Regional

Cuban scholar building connections locally

Although Cuba is just 90 miles from the United States, and is a country commonly mentioned in the news, Americans know very little about the history of the island nation beyond a few scattered facts.

A Cuban scholar who frequently visits American colleges and universities to teach about the history of his home is Raúl Rodriguez, a researcher and professor at the Center for Hemispheric and U.S. Studies at the University of Havana. He recently visited Southern Illinois University Edwardsville, where he said that he finds the experience of teaching at American institutions highly rewarding.

"For me it is an important learning experience," Rodriguez explained.

"To be able to teach here and share with my peers all the experiences of teaching in a different environment with a different set of objectives is something that I very much enjoy. In Cuba we are more used to having a more teacher-centered class. Here there is more opportunity and the students are more willing to engage in conversation and discussion of the topics, which I find very interesting and enriching." Obviously one of the topics he teaches is the Cuban Revolution, but what differences are there between that revolution and the American Revolution?

"The Cuban Revolution is quite unique," he said. "It was a general social upheaval. It was a continuation of the Cuban struggle for self-determination from Spain. It was a profound and genuine idea to try and improve people's lives and also to serve to the best aspirations of the Cuban people, which is national sovereignty and self-determination." An interesting fact is that Cuba did not attain independence from Spain until 1898, many decades after other Latin American countries had become independent.

"It is true that Cuba came somewhat late into independence as compared to many Latin American republics," said Rodriguez. "In some ways it is because of the kind of relationship that Cuba had with Spain. The fact is that Cuba was one of the first territories that was conquered by the Spaniards, and the process of consolidation of nationhood in Cuba came late in terms of its relationship with Spain."

Cuba in many ways was a stopover for much of the colonial transit between the Americas and the Old World. "Because of its geographic location, Cuba was an object of desire, not only by Spain, but later by Britain and the United States," Rodriguez added. "So it was a process that made the Cuban Revolution towards nationhood and national aspiration come a bit late." He said that he thinks that both American politicians and the general public do not really understand what the Cuban Revolution is all about.

"In my view, the Cuban Revolution is indigenous, it's genuine and it's something that is homegrown," he said. "It's not the result of an international communist conspiracy; it's the result of the evolution of Cuba's national sentiment towards independence and self-determination. Of course, at the time of the Cuban Revolution, the world was divided in two, and that gave a strong ideological slant when it came to the ways this process was perceived by the United States."

He thinks that if Americans were allowed to visit Cuba freely they would have a better understanding of his country. Curiously enough, the United States did play a role in Cuban independence from Spain through events such as the explosion of the cruiser U.S.S. Maine and Teddy Roosevelt's "Rough Riders" on San Juan Hill before and during the Spanish-American War of 1898.

SIUE photo

Professor Raúl Radríguez (far right) receiving a delegation of SIUE faculty and students at the Center for Hemispheric and U.S. Studies of the University of Havana.

Aldemaro Romero Jr.
College Talk

"Well it is interesting that still in the collective memory of this country people tend to think the United States gave Cuba its independence," Rodriguez said. "In some ways I have a rather different opinion about that. The Cuban independence, as I said before, started a bit late compared to other Latin American countries, and developed into a really strong nationalist movement for 30 years after 1868. By 1898, when this was really a strong movement that made long strides for the struggle for independence, and was militarily in a position to defeat the Spanish in the next month or six months or so, the United States intervened in the war."

He explains that that this war was essentially a war between a rising power, the United States, and a declining one, Spain, that clung to its last colony as its last prized possession. "The result of that is very clear," Rodriguez said. "The Spanish left Cuba and the United Sates came into Cuba and established their instruments of how to dominate Cuba in a neo-colonial type of way. The fact of the matter is that this is the event that the United States used as the final pretext to participate in a war."

In addition to teaching, Rodriguez visited both the Carbondale and the Edwardsville campuses of Southern Illinois University to expand existing relations between SIU and the University of Havana. "This is my second visit to SIU and SIUE," he said. "I am visiting both campuses this time and I really expect to promote a relation of exchange, academic exchange between the University of Havana and SIUE and SIUC that will be long term and beneficial for both institutions. It will continue to develop a climate of academic scholarship and mutual respect between both institutions and communities."

Aldemaro Romero Jr. 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.