Liberal Practices in a Global World:
Stumbling Blocks for Democratic Citizenship Education

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Abstract

Reflecting on our efforts to provide Canadian university students with a transformative learning experience in Cuba, we were surprised to find that dominant forms of liberal thinking were more difficult to challenge than was anticipated. This paper explores this phenomenon and offers deliberation as a means toward lessening the stronghold of such beliefs. It begins with a sketch of our group participants and an explanation of our methodology, alongside the theory of cultural liberalism that frames the study. This is followed by a two-part description of our findings, suggesting that the liberal ideologies accompanying such innocuous practices as facilitating group harmony filter into understandings of democratic citizenship well beyond such parameters. We end with a tentative conclusion about the possibilities for democratic education in the increasingly complicated space of global interdependence and Cuban transformation in that space.

Précis

Les opinions des seize participants canadiens qui nous ont accompagnés lors d'un programme d'étude de deux semaines à Cuba, étaient souvent polarisées à l'intérieur d'un spectre de réponses. Un étudiant, Bill, a maintenu une opinion polarisée, ne déviant jamais de son extrême enthousiasme concernant la révolution cubaine et ses succès. Le reste des étudiants a migré entre deux pôles, s'y situant à des moments différents et au sujet de questions différentes. Sans délibération critique, la tolérance d'un tel flottement tend vers un comportement peu libéral, une position adoptée par un autre étudiant qui, pour expliquer son refus de facto de discuter des phénomènes dont nous avons été témoins, a déclaré: « Nous [c'est-à-dire, les Canadiens] avons fait ce que nous avons fait et cela fonctionne pour nous. Ils [les Cubains] ont fait ce qu'ils ont fait. Ça fonctionne pour eux » (Paul, communication personnelle, le 22 août 2008). Stuart Hall (1986) explique que ce libéralisme est maintenant inscrit dans nos comportements quotidiens, même chez ceux qui ne considèrent pas comme libéraux. Hall affirme que le libéralisme, pour de nombreuses personnes, sert de «façon évidente à faire la part des choses — « ce que tout le monde sait » » (p. 35). Bien que souvent sceptiques, les libéraux ont l'esprit ouvert, ils embrassent l'individualisme et la liberté, et sont attachés à une économie de l'entreprise privée basée sur la concurrence et la méritocratie. En ce sens, le libéralisme propose une théorie cohérente quant aux pratiques de l'éducation démocratique (Brighouse et Swift, 2003) de telle sorte qu'il nous permet d'exprimer nos propres identités (nationales, ethniques ou culturelles) et de gérer ces différences entre piliers jumeaux que sont l'acceptation et la concurrence.

Introduction

Stuart Hall (1986) explains that cultural liberalism has become conditioned into our everyday behaviours. For many people, such liberalism, even for those who do not consider themselves under this nomenclature, serves as the "obvious way of making sense of things—'what everybody knows'" (p. 35). Although often skeptical, cultural liberals are open-minded, committed to individualism and freedom, and wedded to a private-enterprise economy based on competition and meritocracy. This type of liberalism seems to offer a useful theory for practices of democratic education (Brighouse & Swift, 2003) such that it allows us to express our individual identities (national, ethnic, or cultural) and manage those differences through the twin pillars of acceptance and competition. Cultural liberalism—or multiculturalism, as it is often called—has become part and parcel of what Henry Giroux (2005) calls the "public pedagogy" in advanced democratic states across the globe. For Giroux, however, education is so steeped in liberal tolerance that it actually prevents deeper democratic participation. This is so because tolerance obstructs criticality, including the ability to be self-critical. Indeed, because of this, Giroux (2009) suggests that cultural liberalism often maintains political and economic disadvantages.

On an educational trip to Cuba, we found that the learning process employed by our students supports this claim that cultural liberalism produces stumbling blocks for a deeper democratic educational experience that challenges students to reflect on their largely unquestioned values and attitudes. According to argumentation theorists, discussions vary along two axes, moving between agreement and disagreement as well as between expression—stating ideas without defending them or engaging others—and deliberation, i.e., thoughtful and engaged discussion of different views (Roberts-Miller, 2004). Our students were most comfortable with agreement and expression, less comfortable with disagreement, and resistant to deliberation, a space wherein ideas evolve as individual positions challenge and are challenged by others. A trip that exposes students to different people, places, and cultures does not deliver on the full promise of providing a critical global education experience unless new knowledges are engaged, placed in relationship to one's own experience, and entered into a deliberative framework that leads to a deeper appreciation of global interdependence and worldmindedness (Pike & Selby, 2000). We believe these students were uncomfortable with the struggles that accompany

democratic practices because they lacked a model of deliberation that could enable them to respectfully engage those with whom they disagreed (Nussbaum, 2006).

Our students' lack of deliberative skills represents a crucial problematic of democratic citizenship education: the need for critical engagement of differing views. This issue lies at the heart of the now famous debate between Jurgen Habermas (1989) and Nancy Fraser (1992) as well as those proponents of radical democracy (Benhabib, 1996; Trend, 1996). It also undergirds the notion of *thick democracy*, a term based on the work of Benjamin Barber (1984) and developed in educational theory by Gandin and Apple (2005) and Paul Carr (2008), among others. Thick democracy, which focuses on participatory action and social justice, requires the ability to not only tolerate but engage difference. As Chantal Mouffe (1993) has argued, "a modern democratic theory must make room for competing conceptions of our identities as citizens" (p. 7). Not only must there be competing ideas—what Mouffe calls agonism—but these differences must be engaged. Thus, educational initiatives dedicated to substantive democratic practices must teach students the habits of mind that prepare them to engage difference even in the face of a pervasive tolerance that trains young people to politely disengage and retreat into their own private realms (Giroux, 2009).

Contrary to the inclination toward a liberal tolerance of difference, there is a rich and growing literature on pedagogies that promote critical thinking and civic engagement both locally and globally. Invariably, Dewey (1916/2009; 1938/1997) and Freire (1970) are cited as starting points for such an analysis. However, since the mid 1970s, critical voices operating from a democratic global perspective have emerged. These include Richardson (1976) and Hanvey (1976), followed by Pike and Selby (1988, 2000), Case (1993, 1997), Benhabib (1996), Tye (1999), Merryfield (2001), Nussbaum (2002), Dower (2003), Banks (2004), Ladson-Billings (2005), Gandin & Apple (2005), Olssen (2006), Carr (2008), Giroux (2005, 2009), and Stromquist (2009), to name only a few individuals. Recently, critical scholars (Keith, 2005; Crabtree, 2008; Lewin, 2009a) who are interested in the transformative potential of study abroad and international service learning (ISL) have provided insights that are directly relevant to the study abroad experience examined in this essay.

Study abroad offers a privileged opportunity for far-reaching change in the student traveler's way of looking at, or being in, the world. Lewin (2009b) argues that study abroad "contains the hope for developing students as critics [and] . . . the possibility for

them to engage in more active citizenship" (p. xvii). For this to happen, the study abroad experience has to provide a transformative learning opportunity which, as conceptualized by the University of Toronto's Transformative Learning Centre, is learning that "involves experiencing a deep structural shift in basic premises of thought, feelings and actors. It is a shift in consciousness that dramatically alters our way of being in the world" (n.d., p. 1). Such a shift cannot take place within a liberal paradigm that promotes tolerance without taking up the challenges posed by different experience, ideas, and realities.

Jack Mezirow's (1981, 1997, 2000, 2008) theory of transformative learning and Paul Pederson's (1995) concept of culture shock are useful in conceptualizing the possibility of achieving a rupture in student thinking through deliberative dialogue about the study abroad experience. Transformative learning, according to Mezirow, involves the following progression: 1) elaborating existing frames of reference, 2) learning new frames of reference, 3) transforming points of view, and 4) transforming habits of mind (2008). Through deliberation with oneself and others, transformative learning encourages students to reflect on the limits of knowledge, the certainty of knowledge, as well as the criteria for knowing and the transformation of frames of reference. By incorporating other frames of reference, students are put into the position of interrogating, defending, and reinventing their world views in light of this new information. Transformative learning works on those frameworks that cannot withstand the scrutiny of new information (Mezirow, 2008). Pederson (1995) argues that transformation theory focuses on how we learn to negotiate and act on our own purposes, values, feelings, and meanings. Rather than uncritically assimilating the new values we learn, we begin to judge those values for ourselves; sometimes this enriches our previous beliefs, and other times long-held beliefs shatter under the weight of critical evaluation.

Despite our efforts to provide the students with a transformative learning experience in Cuba, we found that the hold of dominant forms of liberal thinking was more difficult to challenge than we had anticipated. Our goal of transformation was thwarted because students, instead of engaging in deliberation about the structures and causes of different experiences and modes of thinking, acted according to cultural liberalism: even as they acknowledged difference, they sought refuge in familiar patterns of belief.

We begin with a sketch of our group participants and an explanation of our methodology. This is followed by a two-part description of our findings, suggesting that liberal ideologies accompanying group dynamics filter into understandings of democratic

citizenship beyond such provincial parameters. We end with a tentative conclusion about the possibilities for democratic education in the increasingly complicated space of global interdependence.

Participants and Method

Sixteen people from Brock University in St. Catharines, Ontario, Canada flew to Cuba on May 4, 2008, for the field experience portion of a two-week course titled "Global Education: The Perspective of the 'Other'."[1] The half-credit elective was offered through the Faculty of Education; however, many of the students were from other faculties. The students ranged in travel experience, some having never left home and others having traveled extensively. Of those who had previous travel experience, some had, in fact, visited Cuban beach resorts, an experience not uncommon among those of us who must endure the Canadian winters. Canada not only has supported these tourist resorts but has maintained extensive political and economic relations with Cuba despite Canada's close allegiance to the United States, which has famously persisted in its embargo against Cuba since 1960 (Wright, 2007).

While Brock offers a number of international opportunities for its students, this was a new initiative. The combined graduate/undergraduate course was designed to offer an overview of Cuba through a series of lectures, in the mornings of our two-week stay, given by professors of the University of Havana, our host university. These were followed by afternoon cultural excursions. The students received credit based on their participation in both predeparture meetings and the scheduled sessions while in Cuba, as well as journal reflections about their experiences, and a final essay on a topic arising from their time in Cuba. The graduate students were expected to write a more substantive essay than the undergraduate participants; those who went as noncredit participants were asked to participate fully in all class meetings and in-country activities but were not required to hand in any assignments.

With an interest in examining issues of community building and group conflict during this education experience, we conducted post-travel interviews, studied student

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1   All names, with the exception of the co-authors, are pseudonyms.

journals (which they gave us permission to cite), and explored our own anecdotal experiences from the trip. The interview data were transcribed and coded according to the most prevalent themes. The different themes were studied using critical discourse analysis (CDC). CDC assumes that language is inextricably connected to other aspects of social life and cannot be understood apart from the political, cultural, and economic contexts in which it emerges (Banks, 2004; Fairclough, 1999; Foucault, 1972; Kymlicka, 1995). Thus, we analyzed our data twice: first, we studied the narrative themes built up around coping strategies and perceptions of Cuban society; second, we explored how such stories intersect with larger sociocultural and political contexts. In so doing, we recognized that the students' reliance on cultural liberalism allowed their dependence on traditional political economic views (especially the belief that good governments foster democracy through market competition) to go unchallenged.

Given the hegemony of cultural liberalism in Canadian society, we were hardly surprised that students negotiated both each other and cultural difference through a clearly liberal framework. What did surprise us was that, while we admired this expression of cultural liberalism as mature community building, we failed at first to understand how that ideological framework shut down inquiry and debate. Students overwhelmingly stated that individuals should make small concessions to maintain larger group harmony—ignore comments that bother you, avoid people who irritate you, listen to others respectfully, and then bite your tongue. This same liberal sentiment held true with regard to their explanation of Cuba. For instance, students perceived conflicts and contradictions in the sociopolitical structure of Cuba and lamented the reality those brought to Cuban life; however, they ultimately withheld judgment by concluding that Cubans were "poor but happy." Although tactical for group harmony and individual survival during a short educational trip, this liberal strategy conspicuously avoided dialogue in favour of living parallel but unengaged lives. With no training in deliberative models of liberal democratic engagement, students fell back on the received notion that market competition would rectify the inequalities they were witnessing.

As our research will demonstrate, students maintained standardized criteria in their assessment of Cuba—particularly in their perception of education, tourism, and public advertisement, and the need for these spaces to work through open competition and meritocratic reward—even as they offered cultural differences as the reason for the apparent contradictions in Cuban society. This liberal strategy, personal and cultural acceptance

of difference, utilizes dialogue but not deliberation: students expressed a range of ideas but did not engage in debates about the causes, consequences, and interconnections of those ideas. In other words, students practised a thin democracy of tolerance and implicit consensus rather than a thick democracy of intertwined sociopolitical and cultural practices (Carr & Harnett, 1996, p. 14). We turn now to our research findings, which reveal how the use of liberal discourse practices produced the appearance of group harmony, on the one hand, and left the political economic world, characterized by global inequity, unexplored, on the other.

Part I: Group Tensions and Liberal Responses

An important part of the trip was that students studying English with our host program, the University of Havana's Faculty of Foreign Languages (FLEX), would join our group for afternoon cultural experiences or for unscheduled time. They practiced their English and we enjoyed their first-hand accounts that supplemented our classroom lectures. The number of Cuban students varied, as they often joined us between courses and during their personal time, but a core Cuban group emerged of approximately eight students, most of whom were women and all of whom spoke excellent English, a testament to the quality of the FLEX program. While the majority of Canadian students experienced this time with their Cuban counterparts as being among the most beneficial components of the trip, at least one student was uncomfortable with the monetary issues that arose between the Canadian and Cuban students.

The Canadian students varied in financial status, but they all had far more discretionary money than the Cuban students. This was exacerbated by the fact that foreigners converted their money into Cuba's Convertible Currency (CUC), while Cubans used a national currency valued at approximately 1/25 of a CUC. If activities required convertible pesos, many Cuban students simply could not participate unless the group subsidized them. These activities were often extremely affordable from a Western perspective, but there was a de facto expectation that we would pay for any expenses incurred during outings with Cuban students. Paul, who self-described and was described by others as not being comfortable with this expectation, opted out of many activities by simply retreating to his room. Originally from the Caribbean, Paul expressed feeling at home on the island

of Cuba, even though he was clearly not at home with the economic discrepancy between the Canadian and Cuban students. As he explained it, he did not know where the line between charity and generosity or the line between necessity and advantage was to be drawn, so he chose to withdraw from these optional social outings. This is not odd, given that cultural liberalism cultivates a practice of non-engagement with uncomfortable topics and situations, and as privileged global citizens, the members of our group had the possibility of withdrawing from these unscheduled social outings without consequence.

The overwhelming sentiment of the group, however, was to engage with and learn from their Cuban peers. There were two different camps within this majority: those who found that the Cubans' experience, language ability, and sheer friendliness quelled their anxieties about being in an unfamiliar space—the social group—and those who thought that the daily outings with these students added greater nuance to their learning experience in Cuba—the more involved or engaged group. As Caitlin, a member of the second group, noted,

> some people seemed highly unaffected by the fact that we were with . . . the Cuban students . . . they talked with them but it was just kind of like, oh hey, how are you today, bla, bla, bla . . . And then there were others who were genuinely interested in making friends and learning about their life and getting involved in their life during that two weeks. And so I'm not saying one way or the other is right or wrong. (personal communication, October 30, 2008)

Caitlin identified these differences without evaluating them, a hallmark trait of cultural liberalism. Yet, there is an implicit assessment in characterizing some of her classmates as highly unaffected, especially since many of them articulated their experience with the Cuban students as an influential aspect of the trip. Maria, for instance, who was one of the students in Caitlin's unaffected camp, explained that she enjoyed her time with the Cuban students because she could identify with them: "they're around the same age as us and we can just really talk about similar things" (personal communication, September 30, 2008). For instance, Jordan and Maureen attended church with some of the Cuban students. Maureen said that "even though you're in a different country, there's still the same sense of homey-ness and the same sense of welcoming . . . they are our age, and we can really appreciate where they're coming from" (personal communication, August 17, 2008). The common sentiment among this group was that Cubans were

simultaneously different from them but also similar in many ways. As Maureen summarized, "it was kind of interesting to see how we're so different but we're so similar at the same time" (personal communication, August 17, 2008).

Beyond recognizing common ties between Cubans and Canadians, the social group found that their university counterparts offered an additional source of information about everyday life in contemporary Cuba that supplemented class lectures. Jennifer and Lorraine, for example, realized that some of the formal lectures glossed over the concrete experiences and personal hardships of Cuban life. These gaps were filled in by the Cuban students during informal conversations. According to Lorraine, she felt that she "got the real truth from them" (personal communication, October 3, 2008). Jasmine added that some students would tell her that the Cuban system works in theory but (with reference to the inadequacies of the ration system), "I don't eat for two weeks in a month and, like, this is what we go through on a regular basis.[2] So I think it was really awesome getting their side of the story" (personal communication, August 15, 2008). The students in the more engaged group were able to draw connections between these experiences and the course curricula, comparing, contrasting, and evaluating the Cuban students' lives in relationship to the course material that analyzed Cuban life.

These interpersonal relationships between the more engaged Canadians and the Cuban students enabled many of them to think more deeply about the Cuban reality. Caitlin wrote in her journal entry during the early days of our visit to Havana that it felt

> very refreshing to be in a developing country. I don't know quite what it is: maybe the people, the slower pace of life, the lack of modern architecture, the kids playing in the streets, the laundry hanging over the balconies, the heat. All of a sudden life felt so much less complex . . . These first images of Havana are ones I know I won't forget. However, my initial impressions were challenged over the following days. The run-down buildings may have seemed beautiful to me, and initially life may have appeared to be more simple, yet in reality I learned that life is a struggle

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2   It is unlikely that a Cuban student actually told Jasmine that she would go two weeks without eating. For one thing, the students all had a hot lunch at the student cafeteria five days a week; in addition, at the time that this trip occurred, if students' parents worked, most workplaces provided lunches for their employees. The amount of food available at a highly subsidized rate would not last a month, but it was not intended to. Food was available at market prices and, as Jennifer (see below) discovered through her personal contacts, Cubans have developed a variety of ways to make ends meet.

every day for many Cubans and not so "simple." Houses and social facilities are crumbling to the ground, and there is not much that the individuals living in and around them can do about it. (Caitlin, journal entry)

Jennifer, too, felt that she got a different sense of Cuba by engaging with the everyday lives of Cubans. In the last few days of our stay, Jennifer embarked on a solo trip by bus from Havana to Ciego de Avila, several hundred kilometres to the east of the capital; she then transferred buses and headed another hour north to a smaller town, where she met Cuban friends from a previous trip. In her journal entry, Jennifer wrote about this small town:

> Traveling to [that town] opened my eyes to how the Cuban people really live, and how poor their living conditions really are. When I visited the family of the friends I met [there], I noticed that the food they get each month is not nearly enough for them to survive. I noticed that most of the homes . . . had other means of obtaining food, like raising their own pigs and chickens . . . My first visit to a home in [that town] came as a shock to me . . . all of their houses were cement blocks with holes cut out for windows. Inside their houses there were no luxuries, like dishwashers, laundry machines, TVs, VCRs, DVDs, stoves, or even refrigerators.

There is little doubt that Caitlin and Jennifer made deeper connections through their ties to Cuban nationals, but it is important to note how similar their frame of reference is to the other group members'. The more social group sought out similarities between human beings who equally attend church, enjoy music, and love to dance. The more involved group framed their response to Cubans within an ideology of individual rights: food, houses, and the products that go into them. Such a frame is not inherently problematic, as it often leads people to advocate for improved conditions. In both frames, however, students imagined access to consumer goods—whether necessities like homes, food, and clothes or luxuries like iPods, cell phones, and DVD players—as the solution to cultural inequities, and both groups refrained from engaging in deliberation beyond recognizing the inequity, a recognition we do not wish to underestimate even as it suggests a limitation of cultural liberalism.

While Jennifer made many educational discoveries on her side trip, several of the students looked at her excursion to Ciego de Avila as a desire to put her own self-interest

above the group's interest. Not only did she embark on this trip alone to meet individuals outside the group—she did so at the end of our trip, with plans to return to the group only hours before our departing flight to Toronto. This created a great deal of anxiety for some group members. Connor expressed this most ardently: "Anything that individuals would put above the group, it gets to me because the group is that key aspect when you're doing a trip like this" (personal communication, August 17, 2008). He continued, "It wasn't the group that disappointed me. It was individuals in the group that were acting, I think, outside the group" (personal communication, August 17, 2008). Sally, part of Connor's subgroup, stated that Jennifer's actions demonstrated that "she wasn't, I guess, a part of the group. She felt that she should just sort of do whatever she felt like she should do whereas the group had agendas and schedules, and that she saw herself as above that almost" (personal communication, October 15, 2008). These comments are particularly revealing because Jennifer never missed a scheduled event; rather, she made decisions that ran contrary to the larger group sentiment about how to spend her unscheduled time. Connor, however, did opt out of a scheduled tour of Old Havana in favour of exploring the rum museum with his friend, Paul, who also missed our meeting with the Canadian Embassy due to his tardiness at the bus pick-up. Jennifer's decision to undertake some personal travel or to stay overnight after our day trip to Varadero (discussed below) was not like these events but more like Paul's decision to stay in his room rather than go out dancing with Cuban students. Nevertheless, it became a topic of continuous discussion and constant evaluation among the group, suggesting that consensus on acceptable be-haviour was at issue more than group cohesion. In a more deliberative educational model, this distinction and its implications for broader democratic practices may have arisen.

Another incident that was the subject of heated controversy was the decision made by Jennifer and Lorraine who, against the advice of the course instructor, the Cuban guide, and other participants, chose to stay overnight at the Varadero beach resort where the group had made an optional day-long beach trip, while everyone else returned to the hotel in Havana as scheduled. For many members of the group, this marked them as un-cooperative and even courting danger, as they would have to make their own way back to Havana. Lorraine explained that after receiving significant encouragement from various group members to return with them rather than stay another day at the beach,

> I was actually really hesitant about it and I kept going back and forth with what I wanted to do, just for the sake of not having people talk about it. And then at the end we both decided no, we're going to do this, like, just kind of don't worry about what other people think. (personal communication, October 3, 2008)

Jennifer acknowledged the different treatment she received after this decision and stated that she "tried to minimize it by just maybe accepting other people's opinions and their views" (personal communication, October 2, 2008). For Jennifer, people's different views should be acknowledged but not necessarily engaged. She politely allowed individuals to express their concerns but did not allow them to affect her own decision-making process in any way.

Maureen and many other critics of the decision to stay overnight at Varadero couched their position in terms of personal safety and concern for the well-being of these young women. Maureen interpreted the event this way:

> One Saturday we went to Varadero and we left two of our group members behind and this really demonstrated how concerned we all were. We all kind of tried to talk them out of it, and we all kind of tried to say well this is not safe, just tried to give our own opinions on stuff. And even though they decided to stay . . . I think that really kind of proved the group was a caring group and that we all kind of got along well enough that we were concerned for another person's well-being. (personal communication, August 17, 2008)

Connor did not see this experience as revelatory of caring by the majority of the group but rather as the disloyalty of a few group members. He wrote in his journal entry:

> People's true intentions and feelings toward the group came through in spades on this day. When the two ladies chose to stay behind, attempting to persuade younger, impressionable members of the group to stay for their own personal agendas, the statement "we're in this for ourselves" was made loud and clear.

Connor, unlike Maureen, gives agency to the two young women rather than to the group. He sees the two as having an agenda that they are trying to impose on others but does not see the group as having an agenda in their own persuasive tactics. Maria said, for instance, "I tried to talk to [Jennifer], but it didn't really work. But I tried so that there

wouldn't be any conflicts" (personal communication, September 30, 2008). Ultimately, what Maureen interpreted as caring and Connor explained as the edict to act through group solidarity, the two young women experienced as coercive attempts to sway them from doing what they were, strictly speaking, entitled to do—choose how to spend their free time. Under the shade of a liberal umbrella, as this example illustrates, the heat of forced conformity can be cooled into caring about one's safety or desiring community. Cohesion, the ardent desire of so many when Jennifer and Lorraine claimed an extra day at the beach, takes its toll on groups, as harmony and the constant need for consensus are often artificially imposed and maintained through various avoidance strategies. This brand of liberal education differs significantly from the democratic ideals of critical self-examination, a sense of global interdependence, and narrative imagination for difference (Nussbaum 2006, p. 388).

Group solidarity remained a hot-button issue throughout the trip, equaled perhaps only by the stress of forced togetherness and the frequent sociopolitical discussions emerging from the course experience. Although these conversations remained expressive rather than deliberative—that is, students stated their positions without challenging others or altering their ideas—the mere potential for dispute inspired many students to seek external reprieves from the group. Bill often occupied the centre of this frustration in much the same way that Jennifer came to epitomize lack of group solidarity. As the most politicized student in the group, Bill thrived on conversations about social, historical, and economic struggles of all sorts. These conversations, their patent anti-imperialist endings, and Bill's reluctance to lighten up the conversation wore on the group quickly, adding more tension to the existing strain of spending day after day with the same small group. However stressful these interactions were at times, they represent the challenges of a diversely constituted democratic space for which our pedagogical structure and students' liberal predispositions were ill equipped.

If the general tactic with Jennifer was to try to persuade her to stay within the group, the general tactic with Bill was to keep him on the periphery of the group or to distance oneself from him. Bill said, "I definitely didn't want to make big deals out of things that I might have otherwise because I didn't want to ruin my experience there and, again, like, you're seeing that person every day over there and you don't want to have these awkward moments" (personal communication, August 15, 2008). However, the majority found Bill to persistently engage in controversial topics and often avoided him altogether

to sidestep those discussions. Darleen stated explicitly, "I did avoid Bill somewhat, talking about certain things with him because yeah, I guess for the sake of the group you don't want to get into a fight with somebody and you don't want to say something that really offends" (personal communication, August 17, 2008). Connor said succinctly, "I often bit my tongue" (personal communication, August 14, 2008). Sally, identified by herself and others as the quietest participant in the group, described her strategy as simple avoidance (personal communication, October 15, 2008). Maureen explained, "Instead of choosing to go further and create some kind of controversy I just said okay, well, I'll keep my mouth shut and just move on" (personal communication, August 17, 2008). Jasmine made it clear that "if I didn't want to talk to someone I just wouldn't" (personal communication, August 15, 2008). In short, the strategy was to minimize contact with controversial people and, thereby, avoid heated conversations.

As these comments suggest, students sought out like-minded subgroups as a means to avoid interpersonal or political disagreement. This liberal strategy, one that maintained what appeared to us as a mature group harmony, simultaneously prevented students from engaging tensions within the group as well as the contradictions they identified as being part of Cuban society. In short, this liberal strategy prevented full exploration of thick democratic practices. Although the consequences of this limitation were relatively minor for our two-week group excursion, it is clear from student engagement with social and political economic issues in Cuba that these liberal habits flow beyond interpersonal relationships and into the heart of global education as the understanding and negotiation of difference and power worldwide.

Part II: Cuban Contradictions and Liberal Responses

Given the range of well-developed strategies the Canadian students had for dealing with interpersonal conflict and group stress, strategies that many displayed as a natural, practically unconscious, way of dealing with the world, it is not surprising to find parallel responses in their engagement with the real and perceived conflicts within Cuban society more generally. The most often cited conflicts were the two-tiered system developing from Cuba's increasing tourist industry, the lack of economic reward for the more highly educated members of society, and the relentless marketing of the Cuban revolution.

Students struggled with these aspects of Cuban society because they failed to match the politics of North America, wherein competition is understood as signifying freedom and wealth is said to be divvied up, however imperfectly, through a meritocratic system. Their response to the Cuban structures followed the same liberal patterns of their interpersonal relationships: a distanced judgment of all that fell outside the boundaries of normalcy or a sympathetic but unengaged connection.

Even Bill, whose reserve of political solutions often seemed endless, had little hope for Cuba's two-tiered economy. According to Bill, individuals who mistakenly believe themselves to be entitled to more than their fellow citizens are the problem. He underscored this belief, stating that

> the tourist industry is doing a lot for [Cubans]. But I just think that some things need to change in the sense where these people that are making so much money are kind of getting this attitude where they think they're better than others. I don't think that necessarily it is the tourists' fault but it's kind of, like, a mentality thing that should be changed because you need the tourism. That goes without saying . . . I think that's helping the economy but it's just that somehow there needs to be kind of, like . . . I don't know how you will go about it, but just, like, a mentality change (personal communication, August 15, 2008).

Typically, liberals see themselves as innocent, and Bill is no exception. He is clear that neither tourism nor tourists contribute to the social stratification stemming from the introduction of a tourist industry. Rather, the difficulty arises from an ideological relationship between individuals and things: those able to access coveted convertible pesos from foreigners mistakenly believe their wealth makes them better than others. The economic inequity created from the dual currencies did not seem to bother the students as much as the irrational relationship between work and reward. This came out mostly in terms of education, the meritocratic system par excellence. Just as the students struggled to understand what they thought about a tourist industry that brought much-needed resources to Cuba but distributed them unevenly, they were equally uncertain about how to evaluate an educational system that produced highly trained knowledge workers for a society that does not provide opportunities to apply or profit from such training. Paul colloquially explains that it is an "I have a PhD and have to go drive a taxi kind of thing" (personal communication, August 16, 2008). While Cuba maintains an outstanding educational

system throughout all its levels (Carnoy, 2007), it does not have the capacity to sustain many of its highly educated workers. One might have a doctorate or medical degree and choose to drive a taxi because one can earn tips in convertible pesos, easing the purchase of better quality food and other necessary goods. In another variation of this chasm between the Cuban education system and the students' notions of professional lives, Jennifer complained that "even professors who have all this education and work so hard are very lucky if they get to go on vacation to a hotel" (personal communication, October 2, 2008). The students' concern that educated Cubans are undercompensated complements their frustration with those in the tourist industry as overcompensated. In both cases, the system does not calibrate according to the free-market values of work and reward.

The emphasis on professors as a professional class was likely influenced by the nature of a trip in which students were taught by and attended social events with Cuban professors. Nevertheless, it serves as an important case study wherein students reinforce the inherent value of the free market. Darleen, a returning student who runs her own successful business, made this explicit when she said: "I kind of think capitalism is what drives people and nations to an extent. And how can I be motivated to study and work if I'm a PhD and I'm getting $20 a month, and somebody here is a taxi driver and they're getting way more than me and can live way better?" (personal communication, August 17, 2008). The idea that individual competition motivates people—rather than some intrinsic desire or a patriotic belief that one is doing his or her part within the national organization—helped explain what for our students were inefficiencies ranging from loose time schedules to cancelled appointments to less-than-stellar customer service. Tourism and education demonstrated the need for free competition in which merit, rather than policy, would determine one's life choices, a hallmark of democracy across its many variations (Davies, 1999). For students, the ubiquitous public memorials to the revolution similarly highlighted the absence of market competition. Nearly all journals and several interviews addressed the lack of advertisements that they are so used to seeing across the Canadian landscape. Students tended to appreciate the less-consumerist environment, but they also noted that the absence of commercial advertisements was filled with what they saw as pro-revolutionary propaganda. Jordan, for instance, said his first impression of Cuba came as we drove late at night from the airport to our hotel: "We drove past the President Bush is a Terrorista sign and it's like big propaganda and I thought, I hope this whole trip is not just going to be big propaganda thrown in your face" (personal

communication, August 17, 2008). Jordan went on to say, in fact, that he subsequently found Cuban society more open to freedom of ideas and speech than he had originally thought, so his initial fear did not come to fruition.

There were others, however, who were unclear how they felt about marketing consumer products versus marketing the revolution. Lorraine grappled with this, saying:

> I like certain things about it, like, with no advertisements in the streets or whatever, but then I'm still always trying to figure out why it is I like that. Are they trying to protect the people from the Western world and all their outside forces or are they just trying to maintain control? I'm still battling with that. (personal communication, October 30, 2008)

This refusal to stake a position differentiates Lorraine from many of her classmates who see Cuba and Canada as distinct and unrelated societies. Recall that Paul identified Cuba and Canada as two independent, but equally valid, social formations (personal communication, August 22, 2008). And yet, Paul and the other participants on our trip were equally reticent to judge the US embargo and other isolationist policies. In this neutral environment, money, power, and history tend to determine the best course of action. As our conclusion illustrates, the students unproblematically equated their liberal practices and world views with democracy while simultaneously forestalling the democratic work of engaging difference.

Conclusion: Democractic Citizenship Education in the Era of Globalization

Global education's insistence upon a world-minded perspective (Case, 1997; Selby, 2004) frames our understanding of this trip and the students' response to the Cuban context. According to global education scholarship, it is crucial that students become "informed about the world in which they live and are provided with the skills to enable them to be active citizens and to understand how they can shape their own futures and make a difference" (Osler, 2002, p. 2). Because global education commits itself to the development of cosmopolitan world views and teaches democratic citizenship, it is not sufficient that students acknowledge the cultural and political chasms between the Canadian experience

and that of their Cuban counterparts. The goal of global education is to create citizens of the world who see the interconnectivity between these differences and their significance to the global landscape. Global education attempts to guard against the taken-for-granted assumptions and comfortable positions that isolate us from a range of diverse experiences across the globe. Coming to know these experiences a little better is a move in the right direction; however, as our students' comments suggest, one can remain intellectually separate from an object of analysis even if that object is experienced up close and personally. Our students did this by using their own measuring sticks to assess Cuba, and when that experience did not add up, they simply acquiesced to differences—a practice of cultural liberalism they have been cultivating since childhood.

These attitudes and behaviours, for them, function as a microcosm of democracy. When asked specifically about democracy, for instance, members of our group made connections between our experience and democratic practices, but they did not see either as needing further investigation. In fact, they saw both the group community building and the normative forms of democracy as inherently good. Bill explained that the trip was successful precisely because it built a democratic community:

> When you organize a group with a certain goal you have to negotiate the differences between those people to achieve that goal. And in our group our goal was to go to Cuba together, learn some things, and have this experience. We were forced to be together so we made the best of it, I think. We avoided more serious conflict and we made do with being a group for the goal that we had. And I guess that's kind of in political systems . . . you're going to have people disagreeing, and the whole point is to find a common denominator where no matter what you agree or disagree on, you all agree on that one ultimate goal and you make it work in that sense. (personal communication, August 15, 2008)

A common goal determines the course of action, and individual differences must be subjugated to that common denominator. In other words, commonality serves as the condition for the possibility of community such that consensus must be maintained and disagreement avoided. The students, whether conscious of this group philosophy or not, certainly put it into practice throughout our two weeks in Cuba.

A view toward group cohesion and a tendency to overlook or ignore those things that irritated group members informed both the group dynamic and the group's

interpretation of Cuban cultural and political differences. Upon reflection, many of the students saw parallels between interpersonal strategies and national and international relations. Jordan expressed this at length:

> I guess it's kind of like democracy. You're given the chance to voice your opinion . . . The general consensus was if someone wants to try to get along with us, then we're all going to get along. And, for citizenship, it's the same kind of thing. It's all a sense of belonging and having your own little niche. I guess that can go on in the micro or in the macro like the government and how everyone has their own little niche in society performing their jobs. Every job, however small or large it is, has its purpose. We need a garbage man to take out our garbage and we need a prime minister to run our country. Even though they might be viewed differently, they're all still required. (personal communication, August 17, 2008)

His sense that strong communities have differential positions, but that people understand and agree to these differences because they arise through the merits of a free, democratic society, is reiterated by Betty, who thinks that individuals strive to understand each other just as nations do. She said, "We all kind of probably go out of our way to try to understand and at times when we can't we probably do need to step back or talk to the individuals themselves, . . . if you look at that, it's probably pretty close to how people do things on a national level as well" (personal communication, October 30, 2008). Students attributed their interpersonal coping strategies to the natural social relations engendered within healthy democracies. They did not interpret these strategies as constructed from a particular society with a unique world view that could be questioned or even put into dialogue with other world views.

Indeed, the problem many people had with Bill was not that he was rude or inconsiderate; on the contrary, Bill wore his welcome thin because he wanted to have serious political conversations on a repeated basis. He fits the profile that Jasmine paints of people who do not know how to engage in the right time and place:

> Some people try to just fix everything all at once or take on all these ideas and just try to do it all and you can't. So you have to know when you're gonna be ready to take on this and that and how you're gonna do it. Emotionally ready, mentally ready, physically ready, like you just have to be ready, you can't do it all. I know

there's certain things I don't want to deal with but I'll know when I'm ready, I'll deal with it. (personal communication, August 15, 2008)

On the one hand, Jasmine's comment strikes us as among the more mature reflections on group difference; on the other hand, it begs many questions for democratic education—questions that are no less important as Cuba shifts in relationship to the global landscape.

The trip from which our observations are based occurred in 2008, well before Raul Castro announced the sweeping market-oriented economic reforms now being implemented in Cuba. Many of the issues that troubled the students are being addressed by the reforms. For example, Cubans can chose to leave, or never enter, the state sector, as almost 200 job categories (mostly skilled and unskilled trades) can now be exercised within the non-state sector. Cubans can now either engage in these trades as self-employed workers—an option chosen by several hundred thousand Cubans in the two years since the reforms were announced—or choose to be members of worker-controlled cooperatives, or even establish their own small enterprises and hire employees (O'Sullivan, 2011, 2012). It is too early to make a definitive judgment on the extent to which these changes will affect the standard of living of ordinary Cubans or change their collective consciousness. There is, however, little doubt that if these same students were to have a repeat experience in a rapidly changing Cuba, they would get a different impression of life on the island. To what extent would they feel vindicated by the changes? For instance, would they see Cuba as moving in a more economically open, market-oriented direction, or would they, despite certain market-oriented reforms, find a Cuba that has maintained its revolutionary essence? Raul Castro has promised that the reforms will not put an end to socialism in Cuba, but not everyone is convinced that socialism will survive the changes now underway. What is essential about Cuba, be it pre-reform or post-reform, can only be appreciated by immersing oneself deeply in that reality, setting aside preconceived notions, and listening carefully to what the Cuban people have to say. While a two-week study abroad experience hardly provides the time necessary for this to happen, it does offer a starting point for further study and reflection. However, having the intellectual disposition to engage in the required deliberation is an essential precondition for such an appreciation to take place. The difficulties that the student participants had in this regard are, of course, a critical commentary on the failings of the Canadian educational system to equip students with such a skill set, and constitute a

serious shortcoming. In this global era, preparing students for active and critical engagement in deeply democratic citizenship is the greatest challenge facing educators in Canada and abroad. We believe this requires, at minimum, working toward a pedagogy that includes democratic deliberation.

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