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Reopening Paradise: Ecotourism in Cuba

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TITLE

Reopening Paradise: Ecotourism in Cuba

ABSTRACT

In December 2014, President Barack Obama announced that his administration will be working towards normalizing relations between Cuba and America for the first time in sixty-four years. This announcement was followed by loosened regulations on travel and talks of reopening commerce for the near future. The prospect of deregulating trade and travel between Cuba and the United States has many individuals concerned for the various tensions that juxtapose the two countries. Primarily, many are concerned with the tensions between Cuba's socialist values and those of American enterprise. Questions are being raised about the ways these two conflicting values can coexist and work with one another. Secondarily, and most importantly to this paper, many are concerned that the value of profit will be placed before the freedom and well-being of native Cubans and the Cuban ecology. This paper aims to examine the structures which currently make for the Cuban tourism industry, the way tourism has historically and presently affected Cuban natives, and then extrapolate what the state of Cuba tourism will be with American influences in the near future.

INTRODUCTION

My grandfather was the youngest of eleven children in his family; not uncommon for many families in Cuba at the time. They were not particularly wealthy, so growing up in Cuba in the 1920s taught him to be appreciative of the things he had and to be economically savvy about the things he wanted. Out of all eleven of his siblings, he was the only one who completed a formal education; a completed education was a rarity in Cuba at the time. When the time came, his siblings all contributed their savings to pay for his college education. Under the Batista government, my grandfather became an extravagantly wealthy architect; designing hotels, bridges, and resorts all over the north-western part of the island. When my father would describe my abuelo he would smile and say "Your abuelo was an *hijueputa* but he was smart. There was only two cadillacs on the island- one of them was Batista's and the others was your abuelo Efrain's." My abuelo embodied the Cuban ideals of *familia* and *resolver*- he was extremely protective of the people who gave him his education and clever enough to learn how to con the system that made his family poor in the first place. Always pictured with a lit cigar in his hand, it was intuitive that my grandfather was the man to be in Cuba. But when Castro came into power it all changed. Like most Cubans at the time, my abuelo was in favor of the Castro regime, as it addressed the awful corruption the Batista government enabled. However, the moment my grandfather realized that Castro promoted communism, he knew Cuba would fall apart.

A few years after the revolution, my grandfather was able to make the proper connections to flee Cuba with his family. He was one of the few wealthy Cubans that was able to leave the island before it fell apart; most Cuban immigrants fled years after that. A million dollar man in the country his soul was one with, my grandfather left Cuba with nothing more than the clothes he was wearing. My father distinctly remembers when they left the seaport in the northernmost part of the country named Mariel- the same name my family passed down to me. "The guard took all of the things we had came with. My father had to hand over the first gold watch he had bought himself once he became wealthy- the same watch he promised would be mine." It was a common practice for guards to make their wealth off the fleeing families- but it felt very personal

none the less. My grandfather humbly gave all of his possession away, vowing he would do what was right for his family.

After they left Cuba, my family traveled to Spain, then to the Dominican Republic and then to Puerto Rico as refugees. Once he established roots in Puerto Rico however, my grandfather began working and made himself a millionaire once more. My father would recount, “Every time my father made a penny, he would save it. And when he had enough, he pulled each one of his family members and the family of your abuela out of Cuba. He would bring them to our house and they would stay here until they could find a way to live. He never forgot about the place that he came from and how he get here.”

Though we have shared the American dream for almost two generations, our personal history of survival is still a strong part of my family’s identity. Millions of other Cuban-Americans carry fond memories of their *patria*, only wishing they could some day return. In December of 2014, this wish seemed to have come true with the announced reopening of foreign relations between the United States and Cuba. Under these new regulations, Americans could visit the country to engage in “people-to-people” tourism, and possibly begin paving the way to policies allowing for the trade goods, economic investment, and open travel. However, after fifty years of embargo, there is cause for concern the effects this will have on residing Cubans. Current concerns for worsening human rights violations and barred quality of life standards are well placed when taking an indepth look at the history of foreign relations for the country.

Ecotourism as it is practiced in Cuba has affected the lives of locals since the early 1900s- and the romanticism that lead to tourism has continue to affect Cubans long before then.¹ However, ecotourism as it is currently practiced in Cuba is largely contextualized by the placement of the American embargo in the 1950s and the disintegration of the Soviet Union. In order to understand the way ecotourism affects Cuban natives, one must understand the structures that shape its practices. This paper aims to highlight the discrepancy between the current state of tourism in Cuba and what it should be by addressing the very structures that gave way to its creation.

DISCOURSE ON CUBAN ECOTOURISM

The sociopolitical and economic effects of tourism on the Caribbean island of Cuba has been a topic researched throughout the 1980s to present. The ways in which the inherent capitalist nature of tourism interacts with the socialist values of the communist country has been the most salient focal point of such research. That is, the ways capitalism makes the human experience a commodity as it interacts with socialist values of community and solidarity have always been contradictory and yet seem to coexist within the Cuban state. Now that economic sanctions between the United States and Cuba are being reviewed and implemented, the conversation has taken a particular turn of intrigue as to how the latter will negotiate its contradicting interests; namely building revenue and maintaining its socialist values. One school of thought holds that “because of the rise in tourism in Cuba over the past few years and the potential for political change after Fidel Castro leaves power, there are extremely valuable

¹ Rosalie Schwartz. *Pleasure Island: Tourism and Temptation in Cuba*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997.

business opportunities for U.S. hospitality enterprises.”² The prospect of American trade on the island pushes many to believe that “the hunt for hard currency income is so earnest for both state and individual that Cuba has been forced into a compromising pack with the capitalist devil.” Others still yet argue that “the real irony might be that tourism in Cuba has been its saving because it has enabled the socialist system to survive.”³ Overall, there is a concern that Cuba’s ecology is being sacrificed for the sake of producing revenue- this so especially with prospects of American trade.

In understanding the history of Cuban foreign relations after the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the ways in which the socialist government has preserved its identity since then, one can attempt to understand the magnitude of influence the United States can have on the island. However, resuming economic relations between the United States and Cuba is more than economic policy, as it directly affects the political stability of the nation and in turn the exploitation and displacement of peoples, and degradation of the environment. In order to lay claims on what the state of the Cuban government is currently and what it ought to be- for the sake of its ecology and people- one must understand and engage in the economic, social and political discourses surrounding Cuban-American relations.

INTERDISCIPLINARY UNDERSTANDINGS OF “ECOTOURISM”

Consider experiencing the beauty of a flower; when one experiences its beauty we are moved within by awe. However, this awe is sparked not by simply acknowledging the superficial traits of the flower- like it’s color, shape, or vibrance- but by grasping the essence of what the flower *is*. We must understand the context that allows this flower to be. It is understanding the worms that till the soil, the bees that cross pollinate the flower to perpetuate its existence, and the sun and water then allows it to grow.⁴ The awe and appreciation we feel in recognizing such beauty comes from the holistic understanding of the nature within the flower.

Critical thinking involves this same process of recognizing the importance of interconnected activity. We must ask questions about the interdisciplinary facets of events- whether it be ecotourism in Cuba or the metaphysics of observing a cup- in order to truly understand the gravity of what one is experiencing. Timothy Morton, a contemporary scholar and ecocritique, notes, all events occur within the web or mesh that is all of existence.⁵ In explaining the ways in which people should change how they conceive of the world so that we may begin to work towards valuing ecology, Morton states we must accept the fact that “all things are interconnected.”⁶ To truly understand the gravity of an event, one must consider all the interdisciplinary factors which lead to its production. Understanding the ways in which the reality of our ecological state is different from what it ought to be thus involves one’s understanding of the effects of economics, politics, social constructs, etc. on individuals and on the environment. Discourse in economics, politics, and social constructs are not disciplines or

² Backman, K. "The Challenge of Cuban Tourism: A Commentary on "Cuba at the Crossroads"" *Cornell Hotel and Restaurant Administration Quarterly* 48, no. 4 (2007): p. 423

³ Wilkinson, Stephen. "Cuba's Tourism 'Boom': A Curse or a Blessing?" *Third World Quarterly* 29, no. 5 (2008): 980

⁴ Richard Feynman. "THE FEYNMAN SERIES - Beauty." YouTube. Accessed March 02, 2016.

⁵ Timothy Morton. *The Ecological Thought*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010.

⁶ Morton, pg. 3

ideas that can be separated from one another without losing the scope of what is environmental justice.

Understanding the interconnectedness of all things and activities requires changing the popular definition of “nature.” Morton notes, “Nature was always ‘over yonder,’ alien and alienated.”⁷ This speaks to the common conception of “nature” happening in a vacuum of isolation, separate from the experience of modern humans. However, critical thinking demands we think of nature as all things that exist and that all things are a combination of multiple experiences. This means that the trees outside are equal definitions of nature as the buildings in closest city because they both equally part-take in the web of interconnectedness. Conceptualizing the web asks for us to consider the very worms that till the soil and the bees that cross pollinate because they are part of the experience of what is the flower. Morton defines this as “coexistence;” all things individually existing together in the interconnected web. Hence, critically thinking of environmental justice is accepting the premise that all experiences are intrinsically tied to each other and that they are also part of nature.

Accepting interconnectedness requires we change the way we think of ecotourism, or tourism in general. Cofounder of the Center for Responsible Travel, Dr. Martha Honey gives a basic definition of the different ideas that encompass ecotourism in her book “Ecotourism and Sustainable Development.”

“Sound ecotourism should meet four requirements: (1) it should be designed, built, and operated so that it leaves a ‘soft imprint’; (2) it should contribute money to the local economy and local community services; (3) it should contribute financially to environmental protection; and (4) it should educate visitors and members of the local community.”⁸

Honey further elaborates on this definition by clarifying that though ecotourism carries the promise of educating the visitor and respecting the local culture, it can often prompt invasive and exploitative practices. We see this problem develop as tourism has shifted over recent years from the Global North to the underdeveloped Global South- it being that globalization and free trade has pit the weak national capital of developing countries against strong foreign investment, and peoples are being displaced in the name of development and national revenue.⁹ Though ecotourism assumes that untouched stretches of land and culture are key subjects to its ventures, it simultaneously destroys these stretches of land in the name of development. Furthermore, it displaces the people who live on said lands while appropriating their culture for “authenticity.” In the case of Cuba, locals have been forced to move out of their beach side communities for the development of hotels and resorts since the tourism booms of the early 1900s. These same resorts will offer “authentic” Cuban cuisine and promote iconic ideas of the Caribbean with palm trees, cigars, white beaches, and mambo and rumba music playing constantly. However, these ideas of “authentic” are falsely placed because the very people who are stewards of this culture are being marginalized. Ecotourism is then considered invasive and exploitative of the indigenous people.

⁷ Morton, pg. 5

⁸ Honey, Martha. *Ecotourism and Sustainable Development: Who Owns Paradise?* Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 1999. p. 74

⁹ Honey, Martha. *Ecotourism and Sustainable Development: Who Owns Paradise?* Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 1999. p.87 &102

Honey states, “[Ecotourism] at present is a set of interconnected principles whose full implementation presents multilayered problems...crying out for deeper investigation, more rigorous analysis, and more careful theoretical work.”¹⁰ Ecotourism then becomes more than tourists enjoying Cuba’s beautiful beaches, and includes what the political future of this region seems to be and the ways the lives of Cubans are subsequently changed. The presence and interaction of an ecotourist with the ecological, political, and economic environment of the Cuban state then become different sides of the same coin.

ETHICAL REASONING AND DIRECT ACTION

American enterprises are looking upon the opportunity to invest in Cuba as an opportunity to expand their hospitality enterprises, while native Cubans are looking on to American relations with distrust.¹¹ As Cornell University researchers for Sergei Khrushchev, Tony L. Henthorne and Michael S. Latour state, “there appeared to be a high level of distrust and a feeling that U.S. business was disingenuous in its desire to “partner” with established Cuban entities, preferring instead to take over and bring the prevalent American culture (and all that entails) back to Cuba.”¹² Furthermore, many feel as though Cuba is opening its doors has little to benefit to the state of its natives. Many Cuban-Americans express worries that the various human rights violations the country struggles with will not only be ignored, but further exacerbated with the increase of profit industry. As NBCNews covers stories regarding the reopening of relations, one Cuban ex-pat whose family fled during the 1960s explains “And if we support anyone, we have to make sure that freedom is the number one thing... We are making friends with someone who is not giving anything in return.”¹³ Looking at the ways these human rights violations came about clearly contextualizes these sentiments.

In the disintegration of the Soviet Union between 1989 and 1991, Cuba’s economy plummeted due to the disintegration of the communist foreign market. Where Cuba once traded with Russia and other members of the bloc at a discounted rate, it now paid full market price as it would with all other countries.¹⁴ After 1991, Cuba was in need of hard currency, as well as other basic products like food. It quickly turned to tourism as a major source of quick revenue, prompting mass hotel and resort constructions and an influx of international visitors. However, with tourism at its height, the effects of mass industry quickly flooded the island. The reinforcement of prostitution, drugs, exacerbation of ethnic inequalities and racism, and worker exploitation became a threat to the political philosophy of the socialist government. Officials took steps to regulate the effects of tourism by isolating tourist areas from populated civilian cities and by promoting nationalist propaganda in the public sector, but this came to little avail as industry only continued to grow. The power of tourism directly affected the ecological landscape

¹⁰ Honey, Martha. *Ecotourism and Sustainable Development: Who Owns Paradise?* Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 1999. Pg. 97

¹¹ K. Backman, p. 423.

¹² S. Khrushchev, T. L. Henthorne, and M. S. Latour. "Cuba at the Crossroads: The Role of the U.S. Hospitality Industry in Cuban Tourism Initiatives." *Cornell Hotel and Restaurant Administration Quarterly* 48, no. 4 (2007): p.412

¹³ Merrigan, JoAnn. "Local Cuban Americans React to Obama’s Visit to Cuba." WSAVTV. 2016. Accessed April 24, 2016. <http://wsav.com/2016/03/21/local-cuban-americans-react-to-obamas-visit-to-cuba/>.

¹⁴ Peter M. Sanchez, and Kathleen M. Adams. "The Janus-faced Character of Tourism in Cuba." *Annals of Tourism Research* 35, no. 1 (2008): p. 31-32

of the island with the creation of hotels and resorts. While enterprises catered to romanticized ideals of sunny beaches and high quality cigars, the livelihoods of populations of people were directly being affected.

The invitation for foreign investment and the legalization of the American dollar are two fundamental contradictions the Cuban government made against their socialist agenda in the interest of raising revenue, prompting the creation of the current state of tourism. The desperation that followed the disintegration of the communist bloc proved the capitalist strategy of tourism to be a necessity at the time. These two sanctions made “private incentive and entrepreneurship, whether legal or not, salient characteristics of the Cuban economy.”¹⁵ Following the mass constructions of hotels and resorts came an increase in job availability. As the government had intended, the new hotel and beach resorts lead to an influx of foreigners on the island which provided the country with new revenue. What was not foreseen, however, was the nature of the economic power the tourism business would develop. The influx of foreigners, along with the legalization of the American dollar, lead to the creation of the class, scholars of Cuban tourism Sanchez and Adams call, the *petite bourgeoisie*.¹⁶ Defined as those who have access to hard currency and to the power of the American dollar, Cubans working in the tourism industry acquire wealth through the tips and cash-paid services of vacationers. This has prompted the inversion of the Cuban economic infrastructure- Sanchez and Adams reporting that a general practitioner earns an estimated twenty dollars a month, while a hotel manager earns an estimated forty dollars a month and a restaurant waiter earns twenty dollars, with an estimated seventeen dollar tip. Sanchez and Adams conclude, “those who have access to tourism-derived hard currency can live more comfortably than those who do not.”¹⁷

The effects of tourism has also bred corruption, prostitution, racism, alienation, and the mass displacement of human bodies. Where the Cuban ideal of *resolver* once meant to be clever and survive, it now so means to exploit oneself to get by. Cubans working in the tourism sector are more likely to steal items like Cuban cigars or rum and resell them to foreign visitors to acquire American dollars. Cubans are also more likely to see value in becoming sex workers as a way of providing for their needs.¹⁸ When applying for the highly lucrative positions available in the tourism sector, fair-skinned Cubans have far greater success and visibility- reports showing almost all front desk workers in Havana and Varadero hotels are white, while Afro-Cubans, a significant segment of both local populations, represent little to none of the high-level and best-paying positions in the industry.¹⁹ Regardless of race however, Cubans as a whole are treated like second-class citizens to the foreigners who can afford to stay in the hotels and carry the strong incentive of American dollars. All these ways of exploiting individuals has come amount by the stress the American dollar and foreign investment has put on individuals who lack hard currency. Furthermore, one must also take into account the various government efforts to isolate

¹⁵ Peter M. Sanchez, and Kathleen M. Adams. p.33

¹⁶ Peter M. Sanchez, and Kathleen M. Adams. p.33

¹⁷ Peter M. Sanchez, and Kathleen M. Adams. p.33

¹⁸ Peter M. Sanchez, and Kathleen M. Adams. p.35

¹⁹ Peter M. Sanchez, and Kathleen M. Adams. p.36

individuals who do not work in the tourism industry from the general contact of these hotels and beach resorts.

Though the Cuban government has allowed for such contradictions to persist in its socialist regime, nationalist sentiments are still propagated through tourist excursions and sites as a way of socializing Cuban citizens and eliciting foreign sympathy. Nationalist propaganda in tourist sites is especially emphasized in contrast to American capitalist ideals. Constant reminders of the hardship the Cuban people endured through the ‘special time’ of the Revolution fortifies feelings of distrust of the American people and deepens their dedication to the causes of Cuban socialism.²⁰ Museums on the island incessantly pay tribute to the Revolution, its great values, and the Cuban people for their strength and endurance. Statues and artifacts remember Ernesto “Che” Guevara and glorify Cuba’s victory in the Bay of Pigs. Tours of the island also includes showcases of specific local medical facilities and the ecological achievements of the government as a way of dispelling negative notions of underdevelopment or disregard for the environment. The nationalist propaganda in Cuban tourism also elicits support and activism in foreigners to the extent that it leads to the production of pro-Cuban tourist programs, spreading its message internationally.²¹ Organizations like Global Exchange, based in San Francisco, California, aim to shed light on truths in Cuban nationalist propaganda.

The presence of nationalist propaganda is obvious and widespread in the Cuban tourism industry. Though the socialist and Anti-American values of the government resonates deeply with its people, for those wishing to live comfortably or simply survive, the opportunity to produce double the monthly salary of a doctor or state official and to provide for one’s own still remains and resonates equally.

In predicting the trajectory of Cuban-American relations, the dichotomy of producing state revenue through tourism and controlling for threats against the socialist governments will persist. Though Cuba has grown a large part of its economy through tourism, engaging in economic trade with the United States may greatly intensify the same problems Cuba has aimed to regulate. It will not be enough to simply isolate the general Cuban populace from the main tourists hubs or limit tourism to sites that enforce government propaganda. In order for there to be environmental justice within the opening state, American and foreign investment trade will have to be heavily regulated in such a manner that ecological and anthropogenic effects of tourism are accounted for before economical benefit.

CONCLUSION

It is evident that the interplay between history, infrastructure, and political and economic interests have a real and direct effects on the lives of native Cubans. The term ecotourism in this case seems to contradict itself- as it is the increase in tourism that lead to the exploitation of the Cuban environment and people. However, this has not been the case for all interactions. Ecotourism as Dr. Martha Honey outlines is truly possible and has been embodied in several

²⁰ S. Khrushchev, T. L. Henthorne, and M. S. Latour, p. 404.

²¹ Stephen Wilkinson, p. 981

different countries such as Belize, Kenya, and Tanzania.²² The current state of tourism in Cuba continues to promote the distress and displacement of human beings. Many look at the prospects of American investment in the country as worrisome, only making human rights violations worse for those who are trying to survive. However, if these foreign investment agencies and the Cuban government were to pay close attention to the direct affects this industry has on individuals, there is a chance to have ethical and positive relations between the two countries. This would entail investors meeting the requirements of designing facilities that leave a soft imprint on the environment, contribute money to local communities and economies, contributing to environmental protection, and educating visitors to local communities. By modeling their facilities in the likeness of safe ecotourist attractions, like those in Belize or Tanzania, it is possible to keep environmental justice for the natives who experience the day to day effects of this industry.

The story of my grandfather fleeing the country he loved and reinventing himself is a story common to many Cubans-Americans. My grandfather had the foresight and the economic power to leave Cuba before his family was subject to the many ills Cuban natives now face with the state of the tourism industry. However, there are still many individuals who do not have the luxury of leaving the country to find a better life. It then becomes the responsibility of individual people and the various agencies that comprise the tourism industry to make conscious decisions about the way they chose to interact and affect the lives of these human beings. In going forward, there is more research to be done regarding the ways Cubans, like my grandfather, will again chose to reinvent themselves. Cuban-American economic relations, and how that in turn will affect the political and anthropological state of native Cubans, will surely be an important observation to make within the next decades.

²² Honey, Martha. *Ecotourism and Sustainable Development: Who Owns Paradise?* Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 1999. Pg. 71

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