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10 Days in Havana

For as long as most of us in the U.S. can remember, Cuba, although residing only ninety miles south of Florida, has been shrouded in mystery. Painted as both a danger and a renegade by the United States government, the American people to this day remain relatively in the dark about the everyday life that exists on the streets of Havana or in the agricultural fields of Matanzas. With this in mind I traveled to Cuba to see what I would find. Would Cuba be a rotting relic of the Cold War? A tyrannical dystopia run astray from its egalitarian intent? A tropical paradise? The system, and indeed the people I found there were much more complex and subtle than I had anticipated.

Stepping out of the airport is a bit of a surreal experience and one that in many ways is emblematic of the ramifications of the rocky U.S.-Cuban relations. Outside of the terminal is a crowd of people anxiously awaiting friends or relatives. The experience is far more emotional than how the same scene plays out everyday in airports in the United States. For those Cubans who have family members in the United States, visiting can happen rarely, sometimes with up to three years in between visits because of US restrictions on personal travel to Cuba.¹ There is another motivating factor to energize the Cuban crowd standing outside the airport. Friends and relatives coming off planes from Europe or the United States also incite enthusiasm over the promise of foreign and much needed consumer goods. Since

¹ Isaac Saney, *Cuba: A Revolution in Motion*. Nova Scotia, Fernwood Publishing, 2004. Pp. 173.

the fall of the Soviet Union and the presence of an increasingly effective U.S. embargo, it is very hard for Cubans to get their hands on consumer goods, medical supplies, or industrial implements. For this reason it is a common practice for friends or family members abroad to bring back anything from diabetes testing supplies to pens or chewing gum. Our guide for example, Carmen, had told me that she always has friends bring back for her a specific type of asthma medicine from the United States because the free state medicine can sometimes have uncomfortable side effects.

The roots of these issues lies, as mentioned before, in the U.S. embargo on Cuba that has existed since the early years of the Kennedy administration in the 1960s. Since then Cuba has been able to exist without the possibility of importing or exporting from the largest economic power in the world. Even manufactured goods produced overseas cannot be sold to Cuba if 10% or more of the item's components come from a U.S. company.

One cannot underestimate the effect this embargo blockade has even on the physical landscape of Cuban cities like Havana. While interviewing American journalist Conner Gorry who has been living in Havana for over ten years, we began to discuss the state of disrepair that has afflicted many of the buildings that occupy the large urban ring around touristy Old Havana. We talked about how Cuba is, in fact, a poor country and that the Cuban government has chosen to allocate the government's money to things that the long-standing regime has deemed more important, like education and healthcare. Gorry mentioned that Cubans, who are used to and appreciative of receiving essentials from the government, have learned

that looks are not everything. Many would prefer to have the free doctor down the road than a few less potholes in their streets. This was proven to me every day as I saw the resourcefulness of Cubans. Whether it was welding bits of scrap metal to patch up a gate, or reworking that old automobile engine from the 1950s. It was necessity that drove the Cubans we encountered, rather than desire or flashiness.

As we can see with Carmen's case mentioned before, sometimes though, the embargo can even have an impact on the general health of Cuba. Author Isaac Saney wrote in 2005, "As a consequence and because of the U.S. domination of the world pharmaceutical industry, Cuba suffers shortages of major medicines. For example, Cuba is unable to obtain most antibiotics."² This being said however, one cannot doubt the sophistication of Cuba's health care system, especially considering its isolation from the worlds largest commercial pharmaceutical companies.

Not only is Cuba's health care system taking care of Cuba, it is also providing reasonable and efficient medical services to dozens of countries around the world. On the third day of my exploration into Cuba I sat in on a lecture explaining the function of the Latin American School of Medicine, or ELAM. The purpose is to train Cubans as well as people from impoverished regions across the globe to become doctors for no charge. Once they are certified, each doctor is obligated to spend time abroad as physicians in poor areas before returning to practice in their own countries. With these doctors around the world, Cuba is taking important steps toward repairing the reputation that the United States has attempted to tarnish. Steve Brouwer, author of *Revolutionary Doctors: How Venezuela and Cuba are*

² Ibid, 168.

Changing the World's Conception of Health Care, highlights the importance of this "Medical Diplomacy" by showing just how many nations Cuba has developed close diplomatic relations with in exchange for doctors.³ The goodwill toward Cuba that these doctors have fostered around the world can be evidenced by the fact that in the most recent vote in the United Nations, only two countries, the United States and Israel, voted to continue the economic sanctions on Cuba.⁴

With this background, I can begin to discuss the Cuban people and what I experienced of everyday life during my ten days in Havana. Let me begin by saying that Cuban people are incredibly friendly. There is certainly no barrier between you and the "locals" as you wander around Havana. It is hard to even count the amount of times that I was approached out of the blue by someone on the streets asking me where I was from, where I was going, and if I needed help getting anywhere. Everyone I encountered was quick to recommend a restaurant or a bar where a good friend or a family member worked. It contributed to the atmosphere of solidarity that pervades the air in Cuba. Even if two Cubans weren't blood related, they were bonded by shared history, and for that reason were always quick to send me in the direction of an establishment worthy of my patronage.

That being said, the recent economic reforms implemented by Raul Castro are giving people the opportunity (for the first time since the revolution) to open up small private businesses. This legislation has had big impacts on the food industry as hundreds of small restaurants and cafeterias have sprung up in the kitchens and

³ Steve Brouwer, *Revolutionary Doctors: How Venezuela and Cuba are Changing the World's Conception of Health Care*. New York: Monthly Review Press, 2011. Pp. 225.

⁴ Saney, 175.

on the front porches of homes all across Havana. These restaurants range in size and quality, anywhere from sidewalk pizza stands to pre-fixed five course meals in colonial mansions. Either way the message is clear, Cubans are excited to be their own bosses and to enter into the risky world of private business ownership. While attending a lecture given by a professor of Political Science from the University of Havana, I realized with some fascination that this was the first time since the revolution that the government employment of the people has sunk below 98%.

I have traveled to many Latin American countries but arriving in Cuba there was something else that surprised me, how well educated everyone seemed. I guess I should not have been surprised, a highly educated population is one of the most important tenants of communist nations. But, drawing on my knowledge of the poverty that exists in other Latin American countries, and of the picture of Cuba that has been painted by the Miami Cuban exile populations and the American media, I had just imagined the education system to be different. I had a few experiences with the school system in Cuba. My first was a lunch with some students from the University of Havana. When I found out one was a history major I got excited. Since landing on the island I had had the sneaking suspicion that history students might not get a full story, or might have a solely Cuban based knowledge of history. Once again I was proven wrong. After a few minutes of talk about Marx and Hegel's theory of history (much of which would have been historical theories reserved for graduate school in the United States) my new friend quickly changed the conversation to politics. He had very strong opinions not only of Barack Obama, but also of Rick Santorum, Mitt Romney and all of the other leading Republican candidates. He

wanted to know whom I thought was going to win the election in November, but more importantly, he wanted to know whether or not I thought Obama would change his stance on Cuba. The last question took me aback. What we had always seen as a foreign policy issue with little importance or relevance in 21st century America was drastically affecting Cuban lives every day.

The second experience I had regarding education in Cuba was a trip to an elementary school a few miles outside of Havana. The elementary classrooms in Cuba are no different than any of the ones I have been in in the United States, with the small exception that it is Che Guevara's or Fidel Castro's picture above the blackboard rather than George Washington's. The children were excited to see us and upon us entering each classroom the children recited a quote they had prepared, generally by famous revolutionary Jose Marti, on the importance of children or education. At five years old, these children could rattle on more facts about Cuban history or possess a civic understanding greater than some sixteen year olds I know in the United States. Then, they preformed for us. Since arriving in Cuba we had all wondered how it was possible that every single Cuban knew how to dance so well. I think we learned in that moment it is because either they learn as children, or because it is in their blood. Not only was there song and dance, even a few poems were recited for the North American visitors. We were all thoroughly impressed.

There is one thing I have not yet attempted to explain about the Cuban people. I mentioned briefly the idea of "solidarity" in Cuba, and the shared suffering that unites the people of Cuba. What I failed to mention is that these social

constructs are resting on much more than just the embargo of the last sixty years. The island of Cuba was passed from imperial power to imperial power since its discovery by the Spaniards over 500 years ago. Systems of repression were so deeply ingrained that even after many failed rebellions and revolutions not even then could the Cuban people gain what they saw as adequate freedom from outside forces. That is, until 1959. Everyone we talked to all had similar stories. Our translator Alberto for example, mentioned that his family was barely scraping by as poor commodity farmers in the countryside before the revolution. Under the new system, everyone we talked to felt as if social mobility was possible, and that for the first time Cuba was being governed by and for Cubans. The shared suffering is a suffering that spans hundreds of years, but the shared triumph is new and even 60 years later, people are still excited about the possibilities. One last anecdote from my time in Havana, one night we met and befriended a Cuban man who did not seem as if he were well off. At one point we offered to buy him some food and he replied that while he was grateful, if his family could not also eat the food, he would not partake. That is solidarity.