

CUBA 1996--VIGNETTES AND REFLECTIONS

People are hungry, frustrated, and tired of waiting in long lines for pitiful goods. Sugar, coffee, and rum--the backbone of the Cuban economy--are now completely out of reach of most locals.... During good months, a concoction of soy, gristle and meat, euphemistically called hamburger, is distributed sparingly. But many Cubans haven't tasted beef or pork in years. Some have sold jewelry and family heirlooms to buy food, and a few admit to turning to cats and dogs for survival....

--From a Cuba guidebook, 1996 edition, published in Britain

Clinton, Yeltsin and Fidel each place a telephone call to hell to get the devil's view concerning various matters. The phone bills come to \$1 billion, one billion rubles and one peso respectively. "Why the difference?" Fidel asks Satan. "For you," Satan replies, "it's a local call."

--a Cuban joke

I used to be a teacher, but now I drive a cab. There are too many things wrong with this country. We tried socialism. It was a good idea, but it didn't work.

--From a conversation with a taxi driver, my first day in Havana

Well, what is the truth about Cuba today, late June, 1996? By the end of my first day in Havana, I'd read or heard all of the above. I was more than a little depressed. Now, after three weeks in the country, I'm home and thinking back.

It's the first week, and I'm staying with Humberto, his wife Estraella, and their two children. Their apartment is small, but it has three bedrooms, one of which I'm occupying. We're in the section of Havana where many of Cuba's impressive scientific research centers are located. (There are 35 universities in Cuba today; in 1959 there were three. There are now 100 research facilities; in 1959 there were none. No other Third World country comes close to matching Cuba's research capabilities. Many of Cuba's pharmaceutical and biotechnological products are being marketed internationally.)

Estraella works as a software designer at the National Center for Scientific Research located nearby. She's good at her work, and she likes it. She's staying home now taking care of eight-month old Gabriella. (Cuban women are allowed a six month maternity leave with full pay, and another six months at half pay. Her job will be waiting for her when she returns to work, which she is eager to do.)

Each morning Humberto and I make the hour-long bicycle ride to central Havana, he to the Institute for Philosophy, where he works, I to the University of Havana, where I'm helping to prepare the program for the upcoming conference, the Eighth Conference of North American and Cuban Philosophers and Social Scientists. Forty-five North Americans will be arriving this weekend, to be joined by sixty or so Cuban academics.

On the way home, we swing by the neighborhood (free) day-care center. The center is beautiful--clean, well-staffed, filled with exuberant kids. There aren't any hungry or malnourished children here. Every child in Cuba is entitled to a liter of milk a day until the age of seven. As with all Cubans, their health care is free. To be sure, the government has not always been able to keep to its commitment during the terribly difficult "Special Period" that has followed the collapse of the Soviet Union and the tightening of the U.S. blockade. Many medicines, for example, are still in short supply. But it's noteworthy that Cuba, a Third World country, still has the demographic and health statistics of a First World country--infant mortality rates lower than many U.S. cities (9.4/1000 as compared to 36/1000 in Mexico or 44/1000 in the Philippines), small families (no population explosion here), life expectancy the same as the U.S. (74 for men, 78 for women), almost all children born in hospitals, near universal literacy.

Five-year-old Camillo climbs onto the carved wooden seat Humberto has mounted on the bicycle in front of the regular seat, and off we go. As we pull up in front of Humberto's housing complex, I'm struck by its resemblance to a public housing project at home: the building is run down, in need of paint and repairs; the "park" between his building and one across the way is full of weeds and too much trash. Then I notice something else. The vacant spaces between buildings have been turned into gardens. Small sheds have been constructed. People are growing vegetables, raising chickens and even a few pigs. Now I know why, even though I'm in a city of two million, I was awakened this morning by a rooster crowing.

I look again at the park, and I realize I'm looking at something almost never seen at home. There are lots of black children and teenagers in the park. But lots of white kids also, and every shade in between. And they are all playing together. The teenagers are playing soccer. Little kids are running about. A group of young girls are swarming all over a large tree branch that has come down in a storm, standing on the thick part, making it bounce up and down as they hold onto the smaller branches. "I'm not at home," I find myself thinking. "I'm not in Chicago. I'm in the middle of public housing project, but there are no gangs, no drugs, no guns. Black and white together. No fear." As Assata Shakur (ex-Black Panther, once "the most wanted woman in America," now a political refugee in Cuba) remarked during her talk with our delegation the following week, "In Cuba, kids can still be kids."

(Assata raised her daughter in Cuba. Her daughter returned to the U.S. for college, and now, having graduated from Spelman University with high honors, has accepted a four-year scholarship to the University of Chicago's graduate program in Fine Arts.)

"This neighborhood has become so violent! I've lived here for thirty years. It has never been like this."

Humberto's mother is very agitated. He's stopped by to see her, as he often does, on his way home from work. Later, as we bicycle home, he explains. The back wall of his mother's property serves as the back wall of another house. There's an open window in the wall, and the kerosene fumes from the cooker the elderly woman who lives there is using has been bothering Humberto's mother. In spite of his mother's complaints, the woman refused to close the window, so Humberto's mother blocked it off with a piece of cardboard. But yesterday the woman's son, who is a police officer, punched through the cardboard, knocked it down.

Urban violence in Cuba.

Humberto and I are bicycling through "Scholar City," a large educational complex where Humberto had gone to elementary and high school. He's feeling nostalgic. "Right there, next to that bush. That's where I had my first kiss." He can no longer remember the girl's name, but he remembers the kiss.

Before the Revolution, this complex was Havana's largest military base. After the Revolution the barracks were converted into classrooms. From behind one of the buildings we can see the remains of an airstrip that has been mostly torn up and turned into a garden. The section is still military property. The Cuban military have been instructed to become self-sufficient in food, which for the most part they have.

As I'm about to take a picture of the runway/garden, a man comes out of the building to stop me. Humberto talks to him, calms him down. Cubans are very security conscious these days. There are miles of tunnels under Havana. In Holguin we saw a bomb shelter in the front yard of the building next to our hotel, and as we were driving to the beach, we passed a work brigade tunneling into the side a large hill on the outskirts of the city. Many Cubans are afraid that if the Helms-Burton and Toricelli bills fail to bring down the government, the U.S. will resort to more drastic measures. I want to reassure them that that will never happen--but then I remember Desert Storm and Baghdad. It's not hard, after all, in our "democracy," to whip people up for mass murder. All those yellow ribbons. It felt so good.

Havana is very different than it was when I was here last, exactly two years ago.

"More cars in the streets, fewer dogs," says Humberto.

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A lot more cars. And those emaciated, mangy dogs have disappeared. Not because they've been eaten. When times are very hard, dog owners turn their pets out. Now the dogs you see are with their owners, and often on a leash. The dogs look healthy. Their owners too. Almost every Cuban friend I meet seems to have put on a little weight, some more than a little.

The streets are much more alive now than they were two years ago. There are ice cream vendors, people selling snacks and soft drinks, lots of small family restaurants, lots of repair shops. There are also farmers' markets in every neighborhood. Prices in all these places are in pesos.

If you have dollars (and it's estimated that 50% of the population has access to dollars, mostly remittances from relatives abroad, but also payments to those in the tourist industry and bonuses to people in certain other selected sectors), the range of choices extends further. Havana now has a chain of Burgies and Rápidos, state-run fast-food restaurants, where \$1 will buy you a hot dog, \$2 a hamburger, 85 cents a beer. There are also dollar stores in every neighborhood where Cubans can buy food, small appliances and other items not readily available in the regular stores. Prices are high, by Cuban standards, but the stores always seem to be full of customers.

There's a lot of construction going on. It seems mostly confined to hotel construction and joint-venture enterprises, but more people are fixing up their houses, and some new housing is being built. Many buildings are still crumbling, but in some cases the process of deterioration, so acute two years ago, seems to have been reversed.

"There's an epidemic of pregnancies in Cuba right now," says Regula, the Swiss gynecologist in our delegation. "Epidemic" seems too strong a word to me; I haven't noticed many pregnant women--but then I don't notice a lot of things. Regula insists that her observation was confirmed by various Cuban women with whom she has spoken.

I invite Humberto and Estraella to join me at a paladare in the neighborhood. It's quite pleasant. The family, owning a spacious house, has turned their side patio into an open-air restaurant. We each order the chicken dinner and drinks. The food is simple, but tasty. The total bill, for the three of us, is \$10.10.

"So cheap," I say. "I can hardly believe it." I leave \$11 on the table.

"What are you doing?" asks Humberto.

"I'm leaving a tip."

"You shouldn't do that."

"Why not? We always tip at home. The guidebooks say tipping is expected now in Cuba too."

"You're not at home," Humberto replies quietly. "Do what you want. We'll talk about it later."

I leave the tip. As we are walking home, Humberto explains.

"The dinner seemed so cheap to you. It costs us 220 pesos. Do you know how much I make in a month? I make 350 pesos a month. The people running that restaurant are making a lot of money, a lot more than I make. They really don't need to be tipped."

Things are a bit topsy-turvy in Cuba right now. Part-time workers in the market sector make more than full-time, salaried state employees (most people); cab drivers make more than teachers. Raul, one of our translators who is an English teacher at the Pedagogical Institute, notes that many of his students, now working in hotels as bartenders and bellhops, make far more than he does. The government is trying to correct this imbalance by imposing a graduated income tax, but as we well know, it's hard to collect taxes from small, independent businesses--and Cuba has had no experience with tax collection.

Rafael's grandfather comes striding through the front door, a short, wiry man, wearing a campesino's straw hat, thick boots, and shirt open at the chest. We're in Julia, a village outside Bayamo. Rafael has come to visit his relatives. It's his first time ever in Cuba. (Following the main conference in Havana a part of the delegations has flown to Holgein, for a mini-conference. Rafael and I hired a taxi to take us to Julia.)

Rafael, my roommate for a week, a 28 year old philosopher of science, does not fit the Cuban-American stereotype. He grew up poor in Miami, his father having left his mother and their four children for a younger woman. He was politicized by a lesbian professor as an undergraduate, and further radicalized in graduate school, where he was elected president of the University of Oklahoma Minority Students Association. He has chosen to cast his lot with, rather than against, the Cuban Revolution, a choice carrying with it no small amount of risk.

Pleasantries are disposed of quickly enough, then Grandfather launches into a three-hour discourse on the problems of the Cuba, of the province, of agriculture. He's 86 years old, but sensible and amazingly lucid. (Okay, he gets some things wrong. When a neighbor drops in, Grandfather introduces me as "a world-renowned economist from the U.S." "I'm helping him out," he says.)

He tells a pointed joke. "Under socialism, the workers own the factories, the bosses drive the cars. Under capitalism, the bosses own the factories, the workers drive the cars."

Toward the end of the discourse, following the long litany of problems, I ask, "Do you think these can be solved?"

I expect lament and hand-wringing, but his response is immediate. "Of course they can be solved."

We move two houses down to visit Rafael's uncle. It's a simple, one-story house built of concrete blocks and set on a concrete slab. The interior walls are brick, eight feet high, not reaching to the ceiling which is thatched. The house has electricity, but lacks indoor plumbing. During the visit it is said, "we are poor, but happy." Later it is said, "we are poor, but we have our dignity."

There are two babies in the room. The baby one of Rafael's aunts is holding is unmistakably Afro-Cuban. I glance across the room at another aunt's baby: blond hair, blue eyes. Rafael himself, who looks quite Caucasian, has a black grandmother.

(Humberto remarked to me later, when I mentioned Rafael's family, that this is utterly commonplace in Cuba. "In fact," he said, "if a person is acting too 'white,' [I didn't ask him what he meant by that; I could guess] someone will say, 'okay, where are you hiding your grandmother? Have you put her in the cellar?'"

I've been asking questions. Rafael's uncle says he has a question for me. "What do you think of Cuba?"

It's a question I've thought a lot about. "I think Cuba is a miracle," I reply. "I sometimes think that Cubans don't fully appreciate how much you've accomplished. You've done what everyone says can't be done. You're a poor, Third World country, and yet everyone is fed, everyone has a home, everyone has access to medical care, everyone has access to education. There's no population explosion here. There's very little crime. That's not supposed to be possible. Where I come from, nobody thinks that's possible. The problems of poverty have no solutions. Here you've done what most people say can't be done, which is why the Cuban experiment is so important. The whole world is watching Cuba--and let me tell you, there are a lot of people in a lot of countries who want you to fail."

Rafael's aunt, cradling her black baby, answers immediately. "We won't fail. We've survived the worst. The last two years were terrible, but we survived. We won't fail."

I think she's right. I could be wrong, of course, but I feel confident in predicting that the Cuban economy will not collapse, nor will there be any dramatic political upheaval. The moment of greatest danger occurred on August 4, 1994, when a crowd in Havana, gathered along the wide avenue that runs along the sea, whipped up by the huge exodus of boat people then under way, began throwing rocks. What happened?

Fidel Castro himself entered the throng. "If you are going to throw rocks, I'll throw them too," he is said to have said. Hundreds of Havana residents poured onto the Malacon, to talk to and calm down the rioters. They succeeded. No tanks, no guns, not even tear gas. The "riot" ended.

The greater danger, it seems to me, comes from another direction. It's possible that the side effects of tourism, and the general cynicism and selfishness bred by the culture of consumption descending so powerfully on Cuba today may well undermine the great accomplishments of the Cuban Revolution. The body may be saved, but the soul lost.

Maybe. But maybe not. Many, many Cubans are aware of the danger. Not a few are thinking of creative ways to respond. The Cuban people have a history of beating the odds. The dice are still rolling.

Rafael and I hired a taxi to take us from Holguin to Julia. On the way back we stop to pick up two women who are signaling to us for a ride. They had been riding on bicycle pedaled by a young man (three to a bike is not an uncommon sight in Cuba), but it is starting to rain, so they've decided to hitchhike.

Many women hitchhike in Cuba, in Havana as well as in smaller towns. Few men, but many women. At first I wondered if these many women were the hordes of jineteras (prostitutes) I'd heard so much about. But no, the vast majority are just ordinary women coping with the transportation problem. "Aren't you afraid, hitchhiking or walking around at night alone?" I ask one of our female translators. "No," said Vilma, "we're all militia women. We know how to take care of ourselves." She laughed, and explained that she was only kidding; it was not being in the militia that made the difference. It's just a fact, she said, that the streets are safe.

Not completely safe. Shortly after dropping off the young women, we are flagged down again, this time by a middle-aged man accompanying an elderly man. It is explained to us that the old man had been mugged, and had 40 pesos stolen. The old man is clearly agitated, but he doesn't seem hurt. Still, we rush him to the nearby hospital (the Lenin Hospital) for a checkup.

Luis Aguilar, vice-rector of the University of Holguin, is proud of his university and of his province. They have more flexibility than Havana, are less burdened by bureaucracy. There are talented, creative people here, who get things done. An example: the agricultural frentes, one of which we visit.

Certain state farms in the area had been notoriously inefficient. A high-ranking party official approached the university, and asked them to come up with a plan to remedy the situation. So a core of faculty assembled, and in six weeks had come up with a program that was quickly approved. The farms were subdivided into small units, to be staffed by new workers and given

more autonomy. Where to get the workers? This is a major problem in Cuba. There is no land shortage in Cuba; there's a labor shortage in the countryside. How do you get people from the city to return to the country?

A call went out to the people of Holguin. We need to improve food production. Everyone knows that. Volunteers are needed, willing to make a two-year commitment to working in a frente, a small unit with about 250 workers. They will live in bunkhouses, and be able to visit their families only on weekends (because of transportation difficulties). The work will be hard, but rewarding. Their jobs in the city will be held open, but anyone who wishes to stay on after the two years will be encouraged to do so.

Two thousand workers were needed to work on twelve frentes; ten thousand responded. This was September, 1994. The two-year trial period is approaching its end. The members of the frente claimed to be quite pleased with the results. Many were planning to stay on. Housing was being built for those who wanted to move their families to the countryside.

I try to imagine a government official coming to Loyola and asking us to assemble some faculty and draw up a plan to solve one or other of our major problems. I try to imagine a plan drawn up and implemented in six months. It's hard not to envy my Cuban counterparts. So many are being called upon to deal creatively with real social problems. So many are responding. Concrete results are being realized. It's true, academics in the United States are privileged. We have more comfortable offices, vastly more resources at our disposal (libraries, computers, travel allowances, etc.), more freedom to pursue our ideas, however radical, reactionary, whimsical or weird they may be. But with respect to the real problems of our society, we are marginal. Pretty much irrelevant. Aren't we?

I'm speaking with Nelson Labrada, Vice-President of Holguin Province for Economic Development, a former student of Luis Aguilar. We are discussing the likely effects of a sudden end to the U.S. embargo--not all of which will be good. Deborah, a Canadian member of our delegation, asks about the condition of women during the Special Period. Nelson is somewhat evasive, so I repeat the question. We are about to embark on what could be a long discussion when a call goes out for us to return to the bus, to be taken back to the hotel. "Perhaps we can continue this discussion back at the hotel," says Nelson. I'm surprised by his suggestion. It's midnight.

Back at the hotel we assemble on the patio, four or five members of our delegation, eight or so Cubans. A round of beers is ordered. Deborah and I press the point we had been trying to make earlier--that the experience of Nicaragua and Eastern Europe should underscore how vitally important it is for a socialist society to maintain the allegiance of its women. Clearly the Special Period, hard on everybody, is especially hard on women--who bear disproportionately the brunt of shopping, cooking, cleaning, childcare. "Wouldn't this be the ideal time," we ask, "for the Party to urge men to do their revolutionary duty and share more fully in domestic labor?"

There is an extended discussion, mostly by the Cubans, who emphasize the enormous gains the Revolution has wrought for women--access to education, to jobs, to healthcare, to divorce, to childcare, to abortion. One of the women present is particularly articulate about these matters. Still, when the discussion finally comes to an end, at 1:30 a.m., I'm left with the feeling that the basic point Deborah and I had been trying to make had not been addressed.

The next morning I ask Diana, a young translator who had been present of the discussion, but who had not participated, what she thought. Diana is twenty-two, recently married. We are standing by ourselves in front of the hotel, waiting for the morning bus. Her face, normally so bright, clouded.

"Some men understand. Some men don't understand. Many men think they understand, but they really don't. It's discouraging."

It's our last night in Camaguey, a city of 200,000 in east central Cuba). From Holguin we've been bussed here for another mini-conference. Our hosts from the university are giving us a farewell party. The husband of one of the professors has brought his band to play for us, three guitars and maracas. The serenade us with traditional (Spanish) Cuban music, love ballads, "Guantanamera," and a newer addition to that genre, "Comandante Che Guevara." It's a lovely, relaxing evening. Following the concert, we dance.

Suddenly in the distance we hear the sounds of something else--a rhythmic clanging and throbbing. "The conga!" says Nemis, quite excited. "Rehearsal is going on." She explains that Carnival in Camaguey begins on Sunday. In Cuba Carnival is celebrated at different times in different cities. In Camaguey it's always the last week of June--but for the past three years, due to the shortages of the Special Period, there's been no Carnival. This year it's being held again, week-long celebration, with food, costumes, parades, and music. Everyone is excited.

We head for the street, drawn to the sound. Soon we are in the main street, and in the middle of Afro-Cuba. Each neighborhood has its own group of musicians and dancers, and they are lined up as if for a parade, stretching in both directions. It is a parade of sorts. The groups are stationary for ten minutes or so, then at some signal, all advance. At the head of each group are people carrying decorated columns, and behind them are the dancers (women), followed by the musicians (men), followed by people on foot or walking their bicycles. Almost all the dancers and musicians are black.

The music is--how do I describe it? The conga is all percussion. The instruments are all home-made. The big drums are made from wooden barrels with sheepskin stretched tightly over one end. Smaller drums have been fashioned from wooden boxes. There's another set of instruments, triangular pieces of cast steel that seem to have come from automobile wheel rims. The music is explosive, almost violent. Thick wooden sticks slam against the sheepskin; steel

bars hammer the triangles. The intricate rhythms begin loud and strong; the tempo, quick to begin with, increases steadily to near frenzy. Then suddenly the music stops. There's a pause. Then it begins again. The sounds reverberate off the walls of the buildings that line the narrow street and penetrate right through your body. You hear the sounds; you feel the vibrations; you move to the music. You can't help yourself. As Nemis remarks, it's impossible not to dance to the conga.

Humberto and Gilberto are concerned about a different kind of musical scene; they're upset. I've returned to Havana. It's my last day in Cuba, so I've invited Humberto, Gilberto (Humberto's research team leader) and their families to an afternoon of swimming, then dinner, at a pool and restaurant complex (formerly the estate of one of Cuba's pre-revolutionary presidents) located a block from Humberto's home. He and I and his family had gone there my first week. The place was virtually empty then. There's a \$2 admission fee to the pool--a considerable sum for the average Cuban. But I've decided to splurge. I still have a few dollars left. We'll sit around the pool, talk about Cuba, about politics and economics, discuss various articles Humberto and Gilberto have written, watch the kids splash about.

But now the pool is packed. "It's the weekend," Humberto reminds me. A large speaker system has been set up, and loud music is blasting away, Beatles' songs in Spanish and salsified. A DJ is regaling the crowd over the music, urging them to buy tickets ("Only one dollar!") for the raffle to be held shortly. Later a live salsa band will play, also very loud, and a dozen young women will stand in front of the band and dance in place to the music--not as entertainers, just to dance. Serious conversation is impossible.

Later, over dinner, Humberto tells me, "Gilberto and I are disgusted by this." So are their wives. We talk about it. "It's not the loud music," Humberto says, although Gilberto finds the new music lacking in integrity. "It's the lifestyle. Look at the way these people are dressed. Look at the way they are acting."

"Are the women jineteras?" I ask.

"No, probably not, not yet, but they are on their way."

There is much discussion among Cubans about the jineteras. Perhaps because of the recent government crackdown, they did not seem to me to be particularly numerous, but they are certainly a cause of concern to many Cubans. They are, as every Cuban will tell you, the byproduct of tourism. Cubans are deeply ambivalent about tourism. Most seem to be persuaded by the argument that Cuba had no choice but to promote that industry rapidly. Hard currency is desperately needed, and tourism can generate hard currency more rapidly than any other of Cuba's industries. And indeed it has. The number of tourists visiting Cuba has jumped from

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200,000 ten years ago to 800,000 last year (almost none of them from the U.S. since for us to visit Cuba is to "trade with the enemy," and hence is illegal). And the average tourist spends \$171 dollars per day. But still--there are many negatives.

Cubans tend to make two points about their prostitutes. First of all, Cuban women are in great demand by tourists, they say, because they are exceptionally "clean"--very little drug addiction, few incidents of AIDS (fewer than 150 deaths so far--as compared to 300,000 in the U.S.), low incidence of other sexually transmitted diseases. Secondly, this prostitution is not based on need. Unlike those in the sex trade in other Third World countries, women here are not prostituting themselves to feed themselves or their children, nor are they coerced by brutal pimps.

Cubans do not say, as is so often said elsewhere, that prostitution is inevitable, that it is the world's oldest profession, etc., etc., since Cubans know that prostitution, which had been rampant before the Revolution, had been virtually eliminated. The problem now, they say, is the culture of consumerism that is slowly (or rapidly, depending on who you talk to) infecting Cuban society, especially in Havana, especially the youth. "We have our own Generation X," Eduardo remarked. Politically apathetic, attracted by the lifestyle they see in American movies and in the tourist enclaves. Every Cuban with whom I talked about this has expressed deep concern.

It's my last night in Cuba. I'm back at Humberto's. The guests are gone. We're talking. Humberto asks what so many Cubans have asked me, "Why is the United States so hostile to Cuba?"

"You know what I really think it is? It's not the American people. Most people couldn't care less about Cuba. Cuba is irrelevant to their lives. And I don't think it's the Miami Cubans either. Political parties in the U.S. have no trouble ignoring the African-American vote, and there are 20 million African-Americans in the U.S. They could certainly ignore a million Cubans. Obviously it's not the military connection to the Soviet Union, which was the story we used to be told, since that connection has been broken and the sanctions, instead of lessening, have only tightened." (It's curious, isn't it, how that story, which used to be insisted on so vehemently by "realist" policy makers and political scientists has lost all credibility, and yet those who insisted on it, far from being chastened, have moved on without missing a beat to concoct other, even less plausible stories to justify the official policy?)

Humberto is nodding in agreement, so I continue. "I really think it's what Noam Chomsky has called 'threat of the good example.' If Cuba succeeds, other Third World Countries might be tempted to follow your path. That means socialism. That means markets and raw materials and cheap labor not so readily available to our capitalists, to our multinational corporations.

"Look, Cuba in and of itself is economically insignificant, but there are lots of Third World countries--the whole of Latin America, for starters. I really think there's a deep desire on the part of our ruling elite that the socialist 'disease,' which has almost been eradicated, be stamped out

completely. That's the metaphor that's always used--the 'disease' that can spread, can infect unsuspecting hosts. So long as one bacillus is left, capitalism is in danger."

"You know," says Humberto, "I think you're right. Something interesting happened recently. When those airplanes were shot down and the U.S. was so upset, we in our institute got an e-mail message from some of our friends in Venezuela who had been at our last conference. It was a very short message."

He thought for a moment, trying to think of the English translation. "It said basically this: 'Be strong. Stand firm. If you go under, we're fucked.'"

Michael Lebowitz, a Canadian economist in our delegation, used a poem by Bertolt Brecht as the epigram to a paper on the collapse of Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. It's a lovely poem.

Bishop, I can fly
 The tailor said to the bishop.
 Just watch how it works.
 And he climbed with things
 That look like wings
 To the broad, broad roof of the church.
 The bishop passed by.
 It's all a lie.
 Man is no bird.
 No one will ever fly,
 The bishop said of the tailor.

The tailor is done for,
 The people said to the Bishop.
 It was the talk of the fair.
 His wings were smashed,
 And he was dashed
 On the hard, hard stones of the square.
 Toll the bells in the steeple.
 It was all a lie.
 Man is no bird,
 No one will ever fly,
 The Bishop said to the people.

Well, Cuba is still in the air. She's lost a lot of altitude. Almost everyone expected her to crash. But somehow, calling on reserves of strength, intelligence and courage that few thought she had, she seems to have reversed her plunge. Can she really fly? And if so, to where?

David Schweickart

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