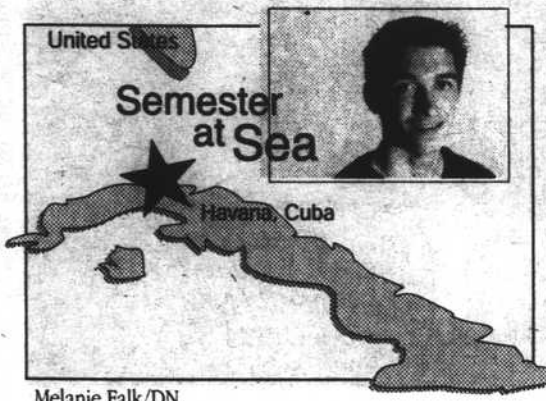


A country misunderstood

Cuban visit opens student's eyes to American misconceptions



Melanie Falk/DN

(Editor's note: Andrew Broer is writing columns while studying on the Semester at Sea ship — a cruise ship that will be traveling around the world. This is the second column in his series.)

Our 28,000-mile journey of discovery began as we raised anchor from Nassau, Bahamas and began to make our way to Cuba. As we pulled into the port of Havana, Cuba at 6 a.m., all I could feel was a sense of nervousness.

I knew that I was one of the few privileged U.S. citizens who would be able to enjoy the opportunity to discover Cuba. I didn't know what to expect. I didn't know how I would be treated when I told the Cubans I was American. I was afraid there would be a sense of hostility between our two peoples.

As I stepped off the ship with some of the other Semester at Sea students, we were greeted on the pier with live musicians and dancers. I walked through the terminal and handed my passport and identification to a man sitting in a small booth. He looked my Cuban visa over and told me to proceed.

I was finally in Cuba!

The students of Semester at Sea were invited to The University of Havana, one of the prominent colleges on the main island of Cuba. As the buses pulled up to the steps of the college, hundreds of students waited outside cheering.

These students were some of the nicest people I have ever met. They were more than willing to take us around town, and they invited us into their homes for dinner. I only hope U.S. citizens are as inviting as the Cubans were to us.

My days in Cuba were spent discovering the city of Havana, its history, people, beaches, shops and restaurants. The marketplace is a central area

where locals come to sell their crafts and goods. You can find anything there, including jewelry, art and even cigars.

The world-famous Cuban cigars were ever-present. I had the opportunity to watch cigar rollers make them right in front of me. Of course, I had to purchase a few. I couldn't wait to take my first opportunity to smoke a Cuban "Monte Cristo" as our boat pulled out of the Havana port.

The night life in Cuba was unbelievable. Every night, students from Semester at Sea and The University of Havana hooked up to go out on the town. I spent many of my nights at night clubs, bars and restaurants that the locals took us to.

The local drink, a "Cuba Libre," is marvelous. In the United States, it would be referred to as a rum and Coke, with a splash of lemon. It can be found anywhere in Cuba.

The people of Cuba are not at all what they are made out to be in the United States. I held such a misconception of them before I had ever met them. Yes, it is a socialist economy, and many of the people are very poor, but their faces do not show it.

Many of the Cuban people were wearing Elian Gonzalez T-shirts when we were around. The people of Cuba have come together and asked the help of all the Semester at Sea students in the return of Elian.

They were so curious to find out about all of us. People would run up to me in the street to ask where I was from, what my name was and if I would come over for dinner with their family. I could not imagine this ever taking place in the United States. I felt so safe, and the people of Cuba made me feel right at home.

Next we set sail for Salvador, Brazil — another place I hadn't visited. I feel that my experiences in Cuba will help in my coming voyage. As we sail around the world, I will remember all the fun the Cuban people created for me.



Shawn Ballarin/DN

Andrew Broer is a sophomore secondary education and English major and a Daily Nebraskan columnist.

Apocalypse now

Consumer-driven, anti-social society could lead to end of civilization



It was another sunless day, enveloped by torrid clouds drizzling burning acid rain. We didn't dare venture out of the dungeon, as we called it, the concrete cellar my neighbors and I had embedded into the hill just before The Great Fall.

It wasn't the rain that deterred us. After the complete disappearance of the ozone layer in 2012, and the acid rain brought about by the industrial buy-out of the government and the predictable relaxing of pollution control laws, our skin developed second-degree burn scars, which now shield us from the rain's penetrative toxicity.

We could barely hear a shallow echo emanating ambiguously out of the charring smog, the echo of gunfire and pillaging that we had memorized all too well; probably from one of the localized clans raiding some encampment nearby.

We knew if the clan-militia captured us, we would be raped and enslaved at least, if not eaten; so we remained bunkered in.

I still wondered how people were able to get manufactured things like guns and bullets. After The Great Fall

of 2023 and the world economic collapse, I knew that all mass production, of all the thousands of consumer items on which we had previously depended, which made our life so easy and which we took for granted, had ceased to be produced or distributed.

With the collapse of the economy, followed by the dissolution of the government, money lost all value, so anything left in any inventories was hoarded in the riots of 2024. Weapons were confiscated by the local militias that formed overnight, only to be exhausted in the regional conflicts over hunting-and-gathering territories.

I still couldn't believe we were living like this. How could our entire civilization collapse and revert back to how we had lived tens of thousands of years ago, like cavemen?

How many times had I dreamed about going back to the pre-'20s; life was so easy then. Back then, the sky was so clear that occasionally at noon you could even see the sun, and the water was so pure you didn't need to neutralize its acid before you drank it.

Back then, before the virtual world was launched, and all communication was digitized and dehumanized, people knew how to talk to each other, and interactions were peaceful and pleasant. We had public institutions like churches and schools that taught common values and communal respect. We valued things like friendship, knowledge, trust and community.

But with the worldwide divide between the rich and the poor by 2020, things really fell apart. The whole world's underclass either revolted or collapsed, which killed the economy, started the riots and eventually the world war that left us where we are today: self-centered savages.

Seem like this is some futurist sci-fi horror? Think again. The disintegration of civilization is a very real threat that humanity faces, which could happen within the next 20 to 30 years.

I see at least three main complexes that are destroying society. Together they explain a great deal of the problems we have at the end of the 20th Century. Without a popular movement to deal with them, they will insure that humanity doesn't see the end of the next century.

Free-market worship

The free market has created a consumer society by engineering the demand for millions of products that mankind has lived without for 10,000 years (examples include everything you possess).

Free-market culture, including the worship of the material-economic aesthetic, cherishes more products and more possessions without looking at the holistic ramifications of massive resource extraction and consumption.

The consumer society produces billions of tons of trash per year — choking our lakes, rivers, oceans, air

and soil unlike anything the Earth has experienced before, eventually culminating in an unlivable planet.

The consumer society requires high production for equally high consumption. High production means longer working hours and an overworked citizen, whose priorities shift to the workplace away from the family and community.

The implications of this befuddle us; they are proven in a higher divorce rate, a teenage pregnancy crisis and the dysfunctional family.

In a desperate plea for help, the free-market consumer society culture relies on the only thing it knows how to do: consume. To solve these social problems, it buys and spends itself into debt in an orgy of materialism, leaving a meaningless vacuum of goods to deal with a psychotic social psyche, not to mention an unfulfilled worker.

The unrestricted free market perpetuates rigid social inequalities, both domestically and internationally, that condemn a person to utter poverty and suffering based on birthright.

Without the capital to compete in capitalism, the world's poor, in Lincoln, London, Los Angeles and Lagos, find themselves poorer and poorer every generation. When they're shortly left with nothing, they will have no reason to continue to cooperate, no ability to continue to provide the labor and raw goods for the rich.

The world should fear this day more than any other.

Failure of Public Institutions

A public institution's (school, library, church, community center) primary function is social integration, stability and unification. Ours are being divested faster than any period in our history. Teachers, once honored, are paid subsistence salaries, while students are now issued school vouchers to pay for private schooling.

Where once boys' clubs for children and literature and art societies for adults organized and orchestrated community action and improvement, social clubs now compete with video games and the corporate lifestyle. Prisons are privatized silos of cheap labor, instead of a retraining ground for America's marginalized.

Virtual World

The virtual world is a slowly growing problem, adding to dehumanization, alienation and meaningless existence. It is not an advancement that offers a net gain for society. A simple sociological fact: Social interaction, a prerequisite to a functional society, requires practice and skill. Practicing with computers that don't think or feel doesn't count.

With eight hours a day behind a computer, the proven relationship between CPU time and depression, even the substitution of essential human emotional processes through cyber-relations, one must ask: What is the price we pay for convenience? Virtual death?

David Baker is a senior African Studies, anthropology and sociology major and a Daily Nebraskan columnist.