

Imperialism and Revolution

Episode #30



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The forming of an exceptional leader

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There are those who believe that focusing on an individual in a particular process of social change is misguided, because social dynamics are driven by historic, economic, and social tendencies that are far more powerful than any individual. Yet the exceptional capacities of the leaders of revolutionary processes can be observed; their unusual, indeed unnatural, insight into historical, national, and global dynamics as well as their political intelligence.

Angel Castro, the father of Fidel, was from a poor peasant family of Galicia, Spain. At the beginning of the twentieth century he migrated to Cuba, where he worked for the United Fruit Company. He later became a contractor who organized groups of workers, which enabled him to acquire property, ultimately

becoming a landholder with significant extensions of land, dedicated to sugar and cattle. By the 1930s, there were about 1000 people living on the plantation, which included a dairy, butchery, bakery, store, public school, post office, and telegraph.

Although Fidel Castro Ruz was the son of a landholder, he was not socialized into bourgeois culture. His mother, Lina Ruz González, was from a poor Cuban peasant family. Neither of Fidel's parents had formal education; both taught themselves to read. The couple lived on their plantation, and they had no social contact with members of the bourgeois class.

Fidel's first social world as a child was formed by the poor workers of his father's plantation, mostly Haitian immigrants. The children of these families were Fidel's first playmates, and they continued to be his friends and companions of Christmas and summer vacations throughout his childhood and adolescence.

Angel Castro was generous with respect to any request for assistance, and he employed more persons than the plantation required, in response to requests for employment. Later in life, Fidel expressed his belief that the conduct of his father with respect to his workers was an important ethical example in his formation. He maintained that he learned from his family at an early age an ethical sensitivity and certain ethical values, an awareness that there is a difference between right and wrong, and that that one has the duty to do what is right.

At the age of four, Fidel began attending the primary school on his father's plantation, a small school with fifteen or twenty children. The schoolteacher advised his parents that Fidel had an advanced aptitude, and she recommended that he be sent to school in the city of Santiago de Cuba. Fidel was enrolled in the Colegio de LaSalle, of the Silesian Brothers, from the first through the fourth grades; and in the Jesuit Colegio de Dolores in Santiago de Cuba for the last two years of primary school and the first two years of secondary school. He transferred to the prestigious Jesuit institution, the Colegio de Belén, in Havana, from which he graduated in 1945 at the age of 18. These schools were private Catholic boarding schools for boys, whose students for the most part were the sons of the bourgeoisie.

Fidel maintained that the ethnical sensitivity that he had learned from his family was reinforced by his education in Catholic schools, particularly the education of the Jesuits. The Jesuits preached and practiced, Fidel said, the virtues of good character, honesty, sacrifice, and discipline. In Fidel's view, the religious martyr and the revolutionary hero are made from same mold; a developed ethical sensitivity is the foundation for political consciousness and for a commitment to social justice.

Fortunate to have attended the finest schools for the bourgeoisie, and fortunate to not have been burdened by the prejudices of bourgeois culture, Fidel Castro arrived at the University of Havana in 1945 with a basic concept of justice that had been formed in his family and in Catholic primary and secondary schools. And he arrived with a "profound and devoted admirer of the heroic struggles of our people for independence in the nineteenth century," and as an admirer and follower of Martí, as a result of "the enormous attraction of Martí's thought for all of us." This formation in the heritage of Martí and of national liberation was deepened by the fact that he had read, "practically all the books that were published" on the two Cuban wars of independence.

Fidel arrived to the University of Havana, however, with little political consciousness. He would later describe himself as a "political illiterate" at that time. He possessed a basic concept of justice; he had seen extreme inequality; and he had knowledge of and identification with the historic Cuban struggle for independence. But he had limited understanding of political economy and class divisions and conflicts, and he had not been involved in any way in political activities. His thinking and his life were transformed during his five years at the University of Havana.

In 1945, the University of Havana was an educational institution for the rich and the middle class, a social place where there was mixing of the bourgeoisie and the relatively privileged sector of the popular

classes, in an environment that included some professors of the Left. In the 1920s and the 1930s, in the epoch of Mella and Martínez Villena, anti-imperialism had been the dominant tendency among student leaders. However, by 1944, with the election of Ramón Grau as President of Cuba, student leadership was shaped by the anti-communist reformism of Grau, leading to a decline of anti-imperialism. By 1945, there had emerged a reaction to Grau reformism among students, with which Fidel identified. He quickly became actively involved with the political activities of the anti-Grau tendency among university students.

Fidel's studies during his first two years at the university led him to become what he would later call a "utopian communist." Especially important was a course taken during his first year, taught by a professor of political economy, Delio Portela. The course, which included 900 pages of mimeographed material, discussed the laws of capitalism and the various economic theories. This study led Fidel to the conclusion that the capitalist system was absurd; but his interpretation was utopian, not based in a scientific analysis of human history. It was simply recognition that capitalism is bad, and that it generates poverty, injustice, and inequality. Other courses that influenced Fidel's development included the "History of Political Ideas," taught by Raúl Roa García, who had been a prominent member of the student revolutionary movement in the 1920s; and a course entitled "Worker Legislation," taught by Aureliano Sánchez Arango.

During his third year at the university, Fidel began to read avidly the works of Marx, Engels, and Lenin, using books of the library of the Communist Party. The Communist Manifesto was one of the first that he read, and it had the most impact. It made clear to him the role of class divisions and class interests in human history, thus enabling him to understand why politicians in Cuba behave so badly: they make promises to the people, in order to obtain the political support of the majority; but they are financially supported by the bourgeoisie, and thus they respond to its interests.

This period of self-directed reading led Fidel to Marxism-Leninism, but because of his previous intellectual and moral development, he would forge a synthesis of Marxism-Leninism with the Cuban tradition of national liberation, which we will explore in the next episode 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.

Sources

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