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Cuba Dreaming

On a Park Bench in Havana with John Lennon

by

Donald W. Bray and Marjorie W. Bray

In Havana a fit place to sit and reflect on the revolution is on the park bench next to the sitting statue of John Lennon. A society like the one he imagined is taking shape in the Cuban archipelago.

The academic and popular discussion of Cuba in the United States mostly misses the key point: the revolution is achieving a new form of democracy based upon shared social goals. These priorities were enunciated during the 1959 political void left by the almost complete collapse of the old order symbolized by Fulgencio Batista. The original revolutionary objectives have been upheld ever since. This constancy, together with inspirational leadership and the control of corruption, has provided a level of consensus sufficient for the revolution to endure while socialist systems elsewhere fell apart.

Basic continuing priorities are mutual assistance, education for all, employment, universal health care, housing, dignified retirement, the promotion of art, a humanitarian international role for Cuba, and public participation in public life. Essentially, all of this is now reality. Three striking indicators are that Cuban student performance is well above that of any other Latin American country, public health statistics have reached the developed-country range, and 85 percent of families own their own dwellings.

For the first time there is a Latin American country in which it is normal for all to be healthy and educated. This has been accomplished by hard work and consumerist denial sustained for almost a half century.

But 2005 is a turning-point year for the revolution. At last, more material rewards are at hand. This is because of government policy and international cooperation with—particularly—Venezuela, China, Canada, and Spain.

The government's decision to switch from the dollar to the euro as a legal circulating currency was accompanied by a calling in of tucked-away dollars to be changed into convertible pesos if they were not to be discounted 10

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percent in future conversion. A windfall of approximately US\$1 billion came into the bank—a recognition that the revolution would not be overturned. Despite the change to the euro, Cuban-Americans did not reduce their financial support of relatives on the island. Today, these remittances exceed the amount earned from tourism, which has reached a historic annual level of 2.2 million visitors.

With its augmented revenues, the government has doubled the minimum wage and distributed energy-saving light bulbs and pressure and rice cookers at no cost. The free conversion to these energy-saving products enhances efficiency and makes sense in a command economy.

Another 2005 windfall was the spiking of the value of nickel exports to almost US\$18,000 per ton, bringing in US\$2 billion more. The Sherritt Company of Canada, Cuba's partner in nickel production, has agreed to invest more in the Cuban mines. China will also capitalize them; it is China's need for nickel for its burgeoning stainless steel production that has caused the price jump. A major discovery of offshore oil has been announced, and U.S. companies have been invited to offer bids on petroleum operations. A Spanish company, Sol Meliá, has completed the construction of 12 luxury hotels and resorts and plans to construct many more. China is committed to engage with the Cuban economy in a fundamental way. Four hundred sorely needed new buses have been shipped to the island. China has agreed to underwrite Cuban factories with sufficient capacity to satisfy national needs for refrigerators and electric fans.

Even more promising are agreements with Venezuela under which the two countries will integrate their economies. For openers, a joint naval yard will be constructed in Zulia Province, Venezuela; the Venezuelan regional office of its national petroleum company will be located in Havana. Cuba will continue to receive US\$27 per barrel of oil, thousands of Cuban health, education, and other technical specialists will work in Venezuela, and the two countries will organize a joint housing construction company.

Cuban-Venezuelan cooperation could well impact the future of the Western Hemisphere and lessen the prospect that the U.S.-promoted Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) will ever be ratified. Cuba and Venezuela are founding partners in the Alternativa Bolivariana (Bolivarian Alternative—ALBA), which seeks a regional free-trade area on Latin American rather than U.S. terms. Whereas FTAA is based on profit maximization and neoliberalism, ALBA will promote human needs: eliminating poverty, illiteracy, and disease while preserving national and indigenous culture and the environment and advancing labor and human rights. It rejects trade rules that jeopardize local agricultural and industrial production, prevent effective national planning, and grant inordinate intellectual property rights to the

countries of the North. Progressive governments already in place in Brazil, Uruguay, and Argentina and progressive movements in Bolivia and Ecuador are sympathetic to the ALBA approach, as is the leading presidential contender in Mexico, Andrés Manuel López Obrador.

U.S.-style democracy sidesteps the issue of a fair distribution of resources to citizens. Rights are expressed as *civil* rights, the first 10 amendments to the U.S. Constitution. The world has moved on toward a broader notion of *human* rights to include the right to employment, health care, education, recreation, dignified retirement, and more. In its foreign policy preachments the United States currently extols democracy, freedom, and civil society. The question left unanswered is “What is the social context of these values?” When the National Endowment for Democracy sends U.S. government money to Venezuela or Cuba, it distributes it to the agencies of civil society that promote neoliberalism. The objective is regime change. Similarly, NED funds have been used in Venezuela in the attempt to dislodge the popular democracy that has emerged there.

The media and the Communist Party in Cuba are dedicated to upholding the priorities of the Revolution. The constitution prohibits the Party from selecting candidates for the local, provincial, and national legislative bodies. The corporate media in the United States usually ignore this system of representative government, but it is taken quite seriously in Cuba, and this avenue for citizen participation in government is strongly bolstered by massive involvement in block committees, unions, youth and cultural organizations, and women’s and small farmers’ organizations. Moreover, the president of the country probably enjoys a higher degree of consent of the governed than his U.S. counterpart. If U.S.-style institutions were imposed, the revolutionary priorities might well be lost, because rich Cuban-Americans would finance campaigns that would lead to a return to a consumerism and a selfishness ethos. For now, Fidel Castro serves as the legitimate overarching custodian of the revolutionary ideals. In Cuba today dissent finds expression in the arts. The future circle of dissent will be enlarged from within the island and not from Florida or Washington, DC.

In the United States there is need for internal criticism of corporate control of politics, neocon dreams of imperial world dominion, the loss of existing health and pension benefits, leading to conditions of life on the edge, environmental degradation, deindustrialization by outsourcing, and the Wal-Martization of wages. By what moral or legal standard does the U.S. government presume to tell Cuba what to do? Instead, Cuba should be studied as a unique example of a participatory society with economic justice—not a utopia, but a country with an operational imaginary. Imagine!