

CUBA: JUNE 1992

I was more than a little apprehensive, returning to Cuba. It was my second visit. I had attended last summer's Conference of North American and Cuban Philosophers. I was attending the conference again, this time with Patsy. I had been deeply moved by last year's visit, but it was clear then that the Cuban experiment was in crisis. Living standards had fallen drastically in the wake of the upheavals in Eastern Europe and the economic turmoil in the Soviet Union. (Ninety percent of Cuba's trade had been with these countries.) There was much discontent, even a sort of panic. All the trends looked bad. There seemed to be no way out.

Since last summer the Soviet Union itself has come apart, and the United States has intensified its economic blockade. All the reports I'd read indicated increased hardship, so I braced myself for the worst--despair, bitterness, a loss of morale even among those who had put a brave face on the matter last year. What would it be like, talking again to the people I had met? What toll had the year taken?

Once again Cuba surprised me. I expected to see the streets bare of traffic. Oil imports, after all, are now less than half of what they had been. But there are lots of cars on the streets--not "lots" by U.S. or Third World city standards, not so many as to make the air unbreathable and the roads impassible, but enough to make you wait for the traffic light to change before crossing the street. The buses are running also, much less often than before, and they are sometimes so crowded that riders don't make it onto the bus, but simply get a foot on the running board and a hand on the door pole and hang on, but people manage to get to where they want to go. There are even more bicycles on the streets now than last year. Anyone who wants one, it seems, can have one. Mostly they are the Chinese "Flying Pigeons," but some are now Cuban made. There are often several persons on a bike--husband and wife, father and school kids (one on the back, one on the crossbar). Many Cubans have been unwilling or unable to learn to ride, but many, clearly, have gotten into it.

I expected to see long lines for food, beggars in the streets, more hustling of tourists, increased cynicism. That's not what I found. Here are some experiences, impressions, reflections.

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I've just come out of the Institute for Philosophy in the Vedado section of Havana, having had a three-hour conversation with a young philosopher there. I'm looking at my map, trying to get my bearings, before setting out on the long walk back to the University housing in Miramar where our delegation is staying. I'm startled by a female voice calling out in English, "I know you!"

I look up, and see a woman ten feet or so in front of me staring at me, an attractive woman, thirty-something, platinum blond, wearing silver earrings, a crisp white blouse and a dark skirt. I

recognize her at once, though the last time I saw her she was mostly red from the neck down, her clothes caked and stained by the same incredibly sticky mud I was trying to wash from my tennis shoes. That was five days ago. We were both washing up after a morning of "voluntary labor." She was using the faucet and basin next to mine, cleaning her hands, trying to get the mud from beneath her fingernails, which, she complained, would never be the same.

Thirty or so of the conference participants had come out that morning to see a farm-camp, one of hundreds that have been constructed recently as part of the drive for local, decentralized, food self-sufficiency. (Gardens have also been planted in vacant lots throughout Havana; city dwellers have been urged to raise chickens if they can.) Able-bodied persons from the city are asked to put in a 15-day stint in the camp. While away from their regular jobs, they continue to receive their pay. At camp they are housed in small barracks, five bunk beds to a room. They eat in the dining hall (better food than in Havana, I'm told), watch TV in the recreation hall, and work peasant hours--7 a.m. till noon, then a three hour siesta, then four more hours of work.

"It's very hard work," my blond friend with perfect English told me as she scrubbed her nails. (I never did get her name; she had lived in the States and also in Jamaica, hence her English.) I didn't need to be told that. I'd just put in two hours in the corn field, pulling weeds by hand. It had rained recently, so the red clay had turned to glue. The weeds came out easily enough, but you had to stop every ten steps or so to peel the clay from your shoes. It's stoop labor. Mercifully it was overcast and cool. What it would be like to do this for nine hours under the summer sun, I shudder to imagine.

Members of our delegation hadn't worked too hard. Visitors to the camp are expected to contribute a couple of hours, so we did (as did the Dean of the Faculty of Philosophy and History and the several Cuban philosophers who had come with us). The woman I was speaking with, however, was not a visitor. She was midway through her twelfth day. She was quite cheerful and upbeat though. "You have to remember," she said, "some people have to do this all their lives. For me it's only fifteen days. It makes you appreciate where your food comes from."

The farm camps seem to me a brilliant idea. There's a labor surplus in the cities now, many factories having had to close for lack of fuel or raw materials. People are mobilized for a common project that satisfying a clear and present need. The work is voluntary, but the obviousness of the need, coupled with the fact that people from all strata participate, put people under heavy moral pressure. Our translators have done voluntary labor; the members of the philosophy faculty have also; so has Juan Antonio Blanco, a high-ranking party official I've gotten to know.

The effort seems to be paying off. The production of fruits and vegetables is up. The food shortage is acute, but no one is worried now about starving. Almost all food is now rationed. Every Cuban has a ration book. Basic items are guaranteed--rice, beans, cooking oil. Many items are on an availability basis. The Cuban diet is changing. Very little meat now. Only children up to age seven are guaranteed milk. Bread is in short supply. (Cuba grows no wheat.) The government is trying to persuade people (with some success) that the current diet is healthier

than the traditional diet, but the shortages are sharply felt and there is much complaining. No panic, though. The basic items are available. The lines for these aren't long.

You don't see hungry children or beggars in the street. Nor homeless people. It's not that people are afraid to approach you. Kids have no hesitation in asking for gum. In the tourist areas one is frequently approached about black-market money-changing or cigars. I've been asked several times for a dollar, but to buy a coke or something else that is available to tourists with dollars but not to Cubans with pesos. It's not like Chicago, where it's rare for me to walk the three blocks from my apartment to the El without being panhandled by someone who claims either to be hungry or in need of transit fare.

I chat briefly with my farm-camp acquaintance, whose nails, I notice, have survived. I think of asking her to join me for coffee. There are a lot of questions I'd like to ask her. But I'm running late. We both remark on the coincidence of meeting like this in a city of three million people. She tells me that she will be leaving for Berlin shortly. She works for the Department of International Affairs, and is being assigned to a post in Berlin. She asks me how I've found my visit. I tell her that I've been having a wonderful time, adding that this is a country that is very easy to like. She smiles brightly, and thanks me for saying that. Like almost all the Cubans I've met, she seems intensely proud of her country.

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We're on the patio of the "Villa," our base in Miramar, where a dozen or so of our group are housed, where we all eat, where various programs are held. Patsy and I are living in a small house nearby, which we are sharing with eight graduate students from Angola. Our room is comfortable enough. We share a bathroom with the two students in the adjacent room; there is no hot water, but that's not really necessary; we have an air conditioner (that works), but we use only the fan; the water is turned off every evening, but we've brought a bucket, which we keep filled in reserve. The house sits directly across from the Russian (formerly Soviet) embassy, a structure so obviously grotesque that you think it must have been a joke. It's the largest embassy in the hemisphere, we're told, a concrete structure that towers over everything around it, over the city itself, resembling nothing so much as a giant Robocop.

The members of our delegation have contributed \$10 apiece to allow our hosts to provide us with a Cuban feast, a buffet of chicken, pork, cheese, lots of fruit, beans and rice, pizza, food of a quality and quantity that Cubans rarely see these days. But for dollars these things are available at the diplomatic store. Our Cuban colleagues from the conference share the meal with us.

I'm sitting with Alberto Fraga, a Cuban professor of history whom I met last year. I'm thinking of the conversation we had had then. We had been drinking, and Alberto began confiding to me his frustrations and anxieties. "I feel like a stranger in my own country," he had said. The dollar/peso double standard was particularly galling. If you have dollars, there is no scarcity in

Cuba; if you have only pesos, the shortages are severe. The rationale is well enough understood. The best Cuban products--food, drink, tobacco, taxis, accommodations--must be reserved for the tourists, because tourists provide the hard currency so desperately needed to purchase the oil, medicines, milk, wheat, etc. that the Cuban economy doesn't produce. Still, it's a bitter pill for a proud people to swallow. It does not go down easily."

Underlying Alberto's specific complaint was the deep anxiety I felt in so many people last year. Things had gotten bad, and they were going to get worse. How could the system survive?

Alberto has been reading my mind. "You remember the conversation we had last year?" I say that I do. "I must tell you something," he says quietly. "I am amazed by our people. I am amazed by our capacity to resist. I didn't think it was possible." He is smiling. It's a tentative, guarded smile, but to me it is striking. Last year Alberto didn't smile when talking of Cuba.

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Juan Antonio Blanco is also guardedly upbeat. Patsy and I have arrived at his apartment before the other guests. We brought a bottle of brandy. We are drinking together. This is my first time in the house of a high-ranking party official. I will visit another later in the week. Both turn out to be quite similar--modest, tastefully appointed, comfortable, but certainly not luxurious. Juan Antonio's is a penthouse, with a lovely view of the city. But the building's main elevator doesn't work. To get to his apartment we had to go to the parking garage in the basement, and take the small elevator from there.

Things are difficult now, Juan Antonio tells us, not only the shortages, but the work that needs to be done. He's done his two weeks of farm labor. He must do military drill every Sunday. He has his regular full-time job with the Department of the Americas. But he's also absorbed in another project, an independent, non-governmental organization, the Felix Varela Center, that is trying to circumvent the state bureaucracy to accomplish things that he and the center's associates think are important. The center is concerned with educational reform, with putting out good information on Cuba, with researching sexual-sexist mores, with further democratizing the country.

Last year Juan Antonio talked of trying to secure the equipment to make a broadcast-quality video on Cuba. He points now with pride to the fifty-some cassettes of tape that have been shot by a Belgian film-maker that he interested in the project. There's more shooting to do, then editing. Soon there will be a product that he hopes he can sell to European and perhaps American distributors, the proceeds from which can be plowed back into the Center.

Curiously, one of the Center's first projects had nothing to do with Cuba. Funds were raised to fund a full-time doctor for a clinic in a small Bolivian village. The doctor, himself Bolivian, is set up in a house that the Bolivian government had wanted to destroy. The house was saved by

the villagers, who formed a human chain around the house to block the bulldozer. It's the house where Bolivian security forces and CIA operatives interrogated, then executed, Che Guevara.

Che is much talked about in Cuba these days. There is much discussion of "rectification," of the mistakes that were made in copying too closely the Soviet model. The moral dimension of socialism was slighted, it is said, and it is this dimension that Che symbolizes. This moral dimension is also seen to be part of the Cuban revolutionary project from the beginning, dating back to the insurrection of 1868, a rebellion against both Spain and slavery, a rebellion against imperialism that culminated nearly a century later. (It's part of Castro's genius, his tying tightly the revolution of 1959 to the earlier struggles for independence. There is no question here, as there was in Eastern Europe, of the government's being foreign-imposed or foreign-dominated. Whatever else one might say about Fidel, there can be no doubting his alignment with Cuban nationalism. Yet it's a curious nationalism, isn't it, that holds up as a great symbol of Cuban independence an Argentine doctor who died in Bolivia?)

Juan Antonio seems to have been deeply touched by Che. He shows us photos of the Center delegation, himself among them, who visited that Bolivian village recently. It strikes me as incongruous, this polished, urbane man, mid-fifties I'd guess, short-cropped grey hair (if you didn't know better, you'd guess him to be an international corporate executive), giving so much of himself to something like the Felix Varela Center, which he directs in his spare time from his study.

When he's out of the room, fixing our drinks, I browse around the study. On his desk, next to his computer, is a small photograph. I've seen it before, the picture taken by the CIA of Che's body, taken to prove to the world that this legendary figure of revolutionary hope was indeed dead. Juan Antonio, it seems, does not want to forget.

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Not everyone in Cuba is happy. Jose is not. Our second afternoon in Havana is given over to a guided tour of the Old City. In Cathedral Square Patsy strikes up a conversation with a young man sitting on the church steps. The tour moves on. Patsy stays behind. She and Jose talk for an hour or so.

Jose is twenty. He has dropped out of school. He's recently quit his job. Fidel is too old, he says. He's been running the country too long. Cuba needs a change. Things are hard now, too hard. Jose wants to get on with his life.

What he does not want to do is his military service. He concedes that the military is necessary, that the country must be defended--but he has a girl friend in Havana, and military duty is in the countryside. He's trying to figure out a way to avoid it.

Jose doesn't like the fact that tourists have all the privileges. He resents the fact that just to get a coke, he must do something illegal. He must change money or sell cigars to get dollars. And even if he gets some, he must ask a tourist to make the purchase for him, since it is illegal for Cubans to have unauthorized dollars.

As Patsy and Jose are talking two policemen stroll by. One shakes his finger at Jose, as if to say, "I know what you are doing." Jose is much embarrassed. It has been suggested that he is indeed up to something illegal. Don't worry, he tells Patsy, he's not afraid of them. There's nothing they can do to him, he says.

The next day, again in the Old City, Patsy sees Jose again. "I'm fine," he tells her. "They didn't bother me."

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We're in Matanzas, a small city two hours from Havana, the cite of a new university. A dozen of us have made the trip. A couple of members of the Matanzas faculty attended the conference, and were eager to have some of us come to their university, to talk to them, to make some connections. The university reminds Patsy of her alma mater, the University of the Philippines-- as it was when she attended in the early 60s, before economic crisis led to its deterioration.

We've been given a tour of the university, and now we're being feted by the rector, at a university house overlooking the bay. It's a beautiful spot, and the buffet table is loaded with food, a four-foot grilled fish serving as the centerpiece. (We chipped in dollars to make the trip, to pay for the fuel and feast.)

We've been eating and drinking and discussing Cuba with our hosts. Patsy and I are talking with Diosmedes, a young philosopher. Raul, one of our regular translators, is hard at work, translating, but also participating in the conversation.

It's impossible not to be charmed by Raul. He's in his late twenties, very bright, always up, ever eager to discuss politics or anything else with you. He loves to talk basketball, and is avidly following the NBA playoffs. He's a passionate fan of the Chicago Bulls. (We've agreed to send him a championship T-shirt if the Bulls win.)

From an abstract discussion of the relation of political parties to democracy, we've moved to the concrete difficulties facing Cuba. Suddenly Patsy says bluntly, "How long can you hold out? If the United States keeps up the pressure, how long can you survive?"

Raul rocks back on his chair, as if taking a blow. "Ahhh," he exclaims, "that's a cruel question."

He's smiling when he says this, almost as if it were a joke. Then he rocks the chair forward, leans toward us, and his tone changes. He speaks gravely, with just a hint of anger. "I can't say how long we can hold out. But we will resist. If you want to help us, fine. If you want to help us, you can. But we will resist."

I think it is at that moment that I became convinced that the Cuban Revolution will survive.

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That is my bottom-line assessment. A year ago I returned from Cuba guardedly hopeful. They might be able to make it, I said. I'd put it more strongly now. I think they will make it. Here are my reasons.

- 1) The Cuban Revolution is intimately bound up with Cuban nationalism. Cuban history is full of stories of Cuban "leaders" selling out their country to one foreign power or another. The influential Cubans in the United States, the right-wing Cubans who collaborate with the CIA, are perceived as precisely that light. (Justly or not, so are most dissidents in Cuba.)
- 2) The alternatives hold little promise. Cubans have long perceived that they are better off than their Caribbean and Latin American neighbors. (It's a correct perception. All the social indicators bear them out.) The "free market" alternative has never seemed plausible. The so-called "democratic alternative" (i.e., multiple parties), which might have appealed a couple of years ago, has lost much of its luster, given the total inability of the Eastern European countries or those that once comprised the Soviet Union to revive their economies. It's obvious now that multi-party democracy is no panacea. It's also obvious that it is easier to tear down structures than to rebuild them.
- 3) The government is proving to be flexible and imaginative in dealing with the present crisis. A year ago there was a subdued panic in the air. It's clear to people now that they will not starve, that the buses will run, that the schools and clinics and day-care centers (not one of which has been closed) will continue to operate.
- 4) The Afro-Cuban dimension (which is never mentioned in the U.S.) seems to me important. Cuba is a multi-racial society, but it is not multi-national. There are not ethnic divisions festering that could explode. It has been estimated that 75% of the Cuban population is mulatto, the rest being either pure white or pure black. One has a sense, in Cuba, that the Afro-Cubans are among the regime's staunchest supporters. Fidel, in 1959, when he visited the United States, stayed in a Harlem hotel. Cuban troops fought in Africa on the side of black Angolans against white South Africans (and won). The Cuban Communist Party openly promotes affirmative action for Afro-Cubans and celebrates the Afro-Cuban cultural heritage. One can't but notice that the influential Miami Cubans are not black. The property owners who fled in the 1960s, and who want their goodies back, are not black.

5) There seems to be relatively little corruption within the Party, or indeed, within Cuban society. There's black-marketeering, but it's in cigars, not crack or heroin. There's some prostitution around the hotels, but it's not blatant. The high officials I've observed do not live opulently. I've heard few complaints about official corruption.

6) Perhaps the most important single factor: the Revolution seems to continue to attract the best and the brightest of the society. This could not be said of Eastern Europe or the Soviet Union, but it seems to be true of Cuba. So many of the people we met were so impressive, above all in their decency and generosity.

That's my assessment, for what it's worth. It's an empirical claim that could turn out to be quite wrong. I don't think it's wrong, but it could be.

There's another assessment I would offer that I feel more confident in making. The Cubans have accomplished something remarkable in the three decades since the revolution. It's hard not to see it as a kind of miracle. Think about it. The Cubans have created, in an underdeveloped, formerly-colonized country, a proud and independent nation. They've created a society where everyone has enough to eat, where everyone has access to education and health care, where everyone has a place to sleep at night. They've created a country that is virtually free of violent crime, a country where men and women can walk the streets of the major cities day or night without fear. They've created a society that does not have a "drug problem," nor even a serious alcohol problem or a serious smoking problem.

There's more. There is a society where blacks and whites intermingle without the tension we take for granted in the United States. There is a society that is moving (grudgingly, but openly) to a healthier diet, to more rational transportation, to more ecologically sensitive agriculture.

And the people are buoyant, sexy, generous, honest, good-humored, dignified. Not everyone, of course--but visitors do tend to identify these as Cuban character traits.

To be sure, there are problems, some quite serious. There is considerable inefficiency in the economy. Alternative political organizations are not permitted. People are sometimes imprisoned for advocating views deemed counter-revolutionary. There is still sexism in the society, and some racism as well. The Cuban experiment is highly imperfect. The Cubans are the first to admit that. It is a human experiment.

But tally up the balance sheet. What have they accomplished? What have they failed to accomplish? And ask further, what, if given a fair chance, might they still accomplish?

Ask further, Why is the United States so implacably opposed to this Revolution?



David Schweickart

June 22, 1992