

REFLECTIONS OF CUBA

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The accepted picture of Cuba as a decaying police state dominated by a mangy Stalinist despot (formerly a puppet) needed some focusing adjustments when two American Irish Catholic women arrived in Havana in June of 1991 for the Symposium on Behavioral Psychology. Having just left New York and Atlanta ABA, we kept blinking - sure that we would find the impoverished on the street. Where were the homeless? For that matter, where were the dirty streets? And the children, they were dressed in new clothes, albeit astro-tone tees and tennis shoes, but still...dancing and smiling plugged into walkmen.

Yes, Cuba is a police state; it is also a socialist country. Having been educated in the United States, we had not realized that there might be positive aspects to either of these characteristics. Believing the myths (revelations) of our free society, we were confronted with intelligent and open conversations with Cuban colleagues describing the many and profound problems they are attempting to address. Adequate housing, food, education, jobs for their developing country.... Are these issues central to our vision of the field of behavioral psychology? Do Americans still believe that there might be solutions to these problems? Have they ever believed that these might be issues of governance and behavior analysis?

Take housing as an example. Some of the housing in Cuba is as described in news reports. Structures are decaying. There is water and electricity; however, many electric lines are exposed to the elements. Paint is at a premium. Interiors may be painted but not exteriors. As with many other materials, it is not available due to the blockade. Not described in the press are the new apartments and revitalized areas of Havana. There are no homeless Cubans.

Take food as an example. It is being rationed. Since we visited in June, even cooking oil is being rationed. (This does not mean Wesson, rather, kerosene.) Being unsure what rationing meant, we asked what our colleagues in Psychology

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at the University had to do to get their groceries. (There are no stores as we know them.) Irene pulled out her ration book and showed us the writing by category and month of all the chickens, eggs, flour, milk, etc., that she had picked up at a center in her neighborhood. The lines we saw, did she have to stand in them? (They were very long.) No. Working women had a separate line from women who worked in the home. Family members had allotments according to their ages and developmental needs.

Take education as an example. Children are required to attend school for 12 years. There are no exceptions. Ten years of English are required. Entrance to one of the 35 universities and colleges is highly competitive; an interview is part of the admission process. In an area not exploited by the American government, we had questions. There were not many black students attending our lectures. When we asked why there were so few blacks in the Psychology Department, we were told that Cuban society is racially mixed and so there would not be quotas to include "black" students in university programs.

Take jobs as an example. The problem here (as elsewhere) is complex. All citizens are required to work, either at an assigned job or in the home. The society guarantees an appropriate job for one's educational level. Because the educational level is high, few desire to work as laborers. And yet there is a need for much manual labor in an underdeveloped country such as Cuba. With the aging of their population, there is a decreasing number of white collar jobs available for graduates. College professors, along with others, must work in the fields a minimum of two weeks per year during harvest.

Take health care as an example. Vaccinations for children are mandatory. There are over 40,000 physicians in Cuba. Many guests at our hotel were there primarily to receive quality health care. Tourists can receive two free medical consultations; a payment plan is available for further care. Cuba has developed a system of rural health care centers where physicians and their families live in apartments which are part of the health centers. This system has made medical care available throughout the island. Additionally, Cuba is exporting physicians and other health care workers throughout Latin America and the Caribbean.

To many Americans, the "Cuban problem" is Castro. Havana could be just like Miami, if it were not for Castro. When are they going to get rid of him anyway? (He has outlasted seven U.S. presidents, is that not enough?) It was interesting that Cubans do not see Fidel as the problem. They see instead many problems generated by the blockade, which required an ever closer relationship with Russia to guarantee their independence.

That Cuba, an island of 10,000,000, is only debilitated by an American economic blockade 30 years in duration appears to some people peripheral to the issue of "freedom." As we walked the streets of Old Havana watching the old Fords, Chevys, and Chryslers cruise by, it became apparent that freedom itself is a question. We are free to be homeless, free to be hungry, free to be illiterate, free

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to be unemployed, free to be ill? Is it possible to be in a city other than Havana and not see, hear and smell the homeless? Can an island so alive - with music and laughter - maintain its independence from US? "It is an issue of dignity." A visit to Cuba prompts many reflections on American society and the rules and contingencies governing our behavior.