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9 Days in Havana Paper – Option 1

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Seeing is Believing: Changing Perspectives on Cuba and Third-World Socialism

Communism. Poverty. Fidel Castro. Revolution. Cuba has had many vague and, generally, negative connotations in the United States. The majority of United States citizens are aware of the hostile relations between the US and Cuba, but few understand the intricacies of the conflict and the reality of life under third-world Socialism. Prior to enrolling in “Cuba: Economic, Environmental and Social Sustainability and Resiliency” and spending nine days as a student-tourist in Havana, my own understanding of Cuba and its people was ignorant, at best. I had studied abroad in Buenos Aires, Argentina, and so I knew a little about Che Guevara and the many revolutionary moments he had inspired. However, what I did not understand is that a Revolution can thoroughly dispose of a dysfunctional system, that the United States had initiated and sustained hostile relations with Cuba, and that people living in a thoroughly non-Capitalist system could function happily and healthily. I came to learn all of this, and more, over the duration of the course and our nine days in Havana, Cuba.

The word ‘Communism’ has an almost entirely negative connotation in the United States. Because the ethics of Communism run contrary to the ideologies of Capitalism, the United States has generally sought to quash or delegitimize any country that attempts to establish a Communist regime. The tensions between the Soviet Union and the United States, which came to a head during the Cold War with Cuba as the center point, clearly illustrate the antagonistic manner with which American Capitalism regards Socialist countries. So it’s fair to say that, without much prior knowledge of Cuba or Cuba-US relations, I went into the class expecting to hear about

conflict, poverty, and clashing socioeconomic systems. Instead, I was surprised by the resourcefulness, resiliency, and ideologies that were formed during the Revolution but have evolved slightly into what Cuba is today.

Cuba's Revolution occurred in response to the repressive and brutally violent regime of Fulgencio Batista. Batista's regime was characterized by growing poverty, an increase in organized crime, and a dependency on United States corporations. Under Batista, the people of Cuba suffered while crime bosses and capitalism flourished. The ethics of Che Guevara and Fidel Castro preached the ideologies of Marxist Communism: solidarity amongst the people and egalitarianism in healthcare, education, and socioeconomic status. Though some changes to the Socialist ideology have had to be made to accommodate events such as the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Capitalist power of the United States, Cuba today effectively and successfully adheres to the same set of Revolutionary ethics.

As soon as we stepped outside of the airport in Havana, we felt surrounded by an atmosphere that perfectly encapsulated the spirit of Cuba. Huge crowds of people waited outside the airport doors, and I have never seen so much camaraderie upon the return of a relative or a good friend. Retrospectively, those interactions characterized the solidarity that Cuban citizens feel towards one another. Across the parking lot from the airport were a series of Revolution-era billboards proclaiming the Socialist ideology and idolizing the image of Che Guevara. Outdated cars cruised around the parking lot, making me feel as though I had stepped off of the plane and into another era. I thought about my first venture into a Latin American country; in Argentina, I had been frantic and paranoid about having my luggage stolen or getting lost in the bustling throngs of people. At Havana International, I felt inexplicably unconcerned and relaxed.

We traveled to CMLK by a brightly-hued 'Pastors for Peace' bus. I was surprised by the blatancy of the Socialist propaganda that we saw en route; we saw several large billboards bearing phrases such as "The Changes in Cuba are for More Socialism" and "All for the Revolution." It struck me, in the United States, we conceal the extreme pervasiveness of Capitalism by disguising it in consumer-oriented commercials and enmeshing it in day-to-day life; in Cuba, however, the Socialist ideology is present and emphasized for all to see. We arrived at the Center, which, though modest, was welcoming and comfortable. After getting settled, we drove out to a music bar to see a performance by acclaimed singer Tony Avila. US propaganda would have us believe that Socialism oppresses individual freedom, but Tony Avila's lyrics were the first of many artistic expressions of opinion that we heard throughout the tour. Lyrics aside, the music was beautiful to listen to; Cuban music has a very human feel to it, and we all felt the urge to get up and dance. Looking back, I can again see an allegory between the way the Cuban people got up and danced together and the general sentiment of the country; people working and living in unison cannot help but produce solidarity and unity, which in turn makes a country strong.

To me, art was the most evident example of the true nature of Cuban society; the various lectures we attended gave an in-depth look at the technical intricacies and history of the country, but the clearest connection to the people of Cuba came through in their art. In Hamel Alley, we were treated to a visual overload of religious art stretched from one end of the street to the other. The art symbolized the enmeshing of Afro-Cuban religion with the culture of the Cuban people in a more mainstream form. Though the events that took place in the Alley were clearly geared towards tourists, the art that covered the streets, walls, and roofs was a symbol of the ability of religion and Socialism to exist side-by-side. Later in the week, we attended a lecture by Lázara

Menéndez, who spoke about the history and development of Afro-Caribbean religions in Cuba; contrary to the US-preached characterization of Socialism as an oppressive and counter-progressive system, we learned that religious pluralism was encouraged and mutually beneficial to the country. This was solidified in the artwork of Salvador González Escalona in Hamel Alley.

Another example of art representing the voice of the people was at Centro Pablo de la Torriente Brau, an art gallery located in Old Havana. The gallery aimed to provide a forum for both visual and musical guitar artists at the local level, but also welcomed artists from outside of the country (like Carl, Dickinson's photographer). Between listening to lectures by Hedelberto Lopez Blanch and Victor Casaus, I perused the various informational pamphlets that we had been handed as we walked in the door. The visual art that had been previously exhibited in the gallery caught my attention, both for the aesthetics of each work as well as for the message that they were clearly trying to get across. Though many of the works commented on issues close to the individual artist, several provided clear commentaries on the trade embargo between the US and Cuba, as well as on the strength and resiliency of Socialism. Socialism as an ideology, it seemed, has very few voices of dissent; though aspects of the system itself might have faults, the solidarity of the people in terms of their respect for the ideology of their country was striking.

In addition to discovering Cuban art as a means of understanding Cuban culture, I also found my conversation with two students from the University of Havana to be particularly enlightening. In contrast to many American students, who arguably tend to be more apathetic or unaware of current social issues, both University of Havana students were actively interested in and engaged with happenings in the government and amongst the people. We asked the students about their conceptualization of Socialism; they responded that it was a system in which they

wholeheartedly believed, despite a few relatively minor faults. One student mentioned that his greatest issue with the system was the imbalance between industries; in a society that is meant to give socioeconomic equality and opportunity to all, certain industries garnered significantly more income. Additionally, housing and transportation are currently major issues, particularly for Cuban families that often have multiple generations living under one roof. However, both students emphatically believed in the foundational ideology of the system, and agreed that the solidarity between the people was almost palpable. As an American accustomed to the brutally fierce competition that has become inherent in our Capitalist system, I found it hard to grasp the concept of solidarity. However, speaking with these students helped me to see that solidarity means more than a loose association with one's neighbor; solidarity is more about understanding that the needs of the individual are the same as the needs of the whole, and that working in competition with one another will do more harm than good. Cuba has attempted to extend this solidarity outward, as exemplified by their sending of doctors to global disaster sites, but thus far the US has resisted their attempts. In *Revolutionary Doctors*, author Steve Brouwer details the ways in which Cuba is attempting to extend its medical education to the international level, provided that the doctors it trains return to serve in underprivileged areas in their own countries. In fact, in a recent article written by Fidel Castro, Cuba's attempts toward international solidarity are inherent in their Socialist doctrine; Castro describes solidarity as the willingness to help out one's neighbor in a time of need, and sees the United States' refusal to interact with Cuba as a refusal towards international unity (Castro, 2012).

Cuba has drastically reshaped my own opinions, both towards the country as a whole and towards the way in which a non-Capitalist system can successfully exist. As I mentioned, my understanding of Cuba prior to my participation in the class and arrival in the country had been

largely based upon government-spread propaganda and a fleeting memory of the horrifically campy movie *Dirty Dancing: Havana Nights*. As a Sociology major, I have been educated in the intricate system of stratification in the United States that is founded in Capitalism and breeds poverty as a result. I understood that the multiple inequalities that exist are not necessarily inherent in a Capitalist system, but they have evolved to become almost inevitable. It was hard for me to imagine a place that could functionally exist with a non-Capitalist system and in the face of long-term United States hostility. Cuba challenged both my conceptualization of my own society and my understanding of third-world resiliency and spirit.

Cuba made me rethink several previously-held notions, but there are three main concepts that stand out in my mind. The first is my understanding of the power of the people. This was particularly pertinent given the Occupy Wall Street movements that established themselves throughout multiple US cities, but ultimately failed to make any system-shaking changes. Cuba's Revolution, on the other hand, changed the system of government, the type of economy, and the values of its people. Learning about Cuba's history from a non-pro-US standpoint was the first step in my newfound understanding; experiencing the Cuban lifestyle and talking to everyday Cuban citizens showed me that the Revolutionary values are still strong today, and I think that that is a profound statement about the power of the people. Second, I was surprised by the acceptance of the lower standard of living in Cuba. This surprise made me realize just how American I am; it has become ingrained in my nature to be competitive and want to constantly move upwards, and I do not think that I could be satisfied with socioeconomic stasis regardless of work ethic. However, what I came to (begin to) understand was that one's satisfaction with a socioeconomic system has everything to do with culture and upbringing, and had I been brought up in a Socialist nation I might have attributed greater value to helping my fellow citizens and

working for a guaranteed salary than I would to accruing ever-increasing amounts of capital and competing with my peers. Third, my understanding of the need to view both sides of an issue was furthered by my conversations with Cuban citizens and by various lectures we attended. I am thinking particularly of our lecture and tour at the organopónico Vivero Alamar; though the US hints at the suffering and struggles of Cuba's people, the internal production of organic crops is a small symbol of Cuba's resiliency and sustainability. The technology, research and development, and efforts towards environmental sustainability described to us by our guide at Vivero Alamar all serve as reminders that Cuba is actively (and successfully) working to alleviate the need for excessive outside imports, and is well ahead of the curve in ensuring its own long-term sustainability. In the end, I think my biggest complaint about our trip to Cuba was the dysfunctional bathrooms, and if that's my biggest complaint in a third-world country that has been facing US hostility for over 50 years, I'd say they're doing things right.