

Introduction

Since the early nineteenth century, Cubans have come to the United States in search of political stability and economic opportunity. The upheaval of the wars of independence (1868–78, 1895–98), the struggling economy of the young republic, and the often radical shifts in government in the first half of the twentieth century all contributed to Cuban emigration; but by far the largest number of Cubans (approximately three-quarters of a million) emigrated after January 1959, when Fidel Castro's July 26th Movement overthrew the government of Fulgencio Batista.

The majority of the Cubans who arrived after 1959 came during three distinct periods: immediately after the revolution, from 1959 to 1962; during the "freedom flights" of 1965 to 1973; and during the "Mariel boatlift" of 1980. As with most revolutions, the first people to be affected, and thus to leave Cuba, were those of the middle and upper classes. With each wave, however, the migration became more representative of Cuban society, not just in socioeconomic status but also in race, ethnicity, and geographic distribution.

Over half of the Cubans settled in south Florida, especially in Dade County and its largest city, Miami. South Florida was close to Cuba, with the same climate, and the area was also attractive because it was already home to a small population of Cubans who had emigrated in previous decades. The new Cuban emigrés perceived themselves as exiles, not immigrants. They did not want to begin life anew as *norteamericanos*. Rather, they hoped to return to their homeland once a more tolerable government replaced Fidel Castro's. Because of the long history of U.S.

involvement in Cuban affairs, many believed it was only a matter of time before Castro fell. The Cubans arrived in the United States during the height of the Cold War, and for Americans they became powerful symbols of the clash between democracy and communism. The U.S. government drafted new immigration laws to accommodate them and devised the Cuban Refugee Program, the most comprehensive refugee assistance program in American immigration history, to welcome them.

As the Cubans waited to return to their homeland, they focused their energies on survival. They had to concern themselves with earning an income, educating their children, and other mundane aspects of day-to-day living. Despite the obstacles of language and culture, they integrated into south Florida's labor market. Building on the successes of earlier Cuban immigrants, they created a vibrant business community in south Florida that revitalized the local economy and drew other immigrants to the area. Two factors contributed to the Cubans' creation of a viable economic enclave: their middle-class values and entrepreneurial skills, which transferred readily across borders, and the Cuban Refugee Program, which pumped millions of dollars into the economy and facilitated the Cubans' adaptation through vocational and professional retraining programs. The economic enclave founded by middle-class Cubans in the early 1960s accommodated all subsequent arrivals from Cuba and served as a magnet for immigrants from all over Latin America.

The Cubans created a cultural enclave as well. Over the years, they tried to define what it meant to be Cuban in a country other than Cuba, and they struggled to define their relationship to both countries. Previous immigrants from Cuba had grappled with the same concerns, but for the refugees from Castro's Cuba, preserving *cubanidad* ("Cubanness," or Cuban identity) became a political responsibility. Feeling betrayed by Castro's revolution, they were determined to maintain a visible presence in south Florida, just ninety miles away from the regime they hated, as a symbol not just of *la Cuba de ayer* (the Cuba of yesterday) but of the Cuba that could be. A politically and economically successful community was the best revenge the *gusanos* (worms—Castro's term for the emigrants) could have. Since many of them hoped to return to their homeland one day, maintaining a sense of *cubanidad* in exile was crucial for the distant day when repatriation would become possible; in the meantime, it would ensure their survival as a distinct community.

With the large concentration of emigrés in south Florida, and its geographic proximity to Cuba, Miami became the symbolic center of

el exilio. The most important exile organizations emerged in this city, as did the exile media, consisting of hundreds of periodicals and close to a dozen Spanish-language radio and television stations. Miami became the center of Cuban creativity in the United States, home to some of Cuba's most important artists, writers, and intellectuals, and Cuban culture found its most vital expression (outside Cuba) in Miami, where it took new forms. Miami was home to Little Havana and Calle Ocho, the Ermita de la Caridad, the *municipios*, and a host of cultural institutions that defined *cubanidad*.

It was also from south Florida that emigrés waged their war against Castro, a paramilitary and propaganda campaign to discredit the Cuban leader and undermine his government that at times received financial and institutional support from the United States government. However, the Cubans were as diverse politically as they were socioeconomically. While opposition to Fidel Castro's government was the *raison d'être* of the community, the Cubans had different political visions for their country's future. The emigrés all claimed to want "democracy" for their homeland, but they had different ideas of what democracy entailed, and their visions were shaped by the successes and failures of Cuban politics. Some favored an authoritarian, non-communist government that would establish social and economic order, modeled in part on the Batista government that Castro's July 26th Movement overthrew. Others advocated an open, multiparty electoral system, modeled after that of the United States or the parliamentary systems of other western democracies. In economics, some were free-market capitalists, while others favored some variation of socialism that would address the social and economic inequalities that had plagued *la patria* since the creation of the Republic. Some wanted to continue their country's symbiotic relationship with the United States, while others, more staunchly nationalistic, favored political and economic independence. Represented within the emigré population were supporters of the various political parties, factions, urban resistance groups, and guerrilla groups of pre-1959 Cuba, as well as literally hundreds of new political organizations that emerged in exile, each coalescing around either some charismatic individual or a particular political concern.

The debates between these different groups contributed to a heated and often violent political climate in south Florida. A segment of the emigré community even came to adopt a more tolerant view of the Castro government and dedicated its efforts to trying to ameliorate U.S.-Cuba relations. Ironically, the exiles' strong sense of responsibility

toward Cuba contributed to their success in the American mainstream: whether trying to topple the Castro government or to cooperate with it, the emigrés learned to work within the American political system.

The purpose of this study is to provide a history of the post-1959 Cuban emigré community in south Florida, a history that not only chronicles the details of the Cubans' immigration and adaptation but also examines the cultural, political, and intellectual life of this community. There is a rich body of work on contemporary Cuban migration, almost all of it in the social sciences, but most of the work focuses on specific aspects of the Cuban experience, whether the formation of an economic enclave or the extremism of exile politics. I have tried to build on these works, using a variety of new research sources, to fill in some of the pieces of the Cuban story and provide an alternative interpretation. As a historian, I have tried to look at the overall picture, discussing not only the Cubans' economic and political life but other aspects of their culture: in short, the formation of community. The Cuban emigrés' case is in some ways unique, and one cannot completely understand their experience without understanding the Cuban exile psychology and the formation of identity. Whenever possible, I have tried to let the emigrés speak for themselves to provide a sense of the human drama of migration and to demonstrate the process of identity formation and cultural negotiation.

The Cubans' experience provides a fascinating case study in American immigration and ethnic history, not only because of the federal government's response to their arrival, or the role they have played in U.S. foreign policy, but because of their response to life in the United States. Few immigrant groups have assimilated structurally in so short a time and simultaneously forged a uniquely bicultural identity. While the Cubans' original goal may have been to preserve Cuban culture on American soil until they could return to their homeland, over time they have produced a uniquely Cuban-American culture. Recent arrivals from Cuba joke that arriving in Miami is like stepping back in time into the Cuba of the 1950s. All around are visible reminders of prerevolutionary Cuban society: schools, businesses, and organizations that shut down in Cuba reopened in exile. But closer examination demonstrates that Cuban culture has developed in different forms on opposite sides of the Florida Straits. As anthropologists and folklorists have pointed out, culture can never be passed on intact from generation to generation; rather, it is continually reinvented in the present. While the emigrés may have thought they were preserving Cuban culture (which was already somewhat Americanized), in fact they adapted their traditions and cus-

toms to meet the realities of life in the United States, much as their compatriots on the island redefined their culture to meet the social and political demands of the new state.

Many emigrés developed a dual identity as both Cuban exiles and Cuban Americans.¹ Staunchly nationalistic, they initially resisted naturalization, perceiving it as a betrayal of their homeland and a negation of the forces that propelled them into exile. Most emigrés eventually realized, however, that citizenship offered them legal protection and opened professional and commercial opportunities. Over time, they also developed strong emotional ties to the country that gave them refuge. As they bought homes, paid taxes, attended PTA meetings, and participated in civic affairs, they developed ties to Florida and the United States in spite of their original intentions. However, with Cuba less than one hundred miles away, and with the continual influx of new refugees, the emigrés remained as preoccupied with their homeland as with their new country. The war against Castro was just one manifestation of this reality. The Cubans adapted socially, economically, and politically to the United States and, at the same time, influenced the political realities in their homeland. They learned English while retaining Spanish, ultimately making bilingualism a necessity in the local labor market. They changed the cultural landscape of south Florida and at the same time became highly Americanized.

Visitors to Miami often claim that they feel they are in Latin America rather than the United States. Billboards dotting the highways advertise Latin American products; streets are named after Spanish and Cuban historical figures; and Spanish is heard as commonly as English in every setting. (Signs in some shops facetiously state “English spoken here.”) This ambiance is what has made Miami so unique, and also what has earned it the most criticism. Only three decades ago, Miami was a resort town in the Deep South whose economy revolved around winter tourism. It is now a major international city, the so-called gateway to the Americas and the principal port of trade between North and South America. The Cubans have played a large role in this economic transformation.

The Cuban presence in south Florida is ubiquitous. According to the most recent census figures, over half of Dade County’s population—or roughly one million people—identify themselves as Latinos or Latin American immigrants, and Cubans make up the majority of these. Commenting on this Latin American influence, journalist Joel Garreau compared south Florida to Hong Kong: an island independent of yet related to the mainland.² South Florida, however, is really a hybrid society, a

border town connected to two mainlands: Cuba and the United States. While the Cubans are not, of course, the only immigrant group in south Florida, they are the most visible and influential group in Miami's political, economic, and civic life. Theirs is a community that continually redefines itself in relation to two nations and two cultures.

This larger theme of cultural negotiation lies at the heart of this study. The book is divided into two parts. Part I provides a history of Cuban migration following the revolution. The experiences of the emigrés varied from wave to wave. The first chapter focuses on those who arrived during the first two waves, from 1959 to 1962 and from 1965 to 1973. These are the Cubans who emigrated in response to the radicalization of Cuban society. As refugees from communism during the height of the Cold War, they received the sympathy and admiration of most Americans. Popular magazines such as *Life*, *Newsweek*, and *Fortune* portrayed them as the "model immigrants," celebrated their heroism and patriotism, and dubbed them the new Horatio Algers. The U.S. government rewarded them with a relief package and benefits program to assist in their adaptation to American society. It was these middle- and working-class Cubans who created the vital cultural and economic enclave in south Florida.

Chapter 2 focuses on the Cubans of Mariel, who are unique within both the Cuban immigrant experience and American immigration as a whole. Unlike the earlier emigrés, these Cubans came of age or lived most of their adult lives in Cuba's new revolutionary society. They were the so-called *hombres nuevos*, the New Men, or New Cubans, produced by the revolution. Many of them had no experience to which they could compare their lives under Castro; thus, their migration was prompted by a different reality. Among the 124,776 new immigrants who arrived in Key West were a sizable number of felons, whom the Cuban government expelled to discredit the emigré community and punish the United States. While the felons comprised less than 4 percent of the total number of immigrants, they commanded a disproportionate amount of media attention. Consequently, the Mariel Cubans became one of the most stigmatized immigrant groups in American history. They were not granted refugee status, nor were they celebrated for their patriotism and heroism. They were shunned by most Americans and even by their compatriots, who feared being stigmatized by association. Yet, in spite of the odds against them, over the next decade they demonstrated patterns of adaptation similar to those of the Cubans who arrived earlier.

It is important to note that this section of the book does *not* attempt to provide an evaluation of the Cuban revolution of 1959. There is a vast literature on the revolution, reflecting a variety of political perspectives and interpretations. A number of these works are included in the bibliography. While researching my book, I found that Americans disagree as to whether the emigrés were justified in leaving Cuba, and their views are usually determined by their interpretations of the revolution. Some perceive the emigrés to be heroes, patriots, and “freedom fighters” (to use a term popularized during the Reagan administration); others view them as Cuba’s old guard, the corrupt bourgeoisie whose emigration was motivated by economic rather than democratic concerns. Both views are simplistic. Close to one million people left Cuba during this period, and their reasons for emigrating are as varied and as complex as the migration itself. I am not interested in judging the revolution or in evaluating whether the emigrés were justified in their reasons for leaving Cuba. It is sufficient that they considered themselves to have ample reasons. I am more concerned with analyzing their response to the exile experience.

Part II of the book explores larger conceptual issues: What does it mean to assimilate into American society? Can one maintain one’s national identity and yet be a full participant in American society? What does it mean to be an American? These are not new questions. Every immigrant and ethnic group has struggled to define its identity within the larger society. However, these questions have particular relevance in the final decade of the twentieth century. Worldwide, the 1980s and early 1990s witnessed the emergence of the “new nationalism”; in the United States, this period saw the emergence of the “English-Only” movement, immigration reform, and the debate over multiculturalism. The debate over what type of society we want to have in the twenty-first century figures prominently in academic forums, the news media, and political circles. The Cuban community in south Florida provides the perfect setting in which to investigate some of these larger issues and questions.

Chapter 3 examines the issue of biculturalism, exploring how the emigrés defined and asserted their identity and altered the cultural landscape of south Florida, as well as how they were altered by the experience of exile. The chapter includes a discussion of exile organizations, the news media, religion, and education as institutions through which to understand this process of cultural negotiation.

Chapter 4 explores a much more controversial topic: exile politics. As a community of predominantly first-generation immigrants, with friends and family still on the island, the emigrés are as concerned with events

in Havana as with those in Miami. Over the past thirty-five years, their mission has been to discredit and topple the Castro government. While emigrés' attitudes toward the Castro regime have not changed much, their methods have. As the emigrés became more and more involved in domestic politics, they applied the skills they learned in the American political arena to their war against Castro. The paramilitary groups of the 1960s were replaced by political action committees in the 1980s, and these were more successful in intensifying U.S. and international pressure on the Castro government.

Cuban exile politics are hardly monolithic, however. A segment of the community has come to favor rapprochement, supporting the normalization of U.S.-Cuba relations as a means of provoking democratic change in Cuba. Some emigrés have abandoned exile politics altogether and immersed themselves in local or ethnic politics. By 1992, Cubans dominated Miami's city commission; the city and county managers were Cuban; ten of the twenty-eight seats occupied by the Dade County delegation in the state legislature were held by Cubans; Cubans had been elected mayor of several cities, including Miami; and one emigré had been elected to the U.S. House of Representatives. (Another Cuban, Lincoln Díaz Balart—Fidel Castro's nephew—was elected later that year.) In addition, Cubans occupied top administrative posts in the key institutions of Dade County, from the *Miami Herald* to the AFL-CIO to local colleges and universities. Nevertheless, in Cuban ethnic politics a politician's success is more often than not determined by his or her views on Cuba. Residents of Miami joke that Florida is the only state in the union with its own foreign policy. (During 1982–83, for example, the Miami City Commission passed twenty-eight resolutions and ordinances that dealt more with foreign policy issues than with local interests.)³ Whether involved in domestic or foreign policy, however, the emigrés' political activities provide another opportunity to study the process of accommodation.

Chapter 5 explores the intellectual and creative life of the emigré community. It is the intellectuals—the writers, poets, dramatists, scholars—who help shape the cultural and political debate in the emigré community. Many of them choose to live outside south Florida, but much of their work is written for—and in response to—the emigré community in south Florida. It is the writers who best exemplify the process of cultural negotiation that is taking place at a wider level in the community. Some are obsessed with their homeland, keeping it alive through characters and plots drawn from memory, or writing social commentaries on the

present-day realities in Cuba. They perceive themselves to be Cuban writers, first and foremost, not immigrant Americans. Conversely, other emigrés write about the complexities of life in the United States. They explore issues of identity and the clash and mediation of cultures—issues relevant, of course, to other immigrant and ethnic writers. Whether in literature, art, or political commentary, these intellectuals struggle with issues of nationalism, adaptation, identity. The work of emigré scholars has also expanded the parameters of political discussion in this community. They have promoted scholarly exchange between *cubanólogos* (those who study Cuba) on and off the island, and thus encouraged diverse interpretations of Cuban history, the revolution, and the exile experience.

Many Americans see the Cuban emigré community as a community that refuses to assimilate. They are angered by the pervasiveness of Spanish as a public language and the role of Cuba in public debate. Some believe that abandoning exile politics altogether and concentrating entirely on domestic issues would be the truest sign of the Cubans' assimilation. As strong believers in the proverbial melting pot, they do not understand the Cubans' reluctance to become Americans. The emigrés are puzzled by these criticisms. They perceive themselves to have assimilated quite well. Even though they are a community of predominantly first-generation immigrants, their average income almost equals that of the national average. Their naturalization rates are among the highest of any Latino or immigrant group. They have high voter registration and voting rates and one of the highest school completion rates in the country. They have created the most lucrative Hispanic business community in the nation. They have a powerful political lobby in Washington. They do not understand why becoming "American" should require that they forget their homeland, their customs and traditions, and their language. These differences in perceptions of what it means to be American have contributed to social tension in south Florida, which over the years has expressed itself in riots, demonstrations, and a variety of political referendums.

Despite the uniqueness of their experience, the Cubans may present a realistic example of assimilation in the contemporary U.S. The nineteenth-century expectation that immigrant groups should relinquish their cultural ties to the homeland (except, perhaps, for a few quaint customs to be displayed at folklife festivals) and "melt" into some generic American culture has become unreasonable in today's society. Indeed, many scholars are now questioning whether the melting pot ever

existed at all. Traveling through the United States, one is reminded that there is no such thing as one American culture. Each region, populated over generations by different native and immigrant groups, has its own unique identity and culture. As international borders become blurred in the late twentieth century and communication and travel between countries becomes easier, it is increasingly possible for immigrants to assimilate structurally and yet retain a distinctive cultural identity. At the same time, this cultural identity will be continually redefined, evolving in response to contact with other groups, the mass media, the public school system, and other influences. Like the Cubans, immigrants will change the character of the communities they move into—but they will also be changed in turn.