

Fidel Castro (1926-2016) - “A towering champion of the oppressed, and the limits of Cuban socialism”

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Fidel Castro was a towering champion of the oppressed, but we shouldn't ignore the limits of the socialism he helped build.

Fidel Castro was, by any standards, a towering figure. In his frail late years his presence still resonated across Latin America, even among generations that did not experience the exhilarating shock of the 1959 Cuban Revolution.

Before the revolution, Cuba symbolized colonialism at its most pernicious. Its war of liberation from Spain was appropriated by the United States, whose government claimed that victory as its own and rewrote the newly independent country's constitution to ensure its dominance [1].

Cuba's sugar was taken by the imperialist interests that maintained its subservient status. Its culture — the voice of slaves who refused to be silent — was emptied of its content and offered to tourists for their consumption.

All that ended on January 1, 1959. A United States confident of its global dominance was challenged by a small Caribbean island. And every occupied country, every suppressed national liberation movement, stood up and celebrated. The giant, it seemed, had clay feet after all.

Again and again, Fidel Castro refused to surrender to threat or blackmail — it is that refusal that explains the blind fury and wrath of his enemies. Republican and Democrat administrations sustained the siege of Cuba for six decades, ranting in disbelief at their own ineffectiveness.

It was, of course, collective resistance that foiled the 1961 US-backed invasion at the Bay of Pigs. The 1962 Missile Crisis, however, showed the leadership in Havana that Soviet support was conditional, and that Cuba was a small actor in a global power game. Distancing itself briefly from Moscow, that was the moment when the country moved into its most radical phase, joining with the liberation struggles of the Third World in a common front that stretched from Latin America to Vietnam. That was the moment when Cuba inspired and symbolized the rising of the oppressed — expressed in the image of Che Guevara.

Guevara's death in Bolivia in October 1967, however, was a crossroads for the revolution. In Peru, Guatemala, and Venezuela, too, the attempt to repeat the Cuban experience had failed with disastrous consequences. Fidel, always concerned first and foremost with the survival of a Cuba under vicious siege and trapped by its economic limitations, drew back from the guerrilla strategy.

A year later, the failure of the 1969 sugar harvest to produce 10 million tons (as was inevitable) marked an ending. Within a year, Cuba fell fully and definitively into the Soviet embrace, and publicly identified with its Third World strategy of alliances and compromise. When Fidel went to

Chile, the future supporters of Pinochet took to the streets to bang their pots in protest; yet he was there to congratulate Allende on his election victory and the progress of his parliamentary road to socialism.

After the Bay of Pigs invasion, Castro declared that the revolution was socialist. Though Fidel himself came from a radical nationalist background [2], his announcement was a recognition of both Cuba's economic dependence on the Soviet Union and of the central role the soon-to-be-refounded Communist Party would play in its future.

In this context, socialism was understood to mean a strong centralized state along Soviet lines. This coincided with both Castro's and Guevara's views of how revolutions are won — by the actions of small and dedicated groups of cadre acting on behalf of the mass movement.

When the Soviets invaded Czechoslovakia in 1968, Castro supported the action, confirming once again Cuba's dependence on the Soviet Union and the nature of the new state in the wake of Che's death. But in Southern Africa, the country asserted its own, bolder, foreign policy.

During the seventies, the role of Cuban forces were key to defeating right-wing insurgencies and sustained Castro's anti-imperialist reputation. There is little doubt their actions hastened the end of apartheid [3]. Yet in the Horn of Africa, Cuban troops defended governments allied with Soviet regional interests that brutally repressed internal liberation movements.

Fidel was never a pliant subordinate. He used his extraordinary charisma and clout to fire occasional warning shots towards Moscow, on the one hand, and to reinforce his personal control of the state on the other. The survivors of the guerrilla force that landed from the "Granma" in 1956 [4] and brought down the Batista dictatorship remained, for the most part, at the center of power for the five decades that followed.

The socialism that Castro espoused had little resemblance to Marx's "self-emancipation of the working class." It was a socialism with a command structure much like that of the guerrilla army in which Fidel was commander-in-chief. What held it together was both Fidel's incontestable authority and the unrelenting hostility of the United States, which not only tried to murder him hundreds of times but was willing to starve the Cuban people into submission.

Under these tough conditions, the system that the revolutionaries built left real gains. Most celebrated of these were efficient and universal systems of health and education. Beyond that, daily life was hard, even before the withdrawal of Soviet aid and the "special period" that followed, which brought the island to the brink of disaster.

It was collective solidarity and sacrifice alone that held back collapse then. Yet there was already serious discontent expressed in absenteeism, in workplace resistance, in the disillusionment of African veterans, for example, as many hopes of the revolution proved illusory. While there was basic social provision, there was little in the way of consumer goods and dissent was treated harshly, whatever its form.

The extreme concentration of power (the leading organs of the state were run by a couple of dozen "historic" leaders under Fidel's control) at the top of the pyramid stifled any possibility for socialist democracy. Political institutions were centrally controlled at every level; local organs, like the Committees for the Defense of the Revolution, maintained vigilance against dissent. On occasions when discontent grew too noisy, thousands of Cubans were dispatched to Miami amid clamorous marches denouncing the departed as "scum."

It was relatively simple to dismiss the calls for democracy from internal critics as imperialist

propaganda, rather than a legitimate claim by working people that a socialism worthy of its name should transform them into the subjects of their own history. Public information was available only in the impenetrable form of the state newspaper *Granma*, and state institutions at every level were little more than channels for the communication of the leadership's decisions.

An opaque bureaucracy, accountable to itself alone, with privileged access to goods and services, became increasingly corrupt in the context of an economy reduced to its minimal provisions. Castro's occasional calls for "rectification" removed some problem individuals but left the system intact.

Yet Cuba survived, due in good part to Fidel's sharp political instincts and his willingness to find allies wherever he could in the wake of the fall of Eastern Europe. But though "pink tide" leaders celebrated Fidel's legacy, as the twenty-first century dawned, new anticapitalist movements, with their emphasis on democracy and participation, had little to learn from Cuba.

The reality was, after all, that the island had featured a highly authoritarian interpretation of socialism that could allow (at one time) the repression of gay people, the denial of criticism, and the emergence of the regime that now prevails in Cuba, where a small group of bureaucrats and military commanders manage and control the economy. They will be the beneficiaries of Cuba's reentry into the world market, not the majority of Cubans.

Fidel, who fell ill in 2006, said relatively little from then on. His death will be mourned across the Third World, because Cuba for so long represented a possibility of liberation from imperial oppression. Its very survival inspired hope. And yet the state that Castro built is a reminder any socialism worth its name needs a deep and radical democracy.

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P.S.

* Jacobin. 11.27.16:

<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2016/11/fidel-castro-obit-cuban-revolution-imperialism/>

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Footnotes

[1] <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1899-1913/platt>

[2] <https://www.marxists.org/history/cuba/archive/castro/1953/10/16.htm>

[3] <http://africasacountry.com/2016/11/viva-fidel/>

[4] <http://www.cuba.cu/gobierno/discursos/2001/ing/f021201i.html>