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Review by Sabrina Thomas, Wabash College

The emergence of the New Diplomatic History has challenged historians to broaden traditional notions of who qualifies as a political actor and what characterizes diplomacy to include new non-state actors and to consider different perspectives of power, agency, and the diplomatic process. Scholars are encouraged to explore the intersections of policy and people, the points at which the power of non-state actors meet the diplomatic process, thereby shaping global agendas and contributing to what historian Paula Fass terms, “international games of power.” ¹Anita Casavantes Bradford’s article reflects a scholarly commitment to the new approach to diplomatic history, building upon the recent works of Laura Briggs, Karen Dubinsky, and Fass who make a convincing case for the role of children as non-traditional agents of power and as symbols of national identity and of the diplomatic process.² Casavantes Bradford situates her work within the historiography of childhood, Cold-War diplomacy, and the iconography of children which reveals the power of emotional diplomacy through the images and stories of child-victimization, rescue, and adoption throughout the Cold-War period. Casavantes Bradford extends the analysis of current historiography into Cuba where childhood, Communism, and the Cold War coalesced in the three years immediately following the Cuban Revolution from 1959 to 1962.

An impressive scholar and storyteller, Casavantes Bradford continues her examination of what she terms, “the Cold War politics of childhood” from her first book, The Revolution is for the Children: The Politics of


Casavantes Bradford’s article shows how Cuban leader Fidel Castro’s revolutionary government utilized representations of children and discourses of childhood to achieve foreign policy goals. Specifically, she examines the contradictory deployment of children—as symbols and bodies—to promote Cuban nationalism and independence from the United States, while simultaneously justifying Cuba’s increasing dependence on the Soviet Union and the Cuban alliance with the socialist world during a complicated and contentious period of the Cold War.

By placing Cuba and Cuban children at the center of her analysis, Casavantes Bradford uses the “politics of childhood” to recast traditional understandings of Cold-War power relationships that are often defined by the dominance of developed nations—the United States and the Soviet Union—over ‘other’ developing nations in the global South—Cuba. Casavantes Bradford counters the traditional narrative, however, by highlighting Cuba’s agency in resisting subordination to the U.S. foreign-policy agenda and in justifying Cuba’s subservience to Soviet foreign-policy goals by evoking Cuba’s alliance with the socialist world. Placing Cuba at the center of her analysis effectively pushes the United States and the Soviet Union to the periphery of Cuban foreign policy, relegating both Cold-War superpowers, at least initially, to the role of responding to Cuban interests and efforts, rather than directing them.

Casavantes Bradford’s use of the politics and discourses of childhood to trace the evolution of U.S.-Cuba-USSR relations demonstrates the historical understanding of how childhood has shaped Cuba’s foreign relations since the U.S. imperial project in Cuba in 1898. Following the Cuban Revolution, revolutionary leaders sought ways to break from the ‘proper roles’ of U.S. dependency that framed Cuba as the grateful and obedient Cuban child and the United States as the benevolent father. The desire of Cuban leaders to shed the stigma of an infantilized and immature Cuba, which was assumed to be unfit for self-government, drove the effort for independence. Initially, the Cuban revolutionary government perpetuated the child-father paradigm by utilizing an alternative image of Cuba. As a dark-skinned rebel soldier, Cuba was the source, rather than recipient, of protection and comfort to a white American child, deploying notions of family to diminish U.S. concerns about the revolution and to soften the consequences of undermining U.S.-Cuba relations (307). However, by 1960, increasing economic tensions between the two countries quickly shifted the discourse. Children and childhood became transformative sites from which Cuban leaders implemented, nurtured, symbolized, and promoted the Cuban nationalist agenda and where leaders connected the island to the socialist world. According to Casavantes Bradford, the Cuban media proved critical in deploying children for Cuban foreign policy goals, including forging closer ties with the Soviet Union. Media outlets like Noticias de Hoy published positive stories of happy and healthy children in other socialist nations to reinforce the benefits of socialism and of Cuba-USSR relations to the Cuban people. By 1961, U.S. leaders, firmly locked into the narrow Cold-War foreign policy of containment, and increasingly agitated by Castro’s socialist and anti-U.S. policies, worked to discredit Castro and the revolution by invoking the same infantilizing images that shaped previous U.S.-Cuba relations. In U.S. imagery, Castro was not the benevolent father figure of the socialist world, but a disobedient and black child.

The most intriguing part of Casavantes Bradford’s work is her discussion of Cuba-USSR relations, which were buoyed by the U.S. debacle at the Bay of Pigs in April 1961. The U.S. blunder recast Cuba from incapable child to military victor, and provided evidence that Cuba had transcended its childhood by

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successfully defending its borders. Nonetheless, the Bay of Pigs did not so much reveal Cuban independence as signal the replacement of Cuban reliance on the United States with Cuban dependence on the Soviet Union. Cuba’s new, socialist parent continued to cast Cuba as child-like, weak, vulnerable, and in need of Soviet protection. Although independence proved elusive, Castro understood that the Soviet Union could protect the island against the threat of another U.S. attack and saw the benefits of an alliance with the Soviet Union and the socialist world in an increasingly contentious Cold War environment. Even the exclusion of Fidel Castro from U.S.-Soviet negotiations following the Cuban Missile Crisis, in October 1962, an act that perpetuated notions that Cuba was not mature enough to participate in major foreign-policy decisions, did not deter Cuban leaders from embracing the island’s parent-child relationship with the Soviet Union, accepting Cuba’s role as *La Niña Adorada del Mundo Socialista*. This Cuban “child” was no longer the disobedient little boy who resisted the tutelage of his benevolent father, but rather an innocent little girl who gladly submitted to the protection of her socialist family.

Casavantes Bradford’s analysis is comprehensive and impressive, and her grasp of current historiography and scholarly trends is refreshing. Her effort to place Cuba at the center of her analysis and firmly root “the politics of childhood” within Cuba’s foreign policy agenda in the initial period after the Cuban Revolution is effective and contributes an interesting perspective to studies of Cold-War relationships and the symbolism used to promote national agendas. The author has a solid grasp of the secondary and primary sources, including popular media, which contributes to the coherence of her analysis.

Still, because Casavantes Bradford admittedly focuses on the ‘official actors’—leaders of the Cuban revolutionary government and media outlets—who shaped and deployed “the politics of childhood” to meet Cuba’s foreign policy agenda, the agency and actions of the children themselves fall silent. As such, an opportunity still exists to push past the limits of traditional history into the realm of the New Diplomatic History by highlighting the ways in which Cuban children perhaps perpetuated the symbolism associated with their images. There are moments throughout the work where the words of real children emerge—the letters from socialist children to Fidel Castro for example—and further incorporation might prove useful for future analysis. Additional possibility exists within the discussion of Cuban humanitarianism for refugee children, which upended the traditional global power dynamics of child rescue and victimization.

Despite these suggestions, Casavantes Bradford’s research is an encouraging precedent for diplomatic historians. Her analysis reconfigures Cold-War relations by emphasizing the agency of developing nations like Cuba in creating and directing their own foreign-policy agendas and pushing the traditional focus on the power and influence of the United States and the Soviet Union to the margins. Additionally, the appropriation of the parent-child metaphor and the use of the politics and discourses of childhood by Cuba and other developing nations to resist subordination by rewriting the national narrative, creating national identity, and promoting foreign policy goals exposes points of power, agency, and aspects of the diplomatic process that have traditionally been ignored. It is this gap that Casavantes Bradford seeks to fill, and here she achieves her goal.

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