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CARIBBEAN IRON CURTAIN? AN AMERICAN VISITS THE NEW TOURIST MAGNET OF CUBA

Clayton Whitt

You have to be careful when crossing the streets of Havana.

This care was one of the first major lessons I learned after arriving in the capital city of Cuba in July to start a month-long study of Spanish at the University of Havana. Indeed, although Cubans in general show a lack of desire to rush about in their daily lives, the drivers on the city streets demonstrate an impatience that I cannot help thinking of as, well, North American in nature. Taxis race each other, buses fly around corners and toss their passengers about, and bicyclists take their lives into their own hands as they weave in and out of the madness. Going on foot is the transport of choice in Havana, but those fortunate enough to be behind the wheel, whether taxi driver or the exceptionally lucky private car owner, stridently assert their dominance of the city streets.

The stream of traffic circulating through Havana's veins is symbolic of the changes injected into Cuba's bloodstream in the last decade by circumstance and the policies of the Cuban government. When the Soviet Union collapsed in the early 1990's, Cuba lost its most valuable trading partner and supporter. The ensuing economic crisis, euphemistically dubbed "The Special Period" by the Cuban powers that be, nearly brought Cuba to complete economic collapse. The country is still slowly recovering. The city streets reflect the measures enacted over the last decade to aid the country's recovery. Mainly, these are both the new emphasis on tourism and the new foreign investment from capitalist nations that are now needed to drive the Cuban economy. During my

wanderings about the city I saw the still ubiquitous 1950's pre-revolutionary American cars. I also saw brand-new European luxury cars ferrying about tourists and foreign business executives and shiny new government taxis that only accept American dollars in payment. New tourist buses were everywhere, contrasting dramatically with the modified tractor-trailers that carry over 200 Cubans at a time around the city for a two-cent fare. And brand-new, foreign-built high rise hotels have changed the Havana skyline and attracted further influxes of tourists from just about everywhere except for the us, because the us government still bans its citizens from traveling to Cuba for recreation.

At first, it was hard for me to get accustomed to the idea that this country, once the Eastern Bloc's representative in the Western Hemisphere, is now a tourist magnet. I had the opportunity to attend a briefing on the Cuban economy at the Ministry of Foreign Investment, where the official on hand asserted that Cuba was working hard to develop high-tech and pharmaceutical industries but also credited the rapid growth of tourism as one of the major lifesavers for the Cuban economy. Some might question whether the introduction of capitalist foreign investment is orthodox with Cuban socialism (what would Che Guevara say?), but the government is taking more of a pragmatic approach to economic recovery. The government official that briefed us assured us that Cuba could have socialism and social justice and yet still be a part of the world economy. While it was disheartening to learn that even Cuba has accepted the inevitability of capitalist world economic integration, it is good to know that Cuba will maintain its commitment to social justice in the face of globalization, at least on paper.

What does Cuba have to lose in the face of globalization? First, the myths that buzz about both the American Right and the American Left need to be addressed. The popular perception on the Right is that Castro's regime is a hated, oppressive, diabolical machine that will stop at nothing to enslave the entire island. The Miami exile community, a potent and conservative political force in America that would benefit financially by the ousting of Castro, fuels this picture. The Left, on the other hand, often takes it to another extreme. I do not know how many times I have heard the idea of Cuba as a socialist paradise expressed by well-intentioned American activists. I am no expert, but my impression after spending a month in Havana, talking to normal Cubans and hearing from government officials, is that the truth is found in the nebulous haze between these two pictures. I am convinced that almost no one is starving or homeless in Cuba. The government provides food rations, health care, and housing to all citizens. No Cubans that I met, not even anti-Castro Cubans, ever tried to tell me different. At the same time, though, it was clear to me that no freedom of speech or the press exists, nor does even a semblance of democracy. Cubans I spoke with, particularly college-age, yearned for more openness and transparency in their government, and more freedoms. But at the same time, the general consensus I encountered was fear that globalization

could erase Cuba's advances in social justice. Cubans are fiercely independent. I do not doubt that they would resist North American hegemony in a hypothetical post-Castro world. But a lot of the people I met also resented the restrictions placed upon them by a government that only publishes a few newspapers and allows Internet access to only tourists and bureaucrats.

What is the answer for Cuba? I naively thought that I would learn that in just a month of studying there, but I left the island more confused than ever. I feel, though, that Cuba needs a government that listens to its own people rather than just determining what is best for them. If Cuba were to develop a democracy, it would be of the ultimate form, because the public would not only have control over its government, but it would also control its economy. However, it would be extremely difficult to democratize a country that receives such tremendous pressure and lives under constant threat of intervention from the us superpower that lurks only 90 miles from its shore. Indeed, if the us government wants to see Cuba open up and democratize, the best course of action would be to remove all economic sanctions and cease all political pressure on Castro's regime. Under these conditions, the Cuban people could take more power in the government and create the social democracy that they deserve. 