

Our Fidel - Fidel Castro, 1926-2016

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Of all the tributes to Fidel Castro and assessments of the Cuban leader's contribution to the world socialist movement, this one by Argentine political economist Claudio Katz seems to me particularly outstanding. It was published first on his web site. My translation and notes.

Richard Fidler

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With Fidel's death Latin America's principal revolutionary figure of the last century has left us. Amidst our great sorrow at his passing it is difficult to assess his stature. But while emotion clouds any evaluation, the Comandante's influence [1] can be appreciated with greater clarity now that he has left.

The media simply emphasize that importance in a descriptive sense. They describe how he was present in the major events of the last 50 years. And his worst enemies in the empire confirm that overwhelming historical influence. They celebrate his death in order to forget that he lasted in office throughout the mandates of ten U.S. presidents and survived countless assassination attempts by the CIA.

Cuba is the obsession of the Pentagon and the frustration of the State Department. No other country of that size has inflicted so many defeats on the empire. After 53 years David forced Goliath to re-establish diplomatic relations. [2]

Fidel arouses admiration that borders on devotion. The praises stem from his capacity to make possible what was highly improbable. But this fascination is frequently divorced from the content of his achievement.

Many idolize Fidel but from the standpoint of capitalism. They extol the Caribbean leader while promoting variants of the system of exploitation that the Comandante fought throughout his life. In reality, they praise the creator of alien universes while rejecting any such journey by themselves.

For the Left, Fidel always had another meaning. He was the principal designer of a revolutionary socialist project of Latin American emancipation. He put into practice the objective inaugurated by Lenin in 1917 and therefore occupied in Latin America a place equivalent to that of the promotor of

the soviets.

But unlike his precursor, Fidel led for decades the process he initiated in 1960. He can be assessed as much for his triumph as for his management.

From a longer-lasting perspective, Castro's achievement is comparable with the campaigns undertaken by Bolívar and San Martín. He led regional actions attempting to link a second independence for Latin America with the international advance of socialism.

Fidel tackled these tasks of Cyclopean proportions while maintaining a very close relationship with his followers. He addressed his messages to millions of sympathizers who cheered him on various continents. He achieved a rational and passionate connection with the multitudes who heard him speak in countless meetings.

The man and the epic

The Cuban leader always acted with audacity. He radicalized his project under the pressure of the empire and adopted a socialist assignment that smashed all the dogmas of the epoch. He demonstrated that it was possible to initiate an anticapitalist process 90 miles from Miami, and with the OLAS [3] he restored the objective of the region's anti-imperialist unity.

These three facets — the revolutionary, the socialist and the Latin American emancipator — Fidel shared with Che. The same meeting of minds that brought them together in the landing of the Granma [4] was verified in the strategy of armed actions against the dictatorships and reactionary governments. They maintained political agreements that disprove everything written about the animosity between Castro and Guevara.

The Comandante restored socialist internationalism after decades of mere statements (or clear betrayals) by the Kremlin bureaucracy. He extended this to Africa with the sending of fighters who played a central role in the defeat of apartheid.

These actions replaced the old connection of slavery between Africa and Latin America with a new relationship of solidarity against the common enemies. This attitude elicited enormous affection for Cuba in the Afro-American communities, corroborated in the impressive visits Fidel made to Harlem and his encounters with Mohammed Ali, Malcolm X or Harry Belafonte.

But Fidel's historic stature emerged with greater clarity after the implosion of the USSR. He achieved anew what appeared impossible by sustaining Cuba's survival amidst unprecedented adversity. He led in the harshest sacrifices of the special period and sustained a collective resistance forged after three decades of revolution.

That battle of convictions was probably more extraordinary than many military actions. Fidel achieved what very few leaders have achieved in similar circumstances.

That victory served as an example for the radical processes that sprouted in the new millennium. When neoliberalism touched off popular rebellions in South America, Hugo Chávez and Evo Morales had a political reference that was absent in other parts of the world. Fidel maintained the socialist ideal as a compass, to be recreated on other foundations.

In Latin America's new stage, the Comandante encouraged campaigns against the external debt and Free Trade treaties, and with ALBA [5] promoted agencies adapted to the post-dictatorship context

in Latin America.

In this context the longing for the “new man” reappeared in the missions of the Cuban doctors. These healthcare contingents demonstrated how the life of the defenseless cast aside by capitalism could be protected.

Fidel combined his aptitude as a speaker (e.g. the “history will absolve me” type of discourse) with military genius (the battle of Cuito Cuanavale in Angola) and geopolitical intelligence (for acting in the international order).

He developed this remarkable profile while maintaining an extremely modest life style. His private life is almost unknown because of the strict separation he established between his privacy and his public exposure.

Over several decades he was involved in all the details of Cuban reality. His tireless activity was popularized with a saying that alluded to this ubiquity (*y en eso llegó Fidel* - “and therein came Fidel”).

He probably decided to organize his own retirement in order to counteract that overwhelming effect. Beginning in 2006 he placed himself in the background and concentrated his entire activity on the battle of ideas. He deployed a prolific critical analysis of environmental depredation and the poverty generated by capitalism.

Castro’s surprising trajectory confirms many conclusions of Marxist theoreticians on the role of the individual in history. A society’s direction is never dictated by the exceptional conduct of the great leaders. That evolution is mainly determined by the objective conditions prevailing in each epoch.

But in the decisive events that define that course, certain individuals play an irreplaceable role. Fidel confirmed that principle.

It is important to remember that protagonism when confronted with the naive myth that attributes the achievements of the Cuban process to the “pressure of the masses.” This formula assumes that the extraordinary direction taken by the country was due to radical demands from below that the leaders had to support.

In fact it was the opposite that occurred. A consistent leadership convinced the majority through the exemplary nature of their conduct. Fidel led the leaders who were in charge of this epic achievement.

Unresolved dilemmas

Cuba has carried out not the revolution it wanted but the one it could make. There is therefore still a significant distance between ambition and attainment. The major cause of this disparity is glaringly obvious: no titan can fully build socialism in a small plot of land under the relentless harassment of the planet’s major power. The surprising thing is the degree to which Cuba was able to advance albeit faced by such a rival.

This small country has won enormous triumphs that reinforced national self-esteem and the authority of the Comandante. From the Bay of Pigs to the return of the child Elián and the liberation of the five captives in the United States, Cuba won major victories under Fidel’s leadership.

But none of those milestones managed to remove the blockade, to close Guantánamo, or to

neutralize the terrorist groups trained by the CIA. Faced with the economic harassment, the family blackmail, the temptation of U.S. citizenship or the mirage of opulent consumerism conveyed by Miami, the tenacity of the Cubans seems miraculous.

This heroism has coexisted with the particular problems the revolution has confronted for a long time now. These difficulties must be assessed in comparison with what has been achieved, bearing in mind the objective limitations affecting the island.

The economy is a central area among those problems. Cuba has shown how a non-capitalist way of thinking can help to avoid hunger, generalized delinquency and school abandonment. In a country with resources closer to Haiti's than Argentina's advances have been achieved in infant nutrition, mortality rates or healthcare that surprise everyone.

But the mistaken imitation of the Russian model of complete nationalization produced ineffective results that severely hampered agro-industrial productivity. This mistaken course reflected the difficulty in reconciling continental revolutionary strategies with market-oriented policies. The idealism required by the first objective collided with the egoism of commercial life.

After the special period the country has survived with tourism, agreements with foreign companies and a dual currency market that has segmented the population between those who receive remittances and those who don't. The society has changed with this emerging social stratification and the subsequent expansion of market activity in order to save foreign exchange and revive agriculture.

Fidel was personally the motive force behind this difficult turn, well aware of the suicide that a return to the shortages of the nineties would entail. Many analysts thought that a return to capitalism had begun, forgetting that the capitalist system presupposes private ownership of the major companies and banks. The reforms have so far opened up more favourable opportunities for the cooperatives, small property and undertakings without allowing the formation of a new ruling class.

The present model seeks to recover high growth rates while simultaneously limiting social inequality. It therefore preserves the economic pre-eminence of the state sector combined with public health and education systems.

Although the changes are proceeding slowly within a context of increasing relief, the three long-term alternatives — capitalist restoration, the Chinese model, or socialist renewal — remain open.

The primacy of one of those models will no longer be the work of Fidel, who rejected the first option, was assessing the second, and favoured the third. His legacy is to continue the egalitarian project within the narrow margins that currently exist in which to implement it.

It is not easy to disentangle this course when the weight of the market, foreign investment, tourism and remittances is increasing. But the suppression of those supports of the economy would lead to the end of the revolution through simple asphyxiation. The balance sought by the reforms is an indispensable foundation for any future transformation.

Significant challenges

The bourgeois establishment has always contrasted the "dictatorship" of the island with the marvels of western democracy. The presidents of the U.S. plutocracy, with great hypocrisy, typically object

to the island's single party system as if the commonality shared by Republicans and Democrats allowed more diversity.

In addition, they avoid mentioning how the electoral colleges violate majority suffrage, and the low level of electoral participation in their country compared with the high participation of the Cubans.

Even greater duplicity is exhibited by the rightists in Latin America. While endorsing the institutional coups d'états in Honduras, Paraguay or Brazil, they wax indignant over the absence of republican formalities in Cuba.

The critics on the left point in a different direction. They question the restrictions on individual freedoms that have given rise to numerous injustices in Cuba.

But if we assess the five decades that have gone by, what is notable is the almost bloodless nature of all the radical transformations effected. It is enough to compare the small number of human losses with the record in other revolutionary processes. The high level of political participation explains this achievement.

Cuba has never suffered the tragedy of the Gulags and therefore avoided the collapse experienced by the USSR. Its political model is very controversial, but to this point no theoretician of direct, soviet or participative democracy has indicated how to govern under the empire's harassment without resorting to defensive measures that restrict citizens' rights.

The revolution itself has tried different mechanisms to correct the errors that this situation generates.

Many analysts think the bureaucracy is the main cause of the country's misfortunes, or the great beneficiary of the malformations in the political regime. There is no doubt about its responsibility in many mishaps. But since this stratum will exist as long as the state endures, not much is to be gained from blaming it for all the ills.

To be sure, the bureaucracy greatly increases the inequality and inefficiency. Egalitarianism helps to counteract the first but does not correct the second. A growing democratization provides a counterweight to these misfortunes but produces no miracles. In those intricate fields of state functioning Fidel's calls to assume responsibility were always more useful than waiting for magic laboratory recipes.

Foreign policy is another focus for harsh questioning of Castroism. The mass media presented Fidel as a mere pawn of the Soviet Union, not recognizing the difference that separates a revolutionary from any servile ruler. They did not imagine any conduct for Cuba other than that practiced by the puppets of the empire.

Some left critics did not understand Fidel's strategy either. The Cuban leader based himself on alliances with the USSR in order to drive forward a global revolutionary process that his partner rejected.

The tension between the two parties was confirmed on countless occasions: the October missile crisis, the Vietnam war, the uprisings in Africa or Latin America. There were concessions and sometimes errors by the Comandante, such as his approval of the Russian invasion of Czechoslovakia. That occupation buried the socialist renewal that the Prague Spring had promised.

But throughout the period of greatest revolutionary ferment in Latin America, Fidel opted for a balance between diplomatic compromises and continued support of the rebel movements. He sought

to overcome Cuba's isolation, maintaining support for the struggles of the oppressed. Castro had to combine the new exigencies of foreign policy with his ideals as a revolutionary.

The right continued to criticize him for his support to popular uprisings, and some currents on the left objected to his indulgent attitude toward governments of the ruling classes.

Much of Fidel's advice was certainly problematic, but responsibility for the decisions remained in the hands of those who received these suggestions. The Comandante always conveyed the validity of the decision as he saw it in the processes of each country and his approach was marked by defiance of the authorities of the left of his time.

Nor should we forget how Castro dismissed the recommendations of the Communist party [6] in the Sierra Maestra and the opinions of the Kremlin in regard to the Latin American insurgency. The Cuban leader taught us through his own practice how a revolutionary acts.

The best tribute

Fidel has died in a very difficult year. Figures as detestable as Macri, Temer[7] or Trump have come to government. Their ideologists are back to proclaiming the end of the egalitarian projects, forgetting how many times they have pronounced this same sentence. Fidel would have said that we must accordingly understand what is happening in order to overcome despondency.

Many editorial writers state that Castro did not understand the present period of consumption, individualism and pragmatism. But in any case he grasped the crisis of capitalism that determines such conduct. That central fact is invisible to Fidel's challengers.

His most vulgar enemies in Miami celebrated his passing with music, confirming the worthless value they assign to human life. But the festivities were meagre consolation for conspirators who have failed to build the least base of support within the island.

Since Fidel retired a decade ago, the repeated speculation over Cuba's future has drawn less attention. However, it is of great interest to find out what Trump will do. We do not know yet whether the brutal statements he made about Castro's death are part of his uncontrolled verbal diarrhea or are a foretaste of greater aggression.

Whatever the case, Latin America must prepare to resist a president-elect who has promised to expel millions of undocumented residents. A new anti-imperialist battle is approaching, and it requires fighting against scepticism and resignation.

Some people say that Fidel embodied the ideals of an older segment of the population removed from the expectations of the youth. They do not take into account how capitalism is striking at the new generation, pushing it to recreate the resistance. The development of that action will tend to update the socialist project of Latin American emancipation.

Fidel struggled for the revolutionary transformations that this society needs. It is now up to us to continue his work.

Claudio Katz, December 2, 2016

P.S.

* Posted by Richard Fidler at Monday, December 05, 2016:

<http://lifeonleft.blogspot.nl/2016/12/fidel-castro-1926-2016.html>

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Footnotes

[1] Fidel Castro is often referred to as Comandante, or Commander, in the Latin American left, in reference to his informal title as “Commander in Chief of the Cuban Revolution,” a legacy of the guerrilla struggle of the 1950s.

[2] See “Release of Cuban Five Opens New Chapter in Cuba-US Relations.”

[3] Latin American Organization of Solidarity.

[4] The name of the boat in which the initial cadres of the anti-Batista guerrilla force travelled from Mexico to Cuba in 1956.

[5] Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America.

[6] Then known in Cuba as the Partido Socialista Popular.