

Decolonizing the Cuban Missile Crisis

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Postcolonial scholars show how knowledge practices participate in the production and reproduction of international hierarchy. A common effect of such practices is to marginalize Third World and other subaltern points of view. For three decades, analysis of the Cuban missile crisis was dominated by a discursive framing produced in the ExComm, one in which Cuba was invisible. The effort to produce a critical oral history enabled Cuban voices—long excluded from interpretive debates about the events of October 1962—to challenge the myth of the crisis as a superpower affair. Despite the oral history project's postcolonial intervention, however, and greater attention to Cuba's role in the crisis, this framing persists and is reproduced in the micro-practices of scholarship. Decolonizing the crisis, and by extension the discipline itself, is not easy to do.

For scholars of International Relations (IR), the Cuban missile crisis—the standard U.S. label for these events¹—has canonical status; its interpretation is central to debates about decision-making, nuclear proliferation, and deterrence, amongst others. As commonly understood, the crisis took place between the United States and the Soviet Union. In this U.S.-centered account, first articulated in the Executive Committee of the National Security Council (ExComm), and reproduced in scholarly and popular writings, “the most dangerous crisis the world has ever seen,” (Dean Rusk in Blight and Welch 1990, 179) has only two participants. As McGeorge Bundy, U.S. Special Assistant for National Security Affairs during the crisis, asserted: “the conduct of *both sides* at the height of the crisis, and especially of *the two leaders*, was marked by prudence and skill” (Bundy 1988, 407, emphasis added). Simply put, Cuba didn't matter in the Cuban missile crisis. In the early 1990s, this view of the crisis was brought into question. In a series of meetings initiated by U.S.-based scholars, U.S., Soviet, and Cuban participants in the crisis were brought together, in Moscow in 1989, Antigua in

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¹ For the Soviets, these events were the Caribbean crisis; for the Cubans, the October crisis.

1991, and Havana in 1992.² The aim of the meetings was to produce “critical oral histories” of the crisis (Blight and Lang 1995, 226–233). Cuba’s role was more significant than U.S. scholarship had assumed, rendering accounts of the crisis as a two-party affair implausible. “The Cuban missile crisis was very much a *Cuban* affair. Fidel Castro played a crucial role at every stage” (Blight, Allyn, and Welch 1993, 5).

Analysis of the missile crisis has long focused on U.S. and, to a lesser extent, Soviet perspectives; Cuban viewpoints have been virtually ignored. Given its impact on IR theory and models of foreign policy decision-making, this oversight is troubling; making sense of the crisis is difficult without Cuba (e.g., Brenner 1990). Cuba’s absence in the literature is not explained by its exclusion from negotiations to “end” the crisis; this is to accept the U.S. account. For Cuba, the October crisis continues (e.g., Blight and Brenner 2002, 27). Nor is it explained by a lack of Cuban data; despite the critical oral history project, Cuba’s marginal status persists. The sidelining of Cuba reflects a deeper problem. Drawing on postcolonial thought, in this article we examine the extent to which IR, as a predominantly Anglo-American social science, can acknowledge the role of subaltern others like Cuba in the making of our world, and on what terms. The effort to produce a critical oral history constitutes a postcolonial intervention in the literature, enabling Cuban voices to challenge standard views of the crisis.³ What happens when the subaltern speaks? How does the discipline respond to voices that challenge its taken-for-granted accounts of the world, the bases on which theories and models are built and tested? We use Cuba’s initial absence from and subsequent appearance in standard U.S. accounts of the crisis to explore the prospects for producing better, less colonial analyses of world politics.

That the practices of states produce hierarchies—among peoples, places and states—is obvious (Hobson and Sharman 2005). It is less obvious that practices of scholarship are complicit in these processes. Postcolonial scholars show how knowledge practices participate in the production and reproduction of international hierarchy. A common effect of such practices is to marginalize Third World and other subaltern points of view (e.g., Dunn and Shaw 2001; Tickner 2003a,b). With few exceptions, the accounts of world politics that serve as the ground for IR theory-building and empirical analysis are Eurocentric, taking the perspective of the most powerful states in the international system (e.g., Krishna 2001; Suzuki 2005). In the analysis of October 1962, “the very definition of the crisis and what exactly its main events were has been dictated by the American version of what happened” (Scott and Smith 1994, 664). We treat Cuba’s invisibility—not unusual in itself—as a puzzle to be explained. Asking “Why doesn’t Cuba count in the Cuban missile crisis?” and “What happens when the Cuban subaltern speaks?” draws attention to the micro-practices through which Cuba’s marginal status is reproduced in IR scholarship. Through analysis of the standard IR literature on the crisis, we show how scholarly practices and the practices of states together produce a hierarchical international order in which Cuba is not a significant locus of agency or knowledge.

Recent debate over political bias, some of it about analysis of Cuba (e.g., White et al. 2002), implicates the relations between U.S. foreign policy and IR scholarship. A dominant narrative of the events of October 1962 emerged from the ExComm deliberations and for almost three decades defined the limits of

² Two meetings took place in 1987, at Hawk’s Cay, Florida and Cambridge, Massachusetts, but no Cubans were present. For reports and transcripts, see Allyn, Blight, and Welch (1992), Blight, Allyn, and Welch (1993), Blight, Lewis, and Welch (1991), Blight and Welch (1990). See also Blight and Lang (2003).

³ Making sense of the crisis from a Cuban point of view follows directly from the project’s aim to generate a “nuclear phenomenology” that challenges the “celebratory rhetoric” evident in standard accounts (Blight and Lang 1995, 228–9).

scholarly and popular analysis of the missile crisis.⁴ In that narrative, Cuban actions and interests were irrelevant, making Cuba an omitted variable and generating unreliable analysis of the causes and dynamics of the crisis. The invisibility of Cuba in the crisis was not an oversight but an effect of power (Trouillot 1995). U.S. policy makers, argues Jorge Domínguez, often ignore the particularities and significance of “small countries” such as Cuba and Vietnam, treating them as “just a locale” (Domínguez 1993, ix). We show how Cuba was excluded from analysis of the Cuban missile crisis, examining the discursive frames through which plausible narratives about the world are assembled. We also show how, despite increased attention to the Cubans after the oral history project, the ExComm’s narrative persists and is reproduced in the micro-practices of scholarship; for almost all, the crisis remains a great power affair. Decolonizing the missile crisis, and by extension the wider discipline, is not easy to do.

Our analysis does not engage the literature’s dominant decision-making focus directly,⁵ nor do we seek to explain the crisis. Instead, we highlight the relations between IR and historiographies of world politics, between the theories and models we build, and the ground those theories take for granted. Empirical work by historians and other social scientists is not “an unproblematic background narrative from which theoretically neutral data can be elicited for the framing of problems and the testing of theories” (Lustick 1996, 605). Like IR itself, histories of world politics are shaped by power and informed by theoretical and political assumptions (e.g., Blaut 1993). Across the social sciences Eurocentric and Orientalist assumptions structuring dominant understandings of world politics and its histories are being rethought (e.g., Cooper and Stoler 1997; Jameson and Miyoshi 1998). U.S. historians are reconceptualizing their objects of analysis and rejecting myths of North American exceptionalism, not least by engaging with the histories and narratives of other peoples and places (e.g., Bender 2002; Bradley 2000). In analysis of inter-American relations it is no longer credible to “leav[e] out the Latin Americans” (Gilderhaus 2005, 325). At the limit, engaging the subaltern enables scholars to rethink the epistemological and ontological frameworks through which histories of world politics are produced (e.g., Karl 2002; Mignolo 2000). The ground upon which IR and its theories are built is shifting, making it important that we are self-conscious about the ways in which scholarly practices contribute to the invisibility of other experiences and points of view. We address this sociology of knowledge issue as an exercise in applied postcolonial theory.

The article is organized as follows: First, we discuss the relations between power, knowledge, and international hierarchy, focusing on the ways in which the temporal and spatial assumptions structuring conventional analysis of the Cuban missile crisis have served to reproduce relations of international hierarchy. Second, we reconstruct the emergence of the dominant U.S. narrative of the crisis and show how it functioned to marginalize other understandings of the events of October 1962. Third, we examine the attempt by Cubans participating in the critical oral history project to articulate an alternative account of the crisis in which Cuba and Cuban actions did matter. Fourth, we consider IR’s response to the subaltern and the consequences for decolonizing the missile crisis. In conclusion, we draw out the wider implications of our argument.

⁴ Other accounts of the crisis have always existed, as in contemporary Soviet and Cuban statements, for example (Weldes 1999a). Our argument concerns the dominant account and the discursive mechanisms through which alternatives have been marginalised. For pre-1990 analyses of the crisis that include Cuba, see, for example, Dinerstein (1976), Morley (1987), Nathan (1992), Paterson (1989), Stone (1966), Williams (1972).

⁵ For the impact of adding Cuba to decision-making models, see Allyn, Blight, and Welch (1989/90), Brenner (1990), Domínguez (2000), Scott and Smith (1994). On different accounts of world history and decision-making, compare, for example, Allison (1971) and Morley (1987).

Power, Knowledge and International Hierarchy

International Relations scholars have long recognized the close links between power, knowledge, and hierarchy. In 1977, Stanley Hoffmann famously argued that taking U.S. status and interests for granted rendered IR an American social science (Hoffmann 1977). In correspondence, E.H. Carr agreed: “[t]he study of international relations in English speaking countries is simply a study of the best way to run the world from positions of strength” (in Haslam 1999, 252–3). Knowledge production reflects and often reinforces the power relations out of which it emerges (Cox 1986). Hoffmann and Carr each raised serious questions about the ways in which power shapes knowledge of the international. Postcolonial IR scholarship forcefully reasserts these themes (e.g., Doty 1996; Muppidi 2005). Hierarchy is not produced by the actions of states alone but also in scholarly and popular analyses of world politics (e.g., Weldes 1999b). In multiple ways, as postcolonial scholars show, dominant modes of IR analysis participate in the production of hierarchical international relations (e.g., Gruffydd Jones 2006). Perhaps most generally, IR often takes for granted as background knowledge, and thus truth, distinctions constitutive of sharp divides between spaces problematically referred to as the North and the South, the First and the Third World, or “the West and the rest” (e.g., Lewis and Wigen 1997). These practices make the North Atlantic world central to world history, acknowledging only contingent connections between “the West” and “the rest”. The former becomes the space of modernity, agency, knowledge, history, and power. The latter becomes “its lack, or other” (Doty 1996, 157). The consequences for our misunderstanding of the world are evident, for example, in analyses of the rise of the West to global dominance that overlook the significance of the non-West (e.g., Hobson 2004), of the spread of sovereignty out of Europe and across the planet that ignore the close ties between sovereignty and imperialism (e.g., Anghie 2005), and of a modernity assumed to be Western, obscuring the existence of other modernities (e.g., Halperin 2006) as well as the constitutive role of colonialism in “Western” modernity itself (e.g., Mignolo 2003).

The discursive practices that make such Eurocentric accounts possible and plausible also make “other possible readings/writings of world politics” more difficult, hence the near invisibility of Africa in IR theory (Dunn 2001, 3; cf. Mbembe 2001). As active subjects of world politics “the rest” appear in distorted form or simply drop from view. The Eurocentric bias in IR is evident in assumptions about the historical geography of the international that structure research on the Cuban missile crisis (Barkawi and Laffey 2006). For three decades most analyses of the crisis presupposed and reproduced a particular set of temporal and spatial assumptions: taken-for-granted chronologies of the key actors, central processes and significant events in the crisis, and spatial frameworks that located those actors, processes and events both in relation to each other and to world politics more generally. Taken together, these assumptions produced an historical geography of the crisis, one in which Cuba didn’t count. The Cuban missile crisis, and by extension world politics, wasn’t about Cuba or Cubans; it was about the United States and the Soviet Union. Here as elsewhere, world politics was great power politics. It has been “the almost universal view among Americans since 1962...that Cuba was not an important player in the crisis, and that October was the purest superpower confrontation of the nuclear age” (Allyn, Blight, and Welch 1992, 211). Despite this broad consensus, however, “the Cuban missile crisis” is not the only way these events can be understood.

Dominant U.S. narratives were confronted at the time by Soviet accounts of the Caribbean crisis and Cuban accounts of the October crisis (Weldes 1999a, chapter 1). These accounts are not easily reconciled with the dominant U.S. narrative; in important respects they are simply incompatible with it. For example,

the U.S. narrative marginalizes both Cuban sovereignty and past U.S. efforts, including military force, to depose Castro. Available at the time, and since, in the statements of Soviet and Cuban state actors, these other accounts highlight the contestability and partiality of the U.S. narrative. Introducing Cuba as more than a passive stage or Soviet puppet—for most, the only plausible alternatives prior to the 1990s—disrupts the framing of the events of 1962 as “the Cuban missile crisis,” leading to a different narrative and, perhaps, a different outcome. But in the United States relatively little attention was paid to Soviet and Cuban accounts. Prior to 1990 the Cubans in particular remained marginal to scholarly analysis of the crisis, with serious consequences for explanation and policy prescription.

Cuba’s marginal status in dominant U.S. narratives of the crisis is an effect of power, reflecting the differential ability of social actors to shape the production of knowledge. Drawing a heuristic distinction between history understood as social process—as what actually happened—and history as knowledge—the framing of what happened in discourse—makes it easier to see “the differential exercise of power that makes some narratives possible and silences others” (Trouillot 1995, 25). U.S. analysis of the crisis has been dominated by the assumptions structuring discussion in the ExComm and repeated in memoirs, biographies, the writings of social scientists, and popular culture—as in the movie *Thirteen Days* (New Line 2000). The prestige of U.S. political institutions, lack of documentary evidence, and insider status—as a member of the ExComm, for instance—lent *prima facie* credibility and authority to accounts produced by former policy-makers. In contrast, Cuban participants and analysts, including state actors like Castro, have been mostly excluded, hence Castro’s question—“where are the Cubans?”—when Kevin Costner showed *Thirteen Days* in Havana (Blight, Welch, and Allyn 2002, 415). The dominant U.S. narrative has seldom confronted other accounts of the crisis directly. When forced to do so, as we show below, the typical response is to deploy a new version of that narrative.

Postcolonial scholarship foregrounds the necessity of giving voice to those rendered invisible, mute, unintelligible, or mad (cf. Blight, Allyn, and Welch 1993, 318–21) by the colonial character of existing fields of knowledge, enabling recognition of subaltern agency and its role in the making of our world. It has produced a large “subaltern studies” literature on which we draw to make sense of Cuba’s shifting role in its own crisis (e.g., Beverley 1999; Chaturvedi 2000). Dominant accounts of events such as international crises generally exclude a variety of subaltern voices. Postcolonial scholars rewrite these accounts by attending to the experience of the subaltern.⁶ This is no easy task (Alcoff 1991; Spivak 1988), leading scholars to stress the need to seek out new sources, and to read old ones in new ways. Like the oral history project, these efforts generate new data but the aim is not just more facts as if some day, having them all, we can write definitive accounts of the past. As Scott and Smith observe, “there is no single truth to be ascertained” (1994, 678). Against such fantasies, postcolonial thought seeks new ways to make sense of the facts, so to contest or transform colonial fields of knowledge and the wider relations of domination—social, economic, cultural, and political—of which they are part.

Postcolonialism opposes colonial and imperial forms of power in the service of an emancipatory project, that of the postcolonial subject (Slater 2004, 20–1; see also Saurin 2006). Engaging subaltern knowledges, postcolonial analysis uses the periphery to throw light on the core, showing how dominant understandings and practices take on different meaning when viewed through subaltern eyes.⁷

⁶ Subaltern is a plural category; there is no essential subaltern (Ortner 1995).

⁷ In this article we treat postcolonialism as a modified form of standpoint theory. For analysis of the epistemological and ontological implications, see, for example, Weeks (1996).

Noting the significance of colonial and imperial relations for the historical geographies of world politics past and present, it locates dominant and subaltern forms of knowledge in relation to the continuing reality of such power, and traces the relations of connection and constitution between colonizer and colonized, dominant and subordinate, in global life (e.g., Cooper 2005; Gregory 2004). These relations are both context and, often, cause of events such as the missile crisis. Beyond critique of representational practices and their mystifying and ideological effects (Lazarus 2002), postcolonialism also attends to the political economies of value and force through which international hierarchies are produced and maintained. Subaltern knowledge provides a vantage point from which to critique both dominant *and subordinated* understandings (cf. Tickner 2003a, 302), for example by mapping the epistemological and ethical implications of their “loci of enunciation” in the context of what Walter Mignolo calls the modern/colonial world system (2000; cf. Lund 2001). Postcolonial critique begins with the subaltern voice but it aspires to overturn the coloniality of power. David Scott, for example, writes of “joining the radical political tradition of Bandung...to an ethos of agonistic respect for pluralisations of subaltern difference” (Scott 1999, 224; on Bandung, see Young 2001, 191–2). Our aim is more modest: interrogating disciplinary responses to the critical oral history project. Engaging with the subaltern has wider implications, however, which we cannot pursue here (e.g., Inayatullah and Blaney 2004).

In allowing the Cubans to speak in their own voice and challenge the standard U.S. account of the missile crisis, the oral history project effects a postcolonial intervention, albeit a limited and potentially problematic one. Making space for subaltern agency is not inherently postcolonial; it depends on what terms agency is acknowledged. For instance, taking for granted the power relations that shape its context means the oral history project risks a neo-colonial relation with the Cubans, turning them into a kind of native informant. Adding Cuban data to an unchanged great power account of the crisis reinforces existing relations of international hierarchy, a charge also laid against some forms of postcolonial scholarship (Spivak 1999, 358–61). Moreover, as Harry Harootunian observes, “the search for the excluded voice often leads to the futile pursuit of authenticity and restores the Eurocentric claims of the sovereign subject it wishes to eliminate” (Harootunian 2000, 48). The Cuban state, like all states, is a contested rather than a unified subject: Castro was a nationalist internationalist, for example, Che Guevara a proletarian one. Decolonizing the crisis is not equivalent to taking Cuban state claims at face value. The crisis looks different if attention is paid to popular experience, for example, whether of the crowds in Havana’s Tropicana nightclub at the height of the crisis (Blight and Brenner 2002, 24) or of low-level U.S. flights over the island before and after the “thirteen days,” the memory of which still induced fear—and involuntary ducking—more than 27 years later (Blight, Allyn, and Welch 1993, 102). Crises impact different subjects in different ways, reproducing or transforming hierarchies of diverse kind. Letting a subaltern speak is only the first step in a postcolonial critique.

Postcolonial analysis is mostly hostile to third-world nationalism and the postcolonial state, focusing instead on subaltern subjects of other kinds (Parry 2004). These, such as South Asian peasants under the British, are often illiterate, leaving only indirect traces of their practices in the texts of colonial rule. In contrast, the Cuban state is the hybrid product of a richly literate trans-Atlantic Hispanic, French, African, and North American culture (Gott 2004; Pérez 1997). Modern institutions like the state are produced through, and in turn generate, numerous texts of diverse kinds. Whether in the form of a state actor such as Castro or the bureaucratic practices that give it form, Cuba can and does speak. In certain respects, then, the typical referents of subaltern studies are not like the Cuban state. Yet there are also similarities between the two cases that license our use of

postcolonial theory. In both cases there is a dominant and a subaltern mode of subjectivity—the colonial Indian state and South Asian peasants, or the U.S. and Cuban states, respectively—in terms of discursive power: the ability to articulate an authoritative account of events and so to constitute worlds of interaction (Slater 2004, 232). Neither an illiterate South Asian peasant nor a famously garrulous Cuban state actor has the power to narrate events in ways that effectively contest dominant accounts. This asymmetry means Cuba's relation to the United States is that of a subaltern. However much noise Cuba makes, it remains unheard, drowned out and spoken for by more powerful voices such as the United States or, as in the "resolution" of the crisis, the Soviet Union (Blight and Brenner 2002, 35–71).

The preceding discussion prompts two questions that structure our analysis below: first, how has Cuba been marginalized from the standard account of the missile crisis? This question leads to a focus on discursive mechanisms of knowledge production—the ways in which a particular account of the crisis emerges from the ExComm and for three decades serves as the basis for subsequent interpretation and analysis. A second question follows from the "discovery" by U.S. scholars through the critical oral history project of Cuba's role in the crisis: what happens when the subaltern speaks? This question leads to a focus on micro-practices of scholarship—on how IR responds to challenges to its commonsense.

Myth-Making: The Cuban Missile Crisis as Heroic History

The conventional narrative or myth⁸ of the Cuban missile crisis was first articulated by President John F. Kennedy and his advisers early on during the events of October 1962. The framing of Cuba in the ExComm drew on a set of background assumptions and representations, on a particular historical geography of world politics, through which the United States constituted its international relations. In this section we trace those practices, showing the consequences for Cuba and U.S.-Cuban relations.

ExComm and After

During the ExComm discussions Cuba and Castro were only rarely mentioned (Weldes 1999a, 74–8). Sometimes they appeared as a Soviet puppet, "an outpost of the Soviet Union with little autonomy" (Brenner 1990, 116). Most often, however, Cuba appeared not as an agent, not even a proxy one, but merely as a place, and a "little pipsqueak of a place" at that (May and Zelikow 1997, 181). Cuba was the place *in which* missiles were deployed by the Soviet Union and *from which* they had to be removed by the United States; the drama was thus between the United States and the Soviet Union. U.S. actions during the crisis—surveillance, blockade, possible bombing or invasion—were directed against a Soviet threat *in Cuba*.

Through its practices during the crisis the United States re-enacted a particular set of international hierarchies between itself, the Soviet Union, and Cuba.⁹ The Cold War United States represented itself as the apex of the hierarchy of states: the most advanced democracy, the bulwark against Communism, a force for good in the world (Weldes 1999a, chapter 6). It had the "right to the moral leadership of this planet" (John F. Kennedy in Lundestad 1989, 527). As such, the United States had both the right and the responsibility to deploy its power to defend the Free World from its enemies. The Soviet Union was represented

⁸ We define myth as a narrative that in a particular culture has "the status of *paradigmatic truth*" (Lincoln 1989, 24).

⁹ Soviet practices also marginalized Cuba, but differently (Blight and Brenner 2002).

in explicitly hierarchical terms as other to this U.S. self. Subordinate and debased, it was a "totalitarian state" that practiced the "secrecy" typical of "despotism" (Kennedy 1962, 367). Through "a fanatical conspiracy, international communism" (Eisenhower 1960, 95), it sought "to impose its absolute authority over the rest of the world" (NSC 68 1978, 385). It was thus represented as both dangerous and powerful, a force to be taken seriously.

Cuba's position within these hierarchies shifted over time. Under Batista, Cuba was a minor satellite, an ally, or client of sorts, but not very important. After the 1959 revolution a starker U.S.-Cuba hierarchy emerged; Cuba came to be represented as a communist state. Turning its back on its "brothers" in the "western hemisphere," (Weldes 1999a, chapters 4-5) Cuba had become a dangerous "enemy," "poised at the throat of the United States" (Kennedy 1961, 79). It also challenged U.S. credibility: "the intrusion of Soviet despotism" into the western hemisphere defied the Monroe Doctrine, "the first and most fundamental of our foreign policies" (Dulles 1954, 591). Under Soviet influence, Cuba supported revolutionary movements elsewhere in Latin America, threatening regional peace and stability. In response, the United States resorted to increasingly harsh economic and political pressure as well as force, both overt—as in the Bay of Pigs invasion—and covert—as in support for Cuban counter-revolutionary terrorism. Simultaneously, however, Cuba was rendered insignificant and virtually invisible. The key assumption was that Cuba had vacated its sovereignty by aligning itself with the Soviet Union, transforming itself into a satellite "walking hand-in-hand with the Sino-Soviet block" (Gerder in Stebbins 1961, 314) and providing "a Communist bridgehead ninety miles from the United States" (Stebbins 1961, 292). "Castro and his gang" had "betrayed the ideals" of the Cuban revolution, which initially "reflected the aspirations of the Cuban people" for "individual liberty and free elections" (Kennedy 1960, 20). This representation separated the "Cuban regime" from the "Cuban people," making the government illegitimate and providing a justification for U.S. actions that over-rode Cuban sovereignty (U.S. Department of State 1961). The United States thus constructed a Cuba whose concerns could be ignored. Cuba's absence from the missile crisis and the subsequent myth, then, were made possible by and served to re-enact Cuba's subordinate position on the hierarchy of states.

These hierarchies were variously enacted by the United States during the events of October 1962. For example, U.S. decision-makers determined that they had a right to conduct surveillance over Cuba. As Dean Rusk argued on October 16, 1962, in order to defend its security the United States should "announce that...we are conducting a surveillance...over Cuba, and we will enforce *our right* to do so" (in Trachtenberg 1985, 172; emphasis added). As it entailed a violation of Cuban airspace, this U.S. "right" in fact abrogated Cuban sovereignty.¹⁰ The United States further enacted this hierarchy by dictating to the Soviet Union and Cuba what weapons they could deploy, and where. President Kennedy had expressly warned on September 13, 1962, that "if Cuba should possess a capacity to carry out offensive actions against the United States...the United States would act" (Kennedy 1963, 675). In 1962 the United States had significant extra-territorial military deployments, including nuclear weapons in Italy and Turkey, which might have been taken to justify reciprocal Soviet measures. Instead, the United States succeeded in determining that the Soviet Union could not station nuclear weapons in Cuba and that the Cubans could not have nuclear or indeed any "offensive" weapons at all. In arrogating to themselves the right to determine which means were permitted for Cuban defense, U.S. decision-makers

¹⁰ U.S.-Cuba and U.S.-Soviet hierarchies thus differed: while the United States asserted an explicit right to over-fly Cuba, it limited itself to covert flights over Soviet territory. For Cuban views of these relations, see Castro in Blight, Allyn, and Welch (1993), 120.

again ignored Cuban sovereignty. That this has seemed unexceptional, exciting virtually no comment by U.S. decision-makers and in most U.S. treatments of the missile crisis, indicates how firmly entrenched this hierarchy is in U.S. foreign policy and scholarly discourse. Finally, this hierarchy was also enacted in the crisis' ending: the Cubans were excluded from the negotiations and the crisis resolution was arranged between the two superpowers alone. As Castro later said, "We had to endure the humiliation" (Castro 1992, 339).

In the years after the crisis, Cuba continued to be marginalized. Classic early accounts offered by participants, such as Arthur Schlesinger (1965), Theodore Sorenson (1965), and Robert Kennedy (1971), closely follow the ExComm narrative. For example, except for a brief discussion of whether the decision to deploy the missiles was Soviet or Cuban, and the claim that Castro's resistance to the verification procedures caused the United States to refuse Cuba a guarantee not to invade (1965, 795–96, 833), Schlesinger's chapters (30, 31) on the crisis ignore Cuba, treating it merely as the site of the conflict. At one point he notes that "there was a brief discussion [in the ExComm] of a demarche to Castro, but it was decided to concentrate on Khrushchev" (1965, 807). No explanation for the decision is given, as if the reason were obvious: this was a U.S.-Soviet confrontation (cf. Sorenson in Allyn, Blight, and Welch 1992, 94). Castro and Cuba did not count. Sorenson similarly entitled his chapter on the crisis "The confrontation *in* Cuba", not "The confrontation *with* Cuba" (1965, chapter 24). As in Schlesinger's account, Cuba and Castro scarcely appear. Instead, the focus is on the standard components of the missile crisis myth: the Soviet deployment, the U.S. discovery of missiles, U.S. decision-making, the "quarantine," negotiations with Khrushchev, and Kennedy's success in getting Khrushchev to retreat from the brink.

In 1971, Graham Allison's influential *Essence of Decision* began the preoccupation with the missile crisis as a canonical instance of crisis decision-making. Here too Cuba is marginalized. Allison begins with four "central questions": "Why did the Soviet Union place strategic offensive missiles in Cuba?", "Why did the United States respond with a naval quarantine of Soviet shipments to Cuba?", "Why were the missiles withdrawn?", and "What were the 'lessons' of the missile crisis?" (1971, 1–2). None of the answers admits of a significant role for Cuba. Allison's book analyses U.S. and Soviet decision-making. Despite being logically and empirically necessary to his analysis—how else can the quality of U.S. choices be judged?—Cuban decision-making is ignored. Although justified by lack of access to Cuban data, a similar lack in the United States and the Soviet Union did not slow growth of huge secondary crisis literature. Lack of access to archival evidence and a preference for interviews and memoirs reinforced Allison's reliance on U.S. state actors for his account of the crisis (Bernstein 2000, 142–3). For us, the most striking omission is Allison's and others' failure to consider how or why the Cubans were defined out of the crisis.

The Cuban Missile Crisis Myth: Heroic History in Postcolonial Perspective

Actions by the United States, statements by U.S. officials, contemporary media accounts, and early histories all coalesced into the myth of "the Cuban missile crisis." Allison summarized the crisis thus: "For thirteen days in October 1962, the United States and the Soviet Union stood 'eyeball to eyeball,' each with the power of mutual annihilation in hand" (1971, 39). Cuba was again irrelevant. "It is remarkable to note the unanimity on this point both within the Kennedy administration in 1962, and in American historiography of the crisis ever since" (Blight, Allyn, and Welch 1993, 402, n.8). This myth is an instance of what Bernard Bailyn (1974) calls heroic history. Early writings on an event like the missile crisis are highly politicized and in fact constitute part of the event itself.

They continue its battles, taking sides and constituting the event *as* an event, one of a particular *kind*. Such analyses “are highly moral; the struggle they present is between good and bad; and they are highly personified; individuals count overwhelmingly; their personal qualities appear to make the difference between victory and defeat” (Bailyn 1974, viii). Standard U.S. analyses of the missile crisis before the 1990s remain ensconced in this heroic moment. Intentionally or not, such analyses continue to take part in the politics of the events themselves. They do so, first, by adopting the categories and tropes put into place by U.S. decision makers in descriptions and policy practices at the time and, second, by reproducing the narratives constructed during and after the crisis by U.S. state officials, and members of the ExComm in particular. Scholarly practices thus participate in Cuba’s continuing unequal encounter with the United States. The Cuban missile crisis and the relations of hierarchy enacted in it continue well beyond the formal resolution of the crisis in 1962.¹¹

In his analysis of the historiography of peasant protest in colonial India, Ranajit Guha (1983, 3) shows how a particular account of peasant protest structures primary discourse such as the eyewitness accounts of colonial officials, secondary discourse such as memoirs, and tertiary discourse such as professional histories.¹² In striking parallels to the heroic myth of the missile crisis, the assumptions of policy—the prevention and control of peasant protest in Guha’s case—are built into the historical record and become the taken-for-granted empirical data on which scholarly accounts are produced. Power is both external to historical narrative and also constitutive of it, inscribed in the narrative *and* in the sources on which it draws. The resulting historiography thus participates in struggles it claims only to describe or explain. In its “affinity with policy” such historiography “reveals its character as a form of colonialist knowledge,” a “prose of counterinsurgency” (1983, 1, 26). Castro and Cuba are present in the heroic myth but always on someone else’s terms, largely those of U.S. policy-makers in 1962. Cuba’s marginalization in the myth obscures the pre-October 1962 origins of the crisis in a persistent pattern of U.S. aggression and subversion of the Cuban revolution. When Cuban state actors like Castro endeavour to raise issues like U.S. aggression, Cuban sovereignty, or Soviet irresolution, they are regularly ignored, mocked, or misinterpreted. Similarly, Guha shows how peasants’ concerns are depicted in ways that render peasant protest pathological or inexplicable (1983, 12). The subaltern are spoken for in ways that deny their historical agency and the legitimacy of their concerns while valorizing conceptions of the world in which, for example, a benevolent United States seeks to liberate the Cuban people from the malign influence of an alien Moscow-controlled Communist regime. Such representations participate, more or less directly, in projects of colonial and neo-colonial ordering.

In 1989, 1991, and 1992 the heroic missile crisis myth was challenged when U.S. and Soviet scholars and decision-makers sat down with their Cuban counterparts to produce a critical oral history. In postcolonial terms, this was a moment when the subaltern spoke, when the Cubans could interrogate the crisis myth. What happens when subaltern narratives and representations encounter heroic history? Has the myth been reworked, and if so, how? As we argue below, despite generating new and important insights into the missile crisis, as a result of micro-practices that continue to marginalize the subaltern voice or explain it away, the critical oral history project largely fails of its postcolonial promise.

¹¹ The myth has changed over time, for example to incorporate the discovery in 1987 that President Kennedy had sought a missile trade with the Soviets (Blight and Welch 1990, 114), but without challenging the structure of the narrative that we discuss here.

¹² Guha defines these discourses according to the order of their appearance in time and their links, whether formal/acknowledged or real/tacit, with an official point of view.

Back to the Brink: Heroic History and the Subaltern Voice

In this and the next section we examine how IR reacted to Cuban challenges to the missile crisis myth. Through a series of conferences held between 1987 and 1992, scholars and participants in the Cuban, Caribbean, and October crises were returned “to the brink” to produce a critical oral history. Before the Cubans could speak, however, they had to be in the room. Unsurprisingly, Cuba was absent from the first two meetings in 1987, replicating the heroic myth by ignoring Cuba and its concerns. As David Welch, one of the organizers, put it: “No one even dreamed of inviting Cubans to either of the first two conferences...we all still had the idea that the crisis was a U.S.-Soviet confrontation to which the Cubans were utterly irrelevant. That was a big mistake but there we are” (personal correspondence). Only when a third conference was organized by the Soviets in Moscow in 1989 were Cuban representatives invited; six politicians and scholars attended, including some who were in government during the crisis (Allyn, Blight, and Welch 1992, xxiii). The Soviet decision to invite the Cubans—the Americans learned of it only upon arrival in Moscow—produced “consternation” among the U.S. participants, who “still thought them irrelevant” and were “worried it would turn into a political circus” (Welch, personal correspondence). Cuban representation was more substantial in Antigua in 1991 (Blight, Lewis, and Welch 1991) and in Havana in 1992, where Castro himself attended (Blight, Allyn, and Welch 1993).

What the Subaltern Said

Once in the room, what did the Cubans say? One of the questions most often asked from within the heroic narrative is: why were the missiles placed in Cuba? This is Allison’s first question in *Essence of Decision* and also the first asked by Robert McNamara at the start of the Moscow conference (Allyn, Blight, and Welch 1992, 7). For the subaltern, the answer is blindingly obvious: “the main origin of the crisis was American aggression against Cuba” (Allyn, Blight, and Welch 1992, 149). In the October crisis narrative, responsibility rests squarely with the United States. The crisis follows concerted U.S. hostility towards the Cuban revolution and is a result of Cuban efforts, with Soviet help, to protect Cuba against an expected U.S. invasion, a larger Bay of Pigs with U.S. ground forces and air power (e.g., Allyn, Blight, and Welch 1992, 15; cf. Blight, Lewis, and Welch 1991, 1–8, 71). Both to defend the Cuban revolution and to improve the strategic balance of power, the Soviet Union offered nuclear weapons (e.g., Blight, Allyn, and Welch 1993, 123). With some reluctance—it would have preferred a public deployment, given that the choice of weapons was legal in international law—Cuba accepted the missiles as part of its contribution to the defense of the socialist camp against capitalist aggression (e.g., Allyn, Blight, and Welch 1992, 70–1; Blight, Allyn, and Welch 1993, 82–7, 198–200, 208). In the meetings, these points were central to Cuban accounts of the crisis.

The subaltern rejected Cold War articulations of Cuba that marginalized Cuban agency.¹³ In orthodox U.S. accounts, Soviet First Deputy Premier Anastas Mikoyan’s visit to Cuba in March 1960 signals the subordination of the Cuban revolution to Moscow and prompts Eisenhower to allow the CIA to commence covert operations. Castro rejected this explanation for U.S. action against Cuba: “Hostility of all sorts had begun way before March of 1960” (Blight, Allyn, and

¹³ In preparing for the Havana meeting, U.S. delegates and the project organisers drew on the 1961 Kennedy White Paper *Cuba* (Blight, Allyn, and Welch 1993, 38–9). On Cuban agency, see Blight and Brenner (2002), Gleijeses (2002).

Welch 1993, 178).¹⁴ Efforts to explain U.S. action as a response to Cuban subversion elsewhere in Latin America also got short shrift (e.g., Blight, Lewis, and Welch 1991, 14). In 1961 and 1962, said Risquet, “there was no Cuban action to export revolution” (in Blight, Lewis, and Welch 1991, 23). Cuban support for local revolutionary movements began after its U.S.-orchestrated expulsion from the O.A.S. in January 1962, as legitimate self defense against states supporting U.S. efforts to generate a “Cuban counterrevolution” (Risquet in Blight, Lewis, and Welch 1991, 23); indeed, “a country attacked and harassed as Cuba was then had every right to act the way it did” (Castro in Blight, Allyn, and Welch 1993, 182).

Consistent with a postcolonial analysis, the subaltern challenged the missile crisis myth by rejecting the spatial and temporal framing that made Cuba and U.S. imperialism invisible. Castro pointed to a long history of U.S. aggression against Latin American states and argued that the proper frame for analyzing Cuban actions—as reactive and defensive—was not the Cold War but the history of unequal U.S.-Cuban relations (in Blight, Allyn, and Welch 1993, 164–166, 174). Americans, said Castro, had a poor knowledge of that history; needed was to “give Americans a proper education, and tell them the historical truth, instead of shaping their opinions on the basis of false premises” (in Blight, Allyn, and Welch 1993, 176). For instance, they were taught that the United States was responsible for Cuba’s independence: “this teaching is incorrect...Spain was defeated, Spain could not continue the war against Cuba...and that is when the U.S. intervention came” (in Blight, Allyn, and Welch 1993, 175–177). In Antigua, Risquet framed the crisis similarly, noting how Cuba was excluded from the peace conference that ended the Spanish-American War (in Blight, Lewis, and Welch 1991, 167, 195)—in Cuban accounts, the Spanish-*Cuban*-American War. This is a very different view of the missile crisis; the spatial and temporal framing is shifted from the 13 days of heroic myth to a century of U.S.-Cuban interaction, punctuated by repeated U.S. interventions in Cuba and elsewhere. This history is not heroic, stressing instead imperial power and its meaning for the subaltern.

For the Cubans, the missile crisis was about the sovereign rights of small states in a world dominated by great powers. It was about imperial power and competition, and the corresponding need to build laws and institutions that defend the independence of small states. This is perhaps clearest in Cuban accounts of the “lessons” of the crisis. U.S. scholarship routinely seeks to identify such lessons. Typically, they are conceived in terms of the knowledge interests of great powers and other states armed with nuclear weapons: “the lessons of the October crisis...privilege one interpretation. I would say that that interpretation is basically the logic of the superpowers” (Rafael Hernández in Blight, Lewis, and Welch 1991, 179). This interest leads to the usual focus on crisis decision-making and deterrence, for example. In contrast, a subaltern perspective is integral to the Cuban lessons. Pointing to the devastating effects of intervention in small third-world states, Hernández argued in Moscow that “a new era in relations among the great powers would imply, as a lesson of the crisis, the acknowledgement of the sovereign interests of small countries and submission to the standards of international law” (in Allyn, Blight, and Welch 1992, 174). Such lessons make little sense in terms of the heroic myth.

Responding to the Subaltern

Getting into the room was not the end of Cuban problems in making themselves heard. In commenting on the Moscow meeting the organizers noted, correctly,

¹⁴ The National Security Council agreed Castro had to go in June, 1959, 6 months after the revolution and prior to links with Moscow (Gleijeses 2002; 14–5). On U.S. plans to overthrow Castro, see Morley (1987); for a Cuban account, see Escalante (2004).

that “the Americans and Soviets did most of the questioning and answering” (Allyn, Blight, and Welch 1992, 201). When the Cubans tried to raise issues important to them, U.S. and Soviet participants often ignored them or changed the subject (Allyn, Blight, and Welch 1992, 14–18, 56–57, 68–75). As a result, Cuban concerns appear idiosyncratic and marginal to the “real” issues raised by the missile crisis, those discussed by the U.S. and Soviet delegates and highlighted in Blight and Welch’s account of the meeting (1990, 325–350). Reactions to the subaltern by U.S. participants were also dismissive, and tinged with anger (e.g., Blight, Allyn, and Welch 1993, 154). Cuban contributions, said the editors after Moscow, had to be read in light of contemporary politics. The Cubans—unlike the Soviets and the Americans—were not capable of discussing the crisis in a neutral, disinterested manner (Allyn, Blight, and Welch 1992, 202–3). For instance, Risquet’s “performance” in Moscow was described as evidence that “Cuban officials...had difficulty transcending rhetoric and invective” (Blight, Allyn, and Welch 1993, 9, 17, 27, 147). The editors also took exception to Fabián Escalante in Antigua describing U.S. operations against Cuba, not unreasonably, as acts of war and regarded the Antigua meeting as a “dead end” (Blight, Allyn, and Welch 1993, 37–8). Behind the Cuban delegates the editors discerned Castro, whose “hovering presence...inevitably politicised” proceedings in Moscow, Antigua, and Havana (Allyn, Blight, and Welch 1992, 201; Blight, Allyn, and Welch 1993, 9, 11, 227, 291).

Beyond discounting repeated Cuban articulations of an alternative historical geography of the crisis as political, U.S. participants in the meetings responded in two further ways. First, they translated the subaltern voice into the social scientific language of misperception; second, they offered their own account of the history of U.S.-Cuban relations. These responses, we show, effectively muffle or distort what the subaltern was saying, while reproducing key elements of the conventional crisis narrative.

Translating the subaltern voice into the language of misperception produced a causal and moral equivalence between the United States and Cuba. This first response to the subaltern acknowledges U.S. aggression against the Cuban revolution (e.g., McNamara in Allyn, Blight, and Welch 1992, 7–9). However, U.S. participants immediately minimized its significance, referring to such actions as “foolish,” “ill-conceived,” “irresponsible,” and “reprehensible” (Blight, Allyn, and Welch 1993, 155, 159, 266; Blight, Lewis, and Welch 1991, 47). At the same time, it was agreed that, as a result of these “foolish” actions, had U.S. policy makers been Cuban, they too would have expected an invasion. As McNamara said repeatedly, “If I’d been a Cuban, I would have thought exactly what I think you thought” (e.g., in Allyn, Blight, and Welch 1992, 7). The reasonableness of Cuban (and Soviet) fears is thus acknowledged. The next, crucial step in the translation asserts that there was no U.S. intention to invade, a claim repeated in Moscow, Antigua, and Havana (Allyn, Blight, and Welch 1992, 9). Determining the threat to Cuba is thus reduced to a simple binary—intent to invade or not. In the absence of such intentions, Cuban and Soviet fears of an invasion were based on misperceptions. This was not to blame them for the crisis, however. U.S. actions were also based on misperceptions, of the Cubans in particular (e.g., Blight, Allyn, and Welch 1993, 41–46, 321–2). The crisis is thus the product of mutual misperception. As Sergo Mikoyan said, “all of the pre-crisis history, beginning with January 1, 1959, is the history of misperceptions” (in Blight, Lewis, and Welch 1991, 39, 49–50). Editorial commentary after Moscow and Havana strongly affirmed this view of the crisis (e.g., Blight and Welch 1990, 329–31). Translating the subaltern voice in these terms mutes claims that the United States was responsible for the crisis, making it instead an unintended consequence of U.S., Soviet, and Cuban actions. The subaltern narrative of the crisis is reduced to one of three equivalent and “incommensurable” sets of perceptions and misperceptions—the Cuban, Caribbean, and October crises (Allyn, Blight, and Welch 1992, xxi).

While accepting that misperception had occurred, the Cubans refused this account of the crisis. As in a postcolonial analysis, the easy slide into relativism is rejected by locating these competing accounts in the context of a particular configuration of power.¹⁵ The October crisis was not just one of three incommensurable narratives; rather, it described the continuing reality of U.S. imperialism. Said Castro, "No other country has intervened more in Latin America than the United States" (in Blight, Allyn, and Welch 1993, 174). Given that history, aggression against the Cuban revolution represented business as usual; the puzzle would be if the United States did *not* seek to overthrow the Cuban government (cf. Gromyko in Allyn, Blight, and Welch 1992, 49, 147–8). Georgy Kornienko identified the implications for subaltern knowledge of explanation in terms of misperception: "for Cuba and for the Soviet Union..., anticipating American military action or perhaps even an invasion, was not a *misperception*; it was a legitimate perception, based on plenty of evidence.... To call it a 'misperception' is to excuse American policy" (in Blight, Lewis, and Welch 1991, 185–6). Framing the crisis in terms of misperception, mutual or otherwise, elides U.S. imperialism and the systematic character of post-1959 efforts to change the Cuban government; the role of U.S. aggression is reduced while the failure to launch an invasion is exaggerated (Hershberg 1990).¹⁶

The second response of U.S. participants to the subaltern's alternative historical geography was to offer their own account of U.S.-Cuban relations. Over the course of the project its organizers grew more receptive to subaltern claims. In Antigua, Welch said "It has always been my view that the Cuban missile crisis began in the nineteenth century" (in Blight, Lewis, and Welch 1991, 188, 204). Blight, Allyn, and Welch included a history of U.S.-Cuban relations, before and after 1898, in the transcripts of the Havana meeting. The missile crisis, they said, "cannot be understood" apart from this history (1993, 322–3). The subaltern had been heard, but how well? In making imperialism integral to the causes of the crisis, as part of a longer history of U.S.-Cuban relations, Blight, Allyn, and Welch accept a key subaltern claim and their history pushes in postcolonial directions. They trace the patterns of racism, paternalism, and imperial desire that shaped U.S. policy towards Cuba, as well as the resentment these policies produced on the island. The overtly anti-imperial character of U.S. foreign policy rhetoric, they argue, makes it hard for U.S. scholars to see U.S. imperialism and, when conscious of the imperial character of U.S.-Cuban relations, most North American observers see it as essentially benign (Blight, Allyn, and Welch 1993, 338, 342). Making sense of the U.S. role in the world thus requires seeing it as others do.

In other ways, however, Blight, Allyn, and Welch reject the Cuban view of the crisis. In Moscow, Antigua, and Havana the Cubans stressed the continuities in U.S. relations with Cuba. In contrast, Blight, Allyn, and Welch offer a history of discontinuity. After 1898, U.S. policy had been "an imperialism of sorts;" Castro's "belief" that the missile crisis was a product of U.S. imperialism was thus "clearly understandable" (1993, 338, 340). But after World War II, U.S. policy toward Latin America was driven by anti-communism (Blight, Allyn, and Welch 1993, 334). In linking U.S. opposition to the Cuban revolution to the history of U.S. imperialism, Castro got it wrong: he "failed to appreciate that the concerns animating American policy during the Eisenhower and Kennedy administrations...had nothing to do with America's quasi-imperial past and reflected a profound if paradoxical insecurity. Misunderstandings such as these are bound to affect the relations between states" (Blight, Allyn, and Welch 1993, 321, 342). In

¹⁵ Classical realist analysis works similarly while differing sharply in other ways.

¹⁶ It also ignores the possibility that the pressure of events might change U.S. intentions (Blight, Lewis, and Welch 1991, 111, 123–4) and the role of U.S. policymakers in fostering misperception of their intentions (Blight, Lewis, and Welch 1991, 131ff; Allyn, Blight, and Welch 1989/90, 147).

a move that reproduces heroic history's individualism, the causes of the crisis are traced to the history of U.S.-Cuban relations as *misperceived* by Castro, who is both product and prisoner of this history (Blight, Allyn, and Welch 1993, 323). Imperialism only exists if consciously present in the minds of U.S. policy makers. This confuses the reasons given for an action with its effects as if, for example, the Christian motivations of missionaries mean they do not also participate in the production of colonial relations of domination (e.g., Thomas 1994, 125–144). Taking U.S. foreign policy makers at their word, U.S. Cold War policy is presented as discontinuous with what had gone before.

The subaltern offered an alternative history of U.S.-Cuban relations. Rejecting that history requires more than simply believing what U.S. policy makers say. Minimally, it requires a comparative analysis of U.S.-Cuban relations before, during, and after the Cold War. Consistent with the subaltern view, such an analysis undermines claims of discontinuity in U.S. policy towards Cuba. A realist analysis of international hierarchy, for example, highlights relations of informal empire, “in which subordinate states face periodic military intervention” and the expectation of intervention if they act in ways unacceptable to the dominant state (Wendt and Friedheim 1995, 697, 698). The United States intervened militarily in Cuba in 1906, 1909, 1912, and 1917–1921; it supported or welcomed military coups in 1934 and 1952. Economic intervention was also persistent, for example, through manipulation of the sugar quota (Morley 1987, 31–9). Despite rejecting the subaltern view, Blight, Allyn, and Welch also hint at such an analysis: “A high degree of American influence in Cuba came to be taken so much for granted that when Fidel Castro stopped playing by the rules in the early 1960s, the dominant American reaction was righteous indignation” (1993, 340).¹⁷ Similarly, an historical materialist analysis of the political economy of imperialism also supports subaltern claims. Comparative analysis of U.S. reactions to social revolution in Mexico, Cuba, Bolivia, and Guatemala, as well as in Chile and Nicaragua, highlights the consistency of U.S. policy towards Latin America throughout the twentieth century. At its core, policy is driven by the defense of U.S. capitalist interests—access to and domination of the hemisphere (Bergquist 1996, 97, 100–1). Blight, Allyn, and Welch also refer to the role of economic interest in U.S.-Cuban relations across the Cold War divide (1993, 327, 328, 330, 333, 335). From each of these otherwise very different theoretical perspectives, then, continuity not discontinuity defines the longer history of U.S.-Cuban and U.S.-Latin American policy. Justifications for intervention shift across the Cold War divide but relations of hierarchy persist. A Cold War narrative of world politics obscures such patterns and provides the framework within which subaltern claims are interpreted and dismissed. Blight, Allyn, and Welch explain the immediate origins of the crisis in the same Cold War terms as the Eisenhower and Kennedy administrations (1993, 335, 336)¹⁸; their history thus provides a “proper education” in which the subaltern and its account of the crisis are explained away.

After Havana: The Discipline and the Subaltern Voice

In this section we examine how IR has responded to the critical oral history project's postcolonial intervention. Despite efforts to speak for the Cubans in the meetings and in editorial commentary, in Moscow, Antigua and Havana the subaltern voice was loud and clear. In IR scholarship, however, the postcolonial

¹⁷ Blight, Allyn, and Welch do not detail the sheer scale of the U.S. impact on Cuba and influence over policy; see, for example, Paterson (1994), Pérez (1997).

¹⁸ Growing ties with the Soviet Union are thus seen as an unintended effect of U.S. efforts to punish Cuba (Blight, Allyn, and Welch 1993, 336); cf. CIA Director Allen Dulles in November 1959 trying to force Cuba closer to the Soviets in order to unify opposition to the revolution and provide a pretext for U.S. action (Cox 2002, 449).

potential of what the subaltern said is mostly lost, drowned out by older, stronger narratives. We try in outline to retrieve it.

Scholars were quick to appreciate the significance of the new information generated by the oral history project and the transcripts were widely cited. The project was one of the “triumphs of glasnost,” said Richard Ned Lebow and Janice Gross Stein; “Better history can produce better lessons” (1994, 6, 16). Len Scott and Steve Smith suggested that the project, together with other new data, made possible “a genuinely international history of the crisis” (1994, 678). Criticism of the project’s methodology was unconvincing (e.g., Kramer et al. 1990); “Western scholars never complained about the use of interviews to construct the American side of the Cuban missile crisis” (Lebow and Stein 1994, 13). The volume produced out of the Havana meeting, said Jorge Domínguez, was “the best single work on the Cuban role in the crisis” (2000, 305, n.2).

The project’s most immediate effect was to increase the number of participants in the crisis from two to three: the United States, the Soviet Union, and Cuba.¹⁹ Recovery of Cuban agency took place on familiar ground, however. Before and after the “return to the brink,” analysis took for granted a Cold War context; the superpower confrontation was still the main causal dynamic (cf. Saull 2005). Scholars continued to focus on U.S.-Soviet relations (e.g., Lebow and Stein 1995; McKeown 2000; Haas 2001; Winter 2003). Cuba became an active subject in the crisis but only a minor one, its role defined by U.S.-Soviet relations (on scholarly bias against Cuba, see Gleijeses 2008). This led to a broadly realist conception of the crisis as the product of clashing state interests and interpretations, mediated by relative state power (e.g., Munton and Welch 2007, 31). Recovery of Cuban agency—in practice quite rare—thus reproduced a conventional Cold War historical geography in which the global south is marginalised.

The subaltern account of the crisis linked it to U.S. interventions in Latin America and elsewhere before, during and after the Cold War. A clear indicator of whether or not the subaltern voice has been heard then is the treatment of U.S. imperialism. Most IR scholars define imperialism narrowly in geopolitical terms, as deliberate policies of foreign conquest and rule. Reference to imperialism after September 11, 2001, for example, focuses on the U.S.-led invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq and policies of counter-insurgency interpreted as “empire-building” (e.g., Kaplan 2005; cf. Gregory 2004). During the Cold War, the United States was a great power, not an empire (cf. Cox 2005, 21–2). The subaltern account of the missile crisis thus makes little sense. In Lebow and Stein’s (1994) otherwise impressive analysis of the crisis, imperialism is not mentioned; Cuba is compared with the U.S.-Soviet crisis over the Israel-Egypt war of 1973. The updated edition of *Essence of Decision* cites imperialism only in reference to bureaucratic expansion. Cuba is linked to U.S.-Soviet conflict over Berlin, as it was by the ExComm; the claim that Soviet missiles were placed in Cuba to defend the revolution is rejected (e.g., Allison and Zelikow 1999, 82–8, 99–109, 181). Once marginal, U.S. actions against Cuba prior to the invasion are discussed but only as responses to Cuban actions, not as part of a longer history of U.S. imperialism (Allison and Zelikow 1999, 82–8; Munton and Welch 2007, 12–20). When invoked, imperialism as political strategy is usually confined to an historical past with little significance for the crisis. In defining the Cold War as a clash between Soviet and U.S. empires, for instance, historian John Lewis Gaddis refers casually to U.S. domination of Latin America and its “hemispheric hegemony” (Gaddis 1997, 177). But his account of the crisis (chapter 9) ignores this context. Richard Snyder’s analysis explicitly accords Cuba agency and refers to the U.S.’s “imperialist past” and its “neocolonial power” toward Cuba (Snyder 1999, 271).

¹⁹ Oddly, this is not true of Allison and Zelikow, described as “the first analytical synthesis of all the new evidence,” (1999, vii).

But the fact that the United States “*had been* an imperialist power” is a background condition, with no direct relevance for the onset of the crisis (Snyder 1999, 286, emphasis added; cf. Nowell 2002). In sum, then, the United States may once have been an imperial power, and at the time of the crisis it may have been a neocolonial one, but this is irrelevant for explanation of the Cuban missile crisis, save insofar as it shapes Castro’s misperceptions of U.S. motives and intentions (e.g., Munton and Welch 2007, 11–2). Imperialism is marginal to understanding the crisis.

Conceiving of the crisis in these terms limits the oral history project’s postcolonial potential. This is evident, for example, in the lessons drawn by both North American *and* Cuban scholars. For North American scholars, the most important lesson to be learned from discovery of the subaltern role in the crisis is the need for “realistic empathy” between great powers and small states (e.g., Blight and Brenner 2002, 177–92; Munton and Welch 2007, 4, 103). The problem is that the North Americans and the Cubans simply do not understand each other.²⁰ If not properly understood, small states—Vietnam, Cuba, Iraq, North Korea, and Iran—can hurt a great power like the United States (Blight and Brenner 2002, 190–1). As British colonial officials also learned, it is important to know what the peasants are thinking. For the Cubans, the key lesson of the crisis is the need for better international laws and institutions to defend small-state sovereignty.²¹ After Moscow, Antigua, and Havana, great powers and small states can draw new, different lessons from the crisis but for both, adding Cuba only reinforces dominant realist and state-centric views of the international. However novel in disciplinary terms, subaltern realism remains a form of realism and thus subject to postcolonial critique (e.g., Krishna 1999; Tickner 2003a).

By definition, efforts to decolonize the crisis must take imperialism seriously, and not only in geopolitical terms (e.g., Barkawi and Laffey 2002). This means getting beyond realist models of the international. The revisionist tradition in U.S. diplomatic history offers such a model, a starting point for engaging the subaltern compatible with postcolonial analysis (cf. Mignolo 2000). When read through this literature the novelty of the oral history project’s findings is reduced. Twenty years before the Moscow meeting, William Appleman Williams framed the crisis as a function of Soviet and Cuban fears of U.S. invasion and a Soviet desire to redress the strategic imbalance (1972, 302). The origins of the crisis, argues Thomas Paterson, “derived largely from the U.S. campaign to quash the Cuban Revolution. To stress only the global dimension (Soviet-American competition), as is commonly done, is to slight the local or regional sources of the conflict” (1994, 260). This prompts questions about relations between the Cuban revolution and the Cold War assumed away in the heroic myth, and helps make sense of Soviet-Cuban conflict both during and after the crisis. It also raises questions about how the Cold War relates to U.S. and other imperial histories. The Cold War’s east-west logic is not dismissed but *de-centered* (e.g., Joseph and Spenser 2008), initially in favour of colonial and imperial relations. The global south becomes integral to how we conceive of the international. Attention shifts from the policies of great powers to the social relations through which they and other subjects of global life are connected, constituted, and produced. To decolonize the crisis is to relocate it in such relations. Like postcolonial scholars, revisionists show how “the different meanings, social myths, and cultural self-understandings constitutive of state and national identities” are shaped by colonial and imperial relations

²⁰ This is contentious, in 1962 and since. Contemporary Cuban fears of a U.S. military invasion appear overstated but U.S. planning for a post-Castro “transition,” including reprivatization of the economy, suggests “misunderstanding” is not the problem; see the U.S. Commission for Assistance to a Free Cuba, <http://www.state.gov/p/wha/rt/cuba>.

²¹ Immediately after the crisis, Cuban leaders drew the lesson that neither superpower could be trusted; see Blight and Brenner (2002, 31, 85–8).

(Muppidi 2004, 16; cf. Joseph, LeGrand, and Salvatore 1998). For example, Greg Grandin argues the Cold War in Latin America was not just a great power conflict or a contest between political liberalism and Soviet communism. It was also a struggle between competing conceptions of democracy (Grandin 2004, 173–98; cf. Halperin 2004, 242–5). Located in structures of imperialism centered on the United States, the missile crisis is a moment in this struggle, conducted within and across state boundaries. Ignoring this context, the heroic myth of the crisis is the prose of democratic counter-revolution, one of the ways in which other views of democracy and what it means are silenced (e.g., Grandin 2006). This is a long way from the usual view of the crisis.

The parallels between Cuban and revisionist accounts of the crisis are striking and, to our knowledge, unremarked. Like the subaltern, revisionist work is often cited but seldom engaged and sometimes explicitly marginalised (Cumings 1993). In a conventional Cold War framing of the crisis, for example, Lebow and Stein (1994, 380, n.6) note Paterson's (1989) "neo-revisionist" argument—which makes U.S.-Cuban relations central to the crisis—without engaging it. Similarly, Munton and Welch (2007, 108) refer to it merely as "provocative." In the Havana meeting of the oral history project, McNamara "was initially sceptical about Wayne Smith's participation owing to his reputation, in some quarters, for being *a bit too inclined to see things from the Cuban point of view*" (Blight, Allyn, and Welch 1993, 156; emphasis added).²² In the micro-practices of IR scholarship and knowledge production a different, postcolonial framing of October, 1962 is lost.

Conclusion

What happens when a discipline's commonsense about the world is challenged? For three decades Castro and Cuba were practically invisible in a vast body of research on the Cuban missile crisis. As Izzy Stone noted, the results were "appallingly ethnocentric. Cuba's fate and interests are simply ignored" (1966, 14). Analysis of the critical oral history project as a postcolonial intervention in the literature shows IR has responded to the subaltern voice. It is no longer plausible to discuss the crisis without taking Cuban agency into account. Analysis of the micro-practices of knowledge production and post-1992 scholarship shows progress is only partial, however, slowed by the day-to-day practices of the discipline considered as a whole. In scholarship and in textbooks,²³ the heroic myth persists. Failure to decolonize the crisis undermines disciplinary ambitions. IR is not, contrary to Carr, a study of how best to run the world. As postcolonial scholars show, IR's too frequent failure to take the subaltern seriously produces blind spots in analysis of world politics. Theory-building and problem-solving are blinkered. Faced with nuclear proliferation and a war on terror fought mostly outside IR's North Atlantic homelands, the wider relevance of our argument is obvious; it is not only the subaltern who has an interest—albeit rather different—in decolonizing the crisis. The postcolonial potential of critical oral history offers a way forward, as does the revisionist tradition in U.S. diplomatic history and the growing body of postcolonial IR scholarship. More than a decade after the meeting in Havana at which the subaltern spoke so clearly, however, it is sobering to reflect on how much remains to be done to decolonize the Cuban missile crisis. If our goal is to decolonize the discipline, so to produce better accounts of the world, we still have a long way to go.

²² No revisionist, Smith has long argued for better U.S. understanding of Cuba; for example, Smith (1985).

²³ See, for example, Baylis and Smith (2005, 100–1, 392–3), Brown with Ainley (2005, 34, 70–5), Kegley and Wittkopf (2001, 67, 515), Nye (2005, 35, 141–5).

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