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Cuba Mosaic

*Nine Days in Havana*

While applying for this course and throughout the initial weeks of the semester, there was pretty much only one thing on my mind when it came to Cuba: urban agriculture. My prior interest in sustainable agriculture and a research paper I wrote as a sophomore had sparked this interest, and I was determined to see this modern marvel in action during our trip. I realized, of course, that there was much more going on in Cuba than urban agriculture. The readings and in-class discussions provided necessary background on the Revolution, socialism, economics, and much more. I read about gender issues and homosexuality in Cuba, as well as health care and education. These were topics rarely covered in my courses as an Environmental Studies major, and my eyes were opened to the complexity of life in Cuba. But they were still focused on urban agriculture.

Needless to say, spending the day at *UBPC Organopónico Vivero Alamar* was a highlight of the trip. What was most striking was not necessarily the wide variety of projects going on at the farm or its impressive productivity; innovations such as high tunnels, raised beds, vermiculture, and the like are being used in the United States as well. What was impressive, rather, was the fact that this type of vegetable production was not a niche market for wealthy consumers or a farm run through a non-profit just scraping by. *Vivero Alamar* is a highly productive urban farm that supplies organic produce to local residents of all income brackets (admittedly, there are few). In the United States, many sustainable agriculture initiatives, particularly those in urban areas, are still fringe markets that support a very small population or a wealthy demographic. In New York City, we have people growing produce on rooftops where organic matter has been deposited by cranes. And yet there are still food deserts and children

who eat chips rather than vegetables. While this phenomenon is not unique to the United States and certainly not the fault of the hardworking individuals involved in sustainable agriculture, it was an entirely different picture in Cuba. It was a picture of government support and a clear commitment to health and food security.

During the many trips we took in the beautiful Pastors for Peace bus, I spent a lot of time looking for *puntas de venta* and the notorious push carts of the *organopónicos*. I also spent a lot of time trying to capture them on camera through the window of a moving bus. Needless to say, they were everywhere. There was no doubt about the commitment to making this produce available to those who need it, whether that meant sitting in a stand on the side of the road or wheeling it around neighborhoods in small carts. This is something many producers in the cities of the United States aren't willing to do, or perhaps unable to do under the pressure of making a profit and a wage high enough to support an urban lifestyle.

In Cuba, however, it was clear that agricultural work is highly valued. It is a major source of employment, with more than 350,000 urban agriculturalists employed throughout Cuba (Koont, 2011, p. 172). One reason for this is that the “the scientific and technical sophistication of urban agriculture has raised the demand for (and thus participation of) skilled labor” (Koont, 2011, p. 173). This respect for agricultural labor and appreciation of its technical nature can be seen in the wages of workers as well. In fact, many Cubans are attracted to the field because the remuneration structure can provide incomes that are significantly higher than those who are employed directly by the state (Koont, 2011, p. 173).

Meanwhile, there is a stigma associated with farming that permeates many areas of the United States. It is often viewed as unskilled labor that is carried out by uneducated rural dwellers. While this perception is changing somewhat rapidly, it is still widespread in certain

regions of the US. This did not seem to be the case in Cuba, and part of that has to do with the government incentives for farmers and urban agriculture sites. This was something wonderful about Cuba that the world could use a good dose of; the success of urban agriculture has certainly been profound in terms of economic, environmental and social sustainability.

However, it was also clear that the urban agricultural initiatives of Cuba did not begin through a grassroots movement for the environment or for an inherent concern for nature. The urban agricultural movement began as a necessity imposed by the reliance on oil and an industrial agriculture model adopted from the Soviet Union (Koont, 2011, p. 2011,18). While I had been told this before, it became clearer in Cuba through interactions with people who had little to no knowledge of urban agriculture's scope or uniqueness. For some, it seemed to be just another source of food. And perhaps that's the way it should be, that urban agriculture and sustainable practices are the norm rather than remarkable. However, this realization helped me focus on some of the more intentional reforms in Cuba, namely many of the explicit social and economic reforms that have influenced the direction of the Revolution and the daily lives of Cubans.

One of the most striking reforms was the nationalization of education in 1961 and the subsequent Literacy Campaign (Mickelson, 2000, p. 57). These reforms and the free, universal nature of the educational system illustrate the commitment of the government and society to caring for the nation's children (Mickelson, 2000, p. 57). Visiting a primary school on our way to Varadero and speaking with Cuban university students over lunch illustrated the importance and benefits of this commitment. One might expect that economic hardship in Cuba would make it difficult to educate the majority of the population while still maintaining facilities and a respectable student teacher ratio. However, as has been noted by Mickelson, "Cuba's relative

poverty as a nation has not stopped its schools from educating the majority of the country's students to relatively high levels" (Mickelson, 2000, p. 30). This was clear during our excursions and interactions.

During lunch with the Cuban students, it was obvious that the students were being put through a rigorous academic program that gave them a broad, global understanding. Many of the students I sat with were History majors. This year they are taking world history, learning simultaneously about the United States, Latin America, Cuba, Africa, Asia, and beyond. In my experience as a student, there has been little emphasis on world history, less on the history of the developing world, and even less on Cuba. For many United States students, Cuba is rarely, if ever, mentioned. These students had a whole semester long course solely on United States history. When asked if they felt their professors portrayed the United States in a biased manner, all were of the opinion that their education about the United States had gotten increasingly factual and unbiased as they got older. This contrasts with the way US citizens are often exposed to Cuba, which is often through mass media or biased sources. As Elena Díaz mentioned in an interview with past Dickinson students, there are many misconceptions about Cuba in the US. Based on a two year period of teaching at the University of Vermont, Elena felt as though students focused on three main things in regards to Cuba: the presence of Fidel Castro, the importance of baseball, and the scarcity and problems of Cuba. She said, "I think that many people have the wrong idea about this country and the way that we are doing things" (Díaz, 2004).

Another important lesson taken from the lunch with Cuban students was the almost exhausting breadth of the Cuban academic programs. While high quality, thorough academic programs abound in the US as well, their cost can be prohibitive. The fact that Cuban students

were given access to this level of educational attainment free of charge was truly mind blowing; as mind blowing as our numbers of university students' tuition in the United States.

Our visit to *Escuela Primaria Fabricio Ojeda* further illustrated the importance of the educational system in Cuba. We were able to visit multiple classrooms, and it was clear that the students were not only well cared for but enthusiastic about their education. The school was clean and pleasant to be in, full of colorful decorations and spacious classrooms. There was even an impressive school garden cultivating vegetables for their own consumption. It certainly did not seem that economic difficulties had affected the quality of the school or the education in a major way.

Speaking with the children was also an important aspect of our visit. In one classroom, almost every student mentioned that his or her favorite subject was mathematics. In another, a young boy explained the Cuban flag and the rationale behind each color and symbol in proud detail. They were excited to tell us about Cuba and make us aware of special things about their country. An especially poignant iteration of this was when students passed out paper doves detailing the plight of the Cuban Five. This was an interesting gesture that was hard for me to wrap my head around, but clearly demonstrated the solidarity Cuban students felt with their nation. Their desire to share this with us was a meaningful sentiment.

The experiences we had with the educational system in Cuba illuminated an aspect of Cuban society that cannot be overlooked, and that is a commitment to children as the future of the country and the Revolution. This is one of the very intentional and focused reforms that the Cuban state has carried out since the Revolution. While we were able to see only a snapshot of education in Cuba, it provided an interesting and stark comparison to the United States system. While the students on our trip have seen some of the best academic programs in the U.S. and

have been given opportunities to receive a critical and comprehensive higher education, it is impossible to ignore the disparities that exist.

Another more recent initiative of the Cuban government that was illustrated by our travels was the build up of the tourism sector in Cuba. Professor Elena Díaz of the *Facultad Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales* (FLACSO) explained that the tourism industry, along with pharmaceuticals, gained importance after eighty percent of Cuba's trade was lost in the 1990s (Elena Díaz, personal communication, 2012). She explained it, as many others have, as a “necessary evil” for the country; it has had notable ideological influences but constitutes an important revenue source for the state. Tourism now accounts for approximately 8 percent of the GDP, and is increasingly utilizing domestic inputs and creating employment opportunities (Saney, 2004, p. 33). When walking around Old Havana and the *Plaza Vieja* in particular, it was hard to imagine that many of the hotels and restaurants, including the *cervecería* where we ate, are government owned and operated. One source attributes 89 percent of available rooms to government ownership, of which eleven percent are managed in fifty-fifty partnerships with foreign companies (Saney, 2004, p. 33).

Professor Díaz also mentioned the increased inequality that tourism has caused in terms of wages. This became ever more clear as we visited various tourist locations attempting to tip as is customary in the US. It was fairly obvious that giving someone a three CUC tip in a restaurant, which is roughly equivalent to 75 pesos (*moneda nacional*), would lead to income disparities and unfair compensation. Over dinner one night, Connor Gorry spoke to us briefly about the legendary case of a doctor turned taxi driver (Connor Gorry, personal communication, 2012). She emphasized that this commonly cited story is a misrepresentation of the actual economic situation. However, the fact that a taxi driver could theoretically earn a higher salary than a

doctor raises some important questions about necessary economic role and the value of a dual monetary system.

Our experience in Varadero was similarly poignant in terms of witnessing the growth and influence of tourism. Somebody in the group mentioned a conspicuous lack of socialist and revolutionary propaganda in Varadero as opposed to Havana. Whether this was intentional or not, it was clear that Varadero was very different from the capital city and catered to a different type of visitor. Artisanal markets were scattered throughout the area where we stayed, selling typical tourist wares at inflated prices. Drinks were significantly higher near the hotels, which were in some cases quite plush. We were even asked to leave one of the nicer hotel bars because it was exclusively for paying guests. All of these aspects signaled a departure from socialist ideology as we had experienced it prior to Varadero. However, it was very helpful to have the background information from Professor Díaz and Koont regarding the Cuban economy and recent reforms. This made it easier to put these sights and experiences into context and understand the complex nature of Cuba's economy and upcoming reforms.

Raúl Castro made a poignant statement about the necessity of economic reform in his address to the 9<sup>th</sup> Congress of the Union of Young Communists stating, “the economic battle constitutes today, more than ever, the principle task and the key ideological work of the cadres, because on this depends the sustainability and preservation of our social system” (Sixth Congress of the Cuban Communist Party, 2010). This statement helped me see the purpose of the *lineamientos*, which are a set of guidelines that will detail the reordering of the economic framework in regards to Cuban socialism. This further ingrained in me the idea that for Cuba, the Revolution and socialism are in constant dynamism. What socialism and Revolution means was very different for different people we spoke to, and many pointed to the fact that Cuba is

relentlessly working to bring the social justice, equality and solidarity goals of the Revolution to fruition. Cuba is clearly not perfect, and neither is the United States. What is striking, necessary, and fascinating about Cuba is the effort to engage the population at large in the Revolution and make it a part of national identity. The solidarity paradigm pervasive in our lectures and daily interactions in Cuba does not appear to be a farce. It seemed to be the result of constant, intentional efforts by the government to make the Revolution relevant to the current social and economic situation in Cuba.

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