

Alexandro Pacheco

Professor Margaret Pamplin

English 101

Utopia in Cuba

Mankind has advanced by achieving success with innovation and sacrifice, hard work and determination; living in societies where governments rule ideally for the sake of its citizens and country. It was during the race for European power in the Renaissance Era when English lawyer and social philosopher Sir Thomas More coined the term "utopia" by writing a book of the same name. It was about a fantasy island governed with a political system in which policies were governed by reason. During a time when imperialism was at its peak, More's fictional world of socialist idealism and universality was popularly described as an "ideal" world when, in fact in More's time, the term meant "no place" and the land was considered more fantasy than plausible. The "ideal" would be matched more accurately in Cuba four hundred years later with the ideals of Socialism dominated from the rise to power of Communist Fidel Castro, who ruled his country by always promoting what was best for the whole country, as opposed to solely for the upper class. Views differ on the complex advantages and disadvantages of such a society, especially when history has shown the complexities of not only Democratic societies but also the demise of unpopular Communist ideals. Ironically, it is those unpopular societies which best parallel the "ideal" world More depicted. After relations between Cuba and the United States deteriorated in 1959, an embargo was placed on the country which forbade it from transacting in any way with the US, effectively cutting economic and social ties to the modern world. This

forced Cuba to contain, and build on, its utopian ideals. Communist-run Cuba has essentially succeeded in sustaining itself on utopian ideals and shockingly has proved this success in several arenas of life.

HEALTHCARE

Dictator-run Cuba is not a full Utopia by any means, but it has very impressive values that form its society in a lot of good ways. One of the main effects of the embargo is on Cuban health care. The Communist government's state-run healthcare system has been praised as one of the best in the world. According to Kayla Brown, in her 2012 article, *Cuban Healthcare and the U.S. Embargo: Exploring the Effects of Isolation*, Cuba has one of the world's lowest infant mortality rates (12). In fact, free healthcare has been part of every citizen's constitutional rights since 1976, writes Maxine Offredy in a 2008 edition of the academic journal, *Qualities in Primary Care* (270). Doctors there work to fulfill mandatory duties deemed necessary with "minimal compensation" (Brown 6). Pharmaceuticals however are a real problem; there are serious shortages. To fill the void, Cubans have incorporated homeopathic (natural) remedies which are grown there (Brown 22). Researchers Eric Peterson and Lynn England, in *Folk Medicine in Communist Cuba*, discuss oils, teas and herbs which are blended to bring relief to many ailments like sinusitis, high blood pressure, hemorrhoids and even hepatitis. (8). Pharmacies stock "green medicine" made from local plants as much as modern medicines. The Cuban Ministry of Health has found 200 plants that are effective (Brown 24).

Clinics in Cuba also reach out into the community to teach preventative care, all without charge of course. In describing these "polyclinics", Offredy states:

This model of ‘medicine-in-the-community’ aims to treat patients as beings in their respective unique environments. The model focuses on disease prevention by identifying risks present in the environment before they become health problems, as well as prioritizing those who are deemed high-risk categories such as elderly, adolescents and people with long-term conditions. (273)

Achievements in Cuban healthcare are on par with the world if not forging the way towards a future that needs to be more inclusive for the sake of research and saving lives. Some examples of achievements include the elimination of polio in 1962; elimination of measles, mumps and rubella by 1995; life expectancy for both sexes currently at 77.6 years; production of the world’s first meningitis B vaccine; production of its own antiviral drugs; highest treatment and control of hypertension in the world; and free medical education for Cuban students as well as for students from Africa and Latin America (Offredy 270).

EDUCATION

Cubans talk about how there used to be so much illiteracy. However, everybody now goes to school. In fact, new generations are growing up very well educated, according to an interesting article in *Intersections* magazine in which the editor interviewed 4 historians who traveled to the island together in 1999 (Wallace, Dyke et al 14). Like healthcare, the education system is 100% subsidized by the government, meaning that Cuban students at all levels can attend school for free. On completion of the basic secondary level, education splits into two categories: pre-university education and technical or professional training. A pre-university education leads to a “Bachillerato” diploma; completion of technical or professional training enables students to

attend one of the country's many technological institutes (Wallace, Dyke et al 16, 21). Because the government fully supports these endeavors for all, their education system is by far the closest comparison to Sir Thomas More's *Utopia*. Their education seems to have created a national optimism, perfectly parallel to the Utopian ideas in More's novel (Wallace, Dyke et al, 45).

AUTO-REPAIR

Years before Fidel Castro took power, Cuba had a strong urban middle class with a distinct love for American cars. When Castro's communist government gained control, US auto imports came to a screeching halt and Cubans were left little choice but to do what they could to keep their cars running any way they could. There are an estimated 60,000 pre-1960 cars in the island's largest cities, Havana and Santiago de Cuba (Wallace, Dyke et al, 12). Richard Scheid, in his 2009 book, *Che's Chevrolet, Fidel's Oldsmobile: On the Road in Cuba*, wrote that automobiles in Cuba were essentially given upgrades under the hoods, their exteriors left wholly intact (12). Further to this, he states:

Most of these *cacharros*... a term of semi-endearment, semi-contempt, more or less equivalent to the English word "jalopy"... have been seriously altered as they aged, have undergone the equivalents of organ transplants and joint reconstructions, with a great number of them adapted to burn diesel fuel, much more economical than high-octane gasoline. What's most remarkable is that because of the US embargo, Cubans couldn't get spare parts so they had to get creative. There are now very few parts of a car that Cubans have not learned to adapt or duplicate and therein lies the dramatic tale of their forced auto-repair industry.

Now with certain aspects of the embargo lifted, there is a sense that the auto industry will change, however one thing remains fact: most Cubans could not afford a new car anyway, as average salaries in Cuba are about \$260 per year (Preston 10). These facts hold true for any forthcoming changes in the healthcare system, save for the potential to change the world's healthcare market system. In order for any of these three systems to endure in the future, their economy will have to stabilize.

CONCLUSION

The embargo has been a challenge for Cuba's healthcare, education and auto-repair industry but, as we have seen, isolationism was met with fierce ingenuity and creativity which has effectively made them work harder in order to survive. In the coming years, Cubans will have to find the unique balance of a tradition in socialism mixed into an already-global society if they expect to keep these traditions intact. While the world begins to explore this very unique island, a new chapter in Cuban history will surely emerge and their Utopian ways will surely adapt as quickly as the isolationism vanishes.

Cubans realize change is coming but there are certain basic principles which will certainly be hard to break. It seems younger leaders want to turn Cuba into a country like Germany or Sweden. They want to live in a socialist society with education and healthcare for all and no extreme differences between rich and poor. Clearly, there are clues as to how world units, when faced with dilemmas like embargoes, deal with survival. In Cuba, government handles education and healthcare and the people self-handled their grip on the pre-1959 automobiles which still to this day transport most Cubans on the island. If Cuba has not been

isolated, would this have lasted as long? It's hard to say but one thing is certain: with relations opening up again, the time is now to open relations between citizens of other countries and learn from each other's mistakes and success.

Works Cited

- Brown, Kayla. "Cuban Healthcare and the U.S. Embargo: Exploring the Effects of Isolation". *A With Honors Projects*. 2012. 12. Web. Accessed 1 April 2017.
- Chambers, R. W. "The Meaning of Utopia." *Utopia A Norton Critical Edition*. Translated and Edited by Robert Adams. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1992. pp.137-142. Web. Accessed 1 April 2017.
- Offredy, Maxine. "The health of a nation: perspectives from Cuba's national health system." *Qualities in Primary Care, Academic Search Premiere*. EBSCO. 16.4 (2008): 269-277. Web. Accessed 1 April 2017.
- Peterson, Eric; England, Lynn. "Folk Medicine in Communist Cuba." *Journal of Undergraduate Research, Brigham Young University*, 20 Aug. 2013, 2705. Web. Accessed 1 April 2017.
- Preston, Benjamin. "Cuba's scrappy vintage cars may be better for scrap heap than collectors." *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media Limited, 23 Dec. 2014. Web. Accessed 1 April 2017.
- Scheid, Richard. "Che's Chevrolet, Fidel's Oldsmobile: On the Road in Cuba." Chapel Hill And London, The University of North Carolina Press, 2004, 5-10. Print.
- Wallace, Brian; Dyck, Reg; Narita, Susan; and Yosha, Michael. "The Face of the Neighbor: Cuba." *Intersections*. Vol. 1999 No. 7: Article 7. 14-22. Web. Accessed 1 April 2017.