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Sustainability of Cuba
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9 Days in Cuba

I had the privilege of traveling to the island of Cuba this month to tour multiple historical and cultural sites around the capital of Havana and the beach destination of Vaeradero. On a simple map of the Caribbean, Cuba looks like just another island off the coast of Florida. However, for the American tourist looking to explore the warm and inviting islands to our south, Cuba represents a forbidden land; a forbidden fruit. While Americans are obviously missing out on stunning beaches, Cuba's revolutionary history and culture provides for a memorable experience unlike any other in the Caribbean. During my limited time on the island I was able to experience the legacy of Castro's famous revolution and how the Cuban people interact with that phenomenon today. I also found myself fascinated by Cuba's critical advances in medicine, through the work of the Latin American School of Medicine (ELAM), and urban agriculture, through the use of *organiponicos* and other sustainable operations. Undoubtedly the most physically enjoyable portion of my tour of my island was the time spent in Varadero taking in the views of the luscious landscape and relaxing on the famous beaches. Cuba truly gave me the most it had to offer and while it is impossible to convey all of the unique experiences I had there, a brief synopsis of them will be more than enough to make any American book the next flight to Havana and leave the embargo at the wayside.

Of all the things that one would be excited to see when traveling to Cuba, there is only one that stands out at nearly every corner you turn; the images of Castro's Revolution. Jose Marti, Che Guevara, Fidel Castro, socialism, national solidarity, and the 26 de Julio flag are beautifully painted on nearly every blank wall and surround you as soon as you step foot outside

of the airport. In a country of expansive landscapes and beautiful beaches, to many Cubans these images are what make Cuba unique. As an American tourist, these murals evoke a sense of irony in that the images that Cubans celebrate on a daily basis, the American government denounces on a daily basis in the form of the embargo. In order to gain even an elementary understanding of the Cuban people and their rich culture, one needs to understand the revolutionary process that occurred in Cuba and its context.

While Cuba and the United States remain in a tenuous relationship today, diplomatic relations between the two countries were not always so hostile. In fact, former president of the United States, John Adams, and many others during the period felt that Cuba was an unnatural territory of Spain and would eventually be annexed by its neighbors to the north.¹ While Cuba was obviously never annexed by the United States, American investment and control of the island was a long standing tradition that spanned across two centuries. Jose Marti brought independence to the island in 1895 and shortly thereafter, investors from the United States began to flood the island with capital. Sugar had historically held up Cuba's mono-crop economy as they produced high rates of processed sugar for decades. While American investment would continually build into the 1940's, the infamous incident involving the USS Maine brought the United States government into the equation and they initiated a series of short military occupations of the island.

By 1926, corporations based in the United States controlled an overwhelming 60% of Cuba's sugar industry and related infrastructure.² The systematic de-industrialization of the island succeeded in its goal of only allowing the Cubans to export raw sugar, but it also began a disturbing decline of living conditions for the general population. Partly to maintain a friendly

¹ Noam Chomsky, "A Century Later," *Peace Review* 10, no. 3 (1998), 1.

² Jorge Ibarra, *Prologue to Revolution: Cuba 1898-1958* (London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1998), 15.

environment for American investors, the United States government inserted Fulgencio Batista during the 1930's, who contributed to the further deterioration of living standards for the Cuban people. The unbearable conditions allowed for Fidel Castro to attempt a revolutionary movement on two separate occasions, becoming successful with the second attempt in 1959. Although initially on decent terms with the United States, the sides would eventually encounter disagreements over land reform and an eventual alliance with the USSR, among other reforms that Castro brought to Cuba. While the United States advertised Castro as a threat, the Cuban middle and lower classes viewed him as a savior for his redistribution of land, healthcare overhaul, and socialist policies, like that of his endearing beard. His dedication to better serve the rights of the people after decades of abuse gave Castro an immediate connection with his people and allowed him to continue their Revolution into the present day.

While the reforms that the Revolution brought to Cuba lifted many people out of poverty and gave them access to healthcare for the first time, the context in which Castro succeeded has proven to be a beacon of hope for other Latin Americans. The Revolution initially succeeded despite the introduction of an embargo, or blockade from the Cuban perspective, against Cuba from the United States, but the eventual collapse of the USSR brought about economic disaster. After losing nearly 80% of its imports from the once powerful Soviet Block, Castro declared the decade of the 1990's a "Special Period" where Cubans would be encouraged to enter a war-like state in a time of peace. Rationing of food and supplies accompanied extremely limited amounts of petroleum and life seemed to grind to a halt. However, through all of this, Castro's dream lived on and the Revolution, thought to be nearing its end, emerged even more consolidated than before.³ Cuba's long history of oppression and eventual triumph through true independence is what the Cuban people cherish and take pride in. Without this understanding of the island's

³ Alberto, Group Interpreter. Informal Interview. Havana, Cuba: March 2012.

history, the billboards, murals, and conversations of the average Cuban would make no sense to an incoming tourist. Not only does this history give the Revolution context, it allows for foreigners to gain a deeper understanding of why Jose Marti, Che Guevara, and Fidel Castro are depicted as prophet-like liberators; it's because they were. However, while Castro continues to advocate for the Cuban people to be in a constant state of revolution, it is impossible to deny that the Revolution is ever so slowly fading into history.

For those who were alive for the critical moment in Cuba's history and feel the effects of it every day, it is easy to understand why they still embody it. My interpreter for the week, Alberto, spoke at length of how poverty stricken his family was before the Revolution and how Castro's movement allowed him to pursue his dream of attending school and becoming a professional.⁴ Nevertheless, the more recent generations, like the college aged students we met, depict the current state of Cuba in a different way. During a meal with a group of students from the University of Havana, many spoke about how the Cuban political scene is somewhat like that of the United States. Humberto, a history major, explained that not every single person in Cuba believes in pure socialism; although there are not additional political parties, everyone has their own individual view.⁵ It was obvious to me that there is stratification within Cuban society based on the period in which you were raised and what your family's personal experience has been with Castro's government. While Castro's "continual state of revolution" is projected onto nearly every street corner and continually reminds the population of all that they have to be proud of, the younger generations are showing signs of political diversification. The recent introduction of private businesses and the continuation of the dual currency system has created a stronger sense of inequality, something that is currently being debated among the population.

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Humberto, University of Havana Student. Informal Interview. Havana, Cuba: March 2012.

Whether this process is a positive or negative one for Cuba, the reality is that things are changing; nothing, not even Castro's Revolution, can be frozen in time.

The constant state of revolution that Castro refers to was widely applied, as previously discussed, during the "Special Period". The consolidation of the political arena and the population was necessary to the survival of the Revolution and led to many fundamental changes on the island. Cubans had experimented with the prospect of urban agriculture prior to the 1990's as a reaction to the inefficiencies of invasive farming methods, but with the sudden loss of imports and supply of petroleum, Cuba was forced to grow a significant amount of its produce in close proximity to the consumers. As I was told, this endeavor took a nation-wide commitment, which led to the creation of community gardens, rooftop plots, and *organiponicos*. These organic gardens provided fresh produce to the population without the use of petroleum and allowed the population to participate in their own food production; a reality that forced Cubans to share in each other's suffering and increase solidarity in the Revolution's fight. The end of the Special Period did not end this revolutionary way of food production as *organiponicos* are widespread across the island and moving towards helping Cuba become self-sustaining in the future. As a tourist, these large organic farms seemed to be a fairy-tale from a movie. Vast open areas of rich soil and green produce covered the area and most farms had a single gas-operated motor, if any at all. While Cuba currently has the ability to import nearly all of their needed goods, they have maintained a significant portion of urban agriculture if not for the environment, then for themselves. In reality, the reliance on oil will eventually have to end and large developed countries, like the United States, will be forced to restrict their use. When this fateful day occurs, Cuba will already have the experience needed to succeed; maybe they can give us some tips.

As a foreigner, it was obvious to me that the window for seeing Cuba in its organic revolutionary state is closing. The opening of the country to tourism during the “Special Period” to strengthen the economy is slowly forcing Cuba towards the realm of being just another Caribbean island that puts on a tourist façade for visitors. While this process can be easily seen throughout Old Havana, the Revolution continues to assert itself in many other areas and continues to elevate Cuba to a truly special place. The revamping of the health care system that Fidel Castro began immediately following the Revolution continues to make an impact both on the island and abroad. With the sudden loss of doctors during the 1960’s, Cuba needed to rebuild the ranks to better care for its citizens. However, Castro felt that providing health care to its citizens was not enough; other Latin American countries as well as countries around the world also needed doctors. Thus, in 1998, the Latin American School of Medicine (ELAM) opened its doors to provide free medical training to both Cuban and international students who pledged to return to their communities and provide healthcare to them.⁶ While in Cuba, I was given a tour of ELAM’s facilities and was able to meet with current medical students from none other than the United States. While we already know the history of tensions that exist between Cuba and the United States, Cuba is making a concerted effort to break down these barriers, even if through small acts of kindness. I must admit, during my visit to ELAM, it was bizarre to experience Cubans welcoming American citizens to participate in a medical training experience that is completely free. Whenever there were statistics or maps depicting where the students come from, the United States contingent was always equally represented and never shoved off into the corner or glossed over. While this may be a diplomatic move on Castro’s part, the school is spearheading an effort to revolutionize healthcare.

⁶ Steve Brouwer, *Revolutionary Doctors: How Venezuela and Cuba are Changing the World’s Conception of Health Care* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2011), 22.

The Cuban people, obviously proud of their revolutionary past, also take pride in ELAM and the Cuban medical system for not only educating thousands of doctors and sending them abroad, but also being on the cutting edge of scientific breakthroughs. During the “Special Period”, the lack of petroleum devastated Cuba’s ability to make critical medicines that they could not import due to the blockade. To fill this void, there was a larger emphasis put on “green medicine”, which entails the use of herbal remedies and preventative care. With petroleum now flowing from Venezuela, Cuba has made significant advances in its research on cures for AIDS/HIV, cancerous tumors, and Hepatitis B; vaccines that, due to the blockade, Americans cannot legally receive.⁷ Cuba has also partnered with many countries throughout Latin America and Africa to share medical training and healthcare techniques. Cuba has even reached as far as boldly offering medical assistance to the United States following the destruction of Hurricane Katrina, only to be denied by an American government that was publically skeptical if Cuba even had the resources to follow through.⁸ Showing that his offers were more than simply a diplomatic ploy, Castro sent the rejected medical teams to Pakistan just a month later to aid in the recovery of a devastating earthquake.

In terms of the distribution of healthcare for Cubans, the development of Medicina Intregal Comunitaria (MIC) has helped previously underserved communities come together through the guidance of community doctors trained at facilities like ELAM. These physicians create an emphasis on preventative medicine and the health of the community as a whole, not on an individual basis, increasing solidarity among the population. As it was explained to me, patients in other countries arrive at the doctor’s office and demand to be “fixed” while Cubans

⁷ Conner Gorry, American citizen, Cuban resident, Writer. Informal Interview. Havana, Cuba: March 2012.

⁸ “Bush Administration Refuses Cuban Offer to Medical Assistance Following Katrina,” Foreign Policy in Focus, last modified October 19, 2005, http://www.fpif.org/articles/bush_administration_refuses_cuban_offer_of_medical_assistance_following_katrina.

have begun to realize that creating a healthy environment is a group effort that must constantly be on one's mind. Although the Cubans I met with were not publicizing their pride in these accomplishments, many were aware of them. They realize that many of the health indicators on the island rival that of developed countries throughout the world; despite even in the context of the American blockade. Furthermore, they have doctors in dozens of countries training physicians and assisting in natural disasters in areas that no other group will venture. As an American tourist, it was nearly impossible to understand this. As we do not have universal healthcare, the idea of mandating the deployment of doctors abroad or educating physicians on American soil for free does not seem like reality in our minds. When we arrive at the doctor's office, it is the one time we will see them that year and we demand to have our ailments eliminated; it is extremely inefficient. Maybe the inefficiencies we struggle with are the reason that Cubans embrace this aspect of their society; they have found a way to beat developed countries at what we thought was our own game.

Throughout my trip I was able to experience Cuban life in the context of these events and accomplishments that have come to define the island. Cuba's lack of tourism history during the second half of the twentieth century equates to a uniquely organic society that has not been destroyed by the foreign influences that accompany the tourism industry. However, with the opening of the island during the 'Special Period', certain sections of Cuba have completely succumbed to this unfortunate reality. While my time in Varadero beach was a breath-taking experience, it was painfully obvious that it had been overrun by the tourist industry. Even during the long ride to the eastern part of the island, the symbols and scenes of the Revolution began to quickly fade and give way to large hotels and European-centered entertainment facilities. Once in Varadero, the murals of Che and Castro, so popular in Havana, could not be found and were

seemingly replaced by flea markets selling inexpensive novelty items that could be found anywhere. Instead of hearing the fast paced echoes of the Spanish language, English was predominantly spoken simply to make European tourists feel more comfortable. Although it seemed as if the water front landscape was constantly trying to convince me to forget about these issues and simply enjoy myself, it weighed heavy on my mind that Cuban culture was under attack. One must wonder that, although the blockade is an awful thing for Cuba, what would happen if it was lifted tomorrow. The obvious response is that American capital would flood the island once again and the prideful images of the Revolution would continue to recede until they were nearly non-existent; a scary prospect after experiencing this rich culture.

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