

Cuba Sí: Let's dream the impossible

Cuba seems to be easy target practice for journalists these days: Fidel is dying, the revolutionary ideal is dead, communism is rotten and the vultures are circling. Soon the US will overrun the island, capitalism will be reinstated and the paradox which is Cuba will finally be resolved.

Much of the comment is predicated on the accepted wisdom that life for Cuban Americans in Miami is necessarily better than life for the majority of Cubans on Cuba.

There have been a number of reports buying into this dominant paradigm, which are based on the personal testimony of one or two individuals (usually in Havana). Personal testimony is always valuable, it gives people a voice and can illuminate a wider truth, but it cannot be used on its own to construct an objective analysis, which requires at least the balancing of more than one perspective.

A more responsible viewpoint is that of Andrew Cawthorne, www.com/montrealgazette/news/story.html?id=2a5948d2-734e-48c2-be03-6bb2c6e0962b&k=31732

a Canadian journalist who has worked in Cuba for 4 years: 'Cuba is neither the paradise its supporters claim, nor the hell its detractors make it out to be.' It's clear that not everything is perfect in Cuba. But we have to be very careful when drawing implications from this: either that things are perfect elsewhere – or that everything in Cuba needs fixing.

Human development

Although George Bush's Commission for a Free Cuba (<http://www.state.gov/p/wha/rt/cuba/>) predicts a humanitarian crisis in Cuba when Castro dies, this is not backed up by evidence from other mainstream US sources: the CIA World Fact Book (www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/index.html/) and the Cuba Transition Project at the University of Miami.

Unlike a number of UK commentators, these sources do not dismiss Cuba's achievements in health and education so lightly. CIA published statistics (updated 8th August 2006) clearly show that the standard of life in Cuba is comparable to that of the US, in terms of:

Infant mortality: 6.2 deaths (Cuba) to 6.4 (US) per 1000 live births

Life expectancy: 77.4 years (Cuba) to 77.85 years (US)

Literacy rate: 97% (Cuba) to 99% (US)

Life in Cuba is better in terms of:

HIV/AIDS prevalence: Less than 0.1% (Cuba) to 0.6% (US)

Unemployment rate: 1.9% in Cuba to 5.1% in US

Population living below the poverty line: 12% in the US

As regards illicit drugs, the CIA report for Cuba notes: 'Territorial waters and air space serve as trans-shipment zone for US- and European-bound drugs' while the US entry reads:

'World's largest consumer of cocaine from Colombia; consumer of heroin, marijuana, and increasingly methamphetamine (Crystal Meth) from Mexico; consumer of high-quality Southeast Asian heroin; illicit producer of cannabis, marijuana, depressants, stimulants, hallucinogens, and methamphetamine; money-laundering center...'

Of course, one of the main entry points for illegal drugs into the US is Miami - where there is now a serious problem of adolescents accessing a variety of substances and a sharp increase in drug-related medical emergencies among the young, according to the US Drug Enforcement Agency. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/americas/771539.stm>

Transition

The Cuba Transition Project (CTP) carried out at the Institute of Cuban and Cuban-American Studies at the University of Miami (ICCAS) (www.ctp.iccas.miami.edu)

with funding from USAID, aimed to make recommendations for the reconstruction of Cuba 'once the post-Castro transition begins in earnest'. The CTP report was published in 2004 at around the same time as the original Commission for a Free Cuba report, but the former provides a remarkably unbiased analysis, charting Cuban progress from the revolution in 1959, through the Soviet era, to the present day.

As regards the period 1959 to 1991, the report bluntly states: 'While Cuba's growth performance was quite impressive, though heavily dependent on Soviet assistance, its performance in human development was spectacular.'

The Human Development Index is a composite indicator produced by the United Nations and measuring average achievement in three basic dimensions of human development - a long and healthy life (measured by life expectancy at birth), knowledge (measured by adult literacy rate and gross enrolment ratio) and a decent standard living (measured by GDP per capita). Criticisms have often been made of the United Nations Human Development Index for Cuba, because full information about the country's GDP has not been forthcoming. http://www.neweconomics.org/gen/m1_1_i2_inteconomics.aspx

Ranis and Kosack of ICCAS argue that: 'When income, always a questionable component, is removed, and the index is recalculated to show only countries' progress in health and education, Cuba comes close to the world's most advanced countries, including the US.' Their recalculations of HDI for the period 1985-1989 give Cuba an index of 0.89 compared to the US index of 0.91.

The ICCAS report continues: 'Though in some ways the shock of the Soviet withdrawal was painful, Cuba's resourcefulness has on the whole been remarkable.' Literacy levels and enrolment rates in primary and secondary education have remained at virtually 100%.

Also 'Cuba can be said to be attempting to pursue a regime of economic self-sufficiency, assisted by a still modest degree of marketization. It has attempted to do this without abandoning its core socialist principles...'

This report expressly advises against US intervention and a rapid switch to a free market economy: 'In order to move onto a higher growth path, Cuba will have to accelerate market reforms... But it must make the transition gradually, while maintaining its commitment to human development.'

Equality

The Economic and Social Data Service (ESDS) (www.esds.sc.uk/) using GDP data from the International Monetary Fund, agree with the ICCAS report: 'one indicator of good governance is a high positive difference in ranking between income and the human development index. The country with the highest positive difference is Cuba.'

The UN Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM) cannot be calculated for Cuba because some economic data is missing. However, the percentage of women members of parliament is available: 36% in Cuba (6th place in the world) compared to 14% in the US. (<http://www.emilyslist.org/about/>)

Another important indicator is the Gini Coefficient, the index of inequality between rich and poor (otherwise known as distribution of family income). (www.wikipedia/Gini_coefficient.htm) The CIA Fact Book lists the Gini Index for the US as 45 (99th place out of 124 countries).

The World Bank's 2006 'Equity and Development' report highlights the fact that: 'Economic inequality has continued to increase in the USA since the late 1970s. This inequality can be seen in numerous aspects of socio-economic life, such as growing income disparities, loss of opportunities – especially for women and minorities, inequality of health, education and crucially, political participation. One in eight people in the USA live in poverty and for a 'developed' country it has an unusually low life expectancy level. These factors highlight the extremely skewed benefits of the free market model, even within national borders.' (www.stwr.net/Global_Inequality.htm)

A report by Craig Torres and Alexandre Tanzi (Bloomberg News 4th August 2006) on the US Federal Reserve concerns about the widening gap between the haves and have-nots, quote Robert Reich, former US secretary of labour: 'Asset ownership is now the driving force behind income inequality.'

Sartoma Sefa-Boake, a black student from Los Angeles on a Cuban scholarship at the Latin American School of Medicine in Havana explained in a Granma International report (June 6 2004) that she could not afford to train in her own country because you have to pay between \$25-30,000 a year: 80% of the inhabitants in her neighbourhood don't have even medical insurance.

Racial inequality in the US was highlighted worldwide when Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans in August 2005, claiming 1,330 lives. The emergency services were unprepared, relief was slow to be mobilised and one year later, the city is still in reconstruction. Cuba's offer of 1000 doctors to help the relief effort was turned down by the US administration.

In contrast, Hurricane Dennis hit Cuba in June the same year, destroying 120,000 homes. But the administration successfully evacuated one and a half million inhabitants, with the result that only 16 people lost their lives. http://www.truthout.org/docs_2005/090305Y.shtml

It's ironic that Cuban-Americans are supporting the recent relaxation of US immigration controls, particularly in the hope that this will encourage Cuban doctors to move to Miami to provide better health care for them. <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2006/08/11/world/main1890012.shtml>

In other words, the American Dream, to which the rest of the world argues all Cubans have the right to aspire, is still as hollow as it was, when first criticised by Arthur Miller in the Death of a Salesman in 1949. This is the story of Willy Loman who is destroyed by his own

stubborn belief in the glory of capitalism and the redemptive power of success. At Willy's funeral, his son Biff says, 'He had the wrong dreams. All, all, wrong.'

Social capital

Since even US mainstream sources acknowledge Cuba's achievements, the question to ask is: So how does Cuba work? Because, however autocratic Castro may be, this level of achievement would not be possible without the collaboration of the rest of the 11 million population.

Cuba works on social capital. It is driven by the belief that the individual can achieve transcendence by working, not for money, but for the benefit of the collectivity. In return, your basic needs are met by the state. Your reward for working hard is recognition by your community or your colleagues.

This dream has become the unthinkable, the ultimate heresy, in a world driven by capitalism and elitism, where the individual can only achieve satisfaction or recognition by being smarter, richer and more powerful than everyone else. And the implicit theory of natural selection behind right-wing thinking is that it's right that the weak should go to the wall.

In Nicaragua of the 1980s, under the Sandinista regime, the term used for work as social capital was 'la trinchera'. Your work, whether as a soldier, a farmer or a university professor, was the trench from which you defended the revolutionary process, ensuring progress towards a better life for all.

It's a concept that is difficult to understand, unless you have seen it from the inside. But thousands of 'internationalistas' from the US, UK, other parts of Europe and Australia, who have taken part in solidarity brigades, or worked as state employees, in Nicaragua or Cuba over the years, have been inspired by this dream. We know that there is another reality.

So, to portray the whole of Cuba as an oppressed people is irresponsible. If commentators travelled outside Havana, they could not fail to notice that the vast majority of Cubans have a house to live in and a job to do, they work hard, come home every evening and spend time together as a family at the weekend.

Their children walk hand in hand to school, dressed in clean white uniforms, shoes on their feet, without fear of strangers or the need to be accompanied by adults. Around the island, which is large, beautiful and varied, there are state-owned holiday complexes, enabling ordinary Cuban families to enjoy other parts of their own country.

This is a far cry from the fate of millions of rural Chinese who work in urban sweatshops, young people living in dormitories, married couples living apart and only seeing their children, left at home with grandparents, once a year at Christmas (BBC series). Interestingly, Arthur Miller's production of *Death of a Salesman* in Beijing in 1983 was a huge success, showing that the theme has universal appeal. China is hailed as one of the developing world's great economic miracles; but her industries are built on foreign (US) investment and her people employed to produce consumer goods for the West.

<http://www.iht.com/slideshows/2006/08/03/business/web.0803produce.php?index=0>

In Cuba one of the revolutionary slogans proudly proclaims: 'We are poor in financial capital, but rich in human capital.'

Such slogans shouldn't be so easily sneered at. Enforced marketization in Nicaragua, classed as one of the Low Income Countries on the OECD DAC scale, has resulted in the privatisation of all health and education services.

http://wwics.si.edu/topics/docs/Gershberg_Paper.pdf

In contrast, universal access to culture is seen as a liberating force in Cuba. One of my enduring memories is the national ballet company performing Swan Lake. The huge theatre in Havana was packed - entire families, courting couples, groups of teenagers, regular guys who had just come on their own. It seemed more like a football match. People were eating hotdogs and drinking Coca Cola. Every time a well-known dancer came on stage, or performed a complex piece, a great cheer rang out and the whole audience leapt to their feet. Everyone could afford to be there – tourists paid US \$25 and student tickets cost Cuban \$2.50.

Cuba for a safe, healthy and peaceful tourism

Parts of Havana may be a mess and there are a number of reasons for this: reconstruction of the centre, the effects of hurricane damage. There are apartment blocks outside the city if people choose to live there. But in the rest of the country what is immediately striking is how clean and tidy everything is, with flowering hedges around neat, modest homes, cropped verges and empty gutters.

In June 2004, a British friend and I spent two weeks as tourists driving around Cuba in a hire car. We were able to go anywhere we chose, stay where we liked and talk to anyone who wanted to talk to us. Picking up hitch-hikers is encouraged because the state itself admits that the public bus service is inadequate.

This experience meant we met a whole spectrum of Cuban society: bar-tenders, tourist guides, women farmers, union officials, students, health workers, policemen, even a couple of bored housewives. The close historical link with the US is evidenced by the surprising number of blond Cubans of all ages: those families have stayed on there.

Each person had their own voice and felt comfortable about speaking their own mind. We found most Cubans to be at ease with themselves, confident and self-reliant. They are gentle people, who show affection to each other in public and are courteous to strangers.

But what surprised us most, after our previous experience in Nicaragua, was the lack of a 'party line'. We were also concerned about the general lack of a historical or political analysis, particularly the lack of 'heroic discipline' or national pride among the young tourist touts, and couldn't understand how Castro allowed that to happen. The fact is that Cuban youth can choose to be unemployed, although there are a variety of training opportunities in social work, sport, science, art...

There is now an attempt to introduce political education in the school curriculum for the new generation, which is important, so that, as in Nicaragua, they can tell the story of what Cuba has achieved, the other reality.

But we would have liked to see the state addressing the attitudes of young hustlers, the beggars, the bored housewives. They reflect badly on Cuba, peddling cheap stories about their country and exchanging their self-respect for a little hard currency. On the other hand, they do give the lie to reports of a regimented and directed population.

The main danger with tourism is that it contaminates the socialist dream with the ideology of consumerism.

In fact, many of the problems that recent commentators focus on in Cuba are clearly related to the increase in tourism – an economic necessity which is a direct result of the loss of support from the former USSR and the continuing sanctions from the US which mean that Cuban Americans are not allowed to send money back to Cuba.

Like the CTP, we found that the management of tourism was quite creative, with its ‘modest degree of marketization’. The state has joint partnership ventures with foreign hotel chains, so retaining control over half of the proceeds. Micro-enterprise is also legalised. Family businesses can flourish as long as they don’t employ other Cubans. People have the opportunity to change professions, so, for example, farmers can form small music bands and sell their own CDs (yes, I know, they always sing the same songs but they’re enjoying themselves) and former English teachers can become tourist guides.

Unfortunately, the increase in tourism has led to prostitution – but if Western men (and women) didn’t visit Cuba for cheap thrills with US dollars in their wallets, this wouldn’t be a problem. It’s been more than half a century since Cuba, under Bautista, was known as ‘America’s whorehouse’: the current clients are not from the US as it is illegal for them to visit Cuba.

And where was the international protest when the German government sanctioned the construction of a mega-brothel in Berlin for the 2006 World Cup - to which under-aged girls were trafficked from Eastern Europe, West Africa and Brazil?

Cuba is pro-active in addressing problems created by others. When you exit Havana airport there’s a nice female doctor who asks how long you’ll be in the country. If you’re only in transit, she says: ‘OK, have a nice stay.’ But if you’re there for longer, she’ll give you condoms and advice on how to avoid spreading HIV/AIDS.

A question of choice

The imprisonment of Cuban journalists in 2003 http://www.rsf.org/article.php3?id_article=18520 has rightly been condemned by the international community. Freedom of expression is a human right. Diplomatic relations with the EU broke down for almost a year. However, according to the then director of the British Council in Cuba, the crisis surrounding this was not helped by the fact that European embassies deliberately started inviting known dissidents to their cocktail parties.

As Cuba pointed out the following year at the WTO conference in Guadalajara (28th May 2004 Declaration) the EU chose to make no response to condemn the human rights abuses carried out by US military in the Abu Graib prison in Iraq (or indeed, at Guantánamo Bay), thus making Europe complicit with US crimes. Over the recent Middle East crisis, the EU also chose not to condemn Israeli force.

Reporters Without Borders has also criticised limitations on press freedom imposed by the US government since the attacks of 11 September <http://www.london-daily.co.uk/news/rsf.htm> The US state their project in the world is to spread ‘freedom and democracy’ but these truths are multi-faceted in any given context.

In Cuba open democracy does not exist in the sense that individuals do not have the right to undermine the concept of social capital, because this would reduce other freedoms. Saul Landau of the Institute for Policy Studies in Washington argues that by ‘giving people what they needed without demanding mature responsibility and by maintaining control of virtually

all projects, the Cuban government helped depoliticize the very people they had educated.’
http://www.tompaine.com/articles/2006/08/23/cuba_misunderestimated.php

Yet people still have their own opinions. One of our Cuban hitchhikers was a woman in her late twenties. She told us she had left school early (which you can choose to do) got married and had two children. Then she had decided she wanted to do something else with her life and was in the middle of training to become a nurse.

When we asked her about people feeling disaffected with opportunities in Cuba, she replied immediately: ‘It’s their choice. Yes, of course, it’s hard work to train and look after your family at the same time. But if you work hard you can become anything you want to be.’

Professionals do not need to beg on the streets in Havana: there is work for them if they choose it. Nor do they need to fear for the future of their children - who can enjoy a good university education completely free of charge, without accumulating student debts. They can aspire to be an international ballet star, an Olympic athlete, an award-winning scientist; they just can’t buy designer trainers.

Luisa, a lecturer from the University of Cienfuegos in central Cuba, visited the University of Wales at Bangor in 2005 to develop links with colleagues working on rural and community development. She has a severely handicapped child who needs 24 hour care – which is provided by the state. This means that, as a woman, a single mother, she is able to work full-time and pursue her career. While in the UK she was able to see the conditions for British academics: increasingly heavy workloads and lack of recognition by the state.

She heard that the Cuban authorities had been checking up on her progress here, in case she was thinking of staying. Rather than being upset by this, she merely laughed, saying: ‘they don’t need to worry! They must be crazy to think I’d want to live anywhere else (but Cuba).’

Let’s be realistic, let’s dream the impossible

I’m actually not a communist, I believe in free elections and a social economy. So, yes, perhaps Castro should have handed over power years ago. There are many other Cubans who have invested just as much social capital, who have the capacity to continue and develop the impossible dream. If Castro had had greater trust in the people, he might not have felt he needed to use such draconian measures against his political detractors at home.

But it’s not too difficult to understand that Castro wanted to keep control, when you look at the fate of Nicaragua. In twelve short years (1979 to 1991) the country experienced ‘the sunrise of the people’ - euphoria at ousting the dictator - carried out an award-winning literacy crusade, mobilised health and coffee brigades, diversified trade, suffered sabotage by the US economic embargo, the US financed contra war and the US propaganda machine, to end up with another US backed right-wing government.

After Castro’s death, the US administration is unlikely to follow the objective advice of the Cuba Transition Project. That doesn’t mean that the dream itself was wrong. Nor does it mean that the majority of Cubans will welcome US intervention. The key mistake is in assuming that Cuba is not ready for this eventuality, since Cubans from all walks of life, including Cuban-American taxi-drivers in Miami, will tell you: ‘Non, están preparados.’ (see also Chris Bickerton <http://www.spiked-online.com/index.php?site/article/1488/>)

For the rest of us, can we afford to dismiss the lessons that could be learned from Cuba: what worked and how; what didn't work and why? Above all, why should we wish to trample on this dream, when all we see around the world, for want of it, are recurring nightmares?

I may be wrong, but I'd rather be called a dreamer than be guilty of irresponsible journalism.

Patricia Daniel
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