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The Revolution constructs socialism

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By Charles McKelvey

The Revolution was conceived by Fidel as a socialist revolution, not named as such, but promised in the form of concrete measures, such as agrarian reform, and in the form of a promise to take the control of the state from the foreign monopolies and the Cuban oligarchy and put it in the hands of those with the political will to act in defense of the interests and needs of the people.

The taking of power for the people required a radical agrarian reform, and not merely a partial agrarian reform involving the distribution of idle land, because the extensive ownership of agricultural land was the source of the political power over the Cuban state of the Cuban oligarchy and the foreign corporations. A radical agrarian reform program was not only the necessary

base for improvement in the standard of living of the people, it also was the political basis for breaking the control of the Cuban state by the Cuban estate bourgeoisie and U.S. agricultural corporations.

What is socialism, other than the taking of control of the state by the people, and the subsequent control of the state over the principal industries of the nation? Grasping this fundamental definition of socialism, we can see that Fidel's promise to the people could not be delivered without socialism, and that Fidel's promise was, in effect, a promise of socialism, even if initially it was not named as such, in order to avoid miscommunication.

But what characteristics would Cuban socialism take? In observing the evolution of the Cuban Revolution, we see Fidel made proposals concerning the direction that the popular socialist revolution could take, but he seemed to be aware that there were contingencies, and that much depended on the comportment of other actors, which he could not know with certainty in advance. Fidel, for example, expressed the hope

for cooperation from the United States, proposing compensation for nationalized U.S. properties through an elevated Cuba-USA sugar trade. Years later, Fidel stated that he had anticipated that the initial U.S. reaction would be hostile, but he believed that the U.S. elite would eventually accept the Revolution as a political reality that did not threaten its fundamental interests. Indeed, it can be said that cooperation with a determined and politically viable popular socialist revolution was more consistent with long-term U.S. interests than continuous political conflict.

Moreover, although the nationalization of U.S. sugar companies and historically abusive U.S. utilities and oil companies was an indispensable step for the popular socialist revolution, it did not necessarily follow that all U.S. companies in Cuba would be nationalized. Here it is worth noting that the nationalization of the three U.S. banks in Cuba did not occur until six weeks after the nationalizations of U.S. agricultural properties, and it followed demonstrated non-cooperation by the U.S. banks in the Cuban project of national development. Moreover, the nationalization of the remaining 166 U.S. properties did not occur until October 24, 1960, ten weeks after the first nationalizations, and in the context of a U.S. aggressive policy of regime change.

As is logical, the Cuban Revolution would have to adapt to the reality that would be forged by U.S. policy toward it, a policy that could not be known with certainty in advance. Had the United States adopted a policy of cooperation, there almost certainly would have been commerce between the two nations, inasmuch as this was being proposed by the Revolution. And there also may have been some U.S. companies operating in Cuba, taking into account the interests of the young Revolution in taking practical steps to facilitate the development of science and the productive economy.

It is reasonable to believe that the story of the Cuban popular socialist revolution would have been very different; if the U.S. power elite had possessed the capacity to see its long-term interests in cooperation, not only with socialist Cuba, but with all the forces for social change that were emerging from the neocolonized peoples.

Then there is the question of the role of the national industrial bourgeoisie in the Cuban popular socialist revolution. Fidel had hoped in 1959 that the national bourgeoisie would be capable of transforming itself from a figurehead bourgeoisie, totally subordinated to the interests of U.S. capital, into an independent national bourgeoisie allied with and contributing to the Cuban revolutionary project of autonomous economic development. But by the middle of 1960, it had become clear that the Cuban industrial bourgeoisie had incorporated itself into the U.S.-directed counterrevolution, and indeed had abandoned the country. The hostility and flight of the Cuban national industrial bourgeoisie required the Cuban revolutionary government to nationalize many more Cuban industries than it had initially planned. Certainly, the counterrevolutionary comportment of the Cuban industrial bourgeoisie cannot be seen as unrelated to the non-cooperation and aggressiveness of the United States. If the U.S. government had possessed the capacity to discern the long-term benefits of cooperation, this likely would have strengthened the political position of those Cuban industrialists who sincerely advocated working with the Cuban revolutionary government.

In addition to the non-cooperation and hostility of the United States and the Cuban bourgeoisie, there also was the factor of the severing of relations with Cuba by Latin American governments, pressured to do so by the U.S. government. The rupture of Cuban relations with Latin America was fundamentally opposed to the Cuban revolutionary ideological orientation toward cooperation and unity among Latin American nations in opposition to imperialism, and it was also opposed to the Cuban and Third World concept of South-South cooperation and mutually beneficial trade among nations as a strategy for economic development.

The Cuban Revolution had to adapt to these conditions, which provided a context for the evolution of the characteristics of the Cuban socialism. At the same time, there was the factor of the embracing of the Cuban Revolution by the Soviet Union. To be sure, had Revolutionary Cuba found cooperation from the

United States, it nonetheless would have insisted on its sovereign right to develop economic, political, and cultural relations with the Soviet Union. But it would have done in the context of a commitment to the diversification of its commercial partners and diplomatic relations.

Without cooperation from the United States, and severed from a potential Latin American South-South trade, Cuba sought to mobilize resources toward investments in scientific and industrial development that were oriented toward satisfaction of the basic needs of the population; priority was given to the formation of the human resources necessary for scientific and industrial development, through the expansion and improvement of education and public health.

The Cuban approach to development was called “equality at a low level,” inasmuch as it focused on the production of basic needs rather than luxury goods, and it attempted to ensure that everyone had access to the basic necessities. The approach required a high degree of collective consciousness and a will of sacrifice, inasmuch as the people were called to leave aside the irrational consumerism characteristic of the capitalist societies. Accordingly, Che Guevara’s concept of the “new man and woman” attained considerable influence. The Cuban approach required a vanguard of exemplary revolutionaries, leaders with advanced consciousness and high levels of commitment, whose comportment would be a model for others. This revolutionary vanguard was recruited from all classes, including professionals, urban workers, rural workers, agricultural cooperativists, and peasants.

The Cuban relation with the Soviet Union provided some compensation for the non-cooperation of the United States. The Soviet Union provided commercial credit, and it guaranteed a market for Cuban products. And it provided machinery that was integral to the strategy of orienting the economy toward industrial development.

As it evolved, the Cuban socialist project encountered obstacles, which required further adjustments. We will pursue these themes in subsequent episodes of Imperialism and Revolution.

This is Charles McKelvey, speaking from Cuba, the heart and soul of a global socialist revolution that struggles for a more just, democratic, and sustainable world.

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