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Cuba Sustainability

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March 29, 2012

### 9 Days in Havana

The time had finally arrived, the trip I had been waiting for to depart on, for what seemed like years, had finally come. Upon enrolling into Dickinson in 2008, I would have never imagined that in my junior year I would be taking a nine-day trip to someplace that few Americans ever hear about, let alone get to visit. However, this trip for me was not only about having an amazing time in a, what originally seemed to me, exotic land...it was about learning more about a society and culture that I had little knowledge about prior to taking this course on Cuban Sustainability. It seemed that every lecture, every encounter with a Cuban, and every cultural experience taught me something I had never learned before and gave me a new appreciation for our neighbors to the South. Three specific events during the nine-day trip truly made me think deeply about how realities of the Cuban people and their culture in the twenty first century we all live in today. Such events were: the day spent at organoponicos, sights and people that were met on the Malecón on many nights, and the trip to Varadero on the last two days. The combination of these three events, combined with others, over the enriching Spring Break trip to Havana, Cuba made these nine-days something that I know I will never forget in my lifetime and will tell about for many years.

On Tuesday, March 13<sup>th</sup> we traveled to a larger organoponico outside the capital city of Havana. During the previous three days in Cuba we had seen a couple of smaller urban agriculture sites in passing to other sights on our itinerary, but they were nothing compared to

site we were about to explore. After an in depth introduction to what exactly the urban agriculture site does and how they cultivate the farm, we were given a tour of all of the extremely interesting aspects of the site. It was amazing to see the rich orange-ish brown soil that was being used to grow all the completely organic products. The color of the soil was something that I have never seen before, it was almost alien. The greens of the trees, lettuce, and other produce were so vivid and fresh it was practically like it was painted onto the landscape. It was amazing to hear the techniques that have been perfected on the sustainable urban agriculture site; they were so simple, yet complex and I instantly thought, “Why doesn’t the United States use these practices for some of its food production! This fresh and organic produce is something I would definitely buy!” The huge bull that was present on the site further drove into my head that the farm did not use any types of petroleum to cultivate their fields. One of the most interesting parts of the tour was to see how the tomatoes, that were grown right on the fields we passed, were being squeezed, poured, boiled, bottled, and sold right on the farm itself. It was a mind-blowing experience to see a virtually zero distribution channel for the tomato paste, something like this would rarely be heard of in the United States and the product would travel thousands of miles to get to the consumers. After seeing the tomato bottling process it was time for some work, and what turned about to be arguably my favorite part of the trip! The nine or so people that stayed at the farm got to work in the fields planting lettuce and pulling old tomato plants right along side with the Cuban farm workers themselves. After some many failures (I hope the business wasn’t hurt too badly by our planting skills), I was finally able to master the art of pulling the young lettuce plants out of the growing container and planting it. Additionally, it was enlightening to eat lunch at the urban agriculture site and eat exactly what the workers had. The meal that was served seemed to be a traditional Cuban workers meal of rice and bean,

lettuce, and a small portion of potatoes. After nearly four hours on the farm Esteban arrived and it was unfortunately time to depart back home to the MLK center.

The importance of urban agriculture and sites like the one we visited outside Havana cannot be stressed enough. Castro said it himself and showed the importance of sustainable urban agriculture when he was asked what has Cuba done for the environment, “Urban agriculture!” Urban agriculture has affected more than just the food supply of the Caribbean nation; it has created a greater sense of community, awareness of environmental practices, and many employment opportunities (over 350,000 people which consists 7% of the workforce). Despite the extreme struggles that Cuba went through with food security and food sovereignty after the collapse of the USSR and during the years of the Special Period it was almost a partial blessing. Cuba effectively adopted the practices of urban agriculture and was able to produce healthy produce for schools, tourist sites, and all Cubans through the rationing system. The forced introduction of more vegetables into Cuban diets has helped them with many aspects of their lives. There is some cause for concern though with the Cubans having more oil available from countries such as Venezuela. Many are worried that Cuba may return to more industrialized practices of agriculture, but luckily for Cuba many citizens are aware of the great benefits of urban agriculture and the fact that industrial agriculture is not sustainable in the long run due to resource depletion (Koont). Sustainable agriculture, I feel, is something that still has a spot in the future of the Cuban economy.

One of the most real and inspirational moments on the trip came on the night of March 14<sup>th</sup> where we were granted freedom to explore the downtown area of Havana. After arriving at a smoke filled bar in Havana, Eddie and I decided our lungs needed some fresh air and we went outside, and ironically took a seat on a stairwell to light our own Cuban Cohiba cigars under the

city lights. Some time went by and a man in a wheelchair approached us and began to talk to us. Following a brief discussion in Spanish we learned the man in the wheelchairs name was Eric and he spoke English very well. Lets just say the Mojitos, Cuba Libres, and cervezas nacionales helped fuel a lively and insightful conversation with Eric throughout the entire night. The three of us talked about everything from the United States relationship with Cuba, to his family, to why we wanted to come to Cuba, and favorite spots in Old Havana. Through these conversations and interactions I was able to come to grasp how entrenched the term solidarity was in Cuban culture and society. Eric said how it is all about that people in the United States and people of Cuba that matter, “F\*\*\* our governments, not the people.” It is not the governments of either country that should decide how feelings and actions towards each other are represented, the personal relationships are what truly matter. He accompanied us all night showing us many of the famous spots, like the Bar Floridita, and not so famous spots in Old Havana. Eric was one the most honest, humble, family men I had ever had the honor to meet. The kinship and values Eric had and practiced were truly amazing. These values of Cuban culture were shown later on in the night when we stopped at a small restaurant on the Malecón. Eddie and I insisted that we would buy him a late night meal, but he refused saying that “if my family is not eating I cannot eat either.” Eric would not even take a few CUC\$ (convertible peso) from us for his taxi ride home because of his own beliefs that any money he receives should be earned and not given out of what he called ‘charity’ (Conversation with Cuban (Eric) on Malecón).

The advances of social development for Cubans are something that Cubans can take pride in and are something that have been constantly brought up in many of our lectures. Elena Diaz talked about the importance of the universal education and health care systems and how they have

contributed greatly to the sense of solidarity and morals that are seen in the Cuban people. Walking down the streets of Old Havana you could see the introduction of personally run businesses, which are something new for the Cuban people and economy since 1959. Diaz used the quote of Raul Castro to show how the Cuban government is allowing its citizens to have more freedoms, “the state does not have to be involved in every aspect of someone’s life.” The point that Diaz made of the problem of two currencies was evident in Old Havana and on the Malecón. While Cuba has made much progress in social development, the currency issue is a big problem facing the economy. The government needs to somehow address the fact that knowledgeable and important doctors many times are making less than taxi cab drivers because doctors are paid in pesos while the cab drivers ask for CUC\$ as fare payment (Diaz). The writings of Mickelson were confirmed during the travels in Havana and other areas of Cuba. There was no visible presence of street children from what I could see (Mickelson). In addition, the HDI facts that we were given on the health (life expectancy) and education levels of Cubans were backed up by multiple lectures and conversations we had during our stay in Cuba (UNDP). During my trip to the Ciudad Deportiva, the importance of sports came up as a vital point to social development in the country and aspect of solidarity. The people we interviewed told how Cuba took and still takes great pride in its sports teams and the training of its young athletes. They mentioned how during both the Revolution and Special Period sports played a key role in showing the country’s pride and values to the outside world (Interview with Cubans at Ciudad Deportiva).

The trip to the famous Cuban beach of Varadero, which lies about two hours east of Havana by bus, was a point in the trip that connected many lectures and events together. After processing all of the adventures and sights of Varadero I began to think of the connection

between the economic future of Cuba and the city of Varadero. These connections will be addressed after a description of the trip and events in Varadero. The trip to Varadero contained some of the most breath-taking views I have ever seen, it was a prime example of Cuba's natural and untouched environment at its finest. Upon our arrival at the Center for Social and Educational Services (CESERE) you could tell that even at night the beach and surrounding area at Varadero would be astonishing. After a mouth-watering dinner at CESERE the group prepared to explore the area and we ended up on the beachfront gazing up at the stars. There are few places in the United States where I have seen more vivid and clear stars and constellations than on the beach that night. The Big Dipper was clearly visible in the night sky thanks to the lack of light pollution near the Varadero beach. The next morning we awoke and spent the entire day taking in the beautiful landscape, beach, and ocean water. It was nice to just relax on the warm beach after a week long of running around Havana for tours and lectures, not to mention it was nice getting a nice tan before our return back to Carlisle. Later in the day after some serious shopping in the local market that was geared toward tourists, we departed on the bus back to Havana for the CMLK and the night out to follow.

I found the trip to Varadero to be so important because Varadero is a prime example of one way Cuba is trying to reform its economy: tourism. Varadero is clearly a tourist attraction as seen by many billboards on the way into the city advertising the beautiful beaches and attractions. As learned from the young Professor from the University of Havana who specialized in Cuban foreign relations, tourism is a key way for the Cuban economy to grow. He even stated that the next step that should be taken by both the US and Cuba is to open tourism even more. Cuba has already started this step by building golf courses to appeal to certain parts of the US tourist sector (University of Havana Professor). It was clear that during our time in the country

Cuba was going through some firsts for its economy since the Revolution by Castro in 1959. To me it seems the future of the Cuban economy could be changing for good with the transformations in laws for buying and selling cars and homes among other things. Another object that made me think about the future of the Cuban economy, in connection to the trip to Varadero, was the Chinese flag hanging from an oil well on way into the city. As shown by the rest of the industrialized world, oil and the control of it can be a powerful resource. As we learned in the lecture by Elena Diaz and the young Cuban Professor, Cuba could have massive reserves right off its northern coast and drilling has already begun in the area. This access to oil is important, especially now with the mounting energy crisis in the United States. The United States has blocked itself from the availability of Cuban oil and other world powers like Russia and China has moved into Cuba to take advantage of the lack of US involvement. As shown by the Cuban Missile Crisis, Cuba can be a very strategic geographical region for a potential enemy of the US. Oil in Cuba could be one of the main contributing factors of the repeal of the embargo by US politicians (Diaz and University of Havana Professor). Alongside of the importance of oil possibly contributing to the repeal of the US blockade on Cuba is the pharmaceutical industry. If world recognized Cuban doctors are the ones to find a cure to cancer or HIV/AIDS, which they have already made many advances in, then the US will definitely have to reconsider its stance of the economic isolation of the island nation.

Cuba is no longer a country of complete mystery to me anymore; it is a place that I have become knowledgeable about not only politically, but culturally as well. The trip has opened my eyes to many alternative ways of thinking and about the future economy of the largest Caribbean island nation. Cuba has changed from a place that I had little interest in due to the lack of information given to me in my younger years to a place that I now want to learn even

more about. There is great hope in my mind that someday, maybe in my lifetime, that the successes of Cubans will be recognized by the United States and the blockade will be lifted. Even the Pope, in his most recent visit, stated that the blockade on Cuba is “unfairly burden(ing) its people.” If the Pope can clearly see the hardships the blockade has put on the *people of Cuba*, the United States should realize *change* is needed now and it is about time to rightfully recognize our neighbors to the south.



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