CUBA 1993--VIGNETTES AND REFLECTIONS

We're in the restaurant of the Ramada Hotel in Miami. The food is overpriced, the service slow, but it's too late to go elsewhere. We've finished our orientation meeting, and have been instructed to be ready to leave for the airport at 5:30 a.m. tomorrow morning.

I look up, and there's Alberto. I'm speechless. Not the person I had expected to see. I knew he was living in Miami, and I knew that Cliff had tried to contact him--but I couldn't imagine him showing up here.

I met Alberto, a professor of literature at the University of Havana, two years ago. Last summer we renewed our acquaintance. He had been rather depressed when we first met, but last summer his spirits seemed higher. "I'm amazed by our people," he had said to me. "I didn't think we could bear up under the hardships, but we have. I'm really amazed."

Last fall Alberto defected. He had been granted a visa to study in Canada, then a visa to give a couple of talks in the U.S. He was to speak at the University of Wisconsin at Whitewater, then at Loyola. The event had been well publicized in Whitewater, and a large crowd had gathered, but the speaker wasn't on his scheduled flight. Then came the phone call--Jorge was in Miami with relatives. "I'd rather be a street sweeper in Miami than a university professor in Cuba," he is said to have said.

I get up, walk toward him, extend my hand. "Alberto," I say. That's all I can say.

"You probably don't want to talk to me," he says. I don't know how to respond. I don't really have to, since Cliff has appeared and asks Alberto how he has been. He's good, he says, is married now (he introduces us to his wife, who is with him). He's working now as a termite exterminator, has bought a new car. His waistline has expanded noticeably (almost grotesquely), so he has evidently been eating a lot. Cliff and he are going off to have a drink. I don't invite myself along. I say goodbye, and wish him good luck.

I don't really know if my wish is sincere. I suppose it is. I'm in no position to judge Alberto. Times are very tough in Cuba right now--tougher this year than last, and that year had been tougher than the year before. The collapse of Eastern Europe in 1989 had cost them most of their trading partners. The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 cut their supply of oil and wheat, and ended the above-market price for their sugar. Last year the U.S. congress passed the Toricelli bill, which further tightened the blockade. (Never mind that the U.N General Assembly voted overwhelmingly last spring against the U.S. blockade--U.N. votes count only when they support our policies.)

I can't bring myself to condemn Alberto for choosing an easier life to a harder one. It's not a choice I've had to make. The Cubans who have refused to desert can judge him, the ones who have refused to give up on the dreams and accomplishments of their remarkable revolution, the

ones who fight on knowing now--as they all seem to--that nothing is certain anymore. I must acknowledge that I am little more than a bystander in the historical drama now being played out. I know whom I admire, and whom I do not, but I must leave the more definitive judgments to others.

***

We've been invited by the university faculty to a reception at Machurucutu, a university conference center on the outskirts of Havana. I feel a bit nostalgic entering the grounds. The conference I attended two summers ago, the one that bound me to Cuba, was held here. Doubtless, our arrangements this year are much better--our hotel accommodations are four-star, and the city is much more accessible--but for me intensely fond feelings attach to this place.

The faculty has prepared for us an elegant spread. Near the pool are eight white-tablecloth-covered tables end to end, beautifully arrayed with pitchers of juice, platters of fresh fruit, plates of cheese and fried meat-filled pastries, and bowls of popcorn. We all express our compliments and begin drinking the rum drinks being passed out to us. Conversations ensue; a few people dive into the pool. The food gleams, untouched but enticing.

Patrick, a University of Michigan undergraduate, decides to sample. Suddenly all conversations stop, and there is a rush to the table. The line is well-mannered and restrained, but serious. Within minutes the food is gone. Those at the end, mostly members of our delegation, have to settle for the popcorn.

Make no mistake: the Cubans are hungry. Dignified, gracious, polite, generous--but also hungry.

***

I had taken a picture of the food tables when I arrived. I am about to take an "after" picture, to go with the "before," when the rains come. It begins to pour, so we all rush to the lower level of the main building to continue the party. A band begins to play, people begin to dance, and the bar moves from outside to inside.

Then the water comes pouring in. I'm not sure why. It may be a faulty gutter. But for whatever reason a torrent of water comes off the roof, into the stairwell, under the door, then spreads out over the dance floor. A valiant few try to divert the flow to a drain, but the rest--well, shoes come off, and the dancing continues. The beer and the rum and the music and the water flow on and on. This is definitely a revolution at which one dances. It seems not to matter that the power is off, the food is gone, and there's half an inch of water on the floor. We are all dancing.

***

What surprises me most about Havana is how little things seem to have changed since last summer. The news this year reaching the States has been relentlessly bleak. To compensate for their lack of oil, the Cuban government had sunk vast sums into a nuclear power plant, but its

construction has been halted--too expensive to continue. Recently a high-speed power boat roared within range of a hotel on Varadero Beach and opened fire with machine guns--a Miami attempt, presumably, to scare away the tourists. In March the worst hurricane of the century slammed into the island, destroying thousands of homes and a good portion of the sugar crop. This spring saw the outbreak of a mysterious disease, a nervous-system disease that can cause blindness. Experts from all over the world are baffled; some 48,000 people (out of a population of 10 million) are said to be suffering.

All this to compound their already immense difficulties. Every Cuban I speak with says that this year has been terribly difficult, much worse than last year. And yet: I expected to see the streets deserted of cars, but there are as many cars on the road as last year. I expected to see homeless people, but in my two weeks, several days of which are spent walking the city, I see only one man who might have passed for the sort of person I encounter daily in Chicago. I expected to see beggars, but only once does a grown man ask me for money--to buy shoes, he says, pointing to the split soles of the ones he is wearing. (Kids in the tourist areas still ask for gum, occasionally for money--for a coke or some candy, they usually say--and, if they see you with a pen, for that also, but I see none begging for food.)

I expected to see people tattered, dirty and depressed. It would be wrong to say that the spirit of the people is bright, unflagging, optimistic, but for the most part their clothes are not tattered, nor are their bodies dirty. Havana remains light years ahead of Manila or Mexico City or inner city Chicago.

I expected to see panic because of the mysterious disease. I ask Eduardo, one our translators, about this. "I wouldn't say 'panic,'" he replies, "but we are worried about it." A friend of his contracted the disease. He has been given massive doses of vitamins, and put on a special diet (free, of course--Cubans take these things for granted); the symptoms have disappeared.

"It's very strange," Eduardo says. "None of the experts know what causes it. They thought at first it was vitamin deficiency, but our diets, although not what they used to be, are much better than most other people's in the region. And it seems to have started, simultaneously, in two provinces quite far from one another."

Eduardo doesn't say it, but I know what he is thinking. It's what many Cubans are thinking. As one put it, "Could this be George Bush's last gift to the Cuban people?"

***

It is customary in the evenings for us to invite a guest to dinner, who will then speak with us informally afterwards. Tonight it's Ron Ridenour, an American expatriate living in Cuba, author of Backfire: The CIA's Biggest Burn.

Ron talks briefly about his own life, then about his book. He was a working class kid, he says, who became active in the 60's--so active that the FBI began visiting his employers, thus costing

him a string of journalism jobs. He spent a year in prison for photographing cops during an anti-war demonstration beating a paralyzed Vietnam vet in a wheelchair. The conviction was later overturned (see! the system works!), but it was a year in prison, court costs, and now no job. (See how the system works.) Eventually he made his way to Cuba.

In 1987 a striking event took place that went virtually unreported in the U.S. media. (Ron documents the media treatment in his book's appendix.) 27 CIA agents--one Italian and 26 Cubans--surfaced in Havana, and revealed themselves to be double agents, i.e., really working for the Cuban government. Nothing like this had ever before happened in CIA history, 27 agents naming names and telling their stories. Cuban television put together an eleven-part documentary about the event, and Ron wrote a book about it.

Most of Ron's audience here in Cuba are well aware that the CIA is Murder, Inc. (on a much large scale), so the big picture is familiar enough, but some of the details are new. Yes, CIA operatives did plant the bomb that blew up a Cubana Airlines passenger plane in 1976, killing 73 people, including the entire Cuban fencing team who were en rout to a meet. (One of the operatives, Luis Posada, still remains active. He was recently involved with Ollie North in training and supplying the Nicaraguan contras.) Yes, the CIA introduced swine flu into Cuba, and dengue fever. Yes, they have repeatedly tried to assassinate Fidel--Cuban security claims 30 attempts.

What is surprising in Ron's account is not CIA perfidy, which has been well-documented elsewhere, but the personal integrity and deep conviction of the Cubans he interviewed, men and women who turned their backs on the promise of a sweet life in Miami and hundreds of thousands of dollars, who instead reported their contacts to Cuban security, then agreed to play--many for more than a decade--the high-risk double game. It was precisely this integrity, Ron thinks, that brought the CIA up short. They simply could not imagine that there are people--nonwhite, Third World people at that--who care so deeply for their country that they cannot be bought.

While walking back to the hotel after Ron's talk, I keep thinking about the question people always ask. Why? Why has the United States been so implacably determined to break the Cuban Revolution? Of course no one believes the official story: our concern for democracy and human rights. We've supported--and continue to support--too many regimes with infinitely worse records on these counts for that story to seem plausible even to those whose job it is to tell it.

The "realist" position used to claim geopolitics: the Soviet threat. That never made sense to me. What possible difference could tiny little Cuba make in a global confrontation, when our real enemy had 10,000 nuclear missiles pointed at us? History seems to have proved me right. If the Cold War had been the reason, then the end of that war would have signaled a reduction in U.S. hostility toward Cuba. In fact, the opposite has been the case. The screws have been tightened--and by a "liberal" Democratic administration at that.

Now people are talking about the power of the U.S. Cuban community. But that makes even less sense. There are scarcely a million Cubans in this country, they are mostly concentrated in one state--and they always vote Republican. The Democrats are never going to win the Cuban vote, the Republicans are never going to lose it--and it's hardly significant anyway. Sorry--a murderous, high-profile policy such as ours toward Cuba is not dictated by a handful of lunatic exiles.

There's really only one good answer, so far as I can see. Chomsky has named it: the threat of a good example. Cuba has done what no other country in Latin America has done. It has broken free of U.S. domination, and has created a social order that all our experts say is impossible: an egalitarian, non-capitalist society where basic needs are met. If Cuba impresses us--delegates from the North--imagine what Cuba must feel like to those from Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador, etc., etc, (apart from the rich) who love their country. It's really no wonder, is it, that U.S. policy-makers have been, since Day One of the Revolution, hysterically concerned to contain the Cuban "virus"? Cuba really is a threat, if not to the American people, certainly to all those corporations that want unimpeded access to the markets, labor and raw materials of the region.

We are no longer talking about a band of fanatical exiles who want their goodies back. Now we are talking about real power.

***

U.S. power poses a threat to the Cuban Revolution, but it's not the only threat.

At Varadero Beach, Cuba's spectacular resort area, I ask Raul if he'd like to join Mike Howard and me for a moped tour of the peninsula.

"I can't rent a moped," he says.

"I know," I reply. "We want you to be our guest."

Raul can't rent a moped because moped rentals, like everything else at Varadero, require dollars--and Cubans, apart from those working in the tourist industry, have no access to dollars.

We climb on our bright new machines and roar up the peninsula, heading toward its tip. We pass hotel after hotel, many open, many more under construction. Raul tells us that all this is new, all built since 1990. All are joint ventures: Cuban-Spanish, Cuban-German, Cuban-Jamaican, etc.

Suddenly Raul pulls over. We're at the Young Pioneers Camp, where Raul had come every year for six years to work as a camp counselor. The camp served children from all over the world, poor kids from all over the world brought to one of the most beautiful beaches in the world as an act of international solidarity.

The camp is now closed--and two new tourist hotels are under construction on the grounds. Raul gesture to the monument: a metal rod, an inch thick, spirals upward like a giant spring, and on this spring are figures of boys and girls climbing, and among them are doves. It's a lovely monument, or rather, it was. It's now coming apart, the paint on the figures is fading, weeds are growing high at its base. Raul says nothing. He only shakes his head.

Tourism is a threat. Everyone knows that. And everyone knows the rationale: Cuba needs hard currency to pay for desperately needed imports--wheat, milk, oil, medicines, spare parts. The analogy with chemotherapy is often invoked. The side effects may be terrible, but when you have cancer, you have no choice.

The side effects are making themselves felt. Until only a few years ago Cubans felt the entire island was theirs (apart from the U.S. occupation of Guantanamo). They could go anywhere, to any beach or any hotel or any restaurant. No longer. They can still go to these places, but they cannot buy anything there--because everything there is priced in dollars. To be sure, in the rest of the Caribbean prices (and the police) keep most of a country's citizens segregated from the tourists. Indeed, it used to be that way in Cuba. But the revolution changed that. Now it seems to be changing back.

There are obvious ill effects of tourism and less obvious. The double standard, dollar/peso, is resented, and engenders bitterness and discontent. There's also the prostitution. Prior to the revolution it was rampant, but for nearly forty years there was scarcely any in Cuba. Now there are young women in the hotel lobbies every evening trying to catch a male tourist's eye. (As with so many things in Cuba, the phenomenon is different here than elsewhere. The Cubans call it "neo-prostitution," engaged in, they say, not out of necessity, but to obtain luxuries. It is also claimed that these encounters do not always lead to sex--the game is less callous, more complex. I don't doubt that there is some truth to these characterizations--but it is also true that Cubans are hungry now, and some are hungrier than others.)

Less obvious: Carlos tells me that morale among those doing voluntary labor in the fields to combat the food crisis has dropped sharply, for it is felt--rightly or wrongly--that the bulk of the food the volunteers are sweating to produce goes to feed the tourists.

Less obvious, too, are the ways in which tourism exacerbates the racism and sexism that the Cuban government has been trying to combat. Linda Carty's paper on the topic creates a stir at the conference. Linda, an African-American sociologist and authority on Caribbean tourism, points out that Caribbean tourism sells sex--above all, exotic, dark-skinned sex. She is deeply concerned that market pressures will force Cuban tourism to do the same. She grants that tourism is necessary for the Cuban economy, and she allows that the racial and sexual problems associated with tourism are less pronounced here than elsewhere. But the trends, she thinks, are foreboding.

In conversation afterward Linda tells me that she has been told that when a foreign company takes over a Cuban hotel (as a joint venture), it typically fires three-quarters of the workers--and

nearly all the Afro-Cubans. She also notes that the majority of the young women in our hotel lobby are Afro-Cuban--but that few (if any) of the hotel staff are black.

***

"Where are you from?" It's late morning. I'm in the lobby of the hotel, and have just left a member of our delegation with whom I'd been chatting. I turn to see a woman--white, well-dressed, early thirties--staring at me. She'd spoken to me in English.

"From the United States," I reply. This response usually elicits surprise, but not this time.

"I know that. Where in the U.S.?"

"Chicago."

"I went to school there," the woman replies. "University of Chicago."

She goes on to say that she's Cuban (Cuban-American, she emphasizes), and that she has been to Cuba six times. Knowing that the Cuban government does not grant visas to exiles too readily, I allow that that must have been difficult.

"Yes," she says, "but we have our ways."

She wants to talk about Cuba. She's very excited, she says; there seems to be a real opening now. I tell her that I've just attended a conference at the University, and that I was surprised by how open the discussions had been. I had expected the restrictions to be tighter this year, given the intensification of the hardships, but that's not what I found.

The young woman is enthusiastic. "Yes," she says, "things are different this year. Last year, it was the pits, but this year it's different."

"Things have to change," I say. "Everyone I've talked with realizes that. But change is very risky right now. A lot could be lost. So many of the accomplishments could be swept away."

An edge creeps into the woman's voice. "They've already been lost. There's nothing left. It's too late."

"But," I venture, "there's still universal health care . . . " I am about to begin the long list--no starvation, free education, almost no violent crime or racial tension or homelessness or serious drug addiction--but I am cut short. The pleasant young woman I have just met, and with whom I was carrying on a polite, if serious, conversation, is suddenly transformed. Her face contorts, her eyes flash:

"Don't give me any of that shit!"

My mind searches for the clever, cutting retort, but the nausea that I feel renders speech impossible. I turn my back on her, and walk away.

***

I have been talking for nearly two hours with Barbara Flores and Orlando Talmargo, two bright young economists, a husband-and-wife team who had made a particularly interesting presentation at the conference. I'm trying to figure out what is really going on with the Cuban economy. I'm pretty well persuaded by their analysis.

Tourism will not solve the deep problems of the Cuban economy, even if its contradictions can be resolved and its worst effects mitigated. At best it will provide the infusion of hard currency to enable the government to make more basic adjustments.

At least as big a problem as tourism is the black market (in both dollars and pesos), which now accounts, astonishingly, for more than half the economy.

"There is no planning in our economy anymore," says Orlando. "Planning is now impossible."

Some of this, of course, is harmless, but much of what is sold is stolen from state industries. Carlos had remarked to me earlier, "To prevent theft from enterprises, you would have to station a battalion of soldiers in every factory."

The fundamental challenge for the Cuban economy is to design a system of incentives that will encourage and reward conscientious, productive effort, without introducing the capitalist "solution" to the incentive problem, i.e., mass unemployment. There is underemployment in Cuba, but no unemployed underclass. If they can get efficient production without mass unemployment (there are lessons to be learned from the Chinese here, I point out), they can survive--indeed prosper.

We discuss these matters intensely--these are things I've thought and written much about. Market relations will have to be introduced. Cooperatives will have to be encouraged. These are my suggestions.

Suddenly Orlando looks at me and asks, "May I ask you a personal question?"

"Of course."

"Why have you come back to Cuba? This is your third visit, right? One visit will satisfy curiosity. Why do you keep coming back?"

I hadn't expected this question. It's a good question. I think for awhile before answering.

"It's hard for me to articulate the impact that that first visit two years ago had on me. I came to Cuba having no idea what to expect. I came out of a sense of duty. I didn't really want to come, but I felt that I should--to see for myself what Cuba was like, before, as seemed likely, everything was swept away. I had been to the Soviet Union in 1988. I was prepared to find something similar here--a cynical, demoralized, hyper-critical people about to embark on a course that would likely end in tragedy.

"That's not what I found. What I found seemed to me a kind of miracle. Something astonishing had been accomplished here.

"It's hard to explain to someone not having lived in the United States how different it feels here. I live in Chicago, near my university, in a relatively good part of the city. I have an apartment, a nice apartment, right on Lake Michigan.

"As I walk along the lake to school each morning, I pass the spot where a homeless man lives. He sleeps among the rocks, in a sleeping bag that is wrapped in many layers of plastic.

"I rarely walk the three blocks from my apartment to El (the elevated train that is a major means of public transportation) without several people asking me for money. And the begging is often charged and threatening. The racial tensions in the city are high. There is some gang activity in the neighborhood. My wife and I saw a young man murdered a couple of years ago, a couple of blocks from our apartment. We didn't see the actual killing, but we heard shots, followed the crowd, and saw the body. He had been wearing the wrong colors or had given the wrong hand sign.

"In the local store where I shop, there was a double killing. A gunman made the owner and his wife lie on the floor, then he shot them both in the head. On another occasion I saw a man aim a gun at a fleeing woman--but he didn't pull the trigger.

Orlando interrupts. He's surprised. "Are you telling me the truth? That's not the way things look on American television."

"No," I agree, "that's not the way things look on TV. And it's not that way everywhere. With enough money you can more or less escape--move to the suburbs, install security systems, isolate yourself. But the problems are terrible, and they are getting worse. You learn to harden yourself, look out for yourself, close yourself off from the appeals of others. But deep inside, it's terrifying. I have two daughters, one recently graduated from college, the other a student at Berkeley. I am constantly afraid for them. Random rapes and muggings and murders happen. They happen all the time.

"What struck me so forcefully two years ago, as I walked about the city, was how similar Havana was to Chicago--the urban bustle, the racial mix--and yet how different. There's a freedom here, I guess I'd call it, "freedom from fear." It's like suddenly a weight had been lifted from my

shoulders, a weight I'd carried so long I was no longer conscious of it--until suddenly it was removed.

"And this freedom isn't just negative. It seems to be reflected in the people, in their openness and generosity, as if they hadn't had to harden themselves to strangers the way we have. It was a remarkable experience.

"So why do I keep coming back? To see if it's really true, I guess; to confirm that the miracle is still intact. And to do what little I can to preserve the accomplishments that now seem so fragile. I really don't know how this discourse strikes Barbara and Orlando. I can't read their enigmatic smiles. Am I confirming their own hopes, or do I seem hopelessly naive? I really don't know. I find myself adding a coda.

"I know you have problems here--serious problems. I don't mean to minimize them. But I have to tell you, your problems seem solvable. I can imagine a solution to your problems. But our problems? The crime, the violence, the massive underclass, a national debt that is out of control, local and state governments in financial crisis, a political system paralyzed, rampant job insecurity--the experts don't even pretend anymore to have answers.

"There's still hope here. In the U.S.--not much. Which is another reason why Cuba seems so important to me. If hope is extinguished here, if the candle goes out . . .

I look down. I really can't continue. I hope these thoughts, which are my deep thoughts, do not sound too simplistic. I, after all, am just passing through, a wide-eyed tourist seeing, perhaps, only what he wants to see.

Still, that's the way it looks to me.

David Schweickart
July 17, 1993