

Cuba Sí

by Phil Wolfson

IT'S 2010 AND I'M VISITING CUBA AGAIN. I AM TIRED, OLD, discouraged, trampled by excuses and broken promises, and ground down by human failure and our incessant will for domination. It is time to fish and be done with it, to set sail and go whither the wind and currents will course. It is not important where I begin. It need not be definitive. But I will choose a spot somewhere on the north coast: a broken pier, stubs standing just above the lapping waves, where the borrowed boat with its scraped green paint and its ancient, pre-revolutionary Evinrude 25 horse will be available for a few CUCs (Cuban dollars for foreigners) to the crazy gringo who asks to go fishing on his own—no charts, just water for a day, some black bruised bananas, and a *cerveza* of whatever stripe, most likely the bland and omnipresent Cristal. It couldn't be the south coast—manure-splattered Trinidad, the colonial jewel; or industrial Cienfuegos with its great bay hugged by Che's still-wild Sierra Escambray—for they say there are no great fish left in the blue Caribbean. But I care little about catching anything; I don't really want to end another life, even that of a fish. For I am withering away faster than any state on the planet. Theorists say so much about what old Karl M. missed. But that one was a doozy—the withering away of the state with an educated populace in control of its destiny. When? Not in my lifetime! Doesn't look good for my son's lifetime. He has yet to give me a grandchild, so no comment about that. It seems so difficult for us to give up control, to choose social forms based on love and cooperation. Withering was to have occurred based on greater sharing and participation, going through the socialist stage as an evolution of cooperation, connection, and an understanding and acceptance of each other's needs and requirements—a spirit program, certainly.

Why I have held on for so long I cannot explain, save that I hate to resort to the bitterness that perfuses my soul, my rage at all that incessant go-nowhere drama that has resulted in the mess, the stench of Cuba: the failure of truth to have its due, the triumph of the Revolution and “democratic centralism” still blaring on radio and television, on billboards that splatter towns and countryside, even as obvious indolence, unemployment, poverty, discouragement and disorientation are plain to see and hear, not just from the discontented. And above all the waste of the glory—the damnable lying to excuse the many failures of leadership. This was in me, how the *amargo* of “nothing to be salvaged” poisoned my soul.

I had been first Cuba's witness and supporter, united in revolutionary zeal and commitment; later her unfaithful lover, critic, distant admirer; then, for too many years, absent and unfeeling, not able to look, lost in despair. This was the toll taken by unnecessary Leninism; the anti-gay criminalization and the isolation of the AIDS-infected; and the

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Two sides of the Cuban Revolution.

Top: Havana, Cuba, 1959. Crowds celebrate the liberation of Havana in the main plaza.

Bottom: Berlin, East Germany, 1972. On his first visit to this important ally and trading partner, Castro described those charged with shooting East Germans fleeing to the West as “the courageous and self-denying border guards of the GDR People's Army who stand guard in the front line of the entire-socialist community.”

Cuban government's refusal to trust its educated, faithful people with full democracy, socialist style—an election, after thirty, forty, fifty years of life with *El Lider*, the last holdout for democratic centralism. We won't count the Chinese system that is just a means to maintain slave labor and control of capital accumulation and people's minds and independence in the service of domination; we won't mention the abomination of North Korea; Cuba is much better, much more loving than that.

First Visit: Nine Years after the 1959 Revolution

IT WAS LOVE AT FIRST SIGHT IN 1968, A TIME OF MAXIMAL ENTHUSIASM, WHEN THE Revolution worldwide seemed a possibility, however deluded that would soon turn out to be. Cuba's defiance of the United States' exploitation of her as a gangster wet dream and sugar confectioner could only be accomplished by nationalization of core industries, agricultural reform with the breakup of large agricultural worker-impoverishing landholdings to be distributed to new native collectives, and self-defense against U.S. military intervention. U.S. interventions had occurred repeatedly during the sixty-one years since the end of the Spanish-American War and the first U.S. betrayal of Cuban independence—all of that prior to the new victory of the Cuban people. That first theft of the victory of Cuban forces fighting for independence from Spain in 1898 was in many respects the model for U.S. imperialism worldwide thereafter: let the indigenous forces carry the burden and casualties for the bulk of the fight, send troops in to take advantage of their near-victory, and after victory install puppets who represent U.S. interests economically and politically. All subsequent interventions were in response to threats to these imposed U.S. interests by nascent nationalist and liberation movements. The history clearly delineated what would come after 1959 and the definitive victory for Cuban independence by the Fidelistas. Expropriation of foreign holdings—necessary for the establishment of an independent self-interested national economic formation—always brings with it a vicious response. Powerful external property holders don't take kindly to self-determination.

The Revolution was military in nature, as it had to be to remove the exploiting country's Cuban-born puppet management, its so-called national government, they who stripped the country of their ill-gotten gains and made off with the national treasure to the Miami refuge, just as the popular uprising closed in on Havana. If the United States took its time to respond, it was not out of fear of the consequences of invasion, but rather an arrogance that time was on its side and a languid response was always possible. Besides, you could starve out the Fidelista vermin and cut them off from the rest of the world—let the people suffer and they would turn out the dogs without loss of U.S. soldiers. So thought the overconfident U.S. leadership, drastically underestimating the power of the collective mind of the Revolution, its insistence on self-determination, and its staunch resistance to imperialism. As if any Cuban person of intelligence and heart would prefer being exploited by foreign domination over the right to march the path of independent national development.

Young, Radical, Anti-Stalinist Gringos in the Late 1960s

TRANSCENDING CUBA'S NATIONAL INDEPENDENCE MOVEMENT WAS THE ROMANCE OF Che and the first emanation since the Spanish Civil War of a Western anti-bureaucratic, near anarchist, anti-racist, internationalist liberation movement. My throng of people in the sixties had no truck with Soviet apparatchiks and Kafkaesque monolithicity. If Stalin's full diabolic mass-murdering status had yet to be clearly delineated or absorbed by us far-flung visionaries from a planet other than the Soviet Union, few of us had roots in parental Communist Party membership. Rather, we were naturally arisen from the bowels of our parents' McCarthyite conformism in response to the cultural blight of the fifties and in resistance to the arbitrary authority of parents, especially fathers, and the authoritarian institutions of the state, the school, and the corporation. We were children of new opportunity, of the emerging post-War welfare state, of airplanes and the possibility for travel, of post-Great Depression prosperity and relative freedom from want—children of the great American surplus production glut.

Fair Play for Cuba was the organization that was beginning to defy the U.S. blockade, sending people to Cuba to experience its revolutionary realization and to widen the base of support, politically and economically, in order to reduce the impact of the blockade that was depriving the Cuban people of their historical U.S. import/export relationship. The blockade was cruelly applied even to core humanitarian requirements—medicines, surgical supplies, and basic foodstuffs such as rice and wheat. Cuba’s pre-Revolutionary infrastructure was minimal, its literacy at less than 70 percent, its infant mortality typically gruesome, as was common throughout Latin America. Its marginalized rural population largely lived in dirt-floored thatch huts or *bohios*, deemed irrelevant save when needed for the sugar harvest or to service the tourists who came to gamble, womanize, and tan at the lustrous white beaches. Americans in pre-Revolutionary Cuba could buy property for a song, even a whistle. Cubans could not. Racism and segregation reflected U.S. prejudices and apartheid. Cubans were stereotyped as a weak, foolish, dance-ridden rhythmic people of no intellectual consequence, like Desi Arnaz’s Ricky Ricardo character in *I Love Lucy*.

Our little group of four came in the first wave of North Americans to visit since the blockade, traveling illegally through Mexico with a thirty-hour return via the Azores and Spain, or alternatively via Prague and back to the United States—we chose the quicker route through Madrid. We were the vanguard of doctors, dentists, and nurses who would come to explore, support the Cuban national health service—health care for all, which we dream of so fervently in the United States—and send supplies in an attempt to offset (in a very small way) the anti-humanitarian U.S. blockade. We arrived just as the first major SDS (Students for a Democratic Society) group was leaving to return to the United States for the Democratic National Convention and what would come to be called the Days of Rage. We were in Cuba when Soviet intervention muzzled the Prague Summer, and we waited in anticipation for Fidel’s announcement of where Cuba stood in regard to Russian intervention to put down the Czech democracy movement. Days passed and our hope mounted that Cuba would speak independently, act independently. Then Fidel mounted his podium and spoke for the usual many hours, laying out his rationale for the intervention as the responsiveness of the Soviet Union to U.S. and Western counter-revolutionary sponsorship of the anti-Soviet occupation freedom movement, and we knew some price had been paid and the deal signed.

Arrogance is a quality that one must recognize and fight in oneself. So too is its opposite, the fear that institutions and states know better than we do. This fear is bulwarked by the institutions’ size, their ability to obtain information, the masses of humans employed by them, and especially by their authority as trumpeted by the organs of the media that serve them. How could any of us know better than Fidel? Che was gone and with him the spirit of perpetual revolution, Trotskyist as that sounds. For me, all beings need be free, and sharing will conquer power—now, in this spiritual era, a kind of Bodhisattva, Mahayana thing—a constant loving revolution toward all power to the people, indeed. But that was then. Despite our misgivings we returned to the United States, telling the great and good story of Cuba on the radio and in articles. We organized health groups to travel to Cuba and see for themselves, to support the emerging health care sector that had been so devastated by doctor and dentist defections—money talks—and to send medical supplies. But our so-called movement was fracturing and moving into deluded, irrelevant, sometimes destructive micro-organizations, splintering over the method to seize state power, as if we were close to that possibility, and looking for leadership and ideology outside our own evolving consciousness within our own national conditions. And of course, drastically underestimating the power of corporatism and its lackeys to absorb our demands—for enfranchisement of people of color, women, and eventually, gay people in the United States—without changing its basic class structure or its ravage of the global poor in its compulsion for profits.



A farmer collects tomatoes in Guira de Melena in 2008. Cuba has begun lending unused land to private farmers and cooperatives as part of a sweeping effort to step up agricultural production.

Second Visit in 1988—Optimism and Fidelismo Survive

INFLUENCED BY THE CRITIQUE OF BUREAUCRATIC STATE SOCIALISM AND PUT OFF BY THE Soviet Union's control and lack of cultivation of local potential, I only returned to Havana again in 1988 for the New Year's celebration. The harbingers of hard times were discernible—glasnost and the beginnings of perestroika signaling major changes to come. Yet Cuban leadership was caught up in the same economics, 90 percent dependent on the Soviet Union, reliant on their historical relationship for artificial support of the price of sugar, despite much lower world pricing, and dependent on Soviet oil imports—4.5 tons of petroleum for each ton of sugar—while also following Soviet foreign policy. Cuba felt bureaucratic and tense, a bit of a freight train on a historical crackup track. I was in the

worst time in my life, my nearly seventeen-year-old son, Noah, having died after four years of leukemia just months before. Havana in winter was tropically stunning, but the decay of the city mirrored my own grief and despair, and little could penetrate me. I jogged from Miramar to Ciudad Vieja and back a few times, and the beauty of the sea vistas was notable, as was the incredible pollution from buses and trucks. The massive new Russian embassy hung like the towering bridge of an aircraft carrier above the suburb, and folks seemed OK. There was enough food to go around, even if the quality was poor. There was nothing to buy. I was impressed by the lack of work initiative. For example, when I brought my friend's Lada to get fixed at a local government garage, I turned it over to six or seven guys who hung around sitting on boxes; it seemed a gigantic effort for one to get up and look interested. It felt as if there were an unofficial *huelga*—a strike, certainly a slowdown—going on. At the Miramar cement and rock beaches, many people hung out during the week's work hours, and the floating inner tubes suggested the long and hazardous passage to better economics in *Gringolandia* to the north. We met some folks living as squatters beachside in a pueblo outside the city, raising parrots and living like U.S. hippies on next to nothing, having fun and being completely unproductive, outside the official economy. I was struck by the tolerance for this, but later heard they were evicted for not having title to the spot. The Coppelia ice cream was still delicious, with a different flavor each day, but the water was off at the tap more than it was on. We hung out with my friend's artist and film buddies, who were vital and creative, brimming with ideas and projects and open to discussion. There was great concern about being openly gay, and many of those who weren't defended the official position. Optimism and *Fidelismo* still reigned.

U.S.-supported economic sabotage and potential terrorist acts against Cuba were in the minds of everyone with whom I spoke. The unprecedented dengue fever epidemic of 1981 (seen by many of us as biological warfare waged by the United States) and the earlier swine flu virus attack were still fresh in public memory. And with Ronald Reagan nearing the end of his second term and the Contras in Nicaragua barely defeated, the United States loomed large as a threat.

Cuba had built a close alliance with the Sandinistas and knew all too well the forces arrayed against a second Caribbean revolution, as well as the implacable hostility toward the first. Cubans also perceived the U.S. administration's willingness to conduct criminal acts against Cuba. We spent time with several marvelous people just back from the Managua front and learned a great deal about that so-called covert U.S. effort to undo another popularly elected government that had moved from banana republic dictatorship towards nationalization and self-determination.

The Difficulty of Criticizing Cuba in a Useful Way

WRITING CRITICALLY OF CUBA IS A RISKY AND TRICKY BUSINESS. I DON'T WANT TO FEED the Right and the malevolents of the exile, or shall I say the elite Cuban immigrants who



A common sight in Cuba: children eager for education. The country's literacy rate soared during the National Literacy Campaign of 1961 and has risen since: 99.8 percent of Cubans over the age of fifteen are now literate, according to the CIA World Factbook.



settled in the United States immediately following the Cuban revolution (U.S.-born Cuban-Americans, much like younger post-war Germans, are themselves innocent and often unconnected to the conflict). I don't want to discourage anyone from visiting, as that is helping Cuba financially through its tourist economy. I want to make clear that the U.S. embargo is criminal, a punishment against innocent people, ineffective as a change agent, and has no basis in just international relationships, is cowardly and bullying, and has no relationship to remuneration for nationalization, as the corporate interests that were nationalized had been extracting profit from Cuba and Cubans for generations—money incalculably in excess of the value of the nationalized property. I want to be clear and explicit: the blockade is a unique and murderous reaction to self-determination and the end of U.S. exploitation; it's a punishment for stopping future exploitation by aggressive foreign capital. I want to praise what is good and original as a result of the Cuban social transformation. I don't know how to build socialism, as I am a gringo in a privileged life and reside in the main global imperialist state. And besides, it is clear that no socialist state has been truly socialist or moved toward a fully democratized—i.e., an empowered activist, collectivist, egalitarian, and individual- and endeavor-honoring—society. Yet I don't want to withhold my observations of what appears troubling and off-putting or to refuse to report the views of those Cubans I've encountered who communicate their experience in a balanced and penetrating fashion; and I want to be true to myself, my own evaluation and judgments, and make them clearly and helpfully. There are many clashing perspectives and truly, I cannot please everybody.

A Problem in Cuba Today: Lack of Self-Sufficiency

WHEN I LAST WENT TO HAVANA, AT THE END OF 1988, THE WATER SUPPLY TO MIRAMAR—the formerly wealthy garden suburb of Havana, where many of the embassies are located—was off many hours of many days and often for days on end. This was attributed then to the disastrous effects of the hurricane that struck Cuba in the late spring. Now, in 2010 while I was in Havana, water in Miramar was shut off for two days of the five I was there. Water to the Cienfuegos all-inclusive resort, built exclusively for foreigners and tourist dollars, was intermittent and off for hours at a time on several occasions during the two days I was there. Provision of water is a governmental responsibility in Cuba; since 2000 in Havana it's been a mixed public/private enterprise with a Spanish co-investor company. Water in Cuba is plentiful. It is tropical and it rains abundantly—about fifty-two inches per year on average. Provision of water is a matter of necessity. Water systems require investment, maintenance,

Artist Jose Fuster, known as the Cuban Picasso, has beautified more than eighty of his neighbors' houses in Jaimanitas, a fishing town west of Havana. "When I travel to the Dominican Republic or Mexico, I see children begging," Fuster says. "I see children cleaning car windshields. We don't have that. In Cuba, I paint what I see: the happiness of children."



A street in Trinidad, Cuba.

and supervision. In a society where labor is plentiful and jobs needed, why hasn't this been fixed in twenty-one years? Where is the mobilization for repairing the water system? Can it all be about materials and supplies—is there no room for innovation? The effects are incalculable on hygiene, waste disposal, health, industry, and urban agriculture. In 2005, the Ministry warned Havana residents of the failure of five pumps at the same time. Water was dispensed by truck to tens of thousands of residents for several weeks. Who was watching the pumps? Certainly the U.S. embargo plays a role in all of this—the absence of spare parts for machinery that was in place before the revolution cannot help matters.

But the water problem of Havana is not just about the embargo. It is also about capital accumulation. And if there is one overarching historical failure of leadership, it is the lack of clarity and success in this nearly fifty-year-old, erratic, planned economy. For it is one thing to defend the Revolution, to stave off the hostile U.S. giant, and it is another to become a client state of the contending giant—the USSR—with its terrible history of bureaucracy, stagnation, and failure to anticipate and thrive, not to mention its failure to create better, democratic, and more fun lives for its citizens. And that dependency is not an excuse for not building an independent economy, as if states and conditions were permanent and not in constant flux. If you take foreign money, at least struggle for your own conditions and your own economic needs, for self-sufficiency in vital industries such as agriculture. Don't let your cement plants disintegrate. Don't let your agriculture decline in favor of foreign imports. Build up what you have as resources—use labor and horticulture, tap the sun, grow plants, irrigate, grow soy and nuts and stuff that feeds—so that when change occurs you have some resilience. Please! Although sugar no longer serves as the main engine of the Cuban economy (sugar production is down to 1.5 million tons or so from its Soviet era levels of 7 million to 8 million tons, so Cuba is no longer a factor in the global sugar economy and has little to export), special trade relations that are predictably fragile and subject to political winds still grease the vulnerable economy. For example, Cuba maintains a special relationship with Venezuela in which the Chavez government provides oil at bargain prices in exchange for doctors and health care workers and, no doubt, political support. Another case in point involves the billion-plus dollars that flow from relatives in the United States to relatives in Cuba. This remittance economy creates harsh inequities—one needs to have a relative to buy the good stuff—and moreover the United States could cut this revenue stream off at any time, forcing Cuba to suffer. Less well known is the fact that Cuba imports 50 percent of its foodstuffs from abroad, and 50 percent of these imports, including soy, wheat, rice, and poultry, come from the United States. With Cuba not allowed to sell anything to the United States—the embargo again—the trade imbalance is deliberately profitable to the U.S. agricultural industry. Wow!

Underemployment and a Ruin in Process

NOTHING IS WHOLE IN CUBA. NOTHING NEW IS ENTIRELY FINISHED. NOTHING OLD IS maintained. Cuba is a ruin in process. There is a disturbing lack of recent human-created beauty. The antique and pre-revolutionary Havana apartment houses still command interest with their melting cornices and remnant cheesecake décor—sometimes strikingly inspired by Art Deco. The recent constructions are scarce, hard-edged, blocky in form, Eastern Bloc-inspired and also crumbling. Every sidewalk appears cracked and broken. Havana is a ruin in the making. Recently some of the buildings along the *Malecon* have been painted, the external stucco cement improved so that the paint could hold. *Havana Vieja* is a tourist-inspired, colorful, and pleasing renovation of a magnificent square of the old city. But, by and large, walking the streets of the city, one sees virtually no evidence of maintenance of structure. The money and supplies are simply not available, but this means that the housing structure of Havana is disintegrating from age, abetted by sun, pollution, and salty sea air. And as for the rest of the country, what I saw was the same, the only differentiation being the resorts and the *Casas Particulares*—private homes with rooms to let for tourists, often renovated with money from Miami and U.S.-based relatives who fled the country and are now allowed to bring U.S. dollars in limited amounts with them on visits—under the Helms-Burton stricture, 1,200 U.S. dollars annually. Lack of government maintenance, lack of personal initiative to fix homes and apartments (lacking because it is discouraged), lack of craft talent, lack of craft cooperatives, lack of tools, lack of shops, antiquation of even the cement mills, lack of rebar and PVC pipe—basics—all of this means ruined housing and depressing living circumstances. Garbage is incessantly visible in Havana, but elsewhere there appears to have been an at least partial victory for the anti-litter movement—something rare indeed in the Third World.

Direct human contact and the Cuban sun are the country's source of warmth. There is music in the air, complex rhythms, and a panache of dress and ornamentation. Cubans' sartorial style is an accomplishment given the lack of clothes, stores in which to buy them, and funds for their purchase. My doctor friends bring home about \$24 per month. Yes, that is on top of free education, free health care, home and apartment ownership, and a ration of basic staples, but \$24 is all they have in their pockets to pay for the rest—such as is available. (Try imagining, with me, doing \$24 a day in the United States—let alone per month.) This means that Cuban people are sharing, bartering, acting as extended family units, looking to relatives abroad for help, calculating, and seeking special circumstances, such as help from workers at the resorts, who bring home tips to support entire circles of people. And there are illicit schemes particularly aimed at the main source of external funds—tourists. Extraordinary women court me as I walk in the neighborhood around the *Hotel Nacional* searching for a store that might have a bottle of rum. I am sixty-six and this does not go to my head. But the sex trade—gay and straight—is thriving, although in addition to straight hooking, some women are looking for a great meal and are prepared to be warm and friendly and spend time with their beaux—unusual for prostitution in the wider world. So goes the story.

We drive two-thirds of Cuba and back in a small and somewhat beaten up Hyundai rental. This is a relatively recent opportunity—to rent your own car. The sidelights have been ripped off, stolen in Havana, probably to embellish some fifties U.S. relic. The steering wheel is a bit loose and the car tends to plane and slide at fifty-five miles per hour. Vast stretches of countryside are unpopulated, perhaps depopulated. Farmland goes untilled; sugar cane gone. Horses and bullocks continue to function as transport and plow teams, the latter justified in the framework of the recent low-input, sustainable organic farming (*continued on page 87*)



Cuba, 2009.

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movement as doing less damage to the earth's creatures and ecology than gas-powered machinery. Transportation is a pastiche of the incredible, ranging from the now neon-painted signature cars of the American fifties to the patched Ladas, clunker Ural motorcycles, and strange hulking, fume-belching trucks of the Soviet bloc period, to a few contemporary vehicles, particularly trucks, often Korean in origin. Occasionally, a new, well-manicured Audi roars past, dark windows speaking of unknown privilege. Driving the roads of Cuba, one sees few cars and barely any amenities, not to mention little commerce. Whole families are hitchhiking, so offering to give rides, often over the long stretches between cities, is a great way to meet people. We pick up thirty-five people by count during the drive—the arrangement is great for directions in this nearly sign-less country, great for getting independent views of the culture, and terrific for getting a feel for people's lives and aspirations. And we are a very novel couple for our hitchhikers—few ordinary people in rural Cuba have contact with U.S. folks, given the stringency of the embargo on travel from the United States. Pigs are led across the potholed, sometimes divided, six-lane Autopista—the main artery of Cuba, unfinished for the eastern third of the country—that without much warning often joins into a three-lane course, along with cowboy-driven herds of goats and cattle. Disturbing is the lack of products being transported, reflected in the still minimalist

stock in grocery stores and in the visible lack of working people, agriculturally and industrially. Throughout the days of our time in Cuba, urban streets are thronged with people, young men and women especially, who could be engaged in productive work. True estimates of unemployment are unobtainable.

With the decades of suppression of privatism (economic activity for private profit or personal gain) signs of self-improvement are minimal. Cubans dress well and decoratively. But on the average, the exteriors of homes are brutally ugly, with infrequent signs of gardening in this lush tropical land. I revisited a *finca* (rural property) on the outskirts of Havana where three generations, soon four, live together in a run-down mansion that had once belonged to a dentist who went bankrupt—long before the revolution—and was scooped up as a bargain by the great-grandfather. There is much land and plentiful water. The views of the Caribbean are beautiful and the wind is fresh and moves the great trees. Twenty-one years ago we sat on the veranda and discussed growing vegetables for home and neighborhood consumption—there are a few farms with livestock on the ruined road to the *finca*—and again we have the same discussion. Rusting machinery litters the ground surrounding the house, where tomatoes, corn, and other staples could be produced in abundance with small effort. My friends, who are truly thoughtful people—the woman a doctor, her husband an engineer—use the same excuses as on my long-ago private visit: no pesticides, no seeds, government discouragement of private cultivation. The house itself is melting into the ground. During the Special Period, after Soviet support for Cuba ended like a train crashing into a cement wall at the end of the tracks, when there was nothing to be had for food, they had a secret pig stash on the second floor above their living quarters and raised pigs for their consumption—this was happening all over Cuba, as if survival had to be hidden. The last pig was butchered a year ago, and times have changed a bit for the better. There is a decrepit comfort here, a leisure, and a Breughel-like naturalness that is wholesome and warm. Friends come and sit on

the veranda. The door to the sea is open and a motorcycle sits perched as if to fly to the blue water.

**The Successes of the Revolution:
Health Care and Education**

CUBA HAS NO MISSILES TURNED TOWARDS the United States, no army ready to invade, no proxy wars being fought in Angola and Ethiopia, the Cold War periphery, as it once did. Its implacable resistance is against U.S. domination, so it seeks to ally with other governments that oppose U.S. hegemony—at present, principally Venezuela and Bolivia. Cuba's main export is no longer sugar. Cigars are still strong. Nickel and chromium contribute. Coffee production is surprisingly stagnant. Citrus is a factor.

More importantly, it is the peaceful provision of physicians and medical experts in dentistry, nursing, and community health care to its allies and other countries, the export of engineers, literacy educators, and teachers of other subjects—exports of educated, helpful humans to developing countries—that appear primary. In Haiti, several hundred Cuban medical personnel supported health care for all Haitians long before the devastation of the earthquake. These health workers stayed on after the disaster and tended to patients in diverse parts of the country—unrecognized, unsupported, and often thwarted by U.S. hostility to Cubans. There is even a U.S. program to get Cuban doctors abroad to defect, using dollar inducements, of course. Cuba has the highest ratio in the world of physicians to residents: 78,000 to 11 million or so in 2007. That's 6.5 doctors for every thousand people, compared to 2.4 per thousand in the United States. And Cuba's truly community-based health system distributes health workers evenly, caring for the poorest towns and neighborhoods as much as the more affluent. There is a medical school to train students from other countries, and Cuba has an exalted history of providing health care to other countries as direct aid.

When I was in Negril, Jamaica, in the seventies, before there was much of a resort, the Cuban doctor was the main health resource for the local population, and it was my distinct pleasure to make rounds

with him and witness the fine work he did for Jamaican people. He was a blessing in an impoverished area deemed unattractive by domestic physicians, who were too few in number and tended to seek better money in more well-heeled areas of the island. That tradition of service continues unabated despite Cuba's own economic problem.

With so many well-educated people, far in excess of the quality of work available that can use those rich minds, Cuba's main resource is just that: an educated, thoughtful populace. To continue to develop this capaciousness requires a clear policy of resource allocation. The blockade has hampered the availability of high speed Internet. Fiberoptic cable between the United States and Cuba would aid this, but that does not appear to be forthcoming from the Yankees. Cuba desperately needs to solve the problem of distributing computers and Internet access to its population or it risks falling further behind in providing for the development of its human resource. E-mail is available to a few, but computers are uncommon and the access to the Web is even less common. Social solutions that enable sharing of hardware by computer co-ops—for example, radically expanding access to the country's Internet cafes—would be a step in the right direction and would avoid the enormous expense of full individualization of computers, yet make possible popular access. Cuba needs to spread the Web over the island.

Parsing out the successes of the Revolution is not difficult. The social successes amount to an astounding welfare state—though it is limited by its poverty, the economic miasma, and its political centralism. Cuban society supports quality education and full literacy; health care for all, with an average life expectancy of seventy-seven years; home and apartment ownership; support for the arts; a guaranteed food allotment as baseline; cultural access for all; and legal equality for all persons, regardless of sex and race, not to mention a commitment to wage equality, even though full equalization has yet to be achieved practically. These are extraordinary achievements and serve as a reference for all societies.

How the Revolution's Promise Could Still Be Fulfilled

WHAT'S MISSING FROM CUBAN SOCIETY IS satisfying politics and democratic participation at all levels of government. Democracy in Cuba is thought of by the exiled Right as the restoration of full monopoly capitalism with its puppet elite in power with their privileged, foreign-dominated economies. In their view, under democracy the nationalized sectors would be privatized and the government would offer the nation's exiled elite reparations and restoration of lost properties. Health care for all, as with the other welfare-state sectors, would become corporatized and for profit. I believe that if the exiles could, they would erase the Revolution from memory. Presumably the Right believes that the majority of Cubans would want this and that the class structure would revert to one in which the lucky few had the happy opportunity to become wealthy.

From the Communist Party of Cuba's side, democratization is also viewed as the restoration of the U.S. imperialist regime with all its attendant horrors, as above. The Party argues that democratization that proceeds too quickly—meaning the opportunity for all citizens to elect their officials and have access to the larger policy issues, particularly the economic—would just open the door to the gobbling behemoth across the Gulf.

This polarization does not reveal the Middle Way, yet that has been the direction necessarily taken by the Cuban government as the practical realities engendered by the economic catastrophe have caused conversion to private cooperatives, particularly in the agricultural sphere. Roughly 60 percent of Cuba's total agricultural output is currently produced on just 35 percent of the island's agricultural land, and some individual agricultural initiative has taken root outside of the formerly totally monolithic state sector. Unfortunately this economic pastiche remains under top-down control, and that top end has yet to be rationalized by full participation of all sectors in economic decision making.

The forcible creation of the state sector as the single and overarching monopoly of power, creativity, resource development and allocation, and the obliteration of the

individual as a creative force by fiat seems to lack the power to lead to economic and political success historically, in Cuba and everywhere else. There is no evidence that the political form—"democratic centralism" as Leninism has called it—has produced anything viable or more transformative than the best examples of democratic social welfare states in Scandinavia. The historical record of oppression under democratic centralism is horrific—with Cuba as a relatively benign example—and it continues to serve the interests of domination and single-person leadership regimes. Paternalism in the Cuban situation expresses itself currently in the oft-repeated party line that "with the beast breathing down our necks from across the Florida Strait, political transformation needs to go slowly." The Party record of leadership, particularly in the economic sphere, seems to me as much or more the cause of the Cuban miasma than is the blockade. The two have fitted together to justify suppression of a creative citizens' dialogue that could serve for economic transformation of Cuban life. Eschewing cooperative formats for state control is a grievous mistake. Removing and penalizing individual personal initiative is a terrible mistake that serves state centralism and the concentration of power. The "New Man" as was envisioned in the late 1960s in Cuba and forced into a format on the Isle of Pines (renamed the Isle of Youth) was a failure. Consciousness cannot be mandated. It has to be created, have a basis in relationships, be validated and absorbed, and include some sense of pleasure in being alive and productive.

Indeed, it is possible that a collapse of the Cuban central state—which does not appear to be in the offing—could open the door to the gobbling behemoth across the Gulf. If so-called "free elections" meant a huge influx of money, glamour, and media, and this was not resisted, then people might be swayed from one kind of perversion of democracy—"democratic centralism"—to another, "the best democracy money can buy."

On the other hand, as an educated, revolutionized population, Cubans surely have the capacity to govern themselves democratically and to move from near-total

state domination into a self-governance uninterested in giving away Cuba's gains and independence to predatory foreign corporations and governments like the United States. And Cubans need to create the economic conditions that lead to their prosperity while maintaining their interconnectedness and generosity to other peoples, the internationalism that truly feeds. If after all this time, the people are not up to this, so be it. The experiment has to move toward validation of concept. Either the Revolution has created a more loving and conscious group of people, or it has failed to do so.

There is almost nothing for the capitalists to buy in Cuba—perhaps beachfront property. Aside from the already expanded foreign tourist resort sector, profitable investment in Cuba would require costly investment in infrastructure, which would have to be created nearly from scratch. Cuban democratic transformation of government is unlikely to lead to a sieve with extraordinary holes that invites the gangsters back and looks forward to a Meyer Lansky in charge of Havana.

Investment in Cuba must support capital development within a framework of self-sufficiency and popular self-determination. Cuba's values—and its population's training—have been in self-sacrifice, sharing of scarce resources, cooperation, critical thinking, compassionate internationalism, and interconnectedness. All populations have thus far preserved self-interest and individualism, no matter the form of government or its length of time in power. The greatest moments of creativity and motivation in human history have been at the time of revolution, before power is reified and the initiative taken from the political/spiritual life of mobilized masses tasting their power and freedom. This is when true excitement and the breath of new life suffuse. True, you can't have this all of the time. You have to work and dig in. But the attempt must be to preserve the joy-in-the-moment attitude that comes with full participation and a sense of brotherhood/sisterhood and communalism. Break the back of alienation and crass materialism!

These qualities exist among Cuban people much as everywhere else. Under

conditions of poverty and want, the pressure for individual solutions increases—alongside the pressure for collective, participatory solutions. Both trends will persist historically in Cuba no matter what. Suppression of individual problem-solving by hierarchical domination only increases alienation, departures for other lands, and a sense of disempowerment. Governmental economic penalization and a psychological/sociological, denigrating critique of collective private or non-state-owned solutions engendered by popular cooperative action is the opposite of what true state support really means—encouraging and engendering popular formations that grow the economy and the people, that train people to communicate and work together. The begrudging yet desperate central government support for popular cooperatives, fairly well limited thus far to the agricultural sector, needs to be expanded to a wholehearted interest in new economic formations and solutions that consist of social welfare and central production units, popular cooperatives, and individual economic formats with encouragement for linkages and planning participation and oversight by everyone at all levels.

The collapse of the Soviet Union into its gangster government phase after 1991 was the actual result of decades of violent suppression by the Soviet government of real collective consciousness—human connection based on caring and cooperation without force, for the greater good, the heart of our spirit connection possibility. This suppression left the door wide open for privileged elements of government to expropriate the means of production for their own personal gain and for a rule of the strongest wolves.

Persistence of the Cuban special case with a transformation to popular government has the possibility for a different outcome: a country that is based on cooperation and cooperatives with a democratically elected state that preserves education, health care, and freedom from landlords and that generates and supports the joy of equality and participatory democracy at all levels. ■