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International tourism in Cuba: Can capitalism be used to save socialism?

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ABSTRACT

Following the fall of the Soviet Bloc in 1989, a somber Fidel Castro informed the Cuban people that their Revolution hovered on the brink of disaster. Faced with an unprecedented economic crisis and few options, the Cuban government, reluctantly returned to international tourism as the foundation for economic salvation. Since then international tourism has multiplied fifteen-fold. While reintroducing tourism may have saved Cuba from a political and economic catastrophe – foreign tourists, mostly from capitalist countries, have enabled Cuba and the Revolution to survive – this use of capitalism to save socialism has also produced formidable challenges. In particular, the emergence of a consumer culture and the subsequent “dollarization” of the economy, pose a grave threat to Cuban society as products are increasingly evaluated, purchased, and consumed on the basis of their symbolic content and meaning for social status. Nonetheless, it will be argued in this paper that since Cuban society remains anchored by highly functional, stable, well-organized neighborhoods and a flourishing, innovative informal economy, embedded values of cooperation may serve as a counteractive force to the rise of a culture of consumerism and materialism. Based on this premise, the paper concludes with an examination of three possible scenarios for the future of tourism in Cuba.

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1. International tourism before the revolution

Prior to the revolution, the U.S. mafia controlled the international tourist industry in Cuba and anchored it in gambling, prostitution, and drugs along with the attractions of sun, sea and sand. Tourism was about pleasure and thousands of visitors from the United States and around the world came to Cuba in search of it. Between 1948 and 1957, tourist arrivals in Cuba grew by 94%. On the eve of the revolution, arrivals from the USA alone accounted for approximately 86% of the visitors to Cuba [1]. However, tourism and sugar painted Havana's social landscape in misery and pain. There were more than 5000 beggars walking the streets of the city in 1958, many of whom were homeless women with children. Crime was on the rise and so too was juvenile delinquency. Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. recalled a visit to Havana during the Batista epoch: “I was enchanted by Havana—and appalled by the way that lovely city was being debased into a great casino and brothel for American businessmen over for a big weekend from Miami. My fellow countrymen reeled through the streets, picking up 14-year-old Cuban girls and tossing coins to make men scramble in the gutter. One wondered how any Cuban—on the basis of this evidence—could regard the United States with anything but hatred [2].”

When the Cuban rebels (*rebeldes*) seized power in January of 1959, they intended to create a people-centered society based on justice and the socioeconomic principles of reciprocity and equitable wealth distribution [3]. The *rebeldes* sought to

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construct a “new” society that would be built, governed, and defended by a “new” people. These people would receive food, housing, health care, and education as basic human rights of citizenship and these rights would be ensured through the actions of a state that would operate in partnership with its people, the popular classes (*clases populares*). In this “new” society, moral rather than material imperatives would motivate citizens, who would then willingly subordinate their personal interests to the broader interests of the collective [4]. Between 1959 and 1989, because of favorable trade agreements with the Soviet Union, the *rebeldes* had the resources to develop their model of a people-centered society.

After 1959, international tourism all but disappeared from the island. The revolutionary government believed that tourism was largely associated with the capitalist evils of corruption, drugs, social inequality, and racism. They considered, nonetheless, leisure time to be a basic human right and made domestic tourism one of the cornerstones of social development. In November 1959, the government established the *Instituto Nacional de la Industria Turística* (National Institute of the Tourism Industry—INTUR) to expand and develop domestic tourism in order to help *Cubanos* acquire knowledge of their country, provide them with opportunities to enjoy it, and to emphasize the revolutionary reality that Cuba belonged to them—the *clases populares* [5].

2. The re-emergence of international tourism

With the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Eastern European Communist Bloc in 1989, Cuba lost close to 75% of its international trade [6]. Living conditions were declining, and the phrase, “*vida no es fácil*” (life is not easy) was a common refrain. As Fidel Castro explained, “We have to develop tourism. It is an important source of foreign currency. We do not like tourism. It has become an economic necessity [7].” The goal was to secure hard currency and the resources needed to stabilize and maintain the existing social and political structure [8]. Reluctantly, Cuba adopted austerity policies and, based on the pre-1959 experience, reluctantly embraced international tourism, bringing thousands of visitors to the island at the very moment when *Cubanos* faced economic disaster [9].

The drama of this new direction is emphasized in Fig. 1. International tourist arrivals in Cuba fell from a peak of 272,000 in 1958 to less than 4000 annually from 1959 until 1973. By 1975, Cuba had begun to promote tourism reaching over 300,000 visitors annually by 1990. As the Special Period began, the industry exploded during the nineties and by 2000, the number of tourist arrivals to Cuba had doubled [10]. By 2004, the number of visitors to Cuba surpassed the two million mark for the first time. Concurrently, gross revenues from tourism increased from U.S. \$1.1 billion in 1995 to U.S. \$1.9 billion in 1999 to U.S. \$2.25 billion in 2004 [11]. By 2003, revenues reached \$2.1 billion, almost half of Cuba’s total hard currency. During this period, tourism surpassed the sugar industry as the prime source of hard currency and became the engine driving the economy. *Cubanos* used to declare, *sin azucar, hay no país* (without sugar, there is no country). Now, they say, *sin turismo, hay no país* (without tourism, there is no country) [12].

Hotels and accommodations anchored the tourist infrastructure. Between 1990 and 2000, the number of hotel rooms in Cuba, in pace with arrivals, doubled from 18,565 to 37,178 [13]. In Havana alone, the total number of rooms increased from 4682 rooms in 1988 to 12,002 rooms in 2002 [14]. To make this expansion possible, Cuba engaged in joint ventures with foreign companies that possessed financial, technical, and marketing expertise [15]. The *rebeldes* understood sugar, tobacco, and manufacturing, but had little experience in the tourism, leisure and hospitality sector. By the late 1990s, 25 joint venture companies—including some giants in the international tourism industry—were providing Cuba with the money and expertise needed to grow the tourist industry [16]. These firms included Spanish, French, German and other European Union companies—Sol Melia, Accor, LTI, Mirama, Riu, SuperClubs, and Sandals [17]. By 2002, 110 U.S. companies, such as AT&T,

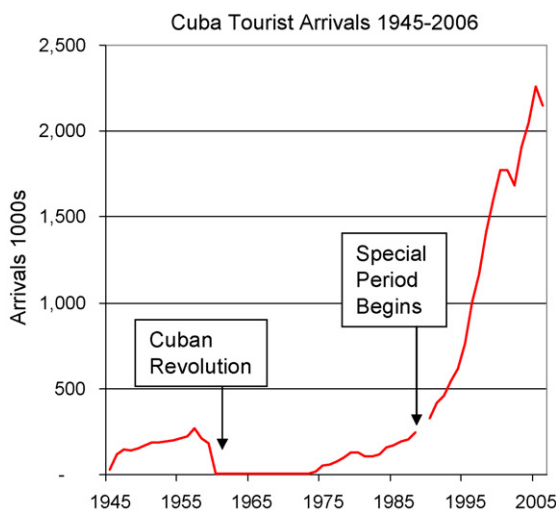


Fig. 1. International tourist arrivals to Cuba 1945–2006.

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