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The Cuban epic - The true assessment of the revolution is particularly important at a time when so much pressure is being exerted to convert Cuba into “a normal country.”

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Release of Cuban Five opens new chapter in Cuba-US relations

Introduction

The release December 17 of the remaining three of five Cubans held for 15 years in US prisons is an historic victory for the Cuban people, their government and supporters around the world.

Ramon Labañino, Geraldo Hernández and Antonio Guerrero joined Fernando González and René González, released earlier, in an emotional reception in Havana with President Raúl Castro.

The five were arrested in 1998 while working in Miami to uncover terrorist plots against the people of Cuba being masterminded by anticommunist extremists in Florida. In a 2001 report to the United Nations, the Cuban government catalogued 3,478 deaths on the island as a result of terrorism, aggression, acts of piracy and other actions. Many of these actions were attributed to operatives of the CIA. [\[1\]](#)

Announcing the release of the Cuban intelligence agents, US President Barack Obama acknowledged that his country's half-century attempt to defeat the Cuban Revolution had failed. He said Washington would now move toward normalizing relations with Cuba, beginning with establishment of embassies by both countries.

However, although he also spoke of easing economic and travel restrictions the US has imposed on Cuba, Obama made no promise of an end to the inhuman economic blockade of Cuba first imposed by Washington in the early years of the Cuban revolution. Ending the blockade remains a pressing task for the solidarity movement that did so much to publicize the case of the Cuban Five.

In the following article, first published in mid-November, Argentine Marxist Claudio Katz outlines some of the outstanding achievements of Cuba's socialist revolution, highlights the challenges — now given added force by the restoration of diplomatic relations with Washington — and critically analyzes issues raised in the far-reaching economic reforms now under way in Cuba. This article has been widely circulated in Latin American media. My translation from the Spanish is based on the text as published December 2 in *Cubadebate* [2]. The endnotes are mine.

Richard Fidler

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The Cuban epic

Claudio Katz

Cuba brought the greatest ideas of social transformation to several generations of Latin Americans. Its revolution touched the youth, convulsed political organizations and shook the left.

In the Sixties Castroism broke with all the dogmas, demonstrating that a socialist process was possible on the continent. Ninety miles from Miami the conspiracies of imperialism were met with generalized nationalizations. And they were followed with heroic attempts at the regional extension of the revolution.

The Cuban decision to resist capitalist restoration after the collapse of the USSR amazed us again. The population of a small island adjacent to the imperial center confronted a suffocating international isolation and managed through fantastic efforts to maintain their independence.

The durability of this process was decisive in the change that has been registered in the South American scenario. The reinstallation of a US colony in Cuba would have blocked the resurrection of the radical processes and limited the victories achieved in opposition to neoliberalism.

In fact, it is very hard to imagine the advances made by Venezuela and Bolivia without the example of a country that knew how to confront the power of the United States. The repetition in the island of the trajectory taken by Russia or Eastern Europe would have buried for a long time all the revolutionary traditions transmitted to the continent.

More than two decades have elapsed since the collapse of the USSR and its international economic bloc (COMECON), and important transformations have been registered in Cuba. Those changes contain enormous possibilities and unquestionable dangers.

Achievements and challenges

The main lesson of late from what has occurred in Cuba is the huge capacity for popular improvement offered by a noncapitalist economic and social way of thinking. Amidst economic shortages, diplomatic isolation, military provocations, financial pressures and media aggression they have managed to preserve parameters of life expectancy, education or child mortality far superior to those in the rest of the region.

This extraordinary achievement remains incomprehensible to the apologists of capitalism. Since they are unable to present comparable examples, they simply don't mention those

achievements. Cuba has shown how hunger, generalized crime and school drop-outs can be avoided with scarce resources.

The country is now confronting serious difficulties in maintaining free provision of major services, but these limitations are quite different from the adversities that prevail in similar countries.

Cuba is not Argentina, Brazil or Mexico. Its situation must be compared with the Latin American economies situated below that scale of economic development. None of those cases can exhibit the profile of an island without unemployment, destitution or massive poverty.

In Cuba the basic needs of the population are covered. All families have access to food, education and health. The shortage of provisions or the lack of variety in articles of consumption do not include those goods that are indispensable for guaranteeing that coverage.

Cuba has an excellent level of school achievement. A recent study by the World Bank considers that its educational system maintains parameters of professional training in many respects similar to those of Finland, Singapore or Canada (Lamrani, 2014).

And it has achieved a life expectancy index that exceeds by five years that of the rest of the continent, and lower mortality rates in all age groups. It has the lowest average rate of malnutrition in Latin America and one of the highest percentages of homes connected to potable water systems (Navarro, 2014).

Furthermore, the country maintains the highest index of food security in the region and a very low poverty level (4%) compared with the average in Latin America (35%) (Vandepitte, 2011). The United Nations Development Program estimates that Cuba is one of the three countries in Latin America that qualifies as having a high level of development (UNDP, 2014)

But Cuba confronts a serious problem in sustaining those advances. The stagnation and privations that followed the collapse of the USSR have been alleviated, but they point to the need to carry out an economic turn. The entire society recognizes that this cannot be postponed, since no one has been able to recover the pattern of income that was common in the 1970s and '80s.

The collapse of Soviet support was followed by a worsening of the US blockade (the Torricelli Act in 1992 and Helms Burton in 1996). This siege blocks trade and generates monumental costs. A ship that stops at a Cuban port cannot moor in the United States and the world's principal market cannot admit a product with Cuban components.

Cuba has suffered periodic provocations that oblige it to pay for a costly military apparatus for its defense. The Cuban government needs to keep 600,000 men on immediate battle alert and must finance a military structure that is totally disproportionate to the size of the country (Isa Conde, 2011).

Moreover, in recent years the country has suffered major commercial and climatic setbacks. Export prices have fallen (nickel) and import costs have risen (foodstuffs). It has been beset by hurricanes, droughts and heavy flooding, especially between 1998 and 2008. These upheavals have not resulted in human tragedies, as they usually do elsewhere in the continent, but they have entailed costs in the millions. The international economic crisis has also resulted in a reduction in income from tourism despite the modest increase in visitors.

The economy has been operating for several years now with a budget deficit and the level of activity is sustained on a razor's edge. The trade balance is as tight as its foreign funding.

Cuba has resisted the restoration of capitalism at the great sacrifice entailed by the “special period” of the 1990s. The economic impact of the collapse of the USSR was devastating. Its entire trade was linked to the COMECON countries and the sales of sugar to that bloc paid for a set of external expenditures.

The country was left with nothing and had to secure its defense and the provision of basic goods in conditions of encirclement and collapse of transportation, electricity and fuel supplies. Very few political regimes have managed to overcome setbacks of that size.

A recent study explains the strength of that resistance by the memory of the social transformations achieved in the 1960s and '70s. And it highlights the refusal to again turn the island into a US brothel. The study draws an instructive comparison with the devastation of people's rights suffered in the former COMECON member countries, which returned to capitalism during that period (Morris, 2014).

At the end of that experience, however, Cuba is in no condition to continue the previous road toward socialism. It is clearly impossible, in a small place in the Caribbean, to erect in solitary fashion a society of abundance and equality. The continuity of the revolution has made it possible to defend the conquests, but not to ensure the productive development and material well-being that the consolidation of socialism presupposes. If the experience of the USSR proved how difficult it is to forge that society by cutting links to the world market, it is clearly inconceivable that Cuba would cherish that idea.

The important change in the Latin American context has helped to reverse Cuba's isolation. Hardships have been alleviated and the functioning of the economy has been normalized, especially through cooperation with Venezuela. But this relief simply helps to sustain what has already been achieved.

Three problems

The adjustments that Cuba must make are dictated by three long-range changes. First, the geopolitical reality introduced by the collapse of the USSR dislocated the entire productive structure. The country had molded its economy to the expectation of major post-capitalist advances in the world or at least in the region.

It was always thought that an effective pursuit of socialism was impossible in a single island and for that reason Cuba sought high levels of complementarity with its partners in Eastern Europe. That connection was combined with the hope for a succession of revolutionary victories in Latin America.

That political strategy explains the high degree of specialization the island developed in doctors, engineers, teachers and soldiers. Closely bound up with these activities was the construction of the values of a society that honoured its fighting heroes, the *brigadistas* and internationalist missions.

Success in this period was registered on many planes. Cuba brought its methods in teaching literacy, in preventive medicine and military preparation to many countries in Latin America and Africa. This legacy was shared in particular with Angola and Nicaragua in the 1970s and '80s, with Haiti (following the earthquake) and currently with Venezuela (exchange of teachers for oil) or Bolivia (doctors and surgeons with sophisticated skills).

Further evidence of Cuba's specialization in relief and solidarity actions is the recent sending of a medical team to Africa to fight the Ebola epidemic. No less than the *New York Times* dedicated a

highly favourable editorial to this action, contrasting the risks assumed by those professionals with the US reluctance to send its own missions. More shocking is the refusal of the insurance companies to cover the financing of these operations (*New York Times*, 2014).

The much-appreciated Cuban doctors are a product of the activist-oriented education that the revolution introduced to support the international expansion of socialism. When that objective was frustrated, the country had to confront the paradox of relying on an educated population with First World ambitions in a fragile Third World economy.

A mass of workers and professionals with high level skills and working-class consciousness are operating in an island with low-productivity manufacturing and farming industries. This divorce between the high cultural and intellectual development of the society and the extremely narrow economic base has innumerable manifestations. Receptionists in the tourist industry, for example, have better professional training than the average visitor.

This disconnect generates difficult problems for anyone who fails to find work at the pay scales consistent with his or her specialty. A taxi driver or waiter making several times the income of an engineer or doctor is the clearest evidence of this strange situation (Padura, 2010, 2012).

During the last 20 years Cuba has registered radical changes in its economy that generate a second type of structural problems. The country survived by accepting tourism, signing agreements with foreign firms and establishing a dual currency market that segments the population between those who receive remittances and those who don't.

The appearance of this important inflow of foreign exchange brought about a very significant economic and social transformation. The bulk of the incoming dollars are not invested. They are transferred to consumption, producing a gap in purchasing power between those with dollars and those without.

Some analysts describe how this dual market has created a significant social stratification. Those on the margins of this circuit have to adjust their budgets and accept austere diets. Those with foreign currency can enjoy better clothes, computers or cellphones (Vandepitte, 2011).

This rift arose in 1993 with the establishment of a dual market that was intended to alleviate the lack of foreign currency. Its unequal impact was cushioned through taxation. To adapt the egalitarian ideal to the external adversity, the state compensated by taxing the new inequality.

A third problem besetting the Cuban economy originates in the mistaken imitation of the Russian model of complete state ownership. The acritical fascination with the USSR led in the 1970s to an inoperative extension of the state sector that had a very negative impact on agro-industrial productivity. The wave of nationalizations wiped out all the small shops and private manufacturers. In 1977 the last vestiges of self-employment were eliminated.

These measures failed to recognize that the transition to socialism is only feasible through a gradual advance of the plan over the market congruent with the efficiency achieved by the state sector in comparison with the private. Cuba repeated the Russian form of comprehensive state ownership without considering the application of the more moderate strategies adopted in Yugoslavia or Hungary.

All attempts to overcome the inconveniences created by complete state ownership were unsuccessful. Voluntary labour, the 10 million ton sugar harvest [3] or the rectification process in the late 1980s were simply palliative. And a deaf ear was turned to the questioning expressed at the time by such agencies as the CEA (the Center for American Studies). [4] The main negative effect of

this statization was the decline in productivity and Cuba's continued dependency on imported food.

These mistakes were probably due to theoretical problems (misapprehension of the transition to socialism) and bureaucratic implementation. But it is clear as well that it was not easy to reconcile the priority assigned to the continental revolutionary strategy with indulgence of the market. The first objective requires a level of idealism, heroism and fairness that clashes with commercial life. Revolutionaries have never found it easy to balance romanticism with realism. Lenin and Trotsky confronted very similar problems during the 1920s.

The current reforms

To deal with this complex scenario, the government has decided to expand the economic scope of the market in order to promote investment. After much discussion and hesitation, they began implementing the resolutions first discussed in 2008 and synthesized in the 2011 guidelines. Existing restrictions on small private activity were relaxed and the creation of businesses and employment of labour were allowed. Also, the ration book is to be abolished, there is to be a gradual liberalization of prices, and attempts will be made to eliminate the existence of the dual currency system.

Measures include greater autonomy in the management of the state enterprises. Each firm will be able to manage its budget in a decentralized way, to acquire inputs and to sell products according to its own estimates (PCC, 2011).

The immediate objective is to save foreign exchange. Unlike the former USSR or China, Cuba cannot survive as an autarchic entity. It needs dollars in order to purchase fuel and import food. Thus it has decided to rearrange the four sources of hard currency income: tourism, nickel, professional services and remittances.

To revive agriculture idle lands will be given over to small private producers and cooperatives, in the hope of repeating the expansion that China achieved in the 1980s. But Cuba faces not only a shortage of available fertile lands. It also has a high level of urbanization that hinders incentives to work in the rural sector.

The most controversial of the reforms is the introduction of a status of "available" workers among all those affected by the reorganization of the public enterprises. The lack of resources means that the harsh reality of companies operating at a deficit must be transparent, as such firms cannot be salvaged by the state. That is why the principle of an official employment guarantee is being eliminated. The idea is to create a new segment of private sector and cooperative employees that absorbs the cutbacks in the state workforce (Maiki, 2011).

The government has repeatedly postponed decisions that clash with the aspirations of the revolution and the values proclaimed for decades. But it understands that it has no other remedy. The pro-market reforms are seen as the only road toward overcoming the critical stagnation in the economy.

These changes do not in themselves imply a return to capitalism. That system presupposes private ownership of the major enterprises and banks, formation of a ruling class and generalization of exploitation. The reforms do not introduce any of those characteristics. They widen the scope for market management in the preceding framework. Concessions are made to private accumulation but within limits that tend to avoid a bourgeois restoration.

These changes have begun to be implemented in recent years. Numerous authorizations have been

given for the purchase and sale of houses or automobiles and cultivable parcels of land have been distributed. Small businesses have appeared such as the “paladares” (restaurants), as well as many commercial undertakings.

There is now a climate of more private activity and planned investments in home improvements. The greater flexibility introduced in this area includes restrictions on foreign ownership and inheritance to avoid a flood of purchases from Miami. The major agreements with foreign firms are centered on renovation of the Port of Mariel and the construction of an industrial zone in that region.

A critical point is the emigration of skilled workers. After the obstacles to travelling abroad were removed there was a torrent of departures. This expatriation is particularly evident among university graduates. As long as not enough jobs are created for the mass of engineers, sociologists or doctors it will be hard to slacken this brain drain.

The general reorganization of employment has already begun with the 350,000 employees who have made the leap toward small businesses. Self-employed workers make up a minimal portion (6%) of the labour force but their number could rise considerably in the coming years.

The danger of a major wave of corruption together with the pro-market reforms is a recognized threat. More than 300 public officials have been jailed or face charges in that connection. Everyone knows how this disease bled the former USSR and is now affecting China. But the major challenge is to speed up the growth rate in an economy that has not managed to expand by more than 2 or 3% annually. Investments are scarce and international financing is not coming in (Rodríguez, 2014).

The reforms have developed so far in a framework similar to the New Economic Plan (NEP) tried in the USSR in the 1920s and in China in the pre-Deng era. They do not go beyond the limits compatible with the continuity of a socialist project. Experience has demonstrated that the leap to capitalism does not occur through mere extension of market radius. It appears when the sector of the bureaucracy that favours reconversion of the elites into ruling classes becomes predominant.

What occurred in the USSR demonstrates that this political decision is the decisive factor in the return to capitalism. In Cuba the funds needed to repeat this process of restoration are not in the hands of the state officials, but among those who receive dollars. However, the leaders define how those resources are to be used.

State ownership and cooperatives

The reform is being debated intensively in Cuba, belying the image of unanimity or silence that exists abroad. All the myths about the absence of discussions are based on ignorance of these polemics. Three different currents have developed in these debates. One highlights the advisability of preserving the pre-eminence of the state. Another favours more market mechanisms. And a self-management approach stands for expanding the cooperatives.

The actual progress of the reforms also raises hard questions about the anticipated scope for waged labour. There are calls for establishing compensatory taxes and more precise limits on such contracts (Piñeiro Harnecker, 2010).

Others point the finger at measures that would increase social inequality (creation of golf courses or exclusive residences) and initiatives to permit the purchase of properties by foreigners (Campos, 2011).

Many questions are raised by those who favour strengthening the cooperatives. They call for encouraging the formation of networks of shops in the neighborhoods and reinforcing the already existing self-managed enterprises such as the UBPCs. [5] They estimate that the economy will be revived without encouraging individualism (Isa Conde, 2011).

This model promotes self-administered firms that take advantage of the knowledge of each territory and industry. It proposes forms of social control over those undertakings by citizens and local governments (Dacal Diaz, 2013).

This approach draws on a critical balance sheet of the bureaucratic difficulties experienced by these enterprises. It notes that the UBPCs encountered impediments and had little decision-making capacity in the vertically organized schemes of the past (Miranda, 2011).

These proposals are designed to set limits on the appetite for profits that is generated by the reintroduction of the market. They defend socialist values, limiting the opening to private initiative (Alonso, 2013).

But cooperatives in themselves do not resolve the bottlenecks confronting the economy. They provide an indispensable complement to the reforms that have been introduced in order to transform the accumulated (or consumed) currencies into investments. In the present situation the creation of this sector of small private enterprise is unavoidable. China can contribute credit and Venezuela oil, but Cuba must recycle its own sources of savings into productive activity.

Some direct questions about the reforms from purely statist perspectives are presented in another tone. They say that the current transformations open the way to capitalism, repeating the turn initiated by Gorbachev with Perestroika. They denounce the "bourgeois proposals" of the official documents, attack their "anti-socialist" content and challenge their proximity to neoliberalism (Fernández Blanco, 2011; Cobas Avivar, 2010).

This view recapitulates the old arguments of the orthodox school without explaining why complete state ownership had such a serious effect on the Cuban economy. It presupposes that the collapse of the USSR was simply due to reactionary conspiracies, and overlooks the suffocating role of the bureaucracy and the privileges it accumulated, muzzling popular dissent. This view assumes that Cuba can congeal its present situation, recycling the stagnation.

This approach warns against real dangers of unemployment and social polarization. But it does not explain how the general impoverishment could be avoided by reinforcing a process of statizations without resources. There is of course a possibility that ruling classes can gestate through the misappropriation of state funds. But the only way to counteract this is by expanding popular control.

The reintroduction of capitalism will not be consummated with the flourishing of small property. That phantom was used in the past to reinforce bureaucratic conduct and stifle individual economic initiative. There is no certainty that the expansion of trade will result in the immediate creation of great private wealth.

That sequence does constitute a risk should Cuba be faced with a major danger of collapse through simple deterioration. Cuba confronts alternative options for survival that require it to choose the lesser evil.

It is pure fatalism to assume that any NEP will end in capitalism, as occurred with Perestroika. In the period following the death of Lenin the result was completely different. Coercive statism was secured through forced collectivization. The challenge at present is to avoid both outcomes.

The critics say the reforms are being implemented by a bureaucratic caste in order to perpetuate its privileges, sacrificing the revolution. But they do not explain why this process did not occur after the collapse of the USSR. At that point there were more arguments than there are now to embrace the cause of capitalism.

This approach is in fact limited to proposing some form of compulsive planning which in the best of cases would lead to recreating a situation similar to the one that exists in North Korea. Cuba has managed to avoid the military encirclement endured by that country. Extreme statism brings more problems than solutions to the dilemmas facing the country.

Dogmatic questioning

A view that is convergent with that of the extreme statist critics postulates a dogmatic approach that sees the present course in Cuba as a ratification of capitalist restoration (Petit, 2011).

This diagnostic does not explain the criteria used to characterize that regression, nor does it present facts concerning this process. It simply notes the existence of this return as a fact that requires no further explanation. It suggests as well that imperialism supports this process, as if the island were not subject to severe US harassment.

These critics also make an analogy with China, arguing that the post-Deng capitalist course is now being reproduced in the Caribbean. These statements dispose of the matter and countenance the burial of the revolution.

Another characterization based on similar grounds attempts more consistent arguments, polemicizing with our view. It agrees in distinguishing periods or models and avoids saying simply that a restoration process is under way. It accepts our comparison with the Soviet NEP and considers that we are presenting a realistic diagnosis of the objectives of the pro-market reforms.

However, it holds that our view is purely economistic. These comparisons, it says, fail to account for the loss of a political compass. Lenin's NEP could coincide with similar initiatives in China or Cuba but was inspired by revolutionary policies that are absent in both those countries (Yunes, 2011).

This approach, although it recognizes the existence of similar economic orientations, validates Lenin and reproves Castro. It justifies in the Bolshevik leader what it objects to in the guerrilla fighter through a simple prior estimate. The one is deified, the other disqualified, notwithstanding the equivalent role that they played in two extraordinary socialist revolutions of the 20th century. It is unclear why that differentiation would invalidate the similarities in economic programs in comparable situations.

If the Russian NEP was meritorious solely because of its Leninist baptism it would lack relevance as a model for socialist transition. If, on the contrary, it offers guidelines for combining the plan with the market, it is an approach that can be of value in particular situations. By this standard one can understand its relative application at various times in the USSR, China and Eastern Europe. To engage in such an assessment is not to resort to any economistic simplification.

Our critic denounces the bureaucracy as the main enemy of the revolution within Cuba. But that is a generic designation that does not indicate who exactly are those conspirators. He suggests that the Castro leadership fulfils that role in a way that is analogous to Gorbachev, as if the resistance during the "special period" had been led by phantoms.

Our critic charges that state officials are accumulating foreign exchange that will be used in the capitalist restructuring. No one denies that danger. But that warning does not infer the existence of a law of historical repetition that assigns to Cuba the same fate that befell the USSR.

To assess the scope of this reported regression it is necessary to present some evidence of the alleged enrichment. Otherwise, it is sheer prejudice. Over the last twenty years the Cuban leadership has displayed an exemplary austerity, and the chief manifestations of inequality involve more the recipients of foreign exchange than they do the state officials.

But if the entire problem were reduced to pointing to who is being enriched, the dilemmas of the Cuban economy would immediately be overcome by disseminating that list. The bigger problem lies in defining an agenda. Should the entry of foreign currency from abroad be prohibited? Should tourism be ended? Should foreign investments be curtailed? Should the revival of small property ownership be prevented?

Faced with these difficult problems, our critics opt for silence. They think that any definition leads to "economism" and they prefer to journey in the haze, forgetting that Cuba is confronting dramatic alternatives of subsistence. One can only conclude from their criticisms of the reforms that they favour some form of total abolition of the market (as for example existed in Albania).

Alternatively, they are suggesting a call for an immediate world revolution, which by building universal socialism would overcome all the dilemmas of isolation. However, the actual difficulties encountered by the dogmatic currents in the previous century when they attempted to achieve those socialist victories serve to illustrate the complexity of that road.

Realism and scepticism

The critics place great hopes in soviet democracy as a means of resolving the Cuban economic blockages. They point to the centrality that Trotsky assigned to that mechanism in order to overcome the problems of the Russian economy in the 1930s.

No doubt this is an important aspect, but placing undue emphasis on it cannot produce magical results. Cuba is faced with trade embargoes, military provocations, a shortage of supplies, a lack of resources and the loss of strategic allies, and these problems will not disappear (or be automatically lessened) with higher degrees of internal democracy.

Trotsky was a realistic politician and never assigned miraculous effects to democracy. He was a trenchant critic of the Stalinist counterrevolution but he advanced very specific economic proposals for Russia. He opposed forced statization and advocated that the plan be combined with the market in tune with the NEP. This approach can serve as an antecedent to the reforms now under way in Cuba (Trotsky, 1973; 1991: 55-72).

When it comes to democracy we have to be very careful with comparisons. Trotsky had to deal with Gulags and executions of Bolsheviks; such things never existed in Cuba. On the contrary, Cuba has been the epicentre of the revolutionary process with the highest level of democratization and popular participation of the 20th century. It has achieved social transformations of Cyclopean proportions with a small number of human losses. Furthermore, its regimes of exception have been very restricted in comparison with similar processes, including in the Soviet Union in the time of Lenin and Trotsky.

The dogmatists locate the Cuban pro-market reforms within the orthodox neoliberal paradigm. They

think that an adjustment plan is being introduced, as opposed to the resistance that unfolded during the special period (Yunes, 2010).

The most curious aspect of this characterization is not the blindness in the face of the obvious chasm that separates Cuba's economic policy from that of Thatcher, Merkel or Cavallo. It is the claim that this policy is in sharp contrast with the policy carried out by the same government in the previous decade. The leaders who headed up a heroic struggle against imperialism are now portrayed as implementing Washington's recipes. How did such a transition occur?

The usual dogmatic explanation points to "Castro's bonapartist conduct" as opposed to the "pressure of the masses." But it is very hard to find any evidence of that relationship, since there are more than enough indications to the opposite in the official leadership in the resistance of the 1990s. Nor is it easy to demonstrate the existence of popular rejection to the later introduction of the reforms.

The critics navigate in a sea of contradictions. They question the low productivity of the economy, but suggest restrictions that would accentuate that problem. They reject isolation, but object to the alliance for survival that Cuba established in the past with the USSR. They predict the failure of reforms that have just begun without explaining why the forecasts of Cuba's collapse came to nothing in the last two decades. With perspectives of this kind, it is impossible to measure the exceptional Cuban epic of the last 50 years.

In other sectors of progressive opinion there is greater caution in their forecasts, scarce attention to the social nature of the regime and great scepticism about the future. The tendency is to point to the weight of repression, the waning of the libertarian utopia and the consolidation of an authoritarian political system (Stefanoni, 2013).

But they forget that in the terrible conditions of harassment Cuba has suffered what has actually occurred is a revolution with unprecedented degrees of freedom. This level of tolerance goes beyond not only the previous experiences of Russia or China but also the bulk of the radical nationalist experiences. Underlying the problem is the legitimacy of any revolution and its defensive protections.

It is not very sensible to presume that Cuba's achievements could have been obtained without suffering, sacrifice and error. The true assessment of the revolution is particularly important at a time when so much pressure is being exerted to convert Cuba into "a normal country." Using that deceptive standard, one can bury everything that has been built over a half century and open the doors to recreating the inequality and crime that prevail in Latin America.

Opportunities and expectations

Some analysts have noted in recent years the existence of an atmosphere of enthusiasm with the changes under way. They argue that Cuba is experiencing a "spring" that breaks with stagnation (Burbach, 2013). Others, more direct participants in this process, point to the positive impact of the present course but warn of the need to adopt initiatives of greater democratization such as reform of the electoral system and unrestricted access to the Internet (Campos, 2011).

In the same vein, there are proposals for new ways of thinking about dissemination of information and popular control over the state structure. Also noted are the delay in implementing the changes and the insensitivity to criticism (Dacal, 2013).

Such mistakes had negative consequences in the past. The enthusiasm for change will not last forever. It is worth remembering all the opportunities for renewal of socialism that were lost in Eastern Europe. The frustration that followed the Prague Spring demoralized an entire generation and facilitated the later restoration of capitalism.

Apathy is the main danger in a society that went through the test of the special period, but the wounds left by that trauma must be healed. In the present conjuncture it is necessary to fight the despair that is generated by the need for change and the preoccupation with its consequences. The turn to the market implies the adoption of measures that very few desire and everyone understands (Guanche, 2011).

Involving citizens in the direct handling of their future is the principal antidote to the dangers in the reforms. This can be achieved by supporting socialist democracy. The vitality of this system is an effective remedy to apathy. What happened in the USSR should serve as a counter example. Since the people considered themselves outside the political system they stayed on the margin of the changes that led to the restoration of capitalism.

Cuba has levels of real democracy superior to any capitalist plutocracy. Its leaders are not elected by an elite of bankers and industrialists, nor do they emerge from the cosmetic advertising constructed by the news media. They do not rule with terror against the population or the intimidation that dominates in some police regimes in Central America. But there are innumerable manifestations of insufficiency of democracy in Cuba's political system and its media. The reforms are the opportunity to correct those deficiencies.

If the economic changes manage to combine appropriately the cooperatives, small property and state priority, the recovery of the economy will renew optimism. The productive and commercial transformations could result in visible improvements in the standard of living of the population. The big challenge is to speed up those advances with the market while at the same time preventing the restoration of capitalism.

The immediate key to avoiding that danger is to limit social inequality through maintaining public and universal education and health systems. The exemplary nature of the leadership, combined with this support, will help in finding the way through the new crossroads facing the country.

The Cuban people have demonstrated an extraordinary capacity to cope with the difficulties, regaining confidence in the revolution. It is a country that requires great caution when it comes to making forecasts. It was often said that it would not withstand the blockade, the invasions, the shortages or the isolation, and it always emerged with elegance. I am sure they will again win the war.

Claudio Katz, November 20, 2014

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P.S.

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Footnotes

[1] For background information on the case of the Cuban Five, see <http://www.freethefive.org/>.

[2] <http://www.cubadebate.cu/opinion/2014/12/02/la-epopeya-cubana/#.VKHF5MB0M4>

[3] A goal established in 1970. Although a record harvest was achieved, it fell short by more than one million tons.

[4] In Spanish, the Centro de Estudios sobre América, an academic institution established in 1964 by the Cuban government with the task, inter alia, of providing intelligence information to Cuban leaders.

[5] The Unidad Básica de Producción Cooperativa (UBPC) is a cooperatively owned agricultural production unit that originated in the 1990s to replace state farms. It was intended "to link the workers to the land, establish material incentives for increased production by tying workers' earnings to the overall production of the UBPC, and increase managerial autonomy and participation in the management of the workplace." (Wikipedia)