

How U.S. Students Perceive Cuba:
A Current Cultural Experience

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Over the past four years, I have taken groups of U.S. students to Cuba twice, and taught several hundred students about Cuba in two very different colleges. I wanted to speak today about how U.S. students perceive Cuba, the Cuban Revolution, and Cubans, including, of course, how students thought and felt about travel to Cuba, but also some of the preconceptions and expectations that I have found among students at two New England colleges: Little College (not its real name), a small, elite, residential, liberal arts college, and Massachusetts State College (not its real name), a medium-sized state college with mostly working-class, commuter students. Despite the profound differences between the explicitly-held beliefs and attitudes of the two groups, there is a significant common ground of shared cultural assumptions that shape and limit their abilities to think critically about U.S. society and about the international order. I'll begin with some of the differences between what I call "liberal elite" students at Little College and "working class conservative" students at Massachusetts State, and move from there to some of the commonalities that I've found among many different U.S. audiences (student and non-student). Visiting Cuba, or even "seeing" Cuba through film, literature, and discussion, has the potential to encourage students to rethink or question some of these unacknowledged assumptions, and, among my classes, has contributed to new types of critical thinking and engagement with the world.

THE "CONSERVATIVE WORKING CLASS"

I will egregiously overgeneralize here about some of the general characteristics, and ideologies and beliefs, of students at Massachusetts State College, where I currently teach. Remember that 20% of students in the Boston area do not graduate from high school, and of those that do, 30% do not go on to college at all—so while Mass. State's students may be more representative of the general U.S. population than Little students are, they still represent something of an elite.

Many of Mass. State's students are first-generation college students, most commute, and most are working their way through college. They come to college under-educated—most have gone to rather mediocre public schools. In particular, learning history has been a process of memorizing dates and names for an exam, then promptly forgetting them. They have not been exposed to critical thinking, analysis, or any kind of interpretive approach in their history classes. Or rather, they have not been made aware of the fact that the "patriotic/great men" approach to learning history is in fact one of many different ways that one can conceptualize history—they have been so profoundly inculcated with this approach that it seems "natural" to them. While they may have forgotten many of the facts, they have indeed internalized some of the underlying concepts: that the United States was founded on ideals of liberty and that its history is the story of how its great leaders have brought it closer and closer to its ideals.

These students consider themselves middle class; when questioned as to the markers of class, they are virtually unanimous that "having a job" places one in the middle class. They are also very confident that the fact that their parents have a job, and the fact that they are in college, reflect their individual efforts and initiative. The corollary, of course, is that if some people in the United States do not have a job, or do not go to college, it is due to their personal failings. "If I did it, anybody can," they believe.

Politically, most Mass. State students probably consider themselves Democrats, with fairly socially conservative attitudes. The white students (and the majority are white) are firmly opposed to affirmative action, which they feel has unfairly limited their own options in life. Many aspire to be nurses, police officers, or teachers, and they deeply resent the feeling that affirmative action may mean that a “minority” candidate is chosen for a position they believe they are qualified for.

Thus at the same time that they believe that “the government” is based on the best of ideals and represents good in the world, they also harbor deep suspicions of the government. Too often, they believe, the government is swayed by “special interests.” Students do not know about capital gains tax or incentives for companies to invest abroad; “special interests” in their view tend to be the interests of immigrants, minorities, and others who have been historically excluded. They do know that some people are rich and powerful, but they tend to feel that wealth and power have been justly earned, and frequently they identify with those among the wealthy and powerful who promote a populist image—Princess Diana, for example.

They also firmly believe that the wealthy and powerful generally utilize their wealth and power in the public interest. When we discussed economic inequality in Latin America in my graduate class, students kept returning to the question of “why can’t Latin American elites be ‘good capitalists’ like U.S. elites, and, like Carnegie and Rockefeller, give their money to charity to overcome their countries’ problems?” When capitalists behave in ways that do not seem to promote the general good—like in closing a factory to move to a cheaper-wage area—they blame the “bad people” who have kept wages low in order to “steal jobs” from the U.S.; they may blame minimum-wage laws that “force” factories to leave, and they argue that “we” as U.S. consumers actually benefit from factories seeking to produce goods at the lowest possible cost.

While few have studied any post-World War II U.S. history, most are aware of at least several post-WWII U.S. interventions abroad—Vietnam, Panama, the Gulf War—because they had friends or relatives who fought there. They instinctively side with the underdog in international affairs, and passionately believe that the United States does also. If the U.S. intervenes abroad, it must be to protect the little people from “bad people” like Saddam Hussein or Manuel Noriega (though they probably don’t recognize the second name), or “bad countries” like the former USSR.

They also feel that ordinary soldiers—their friends and relatives—have been unfairly blamed for wartime activities that are more properly the fault of the government. Here too a sort of dual consciousness about the government manifests itself. They know that veterans are homeless and traumatized, they know that there was something wrong with the war in Vietnam. Christian Appy’s *Working Class War: American Combat Soldiers and Vietnam* nicely captured working class resentment against the liberal elite that they understand to have created the war, and then blamed soldiers for what went wrong. Working class opposition to the anti-war movement, Appy argues, was based on class resentments more than beliefs about international policies; many members of the working class simultaneously opposed the war and the anti-war movement, which the media had succeeded in portraying as a movement of the privileged.

Mass. State students also tend to lack confidence in their abilities and judgements. Since they know about “political correctness,” they are often hesitant to express their views about issues of race and gender because they are worried about not sounding “politically correct.”

“ELITE LIBERALISM” AT LITTLE COLLEGE

Little College students, in contrast (and again, overgeneralizing wildly), have been better educated in terms of critical thinking skills, by their families, by their high schools, and at Little itself. They know about contrasting points of view, and that not everybody considers the U.S. government to be a paragon of virtue in the world—in part because they have traveled more than Mass. State students have. The schools that they attended—mostly white suburban or elite prep schools—though more homogenous in terms of the student body, are also more likely to have an updated “multicultural” curriculum than those attended by Mass. State students. Little students are also conditioned to be particularly sensitive to different “perspectives” and questions of identity. On issues of race, gender, and sexual orientation, they are outspoken and eager to study and promote the perspectives of those who they consider “oppressed”—though given the limits of their experiences, and the ways that “multiculturalism” has been conceptualized in their schools, the term “oppressed” is too-frequently applied to Little College students who are not white, upper-middle class heterosexual males from Massachusetts. (Seriously—“regionalism” has become the latest catchword added to the list of “isms” that politically correct Little students must challenge, following racism, sexism, heterosexism, classism, etc.) Multiculturalism as a buzzword—but it is a multiculturalism that tends towards a superficial celebration of “difference” rather than a structural or economic analysis of inequality.

Thus Little students are not necessarily any closer to independent analytical thinking about issues of social structures, distribution of resources, or the role of the United States in the world. The prominence given to identities shaped by race, ethnicity, gender and sexual orientation in multicultural curricula makes it difficult for them to recognize economic inequality. For example, the term “classism” is also sometimes added to the list, as if “classism,” or prejudice against people of a different social class, were a parallel phenomenon to homophobia, with the implication that the essential problems faced by poor people have to do with cultural attitudes towards them, rather than with the reality of poverty itself. Social acceptance, rather than social change, becomes the goal.

Little students’ education, perhaps prior to Little and certainly at Little, has also exposed them, in a very superficial way, to some postmodern and postcolonialist ideas. They have absorbed the notion that there is no single truth, that political and economic analyses are *passé*, and that oppression—and resistance—take many subtle forms—which they find far more interesting than the more obvious forms. Locating these subtle forms of oppressive thought then becomes a favored activity, which takes place in the classroom and in private and public meetings. At numerous public events over the past few years, Little students of color have demanded that white students acknowledge their “white skin privilege”; white students have eagerly complied (“I recognize my white skin privilege!” being greeted by profuse applause). This “privilege,” however, *presupposes* economic security—it consists of statements like “I can always find cosmetics that match my skin color” or “when I go to a dinner party there are always people of my race there.” While exclusion from these “privileges” certainly affects the lives of students of color, a focus on this exclusion as the *essence* of “oppression” helps to blind *all* of the students to some of the more fundamental “privileges” that they all share.

Unlike Mass. State students, Little students tend to oppose US interventions abroad, and assume that they are carried out for nefarious reasons. However, they have little interest in the topic as a whole. Analysis of foreign policy or international relations, they believe, focuses too much on “white men.” They are quite cynical about the machinations of the government—again, in part because they have been exposed to a broader range of information and opinion—but it is

a cynicism that leads to apathy. If the government and the media are always lying, if it is impossible to discover the “real” truth about events, if the entire concept of a “real” truth is flawed, then the idea of taking action or working for change is ludicrous.

More interesting to Little students than U.S. policies towards Iraq, for example, would be a study of attitudes towards women in Iraqi society; more interesting than studying agrarian reform or health in Cuba would be looking at forms of racism. Are these approaches mutually exclusive? Unfortunately, the dialogue seems to make them so, and not only in the case of Cuba. Any discussion of any political topic is scrutinized for evidence that it has “marginalized” or “silenced” some social group in any subtle way, and if it has, it is dismissed as “oppressive.” Those of us who try to teach multiple perspectives and voices need to consider that nihilism, rather than critical thinking, can be the result of our efforts.

In general students tend to mechanistically apply critical “insights” developed in the context of the United States to Cuba. Power, especially state power, is deemed inherently “oppressive”; since identities are more important than ideas, or rather, ideas are reflections of identities, white men necessarily exercise white male power. For example, in a class on the history of U.S. relations with Latin America, a “politically-correct” Little student excoriated me for using Paul Farmer’s *The Uses of Haiti*, since it was written by a white man, and thus gave a “white male” perspective on Haiti, marginalizing women and people of color. (Since it was written by a white man, she had apparently decided it wasn’t necessary to read it, since when I asked her for an example from the text where she felt this happened, she decided to drop the class.) In the case of Cuba, obviously, Fidel exercises “white male” power. Thus simplistic analyses like those of Carlos Moore or Reinaldo Arenas have enormous resonance—they are the voices of oppressed “identities” and thus inherently liberatory.

Finally, the postmodern “political correctness” fostered by both students and faculty at Little demands that we avoid “simplistic dichotomies,” recognize and celebrate diverse forms of identities and resistance (especially “everyday resistance”), eschew words like “victim” that deny the agency of the oppressed and turn them into “others.” It thus becomes impossible to discuss U.S. power and its abuses, because that would be ignoring the “agency” of the victims, who are not “victims” anyway because those below also shape history...

Thus the critique of power that has developed through this rather superficial understanding of multiculturalism, postmodernism, postcolonialism, and political correctness, is just as incapable of seeing or analyzing structural inequalities or the U.S. role in the world as is the patriotic blindness instilled by many public schools. In fact, although superficially quite different from the ideological perspective of Mass. State students, it is based, underneath, on a set of fundamentally common attitudes, which are instilled not necessarily explicitly through the schools, but implicitly through the pervasive institutions that all are exposed to, ranging from the media to the social realities of the United States, which those who have not lived or traveled elsewhere tend to naturalize as inherent aspects of the human condition.

COMMON GROUND

Students’ views towards Cuba have been shaped not only by the class and educational specificities of their experiences, but also by ideologies and assumptions inculcated by aspects of U.S. culture that seem to be widely shared across class lines. What they believe about Cuba develops in the context of their beliefs about the United States. Virtually all of the students live in a state of blissful ignorance about the U.S. role in the world. (Although Little students may have a more cynical *attitude*, they have little specific knowledge or understanding of the

character and goals of U.S. policies and actions.) Both groups, despite having taken 12 years of U.S. history, have never heard the names Patrice Lumumba, Che Guevara, Salvador Allende or Anastasio Somoza. Part of the reason for this ignorance is that U.S. history courses tend to stop at World War II, and in any case, “foreign policy” is separated from “U.S. history” as a separate field. In addition, students have been exposed to a lifetime of media and political images of U.S. beneficence, including over a decade of pledging allegiance to the U.S. flag and repeating “one nation, under God, with liberty and justice for all” every day. Even if they suspect that there may not be “liberty and justice for all,” they believe that the United States is fundamentally *different* from other countries because of its *ideals*, whether or not these ideals have been fully attained. Thus some ideas, projects, and ideals can be dismissed as “un-American”—a rather unusual concept, if you think about it. (They also, of course, unhesitatingly appropriate the term “America” to refer to the United States.) Their vision of U.S. history as a triumphant march towards a set of ideals corresponds to the one that James Loewen proposes in his critique of U.S. history teaching, *Lies my Teacher Told Me*.

Some students are aware that there is anti-U.S. sentiment outside of the United States, either because they have experienced it in their travels, or because they have seen it on the news (e.g., embassy bombings). This sentiment, they believe, must be motivated by jealousy, either of U.S. material advantages, or of U.S. “freedoms.” They are vaguely aware that the material abundance of the United States is unparalleled, and they attribute this abundance, of course, to our superior political and economic system, since their teachers, the media, and politicians have carefully them shielded from knowledge of our relations with other parts of the world.

If jealousy is not the motive—or perhaps intertwined with jealousy—anti-U.S. sentiment must come from the fact that some people are just “bad people.” Almost all students at both colleges have learned that Hitler was one such “bad person”; by analogy, the world (outside of the United States) must be full of “bad people” seeking political and military power. In fact, to them, virtually anybody—outside of the United States—who seeks political and military power *must* be a “bad person.” U.S. exercises of political and military power, in contrast, take place only to protect the victims or potential victims of these “bad people”—as in the Gulf War, or the recent bombings of Sudan and Afghanistan.

What students have learned—and the ideologies they have been imbued with—is reinforced strategically by what they have *not* learned. In an exercise that I give students on the first day of class, I ask them to name five important Latin Americans, past or present. I then put *all* of the names they’ve come up with on the board, and read through them, asking students to raise their hands if they have heard the name before. Fidel Castro is consistently the most-recognized Latin American person—he has virtually 100% name recognition. Perhaps two or three (out of groups ranging from 20 to 50) have heard the names Che Guevara, Fulgencio Batista, Gabriel García Márquez, or Subcomandante Marcos. In between fall a few sports and entertainment figures. (In fact when I’ve included the English-speaking Caribbean, Bob Marley and Fidel have tied for first place.) About Fidel, they know that he has a beard, that he is a communist, that he is a dictator, that he smokes cigars, that he tried to launch Soviet missiles against us, prompting the Bay of Pigs invasion, and that he shot down some planes. Thus he clearly falls into the category of a “bad person.” Since the students have no background knowledge of the historical U.S. role in Latin America, they can conceive no rational or historical explanation for animosity against the U.S. The “facts” that they may learn are fit into—and thus shaped to conform to—a context that discourages structural analysis or understanding of cause and effect.

The idea that the Bay of Pigs invasion was sparked by Cuba's aiming Soviet missiles at the U.S. is widespread—the argument surfaces frequently in class discussion, and I have never had a student suggest that there was a problem with it. A discussion of the term “dictator” also yields interesting results. Students know that it means a “bad person,” and they know that it has something to do with not being elected. I recently observed a conversation between a Cuban speaker and a U.S. audience (not students, but of the same social background as most Little students) on the topic that illustrates some of the ways that pre-existing beliefs shape and limit the way people process information:

Person A: I can't believe that you spoke for 45 minutes about Cuba and never once said that Fidel Castro was a dictator.

Cuban Speaker: I don't believe that he is a dictator. What exactly do you mean by “dictator”?

Person B: That's his title. He has declared himself dictator.

Person A: If you won't admit that he is a dictator then I am not going to listen to you any more. (Stalks out.)

Person C: He's a dictator because he's militaristic, he shoots down planes, so he isn't like our political leaders.

These members of the audience were so sure of the connection between Cuba, dictatorship, evil, and military aggression, that their inability to define the term dictator did not sway them from their conviction that Fidel Castro *is* one, and even from the almost ludicrous assumption that he is unique among world leaders for not having renounced the use of violence. (And this only days after the U.S. attacks on Afghanistan and Sudan.)

At another public event at which I spoke, I was asked whether there was a strong military presence in the streets in Cuba. I said no, and a member of the audience (not a student) raised her hand to say that she had been to Cuba—she sailed over illegally on a pleasure boat from Florida—and that she had seen police “everywhere.” When I asked, “What were they doing?” she paused, a bit puzzled, trying to remember, and finally said, “They looked like they were directing traffic.”

Since communism, dictatorship, militarism, and government control are so inextricably linked in their minds, students assume that any Cuban film will be nothing but government propaganda. I've had students in the same class critique “Portrait of Teresa” from opposite, but related, angles: one said that it was obviously pro-revolutionary propaganda because it showed so many people having televisions; while another perceived its critical look at Cuban society as “dissidence” and wondered how it could have been filmed and sneaked out of the country, because it was obviously a counter-revolutionary work trying to show how badly people lived, in small houses, with crowded busses, and with the state controlling everything, with Teresa forced to work, etc. (This latter comment was from a Little student—Mass. State students tend to be more aware that some people in the United States live in small houses, use public transportation, and have to work...)

These explicit beliefs about communism, and about U.S. history and politics, are shaped by some very deep-seated beliefs about the individual and society, in particular, about what

aspects of the human condition and social organization and under human control, that are also shared by both groups of students. Students are extremely wary of any legal or governmental actions that might limit their “freedom,” but it is very difficult for them to recognize that “freedom” can be limited in ways other than by decree. They know that “we live in a free country”; they know that laws enshrining different rights for blacks and whites, or for men and women, are wrong—but in the absence of such laws, they are sure that any inequalities must be due to individual differences or inadequacies.

They know that money is required to obtain an automobile, or purchase medications, or publish a book, or open a restaurant—thus they recognize that not all citizens have an equal ability to do these things. However, they attribute this inequality not to human agency or even social structure, but rather to abstract economic “laws” that govern social facts like unemployment rates, health insurance, deindustrialization, or the quality of public schools. One may complain about “the economy,” the way that one complains about the weather, but it would be absurd to try to change the way the economy functions, and absurd to consider unequal distribution of resources a limit on anyone’s “freedom”—it is simply an inevitable fact of life.

The only exception to this view of the “laws of the market” as something beyond the sphere of human control is socialism: a system that tries to “artificially” control the economy. Thus poverty or economic crisis in Cuba are due to “socialism”; in the USSR they are due to “the legacy of communism”; while in Mexico, Brazil, Indonesia, or the United States these phenomena are due to “recession” or “global economic forces” or even “the falling peso”—complex events that have no identifiable “cause” and certainly are not due to the economic systems in those countries.

This dual consciousness regarding the “causes” of economic structures—that in capitalist systems the “causes” are impersonal economic laws while in communist systems the “causes” are human agency—is reinforced by news articles which positively gloat about the “return of capitalism” in Nicaragua, acknowledging the growing poverty, hunger, and inequality as an unfortunate but inevitable side effect of economic growth, while articles on Cuba manage to make perfectly familiar characteristics of U.S. capitalism—like the fact that some people have nice cars and others don’t, or that people pay taxes—seem like further examples of Communist repression. In Nicaragua, a 70% poverty rate and the fact that the UN Human Development Index ranked Nicaragua’s quality of life as the second lowest in the hemisphere are seen as secondary to the fact that “the economy [has] restarted”; “Nicaragua is taking steps to join global economy”; and the fact that “Nicaragua’s upper classes . . . are experiencing a boom.”¹ As Alejandro Portes pointed out in *Latin Journey*, in countries defined as “enemies” (like Cuba), the U.S. government (and media, and population) understands all economic problems to be the result of political decisions, whereas in “friendly” countries like today’s Nicaragua, or Brazil, or Mexico, the media rarely question the causes of poverty, it is seen as a purely economic phenomenon and not due to political causes or government decisions. In fact most people seem to “know” that Cuba is suffering from severe economic problems; but few are aware of the economic problems in other Latin American countries.

In one class (at Little, though I’d guess that Mass. State students’ reactions would be similar), I had students read Tom Miller’s *Trading with the Enemy* right after Carolina Maria de Jesus’s *Child of the Dark*. Most sympathized deeply with Carolina, but not a single one

¹ Christine MacDonald, “Nicaragua is taking steps to join global economy—but road is long,” *Boston Sunday Globe*, August 9, 1998, p. A18.

questioned her passive acceptance of her situation; when they read Miller, they were shocked that people in Cuba did not rebel at the conditions he described. In the case of Cuba, it seemed obvious to my students—as it also seems to be to most people in Cuba—that economic conditions are the result of human actions, decisions, and structures that can be criticized and changed. What is striking is that in a capitalist situation—like the U.S. or Brazil—it never occurs to students that economic conditions are subject to anything except abstract economic “laws.”

Cubans, on the other hand, tend to understand quite well that economic structures are human creations. A Cuban (living in Cuba) who was bitterly opposed to the revolution once expressed her outrage to a group of students about the fact that once when she prepared to board an airplane, Cuban officials separated the passengers and allowed the foreigners, whiter, and wealthy-looking people to board first, and they were seated in the front of the plane in large, comfortable seats, and served orange juice and champagne, while the other, “ordinary” Cubans were relegated to the back of the plane in uncomfortable seats and not served at all. I could practically see the picture shifting in the students’ minds as they came to realize that she perceived active injustice where they had previously seen only “first class.”

This kind of social consciousness was one of the aspects of Cuban society that most profoundly impressed my Little students when we went there. If the way that they understand the United States shapes the way that they see Cuba, learning something about, or especially seeing, Cuba forced them to rethink many of the truisms that they believe about the United States. Despite their vague beliefs that the United States is a democracy, and has the best government in the world, almost all of them are profoundly alienated from the political system. They believe firmly in upward mobility, choice, and individual action in determining their own lives, but they do not believe that any of the structural conditions of their society are susceptible to change. Some of the structural conditions are simply “natural” and not subject to human control at all; others may be subject to control by “the government,” but it is unlikely that an individual could affect them, so it is not even worth having an opinion about them. They are unaware that capitalism is an economic system, or that the way the economy functions has anything to do with human decisions that can be changed. As one student wrote after a 2-week study-trip:

“Having returned back to the Little bubble it has been interesting to see what kinds of questions people ask if they ask at all... It is hard to have had this incredible experience of being in a country that is so alive with political activity where every individual on the street has a political stance and opinion that they are willing to voice and return to an atmosphere where for the most part no one really cares.”

Students are rarely aware of legislation before Congress—thus Little students were shocked to find that Cubans could discuss the Torricelli and Helms Burton legislation, which they had never heard of before. It would never occur to them that people might be interested in the infant mortality rate of their town, state, or country, or in levels of agricultural or industrial production. All of these issues seem removed, irrelevant, and certainly outside of the realm of what an ordinary citizen might care about or be involved in. The fact that Cubans tried to engage them in discussions of such matters made them question, for the first time, the meaning and depth of “democracy” in their own society.

Teaching about Cuba, and travelling there with students—which was more practical with better-funded Little students than it has been at Mass. State—has taught me a lot about the

preconceptions that shape the ways that students process information. It has made me especially wary of “critical” approaches that students can internalize without fundamentally questioning some of these preconceptions. In particular, I worry about versions of postmodernist and postcolonialist approaches that encourage nihilistic, rather than critical, thinking, and that obscure the very power relations that more traditional, celebratory approaches also avoid. I also fear versions of multiculturalism that celebrate and privilege “identity” in ways that allow economically comfortable students to feel self-righteous even as they ignore the realities of poverty and violence in the world. Cuba was so different from what they had been led to believe that it helped them to take a more questioning attitude towards other types of received wisdom. In addition, studying, or experiencing Cuba forced them to confront some of their most implicit beliefs about human nature and society. Seeing this transformative process has also helped me to see some of the limitations of other classroom approaches to critical thinking.