

## CUBAN STUDIES

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Peter Roman, *People's Power: Cuba's Experience with Representative Government.*

Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1999. 284 pp. Reviewed by Carolee Bengelsdorf. 157

Charles D. Ameringer. *The Cuban Democratic Experience: The Auténtico Years, 1944-1952*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2000. 229 pp.

Charles D. Ameringer's *Cuban Democratic Experience* is an important book. He does not break analytical ground but no matter: his is a thoughtful, well-documented account of the administrations of Ramón Grau San Martín and Carlos Prío Socarrás, a noteworthy accomplishment in and of itself. Too often the years between 1933 and 1959 in Cuba are labeled the Batista era, which is a two-edged mistake. It is a simplification: Fulgencio Batista was a military populist in the 1930s, a constitutionally elected president in the early 1940s, and almost a mainstream dictator in the 1950s. It is also a misnomer: Cuba had a truly democratic experience during the Auténtico years, one that Ameringer admirably rehabilitates, his disclaimer of such a purpose notwithstanding (p. 15).

Cuba between the revolutions of 1933 and 1959 offers a textbook case of political change: a revolutionary situation in 1933 followed by reaction and reform; a democratic transition concluding with the singular *pacto* embodied in the Constitution of 1940; twelve years of representative democracy bolstered by Batista's passing the reins of power to the oppositionist Grau in 1944; the breakdown of democracy in 1952; and a definitive revolution in 1959. Ameringer does not stray too far afield of his narrative, a glaring weakness, for the rich, ably woven details cry out for more probing commentary.

A simple but oft-overlooked reason that Cuba was a democracy for the twelve years — not just the Auténticos' eight — of the Constitution of 1940 lies in the relatively honest elections held between 1940 and 1952 (presidential and midterm) — no mean feat, given the electoral history of the first republic (1902-1933). Batista shed his colonel's garb in 1940 to put on a mostly fairly earned presidential sash in 1940; he governed largely as a civilian, organized a clean enough contest in 1944, and civilly bowed out when Grau won the presidency. Similarly, both Auténtico administrations sufficiently respected the integrity of the electoral process, with the midterm elections of 1950 singularly standing out in that respect (pp. 108-110). True, Cuba was no Tocquevillian democracy, and money tilted the ballot boxes. Ameringer does a particularly good job of presenting the rise of José Miguel Alemán and his (in)famous BAGA (Bloque Alemán-Grau Alsina), Francisco Grau Alsina being the president's nephew and not at all shy about mixing cash and politics; BAGA continued its influential ways under Prío. Cuban elections were certainly fertile ground for campaign finance reform, though calls for it were rarely heard.

The same could not be said about the clamor for honest government. Blurred boundaries between public and private tills had been a mark of republican politics since 1902; from the start, reformers harped on the need for decent *políticos* and a professional civil service. When the Auténticos won in 1944 and

Grau — the great reformer of 1933 — assumed the presidency, expectations ran high. Grau resoundingly disappointed the popular trust: his administration was as corrupt as the worst before him, and Ameringer seconds this widely accepted appraisal of Cuban historiography (pp. 32-41). Corruption and *pistolero* — the violence of political gangs (*grupos de acción*) seemed as central to the first Auténtico government as the doctrine of nationalism and social justice that had inspired the party's founding in 1934. Opposition and reform quickly brewed.

*The Cuban Democratic Experience* capably narrates both: opposition in the rise of Eduardo Chibás and the Ortodoxos, and reform in the efforts of the Prío administration. Chibás had been a prominent Auténtico until Grau dashed both *auténticismo*'s ideals and Chibás's presidential ambitions. In 1947, he founded the Ortodoxo Party, which did not do well at the polls in 1948 (12.8%; p. 65). Chibás and the Ortodoxos distinguished themselves from the Auténticos on the issue of corruption, as their social and economic programs were only negligibly different. Prío turned a new leaf — and not just, if prominently, in his last two years of Nuevos Rumbos — most noticeably in his efforts to curb *pistolero* and to investigate the rampant corruption in the Grau administration (pp. 74-89). Not since Gerardo Machado had Cuba had a president so committed to reforming the sugar-centered economy. The author again documents his presentation well but falls short in probing the implications of Chibás's strident opposition and Prío's frustrated reforms.

Understandably, Ameringer disclaims the purpose of rehabilitating the Auténticos, yet that is precisely what he accomplishes. Between 1940 and 1952, Cuba had a badly functioning democracy, but the preceding and succeeding alternatives were worse. Grau and especially Prío were true democrats; freedom of expression was never as robust in Cuba as under their watch. Democracies are painstakingly and imperfectly crafted. Ameringer rightly concludes that the Auténticos are worth recalling for their pluses as well as their minuses. Flaws apart, his book is a must for all interested in republican history.

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K. Lynn Stoner and Luis Hipólito Serrano Pérez, eds. *Cuban and Cuban-American Women: An Annotated Bibliography*. Wilmington, Del.: Scholarly Resources, 2000. Author Index. Subject Index. 189 pp.

This annotated bibliography on Cuban and Cuban American women is a welcome addition to K. Lynn Stoner's excellent book on the Cuban women's movement for legal change in the early republic (1991) and to the Stoner microfilm collection on Cuban feminism, also published by Scholarly Re-