

Consumer Culture Black American

In 1997, Alfonso Casanova Montero, Cuba's minister for economic and central planning, remarked to a group of visiting scholars that Cuba aspires to "move people from selfishness to solidarity." During my nine-day stay in Cuba as a member of a Columbia University delegation (see Editor's Essay), this simple but powerful statement came to serve as a framework for investigating a burgeoning materialism in Cuban society. These developments corrupt Cuba's revolutionary project of moving people from selfishness to solidarity.

Although selfishness and solidarity seem to refer to individual proclivities or behaviors, they are intricately bound to larger socioeconomic changes. The dismantling of the Soviet Union earlier in this decade devastated the Cuban economy. Without a market for Cuban goods, without substantial financial supports, and with the chokehold of the U.S. Helms-Burton Act, Cuba entered the "Special Period." Food rations were meager, electricity was intermittent, oil was almost nonexistent, and families struggled to make ends meet. Cuba desperately needed a source of income to feed its people. The government turned to tourism. By 1997, tourism had become the second-largest source of income for the country, bringing in 1.2 million visitors per year, according to Cuba's minister of economics. Tourism necessitated a tripartite monetary system of highly valued U.S. dollars, functional Cuban pesos, and a currency that fell somewhere between these two.



Shopping for sneakers. Photo by Kristen Clarke.

Tourists, however, bring with them more than foreign money, suntan lotion, and cameras. Before the Special Period, most tourists arrived as comrades, hoping to learn from Cuba's political and economic successes. Many recent tourists, by contrast, are hostile

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to Cuban socialism. Speaking to the Columbia delegation in 1997, a representative of the Cuban Federation of Women described the businessmen and pleasure seekers who now flock to Cuba as having "bad habits" and wanting to "hurt Cuba." Opening Cuba to

tourism has meant opening Cuba to these influences, one of which is the "bad habit" of excessive materialism.

Modern consumer capitalism aims to create false needs. These consumer illusions drive people to spend money they do not have on things they may not want or to buy things for other people who probably do not need them. These commodities are coded with meaning and stratified by their symbolic and monetary worth. This hierarchy of consumer items reinforces class stratification based on the traditional axes of income, occupation, and education. Disadvantaged and marginalized groups use material possessions to both simulate and satirize privilege. Yet in their actual purchase of consumer goods to make a symbolic statement, they unwittingly fund the engines of inequality. This kind of material posturing also turns group members against one another as each vies for stylistic superiority.

In some ways, this is the story of black American youth, who participate in—or, more correctly, who are pawns in—a youth cultural style that demands the right shoes, the right sweatshirt, and the right car, all at a substantial price. Compared with their white peers, black American youth watch more television, view television more favorably, and respond more positively to marketing stimuli. Black youth are particularly vulnerable to the messages they view on television about what to buy, why they should buy, and

who they could be (or, at the very least, be like) if they buy.¹ From the top of a girl's twelve-inch-high French twist hairstyle to the underside of a pair of Nike Air Jordan basketball shoes, through all the Georgetown jogging suits, Girbaud jeans, fourteen-carat gold necklaces, Karl Kani leather jackets, and Tommy Hilfiger boxer shorts in between, black American youth are walking megamalls, forever trying to stay in material dialogue with their friends as well as

their enemies. Selfishness sustains this commodities game.

The present reality for Cuban youth is quite different, but the similarities are growing. A strong countercapitalist sentiment does persist in Cuba. The Cuban landscape is lit-

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erally decorated with pro-Cuban slogans. Whereas liquor and cigarette advertisements saturate black American neighborhoods, the billboards and public art in Cuban neighborhoods remind the people of the successes of the revolution and testify to the enduring support of its population. The deliberate inclusion of Cuban youth in painting these slogans is an important component in maintaining the revolutionary efforts.

Hence, there seems to be a tension between the lure of conspicuous consumption, on the one hand—which at some point becomes synonymous with selfishness—and the Cuban project of solidarity, on the other

hand. In Havana, our delegation visited a youth center where the young people—all Afro-Cuban and in their late teens and early twenties—planned and choreographed a fashion show for our entertainment. The youth center was a spacious but plain warehouse-like building, furnished with simple white lawn chairs and lit by the late afternoon sun. Its few decorations affirmed a commitment to local activism and progress: One hand-stenciled poster hailed "Community, Our Reason for Being" (Comunidad, Nuestra Razon de Ser). Near the center's entrance, a small exhibit offered a history of the neighborhood and outlined plans for its redevelopment. Architectural etchings showed the placement of new housing and new neighborhood service facilities in development. The youth at the center aided in the planning and actual construction of their new neighborhood. The director of the center offered introductory remarks about these redevelopment activities and other programs run by the center. The highlight of the afternoon—the fashion show—followed her comments. The aspiring models—four young women and three young men—seemed eager to strut their stuff before a captive and earnest audience.

The models were long and lanky, pivoting in step with the music and each other, arms dangling with a confident ease. They smiled only for dramatic effect. The show consciously emulated the high-fashion runways of Paris, Milan, and New York, even if the fashions were neither Versace nor Vera Wang. In the flashing lights of my camera, the scenes jumped from vogue make-believe back to Cuban reality: Flash! Was that supermodel Naomi Campbell? Flash! Was that supermodel Tyson Beckford? These were not, of course, supermodels. They were young people not unlike myself. The production reminded me of the fashion show my own church youth group once hosted in the church

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basement, a show for which our parents served as the captive audience. For me, watching such a familiar fashion show in a Cuban youth center exemplified the shrinking cultural distance between young people around the world.

In theory, a fashion show can be a positive activity, allowing boys and girls, women and men, to feel good about their bodies and confident in their self-presentation. Adolescent and young adults have a fair amount of healthy narcissism that a fashion show can heartily feed. Usually, however, such

displays limit our conceptions of beauty, focus our attentions on overpriced clothing, and add an irresistible sensuality to otherwise mundane consumer goods. An event as seemingly innocent as the Cuban youth's fashion show could be an early germ of consumer capitalism.

Dr. Montero said that Cuba aspires to move people from selfishness to solidarity. Is there solidarity in the fact that some peo-

ple can afford a \$100 pair of designer jeans when others shop at the Salvation Army? Is there solidarity in the million-dollar en-

endorsement contracts that some receive, while others cannot even find decent employment? These are the extremes of inequality in the United States and other capitalist economies. At the very micro-level, a fashion show could constitute a "school of capitalism" (to use a term that the Cuban minister of Asian, African and Middle Eastern affairs used to describe the emerging independent Cuban farmers' markets). Cuba's participation in

the world economy has meant and will continue to mean the exposure of its youth to the materialism that capitalism creates. The fashion show is an example of the ways in which magazines, television, and the new tourists disseminate the capitalist obsession with consumer goods. As a result, these young Cubans may aspire to roles that maintain and advance selfish desires.



Young woman in Varadero. Photo by Chester Higgins Jr.

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Selfishness and solidarity are not, however, completely separate. Individuals, institutions, and activities are never wholly one or the other. The fashion show may have sown the seeds of individualist materialism, but the local Committee for Defense of the Revolution sponsored and sanctioned the youth group nonetheless. The young people actively helped to rebuild their neighborhood, collectively and in solidarity. The fashion show itself was only one of the many instances where people opened their homes and lives to the delegation during our visit. We were given an unbelievably *unselfish* reception every place we went. Amidst burgeoning consumerism, then, there are clear attempts to limit its prevalence. There are literal "signs" (as in placards) that the Cuban people are actively resisting the lure of selfishness.

For example, the billboards and murals that decorate the Cuban landscape obscure the materialist ways in which Cuba's solidarity project could be eaten away from within. In the United States, it is impossible to escape the billboards that display a slogan attached to a pretty face enticing us to buy some product. Although a few such advertisements exist in Cuba, they are minimal in comparison to the signs exclaiming pride in and commitment to the revolution and the Cuban people: "En Cuba, Niños con Escuela, 100 percent" (In Cuba, children in school,

100 percent); "Grandes Causas Requieren Sacrificios" (Grand causes require sacrifices); "CUBA—Ni Escuelas Cerradas Ni Maestros sin Empleo" (Cuba—neither closed schools nor teachers without work); "Es la Hora de Gritar, Revolución" (It's time to shout "Revolution"); "Venceremos!" (We shall overcome). Instead of cigarette or airline billboards, these are the slogans that Cubans read as they walk to work and school. In Santiago, the League of Communist Youth (U Jota Ce) plays a special role in propagating these pro-Cuban sentiments. Youth in the United States mark their buildings and neighborhoods with gang symbols and street tags. Cuban graffiti, by contrast, are for the country.²

Two processes seem to be operating in contemporary Cuba concerning consumer culture and its relationship to the project of solidarity. On the one hand, tourism and other connections to the capitalist world infuse strains of conspicuous consumption that plant the seeds for competitive individualism at the level of material symbols and signs. On the other hand, Cuba seems to be making a conscious and strategic effort to stop the consumption cancer, an effort evident in public signs. The fact that the Cuban authorities explicitly involve the youth in painting neighborhoods with pro-Cuban slogans further illustrates the attention to areas in which the country may be vulnerable to materialistic appeals for defection.

Having emphasized the role of tourists as emissaries of capitalist consumerism, I will end—appropriately, I think—with an interpretation of the presence of the Columbia delegation as both scholars and tourists. As a privileged group of African-American, Caribbean, and Latino scholars, we represented many of the fruits of capitalism, regardless of our prorevolutionary utterances. Our perfumes and colognes, rings and earrings, and multiple outfits implied a (false) story about American capitalism as a source of unlimited opportunity and wealth. On the streets of Havana and Santiago, everyday Cubans were paying attention. At the airport upon our arrival, two young Cuban baggage handlers stared intently at a delegate's T-shirt, featuring a picture of a prominent African-American sports star. The two teenagers pointed at the picture of the athlete, whom they seemed to recognize. They cupped their hands over their faces and exchanged whispers accented with wide, admiring grins. Short of appearing covetous, the two young men were clearly impressed by the popular sports icon—who is himself packaged as a commodity—as well as the brand-name T-shirt that bore his likeness.

Even more than our clothing and accessories, however, the way we spent money could have easily given the impression (however erroneous) that riches were our common bond—riches earned in the United States. We bought cigars and books and rum and coffee and T-shirts and CDs and gave generous tips to our hosts. We did not make these expenditures without consternation and debate about the stratification that these purchases created

by endowing some Cubans with American dollars while lesser-valued Cuban money had to suffice for others. But we gave nonetheless, because we could think of no other way to show our sincere gratitude for the hospitality extended to us. In the end, it seemed that all of us were accomplices in the propagation of capitalism, regardless of our intentions.

Cuba's revolution has been engaged in the noble task of moving people from selfishness to solidarity. These efforts have been imperiled by the crisis of the Special Period and the subsequent reliance on tourism. At the national level, Cuba has tried to resist the pressures of global capitalism. State-sponsored, pro-Cuban billboards indicate this persistence. At the local level, however, "schools of capitalism"—manifest in the spontaneous flea markets, the slight increases in inequality, and the tourist and media examples of conspicuous consumption—could undermine Cuban socialism and the Cuban solidarity project.

Notes

1. See George Moschis, *Consumer Socialization: A Life-Cycle Perspective* (Lexington, Mass.: Lexington Books, 1987), for a review of the literature on black youth and consumer culture.

2. It would be naive to suggest that these murals were spontaneous creations of youthful nationalist energy. The shortage of paint and other materials during the economic crisis in Cuba is a tip that these are state-sponsored and commissioned works of public art for the purpose of replanting the ideals of the revolution into the hearts and minds of Cubans. There are such commissioned positive murals in the United States as well, but they are rarely nationalistic and are almost always overshadowed by the omnipresence of glossy advertising or neighborhood taggings.