



## Notes on the Revolution / Column 28



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November 6, 2019

The charismatic authority of Fidel

By Charles McKelvey

The Third International Symposium on the Cuban Revolution, Its Origen and Historic Development, sponsored by the Institute of History of Cuba, was held in Havana from October 29 to October 31, 2019. In two panels on October 31, four panelists spoke of different dimensions of the life, thought, and political practice of Fidel Castro.

Focusing on “Fidel and Justice,” Katiuska Blanco Castiñeira illustrated Fidel’s sense of justice as a child and youth, including his awareness of class and racial inequalities, which culminated in his becoming a lawyer who defended the poor, prior to his organization of the attack on the Moncada military barracks on July 26, 1953,

Elier Ramírez Cañedo observed that Fidel consistently was interested in contact with the people of the United States, and he often received prominent personalities from Cuba’s northern neighbor. And Fidel attempted to utilize informal channels of communication with U.S. presidents, beginning with JFK. He consistently proposed dialogue and negotiation with the USA, but always of the basis of equal sovereignty and mutual respect. Ramírez further



observed that Fidel conceived the Cuban Revolution as part of a Latin American Revolution, and he believed that the forward advance of the Latin American Revolution would be necessary for the consolidation of the Cuban Revolution, as is evident in Fidel's integrationist vision at the beginning of the twenty-first century, when he joined with Hugo Chávez in the creation of ALBA, the Bolivarian Alternative for Our America.

René González Barrios focused on the internationalist vision of Fidel, which was based on his anti-colonial and anti-imperialist perspective and his belief in the principles of self-determination of peoples and the sovereignty of states. Drawing upon Lenin, Fidel viewed revolutionary internationalism as solidarity with the oppressed peoples of the world. He believed that internationalism is the essence of the Revolution. In accordance with these beliefs, Cuba sponsored the First Solidarity Conference of the peoples of Africa, Asia, and Latin America in 1966; provided assistance to Angola, Ethiopia, Vietnam, and Grenada; and sent medical missions to many countries in the world.

Gustavo Espinoza stresses the teachings of Fidel to the effect that the force of ideas is central to the liberation of the peoples, that the necessary road of liberation depends on the conditions of each country, that the process of social change requires united mass action, and that the vanguard must construct the unity of the masses. Therefore, the vanguard itself must be united on a correct discernment of national conditions and the necessary road for social change, whether it be in the form of reform or revolution, but always requiring united mass action. Fidel also taught, Espinoza notes, that in processes of social change, there will be gains and setbacks, and one must not lose faith when setbacks occur.

There is a tendency today to overlook an essential characteristic of modern revolutionary processes, namely, the emergence of a persons with an exceptional capacity to discern and understand the unfolding of events, who also possess a boundless commitment to the values of social justice that are the foundation of modern anti-colonial revolutions of national and social liberation. The early twentieth century German sociologist Max Weber, analyzing the phenomenon of exceptional persons in a historic religious context, maintains that exceptional persons possess charismatic authority, different from the traditional authority of a king or a chief or the bureaucratic-legal authority of a president of a country. Appropriating Weber's concept when we observe modern revolutionary process, we are able to observe a general pattern of the emergence of leaders with an exceptional capacity to understand revolutionary theory and practice, who possess a charismatic authority conferred on them by the people. The charismatic leaders of modern revolutions include Toussaint, Lenin, Gandhi, Mao, Ho Chi Minh, Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, Simón Bolívar, José Martí, Augusto Sandino, Salvador Allende, Hugo Chávez, Evo Morales, among others. The emergence of a leader with charismatic authority is needed for a social movement to attain significant goals, because a leader with charismatic authority is able to forge the necessary unity from various tendencies, often contradictory, within the movement.

Fidel Castro, known today in Cuba as the historic leader of the Cuban Revolution, continually demonstrated an exceptional capacity for historical social scientific understanding, discerning the historic unfolding of global structures of domination and their manifestation in Cuba; and also seeing the constantly present and irrepressible expression of the colonized people for social justice. In addition, he possessed an exceptional capacity for pedagogical discourse, combining historical overview, theoretical analysis, and concrete solutions in an eclectic manner, always responding to concrete situations, and never organized in the manner of an academic treatise. Moreover, he repeatedly demonstrated an exceptional capacity for the art of politics, knowing the concrete issues that touched the emotions of the people; and sensing the pulse of the political maturity of the people, thereby avoiding political overreach, in which the leader tries to take the people beyond what their present political consciousness permits. What



is more, he also possessed an exceptional intelligence for military affairs, creating an army that overthrew the U.S.-backed dictatorship in a little more than two years. He also possessed a deep faith in the future of humanity, believing that no force on earth could stop the forward march of the peoples for social justice, once they understood the correct and necessary road toward their emancipation.

There were key moments in the history of the Cuban revolution in which Fidel's exceptional capacities were demonstrated. Such key moments include:

the articulation of History Will Absolve Me, part manifesto and part platform, which in combination with the attack on Moncada Barracks, galvanized the people;

the unifying of the diverse anti-Batista tendencies as the guerilla struggle approached triumph;

following the triumph of the Revolution, the decisive action of the Revolutionary Government in defense of the people, including the Agrarian Reform Law, the literacy campaign, and the reduction of housing rents and electricity rates;

Fidel's proposal to preserve the strong ties with the United States, but transforming them into a mutually-beneficial economic and mutually-respectful political relations, rejected by the empire;

the unifying of the various revolutionary tendencies to form a vanguard party that would lead the revolution, taking the place of Fidel's personal charismatic authority;

Fidel's leadership in the Non-Aligned Movement in the late 1970s and early 1980s, calling for global implementation of the historic revolutionary Third World project, rejecting the neoliberal project of the global powers, basing these proposals in scientific economic analysis;

Fidel's analysis of the origin of the Third World external debt, describing it as morally and politically unpayable;

Fidel's leadership of the Cuban nation in the adjustments of the Special Period;

Fidel's incorporation of the issues of gender equality (1960s) and ecology (1990s) into the fundamental principles of the Cuban Revolution;

Fidel's search for common ground between the Cuban Revolution and the Catholic Church (beginning in the 1980s), not only in Cuba, but also at an international level;

and Fidel's leading of the Cuban Revolution toward participation and leadership in the process of Latin American union and integration (beginning in the late 1990s).

The phenomenon of Fidel defies natural explanation. In a secular age, we would not want to turn to a traditional spiritual explanation. Yet we would have to be blind to not see the modern spiritual manifestations of the Cuban Revolution. It formulates concepts and values that retakes the historic formulations of the prophets of ancient Israel, who condemned the greed of the kings in the name of justice for the poor. Educated in Catholic schools, the historic leader of the Cuban Revolution once declared that if the Catholic Church were to develop a state in accordance with its values, it would do exactly what the Cuban Revolution has done. When he succumbed to the natural process of death at the age of ninety, the outpouring of popular affection for him was so overwhelming that it inspired a prominent Cuban journalist to observe that the Cuban people have declared Fidel to be sacred.



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When the modern sociologist Max Weber discerned the pattern of charismatic leadership, he observed its expression in historical religious contexts, in which religious institutions, concepts, and values dominated societies. In a modern secular age, perhaps we ought to consider that the ancient historic thirst of humanity for truth and social justice is now expressed in the form of the charismatic leaders of popular revolutions, who have the capacity to express fundamental, universal values and aspirations; but who, unlike the prophets of old, also have the capacity to mobilize the people in the taking of political power and the construction of a more just society. And perhaps, just as for centuries Jews, Christians, and Muslims have studied the sacred texts formed by the words of the ancient prophets, everyone who today is committed to a more just world ought to study the speeches and writings of our modern charismatic leaders, treating them as sacred texts that can educate and guide us toward the necessary road for our emancipation.

This is Charles McKelvey, reflecting on the unfolding global popular socialist revolution forged by our peoples in defense of humanity.

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