

Cuba's Energy Use in Political Perspective

Contributed by Sharif Abdullah
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"Yes, there are more people on bikes than cars in Havana. But, each of those guys on the bicycle is dreaming of the day when the Embargo gets lifted, so they can buy a Ford."

Today's observation for Culture Change on climate and pollution policy is by author Sharif Abdullah, in response to yesterday's "Cuba And Dealing with Global Pollution" by Ian Angus:

A well-written article that reaches the wrong conclusion.

Let me preface my remarks by saying that I've been to Cuba many times, and that I LOVE the island. I do my best writing there.

And, let me say that all the innovations and eco-changes the author mentions are true. (He doesn't mention that Cuba has more bicycles than any other society in the Western Hemisphere, and that the leading cause of death for young Cuban men is BICYCLE ACCIDENTS! That's a LOT of bicycles!)

But, these changes are NOT due to Cuba being "socialist" or "communist". (They don't even know what that means anymore. They call their present mix of socialism, capitalism and whatever else, the "Special Period".) The changes are due to Cuba being a DICTATORSHIP.

The changes were made because Castro woke up one day and said, "We're going to make these changes." Then, everybody else said, "Yes, sir." And the changes were made.

These changes were made NOT because there was a groundswell of support, or a change/ transformation of public consciousness. It DEFINITELY was not because of the old Marxist fairy tale that pollution and ecocide is the result of "capitalism".

I was in Czechoslovakia as the country was transforming from decades of Communist rule. The air was so filthy that it was downright chunky. Worst than Mexico City on a good day. The air was so acidic, it was eating the marble off of the statues and eating away the facades on buildings, causing them to crumble onto the street. And, not one of the former Communist rulers gave it a second thought: pollution was a "capitalist" problem, and they weren't capitalists, so they didn't have a problem! Like that logic?

In a democracy, you have to balance out a bunch of competing interests and points of view to arrive at a consensus. Most of the time, that consensus is to maintain the status quo. Even when the status quo is deadly.

In a dictatorship, you only have to convince ONE GUY (or a small committee) and, once they are convinced of the change, IT HAPPENS. In Sri Lanka about 5 years ago, the Tamil Tigers banned plastic bags in the territories they governed. INSTANTLY, plastic bags disappeared from the North and East of the island. (As you may know, the problem of plastic bags and bottles in the Third World is particularly bad. They wind up in people's trash, and the traditional

method of disposing of trash is by burning. People just don't understand that burning plastics is different from burning leaves and food wastes.) This was NOT a shift in consciousness: no one gave a shit about burning plastic bags. But, NO ONE wanted to run afoul of the Tamil Tigers.

HOWEVER: Fostering worldwide dictatorships is NOT the solution to global environmental destruction! This sword cuts both ways: when I am in Cuba, I stay with a couple of little old ladies (who call themselves my "Mothers") in a '50s style condo overlooking Havana Bay in one direction and the Prado in the other. When I stand out on the balcony, I have this magnificent view of the Bay, El Morro (the old fort) and, about two miles away, a tall smokestack with a bright yellow flame at the top, trailing black smoke as far as the eye can see, over ten miles on a clear day. Day in, day out, the flame and the smoke are there.

As you may know, Cuba is an oil producing country. That smokestack, and hundreds like them, represent Cuba BURNING OFF NATURAL GAS. It's not cost-efficient to store it, transport it, or even use it. So, with the consciousness of the 1940's, they burn off the "waste". THEY ARE BURNING MONEY, BURNING "FREE" ENERGY.

And, everyone on the island knows this. When the wind blows the wrong way, that smoke comes right into Havana, giving everyone watery eyes and coughing fits.

BUT, no one does anything about it. Why? Because the Big Guy hasn't said anything about the smokestacks. Yet. (And, as soon as he does say something about it, that smokestack will DISAPPEAR.)

This is why I say that the real issue is a question of CONSCIOUSNESS. Yes, there are more people on bikes than cars in Havana. But, each of those guys on the bicycle is dreaming of the day when the Embargo gets lifted, so they can buy a Ford.

Communism/socialism is a failed ideology, based on mythology and illusion. Capitalism is a failed ideology, based on mythology and illusion. We will find no solution by advocating that we switch from one failed ideology to another.

What we need right now is SOMETHING ELSE, something that springs from a completely different conceptual seed-bed. THAT'S what I've been working on for the past 10 years. It's almost ready... and being field-tested! Stay tuned...

Peace,

Sharif Abdullah

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Visit the new Commonway website: commonway.org. Sharif M. Abdullah is the author of
The Power of One: Authentic Leadership in Turbulent Times, New Society Publishers, 2007.

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Cuba news-update comment:

"...go now, before [Cuba] opens up and every other block has a DKNY store and a Starbucks and the beaches are lined with Hilton and Travelodge hotels." -- this fear is understandable, but Cuba may be home free forever as the corporate global economy's major players have to retrench after the 2008 petrocollapse kicked in (the teeth of the growth economy). - ed.

"Three-Quarters Favor Normalized Relations with Cuba" April 13, 2009:

fromtheleft.wordpress.com (source of Havana harbor photo above)