

IT'S A QUEER THING

Out of complacency

The politics of oppression have some common denominators

by Howard N. Dana

As you read my column this month, I will be on a trip to Cuba. That's right, Cuba—that biggest of Caribbean islands, once a playground for the rich, now under the communist government of Fidel Castro.

Why on earth would I want to go to Cuba? Why would a queer activist want to visit a communist Latin American island? To me, it is more a question of why *wouldn't* an out gay man want to go to Cuba? I have long been fascinated with Cuba. Its culture, people, traditions and defiance have inspired me.

That the United States forbids its citizens to travel to or spend money in Cuba makes a trip there even more appealing. It is an act of civil disobedience to defy the U.S. ban on tourism to Cuba. Since the communist revolution of Fidel Castro, 33 years ago, the Cuban government has withstood a U.S. stranglehold on its economy. Much rhetoric has been used to villainize Castro's government, but one must give it credit for being just as stubborn as the U.S. government, and at much greater odds.

My friends know that I claim to be a socialist, not a communist. I am very critical of some of the things the Cuban government has done. But I do understand the Cuban idea of personal sacrifice for the good of the Communist Party. For the Cubans, what is best for the party is what is best for the individual—a concept individualistic U.S. citizens have trouble relating to. I can understand this loyalty up to the point at which it is used to take away civil liberties. But, just as I do not believe that everything the Cuban government has done has been good, I do not believe that we in the United States have been given an accurate picture of the situation there.

When I visited Nicaragua seven years ago, during the Contra-Sandinista war, my conversations with people clearly showed that the information I had gotten in the U.S. about the situation in Nicaragua was heavily skewed. The available press was completely one-sided. The U.S. government was supporting the rebel Contras against the legitimate Nicaraguan government, and we were led to believe that this was the right thing to be doing. What we were getting was only half of the story. I suspect I will find a similar situation in Cuba, where we are also not allowed to see the whole picture.

Having seen poverty elsewhere in Latin America, I am prepared to see very poor conditions in Cuba. The economic embargo was manageable only so long as Cuba could rely on the Soviet Union to provide some of the U.S.-denied essentials. But the country cannot be self sustaining, and, since the dissolution of the U.S.S.R., Cuba has suffered greatly from a shortage of medical supplies, gasoline and other imported goods. For a nation that has always offered universal health coverage and free education to have to go without medical supplies and books is shameful.

The Cuban economy is in dire straits, and the island is being worn ragged by the embargo. The United States has kept Cuba in a state of economic siege for 33 years. And yet, I also expect to find a lot of joy on my trip. I am going to go as an openly gay man and will ask lots of questions about the lives of gay, lesbian and bisexual Cubans. I expect to encounter some

homophobia, which, as in the rest of the world, exists in Latin America. I also expect to find people who are very interested in queer issues.

Part of my agenda while in Cuba will be to see what the situation is for people living with HIV and AIDS. Until recently, HIV-positive people were quarantined in government-run sanitariums. Granted, life in a sanitarium, with plenty of medical attention and government-supplied food, was often better than could be had in general Cuban society, but people were still being held because of their HIV status. Because of a lack of funds, the sanitarium system is now completely voluntary. Cuba also has a very low rate of HIV in its population, especially compared to its island neighbor, Haiti. Cuban HIV policies seem progressive on the one hand, by taking care of people with HIV disease, and barbaric on the other, by "locking" them up. It is my hope to tour a sanitarium and speak to people with HIV about their care and their experiences.

Following a May Day celebration in Havana, the brigade I will be with will have an audience with high government officials, including Fidel Castro. During the trip we will have a chance to talk to a variety of Cubans, from farm workers to the president. While I am viewing this trip partially as a journalistic endeavor, I am also going to Cuba in solidarity with an oppressed people. The Cubans have suffered a great deal at the hand of the United States. To treat a tiny island nation the way we have treated Cuba is a gross violation of the very principles we uphold in the United Nations. The hypocrisy of the United States is forcing the Cuban people to live at a subhuman level.

The politics of oppression have some real common denominators. To me, go-

ing to Cuba in an act of solidarity is as much about being a gay man as it is about my interest in Latin America. I firmly believe that unless oppressed people of all kinds can work together to end oppression, we will never see the day when any of us is free. To think that African Americans could work to end racism without the help of Japanese Americans or Mexican Americans is preposterous. It is just as preposterous to imagine that we can fight heterosexism without including our Jewish or Asian or Arab brothers and sisters. In a pluralistic society such as ours, the ties between racism, sexism, classism and heterosexism are clear. The easiest way to keep oppressed people in a state of submission is to pit them against one another. To divide and conquer.

I am a queer activist, and I will combat heterosexism and homophobia wherever I can. But to think that I don't need to be concerned with other issues is to fall into the trap of bigotry myself. Complacency breeds contempt. My trip to Cuba is one way of pressing myself, and my consciousness, out of complacency.

As you read this, I will be walking the streets of Havana. I will be talking with people about what it is like to be Cuban and what it is like to be a U.S. citizen. I will be asking about what it is like to be lesbian or gay in Cuba. And answers will come about what it is like to be lesbian or gay in the United States. I will be getting some answers and making some connections that will ultimately further the cause of both queer and Latino/a cultures.



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