

An Anarchist in Cuba: Socialism or Cell Phones

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On February 2, 2008, I stepped off a plane that had left a frigid Toronto three and a half hours earlier and landed in the balmy sunshine of Holguin, Cuba. It was impossible to know then that I had arrived two weeks before the end of the island's Revolution as we know it.

On February 19, the Monarchal Brotherhood passed the scepter of rule from Older Brother to Younger Brother, initially signaling a continuity, not a rupture, of what had come before that date. From all reports, there was no commotion on the island about the change; no great objection, nor celebration. Things were expected to continue as they had.

The changes that signal an end to the Cuban Revolution (more below about what it actually consisted of), were, in fact, changes celebrated internationally as "reforms," "a loosening up," an "entry into the 21st century" — the announcement that a host of electronic toys (now thought to be almost necessities in most of the world) would be available on the island. Cell phones, DVDs, computers, and Ipods could now be purchased and used. Other improvements (not exactly reforms, but badly needed) such as the purchase of a large number of Chinese buses to replace the crowded, uncomfortable ones that had made travel such a problem for the average Cuban, were welcomed by all. Private plots of land will also be permitted on fallow land.

By virtue of being employed as a full-time journalist, the one category protected by the U.S. Constitution's 1st Amendment, I was able to travel legally to Cuba without violating the so-called Cuban Democracy Act, which among other things prohibits visits there by U.S. citizens. This was my second trip, both times as part of an organized tour, which has positive and negative aspects for one trying to make an assessment of the country being visited.

The tours were wonderfully organized and featured amazingly knowledgeable guides and translators. Most tourists, a large number of who hail from Canada, are solely interested in beaching it in a warm climate and rarely leave their all-inclusive resorts where the only Cubans they come in contact with are in the service sector delivering *mojitos* to their cabana. The itineraries of the tours I traveled with were designed to acquaint us with the island — its culture, history, and politics. Our route was through the Eastern end of the island, never coming near Havana which was hundreds of miles away to the west.

I was very aware of the history of the Soviet-American Friendship League tours of the 1930s, when U.S. communists were similarly brought to Stalin's USSR and came away declaring they had seen socialism being built. Traveling on a tour meant that we had little interaction with Cubans on the street although there was no attempt to restrict us from doing so. My Spanish is so pathetically weak that I doubt whether I would have been able to carry on much of a conversation about politics or the economy in any event. Also, I'm sure I could have found people who loved the Revolution as well as those who were waiting for its collapse.

Given many of the deprivations people experience and the repressive nature of the government, the dissatisfaction is understandable, but in a recent CBS poll taken in the U.S., 82 percent of those questioned said this country was on the wrong track. Cuba is a poor country whose economy has been terribly distorted by the U.S. embargo and probably from bureaucratic bungling as well, but still, it undoubtedly provides the best material conditions for the poor of any nation in the world, including the U.S.

For a police state, one doesn't see very many cops or military as you travel about. However, less obvious to the visitor are the 135,000 Committees for the Defense of the Revolution, neighborhood organizations which are charged with monitoring their fellow citizens for "inappropriate behavior" including not only political offenses, but other forms of anti-social acts such as child or spousal abuse. The committees attempt to manage behavior at the community level by handing

out warnings to citizens, which if not heeded, can lead to criminal charges. There is no organized political opposition, so most activity dealt with is of a social nature. They are also an apparatus for upward mobility through the Communist Party hierarchy.

Amnesty International estimates that Cuba has about 330 political prisoners at any given time, mostly civil rights campaigners, functioning in very small groups or as brave individuals confronting the state. But all states are politically repressive to one degree or another; all maintain a system of police and prisons.

Political prisoners are unacceptable

It is perhaps the height of hypocrisy for a country like the United States to criticize Cuba given this country's own terrible history of suppression of civil rights and liberties, its horrendous prison system, and the Bush-initiated torture and detention centers abroad. Still, for those of us who desire the end of the political state, we hold to a standard that demands democracy as the key component at every level of decision making. One man at the head of a government for almost 50 years violates this concept, and any number of political prisoners is unacceptable.

There are perhaps four large categories of American thought which provide definitions of the fifty years of Castro rule: 1) the right-wing which views the island as a totalitarian, communist police state where starving people live under daily repressive rule, and the government is involved in drug trafficking and terrorism; 2) the center through to the liberal left which agrees, perhaps in the mode of Michael Moore's movie, *Sicko*, that the Revolution has provided good social services for the poor and resisted U.S. hegemony in the hemisphere, but needs to install more democracy and private investment; 3) the organized left which sees very little wrong with the island and views all criticism of it as aid to the U.S. empire, and 4) the anarchist view which, indeed, sees the island as a police state needing a second revolution to install workers democracy, but has no use for calls for returning to private forms of ownership or foreign investment.

Political democracy and the overthrow of elite and police rule is always the goal of any authentic revolution, but so is creating a society of economic and social equity — essentially, anarchist-communism — no government, no capitalism.

In states such as Cuba and the remaining countries that identify themselves as socialist, a ruling apparatus remains and practices what has traditionally been labeled, state capitalism, where the government replaced private entrepreneurs in developing Western-style capitalism and industrialism. It hires wage labor, supervises investment, commodities are produced and exchanged for currency, etc. It's the manner in which formerly agricultural nations, from China to Russia, were able to build a modern economy and infrastructure.

Accompanying the state economic structures were draconian political apparatuses that declared, in the words of Fidel seen posted across the island, "With the Revolution, everything; against the Revolution, nothing." Of course, it is the government that gets to define what's inside and what is outside. Cuba, however, never has been able to build the industrial infrastructure created by other communist states and, hence, has a population restive for the commodities they see citizens of other nations purchasing.

The right-wing vision of what they refer to as "the return of democracy" to Cuba is a bad joke given its history, and, in fact, means the resurrection of its status as U.S. corporate investment target and playground for Western vacationers which it was before 1959. I've heard Cuban-

Americans, ones who have never set foot on the island, tell me that until the Communists took over, Cuba “was a wonderful place” where “everyone was happy.”

This is willful ignorance in the extreme. In fact, before Castro’s takeover in 1959, Cuba was a dictatorship, a torture state that functioned as a warehouse and gambling den for rich Americans, which allowed unrestrained corporate exploitation run by a corrupt domestic elite that enforced it all for the Mob and U.S. companies. If anything, the Revolution has vastly improved the lot of the common people of the island to the extent that there is a unique phenomena in Cuba, unknown elsewhere among the poor and certainly poor nations, that everyone should have equal access to adequate goods and services. Most poor just assume they won’t.

What they call reform in Cuba

The advocates of what they call reform in Cuba would very quickly force the island into being another Jamaica with a return to deep class divisions, a dependency on tourism, its cities degenerating into crime-filled areas like Kingston, and little or no social services for the poor.

One wonders whether these “democracy” advocates think the poor, or anyone, would be happier in democratic Mexico, where hundreds of thousands of small farmers have been ruined by NAFTA and forced into the capital city already bursting at the seams, where *narcotraficantes* battle the cops with automatic weapons, where hundreds of women are murdered in the border regions each year, where the vast majority of people live without social services, and function as a pool of cheap labor for U.S. corporations, or, in totalitarian, commie Cuba, where the basic necessities of life are provided or subsidized?

In every article about the recent brotherly transfer of power, it is always noted that the average Cuban receives \$20 a month from the government in wages, that housing and transportation are major problems, and in right-wing accounts, that the people are starving (a total lie without basis; farmers markets are bursting at the seams with produce, although meat and poultry can be scarce).

The implication is that the Revolution is a failure for being able to provide so little in financial reward for a month’s labor. Cuba is a poor country, made poorer by the U.S. embargo, but has always had an official socialist ethos of equity, hence, the small amount of wealth the country possesses is distributed in the most equal manner possible, or such is the official account.

However, Cuban Communist Party bureaucrats and others in so-called sensitive sectors of the economy have always had a wage above the average and an availability to housing, cars, and commodities that most Cubans don’t. Now, with an increasing number of joint tourist and industrial investment ventures with foreign companies, there is a growing strata of wage workers in those industries who similarly have an income significantly higher than the average Cuban.

Listening to Korn on their Ipods

It is not unusual to meet a college professor or doctor working as a guide or interpreter knowing that a week’s work can bring them hundreds of Canadian dollars. It will be those with disposable income who will be able to purchase the newly offered DVDs, cell phones, and the rest of the technological junk that is so appealing. I realize calling it “junk” displays a individual bias. Most citizens of the modern world don’t see such items as luxuries, but increasingly as necessities. I’m

sure the proliferation of spontaneous music street jams, for so long a feature of Cuban urban life, will soon be a quaint exercise performed for the throngs of tourists searching for the “real Cuba” while former street musicians will be listening to Korn on their Ipods.

The sudden permission by Raul to allow purchase of 21st technology gadgets appears to many as a grudging acceptance of a modernity that had been resisted by the geriatric leadership until now. There’s delight in some quarters that the seemingly dour world of Cuban communism will see its Revolution unraveled with the introduction of DVDs, cell phones and video games. In this regard, those desiring Cuba to retake its proper place in the world capitalist order may be correct.

Even with its privileged bureaucracy, its police control, and centralized economy, there is a spontaneous, communal, imaginative aspect to the Revolution. This shows up in its vibrant culture and music scenes, but also on the local level where women’s groups challenge traditional *machismo*, neighbors plant vast community organic gardens, and most share a pride in having defeated and held off the imperialist monster of the north. The island’s education system creates a higher literacy rate than that of the States, and its universal health care system provides a better infant mortality than the U.S. These and other successes have made Cuba a model of what can be done with little. (For instance, Detroit’s infant mortality rate is 16 deaths per 1,000 live births; Cuba’s is six.)

The socialist farm

A recent clandestine poll taken by an organization affiliated with the U.S. Republican Party, “found that more than half of those interviewed considered their economic woes to be their chief concern while less than 10 percent listed lack of political freedom as the main problem facing the country,” according to a June 5, 2008, *The New York Times*. If accurate, this indicates widely held attitudes reflecting rising expectations based on an understandable level of dissatisfaction about crumbling infrastructure, inadequate housing, restrictions on mobility, poor transportation, and other shortages, but it also means, how are you going to keep them down on the socialist farm once they’ve seen capitalist commodities?

This desire for the latter items, Raul’s “reforms,” suggests strongly that Cuban attitudes are changing in a direction contrary to Che’s idea of creating “Socialist Man;” the “new freedoms” may become the thin wedge of bringing back what *los barbudos* resisted for half a century. In the same study above, 80 percent of Cubans polled (remembering that this is from a right wing group) stated they wanted a market economy, probably indicating, if the sampling is correct, the hope that a Western-style economy would provide more of what remains scarce.

Perhaps many Cubans dream of being able to shop like their Miami brethren, but, on this path lies only what other poor nations experience — poverty alongside wealth, limited or non-existent health care, and other subsidized government services, crime, and in Cuba’s case, the island could return to being an alternative to the Jamaica for American tourists with all that accompanies such an economy. Allowing unbridled foreign investment again — corporate looting — suggests the model of Mexico where corporations flock to the country for its low wages and lack of labor problems. A glimpse of what could be expected is in the recent news of a Mexico City Ford Fiesta plant that announced the halving of wages to \$2 an hour.

Riding on an air conditioned, European-produced tour bus, we easily made it along Cuban roads, some in excellent conditions, particularly the 16-lane ones constructed by the Soviets that

could double as landing strips, or, the scenic La Farola road that twists and dips through the Sierra del Purial from outside of Guantanamo City to Baracoa where Columbus visited on his second day in the New (to him) World. Other two-laners were pothole-filled, but going slowly through beautiful and historic countryside left no one wishing for a speedier journey.

Disappointment

My only real disappointment of the trip (surprisingly to my Canadian companions, as well) was that we had been promised a view of the overlook of the U.S. military and torture base at Guantanamo Bay. Although photographs of the facility are readily available on the U.S Department of Defense web site, the American government made the ludicrous charge that the Cubans were allowing Al-Qaeda operatives to peer in at the base. A Cuban army check point blocking the road to the lookout point, was the only time I saw any concentration of military.

Signs of revolutionary exhortation proliferate everywhere on the island – as billboards and on buildings, including one which announced that this was “A Revolution with Energy,!” and displayed a fluorescent (CFL) bulb of the type that has been installed everywhere on the island. Government workers went door-to-door trading them for the old incandescent ones. There’s no way to estimate how the population relates to these signs or whether or not they have an impact on collective consciousness.

When we arrived at a destination, we always had first rate accommodations although curiously, our guides needed permission from the Ministry of Tourism to enter even though one was an officer in the Cuban army reserves and our tour bus and the hotel is administered by *Gaviota Grupo*, a section of the Cuban armed forces devoted to tourism. After a Raul edict later in the year, Cubans can now stay at tourist hotels, although they are priced way beyond the means of the average citizen. Still, Cubans found the prohibition insulting and were glad to see it ended.

As we drove through narrow city streets with our huge bus, we were aware of the shabby exteriors of most ordinary homes. Our guide said that people don’t fix up the outside to avoid ostentatiousness, but that the insides are adequate. From what we could see through open doors, most floors are tiled; there is furniture and a TV. Still, the difference between our tourist accommodations and the average Cuban housing is striking. Our guide told us the country needs 100,000 new home built each year, but nowhere near that is occurring.

In Santiago de Cuba, the southern city hailed as the home of the Revolution, we visited the Moncada Barracks where Castro and 125 men attacked the dictator Batista’s garrison on July 26, 1953. A guide explained the battle, Castro’s strategy, and showed us where the fighting occurred, some of it where we were standing. Castro was captured as were many of his men, some of whom were tortured and summarily executed.

We also went to *El Cementerio Santa Ifiginea* where the tomb of Jose Marti, Cuba’s national hero, is located. All was appropriately very solemn, until distorted martial music began blaring from loud speakers and an honor guard of three Cuban soldiers marched from the main building to the tomb thrusting their legs with each step waist high and perpendicular to the ground.

One can’t believe that the simple man who this monument rightly honors for his words and deeds would have been comfortable with this display of extreme distortion of the body in service to militarism. Close to the Marti tomb is one commemorating the martyrs of July 26 with the

names of the fallen inscribed on it. Many of Castro's comrades were no more than 18 and one was 14.

Socio-Cultural Chocolate Trail

From the cemetery, we traveled through the city to the *Casa de Las Religeones Populares*, a dwelling that houses practitioners of a type of Santeria or vudu. The people there performed music and ecstatic dance numbers for us. This is not usually done for visitors, who are rare. Next door, incongruently, was the headquarters of the District Committee of the PCC (*Partido Comunista Cubano*). The remnants of the primitive adjacent to the representative of the modern, bureaucratic state.

In Baracoa the next morning, we toured *Sendero Sociocultural del Cacao*, the Socio-Cultural Chocolate Trail, which is set up to receive tourists, but like so many other places in this region, we were the only ones there. On site is a 100-year-old working chocolate factory and the cacao is grown on the grounds, as well. Che, himself, is said to have sparked the resurrection of cacao production in 1963 according to a local billboard.

The cacao pods have a sweetish flesh which can be eaten fresh, but the seeds are what produces the chocolate and are extremely bitter to the point of being inedible until dried, ground, and sugar added. Our guide was Alejandro Hartmann, Baracoa's historian and preservationist, who explained the cacao production process. Then, chocolate bars! This facility is also managed by the Army.

Probably the most moving moment of the trip for all of us was when we were welcomed to the compound of the *Grupo Nongon y Kiriba* people, who identify themselves as the descendants of the few original Taino people not wiped out by Spanish genocide. We were greeted warmly by them and presented with an elaborate feast consisting of roast pig that was rotating on a spit when we arrived, roast fish, and 20 other dishes of corn, beans, coconut, and vegetables. After welcoming festivities and the meal consumed, dancing commenced with musical accompaniment. Soon, we were invited to dance with the participants, and many of us accepted.

As we prepared to leave, our tour leader, gave a heartfelt speech of appreciation for their hospitality, which they returned in kind. All of us were fighting back tears at such a moving experience, perhaps made much more so because this remaining remnant of a people wiped out by our European ancestors left us wondering how long they can continue to survive in the modern world.

We left Baracoa for Guardalavaca along a badly rutted road, but each mile of scenery was described interestingly by our guide in both ecological and political terms. We stopped at *Bahia de Taco* for a rest and a group photo. The rest area features a statue of Alejandro de Humboldt, the cartographer for Castro's rebel band.

We later passed an ominous looking factory which is the first industrial site we had seen, so it was striking in its contrast to the lush eastern province vegetation in which it is located. It is a joint Canadian/Cuban nickel refinery (images of Sudbury, Ontario). Workers there are also a privileged strata. A billboard at the entrance exhorts those entering to "*Imagínese El Futuro*," surrounding by an illustration of smoking, industrial facilities. Is this the future to be imagined? It raises the question of how does a country generate wealth, particularly when its population

wants better conditions and more commodities? This signals complete immersion in the world market and all that it brings — heaven and hell, if commodities are heaven.

Seeing this plant brought to mind the condition of Cuba's workers, all represented by official unions, which, as in all socialist countries, function to assure state production norms are met and discipline the labor force rather than represent the interests of workers. The Cuban government and its Western leftist apologists say class conflict has been suppressed, and it is the socialist government itself that represents the interests of labor. It's hard to believe many workers buy that.

Since the 1880s, Cuban anarcho-syndicalism was a major force on the island, including the IWW, militantly fighting for worker rights. The movement survived Spanish rule and that of a succession of Cuban dictators following the War of Independence, but has been suppressed by the Castro regime since it took over a half century ago. This is related powerfully by Frank Fernández in his *Cuban Anarchism: The History of a Movement*.

There's still a small, resilient, clandestine anarcho-syndicalist movement deep inside Cuba whose ideals have never been extinguished, that can provide a path away from both state and private capitalism. The desire for an authentic Revolution, distant from the world of Ipods, still beats in many hearts on the island.

May our Cuban comrades make it so.

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