



Fidel castro: His Political Origin, Rule, and Legacy

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Cuba has not been at the center of world attention for a long time, particularly after the collapse of the Soviet bloc considerably diminished the island's importance to US imperialism. For the international left, political developments in other Latin American countries, especially Venezuela, have surpassed Cuba as a primary focus of attention. That does not mean, however, that the Cuban model has ceased to be a desirable, even if at present unrealizable, model for significant sections of the left, particularly in Latin America. For larger sections of the left, there is still considerable misinformation and confusion about the true nature of Cuba's "really existing socialism," a confusion that far from being of merely academic interest has a significant impact on the left's conception of socialism and democracy. The lack of democracy and therefore of authentic socialism in Cuba is not only a problem of interest to Cubans, but also a critical test of how seriously the international left takes its democratic pronouncements.

Origins

The Cuban Revolution was an unexpected and welcome surprise to many. After the rebel army, supported by an important urban underground, smashed Cuba's regular army, what began as a political revolution quickly became a social revolution, the third in Latin America—after those of Mexico in 1910 and Bolivia in 1952. For the anti-imperialist left in Latin America and elsewhere, it represented a successful defeat and comeuppance of the US empire, which had recently frustrated the Bolivian revolution and overthrown the reform movement of the democratically elected Jacobo Árbenz in Guatemala in 1954.

The Cuba of the 1950s shared many traits with the rest of Latin America: economic underdevelopment, poverty, subjection to US imperialism, and after the military coup of March 10, 1952, a corrupt military dictatorship that became increasingly brutal as resistance to it increased. Military dictatorships were particularly common in Latin America at the height of the Cold War when they enjoyed the full support of Washington in the name of opposing "Communist subversion" in the region. Besides General Fulgencio Batista's Cuba, this was also true for such dictatorships as those in Venezuela, Colombia, Paraguay, Perú, Nicaragua, and the Dominican Republic.

Yet Cuba was the only one among this group of nations that had a successful multiclass democratic revolution that less than two years after having taken power was well on its way to joining the Communist¹ bloc of countries led by the USSR, right in the backyard of the United States. This dramatic change plus the social gains that were made by the Cuban people in education, health, and other social-justice issues, particularly in the early decades of the revolution, elicited the support of the old and new generations of anti-imperialist women and men.

What made that revolution possible? An answer to this question requires a discussion, on one hand, of the social structural conditions that facilitated a revolution, and on the other hand, of the political figures, particularly Fidel Castro, who harnessed those conditions to implement their own revolutionary goals. This particular combination of social structural conditions and political leadership also explains the overwhelming power that Fidel Castro was able to obtain as a revolutionary head of state.

On the Eve of the Revolution: Combined and Uneven development

The Cuba of the 1950s occupied a relatively high economic position in Latin America. With a population of 5.8 million people, the island had the fourth highest per capita income among the twenty Latin American countries after Argentina, Uruguay, and Venezuela, and the thirty-first highest in the world.² Cuba also ranked fourth in Latin America according to an average of twelve indexes covering such items as percentage of the labor force employed in mining, manufacturing, and construction; percentage of literate persons; and per capita electric power, newsprint, and caloric food consumption.³ Yet, its economy was characterized by a highly uneven and combined development. Its relatively high economic position in Latin America hid substantial differences in living standards between the urban (57 percent of Cuba's population in 1953), and rural areas (43 percent), and especially between the capital city, Havana (21 percent of Cuba's population) and the rest of the country. Thus, for example, 60 percent of physicians, 62 percent of dentists, and 80 percent of hospital beds were in Havana,⁴ and while the rate for illiteracy for the country as a whole was 23.6 percent, the rate for Havana was only 7.5 percent in contrast to 43 percent of the rural population that could not read or write.⁵

One important feature of this uneven economic development was the significant growth and advance of the mass media, which turned out to play an important role in the revolution. These included newspapers, magazines, radio, and particularly television, of which Cuba was a pioneer in Latin America.⁶ The largest weekly magazine *Bohemia*—with its left of center politics—counted its circulation in the hundreds of thousands, including its significant Latin American export audience. *Bohemia* published many of Fidel Castro's exhortations to revolution during those periods when there was no censorship under the Batista dictatorship. After the revolutionary victory, television became an important vehicle for Fidel Castro's interviews and speeches oriented to win over and consolidate support for the revolutionary government. Contrary to the African American poet and singer Gil Scott-Heron's 1971 prophecy, this revolution *was* televised.

No oligarchy

Perhaps the most politically important distinguishing feature of Cuba's social structure in the 1950s is that it lacked an oligarchy, that is the close organic relations among the upper classes, the high ranks of the armed forces, and the Catholic Church hierarchy, which had effectively acted as the institutional bases of reaction in many Latin American countries. In 1902, with the formal declaration of Cuban independence from the US occupation that had replaced Spanish colonialism in 1898, a half-baked and fragile Cuban oligarchy came into being, represented by the classic duopoly of the Liberal and Conservative parties that relied on the support of a weak, sugar-centered bourgeoisie devoid of a national project. At the same time, a class of predominantly white army officers—many of whom had served as generals in the Cuban war of independence in the 1890s—with organic ties to the Cuban upper classes, ran the army.

As in the rest of the Spanish-speaking Caribbean, the Catholic hierarchy, while influential, was not then, nor later, a major and decisive political actor, in contrast with the more crucial role it played in many other Latin American countries. One of the main causes of the weakness of this oligarchy was the sharp limits on Cuban independence established by the United States through the Platt Amendment imposed on the Cuban Constitution of 1901 granting the United States the legal right to intervene in Cuban affairs, which the Cubans were forced to accept as a condition of the “independence” of the island.

This half-baked oligarchic arrangement came crashing down with the 1933 revolution that succeeded in overthrowing the Machado dictatorship and established for a short time a nationalist government—strongly supported by the popular classes—that introduced labor and social legislation, and with it the foundations of a Cuban welfare state.⁷ The US government refused to recognize this government, which was soon overthrown with US support by the new plebeian army leadership of sergeants led by Fulgencio Batista who eliminated the old officer class. After the overthrow of the progressive nationalist government, the United States, in an attempt to provide some legitimacy to the unpopular government controlled by the former sergeant now turned Colonel Batista, agreed in 1934 to abolish the Platt Amendment. In return for a greater degree of political self-rule, Batista accepted, in addition to concessions such as maintaining the US naval base at Guantánamo Bay, a new reciprocity treaty that perpetuated the reign of sugar, thereby hindering attempts to diversify the economy of the island through which other Latin American countries, such as Mexico, had achieved some success with their import substitution policies.

This is how the 1933 revolution produced no permanent resolution of any of the major social questions affecting the island, including badly needed agrarian

reform, and led instead to open counterrevolution and then, under the contradictory pressures of US capital and the world market on one hand, and of the ever-present threat of working class and popular unrest on the other hand, to a variety of state-capitalist compromises involving the significant state regulation of the economy that discouraged foreign investment. The most important example was the case of the sugar industry where the state established, in 1937, a corporate entity to oversee the industry (Instituto Cubano de Estabilización del Azúcar—ICEA) and a detailed set of regulations of labor conditions, wages, and production quotas for the industry as a whole as well as for each sugar mill. These were the kinds of institutional arrangements that framed the social and political *modus vivendi* of the next two decades of Cuban history.

No major social class emerged totally victorious after the 1933 revolution, and although capitalism and imperialism strongly consolidated themselves, a capitalist ruling class of equal strength did not, in part because of its reliance on the US as the ultimate guarantor of its fate against any possible internal threat to its power and privileges. Instead, there was a numerically important Cuban business class that did not really rule but bolstered its privileged position and benefited as much as it could from the governments of the day. This Cuban business class initially supported the Batista dictatorship in a purely opportunistic fashion, but later abandoned it as the very corrupt government shook down businesspeople without even being able to guarantee law and order and a predictable legal and business climate. This helps to explain why prominent members of the business class, such as the very wealthy sugar magnate Julio Lobo, helped to finance Fidel Castro's 26th of July Movement before it came to power.⁸

The Batista sergeants' coup also led to the emergence of a new army headed by the former sergeants suddenly turned into colonels and generals, who never recognized or ceded their control to the newly trained professional officers schooled in the island's military academies, to serve the Constitution in a nonpartisan manner. Instead, the Cuban army remained a fundamentally political, mercenary army whose rank-and-file members served on a voluntary basis in exchange for a secure job and salary, devoid of any purpose or ideology except for the personal enrichment of its leaders and the meager benefits that trickled down to its ranks.⁹ This explains the failure of the attempt by the academy-trained professional military officers—the so-called *puros* (the pure)—to overthrow the Batista regime in 1956 and, more important, the general apathy and unwillingness of the soldiers to fight the 26th of July Movement rebels. Meanwhile, the traditional Liberal and Conservative parties lost much of their power and influence and were relegated to a less important role as new parties came into existence, which also failed to create a strong and stable role for themselves and collapsed as they were unable to face the new realities created by the Batista military dictatorship. In contrast, in Venezuela, the social-

democratic *Acción Democrática* (AD) and the Social-Christian Party (COPEI) managed to survive the dictatorship of Marcos Pérez Jiménez and emerged as strong and stable parties of the social and economic status quo after the Venezuelan dictatorship was overthrown in January 1958.

In 1944, Batista's candidate lost the elections to the first of two liberal-democratic, but very corrupt, governments. These governments preserved, on the whole, the democratic features of the progressive 1940 Constitution, and introduced institutional changes such as the creation of a national bank to regulate the monetary and financial systems in the island. Nevertheless, they were unable to change the fundamental features of the social-political structure of the post-1933 Cuba. These were the features that remained unchanged all the way up to the eve of the revolution of 1959.

A large but weak working class

One of the main features of the large working class in Cuba on the eve of the revolution was that a substantial part of it was rural and centered on the seasonal sugar industry. The great majority of these sugar workers were wage-earning agricultural workers cutting, collecting, and transporting the cane, with a minority of industrial workers working on the processing of sugar and the maintenance, repair, and upkeep of the sugar mills. As we shall see later in greater detail, this made Cuba different from other lessdeveloped countries where peasants dominated the rural landscape engaged in self-subsistence agriculture. It is true that in the 1950s new sectors of the working class had emerged as a result of a degree of diversification of the economy away from the sugar industry despite the constraints imposed by economic treaties with the United States. These included, besides the extraction of nickel and cobalt in eastern Cuba and oil refineries, the production of pharmaceutical products, tires, flour, fertilizers, textiles such as rayon, detergents, toiletries, glass, and cement.¹⁰ Nevertheless, sugar continued at the heart of the Cuban economy with the most important sector of the agricultural proletariat associated with it.

A study published in 1956 by the US Department of Commerce based on the 1953 Cuban census, cites farm laborers, including unpaid family workers, as constituting 28.8 percent of the labor force in the island, which could be considered as a rough approximation of the size of the rural working class in the 1950s. The same study also cites a group classified as farmers and ranchers as constituting an additional 11.3 percent of the total labor force. It is likely that the figures of both groups fluctuated through time as a result of movement between those two groups of poor farmers and ranchers seeking to seasonally supplement their income by selling their labor in the sugar industry, and also as a result of substantial migration from rural to urban areas. Even so, those figures indicate a much higher proportion—more than double—of salaried rural workers compared to peasants in the countryside.

It is thus ironic that the peasants that Fidel Castro came into contact with in the Sierra Maestra were not representative of the Cuban rural labor force. (Sugar is typically planted in flat rather than mountainous lands.) The structure of Cuba's rural labor force in the 1950s also helps to explain why once Fidel Castro and his close associates adopted the Soviet system, they had a much easier time collectivizing agriculture into state farms than was the case in other Communist countries with large peasantries.

Besides the agricultural proletariat, Cuba also had a larger and more important urban working class. The same 1956 study classified 22.7 percent of the Cuban labor force under the category of craftsmen, foremen, operatives, and kindred workers, 7.2 percent as clerical and kindred workers, and 6.2 percent as sales workers. Service workers, except private households, constituted 4.2 percent of the urban working class, and private household workers 4.0 percent. These categories could be considered a rough approximation of the urban working class, for a total of 44.3 percent of the total labor force in the island.¹¹

Over fifty percent of this two million rural and urban labor force was unionized, mostly under the control of the very corrupt Mujalista union bureaucracy, whose leader Eusebio Mujal had supported Batista since his second military coup in 1952, promising to keep labor peace in exchange for being ratified as the principal union leader. For its part, Batista's government refrained from an immediate attack on labor's gains, although it did not take long for it to gradually, but substantially, erode labor's wages and working conditions. Mujal became even more bound to Batista after the dictator outlawed the Popular Socialist Party (PSP), the name adopted by the Communists at the time of the Soviet alliance with the United States during the Second World War, a move that increased Mujal's control and that further eroded the already limited influence of that party on the organized working class in the island. According to an internal survey conducted in 1956 by the PSP, only 15 percent of the country's two thousand local unions were led by Communists or by union leaders who supported collaboration with the PSP.¹²

The Communist Party's influence on the Cuban working class had its militant heyday in the late twenties and early thirties, at the time of its "third period" ultra-left and sectarian politics. Its growth displaced the hold that the anarchists had on the working class from the late nineteenth century until the mid 1920s, both in Cuba and in the predominantly Cuban tobacco enclaves in Key West and Tampa in Florida to which Cuban tobacco workers would migrate—before there were immigration controls—because of strikes or poor economic conditions in the island. That growth allowed the CP to play a leading role in the 1933 revolution against the Machado dictatorship, a revolution in which the working class played a significant part. However, the CP "third period" policy against supporting the new nationalist revolutionary government that the Roosevelt

administration refused to recognize significantly contributed to the failure of that revolution. Moreover, under the popular front policy adopted by the CP later on, and as a result of the nationalists refusing to work with the CP because of its conduct in the 1933 revolution, the Cuban Communists made a deal with Batista in 1938 providing him with political and electoral support in exchange for the CP being handed the official control of the Cuban labor movement. The defeat of the candidate supported by Batista and the Communists in the 1944 elections and the Cold War that began a few years later, dealt a severe blow to Communist political influence in general and their trade union influence in particular.

It was then that the labor representatives of the Auténtico Party—the former revolutionary nationalists of the 1930s—with Eusebio Mujal among them, who, along with other independent labor leaders who could be loosely identified as nationalist, took over the unions, sometimes based on the use of force and other assorted gangster methods. Soon after, Mujal emerged as the top leader of the only trade-union confederation, a role that he continued to play under Batista.

Opposition to the dictatorship grew among the large majority of Cubans. The working class found itself under the yoke of the double dictatorship of Mujal in the unions and of Batista in the country as a whole. Remarkably, as some authors have shown, there were many labor struggles that took place in that period, some with an open anti-Batista agenda.¹³ The Mujalista bureaucracy did not have total control of working-class unrest and there were some militant unions—like that of the bank workers—that managed to escape Mujal’s vise. However, these struggles did not translate into a strong and visible independent working-class organization opposed to the government. This was due to the fragmentary character of these struggles that lacked the continuity and cumulative impact that would have made a strong and independent working-class organization possible. This was the context in which Fidel’s 26th of July Movement called for a general strike in April of 1958. The strike was a total defeat: the majority of the workers, union and nonunion, did not respond, and the minority who did was violently repressed by Batista’s police. This had very serious consequences for the revolutionary movement, as well as for the role that the working class would play in the revolution. On May 3, 1958, less than a month after the defeat of the April strike, the leadership of the movement met with Fidel Castro at Altos de Mompié in the Sierra Maestra to discuss the strike failure and how to proceed with the struggle.¹⁴ One result of this meeting was that Castro solidified his control of the movement by being named general secretary and commander-in-chief of the rebel army. The other was that the movement adopted guerrilla warfare as its central strategy and assigned the general strike to a secondary role only as the popular culmination of the military campaign. After Batista and his immediate entourage fled the country on New Year’s Day in 1959, Fidel Castro and the 26th of July Movement called for a general strike to paralyze the country to prevent a

military coup. As the possibility of a coup greatly receded less than twenty-four hours after Batista's departure, the planned general strike rapidly turned into a huge, multiclass national festival to celebrate the victory of the rebels and to greet Fidel Castro and his rebel army in its long east-to-west triumphant procession towards Havana where they arrived on January 8. This is how the active, organized fragments of the Cuban working class, and even more so the far larger number of workers who sympathized as individuals with the revolution, ended up as supporting actors instead of being the central protagonists in the successful struggle to overthrow the Batista dictatorship. The FONU (Frente Obrero Nacional Unido)—a broad workers' front formed and led by the 26th of July Movement in 1958, which included every anti-Batista political formation, and especially the Communists—was no political or organizational match for Fidel Castro and the broader 26th of July Movement, and only played a secondary role in the overall anti-Batista struggle. Neither the urban nor the rural working class played a central role in that struggle.

How Fidel Castro emerged:

The interface of social structure and political leadership

When the Batista coup took place on March 10, 1952, Fidel Castro had graduated two years earlier from the law school at the University of Havana. He was one of the many children of Ángel Castro, a turn-of-the-century Galician immigrant who became a wealthy sugar landlord in eastern Cuba. Although he never showed any political inclination while studying at the elite Jesuit Colegio Belén high school, after he entered the University of Havana in 1945 he became involved with one of the several political gangster groups at the university, for the most part formed by demoralized veterans of the 1933 Revolution battling each other for the no-show jobs and other kinds of sinecures used by the Auténtico governments then in power to coopt and neutralize the former revolutionaries.¹⁵ Then, while still in law school, he participated in two important events that came to have a deep influence on him: one was the 1947 Cayo Confites expedition that intended to sail to the Dominican Republic from a key off the Cuban coast to provoke a revolution against the Trujillo dictatorship. The expedition never got off the key due to Washington's pressure on the Cuban army to squash it. The other event was the so-called "Bogotazo," the massive rioting that took place in Bogotá, Colombia, after the assassination of Liberal Party leader Eliecer Gaitán in 1948. For Fidel Castro, the Cayo Confites expedition of some 1,200 men was an example of what he regarded as bad organizing and sloppy, hasty recruitment methods that led to the incorporation of "delinquents, some lumpen elements and all kinds of others."¹⁶ Concerning the

“Bogotazo,” although Castro had been impressed by the eruption of an oppressed people and by their courage and heroism, he remarked that

there was no organization, no political education to accompany that heroism. There was political awareness and a rebellious spirit, but no political education and no leadership. The [Bogotazo] uprising influenced me greatly in my later revolutionary life . . . I wanted to avoid the revolution sinking into anarchy, looting, disorder, and people taking the law into their own hands. . . . The [Colombian] oligarchs—who supported the status quo and wanted to portray the people as an anarchic, disorderly mob—took advantage of that situation.¹⁷

It was the disorganized and chaotic nature of these failed enterprises that shaped much of Fidel Castro’s particular emphasis on political discipline and suppression of dissident views and factions within a revolutionary movement. As Fidel Castro wrote to his then close friend Luis Conte Agüero in 1954,

Conditions that are indispensable for the integration of a truly civic movement: ideology, discipline and chieftainship. The three are essential, but chieftainship is basic. I don’t know whether it was Napoleon who said that a bad general in battle is worth more than twenty good generals. A movement cannot be organized where everyone believes he has the right to issue public statements without consulting anyone else; nor can one expect anything of a movement that will be integrated by anarchic men who at the first disagreement take the path they consider most convenient, tearing apart and destroying the vehicle. The apparatus of propaganda and organization must be such and so powerful that it will implacably destroy him who will create tendencies, cliques, or schisms or will rise against the movement.¹⁸

While still at the university, Castro later joined the recently formed Ortodoxo Party. It is clear that he was already involved in leftist politics and was interested in not only national but also international issues, such as the Puerto Rican independence movement and opposition to Franco’s Spain. The Ortodoxo Party was a broad political formation that had been created as a split off the increasingly corrupt Auténtico Party that held national elective office from 1944 until Batista’s coup in 1952. It was a progressive reform party that focused on the fight against official corruption and, among its various political positions, opposed Communism on democratic political grounds while also defending the democratic rights of the Cuban Communists against the local version of McCarthyism. Most important, it attracted a large number of idealistic middle- and working-class youth that later became the most important source of recruitment for Fidel Castro’s 26th of July Movement.

Castro became a secondary leader in that party and eventually ran as a candidate for the Cuban House of Representatives in the 1952 elections that never took

place because of Batista's coup. It was in response to that coup that Fidel Castro began to advocate and organize the armed struggle against Batista within the Ortodoxo Party itself. However, the party soon split into various factions, some of them abstentionist and some others favoring unprincipled coalitions with traditional, discredited parties opposed to Batista. None of them were able to prosper under the unfavorable conditions of a military dictatorship that differed dramatically from the functioning of an electoral party in a constitutional, even if corrupt, political democracy. The other anti-Batista parties were, for a variety of reasons, no better than the Ortodoxos. That is why Fidel Castro and his close associates started to act on their own and secretly began to recruit sections of the Ortodoxo Party and unaffiliated youth for the attack on the Moncada barracks scheduled for July 26, 1953. The political vacuum in the opposition to Batista considerably helped his recruitment efforts, since from the very beginning his consistent and coherent line of armed struggle against the dictatorship attracted the young people who had become thoroughly disillusioned with the irrelevance of the regular opposition parties.

Along with his emphasis on armed struggle as the strategy to fight against Batista, Fidel's attack on the Moncada barracks was premised on a social program that included agrarian reform—a widespread popular aspiration—with compensation for the expropriated landlords, and a substantial profit-sharing plan for workers in industrial and commercial enterprises. These measures were not socialist or, aside from the nationalization of public utilities, collectivist, but were radical for the Cuba of the 1950s. Castro explicitly outlined this radical program in the speech that he gave at his and his fellow fighters' trial after the Batista forces defeated the attack, which was later published under the title *History Will Absolve Me*, the final sentence of that speech.

It did not take long before Castro concluded that the combination of armed struggle with a radical social program was an obstacle to widening support for his 26th of July Movement—which he had founded after he and his Moncada companions were amnestied by Batista in 1955—and increasing his group's influence within the anti-Batista movement, which on the whole was liberal-populist and progressive but not radical. That is why, although he continued to insist in the armed struggle to overthrow Batista (a position he never abandoned), by 1956 he had significantly modulated his social radicalism. This became clearly articulated in the politically militant but socially moderate Manifesto that he co-authored with Felipe Pazos and Raúl Chibás, two very prestigious figures of Cuba's progressive circles, in the Sierra Maestra on July 12, 1957.¹⁹

The Manifesto, which rapidly became far better known than Castro's *History Will Absolve Me*, conferred an enormous degree of legitimacy among the progressive anti-Batista public to Castro's 26th of July Movement at a time when it had not yet fully consolidated itself in the Sierra Maestra. It turned out to be, in conjunction with a number of small but significant military victories against

Batista's troops, a major step in Fidel Castro's journey towards becoming the hegemonic figure of the opposition camp. Moreover, the publication of the Manifesto in *Bohemia*, the Cuban weekly with the largest circulation in the island, during a period when Batista's censorship had been suspended, deeply affected thousands of people, further propelling the 26th of July Movement towards their unrivaled hegemony over the other groups engaged in armed rebellion who had failed in their own confrontations with Batista's armed forces. The Manifesto fell on fertile ground in a political culture where the notion of revolution, in the sense of a forceful overthrow of an illegitimate government, had wide acceptance, especially when the potentially divisive issue of a revolutionary, as distinct from a progressive reformist, social program, was set aside.

It is also worth underlining that Fidel Castro, like other left-inclined Cuban oppositionists (except for the Communists), kept his anti-imperialist politics to himself throughout the struggle against Batista, both in his more socially radical and moderate periods. Although he revealed his anti-imperialist sentiments in private to close associates such as Celia Sánchez,²⁰ in public he limited himself to the democratic critique of US foreign policy for its support of Batista and other Latin American dictators. And when his younger brother Raúl Castro, as head of the Frank País Second Front elsewhere in Oriente province, ordered the kidnapping of American military personnel from the Guantánamo Naval Base to stop the United States from assisting the Batista dictatorship in its bombing of the rebel areas in June 1958, Fidel immediately ordered their release.

For a variety of reasons, anti-imperialism had become dormant in the Cuban political scene since the 1930s. Only the Communists and their close periphery used the term to describe and analyze US policies towards Cuba and Latin America.²¹ Yet, the Communists contributed to the fading of the anti-imperialist sentiment with the Soviet alliance with the United States in World War II, and their support for the Roosevelt administration, a popular policy in the island in the Communist and non-Communist left alike.

It was Fidel's tactical ability to retreat from potentially divisive programmatic social issues that revealed him as the thoroughly political animal and master political operator and tactician he was, endowed with an acute sense of Cuban political culture and an uncanny ability to understand and to take advantage of specific political conjunctures to broaden his political base and support.

Part of what gave him room to tactically maneuver substantive political issues was that the inner core of the people he relied on was an heterogeneous group of militant "classless" individuals, in the sense of their not having a connection to any of the then existing organizations of any class. They were therefore not committed to, or bound by, any particular social program. And those who did,

such as Raúl Castro and Ernesto “Che” Guevara, knew Fidel well enough to trust him to move the political dynamic of the movement in a generally left direction.

Confirming the class heterogeneity of the group of people closest to Fidel, historian Hugh Thomas notes that the people who joined Fidel in the attack on the Moncada barracks on July 26, 1953, came from a wide variety of social backgrounds, including accountants, agricultural workers, bus workers, businessmen, shop assistants, plumbers, and students. Thomas further notes that the group of eighty-one persons that accompanied Fidel in the Granma expedition to Cuba in late 1956—nineteen of whom had participated in the Moncada attack—might have had an overall higher education than the Moncada group, but that it was socially heterogeneous, too. According to Thomas, both of these groups comprised Castro’s inner group of loyal followers.²² This inner group was later enlarged by people selected from the new urban volunteers and from a few thousand peasants in the Sierra Maestra and elsewhere in eastern Cuba. It should be noted that, with a small number of important exceptions, the peasant recruits had little or no history of organized peasant struggles and that in contrast with the rebel army recruits from towns and cities in Cuba’s eastern Oriente Province, the peasant recruits did not generally play any major leadership roles after the revolutionary victory.²³

In addition to his political talent, Fidel Castro’s ascendancy in the anti-Batista movement benefited from the occurrence of events beyond his control that cannot be explained either in terms of the characteristics of Cuba’s social structure or his own extraordinary political skills. To begin with, he physically survived the armed struggle against Batista without any significant injury, something that cannot be taken for granted when considering that out of the eighty-one people who accompanied him to Cuba in the boat *Granma*, no more than twenty survived the invasion and its immediate aftermath. Even more important was the failure of the other revolutionary groups to overthrow Batista by force, and the death of other revolutionary leaders who could have potentially challenged his leadership. One of them, José Antonio Echeverría, was a popular student leader who founded the *Directorio Revolucionario*, another political group engaged in the armed struggle against Batista. He was killed in a confrontation with Batista’s police on March 13, 1957 after attempting to simultaneously capture a radio station (where he managed to broadcast a brief speech shortly before being shot after he left the station) and carry out an assault on the Presidential Palace. The other potential rival was Frank País, the national coordinator of the 26th of July Movement, killed by Batista’s police in the streets of Santiago de Cuba on July 30, 1957. País was an independent-minded revolutionary who emphasized the importance of a clear political program and a well-structured 26th of July Movement, in contrast with the unclear, weakly structured organization more easily subject to the control of the top leader model that Fidel favored.²⁴

But Fidel Castro's emergence and ascendance to the top of the anti-Batista movement, his victory over Batista on January 1, 1959, and the great deal of political power he acquired after victory cannot be accounted for based only on his undisputable political talents and his good fortune. It was the interface between those two factors with Cuba's social structure of that time—devoid of an oligarchical ruling class with firm organic ties to an ideologically committed army hierarchy, which could have effectively repressed attempts against its power, and of stable political organizations and parties that could have channeled the popular discontent—that made his trajectory possible.

Fidel Castro in power

Fidel Castro's victory surpassed anybody's expectations—his forces managed to eliminate the army from the Cuban political scene on January 1, 1959—and led him to power with an immense and virtually unchallengeable popularity. All other political groups and personalities had either been discredited or lagged far behind Fidel in popular support and legitimacy.

Once in power, Fidel behaved in a remarkably similar manner as when he was in the Sierra: as the unquestionable leader of a disciplined guerrilla army controlled from above that strictly follows the military orders of their superiors. To this he added, once in power, his extremely intelligent use of television and the public plaza to appeal to the widespread radicalization and growing anti-imperialist sentiment of the people at large.

Although he undoubtedly consulted with and listened to those in his inner circle, he acted on his own, even disregarding previous agreements while often refusing to accept criticism. He treated his close comrades as consultants and not as full peers embarked in a joint project.²⁵ His key consideration was to be the one decision maker and remain in control of the political situation.

That is why, after victory, Fidel Castro prevented any attempt to transform the 26th of July Movement from the amorphous, unstructured group it had been during the struggle against Batista into a democratically organized, disciplined party. Doing so would have limited the room for his political maneuvering, particularly early in the revolution when his movement was still politically heterogeneous. At that time, such a party would have inevitably included the political tendencies that he abhorred. It was only in 1965—long after all the major social-structural changes had already been implemented and the liberals, social democrats, and independent anti-imperialist revolutionaries of the 26th of July Movement (see below) had either left the country or had been marginalized—that a so-called “democratic centralist” Communist Party uniting the 26th of July Movement with the Communists (and with the much smaller Directorio Revolucionario) was finally established in Cuba. However, for reasons

discussed later, this party did not significantly impinge on Fidel's ultimate control of what happened in Cuba.

Fidel's turn to Communism

Even today, most American liberals and many radicals contend that it was the United States' imperialist policies that "forced" Fidel Castro into the hands of the Soviet Union and Communism. To be sure, the United States responded to the victorious Cuban Revolution in a predictably imperialist fashion similar to the way it had responded, earlier in that decade, to the democratically elected reform government of Jacobo Árbenz in Guatemala in 1954 and the Iranian nationalist regime of Mohammad Mosaddegh in Iran in 1953. However, the view that Fidel Castro was "forced" or "compelled" to adopt Communism is misleading because it deprives him and his close associates of any political agency and implicitly conceives them as politically blank slates open to any political path had US policy towards Cuba been different.

In fact, Fidel and the other revolutionary leaders did have political ideas. This became clear soon after the victory of the Cuban Revolution with the creation, in the revolutionary camp overwhelmingly composed by members of the 26th of July Movement, of a powerful pro-Soviet tendency oriented to an alliance with the PSP (Popular Socialist Party), the old pro-Moscow Cuban Communists. This tendency was led by Raúl Castro, a former member of the *Juventud Socialista* (the youth wing of the PSP), and by Che Guevara, who had never joined a Communist Party but was then pro-Soviet and an admirer of Stalin, notwithstanding the fact that more than two years had elapsed since Khrushchev's revelations of Stalin's crimes in 1956. The new revolutionary government also had in its ranks an important non-Communist, anti-imperialist left (e.g., Carlos Franqui, David Salvador, Faustino Pérez), plus liberal (Roberto Agramonte, Rufo López Fresquet) and social democratic (Manuel Ray, Manuel Fernández) tendencies.

Fidel Castro did not immediately commit (at least in public) to any of those tendencies. Although he had been a leftist for many years and intended to make a radical revolution, he left it to the existing relation of forces inside Cuba and abroad, and to the tactical possibilities available to him given the existing relation of forces, to determine the path to follow while maneuvering to ensure that he remained in control. Had he gone in a different direction, Che Guevara would have immediately left the island and Raúl Castro would have gone into the opposition. Information found in the Soviet archives show that Raúl Castro briefly considered breaking with his older brother Fidel during the first half of 1959 when Fidel's commitment to working with the Communists was in doubt.²⁷ By the fall of 1959, less than a year after victory, it became clear that Fidel Castro was moving in the direction of an alliance with the USSR and, months later, towards the transformation of the Cuban society and economy into the

Soviet mold. While he later claimed that he had been a “Marxist-Leninist” all along, this was more likely a retrospective justification of the political course he took later, rather than an accurate account of his early political ideas. His decision was probably influenced by the fact that the victory of the Cuban Revolution coincided with the widespread perception in the late 1950s and early 1960s that the balance of world power had shifted in favor of the USSR. The Soviet’s test of its first intercontinental ballistic missile and the launch of Sputnik in 1957 had generated serious concerns in the US regarding Soviet supremacy in those key areas. And while the US economy was growing at a rate of 2 to 3 percent per year, various US government agencies had estimated that the Soviet economy was growing approximately three times as fast.²⁸ Also, quite a few things were happening in the Third World that favored Soviet foreign policy, such as the Communist electoral victory in Kerala, India in 1957,²⁹ and a left-wing coup that overthrew the Iraqi monarchy in 1958³⁰ (countered by a US invasion of Lebanon that followed shortly thereafter). Successes in Laos³¹ and a domestic turn to the left by Nasser in Egypt and by Sukarno in Indonesia (both allies of the USSR) further bolstered Soviet power and international prestige.³² This constellation of events may have persuaded Fidel that were he to follow the Communist road, he could count on the rising power of the USSR to confront the growing US aggression against Cuba, support a total break with Washington, and implement a Soviet- type of system for which he had an affinity given the great social and political control that it would confer on him.

As an early step in his path towards Soviet-type Communism, in November 1959 Fidel Castro personally intervened in the Tenth Congress of the Confederation of Cuban Workers (CTC—Confederación de Trabajadores de Cuba), the union central established in 1938, to rescue the Communists and their allies within the 26th of July Movement from a serious defeat in the election of the Confederation’s top leaders. Consistent with the findings of their 1956 survey, the PSP had obtained only 10 percent of the votes in the union elections that had taken place earlier that year as well as in the delegate elections to the Congress itself. Fidel Castro’s intervention allowed the 26th of July unionists friendly to the Communists to take control of the Confederation in what proved to be the short term. That was followed, in the subsequent months, by the purge of at least half of the union officials elected in 1959—some were also imprisoned—who were hostile to the PSP and their allies within the 26th of July Movement, thus consolidating the control of the latter two groups over the union movement. Shortly afterwards, in August 1961, new laws were enacted bringing the functioning of the Cuban unions into alignment with those of the Soviet bloc by subordinating them to the state and treating them primarily as a means to increase production and as conveyor belts of the state’s orders. In November 1961, at the eleventh congress of the CTC, the hard polemics and controversies that had gone on in the Tenth Congress were replaced with the principle of unanimity.

Then, topping it all, Lázaro Peña, the old Stalinist labor leader who, with Batista's consent, had controlled the trade-union movement in the early forties (during Batista's first period in power) was elected to the top post of secretary general of the CTC. With this move, Fidel Castro dealt the last blow to the last vestiges of autonomy of the organized working class and subjected it to his total control. It should be noted that notwithstanding the loss of some of their pre-revolutionary labor conquests, most Cuban workers were pleased with the gains they obtained under the young revolutionary regime, and therefore they did not protest the state takeover of their unions.

The Sovietization of the island proceeded to encompass other areas of Cuban society, all under Fidel's direction. In May 1960, the government seized the opposition press and replaced it with government-controlled monolithic media. This was clearly a strategic, long-term institutional move since the country was not facing any kind of crisis at that particular time. Other pro-revolutionary but independent newspapers, such as *La Calle*, were shut down some time later, as was *Lunes de Revolución*, the independent cultural weekly of *Revolución*, the 26th of July Movement newspaper. The abolition of additional independent autonomous organizations continued with the institution, by Fidel, of the Cuban Federation of Women (Federación de Mujeres Cubanas—FMC) in August 1960, which led to the disbanding of more than 920 preexisting women's organizations, and their incorporation and assimilation into the FMC which became, by government fiat, the sole and official women's organization.

Earlier, toward the end of 1959, Fidel's government started to limit the autonomy of the "sociedades de color," the mutual-aid societies that for many years constituted the organizational spine of Black life in Cuba. Few "sociedades" remained after that, but they totally disappeared by the mid-sixties, after Fidel's government proclaimed that, given the gains that Black Cubans had made under the revolution on the basis of class-based reforms and the abolition of racial segregation, the problems of racial discrimination and racism had been resolved. For the next thirty years, total silence prevailed on racial questions, notwithstanding the evident institutional racism in a society that was being ruled by whites, and that lacked any significant affirmative action programs to address the situation.³³ That silence basically continued the pre-revolutionary taboo avoiding any open discussion of race that harked back to the so-called race war of 1912, which in fact never was a real war, but a massacre of Black Cubans.³⁴ On April 16, 1961, shortly before the US Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba, Fidel Castro proclaimed the "socialist" character of the revolution. By that time, all of the above-mentioned changes, along with the nationalization of most of the Cuban economy—a process that ended in 1968, with the nationalization of even the tiniest businesses in the island probably making Cuba the most nationalized economy in the world—had set the foundations of a Caribbean replica of the Soviet system.³⁵ The finishing touch was the formation of a single ruling party, a

process that was finalized, after two previous provisional organizations, with the official foundation of the Cuban Communist Party in October 1965. Structured in the Soviet mold, this party allowed no internal dissent or opposition, and in effect ruled over the economy, under the leadership and control of Fidel Castro, through: (1) its “mass organizations,” such as the FMC (the women’s federation) and the CTC (the union central), that served as conveyor belts for its decisions and orders; and (2) its control of the mass media—all the newspapers, magazines, radio, and television stations in the island—based on the “orientations” that came from the Ideological Department of the Central Committee of the Cuban Communist Party.

Although the Cuban Communist Party followed the fundamental outlines of the Soviet-style parties in the USSR and Eastern Europe, it also had characteristics of its own. One was the great emphasis it placed on popular mobilization—a device introduced by Fidel Castro—devoid, however, of any real mechanisms of popular democratic discussion and control (a feature that it did share with its sister parties in the Communist bloc). Another feature present in many of those mobilizations was pseudo-plebiscitarian politics, also introduced by Fidel, of having the participants “vote” right then and there, raising their hands to show popular approval for the leadership’s initiatives.³⁶

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1. I use the term Communist for the sake of clarity, but I do not link present-day Communism with the communism of Marx, Engels, and many other revolutionaries who predate the rise of Stalinism. I also use Communism in a generic sense to describe a class and socioeconomic system even though each Communist country had its own peculiarities. Marxists use the term capitalism similarly, even though capitalist states, like the United States, South Korea, and Norway, are not identical.
 2. Pedro C. M. Teichert, “Analysis of Real Growth and Wealth in the Latin American Republics,” *Journal of Inter-American Studies* I, April 1959, 184–185.
 3. Ibid.
 4. Marifeli Pérez-Stable, *The Cuban Revolution: Origins, Course and Legacy*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 29.
 5. Jorge Ibarra, Prologue to *Revolution: Cuba, 1898–1958*, trans. Marjorie Moore (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1998), 162.
 6. Yeidy M. Rivero, *Broadcasting Modernity: Cuban Commercial Television 1950–1960* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2015).
 7. See Samuel Farber, *Revolution and Reaction in Cuba, 1933–1960: A Political Sociology from Machado to Castro* (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1976).
 8. John Paul Rathbone, *The Sugar King of Havana: The Rise and Fall of Julio Lobo, Cuba’s Last Tycoon* (New York, Penguin, 2011), 210–211. Rathbone claims that Lobo gave \$25,000 to the 26th of July Movement because the Movement threatened to burn his cane fields. However, shortly after the revolutionary victory the Cuban press, freed from any government censorship, reported that Lobo financially supported the revolution out of his own free will.

9. One of Batista's first decrees after his successful military coup on March 10, 1952, was to order a substantial increase in the salaries of soldiers and policemen.
10. Jorge Ibarra, *Prologue to Revolution*, 18–19.
11. US Department of Commerce, Bureau of Foreign Commerce, *Investment in Cuba: Basic Information for United States Businessmen*, Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1956, 183.
12. Jorge Ibarra, *Prologue to Revolution: Cuba, 1898–1958*, 170.
13. Steve Cushion, *A Hidden History of the Cuban Revolution: How the Working Class Shaped the Guerrillas' Victory* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2016).
14. Julia Sweig, *Inside the Cuban Revolution: Fidel Castro and the Urban Underground* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 150.
15. See the more detailed discussion of political gangsterism in Cuba in Samuel Farber, *Revolution and Reaction in Cuba, 1933–1960*, 117–122.
16. Fidel Castro, *My Early Years*, ed. Deborah Shnookal and Pedro Alvarez Tabío, (Melbourne, Australia: Ocean Press, 1998), 98. For more details about the Cayo Confites expedition and the politics behind it see Charles D. Ameringer, *The Caribbean Legion. Patriots, Politicians, Soldiers of Fortune, 1946–1950* (University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996).
17. *Ibid.*, 126–127.
18. Luis Conte Aguero, *26 Cartas del Presidio* (Havana: Editorial Cuba, 1960), 73. These letters were published before Conte Aguero's break with Fidel Castro. Castro's emphasis.
19. For the text of the Sierra Maestra Manifesto see Rolando E. Bonachea and Nelson P. Valdés, eds., *Revolutionary Struggle 1947–1958*, vol. 1 of *The Selected Works of Fidel Castro* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1972), 343–48.
20. In June 1958, Fidel Castro privately wrote to Celia Sánchez that when the war against Batista finished, a bigger and much longer war would begin against the United States. Carlos Franqui, *Diario de la Revolución Cubana*, 473.
21. Thus, for example, an official pamphlet of the 26th of July Movement published in 1957 danced around the term imperialism “as already inappropriate to the American continent” although there were still forms of economic penetration and political influence similar to it. The pamphlet proposed a new treatment of “constructive friendship” so Cuba could be a “loyal ally of the great country of the North and at the same time safely preserve the capacity to orient its own destiny.” Movimiento Revolucionario 26 de Julio, *Nuestra Razón: Manifiesto-Programa del Movimiento 26 de Julio*, in Enrique González Pedrero, *La Revolución Cubana* (Ciudad de México: Escuela Nacional de Ciencias Políticas y Sociales, 1959), 124.
22. Hugh Thomas, “Middle Class Politics and the Cuban Revolution,” in *The Politics of Conformity in Latin America*, ed. Claudio Véliz (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), 261.
23. See the detailed biographies of many revolutionary generals in Luis Báez, *Secretos de Generales*, Havana: Editorial Si–Mar, 1996.
24. Unlike most other top leaders of the 26th of July Movement, Frank País had strong roots in the life of Cuban civil society. He and his family were very active in the Baptist Church, and his parents were among the tiny minority of Spanish Protestant immigrants to Cuba.
25. Carlos Franqui, *Diario de la Revolución Cubana* (Paris: Ruedo Ibérico, 1976), 611.
26. For a detailed analysis of Che Guevara's politics see Samuel Farber, *The Politics of Che Guevara: Theory and Practice* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2016).
27. Aleksandr Fursenko and Timothy Naftali, “One Hell of a Gamble,” *Khrushchev, Castro, and Kennedy 1958–1964* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1997), 18.
28. *Ibid.*, 77.

29. Jerry F. Hough, *The Struggle for the Third World: Soviet Debates and American Options* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 1986), 120.
30. William Taubman, *Khrushchev: The Man and His Era* (New York: Norton, 2003), 402.
31. Herbert Dinerstein, *The Making of a Missile Crisis: October 1962* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 113.
32. Jerry F. Hough, *The Struggle for the Third World*, 120; and Jean Lacouture, *Nasser: A Biography* (New York: Knopf, 1973), 230–35, 244.
33. For a recent brief but thorough examination of “structural racism” in Cuba see Sandra Abd’Allah-Alvarez Ramírez, ¿Racismo “estructural” en Cuba? Notas para el debate,” *Cuba Posible*, September 6, 2017. <https://cubaposible.com/racismo-estructu...>
34. Silvio Castro Fernández, *La Masacre de los independientes de color en 1912*, 2nd edition (La Habana: Editorial de Ciencias Sociales, 2008).
35. For details of the “revolutionary offensive” that nationalized all urban businesses see my article “Cuba in 1968,” *Jacobin*, April 30, 1968, <https://jacobinmag.com/2018/04/cuba-1968...>
36. An authentic plebiscite, such as the “Brexit” elections in Great Britain, assumes extensive public discussion previous to the elections, ending with a “Yes” or “No” secret vote at the ballot box.
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Fidel Castro's Rule and Legacy--Part II

THE FACT THAT the new Cuban revolutionary government was undemocratic did not mean that it was not popular, particularly during its first 30 years. Fidel's regime enjoyed a great deal of popular support until the early nineties, when the collapse of the Soviet bloc produced a severe economic crisis in the island that alienated a substantial part of the population, especially the youth.

This support was based on four principal factors: First, the regime was perceived by most Cubans as being honest, an important departure from the popular view of practically all previous Cuban governments. The top revolutionary leadership surely enjoyed a much higher standard of living than the majority of the population, but based on their privileged access to all kinds of consumer goods (including travel abroad as part of official delegations) and not on their theft of public monies or in any kind of racketeering (drugs or gambling) inside Cuba. [\(1\)](#)

Second, the regime established, with massive Soviet subsidies, an extensive and generous welfare state, particularly evident in the areas of health and in a system of education that went from universal elementary education and literacy to secondary and university education for a significant proportion of the population.

This helped to consolidate an austere but secure standard of living assuring the minimal material needs of the great majority of the population, although — like every economy based on the Soviet model — it was chronically affected by serious shortages of consumer goods and a permanent housing crisis.

Third, the departure of the upper classes and major sections of the middle classes, and a substantial population growth until the late '70s created room for considerable social mobility notwithstanding the very mediocre rates of economic growth during the entire revolutionary period. [\(2\)](#)

Last but not least was the early radicalization of large sectors of the population, and the resurgence of mass anti-imperialism, dormant since World War II, brought back to life by the threats and aggressions of U.S. imperialism, which in turn contributed to the legitimacy and support for the revolutionary government.

Fidel Castro adroitly manipulated this real and authentic support in his favor, particularly in the first years of the revolution, when he and his inner group would make fundamental decisions regarding the road the revolution would take without giving any previous clue as to what they had in mind.

Fidel's modus operandi involved proclaiming totally unanticipated policies never previously mentioned, much less open to any kind of discussion beyond his inner

circle, and then organizing great mobilizations to show support for what he and his close associates had already decided.

Perhaps the best example of this was the Agrarian Reform law of May 1959. Even though talk about a new agrarian law had abounded since the revolutionary victory, nobody, including the mass media of all political colorations, had any idea of what it would entail and how radical it would be.

That is why even the big landlords and sugar mill owners “supported” the notion of agrarian reform and donated significant amounts of money and agricultural equipment to the new government with the clear hope of influencing its content. Once the law was promulgated, however, they fiercely opposed it since it sharply limited landholding size, established the compensation of the confiscated land based on the undervalued estimates that the owners had declared for tax purposes, and made it payable with 20-year bonds (which, in the end, were never issued.)⁽³⁾

To be sure, Fidel Castro’s method was effective in surprising and throwing domestic and foreign enemies off balance, at least in the short term. Most important, however, was that his sudden and unexpected communication to the public, from the top, of major policy decisions like this one, prevented the autonomous political development and organization among the supporters of the revolution themselves, two indispensable elements of an authentically democratic revolution from below.

For those opposed to or critical of his decisions, Fidel resorted to an extensive and ever present apparatus of control and repression. To be sure, the saliency and importance of these repressive mechanisms varied substantially throughout his regime.

One of the first was the Committees for the Defense of the Revolution (CDR), founded in September 1960. Their principal purpose was vigilance and repression, as Fidel Castro himself indicated when he called on the Cuban people to “establish against the campaign of imperialism a system of collective revolutionary vigilance, in which everyone knows who everyone is, what each person who lives on the block does, what relations he had with the tyranny, to what he is dedicated, whom he meets, and what activities he follows.”⁽⁴⁾

Every Cuban citizen was supposed to participate in the CDR, and those who declined were seen as not “integrated” in the revolutionary process, which seriously affected their higher education and employment prospects. With the passage of time, the CDRs acquired other functions besides political vigilance, particularly in the area of social assistance. However, with the onset of the

Special Period that began in the 1990s, their functioning substantially deteriorated.

Cuban social scientists Armando Chaguaceda and Lennier López described, in a recent article, how CDR meetings and neighborhood patrols that characterized the earlier decades became extremely rare, and the fact that younger people did not care to assume the leadership of the committees at the local level.⁽⁵⁾ Thus, while the political control of Fidel's regime continued to be extraordinary, it increasingly became more dependent on the supervision and surveillance of government agencies, such as State Security (Seguridad del Estado)

The repression of political dissidents started early on in the first years of the revolution, and included right-wing counterrevolutionaries, many of them organized and supported by the CIA, as well as supporters of the revolution. One of Fidel Castro's first acts of repression was the purging, and in some cases the imprisonment, of local union leaders who resisted the takeover by the old Communist Party and its allies of the union confederation in 1959 and 1960.

The repression of leftists also touched the old Communist leader Aníbal Escalante, first, in 1962 for his sectarian attempt to accumulate power by excluding from government positions revolutionaries who had not belonged to the old Communist Party. He was purged and arrested again in 1968, when he and a group of his followers were accused of forming a party "micro-faction" critical of Fidel Castro's economic policies and of attempting to rally the support of East European diplomats with whom he had regular contact.

Escalante and his closest collaborators were given long prison sentences. What distinguished this particular purge from any other is that for Fidel — and his brother Raúl, assigned to officially charge Escalante — the "micro-faction" represented an organized threat to the monolithic conception of the party that he and his brother shared and that they were trying to implement.

Besides the fact that many of the "micro-faction" criticisms of Fidel Castro's economic policy proved to be correct later on — such as what turned out to be the disastrous effort to have a 10 million ton sugar crop in 1970 — no evidence was ever presented that Escalante and his little group were conspiring to remove or overthrow the Cuban government with or without the active support of any Eastern European Communist diplomat.⁽⁶⁾

Rather than combat Escalante's "unpatriotic" behavior through political means, police methods were used instead. Of course the issue here is not that of sympathy for Escalante's hardcore Stalinism, but whether his group was entitled

to factional rights in the Cuban Communist Party rather than being criminally prosecuted for their dissent.

A much lesser known but far more significant purge of the pro-revolutionary left involved Walterio Carbonell (1920-2008), a Cuban exponent of a particular version of Black Power politics.

Carbonell had originally been a member of the PSP (the old pro-Moscow Cuban Communists). Ironically, he had been expelled from the party for supporting Fidel Castro's attack on the Moncada barracks on July 26, 1953. After the revolution, he served as Cuba's Ambassador to the Algerian FLN (National Liberation Front) then located in Tunisia.

In 1961, he published his *Crítica: Como Surgió la Cultura Nacional* (Critique. How [Cuba's] National Culture Emerged) asserting that Black Cubans had played a major role in Cuba's wars of independence and the establishment of the republic, and that this fact had been subsequently erased by the pre-revolutionary white racist culture and institutions.

Moreover, Carbonell argued, it was the Black Cuban experience that was at the heart of the Cuban Revolution's radicalism. Fidel's government, about to proclaim that the revolution had eliminated racism as part of its campaign for "national unity," labeled Carbonell as a racially divisive figure and began to persecute him.

In 1968 Carbonell, a leading figure of a group of Black Cuban intellectuals and artists calling on the government to actively intervene against racism in the island, was arrested. He endured various forms of detention between 1968 and 1974, including compulsory labor. After his release in 1974, and as a result of continuing to defend his ideas, he was interned in various psychiatric hospitals where he was subjected to electroshock and drug therapy for another two to three years.⁽⁷⁾

Meanwhile, his 1961 book disappeared from circulation. It became available much later, in 2005 when, in a relatively more liberal period, the director of the National Library, where Carbonell was working as a little-known researcher, made it available on line.⁽⁸⁾

At various times Fidel Castro admitted the existence of large numbers of political prisoners in the island, mentioning 15,000 political prisoners at one time after having previously mentioned 20,000.⁽⁹⁾

These political prisoners — many, although by no means all, were right-wing opponents of the regime some of whom were also involved in the commission of violent acts with support from the U.S. government — were most often found

guilty of vague, frameup charges such as enemy propaganda, contempt for authority (desacato), rebellion, acts against state security, clandestine printing, diffusion of false news, pre-criminal social dangerousness, illicit association, meetings and demonstrations, resistance, defamation and libel.(10)

Typically they received long-term sentences, frequently 20 years or longer in prison. (Under Raúl Castro, the emphasis changed from long-term sentences — there are now some 140 long-term political prisoners — to making thousands of short-term arrests every year both to prevent and to punish dissident political activity.)(11)

It is worth mentioning that Cuba under Fidel had a very large number of common prisoners. This pattern continues under Raul: In May 2017, Cuba occupied, with a ratio of 510 common prisoners per 100,000 persons, the sixth place among 223 prison systems in independent countries and dependent territories, surpassed only by the Seychelles, the United States of America, St. Kitts and Nevis, Turkmenistan and the U.S. Virgin Islands.(12)

Repression under Fidel's regime not only included criticism or opposition to his regime, but a much larger set of practices — for example, membership and activities in religious organizations, which in Cuba included the African religion of Abakuá, and the Jehovah's Witnesses — that escaped the control of the state, or those, like homosexuality, that shocked and did not conform to the officially accepted norms of conduct, and stood against the New Man that Fidel wanted to create.

In 1965, Fidel's government established the Unidades Militares de Ayuda a la Producción (Military Units for Aid to Production) camps, where for about three years gays, along with Jehovah's Witnesses, many committed Catholics, members of the Afro-Cuban secret, but non-political, societies such as Abakuá, were forced to provide cheap, regimented labor for the Cuban State.(13)

The repression of gays was intensified at the onset of the Quinquenio Gris (The Grey Quinquennium) in 1971,(14)with the declaration by the National Congress of Education and Culture that “notorious homosexuals” were not going to be tolerated in spite of their “artistic merits” because of the influence they could have on the Cuban youth.

Homosexuals who had direct contact with young people regarding cultural activities of any kind were to be transferred to other organizations and workplaces. The Congress also declared that people with “morals undermining the prestige of the revolution” would be prevented from joining any group of performers representing Cuba abroad.(15)

Contrary to what some North American liberals and radicals have argued, the big push for this anti-gay campaign did not come from the old pro-Moscow sector of the new Cuban Communist Party, but from a Fidel Castro determined to create among the youth a military-style discipline with a marked anti-urban bias.

Thus, in Fidel's March 13, 1963 speech at the University of Havana, he blasted the "bourgeois children" who imitated Elvis Presley and presented "freelance effeminate" shows, and then noting that given that it was not easy to straighten out adult homosexuals — "a tree that had grown twisted" — no radical measures would be taken against them, but that the young "aspiring" to be homosexuals were a different matter.

He then pointed out that rural Cuba did not produce the "subproduct" of homosexuality.⁽¹⁶⁾ That is why, at about the same time that the UMAPs were established, the Cuban government opened the Center for Special Education for boys considered to be "effeminate" and for those raised by single mothers believed to be at risk of becoming homosexuals. The obligatory separation of these children from the public schools was based on the notion that they could "infect" their fellow students.⁽¹⁷⁾

The UMAP experience and the long-lasting discrimination and persecution of Cuban gays, which seriously began to diminish only in the 1990s,⁽¹⁸⁾ is a test of the commonly brandished argument justifying the Cuban government's repression as a response to the real (and imagined) subversion of U.S. imperialism and its Cuban right-wing agents.

Evidently, these repressive "cultural" campaigns had nothing to do with such enemies; instead they were aimed at the creation of Fidel's version of the New Man, instilled with Spartan military virtues, who worshiped the Cuban state and rejected the degeneracy of city living, which not incidentally facilitated Fidel Castro's aim to wholly control the life of Cubans.

Much of the admiration and respect that people in the Global South, especially Latin Americans, have for Fidel Castro comes not necessarily from his having established Communism in Cuba, but from having challenged outright the North American empire not only by affirming Cuban independence but also by sponsoring movements abroad against the local ruling classes associated with the U.S. empire.

This deepened Washington's hostility to the Cuban regime leading the United States not only to establish the economic blockade of the island but also to sponsor military invasions, terror campaigns and assassination attempts on Fidel Castro.

While it is true that Fidel Castro maintained his opposition to the U.S. empire to his last breath, his foreign policy, particularly after the late 1960s, was moved more by the defense of Cuban state interests as he defined them and by his alliance with the USSR than by the pursuit of anti-capitalist revolution.

Foreign Policy between Revolution and Reasons of State

In the early and mid-'60s, Fidel Castro sponsored revolutionary guerrillas in several Latin American countries. In the late '60s, however, the Soviet Union, interested in upholding the then-existing international balance of power that assigned Latin America to the U.S. sphere of influence, began to apply strong political and economic pressure on Cuba to play down its open support for guerrilla warfare in that part of the world.

Fidel responded by reducing, in the '70s, his support of guerrilla warfare in Latin America and turning instead to Africa, aware that his interest in supporting African liberation movements was strategically more compatible with Soviet interests in spite of their many subsequent tactical disagreements. It is this strategic alliance with the USSR that explains in many ways Fidel's apparently contradictory policies in the African continent.

On the one hand he very actively pursued a left-wing policy, with the support and collaboration of the USSR, of fighting alongside the left-wing nationalists in Angola against the right wing UNITA and the forces of South African Apartheid. On the other hand, he pursued a right-wing policy in the Horn of Africa, also in accordance with the USSR, of supporting the "leftist" bloody dictatorship in Ethiopia against Eritrea's independence movement.

That is why Fidel Castro directed the Cuban armed forces to relieve the Ethiopian troops fighting on the Ogaden front, where the war between Ethiopia and Somalia was being played out, which allowed the Ethiopians to continue their war versus the Eritreans. [\(19\)](#) For Cuba, the support for Ethiopia's war, especially in the Ogaden region claimed by Somalia, was a war of choice, since it was neither an anti-imperialist war, and much less a war in defense of Cuban sovereignty. In this war against the Somalian government, Cuba deployed, during the first quarter of 1978, no fewer than 17,000 of its troops. [\(20\)](#)

In a speech delivered on April 26, 1978, Fidel Castro tried to justify his government's new position of opposing Eritrea's independence from Ethiopia (which he had previously supported) by comparing the Eritrean liberationists to the secessionists in the American South who provoked the American Civil War.

As Nelson P. Valdés pointed out, this was a baseless comparison for a number of reasons, including the fact that the American South had been an integral part of

the United States since its inception and did not constitute a separate nation. Besides, the Eritrean struggle was an authentic popular movement untainted by the racism of the Southern secessionists.[\(21\)](#)

In fact, the main reason why Fidel Castro changed his earlier position was that the new “left wing” Ethiopian government, unlike Haile Selassie, had taken the side of the Soviets in the Cold War.

It was for the same reasons that, to the great surprise and disappointment of the Cuban people, Fidel Castro supported the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968, although it was also clear that Castro’s political dislike for Dubcek’s liberal policies played an important role in his decision to support the Soviet action.

Castro was also critical of the USSR, and sarcastically wondered whether Moscow would come to Cuba’s military aid in the event of a U.S. invasion. He also supported, at least implicitly, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, although with much discomfort and in a low-key manner because of the high political cost that his support entailed for his leadership, since 1978, of the non-aligned movement, the great majority of whose members were strongly opposed to the Soviet intervention.[\(22\)](#)

Even in the most radical stages of his foreign policy in the early ’60s, Fidel refrained from supporting opposition movements against governments that had good relations with Havana and rejected U.S. policy towards the island, independently of the ideological coloration of those governments.

The most paradigmatic cases of his “reasons of state” approach to Cuban foreign policy was the highly cordial relations that his government maintained with the Mexico of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) and with Franco’s Spain. His support, or lack thereof, for the guerrilla and opposition movements then ongoing in Latin American countries such as Guatemala, El Salvador and Venezuela depended on the degree to which they agreed with Cuba’s favored guerrilla strategies and political approach to the governments that the guerrillas were combating.

The Cuban Economy under Fidel

The triumph of the Revolution of 1959 ushered among the great majority of Cubans great expectations for the Cuban economy. Short term, they were looking forward to an agrarian reform and a program of economic diversification that would diminish sugar monoculture and radically improve the living standards of rural Cuba.

Responding to those expectations, the early months of the revolution saw a program of industrialization, supported by an import substitution policy, animated by the government's popular slogan "compre productos cubanos" (buy Cuban products), expected to help address the chronic unemployment that not only affected rural Cuba but a high proportion of urban youth entering the labor market.

In the long run, as a 1956 study of the United States Bureau of Foreign Commerce explained, the goal of the Cuban average working person was "to reach a standard of living comparable to the American worker."[\(23\)](#)

During Fidel Castro's rule, sugar production was dramatically reduced (a 57% drop between 1989 and 2000), and by the time of his death in 2016, it ranged from one to one and a half million tons a year compared with the 5-7 million that had prevailed in the 1950s. In 2018 only 1.1 million tons were produced, and Cuba had to buy sugar abroad to complete the quota assigned to Cubans in their ration books.[\(24\)](#)

But this decline was not the result of a successful agricultural diversification and industrialization program. Instead, Cuba became even more dependent on imports from abroad for most of its food and industrial products. Quite aside from the problems that Cuba, like all sugar producers confronted in the international market, the Cuban government's failure to maintain and modernize its sugar mills and the lack of diversification into various sugar byproducts sealed the fate of the industry.

Thus, for example, while Cuba reduced its capacity to produce sugar, Brazil was expanding and modernizing it, with the ability to flexibly move from the production of sugar to alcohol produced to be used as fuel.[\(25\)](#)

Although sugar decay in Cuba started long before the collapse of the Soviet bloc, it was undoubtedly aggravated by it. As the reign of sugar declined under Fidel Castro's rule, Cuba became heavily dependent on remittances from Cubans abroad and especially from the United States, the export of services such as the foreign sale of medical services and tourism, the export of nickel (Cuba is the

10th largest producer in the world), and a promising but yet relatively small pharmaceutical industry.

From a longer and comparative perspective, Cuba's economic performance throughout Fidel's 47 years-long regime was rather unimpressive.

Gross Domestic Product figures, an admittedly crude and problematic but still useful indicator of economic dynamism, which the Cuban government itself uses as a yardstick — although with revisions to include the social services provided free of charge in the country — show the Cuba of 1950 as ranking tenth in per capita GDP among 47 countries in Latin America and the Caribbean.

Almost 60 years later in 2006, the year that Fidel Castro retired, Cuba ranked seventh from the bottom and was ahead of only Haiti, Honduras, Nicaragua, Bolivia, El Salvador and Paraguay. While its overall growth rate during the period of Fidel Castro's rule (1959-2006) was only 0.92%, it varied widely during those 47 years but was nevertheless never higher than the 2.04 percent growth it achieved for the period 1971-1989 that included the sugar boom of the '70s.[\(26\)](#)

For purposes of comparison, the rate of GDP growth in the pre-revolutionary period of 1950-58 was 1.61%, also unimpressive, but still higher than during the subsequent revolutionary period.[\(27\)](#)

Supporters of the Cuban government would argue that, although useful, those figures are less revealing than the various indices published by the United Nations, and especially the Human Development Index (HDI) compiled by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP).

The HDI is based on three criteria: health, education, and per capita Gross National Income. Since it was first published in 1990, before the collapse of the Soviet Union, Cuban ranked seventh among the nations of Latin America and the Caribbean, and continued to rank seventh in the 2007/2008 rankings right after Fidel Castro retired.

By 2018, Cuba's ranking had descended to 73rd in the world and the 11th in Latin America and the Caribbean behind Chile (44), Argentina (47), Bahamas (54), Uruguay (55), Barbados (58), Costa Rica (63), Panama (66), Trinidad and Tobago (69), Antigua and Barbuda (70) and Saint Kitts and Nevis (72).[\(28\)](#)

Thus Cuba certainly fared better in the comparative HDI scores, under Fidel and also under Raúl. However, the Index was primarily designed to measure the hardships in underdeveloped capitalist countries, and not for countries that, like

Cuba, combine the problems of underdevelopment with those of Soviet-type societies.

In the specific case of Cuba, those systemic problems have included food shortages, particularly for the more than one third of the population that does not receive hard currency remittances from abroad and is disproportionately Black; scarcity of housing, clothing and toiletries;(29) poor public urban and interurban bus and railway transportation, except for those paying with hard currency; lack of road maintenance; irregular and sporadic garbage collection; and inadequate delivery of water and electricity, except for those lucky enough to live in or near a tourist zone.

The case of water is very revealing. On one hand, Cuba has reported being able to deliver drinking water to 95% of its population. Yet Cuba has never been able to solve the serious water shortages it has chronically experienced before the revolution, since the late 1940s.

The most important contemporary cause of that shortage has been the very deteriorated infrastructure — broken pipes and numerous leaks — a problem that originated before the collapse of the Soviet bloc in 1989 and 1990 (recently worsened by recurring droughts). As a result, 58% of the water pumped by the country's aqueducts is lost, a situation that is even worse in the case of the Havana metropolitan area, where 70% of the water is lost.(30)

The accumulated spilled water has led to epidemics, such as the Dengue epidemics spread by the *Aedes Aegypti* mosquito, that have periodically affected Cuba throughout Fidel and Raúl Castros' rule. While some of the problems listed above are common to Cuba and capitalist underdeveloped countries, others are the result of the specific problems that affect Soviet type economies in such areas as agriculture, consumer goods, such as toiletries, and personal services.

Fidel Castro continually pointed at the U.S. economic blockade, instituted in the early '60s, as the single most important explanation for the economic problems of the island. The criminal blockade undoubtedly dealt a big blow to the Cuban economy. It was particularly damaging in the early days of the revolution, when the island was totally dependent on U.S.-made machinery, technology and services for the functioning and maintenance of its infrastructure.

As a result of the blockade, much of the capital stock and inputs of the Cuban economy had to end up being replaced with equipment and other materiel resources from the Eastern bloc. It's also clear that the abolition of that blockade would have substantially benefited the island's economy during that period.

There is no doubt that the complete abolition of the criminal blockade — already significantly modified with such measures as the authorization to sell U.S. agricultural goods to Cuba in 2001, and the liberalization of restrictions decreed by Obama, such as the recent resumption of regularly scheduled commercial flights to the island — would be a welcome development and benefit the Cuban economy, particularly in the rapidly growing tourist industry and in biotechnology and pharmaceuticals.

Unfortunately, Donald Trump's measures against Cuba, while less severe than was expected due perhaps to the pressure of the pro-Cuba-trade business lobbies such as agribusiness and the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, undoubtedly constitute a setback to such prospects.

Under Trump's new rules, travel by Americans (other than Cuban-Americans) to Cuba was significantly reduced and since then the active discouragement of travel to Cuba by the State Department and the withdrawal of most U.S. diplomatic personnel from the island has further reduced the number of travelers from the United States and made it much more difficult for Cubans to obtain U.S. visas.

The latter Trumpian moves were supposedly adopted as a response to the mysterious "sonic attacks" suffered by U.S. and Canadian diplomats, although it is perhaps possible, as Peter Kornbluh has argued, that since no tourists were affected and that many of those harmed were CIA agents,⁽³¹⁾ the mysterious sonic phenomena were possibly the result of mismanaged CIA operations.⁽³²⁾

In April of this year, the U.S. government adopted new measures against Cuba in the context of its growing intervention in Venezuela to overthrow the Maduro government, a close ally of the Cuban regime.

Following the lead of John R. Bolton and Senator Marco Rubio who for a long time have been trying to "tighten the screws" on Cuba, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo announced the full implementation of Title III of the Helms-Burton Act that will allow U.S. citizens to bring lawsuits against entities "trafficking in confiscated property" in Cuba effective May 2. This section of the Act had previously been waived by each administration since the Act's adoption in 1996.

Trump's actions will particularly affect foreign investors in Cuba who may be utilizing plant and other facilities previously confiscated from U.S. capitalists. Canada and the European Union have registered their strong objection to Title III since the legislation was adopted and continued to do so in the wake of the recent Washington measures.

As part of the April measures, the Trump administration will further restrict nonfamily travel to Cuba and will also limit money sent to the country to \$1,000 per person, per quarter. While it is true that this measure will have little effect on the great majority of remittances since these average \$200 to \$220 a month, it will have a negative impact on the relatively small but significant number of large remittances that are used in Cuba for such purposes as house renovations (often to rent them to tourists) and the opening of small businesses.

In any case, there are important facts that undermine Fidel's blaming the blockade for Cuba's economic ills in major ways. First, the United States was the only major capitalist country that boycotted Cuba. Canada, Spain, France and the rest of Western Europe did not, and since the 1960s they have played an important role in Cuba's economic life.

The principal problem in Cuba's economic relations with these countries has been the overall scarcity of goods and services it has been able to offer for sale, and as a result, the insufficient amount of hard currency it has to pay for imports.

It is very telling that when Cuba obtained large amounts of foreign income as the result of the rise of the world price of sugar to record levels during the commodities boom of the first half of the 1970s (it increased 15-fold from 1968 to 1974), it dramatically increased its trade with the capitalist world. While the non-Communist world's share of Cuban exports (mostly sugar) rose to an all-time high of 47.3% in 1972, and remained high at 43.3% in 1974, its share of Cuban imports reached 39.5% in 1974, and peaked at 51.4% in 1975.[\(33\)](#)

Beyond trade itself, the European capitalist countries were willing to expand their economic relations with the island. Thus, the Cuban government received more than six billion dollars in credits and loans from many of these European industrialized capitalist countries until its economic problems led it to suspend the service of these debts in 1986 — several years before the collapse of the Soviet bloc. Cuba managed to negotiate this extant debt with the Paris Club only in December of 2015 when it was forgiven some of its obligations and allowed to resume the gradual repayment of the remaining debt.[\(34\)](#)

Most significantly, from 1960 to 1990 Cuba received approximately \$65 billion from the Soviet Union on very favorable terms, in addition to other credits and aid from other East European countries and China. Even the most conservative estimates place the Soviet aid well above Cuba's losses from U.S. economic aggression during that period.[\(35\)](#)

Thus, even though the U.S. blockade has certainly harmed the Cuban economy, it was less important than internal factors in determining its poor performance.

Fidel's Cuba replicated in all its essentials the Soviet economic model, where a bureaucratic ruling class appropriates the economic surplus without any democratic planning or institutional constraints by unions or other independent popular organizations — thereby depriving the system of a mechanism equivalent to the regulating and disciplining role of the capitalist market.

It is a centralized bureaucratic system that lacks any transparency in its managerial conduct and decision making, and where managers avoid taking responsibility for economic decisions for fear of being overruled and punished by those above them, resulting in economic inefficiency and even chaos.

For their part, workers have little motivation to work since they neither have material incentives (adequate salaries and satisfactory access to consumer goods) nor political incentives (a real say and democratic control of their workplaces and communities). This lack of motivation is evident in the lack of care in the performance of their work in every sector of the state-run enterprises.

Observers of the Cuban economy reported inefficient factories under Fidel (as under Raúl Castro's rule), inflating their expenses to obtain more financial subsidies from the government, and a generalized lack of attention to the costs of production, leading to situations such as a plastics factory investing \$1.15 for every dollar's worth of merchandise produced. [\(36\)](#)

These widespread patterns are part of the phenomenon of “soft budgets” of public enterprises in Soviet-type economies, and are a key element of what the Hungarian economist Janos Kornai called “shortage economies” with their accompanying waste and inefficiency. Cuba's central bureaucratic planning has produced the long-standing problems of the economy under both Fidel and Raúl Castro.

Even the Cuban government press has acknowledged the waste of resources, the overuse of energy carriers, and the existence of idle plants in enterprises. But the blame for these problems has been assigned to the lack of “economic culture” rather than to the structure and organization of the economic system itself. [\(37\)](#)

Like other Soviet-type economies, Fidel Castro's Cuba was characterized by what the social scientist Charles E. Lindblom called an economy of “strong thumbs, no fingers.” A “strong thumbs” economy, typical of a centralized bureaucratic administration, is one where the government is able to mobilize large numbers of people to carry out homogeneous, routine and repetitive tasks that require little variation, initiative, or improvisation to adapt to specific conditions and unexpected circumstances at the local level. Examples of such tasks are the systematic, military style preparations in anticipation of natural

disasters and massive vaccination campaigns and other preventive and standardized medical tests.

In contrast, a “nimble fingers” economy allows the system to efficiently and effectively deal with issues of variety, size, design and taste in consumer goods and to adequately organize the timely coordination of complex processes inside and among the different sectors of the economy.

The consequences of having a “strong thumbs, no fingers” economy in Cuba are evident in the agricultural sector, mostly because of the inevitable and unpredictable changes in climate and local conditions, which require more local initiative, intensive care and individual motivation than in the industrial sector — and also because of the complex and time-consuming bureaucratic hurdles involved in the process of conveying the agricultural goods, which become easily damaged or quickly spoiled from the farm to the consumer.

Just a couple of years after Fidel Castro retired, a foreign journalist residing in Cuba reported that the long bureaucratic road from farm to consumer established under Fidel Castro included eleven transfer points.[\(38\)](#)

Fidel’s personal interventions considerably aggravated the problems of his already malfunctioning economy. In contrast with his younger brother Raúl, who as the long-time head of the Armed Forces since the early ’60s got used to delegating power through the established military hierarchies, Fidel was a micromanager, often ignoring the judgment of local workers and managers intimately familiar with the situation at hand.

Considering himself an expert after having read a few books and articles on a given issue, he would also disregard the advice of the professional experts and initiate predictably unsuccessful and wasteful projects, such as developing a new breed of the so-called F1 hybrid cows, which he insisted on against the advice of the British experts he himself brought to Cuba in the 1960s.[\(39\)](#)

Most disastrous of all was his campaign to achieve a totally unprecedented 10 million ton sugar crop in 1970, which not only failed but also greatly disrupted the rest of the economy by deviating transportation and other resources from other economic sectors.

Like so many other dictators, Fidel was also inclined to gigantism, whether ordering the construction of an Olympic size swimming pool in a local recreation center when a smaller pool would have been fully adequate for the purposes at hand, or, on a far larger scale, insisting in an unnecessarily wide and wasteful eight-lane highway traversing much of the island.

This gigantism in the execution of new projects was, in many ways, the other side of the economic coin of paying little attention to the modernization, maintenance and upkeep of existing facilities, as in the case of the sugar industry which he just let fall apart.

The already meager resources of the island were thus further depleted with these and other economic interventions. The last ones Fidel undertook, based on his so-called “Battle of Ideas” campaign, took place from 2000 to 2006, when at the head of the “Grupo de Coordinación y Apoyo del Comandante en Jefe” (Commander in Chief’s Coordination and Support Group) that he formed outside and independently of the established agencies and institutions of his own government, he set out to “solve” certain problems meriting his attention.

One of those problems involved the educational sector affected by the massive flight of poorly compensated teachers and other professionals to the tourist industry. By fiat Fidel created a program for “emergent” teachers involving 18 and 19 year-old people, fresh out of high school, who with very little training were given teaching positions with very poor educational results.⁽⁴⁰⁾

Meanwhile, disregarding the economic plans and budgets set by his own government, he arbitrarily appropriated material resources for his own pet projects, such as the reconstruction of the University of Havana Law School building, which he had attended many decades earlier. When Fidel was forced to retire due to poor health in 2006, Raúl Castro immediately disbanded most of these projects along with the Grupo de Coordinación.

After Fidel: Raúl Castro’s Reforms

The fundamental outlines of the society built under Fidel Castro remain, although the reforms introduced by his brother Raúl in the last ten years have modified and softened some of its hardest edges.

Prompted by the urgent need for economic modernization and growth, Raúl, ever the pragmatist of the two Castros, has been trying to establish a modified version of the Sino-Vietnamese model that maintains the one-party state built by Fidel while partially opening the economy to self-employment, private enterprise and the market, resulting in some 25-30% of the active labor force becoming independent producers and service providers.

In the political realm, the state’s control of its citizenry has been liberalized. But this hasn’t been matched by the recognition of citizen rights and any degree of democratization. For example, the 2012 emigration reform, and the subsequent revisions thereof, have facilitated the movement of Cuban citizens in and out of the country, but do not recognize travel abroad as their right.

Thus, many dissidents have been prevented from leaving the country or their trips abroad have been delayed until after the events they were trying to attend have taken place. Meanwhile, the structures and politics of the one-party state with its so-called mass organizations as its transmission belts remain, along with a state-controlled monolithic mass media and the omniscient State Security who have even reached beyond Cuba to train and advise the intelligence systems of foreign countries such as Venezuela.

The new Cuban Constitution approved on February 24, 2019 does not change this political reality, leaving aside the fact that it was approved under the Cuban Communist Party's monopoly of the mass media and the impossibility for dissenting views to organize in order to present and campaign for alternative constitutional visions.

This contrasts with the progressive Constitution of 1940, where a variety of political parties, including the Cuban Communists who played an important role in the Constitutional Convention, offered alternative views that were partially incorporated into the constitutional text.

Reluctant to deviate too much from the Soviet model of economic control he inherited from his older brother, Raúl's reforms have been relatively modest and contradictory, as shown by the almost cyclical restrictions and subsequent relaxation of the rules for urban self-employment,⁽⁴¹⁾ probably stemming from the government's fear of losing control of the economy, but which is hardly reassuring to the small, sometimes tiny, businesses operating in the island.

Another, very important example are the agricultural reforms Raúl Castro introduced early on to solve the shortage of agricultural products, granting leases to individuals to work the land. The 169,434 people who obtained those leases from 2008 until 2016 have been facing numerous obstacles that have prevented the reform from yielding positive results.

Most of these obstacles are government made: In contrast with the five-year and permanent leases typically granted by the Chinese and Vietnamese governments, Raúl's government only granted 10-year leases, renewable for 10 years; their recent extension to two 20-year terms and doubling of the maximum size of the land allotments will probably not be enough to provide positive prospects to the new leaseholders.

These farmers — like the 589,000 (as of 2018) urban “cuenta propistas” (people who work for themselves, but also hire others) — cannot obtain the inputs they need at wholesale prices and bank loans for an amount sufficient to operate and keep their usually small enterprises afloat.⁽⁴²⁾ Moreover, the new agricultural

lessees must sell most of their produce to Acopio, the state enterprise that also determines the purchasing prices. It is only what remains after Acopio has taken its share that the lessees can sell on their own at market prices, thus discouraging production.

As in the days of Fidel Castro's rule, Cuban agriculture continues to suffer from organizational and bureaucratic ineptness. In 2016, for example, the official Cuban press acknowledged the serious problem of insufficient and inadequate packaging of processed agricultural products for the retail market. Thus the available 3.2 kilogram cans of tomato paste are too large and, at the cost of 130 pesos, too expensive for the retail trade.[\(43\)](#)

Another article reported that in Eastern Cuba near Guantánamo[\(44\)](#) the tomato crop was lost because of the lack of industrial facilities to process it. Mundubat, a Basque NGO, recently estimated that Cuba loses 57% of the food it produces.[\(45\)](#)

Partly because of the slowdown of the rise in tourism that had taken place during Obama's second period — due, in part, to the resumption of diplomatic relations between the United States and Cuba in December of 2014 — Cuba achieved negative GDP growth of -0.9% in 2016, a low 1.6% in 2017 and an even lower 1.2% growth in 2018. The government projects a growth of 1.5 percent for 2019, all of which is well below the 5-7% growth that economists estimate it would take for Cuba to embark on a course of economic growth.

More worrisome is that the rate of new investment, necessary to replenish the capital stock has become among the lowest in Latin America, dropping below 12% of GDP. With government forecasts indicating lower investments in the near future, the rate of gross capital formation may descend to slightly over 10%, barely half the rate of investment considered necessary for economic development.[\(46\)](#)

Productivity is sliding too. Agricultural yields — with the exception of potatoes — are well below the rest of Latin America. In industry, biotechnology is the only sector that enjoys high productivity relative to the region.[\(47\)](#)

Meanwhile, inequality — to a significant degree contained during Fidel's rule — has grown. This is due to a number of factors that include the differential access to remittances from abroad (Black Cubans are much less likely to obtain them), and higher incomes in the growing private sector.

It is also the result of racial discrimination, for which the government bears a heavy responsibility with its racially blind policies, although “affirmative action” exceptions have been made in specific instances such as in the racial composition

of the Central Committee of the CCP. Experts put some 25% of the population below the poverty line, although that is just an estimate since the government has for over 20 years refused to release any data on poverty and inequality.

But the stark reality is that were it not for the remittances — more than three billion dollars — from Cuban-Americans in the United States and to a lesser extent from Spain and elsewhere, most Cubans would not be able to satisfy their most basic needs with their own earnings.

In 2017, Cubans earned on average 786 Cuban pesos a month.⁽⁴⁸⁾ Those pesos are used to acquire a diminishing number of goods, mostly through the shrinking rationing system, which the government plans to abolish. An increasing number of basic goods have to be acquired with CUCs (the Cuban equivalent of American dollars, each CUC costing approximately 25 Cuban pesos), making them unaffordable.

The purchasing power of average Cubans has been further eroded by inflation: the average state salary in 2016 represented 39% of its value in 1989 and 50% in the case of pensions.⁽⁴⁹⁾

Free education and health services have offset part of those losses. However, that is changing as the deterioration of schools, which began after the collapse of the Soviet bloc in the 1990s, has led to an exponential growth of private tutoring, often provided by the schoolteachers themselves, as a source of income. A parallel development has been taking place in the health sector, with the growing practice of providing gratuities to doctors and other medical personnel in order to insure proper attention.

This deterioration has continued the reversal of many of the positive gains achieved by the revolutionary government in its early decades. Thus, for example, 390 Cuban schools were closed in the country for structural safety reasons before the beginning of the 2016-2017 school year.⁽⁵⁰⁾

According to Minister of Education Ena Elsa Velázquez Cobiella, Cuba's education system was still short of 16,000 teachers in 2016,⁽⁵¹⁾ even after 17,800 retirees, part-timers, university students and others were enticed to return to the classroom in recent years. Even so, the number of classroom teachers declined from 218, 570 in the academic year 2008-2009 to 194,811 in the year 2016-2017. This is hardly surprising, since the average monthly compensation in the educational sector in 2016 was 533 pesos (\$21), well below the then-average state salary of 740 pesos.⁽⁵²⁾

The widespread physical deterioration of public buildings and facilities has affected not only schools but also hospital and other medical centers except for

those set aside for the hard-currency medical tourism. To cap it all, the massive export of medical personnel to Venezuela (in exchange for oil), and to other foreign countries (in exchange for hard currency) has taken a heavy toll on the medical services provided to the Cuban people in the island.(53)

Thus the number of family doctors in Cuba shrunk by 40%. At the same time, while the total number of doctors rose 21% (including those sent abroad,) the total health personnel decreased 22% in 2008–2016 and the number of hospitals declined 32% in 2007-2016.(54)

Fidel's system endures, but it is foundering, primarily for internal reasons. Cuba has a new president, Miguel Díaz-Canel Bermúdez, born after the 1959 revolution, although Raúl Castro continues to be the First Secretary of the Cuban Communist Party and head of the Armed Forces.

It remains to be seen whether, as the historic generation of revolutionary leaders passes away within the next several years, the new Communist leaders will proceed to fully establish the Sino-Vietnamese model or attempt to hold on to Raúl Castro's status quo.

Notes

1. In 1989, General Arnaldo Ochoa and three other high army officers were accused of engaging in the international drug traffic and executed. In light of Fidel Castro's concerns with every aspect of Cuban life and his micro-managing tendencies, it is hard to believe that he was not aware and that at least he did not "look the other way" before the trafficking group's activities, mostly on behalf of the Cuban state's treasury, threatened to become an international scandal. However, the drugs involved were not destined for domestic consumption in Cuba.
2. Starting in the late '70s, Cuba has been facing a growing demographic crisis with a declining birth rate, substantial emigration and an aging of its population.
3. The agrarian reform policy was not even developed by the revolutionary government's cabinet but by a group secretly meeting at Che Guevara's home with the substantial participation of PSP (the old pro-Moscow Communists) members but excluding the cabinet's liberals, social democrats and revolutionary anti-imperialists alike. This was a clear demonstration of the growing power of the PSP-Raúl Castro-Che Guevara tendency within the revolutionary camp. John Lee Anderson, *Che Guevara. A Revolutionary Life*, New York: Grove Press, 1997, 404-6.
4. Cited by César Escalante in "Los Comités de Defensa de la Revolución," *Cuba Socialista*, 1, septiembre 1961, 70.
5. Armando Chaguaceda and Lennier López, "Cuban Civil Society. Its Present Panorama," *New Politics*, Winter 2018, 40.
6. Samuel Farber, "Cuba in 1968," *Jacobin*, April 29, 2018.
7. Lillian Guerra, *Visions of Power in Cuba: Revolution, Redemption, and Resistance 1959–1971* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 274.
8. Ignacio Ramonet, *Fidel Castro: Biografía a dos voces* (Barcelona: Random House Mondadori, 2006), 486, and Fidel Castro interview with Lee Lockwood, *Playboy*, January 1967, 74.
9. Amnesty International, *Restrictions on Freedom of Expression in Cuba*, London: Amnesty International, June 30, 2010, 9-10.
10. See Amnesty International report for Cuba 2016/2017.
<https://www.amnesty.org/es/countries/americas/cuba/report-cuba/>

11. Roy Walmsley, Institute for Criminal Policy Research, World Prison Brief, World Prison Population List, 11th edition, May 2017.
12. Ian Lumsden, *Machos, Maricones and Gays: Cuba and Homosexuality* (Philadelphia, Pa.: Temple University Press, 1996), 65-70.
13. The late distinguished Cuban architect Mario Coyula Cowley persuasively argued that the Gray Period actually lasted a bitter 15 years (“Trinquenio Amargo”) and began much earlier in the 1960s. Mario Coyula, “El Trinquenio Amargo y la ciudad distópica: autopsia de una utopía,” UNAM Archipiélago, <http://www.revistas.unam.mx/index.php/archipielago/article/view/19944>.
14. Cited from excerpts from *Granma Weekly Review*, May 9, 1971, 5 in Allen Young, *Gays Under the Cuban Revolution* (San Francisco: Grey Fox Press, 1981), 32-33.
15. Departamento de Versiones Taquigráficas del Gobierno Revolucionario, “Discurso pronunciado por el Comandante Fidel Castro Ruz, primer ministro del gobierno revolucionario de Cuba, en la clausura del acto para conmemorar el VI aniversario del asalto al palacio presidencial celebrado en la escalinata de la Universidad de la Habana, 13 de marzo de 1963,” [cuba.cu, http://www.cuba.cu/gobierno/discursos/1963/esp/f130363e.html](http://www.cuba.cu/gobierno/discursos/1963/esp/f130363e.html).
16. Lillian Guerra, “Gender Policing, Homosexuality and the New Patriarchy of the Cuban Revolution, 1965-1970,” *Social History*, 35, 3, August 2010, 274.
17. For example, the compulsory isolation of HIV-positive Cubans came to an end in 1993.
18. William M. LeoGrande, “Cuban-Soviet relations and Cuban policy in Africa,” in Carmelo Mesa-Lago and June S. Belkin (eds.) *Cuba in Africa* (Pittsburgh: Center for Latin American Studies, University Center for International Studies, University of Pittsburgh, 1982), 41.
19. Wayne S. Smith, *The Closest of Enemies: A Personal Account of U.S.-Cuban Diplomatic Relations Since 1957* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1987), 40.
20. Nelson P. Valdés, “Cuba’s involvement in the Horn of Africa: The Ethiopian-Somali War and the Eritrean Conflict,” Mesa-Lago and Belkin, ed. *Cuba in Africa*, 80, 84.
21. Initially, Cuba did not explicitly support the invasion, but refused to support and voted against (rather than abstain) a UN resolution condemning it, with Cuban foreign minister Raúl Roa claiming that “we shall not vote against socialism.” Lars Schoultz, *That Infernal Little Republic: The United States and the Cuban Revolution*, Chapel Hill, N.C.: The University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 351.
22. United States Department of Commerce, *Investment in Cuba*,
23. Juan Triana Cordoví, “La dulce francesa,” *Rebelión*, October 22, 2018. <http://www.rebellion.org/noticia.php?id=248056>.
24. Frank W. Thompson, “Reconsidering Cuban Economic Performance in Retrospect,” paper delivered at the conference “The Measure of a Revolution: Cuba, 1959-2009,” May 7-9, 2009, Queen’s University, Kingston, Ontario, Canada, 3-4, 6, 7. This is one of several revisions of Thompson’s article “Cuban Economic Performance in Retrospect,” *Review of Radical Political Economics*, 37, no. 3 (Summer 2005). The important Cuban economist Pavel Vidal estimated that at best Cuba’s GDP grew just over one percent in the period 1960-2017. Joaquín P. Pujol, “Cuban Economy Today and Perspectives for the Future, Summary of Findings of 28th Annual ASCE [Association for the Study of the Cuban Economy], November 13, 2018.
25. Frank W. Thompson, *Ibid.*
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