

Semester Study Abroad in Cuba Politics, Culture and History of Cuba

A 13-week, 16-credit study abroad program in Cuba
January 29 – April 27, 2024



Politics, Culture and History of Cuba is offered by the Autonomous University of Social Movements (AUSM) in coordination with the Facultad Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales (FLACSO), an affiliate of the University of Habana. The 13-week program uses a social justice framework and popular education pedagogy that combines discussion-based classes, occasional lectures, and hands on experience.

Social justice framework

US students will encounter a reality in Cuba unlike anything they have experienced. The total absence of commercial advertisements, mass organizations structured by the State, free universal health care and education, lack of ready access to many consumer goods - all these things, and many more, will quickly turn students' worlds upside down. The social, political and historical realities of Cuba generate many questions, challenge pre-conceived notions, and quickly move students outside their comfort zones. All this creates the perfect conditions for a unique and rewarding educational experience.

In this context, our social justice framework provides students with a set of paradigmatic questions that are familiar enough to generate energetic debate, while the Cuban context moves students outside of the political parameters that generally frame their experiences in the US. Among the key social justice questions students face in Cuba are:

- Decision-making processes and citizenship rights: What does democracy mean? What constitutes genuine political participation? How do political and economic systems impact the integrity of community? We explore these questions by discussing democracy vs paternalism, democratic centralism, bureaucracy vs autonomy, the role of mass organizations, formal elections vs popular consultations, collective vs individual rights, the role and meaning of community, the roles of leadership with particular focus on hierarchy vs broad-based leadership formation.
- Social justice vs wealth production: Is wealth creation more important than equity? What are proper incentives for labor? Is it possible to build a social consensus around labor norms that are not based solely on wage levels? We explore these questions by discussing rights vs responsibilities, market mechanisms vs socialization, material vs moral incentives.
- Race, class, gender and sexual orientation: Does the State have the final, or even most important, say on questions of gender and racial equity? What is the impact of historical legacy on current social relations? Are race and gender inequalities automatically overcome in a

classless society? What is Cuba's history with issues of sexual orientation and AIDS treatment? We discuss legal vs social vs cultural rights, inter-relationships among race, class, gender and sexual orientation.

These are not simple debates over ideas. They manifest themselves in grocery store discussions, at family dinners, in the mainstream media, and in government discourses. They unfold in a particular historical context impacted by an often-contentious relationship with the US government, and grounded in nationalism built on foundations of sovereignty, equity and Cuba's particular brand of Marxism.

Core program

The core program consists of **four classes** integrated into an interdisciplinary, modular system. This means we combine theoretical classes with workshops and experiential learning. Reading materials are scholarly texts from a variety of disciplines. Students meet for 8 hours of formal academic classes each week, including lectures, seminar discussion, and group reflection sessions. Connecting theory with practice, these classes are combined with **experiential learning** encounters, meetings with community groups, non-governmental organizations, neighborhood groups, and visits to cultural spaces and museums. Experiential workshops may include visits to public schools, medical centers, cooperatives, mass organizations, and community outreach efforts. Students participate in one or two cultural events each week, including Cuba's world-renowned cinema, dance, music, theater, sports events, etc. These immersive activities outside the classroom comprise 25 hours of instructional time per week.

Assignments include four essays, in which students synthesize academic lessons from course readings and lectures together with their experiential learning and everyday life with homestay families. Bringing all these elements together, they reflect on questions such as the impacts of the US economic blockade and their understandings of how race, sexuality and gender operate in Cuba. Students are also tasked with weekly presentations on the reading material and key takeaways from their classes. Spanish instructors assign grammatical exercises, conversation topics with homestay families, and oral reviews as needed.

Students also prepare a **final project**, in which they plan their re-entry to the US and how they will put their experiences in Cuba to work both academically and socially. The task is to prepare a tool the student can use to effectively communicate core insights from their time abroad to audiences back home, ideally paired with proposals for how this audience can take concrete action in solidarity with the Cuban people. The final project may be a paper, written individually or collectively, or it may involve production of a play or video, development of an educational program for a US audience, production of art, planning a conference, production of a zine, etc., with subject matter determined in consultation with professors. Students whose final project consists of a performance, presentation, or work of art will also be asked to write a theoretical justification of their project. All projects should also contain an action plan, outlining how exactly this "tool" will be implemented upon the student's return. During the final days of the program, students will present their projects in seminar-style format, with fifteen minutes for presentation and twenty minutes for discussion/critique by fellow students and professors.

In addition to spending 12 weeks in and around Havana, students spend one week touring the country. They spend two days participating in activities with Cuban students at **Korimacao**, an education center for theater, music, and visual art. They then visit **Playa Girón** (Bay of Pigs), the site of the attempted US invasion in 1961, and the neighboring city of **Cienfuegos**. The group then heads east along Cuba's southern coast, stopping in the **El Nicho** ecological preserve before spending two days in the colonial city of **Trinidad** to learn about its architecture and history. The final stop is **Santa Clara** in central Cuba, where students visit the memorial to Che Guevara and learn about one of the Revolution's most definitive battles.

Housing and meals

Students live with families in Marianao, located on the southwest side of Havana, about 20 minutes from the city center. It is a popular barrio with a large Afro-Cuban population. Families are carefully screened by AUSM staff permanently based in Marianao. Homestays provide students with a unique opportunity to learn firsthand from Cuban families while also improving their Spanish.

Communication with the US

The cellular network is the best way to access the internet, so students are encouraged to purchase a Cuban SIM card. However, Cuba's 3G network is slow and spotty, so students should drastically reduce their expectations of internet connectivity. Whatsapp and Facebook Messenger are the best modes of communication with people in the US.

Legality

Because of restrictions under the US embargo of Cuba, the home institution of each student must accept the program for credit toward an undergraduate or graduate degree and provide a letter to the student signed by the on-campus staff or professor designated to manage travel to Cuba. For more information on the nature of travel restrictions to Cuba for US citizens, the Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) administers the embargo and the relevant regulations are reproduced below. The full regulations are available at <http://www.treasury.gov/resource-center/sanctions/Programs/pages/cuba.aspx>.

Courses

Cuban Politics (POLS 373/573) 60 hours, 4 credits: Analysis of the Cuban political system, how it is organized, how it has changed in the decades since the Revolution, the role of the Cuban Communist Party, and Cuba's relationships with the United States, the rest of Latin America, and formerly-colonized countries around the world. The course includes a critical discussion of the role of Cuban society in politics and decision-making, as well as a theoretical and practical introduction to Marxism and attempts at practically applying it within Cuban politics. Classroom discussions and readings are complemented by experiential activities, such as meetings with civil society organizations, mass organizations such as the Federation of Cuban Women and Committees in Defense of the Revolution, youth active in the Communist Party, and members of the university students' union. Course objectives:

- Understand the political structures and state institutions that shape Cuban society.

- Understand the ebbs and flows of US-Cuba relations, particularly as they relate to worldwide and regional political trends.
- Understand Cuba's international relations, with special focus on Latin America and Africa.
- Understand the structure and decision-making processes of the Cuban state, with special emphasis on the Cuban Communist Party and the various mass organizations (Federation of Cuban Women, Federation of Cuban Labor, Committees for the Defense of the Revolution).
- Understand basic Marxist analytical categories, including class, exploitation, value, and crisis.
- Compare the Cuban and United States' political systems.
- Critically evaluate the real-life application of Marxism in Cuba.
- Synthesize knowledge into proposals for social change, especially proposals that can be translated into the US context.

History of Cuba (HIST 371/571) 60 hours, 4 credits: Overview of Cuban history, including colonization, independence struggles, the 1959 Revolution, the social impacts of the revolution, the Special Period after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, and the reforms beginning in the 2000s. There is particular emphasis on US-Cuba relations as they developed through the centuries. Classroom discussions and readings are complemented by experiential activities, including visits to the Ethnography Museum, Museum of the Revolution, the Museum of the Literacy Campaign, and visits to significant historical sites such as colonial Havana and the Plaza of the Revolution. The course will allow students to situate an analysis of contemporary Cuba within a historical context. Course objectives:

- Understand the impact of colonization and slavery.
- Understand the historic cultural and political influence of the US, beginning with the period of the US Civil War / Cuba's 10 Years War for independence.
- Understand the development of Cuban nationalism and how its meaning compares to US nationalism.
- Understand the genesis, dynamics, and impact of the 1959 Revolution.
- Understand the stages of development of post-revolutionary Cuba, with special focus on the development of socialism and the Non-Aligned Movement.
- Understand the development and impact of the "Special Period."
- Understand and evaluate the economic and social changes announced during the Sixth Congress of the Communist Party.
- Analyze Cuban history within a hemispheric and global context, as well as within the timelines of global geopolitics and social movements.

Cuban Society and Culture (SOC 372/572) 60 hours, 4 credits: Investigation of Cuban society today, including race and gender dynamics, sexuality, disability, spirituality, children and youth, the arts, non-governmental organizations, and state-organized federations. Students develop a complex analysis of the various institutions, identities, and relationships that form Cuban society, situating their analysis in a rich web of government institutions, state-organized mass organizations, cultures, beliefs and practices. Special attention is given to the intersection of race, gender and class in contemporary Cuban society. Students also learn about special topics, including innovative solutions to obstacles (such as agroecology), and the challenges triggered by the Covid-19 pandemic. Classroom discussions are complemented by experiential activities such

as visits to arts spaces, public health projects, schools, clinics, community outreach projects focusing on disability, sexuality and youth, and agroecology cooperatives. Course objectives:

- Understand the historic development of race and gender relations in Cuba, including a critical evaluation of the impact of state-sponsored measures to alter race and gender dynamics after the revolution.
- Understand the impact of the Cuban Revolution on second and third generation post-revolutionary Cubans.
- Understand the impacts of the current wave of emigration on Cuban society and inter-generational dynamics.
- Understand the role, scope of action and impacts of non-governmental organizations.
- Understand debates around disability rights within Cuba, especially given its current demographic shifts.
- Understand the role of spirituality within current Cuban society, especially as it relates to Cubans of African heritage.
- Compare and contrast Cuban society and culture with that of the United States, giving special attention to the impact of US culture on Cuba.
- Critically evaluate impacts of the US embargo on Cuban society.
- Critically evaluate Gramsci's "cultural revolution" as it manifests itself in Cuba today.
- Synthesize lessons into proposals for how the ideals of the Cuban Revolution can be promoted within contemporary society.

Spanish Language (SPAN 280/380/480) 60 hours, 4 credits: All students take a written and oral placement exam upon arrival in Havana. The beginning level course is intended for students with limited capacity to understand Spanish. Instructors use popular education methodologies and emphasize oral competency. Course objectives include basic conversational vocabulary, basic verb conjugation, and fundamental aspects of Spanish grammar, such as gender, pronouns, negation and sequencing. The intermediate course is intended for students with a year of college-level Spanish and who demonstrate a basic competency with the Spanish language. Students master basic grammatical structures and build conversational skills through discussion of selected texts that promote cultural understanding. Course objectives include advanced vocabulary specific to Politics, History, and Sociology courses, advanced conjugation (such as the subjunctive), listening comprehension, and the ability to converse about common topics. The advanced course is designed for native, fluent, and near-fluent speakers. The course focuses on Cuban literature, poetry, film, and other expressions of Cuban culture. Course objectives include the developing familiarity with Cuban literary, political, and cinematic figures, the ability to discuss cultural movements throughout Cuban history, comparison across genres and time periods, and the ability to synthesize this knowledge as to formulate original opinions on these topics. Across all three levels, language is taught by engaging with and reflecting on Cuban culture. In addition to formal classes, the experience of living with local host families provides many hours of language practice, and topics related to the home stay will be addressed in class.

Political Education (supplemental): After participating in the Fall 2018 semester as an undergraduate student, current AUSM staff person Sabrina Melendez identified the need learn about the fundamental differences between capitalism and socialism, as a basis for students to make sense of their experiences in Cuba. Upon returning home, they brought together a collective of volunteers and created an online reading group called Understanding Capitalism. The course features short, accessible texts on topics such as historical materialism, the labor theory of value, economic crises, imperialism, reproductive labor, racial capitalism, disability, indigenous sovereignty, ecology, and 'animal' as a political

category. Over 500 people have participated in the reading group to date, and AUSM is proud to integrate this impactful project into our own curriculum.

Professors:

- Dr. Marta Rosa Muñoz Campos, Director of FLACSO- Cuba
- Dr. Reynaldo Jiménez, Academic Coordinator of FLACSO- Cuba
- Dr. Stuart Schussler, Autonomous University of Social Movements
- Msc. Lisandra Quirós Izquierdo, Autonomous University of Social Movements
- Sabrina Melendez, Autonomous University of Social Movements
- Dr. Fabio Fernández Batista, Department of Philosophy and History, University of Havana
- Dr. Olga Pérez Soto, Department of Economics, University of Havana
- Dr. Beatriz Torres, Center for Demographic Studies, University of Havana
- Dr. Marcelino Roberto Almaguer, FLACSO- Cuba
- Dr. Dacheri López, FLACSO- Cuba
- Dr. Geydis Fundora Nevet, FLACSO- Cuba
- Dr. Luisa Iñiguez, FLACSO- Cuba
- Msc Isys Pelier, FLACSO- Cuba
- Kenneth Fowler, FLACSO- Cuba
- Dr. Lázaro Díaz Fariñas, FLACSO- Cuba
- Dr. María del Carmen Zabala, FLACSO- Cuba
- Dr. Lino Borroto, FLACSO- Cuba
- Dr. Ana Isabel Peñate Leiva, FLACSO- Cuba
- Msc. Danay Díaz Pérez, FLACSO- Cuba

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- Gott, Richard. 2005. *Cuba: A New History*. Yale University Press. [Chapters 3-7]
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- "Understanding Capitalism Syllabus." 2022.
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Assignments, grading and rubric

Participation – 30%

Essays – 40%

Final presentation – 10%

Final Project – 20%

Essays

The essays are an opportunity to bring together the material you're learning about in classes and the assigned readings with your experiences from activities, conversations with your homestay family, and everyday life in Cuba. What have the academic sources taught you about the topic, and how does your experience support, contradict, or complicate this picture? These questions will help you explore your *understanding* of the topic. And you may need to fill in gaps in your understanding of certain topics by interviewing your homestay family about them (for example, differences between various generations' understandings of nationalism). We invite you to also *analyze* the topic by exploring the historical, political, economic, cultural (etc) forces that shape what you're learning in class and hearing in conversation, possibly leading you to critically evaluate the situation. Finally, we also invite you *propose* a course of action. What is to be done to advance the struggle for liberation? This is where the rubber hits the road, where theoretical reflection bridges into practice, so we hope you'll use your essays as an opportunity to develop courageous proposals.

Please discuss your ideas with the coordinator during office hours. If you wish to write about a different topic than the prompts listed here, please discuss with them also.

- Essay 1: What were your expectations, assumptions, and understandings about Cuba prior to arriving? How has your understanding of the country changed over these past weeks?
- Essay 2: How has the US blockade affected the Cuban people? How do Cubans characterize their country's relationship with the US? How is Cuba resisting the blockade?
- Essay 3: How do racism and sexism manifest in Cuba? In what ways has socialism combatted these structures of oppression and in what ways has it failed to? How do Cubans' perceptions of racism and sexism differ from the understandings of everyday people in the US?
- Essay 4: Given your experience in Cuba, what is your understanding of democracy? How does it relate to the meaning and practice of democracy in both capitalist and socialist societies? What lessons do you think US social movements should learn from socialist understandings and practices of democracy?

Essays should be 5-8 pages in length (double spaced), although what's most important is developing and justifying your argument. Essays will be evaluated according to the following criteria:

- Effort, completion and clarity (45)
 - Is the essay complete, or are there aspects that remain in draft form? (15/45)
 - How much effort did the student put into the project? (15/45)

- Is the writing clear? (15/45)
- Justification (30)
 - Is the information presented well-researched and based on specific texts, lectures, activities, and conversations? (Please cite them.) (15/30)
 - Does the essay advance a clear argument? Is there a solid theoretical and/or empirical justification for it? (15/30)
- Analysis, evaluation and proposal (25)
 - Does the essay primarily demonstrate an understanding of the issues raised, or does it culminate in political evaluations and/or proposals for what is to be done?

Final project and presentation

The final project is to create a *tool* you will use once you return home. This can be a tool to educate people about life under the embargo, the Cuban political and economic system, your vision for a better world, to create a local solidarity organization, to inspire people to dream bigger and act in a more committed way, or whatever else you decide. It can take the form of a presentation, a zine, an article to be published, a photo essay, a collection of poems, a video, a proposal for a new organization or conference, or whatever else. The point is to use this assignment to do the theoretical and practical planning work that will help you be able to act more effectively once you return home.

Your final project should draw on our academic classes, group discussions, activities, the course readings, and your discussions with your homestay family. Projects usually consist of three parts:

- The presentation/artwork/plan itself
- A *theoretical justification* of why you decided to focus on this topic and give this form to your project. What are you trying to achieve by doing all this, and why is it a good idea?
- A *plan* for how you will use the tool

Please discuss your ideas with the coordinator during office hours. The coordinator will work with you to determine what a finished project looks like in each case.

Final projects will be evaluated according to the following criteria:

- Effort, completion and clarity (45)
 - Is the presentation / zine / documentary etc complete, or are there aspects that remain in draft form? (15/45)
 - How much effort did the student put into the project? (15/45)
 - Is the writing clear? (15/45)
- Justification (30)

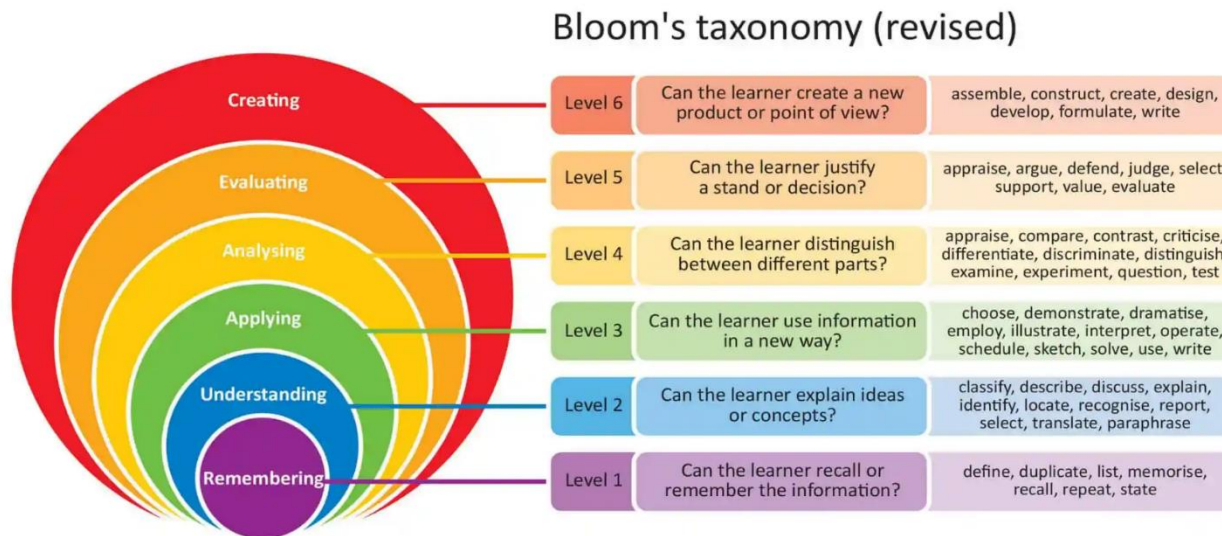
- Is the information presented well-researched and based on specific texts, lectures, and activities? (Please cite them.) (15/30)
- Is there a solid theoretical justification for why this is a good idea, for how it contributes to social change? (15/30)
- Feasibility (25)
 - Is it feasible to use this tool? Given the roll-out process described, can we be confident the student will implement the project?

Students will also give an oral presentation describing their projects (presentation slides are welcomed but not required). Presentations are generally 15-20 minutes, followed by 10-15 minutes of Q&A. They will be evaluated according to the following criteria:

- Length and clarity (45)
 - Within the allotted time, did the student clearly communicate the basics (who, what, when, where, why and how) of their plan?
- Justification (30)
 - Did the student communicate what outcomes they hope to achieve and how they contribute to social change?
- Inspiration (25)
 - Is the plan compelling? Is it exciting and likely to generate continued participation?

Grading

In general, AUSM grades according to Bloom's taxonomy, with students demonstrating higher-level skills receiving higher grades:



(Anderson & Krathwol, eds 2001)

This is also a rule of thumb we use when assigning numerical grades:

95-100	Exceptional	80-84	Good	60-69	Passing
90-94	Excellent	75-79	Competent	50-59	Marginally passing
85-89	Very good	70-74	Fairly competent		

Schedule of classes and activities

Spanish classes meet twice weekly throughout the semester.

Week 1

Classes

Orientation
Spanish entrance exam
Political education

Activities

Getting to know Havana and the Historic Center
Getting to know Marianao
The Martin Luther King Memorial Center
The Art Factory
Weekly reflection and evaluation

Week 2

Classes

Cuba's independence struggle
The Cuban Republic at the turn of the century
Political education

Activities

Ethnography Museum
Quinta de los Molinos
University Student Federation
Weekly reflection and evaluation

Week 3

Classes

The Cuban Revolution
Cuba after the Revolution: Life within the Soviet bloc
Political education

Activities

Museum of the Revolution
Literacy Campaign Museum
Cuban Communist Party youth
Weekly reflection and evaluation

Week 4

Classes

Contributions of Marxism to modern thought
Paolo Freire and popular education
Political education

Activities

Cuban Women's Federation
International Relations Institute
Oscar Arnulfo Romero Center
La Casa Tomada
Weekly reflection and evaluation

Week 5

Classes

Cuban electoral system
State and party in the 2019 Cuban Constitution
Political education

Activities

Committee in Defense of the Revolution
José Martí Memorial
Roundtable with university students
Weekly reflection and evaluation

Week 6

Classes

Cuba-US relations and the blockade
Feminism, gender and family in Cuba
Political education

Activities

Memorial of Condemnation
Daycare center
Africa House
Weekly reflection and evaluation

Week 7 *Trip to the Korimacao arts center and to the cities of Cienfuegos, Trinidad, and Santa Clara*

Week 8

Classes

African religions and culture
Sexual diversity in Cuba
Political education

Activities

Hamel alley
National Center for the Promotion of Health
Quisicubana Project
National Center for Sex Education
Weekly reflection and evaluation

Week 9

Classes

Disability and development in Cuba
New economic actors: cooperatives and small businesses
Political education

Activities

FLACSO vegetable garden
Aristides Viera cooperative
Happy Little Farm
Weekly reflection and evaluation

Week 10

Classes

Healthcare and Cuba's response to Covid-19
Science, technology and innovation, from the youth's perspective
Political education

Activities

Poly-clinic
Roundtable with youth volunteers in the Covid-19 effort
A+Espacios
Plaza of the Revolution
Weekly reflection and evaluation

Week 11

Classes

Environment and the Work for Life project
The rights of children and youth: Towards greater inclusion
Political education

Activities

Primary school
Weekly reflection and evaluation

Week 12 *Reading week, for preparing final projects. Students may also volunteer in areas of interest.*

Week 13 *Final presentations, final evaluation, Spanish exit exam, going away party with homestay families, and preparations for departure.*