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Cover Story

His Key to Life: Communicating through Music, page 46

Featured Inside

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Cuba

Restructuring a Revolution

written by **MICHAEL KIMMERLEIN '16**

On December 17, 2014, United States President Barack Obama and Cuban President Raúl Castro announced that diplomatic ties between the two countries would be restored. By January of 2015, less than a month after the announcement, University of Rhode Island (URI) political science Professor Maureen Moakley and economics Professor Richard McIntyre were in Havana with 20 students.

Moakley had been studying political issues in the Caribbean while looking at the possibility of statehood for Puerto Rico. Although her primary research focus is on local politics, especially in Rhode Island and New England, she has recently shifted her attention to comparing countries in the Caribbean.

"You have a region of the globe that has a similar history of colonialization and slavery," she says of the Caribbean. "Yet, look how differently the Dominican Republic, Cuba, Puerto Rico and Haiti have evolved."

The fascinating question is "How did they develop?" Moakley says. "And how these various governments do or do not provide peace and prosperity for the citizens and a place in the global environment."

With each country's issues, Moakley finds the situation in Cuba the most fascinating.

"Because it was a communist revolution it doesn't conform to the norms of democracy," she says. "But in many ways they've done things remarkably well."

She points to Cuba's comprehensive health care system, high level of literacy and its relative economic, social, political and racial equality, which she says is unknown elsewhere in the Caribbean.

That all sounds well and good, but Cuba is obviously not without critical problems. Cuba went through a dramatic and long depression in the 1990s after the Soviet Union collapsed and so far has not been able to transition effectively from failed central economic planning and state ownership.

"The fascinating thing now is to see how they emerge," Moakley says. "It's no easy thing to restructure a revolution; they have to balance the social and political norms of equality and redistribution with an incentive-based economy."

The economy is what Professor McIntyre is looking at in Cuba with the concept of cooperatively owned enterprises [article page on 12]. But Moakley is looking at the bigger political picture.

What she's interested in, she says, is "how the regime balances its notable achievements and the structural problems without having a counter-revolution."

Many people there are not happy about the idea of moving away from a "command socialist economy," according to Moakley, but what most Cubans appear to want is a socialist democratic society like Sweden or Norway with an economy based on incentives and rewards for productivity but with an extensive welfare state.

Moakley appears regularly on Rhode Island Public Radio as a commentator on "Political Roundtable" and analyzes trends in Rhode Island state politics. Her interest in the Caribbean was piqued in the early 2000s by the issue of Puerto Rico statehood. Convinced of the need for more opportunities for foreign study, she has led student trips to the Dominican Republic and to Cuba during URI's J-Term [January classes] where they considered the vast differences between Cuba and other Caribbean countries.

"You go to some Caribbean countries today and go out into the countryside and you see people living in appalling poverty," Moakley says. "You don't see that in Cuba."

People have reasonable housing and transportation, she says, and are well educated and have good health care. The problem, Moakley says, is the economic system was inherently flawed, particularly in agriculture.

"It simply does not work," she says. "They import 60 percent of their food."

So, Moakley is looking at theories of democracies, the development and the success or the failures, of their application.

But is democracy something that could work in Cuba? Moakley thinks it can, but with some caution.

"Ultimately, it could work but it's far down the line because they're still committed to a communist ideology," she says. "In Marxist philosophy the notion is that the state will eventually wither away, perhaps."

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- Maureen Moakley

Maureen Moakley
professor of political science

When this happens, Moakley explains, the hierarchical infrastructure of the communist party will eventually have less of a stronghold on the country and citizens will have more of a say.

"There would be more input from citizens, cooperatives and local representation," she says. "They're trying to move toward an economic and social system that allows people to manage their own affairs."

With diplomacy between the United States and Cuba being reopened, Moakley is interested in seeing how Cuba's government evolves.

"They have the potential to do a lot better than a lot of other Latin American countries," she says. "And it's striking that they do some things better than we do." 99.8 percent of Cubans are literate, slightly higher than the rate in the United States, and Cubans live just as long as Americans but spend only 4 percent as much on health care.

As the renewed relationship between the United States and Cuba grows, Moakley says she sees the classic United States policy of trying to impose our ideas of democracy and democratic values changing.

"The fact is we trade with Vietnam, we trade with China, that's a standard that I think will develop," she says, noting that with Cuba importing the majority of its food, it is in the United States interest to trade with this country.

In addition, Moakley says Cuba is beginning to adjust the authoritarian system to be more inclusive.

"As they move along, they've already opened up the representative process," she says. "The government is becoming more representative as we speak. They have quotas for women and for different races."

Down the road, Moakley adds, a more representative system could ultimately replace the force of the communist party.

As for her students, Moakley sees Cuba as a unique learning opportunity – opening their eyes to a government totally different from what they know in the United States.

"It's fascinating for students to observe a relatively egalitarian society," she says. "They understand the shortages – and flaws that people don't live the way we would expect people to live in the United States."

With her students and in her own research, Moakley is seeing in Cuba a system that is viable yet is vastly different from our country. Moakley notes the importance of looking at and learning from alternative systems.

"Students can learn from Cuba, the critical problems, but also the remarkable successes in equality and racial relations," says Moakley.

The *Cooperation* MODEL

written by **MICHAEL KIMMERLEIN '16**

For University of Rhode Island (URI) economics Professor Richard McIntyre, cooperation is key when it comes to running a successful economy.

Imagine the stereotypical boardroom where executives in expensive suits make decisions that affect workers on a factory floor that they themselves may never have worked on. This is a common way of conducting business.

The model is one that McIntyre thinks needs to be changed. His research is focused on the labor process.

"Employers can't technically buy labor," he says. "But, what they can buy is your time, and labor process theory looks at the various ways in which employers can motivate employees to use their time effectively."

This can be done in a number of ways. One method is implementing technology in the workplace.

"The classic example is the assembly line," McIntyre says. "Control over the pace of work is taken away from the employee."

This allows employers to see where productivity is breaking down. If you're not keeping up with the assembly line – think of the classic candy factory scene from television's "I Love Lucy" where Lucy shoves chocolate into her mouth and clothes to try to keep up with the pace – the boss can see right away who's falling behind.

Then there is the foreman model where a low-ranking manager's sole job is to get people to do the work they're paid to do. Finally, there is the job ladder theory, a formerly popular method in the United States.

"You can get people to work hard if they believe that by working hard they will be promoted," McIntyre explains. "If you can see a career for yourself in a certain organization, or that your performance in a certain organization might lead to a better job in another organization, then you will work hard."

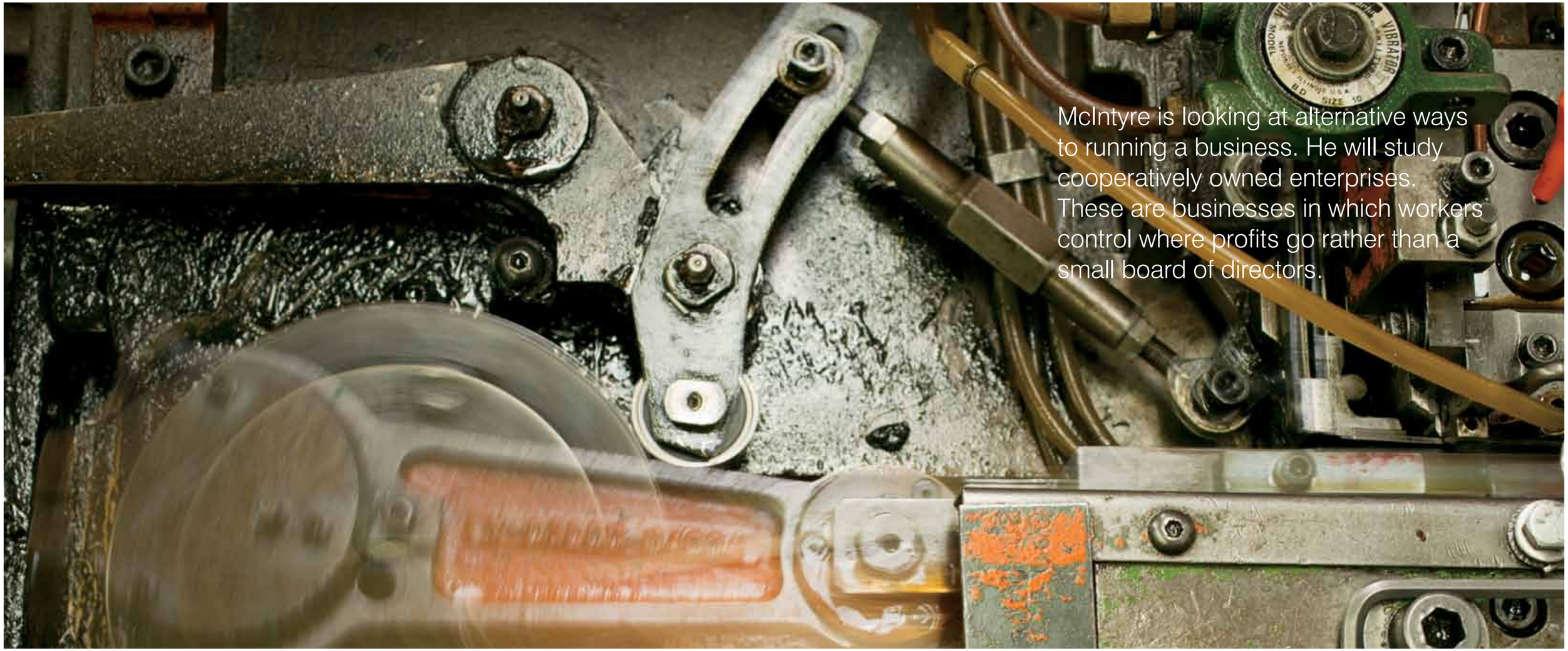
But, this expectation does not necessarily pan out. McIntyre has observed that many of these organizations and companies – mostly big and multinational corporations – have been "flattened." Those job ladders leading low-level employees to higher-paying management positions do not exist much anymore, McIntyre says.

"There was a wave in the 1980s and '90s, where the lingo was 'flattening the organization,' limiting the number of middle management and decently paid production worker positions," McIntyre says. "That's great from management's point of view because it saves money, but the problem is employee motivation. It's hard to motivate your employees when they see no chance for growth within the company."

From McIntyre's perspective, the distance between employer and employee is widening with globalization and that poses a problem. Workers in a factory in Bangladesh providing shoes, for example, cannot go to the company headquarters in the United States and confront their employer about their work conditions. He explains that this issue is important to analyze now considering how the global economy has grown in recent years.

McIntyre recalls the tragic Rana Plaza collapse in Bangladesh in 2013 when more than 1,000 people died.

"Those people were working in unsafe factories to produce the clothes that you and I wear," McIntyre says. "So we are morally implicated in that disaster."



McIntyre is looking at alternative ways to running a business. He will study cooperatively owned enterprises. These are businesses in which workers control where profits go rather than a small board of directors.

Morality – that's not a word you typically hear coming from most economists. Professor McIntyre is not most economists. Most economists don't like to talk about moral issues because there's no way to address them scientifically – something McIntyre thinks should change.

"It's something we avoid at our peril," he says. "Economics is always involved with morality, whether other economists address it or not. You can't get away from it."

Consequently, he is looking at alternative ways to running a business. When he takes sabbatical in the spring, he will study cooperatively owned enterprises. These are businesses in which workers control where profits go rather than a small board of directors that likely never worked on a factory floor.

"That's the source of our problems," McIntyre says of the board of directors' model, a conclusion he came to when a colleague raised the point in a critique of his 2008 book, "Are Worker Rights Human Rights?" and ultimately shifted the way he was looking at his research.

"If that group of people can get a bigger surplus or profit by shifting those jobs to Mexico, they'll do it," McIntyre explains. "The directors, generally with no real personal connection to the low-level employees, strive to maximize profits at any cost. That's their focus."

The potential solution, he says, of some of the issues brought about by globalization lies in granting the factory workers who produce the surplus – control of appropriating and distributing the surplus. His daughter works for such an organization in Vermont and the model is working in multiple places in Europe.

During his sabbatical McIntyre will investigate these enterprises in three places: Cuba, France and Vermont. His work in Cuba extends URI's presence there.

Along with Professor Maureen Moakley [article on page 8] from URI's political science department, McIntyre has started the URI Cuba program that takes students to the country for the month of January, and recently had two students study there for an entire semester.

In Cuba it is actually official government policy to encourage cooperatives, McIntyre says. And this is the model that he sees changing the way business is done in the United States and around the world.

To McIntyre, the connection between what he sees in Cuba and elsewhere is the focus of his research.

"I think a lot of what's going to happen in the 21st century is the development of a new model, which is neither state socialist nor corporate capitalist, but ways in which workers can have control over their own lives," McIntyre says.

The model McIntyre envisions hinges on the idea of taking power out of the hands of the stereotypical boardroom of company executives and giving it to the people actually doing the hands-on work – those making the car or the shoes or computer.

McIntyre explains: "The desire to and the possibility of controlling the material conditions of your existence is what people in all of these places are looking for."

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