

CUBA!

Two . . . Observations

By Jack Seaton



Charles Pfeiffer

Chewing gum is favored in other lands now. The United States started it and the world is taking it up. The Star Weekly, in 1928, reported:

Gum-chewing, originally an exclusively American pastime, is fast becoming a universal habit . . . The industry is said to have got its start on a capital outlay of \$55. By 1919 there were fifty-seven concerns making chewing gum in the United States, but through consolidations, failures and so on the number has been reduced by seventeen.

The domestic factories are dependent upon the tropic forests for their basic supply of chicle. Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras and other central and Southern American countries furnish the greater part of the raw material.

"Tiene chicles?"

Children in foreign countries have often asked me for gum but I hadn't expected to hear it from Cuban children. Usually I talked with Cuban kids about being "pioneers" (Cub Scout with a political conscience) or about Che and why they wanted to be like him.

No, nino, no tengo chicles. Listen, let me tell you something. When I was in Mexico, kids just like you bugged me all the time about chicles. There they had to sell them. I always hated buying them since it seemed to me a gratuitous act, a degrading form of capitalist charity. Sometimes I thought, 'I won't buy any gum, the kid will come to hate me and the system even more, and then there will be a better chance for the Revolution to happen.'

But that solved nothing, not my problem and certainly not his. How to break out of the circle? I wanted to rescue the boy from all that oppressive shit about chicles.

Listen, you poor Mexican bugger, can't you see what they're doing to you. Your father's a worker and he still thinks there was a revolution in this country. And you, maybe, will go to school. Your friends will surely be spied on, infiltrated and betrayed. You will know what's going on if only because at some point in the struggle one of them will fall. That much is certain. And when you protest you too will be beaten, tortured, perhaps shot. Trade in your gum for a gun. Listen, you poor Cuban bugger . . .

"No, nino, no tengo chicles," was all I could say. I was much comforted by the fact that at least in Cuba the Revolution made those feelings within me irrelevant. It had already put an end to the anguish of the child who peddles gum on the streets by substituting a new life (albeit one with some inconveniences, like not having chewing gum.) In Cuba I did not feel compromised by the complaint of a small child nor at odds with the system in general. I did feel those things in Mexico. And, yes, I feel them in Canada.

My trip to Cuba was a kind of political protest, for like protest, it began with a moral dilemma. The dilemma was inherent in the fact of my being a Canadian, a student, and (one might safely say "therefore") middle class.

Those who are not revolutionaries out of life-and-death necessity usually enter the struggle by working out the contradictions of their own situation. In Canada, for example, we ultimately share part of the guilt for U.S. military and economic aggression in the world today by inviting U.S. domination of our own economy.

The university this economy sustains is bourgeois in its orientation and in its membership. It operates in a country in which 40 per cent of the people live below the poverty line, and in a world in which hunger, disease and abject poverty are the norm, without necessarily addressing itself to those problems.

Che Guevara once wrote the following words in a reply to one Sra. Maria Rosario Guevara: "I don't think you and I are very closely related, but if you are capable of trembling with indignation each time that an injustice is committed in the world, we are comrades, and that is more important."

Who would not like to think themselves capable of such comradeship? Yet how great a contradiction it would be for a Canadian student to live by these words and feel no conflict. Given the fact of our complicity with the economic strategy of the United States in the world today, it is impossible to be a Canadian without struggle: given the fact of the class structure of our universities, it is impossible to be a student without struggle: given the level of poverty in Canada and in the world, it is absurdly impossible to remain committed to bourgeois values and still tremble with indignation.

For me the moral dilemma took definite shape in Cuba: the conflict was simplified. I remember the Cuban "responsibility" assigned to us addressing our group the day we arrived in Havana.

He said: "We are here to help you see our country, since we are revolutionaries and you want to become revolutionaries."

Cuba's sad history, though more tragic than our own, has much to teach us by analogy. Until ten years ago her entire economy was controlled by U.S. monopolies which exploited her as brutally as any colony was ever exploited. While peasants starved, arable land owned by U.S. and Cuban latifundists was purposefully not developed.

It was sometimes held in reserve or overplanted with cane to cover fluctuations in the world sugar market. To the financiers, Cuba was a rich parcel of real estate to be utilized and manipulated for the highest possible profit.

With the dollars from the sugar crop, which accounted for about one quarter of the gross national products, Cuba was able to buy nearly all the manufactured goods and foodstuffs she needed from other countries. Usually she got them from the United States. The arrangement was so profitable for the Americans that they ensured its perpetuation by paying more than the world price for cane, thus making sugar, and sugar alone, a profitable crop. The United States, in fact, discouraged agricultural diversification in Cuba as well as industrialization or even the cultivation of new trading partners. Her control was complete and effective.

In Canada, though we suffer less palpably under the weight of U.S. economic control, as a nation we are treated with hardly more deference. The tendency to sell rather than develop resources, to trade raw materials for manufactured goods, and endure effective foreign control over natural resources and the means of production themselves were major features of Cuba's economy. They are not unknown features of our own economy.

University education in an underdeveloped country also finds parallels in our own system. Education in Cuba before 1959 was essentially a commodity, like milk, shoes or ice-cream, could be purchased for dollars by the privileged ruling class. Leo Huberman and Paul Sweezy's recent and excellent book, *Socialism in Cuba* (Monthly Review Press), quotes Dr. Roberto Perada, Vice-Minister of Health, as saying that when he "studied medicine before the Revolution, it was possible for a medical student to get his license without attending school, or even without any hospital practice."

In Canada the rope is tied with a different knot. Although you must go to medical school to be a doctor, you may in fact not be able to go, purely for lack of funds. The relation between Canadian economy and Canadian education is variously that of buyer-seller or employer-employee. Business has long been the central metaphor of academia, a fact which Thorstein Veblen warned against in the early part of this century in *Higher Learning in America*.

Having once conceived of the university as an enterprise how easy it became to apply to it in practice the corporate model. It was an inevitable disaster in North American education. That which "reflects the lie in the soul of modern society," as Harold Innis once observed, was "the descent of the university into the market place."

To say these things is to say the obvious. We have realms of data on U.S. economic domination of Canada and at least as much material on the influence of business in our universities. But what has all this to do with Cuba?

As Canadians we are materially better off, incomparably so, than were the Cubans before their revolution. But qualitatively, as Canadians and as students we find ourselves in the same relationship to those who ultimately control us. There is a dialectical interdependence between development and underdevelopment, exploiting and being exploited, which is operative in our own situation.

Education, like industrialization, requires enormous investment. Therefore, some link between the university and the business community has always been inevitable. Given the nature of capitalist business practices it was equally inevitable that we would be financed on the understanding that our work, as a whole, serves the interests of the financiers. Or at least, since one way or another we are here to stay, that it not run counter to those interests.

I met a miner in Pinar del Rio who described to me his miserable lot before the triumph of the Revolution. What struck me even more than the familiar atrocities of the work conditions was the fact that as a dynamiter he had to buy his own

explosives. Thus, an exploited worker was subsidizing his own exploitation.

The expense to the university in its unfortunate alliance with business is equally absurd though much less obvious. The collective energies of the university are not necessarily directed at solving the problems of the masses of people in Canada or in the rest of the world. Though materially liberated, in matters of conscience we are unquestionably underdeveloped. What we forfeit in this arrangement, therefore, is the chance to live for life.

In Cuba the urgency of a people's need is measured by the fact that it exists, and is urgently expressed. I was repeatedly moved by the practical authenticity which underlies the Cubans' fervor for meeting these needs, despite the continuing personal and material sacrifice they face.

We are talking now about things like universal medical treatment, wiping out of illiteracy, self-defense, the growing and distribution of food so that no one starves and everyone is reasonably well-fed (During the time I worked on a Cuban farm I lived very comfortably on the Cuban ration.) None of these problems have even been faced in the rest of Latin America, let alone solved as they have been solved in Cuba ten years after the triumph of the rebel army.

To the Cubans the Revolution is a matter of conscience first and of economics second. Revolutionaries, after all, are not so interested in economics as in revolution.

North American critics of Cuban socialism are slow to accept revolutionary zeal as a significant factor in Cuba's efforts to struggle free of the condition of underdevelopment. Economists in particular see it as more of a restraint. Wassily Leontief, in a recent article on Cuba in the *New York Review of Books* criticized the "continual reliance on 'moral' as contrasted to material incentives" since this reliance "no doubt adversely affects the productivity of labour and its growth." (NYR, Sept., 1969). It might indeed be more efficient to use material incentives and rely less on voluntary labour, especially now when there are shortages of almost everything in Cuba. But as Che Guevara warned in *Socialism and Man*, it would also undermine the Revolution itself:

There is a danger that the forest won't be seen for the trees. Following the will-o'-the-wisp method of achieving socialism with the help of the dull instruments which link us to capitalism (the commodity as the economic cell, profitability, individual material interest as a lever, etc.) can lead into a blind alley. . . . The economic foundation which has been formed has already done its work of undermining the development of consciousness. To build communism, you must build new men as well as the new economic base.

The latest pleas from the U.S. intellectual community for a completely restructured society and university have followed similarly radical lines.

The great intellectual task of the present is the task of rethinking every aspect of technological civilization. That this civilization inherently moves toward self-destruction is now clear, and any radical rethinking must start from the premise that its manifest destructiveness will not be stopped by a broader distribution of the values which constitute and sustain the evil itself. If the universities were to dedicate themselves to this rethinking, then they would not only serve society in the most valuable way possible, but they might even save themselves.

— John H. Shaar and Sheldon S. Wolin, "Education and Technological Society", *New York Review of Books*, October, 1969.

As I write now a U.S. bomb is exploding in the Aleutian Islands, Rockefeller has his arm around Papa Doc Duvalier — just keep smilin', Nelson, business is better than ever — U.S. draft rates are up since Nixon announced troop withdrawals from Vietnam, and Claude Bissell is all upright about violence — violence? what's that? — in our universities.

And in the street outside a child's voice cries "chicles!". I wish he could run into our university and peddle his gum at the next meeting of the Board of Governors, or disrupt the next formal dinner in Winters College.

He would teach us that there are times when ceremony must give way to urgency, irrelevance to relevance. I wish he would intrude upon a lecture about the problems of underdevelopment. He would teach us about underdevelopment.

Jack Seaton is a York graduate who recently spent a month and a half this past summer in Cuba with a group of Canadian students. He is currently leading a College E tutorial in Third World Studies. This is the second in a series of articles for EXCALIBUR. The third will appear in about three weeks.