Mesa-Lago, Carmelo and Pérez López, Jorge (2013) *Cuba Under Raúl Castro: Assessing the Reforms*, Lynne Rienner (Boulder, PA), xv + 295 pp. £51.95 hbk.

Cuba has become a routine stop on the itineraries of foreign diplomats and tourists alike, but economic trends on the island remain a mystery to most visitors. This book illuminates these trends through detailed analysis, focusing on the period spanning the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989 to the current presidency of Raúl Castro. The information is clearly presented, well organised, and useful for understanding Cuba's economic trajectory, though I was struck by two uncertainties—elaborated below—as I read book.

Written by two economists, *Cuba Under Raúl Castro* is heavily dependent on statistics of production, consumption, trade, and investment across mining, tourism, oil, agriculture, emerging private businesses, and other sectors. The authors assess Cuba's development by comparing data from 1989 through 2012, enabling an analysis of the economic reforms (*Lineamientos*) introduced by Raúl's government. Herein lies my first uncertainty, which the authors openly acknowledge: the data exhibits 'important gaps, credibility problems, and contradictions...There are few statistics to properly measure the effects of the reforms' (pp. 68, 220).

To deal with the statistical deficit the authors combine data from the Cuban National Office of Statistics, the United Nations, the Economist Intelligence Unit, and other local and foreign sources. Despite their scarcity, the numbers reveal a trend: high levels of productivity in the early 1960s, decline until 2005, and a gradual recovery in several important sectors since 2006 when Raúl Castro became Cuba's acting president. Similarly, agricultural production through usufruct (a form of private use of public land) shows an 8.7 per cent increase between 2010 and 2011, though the lack of disaggregated data impedes closer analysis of usufruct as a share of agriculture in general.

To explain the improvement in economic performance under Raul, two chapters analyse the debates and reforms introduced by Raúl to stimulate growth 'within socialist parameters' (p.xiii). The authors advocate faster action to address inadequate infrastructure, escalating social welfare costs, the

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scepticism of foreign investors, and the 'irrational policies' of the past. Despite the delays, though, they find that, 'The reforms being implemented to cope with these problems are pointed in the right direction' (p. 165).

Here arises my second uncertainty. Positive appraisals of Raúl's efforts to 'update' Cuba's economic model are contradicted by strongly worded statements to the contrary, for instance: 'It is probable that the current 'updating' of the model will not succeed and that the leadership will have to go back to the drawing board' (p. 226). These opposing statements may reflect diverging views among the two authors, or perhaps a concern that too favourable an appraisal of Cuban policies might alienate conservative readers in this deeply polarised field. Among their other criticisms is that, 'Partido Comunista de Cuba (PCC, Cuban Communist Party), continues to latch on to dogmatic positions and to schemes that have failed everywhere' (p. 224). Such sweeping observations—common in Cuban-American literature—would be more credible if substantiated with specific examples. 'Positions' and 'schemes' seem to refer to structures like the government's Five-Year Plans, which exhibit 'numerous errors and failures' (p. 225). 'Everywhere' presumably means the former Soviet Union, Vietnam, China, and other centralised polities. To equate Cuba's policies, let alone the conditions that have given rise to them, with any of these contexts is short sighted. Moreover, the statement ignores the success of five-year plans in China and Vietnam.

The above over-generalisations do not reflect the book's otherwise balanced and nuanced analysis. A good example of that nuance, and in my opinion one of the book's main contributions, is its consideration of specific conflicts of interest between the political leadership and lower level bureaucrats. Self-employment, for example, is advocated by Raúl but delayed and opposed by administrators for whom a reduction of red tape and eradication of impunity would 'eliminate the possibility of getting bribes' (p. 203). The authors convincingly show that these tensions, evident at all stages along the chain of command, are a key impediment to more effective reform of the Cuban economy. This point may partially explain the contradictory appraisals noted above: the authors support Raúl's efforts but are skeptical that the island's convoluted bureaucracy will allow his reforms to bear fruit.

In sum, *Cuba Under Raúl Castro* sheds light on an impressive range of economic sectors and organising structures, including the informal sector and others not mentioned in this review. Difficulties in obtaining data and occasional flashes of political ambivalence do not detract from a well-organised, meticulous study of the Cuban economy. For the growing number of diplomats and tourists bound for Cuba, particularly those going for ‘education’, the book will serve as a guide for unravelling the economic puzzles that await them.

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