

Cuba : Transitions without End

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” The victory of the Revolution is a rampart that ensures that never again will Cuba become the most sordid brothel our planet has ever known linked to a criminal gambling and drug infested inferno of the colonial occupiers.” Comandante Ernesto Che Guevara, 1 May 1959.

Invariably, after every speaking engagement on Latin America. the question was raised about Cuba’s fate after the exit of the Comandante from the political stage. The question was not malicious although among my listeners there were those who believed , or prayed for, that the departure of Fidel Alejandro Castro Ruz, born (1926) in the former province of Oriente on his father’s farm (Manacas) ,marks the terminal point of the socialist revolution. Throughout the ages and by the very nature of our existence it is part of our normal being to ask that basic question: from whence have we come and whither are we are going? There are many that have personalized one of the most momentous historical metamorphoses of all times.

Fidel Castro and the Revolution that he incubated and flung into battle with such resounding surprises and successes for more than a half a century cannot be abstracted from the role of the masses as the energizing dynamic of change.

The personalization of leaders as the drive wheel of change is erroneous as it assumes that the makers of history are exclusively the leaders of social and political movements. Such a muddled perception is the incarnation of the Fuhrerprinzip of Nazism that sweeps aside the seminal role of ordinary peoples that battle to defend the Revolution and build on it. It deliberately eviscerates the world of labour: workers, farmers, professionals, the men and women that comprise the armed forces. In short, it ignores the creators of wealth as the engine of change.

History is about numbers and very big numbers that dramatically erupt onto the political stage at certain nodal points in response to the contradictions of our time stemming from irrepressible convulsions . The revolutionary that is Fidel Castro is thus inseparable from the masses that catapulted him into the fires of national struggle from the Moncada Barracks to the liberation of Havana, in much the same way as Gandhi and Mandela in their freedom struggles; and no less so Lenin and the October Revolution.

Thomas Carlyle enriched our understanding of this duality when he wrote in his classic depiction of the French Revolution:

“Hunger and nakedness and nightmare oppression lying heavy on twenty-five million: this, not the wounded vanities or contradicted philosophies of

philosophical advocates, rich shopkeepers, rural nobles, was the prime mover in the French Revolution; as the like will be in all such revolutions, in all countries.”

The penetrating insight of Marx with its sublime message of hope and struggle as humanity faces up to the exigencies of smashing the inherited mould of capitalism, a system of class power, privilege, profit and exploitation, illumines the compulsive sweep of revolutionary change.

“History does nothing; it possesses no immense wealth, fights no battles. It is rather man, real living man who does everything, who grapples with everything and who fights.”

As a teacher and writer (and Spanish speaker) I tracked the Revolution’s trajectory spanning more than half a century. I was never a member of any political body nor was I ever enamored by the phony cult of objectivity. In those decades, I talked to its peoples from all walks of life. I met its leadership. I participated in its seminars and conferences. It was in those years of agony and ecstasy that I witnessed the unending twists and turns of its ascendancy. In those years, I also encountered the hate-filled émigrés, who had chosen the path of counter-revolution, dishonor and mendacity, ensconced in Miami and elsewhere.

To grasp the nature of the transition – and that is the crucial word of this lecture – that has reshaped the nation’s psyche it is well to recall that the Revolution was generated as a reaction against the exploitation and sheer cruelty perpetrated by the US occupation and its domesticated political Quislings that reigned through the instrumentalities of unadulterated state terrorism since the consummation of the conquest in 1898. Listen well to the Comandante’s words framed on the eve of the freedom upsurge . Its relevance to the new transition is all too obvious.

“Some have insisted that the only way out for Cuba was to guarantee private investments. That , we are told, would solve the whole problem. But foreign capitalists had these guarantees in Cuba for fifty years , and similar guarantees in practically every other country of the American continent. Did these guarantees solve the pressing problems confronting its peoples? Did they solve the problem of mass unemployment, education, public health? Indeed, what did they solve in all these fifty years? Joblessness straddling more than one third of the labour force, poverty, hunger and chronic malnutrition...”

I recall on one of our walks on the Malecon with my friend the late Renato Constantino, a celebrated Philipino resistance fighter, philosopher and writer pointing his hand to the waters of the bay in the direction of Florida and saying: ” Over there, just a couple of kilometers away. I believe it’s around 90 kms. There is the super-colonial Goliath , that has flung everything against this bastion of a socialist David and what we’ve seen is that the power of the *imperio* has been clubbed. Why? You know the answer. What Voltaire said about God applies no less so to Cuba: If Cuba did not exist we would have had to invent it.” What Renato was saying was that the White Man’s world of the *imperio* cannot coexist with Cuba; and hence, in their view, it must be destroyed. It is toxic and contagious.

Its sheer capacity to survive and strike back owed nothing to a world of miracles and Shamans. What Bush, his acolytes and predecessors mean by transition is something quite

different from the meaning emblazoned in the theory and praxis of the Revolution? It reminds me of the words of Ho Chi Minh formulated after the breakdown of the Fountainebleau negotiations in 1946. " Words have different meaning for different people. If you spit in the face of the colonialists they will always call it rain."

We cannot speak of the multi-faceted transitions in Cuba without studying the grim transition of imperialism. They are inter-related. American capitalism has leapt into the big transition, that of recession, galloping fast towards the Big Depression. The credit seizures and foreclosures are gobbling up jobs and earnings at an alarming tempo. Panic stricken stock markets are plummeting with many major financial institutions going bust. The industrial capacity of US capitalism has withered. What remains of its colossal industrial heritage, a legacy mainly of the decades 1865-1914, is being swiftly offshored. Detroit, the once proud citadel of industrial might is now a wasteland. Its financial structures are wobbly, shackled with uncontrollable debt: household, corporate and government that continues to burgeon exponentially. Americans and foreigners have lost confidence in the greenback that is swiftly ceasing to be a store of value.

Iran's president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad hammered the point when he said: "the dollar is nothing but a worthless piece of paper." A contention that few will contest. Its claim to be the world's reserve currency is a fairy tale. Credit flows are drying up . Banks are dumping their assets into collapsing markets. Defaults and bankruptcies are soaring. In sum, US financial capitalism is in the throes of an implosion. Uncle Sam is an enfeebled mendicant living off borrowed time and borrowed money. But not for long can this game continue.

The empire has over 700 military overseas bases in over 130 countries but its effective power is shrinking day by day. This then is the big contrast with Cuba's transition. Its growth in real terms has steadily topped 6% over the last six years. The brutalizing years of the Special Period have largely been vanquished. The economic and spiritual revolutions in Cuba are nothing short of mind-boggling that bear no comparison with any Latin American countries. Let there be no illusion. Cuba is a Third World nation. It still is a poor country. The wages of its labour force are still abysmally low. The exploitation of man by man has vanished. Of pivotal importance, however, is that it has now achieved full employment, a reality once regarded as the unattainable Nirvana. Illiteracy, malnutrition and mendicancy have ceased to exist. Its life expectancy is almost on a par with Japan and Sweden, as against 56 in Batista's neo-colony. Its infant mortality rate is on a par with Canada and has already outstripped that of the United States. These are the transitions that the media masters of the corporate gulag chose to eliminate from their specious references on transitions.

I well remember the Revolution's formative years when the white-skinned medical personnel bolted the country boasting that medicine is dead and the only thing that will take its place is Voodoo. In their imbecilic gasp of triumph they had forgotten to say that their political cronies had plundered the nation's Treasury and dispatched its pickings to the land of the ex-colonial master. Cuba now has around 90,000 students spanning the entire range of medical care. This nation which, according to its unbending liquidators, has abolished 'human rights' has set its goal of becoming the paramount medical science citadel in the world.

There are now over 12,000 students in ELAM: **La Escuela Latinoamericana de Medicina**, one of the world's top educational establishments. Over the next decade it will be

graduating with Venezuela more than 100,000 Latin American and Caribbean doctors within the integration framework of ALBA: Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas. Together with Venezuela, Operation Miracle was launched designed to restore vision to no fewer than 6 million in all of Latin America and the Caribbean.

These astounding numbers would have been inconceivable without a socialist order and the discipline and sacrifices that moved in tandem with it. Tens of thousands of Cuban medical and non-medical personnel are working in 27 countries under difficult physical conditions. In his visit to Cuba in 2007, in which he decorated the 140 medical personnel, General Pervez Musharraf (a fervent ally of the empire) was not indulging in hyperbole when he noted:

“Yours was one of the greatest acts of solidarity that humanity has ever known. We thank President Castro and the Cuban people. You came thousands of miles away, in the depth of one of the most severest winters, to heal and save the lives of thousands of our people stricken by that appalling natural disaster. You even brought your own medical equipment and medicines. There is not a single village in our country that has not heard of your heroic deeds and sacrifices. These awards are a modest token to express our gratitude. You gave everything but took nothing in exchange except our love. The word thanks , you will understand, is too small a tribute to convey the immensity of our debt and feeling towards you.”

The systematic state terrorist onslaughts against Cuba pre-date 1962 that marked the start of the official embargo that has endured with no respite for almost half a century .Attempts to quarantine Cuba have failed. Year after year in the UN General Assembly just two countries, the United States (plus its two Pacific island protectorates) and Israel voted for the embargo’s perpetuation. Its cumulative cost according to foreign minister Roque approaches \$100bn. And yet, notwithstanding the permanent war including several aborted attempts at assassination of the president, Cuba has lurched forward prodigiously , not only in its dispensation of education and medical aid to countries on many continents, but as a fraternal catalyst in the liberation struggle. No country in the world has given as much to Africa as Cuba has done and continues to do. A gift sealed with the blood of its peoples.

Nelson Mandela touched on one of the energizing roles of Cuba when he spelt out in his homage to the Comandante during his visit to South Africa following the liquidation of the Apartheid regime.

“We and all the peoples of the Free World are honored to have you here. And by the Free World we refer to the peoples whose blood has been shed profusely to liquidate imperialism. Consider South Africa as your land. We shall not forget the decisive role you played militarily in destroying the South African army. You came thousands of miles to participate in the freedom struggle with us. You fought nobly, unstintingly and shed your blood to ensure our freedom. Without you our freedom would not have been consummated.”

Obviously such views were in contrast to the architects of Cuba’s annihilation. These avalanches of death-dealing hatred had nothing to do with the familiar claptrap that the island of socialism had repudiated all the vestiges of human rights and democracy. The heights of vulgarity scaled by the practitioners of exterminism were exhibited by General

Alexander Haig, one of President's Reagan's henchmen, when he fulminated in a meeting of the National Security Council : "You just give me the word and I'll turn that fucking little island into a parking lot." If this is not an exhortation to the Holocaust then words have no meaning. The mass exterminism propounded by Haig was not galvanized because of the apprehensions of the upshot of another Bay of Pigs.

It was because even at that time Cuba had made yet another dramatic transition: it had become militarily invulnerable. This was matched by the decline of the imperio and its military over-reach that exposed its soft underbelly. To this was added an event of the greatest importance , the alliance with Venezuela concretized in the words of Chavez:

"An attack against Cuba will be countered by an immediate cut-off of oil. More important is that it will lead to a flow of blood including the blood of Bolivarian patriots since revolutionary Cuba and Venezuela are blended in the war against imperialism. It will be an horrendous war if the imbeciles that rule the imperio are so dumb as to unleash it. And I need hardly say that it will be a devastating counterpunch that overflows the confines of Cuba." For the first time in the history of the Americas a black man was calling the shots.

In yet another of his preachments on Cuba's transition, Bush excoriated Barack Obama for declaring that if he's elected he would talk to everyone. In a regime in which the very mention of dialogue is anathema Bush flatly pontificated that "there can be no dialogue with the Castro tyrant that has brought nothing but disaster and poverty to his people and eliminating all traces of human dignity and freedom." This is quite a mouthful from a man that continues to prattle endlessly about human dignity when in his own backyard the American prison population stands at 2.3 million with no signs of tapering off. According to the Pew Report it now has 750 prisoners per 100,000 as against 79 per 100,000 in Switzerland. One in 15 African Americans are behind bars, as against 1 in 75 for Hispanics and 1 in 106 for whites.

Is Bush oblivious to the crimes against humanity in the war that he has waged against Iraq in which more than one million Iraqis have been killed and wounded? In addition, their factories, farms, homes and infrastructure have been smashed. The cost of that war has moved from billions to trillions of dollars seen from the American side of the balance sheet. The numbers are misleading in that they do not include the costs to the people of Iraq. Indeed, the policies of US exterminism was neatly encapsulated in the pithy comment of the British dramatist and Nobel Prize winner Harold Pinter " You either do as I say or I'll kick your ass in." Because of its refusal to have its ass kicked in Cuba has been condemned to the chopping block. To be sure there are no presidents since 1945 that are not indictable on war crimes charges.

Bush launched one more of his transitions when his administration created a Cuba Transition Coordinator bossed by Cleb McCarry, former ambassador to Afghanistan. On 10 July 2006, a report of the Commission for Assistance to a Free Cuba demanded immediate action "to ensure the failure of the Castro's regime succession strategy."

There was nothing new in this verbose report. It was framed as an ultimatum that bluntly stated that the land and industrial and financial sectors must be denationalized. The Roman Church and its prerogatives must be fully restored including its extensive land holdings and the end of the separation of Church and State.. It was a blueprint for the return of the neo-colonial occupation from 1898-1959. Noteworthy is that its goals could be succinctly

summarized in an utterance made more than 50 years ago by an American oilman at the peak of the oil bonanza in Venezuela.

“Here in Venezuela you have the right to do what you like with your capital. This right is dearer to me than all the political rights in the world.”

The Economist, that militant mouthpiece of Big Capital (it’s owned by the Pearson Trust) hollers for US intervention to halt the nationalist and socialist offensives gathering speed in Cuba, Venezuela, Bolivia and Nicaragua. “To put it bluntly , Latin America needs more Lula da Silvas [and his version of neo-liberalism] and fewer Chavez’s and Morales’s. This is where the United States could help.” The imperial masters , however,do not require such morsels of advice because it is central to the applied logic of state terrorism.

As we have seen, institutional changes have been a permanent trait of the Revolution and the current debates and their implementation do not mark a qualitative change in their direction. It is but yet another phase of the greatest importance given the immense strides and complexity of the national economy. Cuba today is a power house of modern science and technology embracing bio-technology, electronics, engineering, information technology, the chemical and petrochemical industries, mining, the iron and steel industry, etc. To that inventory we should simply say that Cuba stands at the summit of world educational attainment.

The debate on the new transition In Cuba has reached a frenzied pace and straddles the problem of optimizing capital and labour resources. No holes are barred in these debates on the extent of administrative incompetence and corruption, and the theft of national assets. The current projects call for a massive overhaul of the bureaucracy whose swollen numbers are a deterrent to the nation’s productive advance.

These changes now underway demand a decentralization of economic decision making slated to boost productivity. The changes will require an overhaul of wholesale and retail price structures, wage payments and incentive payments, subsidies and the prevailing rationing system The latter was never designed to be a permanent fixture of a socialist order. These changes call for, as President Raul Castro stated in his 26 July 2007 policy statement, for the elimination of a host of prohibitions and red tape. Illustrative is the case of the dairy industry and specifically milk distribution. There are no overall directives engulfing the entire economy. Experimentation is proceeding on a piecemeal basis in various municipalities and then gradually extended. In the case of milk distribution this has resulted in savings of over \$40 million and in addition huge savings in fuel costs.

This is how Fidel puts it in his **Reflections** of 16 January. “We do not intend to give anything to those who could be producing but do not produce, or who produce very little. We shall reward the merits of those who work with their hands and their minds.” The question is obviously open: to what extent will these transitions, that cut deeply into the flesh of Cuba’s socialism, engender enhanced inequalities in a society whose egalitarianism is legendary.? Our query will soon be answered by unfolding events.

There are well-intentioned critics who propagate that Cuba should embrace the free market magic and its propertied social relations from whence it follows that the Chinese model is appropriate. One recalls Deng Xiaoping’s epic outburst. “To be rich is glorious” Deng’s ideas and their reverberations have been discussed in depth for several years in Cuba. But let us

be realistic. What is Deng's rallying cry other than a resounding clamour for the restoration of capitalism? A visit to China's cities and countryside and the monstrous inequalities between them and within them is amply confirmatory of the workings of the system. Its millionaires have become billionaires. China and Cuba belong to two opposed universes. China's level of inequality, measured by the Gini coefficient, is similar to that of American capitalism.

The capitalist reality of the islands of Hong Kong and Macao owned and dominated politically by a cabal of at most a dozen mega capitalist families that are entrenched through marriage, extended family connections and their daily economic wheelings and dealings would suggest that the Cuban leadership and its people will not be following this road. Thus the relevance of the Chinese capitalist model to Cuba smacks of total irrationalism.

Our lectures on transitions both within imperialism and Cuba are taking place not in an abstract world but in a world where capitalism – and American capitalism in particular – is traversing one of the most cataclysmic upheavals since the Great Depression of the 1930s. The resultant of this tragedy is beyond the scope of these lectures.

But what I believe will be the most important conditioner of the future direction of socialism in Cuba are the ethical foundations on which it reposes. This is enshrined in what I conceive to be one of the most penetrating manifestos in Cuban history. It is the definition of the Revolution so masterly articulated on 1 May 2000 by the Comandante that merits quotation at length.

"The Revolution is the sense of the historic moment; it is to change all that must be changed; it is equality and freedom in their plenitude; it means that we must be treated, and to treat others, as human beings; it is to emancipate ourselves by our own powers; it is to challenge the powerful dominant forces within the nation and abroad; it is to defend our values at whatever price and sacrifice; it is modesty, disinterestedness, altruism, solidarity and heroism; it means not having recourse to lies or thrashing ethical principles; it is the deep conviction that there is no force in the world capable of crushing the power of truth and ideas. Revolution is unity; it is independence; it is to fight for the materialization of our dreams for Cuba and the world; it is the foundation of our patriotism, our socialism and our internationalism."

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He taught at the University of Kings College and Dalhousie University in Nova Scotia. His classic work is *The Rise and Fall of Economic Liberalism* and his latest book is: *Cuba and Venezuela: The Nemeses of Imperialism* published by Citizens International in Penang, Malaysia. He is a frequent contributor to *Le Monde Diplomatique* and *The Economic and Political Weekly*.

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