

Janice Gutman

My last trip to Cuba was in 1970, eleven years after the revolution. Both the revolution and I were young, idealistic and inspired. I met so many Cubans whose lives had changed so dramatically, so quickly. Men and women who had no education, no money, and no future before 1959 could now read and write, had free medical care, enough food, a good place to live and the respect of their neighbors and communities - they felt a part of something bigger than themselves- all of that made life better for the majority of the Cubans. Those Cubans who were wealthy before the revolution - who did not want to share their wealth and did not share the socialist dream - were welcome to leave and start over in a capitalist country. I came back from my two months in Cuba inspired to help make a revolution in the U.S. My time with the Cubans taught me that what I did could make a difference - that governments could be changed. I became an activist.

This September, forty- two years later, I returned. As one Cuban said to me - I returned to a different Cuba. Some things are the same. Education and health care are still free to all. There are still many Cubans, young and old, who believe in the revolution and are dedicated to the survival of the Cuban government even if new means of survival need to be found. The fall of the Soviet Union and the U.S. blockade have created massive economic problems for the Cubans, and they have turned to tourism, two forms of currency, and the development of small businesses to provide part of the solution to the issue of economic survival. And these changes have created a new set of problems. There are still economic, gender and racial disparities in Cuba. But they are all topics of a national discussion - focused on by the Communist Party, and discussed at all levels of government and between people. I have spent the last 42 years working with others to try to figure out how to make sweeping and basic changes in the U.S. - and at the same time making all kinds of compromises for my own survival in this system. I am still inspired by the basic values and strength of the Cuban revolution even as it struggles to figure out the compromises it needs to make to survive.