

Cuba: Vivir entre ciclones / Cuba: Living between Hurricanes

The Director writes:

We found our title in a speech by Cuba's President, Miguel Díaz-Canel, to the meeting of Caribbean countries in Managua in 2019: "Living between hurricanes has conditioned our lives; it has modified our geographies and spurred our migrations. And it has also educated us in the need to further study the phenomena that await us and work to reverse their damage." This film takes a step in that direction.

Taking our lead from recent work by historians and alive to the growing threat of climate change, we set out for Caibarién, a port on the island's north coast which has seen better days, to investigate the effects of hurricanes down the centuries in shaping Cuba's agro-industry and the social formation that goes with it. We chose Caibarién because this is where Hurricane Irma, one of the most powerful ever to sweep the Caribbean, made landfall in the early hours of 9th September 2017. Initial research threw up a variety of footage of the event on YouTube, and we knew there would be more. But this would only be our starting point. Our aim was the historical big picture, and the relation of hurricanes to other facets of climate and ecology in a vulnerable region whose economy was tied in to global markets. One of us already knew the locality, where forests and food self-sufficiency had given way to cattle ranching, tobacco cultivation, and increasingly during the nineteenth century, the sugarcane industry, with its railways and sugar mills, resulting in soil exhaustion and pollution. Caibarién, once a thriving entrepôt, offered a promising vantage point to test the historians' thesis about the advance of commodity frontiers, a process in which the twenty-first century has brought the encroachment of a new commodity in the form of mass tourism – which is equally at the mercy of global markets, and also has serious ecological effects.

Working with the Fundación Antonio Jiménez Nuñez, a Cuban NGO dedicated to environmentalism, gave us the opportunity to get away from the iconic imagery of a Caribbean paradise which Communism has caught in an anachronistic time warp – the very imagery associated with the mass tourism whose growth since the 1990s has gone some way to replacing the foreign earnings lost when the sugar industry collapsed after the fall of the Soviet bloc. Our camera offers an unvarnished alternative perspective, as we film the streets of the town and surrounding countryside, and visit one of the new hotels on the nearby keys.

The film combines a series of elements, including the benefit of access to the archive at the Cinemateca, especially the newsreels that the film institute, the ICAIC, released every week from 1960 to 1990, which provide glimpses of hurricanes and their aftermath, as well as various aspects of agro-industry. The independent filmmaker Giselle García Castro kindly gave us drone shots of Caibarién filmed for her documentary 'Lista Quinta'. Our interlocutors fall into two main groups. First, the historians and others who gathered for a symposium hosted by the Fundación in Havana. Second, the people we met in Caibarién, who were well aware of being caught between the past, which has bequeathed problems like soil exhaustion and contamination, and a future threatened by rising temperatures and sea levels combined with ever more intense hurricanes. Our guide in Caibarién is a local ecological activist, Pedro González. Reinaldo Funes from the Fundación takes us to the eco-tourist installation at Las Terrazas, near Havana, and not far away, Finca Marta, a model of sustainable farming run by his brother Fernando Funes.

The results, showing a picture of Cuba very different from what is normally seen abroad, will support the work of the Fundación within Cuba and connect it to an international audience geared up to thinking globally and acting locally. To be disseminated through open access, *Cuba: Living between Hurricanes* has been made under aegis of the Commodities of Empire Research Project at the University of London's School of Advanced Studies, with project partners in the UK, USA, Puerto Rico, Spain and the Netherlands, forming a network with potential impact on public thinking and policy makers at both local and international level.

Michael Chanan