

PERCEPTIONS OF CUBA

Canadian and American Policies
in Comparative Perspective

Lana Wylie

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PERCEPTIONS OF CUBA:
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IN COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

In 1976, with the U.S. trade embargo against Cuba under way, Canada's Prime Minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau visited the island nation, befriended his counterpart, and exclaimed publicly, 'Long live Prime Minister Fidel Castro!' During the past half-century of communist rule in Cuba, Canada's policy of engagement with the country has contrasted sharply with the United States' policy of isolation. Based on a series of interviews conducted in Havana, Washington, and Ottawa, *Perceptions of Cuba* moves beyond traditional economic and political analyses to show that national identities distinct to each country contributed to the formation of their dissimilar foreign policies.

Lana Wylie argues that Canadians and Americans perceive Cuba through different lenses rooted in their respective identities: American exceptionalism made Cuba the polar opposite of the United States, while Canada's self-image as a good international citizen and as 'not American' has allowed the country to engage with the Cuban government. By acknowledging that competing national identities, perceptions, and ideas play a major role in foreign policies, *Perceptions of Cuba* makes a significant contribution to our understanding of international relations.

LANA WYLIE is an assistant professor in the Department of Political Science at McMaster University.

To my parents, Lloyd and Ferne Wylie

Preface

Perceptions of Cuba makes the case that foreign policy is constructed by our perceptions which in turn have their origins in our identities. This research began with a research question that was familiar in the literature at the time. I set out to explain why the United States continued to isolate Cuba while Canada followed a policy of engagement. I began by reviewing the standard explanations based on electoral and interest-group politics and economic interests.

Certainly, in the United States, Cuban Americans have become a powerful immigrant group. When they vote as a bloc, they are able to influence election outcomes in Florida, and since Florida is a swing state in presidential elections, Cuban Americans become an important focus of campaigns. Their concerns are well known in Washington and they often have the ear of policy makers. Canada, on the other hand, does not have a significant Cuban immigrant population and Canadians are able to sell many of their products to Cubans without a concern for American competition. In most of the scholarly literature, these explanations have been well accepted as the reasons for the existence of the two policies.

Yet, once I began to conduct my interviews in Washington, Ottawa, and Havana, I was amazed by the differences in the way Canadians and Americans saw the same issues, events, and people in Cuba and even understood the country itself. In Havana, American and Canadian diplomats often reside in the same neighbourhoods, use the same grocery stores, and frequent the same restaurants, yet they told me very different stories about life in Havana and politics and society in Cuba. Electoral politics or economic advantages could not explain these different perceptions; these different ideas of the 'truth.'

This book explores the role of perception in the construction of these two policies. Although perceptions of Cuba have evolved in Canada and the United States over the years, the book makes the case that some perceptions have persisted for many decades. The cover represents a particular view of Cuba that resides in the American imagination. The image portrayed harkens back to a pre-revolutionary era in Cuban history when Cuba was considered within the American imagination as 'America's playground.'

The research for this book first began in the late 1990s as I was completing my PhD. At that time I conducted thirty-five confidential interviews of Cuban, American, and Canadian policy makers and other influential individuals in Washington, D.C., Ottawa, and Havana. Some of these people were in government positions at that time while others had retired or assumed new roles in the private sector. Still others were powerful actors in business, academic, or policy making circles. In subsequent years I had many more discussions with other people in similar roles, and although most of these conversations were not formal interviews, they certainly contributed to my understanding of Canadian and American policy towards Cuba.

This book would not have been possible without the assistance of many colleagues, friends, and family. I am pleased to acknowledge them here. It has been a pleasure to work once again with Daniel Quinlan, a fabulous editor at the University of Toronto Press, and with a highly skilled copy editor, Curtis Fahey. Both of them went above and beyond to help me turn a manuscript into this published book. I appreciate, too, the assistance of Len Husband and Wayne Herrington, also with the University of Toronto Press. The manuscript was greatly improved by the suggestions of the anonymous reviewers. I thank the many research assistants who worked with me on the book. They are Meaghan Willis, Lucy Draper-Chislett, Calum McNeil, Maegan Baird, and Jacqueline Cummings. Thank you also to the late Mary Haslam, who, as a life-long educator, would have been pleased that her gift enabled my first research trip to Cuba.

I am greatly indebted as well to all my colleagues in Canada, Cuba, and the United States who also study Cuba and who provided me with invaluable feedback, support, and advice. Although it is impossible to name everyone here, I would like to acknowledge especially a few people who went above and beyond. Mark Entwistle provided invaluable insight into the Canada-Cuba and U.S.-Cuba relationships and urged me to get the book published when it was in its infancy.

Robert Wright encouraged me from the moment I first told him about the project, freely shared his knowledge of Cuba and the Canadian-Cuban relationship with me, and has given me his friendship and support. My friends and colleagues in the Cuban-Canadian Working Group at the University of Havana, particularly Raúl Rodríguez and Jorge Mario Sanchez, have provided much support and advice. Over the years I have come to think of these people as friends as well as colleagues. I am grateful to everyone, past and present, at the Canadian embassy in Havana for their assistance and hospitality during my many trips to Cuba. In particular, I would like to thank Jean-Pierre Juneau, Alexandra Bugailiskis, Simon Cridland, and Ram Kamineneni.

I consider myself fortunate to work with a great group of colleagues at McMaster University who have encouraged the publication of this volume. Similarly, it would have taken me much longer to turn the rough manuscript into a book without the support of the staff of the Department of Political Science. They are often a step or two ahead of any request and in the end they help to make my job a pleasure. I also thank my undergraduate and graduate students at McMaster University and previously Yale University for their insights.

I completed much of the research for this project when I was a graduate student at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, so I am also indebted to my fellow graduate student colleagues there, the staff of the Political Science Department, and, of course, everyone who provided guidance on my dissertation project. Most important, I owe a large debt to my supervisor, Howard J. Wiarda, who introduced me to his network of contacts in Washington and helped guide the dissertation research. The other members of my dissertation committee, Eric Einhorn and Carmen Diana Deere, were also very supportive of the project. Likewise, I owe a large debt of gratitude to Gregory Huber of Yale University who encouraged my continued research on this project even though it was far removed from the focus of the post-doctoral fellowship I conducted under his guidance.

Although I am unable to thank everyone I interviewed because the interviews were all conducted under the assurance of confidentiality, I would like to say to each of the people who took time to speak with me that I am very grateful for your time and frankness.

I owe the biggest debt of all to my family. Duane Hewitt provided support, advice, and encouragement throughout the project. I am truly grateful for his partnership. My children, Chloe Hewitt and Duncan Wylie, shared their mother with this book and I hope to make up for

some lost time now that it is finally in print. Thank you also to my sisters Lynn Rider and Lori Stark. Lynn has graciously read and commented on large sections of the manuscript and both of them have been there for me when I most needed the type of friendship only a sister could give. My parents, Lloyd and Ferne Wylie, actively encouraged a love of education and helped to nurture my curiosity about the world from kindergarten onwards. They were the best kind of parents and for this reason the book is dedicated to them.

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PERCEPTIONS OF CUBA:
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IN COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

1 Introduction

Canadians should be ashamed of themselves.

– U.S. Senator Jesse Helms

[Helms-Burton is] the latest manifestation of the bully in the American psyche.

– Canadian Member of Parliament Bill Blaikie

In 1996 a private member's bill was introduced into the Canadian Parliament to allow descendants of the United Empire Loyalists to claim compensation for the land confiscated by the United States government after the American Revolution in 1776. The Godfrey-Milliken Bill, though never passed, was written in retaliation for an American measure designed to hamper other countries from investing in Cuba. This measure, the Cuban Liberty and Democratic Solidarity (*Libertad*) Act, commonly known as the Helms-Burton Act, outraged Canadians because they interpreted it as Washington trying to dictate Canadian policy. Outrage was directed north as well. U.S. Senator Jesse Helms compared Canada's relationship with Cuba to Britain's appeasement of Hitler at Munich. He declared that Canadians should 'be ashamed of themselves.' A Canadian Member of Parliament shot back by calling the United States a 'bully.' The minister of foreign affairs, Lloyd Axworthy, remarked that 'Helms-Burton is bad legislation.'¹ How did the cross-border rhetoric over this American bill designed to thwart foreign investment in Cuba become an issue of such magnitude in Canadian-American relations?

It certainly wasn't the first time that Canadians and Americans exchanged harsh words over Cuba. Even before the world stood on the

brink of nuclear war over Cuba in 1962, the United States and Canada had distinct policies towards Fidel Castro's revolution. These differences persist in the twenty-first century and have, at times, caused considerable tension between the countries flanking the 49th parallel. The American isolationist approach is in many ways antithetical to Canada's policy of constructive engagement.² Much of the current literature offers traditional economic or domestic-interest-group explanations for the two policies. This study questions the conventional narratives and proposes another account based on ideational variables.

To most of the world, the differences between Americans and Canadians seem marginal. Indeed, the two societies are closely intertwined. Connections between Canadians and Americans exist at all levels of commerce, government, and civil society. The two countries are the other's largest trading partner. Over 200 million people cross the border each year.³ People from both countries often work, live, or have friends or relatives in the other country. The American ambassador to Canada, Gordon Giffen, put it this way: 'Maybe it's our sheer proximity, with its famous 5,500 mile unguarded border. Maybe it's our tangled histories. Maybe it's a product of Canadians visiting Florida or Americans skiing at Whistler.' He continued: 'Maybe it's the impact of the ubiquitous presence here of American-owned media with their ubiquitous Canadian-born journalists and entertainers. Or maybe it's the expansion of the NHL to places like North Carolina, Tennessee and Florida. Whatever the reason, our relationship is unlike that between any other two sovereign nations anywhere, anytime.'⁴

Yet, despite these connections, there are important differences between the two societies. This is true of their foreign policies and particularly true when we compare policy towards Cuba. By examining the two countries' policies towards Cuba in tandem, this study will demonstrate that there is far more than domestic political, security, or economic calculations involved in the formulation of these foreign policies.

The reasons put forth to explain American policy towards Cuba have changed over the years. Before the Cuban American community was a force to reckon with in U.S. politics, the most popular explanation advanced for U.S. policy was a security-based argument which asserted that the policy of isolation was a reflection of Cuba's status as a Soviet satellite. After the consolidation of the large, electorally powerful Cuban American community in the 1980s, a domestic-interest-group explanation became the most popular narrative. This explana-

tion argues that the American policy is a direct result of the power of the Cuban American lobby. Claiming that the Cuban American community's strong presence and electoral clout in Florida and New Jersey practically guarantees its ability to dictate policy towards Cuba, this theory continues to be viewed as the main explanation for U.S.-Cuba policy.

The often heard explanation for the Canadian policy of engagement is the national-economic-interest argument. It maintains that the opportunity for Canadians to invest in Cuba, free of American competition, drives Canadian engagement.⁵ This study questions these explanations and demonstrates that the policies are distinct because the two countries are different in other ways: they have their own identities and perceptions that contribute to the formation of very distinct approaches towards Cuba.

The Approach

The book adopts a constructivist approach to this question. Rising out of the end of the Cold War, constructivism is now recognized as a useful approach to some of the major problems in international relations. In the 1980s and early 1990s, both the fields of international relations (IR) and comparative politics eschewed studies based on 'soft' explanations like ideas and culture.⁶ IR was dominated by varieties of realism, an approach that dealt in hard-power calculations and notions of balance between states. By that time, comparative politics had dismissed most of the early political-culture studies as ethnocentric. The field of comparative foreign policy was focused on behavioral studies that touched on cultural or ideational factors in only a cursory manner.

Yet the end of the Cold War and the failure of realism and other models to explain the seemingly sudden change in Soviet domestic and foreign policy, and the rapid reconfiguration of global politics that followed, forced scholars to take another look at the earlier 'soft' explanations.⁷ They found that cultural and ideational factors could help them understand the demise of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War. Furthermore, the questions that had dominated the study of world politics for decades – superpower rivalry, the arms race, and bipolarity – became, almost overnight, the relics of an earlier era. Instead, the once often considered secondary, or even irrelevant, issues of international relations drew increasing scholarly attention. The rise in ethnic tensions, questions of nationality, and the spread of

democratic values – all by-products of the collapse of the Soviet Union and the break-up of the Warsaw Pact alliance – came to the forefront of political science. Culture and identity variables were at the heart of these now important issues. Political-cultural studies enjoyed a renaissance.

Realizing the relevance of these variables, a greater number of political scientists began to apply norms, beliefs, identity, and cultural factors to other research questions. As the 1990s drew to a close, these variables were being increasingly used both in conjunction with traditional explanations and to provide alternative hypotheses for a wide variety of international behaviour.

In the past two decades, cultural studies have been embraced by a new scholarly tradition in international relations. Known as constructivists, or sometimes as reflectivists, the proponents of this approach posit that culture and identity are integral to a complete understanding of the dynamics of international relations. Unlike other mainstream IR theories (such as neorealism or neoliberalism), constructivism does not treat the identity and interests of international actors as given but instead problematizes them, revealing that they are socially constructed. Constructivists maintain that social structures mould the identity and interests of actors who, in turn, create social structures through their interactions and beliefs. It is a mutually constituting process. These scholars emphasize that our perceptions, beliefs, assumptions, ideas, actions, and interactions create the world we live in.

In 1989 Nicholas Onuf gave rise to the term constructivism in political science.⁸ In *World of Our Making*, Onuf argued that people use language to understand the world and also use it to bring their influence to bear on the world itself. Language is used as a tool to influence how others understand the world. Onuf states, 'Fundamental to constructivism is the proposition that human beings are social beings, and we would not be human but for our social relations. In other words, social relations *make* or *construct* people ... Conversely, we *make* the world what it is ... [and] talking is undoubtedly the most important way that we go about making the world what it is.'⁹ However, it is Alexander Wendt's 1992 article 'Anarchy Is What States Make of It: The Social Construction of Power Politics'¹⁰ that has become the seminal work in constructivism. Wendt uses the concept of anarchy to show that many things that are taken as given are actually created by our ideas, perceptions, norms, culture, and interactions: 'People act toward objects,

including other actors, on the basis of the meanings that objects have for them.¹¹ For example, he explains that 'if a society "forgets" what a university is, the powers and practices of professor and student cease to exist ... It is collective meanings that constitute the structures which organize our actions.'¹² Wendt asserts that, just as people have identities (like daughter, wife, lawyer, activist, nurse), so do states (like superpower, leader of the Western alliance, peacekeeper). He defines identities as 'relatively stable, role-specific understandings and expectations about self.'¹³ How others relate to those people (or states) and how those people or states act is often based on those identities. 'Identities are the basis of interests.'¹⁴ Interests will differ based on 'who you are.' It is in the interest of a professor to conduct research, publish, and teach whereas it is in the interest of a student to learn and achieve good grades. This is what students and professors 'do' or at least strive to do. Similarly, it is in the interest of a state that identifies itself as a 'democratic leader' to promote the development of free and fair elections among its neighbours. Another, perhaps even a democratic, country that does not see itself primarily in this fashion will be less insistent that its neighbours conduct their elections in certain ways and consequently have a different relationship with those neighbours.

Contrary to neorealism, Wendt argues that the structure of the system (anarchy) does not produce the identity and interests of the actors; instead, the states themselves (i.e., their interests and identities) have created the structure of the system which in turn influences those very interests and identities. He explains that anarchy as we know it is a creation of social context. States act as if they are in a self-help environment – they believe that other states are threatening and as a consequence engage in activities (building up their own armaments etc.) that appear threatening to others. Other states in turn do the same in response, which creates a security dilemma – and thereby creates anarchy. It becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. 'Self-help security systems evolve from cycles of interaction in which each party acts in ways that the other feels are threatening to the self, creating expectations that the other is not to be trusted.'¹⁵ In other words, according to constructivists, we make our own reality – in this case an anarchic self-help international system.

Roots of Self-Identity: Domestic and International Contexts

Yet scholars of foreign policy have only recently begun to investigate the relevance of this approach to their own research. The delay in