

## **OBITUARY<sup>1</sup>**

### **FIDEL CASTRO (1926-2016): ANTI-WESTERN- IMPERIALISM LEADER WHO HELPED DEVELOP ENVIABLE EDUCATION AND HEALTH SYSTEMS**

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The death of Fidel Castro, on 25<sup>th</sup> November, 2016, had a mixed reception in the global media. The virtues of the Cuban revolution and the country's rebirth that followed were highlighted in several accounts, whereas others gave importance to Castro's detractors who would fling accounts of human rights abuses in the face of anyone seeking to highlight Cuban achievements. Detractors would trumpet the estimated 582 executions after the overthrow of the Batista regime, in contrast to, for instance, the strong sense of forgiveness expressed by the Sandinistas after their 1979 Nicaraguan revolution. They would point to the continuing shackles placed on political dissidents and to the arrest of homosexuals, although homosexuality was later decriminalised in Cuba.

While people in Florida, some being offspring of *émigrés* from Cuba, were shown on the global media dancing in the streets at the death of a man who survived countless CIA engineered assassination attempts, others, living in Cuba and who benefited from the country's social programmes, were shown lining up to pay homage to Fidel Castro. Many of the latter regard him as an iconic figure who stood up to and resisted the might of Western ("Yankee") imperialism. Like all leaders, Castro, a self-declared Marxist-Leninist, though there seem to have been no such declarations at the start of the revolution,

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<sup>1</sup> This obituary is adapted from an entry on Castro by Peter Mayo in the *Encyclopedia of Modern Political Thought*, CQ Press (Sage), 2013.

had his imperfections and contradictions. Among the latter was his adopting an anti-western imperialism stance while steering his country towards another superpower's orbit, most likely a situation that was forced on him, in a Cold War context, as a result of US antagonism towards a revolutionary movement that liquidated its assets. This situation contradicted Cuba's non-aligned status in the eyes of some. Most notable among the latter was Colonel Gaddafi of Libya, whose country, like Cuba, formed part of the non-aligned movement.

### **Remarkable achievements**

Yet, for all its contradictions and shortcomings, the country Castro led can teach the West a few lessons in terms of how to make good use of foreign support and popular determination to provide a whole array of social programmes at home and abroad.

The list is impressive: genuine health care available and free to all (a ratio of one doctor for 130 persons) backed by a world class medical faculty (it is believed to have produced 130,000 doctors, 1500 foreign graduates in medicine *per annum*, with a total of 25,000 medicine graduates from eighty four countries) and child mortality reduced from around 42% at the start of the revolution to 4% at present. Cuba is the only Latin American country without undernourished children, without any children living and sleeping on the streets and without incidences of mother to child HIV transmission. Other achievements include the production of vaccines for the fight against cancer, life expectancy at 79 years of age, illiteracy being virtually non-existent and high levels of educational achievement registered throughout the country. Comparative studies, for instance, indicate that Cuban students excel in such domains as languages and Mathematics (Carnoy and Marshall, 2005). Cuba also punched above its weight in sport (it claims the greatest haul of Olympic medals among Latin American countries). It is the only country to have attained an internationally acknowledged degree of sustainable development. All these achievements occurred against the backdrop of a 50 year blockade which has only recently been lifted. <sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Indebted to former world soccer superstar Diego Armando Maradona for a summary of these documented achievements of the revolutionary Caribbean state.

## **Formation**

Fidel Alejandro Castro Ruz (90) was the son of a Spanish immigrant from Galicia, Spain. A significant world personality in the second half of the 20th century, Castro was regarded, love him or hate him, as a superb fighter, athlete, strategist and orator (some of his speeches lasted for hours). He is widely regarded to have been endowed with extraordinary intelligence. He also lived a charmed life, having dodged the bullet on numerous occasions.

After having been educated at the De Lasalle college at Santiago de Cuba, later by Jesuits at the Colegio de Dolores in the same city and the Colegio de Belen, Castro graduated from the University of Havana as a lawyer and went on to become the charismatic architect of a revolution that led to the establishing of a socialist state. He held on to power until recently when the presidential reins were handed to his brother Raul Castro, now 85, who has promised to step down in 2018, probably bringing an end to a family dynasty of almost 60 years. While a student at school and university, Fidel Castro excelled at sports. He was also involved in political activism often in support of the Orthodox Party led by Eduardo Chibás. The situation, during his student days, was volatile. Murders occurred and student gangs played a prominent part.

In 1947, he participated in a failed expedition to overthrow the Dominican Republic dictator, Rafael Leonidas Trujillo Molina. While attending a student congress the following year, he was involved in an uprising in Bogota, Colombia known as the 'Bogotazo'.

## **The Cuban Revolution**

In a country which was very much 'a US playground'<sup>3</sup> and well known for Mafia interests, Castro soon endeavoured to change the status quo represented by the Batista regime. First, drawing on his legal training, he denounced the government of Fulgencio Batista as anti-constitutional; Batista had staged a coup d'état to overthrow a democratically elected government.

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<sup>3</sup> Prostitution and gambling were features of this 'playground'. It has to be said that despite the educational efforts to rehabilitate its victims, namely the prostitutes themselves, through educational programmes such as specifically targeted schools, prostitution is as present today as it is in all other countries. Though illegal, it is a feature of tourism, a mainstay of the economy.

Seeing that this legal effort came to nought, he, together with others, including his brother Raul, mounted an abortive attack on the Moncada Barracks. This armed attack was carried out with a view to paving the way for a revolution. The date was 26th July 1953 which was to become a momentous one. Castro would later insist on its being identified as the start of the Cuban revolution. The attack floundered and Castro, together with many others, was rounded up. While some of his comrades were executed, Castro was jailed for fifteen years. He was very lucky in that the Lieutenant who took him prisoner, Pedro Sarria, simply refused to have him shot or handed over to the barracks commander who would otherwise have had him killed after having him subjected to the most gruesome torture, the kind of torture mentioned in Castro's letters from prison.

### **Prison Education**

While in prison, Castro was to write a tract 'History will absolve me.' This was his self-defence at the trial. The tract would later enjoy wide circulation throughout Cuba. He read voraciously and helped set up a prison school. Setting up prison schools is typical of some of the most revolutionary figures in modern history, including Antonio Gramsci and Amadeo Bordiga who set up a similar school at Ustica when awaiting their trial during the Fascist clampdown on leftist politics in Italy.

Castro's school brings to mind similar efforts, notably those by Nelson Mandela and fellow prisoners at Robben Island in South Africa and more recently Palestinian prisoners inside Ansar III in the Naqab/Negev desert in the Middle East. This type of activity emphasises time and time again the educational basis of any social-justice oriented revolution.

### **Decisive assault**

Castro and his fellow captives were released in 1955 as a result of an amnesty. This would prove a costly error on Batista's part. Castro eventually went to Mexico where he met the Argentinean doctor turned revolutionary, Ernesto 'Che' Guevara. A number of potential Cuban and other revolutionaries joined his clandestine movement - the 26th July Movement. Travelling to Cuba on board a rickety old yacht, The Granma (regular capacity: 20 persons), this band of revolutionaries landed on the island on 2nd December, 1956. They were organised into different columns.

They were dispersed by enemy action and many lost their lives. From the original group of 82, only eleven remained and retreated to the Sierra Maestra from where they launched their attacks. Gradually their numbers swelled as more locals joined their ranks. Following the captures of different localities, Castro and his companeros, dubbed los barbudos (the bearded ones), finally marched on Havana on January 8, 1959. By then Batista had fled the country. Fidel was first appointed Commander of the armed forces and later Prime Minister.

### **Trade and 'land for the peasants'**

An agrarian reform was soon put into effect. This has been and continues to be the initial desideratum of most revolutionary discourse in Latin America – *la reforma agraria* based on 'land for the campesinos/as'. In Cuba, large landholdings were broken up for redistribution among peasants, some of whom were organised into cooperatives.

After having visited the USA, Castro signed a trade agreement with the Soviet Union. There followed a series of sanctions by the USA, especially following the appropriation of many of its Cuban assets and nationalisation of several of its oil refineries. When in NYC to address the UN, Castro and the Cuban delegation stayed at Harlem, thanks to the efforts of Malcolm X among others (Young, 2003, p. 17). Leaders of the Cuban delegation had moved there after having been appalled by the unfriendly treatment meted out to them by the owners and management of their original hotel situated close to the UN headquarters.

Links were forged between the Cuban struggle and that of the oppressed in other parts of the world, especially Afro-Americans. The USA broke diplomatic relations with Cuba and also planned, through the CIA, in collusion with Cuban exiles and Mafia bosses, an invasion, with a landing at the 'Bahia de los cochinos' (bay of pigs) which turned out to be an unmitigated disaster. Numerous attempts on Castro's life were subsequently carried out.

With Cuba veering more strongly towards the Soviet orbit, matters with the USA came to a head especially when the Soviet Union, led by its leader, Nikita Khrushchev, was allowed to deploy missiles on the island facing Florida, in retaliation

to US missiles in Turkey and other places facing the Soviet Union. This tense situation was solved by the two superpowers behind Castro's back. Earlier, US President John Fitzgerald Kennedy had ordered an economic blockade of Cuba which was maintained until very recently and was even consolidated following the collapse of the USSR in 1991. Castro had also broken relations with the Catholic Church because of its alleged connections with the Batista regime but the situation with the Vatican thawed significantly towards the end of the 90s marked by the visit of Pope John Paul II to the country. By then the Church had been allowed back.

Despite all the economic difficulties, the country, under Castro, made important strides forward in education, medicine, science, sport, international exchange relations and sustainable development.

The Cuban revolution served as a promising source of hope not only to the impoverished people of Latin America but also to the rest of the 'Tricontinental World'. The term was used in 1960 during Castro's visit to the UN and subsequently Harlem in NYC. Castro's notion of 'tricontinental' applied to the exploited and colonized populations of Latin America, Asia and Africa. A Tricontinental Conference was later held in Havana in 1966. It offered a militant version of the 'Third World' alliance against continued western imperialism, an alliance that owes its origins to the Bandung Conference, which had taken place eleven years earlier.

The term 'tricontinental' captured a significant feature of the Cuban revolution—its "South-to-South" international ethos of cooperation and solidarity. Cuba made a significant contribution to the dismantling of Apartheid in South Africa, a point Nelson Mandela underlined. Cuba's radical vision of "tricontinental" was, however, not merely determined by geographical boundaries. The link with the plight of Afro-Americans suggests that Castro and his collaborators never lost sight of the existence of the 'third world' in the 'first world.' In 2004, Castro offered help to the 'wretched and oppressed' of the US. The oppressed Americans, on this occasion, were the impoverished of New Orleans.



This occurred in the immediate aftermath of Hurricane Katrina (Giroux, 2006). Castro offered access to Cuba's never ending supply of high quality doctors and health workers to assist those whose home and communities had been devastated by the storm. Some interpreted the humanitarian gesture as Castro's ultimate insult to his mighty neighbour; and indeed US leaders must have regarded it so, promptly refusing the offer. This gesture was interpreted as signalling Cuba's commitment to the global south, defined widely.

Under Castro's leadership, Cuba placed its educational and medical facilities at the service of not only its own people and celebrities but also the common people of Africa, Asia and many other parts of the world. There emerged a series of bilateral, trilateral or multilateral agreements in the context of South-to-South cooperation, which contrasted with the more global and dominant models of hierarchical North-South relations, often denounced for maintaining former colonies in a colonial bind. As an example of this 'delinking' process, Venezuelan oil at low prices and interest rates was exchanged, during the Chavez and Maduro years, for Cuban teachers, doctors and health workers. Cuba had Venezuelan literacy tutors trained in the 'Yo si Puedo' pedagogical method created by the late Cuban educator, Leonela Relys (Relys Díaz, 2013), who at the age of 15 had participated in the Cuban literacy campaign.

As a result, Cuba helped the Venezuela government enable one and a half million people learn to read and write (Marquez, 2005). This satisfied a great social demand. It was then followed by an attempt to articulate the achievements of the crusade with the formal, technical-rational demands of a state educational system that was crucial to Venezuela's development (Cole, 2011).

The link between the Cuban revolution and the education of the masses was forged at the very start when the country staged a mass scale literacy campaign, thus anticipating and serving as a model to those that were later carried out in Nicaragua and Grenada. The notion of *brigadista* (literacy brigade worker) derives from the Cuban campaign. 268,000 Cubans were involved in the literacy campaign in 1961, proclaimed the Year of Education, and around 707,000 Cubans became literate by December 22, 1961. (Bhola, 1984).

A year later, Cuba's literacy rate was an impressive 96% (Fagan, 1964). Members of the literacy brigades from the city were sent to the country to teach and learn from peasants, as would be the case later in Nicaragua. The attempt, as with Nicaragua, was to bring city and country together. The fight against US imperialism and its client regime in the country was to be followed, or rather accompanied, by a fight against illiteracy and lack of basic education. (Leiner, 2013)

In the later *cruzadas*, those in Nicaragua and Grenada, the image of Paulo Freire, well known for his revolutionary approach to education, loomed large. This was not the case with the Cuban campaign as Freire was still little known, certainly outside Brazil, at the time. Freire however became a source of reference for Cuban popular education in later years. Castro and Che Guevara were listed, in Freire's early published works, as revolutionary heroes and sources of inspiration.

The connections between revolutionary Cuba and the critical pedagogy of Paulo Freire were marked by the decision whereby Castro was to publicly recognise the Brazilian's political pedagogical efforts, something which, alas, did not come to pass as Freire died on 2 May, 1997. His death occurred a month or so before he was to travel to Cuba to collect the award from Castro. Che Guevara, that other stalwart of the Cuban revolution, and Freire have often been mentioned in the same breath, especially by the MST in Brazil who regard them, with José Martí and others, as towering sources of influence in their educational programme. Che's ideas and Freire's have been brought together in at least one published volume focusing on revolutionary critical pedagogy (McLaren, 2000)

As part of its revolutionary commitment to international cooperation, with no strings attached—quite credible now that the connection with the dismantled USSR is history and a small country such as Cuba cannot harbour imperial ambitions—Cuba makes the products of its educational institutions (teachers, health workers, doctors) available for export against token fees, depending on the receiving country's ability to pay. It is, in fact, the bilateral, trilateral or multilateral agreements generated by these forms of collaborations with other countries, within the context of South-to-South cooperation, which is the primary focus of an important edited book, *The Capacity to*



*Share* (Hickling- Hudson et al, 2012). There are those who have expressed civil rights concerns regarding whether qualified personnel chosen for these exchanges had the option to decline work assignments abroad.

Like Nicaragua later, Cuba was forced to contend with overwhelming obstacles in its efforts to serve as a revolutionary model to other countries within the US intercontinental sphere of influence in the Americas. Despite all this, Cuba registered notable achievements, especially in preventive medicine and education. The *Universidad de la Habana* (University of Havana), although not recognized in the top flight of the now widely referred to world university rankings, has a medical school that is considered among the best in the world. Many ambitious students from the formerly Anglo-colonized Caribbean are said to strive hard to learn Spanish in order to gain admission to this school.

The same applies to Cuba's science centres, one of them lauded, in a late 80s programme shown on *Rai TV* (Italian State TV) by that great connoisseur of Latin American affairs, Gianni Minà, as a remarkable research institution of its kind. Editor of the Italian review *Latino America e tutti i Sud del Mondo* (Latin America and the Global South), Minà had carried out a long televised and published interview with Castro.

In 2000, Argentina's former soccer superstar, Diego Armando Maradona, like others, chose to go to Cuba for rehabilitation from a life threatening, drug-related illness. So did Hugo Chavez in his fight against cancer, a fight he ultimately lost.

According to a 2006 WWF (World Wildlife Federation) report, Cuba is the only country in the world with sustainable development, a significant achievement also in light of the U.N.'s latest SDGs. (Bachtell, 2009) It combined high human development standards (high literacy and health indexes) with a low ecological footprint. This includes the rate of electricity consumed and carbon dioxide emitted per capita.<sup>4</sup> In making

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<sup>4</sup> See <http://www.ecosherpa.com/news/cuba-only-country-with-sustainable-development/> Indebted to Professor Paul J Pace from the University of Malta for making this source and the one that follows (endnote V) known to me.

use of old cars and other products, which are made to function thanks to some superb mechanics and technicians, Castro's Cuba has militated against the prevalent 'consumer culture ideology' of obsolescence with its devastating planetary effects.

Some organizations counter these achievements and the statistics involved by pointing to Cuba's poor standing in the human rights index. This gives rise to several arguments regarding the extent of allowing civil liberties in a state of siege involving a sworn giant enemy lying next door. The growing tensions in the region, going back to the period leading to the Missiles Crisis, which brought the world to the brink of a Third World War, offered the western media a field day, as if being in the USSR's orbit was not reason enough for portraying Cuba in a bad light.

Revolutionary movements cannot rest on their laurels especially at a time when a younger generation has emerged with little remembrance of life in Cuba under the former dictatorship. Whatever the achievements of the revolution, probably lost on the younger generation and those who think the country must 'kick on' and not cling to the past, there is a need to ensure projecting the image of a country that has the backing of the people, whatever form democracy might take.

This is to emphasize that, despite the rhetoric surrounding it, western style bourgeois representative democracy is not the only conceivable model of democracy available. Like all models, it has its limitations. These limitations were constantly exposed by the *indignados* in Spain and Greece, the Occupy movements and Arab protestors, as references to the emergence of more capillary forms of power and grassroots democratic networking abound. (Darder and Mayo, 2011) Cuba has its own forms of internal democracy, as scholars such as Sheryl Lutjens (1996) have documented, especially in light of the process of 'rectification' that started in the mid-80s, a process which allowed for popular participation in institutions such as schools.

It is helpful to recall that the Sandinistas in Nicaragua legitimized their leadership following the overthrow of a corrupt dictatorship in 1979 with an internationally monitored election, which they won by a landslide in the early eighties—a democratic process that the U.S., under President Reagan,

refused to honour and which did not prevent the Sandinistas from being demonised in the mainstream US media.

The other great leftist turn in South America, following the Cuban revolution, occurred with Allende's electoral victory in Chile, 1970. Castro pointed to Allende's weakness in that his government did not press its advantage home and consolidate the country's revolutionary gains by seeking to disorganize its opposing forces. He was also astonished by the ruling party's faith in the army's 'neutrality'. One can argue that Castro was vindicated by events that unfolded, shortly after, in Chile. (Galloway, 2006, pp. 301-302).

Fidel Castro and fellow revolutionary icon, Ernesto 'Che' Guevara, are depicted as having been uncompromising and ruthless with opponents, those perceived as traitors (see Paco Ignacio Taibo II's chilling account of Eutimio Guerra's execution) and those within their ranks regarded as threatening to seriously undermine a hard-earned revolution that took the country away from the clutches of US led Western imperialism. One cannot help but be reminded of Che's much quoted statement: "One has to grow *hard* but without ever losing *tenderness*." (Taibo II, 2000)

Castro, for his part, would act firmly with members of his own revolutionary movement, despite any prestige they might have garnered in revolutionary wars elsewhere. The 1989 execution of Arnaldo Tomas Ochoa Sanchez, a hero of the Angola war, and his associates comes to mind. This was justified by Castro on the grounds that the country had to avoid being liable to accusations of serving as a transit centre for drug trafficking (Cuba's location was ideal in this regard), as was the case with Panama. The USA would have mercilessly exploited this situation, as it did with Noriega in Panama.

Cuba also needed to maintain the moral high-ground with regard to its being a country free of drug trafficking, a situation which distinguishes it from other countries in the region and the rest of the Americas.

### **Dangers of romanticisation**

Like any other country, Cuba is not to be romanticized. Cuba operated a strict policy of control over departures and arrivals of citizens from abroad. This was recently subject to revision,

given that the situation has dramatically changed since the early days of the revolution when Cuba lost a huge percentage of its brainpower - doctors and other professionals - to the US. If anything, the small nation now proactively exports such power.

There is also an overproduction of qualified people without reciprocal economic investments to integrate them. It has been argued that one should not blame this solely on the infamous blockade. In the view of many, the blockade had no justification in recent times, once the Soviet 'threat' to the USA was non-existent. Recently lifted, the blockade was condemned by several world figures. These included the late Pope John Paul II who, as is well known, was a staunch opponent of Soviet communism and is widely perceived to have been a catalyst for its overthrow.

As Antonia Darder and I (2011) argued:

Maybe the real threat to the US and its unbridled market economy stems from something else. If left to freely develop its socialist vision of democracy, Cuba might serve as a credible and more viable alternative to US-led capitalism. Now that Cuba has modified some of its old and perhaps ossified ways, even cultivating market-socialism, we might want to consider whether the country has the potential today to meet its early promise and truly develop—through its *capacity to share*, with no strings attached—into a microcosm of another world that is possible. (p.9)

The lifting of the blockade, for which even Pope Francis strove hard, lobbying strongly, recently came to pass following the normalization of relations between the two countries. It remains to be seen whether the Donald Trump administration will respect Obama's legacy with regard to the normalization of US-Cuba relations, as the US President-Elect seeks to appease his voters from the Cuban émigré communities in Florida and elsewhere.

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