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Cuba Discussion

The Leadership Succession Bears the Mark of Continuity

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Where is Cuba going ? Can the social achievements of the Cuban Revolution of 1959 be maintained? How to maintain a non-capitalist society? What are the dangers of a capitalist restoration?

What is at stake in Cuba is essential for the workers of the entire world, because a capitalist restoration in Cuba would call into question for a long time the legitimacy of all projects of socialist transformation.

Without claiming to be able to give definitive answers, we have decided to open the debate on the analysis of Cuban society and the orientations that could make it possible to maintain and develop its achievements. In the coming weeks we will be publishing a series of articles, including some by critical Marxists who are active in Cuba. Our first article is a report by Jean Castillo, a French Marxist who has regularly visited Cuba. We hope by publishing these articles to further a debate whose aim is to better arm those who are attached to the defence of the achievements of the Cuban Revolution.

[<https://npa31.org/IMG/jpg/FidelRaul.jpg>]

Fidel with brother Raul

For the present generation of Cuban adults socialism is synonymous with shortages, bureaucracy and vertical and authoritarian power relations. How did we get there after the victory of a revolution whose slogans of social justice and national sovereignty were taken up and implemented by millions of Cubans for more half a century?

Over the last 15 years the revolutionary process has marked time. With the collapse of the Soviet Union Cuban had to adopt itself to an international context with no safety net. That led to radical changes in the way people behaved, to a recomposition of social norms, to a turning upside down of the social pyramid: with the development of tourism prostitution returned and jobs as waiters or taxi drivers became much more lucrative than those of teachers and doctors.

Almost the entire population could not live on their salaries alone. With the exception of the "remesas" - the money sent by exiles - there remained few alternatives ways to survive in a situation of shortages of everything. The Cuban expression "invent, resolve, find the way out" [1] has today become "steal, corrupt, bribe".

So what legitimacy can the revolutionary process still lay claim to today, when the foundation of values on which it rested is eroding as the double morality [2] infiltrates Cuban society and we can see the return of certain capitalist values?

In this context, the leadership of Fidel Castro functioned in spite of everything as a compass. So when the historic leader handed over power, without however completely abandoning the conduct of affairs, and reserving for himself the possibility of returning, the Cuban population, for a large part disoriented, decided to wait.

What popular base has the revolution today?

When you walk through streets of Havana, away from the tourist quarters, what is first of all evident is fatigue, discontent, disappointment. If you risk asking a question the reply is invariably followed by the refrain "ah, it's not

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easy” or the slightly more dynamic “it's the struggle, comrade” [3]. The daily struggle, not the revolutionary struggle. Because to succeed in obtaining the food and products that are necessary for an ordinary life, not a luxurious one, is a real battle everyday. Certain things are only available in foreign currency, such as oil, whose price varied between 2.10 and 2.30 CUC . [4] a litre in the summer of 2006, whereas the salary of a state employee is on average 15 CUC a month.

The government knows this but refuses to increase wages for fear of setting off an inflationary spiral. So the majority of Cubans live according to their old national maxim “the state pretends to pay me, so I pretend to work”. So we can only wonder at the figure of economic growth (11.8%) that was announced by the Cuban authorities for the year 2005 [5]. Since income from work has become symbolic, the Cubans “find a way” to survive in some other way.

This economy of poverty leads to a loss of ideological references and to a certain recomposition of socialist norms. There is an anecdote circulating according to which a pupil explained to his history teacher during an examination that he lived at present in a socialist regime, since there was poverty, whereas before the fall of the Berlin Wall Cuba was capitalist; we lacked nothing.

To be able to live when the salary alone cannot cover the needs of families, Cubans are forced to take time off work to go and look in the streets for the resources that are necessary to survive, or else to steal and corrupt in their own workplace, which is sometime an important source of revenues. The workers in cigar factories, oil refineries, building enterprises, daily steal a not negligible part of their production. Thus an ordinary worker in a cigar factory estimated in June 2006 his daily gains at 1500 Cuban pesos, whereas the monthly salary that the state pays him for his work is around 400 Cuban pesos. The gains of foremen and factory managers are, thanks to their functions, considerably more than that.

To try and deal with the situation the government is fighting on the terrain of ideas. In 1999 there was launched the “battle of ideas” whose main objective is to bring back into the arms of the socialist fatherland, with its collective ideals, the sheep who have strayed onto the road of capitalism and triumphant individualism.

However, two serious mistakes undermine this campaign: it does not confront the real economic problem which is the source of the disillusionment of Cubans in relation to socialism, and it was launched by the veterans of the revolution, the old leaders of the revolutionary army, not very suited to mobilize on a large scale and in a lasting way around themselves hundreds of thousands of young people. As long as the problematic relationship between consumer prices and wages has not been resolved and there has not been any renovation of the bureaucratic and dogmatic functioning of the regime, no political attempt will be able to really convince Cubans that there exists a valid socialism, one that is synonymous with neither poverty nor repression.

“Socialism” or “communism” have become symbols of authoritarian, bureaucratic and vertical systems. It is worrying to see that as in the former Soviet Union, the deviant practice of functionaries at the highest level has made possible the amalgamation between a kind of regime, from its economic and political choices to its objectives of social justice, and certain dogmatic and repressive practices against everything that is not in the defined political line.

Cuban youth is today responding to the hyper-politicization of public space (advertising hoardings on the roads, media, compulsory meetings at work and where people live) by a marked disinterest in politics. As for the Cubans of the previous generation, when you ask them to define themselves politically, they say that they are above all “Fidelistas”. It is respect and admiration for Fidel Castro, as the historic leader of the national social transformation, which makes of these Cubans people who “conform” to the ideology that is promoted by the authorities, and not their attachment to a system of “socialist” ideas, values, and practices. That is why the spectre of his coming disappearance is preoccupying for the survival of the regime. The leading elites understand this well and ceaselessly repeat that the passage of power to Raul Castro backed by the Cuban Communist Party (PCC) is perfectly legitimate

and that it is taking place in the greatest revolutionary continuity.

The government's strategies at a time of unrecognized political crisis

The Cuban regime has been built since it came into existence on cycles of opening and closing, of the greatest tolerance followed by the harshest repression. Since 2003 a repressive cycle has clearly opened, with first of all the launching of a campaign against illegal minor trafficking and commerce at the beginning of 2003, then the arrest of the 75 dissidents in the spring of that year. Since then we can see a recentralization of the economy, the putting in place of mechanisms of social control, reinforced with the creation of the corps of social workers which is made up of 28,000 young Cubans and the unleashing of the campaign against corruption in 2005.

On the economic level the partial opening up to the market and the right for 150 trades to exercise more or less freely their profession have been put into question. In fact, the licenses which give people the right to exercise their profession are not always renewed, and few new licenses are issued. The frequency of control checks is constantly increasing, although sometimes one can question their effectiveness, given the common practice of collusive transactions among Cubans, in other words exchanging favors: the boss closes his eyes to the fiddles of his subordinates provided they reserve a share for him. Since almost all Cubans make part of their income through illegal trade, it is not in their interest to denounce anyone else because behaving in that way could easily turn against the informer.

The economy continues to be dual: in the national currency, the Cuban peso, for the commodities that are sold at a low price, in convertible pesos (in US dollars until the end of 2004 at which time the dollar was withdrawn from circulation in favor of the new peso) for trade in foreign currency. It seems probable that in time the government's objective is to fuse these two systems into one, with a single currency. But the present strategic choices do not seem to confirm that. In reality the priority that is given to tourism and the service economy (biotechnologies, high-quality medical services, welcoming Latin Americans in particular for simple surgical operations that are not accessible in their own countries) goes along with a territorial and social segmentation of Cuban society.

The spaces that are given over to the market economy are conceived of and function as enclaves within the Cuban national economy. Some neighborhoods on the outskirts of big cities have become the new centres for receiving Latin Americans who are waiting for the medical services promised by operation Milagro [6] These places are consciously cut off from the centres where the rest of the Cuban population lives. They are well away from the town centre and are difficult to reach by public transport. In the same way the tourist centres have been planned from the beginning as enclaves, most often on the coast, and run in such a way that the contacts between foreigners and Cubans are kept to the strict minimum.

However, these policies have not been crowned with success. More and more foreign tourists, students, journalists, and businessmen mix with Cubans in the cities and particularly in Havana, which has made possible the development of prostitution, gambling, and new forms of petty crime. Part of Cuban youth no longer works and waits for the "yuma", the foreigner, who provides their livelihood. Many workers of other generations have made similar choices: they leave their job in the public administration as a teacher, doctor, lawyer, or nurse to become a waiter, a taxi driver, a guide in museums or in town, professions that are much more lucrative because they are paid in foreign currency.

To stop the inexorable exodus of qualified professional people towards the market sector (both formal and informal) of the Cuban economy the government has launched big projects to repair the two sectors that have been the most damaged: health and education. These are "maestros (teachers) emergentes" and "infirmieros (nurses) emergentes". "Emergentes" can be translated as emergent, but also as urgent. So these programmes have become

in Cuba the object of endless jokes about the real urgency of training teachers and nurses in the face of the extreme shortages that the country is confronted with. Given short training courses directed towards the most concrete aspect of their profession, these young people, who have been quickly accorded their diplomas, do not have the same degree of knowledge as their predecessors on the job, and Cubans complain of the worsening public service in hospitals and schools.

Bandages on wooden legs, these programmes can therefore only be very short term solutions and can in no case replace a real questioning of the way the nation's human resources are distributed across different sectors. If the population is waiting, the dominant impression one gets is that the government and the top civil services are also waiting and do not dare to launch real programmes to renovate the project of social transformation that was at the origin of the Cuban revolution. Such programmes are however indispensable in order to safeguard the social gains that have been won over nearly half the century.

A controlled passage of power

When on the evening of July 31st 2006 the news was announced of Fidel Castro's illness and consequently the passage of power to his brother Raul, the Cubans of Miami invaded the streets of their city for a big spontaneous party. On the island of Cuba the streets were deserted and silent. In the following days very few people risked touching on the subject in a public conversation, whether in the office, on the building site, or at the bus stop. Deprived of the slightest information concerning the health of their head of state, closely controlled by the police, state security and the army, reinforced for the occasion by tens of thousands of reservists, people were in fact excluded from the process of political decision-making that governed the passage of power.

So the Cubans decided to wait. Paradoxically, whereas Cuban public space is extremely dominated by ideology a part of the Cuban population, which we cannot measure exactly, seems very depoliticized. Because they know that they will not be consulted, because they know that they will have no influence on the strategic choices that are made in the name of the nation by leaders disconnected from the realities of precarious daily lives. The passivity that is linked to depoliticization is worrying because it could in time make possible a capitalist restoration almost without resistance, as was the case when the Soviet Union became Russia again.

Invoked everywhere, the Cuban people therefore has no real existence anywhere. Mythified, encouraged, harangued by the leading cadres of organizations and of the government, the Cuban people is in reality fragmented, discouraged, tired, engaged in a short term battle with daily necessities and less and less in tune with the grandiloquence of the speeches of the leaders about the "revolutionary sacrifices" that have to be made for the future of the nation. Faced with this popular disaffection for the regime and its highest representatives, at this extremely delicate and dangerous moment, the moment of the passage of power (for the moment officially provisional) between Fidel and Raul Castro, the government is firmly insisting on continuity. Continuity between the two Castro brothers, the continuity of the revolutionary paradigm and its values, the continuity that is ensured by the role of the PCC as a political vanguard.

In August meetings of support to Fidel were organized everywhere, invariably closed by interventions of militants wishing the "Comandante" a speedy recovery. Changes had already taken place from the month of July on the institutional level: the party was put forward again, after having been for decades a framework for approving decisions rather than making political proposals. Its permanent secretariat has been reactivated. In public spaces placards praising the party as the only legitimate heir of the revolutionary process have appeared.

Political continuity is therefore the present political programme of the heirs designated by Fidel Castro in the proclamation that was read by his personal secretary on July 31st 2006. It is certainly obvious that it is not in the interest of the leaders to propose radically reforming the regime while the historic leader of the revolution is still alive.

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It is legitimate that they should take support from the fragile status quo that exists at the moment. But this position can't be maintained for very long. Inside the country Raul Castro does not have the charismatic authority that his brother has.

Abroad he doesn't have the same political status as him either. So it will be much more difficult for him to face up to the pressures, whether they come from Cubans living on the island who seem to want a change, certainly progressive, which will make it possible both to engage more freely in trade and to obtain civil and political freedoms while maintaining the revolutionary social gains: or from the international community and the Cuban exile community, who are pushing for a systemic political change which would in time give birth to a new neo-liberal capitalist society on the Western model.

When Fidel Castro was finally unable to lead the Cuban delegation to the Non-Aligned Summit that was held in Havana in mid-September 2006, the speculation about his state of health and the supposed "transition" which will take place in Cuba were widespread. It is certain that the historic leader of the revolution is weakened. It seems difficult to imagine that he will ever take back his positions at the highest level and cancel the delegation of power, although it is still provisional, to his brother Raul.

[<https://npa31.org/IMG/jpg/cdr.jpg>]

It is however very premature or already obsolete to talk of a Cuban transition. It is obsolete because for 15 years now the analysts have thought they could see a "transition" in Cuba without anything fundamentally changing. It is premature because you cannot project political schemas that were created during the regime changes in the South American cone or during the passage from really existing socialism to democracy and the market economy in Eastern Europe, onto Cuban reality.

There exist in Cuba progressive forces who are trying to make the ossified structures of a socialism that was inherited from the Soviet Union evolve towards a socialism that can combine all civil, political and social freedoms and maintain an economic model whose objectives are social justice and real participation by the citizens. These forces are weak. There does not exist in Cuba an independent trade union force or social movements that speak with a voice distinct from that of the government in the public space. All the mass organizations [1] without exception are in reality para-state organizations, which function more as transmission belts for the orientations that are decided at the highest level than as structures in defense of the interests of their members.

Some members are trying to renovate their internal functioning from below, since they are unable to change the practices from above. Others are trying to build within these unavoidable structures, to which all Cubans are supposed to belong, spaces for reflection on the revolution as a political process. What is involved is small groups who are not formally organized, we should really speak of a loose network which is more or less elastic depending on the period.

These groups do not of course constitute a strong dynamic for renovation in the real sense of the world in Cuba, but they are fighting within their own reality to safeguard the revolutionary conquests at the same time as reoccupying the political spaces that have been in part confiscated by a certain leading elite enjoying new privileges since the fall of the Berlin wall. It is on these forces that we have to take a chance, so that the island is not once again transformed into a banana republic or into an annex of the United States, economically dependent, politically dominated, and socially unjust.

[1] In Spanish, "Inventar, resolver, alcanzarse".

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[2] Publicly supporting revolutionary values so as not to have problems with the authorities, while at the same having practices that are far removed from these values (theft, lying, embezzlement, corruption, etc.).

[3] "Aah, no es facil". â€"Es la lucha, companero".

[4] CUC is the convertible peso. 1 CUC = 0.85 euros

[5] Granma, official press organ of the PCC, December 22nd, 2005.

[6] Literally, "Operation Miracle", whose aim is to restore sight to those who are wholly or partly suffering from cataracts, by means of an operation that is simple, but expensive in the other countries of Latin America.

[7] These organizations are : the CTC (Cuban Workers' Confederation); the FMC (Federation of Cuban Women); the CDR (committees in Defence of the Revolution); the ANAP (National Association of Small Farmers); the FEU (Federation of University Students); the FEEM (Federation of Middle School Students); the Pioneers (primary school pupils) and the UJC (Union of Young Communists).