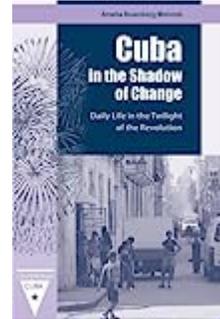




**Amelia Rosenberg Weinreb.** *Cuba in the Shadow of Change: Daily Life in the Twilight of the Revolution.* Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2009. 254 pp. \$69.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8130-3369-3.



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## **Cuba's Silent Majority in the Shadow of Revolution and Change**

The ethnographer Amelia Rosenberg Weinreb has undertaken an examination of a supposedly unspectacular section of the Cuban population, the so-called silent majority. This is her definition of a predominantly white and well-educated Cuban middle class whose aspirations to build a satisfying life are chronically frustrated. Despite their often excellent education they have almost no chance of getting a job in accordance with their skills, and face the contradiction of wanting to earn their own keep but having no other choice than to do it extralegally. According to the author, who recorded the voices of this silent majority through participatory observation, these unattainable aspirations and disappointments are responsible for their "silence" and their withdrawal into a private sphere, as well as their increasingly negative relationship to the state. Rosenberg Weinreb's study aims to document a dissatisfaction with the political and economic system of contemporary Cuba that leads not to public protests but to resignation. To explain this specific phenomenon, she introduces the term "unsatisfied citizen-consumers" and provides a record of what she

calls "shadow opinion." The challenge of her topic is obvious: she tries to reveal social change within the process of change itself, one of the most difficult goals for an ethnographic or social science-oriented investigation.

The study deals therefore with the profound social, cultural, and economic changes in late socialist Cuba that began in the early 1990s, known as the "special period," and are still going on. Through the definition of "late socialism" that follows the research on social and cultural transformations since the decline of socialism in the former Eastern bloc, she describes processes in Cuban society such as the increasing importance of consumers who are shifting towards capitalism, combined with a declining commitment among citizens to the socialist state (p. 34). An open, public discussion about which economic and social changes are to be undertaken in the future is one of the greatest taboos in present-day Cuba; nevertheless this question is vibrant in the everyday life of almost all Cubans, due to all the shortages of basic consumer goods and the struggle to get them on the existing black and grey markets, as the author tries to prove. The two

big questions behind these problems are, first, how to introduce elements of a free market system in order to stimulate private initiative and production; and second, how far the social security network can be preserved under a market system.

The protagonists of this investigation are rather unusual in terms of what is normally associated with Cuba; they are not, for example, firm revolutionaries, exile Cubans, artists or musicians, or dissidents. Instead, Rosenberg Weinreb focuses on "normal people" who are seeking a "normal life" without luxury but also without deprivations. They are those who have the modest aspiration to share the consumer goods that are normal for middle-class people in industrialized Western countries (e.g., tools and household utensils or paper diapers). Until now this segment of the Cuban population has been underexposed in both popular and academic discourse, because it is inconspicuous and because its members, being neither exotic nor political dissidents, do not fit in with observers' preconceptions about Cubans. This silent majority of relatively privileged and well-educated people consists mainly of those who have been born since the triumph of the revolution, many of them raised in the "golden ages" of Cuban socialism, the 1970s and partly the 1980s, periods characterized by saturation with (Eastern) consumer goods and the consolidation of a successful social security system providing health care and good education for everybody.

The economic and political crisis that seized Cuba twenty years ago, after the fall of the Eastern bloc, changed the lives of all Cubans drastically, and signs of underdevelopment like hunger, poverty, and underemployment that are characteristic of all "Third World" countries suddenly became part of everyday life. Many Cubans fled this situation—if they could—to begin a new life outside Cuba, but the majority stayed and tried to cope with the difficulties. The hardships of the "special period" of the 1990s are over now and the Cuban economy has recovered, but nevertheless the system does not offer a future to the majority of its citizens in terms of adequate job opportunities and the prospect of earning their own keep. The only alternative is the paradoxical situation of developing extralegal grey and black market activities and jobs in order to survive. According to the author, this is the main reason why the struggle to get even the most simple consumer goods or to possess "dollars" (or their equivalent) has acquired such an exaggerated importance in Cuban everyday life. Rosenberg Weinreb shows this convincingly in part 2 ("Meanings") of her study, trying to record the words and terms

of these practices in a kind of "Special Period Lexicon" and explaining their significance with the results of her field research. Social scientists, ethnographers, or historians familiar with present-day Cuba will find no surprises in this chapter: The phenomena of the Cuban everyday struggle are well known and even apparent to normal visitors. What is new is the intimate insight that Rosenberg Weinreb can offer through the perspective of her protagonists, making visible the shifts and changes of meanings and significations of material goods, values, consumption, and property within Cuban society. Her study therefore reflects not only the emergence of a new class division within the society (according to the possession of dollar-equivalents), but also the fear that "consumers" will replace "citizens," that citizens will be reduced to consumers, and that citizenship and active civic participation within society will become "commodified." One indication is her observation that Cubans almost never openly express their political criticisms, whereas consumer frustrations and the lack of material goods are among the few things that they can complain about openly to others (Cubans and visitors) without fear of state reprisals (p. 85). Another insight provided by her research deals with the meaning of "freedom," the significance of migration in Cuban society, the possibility of a temporary migration, and the longing to leave the frustrating situation.

Rosenberg Weinreb's study fills a gap, because there has been almost no ethnographic material about Cuban society since the large-scale ethnographic studies of Oscar and Ruth Lewis, and Susan Rigdon, whose attempt to reveal the phenomena of social change in the revolutionary society of the 1960s through participatory observation was cut short by the Cuban government in the late 1960s. Only in the last decade have some social scientists, ethnographers, and/or historians made new attempts to base their investigations on oral history or participatory observations. They were confronted with the same difficulties as the author of the present book: they had either to deal with severe restrictions imposed by the government or they had to investigate discreetly—as Rosenberg Weinreb did—without official permission and with a restricted selection of interview partners. Rosenberg Weinreb deals with this obvious methodological problem, admitting that she could only obtain profound information about the topic through her long-term intimate personal contacts. I felt somewhat uncomfortable with her insistence on what she calls "family fieldwork" (p. 12), and the description of how she used the presence of her children to gain confidence as a "mother" and how she ob-

tained more intimate details from informants by using the observations of their children.

The results of her study are based on the testimonies of about fifty families listed in the appendix with anonymized names and a short characterization. The list shows a balanced proportion of what the author calls "anti-Castro" people on the one hand, and informants with "Communist Party affiliation" on the other, whereas in the study itself the majority of the opinions expressed seem to be clearly from the "anti-Castro" faction. This is one of the main shortcomings of this investigation; another is the assumption that Cubans with "Communist Party affiliation" are an "out-group" concerning black and grey market activities and the shift in the meanings of values and consumption (p. 66). Those who are categorized as "Communist Party members" (and presumed supporters of the political system) play in my opinion the essential role in the network of grey and black market activities. Without their active participation (or their deliberate turning of a blind eye) the whole

"shadow system" would not work at all.

On the basis of her findings on the increasing significance of consumption and consumer goods within Cuban society, Rosenberg Weinreb comes to the convincing conclusion that one of the most important indicators of change within the contemporary Cuban system, independently of how it is defined ("communist," "authoritarian," "state socialist," "late socialist," etc.), is consumer details (e.g., the price of a rice cooker), which, according to the author, "remain the litmus test to measure the extent to which any transition in Cuba is solid rather than symbolic, or to measure the depth of the reforms" (p. 186). Apart from the aforementioned shortcomings and criticisms, Rosenberg Weinreb's innovative study on Cuba's silent majority is highly recommended to all historians, ethnographers, and social scientists who are interested in contemporary Cuba and in gaining new insights in order to explain widely known phenomena and changes within Cuban society since the 1990s.

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