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One way out

By Donald J. Boudreaux

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A Sept. 3 letter to the editor of The Boston Globe caught my eye. Its author suggested that Uncle Sam's ban on American tourism to Cuba is motivated by "US government fears that ordinary people traveling there might find themselves comparing the two societies and wondering who's better off."

Law-abiding citizen that I am, I've never been to Cuba. So I have no evidence gathered with my own eyes of what life is like for ordinary Cubans. But I have other evidence -- perhaps even more compelling than could be gathered from a trip to Havana -- that everyday life for Cubans is incomparably worse than it is for Americans.

That evidence is the direction of the dinghies.

The small boats and rafts plowing the treacherous waters between "Castrotopia" and Florida head in only one direction: northward. These tiny vessels are filled with people risking their lives to escape from their homeland to a foreign country.

Why would so many embark on such a journey if life in America is worse than -- or even comparable to -- life in Cuba? And why are no Americans jumping into those dinghies and sailing them southward to Cuba?

Few facts are more revealing than the direction people travel when they vote with their feet. They go from worse places to better ones. And because people do not abandon their homes and families lightly, when there are large emigrations from one country to another, the countries people emigrate to are not just marginally better than the places people leave; they're *much* better.

So I have not even a whiff of a doubt that Cuba is hellish compared to America. Whatever are Uncle Sam's motives for banning tourism to Cuba, fear that Americans will find there an irresistible paradise is not among them.

But why does the letter's author -- whose residence is listed as Concord, Mass. -- not grasp what to me is an indisputable fact? Perhaps he doesn't know that Cubans routinely try to escape from their island prison. Maybe he believes Cubans are deluded, not recognizing the splendors of their own society and the squalor of America.

Or maybe he's an "intellectual" of the sort that University of Massachusetts sociologist Paul Hollander discusses in his book "Political Pilgrims: Western

Intellectuals in Search of the Good Society."

Hollander documents the long history of intellectuals' fascination with tyrannies -- of their fawning admiration of, applause for and support of political regimes that killed, crushed and enslaved individuals. If the tyrannies' leaders proclaimed their goal to be greater equality, less poverty and more "social justice," intellectuals got all giddy and hopeful.

Such giddiness and hopefulness, though, are blinding.

Too many intellectuals are driven by a disturbing will to believe society can and should be remade by strong leaders. Worse, this will to believe is combined with intellectuals' childish gullibility for tyrants' promises and propaganda. Hollander exposes the utter credulity of intellectuals who cheered on the likes of Stalin, Mao and Castro -- intellectuals whose faith in central planning and esteem for central planners is simply astonishing to any adult whose mind and soul aren't deformed by the will to believe in salvation by strongmen.

These intellectuals' indiscriminate hostility to capitalism and commerce renders them stupid. I have no better word to describe the affliction. British playwright George Bernard Shaw, traveling to Stalinist Russia by train, threw away his provisions before crossing the Soviet border because he was sure there were no shortages in the U.S.S.R.

Or consider this choice passage from Hollander's book, quoting an article from Scribner's Magazine about Americans touring Stalinist Russia in the early 1930s:

"They are wildly enthusiastic about all they see but not always logical; they were enthusiastic before they came and their visit only doubly convinces them. A schoolteacher was on a tour of one of the newspaper plants. She saw a machine which did wonders with the paper that was fed to it. 'Really, that is remarkable,' she commented. 'Such an amazing invention could be produced only in a country like yours, where labor is free, unexploited, and working for one end. I shall write a book about what I have seen.' She was a trifle embarrassed when she walked to the rear and saw the sign: 'Made in Brooklyn, N.Y.'"

Of course, now that the atrocities and privations of the Soviet Union have been exposed so vividly, Western intellectuals no longer sing the praises of this late and unlamented regime.

Sadly, though, some intellectuals still sing puerile praises of Fidel and Raul Castro.

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