relations (Poitiers, March 30-31, 2022). It aims at overcoming

the historiographical limitations, on the basis of three main (although not exclusive) lines of research:

- 1) Cultural circulations: Beyond the physical component of a process of circulation that links two geographical and cultural areas, we wish to highlight the symbolic aspects of Cuba-Europe interactions. We encourage proposals focused on both the physical movement of objects and in the “narrative scheme” (François Hartog) that emerges because of a circulation process. The objects that shape the interaction between two geographic and cultural spaces (translated books, commercial product, paintings, revolutionary magazines, photography, exhibitions, films) result in an active reception by the host society and produce a representation, a particular imagery of the issuing society. Without dismissing the importance of describing the “materiality” of the cultural transfer, we want above all to question the effects of the encounter with the “otherness”, as well as the crossing of sensibilities and imaginaries (Sylvain Venayre). The conference will not only seek to identify the main products of the “cultural circulations” but also wishes to unveil the projects that underlie this movement, as well as the unexpected effects of a given circulation. Therefore, we encourage researchers to work on the nature and the scope of transferred materials and ideas, as well as on the way in which each cultural and political contexts – Cuban or European – mediate the reception of reciprocal influences.
- 2) Mediators: Within the framework of “cultural transfers” studies (Michel Espagne), some scholars have highlighted the key role played by certain figures – mediators – in articulating the relationships between two geographical and cultural spaces. Representations of a society regarding a foreign reality are sometimes determined by the creative work of a mediator (translator, diplomat, painter, writer, political activist, researcher, athlete). People who take part in “cultural circulations” are able to “extract” a portion of a specific reality and transfer it to another setting, thus contributing to the dissemination of a specific and conditioned image of the explored society. We invite researchers to explore the mechanics through which these mediators have accompanied the transmission of influences or imaginaries in the “Cuban-European space”, inducing a “readjusted” integration and reception in the host context. We welcome contributions that seek to assess the role of these mediators in shaping the representations of an “otherness”. We encourage works on the role of renowned mediators and on the influence of lesser-known figures, women and men who have not been in the forefront but who, through a more “discreet” action (a translator, interpreter, press correspondent, language teacher) have shaped interactions and the images that emerge.
- 3) Bilateral relationships: Finally, we also encourage more traditional works on political, diplomatic, and commercial relations between Cuba and Western Europe. Although the prevailing vision of Cuba’s foreign policy tends to present the island’s international history as an evolution from a phase of US control (1898-1959) to Soviet hegemony (from 1960-1961 until the end of the Cold War), we believe that this picture simplifies the history of Cuba’s international relations, overlooking the influence that Western Europe has exercised in Cuba throughout the 20th century. For instance, French and Spanish cultures had a large presence in pre-1959 Cuba and, for many Cubans, offered an alternative to the dominant American influence. Moreover, European countries did not remain indifferent to the Cuban events, especially after the revolution. The wide range of diplomatic sources produced by Western European embassies in Cuba (as well as the NATO archives, located in Brussels), highlights the strategic importance of the

Caribbean island, in particular since 1961, when Fidel Castro proclaimed the socialist character of the revolution and embarked on a lasting alliance with the USSR. The US trade embargo, decreed in 1960, was not unanimously welcomed by the Western bloc, and countries such as Belgium, France, and the United Kingdom distanced themselves from the White House policy against Cuba, developing commercial ties with Havana in the 1960s. These are only some few examples of the Cuban-European inter-state relations that have been overshadowed by historiography and that we hope to bring out during our conference.

Proposals in English, French or Spanish (2,500 characters including spaces), as well as a short CV, can be sent to the following email address (rafael.pedemonte@univ-poitiers.fr) before October 10, 2023.