

Regional

Cuban scholars see possibilities in relations

The United States has always had a complicated relationship with Cuba. From the time it wanted to buy it from Spain in the 19th century, to the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962, to the embargo that still lasts today, there has always been controversy about how these two nations – so geographically close – became so politically and ideologically distant.

To more closely examine the roots of our nation's relationship with Cuba – and to explore possibilities of how to take relations to a more mutually beneficial level – Southern Illinois University Edwardsville hosted three Cuban scholars from the University of Havana who are experts on U.S. relations for a visit last week.

Among the Cubans was Jorge Hernández Martínez, a sociologist who studies the political culture of the United States and inter-American relations. He is the director of the Center for U.S. and Hemispheric Studies at the University of Havana. Accompanying him was Luis René Fernández Tabío, a senior researcher and professor at the University of Havana specializing in international economics. Raúl Rodríguez Rodríguez, another professor and researcher at the University of Havana, completed the delegation.

"Cuba is an island with a vibrant culture and with a very well-educated population who are always welcoming of Americans who can travel there," said Rodríguez. Fernández agrees and said that the similarities between both countries extend well beyond what most people would think.

"Cuba and the U.S. are very close not only geographically but also in terms of national identity," he said. "Cubans and Americans share the same tastes for foods, music and other products. And don't forget that baseball is Cuba's most popular sport." Americans who travel to Cuba will see how Cubans cherish and take good care of American cars from the 1950s. Yet, there are also noticeable differences, such as the lack of billboards and other commercial advertisement for products on the streets. For Hernández, the basic problem in today's U.S.-Cuban relations is a matter of perceptions.



Photo by Daniel Martinez

From left are Dr. Luis René Fernández Tabío (University of Havana), Prof. Jorge Hernández Martínez (University of Havana), Dr. Aldemaro Romero (SIUE), and Prof. Raúl Rodríguez Rodríguez (University of Havana).

"Sometimes we do not realize who each other really is," he said. "We need better information and good faith to understand each other better. Despite the differences in politics and economics, we share many things in common. We need to develop mutual trust, without prejudices."

Many diplomats would say that a way to start dispelling misconceptions and create trust and communication between coun-

tries in through people-to-people contacts, particularly in the cultural, academic and sporting areas. One of the best examples was when relations between China and the United States began opening during the Nixon administration.

Rodríguez pointed to some attempts to develop "baseball diplomacy" with both professional and amateur U.S. teams visiting Cuba and the Cuban national team vis-

iting the United States. But for him, cultural and academic exchanges are critical to bettering the relationship of the two nations. "In this country people know very little about Cuba," he said. "There are a lot good, decent people in the U.S. who ask why we do not have more normal relations."

For Fernández the possibilities for commerce between both countries are immense. "Without the economic sanctions there

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would be amazing trade between the two countries," he said. In fact, experts calculate that the trade would be between \$3 billion and \$6 billion annually, with the greater benefit going to the United States, as Cuba would import more than they would export. Such levels of trade, the experts say, could generate between 50,000 and 100,000 jobs in this country. Cuba has begun implementing new economic reforms that are expected to yield results in the near future.

"This would make Cuba even more attractive for commerce with the U.S.," said Fernández. "Because of recent oil exploration there are great possibilities for the U.S. oil companies." Economic changes always influence personal and political conditions. They all said that they are hopeful that the current reforms will bring that about.

"Because of the betterment in conditions of Cuba fewer and fewer people would want to leave," said Hernández. "Those who want to leave want to do so essentially because of economic opportunities rather because of politics."

"From the Cuban society and its leadership there is a clear understanding that economic improvement and the system is a necessity. It is a problem that needs to be solved," said Fernández. For him that does not mean that they have to abandon the free access Cubans have to education and health care. "The question is that we need to improve the economy in order to maintain that free access," he said.

Is more progress to be expected? Change, said the Cuban scholars, is always slow, but they all said that they were optimistic about the future.

Aldemaro Romero is the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. His show, "Segue," can be heard every Sunday morning at 9 a.m. on WSIE, 88.7 FM. He can be reached at College_Arts_Sciences@siue.edu.