Two Cuba’s

A Blog Post by Rose Allen

Walking through the streets of Havana I was struck by the frequent visible contrast between buildings that stood side by side. Many buildings in Cuba were crumbling, in decay, and on the verge of collapsing. Others were beautifully well maintained.

Throughout my week in Cuba I began to notice other similar types of contrast – like the contrast between the two currencies that exist in Cuba, the contrast between those who receive remittances from family members and those who do not, the contrast between those who were dying to escape the country and those who were perfectly content staying in Cuba, and the contrast between those who heavily critiqued their government and those wholeheartedly proud of their country.

These coexisting realities were extreme and difficult to fully understand in just a weeks time. But as we had the opportunity to converse with academics, students, and government officials, and other locals from different backgrounds, I began to start to see some of the patterns behind these differing realities.

The Dual Economy

The Cuban economy has two coexisting currencies – the Cuban Convertible Peso (CUC) and the National Peso (CUP). The CUC, which is pegged to the dollar, was created after the fall of the Soviet Union in 1993, and is worth 25 times as much as the CUP. Generally the CUC is only used by tourists, foreign companies, and some state entrepreneurs, while most Cuban locals are paid in CUP. These two currencies have a significant impact on local economy and the tourist industry.

One of the most striking aspect of this dual economy that multiple lecturers brought up, including Cuban academic and economist Rafael Bentacourt, was the fact that it has led to a type of national, in-country brain drain. That is, professional doctors and lawyers with high-level degrees often leave their professions to work in the tourist industry. These professionals can earn more money as a taxi driver or waiter than as a doctor or lawyer. This is because they benefit from tourists tipping them in the more valuable CUC currency. One of our tour guides, in fact, had a Law Degree and was previously a lawyer. He explained that working as a lawyer with
a government salary, he simply was not paid enough to make a comfortable living, so he decided to train to become a tour guide.

Additionally, in a visit to Cuba Libre Café, a book store run by MIIS alumna Conner Gory, we had a discussion about the tendency for tourists tend to over-tip or over-pay for basic goods and services, which can actually have a detrimental impact on local Cubans. Although tourists may believe they are helping local Cubans by giving their taxi drivers a fat tip, this drives up the prices of these services, making it impossible for local Cubans to afford them. If a taxi driver knows that a tourist is willing to pay significantly more for a taxi ride in a stronger currency, they will charge higher prices and avoid even picking up local Cubans.

Remittance Economy

Another theme that kept surfacing throughout our trip was the presence of the remittance economy and how that played into growing inequalities throughout Havana. Many Cubans have family in the United States who they are dependent on for income. With access to dollars, these families can afford significantly more than their Cuban counterparts who do not have family in the United States.

In a lecture with a prominent Cuban architect, Miguel Coyula, Coyula explained how the remittance economy played into some of the extreme variations in the levels of building maintenance throughout Havana. He explained that after the Revolution, the ownership of all private property was transferred to the government. While people who previously lived in a building were allowed to stay in their homes, there was no longer any building manager in charge of maintaining the property. Moreover, with the limited Cuban salary, most families cannot afford to make repairs to the building. Today, this has resulted in crumbling infrastructure throughout the city and frequent building collapses—Coyula estimated that there is an average of three building collapses a day. The families who receive remittances from their families, however, can afford to maintain their buildings’ infrastructure. This helps explain the extreme contrasts in the buildings throughout Havana.
Young People

One of the final noteworthy contrasts I noted was the differing perspectives of the younger generations about Cuba, its government, and whether or not they wanted to stay in Cuba. During our trip we had the opportunity to visit a group of students at a prestigious graduate school who were studying to be diplomats. The students explained how they had completed a year of national service before attending their school at Guantanamo. They expressed that this was a bonding experience and how they felt a sense of national pride after this service year. They explained that while their program was competitive, it was completely free and the government even provided them with a small living stipend. They also explained that after completing their program, the government would guarantee them a job related to their field of study.

As a graduate student stressed about getting a job in a competitive market after graduating, in addition to paying off thousands of dollars in student debt, this seems like a great deal. But not all young locals I met had such a positive outlook on their future and the Cuban government. One young man explained how he struggled to make ends meet as a musician, and how it had been extremely difficult for him to move to Havana in the first place to produce music, because the government heavily restricts movement within Cuba. He expressed a desire to try to leave the country, but did not currently have the means to do so. One young woman explained how the majority of her classmates have left the country, because there simply were not enough opportunities in Cuba. She explained that she wanted to stay to be with her family, but many of her friends and peers had left.

Concluding Thoughts

Overall my experience in Cuba brought up more questions than answers. I concluded that there is no one singular Cuban experience or truth, but many. During the trip I was able to just begin to understand these differing, simultaneous realities and the nuances behind them. This trip made me appreciate how important it is to listen to different perspectives and not completely write off one perspective or the another. One week was not enough time to fully understand Cuban culture and the Cuban experience, but it was enough time to understand that there are differing realities in Cuba and I still have much more to learn.