

Fidel Castro: Political Power and the New Culture of Communication

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Among his many other achievements, Fidel's accomplishments as the constructor of the new Cuban society include:

overthrowing capitalism in favour of socialism and its related principles of equality and solidarity;

defeating U.S. neo-colonialist domination to attain sovereignty,

independence and dignity;

upholding human rights in the areas of health, education, culture and sport; respecting racial equality, gender equality, food and housing for all;

and defending freedom of speech and the press, the latter being one of the domains in which Fidel's example still has much to teach us, and creating a civilized social/political atmosphere without violence.

The basis of these exploits, which did not exist before 1959, is the political power of the people resulting from the Revolution that quashed the U.S.-backed state.



Arnold August

As early as 1953, the conquest of a new revolutionary people's power was at the forefront of Fidel's mind. This unshakeable goal was combined with the spirit of self-sacrifice that characterized his entire political life. Through defeats and victories from 1953 to 1956 until 1959, his every thought and action were inspired by this overriding guiding objective. It was indelibly combined with key creative tactics that were designed to convert the aspiration to conquer people's power through armed revolution into a reality. This was the focus of Fidel's passion.

The current new society bequeathed to the Cuban people finds its origins in the liberated areas during the wars of 1868 and 1895, the latter reaching new levels of organization under the leadership of the Revolutionary Party of Cuba and José Martí. Thus, the seeds of new political power were sowed in the second half of the 19th century, to be resuscitated and updated by Fidel in compliance with the new conditions. Local political power forged in the Sierra Maestra's liberated areas in 1957-58 was embedded as a virtual state within the neo-colonial dominated state. The July 26 Movement and the Rebel Army were founded and developed by Fidel and his comrades. They grew as the seeds of the Communist Party of Cuba and the Armed Forces respectively. These institutions constitute two ramparts in the maintenance and development of the people's power, in combination with Cuba's socialist culture as the shield.

In the course of this epic victorious march and in the ensuing decades, Fidel contributed toward a new feature of the culture of enacting politics within the Cuban Revolution. He was a communicator par excellence, a key component to conquer and improve political power. Thus, his thought and action, among other aspects of his legacy, constitute a new culture of communication between the leader and his people. Let's look at five examples of how Fidel's culture of enacting politics was fuelled by the new culture of communication, both of which mutually propelled each other.

First, there was the 1953 writing and distribution of *History Will Absolve Me*. One may ask how it is possible to speak of the communication talents of a leader representing the people's quest for political power, when he was imprisoned in solitary confinement, far from the masses. However, despite these extreme restrictions, he managed to communicate secretly with other jailed combatants, with some inmates serving time for common crimes and even with guards and prison employees. Before and after his defence, this was his extremely limited world.

Despite being limited to this underground communication system only and combined with the few books he was able to muster, he prepared his defence by memory. It was reported that he wrote and edited in his cell day and night, committing every word to memory until the moment he was brought to court. Only a person entirely devoted to solving Cuba's problems through a revolution to open the path for people's power could have maximized such scant communication tools at his disposal.

After delivering his defence from memory, he returned to his cell to find that his written statement had vanished. He set about rewriting it from memory. With close clandestine connections inside and outside the prison walls, he further expanded his communication with the people. Fidel smuggled out his defence piece by piece, using ingenious methods, such as using lemon juice for invisible ink to write on tiny bits of paper. By the time they reached their destination in Havana, the papers inscribed with invisible ink passed through prison security, but, as planned, they then dried up and could be read in Havana.

In Havana, Melba Hernández and Haydee Santamaria, the two women who had participated in the Moncada attack, were among a handful of people in charge of assembling the pieces of paper like a jigsaw puzzle and then printing the text in pamphlet form. Fidel initially instructed his limited world, consisting mainly of these two women, to produce 100,000 copies of his defence. He wrote to Melba and Haydee on June 18, 1954: “Without propaganda there is no mass movement, and without a mass movement, no revolution is possible.” Fidel was no doubt inspired by this interaction with his two comrades, who once again, like in Moncada, were putting their lives on the line under the Batista dictatorship. They themselves, in turn, were galvanized by Fidel’s thinking and heroic resistance in prison. And thus the lemons growing from Cuba’s fertile soil returned to fertilize the revolutionary movement through Fidel’s makeshift pen.

A second illustration is Fidel’s unique communication skill in defending people’s power. On January 8, 1959, this time in front of an immense crowd in Havana, in contrast to the extreme limitations of his solitary cell, Fidel said, “There is immense joy. However, there is still much to be done. Let us not fool ourselves into believing that the future will be easy; perhaps everything will be more difficult in the future.” No doubt the leader was inspired by the jubilant people. However, he was also making use of his unparalleled perspicacity in front of overjoyed supporters, realizing that he had to convey to them, and the national TV audience, caution and vigilance for the coming months and years. Fidel and the people converged into one political and ideological entity by means of his dexterity to communicate. It is difficult to say whether that classic statement spontaneously emerged out of the Havana political atmosphere of the time, given his extraordinary gift to feel the pulse of his people, or whether Fidel had already thought it through. In any case, he said what had to be said.

Either way, there are many other memorable moments in which his communication was indeed *spontaneous*, leaving in its wake a permanent imprint on the Cuban political landscape. This brings us to our third illustration, which occurred on September 28, 1960, where Fidel spoke in Havana in front of a mass gathering. The transcript reads the way many Cubans still remember it today, either through their own participation or by that unequalled Cuban revolutionary collective memory, through family and friends. I quote from the transcript this first portion in parentheses:

“(Sounds of the explosion of a firecracker) Fidel says, ‘A bomb?’ (People shouting: ‘Block them! We will win!’) (People sing the national anthem and shout, ‘¡Viva Cuba! ¡Viva la Revolución!’)”

The transcript continues:

(Someone from the public speaks with Dr. Castro) (Sounds of a second explosion)

Fidel goes on:

... Do not underestimate the imperialist enemy.

Out of this dramatic U.S.-backed threat in the heart of Havana, the Committees for the Defence of the Revolution (CDRs) spontaneously emerged in the neighbourhoods and then

further developed with the assistance of the Cuban revolutionary leadership. The need for this new type of mass organization was one of life and death for the Cuban Revolution. At the time, in 1961, their formation proved to be indispensable in defending Cuba against U.S.-supported and financed incursions and terrorist acts designed to subvert revolutionary political power. The CDRs, a fruit of the Fidel-and-the-people dynamic, also contributed substantially to governing at the national and local levels, especially from 1959 to 1976, when the political system was institutionalized and the new Constitution approved. The CDRs continued its work after 1976 in many other ways.

In sum, Che captured the essence of this unsurpassed leader-and-people communication. The guerrilla wrote, "At the big public mass meetings, one can observe something like the dialogue of two tuning forks whose vibrations interact, producing new ones in the speaker."

The fourth illustration draws on a presentation by Fidel on November 25, 2005 to students and professors at the University of Havana on the occasion of the 60th anniversary of his entry there as student. While a student at the University, Fidel dealt in detail with problems confronting Cuba, such as the need to save electricity and oppose corruption. The talk was punctuated with applause and laughter, depending on the point being made. Reading through the transcript again, it provides an almost visual record, such is the vivid interaction of the leader with students and professors. About two-thirds of the way into the talk, he concluded with what was likely an instinctive statement based on perhaps the look on the concerned faces of the students:

This country can self-destruct; this Revolution can destroy itself, but they can never destroy us; we can destroy ourselves, and it would be our fault.

Once again, the defence and the further development of people's power were at the centre of Fidel's message. After this statement, the interaction between the audience and Fidel accelerated. Che also summarized Fidel's relationship with the people in this way:

Fidel and the mass begin to vibrate together in a dialogue of growing intensity until they reach the climax in an abrupt conclusion.

More than 11 years after the University of Havana talk, corruption is still a problem. However, despite this and other problems, the Revolution based on the people in power is undefeated. The maturity and steadfast nature of the vast majority of Cuban youth may be one of the reasons for its enduring nature.

There are innumerable similar examples. One that comes to mind is February 4, 1962, when more than 1 million Cubans gathered in Plaza de la Revolución following the call of the Revolutionary Government to constitute the Second People's National General Assembly. Last week was the 55th anniversary of this occasion when Fidel Castro had read the declaration and galvanized the people by both its content and his extraordinary flair for communication to consciously vote in favour of it. In fact, this historical moment inspired me to use a photo of this show-of-hands vote as the cover of my 1999 book on democracy in Cuba.

The fifth example is Fidel's March 27, 2016 article "Brother Obama." At first glance, as in the initial example of the 1953 Moncada defence, one may ask how an article written by the

retired President in relatively fragile health can be illustrative of the leader–people dynamic by means of active communication between the two to defend the Revolution? While it was no longer possible for him to address and exchange with large crowds, aside from a few exceptions since 2008, he found a way through journalism, to which he had been attracted for many decades. During and right after the Obama visit, a lively debate erupted in the Cuban press and among the people regarding the approach taken to some of Obama’s speeches. It was far from unanimous. “Brother Obama” was written in the context of these controversies. Fidel knew, despite the condition of his health, what was happening in Cuba, and thus his most auspicious article struck a chord with society. It rippled like a wave through the political conversations taking place in Cuba and indeed internationally.

He began his “Brother Obama” address with the following:

“The kings of Spain brought us the conquistadores and masters.” It impacted many inside and outside Cuba, as Obama could not be naively appraised. There is a history of colonialism, neo-colonialism and imperialism from which Obama cannot be detached. However, one of the best and focused of Fidel’s charges was yet to come. He referred to Obama’s startling assertion, quoted by Fidel: “It is time, now, to forget the past, leave the past behind, let us look to the future together, a future of hope.” Fidel felt obliged to answer:

I suppose all of us were at risk of a heart attack upon hearing these words from the President of the United States.

Fidel, the revolutionary journalist, courageously wrote what many Cubans, and friends of Cuba, were thinking and writing in their respective ways. It was as if Fidel had somehow inhabited our minds. His timely intervention served as an enormous stimulus and fortification of the Cuban socialist cultural shield. This is held aloft by the vast majority of Cubans to protect people’s political power, independence and dignity and, with this, all the economic, social and cultural achievements of the Revolution.

This is but one of many examples that epitomizes Fidel’s uncanny ability to maintain his dialogue with Cubans through the pen. From the use of lemon juice as indelible ink in 1953 to employing appropriate instruments of writing in 2016, there existed one common thread: Fidel’s concern for the people’s needs of the time expressed by synthesizing them into his ever evolving Marxist-Leninist and Martiano thought to guide action with the goal of safeguarding political power as the foundation of the Cuban Revolution. Thus, in the course of history, Melba and Haydee became millions.

Throughout Fidel’s political life, he contributed to this new culture of communication without historical parallel, given its unique style and long duration, from 1953 to 2016. It is now part of the Cuban Revolution’s patrimony available to every Cuban to exercise on his or her own. But Fidel set the bar very high. Thus, it is not possible to replicate his example, because Fidel is Fidel. However, his legacy as a communicator is the model for leaders at all levels and for revolutionaries in general.

Fidel’s legacy is also part of the world heritage to guide writers and journalists in our countries, such as Canada, to maintain intimate dialectical communication with the needs and concerns of the peoples we are writing about and for.

English version of the Spanish-language presentation given as part of the panel titled “Fidel, Builder of the New Society” at the “Fidel, Politics, and Culture Symposium” held February 10–11, 2017 during the Havana International Book Fair.

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