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Che's Chevrolet, Fidel's Oldsmobile: On the Road in Cuba

by Richard Schweid (review)

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(Review)

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anism and machismo" (p. 470). In my view, this is an area that needs further examination, particularly given the intertwining of the processes of democratization and militarization (and, by extension, masculinization) evident in Salvatore's otherwise brilliant exposition.

In closing, I should say that, while *Wandering Paysanos* is destined to change the way specialists in nineteenth-century Argentine and Spanish American history think about the Rosas Era and the broader problems of caudillismo and peasant politics, it is definitely not an easy read. The book is so richly documented and theoretically sophisticated that it simply would not work in an undergraduate course. Instructors of graduate seminars may want to consider assigning individual chapters or the book's introduction, which will expose their students to several well-explained layers of critical theory and problems of methodology. Specialists need to give this book the serious consideration it deserves.

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***Che's Chevrolet, Fidel's Oldsmobile: On the Road in Cuba.* By Richard Schweid, Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2004, p.256, \$27.50.**

Transportation in Cuba seems an eternal theme, at least since the 1959 Revolution that changed life on the island in countless ways. Much of the visible U.S. presence vanished after ties with the United States were broken in 1960. But even today, vintage American cars are a reminder of days when the U.S. held sway in Havana and other cities and are surely a testament to Cuban ingenuity in keeping them running.

Richard Schweid's book captures this anomaly, giving an historical overview of motor vehicles in Cuba. His book takes readers on a road trip mentioning places, events, and personages along the way, and while the book will be of interest to academics who work on Cuba it will also appeal to car buffs of all persuasions. Schweid frames his car talk within the dismal state of public transport in contemporary Cuba—long waits for overcrowded buses under trying conditions, and a reliance on bicycles, motorcycles, scooters, and carts of every description pulled by donkeys, horses—whatever means possible. In sum, cars—especially the

Fords, Oldsmobiles, Buicks, Studebakers, Plymouths, Chevrolets etc. of the American fleet—are seen as part of a rejected past and a way to help resolve transportation problems of the present.

As a part of his road trip, Schweid goes to museums, car shows, and along city streets, mainly in Havana and Santiago. He uses historical documents, interviews, and personal experiences as bases of information and includes a wealth of photographs or images. The photos alone, which include eight color photographs by Adalberto Roque, are a considerable part of the book's attraction. Academics will regret the lack of reference detail even for quoted material (book titles but no page numbers) and some misstatements, for example, a reference to José Martí, "and others who died in the 1898 War of Independence from Spain" (p. 13). (Martí died in a struggle for independence which began three years before the Spanish-Cuban-American War of 1898.)

The first chapters trace the early days of cars in Cuba, a middle chapter looks at bus and trolley transport, and the final two chapters look at motor vehicles from the 1950s to the present, which is where Che's Chevrolet and Fidel's Oldsmobile come in.

The narrative has numerous descriptions of the realities of everyday existence in Cuba—a U.S.-style parallel of the work of contemporary Cuban authors like Nancy Alonso, whose *Cerrado por reparación* (Closed for Repairs) also mentions potholes, frustrations with buses, and maintenance problems. Schweid covers many topics, including music, politics, the Mafia influence in Havana under Batista, and the initial phases of the Cuban Revolution. He also gives many examples of the effects of the Special Period on transportation. He explains some of the amazing adaptations that kept the U.S. workhorses running and observes that after the Revolution the car dealership owners lost their jobs while good mechanics were still in demand. What's next for the Detroit vehicles still in use in Cuba? Schweid predicts that eventually they will become relics of the Castro years—icons of irony.

Schweid's book contains a complete bibliography and a good index. For an overview of Cuba with automobiles as a guide, this is an entertaining introduction.

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