

“Ours Is An Autonomous Revolution”

Impressions from a visit to Cuba, March-April 1999

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I visited Cuba with my family for two weeks in late March and early April 1999. Unlike my previous visits, which were confined to Havana, the trip took in the province of Pinar del Rio at the extreme west of the island, Santiago de Cuba in the east, and the province of Villa Clara whose capital, Santa Clara lies in the very centre of Cuba. We also spent some days in the tourist resort area of Varadero. In Santiago, Santa Clara and Havana I gave seminars on Globalisation and Caribbean Integration to members of the National Association of Cuban Economists (known by its Spanish acronym ANEC) which hosted my visit.

I am using this medium to record my impressions and to share them with friends and colleagues. Cuba remains a remarkable example of courage and determination in defending its national sovereignty in the face of almost overwhelming odds and of sustained commitment to social justice in spite of extreme economic difficulties. Not everything is perfect, and I am sure that I would have lots to complain about if I had to live the life of an ordinary Cuban. But I also believe that there is much that we in the rest of the Caribbean can learn—and take heart—from, subjected as we are to a daily barrage of individualist and consumerist values and the often demoralising effects of the ideology of globalisation.

General impressions

My first impression is that the worst of the economic crisis is over and that Cubans generally feel that the proverbial “light at the end of the tunnel” is in sight. This is in strong contrast to the sense I had on a visit in 1992, at the height of the “Special Period” caused by the collapse of the Soviet Union and other Comecon countries (foreign trade had contracted by 75% and national income by 35% since 1989). At that time the mood was one of depression bordering on despair. This time there was a feeling of self-confidence on having managed the crisis successfully and optimism regarding the future.

The most noticeable visual difference between 1999 and 1992 is in the area of public transport. The enormous lines of people at bus stops and heavily overcrowded buses—with people literally hanging on to the sides and backs of the buses—are no longer evident. Many new buses are on the road, the lines are shorter, and the buses are heavily packed on the inside but no longer on the outside! One was also struck by the ingenuity and adaptability displayed by Cubans in the field of transport. “Camellos” (Camels) is the popular name for a locally engineered bus consisting of a rig pulling a long trailer formed by the joining up of two bus bodies and capable of carrying up to 300 people. Re-engineered cars of 10, 20, 30 and up to 50 years vintage are everywhere to be seen, including a locally invented “stretch Lada” apparently made by joining up the front end, centre and back end of two or three old Lada motor-cars into a single, limousine-type

vehicle used as a taxi. Many gasoline engines have been retrofitted for diesel fuel, and we also saw a small truck powered by natural gas. Bicycles and motor-bikes have also been modified to become family transport vehicles by the addition of a variety of side-cars.

Our economist-driver in Santiago had a particular spin to all this. In other countries such as Jamaica and several African countries he had visited, he had noted that owning a new car is a status symbol. By contrast in Cuba, he claimed, driving an *old* car is a source of pride, for it is a testament to the inventiveness and ingenuity of the owner—and the older the better. “In Jamaica I saw cars thrown away on the side of the road that I would just love to get my hands on here, for I know I could get them back in service” he exclaimed. This struck me as an inversion of the normal values of a consumer society that is a direct result of decades of coping with the US blockade and the Special Period. (Many people have commented that Cuba is a paradise for lovers of classical and antique cars, to the point where this could become a tourist attraction).

The downside of the transport sector is that Havana and other cities seem to be continually overhung by a dense pall of pollution generated by exhaust fumes from inefficient engines, and asthma and other respiratory ailments have become a serious public health concern. Inter-urban transport evidently continues to be a problem, as shown by the prevalence of hitchhiking on the major Provincial highways.

From the outside and following overseas press treatment of Cuba, one can easily form the impression that the population is on the brink of starvation and in general suffering from the effects of an acute economic crisis. This is in stark contrast to the impression one gets when moving about the island. From one end to the other, the people appear to be well nourished, well dressed, orderly, and in good humour. Cubans enjoy sport—the finals of the national baseball championships featuring Havana against Santiago were in full swing and generated intense excitement. Other visible forms of recreation are going to the beaches, playing dominoes and chess on the sidewalks and in the parks, and just plain “liming” on the sidewalks and on the malecon (sea-wall) in Havana.

In the two weeks we spent travelling through six provinces we saw no homeless people and no street children. I saw only two people who appeared, by their physical appearance, to be indigent; both were elderly men. I saw two shanty communities—one in Santiago and the other in Santa Clara—both very small by Jamaican standards. Cuban officials readily admit that the housing shortage has been exacerbated by the material scarcities of the Special Period.

We were hassled by street vendors perhaps half-a-dozen times, but we never felt threatened, or the object of envy or predatory interest. Curio vendors took “no” for an answer without further argument. On this score alone Cuba is well placed to outperform Jamaica in tourist product. In Varadero town, tourists and Cubans mix freely on the streets and on the beaches without any apparent discomfort or friction.

As on previous visits, I was struck by the relatively low degree of visible inequality in Cuban society (although inequalities have indeed emerged in the Special Period, and I

talk about these later). What was noticeable on this visit was the high degree on inter-regional equality. The appearance of the people and public amenities in Santiago, Santa Clara, Pinar del Rio and Varadero was just about the same as in Havana itself. I did not see anywhere that could be classified as a “depressed region” in Cuba. Based on what we saw, heard and experienced one could readily agree with a Jamaican businessman who after returning from a recent visit wrote that “it could easily be argued that the Cubans enjoy a higher standard of living, literally speaking, than the vast majority of Jamaicans” (John Azar, letter in the Jamaican Gleaner newspaper, 4/3/99).

The economy

Official figures confirm a sustained economic recovery with positive growth rates since 1995. In 1998 growth was recorded in the following sectors: nickel 12 percent, tobacco 22 percent, metal machinery 10 percent, aquaculture 17 percent, lobster production 23 percent, tourism 19 percent, crude petroleum 13 percent, garden produce and vegetables 15 percent¹. Sugar production was down in 1998 but the 1999 harvest is running at 10 percent above the previous year. I was told of several instances of improvements in sugar milling technology resulting from the work of local research institutes, which would impact positively on sucrose recovery rates and on equipment downtime in 1999. Tourism is booming: the sector has recorded 18 percent average annual growth through the 1990s and room capacity expanded from 2,000 in 1990 to 29,000 in 1998. This, together with the flow of remittances from overseas Cubans, has alleviated the shortage of foreign currency and helped to stabilise the free market price of the US dollar, which is now steady at 21 Cuban pesos.

We asked particularly about backward linkages from the tourism sector to the rest of the economy. We were told that hotels are required to source their inputs of food and other supplies from state agencies. Imported inputs are allowed only where Cuban products of satisfactory quality are not available. As a result, the local content of the tourism industry had grown from approximately 10 percent at the beginning of the 1990s to an estimated 40 percent today².

Social services

We were impressed by the amount of social services which continue to be provided to the population. In Santiago, the President of the ANEC chapter in the province told us about the role of her 24-year old daughter who is a “Medico de la familia” (Family doctor). Family doctors are health care professionals who are assigned to households covering 97.6 percent of the population and who combine the training and skills of a medical doctor with the responsibilities of a social worker. For instance as soon as a woman becomes pregnant her Family doctor has the responsibility of monitoring and ensuring the health of the mother and the unborn child throughout the entire pregnancy. If the woman is unemployed the Family doctor identifies the nearest enterprise in her neighbourhood which is legally obliged to provide her with economic support for the duration of the pregnancy. For example if she lives near a hotel then the hotel must

¹ Carlos Lage (Minister of the Economy), “Economia cubana: recuperacion confirmada”, *El Economista*, Special Supplement, January/February 1999; p. 1

² Figure to be checked

provide for her, whether or not she works, or has ever worked, for that hotel. If she lives in a remote rural area then the responsibility is assigned to the local municipality, farm or other state agency.

Fresh milk is guaranteed to pregnant and lactating mothers and to infants, in the case of the latter the quota is one litre per day (our hosts in the guesthouse in Santiago were very upset when our children refused the fresh milk provided them at breakfast). Family doctors have also been engaging in intensive sexual counselling and education programmes with teenagers of both sexes in the families to which they are assigned. One result is that the average age of first pregnancy, which was formerly 14-15 years, is now in the region of 17-18 years and the average number of children per woman is now 1.56.

In Havana, another woman economist told us that she would never have been able to function as a professional without the level of state assistance provided to help her with her three children, two of whom are twins. Prior to the Special Period the state provided a nursing assistant to look after the child from 6 weeks after birth, thus allowing the mother to return to work. As a result of the Special Period this had been adjusted to 2 years, when the infant could be sent to a Nursery School.

These could hardly be isolated cases as Cuban social statistics show none of the precipitate declines in the health and education status of the population that have occurred in eastern Europe and the former USSR (where average life expectancy has fallen by 10 years, for example). For example the infant mortality rate has continued to decline and now stands at 7.2 per 1000 live births, one of the lowest in the world. Life expectancy has held steady at 74+, and other indicators such as the doctor/population ratio, education enrolment ratios, and teacher/student ratios have held steady, continued to improve or declined only marginally. In fact, a direct comparison with Jamaica shows Cuba as better off in several leading social indicators, in spite of its considerably lower per capita income (table below).

Cuba and Jamaica 1997 – some comparisons

	Cuba	Jamaica
Real GDP per capita, 1995 (PPP\$)	3,100	3,800
Life expectancy at birth, years	74.7	74.1
Infant mortality rate per 1000 live births	7.2	24.5
Population with access to health services, %	100	N/A.
Population with access to family planning services, %	97.6	63.6
Fertility rate, children per woman	1.56	3.0
Doctors per 100,000 population	518	57
Nurses per 100,000 population	752	69
Pupil/ teacher ratio, primary	13.1	31.4
Pupil/teacher ratio, secondary	10.1	19.5
Unversity enrolment per 10,000 population, no.	94	62
Adult literacy rate, %	96	85
Education expenditure % GDP	10.0	7.2

Sources: UNDP and national statistical agencies. N/A = Data Not Available

It is simple but basic things like these which I am convinced help to explain the remarkable resilience and stability of the Cuban system during the harsh economic conditions of the Special Period. A comprehensive study of the Cuban economy undertaken by the United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC/CEPAL) estimated that the effect on the Cuban economy of the interruption of trade relations with Comecon countries in 1990 was greater than that of the Great Depression of the 1930s. The study, prepared under the direction of a former Minister of Finance in the government of Mexico, concluded:

Given the magnitude of the external shock, the cost of the stabilisation policy turned out to be relatively low and its distribution more equitable in comparison with other Latin American economies, thanks to the policy of guaranteeing the employment and income levels of the population.³

The sense one gets in Cuba is that this and policies stem from a culture of commitment to the welfare of the population—a culture that permeates all levels of government and public administration and of the political process, from top down and from bottom up.

Institutional adjustment capabilities: the case of ANEC

There is evidence of a growing institutional capacity for economic adjustment on the part of the Cuban system. One notable example is ANEC itself (the National Association of Cuban Economists) which hosted our visit within Cuba. ANEC is Cuba's largest and strongest NGO. It has some 28,000 members—in Cuba the economics profession includes accountants and business managers, and these account for a large portion, if not the majority, of the membership. ANEC has established a full-fledged organisational structure with an elected Executive Committee in all 14 provinces and 169 municipalities, and a "Seccion de Base" (Base Section) in all major enterprises such as hotels.

ANEC has been completely re-engineered to meet the challenges of the Special Period. Formerly just a professional body that looked after the interests of its members, it is now a training and consultancy organisation with a mission to assist enterprises and ministries in upgrading their financial and business management. The context of this is the decentralisation of economic management and the requirement that enterprises become financially self-supporting as a result of policy reforms. As an ANEC officer explained it to me, "in Cuba we lacked a culture of efficiency and of economy" as a result of decades of central planning with guaranteed supplies and markets from the Comecon countries.

³ CEPAL, *La economía cubana. Reformas estructurales y desempeño en los noventa*. CEPAL and FCE, 1997, pp. 34, 66; cited by Ricardo Alarcon Quesada, "El milagro cubana y su futuro", *Tricontinental*, Year 33, No. 141, 1999, p. 7. Material in English is available in Angel Ferriol Muruaga, "Economic reform in Cuba in the 1990s", and Norman Girvan, "Cuba: Structural Adjustment with a Human Face?", both in *Pensamiento Propio*, No. 7, 1998.

ANEC's success in its new role can be gauged by the fact that it has so far executed a total of 723 consultancy contracts with 500 Cuban entities⁴. ANEC also conducted 1,392 training courses in 1998. Fees are charged according to the principle of "ability to pay"—services to social service ministries are provided gratis. As an NGO, ANEC is not a profit-making entity and consultancy income is used to cross-subsidise free services and for social benefits (such as life insurance) for the members.

There are no quantitative indicators of the impact of ANEC's services on enterprise productivity, but ANEC officers insist that the favourable impact is evident from their own experience and from the continued demand for their services. However such indicators could be useful management tools for ANEC, by permitting a comparison of the impact of its services in different industries and modalities, and in computing benefit-cost analysis of service delivery.

ANEC also provides social services to its members and to young people (ANEC Santa Clara, for instance, was running a small orphanage next door to its headquarters for seven children who had lost their parents). ANEC has also won the privileged status of a consultant NGO to the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC). This means that it is one of the designated NGOs to which all ECOSOC documents must be sent for comment (ANEC was the fifth NGO in the world to be so designated and had to submit to rigorous evaluation from ECOSOC). Just last week, ANEC was asked to chair the Consultative Panel of NGOs meeting in New York in May to consider progress in the implementation of the Programme of Action of the World Social Summit in 1995.

We were met and taken around by officers from the ANEC national office in Havana as well as the Provincial ANEC executive committees of Havana itself, Pinar de Rio, Santiago de Cuba, Villa Clara, and Varadero. We also met several ANEC members in the Base Sections. In Santa Clara and in Havana I had meetings lasting several hours with the full ANEC Executive Committees for their respective provinces. Each meeting was attended by 15-20 executive members, the majority by appearance in their 20s and 30s. The principal officers took turns in summarising the consultative and social services provided by ANEC in their respective provinces as well as the financial affairs of the organisation. They were articulate, energetic, and full of enthusiasm for their work. They answered all my questions readily and provided all additional information I requested. By the end of my visit I told ANEC officials that, of dozens of countries I had visited all over the world, I had never encountered an association of economists so well organised and mobilised for national development, and committed to this mission, as ANEC.

Incidentally, I learnt that ANEC had made 21 one-hour videos from the presentations and discussions at the International Meeting on Globalisation and Deveopment held in Havana in January. The videos were distributed to the ANEC chapters in all 14 provinces, where they we used as the basis of discussions at weekly meetings of the membership. The presentations on Caribbean Integration by Miguel Ceara and myself, for example, formed the content of one video which had already been viewed by the

⁴ Information taken from the Annual Report of ANEC's National Committee, November 1998.

ANEC members whom I met. By this means, the knowledge contained in the five-day meeting had been widely disseminated amongst the ANEC membership throughout the length and breadth of Cuba.

Other examples

I encountered other examples of the development of Cuba's institutional capacity for adjustment in the Special Period. In Santa Clara, I visited the "Instituto de Biotecnología de las Plantas" (Biotechnology Plant Institute). This was set up in 1992 at a cost of some US\$2 million; the fact that this amount was found for R&D at a time of acute financial constraint is itself significant. Counting with 7 research labs and a professional staff of 100, IBT has developed disease resistant varieties of the principal food, orchard and forestry crops cultivated in Cuba. These include potatoes, bananas, plantains, sugar cane, coffee, papaw, and pine. IBT produces vitroplants of the new varieties in its biofactory, which has an annual capacity of 4 million. IBT has generated the basic technology for Cuba's 15 biofactories with a total annual capacity of 60 million vitroplants, which is greater than that of the rest of Latin America and the Caribbean. IBT has also provided technical assistance and/or vitroplants to other Caribbean countries including St Lucia, Grenada, Haiti, the Dominican Republic and Belize. Hence, IBT has been a technological platform for the drive towards food self-sufficiency and agricultural export diversification in the Special Period.

I was also told about the "Foro de Ciencia y Técnica" (Science and Technology Forum). This is a national programme launched during the Special Period to stimulate technical innovations and inventiveness among farmers, production workers, technicians and professionals at the enterprise level. Prizes and special recognition are provided, and the winning inventions are diffused throughout the country. The programme is credited with generating many useful inventions in spare parts and the rehabilitation of transport and industrial equipment and in agriculture.

Our final example is the Instituto de Diseño Superior (Higher Design Institute) in Havana, which we visited on April 8. IDS's mission is to conduct research and training programmes to upgrade the design capabilities of industrial enterprises such as those in furniture, footwear, and transport. The Director explained that in the period of Soviet-style central planning Cuban industry had been supply-driven and oriented towards meeting physical targets. Enterprises now need to be re-engineered to become market-driven and customer-oriented, which is where the Institute comes in.

Nonetheless old habits die hard. The Institute had made recommendations to the Ministry of Transport to effect design changes to the "Camel" buses to make them more passenger friendly. These had, in the main, been ignored, presumably in deference to manufacturing economy—and perhaps because of the absence of competitive pressure!

The above examples provide convincing evidence that "when Cubans decide to do something, they do it." After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Cuba appears to have gone through an intense period of internal reflection, self-evaluation and debate lasting for several years. The final results were crystallised in the 5th Congress of the Cuban

Communist Party (1995) which approved resolutions fixing the strategy and goals for the Special Period. It was the Economic Resolution of 5th Congress, for example, that provided the context for the re-engineering of ANEC. Hence, the “loop” appears to consist of (i) a process of bottom-up and top-down debate within the Party, Government, and Mass Organisations, (ii) overall goal-setting by State and Party, (iii) translation of goals into specific micro-level programmes by agencies, organisations and enterprises, and finally (iv) disciplined and committed execution of programmes by leadership and staff.

If my impression is correct, then this would represent a rather unique adaptation of the former system of centralised planning and material balances to the requirements of national survival and re-insertion into a global market economy, drawing on the strong participatory ethos and practices that have always been features of the Cuban revolutionary process.

In this context I could not help suggesting somewhat provocatively to my Cuban hosts that “there is no cloud without a silver lining” and that Cuba’s response to the fall of the USSR together with the tightening of the US blockade in the 1990s had proven that self-reliance was possible even for a small island nation, given unity and determination. Cuba had survived while maintaining the social gains of the Revolution in the face of the hostility of one superpower and, since 1990, without the support of the other. I went on to suggest that the moment of greatest danger for the Cuban process would be when the US blockade is lifted, as it obviously must be some day. A flood of North American capital and imports, led by Cuban-Americans in Florida, could be anticipated; with possibly negative effects on the ethos of self-reliance and non-consumerism that had been developed over the years.

It turned out that this question is indeed exercising the minds of many in the Cuban leadership. Interestingly enough, the response I received was not from an economist but from a woman who is engaged in the field of journalism and culture. This brings me to the questions of Ideology, Participation and Culture that follows next.

Ideology

During the Special Period the Cuban Revolution appears to have returned even more strongly to its nationalist roots. Although socialism remains the official ideology—and is the basis of the Cuban Constitution—Marx and Lenin are hardly anywhere to be seen on public billboards and are only infrequently cited in public discourse. Symbolically, they have yielded pride of place to Jose Marti, Antonio Maceo and Che Guevara, heroes of Cuba’s unique tradition of nationalist and internationalist struggle. The emphasis now is on the continuity of the revolutionary process from the early years of resistance to slavery and Spanish rule through to the triumph of the 26th of July Movement and the ensuing four decades of resistance to the United States. A recent article by Ricardo Alarcon, President of the National Assembly, summarises the present perspective:

At the end of the last decade when European socialism was derailed, there were many who announced the imminent demise of the Cuban Revolution. Yet next

year (1999) we celebrate 40 years of revolution, one quarter of this since the dissolution of the socialist camp, with no indication that it will suffer the same fate as the frustrated experiences of Eastern Europe.

Our Revolution did not collapse for the simple reason that it was not a product of the Cold War nor was it imported from outside. To understand this it is necessary to take account of the long history by which the Cuban nation, since its birth, fought for its independence and for justice in confrontation with powerful external forces. The victory of January 1959 was the culmination of this entirely autonomous process⁵.

Santiago de Cuba and the eastern (Oriente) region occupy a special place in this tradition, a place of which its residents are justly proud (and continually remind Havaneros in friendly rivalry). The city of Santiago could almost be regarded as one extended memorial to the history of struggle. Within a short distance of one another one can visit the solemn tomb of Jose Marti, National Hero and father of the Cuban nation; the magnificent monument to Antonio Maceo--the "Bronze Titan"—a leading general in the Wars of Independence who refused to accept a compromise treaty with the Spanish because it did not include abolition of slavery and full independence⁶; the "El Morro" fort overlooking Santiago Bay, where the story of the defeat of the Spanish fleet by the US Navy in 1898 is told; the memorial to the Cubans, Spanish and Americans who died in that battle, well maintained and recently visited by surviving grandchildren of all three groups; the memorial park to Frank Pais, martyr of the 26th of July movement assassinated by the forces of Batista at the age of 22; and the Moncada Barracks attacked by Fidel and his comrades in 1953, now a huge primary school—but with the bullet holes in the walls left intact.

More than anything else, Cuba is replete with images of Che Guevara from one end of the island to the other. The story of Che's life and death is being told and re-told in countless books and magazines; he has become an icon immortalised in paraphernalia of every type and description. Especially for Cuba's young, Che's life is used by the authorities to promote the values of selfless internationalism that is seen as the defining characteristic of the Cuban Revolution. The mausoleum recently erected in honour of Che and his comrades-in-arms is at once magnificent in scope and tastefully artistic in design and execution. Seeing it was indeed a moving experience and I urge everyone who goes to Cuba to try and make the trip to the central city of Santa Clara where it is located, about three hours by road from Havana.

⁵ Ricardo Alarcon Quesada, "El milagro cubana y su futuro", p. 7. The history of resistance and struggle is well documented in a book recently published in both Spanish and English by one of Cuba's leading historians, Professor Jose Canto Navarro, *History of Cuba: The Challenge of the Yoke and the Star; Biography of a People*. Havana: Editorial SI-MAR; 1998

⁶ Maceo's mother died in Jamaica and her remains were eventually taken back to Cuba where her tomb is located a few yards from that of Marti

Participation

According to Ricardo Alarcon “the true explanation for what could be called ‘the Cuban miracle’ is rooted in its political system, its democracy”⁷. Our meeting with the Government of the Province of Havana City provided a first-hand account of the workings of Cuban democracy and the means by which ordinary citizens participate in the political process. The meeting room was filled with approximately 20 people, all officers or staff of the Provincial Council. They appeared to range in age from their late 20s to their 50s with the majority clustered around the mid-point of this range. About one-third were women, and the ethnic balance appeared to be roughly representative of the Cuban population as a whole. Except for a small number of staff employed to the Council, all had been directly elected to the Provincial Assembly. The Assembly is made up of 326 delegates divided roughly equally between those elected directly by the population in the Municipalities, and those elected by the mass organisations (women, youth, workers, professional organisations).

I was fascinated by their description of the process by which the delegates are elected from the Municipalities. Within each electoral unit the electors must nominate no less than 2 and no more than 5 candidates. A candidate need not be a member of the Communist Party. Electoral campaigning by the candidate is not allowed. Instead, those nominating the candidate must prepare a biographical summary setting out his/her credentials and the reasons why they believe s/he will make a good delegate. This summary is vetted by the Provincial Electoral Commission to ensure its accuracy and consistency in terms of level of detail since “it is possible to write a great deal about a candidate who has really done very little, and the opposite is also true”. Once approved, the bio-note is circulated among electors with a photograph affixed.

At this point I asked jokingly what happens if a candidate is not good-looking. With good humour they said that this hardly mattered, the men all claiming that they had been elected in spite of their looks. One man declared proudly that he had been elected consistently for the past 20 years although he was neither a Party member nor good-looking! In any case, the pros and cons of candidates are debated within the respective communities over a period of months, so that all electors have an opportunity to evaluate their suitability. The election is by secret ballot in which all those over the age of 16 have the right to vote. Municipal delegates serve for 2 ½ years and are subject to recall. They also spent some time explaining the powers and responsibilities of the Provincial Government.

After listening carefully to the accounts and to the answers to my questions I had to ask myself whether the ordinary Cuban citizen does not enjoy more democracy in Cuba—at least in the sense of participation—than I do in Jamaica. I did not vote in the last national and local elections in Jamaica because I was not registered, having been absent from the island when registration was taking place and not having the information—or perhaps the interest—to get on the voters’ list. In any case, as an ordinary citizen I have no say in the selection of candidates and no means of participating in the political process other than

⁷ Ricardo Alarcon, “El milagro cubano y su futuro”, p. 7

by voting every five years. Apart from voting, Cubans can and do participate actively in meetings of the “Circuncripciones” (the basic units in the Municipalities, of which there are 1,510 in Havana City) as well as of the mass organisations to which they belong.

The irony of all this is that Cuba is portrayed to the outside world by the western media as a highly authoritarian one-Party state. News agencies, for example, routinely refer to Cuba as “the Communist-ruled Caribbean island”—although I have never seen Britain referred to “the capitalist-ruled island in the North Sea”. Within Cuba, the sense of the presence of Fidel Castro in political affairs is also far more muted than one would imagine from outside press coverage.

I don’t doubt that the Cuban political process is more complex than it was possible to grasp from one meeting with a group consisting of the Provincial leadership. But I left this meeting wondering if anyone in their right mind could suggest to Cubans that they should give up their political system for the kind of competitive, tribalistic, two-party “democracy” of the kind we have in Jamaica.

Culture

The effort to maintain the revolutionary ethic of the Cuban process comes amidst growing concern about certain negative developments in the sphere of culture and values associated with the Special Period. Re-emergence of income inequality, consumerism, individualism, and racial (colour) discrimination are dangers that have been identified as stemming from the legalisation of US dollars and the influx of foreign investment. These issues were openly discussed at the annual congress of the Union of Cuba Writers and Artists (UNEC) in 1998, and it seems significant that it is this group which has been active in bringing them vigorously to public attention. A paper prepared for the Congress by the President of the prestigious Casa de las Americas institute and four other authors observed with concern:

Only recently we have noted the abandonment of the term “Companero” (Comrade) and its indiscriminate substitution by the term “Senor” (Mister) with its feminine form and the corresponding plural forms. This is not a superficial matter. It represents a small but significant step towards what could become a wholesale retreat from “a specifically socialist collective culture”, “a way of life and subjective practice” that have been forged by our people in the heat of decades of revolutionary struggle.....

The pockets of capitalism (that have emerged) have created or accentuated inequalities, and together with these have given rise to signs of retrogression in social relations. Sometimes, in line with what happens in other countries, the distribution of employment in certain enterprises is managed in a manner that gives preferential access to the better-paid jobs to “whites” over “blacks”. For another thing, the image of our reality that appears in certain spectacles and media scarcely constitutes an adequate reflection of the multiracial character of our culture. Only the survival of certain inherited prejudices, together with lack of imagination, determines that, independently of their original roots, many people

now feel obliged to define themselves as “whites”. (Our dance groups normally provide examples of adequate treatment of this question). Added to this is the reticence about open discussion of the problem of racial prejudice, which is a basic problem in a country with characteristics such as ours and in a time of scandalous and shameful racism in so many regions of the world...⁸

The issue of race relations in Cuba is a complex one, which has been the subject of much writing and debate⁹. It is generally accepted that black Cubans¹⁰ have been major beneficiaries of the Revolution by virtue of the legal abolition of racial discrimination and the enormous expansion of educational opportunities, health services, and employment. The impact of these gains on the professions, including ANEC itself, was noticeable in our meetings with several organisations and Universities. It was interesting to learn, for instance, of the Jamaican parentage of the President of the ANEC chapter in the Province of Havana City (as well as that of the First Secretary of the Party in the Santiago Province).

A more intractable problem, to which the UNEAC paper draws attention, is the legacy of unconscious prejudice that permeates the value system as a result of the history of slavery and the plantation system. This is a phenomenon that is all too well known in Jamaica and other parts of the Caribbean. Cuba’s nationalist-revolutionary ethos is inclusive and does not recognise differences in immigrant or ethnic origins as being significant—all are, or should be, “Cubano 100%”. This is laudable, but the same ethos might make it difficult to handle the problem of inherited, unconscious prejudices, a process, which requires self-examination and open dialogue.

As Cuba looks towards integrating itself more actively with the rest of the Caribbean, which is overwhelmingly black, the issue of race relations is bound to arise and it is in Cuba’s own interest to confront the issue squarely as it relates to its own society. One can only hope that the cultural workers of UNEAC continue to bring the issues of race, gender and social values into the open and to agitate for the full integration of these cultural concerns into economic, social and political practice.

Continuity

In fact, it was in response to my question about the dangers attendant on the possible lifting of the US blockade that I was told about the concerns expressed at the UNEAC Congress. One of the participants (the woman journalist mentioned above) told me candidly that she had no fears of cultural retrogression while Fidel is still alive: the concern is about what might happen after Fidel is no longer around. Hence, the UNEAC

⁸ From paper on “Culture and Society” by Roberto Fernandez Retamar and five other authors, presented to the Annual Congress of the Union of Writers and Artists (UNEAC), 1998; kindly made available to me by ANEC. Extracts from pages. 50, 53 of the report, my translation.

⁹ For instance, Alejandro de la Fuente, “Recreating Racism: Race and Discrimination in Cuba’s ‘Special Period’”, Cuba Briefing Paper Series No. 18, Georgetown University, July 1998

¹⁰ Official statistics classify 66 percent of the Cuban population as “white”, 12 percent as “black”, 21.9 percent as “mixed” (sometimes used interchangeably with “mulatto”), and 0.1 percent as being of Asian background.

Congress had decided to establish a Commission to study the speeches and writings of Fidel over the years with a view to summarising the core values and ensuring their transmission to future generations. Apart from its relevance to the struggle for continuity, this may be another example of the process of “Cubanisation” of the nationalist-revolutionary ideology.

On this subject we had a fascinating exchange with the First Secretary of the Party for Villa Clara Province. In his mid-30s, intelligent, articulate, and brimming with self-confidence (like most Cubans we met), he explained the chief ideological tasks identified by the Party (I am paraphrasing from my notes of the meeting):

My generation has direct personal experience of the hard times of the early years of the Revolution as well as the better times of the 1970s and the 1980s. Therefore, we can cope with the hard times of the Special Period because we have experienced them before and we know that things will get better. This is not the case for the generation born in the 1970s and the 1980s, which only experienced good times before the Special Period. We are also looking ahead to the coming generation, which will be the first not to have direct personal contact with those who actually made the Revolution.

So we have to work hard with young people and with the children, teaching them the history of the Revolution and showing them the examples set by the people who made the Revolution. We are confident that we will succeed because we are already seeing the results.

One such “result” is the President of the Federation of the University Economics students in Villa Clara Province, who attended the meeting I had with the ANEC Provincial Executive. Also highly articulate, he insisted on inviting us to a daytime fete among the students the following day, because, he said, of the importance of furthering the Caribbean connection. A dance session in full swing was duly interrupted to introduce the visitors from Jamaica and I was invited to speak briefly to the students. I could not help wondering if this could have happened on the UWI Campus without eliciting loud and rowdy protests! And we were impressed by the fact that on the next day (Sunday) the students were due to perform voluntary service by cleaning up the physical facilities of the Faculty of Economics at the University.

Can Cuba survive as an island oasis of collective, selfless, humanistic cultural values just 90 miles away from the most powerful consumer society on earth, where many overseas Cubans reside, and in a global context of neoliberal individualist consumerism? The conventional wisdom says “no”: it holds that such survival will be impossible in a post-blockade, post-Fidel era. Yet it was also the conventional wisdom that Cuba would implode after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Within Cuba, one is struck by the breadth and depth of the institutionalisation of the system, its identification with the core historical traditions of the Cuban nation, and the multiple layers of citizen participation that exist. On the other hand the results of the limited market-oriented reforms already introduced show how easily the “old” (and not so old) values can reassert themselves.

My guess, then, is that the most likely scenario is one of the intensification of ideological and cultural contention within Cuban society itself, between protagonists of the revolutionary project—young and old--on the one hand and the protagonists of North American consumer culture and of “plural” political institutions on the other. In this context, and in the absence of Fidel’s enormous prestige and skills in political education and communication, the danger is that of increasing resort to authoritarian procedures on the part of the political and institutional leadership. The alternative is a continuous deepening of the established democratic processes together with an attitude of flexibility and a continued willingness to engage in social experimentation.

This of course, is a delicate balance that is far easier to put into words than into practice. Yet the catastrophic results of the headlong rush into free-market capitalism in Russia, as well as the evidence of many negative social consequences of the market reforms introduced in China, are constant reminders to Cubans that there is much in the present system that they should seek to preserve.

Perceptions of the Caribbean

Everywhere we went in Cuba we encountered tremendous interest in Jamaica and other Caribbean countries and a great desire for closer relations and exchange at all levels. Indeed I interpret my invitation and the hospitality extended to me and my family by ANEC as one of many signs of the importance that Cuba presently attaches to its relations with the rest of the Caribbean region. Fidel himself spoke with great feeling about this at the January Encuentro in Havana and his remarks have received a great deal of attention within Cuba, resonating everywhere on our visit.

In Santiago de Cuba we visited and were entertained at the “Casa del Caribe” (Caribbean House), which receives support from the central government and provincial authorities. A memorial bust of Maurice Bishop stands in the garden at the entrance of the Casa, which is in a beautiful old building located in an area of the city previously occupied by the upper classes. We were delighted to learn of the strong Caribbean participation in the annual Cultural Festival of the Caribbean hosted every July by the Casa. This year’s festival is dedicated to the Caribbean Diaspora.

I asked the First Secretary of the Party in Villa Clara Province specifically about the Party’s view on relations with the rest of the Caribbean. It will be recalled that this is a man in his mid-30s who probably represents the next generation of Cuban leadership. His reply, reconstructed from my notes, went something like this:

Cuba is a Caribbean country, but in addition to that Cuba has *no alternative* but to integrate itself into the Caribbean region. You have Mercosur, you have the Andean Group, you have Central America, and you have the Caribbean, which is where we belong. We are the same people; we have the same culture, the same climate, the same way of life. There are people who came from other Caribbean islands to Cuba, for example in Oriente, in Santiago. The only thing that divides us is language, and that is not really a problem, it can be overcome.

I expressed the view that it would fall to the students and young people to carry Caribbean integration forward by developing contact and interchanges at all levels and he agreed. In discussing this at the University of Villa Clara, the Dean of Economics commented that for three decades all their institutional collaborative arrangements had been with Universities in east Europe. There had been virtually no contact with Caribbean universities and now this needs to be changed.

Apart for the further development of ties between ANEC and the Association of Caribbean Economists (which is separately treated), I was able to identify several opportunities for future collaboration. Santiago is the province with the strongest historical connections with the English-speaking Caribbean and with Haiti. At the University of Santiago, a Centre of Caribbean Studies has been established among staff in the schools of Economics and Social Sciences (the two are normally separate in the Cuban system). The Centre is promoting the teaching of courses in Caribbean Studies at the undergraduate level and for a specialised Master's Degree. The need is however for academic texts, journals and other teaching materials, especially on the non-Hispanic Caribbean, which are either not available or are costly to acquire. I am therefore asking all colleagues to donate copies of their work or that of their institutions to this group. Any materials sent to me will get there. I am also exploring the possibility of organising a small workshop in which scholars from the UWI would provide advice and assistance to this group in the structuring of their Caribbean Studies programme.

Other possibilities for collaboration were identified with the Centre for the Study of the World Economy in Havana; the Study Group on the History of Cuban Economic Thought at the University of Havana; and Centre for Sociological Studies in Havana. These are also the subjects of a separate memorandum. In short, I believe there is great scope for and interest in expanding contact by means of lecture tours, seminars, workshops, and student exchanges in both directions.

In conclusion

I returned from two weeks in Cuba with a strong sense of the people's will to survive, to resist and to defend their sovereignty and the social gains of their revolution, and of the sincerity of their hospitality and their feeling of fraternity with other Caribbean people. I believe we in the rest of the region can only benefit from broadening and deepening our contact with the Cuban people.

Finally I wish to thank ANEC for the opportunity provided to get to know Cuba better, for the unstinting hospitality given to me and my family, and for the honour they bestowed on me.

University of the West Indies,
Mona, Jamaica
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