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Cuba Discussion

A rapid glance at the future

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Revolutionary socialist construction in Cuba has been carried out under the leadership of Fidel Castro for nearly half a century. For obvious biological reasons the personalities of the generation which led the struggle for power and established the bases of the new society will leave the scene in the fairly near future. The problem of the succession is not then a possibility; it is a fact which inexorably imposes itself.

[<https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/cubai5.jpg>]

May Day in Revolution Plaza

Until recently this subject was avoided in Cuba, perhaps so as to avoid suspicions of illness emerging on the basis of such speculation. When we were asked what would happen in Cuba when Fidel was no more (a way of not mentioning death) we generally limited ourselves to ingenious and elliptical responses, or judgements which were hollow to the point of ridicule, to ensure that nothing would change, that all would continue as before, that Cuban society was totally prepared, that the "succession" was ready and that the party is immortal.

What is certain is that we have not taken enough time to reflect and still less to debate publicly this future; we Cubans, who live through this reality and must live through that which comes, we have left the debate in the hands of foreigners, who were not necessarily adversaries and were often concerned about the future of socialism, in Cuba and elsewhere. Once more then, on this subject as many others, a debate, primarily Cuban in its content, comes to us on the rebound.

The importance of the affair stems from the impact of such a fact for Cubans, for the road of construction of a society of equity and justice, of intense solidarity, proclaimed socialist, having been led for a half century in a clearly personalised fashion, as much concerning the general orientation of the project as the conjunctural decisions. An orientation which has been forced - by an implacable blockade - to carry out strategic zigzags to guarantee its survival, to resist in the conditions of an austerity imposed on the population, under a permanent threat of aggression which becomes stronger at critical moments, thus restraining the capacities of ensuring the satisfaction of a great part of popular basic needs. It is not necessary to pursue this rosary to sketch out the socio-economic landscape the country has traversed. I try to allude here to concrete reality, not value judgements.

There are neither motives nor arguments to prognosticate that the Cuban socialist project will become unviable when Fidel is no more. Nonetheless his exit from the space of political decision taking will be the strongest shock that the leaders of Cuban socialism will have experienced. I think that nobody should doubt that and thus, without need of any other considerations, responses should not minimise the significance of this fact.

Concentration of leadership

When I am asked about this perspective, I respond that I cannot predict what will happen, but I can state what I would like to happen. I base myself now on this reflection, which I have had the opportunity to repeat, because it concerns this future which is linked to all the questions that I am going to deal with. .

The leadership of our revolutionary process (I do not wish to generalise here) is based on a double legitimacy. On the one hand the charismatic legitimacy (a category well defined at the theoretical level by Max Weber), based on the capacities and the consensus around a historic leadership, that the figure of Fidel embodies, and which is unique and

cannot be passed on for various reasons, including the genius or talent of this leader. On the other hand, an institutional legitimacy, based on the political and legal instruments adopted since the mid-1970s and which were partially renovated at the beginning of the 1990s, even if they kept to a large extent the imprint of the structural and functional conception of the Soviet bureaucracy, with positive aspects but undoubtedly also with certain faults, which led to the death of socialism in such a powerful country.

Between these two legitimacies of organs of power it is, for obvious reasons, the charismatic leadership which has dominated the institutional aspect. For today the authority of the Commander in Chief (the only title which includes all the powers and which, from its formalisation during the restructuring of the military grades, should disappear with Fidel, if my memories are correct) is decisive and is questioned neither in the Political Bureau of the Communist Party, nor in the National Assembly of Popular Power, nor inside the Council of State. The same goes obviously in the armed Forces, of which the head of state becomes Commander in Chief in wartime under all latitudes. Thus the decision-making organs, which are explicitly and intentionally collegial and which were thus conceived, are subject to the personal leadership.

Let us note, between parentheses, that many have noted the apparent equivocation according to which in the sphere of civil power a form stemming from a state of war predominates, whereas the country lives in peace. That implies that the country had been forced to live through the state of peace as if it was a state of war.

Such a concentration of the leadership has led to some errors (I am not capable of judging them), but has allowed a coherence of the revolutionary project, a continuity of consensus concerning sovereignty and the vitality of the ideals of social justice and solidarity, which after a hazardous itinerary have found their place and an appropriate echo on our continent. But the preservation of these gains and the development of new ones will demand, in my opinion, a change in the apparatus of power.

Ideally the effacement of the historic leadership of the first political level should lead to a transition of this form of leadership to a new relationship, in which collegial relations prevail over individual will concerning the taking of decisions and the conception of strategies. In fact, that is what the Constitution states: that the President is not at the head of the country, but chairs the work of the Council of State and that, when his proposals do not have majority support there, he should submit to the majority. Something similar should have taken place concerning the role of the head of state before the National Assembly.

That does not mean that the head of state should not legislate or that one cannot make pertinent institutional changes. Such changes would in no way mean the need to artificially implant the models of liberal democracy, but would stem from the specific demands of the system, based on an institutionalism which, insufficient as it is, has not yet given all that of which it disposes. For it amounts to an area where "outside advice" however well intentioned, contributes little.

The intervention of Fidel Castro at the Aula Magna of the University of Havana on November 17, 2006 impressed the audience, for it presented concerns which had not been previously made public. [1] They surely assail the great statesman, who knows that his days are numbered. The socialist experience born out of the October revolution has proved itself to be reversible. This catastrophe has dismantled the myth of its irreversibility. The epicentre of post-capitalism inside the world system has been disarmed (and the second nuclear power of the planet has been cast to the winds on the néolibéral ocean, pauperised and dependent).

Not surprising in this situation that the first preoccupation of Fidel turns around the reversibility of our own process, taking account of the fact that in Europe it is not only the experience and its conception which have failed, but that the defeat has affected socialism (and even the utopia around which the Bolshevik project was established). All that was supposed irreversible. And it is not that they have decided to do otherwise. No, they have abandoned. A catastrophe

which has provoked a generalised crisis of the socialist paradigm. Not because it is completed, but because obviously it is necessary to think otherwise and take account of the fact that socialism has proved itself reversible.

Democracy?

If this model has engendered the germs of its own destruction, any socialist experience can then engender them. Fidel believes that if the revolution cannot be destroyed from outside, it can scupper itself. And he indicates corruption as being at the centre of the evil which could bring about this destruction. I think he is right, but he has not said everything. I wonder moreover if the collapse of the Soviet system was, essentially, an effect of corruption, even if corruption was certainly present in the framework of the deformations. I believe that socialism can be damaged as much by bureaucratism and the lack of democracy as by corruption. And I am not referring there to electoralist systems, multi-party confrontations, campaigns of struggles, or alternation in the exercise of power. I speak of democracy, that we have not been capable of creating on Earth, although we believe we know all about it.

We have not created it under capitalism - what is of interest is that which has imposed itself historically - because democracy serves there as a support to the empire of the market and money, to the dynamics of enrichment which make what we call corruption constitute the substantial dynamic of reproduction and thus reduces the notion of corruption to the violation of its own rules of the game.

We have not created it in the socialist experiences, because efforts to allow to the people an effective participation in the decision-making mechanisms, laudable in certain cases, have been insufficient. Che noted that "the masses should have the possibility of leading their destiny, of deciding what would go to accumulation and what would go to consumption; economic technique should work with these choices; the consciousness of the masses will guarantee its implementation". This is a long-term project, which we will not arrive at if, for example, corruption submerges us. For this reason we should not only consider corruption as an offence, but also as a moral problem. Because success in relation to an offence does not guarantee its suppression and the corrupted of tomorrow can take the place of the corrupted of today.

It is only to the extent of the construction of a society committed in a consensual manner to the transcendence of inequality, poverty, submission to the tyranny of capital that it will become obvious that democracy, as the power of the people, for the people and by the people is a political category which is only compatible with socialism, for it is already shown that - unlike capitalism - it cannot maintain itself without it.

We should accustom ourselves to thinking that Fidel will not have the time to find a practical solution to problems that will inevitably require time. It is very probable that the generations to come will regret the absence of his vision in facing these problems. We also, who have lived together with him, would have wished to find practical responses to several of the concerns that face us today. And I am sure that is also the case with him and that this justified anxiety is apparent in his speeches in recent years.

New situation, new challenges

But the most important thing in my opinion is to take account of the current scenario. To sum it up briefly: the collapse of socialisms created illusions inside the Empire. They collapsed rapidly and the world is beginning to experience another wave of transformations. This wave, which could be more promising than that which has led to the appearance of the bipolar world that we have known, has begun in Latin America with motors which coincide

harmoniously with the Cuban project. This scenario has seen an opening to Fidel's Cuba and this Cuba of Fidel has, in many ways, helped what has also started in America. The famous dictum of Margaret Thatcher - "there is no alternative" - used to justify the application of the neoliberal model, is now turned against its creators. Today there is no alternative for imperialism and for its centres of power it could be very difficult to accept even a different capitalism, and not only the progression of a reinvented socialism. Fidel Castro could not experience his reality in withdrawal, as a simple witness, nor would the world which is beginning to arise want him to.

The reconstruction of paradigms already allows new signs to emerge. No conception should be copied, no sovereignty should subject itself, no interest should be subordinated, and no leadership should be copied. We inherit an apprenticeship for a socialism different from everything previously experienced and Fidel, disposing of more experience than any other statesman in the area of escaping from traps and harassment, can still have things to contribute to us.

It is certain that for many years we have committed errors and that we will continue to do so in believing we know what socialism is. And also in believing we know what democracy is. And beyond that it is true that economics is far from being an exact science. The term "political economy" is not born out of caprice, which economists imbued with their science tend to forget, as they tend to depreciate the pertinence of the debate opposing the econometric criteria to the extra-economic criteria. [2] This is not a local disease of Cubans, nor even a specificity of socialism. John Kenneth Galbraith, who died recently at the age of 97, was not even proposed for the Nobel Prize in economics because his theories went too far from the narrowly economic framework, and this despite the quantity and importance of his writings and despite the fact that he was an adviser to three US presidents. But by chance, it appears that we are arriving at a consensus: it is the socialism of the 21st century that needs to be invented.

With all these insufficiencies Cuba's socialist society - even if this term expresses above all still what it aspires to be and not what it is - disposes of an intelligence, a know how (a "human capital" in the fashionable formulation) which is exceptional and decisive for the changes which are on the agenda for the continent. Also to conceive the future starting from a perspective which is political, economic, sociological and ethical.

None of this allows us to cease concerning ourselves with the conjuncture when Fidel is no more. But it will not be that imagined by the enemies of the revolution, more preoccupied, in truth, by the fact that he can remain alive than by his death. .

The article we reproduce here "was drawn up in response to a questionnaire presented to a group of Cuban researchers" writes the author, with a view to its publication under the title: "Cuba, the dilemmas of the future - a debate on Cuba on the basis of Fidel's speech to the University of Havana" (November 17, 2005), by the Cuban review "La Jiribilla". Subtitles, notes and headline are by IV.

[1] In this speech, Fidel Castro said: "This revolution can destroy itself all alone and the only ones who cannot destroy it is them [the US, imperialism]. But we, we can destroy it and this will be our fault". He spoke of "tens of thousand of parasites who produce nothing and gain everything..." in Cuba.

[2] The author here alludes to the economic debate conducted by Che Guevara before he left Cuba, a debate for which the Cuban revolutionary invited notably the economists Ernest Mandel and Charles Bettelheim. The economic conceptions of Che were then abandoned under Soviet pressure