

Review - The Cuban Embargo

Written by Alessandro Badella

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ALESSANDRO BADELLA, JUN 20 2015

The Cuban Embargo: The Domestic Politics of an American Foreign Policy

By Patrick J. Haney and Walt Vanderbush

Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2005.

This short and readable book, despite not being so up to date, represents one of the few examples of academic monograph on US economic sanctions (or embargo) against Cuba (see Kaplowitz 1998; Hufbauer & Kotschwar 2014; Spadoni 2014; White 2014). As we approach a turning point in US-Cuba relations, which Washington has interpreted through the lens of economic coercion over the island, this book is useful to understand the dynamics behind such a policy of economic isolation.

However, *The Cuban Embargo* does not deal with the juridical and bureaucratic aspects of the economic sanctions over the island, while, on the contrary, it focuses on the “changing politics of U.S. policy toward Cuba” (p. 3). This analysis is not simply an outlook on the evolution of the embargo (its ramification and progressive extension of its scope), but on the political internal components that contributed to shape this foreign policy toward Cuba. Haney and Vanderbush attempt to explore the connections between the American internal dynamics and the foreign policy toward Cuba, or the so called “two level-game” in the relations with Cuba (LeoGrande 1998): the internal level could shape the international one and vice versa. The Cuban case, due to some peculiar combination of factors, represents a perfect (even if not unique) case study (p. 6).

The authors use two main parameters to assert the influence of the internal dynamics on US policy toward Cuba. The first one is the institutional fight between Congress and the president, as “the executive is today more fragmented, foreign policy is more complicated and diverse, and Congress is both more engaged and also more open to political forces in foreign policy than perhaps ever before” (p. 8). In the Cuban case, the embargo evolved along with the forces involved within US foreign policy-making process: while, during the Cold War, the president and his administration could manage the country’s foreign policy more independently, with the end of the Soviet threat, new internal political forces started to erode this primacy in the process of policy-making (pp. 3-4). Moreover, since the 1960s and 1970s, Congress had been stripping away US policy toward Cuba from the president, and this process continued and grew after the Cold War: the two main codifications of the embargo (in 1992 and 1996) were approved by Congress which forced the president to sign them. In the meanwhile, Clinton tried to resist this congressional overextension and influence over US foreign policy (pp. 110-130), while using his power to reduce the scope and action of the Helms-Burton Act (Title III in particular). In sum, American foreign policy over Cuba has been the battlefield for the conflict between Congress and the president, especially since the end of the Cold War.

The erosion of US national interests after the Cold War (see Huntington 1997) determined a growing role of Congress in foreign policy but also paved the way for the role of new players: activists (on human rights, environment, labour rights, etc...) and lobbies could both influence the policy process and, thus, US foreign policy. In the Cuban case, the “ethnic foreign policy” (on this definition see Shain 1995) became a distinguishing feature of the Cuban-American community: the monolithic Miami community gained the power to influence and monopolise US foreign policy over Cuba as the Cuban constituencies in South Florida became pivotal for state or national elections. The role of the Cuban ethnic lobby became more evident with the growing power of the Cuban American National Foundation, or CANF (pp. 31-52), which survived the end of Reaganism and of the Cold War and was still relevant

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during George W. Bush's presidency (pp. 131-154). The ethnic lobby is the second parameter used by the authors and it is highly connected with the central role of Congress in shaping US foreign policy. In fact, the CANF was born as a government-sponsored group to sustain Reagan's foreign policy in the Caribbean and Central American while, after the Cold War, the Foundation and the Cuban-American lobby entered Congress and defied the presidential projects over Cuba.

Both these perspectives (the Congress vs president dynamics and the ethnic lobbies) are not new, while this book represents the systematization of the authors' previous works (Haney & Vanderbush 1999; Brenner et al. 2002). However, the main merit of this book is introducing the "relative power of Congress, the president, and interest groups in making foreign policy" (p. 8) as a potential framework to understand US-Cuba relations. Even reading it ten years after its publication, *The Cuban Embargo* still helps to describe the social and political forces beyond US foreign policy toward Cuba and its relative changes. Even if the progressive erosion of the Cuba congressional lobby could explain the diminishing appeal of sanctions among policy-makers, it does not explain the survival of the codifications of the 1990s ("The survival of the embargo for more than four decades has been impressive and perhaps surprising in many ways", p. 167). However, this work contributes to analyse, through a peculiar theoretical framework, the internal forces of US foreign policy by tracing their potential evolution (ten years ago like today) within the "two-level game" between Washington and Havana.

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About the author:

Alessandro Badella is a PhD candidate in Political Science ('Democracy and Human Rights') at the University of Genoa (Italy) with a project on US democracy promotion after the Cold War. He has several academic publications about US-Cuba relations after the Cold War and the role and the rational of US democracy promotion in Cuba. His website is <http://abadella.eu/>

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