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Cuba

The greatest statesman of the last half-century

- Features - In Memoriam - Obituaries and appreciations -

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Fidel Castro was by far the greatest statesman of this last half century. He was also the last of the great revolutionary leaders of the democratic revolutions of national liberation that began in 1910 with the Chinese, Persian and Mexican revolutions and during and after the Second World War led to the independence and unity of China and the independence of the Indian subcontinent and Indonesia, Indochina, the African colonies, Nasser's Egypt and Algeria.

Cuba is a small country of 11.5 million inhabitants. For a long time it depended economically on the export of a monoculture - cane sugar – as well as rum, tobacco and tourism and it now depends also on the provision of services (tourism, dispatch of doctors and teachers). This "dessert" economy (based on dispensable luxuries such as tobacco and drink) reliant on services produces very little surplus value and depends on the distribution of world surplus value produced in more industrialized regions, in other words on the economic surpluses available to the sectors that consume these goods and services which are not indispensable. It is therefore a fragile and dependent country.

One of the great merits of Fidel Castro was having made possible the immediate raising of the cultural level of Cuba and the rapid and exemplary development of scientific research and medical sciences of high quality. The son of a landowner who grew sugar and a pupil of the Jesuits, he broke the dependence on sugar and, with a poor population which until then believed in the African saints and richer classes which were Catholic or Protestant, built a scientific and secular education system.

Tons of insults have been dumped on the corpse of Fidel Castro, with the objective of minimizing his achievement and preparing the final assault against Cuba, to recolonize it and rebuild the brothels and gambling houses. But there have also been unpleasant incidences of conservative moralizing and necrophiliac assertion from the eternal opportunists, or the eulogies of sincere supporters of the Cuban revolution and faithful Fidelistas who cannot distinguish between a people's revolution and the virtues and limits of its leaders. It would offend the ethics and intelligence of readers and I would be remiss in my duty as historian, journalist and of socialist if I unthinkingly joined them.

Fidel Castro was in fact a great revolutionary Cuban, of the stature of Martí, and a great Cuban statesman, a permanent and courageous defender of the independence of Cuba against US imperialism and, in his own way, of the transformation of a democratic anti-imperialist revolution as a point of departure for the construction of the elementary bases of socialism - which can really be built only at the world level - in this small, poor and dependent island. But he was neither a socialist when he was an activist in the student movement and in the party of Guiteras [1] as an anti-imperialist radical nationalist, in opposition to the Popular Socialist Party (Stalinist/Communist), then allied with the dictator Fulgencio Batista, nor when he attacked the Moncada barracks with fellow democrats, nor when he disembarked in Cuba in the heroic Granma expedition. That is why the US State Department believed he could be used to get rid of Batista, increasingly an embarrassment, and sent Herbert Matthews of the *New York Times* to interview him in the Sierra Maestra – until 1959 Communist Parties throughout the world fought him as a petty bourgeois adventurer.

All my life I have defended the Cuban revolution without identifying it with Fidel Castro or other leaders. I was president of the Argentine Committee of Solidarity with the Cuban Revolution created in 1957, two years before the triumph of the revolution and the "progressive" government of Frondizi jailed me for that.

I can say therefore that Fidel's errors were many and sizeable, derived from his lack of socialist education and the

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tactical necessities of the alliance with the worldwide counterrevolutionary bureaucracy that ran the Soviet Union.

During the missile crisis of 1962, which brought the world to the brink of nuclear war, Fidel and the Cuban Government faced the great danger and repudiated the betrayal of Khrushchev who withdrew the defensive rockets without consulting them. But then, to renew all its productive apparatus, Cuba had to rely on the Kremlin and Castro, imitating the Soviet Communists, created a single party that transformed into the Communist Party and identified the latter with the state, rather than keeping it separate and making it an organ of critical control. While imperialism, with its military and political attacks and its criminal blockade, created shortages in Cuba, sowed diseases and forced a poor country to build a disproportionate military force, thus generating poverty and bureaucracy, Fidel and his comrades believed that development and socialism could be built on the basis of apparatuses and blocked the way to self-management, workers' control and the real participation of the workers in the decisions of the Communist Party and the government. This strengthened the bureaucracy.

Censorship, cultural repression and homophobia as well as support for the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968 damaged Fidel's global prestige. The failure of the huge "zafra" (sugar harvest) of 1970 disarticulated the economy. Fidel also characterized the corrupt Brezhnev as a "great Marxist" and supported the Argentine dictatorship during the Malvinas war, believing that it was anti-imperialist. As a statesman, he was guided by what he believed was good for Cuba, not by what aided social liberation, and he identified states and governments with peoples – he was the first to hail the fraudulent victory of Salinas in the Mexican presidential elections of 1988.

These errors had an enormous cost but Cuba today is no longer the Cuba of 1959. Fidel will always be remembered as an anti-imperialist revolutionary.

[1] A democratic and anti-imperialist leader assassinated in 1935 by the troops of the Batista-Caffery-Mendieta government