CUBA IN THE SHADOW OF CHANGE

Daily Life in the Twilight of the Revolution

BY AMELIA ROSENBERG WEINREB
Cuba’s unique anachronisms—crumbling colonial architecture, vintage American cars, and the same Commander-in-Chief for nearly half a century—hold an allure for tourists looking for nostalgia and socialism in a sun and rum-drenched Caribbean.

Yet Cuba is in transition. Since Fidel Castro’s ailing health was made public in August 2006, the future of Cuba and its leadership has seen wider coverage and debate in the international media. But which way will things go as power passes from Fidel to his younger brother Raúl? Will there be a move away from socialism toward capitalism and from authoritarianism toward democracy?

For nearly 20 years, following the collapse of the Soviet Bloc in 1989, Cuba has buoyed between capitalism and communism as it has transitioned away from orthodox socialism. How do Cubans understand their long process of social and cultural change?

My ethnographic research among Cuban citizen’s in ordinary neighborhoods—undertaken in 1994, 2000, and 2003—sought to address this question through interviews with about 50 informant households. What I found was that their experience over this period has been difficult, protracted, fatiguing, and full of irony, particularly as emphasized in their frustrations as consumers.

A GLIMPSE INTO A HAVANA NEIGHBORHOOD

Off the tourist track on the outskirts of Havana’s city center there is a leafy, primarily residential zone of modest, shabby apartment buildings and houses. In addition to its run-down family dwellings this neighborhood has a small shopping strip, an outdoor farmers market, bodegas (ration distribution centers), schools, pharmacies, and a consultorio in which the neighborhood’s family doctor practices. The Cuban government’s presence is found in the formerly lavish mansions that have been converted into ministry buildings to house public services. Pillared and majestically repainted canary yellow, salmon, or aquamarine, they are usually marked with a bust of José Martí in front.

What Cuban public space lacks in overt commerciality it compensates for in the charm of outdoor living and communal space. Children run, shout, and play stickball freely in the street. Laundry flaps openly throughout the neighborhood. As neighbors hangout on the stoops and porches of Havana’s pre-Revolutionary mansions and apartment blocks, music, voices, and cooking smells drift along passageways and across courtyards.

The image of Ernesto Ché Guevara and his motto Hasta la Victoria Siempre—“Always Towards Victory”—dwarfs pedestrians passing the Ministry of the Interior. An icon of Revolutionary sacrifice and the socialist ideals of collectivization and selflessness, his classic image has been copyrighted and any time it is used the Cuban government reaps a profit.

Some homes with access to dollars in Cuba’s two-tier economy remain lavish.
Yet despite the appeal of such community life, Cubans feel desperately trapped both as citizens and consumers in the face of official neighborhood surveillance, informers, travel restrictions, high prices, restricted consumer options, and a lack of political change.

One summer morning at the shared clothesline two neighbors chat as they hang laundry out for the day. Topics include the influence of their astrological signs on their personalities, the going rate for home manicures and pedicures, and the declining quality of public school lunches. But what is most aggravating to Tatiana—a university-educated management graduate who struggles to earn money at home from under-the-table jobs—is the fact that the price of Nestlé Nesquik (a chocolate-flavored drink imported from Mexico) has just gone up, yet again. Her complaint does not jibe with nostalgic images of Cubans receiving brand-less Communist rations in tin cups. But Tatiana regards Nesquik as a household staple for her school-aged daughter, and the price hike is going to be an added strain on the family purse. Lowering her voice—a Cuban ritual indicating a political problem is about to be addressed—she hisses in frustration, “But I can’t say anything. Who would I complain to?” She throws up her hands, shrugs, and then slaps her cut-off jeans.

While there are certainly stories of valiant individuals and small activist groups—such as artists, performers, and filmmakers—who have confronted, challenged, or resisted the Cuban government, most ordinary Cubans would agree that engaging in activism as a political tool to raise their standard of living is too risky given the likelihood of government reprisal. Instead, purposeful obscurity is the most common coping mechanism used to make ends meet in the absence of public discussions, surveys, elections, and the freedom of assembly. For most Cubans withdrawal from civic participation, engagement in the black market, and undocumented migration are practical, clandestine strategies that circumvent or extend beyond the reach of state control. This widespread alienation from Castro’s vision has permanently altered Cuban society, and points to the emergence of what I call a “shadow public” and the twilight of the Socialist Revolution from within.

CUBA’S PROLONGED “SPECIAL PERIOD”

The collapse of the Soviet trading bloc in 1990—which accounted for 80% of Cuba’s trade—brought about a period of striking change in Cuban society and prompted Fidel Castro to declare a “Special Period in Time of Peace” (Periodo Especial en Tiempo de Paz). The first half of the 1990s witnessed an economic freefall marked by austerity measures and
ordinances that enjoined Cubans to work hard and be patient. For the first time under Castro’s Revolutionary government, Cubans faced shortages of food, medicine, clothing, shoes, paper, soap, gasoline, and other basic supplies at unprecedented levels. Desperation reached a peak in 1994 with the balsero (rafter) crisis that saw 35,000 Cubans take to the open sea in homemade rafts, risking death, to reach the United States and avoid material scarcity and political stagnation. This led Castro to initiate a series of reforms that, ironically, drew on features of capitalist societies. These included the de-penalization of the US dollar, the opening of free markets for agricultural products, the allowance of certain forms of self-employment and increasing foreign investment, and an emphasis on tourism as the most important way to rebuild the Cuban economy.

The start of the Special Period and the disturbing paradoxes it presented were so profound that Cubans began to use its beginning, rather than the Revolution itself, as the main historical reference point of change. In daily conversations, the phrase “antes de” (“before”) primarily refers to the era before the personal household economic crisis of the early 1990s and the loss of Cubans’ basic luxuries—“Antes de we used to throw big birthday parties for our kids when they turned one. Not now . . . . Antes de you used to be able to get bras and underwear annually on the ration book. Not anymore.”

While shortages improved with economic recovery and the worst of the Special Period was over by the mid-1990s, the most lasting impact for Cubans was the ironic means of economic recovery. All the liberalizing reforms that were new to Cuba since the Revolution were intended to increase state revenue by any means necessary in order to ensure the continuation of the egalitarian society established by the Revolution. Although Castro justified Special Period reforms as temporary measures in response to the national state of emergency (and officials still declare that socialism is thriving), most of the market reforms remain in place to a greater or lesser extent today. As a result, Cuba has transitioned into what some scholars call late socialism—an awkward and ironic blend of capitalist and socialist strategies for national development and economic recovery.

DOLLARIZATION DAZE

More than any other Special Period reform, Cubans see “dollarization”—the domestic use of foreign currency in parallel to or instead of the domestic currency—as the one that affected them most profoundly and personally. From 1993 to 2004, the US dollar was legal tender in Cuba. But now, Cubans must convert US dollars into pesos convertibles (or CUCs), known locally as chavitos, and pay a 10% tax. This measure is also applied to foreign visitors in stores, hotels, bars, cafeterias, taxis, rental car companies, and any other business that accepts cash payments in US dollars. Yet Cuban salaries continue to be paid in “ordinary” (non-convertible) Cuban pesos, which, in
Alex Weinreb

must be converted into chavitos for most purchases, thereby losing their value. In addition to these taxes, the Cuban government also captures dollars by allowing Cuban citizens to shop in state-run tiendas de recuperacion de divisas (or TRDs), “dollar recovery stores” that sell clothing, food, and household items at high markups.

David, a state tobacco warehouse manager (who runs a bootleg video rental business on the side), explains that while access to dollars affords new consumer freedoms, it has also created widespread dissatisfaction and an unruly, two-tiered economy. Legally, he can only hold one job, where his salary is paid in pesos at low, state wages. To his frustration, however, most products of any household relevance—soup, cereal, milk, meat, laundry detergent, and personal hygiene products—are only available in “dollar stores,” where goods are often inflated beyond his means and that of most Cubans.

It is widely known that some Cubans are able to take advantage of increasing tourism by running businesses out of their homes. Some rent them out as casas particulares (bed and breakfasts) to vacationers—a practice legalized in 1998 but pursued illicitly and at high risk both before and after that date. Others run paladares, home-based restaurants that legally can seat 12 or fewer guests, or use their homes to sell goods on the black market, while still others simply engage in jineterismo (hustling or prostitution). These income-generating strategies can earn more in one week than a Cuban citizen could make in a year or more of state wages. For example, it is said that a jinetera (a prostitute or female escort) can earn more in one night than a medical doctor can in one year—a widely circulating testament to Cuba’s changing values and the loss of socialist prowess.

Still, available income does not solve the problem of obtaining those goods that are unavailable on the limited and unpredictable Cuban market. Merchandise in stores is restricted, state-selected, and does not follow the laws of supply and demand. This lack of access to material goods heightens the longing for them, particularly as Cubans see the lifestyles of the new consuming sectors, whether native Cubans or tourists. Despite sustained socialist state achievements, such as low infant mortality and high literacy rates, most Cubans want something more, and they believe they can get it somewhere else in the world.

I often found it remarkable that they had firsthand details about specific types of goods and services to which they wanted access—Johnson & Johnson No-More-Tears baby shampoo, queen-sized pantyhose, home mortgage deals, fast internet connections, and short lines at well-stocked medical centers. While imported products are increasingly available on shelves in Havana’s tourist shops, they remain prohibitively
expensive for most Cubans. But my informants obtained consumer minutiae through hand-delivered gifts, visits and phone calls from family abroad, commercial advertisements broadcast on illegal satellite TV, conversations with tourists, and even videotaped footage of loved ones enjoying life elsewhere.

Beatriz, who runs an underground nursery school, watches and re-watches a video brought to her from her family in West Virginia. Her tall, muscular, fair son wears a baseball cap and walks around his comfortable, suburban two-story home with Beatriz’s granddaughter, baby Rosario, in his arms. He points out various features in matching beiges and light blues, panning over the wall-to-wall carpet, the wallpaper, a den with an enormous TV set, a full dining-room set, and a picture window that reveals a green backyard. Next is the well-equipped kitchen with large cabinets and spacious counters, where his wife is preparing food and a garbage disposal whirs in the background. They speak into the camera, telling Beatriz how much they love and miss her, but the tour of their home is the most prominent feature of the film.

Such consumer and lifestyle details are politically symbolic, igniting a vivid imagination of life elsewhere and fueling subdued anger against the state. Because of poor leadership and botched international relations, they feel Cuba, despite all of the potential of its educated and talented population, is sadly atrasado (“backwards, kept behind”). At the same time they see their own desires as normal—clipping along at a pace with the rest of the developed world. Their tastes are much more like a family living in Miami than those found living in the cities of the neighboring Caribbean or Central America.

ORDINARY OUTLAWS

At a dinner party a fellow guest cordially tells us he can pick up some salmon for us and bring it back in a minute if we would prefer fish rather than the beef being served—both rare luxuries. In surprise, I ask how, never having seen salmon in Cuba before.

“I’m a chef at a big state-run hotel,” he explains. Then, using a common hand signal—he brings each finger down in one swift consecutive swiping movement to form a fist that has just captured something—he indicates that he steals it. Scowling, he shrugs and shakes his head. “I’m always luchando [literally “struggling,” but also slang for “pilfering”], so I have some on hand in my freezer. But it’s just because I’m in Cuba. I wouldn’t be doing this—I wouldn’t have to do this—somewhere else,” he says. He then places his hands on his heart to justify his actions.

Ordinary citizens experience unavoidable stress and secrecy as they try to make ends meet in Cuba’s authoritarian bureaucratic structure, obtain basic luxuries under the table, and discreetly plan their escape without state retribution. These desires and pressures lie at the core of their lived experience. Cubans are cash poor and expend what they consider unreasonable amounts of time and energy perfecting the art of
finding more, stretching resources, or milking national systems that offer citizens less than ever before. During hard times, state-guaranteed employment provides them with a sense of security as rightful citizens. Yet they also are frustrated as consumers with what they feel are punitively tight limitations that fuel negative feelings about how they live, where they live, and who is at fault for their discontent.

Typically, one member of the household maintains some sort of legal fulltime work, while at least one other family member contributes to the family income por la izquierda—literally “on the left”—through self-employment in the form of small off-the-books or untaxed jobs. Examples include baking and selling cakes from home, peddling goods such as clothing, farm-fresh food, or bootleg CDs door-to-door, or running a hair salon out of a back room. At other times, the family may be bisneros (slang for “black marketers”) and have much more extensive engagement with a black-market business like running a lucrative home-based restaurant or selling rum pilfered from a state factory.

Even if this combination of activities and income helps keep a family afloat, many feel they are wasting their training and education. One civil engineer explained to me that it was more lucrative to drive a gypsy cab. An economist told me he sold black-market orange juice. Instead of applying their skills in legal ways, these unsatisfied citizen-consumers lived with the daily stress of maintaining an underground enterprise. To earn their own keep and provide a decent lifestyle for themselves and their families, they had no choice but to pursue extra-legal means. Chronically frustrated, they often described themselves as sin futuro (“without a future”)—at least in Cuba.

Yet despite their illegal activities, Cubans generally pride themselves on being “clean-living.” This translates into immaculate homes, ironed clothing, well-scrubbed children, and a strong moral orientation toward generosity, manners, propriety, thrift, industriousness, conscientiousness, self-reliance, and an intense family loyalty. They therefore do not fit the typical picture of outlaws. But they are also aware that, in deference to coping materially, they exclude honesty and rule-following from their moral universe.

When we discussed this, they were troubled by certain elements of the choices they had to make. In particular, they described a dissonance between their personal values and the strategies they employed to earn a living. They had become largely numb to corruption and living outside the law and were fatigued by their constraints and apprehensions. Most significantly, against their will and at the expense of all other interests, their identity had become wrapped up in thrift and the stress associated with obtaining financial security.
NEW DEPENDENCIES

Cubans generally depend less on the state and more on their wide social networks—family, friends, and visitors from the USA—to obtain access to higher-quality products, particularly electronics, clothing, medicine, non-perishable foods, baby care products, and beauty aids. To an outsider the presence of these goods in some homes provides a veneer of relative wealth and consumer access that belies the low salaries and market caprice of today’s Cuba. They may even make it seem as though Cuba’s national system of distribution is working, but this would be disputed by most of the Cubans I encountered. For example, Fredrich, who supports his wife and baby son via the illegal selling of cigars taken from his factory line, argues that the Cuban socialist distribution system is weak, and it continues to grow weaker in the face of informal and underground operations, police corruption, payoffs to officials, and growing disparities and jealousies between people who were once compañeros, or comrades.

Nevertheless, a public safety net continues to serve somewhat as a national equalizer. Against the fiscal odds, the Cuban government has continued to provide universal education, healthcare, and modest rations to its citizens. Cubans are still proud of the history and achievements of Cuba’s socialist system, particularly healthcare. But as citizens will explain, these public goods—the “jewels in the crown” of the Revolution—are not truly free in any sense of the word. Payoffs are built into almost any supposedly free service, and more than that, the cost of being a Cuban is too much to bear for a lifetime.

Cubans cite economic traps more than anything else as their motivation to endlessly hatch plans to escape. If they could just reach US soil they would magically be granted asylum under the 1996 Cuban Adjustment Act, becoming US citizens within a year of their arrival by simply proving their Cuban identity. Many Cubans have friends that live abroad. Although this simultaneously links Cubans directly to somewhere else, it also makes them feel further isolated from progress, emphasizing their lack of ability to purchase, own, or experience what their kin in exile have, or even the freedom to join them there.

In the shadow of a changing Cuba, I encountered citizens practicing intentional political silence and underground economic activity, while cultivating a secret identity as prospective migrants. This shadow public shares common interests and concerns but seeks invisibility as its members look to improve their lot and avoid contact with the state. They are the quiet majority of ordinary citizens who are not moved to organize politically either because they do not share a clearly articulated ideological struggle, because they are waiting, or because they fear state menace. Yet their stories are important to highlight because they tell us about Cuba in transition, a topic that is gaining prominence and generating increasing public interest as Cuba’s future points to imminent change. Will these citizens soon emerge from the shadows and see the dawn of a new Cuba?

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For Further Reading


