

VIGNETTES AND REFLECTIONS: CUBA 1994

I've been in Havana three days. My wife and I flew in from Montreal; Patsy went on to Matanzas, where she will spend most of her time. She's been invited to give some lectures and teach some classes at the university there.

It's a different experience this time. Each June for the past four years I've been part of the Conference of North American and Cuban Philosophers, held at the University of Havana. This time I came down a week early to do some advance preparation for the conference and to deliver three lectures to the Institute for Philosophy. I'm staying this week with a Cuban family.

I brought a bicycle with me this time. Havana is a great city for bicycles—not too big, not too hilly, and not many cars. The streets belong to the cyclists—men, women and children, riding singly, or two to a hike, sometimes three. There's even a "Cyclobus," a bus for bicyclists that ferries them through the tunnel connecting the main city with East Havana across the bay.

I've been exploring the old city, and have ridden out past the train station, following a road along the harbor. I stop for a closer look. The harbor is badly polluted. And there's not much activity. A few ships are being unloaded, but not many. This is a far cry from a few years ago, when the harbor was alive with freighters, mostly from the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. But that trade has now collapsed. Cuba, almost overnight, lost 85% of its foreign trade—its sources of supplies and the markets for its goods—and virtually all its foreign aid. The economy has been in sharp decline ever since. Each year of this "special period" the government has projected a bottoming out, a recovery, hut, as Humberto put it, "The recovery is like God. It's everywhere—but nobody sees it."

This is a rather depressing sight, the stagnant, oily water, the listless ships. And it's hot. The breeze that had been blowing all morning has suddenly stopped. I turn and walk back to my hike, stepping into a patch of tall, thick grass. My foot sinks into the mud. But it isn't mud. I've stepped on a dog. More precisely, into a dog. I don't know how long it has been dead—not too long. Its eyes are open, but glazed. The pressure of my foot has pulled the skin from its side, exposing pink flesh, ribs, entrails. I shudder, scrape my foot wildly on the grass to remove the skin that had stuck to my shoe. I recoil from the stench, and fight off a wave of nausea, all the while staring at the small creature, which now seems so utterly naked.

A terrible thought forms in my mind as I peddle homeward. Could this be a metaphor for the Cuban Revolution: once so alive and hopeful, now superficially the same, but rotting from the inside, waiting for a slight pressure to tear open the skin and demonstrate once and for all that it is truly dead? For me this is a terrible thought.

I'm walking with Humberto along the Malacon--a long, wide avenue that stretches along the coast. A low sea wall keeps the water at bay, and serves as a place where hundreds sit every night, singing, drinking, romancing, buying and selling (according to Humberto) anything you want, anything at all.

There's prostitution in Cuba now. Humberto points out to me certain women hitchhiking. Lots of women hitchhike in Cuba, men too. It's a common means of transportation. In fact government vehicles are required by law to pick up passengers if they have extra room. There are also the "yellow people"- officials dressed in yellow uniforms at bus stops that will stop passing cars and ask them to give people rides. (Cuba is coping with its transportation difficulties in many ways.)

The prostitutes are different-they dress differently, stand differently. "You can tell." says Humberto. And of course I can.

Prostitution—if that's its proper designation—has become much more common in Cuba in recent years, although it remains confined primarily to the tourist sector. ("When I see Cuban women selling themselves to Cuban men for pesos because they are hungry," says Karen Wald, an American journalist living in Cuba, "then I'll say prostitution has returned to Cuba. I haven't seen that yet-Though it's getting closer.")

Cubans are worried. "I'm worried about my country," says Humberto. "I love my daughter, and I love my country. I don't want my daughter to grow up and be a prostitute." Cubans are worried about the state of the economy, how to get by day by day, but they are also worried about ethical matters, about values. The "dollarization" of the economy—a recent reform that allows Cubans to hold dollars and to spend them in special stores—may have been economically necessary to encourage Cubans living in the United States to send money to relatives here (remittances from abroad is a major source of hard currency for many Third World countries), but it is also responsible, at least in part, for the rise in crime, in prostitution, in hustling. Parents are worried about their children. (I should note that by American standards Cuban children and Cuban teenagers are remarkably well-behaved: respectful of their parents, polite to other adults, and neither loud nor rowdy in groups. Doubtless there are exceptions, but the contrast with the American norm is striking.)

Humberto and I walk past the U.S. Interest Section-in earlier days the U.S. Embassy which looms large over this section of the city. Humberto is a philosopher, and a party member. His intelligence and quick sense of humor makes him a delightful companion. He's explaining to me about Fidel jokes.

"Cubans are funny," he says. "Fidel isn't held in awe, as if he were a god or something. No. Not at all. He's considered more like an uncle. People talk about him that way, like they know him personally. Complain about him. Joke about him. Yes, there are lots of jokes." Humberto offers an example:

"On certain days, the U.S. Interest Section takes applications for visas. On those days long lines form. One day Fidel pulls up to the Interest Section, sees the line, gets out. As he approaches the man at the end of the line, the man sees him coming and runs away. So does the next, and the

next, and the next, until pretty soon there's only one man left. This last man turns around, sees Fidel, and he too starts to run, but Fidel stops him.

"Why are you running away?" he asks. "What you are doing is not illegal. We do not prohibit people from applying for exit visas." "The man looks puzzled. 'But if you're leaving,' he replies, 'why should we?'"

Humberto explains that he doesn't consider such jokes "counter-revolutionary," "On the contrary," he says. "As long as people keep telling jokes, I'm not so worried. But if they stop telling jokes . . . then I worry."

Assata Shakur is speaking to our delegation this evening. She arrived a little late. I was getting worried, but then I saw her car racing up the entrance to road to the Villa Pan Americana, the hotel complex where we are staying. It's a Po!ski, an old Polish car that she—and those Cuban mechanics who are such geniuses—have somehow kept running. She's smiling and animated, but she seems somehow distracted. She begins her talk by explaining why.

By way of introduction I tell the audience a bit about the woman who is about to speak. We hear constantly about Cubans fleeing to the United States. But sometimes flight is in the opposite direction.

I read her autobiography, called simply Assata two years ago. It opens in 1973, on the New Jersey Turnpike. At that time Assata Shakur is the most wanted woman in America. She's a member of the Black Panther Party—an organization specifically targeted for destruction by J. Edgar Hoover and the government's secret COINTELPRO operation. She has been charged with dozens of crimes—none of which is she ever found guilty of committing.

There is a shootout on the New Jersey Turnpike. Her best friend Zaid Malik Shakur is killed. She is terribly wounded. A police officer is also killed. Assata is taken to jail, brutalized, charged with murder.

The rest of the hook details, in alternating chapters, how Joanne Byron, a precocious young girl from New York City came to be Assata Shakur, and how Assata Shakur came to be in Cuba. (In one of those farcical trials that marked the era, she was found guilty of murder. Somehow—she keeps the details vague—she escaped from prison.)

Assata begins her talk by apologizing for not having a polished presentation to give. Earlier in the day she had received a phone call from a close friend in Los Angeles. Her friend's son—a bright, promising young African-American, college hound—had been shot in the head and heart. She's still reeling from the news.

Assata gives a short talk, answers many questions. As always she's sharp, eloquent, combining

high-spirited humor with serious political analysis. There's time for one more question. "You've lived in Cuba for more than ten years," I ask. "You've raised your daughter here. How do you think it's going to come out? Will the Revolution survive?"

She inhales sharply, responds quickly, almost to herself, "Henry asks Helen, but Helen ain't tellin'." She rocks forward in her chair and cups her face in her hands. She pauses for moment, as if deep in thought.

Then she straightens up, and I can see that her eyes have swollen slightly. She's holding back tears. "I don't know what is going to happen here," she says softly. "I can't predict the future.

"But I will say this. I hope no Cuban will ever have to know what it is like to have a bright, promising son shot in the head and heart for no reason at all. I hope no Cuban will ever have to live in a place where it takes an act of courage to walk out the door to go to school. I hope no Cuban parent will ever have to send a child to a school that has had metal detectors installed at the entrance. I hope no Cuban will ever have to live in a society where people are left homeless in the streets, where they have no access to medical care, where the schools are like prisons.

"I don't know what is going to happen here. I can only hope that Cubans do not lose what they have gained. I can only hope."

I'm in the Dean's Office, sitting at a table, discussing the upcoming conference program. Present are the dean, the head of the Graduate Program in Philosophy, and four other key Cuban conference organizers. It occurs to me that Raul (the translator) and I are the only men at the table.

Humberto, representing the Institute for Philosophy, is giving a lecture at one of Havana's major hospitals, to a group of philosophers from that and other hospitals. (Every hospital in Cuba has a philosophy faculty.) He's invited me to come along, so we'd ridden our bicycles over there together. In attendance are six women and three men. One of the women has brought her daughter with her.

The director of the Institute for Philosophy is a woman. The vice-director of the Institute for Philosophy is a woman.

During our visit to the Pedagogical Hospital, it is remarked that at the time of the Revolution there were 6000 doctors in Cuba, of which 3000 fled to the United States. Now there are 50,000 doctors in Cuba. Slightly more than half of these are woman.

A thought crosses my mind: I know why the Cuban Revolution will succeed. It's run by women.

An exaggeration, of course. The top leadership is mostly male. Rut it does seem to me that the

Cuban Revolution has the allegiance of its women to a much greater degree than had the regimes of Eastern Europe or the Soviet Union. The effects of the Revolution were direct and immediate. The sex industry that figured so prominently in pre-revolutionary Cuba was abolished. The equality of women before the law was proclaimed. Young women joined young men in the first years of the revolution in the massive mobilization to bring literacy to the countryside. Divorce laws were liberalized, and contraception made readily available. With employment guaranteed no woman is economically dependent on a man.

Also important, I think, is the way Cuba treats its children. Cubans love their children in an open, demonstrative way that leaves no room for doubt. (I'm told that differences in child-rearing practices made it difficult for Cuban families to socialize easily with Russian families. The latter were perceived to be excessively harsh in dealing with their children, which made Cubans uncomfortable.)

This love has been institutionalized in important ways. Every pregnant woman is given extensive pre-natal care—eight to twelve visits from the family doctor. Every Cuban child is guaranteed a ration of milk each day. Every Cuban child sees a doctor regularly. (A Canadian research team looking into Cuba's health care for children during the special period was also housed at the Villa Pan Americana. A member reported that they were amazed at how well the system continues to function, given the massive contraction in the overall economy. Clearly the government has made children's health a high priority.)

It's interesting to note—symbolic in a way—that Cuban hospitals treated 11,000 Chernobyl children. No other country came close to extending that kind of help—not Sweden or Germany or any other "advanced" country. God knows, not the United States.

(Given the slash and burn applied to public health and public education over the past decade and a half, given the well-funded resistance today to universal health care and equal spending on education, no one should say that America loves children—not its own nor anyone else's. Individuals might love their own children, but we don't love, collectively, our children.)

I accompany Humberto to the day care center, where he has to pick up his three-year old son. There are few toys in evidence, but the place is alive with activity. When I start taking pictures, the bolder kids come forward, deeply curious. 'they approach, then pull back when I point the camera at them. This develops into a kind of game. I'm struck by the fact that no one gets wired up by this, no one gets excessively loud, no one vies aggressively for attention. (Imbued with the mistaken sense that I'm good with young children, I often do such things with American kids. Invariably the excitement level goes up to the point that I have to, awkwardly, call the game off.)

I'm also struck by the rainbow. The kids are a Benetton ad from blue-eyed blond (a couple) to black (more), and every hue in between. It's the kind of mix you see on Sesame Street and other TV shows at home, but rarely in real life. The kids are wearing only shorts (into which they

change when they arrive in the morning), so the rainbow beauty is heightened even more. They all look healthy and well-fed. They all seem alert.

I take lots of pictures.

Cuban contradictions. There are more cars on the streets this summer than last. Also more dogs.

There are more dogs because people are hungrier. It's harder to feed your pets, so you turn them loose.

The cars surprise me. All the reports I've seen say that the economy has sunk even further, that Cuba, with almost no oil of its own, has less hard currency than ever before with which to meet its energy needs. Why then are there more cars on the street?

I put this question to Juan Antonio Blanco at dinner. (Juan Antonio is the director of the Felix Varela Center, one of Cuba's few NGO's "non-government organizations.") He provides the answer. "The gasoline ration has not gone up, but there is gas to buy with dollars—those dollars coming from relatives abroad and from tourists. The government is quite willing to spend dollars to import extra gasoline for the dollar market, because it can recover the dollars at once."

Makes sense. And it's a convenience as well. On several occasions Cuban friends were willing to take us places if we could give them money for the gasoline. Last year this was much more difficult. Last year it was illegal for Cubans to have dollars, so such a transaction would have involved some sort of subterfuge, and the gasoline itself would have been harder to find.

Cuban contradictions. Life is more difficult now. It's easier now to have friends over for dinner.

Romelia Pino, the vice-director of the Institute for Philosophy, wants to show me her "special period" kitchen.

"Here's our gas stove," she says, gesturing to a small range.

"It's our best means of cooking. But gas is often in short supply, so here's our second line of defense." She points to a hot-plate.

"But we often have blackouts, so here's our third option." She indicates an odd contraption sitting on the sink. I'm told is a homemade kerosene cooker. My attention is called to a large can fastened to the wall several feet above the cooker, with a plastic tube descending to it. Yet another tribute to Cuban ingenuity.

Cubans are quite proud, and justly so, of their inventiveness. Romelia shows me a kerosene "candle" made from an old toothpaste tube. While she's explaining that, I notice a man take a

bottle of alcohol from the top of the refrigerator, take off the cap, to which is attached a metal brush, strike the brush, wet with alcohol, between two strips of metal with wires attached mounted on the wall. There's a spark, then a flame. He lights his cigarette with a "special period match."

During my two week stay in Havana I am invited to dinner six times, with six different families (apart from the one with whom I stayed the first week). On every occasion the meal is excellent—often creative (special-period mayonnaise—one egg and some oil to which is added onions, garlic and a well- mashed potato), but invariably delicious. It's not easy to have guests over. It takes advanced planning and often the help of neighbors and friends. Help also from the dollar stores and perhaps the black market. But it can be done. More easily this year, it seems, than last year.

It can't be denied that there's much discontent in Cuba. Living standards have tumbled. The "special period" drags on. I ask Humberto if most people still support the Revolution. "Yes," he says, "I think so. I think the majority of the population supports it." He adds somewhat wistfully, "Maybe it's only 51%, but I think the majority supports."

The discontent seems most acute in Havana. The housing shortage is severe. The government made no real attempt to restrict migration from the countryside after the Revolution, so the population in Havana has swollen to 2.5 million, a quarter of Cuba's total. Unlike most Third World countries, Cuba does not have an overall population problem, but it does have one in Havana. With resources now strained overcrowding is worse than ever, since housing stock is deteriorating faster than it is being replaced.

Transportation is also more difficult in Havana than elsewhere. You have further to go in a big city to get to work than in a small town. You have to ride your bike further. The long wait for a bus is more aggravating. And of course you are further away from where the food is grown.

The future of Cuba may well be decided, not in Havana, but in the countryside. At this moment, in the countryside, a massive experiment is underway. Last fall, suddenly, virtually all the state farms were broken up, turned into producer cooperatives. This is a major reform.

On Saturday a group of us, twenty-two in all, visit one of these new ventures. On the bus taking us there Miguel Limia, a researcher from the Institute for Philosophy who has been investigating four cooperatives in the area answers our questions. (Philosophers do lots of interesting things in Cuba.) Once there we meet for several hours with the leadership council. Here's some of what we are told:

The cooperative we are visiting is a sugar cane cooperative. Most of the new cooperatives are sugar cane cooperatives, since most of the farm land of Cuba is planted in sugar cane—part of the ill-conceived, Soviet inspired "socialist division of labor." Like all cane cooperatives this one is quite large, some 3000 acres to be worked by 126 workers—former employees of the state farm.

The land still belongs to the state, but the workers can use it free of charge. The existing equipment was divided among the four cooperatives that formerly comprised the state farm. The cooperatives been granted long-term loans with which to purchase this equipment. The equipment now belongs to the workers, as does the crop—which will be sold to the state.

The leadership was initially appointed, but all will have to stand for election in the future. 'the workers all meet once a month to decide on things. They decide the work norms, pay scales and what will be done with the surplus (if there is a surplus). They can also enter into agreements with other cooperatives concerning the renting out of equipment.

The cooperative can also engage in food production for their own use. This is a major benefit that has been quickly seized upon. The cooperative raises most of its own food—mostly fruits and vegetables, rice and beans, but they also have pigs, and are making plans for chickens, rabbits and a fish pond.

They are also planning to construct some housing units for the members most in need, and there is talk of constructing a recreation hall.

Miguel cautioned us on the bus against drawing conclusions too hastily from this one cooperative. It's one of the best, he says. Others are having more difficulties. He also insisted that we not view this as a finished process. Various pieces of the reform will have to be modified. In particular—all the economists with whom I talked seemed to agree on this—in some form or another a farmers market will have to be reintroduced.

The point of the experiment, which is stated repeatedly, is to make the workers the owners of their product—so that they will feel a sense of responsibility for their labor. The goal is to increase productivity. Cuban socialists now invoke what is often regarded as an anti-socialist mantra: what is owned by everybody is cared for by nobody.

The workers with whom we visited are interested in productivity, but at this point they seem to be relishing above all their (relative) autonomy. Their enthusiasm is palpable.

"What about other benefits?" a member of our delegation wants to know.

"What will you do about health care and education?"

The director of the cooperative, to whom the question was addressed, seemed puzzled. "Those things are free, of course. This is just one more place in Cuba."

On the plane from Montreal to Havana I found myself deeply anxious. I've come to care deeply about the fate of the Cuban Revolution. It holds such promise, but it now seems so precarious. The reports in the press have been ominous: defectors, Cubans occupying embassies demanding exit visas, the flood of refugees continuing unabated. Letters I'd received from friends in Cuba

confirmed that life has gotten even harder than it was last year—and that had been harder than the year before, and that year harder than the one before it.

"The recovery is like God. It's everywhere, but nobody can see it."

I was deeply apprehensive about seeing the friends I now have in Cuba—good people who, as of last year, had continued to believe in the ideals and promise of the Revolution. How many of them would now be demoralized, ready to quit, looking for a way out, a way North? Could I blame them? These are people with lives to lead, families to raise. How long can one persevere when the tide of history seems so set against you?

On the plane back to Montreal I am in a different mood. The night before I woke in the middle of the night. I was thinking/dreaming of certain friends. Also of my youngest daughter, who is 21. I was saying the them—and to her. "You must go to Cuba next year. You've got to see what's happening there." I was saying that not in anguish but with hope. Something important is happening in Cuba, important not just for Cubans.

I feel pretty sure now that the Cuban economy is going to turn around. There are so many smart Cubans pushing for the sorts of reforms that should pay off—above all in agriculture, but elsewhere also. Not surprisingly, many are looking to China—not as a model to copy slavishly (they've been burned by such copying before), but as an example of a reform path that avoids the chaos of Eastern Europe, indeed a path that has produced spectacular results. The economy will make it. I'm prepared to make that prediction. But will the Cuban Revolution survive? Those ideals and accomplishments that exert such a pull on Left intellectuals like myself?

That's a harder question. An intellectual and moral struggle is now underway in Cuba, a groping for a path that will produce economic results without sacrificing what is best about Cuba. I don't know how this will come out. This I can't predict.

But one thing I will say. The Cuban Revolution has produced something that the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe did not. It has produced a culture a living culture of dignity and depth. I would say that this, more than any other factor, explains Cuba's remarkable resiliency.

Think about it. What would have happened to the "miracle" economies of South Korea and Taiwan if suddenly, overnight, 85% of their trade collapsed? Can we imagine them lasting even six weeks without troops being called out to crush the students and strikers in the streets?

Think about it. Cuba has stood absolutely alone now for half a decade against "the world's one remaining superpower." And it has not faced "benign neglect." Is it any wonder that Cubans still carry themselves with an unpretentious, non-posturing pride.

We're not talking here of a militaristic, chauvinistic culture. We're talking about a culture that has made an Argentine doctor who died in Bolivia its preeminent icon. We're talking about a culture of color and music and dance, a culture where adults love children, and not only their own—my God, they even love teenagers. We're talking about a culture that draws its strength from the racial mix of its past. (The only monument along the Malacon that flies the Cuban flag is that of

Maceo, the great Cuban general, a black man, who knew that the war against Spain would become a war against the United States.) We're talking about a culture that is really trying to come to grips with racism, sexism, even its own shameful homophobia.

And the Cubans ride bicycles and worry about the environment.

I don't mean to gloss over the real problems in Cuba. All major decisions come from on high. Many institutions are rigidly bureaucratic. Dissent is tolerated -but only within carefully circumscribed bounds. People are imprisoned who shouldn't be. People are hungry—and what they do get to eat often isn't very good. (Patsy ate for several days in the faculty cafeteria at the University of Matanzas. The blue- green semi-meat she just couldn't swallow.) Certain reforms—principally the encouragement of tourism- -may be exacerbating the problems of racism and sexism in Cuba. With the black market so widespread and conditions so hard, few Cubans can get by without breaking the law. Corruption and cynicism are on the rise.

And yet It's important that the Revolution survive. It deserves our support. I think so. Not only for abstract reasons— proof that the socialist project has not failed but more concretely: there are so many good people in Cuba still fighting for the dream that many of us have dreamed. Whether they know it or not, they are fighting for us as well as for themselves. We owe it to them to lend a hand.

The morning the North American delegation left Miami for Havana, it was noticed that there was blood on the floor of the lobby of the Ramada Inn where they were staying. There had been a robbery the night before. That night also a man with a rifle had been firing at passers-by from a Miami rooftop.

On our return to the United States we were barraged with the news I hadn't heard in Cuba: O.J. Simpson had apparently murdered his wife, nearly decapitating her with a hunting knife. The subsequent police chase was covered live, millions waiting (hoping?) for an on-camera suicide. The next day a former airman went on a rampage at an airforce base in Washington, killing 5, wounding 18, the victims ranging in age from four to 72.

Perhaps that dead dog is a more apt metaphor for our own culture. Except that the dog isn't dead. It may be sick, perhaps even terminally so, but it could become (even more) vicious. Check out the upcoming House and Senate races; tune into talk radio. (I heard G. Gordon Liddy this morning attacking the ban on semi- automatic assault weapons, and quoting Jefferson on the right to revolution. He and his avid listeners are not dreaming of a Socialist revolution.)

Let us hope that Cuba survives.

David Schweickart

June 23, 1994