



I did not vote for Brexit. I thought it an idiotic, retrograde concept that would most hurt the poorest in society, accelerate the dismemberment of the United Kingdom, and lead to diminution of British influence on the world stage. I craved a validatory referendum. But although I did not vote Conservative in the December election I recognise that it gave Boris Johnson the mandate he wanted. We left the European Union at the end of January and are now feeling our way into what that means.

The news throughout February was a spew of reassuring propaganda about our right to self-determination and our strong negotiating position. Behind the rhetoric I sensed officialdom scratching for expedient things to say. It made me wonder if, in our haste to secure seamless trade and travel for us (but not for them) we have any sense of a vision for the future. What sort of Britain do we want to become?

A recent trip to Cuba provided insights into what it means to be geographically close to a continental bloc while being, at the same time, restricted from trading with it. How does a country balance the demands of free will against economic prosperity outwith an established regional order?

It's a humid afternoon in the middle of hurricane season when I land at Holguin, a provincial capital in the south of the island. My fellow passengers are bound for the beach resorts of Playa Blanca and Guadalavaca, but I take a taxi into town. The driver, Mateo, has the sort of boxy Lada I joked about as a child. I find myself sticking to the seats. I wind down the window, but it only goes so far.

In town, Mateo navigates the grid of unprepossessing, one-way streets to park next to a concrete house with decorous planting along the fence. "Aquí," he says with a sharp flick of his chin, "*hostal*."

The thing to do in Cuba is book a room in someone's house. It's legal, although not as formal as AirBnB. The apartment I have chosen through my usual agent, Booking.com, is a spacious granny flat on the top floor of the building. The owners, husband and wife, are both doctors of zoology. The hard currency provided by rental income funds their collecting. The garden is a dense cornucopia of succulents and cacti, ferns and ficus; plants I have only seen growing indoors. From my rooftop veranda, I try to photograph the swooping turkey vultures, then crack open a tin of Cristal and wait for the storm to clear the air. When it comes, pouring in sheets over the guttering, it doesn't stop the hawkers from splashing through the puddles and calling out their wares in a resonant drawl: "El pan! La sandia!"



On the far side of the road is a school. On the wall is painted the slogan: *Sin educación, no hay revolución posible - Fidel*. I unpack, and wait for the rain to stop.

That evening, the town centre has an air of refined manners. Shy couples sit hip to hip on the damp steps of the state phone company building to access the Wi-Fi. The plaza is dominated by an art deco theatre that is wonderfully lit but never open. The shops sell household essentials: mustard yellow corduroy for the skirts and trousers worn by schoolchildren, flipflops, saddle oil, blue nylon tow rope, economy bundles of toilet paper.

## “They call it *el bloqueo*, the blockade”

Mike, a Canadian, and the only other resident in my hostel, has been coming for ten years. “They call it *el bloqueo*, the blockade. Before Obama eased it, there was nothing on the shelves. *Nothing*.”

“And Trump has put it back?”

“Yes,” he says with a bemused shake of his head. “Trump has put it back.”

Returning to the hostel, I examine the cars parked in the slanted bays round the town square. I had imagined the highly polished, 1950s classics to be a gimmick for tourists in Habana; a photo opportunity on some broad boulevard lined with roystonea, the swaying, regal palm trees common to the Caribbean. The evidence in Holguin proves me right. Transport is mostly provided by compact, horse-drawn taxis, but the streets are also home to patched and overpainted relics from before the revolution. I watch a man replace the cambelt of a rusting, two-tone Pontillac with the inner tube from a bicycle tyre. In this country, everyone is a mechanic. And everyone, I soon realise, is unbelievably open.

As I’m waiting in a patient queue for a bocadillo from a pop-up store, the window of someone’s home, two boys wearing Miami Dolphins tops ask me in English where I’m from. I say ‘Scotland,’ unsure what their attitude to Britain might be.

“Edinburgh,” they giggle, “Glasgow Rangers.”

Their eyes have a friendly innocence I find reassuring. I feel guilty for fearing they might try to rip me off. “Bueno,” I say. “Muy inteligente.”



The boys are served ahead of me. The shorter one pays for a gelato in local currency as opposed to the tourist money I am obliged to use. He orders an extra one and presents it to me as a gift. "Thank you for coming to Cuba," he says.

After two days in Holguin I am ready to move on. I book tickets for the early morning bus on the state-run, and relatively efficient, Viazul service. At four the following morning I am sitting in a cool, white-painted waiting room. The bus is late but that's hardly surprising as it started in Santiago, ninety miles south. An hour later I find my seat, pad it out with a jacket, then settle in to watch the sunrise.

Driving north, we pass through mile after mile of sugar cane plantations. The workers are already hacking at the sharp-edged cane leaves just as slaves would have done two hundred years ago. The year-round growing season provides a constant demand for manual labour but means there is never any respite from the grinding nature of it.

The driver shifts into first gear and I crane over the seats to see why. We are held up by a farm cart. A man in a straw hat makes occasional flicks of the whip to keep his mule moving. It is two miles before sufficient space appears in the oncoming traffic to allow us to overtake. The story is repeated a few miles later and I wonder why they don't banish such vehicles from the main roads.

An hour later we pass below a wide-fronted ranch set on a hillside against a copse of banyan trees. It looks like the location for an Isabel Allende novel. In the field next to the road a brand-new, four-wheel drive tractor ploughs up the cane that has already been cut. Behind the tractor, a flock of white ibis high-step through the turned stalks. This will be the only tractor I see on my trip. Under the shade of a thorn bush, three farm workers are watching the machine from horseback, their hats pushed back on their heads. I am witnessing an industrial revolution in action and sense the possibility of imminent and destructive social change.

**I am witnessing an industrial revolution and sense the possibility of imminent and destructive social change.**

After another hour, we pull into one of the intermediate towns and halt in the bus station. There is a fluster of bag checking and seat preserving as some passengers get off and others get on. Stretching my legs, I place a coin in the hand of a woman guarding the toilets. She



mutters something scathing but I ignore her. The filth tells me I was right to do so.

Back on the concourse I queue for food at the little kiosk. It sells cigarettes, packets of biscuits, and bags of dried fruit. The service is slow. When the bus driver calls us back I rush away empty handed. The wealthy looking woman sitting on the other side of the aisle immediately opens a packet of biscuits and offers me one. “Gracias,” I say, “Muchos gracias.” Sadly, she speaks no English and my Spanish will not stretch to a full conversation.

Just as the bus starts reversing, one of the new passengers shouts out. We jerk to a halt as the man hastily ushers his young son along the aisle.

“El niño necesita el baño?” asks the driver with a toothy smile. He pulls forward and we wait a few minutes for the pair to return from the loo. The queue for the kiosk has died down. I should not have allowed the panic of being left behind to rattle me. Do I not have the same rights as the boy?

Once we get going, I earwig as my benefactor engages her other neighbour in conversation. Hooped earrings dance as her head moves. Manicured fingernails stroke an iPhone, albeit an old one. She is in her mid-thirties and very dark skinned. Her neighbour has fairer skin and is a good deal older. His jeans are worn through at the knees. I wonder what they might have in common but soon he is pulling a photo of his grandchildren from his wallet. There are deep laughter lines beside his eyes as she shows him the photos on her phone. He is enthralled by the way she enlarges the pictures with two fingers.

I think of the prejudicial nature of the 1970s Britain in which I grew up; the race riots, the hooliganism, the undercurrent of sexual violence. If I imagined we had progressed since those days, the Brexit process has forced me to revise that opinion. The fear of otherness, if not of skin colour or social status, then religion or origin, has hardened. The election of Trump, Bolsonaro, Modi, Orban and others prove this a global phenomenon.

After eight hours the bus finally arrives at my destination, Santa Clara. The town sits halfway down the central spine of the country. In December 1959 it was the site of the decisive battle between the revolutionary forces of Fidel Castro and the national army of President Fulgencio Batista. The attack culminated in the derailing of a troop train, *el tren blindado*, by an earth moving tractor thereby breaking the north-south communication channels. Batista fled Cuba within forty-eight hours.



The train is central to the tourist experience of Santa Clara, as is the man who led the attack, Ernesto 'Che' Guevara. The town hosts a vast mausoleum dedicated to his memory. His body was recovered from Bolivia several years after he was killed by Government forces on the orders, so legend says, of the CIA. A forty-foot statue towers over the town, the pedestal bearing the legend, *Hasta la victoria siempre*.

## *Hasta la victoria siempre.*

It's impossible to escape the iconic red and black image of Guevara. Consciously and aggressively photogenic, artistic and unforgiving, complex and idealistic, the man is everywhere. A mile beyond *el tren* is a life-size statue of him striding out with a young boy, representing the youth of Cuba, on his shoulder. The lady who owns my hostel describes it with tears in her eyes. "Es tan hermoso," she says. "So beautiful."

The Cuban revolution should not, from a military point of view, have been successful. Of the 80 would-be revolutionaries who sailed to Cuba on a dangerously overcrowded pleasure boat in 1953, only 20 survived the government's defensive ambush. They scattered into the southern hills, gradually regrouping to conduct a five-year guerrilla campaign. Bit by bit they garnered support from the agrarian population and, eventually, the soldiery of the national army. The principal reasons for their victory were the ineptitude and corruption in the government, the exploitative nature of American commercial policies [i], and the charismatic use of radio by the rebels.

A statue in Habana's Museum of the Revolution depicts the three great leaders - Che Guevara, Fidel Castro, and Camilo Cienfuegos - pointing towards a distant future. Each is recognisable by their idiosyncratic headdress: a beret, a field cap, a Stetson. What marked these men out was their unwavering belief in their cause. Although Cienfuegos was the son of a tailor, the Castro brothers, Fidel and Raúl, were from the wealthy middle classes. Guevara was an Argentine, and a student doctor. All of them could have abandoned revolution for profitable and peaceful lives. But they didn't.

At the mausoleum I buy a translated copy of *The Motorcycle Diaries*, the journal of Guevara's personal odyssey from the southern tip of Argentina up through Chile and Peru to Mexico[ii]. It was here that he eventually met Fidel Castro. At first, I am struck by the immature jottings of impressionable youth, but as the book progresses one senses his emerging political consciousness and his overarching belief in the goodness, and absolute



equality, of all people.

The read makes me think of Brexiteers back home. It is clear that leaving the European Union will have a significantly downward effect on the economy. I wonder if economic decline will affect the likes of Gove, Farage, Rees-Mogg, or Johnson. Was their political positioning driven by ideology or personal gain? Donald Tusk, the pragmatic and tireless European Council President, stated that they deserve a special place in hell for the planless confusion they created. I think he's being kind. As George Bernard Shaw icily remarked, the problem with democracy is that one is given leaders no better than one deserves.

**“The problem with democracy is that one is given leaders no better than one deserves...” George Bernard Shaw**

The bus from Santa Clara to the coastal town of Trinidad takes a convoluted route much longer than necessary. We pull into the cobbled bus station after dark. The map in the guide book has different street names to those written on the walls. I end up paying a taxi driver the equivalent of £10 to take me less than 200 metres. I am angry. I imagined I had got under the skin of the culture and was worthy of being considered *compatriota*. It grates to be reminded of my foreignness. And if I am foreign, the stopover in Trinidad forces me to taste the full extent of Cuba's isolation from the world.

Having booked all my accommodation thus far in advance, I now have to decide where to go next. I access Booking.com, look up La Habana, choose a hotel, and try to pay with the debit card I have registered. On the intermittent internet in my hostel I find myself unable to complete the transaction. I try again, and then again. Finally, I realise the system will not allow me to do so. Booking.com is owned by an American corporation and therefore banned from 'trading with the enemy'. Although I used the website from within the UK without issue, now that I am in Cuba I can view what rooms are available but cannot reserve them.

During the same transaction, my debit card stops working. This is irritating as I had informed my bank I was coming. Calling the fraud team on a Friday afternoon proves impossible. My network provider (Vodafone) has no coverage in Cuba whatsoever. The only option is to depend on the kindness of my host. It takes three hours, and roughly £70 in call charges, to release sufficient funds for the weekend. He also books a hotel for me in Habana



the old-fashioned way, by phone.

This demonstrates the extent to which global corporations are both interdependent and governed by American commercial regulation. To trade with, or in, America you need to comply with their laws - and so must the entirety of your supply chain.

British commercial regulation is intricately entwined with European statutes. This is not a matter of creating red tape but reducing it. If one was exporting smoked salmon to Bulgaria or importing cars from Poland, common trade policies ensure consistency of border controls and trading standards. Choosing to leave this common market presents us with two options: to slowly disentangle ourselves from the complex interrelationships of law and trade, both with Europe and, by extension, America; or to comply with regulations we have no say in drafting.

At last able to access cash, I explore the cobbled squares and uneven terraces of artisanal shops. Trinidad is a photographer's heaven. A man with leathery brown skin carries a cello on his shoulder against a lemon-yellow wall. A cowboy steers a cob round a red Chevrolet. Two women, one dressed entirely in white, busk among the diners in a restaurant.

Having taken their picture, I listen to their exquisite, close-harmony singing. I buy a home-made CD when they come round for tips. The one in white tells me her clothing is a political statement. Her husband, a journalist, was arrested in 2015 and is still held without charge. *Damas de Blanco* is a protest movement. She does not, however, blame the Castro brothers for her husband's incarceration. Nor is she afraid to be identified as a protester despite waves of arrests of the Damas in 2015 and 2016. There is something wonderfully paradoxical about her political stance. "We are all Cubans," she says. "We love Cuba."

Cubans see themselves as the victims of a never-ending external aggression. The 1959 revolution finally won self-determination after a litany of attempts dating back to the 1820s. In particular, the 1895 war of independence saw America cajoled into protecting Cubans against Spanish atrocities. The war replaced one brutal colonial power with a military occupation that provided negligible political, economic, or social benefit for the natives. American corporations took over the railroads, the sugar industry, and the newspapers. America became a colonial power in all but name. The puppet governments it maintained provided a haven for organised crime<sup>[iii]</sup>. Powerful unions drove through labour laws that created widespread income disparity and, eventually, economic stagnation. At the start of the 1950s, Cuba had a larger economy than Japan, more doctors per capita than the United



Kingdom, and the highest rate of education spending in the region[iv]. By 1958, growth had slowed to 1%. The revolution swept away external interference and consolidated its position by seeing off the disastrous American counter invasion in the Bay of Pigs in 1961. Where Castro failed, however, was in winning external support. Following the Missile Crisis of 1962, Russia left Cuba friendless and alone on the international stage.

Political graffiti near the bus station shows an American marine kicking in the door of someone's home to demand, at gunpoint, why they hold America in such disdain. The owner of the house does not have to answer. Cubans are hoping el bloqueo is coming to an end. Prince Charles made an official visit. China, ever quick to expand its 'Belt and Road' trade initiative, has already spotted market opportunities. The benefits of affordable tractors, busses, and sewing machines are easy to imagine.

Although the EU is undoubtedly a flawed institution, there remains the question of what would happen without it? How will disparate European interests ever define a meaningful stance on Russian expansionism, global terrorism, climate change, ocean plastics, animal husbandry, food standards, health pandemics, or economic migration?

My suspicion is that Britain's position on the United Nations Security Council will once again be called into question. Scotland will secede. Ireland will unite. And the critical global issues we face today will become minority interests behind energy security and food provision; the economics of corduroy and tow rope. We will overfish our waters and our rural areas will fall prey to the global corporations that have already hollowed out the farming communities of Iowa and Minnesota[v]. People with transferable skills will thrive in a service-based, gig economy. Those without will drift into the minimum-wage, zero-hour work once done by Eastern Europeans.

Through this lens, the visionary nature of the Cuban revolution seems all the more evident. Cuba maintains eight vast national parks. The immaculate beaches of Varadero stretch fourteen miles without a single plastic bag or cigarette butt on the sand. The Bay of Pigs is one of the top diving destinations in the world. The national sporting teams, particularly in running, baseball, boxing, fencing, and basketball, demonstrate the benefit of mandatory lessons in schools and the superlative nature of Cuban coaching. With a population of barely twelve million, Cuba fields over eighty Olympic standard boxers. It is second in the overall Olympic medal table behind the United States. Britain is third.

Keen to shift the cultural focus away from America, the Castro brothers started pushing



European sport in schools. How long will it be, I wonder, before Cuba beats England at cricket?

## How long will it be before Cuba beats England at cricket?

And it's not just sport in which Cuba excels. Arriving in La Habana one is immediately assaulted by the unstoppable rhythm and swish of drums. Every restaurant has a band, and every band has a style. There are favourite songs - *Gauntanamera*, *Chan Chan*, *The Peanut Vendor* - and each of these can be interpreted through the milieu of musical schools: danzon, guaracha, rumba, mambo, son, trova, chacha, salsa, and timba to name but a few. After a few hours, the music enters your very bones.

Late one evening I am strolling through the Plaza de Armas and listen to a solitary busker in a canary-yellow, double-breasted suit playing a trumpet in the doorway of a bookshop. Stencilled on the window above him are the authors of some of the books on sale: Mishima, Yukio; Huxley, Aldous; Trotsky, Leon; Byron, Lord. I'm leaving in a few days and, though keen to get home, am inhaling everything I admire. I meet a friend in the Plaza Vieja to drink cocktails and discuss Hemingway. She asks me what I like best.

"The equality," I reply without pause. "There is no racism here, no class division. A busload of wealthy tourists has no more right to the road than a labourer in a donkey cart."

My friend has been to Cuba many times. Although an American, she entered on a missionary visa. I ask her the same question and she gropes for an answer. "Doing so much with so little," she says eventually. "It's the people, really. Despite everything, They're so *nice*."

Her eyes drift across the square to an outlandish statue of a naked, shaven-headed woman holding a huge fork while riding a giant cockerel. "You know what that signifies?" she asks.

I shake my head.

"It's about the women who had to feed their families after the revolution. Fidel banned prostitution but that was all many of them could do."



She is urging me to curb my regard. The communist revolution did not, by any means, deliver the benefits it promised. But I recall the tractor in the sugar plantation. The easing of travel and trade restrictions under Obama and then Raúl Castro has allowed an influx of hard currency that is now concentrating in the hands of a few. There is no such thing as a little capitalism. Very soon there could be enormous wealth disparity and I fear for the effect it will have.

“There is still a lot we can learn,” I say.

She nods. “Not just Britain. Everyone should come see for themselves.”

I did not vote for Brexit. But now it has happened I recognise a responsibility to build a country fit for our children. The current conservative government is using its mandate as a veil for a raft of sour-tasting, divisive policies. This is not the Britain I want.

I want Britain to have a significant role in the world. Not the world’s policemen - we can no longer afford that - but the world’s conscience. I want ideas to move freely and our service sector to flourish. I want us to lead on the complex and knotty issues of the day. I want us to be open to others and learn from the best they have to offer. I want our elected officials to be charismatic, visionary, and motivated by a deep sense of service. I want us to value academic, artistic, and sporting excellence, and invest in them all. I want us to be innovative and entrepreneurial, while at the same time a model of social equality. I want the rights of all to be protected. I want *nationalism* to become a popular and positive word. I want our environment and wildlife to be cherished. And above all, I want us to be kind.

The future is in our hands.

[i] The wonderful novel *Telex from Cuba* by Rachel Kushner describes the revolution from the point of view of the American staff of the sugar company. Kushner, R., (2014) *Telex from Cuba*, Vintage.

[ii] Guevara, E., (2004) *The Motorcycle Diaries: Notes on a Latin American Journey*, Harper Perennial



[iii] See Coppola, Frances Ford, (1974), *The Godfather Part 2*, Paramount Pictures, New York

[iv] See Sainsbury, B., and McCarthy, C., (2017) *The Lonely Planet Guide to Cuba 9<sup>th</sup> Edition*, Lonely Planet

[v] See <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2017/jul/18/rise-of-mega-farms-how-the-us-model-of-intensive-farming-is-invading-the-world> [viewed 23 January 2020]

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