

The Dichotomy of Gratitude: Cuba from the American Perspective

In October of 2023, I embarked on a ten-day trip to Cuba, sponsored by my high school's program Pathways in Education. Over the course of the sojourn, I found myself entangled in the dichotomy of gratitude, woven between my identity as an American tourist and the usage of everyday Cuban life to reinforce the concept of gratefulness.

Throughout the trip, we were prompted to reflect upon our unique position as Americans. Encouraged to further appreciate the everyday comforts of our home country, like running water, cheap and readily available food, and a modernized city, this call for gratitude echoed amidst the backdrop of a nation where these very conveniences were scarce. This stark contrast sparked an introspection, questioning not just the comforts we enjoyed, but the intricate relationship between our presence as American visitors and the historical complexities that shaped Cuba's reality.

It was only sixty-five years ago that the US first imposed its embargo on Cuba, a direct result of their alliance with Russia during the Cold War. Because of this embargo, following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Cuba was placed into an "economic stranglehold"* . Visiting Cuba today, *el bloqueo*'s impact is evident, from the many locals who run *casas particulares*, to the 1960's American cars that vibrantly decorate its streets. Looking at the time capsule of a country around me, I couldn't help but feel guilty, knowing that as American tourists, we were taking advantage of the poverty caused by our country.

So, galloping down the asphalts of Cuba in the backseat of a teal blue 1950s Ford, I thought about our drivers, working for what was likely a small wage, reduced even further by costs pertaining to gas, governmental taxes, and even operating a business for tourists.

Throughout the trip, these kinds of thoughts pulled at the back of my mind, disguised under dark jokes about “making poverty an aesthetic” and “supporting small economies”.

Beyond that isolated tourist attraction, it was nearly every day that we were provided multi-course meals, complete with healthy servings of meats and cheese. These luxuries permeated even into our living conditions, where we would be provided hot water and air conditioning. Despite all the opulence given to us students, though, we would continually be expounded to about everyday Cuban life, making pennies on the dollar to receive enough to spend at a bodega for meager groceries. So, while we feasted like kings on lobster and eggs, it was under the knowledge that the average Cuban was only rationed 5 eggs and made less than 80\$ USD every month. At one point, we were even given a third of their average monthly salary, 800 CUC, as spending money for groceries, to better understand what budgeting was like.

It was through these experiences that I came to understand the dichotomy of gratitude. On one hand, of course, I was immensely grateful for the trip itself. At no cost to us students, in the span of a little over a week, we had become intimately familiar with the many beauties, natural and manmade, that Cuba had to offer. From hiking through sprawling mountainscapes and beautiful beaches to dancing and eating among incredible Spanish and Russian architecture, the Cuban environment and culture were easy to fall in love with. For those ten days of fun and lavish living, I will be forever grateful. On the other hand, though, I grappled with the discomfort of a narrative that seemingly asked us to be thankful for the many things that Cubans lived without. Being told to be grateful for what we have at home, living better than we did at home, all in front of people who weren't even legally allowed to eat what they served tourists, made it challenging to reconcile the gratitude for the trip with the disparities it highlighted. This

complexity was reinforced only by the recognition of resilience in the Cuban people, though not by choice, rather through necessity.

In reflecting on the trip as a whole, I am left with a sense of gratitude through two modes. The first of which is gratitude towards the adventure as a whole, a life-changing experience that I am thankful to have treasured. The second of which is a conflicting, somewhat guilty gratitude, for my lived conditions in America, knowing that this gratitude comes from the apparent comparative value of the livelihood of others. To this day, Cuba continues to build up an economy heavily reliant on tourism. The livelihood of its people are supported by the people of other nations, who, use the country as a lesson to learn from. At the end of the day in my case, the takeaway is the lesson of gratitude exchanged for further support for those in a country less fortunate than ours. As such, the conclusion is the following: The dichotomy rests on an uneasy balance of neither good nor evil, rather self-perpetuating necessity. In this tapestry of experiences, the threads of gratitude, disparity, and resilience weave a narrative that challenges us to reflect not only on our own privileges but also on our responsibility to contribute to a more equitable world.