

PHILOSOPHICAL EXPLORATIONS

An African and American Survival Ethics: The Case of Cuba

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Until recently the principal burden of ethics was to choose among the many possible directions we might take our lives. However, we now face an unprecedented crisis: the possibility of the extinction of life itself. We have known about the possibility of the destruction of the food chain through “nuclear winter” since the 1980s. Consensus has developed on imminent species extinction through global warming. Effective responses to these threats require global action. However, action must be motivated. Ethics and morality are stimuli to action, but they have never faced such a challenge. Riddled with the disagreement customary to philosophy, contemporary ethical systems are not adequate to the task.

Philosophers and neuroscientists have recently proposed that science supplement ethics to give it a more secure foundation. Kwame Anthony Appiah’s *Experiments in Ethics* examines this hypothesis. One of his examples uses functional magnetic resonance imaging to map brain activity while subjects are struggling with ethical dilemmas. Bolder theorists like Richard Joyce claim that ethics must yield its autonomy to the neurobiological and psychological sciences.

The task of this essay is to reflect on a fusion of ethics and science. Its method is conceptual analysis rather than experimentation. Its primary objective is to help lay a foundation for a new ethics that can achieve global consensus. Since the problem that provokes a call for a new ethics is the survival of life on earth as we know it, I call this new ethics *survival ethics*. To achieve the consensus necessary to counter the global threats to life, this new ethics must be compatible with traditional ethical systems now in place throughout the world. It proposes a minimalist standard that other ethics can build upon.

The essay’s first sections consider Appiah’s claim that ethics has always been an experimental discipline. If ethics is analogous to science, or if it can be partnered with science, then the test of his claim is whether there is progress in ethics. The essay’s intermediate sections examine classical ethical systems that are at first glance incompatible in their basic assumptions. Using evolutionary principles to explain changes in morality over long periods of time can show that these traditional ethical systems are complementary rather than contradictory.

The final sections take Cuba as a case study in survival ethics. Because Cuba has had an African-descended majority population for the past half-millennium, the essay will examine Cuba from an African-centered perspective, with emphasis on an African thinker’s claim that humans share fundamental objectives: survival and creativity. Other values articulate a superstructure based on these principles. When a nation’s survival is threatened, its other values must be reexamined in the light of survival. The essay’s conclusion reflects on the import of the Cuban experience for a world whose survival is at risk.

Because of United States threats to its autonomy, Cuba has paid more attention to survival than freedom. The Cuban example can stimulate a search for a universal—rather than European-based—ethics that takes survival as its starting point. After rejecting religious presuppositions as the ground of ethics, European philosophy turned to freedom as a first principle. However, freedom as a foundational ethical principle has failed us in many ways. The most recent example is the use of the rhetoric of freedom through democracy to justify the United States military invasion of Iraq.

The Cuban example inspires a search for a universal ethics because of its interrogation of freedom. In addition, Castro's professed belief in the compatibility of the Christian and Marxist pursuits of social justice suggests the possibility of a universal ethics that is not inimical to religious belief. Cuba's revolutionary strides towards an unprecedented vision of "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" are the world's best hope for a consensual global ethics that fosters diversity rather than homogeneity. At the same time, Cuba's vision extends to constitutional protection of the "environment and natural resources" (Article 27). The Cuban example promotes an ethics that does not separate humans from nature.

Experiments in Ethics

Several years ago I visited a traditional long-house on a remote tributary of the Rejang river in Borneo. The long-house bordered an area that the Malaysian national government had recently declared a protected national reserve. Its residents had traditionally used the area for hunting and gathering and rudimentary agriculture. They were now forbidden to use this land. I asked the village headman whether he was angry at the Malaysian government in Kuala Lumpur for taking away his people's right of access to land they had used for their survival. Was the taking right and fair?

He gave me a long, hard look as if he wondered about my mental powers. He asked whether I knew how his people had come to live on this land. He said that many years ago they had come from the north to take the land away from the people who lived there. And now the Malaysians were taking the land away from his people. That, he implied, is simply the order of nature.

Richard Wrangham among others claims that a territorial imperative drives all animals, humans included. In the days of hunter-gatherers and proto-agriculturalists, humans exhibited intra-species kill rates comparable to those of the other notorious killer mammals—wolves and chimpanzees. Animals command a territory and patrol its boundaries to ward off incursions. When numbers and circumstances permit, groups sweep into neighboring territories to kill their competitors and expand their habitat as well as their own numbers.

What distinguishes Wrangham's discourse on territory is his claim that the intra-species kill rates of humans in the last century were significantly lower than the rates of early hunter-gatherers and primitive agriculturalists. His claim conflicts with our images of peaceful hunter-gathers like the San versus images of global warfare and genocide in the 20th century. While his methods and data can be questioned, one thing is certain. The world has moved *in principle* from the Borneo headman's ethics to that of the United Nations

Declaration of Human Rights. Humans must still command territory (more generally called *capital* in our time) to survive and flourish. That principle cannot change. What has changed is the size and bonding principles of human groups.

Where prehistoric groups were small and bonded by genetic principles, contemporary groups are large and bonded by universal principles—at least in theory. Evidence for the hypothesis that ethics is analogous to an experimental science is to be found in the history of ethics. The claim is that over time we as a species have discovered how to do ethics. First, we have recognized—some 10,000 to 15,000 years ago with the invention of tribal nations—that we do not need to kill other humans who do not share our genetic traits. Second, we have realized that we can be most successful in surviving and exercising our freedom to create if we have a large group supporting our efforts. The wisdom of Mo-Tzu in China in 300 B.C.E and Christ in early C.E. proclaimed that in the best case our group should include every other human being. Third, we’ve seen that diversity is indispensable to life’s flourishing. The African American philosopher Alain Locke (the first African American Rhodes scholar and first Harvard Ph.D. in philosophy) recognized that what most binds humans together is the fact of our difference. Locke advocates an ethics that would “pivot on the principle that the affirmation of one’s own world of values does not of necessity involve the denial or depreciation of someone else’s.”

As analogous to an experimental science, ethics must build upon the knowledge developed within its various traditions. The scientific part of ethics is the part that can be proven by using a scientific method. Research in this area might show, for example, that altruism plays an important role in human survival. Recent research investigates the neural processes underlying moral reasoning. This kind of research might very well explain our predisposition to make certain kinds of ethical choices, but it cannot make those choices for us. However, the scientific method *can* show that some proposals for passing life along to our successors are more effective than others.

Is the “survival ethics” that I propose compatible with other ethical systems? Survival ethics does not speak to the ethical foundations of the world’s major religions. It does not address the claim of the religions of the Bible—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—that only a divine being can confer value. It is silent in the face of the claim of many religions that the meaning of life is to be found beyond life—in life after death for the biblical religions, in the realization of our divine nature for the Hindus, in the end of suffering in Nirvana for the Buddhists.

We cannot approach these kinds of claims about the meaning of life in a consensual way. The meaning of life at a consensual level is *life itself*. To “mean” is to “connect.” Life is a series of self-replicating connections that change their form over time. At this foundational level, the meaning of life is found in the connections that life itself makes. As metaphysical beings, we may hope that those connections point beyond themselves to supernatural connections. Collectively, humans have superimposed layer upon layer of meaning on life itself. The most popular religions in the world, some with over 2,000-year histories, find the meaning of life beyond life. A common-ground survival ethics speaks neither for nor against that hope. This ethics aims to make it possible for the hope to carry itself into the future. Without life—this down-to-earth life that we live daily—that hope cannot continue.

Survival's Competitor

The powerful rhetoric of freedom in the contemporary era might seem to imply that freedom trumps survival. “Give me liberty or give me death,” in Patrick Henry’s clarion call. Nonetheless the battle cry of “*Freedom!*” carries a good deal of cultural baggage. The conservative sociologist Orlando Patterson, for example, makes the insupportable claim that Western civilization actually invented the term: “...non-Western peoples have thought so little about freedom that most human languages did not even possess a word for the concept before contact with the West.” While claiming without substantive evidence that “slavery was a nearly universal institution” from prehistory to the 20th century, Patterson also admits that “the slave desperately desired his freedom.” His principal argument is that *freedom* could not arise in its modern sense until masters acknowledged enslaved persons’ right to be free. Patterson calls the “valorization of personal liberty...the noblest achievement of Western civilization,” but he also recognizes that personal freedom carries with itself a set of “evils”: Nazi Germans, for example, “correctly called what they experienced ‘freedom.’” Though Patterson’s claim about the Western invention of *freedom* is questionable, his style of rhetoric is used to justify current aggressive United States foreign policy.

Freedom in a Western sense translates poorly into Asian languages, as Mao Zedong’s contempt for the term shows. He derides “*freedomism*” as the right of the individual to do whatever she may wish—the unbridled license of capitalism. Freedom as individual autonomy poses a threat to cultures that value group solidarity.

If the term *freedom* carries such a heavy cultural burden, how can it serve as a foundation for a global ethics? Hegel attempted to establish the first principle of an ethics grounded in freedom: “The History of the world is none other than the progress of the consciousness of Freedom; a progress whose development according to the necessity of its nature, it is our business to investigate.”

Hegel conceptualizes freedom as variation in form. He defines Spirit, the driving force of freedom, as the “infinite impulse of activity to alter its forms.” Nature’s variation of forms is her expression of freedom, and our human ability self-consciously to alter nature’s forms reveals the indissolubility of nature and humanity. Humans have become the conscious agents of nature in varying her forms. Ten thousand years of human intervention have created our domesticated animals and crops, even our household pets. We cannot imagine how our human nature will transform that larger nature which gave birth to us.

Hegel’s rhetoric of freedom is Eurocentric in the extreme. In his words, the “History of the World travels from East to West, for Europe is absolutely the end of History.” Africans can play no role in world history, because they lack the “principle which naturally accompanies all of our [European] ideas—the category of Universality.” Hegel imagines that freedom will achieve its apotheosis not in Europe but in the Americas—“perhaps in a contest between North and South America.” Ironically, Cuba with its African-descended majority population spearheads that contest now, joined by other Latin American countries like Venezuela and Bolivia.

An ethics grounded in a first principle of freedom is intuitively appealing. As autonomous beings, we instinctively want to be able to do whatever we wish to do.

However, as figures as opposed as Mao Zedong and Orlando Patterson remind us, the exercise of this kind of “personal freedom” carries with it “evils” that must be counterbalanced by community solidarity. That solidarity’s aim is the survival of the community. In the best of circumstances, freedom and survival are complementary. As John Stuart Mill reminds us, we bolster our chances of survival with the creative exercise of freedom. Mill pointed out a rationale for societies to give their citizens maximum possible freedom. A culture is an experiment in living, and the free-thinkers of a society constantly try out new experiments that may enhance a culture’s survival and flourishing.

In the worst of circumstances, however, freedom takes a back seat to survival. We cannot be free unless we survive. Five thousand years of written history show that we can survive without being free. Reflection on these two principles calls for a reexamination of the foundations of ethics—particularly in light of recent efforts to view ethics as an experimental science.

Ethics must start with an assumption. As a first principle, that assumption cannot be proven. Immanuel Kant’s assumption was that our capacity for rational thought carries within itself an obligation to act in accord with universal law. It is our duty to make sure that our rationales for our actions can be universalized: what is good for one must be good for all. Numerous theories compete with Kant’s, and all ground themselves in quite different assumptions: humans must act in such a way as to maximize pleasure, respect the rights of individuals, or of community, or care for others. No consensus exists on the status of these assumptions. To choose among them appears to be a matter of cultural exposure or personal taste. What principle could give foundational priority to Kantian universal duty, utilitarian pleasure, individual rights, community rights, or a feminist principle of caring?

The ethical theories based on these principles compete with one another for dominance in contemporary ethical theory and their lineage can be traced to the earliest writings in ethics. Each of the principles grounds itself on a fact that is indispensable to human survival. Our capacity to rationalize or universalize makes us the most fearsome competitor among the top predators with whom we have competed. Pleasure and pain are “twin rudders,” in Aristotle’s words, of human experience. Individual and community rights must balance one another in a healthy polis. And no amount of ethical theorizing will constrain a person who does not at some level care about the “other.”

My question is whether some underlying principle gives these five ethical theories their currency. My tentative answer is that rationality, pleasure, individual and community rights, and caring are not ends in themselves but rather indispensable instruments of human survival. To be good, after all, is first to be. The assumption that all of us must rely upon to start the enterprise of ethics in a reasoned way is this: we have an ethical obligation to carry on life. Our lives are not something we have earned but something we have been given. We express our gratitude for the gift of life by improving the conditions of life for our successors. We best do that by exercising the freedom of creativity. Constraints to freedom are precisely threats to life.

The Senegalese historian Cheikh Anta Diop claims that all cultures have a two-fold mission: “Survival and creativity. Man must create to survive. To create he must ensure his

survival.” The freedom of creativity and survival cannot be separated. Diop went so far as to say that ethics must be grounded in the science of ecology. He predicts a time not far off when the pollution of nature will become a sacrilege, a criminal act, even and mainly for the atheist, because of the one fact that the future of humanity is at stake; what the knowledge of the “science of the epoch” decrees as harmful to the whole group thus becomes progressively a moral prohibition.

For Diop, the limits of the environment set the limits to human freedom. Diop offers a corrective to a contemporary emphasis on freedom that fails to recognize the threat to our survival from contemporary technology.

Coming from outside the European tradition but thoroughly steeped in it (he received his Ph.D. from the Sorbonne), Diop refocuses attention on our current situation. Before the advent of the human potential to destroy life as we know it, our primary ethical question was about choosing among the many different directions we might take in life—that is, the question of freedom. Diop reminds us that “the future of humanity” is now at risk. We can no longer happily proclaim with the historical rhetoric of the United States, “Give me liberty or give me death,” or “Live free or die.”

By correlating survival and creativity, Diop expresses a paradox. Freedom must yield to survival on the scale of global ethics, but freedom broadly conceived is our best instrument of survival. Freedom expressed as creativity generates cultural variability. And variety is not simply the spice of life; rather it is the engine of life, as evolutionary theory has demonstrated so clearly. The ambiguity of *freedom* as a concept obscures its potential for promoting survival. In a minimalist definition, freedom is a function of our range of choices. Our ability to formulate and exercise our choices depends on community support. The larger the community, the better its opportunity for conceiving and executing choices.

Ethics is analogous to an experimental science in its use of reasoning processes. The assumptions that we should care enough about life to pass it on or that the twin principles of survival and creativity should guide our efforts to help life flourish cannot be tested. What can be tested are our hypotheses about the best methods to promote survival and flourishing. Diop is right to insist that the science of ecology be our guide in contemporary ethics because science must buttress ethics in this time of peril.

I choose Diop’s African ethics as the introduction to practical reflection on Cuba’s employment of a survival ethics. Marxist theory has dominated much of the analysis of the Cuban revolution. However, an African-descended population has constituted the majority of the Cuban population for the past 500 years. The revolution took its foothold in the Sierra Maestra where that population is heavily concentrated. The most powerful revolutionary initiative was the literacy campaign which included the Sierra Maestra, the most remote mountain area of Cuba’s Oriente. It is time to examine Cuba’s revolution through an African rather than a Marxist lens.

Fidel Castro’s own rhetoric of ethics has focused on the survival of the revolution in the face of constant threats from the United States. But Castro also engages a rhetoric of survival ethics in the face of threats to human survival. He has expressed the “profound conviction that our species, and with it each one of our peoples, are at a turning point in

their history: the course of events must change or else our species will not survive.” He remarks that the earth is our only chance for life—Mars can’t support us and there’s no way to get there “*en masse*.” If we don’t save the planet, “many millions of years will have to go by before another intelligent species arises that can start all over again the adventure we have gone through.”

Survival Ethics in Cuba

In particular, what light can the Cuban revolution bring to the practical engagement of a survival ethics? At first glance, an ethics of freedom rather than survival appears to run through the history of Cuba. Louis Pérez’s *To Die in Cuba*, a study of the history of suicide in Cuba, emphasizes this point. From the Taino Indians leaping off the Yumurí valley cliffs to avoid enslavement by Spanish conquistadores, to Jose Martí’s hopeless charge at Dos Rios, to Castro’s cries of *Patria o Muerto*, *Socialismo o Muerto*, Cubans appear to have valorized freedom over life. Cuba’s history may be read as a living testimony to an ethics of freedom. Through its half-millennium history, Cuba has tried to shatter the constraints imposed on its freedom. The revolution marks the first moment of real Cuban freedom. However, that revolution is a work in progress that imposes strict constitutional limitations on freedom justified by United States threats to Cuba’s survival. Nonetheless, Castro goes so far as to say that if one person feels he is not free to practice his religion, if one woman is not free to develop her potential, if “even one person were discriminated against because of the color of his skin—just one—it would be cause for deep concern. The Revolution wouldn’t be complete as a work of art.”

For all of its overwhelming success in the face of overpowering odds, Cuba is still perfecting a model for social justice. In Castro’s words, “I think the Revolution is a work that should be constantly improved; moreover, it’s a work of art.” The Cuban constitution guarantees the freedoms associated with democracy—freedom of speech and the press (Article 53), rights to assembly and demonstration (Article 54), freedom of conscience and religion (Article 55), inviolability of mail, home, and persons (Articles 56, 57, 58). However, those freedoms in the context of the revolution as a “work of art” did not yield a successor to Castro for nearly a half-century.

In spite of the duration of Castro’s tenure, Peter Roman argues that a vigorous democracy exists at the grass-roots level in Cuba. One question, however, cannot be subjected to democratic debate. Article 62 of the constitution states that “[n]one of the freedoms which are recognized for citizens can be exercised contrary...to the decision of the Cuban people to build socialism and communism.” The Cuban government, for example, currently does not find freedom of the press to be compatible with that decision, as the press is both owned by the state and controlled “for the exclusive service of the working people and in the interests of society” (Article 53).

Cuba has achieved extraordinary results in establishing basic foundations for the conventional freedoms of democracy with its emphasis on universal health care and literacy. Castro’s most recent initiative is to aim for universal university-level education for all Cubans. The rights of women have been paramount in the history of the revolution. However, the question is whether Cuba’s commitment to social justice can permit the

wholesale exercise of democracy's conventional freedoms. The rights of Afro-Cubans and gays are not accorded the institutional safeguards Cuba now provides for women's rights.

Can the suppression of apparent freedoms be justified for the sake of a greater social good? Cuba must defend itself against overt aggression (for example, the terrorist campaigns against tourism in Cuba in the 1990's), and against the more subtle forces of free market exchanges. Money abhors a vacuum. Should both the embargo and socialist constraints be lifted, the ownership of much of Cuba would revert to the pre-revolutionary model. The first elected president after the 1898-1902 United States occupation of Cuba, Tomás Estrada Palma, led a "Republic that often seemed to privilege Americans over Cubans." By the time of Batista's dictatorship, United States interests controlled much of the Cuban economy.

Cuban informants in five research trips to the island over the past three years have told me that United States discretionary consumer goods—Nikes, Xboxes, Polo T's—are seductive to their children. They have said that the solidarity of the "special period," the Cuban response to the economic catastrophe that Cuba suffered after the collapse of the Soviet Union, is experiencing pressure from the grinding poverty imposed by the embargo. Can social justice be sustained in an environment driven by free market forces?

If these two elements are unalterably opposed in our present economic circumstances, then sustaining the Cuban revolution as embodied in its current socialist constitution is a morally defensible goal. Nonetheless, visits to Cuba reveal that many Cubans chafe under the restrictions of socialism as expressed in contemporary Cuba. Cuba requires an extraordinary sacrifice of its citizens in pursuing social justice not simply for its own poorest but for others in some of the poorest countries in the world. The Latin American School of Medicine on the outskirts of Havana attracts students from the most impoverished nations in the world. Cuba pays all expenses for these students (excepting transport to and from their countries) for six or seven years of medical school. Many workers in the tourist industry have expressed their distaste for this largesse to me. The universal health care and education provisions for all Cubans place a great burden on the national budget.

Has Cuba taken "a bridge too far" in the battle of ideas that seeks to expand the limits of ethical obligation? If social justice and economic freedom are to be weighed against one another, which should take precedence? Is it ethical for a strong political leader and his revolutionary government to impose his sense of social justice on a population that includes dissenters? Lincoln's imposition of the abolition of slavery on dissenting Southerners sets a precedent, but are the circumstances comparable?

Cuba deliberately restricts its citizens' freedom, with the justification that Cuba's survival cannot embrace such measures as a free press. In a survival scenario, socialism becomes a way station on the path to communism. In Castro's words, "We start from the concept that according to the ideas of Marx, Engels, and Lenin, communism is the final objective, but there is the stage of socialism." That fact is not clearly brought to the surface in the Cuban constitution, which barely mentions communism in the Preamble and Articles 5, 39, and 62. Communism itself is a utopian expression of the human desire for greater freedom—one surpassing previous models that were not grounded in social justice and sustainability. However, as Diop insists, considerations of survival mark the limits of

freedom. Perhaps Cuba can stand as a model for the world's reflection on the balance between survival and freedom. We contemplate a future in which unbridled freedom threatens our survival. Cuba's example may strengthen our resolve to make hard choices.

Cuban Survival Ethics

Perhaps in part because of Cuba's African heritage, Cuba has given full expression to Diop's African ethics: freedom must be exercised within the constraints of survival and toward the end of survival. Nonetheless, survival must exhibit the richness of historical human creativity—even in the area of religion. In this vein, Castro has modified his original Marxist exclusion of religion from the Cuban polity to now claim that the methods of Christianity and Marxism are compatible, even if their ultimate aims are not.

Castro's remarks on Christianity and Marxism in Frei Betto's work, *Fidel and Religion*, comprise the most intensive treatment of the subject, and standard histories of Castro such as those of Coltman and Szulc affirm its general claims. Critics may argue that Castro utters these remarks on the compatibility of such diverse systems only for the purposes of propaganda and political gain. However, these remarks are congruent with the postulates of a survival ethics. Castro's "real" motives for uttering these remarks are beyond the limits of this essay.

Castro goes so far as to say "it's a mistake to stress philosophical differences with the Christians...rather than to try to persuade all who share the same aspiration of justice to unite in a common struggle..." Castro claims that "it is possible for Christians to be Marxists as well, and to work together with Marxist Communists to transform the world." The common ground of the two groups is the desire to "end the exploitation of man by man and to struggle for a fair distribution of social wealth, equality, fraternity, and the dignity of all human beings."

Most strikingly, Castro insists that Christianity and communism are grounded in a principle of love: "the precept of loving thy neighbor...is very concretely applied...in the human equality, fraternity and solidarity upheld by socialism and in the internationalist spirit." Castro presents as evidence of a Cuban practice of love the thousands of Cuban workers who go to the poorest countries in the world to offer their services. I experienced this initiative first-hand on a trip to Ghana in 2000 when my traveling companion received first-rate emergency treatment from a Cuban doctor at a Cape Coast hospital. Through their works these Cubans demonstrate "the practical application of their respect, consideration and love for their fellow human beings." Castro believes that the socialist revolution has brought the expression of love or solidarity "to its highest point," but a "communist society will develop it still more. Socialism doesn't yet uphold full equality...." In the end, "loving thy neighbor means practicing solidarity."

Castro's efforts to join love and solidarity are not idiosyncratic. Che Guevara's concept of the "new man" in Cuba emphasizes the same linkage. In a speech on revolutionary medicine to the Cuban militia on August 19, 1960, Guevara said that "in Cuba a new type of man is being created." In a letter to the Uruguayan weekly, *Marcha*, published on March 12, 1965, Guevara said, "At the risk of seeming ridiculous, let me say that the true

revolutionary is guided by great feelings of love. It is impossible to think of a genuine revolutionary lacking this quality.”

Castro and Guevara’s linking love and solidarity to the revolution is important to an ethics grounded in survival. In human communities, love is the condition of survival. As social beings, we cannot survive without the support of our groups. The more tightly knit the group, the better our chances of survival. Furthermore, our freedom narrowly defined as our range of choices and our ability to be creative is dependent on group support. As mentioned above, the wisdom of the Chinese philosopher Mo-Tzu and Christ was to insist that every human being be a member of a single group. A group bound together by Mo-Tzu’s *chien-ai* or universal and unconditional Christian love would be able to exercise a formidable range of choice or freedom.

Interestingly, the Indo-European roots of the term *love* are conjoined with the term *free*. The root, *pri*, to love, takes the suffixed form **priy-o-*, meaning *free*. The Old English *fræon* means to *love* or *set free*. Even in their etymology, the principles of love and freedom are inseparable. In educating their children to make reflective choices about how to live their lives, parents set their children free with a supreme act of love. Cuba’s literacy campaign is the best evidence of the primary aim of the revolution—to enhance the survival of the Cuban people by giving them access to the creativity that reading makes possible.

The campaign has enjoyed extraordinary success. The April 2008 U.S. Central Intelligence Agency country reports note that Cuba’s literacy rate is 99.8 percent (2002 census), while that of the United States is 99.0 percent (2003 estimate) for both males and females over the age of 15 who can read and write. The CIA also reports that Cuba’s unemployment rate is less than half that of the United States: 1.9 percent versus 4.6 percent (2007 estimated). Given the current state of Cuba’s economy, this figure appears to be preposterous. However, visits to Cuba’s universities show that many younger Cubans who would otherwise be unemployed are enrolled in schools of social work or art. Despite its extraordinary economic hardships, Cuba is moving toward a universal system of education that would provide every Cuban with the equivalent of a university education.

Castro has articulated the idea of a nation becoming a university. In this he echoes the sentiment of the African American socialist, W.E.B. Du Bois: “Today there is but one rivalry between culture and vocation, college training and trade and professional training, and that is the rivalry of Time. Some day every human being will have college training.” That day is far in the future, and perhaps only in a future communist society rather than a contemporary socialist society. Nevertheless, Cuba is taking bold steps toward that future.

Cuba’s efforts to help the poorest nations in the world with their own educational systems are truly stunning. As mentioned above, Cuba offers six or seven years of medical education to qualified students from the world’s poorest countries. Cuban citizens pay all expenses for these students, including tuition, room, board, textbooks, medical care, clothing, and entertainment. The students are responsible only for their own transportation to Cuba. Some of the recruits to this program are African Americans from the Mississippi delta and United States inner cities who would never have a chance to qualify for or pay for medical school. I have visited the medical school for foreigners on the outskirts of Havana,

and its facilities are far superior to those of the University of Havana, Castro's own *alma mater*.

Survival Ethics and Cuba's Material Conditions

Recent reflections on Marxist theories of ecology have highlighted the conditions for a utopian "stateless state." The preconditions for human freedom are the elimination of resource scarcity and the mechanization of labor that does not require creative human consciousness. Given its economic circumstances, Cuba has not been able to fully develop a system of renewable energy resources and production efficiency. Neither has Cuba been able to pursue a minimal human footprint consonant with sustainability. Nevertheless, Cuba's efforts toward a sustainable resource independence model can have a catalytic effect on nations suffering from the effects of post-colonialism.

The famous 1950s automobiles in Havana show the enforced paradox of the Cuban economy—polluting, wasteful of energy resources, yet wondrously recycled. Cuba's dependence on a global economy is a point of real vulnerability: "Tour operators and airlines could make or break the most elaborate plan for the development of tourism in a country like Cuba." In the special period, Cuba has practiced a kind of "socialism with an edge" that finds an advantage in being cut off from global markets: "Closing plants that produce high levels of pollution, downsizing or eliminating activities that require high energy consumption; [sic] and abandoning some agricultural practices that rely on mechanization and chemical fertilizers could be considered positive results of exclusion." Entry into the economy of globalization poses a threat to Cuba's commitment to socialism. Cuba can counterbalance this threat by shifting her exports from products like sugar and tobacco that are dependent on natural resources to exports that are primarily knowledge-based, like vaccines and other bio-technologies.

Cuba's need for economic autonomy in the agricultural sector is equally urgent. Cuba's increasing trade with the United States reflects a dependency that started in the early 1990s when "55 percent of calories, 50 percent of proteins, and 90 percent of all fats consumed in Cuba were imported." In 1993 the Basic Units of Cooperative Production (UBPCs) were created to step up agricultural production and lower costs. The UBPCs "turned a fundamental portion of state farm land over in free usufruct on long-term leases to workers' collectives." Some scholars argue that even more liberalization is required: "Financial and participatory autonomy and self-management are key to the rationalization and economic viability of Cuban agriculture." In the meantime Cuba's soils suffer from desertification, salinity, aridity, erosion, low fertility, and insufficient organic matter. As Castro said, the revolution is a work of art in progress. Nevertheless, Cuba's gains in agriculture are impressive, given the hurdles she faces.

In sustaining itself under the worst possible economic conditions, Cuba is developing a model that other post-colonial countries victimized by monocropping and dependence on fluctuating world markets can use to great benefit. An economy completely dependent on imported oil cannot sustain the conditions of freedom. Even the United States feels the sting of this truth as many of its freedoms erode during its desperate efforts to control global oil supplies. An economy dependent on imported capital goods cannot sustain its freedom. Che Guevara saw this early in the revolution when he insisted on Soviet Union

support for Cuban industrialization. Cuba can sustain the revolution only by making herself independent with respect to resources and manufacturing—to the degree possible, given her island nature. Ironically, the “special period” has driven Cuba towards securing her freedom by cultivating her own food, energy and manufacturing resources, and by creating a knowledge base she can export to the wider world.

Enlightened nations throughout the world might be encouraged to support Cuba’s efforts to achieve independence through sustainable energy and agricultural projects. Alliances between Cuba and other groups throughout the world can also project a model for self-defense against globalization. The Cuban model must be so deeply grounded in social justice, sustainability, and freedom that it compels global support for its economic and technical realization. As a global model, Cuba must reach beyond sectarian socialisms to embrace the ancient communalisms of the Americas, Eurasia, Africa, and Oceania. Indeed, further research may show that the nearly half-century-old Cuban socialist revolution owes some important measure of its success to the half-millennium majority presence of African-descended peoples in Cuba.

The Cuban model must reach out not only to its most obvious allies but even to its hidden potential allies. The special period has helped Cuba to be much more sparing in its use of resources. Environmentalists throughout the world have good reason to pay close attention to Cuba’s environmental reforms and to support them where possible. The Cuban model can sustain its radical nature through even more radical transformation of its posture toward the environment. Richard Levins has claimed in these pages (“How Cuba is Going Ecological”) that Cuba’s commitment to socialism is a stimulus for its environmental measures: “each kind of society develops its own relation with the rest of nature, and...an ecological pathway of development is at least latent in socialist development, co-equal with equity and participation.” Levins sees an “ecological pathway” as indispensable to the success of socialism. That pathway has as its foundation universal education in science: “...Cuba, with only 2 percent of the population of Latin America, has 11 percent of its scientists, a large fraction of them women.” Cuba’s commitment to the environment follows directly from socialism’s focus on “human need.”

In solidarity with nascent but increasingly powerful movements throughout the world, Cuba can aim not simply at its own survival, but survival for the earth itself as a living organism. Marx speaks of the “unity of man with nature.” He claims that there can be only “one science” that unites man and nature. Marx’s holistic ontology finds support in other contemporary movements such as Afrocentricity, Ecofeminism, and Deep Ecology. Solidarity among these groups is urgent in this time of peril for the earth. In Castro’s words, the mad rush of globalization to the “abyss must be stopped. *Nature must be saved.* National identities must be preserved. The culture of every country must be protected. Equality, fraternity and true liberty must prevail.”

Castro’s freedom is not our fathers’ freedom. It’s much more than the *liberté* of *liberté, égalité, fraternité*, or the *liberty* of *life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness*. This is an unimagined new way to live that the whole earth drives us toward. The *liberty* of democracy has proven itself false—either as the tyranny of the majority that John Stuart Mill cautioned against, or as the tyranny of the minority exhibited in a capitalist kleptocracy masquerading as democracy.

The *life* that the world's most powerful democracy has promised us is restricted to human populations, and even then only to a select few. That democracy promises no "right to life" for the billion humans who live on a dollar a day—or less—or for the other life forms being exterminated every day.

And what of the vaunted "*pursuit of happiness*"? No one has offered a better definition of *happiness* than Aristotle: "activity in accord with excellence." We are social beings, and we cannot achieve excellence without everyone working together. The pre-condition for happiness is social justice. That is the common insight of Christ and Marx, expressed in divergent ways.

The Cuban revolutionary experiment models a survival ethics for the world. We cannot know its future now. But it makes three promises: Not mere life, but sustainable life. Not mere liberty, but a liberty that aims at the diminution if not the withering away of the state as we have known it. Not mere happiness, but a perfect happiness that only everyone working together under conditions of social justice can achieve: "the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all."

As Cheikh Anta Diop says, that freedom can only be exercised within the constraints of survival because "the future of humanity is at stake." We know that because the "science of the epoch decrees" what is "harmful to the whole group." The "moral prohibitions" of a survival ethics are grounded in physical science, effectively fusing the two disciplines. Cuba has sacrificed many of the conventional aspects of freedom for the sake of survival. The world can look to the Cuban example as it makes hard choices to restrict political and economic excesses that threaten survival. The growing global consensus on the nature and depth of these threats is a motive to propose a survival ethics that the whole earth might accept in a time of unprecedented peril.