

Eddie Einbender-Luks  
Prof. Koont and Prof. Rose  
Econ 214 Soci 230  
March 29, 2012

### Nine days in Havana:

I remember the moment when I first heard that Dickinson College was offering a mosaic class on the current social and economic situation in Cuba that included a nine-day trip to Havana – I nearly fell out of my chair with excitement. I have studied Cuba's history in previous classes, seen films about the country, but I never considered that I would have the chance to travel there and experience the lively culture and the unique society Cuba has to offer. However short the trip may be, the opportunity was a rich and rare one that I could not pass up. My travel and experiences in Cuba would bring to life my academic study of Cuban history, society, economy and culture.

Growing up, I knew little about Cuba: they had great cigars but you weren't allowed to buy them, and citizens of the United States weren't allowed to travel there. I find it interesting that I knew so little about Cuba before coming to college and I rarely heard about any news or information on the country except for outstanding media events such as the Elian Gonzales story. Some of the reasons for the lack of information focusing on Cuba in US media, especially the positive achievements that the government and people have reached, is due to the antagonistic relationship that Cuba and the United States have had since Fidel Castro led the triumph of the Revolution in 1959. After learning about the historical relationship between Cuba and the United States through this class and previous courses, I jumped at the opportunity to have the privilege to travel to Cuba and experience the country first hand and talk with Cuban people about their perspectives and ideologies. One of our primary goals in visiting Cuba was to engage in a dialogue with Cubans on issues of our differing political, social and economic systems and cultures, and break down prejudices we may have had of each other in order to continue the growing friendly relationships that our two nations are building. I believe that these people to people exchanges will be the change and development needed from below to improving international solidarity and achieving a better relationship on the governmental level. In this article, through a mix of my academic studies and readings, lectures we have attended throughout or nine days in Havana, my personal experiences and informal conversations I have had with Cubans, I will explore the historical relationship between the United States and Cuba, the current economic and social trends and transitions occurring within Cuba, the alternative model that the Cuban approach offers to the international community and how the Revolution persists in everyday life among average Cubans within their society today.

Throughout the week we attended a number of academic lectures on critical issues concerning the history and present situation of the social development in Cuba, US-Cuba international relations, the economic situation and current transitions occurring within Cuba, the persistence of the Revolution and the ideology of solidarity and selfless service among the people. In order to understand the current situation however, the historical context must be understood. Dating back to the early 19<sup>th</sup> century Cuba represented an economic and strategic interest to the United States. Located about ninety miles south of Florida's shores, falling well within the United States' sphere of influence and hemispheric

hegemonic domination, both countries' histories have inevitably come into contact with one another in a diverse variety of ways. In 1823, Secretary of State John Quincy Adams wrote the Monroe Doctrine, which expresses the United States foreign policy and hemispheric security and that any attempt by European colonial powers to intervene, gain territory or threaten interests of any country in the Americas was an attack on the interests of the United States. This foreign policy ideology clearly encompasses Cuba, and John Quincy Adams describes the probability of US annexation of Cuba within half a century:

There are laws of political as well as of physical gravitation; and if an apple severed by the tempest from its native tree cannot choose but fall to the ground, Cuba, forcibly disjoined from its own unnatural connection with Spain, and incapable of self support, can gravitate only towards the North American Union, which by the same law of nature cannot cast her off from its bosom.<sup>1</sup>

In Cuba this is known as “la fruta madura”, or “the ripe fruit” policy. The idea expresses that Washington would wait for Cuba to mature and be ripe for the picking, or according to “laws of political as well as of physical gravitation” fall into the control of the United States. We attended a lecture on March 16, 2012 on US-Cuba relations at Facultad Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales (FLACSO), Latin American School of Social Sciences, which addressed the historical context for relations between our countries. The lecturer, (name) discussed how the United States intervened in the Cuban war for independence from Spain in 1898, a war known to us as the Spanish-American War, which lasted until 1902. Essentially, the fruit had been forcibly picked, as American policy makers did not believe that the political, economic and social environment was stable enough for the Cubans to establish an independent self-sustaining government. So the United States essentially controlled Cuba as a protectorate, and through the Platt Amendment instituted in 1901, the United States controlled Cuba's foreign policy and economic debt policy. In addition the amendment gave the US the right to intervene militarily in Cuban affairs at any time, thus creating a new, neo-colonial situation, where Cubans were transferred from living with repression under Spain to domination by the United States.

Throughout the next half century, the United States came to dominate the majority of industries, building of infrastructure, communication and credit lending systems. The majority of wealth was controlled by a minority foreign elite. Jorge Ibarra describes in “Studies in Cuban History: Prologue to Revolution: Cuba, 1898-1958” how the dominant power that the United States controlled through monopolies during the early half of the twentieth century functioned as “another economic mechanism of neocolonial domination oriented toward subordinating the development of the domestic bourgeoisie to the expropriation of its surplus along with the earnings of the working population.”<sup>2</sup> The domination of US interests to control the wealth and industries in Cuba kept the country in a state of underdevelopment and the profit-oriented capitalistic nature of US control disregarded the needs of the people and led to poverty, lack of adequate health care and

---

<sup>1</sup> Jane Franklin, *Cuba and the United States: A Chronological History*. (Melbourne: Ocean Press, 1997) Introduction.

<sup>2</sup> Jorge Ibarra, *Prologue to Revolution: Cuba 1898-1958*. (Boulder: Lynne-Rienner Publishers, 1998), 16-17.

access to education, and a deplorable housing shortage situation. In addition, the United States supported authoritarian regimes such as Fulgencio Batista who supported US interests, ignored the needs of his people and ruled with ruthless command. In the years leading up to Revolution in 1959, there was great discontent among the general population and movements initiated by Revolutionaries such as Fidel Castro, Camilo Cienfuegos, Che Guevara, Frank País who led to the overthrow of the Batista regime. Their goal was to establish a new Revolutionary structure and ideology that was intended to address the social, political and economic injustices and human rights abuses under the Batista regime and the imperialism of the United States.

After Castro nationalized many industries and redistributed land, including US property, declared the Revolution as socialist and allied Cuba economically and diplomatically with the Soviet Union, the United States saw this as an act of defiance and strategically addressed the issue within the context of the Cold War. The US cut all economic and diplomatic ties with Cuba and instituted an economic embargo on the country that still exists forcefully today. In many discussions I had with Cubans as well as my classmates and professors on the topic of the embargo and US-Cuba relations, the clear consensus is that the embargo is a relic of the Cold War, an archaic imposition that no longer reflects the reasons for which it was initiated. The Cuban Revolution, in the eyes of US policy makers viewed this radical movement that Castro later declared as socialist as a potentially extremely dangerous force that had to be contained and prevented from spreading to other countries in Latin America. Castro was able to defy *yanqui* imperialism. He argues in an editorial piece "La Fruta que no cayó", "the fruit that did not fall" that despite the passing of half a century of US imperialism, "the Cuban fruit had not fallen into Yankee hands" and that through the Revolution, Cuba has been able to maintain its sovereignty and true independence.<sup>3</sup>

The Revolution sought to redistribute land and wealth among the general population, nationalize foreign owned industries to achieve greater sovereignty and develop a holistic social and economic policy to address the deep social ills that were the result of years of neglect by Batista and US imperialism. A lecture by Dr. Elena Díaz of FLACSO at one of the University of Havana schools locations, addressed the history and present situation of social development in Cuba. She analyzed the ideology of the Revolution and the enduring values of solidarity, social inclusion, meeting the basic human needs of all of the Cuban people, and continuing the social policies of the Revolution, all of which Castro instilled and preached at the outset of his governance.

In a number of discussions I had with people, talking about their lives, what they do for a living, their favorite foods, their families, it became apparent to me that there was certain vocabulary people used that reflected a dialogue and narrative that had roots in the Revolution and represented a certain social solidarity that I am unfamiliar with and do not notice on a day to day basis in the United States or in my neighborhood. In Cuba, there is a strong sense of community, people hang out outside, children are playing in the streets and their backyards, older men sit around fold-out tables and play dominoes, men and women share stories while they work on their cars or hang clothes up to dry. As one woman I

---

<sup>3</sup> Fidel Castro. "La Fruta que no Cayó." *Cuba Debate*, Last modified January 25, 2012. Accessed March 28, 2012. <http://www.cubadebate.cu/reflexionesfidel/2012/01/25/la-fruta-que-no-cayo/>.

talked to told me, your neighbors are like family and that sense of intimacy outside of blood relations is typically Cuban and reflects a greater social cohesiveness and community.

There is a vibrancy and color that permeates the neighborhood of Mariano where we stayed as well as in downtown Havana, which contrasts with the deteriorating buildings and sidewalks. A certain aesthetic is represented that is foreign to me- the feeling of being transported back in time in a Caribbean island, immersed among the old American and European cars, the old mansions and smaller, more modest houses. Your surroundings are not brand new, they have been there for a long time and reflect a certain worn, rugged character that is beautiful at the same time.

In addition to the lectures and discussions, we visited the Escuela Latinoamericana de Medicina (ELAM), or Medical School of Latin America and had the opportunity to talk with some American students, who are currently attending the school for free, about their experiences studying and living in Cuba. We also had the opportunity to visit the Alamar urban agriculture site located fifteen minutes outside of old Havana and help plant seedlings in organopónicos and pick organically grown tomatoes. Everywhere we went we were greeted with a warm welcome. Everyone at both the medical school and urban agriculture site were enthusiastic and excited to answer our questions and engage in discussion. Apart from the planned lectures and visits, we had free time to explore the neighborhood of Mariano, where the Martin Luther King Jr. Center is located in which we stayed, as well as to walk around old Havana to take pictures, walk in shops and markets and taste local food in restaurants and bars.

I find that exploring on my own is one of the most rewarding experiences in a foreign country and forces me to come into direct contact with the new culture and society that I am in. One of the methods that I find very useful to get to know a new place is by running. In my opinion there is no better way to explore a new area. I am an athlete and I train for cross-country and track, so I needed to continue training while we were in Cuba. However besides my need to train, I enjoy running in a new foreign country to put myself on the streets and come into contact with the environment directly. No bus or glass windows separating me from the street life, the motorcycles and American Chevies from the 50's, the honking taxi drivers and students walking back from school, the dogs barking from behind fences, the grit, the wind, the uneven sidewalk and cracked streets. It is a rush of colors, of details, a great stimulation of the senses. However, running prevents me from absorbing the details around me, I take in what I can and then move on to the next scene.

My passion for running also stems for the feeling of freedom that it gives me, the uninhibited ability to find new places and go down untraveled paths. Often the reward is discovering a new place or having an experience that I wouldn't have had otherwise. In one such case I came across "La Ciudad Deportiva" or City of Sports that encompasses a baseball stadium, fields for soccer, baseball and other sports, a basketball court, tennis courts, a swimming and diving stadium and a four-hundred meter dirt track, most of which was open to the public. I was extremely excited to find a place of such magnitude dedicated to athletics for the public, with the exception of the beautiful, fifty-meter Olympic sized pool, which was reserved for kids ranging from five to eighteen years old.

A couple of my classmates traveling with me from Dickinson College are swimmers and compete at the varsity level and were training for nationals for the following week. As an athlete I understand how important it is to train so I helped them get into La Ciudad Deportiva and train in the pool. We didn't encounter any problems using the facilities and

had the chance to interview a Cuban parent, a couple of trainers and a sixteen-year-old national champion swimmer on their personal experiences, their opinions of the Revolution and the importance of sports and athletics in Cuban society and on the international level as well. One father I talked to related to me that he believes sports are integral to the education and socialization of kids and that is why he supports his seven-year-old son in his interest in swimming. He continued to express that through sports and healthy competition people are brought together and are forced to interact and mature in a mutual way. In response to another one of my questions on how popular sports are in Cuban society, he chuckled and said “muy popular” or very popular. Cubans are passionate about baseball, soccer, volleyball, track and field, boxing, basketball, and swimming to name just a few. Cuba was second behind the United States in the most recent Pan American games that occurred this past summer. Behind the United States, Cuba holds the second most gold medals in the event’s history as well as the second most medals won total. The Pan American games includes all of the Olympic sports and more, demonstrating that Cubans are talented and successful in a wide range of sports and athletic competitions. We also talked with a fifty-nine year old woman who was swimming seamlessly through the water to demonstrate a technique to a ten-year-old girl. She told us that she remembers swimming on a team before the Revolution in 1959 as a child, and how the atmosphere and sense of solidarity and pride in competition was strengthened after the Revolution. The trainer explained that greater funding was provided for development in sports in infrastructure, materials, training and facilities and the spirit and ideology of the Revolution for solidarity brought Cuban athletes together. This common interest of competition and athletics also brought citizens from two different nations together. My passion for running and my classmates’ passion for swimming brought us in contact with Cubans who also share the passion for sports and recreation. Through athletic competition such as in the Pan American games and the Olympics, the different nations in the world are brought together to compete against one another, creating more international solidarity through this mutual interest.

Through my conversations on social solidarity, the strong sense of community and Cuba as one big neighborhood in addition to the strong passion and national pride that is reflected through athletic success and competition and the revolutionary narrative that is still alive and breathing, I have come in contact with a culture that is different from my own, and through these differences I have also come to see our similarities as human beings and the lessons to be learned from an alternative socialist representative system that believes in such values as quality free public education and healthcare. Although my initial contact with Cuba was short, I know I will be traveling there again some day.

## Bibliography

Castro, Fidel. "La Fruta que no Cayó." *Cuba Debate*, Last modified January 25, 2012. Accessed March 28, 2012. <http://www.cubadebate.cu/reflexiones-fidel/2012/01/25/la-fruta-que-no-cayo/>.

Franklin, Jane. *Cuba and the United States: A Chronological History*, Introduction. Melbourne: Ocean Press, 1997.

Ibarra, Jorge. "Finance Capital and Economic Structure of the Republic." In *Prologue to Revolution: Cuba, 1898-1958*, 16-17. Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1998.