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Innovation and the Cuban Dream: Nine Days in Havana

Imagine the ‘American Dream’. This iconic idea is meant to represent the U.S. American success story: someone who makes something out of nothing, who rises to the top, who achieves upward socioeconomic mobility in the land of the free. Just ninety miles away, the dream of success looks a little bit different. Perhaps you are, as I was, curious; what does a ‘Cuban Dream’ look like? Such a dream is understandably difficult to visualize, as few U.S. Americans know what Cuba itself looks like. When he was in Carlisle about a year ago, I was privileged to have the opportunity to ask Cuban journalist Hedelberto Lopez Blanch his thoughts on the matter.

Blanch defined the ‘Cuban Dream’ in this way: *“El sueño cubano es tener resuelto los problemas fundamentales de toda la población y tener relaciones, de... tener relación con todos los países del mundo. [...] Podemos compartir con todo el mundo, y ayudar- ayudar a los países pobres, los países que tienen menos”* (Lopez Blanch). Translation: “The Cuban Dream is to have resolved the fundamental problems of the population and to have relationships... to have a relationship with all of the countries of the world. [...] We can share with everyone, and help - help the poor countries, the countries that have less” (Lopez Blanch). As I began my nine-day stay in Cuba earlier this month, Hedelberto’s words were fresh on my mind.

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I suppose I should start at the beginning. We landed at the José Martí airport in Havana on the tenth of March; ‘we’ being myself and twenty-three others from Dickinson College in Carlisle, Pennsylvania. Our trip was part of our studies of the economy, sociology, politics, agriculture, healthcare and LGBT issues of Cuba. Havana air smelled like gasoline, wood smoke and something else (?). Just beyond the José Martí parking lot, we saw the first of many billboards emblazoned with the unmistakable image of Argentine revolutionary Ernesto Che Guevara. This billboard reads:

*Te vemos cada día
... puro como niño
como un hombre puro
Che Comandante, amigo.*

We see you every day
... pure like a child
or like a pure man
Che Comandante, friend.

Air and old cars aside, this and other billboards are what most imprinted on my mind from that first day. The billboards of Havana are not the billboards we are accustomed to in the States. There is no mention of highway-side restaurants, shopping outlets or gentlemen's clubs. A drive through Havana rather consists of a visual conversation of proud Socialism, criticism of the blockade (what we call the embargo), the wisdom of Che Guevara, the legacy of José Martí and the accomplishments of Fidel Castro. Also components of this mixture, given our timing, were billboards dedicated to International Women's Day and the welcoming of Pope Benedict XVI.

Havana's billboards echo Hedelberto's explanation of the Cuban Dream, as they address the intangible and ideological rather than immediately satiable, material compulsions. In particular, this dream shone through in the representations of Guevara, Martí and Castro. An evidently cherished trinity, their prevalence was a thing I could marvel at but not quite understand. (I would be reminded of this feeling later on in the trip when the MLK Center's Raúl Suarez spoke to us about the practices of Santería and Catholicism overlapping without conflict in Cuba.) Tributes to Castro, Martí and Guevara were everywhere: billboards, walls of buildings, front yards, the elementary school we visited, Afro-Cuban street artist Salvador's work on Hamel Alley, and the marine research center door. There appeared to be a common reverence for these revolutionaries everywhere we went in Havana.

Entering a rooftop garden site in Havana then, I was not surprised to see hanging on the fence a sign bearing a quote of José Martí's. This sign states: "*...la tierra produce sin cesar... si los que viven en ella quieren librarse de miseria, cultívenla de modo que en todas épocas produzcamás de lo necesario para vivir...*"



This means: "...the earth produces without ceasing... if those who live in it want to free themselves from misery, they cultivate it so that in all ages more than what is necessary to survive is produced..." This sign was indicative of the second commonality I observed in Cuba: a respect for and developed understanding of working with the land. Every time I mentioned to someone that I was studying urban agriculture, I was met with exceptional positivity; though I would also mention the several other things we had come to Cuba to study, it was usually urban

agriculture that would elicit the most excitement. The nation's effort in sustainable urban agriculture is something that Cubans seem to be very proud of, and, I think, rightly so.

So, why is it that Cuba has made such strides in the world of agriculture? According to Dr. Gilberto Valdés, a man from the Grupo Galfisawho spoke to us on the twelfth, (I paraphrase): *Cuba developed urban agriculture not because they are geniuses, but because they were in a time of crisis* (Valdés). Urban agriculture is one example of the resilience of the Cuban Dream despite drastic limitations imposed by outside forces. At the rooftop garden site, the man in charge called something out when we began ascending the slightly rickety staircase (I paraphrase): *be careful on those stairs, they're suffering from the blockade!* While he offered this in good humor, it brought attention to the reality of the blockade's effect on Cuba and Cubans.

In addition to this rooftop garden, we were able to visit an organopónico in Alamar on the thirteenth. A man by the name of Naranjo welcomed us, saying it was a pleasure to work with students, especially from their (I paraphrase) *sister country, the United States* (Naranjo). This organopónico is one of several innovative agricultural techniques currently utilized in Cuba, along with *parcelas* (plots) and *huertas intensivas* (intensive orchards) (Koont). Organopónicos maximize the produce that comes from one plot of land, and utilize locally produced bio-fertilizers to maintain the organic food's quality. This particular organopónico is about ten hectares, and produces over 270 species of produce (Naranjo). Naranjo stressed that workers in organic agriculture need to have extensive knowledge on plants, soil and the interactions between insects and plants. At this center, about one in every six workers has earned a

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professional degree in the field (Naranjo). The organopónico is a site of production, of experimentation with new ways to improve production and of education.

As we walked around the organopónico and continued to listen to what Naranjo had to say, the multifaceted nature of the benefits of organic urban agriculture in Cuba began to sink in; it is a situation in which doing good generates even more good. The primary motive behind urban agriculture is of course to provide Cubans with food, and to do so without relying on outside sources. This challenge, this motivation, has shaped the urban agriculture industry in Cuba into one that is as proficient as possible. With proficiency comes the localization of food, which is related to the food being organic, as all of the produce grown at the Alamar organopónico is.

Localization also means the reduction of Cuba's carbon footprint. (A small tractor went by while we were listening to Naranjo. He apologized, explaining that this was the only engine on site.) Growing organic produce requires creative techniques and developments of bio-fertilizers, which is a specialization unto itself and creates job and education opportunities. It is no wonder

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that everyone I met was so proud of Cuba's development of urban agriculture. It is more than just the food; organic urban agriculture like what we saw in Alamar is Cuban resiliency and innovation at its best. It is a way that Cubans are taking care of one another, and navigating success outside of the boundaries set by outside forces.

While we were standing by some noni (also referred to as "cheese fruit") trees, it became apparent that one of the people in our group had been bitten by some kind of insect. Naranjo disappeared for a second, and returned with fresh aloe to soothe the bite. This act of kindness reminded me of something that one of the U.S. American students at ELAM, the Latin American School of Medicine, had mentioned the day before, and that is that a relatively extensive knowledge on plants and remedies like this is common knowledge amongst Cubans. This student's name is Heather. Heather is originally from the state of Georgia. She is currently studying at ELAM, along with several other U.S. Americans. There are currently over 96 different nationalities represented at the school, and over twenty religions practiced (Dickinson ELAM). This is fairly impressive for a school that has only been around for twelve years.

Requirements to apply to ELAM are as follows: one must be under the age of twenty-five, have completed high school, have no diseases, be from a disadvantaged community, and be willing to practice a new kind of medicine. As Heather explained to us, herbal remedies like what Naranjo offered are not simply viewed as herbal remedies—they are medicine, and are just another part of the medical knowledge one acquires as an ELAM student (Heather, ELAM).

Some of the students we were able to speak with said that the *leave your morals at the door* attitude that can sometimes be associated with U.S. medical schooling acted as another motivation to study at ELAM, rather than a school in the States. ELAM promotes a style of learning that focuses on preparing students as a

community to serve the community at large. According to the students we met, their grades are posted publicly as a way to hold the entire group accountable for one another's successes and failures. If someone in a given class is doing poorly, it is the community of the class's responsibility to get that individual up to speed.

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Like urban agriculture, ELAM and the doctors it produces are bettering the island in more ways than one. By offering a free six-year, holistic program to aspiring doctors from all over the world, ELAM exemplifies Hedelberto's Cuban Dream in which Cuba is able to help other countries. Cuban doctors and ELAM graduates improve Cuba and the rest of the world through their practice of medicine, yes, but also by the standard they set for the practice of medicine itself. As Steve Brouwer points out in his book Revolutionary Doctors: How Venezuela and Cuba

are Changing the World's Conception of Health Care: "revolutionary doctors and medical students from Cuba [...] are demonstrating that humanity is capable of delivering medical care to everyone—not in the remote future, but right now" (Brouwer, 215).

These doctors and those who work in urban agriculture in Cuba are living Hedelberto's Cuban Dream. By trying to understand this dream, we U.S. Americans may develop our conceptions of social sustainability in post-revolutionary Cuba, and gain new perspective on some of the progress that has been made in the country. It is my hope that by reading about what I learned and experienced during my fleeting days in Havana, you have gained somewhat of a taste for today's Cuba; a taste that transcends the tales of hand-rolled tobacco, smoked pork, fine rum and strong coffee—one that challenges what you have heard and enriches what you know.

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