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An Introduction to Contemporary Cuba

MOST VISITORS who come to Cuba to study the revolution first set foot at José Martí airport in Havana and acquire their initial impressions of the country from the nation's capital. A visit to Havana can be as deceiving today as it was before 1959. Until then Havana lived off the wealth produced in the countryside and enjoyed an immeasurably higher standard of living than did Cuba's rural hinterland. There was a large middle class, which enjoyed many of the amenities associated with the American way of life. The country as a whole suffered from underdevelopment, manifested especially in high unemployment and lack of manufacturing industry, but these problems were less apparent in the capital than in the countryside.

Consumer goods were imported from Florida or were made in Cuba by American branch plants, in exchange for Cuban sugar and tobacco. Havana was an extension of the U.S. domestic market, and American influence was felt everywhere. Advertisements for American products saturated newspapers, billboards, and the television screens that were as ubiquitous in Havana as in Florida. Havana's modern downtown, replete with high-rise

apartment buildings and broad thoroughfares, was in many ways more reminiscent of Miami than of Mexico City or San José.

To visitors, then, Havana may have seemed like the capital of a relatively prosperous country, but the rest of Cuba, with few exceptions, belied this impression. Rural society and its economy had long been stagnant. Vast stretches of the countryside had been left untended. The structure of Cuba's agricultural economy, largely based on sugar-cane plantations, huge cattle ranches, and precarious peasant holdings, inhibited the emergence of a vibrant rural culture. There were neither strong *campesino* (peasant or self-employed farming) institutions nor amenities such as schools, hospitals, electricity, and roads. Instead, there was large-scale seasonal unemployment and constant migration to Havana, which was an altogether different world.

In some respects, Havana today continues to be unrepresentative of Cuba. To be sure, the gap in economic and cultural standards has been considerably reduced. The capital does not accurately reflect what has happened during the last three decades precisely because the transformation wrought by the 1959 revolution is most evident in rural Cuba. If Havana was privileged during the prerevolutionary regime, the inverse is true today. Although health and educational facilities have been improved and expanded since the fall of Fulgencio Batista's government, relatively little has otherwise been invested in the physical infrastructure of the city. Provincial capitals are in much better condition.

Physically, Havana now seems quite different from most Latin American capitals. Thirty years ago, its modern hub, Vedado, must have seemed as contemporary as the center of any other Latin American metropolis. No new high-rises have been built there since the early 1960s—the ostentatious new Cohiba Hotel being the most conspicuous exception—and it continues to be dominated by familiar landmarks such as the Habana Libre Hotel and the Focsa Building. Almost every building in Havana now looks run down; most have not had new paint for decades. The

stores that distribute rationed food and clothing have become increasingly empty and threadbare. Other goods are virtually unattainable except where customers pay with U.S. dollars. At night street lights are dimmed to save electricity. Power outages are routine. To catch and board one of the capital's jammed buses is a major achievement. Bikes have suddenly become ubiquitous, defying potholes, nighttime darkness, and cars driven oblivious of traffic signs and speed limits.

Walking at night is a major challenge. At any moment you may have to jump out of the way to avoid an untended pothole or a bike hurtling out of nowhere. You place your life in the hands of the gods yet not in the hands of people about to assault you. You can go out on the street almost anywhere during one of Havana's power outages (and many people, including women, have no alternative but to do so) without fear of being raped or assaulted. There has been a recent increase in robbery because of the economic crisis. Nevertheless, the serenity of street life after dark is astonishing in comparison to the eerie, fearful tension that pervades the empty streets of most large U.S. cities and to the social violence that marks the crowded, impoverished barrios of many a Latin American city.

Havana lacks the bustle and noise of traffic, markets, street vendors, and cantinas that you find in places like Mexico City and San José. Until the recent advent of joint ventures with foreign corporations, its billboards have also been strikingly different from others in the hemisphere. Instead of advertisements for Coca Cola and Marlboro cigarettes there are political slogans and educational statements.

The majority of visitors, regardless of their politics, feel ambivalent about Havana's physical appearance. You know that it is the capital of a poor Communist country with different priorities from those of Mexico and Costa Rica. Everywhere you encounter the effects of the American embargo, which is aggravated by the collapse of trade with the former Communist bloc. The empty

stores and the ever-present queues evoke unpleasant images for those who associate scarcity and drab monotony with the repressive regimes of the former Communist countries in Europe. People who love it would like to see Havana regain the tropical vivacity (epitomized by the annual carnival) that once made it famous. Aficionados of the city also long for the day when the gorgeous colonial buildings lining the sea-front Malecón and the narrow streets and squares of Old Havana will be restored. Habana Vieja has been designated by the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) as a World Heritage site. Though pockets of Old Havana have been restored, the ruined state of much of it confronts you when you walk by its fallen balconies, crumbling buildings, and rubble-strewn sidewalks. You ask yourself if there is time left for Havana to reemerge as the Pearl of the Antilles, surely one of the most beautiful cities in the world.

There is one other major difference between Havana and other Latin American cities, one that is too easily taken for granted. The shops are empty and the food is monotonous and scarce; housing conditions may appall; people may complain about everything; but until very recently impoverished children and mothers begging on the street were nowhere to be found. In their place you see the most obvious fruits of the revolution—children and youths of every color with bodies that radiate health and vitality. They all seem to be in school, and although they bitterly complain about the lack of clothes, overall they are as well dressed and, until the present crisis, certainly better fed than the majority of Latin Americans. Finally, there is a greater mixing and blending of races among all classes than anywhere else in the region.

There are tough working class municipalities, such as Regla and San Miguel del Padrón, in metropolitan Havana and some that remain much more privileged—Vedado or Miramar, for example. Living conditions in much of Habana Vieja and Centro

Habana are often miserable. People in crowded and crumbling tenements are plagued by blackouts and often lack running water and gas. Though their difficulties are in many ways similar to those of the *vecindades* in the heart of Mexico City, it can be argued that Havana's poor are not marginalized as they would be elsewhere in Latin America or in American inner-city ghettoes. To be sure, some truly miserable barrios, largely populated by impoverished, scantily educated blacks, persist—such as Pogolotti and Cocosolo on the outskirts of Marianao (another municipality). They seem worlds apart from the rest of the city and of course are rarely seen by most visitors. Though such exceptional barrios exist, most poor neighborhoods are not bound by class, race, or culture. In almost every block you will find families headed by professionals unable to find better accommodation elsewhere, as well as families in which semiliterate grandmothers live with children and grandchildren who have become doctors and engineers. In less than two generations the extension of health, education, and employment has all but terminated the marginalization of whole sectors of the population. Blacks are integrated into the mainstream of society in a way that would seem inconceivable under present conditions in North America. The new homogeneity of Cuba's people is most apparent in the country's mass culture.

There is undoubtedly much that is problematic about Cuban culture, particularly the fact that until recently much of it has been controlled by a bureaucratic state. The Communist Party retains ultimate control over all the media and cultural outlets ranging from the stultifying newspapers to the bookstores whose shelves are laden with unsought official texts. But such ideological control does not preclude the existence of rich and varied cultural activities. Only when a cultural issue is interpreted by state bureaucrats as representing a direct and serious challenge to the authority and legitimacy of the regime is political censorship exercised. In fact, theater, film, and popular music in Havana are full of satire and

criticism of the problems that Cubans confront in everyday life. To be sure, some inequality in access to cultural events inevitably persists. But few countries have done more than Cuba to extend cultural opportunities—theater, music, dance, crafts—to every class and region. Unlike Mexico (and in some respects even Costa Rica), Cuba no longer systematically renders ignorant large sectors of the population through mindless comic books and sensational tabloids. Cubans may be deprived of a wide range of civil rights, but almost all young Cubans can realistically aspire to participate in national culture and public discourse. They may not agree with the regime's policies at home or abroad, and many may fear to criticize them in public, but most Cubans are informed about their major elements. In short, Cuba increasingly enjoys an integrated modern culture capable of applying reasonable solutions to social problems and issues. Nevertheless, newcomers to the country can be taken aback by the persistence of habits, beliefs, and taboos that seem idiosyncratic to outsiders. At times it seems that there is not a single Cuban who, in a crisis, will not resort to making an offering to Ochún (Virgen de la Caridad), Yemayá (Virgen de Regla), or to Babalú Ayé (San Lázaro), or consult a *santero* to divine their future with the aid of coconut, cards, and shells.[1]

Though an abortion or a divorce seems to involve no more than a routine visit to the appropriate office, there are still teenage brides who get married because they cannot imagine a more meaningful way to order their lives. Until the beginning of the 1990s young people who in other respects seemed to be as cosmopolitan as any surprised you by announcing as a matter of fact that only under certain circumstances might you wear shorts or sandals, regardless of the boundless heat and humidity of Havana summers. Until quite recently, universities prohibited students from wearing shorts, and in some provincial towns the police still enforce the number of shirt buttons that may be left undone when men are out at night.

Cuban homophobia is a part of this traditional culture. This