

FINAL WORD ↪ BY A. BARTON HINKLE

The Joy of Deprivation

When the Obama administration decided late last year to ease U.S. policy toward Cuba, some Americans had an odd reaction best epitomized by journalist Jeremy Scahill, who tweeted that he was “very glad I was able to visit Cuba several times before U.S. tourists try to turn it into Cancun.”

You see a lot of this on the American left, where for some there is something pure and beautiful about the stark deprivations endured by people who live under leftist economic theory. The themselves tend to be well compared to those they admire and they certainly don't seem inclined to give up the comforts of capitalism to join in solidarity with the workers and peasants. Sean Penn, for instance, once called for the anyone who referred to Venezuelan Hugo Chavez as a dictator. But when Penn needs toilet paper, you don't see him queuing up in Caracas.

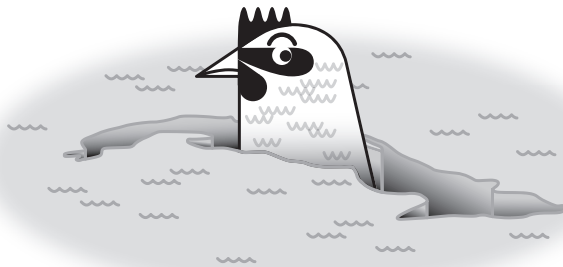
Solzhenitsyn once remarked on “the desire not to know” by Westerners with romantic delusions about the Soviet Union. The Soviets are no more, yet that desire lives on. After the Cuba announcement, Wonkette—the snarky left-wing blog—reposted a long and earnest piece about the island from a few years previously. “There are severe food shortages,” wrote Rebecca Schoenkopf. “I do not understand why a tropical island would lack fruits and vegetables ... and my only assumption is that maybe they have to export it all.”

Yes, of course. That must be it.

Humankind has had a long and arduous slog out of the muck to get where

we are today, and for many people in the developing world the journey will continue for some decades. Events such as hurricanes and the Ebola outbreak offer brutal reminders of how very fragile human progress is and how tremendously grateful we ought to be for modern conveniences such as hospitals—or, for that matter, paved roads.

Listen to some people, though, and you get the sense that all this progress is a terrible shame. “Bring on the Dark” was the headline of a recent op-ed in the



New York Times that condemned, without irony, artificial light. Electric light “drives us to ... excess, in every imaginable form,” including “the most persistent of all illusions: that human progress is the reason for the world,” according to the author, Clark Strand. While conceding that “advances in science, industry, medicine, and nearly every other area of human enterprise resulted from the influx of light,” he nevertheless hoped that “if we won't come to our senses and search for the darkness ... the darkness will come looking for us.”

A few days later, another *Times* op-ed noted that “up until just a few hundred years ago, concentrated sugars were essentially absent from the human diet,” but nowadays “sugar is everywhere.” This is bad, according to the authors, James DiNicolantonio and Sean Lucan, because people really like sugar and because too much

sugar is bad for you. So, they suggested that we “regulate sugar-added products just as we do alcohol and tobacco.”

And consider the local-food movement, which encourages people to grow and eat their own food or at least eat food grown locally, the way people used to do. Ostensibly, eating local entails all sorts of benefits, though anyone who's ever done any farming knows it has downsides, too. (Ever plucked a chicken? No? Boy, are you missing some fun!) Still, novelist Barbara Kingsolver, who considers “conspicuous consumption” a “spiritual error,” wrote a whole book on the subject, *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle*—which, interestingly enough, she has made available not only in her local farmer's market but everywhere across the country.

Attitudes such as these are deeply reactionary—it's no surprise that conservatives, sometimes consider deprivation a sign of virtue—or even a cause of it. David Frum has written that “without welfare and food stamps, poor people would cling harder to working-class respectability.” He approvingly quotes William Bennett, who once read widely from an account of the Donner party” and wondered “Where did those people go?” Into one another's stomachs, would seem the obvious answer. But Frum and Bennett mean something else: what happened to that kind of fortitude and toughness?

Like liberal admirers of socialism, such conservatives always seem to think that *other people* should do without. They don't go marching naked into the snow-covered woods to toughen *themselves* up. Anyone who has suffered severe deprivation even briefly knows how miserable it truly is. There's nothing noble about starving to death—or living on an island prison where time has stood still for six decades while the rest of the world has moved forward. Given the choice between abject misery and material progress, sane people choose progress. That's why, if Americans ever do succeed in turning Havana into Cancun, no one will cheer louder than the Cubans. R