Tourism in Cuba: The Great Un-equalizer
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Introduction

Cuba’s relationship with tourism has differed over the years according to its political status. Pre-revolutionary Cuba engaged with tourism grandiosely, becoming a well-known hub of crime (mafia activity), gambling, corruption, and prostitution (Jiménez, 2008, p. 146). Much of Cuba’s success in tourism was due to the nation’s close ties with the United States, as about 85% of tourists were American (Seaton, 1997, p.314). However, Fidel Castro and the Revolution made it a priority to cut ties with the United States, including withdrawal from the tourism industry, with the purpose of decreasing American capitalist influences and eliminating its associated “capitalist evils:” corruption, drugs, social inequality, racism, etc. (Taylor and McGlynn, 2008, p.406).

In the early 1990s, the collapse of the Soviet Union had a nearly paralyzing effect on the Cuban economy, inducing the loss of about 75% of its international trade and beginning the “Special Period,” an extended period of economic crisis (Taylor and McGlynn, 2008, p.406). The Cuban State (essentially Fidel Castro) responded through the implementation of several economic reforms including increased efforts to expand the tourism sector as well as the legalization of foreign investment in joint ventures in tourism-related projects, of self-employment and private enterprise, and of dollars (later the convertible peso) and remittances. These reforms effectively re-incorporated Cuba into the global economy (Mazzei, 2012, p.96). Cuba enacted these reforms with the goal of securing hard-currency to jumpstart economic recovery and to maintain the existing socio-political structure: the socialist state. It’s important to note that Castro decided to engage in capitalism to maintain socialism. His rationalization of this contradicting relationship was to suggest that “[w]e have to develop tourism. It is an important source of foreign currency. We do not like tourism. It has become an economic necessity” (Taylor and
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Cuba's introduction into the transnational economy has changed the Cuban way of life. In this essay, I explore how the Cuban state’s incorporation of the tourism industry, a capitalist venture, has created conditions yielding to the development of socio-economic inequalities, directly conflicting with the revolutionary notion of egalitarianism. I describe a non-exhaustive selection of socio-economic inequalities stemming from and associated with tourism in Cuba, with a focus on race, gender, class, wealth, and access to resources.

The information I present has been obtained through literature review as well as from ethnographic research. All of the personal experiences I reference are associated with a 10-day research trip to Cuba in March 2018. The trip consisted of visits to Santiago de Cuba, Trinidad, Camagüey, and Havana.

**Social Hierarchy with Cubans in 2nd Place**

The Cuban socialist state prides itself on fostering a society of equality; that is, a society which offers no advantages to any heritage, skin color, age, religious denomination, etc. Despite these embedded revolutionary notions, the expansion of the tourism industry in response to the collapse of the Soviet Union has resulted in the introduction of a social hierarchical system. This system, effectively created by the State itself, prioritizes foreigners over Cuban nationals, completely disrupting the egalitarian ideals that the government has imparted upon its citizens since the Revolution.

The hierarchical system is best shown through what has been termed a “tourist apartheid” by many scholars, which is the intentional separation of foreigners in the tourist world from Cubans in the real Cuba. This separation is designed to keep tourists’ capitalist values, as most tourists come from capitalist countries, away from Cubans and to keep the reality of the struggles of Cuban daily life away from the tourists (Jiménez, 2008, p.151). The State’s goal is to ultimately regulate global
capitalism’s presence in and influence on Cuban society, creating an “eco-
nomic firewall,” while keeping everyday hardships out of tourists’ views in
order to maintain its reputation as a desired tourist locale (Mazzei, 2012,
p.100). Due to segregation, Cubans begin to feel marginalized within their
own country and treated as second-class citizens (Sixto, 2006). As paying
tourists, foreigners are treated to all of the goods, services, and resources
they desire whereas Cubans are hard-pressed to find even the most basic
of materials, such as toilet paper (Ahmed, 2016). This stark stratification
in access was most apparent during the “Special Period” in the mid-
1990s, when Cubans would starve with rations while tourists dined on
their meals of choice. The increased limitation of resources for Cubans
can be understood to be partially caused by the channeling of resources
to foreigners, which is particularly apparent in the medical field. Medical
tourism has become such an economic focus that resources such as medi-
cation and doctors’ time have become sparser for Cubans (Sixto, 2006).

Due to the State’s desire to maintain a separation between for-
eigners and Cubans, there has been a notable increase in the surveillance
and regulation of Cubans. The interaction between tourists and Cubans is
increasingly watched for and prevented through the constructive design
of tourist sites as well as ‘randomized’ police checks. With the significant
increase in tourism in the past 20 years, Cuba has acquired the need to
construct more tourist sites such as hotels, resorts, etc. These construction
projects are not only focused on generating housing for foreigners, but
they also focus on incorporating into their design the functional goal of
keeping tourists away from Cubans. Discos, bars, and restaurants are now
placed within tourist resorts, emphasizing the disconnection between
tourism and Cuba (Colantonio and Potter, 2006, p.31). As a further mea-
sure, the Cuban state has trained its police to watch out for tourists with
Cubans in order to maintain the separation between worlds. However, the
method of identification of Cubans directly correlates to the association
of Cuban-ness with blackness, resulting in the increased surveillance of
Afro-Cubans (Roland, 2006, p.160). As a result, whenever a dark-skinned
person is with a fair-skinned person, the assumed tourist, (s)he is more likely to be confronted and ‘routinely stopped’ by the police (Roland, 2006, p.157).

When in Havana, my group, which was made up of mostly lighter-skinned people, was standing outside of the Hotel Presidente with two Cuban dancers, both dark-skinned. After a few minutes of hovering on the street corner, a Cuban police officer approached one of the two dancers and asked for his ID. The black male dancer was asked what he was doing with our group as the officer wrote down his personal information. In retrospect, it’s apparent that the police were monitoring the tourist-oriented area to keep it ‘clean’ of Cuban nationals. Deducing based on racist associations, the police identified a fellow Cuban who they assumed to be engaging in some form of illicit, or informal, activity with foreigners. This experience helps emphasize the concept that the development of the social stratification between tourists and Cubans has simultaneously led to the ‘blackening’ of Cuban identity, delegating privilege to the Non-Cuban (the foreigner), as well as the development of racial inequalities among Cubans (Roland, 2006, p.160).

**Class and Wealth Disparity**

The expansion of tourism was a reform implemented within the economic recovery plan after the collapse of the Soviet Union as a method of acquiring hard currency. Alongside its accompanying economic reforms, an abundant quantity of dollars began flowing into Cuba’s borders with no way for the government to regulate its movement. As a result, the State legalized the dollar in 1993 (later implementing the convertible peso [CUC]), leading to the formation of the dual currency system the country still uses today (Eckstein and Brenner, 2008, p.183).

The beginnings of wealth disparity became apparent the moment the Cuban State prioritized the movement of hard currency within its borders over the socialist notion of equal economic livelihoods. The introduction of the CUC as a preferred mode of currency allowed for the
emergence of class statuses as well as income brackets. Particularly with the increasing uselessness of the peso economy, there are increasingly significant inequalities between those with and without access to CUCs (Jiménez, 2008, p.148).

The recognition and incorporation of the dollar into the Cuban economy disrupted the level playing field regarding salaries of Cuban workers. Those who worked in the hard currency industries had access to CUCs and therefore to larger salaries. Quantitative evidence of the widening income gap is the finding by a group of Cuban economists that 94% of Cuba's lowest income group worked in the state sector where there is little to no access to the CUC. Among Cuba's highest income earners, 36% received hard-currency through their jobs while another 39% received remittances from abroad (de la Fuente, 2011). It is clear that differential access to the CUC, a dollar-based currency, leads to wealth disparity.

Access to the CUC has become a defining factor for Cubans who work in the tourist industry or who receive remittance payments from family members abroad. This population maintains a different lifestyle; they have access to more goods and resources as a direct result of having more money to spend (Taylor and McGlynn, 2008, p.408). It's apparent that Cubans are no longer sheltered from the power of possessing currency in a world market. The growing divide between those with and without CUCs has effectively led to the development of two classes: a petite bourgeoisie and a group characterized by poverty (Sanchez and Adams, 2008, p.33). It's important here to recognize the Cuban State's decision to form dollar stores in order to capture hard currency, thus participating in and supporting the expansion of consumerism as well as wealth and class stratifications. (Taylor and McGlynn, 2008, p.408).

A growing constituent of the petit bourgeoisie is the population of Cubans participating in private industries such as casas particulares (bed and breakfasts) and paladares (private restaurants). This population engages in self-employment, which is now allowed by the Cuban State if granted the proper license. Cuba's private industry sector has seen a
significant increase in participation since the expansion of tourism and has contributed significantly to the wealth disparity in Cuba (Feinberg and Newfarmer, 2016, p.21). Per a survey in 2002, the income difference between a paladar owner and a state job was 12,500:1, a significant gap only expected to grow with time (de la Fuente, 2011). Thus, self-employed Cubans enjoy a much different lifestyle than that of the ordinary Cuban, fit with desirable goods like air conditioning, TV, or cell phones.

A result of this burgeoning divide in class and thus social status is the growth of Cubans’ desire to access and possess dollars and the resultant growth of pseudo-capitalist enriching ventures through the informal/illegal economies (Sanchez and Adams, 2008, p.33). Due to this increased focus on gathering CUCs, there has arisen a notable movement of people from state professional jobs to lower-skilled jobs in the tourism sector. It’s common to see a Cuban with a higher education working as a taxi driver, waiter, tour guide, doorman, or prostitute in order to join the upper echelon of the new Cuban social hierarchy. The difference in wages is staggering; a taxi driver can make $467 a month while a teacher may make only $8 a month (Mazzei, 2012, p.97). The incentive to acquire a higher education has diminished, for state jobs don’t provide the same lifestyle a job in the service industry could (Seaton, 1997, p.317). The resulting inversion of Cuba’s merit-based economic structure has and continues to lead to Cuba’s state-sector brain drain (Eckstein and Brenner, 2008, p.188). It’s important to note that this movement subverts the foundational progressive element of education integral to Cuba’s revolutionary identity (Jiménez, 2008, p.153). Looking to the future, if professional jobs continue to be deprioritized, Cuba will grow more dependent on tourism, which, due to its instability, may lead to economic declines or crises.

The Racial Divide

According to the rhetoric of the Revolution, racial discrimination in Cuba was unacceptable and intolerable. Fidel Castro made it a priority to establish a ‘racial democracy,’ one in which race would be an irrele-
vant categorization (de la Fuente, 2011). Although this rhetoric has been
incorporated into everyday language, people’s actions continue to tell an
opposite truth: Cubans are discriminated against based on the color of
their skin. Now, with the advent of tourism, racism is made more appar-
et by tourism’s influence on the Cuban socio-economic environment and
has become a forefront social issue.

The growing desire to obtain hard currency in order to achieve a
certain class status and thus live a certain lifestyle has changed the dyna-
ic of Cuba’s economy (Taylor and McGlynn, 2008, p.410). More than ever,
Cubans are rushing to join the tourism sector; however, it can be noted
that there is an underrepresentation of Afro-Cubans in the tourism sector
as there are more whites than blacks or mulattos in the service industry.
According to a report by the Center for Anthropology of the Ministry
of Science, Technology, and Environment, whites are more likely than
blacks to access dollars through tourism (including informal tourism);
whites are 1.6 times more likely than blacks to receive tips and whites
hold 80% of dollar economy employment while constituting 60% of the
population (Eckstein and Brenner, 2008, p.185). This trend is due to the
underlying job discrimination and marginalization of blacks and mulattos
in the tourism and private industries, which can typically be attributed to
the Cuban State’s idea that those with fairer-skin are more ‘fit’ to attract
foreigners and thus income for the State (Sanchez and Adams, 2008, p.34).
Oftentimes, the more desirable positions, such as management, are offered
to whites while positions for entertainers, cooks, and janitors are offered
to blacks and mulattos (de la Fuente, 2011). As a result, whites have more
contact with foreigners and receive more hard currency tips. In conclu-
sion, the limited access Afro-Cubans experience to employment in the
tourism industry relegates them to the lower income bracket (blacks and
mulattos are concentrated in the lowest deciles according to income) and
its associated class status (de la Fuente, 2011). Therefore, racial inequality
in Cuba coincides with class inequality and vice versa (Jiménez, 2008,
p.150).
In addition to their job exclusion from State-run tourist sites, Afro-Cubans are also generally excluded from and underrepresented in the private industry. This trend is due to the fact that most of the Cubans who receive remittances are white, as most of the Cubans who left post-Revolution were white (de la Fuente, 2011). There are claims that blacks were the population most benefited by the Revolution, but with the legalization of remittances and the flow of hard currency, those benefits have noticeably rolled back (Roland, 2006, p.155). Access to the private industry is largely governed by familial relations, as a significant portion of business capital comes from remittances. As such, there are three times as many self-employed whites as blacks and mulattos (de la Fuente, 2011). Contributing to the deficiency in black representation in the private industry sector is housing segregation. Whites tend to live in more ‘residential’ neighborhoods that are not crowded while blacks live in overcrowded and under-maintained neighborhoods (de la Fuente, 2011). Alongside capital, neighborhood is a determining factor of whether or not the operation of a private business can be entertained. Combining the housing and capital barriers, Afro-Cubans are unable to join the private industry sector and are left to find other means of accessing hard currency, leading to the reality that Afro-Cubans are more likely to engage in the informal/illegal economies (Taylor and McGlynn, 2008, p.408).

Exacerbated by the exclusion of Afro-Cubans in desired positions within the tourism industry is the commodification and exoticization of race as blacks are often delegated to positions in entertainment. Advertisements, developed by the State, for trips to Cuba are apt to promote entertainment involving Afro-Cuban dancing and music, in which men and women flaunt their bodies for (primarily white) tourists to consume. Essentially, the State idealizes the blackening of the Cuban identity and its associated sexual characterization to attract financial resources (Roland, 2006, p.159).

While in Santiago de Cuba, my group and I visited a tourist hotel rooftop bar and witnessed a ‘salsa show,’ which consisted mostly of Af-
ro-Cuban men and women singing and dancing while wearing little clothing. Most of the viewers were white foreigners drinking, smoking, and enjoying the ‘cultural show’ which they were told was a ‘representation’ of Cuba but was really a venue for the active consumption of blackness. The reality is that these Afro-Cubans were working for a small wage while being subject to a system that takes advantage of their class and racial statuses. Afro-Cubans are subject to continuous expectations by foreigners and Cubans alike to be available for consumption, for blacks are continually exoticized and objectified (Davidson, 1996, p.46). It’s important to remember that the Cuban State actively participates in the advertisement of Afro-Cubans as exotic peoples in order to increase the consumption of Afro-Cubans in Cuba via tourism (Jiménez, 2008, p.150). Thus, the State acts as a proponent and beneficiary of the increasing commodification of race in Cuba and the resultantly generated racial discrimination. It can be concluded that tourism, an industry supported by the State, has created the environment in which Afro-Cubans are treated unequally and discriminatingly.

**Women and Jineterismo**

Similar to the Revolution’s promise to form a ‘racial democracy,’ the Revolution set its sights on the liberation of women by increasing the incorporation of women into society and the workplace, decreasing their subjection to discrimination in education and employment, and increasing the division of responsibility in the household (Trumbull, 2001, p.356). A notable venture undertaken by Fidel Castro was the termination of prostitution, which was a popular occupation in pre-Revolutionary Cuba (Jiménez, 2008, p.149). Despite the Revolution’s success in the increased incorporation of women into society, since the Special Period, the State has doubled back on its rhetoric by underhandedly ‘permitting’ the exploitation and objectification of women for the purpose of generating hard currency via tourism (Trumbull, 2001, p.356).

In today’s tourism-oriented Cuba, Cuban women are subject
to hyper-sexualization and objectification by the State (Jiménez, 2008, p.149). In order to entice tourists to visit the island, the Cuban State uses the image of the Cuban woman as an exotic, other-worldly, and sexual figure. It is very common to see images of scantily clad women on the beach in State-sponsored advertisements, essentially selling sex (Trumbull, 2001, p.358). In particular, it is common to see the portrayal of Afro-Cuban women, for Afro-Cuban women have become associated with an exaggerated exoticization and physical eroticization (Jiménez, 2008, p.150). It’s apparent that the State-driven commodification of women has stimulated the emergence and growth of a stark objectification of women, particularly women of color. An important irony to recognize is the distinct contradiction between Fidel Castro’s denunciation of the exploitation of people in capitalist structures while the State (influenced by his philosophy) actively takes part in the exploitation of women in pursuit of success in tourism, a capitalist venture (Trumbull, 2001, p.363).

The objectification of women has led to an increasing amount of sex tourism in Cuba. Despite the motivated eradication of prostitution and sex tourism post-Revolution, sex tourism has once again become a major source of hard currency revenue for the State (Trumbull, 2001, p.356). As a result, although the presence of sex tourism goes against socialist ideals and portrays the weakening of the socialist State, the State continues to eroticize Cubans in order to informally utilize the sex tourism market as a significant source of currency.

The Cuban sex tourism industry is not associated with an official network; rather, it is built upon the work of jineteros, or sex workers, who are members of the informal economy. Jineteros don't work through any formal organizations but function independently in so much that they organize what they do, who they go with, and how much they earn (Trumbull, 2001, p.359). Jineterismo has become a popular occupation among many women who find it necessary to make extra money beyond their state job because they are aware that there are abundant opportunities to earn hard currency from foreigners. As a result, many women
from regions of Cuba with little access to tourists migrate to tourist hot spots, particularly Havana (Trumbull, 2001, p.359). After migrating to Havana, women have a difficult time finding housing due to Cuba’s internal migration laws and are unable to acquire any state job due to Cuba’s employment laws (Davidson, 1996, p.41). Therefore, women who travel for jineterismo are forced into difficult circumstances in which it becomes essential to carry out the sex work and so are more vulnerable to being taken advantage of by tourists or other Cubans (Trumbull, 2001, p.360).

Because jineterismo is part of the informal economy, there is a proportional overrepresentation of Afro-Cuban women, which has led to the construction of the association between the jinetera and the mulatta (Fernandez, 2009, p.87). The sex worker has become defined in terms of both gender (female) and race (mulatta). This association serves to increase the scope and effects of the damaging racial stereotype already associated with blackness in Cuba: the construction of the Afro-Cuban woman as exotic, erotic, and sexually available (Fernandez, 2009, p.87). The racial tie to occupation, Afro-Cubans to sex, has become so strong that engagement by whites in jineterismo goes typically unnoticed, resulting in the increased and unbalanced surveillance of Afro-Cubans by police when looking to keep foreigners from Cubans (Fernandez, 2009, p.87). The combinatory effect of racial exclusion in the tourism industry and the commodification of race has led to racial discrimination in the principal avenues pursued by Afro-Cubans, particularly Afro-Cuban women, for acquiring hard currency.

**Urban-Rural Divide**

Cuba’s infrastructure was not attended to much since the Revolution, so when tourism began to increase, changes and improvements needed to be made. Logically, those locations with the largest influx of people were attended to first, including Havana, Trinidad, and Varadero. These ‘tourist hot spots’ most typically were urban or beach landscapes (Feinberg and Newfarmer, 2016, p.17). As a result, all of Cuba hasn’t bene-
fited from the increase in tourism - only the large cities, primarily Havana. Due to this urban preference, the rural areas of Cuba have become neglected and are allocated less resources and services from the State, forming an urban-rural divide (Feinberg and Newfarmer, 2016, p.17).

A defining feature of the urban-rural divide is the notable concentration of economic benefits stemming from tourism in tourist poles. Tourism creates a positive multiplier effect in that for every job it creates directly, jobs are simultaneously formed indirectly in industries such as agriculture, communications, the informal economy, etc. (Jiménez, 2008, p.147). In inland Cuba, where there isn’t much tourism, if any, there is little to no multiplier effect, contributing to the growing incentive for Cubans to migrate from rural to urban areas, particularly to Havana, where there is greater opportunity for dollar earning (Eckstein and Brenner, 2008, p.185).

Within Havana’s city limits, urban development has been allocated by the State to coastal areas and adjacent neighborhoods, which are more frequented by tourists, while neighborhoods on the inland/south side have been neglected from improvements (Colantonio, 2004, p.22). The result is the development of unequal environmental conditions due to urban planning with tourism, rather than the Cuban people, in mind. These environmental disparities translate further into racial inequalities as the neglected south side neighborhoods of Havana are where many Afro-Cubans are housed (Colantonio, 2004, p.23). It’s apparent that the State’s direct involvement with the tourism industry, which has created conditions ripe for inequalities, has led it to sacrifice socialist priorities for the assumption of hard currency.

**Conclusions**

Cuba is an established socialist state which prides itself on upholding egalitarian values. However, the reforms the State implemented during the Special Period to develop the tourism industry have led to the emergence of socio-economic inequalities as well as the incorporation of
capitalist tendencies into the collective conscience. Both of these results directly oppose the ideological foundations of the Cuban state.

There is an undeniable correlation between tourism and Cuba’s evolving socio-economic inequalities, for tourism has fostered conditions in which disparities have begun to evolve quickly and prominently. Tourism has generated race, gender, class, wealth, and environmental discrepancies, which directly contradict the State’s foundational notion that all Cubans are equal. In the foreseeable future, it is expected that these divides (racial, class, environmental, wealth, etc.) will widen, for tourism is only slated to expand. It should be noted then that the State, due to its direct involvement with the operations of the tourism industry, plays an active role in the evolution of the social inequalities present in Cuba and must be held accountable for sustaining discriminatory practices that propagate the unequal treatment of Cubans.

Regarding the increase in capitalist tendencies adopted by both the Cuban people and the Cuban State, it’s interesting to witness how a country with such a conflicted history with the United States and so fervently against the inequalities created by capitalism in the U.S. has now inflicted upon itself the same fate. It can be predicted that Cuba will respond by veering in the direction of tightened socialist regulation; however, there is no guarantee that Cuba may be able to return to its Revolutionary condition. Now that the Cuban people have experienced capitalism and hold ideas of materialism, consumerism, and the opportunities associated with wealth in their minds, it will be very difficult to return to a world where especulación (the desire to show off material wealth) is socially unaccepted and all are socio-economically equal.
References


