

Film review: *Cuba at the Crossroads*

The unfortunate workaholicism that frequently causes me to arise early on Saturday mornings often finds me watching New York's Channel 13 over my first cup of coffee before starting to get serious about the day's activities. This has, at times, produced the serendipitous result of exposing me to interesting programming that I would otherwise miss. Such an outcome occurred one recent morning when I had the good fortune to see a documentary entitled *Cuba at the Crossroads*. This 29-minute film provides an analytical look at Cuba in 1996 and its ongoing antagonism with the United States that, I feel, will be of great interest to most Latin Americanist geographers and teachers of Latin American and Caribbean affairs. It offers a brief, but balanced, overview of this controversial relationship. The film was prepared by the Center for Defense Information as part of its "America's Defense Monitor" series that airs on the U.S. Public Broadcasting System (PBS). The short length of this film, and others in the series, makes it ideal for use in the classroom setting, where it will almost certainly serve to generate a very lively discussion while providing students with the essential background information about the problems that have led to the current situation.

The film opens with an observation that the inflow of foreign investors and tourists into Cuba during the 1990s has brought great change to the country. The only two constants remaining are the government of Fidel Castro and the unrelenting U.S. foreign policy designed to overthrow that government. It focuses on the Helms-Burton Law, passed by the U.S. Congress in 1996, to tighten further the embargo on trading with Cuba. A diversity of opinions about this law are expressed through a series of interspersed interviews, which include representatives of both political parties in the United States, a variety of policy analysts in both countries, North American capitalists, and people-on-the-street in Miami and in Cuba. Through these interviews and the accompanying narrative, the film criticizes the U.S. policy, while explaining its rationale, but accomplishes this in a very reasonable manner that reflects the nature of the organization that produced it. The Center for Defense Information is a non-government organization led by a retired admiral and vice-admiral of the U.S. Navy whose patriotic intentions seem unquestionable. The strong critique of U.S. policy that they offer, therefore, should capture even more attention among the viewing public than if they were suggested by normally leftist sources.

Among other things, the film notes that more than 240 joint foreign-state ventures are now operating in Cuba, with a value of more than \$750,000,000. U.S. firms are unable to participate in this new development which, it is suggested, will cost them dearly in the long run in a market that is very receptive to U.S. goods and brand names. Cuba's economic reforms have also led to the privatization of more than 100 professions and provided "space" for many small-scale private operations such as restaurants and farmers' markets, all of which may well be contributing to a decline in the government's ability to control all aspects of the lives of its citizenry.

The film's strength lies in its balance. *Cuba at the Crossroads* offers a brief synopsis of the difficult relationship between Cuba and the United States, beginning with its origins in the Spanish-American War, the centennial of which is being observed this year. It also chronicles the unequal nature of the Cuban-Soviet relationship during the thirty-year period following the overthrow of the Batista dictatorship. The film shows both the hardships now endured by the Cuban people and some of the creative ways in which they are seeking to overcome them. It notes the increasing gaps, in what is perhaps Latin America's most egalitarian society, that have emerged with the 'dollarization' of several sectors of the economy, most notably tourism. It also illustrates clearly the overwhelming lack of international support for the U.S. policy and how that policy violates international law. Both sides of opinion within Miami's Cuban community are presented, including those of the fiercely anti-Castro *Cuban-American National Foundation* and of the more moderate *Cambio Cubano*, whose willingness to engage in discussions with the Castro government is, perhaps, not widely known among the U.S. public.

In the final analysis, the viewer comes away from this documentary with a much clearer vision of contemporary Cuba and a better understanding of why US policy toward that country has failed to yield any **[end p. 127]** desirable outcomes. Bill Clinton is the ninth US President to wrestle with this relationship but Castro remains in power, actually strengthened in the minds of many by the continuing US hostility directed at his government.

A final asset worthy of note about this film, and of the others in the ADM series, is its price. It can be purchased by anyone for just \$25.00 and there is a special rate of just \$18.00 for faculty members. Overall, this renders it a much more reasonably priced audiovisual tool than most of the more commercially produced items available yet the quality of the production is remarkably professional. I highly recommend that the readers of this journal contact the Center for Defense Information for purchase information about this and other documentaries in the series, all of which deal with very contemporary issues of concern in the post-Cold War era and many of which have international dimensions. The address is: Center for Defense Information 1500 Massachusetts Avenue NW Washington, DC 20005

Dr. James Wiley
Department of Economics and Geography
Hofstra University
Hempstead, New York **[end p. 128]**