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THE EDITOR'S COLUMN

In Costa Rica

As I write these words I am in San Pedro, Costa Rica, high on a hillside overlooking San José, serenaded by roosters and a parrot. Ellen and I are here with a group of students from Florida State, who are spending two months studying and sightseeing. Teaching Spanish in a Spanish-speaking country is not only a new experience but a treat, as the students learn so quickly.

Residential San José is full of flowers, huge tropical flowers which, I am told, bloom year round. The temperature seldom goes below 50 or above 80. Costa Rica has more animal and plant species per square kilometer than does any other country, and this is reflected in the food, which is surprisingly tasty, healthful, and varied. Besides the familiar papaya, mango, guanábana, tamarindo, and yuca, there are many new edible plants, such as chan, a seed from which a cold beverage is prepared, pejibaye, a mealy fruit sold hot like a chestnut, and manzana de agua, which looks vaguely like an apple but tastes like a rose. The buses, which range from new Pegasos to used yellow school buses without mufflers, have such colorful names painted on their sides that I start writing some of them down: El Bucanero, Evel Knievel, Seminole, Comanche, El Rebelde, Arco Iris, Reina de los Ángeles, Jhonattan Alfredo, Non Plus Ultra, El diplomático, El gladiador, El

toro, El faraón, Mandingo, Enterprise, Castilla, Indiana Jones, and my favorite, Cunard Princess.

There are also many good things to be said about Costa Rican society, whose people like Americans much as the Bulgarians like [p.2] Russians. Costa Rica is the most democratic country in Latin America; wealth and land are more evenly distributed than in its neighbors. Elections are honest. All political parties are legal and publicly funded. Compromise rather than confrontation is the national style. In contrast with, say, Nicaragua or Chile, Costa Ricans cannot be exiled from their own country. The army has been abolished, and there remains only a politically powerless National Guard;¹ military spending is very low, and the savings are spent on social programs.

One cannot arrive in Costa Rica without being informed of the above, which is endlessly repeated in tourist literature. Costa Ricans promote their government as a tourist attraction, and it is also a source of national pride and even smugness. Nevertheless, I find myself uneasy and unhappy despite positive expectations, and the present column is an exploration of the reasons and a substitute for the discussions which I can hardly have with the Costa Ricans.

The first of these reasons is isolation. There is little high culture here. More serious, while literacy is high, there is little reading. Bookstores are few and poorly stocked; as is typical of isolated places, alcohol consumption is high. The isolation from Hispanic culture is greatest: while with effort one can buy the *Miami Herald* and *Newsweek*, I have not seen a copy of *El País*, *Cambio 16* or any similar publication from a Latin American country. WOR-TV is

¹ Under U.S. pressure, Nicaragua and various other countries in the region abolished their armies a generation before Costa Rica did so in 1949, replacing them with National Guards. However, as soon as the U.S. relaxed the pressure the National Guards took on the political role of armies; the dictator Anastasio Somoza was head of the Nicaraguan National Guard. The situation in Costa Rica is very different.

retransmitted locally; WTBS and Cable News Network are available on cable, and these are seemingly the most attractive and accessible sources of world culture and information to many Costa Ricans.

A second source of my unhappiness here is the country's economic crisis. Costa Rica has gone far towards eliminating misery; there are few abandoned children or sidewalk dwellers, and San José is not surrounded by the *villas miseria* or *pueblos jóvenes* which one sees around Lima, Managua, Mexico City and elsewhere. Costa Rica is the leader or one of the leaders in Latin America not just in literacy but in life expectancy, reduction of infant mortality and the birth rate, control of tropical diseases, and protection of the environment. [p. 2]

At the same time that these significant accomplishments have been made, prosperity has not been achieved. The country is bankrupt, as it was hit very hard by the increases in oil prices and interest rates. It has a debt it cannot pay, and crushing interest payments; imports far exceed exports, so the debt is still increasing. The standard of living has deteriorated considerably in the last five years, and further deterioration is expected. The national unwillingness to make ends meet now—by further devaluation of the overvalued *colón*, say—means a larger potential crisis later.

For one who reads the newspaper and talks with the people, it is not much fun sojourning in a bankrupt country. The atmosphere is depressed; there are no scapegoats on which problems can be conveniently blamed, nor any obvious or painless solutions. While there is a lot of lip service in favor of investment and bewildered admiration of the industrialization of such small and resource-poor countries as Taiwan and South Korea, foreign investment is in effect not welcomed. Repatriation of dividends (sending profit out of the country) is politically incorrect; legally mandated fringe benefits, leaves, and bonuses cost employers a high 44% of workers' salary, and there is pressure to increase these benefits further. Nationalization and confiscation insurance is advertised in the local paper (*La Nación*, June 23, 1986, p. 32A).

A declining standard of living is threatening to any government, and Costa Rica's democracy seems far less sound than the utopian image presented to foreigners. The inability of the legislature to bring revenues and expenditures into balance is freely admitted. An income tax is politically impossible; high customs duties are the main source of government revenue, and smuggling is out of control. The constitution, born of civil war as recently as 1948, is already called out-of-date. When one reads statements such as "el país y sus instituciones están amenazados. Hay que usar mano de hierro y actuar" (*La Nación*, June 14, 1986, p. 15), and finds politics compared with soccer ("nuestra política es un espejo del fútbol," *La Nación*, June 8, 1986, p. 14A),² [p. 4] it is hard to relax and take Costa Rica as its people want it to be taken.

Compounding my discomfiture over this situation is that Costa Rica's economic problems would be even more severe were it not for aid from the U.S. Costa Rica has received and continues to receive more U.S. aid per capita than does any other country. The aid comes in a startling variety of forms: agricultural aid, housing aid, fellowships to study in the U.S., and various other types, including direct covering of a portion of Costa Rica's trade deficit because "deterioration of Costa Rica's standard of living is contrary to American interests in the region" (*La Nación*, June 3, 1986, p. 4A).³ In fact, no small part of my

² What is meant by this is that politics is enjoyed as a sort of national sport, with colors, heroes, party flags, patterns of honks on car horns, and a great deal of enthusiasm and activity but without depth or examination of issues. Despite repeated inquiries, for example, it took an expert on constitutional law, employed by the legislature, to explain to me the difference in policies between Costa Rica's two principal political parties.

³ Costa Rica "has paid interest to banks through U.S. loans and direct grants, and only the infusion of substantial sums...is keeping Costa Rica's standard of living from plummeting even more disastrously" (*Dossier*, September 1986, p. D-24).

unhappiness is from the activities of my own government and the eagerness with which Costa Ricans support it. (Working for the U.S. embassy is the most prestigious job in town.) Spanish-language studios of the controversial Voice of America are here. The United States Information Agency, which in a curious contradiction does not feel secure enough to post a sign outside its headquarters, gives out literature which at home would be described as “far right.” The quantity of aid given, and the grounds on which it is given, is disturbing enough. The open offers of further aid for further adherence to U.S. policy—by permitting military activities against Nicaragua to be based in Costa Rica, for example—are embarrassing.

Nicaragua in fact is constantly in the background. There is no investment in the far north of Costa Rica; many farms have been abandoned for security reasons. Through bus and truck service north from Costa Rica, formerly frequent, has almost vanished.

A small but significant section of Nicaragua’s population is in exile, and the largest portion of it is in Costa Rica. Costa Ricans resent the economic burden these Nicaraguan refugees represent, and they are perceived as a destabilizing influence and poor candidates for Costa Rican citizenship. Just as refugee Cubans in Miami, they constitute a political force. If one wishes to find out what is wrong with Nicaragua today, Costa Rica is the place to learn about it. As Costa Ricans point [p. 5] out, they were not afflicted with impoverished refugees during the Somoza years. Certainly the quotations from Daniel Ortega which I read in the Costa Rican press, which covers Nicaragua extensively, are eye-openers.

But the real problem is Costa Rica itself. The longer I am here the more disturbing facts I stumble across. While the media are supposedly free, there is an Oficina de Censura, and reporters must be licensed, the latter a violation of the American Human Rights Convention (*Tico Times*, July 4, 1986, p. 4). 48% of those incarcerated in Costa Rica are awaiting trial (*La Nación*, July 6, 1986, p. 14A). Costa Rica is that rarity today, an officially Catholic country. As in Franco’s Spain,

religious instruction is provided at state expense; among other consequences this provides income for priests, and ensures their support for the government.

And behind the democratic political institutions, there are some familiar cultural features. There is the same amiable, maddening disorganization, the same “vuelva Ud. mañana,” the large and inefficient bureaucracy, the hypersensitivity to real or imagined slights, the relative disinterest in producing and selling goods. The primacy of the family, with the implicit submission of the individual to it, is stated in the constitution. By American standards, relations between the sexes are immature. It is even a burden to be faced again with ubiquitous smoking.

Finally, there is the very sensitive problem of security. Costa Rica prides itself on public order, for which reason it is the preferred spot in Central America for researchers, students, and tourists, almost all of them Americans. These bring considerable foreign exchange, and there is a deliberate effort to downplay dangers in order not to scare them away. There is little anti-Americanism among the Costa Ricans, for most of whom Reagan is a hero, but there are many foreigners besides the Nicaraguan refugees in the country. An increase in petty crime is commonly attributed to foreigners, and it is assumed that they were responsible for a grenade set off in front of the U.S. consulate the week before our arrival.

Our classes are held in rooms leased from the Centro Cultural Costarricense-Norteamericano, the name a euphemism, I learn after arrival, as it is actually an entity of the United States Information Agency. Never before have I had to teach in a building protected by [p. 6] an armed and sometimes inebriated *guardia civil*. We are instructed not to evacuate the building in the event of a bomb threat because we are safer inside than out. All shatterable glass, down to the mirrors in the restrooms, has been removed pending the arrival of Mylar to reinforce it. One must pass through a metal detector to enter, and it is hard to say which worries me more, that the checkpoint is

necessary, or the lackadaisical efforts of the security officers who—at times—do not check familiar faces or pretty girls, and ignore or do not hear the alarm when it goes off and interrupts their conversation.