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Cover Page Footnote

A special thanks to the following for bringing this experience to fruition: Kevin Kecskes, PhD Isbel Diaz Torres

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This paper seeks to explore how a shifting economic model and an increasing influx of U.S. tourism, customs, and products will impact consumerism and waste in Cuba. The paper begins by charting the rise of an unwitting conservationist culture among Cubans, built out of necessity as a response to Castro-era economic hardships. This is followed by a discussion of recent Cuban economic reforms and the rise of tourism, private enterprise and material luxury in Cuba. For the emerging autonomous economic class who have shouldered decades of scarcity, the social and economic values of consumerism far outweigh any perceived environmental cost. Finally, an analysis is undertaken concerning the ideological and infrastructural challenges facing Cuba as it moves towards a future of elevated consumption. Public infrastructure in Cuba is outdated and ill-equipped to manage the swift rise in material waste that will result from increased tourism and economic activity. While co-production models and community organizing efforts to promote environmentalism have proven successful on other island nations that have experienced a swift rise in consumption, civil society actors in Cuba experience socio-political barriers to public participation. Looking forward, the Cuban state must empower the burgeoning private sector and Cuban citizens to participate in the effort to maintain Cuba's low ecological footprint.

Part One: The Rise of the Cuban Creative Class

Cuban-born artist and designer Ernesto Oroza is a collector of artifacts. These artifacts are rare, but they aren't products of ancient history, and they aren't expert-made. Rather, they are the stuff of everyday Cuban life, doubly remarkable in their genius and simplicity: old aluminum lunch trays fashioned into radio antennas; a motor, harvested from a broken washing machine and welded to power a makeshift key-cutter; an irrigation system consisting of old soda bottles nourishing an urban farm of organic produce.

Oroza travelled all over Cuba collecting these objects between 1994 and 2007, during the height of what Fidel Castro dubbed "The Special Period in a Time of Peace." Following the fall of the Soviet Union in 1989, Cuba lost close to 75% of its international trade and the economy plummeted. Faced with severe austerity measures and dwindling resources, Cubans had to get creative to make do. And they did: the perfect storm of material scarcity brought on by the Special Period, and a ubiquitous, free education system distributed through socialist policy merged to spawn remarkable ingenuity in the everyday.

Oroza calls the DIY phenomena "technological disobedience,"¹ or the tendency for Cubans to think outside the normal capabilities of an object. Interestingly, in a place where disobedience towards government authority is not tolerated, liberation from the limitations of single-use material objects was attained. It was, in a way, its own form of individualism: a creative force that surpassed the boundaries of everyday material rules.

"As the crisis became more severe, people's creativity grew more powerful, and everywhere you looked you saw solutions to the needs that people faced all the time, in every aspect of life," Oroza said in a 2013 interview.² Examples of technological disobedience arise everywhere in the contemporary news and pop culture documenting Cuban life. In *The Other Side of Paradise*, Julia Cooke writes about throw pillows stuffed with old VHS tape, and faulty toilet bowl chains patched up with a melted Bic pen cap.³ Another journalist recounts street vendors serving up flan in the bottom half of a used beer can to eager customers.⁴ During my time in Cuba in December 2016, I visited Muraleando, an urban dump-turned-community art center that was an impressive homage to creative re-use. The architectural layout of the space evoked the colorful flair of Antoni Gaudi but, upon closer inspection, was composed of recycled construction materials and accented with broken glass, old coffee cups and chunks of household appliances. Sculptures fashioned from car parts line the site: a hubcap-framed shrine to an unspecified deity, a rooster sculpted from the axle of a Ford '59.

Perhaps the most striking recognition of Cuban resourcefulness came from a non-Cuban. During a visit to the newly opened American Embassy in Cuba, an uninviting fortress of steel barricades set against the breezy, palm-lined backdrop of the Malecon, I asked U.S. Foreign Service Officer Steve Martelli what Americans could learn from Cubans. In lieu of mentioning Cuba's exemplary health care and education systems, he gushed, "You should see the things they make, out of the things they make them with," mentioning a boat he once saw fashioned with the old motor from a blender.⁵

Conservation shows in Cuba's environmental metrics. It is the only country that meets the conditions of sustainability according to the Worldwide Fund for Nature (WWF), which refers to a balance between human development indicators and ecological footprint.⁶ As Cabello et al. explain, "the government of Cuba was forced by its extreme situation to confront the reality of limited resources. It chose the less traveled path of sustainable development for its people. The culture of savings and rational use of resources is also of core importance for the Cuban model."⁷

Remarkably, while Cuban people have access to free education and quality health care, and have a life expectancy rate that slightly outstretches Americans, their environmental impact has remained impressively low. According to Lewis:

the average Cuban has a 4.7-acre ecological footprint, the total amount of land area needed to grow the food they eat, produce the goods they use, and absorb the carbon they emit. For humans to avoid depleting the earth's ecological resources, we would all have to live on about 4 acres each, according to the environmental nonprofit Global Footprint Network. As of 2011, Costa Ricans each used 5.4 acres, Norwegians almost 12, Americans nearly 17.⁸

But where do the Cuban people stand on these metrics? Considering that most citizens living within the lexicon of capitalist-oriented Western societies have been taught to equate consumption and excess with progress, championing the conservationist road less traveled is a remarkable mentality for the Cuban populace to maintain. But are Cubans actually satisfied with their level of consumption, or is their eco-friendly lifestyle just an ironic byproduct of the grim economic realities on the island?

There is a common term used to describe how Cubans face the struggle that colors everyday life: *resolver*, to resolve. *Resolver*, above all, encapsulates the relentless work ethic and creative tactics employed by Cubans to solve their problems. The Communist Party has since latched onto

the concept of *resolver* as a point of national pride. Hours of blistering public oration delivered by Fidel Castro, and countless newspaper articles and billboards embracing socialist ideals and the *patria*, or homeland, have reminded generations of Cubans of the value inherent in their struggle. Wrote Perez:

*Sacrifice and struggle persisted as idealized attributes of Cuban, to be invoked as the model of conduct as circumstances warranted... Cubans were overtaken by the inexorable logic of their past, enjoined to discharge a legacy of duty imposed by all the history that preceded them. The past provided a time-honored paradigm, loaded with meaning from which to infer duty appropriate to being Cuban.*⁹

However, many Cubans speak of a present that is far removed from the past. Weary from decades of austerity and nationalistic propaganda promising that next year, things will be better, many in Cuba are not satisfied with their current lifestyle or consumption patterns. Novelist Ena Lucía Portela bluntly said in 2007 that “in truth I do not have the slightest idea of what it means to be Cuban today, assuming that it means anything at all. For me, with apologies to the patriots, these trappings of nationality are nothing more than a bureaucratic formality, and are very fucked-up at times.”¹⁰ More objectively, Cuban political scientist Pedro Campos Santos said that “we Cubans for the most part support the revolution and socialism, but we are weary with attributing everything that goes wrong with the embargo. We can no longer put up with the ration book, the low salaries, the high prices of basic necessities, the lack of public transportation.”¹¹

Dr. Margaret Crahan, longtime Cuba scholar and Director of the Cuba Program at Columbia University, argued that, contrary to what the government may encourage its subjects to believe, consumerism has always been a significant part of Cuban culture. In the 1950s, Cubans were the biggest consumers of luxury goods in Latin America. Now, she said, Cubans have “pent-up consumer desires” due to the long-term scarcities of previous decades.¹²

If pent-up consumer desires exist amongst contemporary Cubans, economic reforms and increased tourism in recent years have offered the first glimpse of opportunity to honor them. A surge of global culture set against the fading backdrop of Cuban socialist ideals is the tense setting of an increasingly contemporary Cuba today.

Part Two: The Floodgates Open

“It took us 50 years to understand that our public sector is very inefficient,” an economist for the Central party of Cuba who preferred to remain unnamed, said bluntly one evening over dinner in Havana.¹³ She is referring, of course, to the economic woes that have plagued Cuba for decades, and the radical reforms aimed at slowly opening up the free market and enticing foreign direct investment. New economic and social policies, introduced in 2011, present more opportunities for the private sector- and personal liberty than Cubans have seen in decades. Cubans can now buy and sell homes and automobiles. They can travel abroad as tourists. They can own their own business, so long as it falls on a list of approved enterprises. By the end of December 2015, it was reported that roughly 500,000 Cubans were self-employed, themselves employing another 115,000 workers.¹⁴

Coupled with those self-employed part-time in joint ventures, or operating within private farm cooperatives, one estimate posits that as much as 34% of Cuban’s working population now resides in the private sector.¹⁵

This economist, who I will refer to as Garcia, had been invited to dinner with our group from Portland to share, from the horse’s mouth, just what the government intends with these changes. “A common misconception is that we are moving toward capitalism. That is not true. We are working to make socialism more economically viable,” Garcia said. “10 years ago, the private sector was the devil. Now we are slowly trying to figure out how it can work within our system.”¹⁶

If the devil had a face, it would be that of a sunburnt, guayabera-clad tourist. Garcia pointed to the tourism sector as the peculiar leader that will support Cuba’s economy through its transition into a free-market world. Indeed, the majority of legally recognized forms of self-employment are directly tied to tourism, including private restaurants, lodgings, and taxi services. Furthermore, the tourism sector currently receives the lion’s share of Cuba’s foreign direct investment (52% as of 2014).¹⁷

The restoration of diplomatic relations with the U.S. will certainly play a major role in this market. The first American-run hotel, a Four Points by Sheraton, opened in Havana’s upscale Miramar district in 2016. In the same year, Cuba experienced a 100% increase in U.S. tourism—second only to Canada in overall number of tourists—and economists project that eventually upwards of three million Americans alone will flock to Cuba each year, once tourism restrictions have been fully lifted.¹⁸ And as far as the Communist

Party of Cuba is concerned, this is a good thing. “This country is depending on one product, and that is tourism,” Dr. Crahan told our group. “And the more from the U.S., the better, because we have the highest rate of spending.”¹⁹

It appears that even the most bitter of political foes can set aside their swords where profits are concerned. Now, whether or not the 45th President of the United States, Donald Trump, will shut the diplomatic doors barely opened by the Obama administration remains to be seen. While news of Trump’s election, followed by Fidel Castro’s passing just two weeks later, rocked both nations, Cuba’s entrepreneurs made one thing clear: they mean business. In December 2016, an open letter to Donald Trump signed by hundreds of fledgling private businesses owners implored President Trump to honor increased engagement between the two nations. “Increased interaction and business dealings with U.S. travelers and U.S. companies has had important economic benefits, the exchanges of ideas and knowledge, and offered much hope for the future,” the letter states.²⁰

Exchange between the U.S. and Cuban is not only transactional; it is ideological. The fight for economic autonomy appears to be running tangential to the fight for social autonomy. And while, from a market perspective, this is largely positive, the potential impact on the environment and cultural fabric of Cuba in the form of increased consumption is a major byproduct that is receiving little attention.

Even Americans acknowledge that now is the time to visit Cuba “before it’s ruined.”²¹ Tourists themselves likely understand that their presence in large volumes inevitably has an effect on the host culture, sacrificing the organic feel of cultural centers to provide “sites of consumption” catering to the interests and priorities of visitors. It is possible that some tourists also understand their impact not just on the built environment, but the natural environment of host countries, as well as local lifestyles and consumption patterns.²²

The juxtaposition of tourist culture and local culture is not new to Cuba. Following the economic plummet set on by the Special Period of the 1990s, Cuban leaders were forced to open its borders to the ever-growing global tourism market as a matter of economic survival. Habana Vieja was retrofitted as a tourist destination, equipped with some of the goods and services required to satisfy the desires of predominantly Canadian and European visitors. Write Taylor and McGlynn, “international tourism necessitates turning cities into ‘sites of consumption’ in which the experiences of the city represent the commodity sold to the tourists.”²³ This included a proliferation of hotels,

historic sites, restaurants, entertainment venues, and retail stores (albeit, still government-run enterprises at this point).

Much like the views of the economist Garcia today, the Cuban leadership then staunchly maintained that the establishment of a tourist market was not an acceptance of capitalism, but rather a necessary evil tolerated with the aim of preserving the socialist system. Fidel Castro said himself in 1995 that “we are improving socialism, I am sure. We are not just struggling to save it, we are struggling to improve it.”²⁴ With the aim of putting safeguards in place, the government enacted a series of policies aimed at containing tourist culture, discouraging everyday Cubans’ access to this other world in what has been frequently termed as “tourist apartheid.” In some cases, Cubans weren’t permitted within areas quarantined for tourism, such as hotels, bars and private beaches, unless their employment necessitated it. While this might call to mind a stratification system like apartheid, the policies were not aimed at granting power to those who have access over those who do not. Rather, it was an attempt to “protect” domestic socialist society from a capitalist market. Mazzei more accurately refers to these measures as Castro’s “economic firewall.”²⁵ The firewall was made complete with a dual currency system that persists today, firmly separating the transactions of everyday Cuban life from those taking place within the tourist realm.

While reforms in the 2000s rooted out some of these inequities, tensions linger. “I hate our policy of tourism just as a lot of Cubans hate it. I don’t think it’s fair that everything in Cuba is for the tourists and nothing is for us, the Cubans,” said artist Maria Antonia Carrillo²⁶; Perez goes on to say, “something of a cynicism coursed its way into popular, if private, discourses, perhaps best suggested by the popular joke during the Special Period: parents ask their son what he wishes to be when he grows up, and the boy responds, ‘A foreigner.’”²⁷

In Cuba, it has become more valuable to drive a taxi or serve poolside cocktails than it is to hold a government position, such as that of doctor or engineer, because these roles offer access to elevated income from tourists. The formal legalization of private enterprises closely associated with tourism has only increased the desire to work in this sector. For many Cubans, this means holding one government position paying an average of USD \$25 per month, and keeping a more lucrative side job that taps into tourist dollars. This system has inevitably given rise to a stratified society based on who has access to the tourist market and who does not—a system unreflective of traditional socialist ideals. In a lecture at the Centro de Estudios Martianos in Havana, a lead economist for the Communist Party of Cuba Dr. Jose Luis Rodriguez pointed to the lack of integration between Cuba’s “dual economy” to be an

utmost problem facing the country today.²⁸

Furthermore, obstructing Cubans' access to material items doesn't necessarily reduce their desire for them. Writes Schwartz, "Hard-pressed Cubans understandably envy well-fed visitors and also might like to share the scarce soap and toilet paper that hotels furnish to guests."²⁹ Lewis noted, "I found few Cubans who were satisfied with their current level of consumption, and understandably so. Cubans make many sacrifices that us Americans would hardly accept, from forgoing air travel to creatively sourcing toilet paper."³⁰

My own experience was that of a Cuba torn between two worlds. The bare shelves of the government stores where people go to buy basics, such as rice and oil, for bargain rates using *moneda nacional*, look antiquated and stale next to newer, privately-owned shops advertising their wares through colorful signage and shelves stocked with enticing goods. Young people sport Western fashions, and their noses are increasingly glued to the ballooning number of smartphone screens making their way across the island. Access to the Internet, set to expand in 2017 following new agreements with Google, offers a glimpse into another world that is ideological light years away from socialist norms.³¹ This dynamic reveals major tensions between the principal facets of sustainable development: economic growth, environmental responsibility, and social equity. From a strictly environmental perspective, Castro's "economic firewall" has somewhat insulated consumer culture and waste from permeating the conservationist culture in Cuba. For better or worse, that influence is dwindling. Furthermore, denying citizens the same access to services and material opportunity that is made available to visitors is fundamentally unjust, and, as Jatar-Hausmann writes, "intolerance of inequity is perhaps the greatest legacy of socialism among Cubans."³² It is not unusual to have the principles of economic growth and environmental protection pitted against one another, but nowhere more than Cuba is the tension more stark, or inextricably tied to human rights.

Regardless, the struggle to balance two economic structures alongside of one another—a capitalist-driven global tourism market and a fiercely socialist domestic system—will likely be rife with controversy. It is undeniable that the rise of tourism and the private sector will continue to increase social stratification and ideological tensions in Cuban civil society in years ahead.

Part Three: Trash talk

I meet Isbel Diaz Torres where the Prado meets the Malecon, a convergence of two major pedestrian thoroughfares in Old Havana. It is a pulsing center of the city, where ample open space provides opportunities for interpersonal encounter and stunning views of the ocean. Just days prior, Diaz was at this same spot with his environmental action group, Guardabosques, handing out their newsletter to passersby and performing a street waste cleanup. It is a suitable meeting point for us, then, because we are here to talk trash.

I found Diaz on the Internet prior to my trip, where he is among the intrepid ranks of a rising voice of online bloggers writing outside the editorial review of the Cuban government. He has written several articles for the *Havana Times* about waste issues, and in flipping through these I found the website for his own public education and action endeavor, Guardabosques.³³ Guardabosques' first campaign was an opposition to the disappearance of the urban tree canopy in Havana, but it has since expanded its cause to multiple issues including waste and recycling, encroaching development in environmentally protected areas, and use of GMOs in Cuban agriculture. But waste dominates much of Diaz' attention, and for good reason: it's everywhere.

While Cuba is celebrated for its largely unscathed marine ecosystem and lush coral reefs, another outcome of isolation and lack of industry, life on land is not as pristine. Decades of infrastructural neglect has led to not only a disheveled landscape of crumbling grandeur, but forgotten piles of garbage evidence of an inefficient public sector. Writes Larsson, "As the city, its people and its architecture has aged, so too have its public services."³⁴

Cuba's failing infrastructure, and the inefficiencies of the government that manages it, is well-documented. In September 2016, *The Guardian* chronicled a tour through the back roads of Havana: trash-strewn corridors pockmarked with potholes and leaky sewage drains.³⁵ The *Havana Times*, an online news source publishing self-described "open-minded writing from Cuba," has documented the anger everyday citizens feel towards the comunales, the state-run waste management service, for its negligence.³⁶ My own experience varied, but nowhere was the situation worse than in Central Havana, the high-density residential district just west of the tourist-centric Old Havana. Emily Moran, the American expat who served as our group's cultural liaison and resides in Central Havana, said that her neighbors cynically call the oft-neglected, overflowing blue trash bins on street corners "our community art project."³⁷

With or without compounding economic issues, island nations face particular challenges with waste management. In an address at Portland State University, Marshallese poet and activist Kathy Jentil-Kijiner said that the only environmental issue outweighing the threat of climate change on the Marshall Islands is its immediate and mounting waste problem.³⁸ This is particularly true for island destinations that deal with seasonal tourism, or have experienced a swift rise in tourism since the global travel market exploded in the 1980s. Waste produced by and for tourists is often generated at nearly twice the rate of local waste production.³⁹ Furthermore, many islands lack the space and infrastructure to manage excessive amounts of tourist-produced waste.⁴⁰

Diaz understands what is at stake in Cuba, with the incubation of private industry and tidal wave of American tourism on the horizon. Excessive amounts of material waste are a direct byproduct of consumer culture, and it is questionable whether or not the nation of Cuba will be prepared for this influx of waste, generated not only by tourists but by the host culture which stands to absorb new patterns of consumption. “I understand how people are seeing the chance to consume for the first time, and why they want that,” he said. “It’s hard for me to say ‘you shouldn’t do that’ because my ideas would be completely rejected. Over all, Cubans just want to have the choice, and I support that. But, the arrival of U.S. culture is dangerous because here, the average person has no environmental awareness.”⁴¹

And why should they? In a culture where re-use and hand-me-downs have been the default norm, a set of, for example, new headphones adorned in three layers of disposable plastic packaging would hardly solicit the same offended response as it would for a contemporary environmentalist. As I spoke to Diaz, I realized how much my personal lens had warped my interpretation of consumption. I had the privilege to look at overly packaged items and other symbolic forms of excess, with utter disdain because I had always had access to them.

Indeed, states a report from the Czech-based social service agency People in Need, “The Cuban population has assumed a passive attitude towards the environment, which is a result of State propaganda...environmentalism is seen as a petite bourgeois fad, a luxury that rich and capitalist countries can allow themselves (and use to assuage their own supposed guilt over being the planet’s principal predators).”⁴²

Interestingly, Cuba has an impressive track record of environmental legislation over the years, including a National Environmental Strategy (2011-2015) and an Environmental Law (1981). However, neither of these, in

practice, are seen as largely effective.⁴³ Poor implementation of environmental decree has been corroborated by external watchdogs: Daniel Whittle, senior director of the Cuba program at the Environmental Defense Fund, recently commented that “Cuba’s environmental record isn’t perfect... While its policies look good on paper, implementation has been a mixed bag.”⁴⁴

Since 1975, a formal law has required source separation and collection of recyclable materials. This, also, is generally not happening, save for a few caveats. State businesses (if they are so inclined) can deliver recyclable materials to provincial recovery companies for processing. In addition, hundreds of establishments across the island collect recyclable materials from a self-employed army of trash pickers. These individuals, of which there are estimated to be upwards of 5,800, collect bottles, cans and other recyclables from public and private containers, landfills, and streets, and deliver them in exchange for a price set by the current supply and demand of raw materials. It is estimated that this sector accounts for 64% of the total volume of recyclable waste recovered.⁴⁵ While this exemplifies a fledgling private market contributing to public needs, the industry is not sufficiently formalized and trash-pickers lack the proper training and equipment necessary to complete their work safely and effectively.

According to official figures, 35% of all potentially recyclable waste generated in Cuba is recycled.⁴⁶ Given that there is no consistent data on the quantity of waste generated, this statistic cannot be considered true. However, the Communist Party of Cuba recognizes the value of recycling as a lucrative market for export, and is in the process of updating its Recycling Law which will set more detailed standards for separating, collecting, and exporting materials.⁴⁷ And while it may look good on paper, effective implementation of a new policy would require major investments in infrastructure that currently do not exist. Officials have already identified a laundry list of dire infrastructure needs that in the short term, supersede the need to address waste. When I asked Dr. Rodriguez at the Centro de Estudios Marianos how the city of Havana planned to absorb elevated levels of waste, he skirted the question and emphasized that road repairs and updating the city’s electricity grid were of highest priority, with little resources to accomplish even those tasks.⁴⁸ Thus, I took that to mean there *was no plan*.

Meanwhile, People in Need reported that the production of solid waste in Cuba will increase in the short term:

For example, the packaging and containers industry produced 1387 million plastic bags in 2013; one plant in Santa Clara produced 219

million PET forms for plastic bottles. Cuba has invested approximately 500 million dollars to remodel and modernise the container and packaging industry, with between 25 and 30% of this investment going to the plastics industry. Although per capita figures for consumption of packaging are unlikely to reach the ostentatious figures of other countries in Europe and North America (between \$300 and \$500) it currently stands at \$33 per capita, and is projected to rise to \$47.00.⁴⁹

So, how can Cuba tackle its mounting waste problem? Precedents can offer a few ideas. A study completed on Langkawi Island, Malaysia concluded that more concentrated efforts to sort and reduce waste at hotels and other tourist accommodations was the best strategy to address its waste issue.⁵⁰ Others have recommended an educational, community-driven approach to manage waste at the small scale. On the Marshall Islands, Jentil-Kijiner co-directs an environmental nonprofit focused on engaging youth in waste reduction and consumption awareness.⁵¹ Wilmott & Graci point to co-production and cooperation between nonprofits, neighborhood groups and government to promote best practices, agreeing with the “good governance” model of balance among civil society and the public sector.⁵²

It would seem that these aims might align with the neighborhood-scale relationships around which Cuban civil society is currently organized. However, lack of public enthusiasm for the central government, and specifically the lackluster service of the *comunales*, is not promising. Larsson found apathy amongst Cubans, and pointed to a growing sense of individualism and rejection of Castro’s socialist norms as the cause: “In the long term people react to the impositions [by the government] of solidarity, the community and so on. Those kinds of things must not be imposed because it creates the opposite effect. For example, with the trash on the street, I told a neighbor about it, and he said to me to take another route to avoid this trash. No one cares,” one Havana resident was quoted.⁵³

Martinez reflects similar sentiments in an opinion piece in the *Havana Times*: “Are we currently facing a situation of “social indiscipline” (a term Cuban bureaucracy prefers to use in order to blame the population and to mask its inefficacy) or State incompetence on behalf of a government that doesn’t know how to manage garbage, while it shows not the least amount of interest in promoting recycling?”⁵⁴

From a governance standpoint, this attitude is hardly the makings of an active civil society ready to self-organize for cleaner streets. It is possible that the lack of public trust in the central state is choking the possibility for civil actors to play a role in addressing Cuba’s infrastructural issues.

Apparently, lack of trust is a two-way street. Diaz described an instance, some months ago, in which 40 plainclothes police officers surveyed a group of Guardabosques members picking up trash along one section of the Malecon. Eventually some of them asked, “What are you doing? Who are you associated with?” and were incredulous that the group had organized to perform the task on their own, well, just because.⁵⁵

Under the assumption that people may be performing subversive acts, the government is wary of micro-scale community work, Diaz said. “This distrust also extends to international NGOs, and the government does not want their involvement even though it would help solve the [waste] problem.”⁵⁶

Diaz’s goal is straightforward. He hopes to eventually designate Guardabosques as an environmental cooperative, a fledgling concept in the Cuban economic paradigm which permits private organization. Its mission, Diaz said, would be “to classify and recover materials, process them and use them as an export commodity.”⁵⁷ The effort would also directly involve the current fleet of informal trash pickers; these workers would be given safety equipment, training, and a steady salary. In a different society, this goal would be readily achievable—noble, even. But amidst so many roadblocks, this goal remains uncertain at best.

Garcia, the anonymous Cuban economist, acknowledged that the government needs to embrace public-private partnerships to increase efficiency in its services, stating flatly “The government cannot manage any resource.”⁵⁸ But, she explained that the government is very slow to make changes because, when it comes to the private sector and micro-business, they frankly don’t know what they’re doing.

When it comes to material waste, however, they will be running against the clock. The situation is irreversibly shifting in Cuba, and with the wheel already turning, it is now up to the Cuban government to react.

Conclusions

Cuba is a contradictory place. In an absurd manifestation of Newton’s Third Law, for every force moving one direction there seems to be an equally impressive force pushing pell-mell the opposite way, evident within trends in the workforce, class, religion, politics, and yes, consumption. There is an illustrated ideological divide between those who can vividly access the spirit of yesteryear’s austere revolutionary ideals, and those that are tired of being denied the freedom to access goods and services that they are well aware exist

in abundance, not only in other corners of the world, but now in their own backyard. Private enterprise, consumption, and material luxury are once again a presence in Cuba. For the emerging autonomous economic class who have shouldered decades of scarcity, the social and economic values of consumerism far outweigh any perceived environmental cost. This cost runs high in Cuba, however, because presently the average Cuban has low awareness of the impact of waste on the environment.

For now, the ideology of the Communist Party of Cuba continues to discourage consumption, but this will not last in a present-day Cuba in which the desire at the forefront of most residents' minds is to participate in the new economy. The government must acknowledge this motivation and meet it head-on with planning and foresight, or the environmental results will be catastrophic. Looking forward, the Party must hasten its adaptation of co-production as a means through which to deal with Cuba's waste management infrastructure issues. This must include both direct foreign investment measures, partnerships with international NGOs, and partnerships with its own burgeoning private sector. Above all, it must lift the barriers to public participation for its own people.

Tangential to this, citizens must become more aware of and involved in the environmental protection process through a government-sanctioned education campaign. As the People in Need report states, "Having passed through around 15 years of the Cuban education system, students leave without any awareness of the principal environmental challenges facing their country, much less the feeling of being part of the necessary solution."⁵⁹ Diaz emphasized that reinforcing positive behaviors (such as recycling) rather than discouraging negative behaviors (such as increased waste generation) was important. "What we need to do is to help people see the value in their re-use behaviors that already exist," he said.⁶⁰ Elevated awareness will empower Cubans to make their own educated choices about consumption, and help shape their cities for this next generation of growth.

With changes on the horizon, Cuba must move away from its present contradictions, towards balance. How can it balance social responsibility to a new generation of eager Cuban consumers, while honoring an environmental responsibility to its succeeding generations? How can it balance economic development with the preservation of the natural capital on which their burgeoning tourist market depends? How can it merge an impressive track record of environmental legislation with effective implementation? How can it make a happy marriage of socialist and capitalist economic models on a 42,426 square-mile island still bleeding from decades-long socio-political wounds?

But for now, the contradictory reality of Cuban public life will continue to serve as a breeding ground for societal tension in an age of major change. Perhaps Herman Portocarero, EU Ambassador to Cuba, put it best: our group had a serendipitous meeting with him just hours after landing in Cuba, and, among many other potent comments he stated, wryly, “Havana is a land of contrasts. Lots of good vibes and lots of misery.”⁶¹

Notes

- ¹ Motherboard, “Cuba’s DIY Inventions From 30 Years of Isolation,” YouTube Video, 8:29, June 20, 2013, <https://youtu.be/v-XS4aueDUg>.
- ² Ibid.
- ³ Julia Cooke, *The Other Side of Paradise: Life in the New Cuba*, Berkeley, CA: Seal Press (2014), 36.
- ⁴ Chris Lewis, “Workers’ Paradise,” *Harper’s Magazine Weblog*, November 19, 2015, <http://harpers.org/blog/2015/11/workers-paradise/>.
- ⁵ Steve Martelli, personal communication, December 16, 2016.
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