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Negotiating domestic socialism with global capitalism: So-called tourist apartheid in Cuba

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ABSTRACT

In the 1990s the Cuban government instituted a "dual economy," creating a dollar economy parallel to the peso economy as part of the reform package designed to address economic crisis. Expansion of the tourism sector as a dollar industry was central to efforts to raise revenue, as Cuba began limited and regulated interaction with the global capitalist economy. In an effort to quarantine Cubans from capitalist inequities, citizens were prohibited from accessing tourist facilities other than as workers. Some have referred to this as "tourist apartheid." This study finds that "apartheid" is not an accurate classification of the system in Cuba; rather, the policy is comparable to an economic "firewall" designed to allow regulated engagement with the international capitalist community, while preventing ingress of capitalism domestically.

There is a beach on the south side of Cuba advertised as having beautiful black sand. I found a man willing to drive me the more than three hours to a hotel close to the beach. When we arrived, the driver stopped at the bottom of the hotel driveway and said he could not go any further. He explained that this was a "tourist hotel," and that Cubans were not allowed on the property unless they were going to work or licensed to transport visitors. There were security personnel who, I learned, were there to watch for Cubans "trespassing" onto hotel grounds. This was not my first encounter with so-called "tourist apartheid" in Cuba. I asked the man if he would wait for me while I went to see the sand. He agreed. I ran to what I thought was the correct beach, but instead of black sand found some overweight white men in faded swim trunks, Mojitos in hand. "Not my crowd," I thought, and ran back to the waiting car. I asked the driver to take me to wherever a Cuban would stay in the area. He took me to the "Cuban hotel," where I paid far less than $58/night charged at the tourist hotel.

The separate tourist and Cuban facilities developed out of a series of reforms undertaken by the Cuban regime during the 1990s, when their primary trade partner, the Soviet Union, collapsed. Many of the reforms were designed to reconstitute the economic environment for reinvigorated activity with global capitalism; among these was the institutionalization of a "dual economy," with a dollarized economy alongside a peso economy. The tourism sector was dollarized, and foreign tourists interacted with it in a capitalistic manner, though the terms governing the sector were the purview of the state.

With the collapse of the communist community, interaction with the capitalist economy was near inevitable. Castro for instance recognized the island's challenge in noting "the scarcity of convertible currency to carry out the necessary imports" (Castro, 1995a: 4). He noted that the reforms undertaken were "wide-ranging, as well as quite radical," but designed "to enable our economy to adapt to the realities of today's world." (Castro, 1995a: 4) Yet Castro also noted the potential risks to socialism. "Wide-scale tourism, the depenalization of convertible currency holdings are all measures that became unavoidable but that also carry an inevitable cost." He suggested some might aim "[s]imply to lavish these resources.... The struggle ... against these trends before they turn into a cancer that devours our ethics and revolutionary spirit will have to be

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a colossal one" (Castro, 1995a: 5). The dual economy and related policies were a systematic attempt to adapt and preserve the system. "We are improving socialism, I am sure" Castro said in 1995. "We are not just struggling to save it, we are struggling to improve it" (Castro, 1995c: 2).

Among the measures taken to "protect" Cubans and "the revolutionary spirit" were restrictions against Cubans accessing tourist facilities except as employees. Some have referred to these prohibitions as "tourist apartheid," yet the reform structure was more complex than simply restrictions on facility access. While much of the literature on tourism in Cuba makes reference to "tourist apartheid," few if any studies undertake an empirical analysis of the intent or design of the policy, or whether "apartheid" accurately described the situation. This research makes an attempt to fill the gap using data collected via secondary sources, supplemented by primary sources and during two trips to Cuba in 2000 and one in 2008.

Based on an analysis of the dual economy, its implications, and the context of a broader political system, I find here that while many found the prohibitions against Cubans accessing tourist facilities normatively problematic, including many Cubans, the system was incorrectly described as "apartheid." Indeed, the access restrictions in Cuba were one component of a broader system which differed from apartheid significantly in two constitutive ways: (1) the power dynamic between groups and (2) policy objective. Furthermore, use of the term "apartheid" ultimately misconstrued policies as designed to segregate populations, when in fact they reflected an effort to control state level entrée to the capitalist global economy without undermining a domestic socio–economic agenda. This study finds that the policies implemented in Cuba were an "economic firewall" designed to allow the regime to control the "infiltration" of capitalism within the island's socialist system. The nuances of the policy, the underlying power relationships and distribution of privilege, are consequently not captured, and in fact are obscured by comparisons to "apartheid."

This research makes two important contributions. First, the study provides analysis of the policies behind Cuba's dual economy and their resultant stratification, finding that the system is not one of "apartheid," but state-regulated and tightly controlled economic integration with capitalism. Second, this work contributes to conceptual rigor. The term "apartheid" reflects something specific, and (normatively) something specifically heinous. "Stretching" the concept (Brady and Collier, 2010: 135, 320) to include dynamics which are not apartheid not only thwarts accurate analysis of the subject at hand, but our comparative scholarship on apartheid.

This piece will first look at the ways in which the term "tourist apartheid" has been employed by the literature on Cuba, and then look at the scholarship on apartheid generally. A discussion of Cuba's dual economy and the policies surrounding the tourism sector follows, including an analysis of the "apartheid" application. The piece concludes offering an empirically based approach to understanding these policies conceptually and theoretically, as an "economic firewall."

On "tourist apartheid"

Recent scholarship on Cuba is replete with studies looking at the inequalities that emerged on the island during the mid-to-late 1990s, many referencing "tourist apartheid." In a review of travelogues, Snodgrass (2001) defines tourist apartheid as "the systematic exclusion of Cubans as visitors from the island's tourist hotels and resorts, making these places enclaves where native employees serve a foreign clientele" (Snodgrass, 2001: 209n.14). In 1997, Schwartz noted that "Cubans have complained of a 'tourist apartheid,' because tourist police have turned them away from hotel lobbies and beach resorts where foreign guests enter freely. Hard-pressed Cubans understandably envy well-fed visitors and also might like to share the scarce soap and toilet paper that hotels furnish to guests" Schwartz (1997: 210). Similarly, Elliott and Neirotti (2008) highlight a situation where foreigners enjoy "lush facilities, numerous products and fine food, while residents struggle in their daily existence" (386). These indicate that access is not the only element of the "apartheid; " there is also disparity between the world of the tourist and that of Cubans. And while Elliott and Neirotti rightly indicate that the policy is part of a broader development program, the authors generally fail to analyze the dynamics and context of this "apartheid" system.

Pérez-López (1996/7) and Mesa-Lago (2002), looking at different aspects of Cuban economic policy, categorize "tourist apartheid" as the Cuban government "discriminating" against its people. Mesa-Lago (2002: 22) categorizes the restrictions as one of the "[d]isparities vis-á-vis [f]oreigners" imposed by the government, and recommends reforms to correct the increasing disparities. Pérez-López (1996/7) categorizes the restrictions under "[h]uman rights/worker rights violations," and notes that this type of violation "can result in adverse publicity for foreign investors..." (19). While both authors make note of the policy within the broader context of an economic study, neither provides an analysis of the "apartheid" application.

Shacochis (2000) gets closer to the nuanced complexity of the issue. The author notes that the "world of pleasure and luxury [is] superimposed on ... the texture of Cuban life, if not culture per se, since Cubans themselves are forbidden access to this world ... except as employees" (16). Yet he goes on to acknowledge Cuban reaction to the way in which the tourism sector was engulfing the island; one is quoted as saying, "There are laws for cultural protection, so that the great predator of tourism does not destroy the culture ... We've argued about [tourist apartheid]. Every ministry in Cuba connected with tourism has set up a list of accords to confront these problems" (17). Here, Shacochis hints that discrimination in and of itself was not the goal of the prohibition and that the policy is one with which the state and society continuously grapple, yet still fails to analyze empirically the policy and its fallout.

Facio et al. (2004) provide more depth on Cuban assessment of and reaction to "tourist apartheid" in a study which looks specifically at the ways in which tourism reforms have impacted the lives of women. Through their interviews, it becomes obvious that a stratified class structure has emerged and that there is widespread resentment towards the system. What