

Fidel dies - Reflections on the Cuban Revolution

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Dave Kellaway reflects.

Dishevelled and defeated after the bloody attack on the Moncada barracks; walking free from prison into exile in a smart suit; interviewed by a US journalist in his mountaintop hideout in 1958; triumphantly marching into Havana with Che, Cienfuegos and the other young bearded warriors; announcing the confiscation of US capital and the socialist nature of the revolution to hundreds of thousands; at the front line at the Bay of Pigs with those big black rimmed glasses leading the victory over the CIA invasion force; announcing the fall of Che in Bolivia in a packed Plaza de la Revolucion in Havana; embracing Brezhnev in Moscow; meeting his people in the factories and sugar cane fields; presenting the machine gun to Allende months before the coup in Chile; welcoming back the soldiers from Angola after their victory over apartheid South Africa; greeting Ortega, the leader of the Nicaraguan revolution in 79; the grim announcement of the austere special period following the fall of the Berlin wall in 89; welcoming Chavez and then other reforming Latin American leaders in the new century... and then his withdrawal into not quite retirement, a tracksuited old man with a whitening beard who was still sought after by radical leaders or personalities like Maradona.

Now he is gone, but he has outlived all those US presidents who ordered the CIA to organise hundreds of assassination attempts, internal armed rebellions and a full scale invasion force. His demise and the impending collapse of the Cuban state has been prematurely announced a number of times since 1989. Unlike Russia and Eastern Europe, it has not collapsed into gangster capitalism or experienced those catastrophic effects on living standards and life expectancy. The comparison between the response of Haiti and Cuba to the recent hurricane graphically shows that the gains made by the 1959 revolution still survive. In Cuba, nobody died and whole towns were evacuated smoothly. Raul, Fidel's brother in arms from the first battles still leads the government and is committed to a transition in leadership in 2018. Obama's turn to more positive relations with Cuba is a gain for the Cuban people, it has relaxed certain restrictions and could help economic growth. Visiting Cuba this September I saw the cruise ship passengers swarming through Old Havana. Direct flights from the US to Cuba started in the summer to Santa Clara and increased just this week to Havana.

Whatever our subsequent judgements, Fidel's life is a remarkable one. Born into the middle class, he initially became radicalised as a democratic nationalist and was inspired by the great nineteenth century anti-colonialist fighter, Jose Marti. The first attempt at an armed uprising at the Moncada barracks in Santiago in 1953 ended with many fallen comrades and he was lucky not to be executed. As sometimes happens with defeats, it had a radicalising effect, his famous speech at the trial played a role in that. Exiled to Mexico, he wasted no time assembling a second armed group. In 1958, they left in the small boat Granma to try again. Again most of the fighters were killed in the first days but about a dozen survived and managed to make it to the Sierra Maestra - a friendly peasant played a crucial role. Once there they established a headquarters camp that was never found by Batista's

army and gradually Che, Cienfuegos, his brother Raul and himself built up a number of small fronts which could successfully take on the army.

More importantly the political support was developed and links made with the underground in the big towns. Certainly Fidel and the other leaders were probably already aware that the direction of struggle would lead them into conflict with US, but for a whole period they presented themselves as democratic nationalists fighting a brutal dictatorship. This helped disarm the US who took little or no action to bolster the Batista regime. If we study the period between the entry into Havana and the speech a year or so later where Fidel defined the revolution as socialist, we can see a textbook example of how to take a democratic anti-imperialist revolution down the road to one that overthrew capitalism. Each move forward could be understood as a response to sabotage or to the urgent basic needs of the population.

During the first years of the revolution Havana was the home for all radicals and revolutionaries. This was a revolution made by a group who were outside the Stalinist 'official' communist movement. The Cuban CP came to support the revolution but were subordinate to the Castroist leadership. The impact worldwide was particularly strong in Latin America. Armed groups launched uprisings mostly in rural areas and got the active but discreet support of the Cuban government.

Unfortunately these brave revolutionaries failed to understand the specific conditions of the Cuban victory - it was never just a rural insurgency there anyway - and all ended in defeat. Che even left Cuba to set up a central guerrilla insurgency in Bolivia which also ended in defeat. Fidel supported Che politically and materially in this operation. Indeed in a second wave of armed insurgencies in the late seventies in Central America Cuba helped with resources and fighters. However the failure of these struggles elsewhere in Latin America and the consequent isolation of the Cuban revolution meant that Fidel was obliged to seek shelter in the Soviet camp. This had negative consequences on the way the economy and democratic organisation developed. Farming for instance was over-collectivised and productivity is still to recover since Cuba still imports today around 70% of its food. Also everything was nationalised, down to every restaurant and hairdresser. Today regulated small businesses and self-employment is increasingly allowed. One thing is clear, Fidel led a real anti-capitalist revolution that destroyed the bourgeois state. He was no Nasser, he did not just set up some sort of state capitalist regime.

Although Fidel never presided over a Stalinist Gulag there was some repression of dissidents and opponents. At the beginning of the revolution torturers and Batista leaders were tried and executed - indeed Che was partly in charge of this. Occasionally afterwards there were executions - notoriously of Ochoa and some other military leaders accused of drug running and of a ferry captain who had taken over a ship. Gays were also repressed and sent to special labour camps. Nearly all dissidents were released in recent years although political opponents and artists for example are still harassed regularly. A degree of local democracy and involvement through the committees in defence of the revolution has always existed in a way that we did not see in the Stalinist countries. Debate goes on today in a number of restricted forums, particularly over the 'modernisation' of the economy. Of course the limits are that you cannot form a political current or party outside of the Cuban Communist Party, you cannot start up a really independent publication opposing the government and your internet use is tightly controlled.

Another distinction between Fidel and other 'communist' leaders is that he has not set up a dynasty as we have seen in China. His children had not been propelled into high government posts. Although he has enjoyed some of the privileges of government leadership he has not built sumptuous palaces or wallowed in the trappings of wealth. The US and the CIA have always tried to expose such crimes but have failed dismally. Despite any political failings we might discuss Fidel retains a certain moral probity and dignity in these areas. Although his image is prominently displayed usually with some

revolutionary proclamation it is not overwhelming nor are there any statues.

Lately some of Fidel's style of leadership and political positions on some questions have been altered by the current leader, Raul Castro. Several of Fidel's appointees were shifted to one side by his brother who prefers a more institutionalised, conventional political procedure. Raul has also been more open to economic reforms and welcoming investment by foreign corporations. Part of the problem of understanding what is going on in Cuba is the fact that the real debates are not very transparent. Rather infrequently there is a Party congress where a big document is presented to the people which is then subject to thousands of amendments but no counter documents are permitted or organised currents. A lively debate does exist around the continued influence of the old military guard, over whether the Chinese road is the correct one and over regulation of foreign investment. Some cadres are clearly positioning themselves for the fruits of any larger scale capitalist opening, others are concerned about defending and improving the living standards of the people.

One of the lasting legacies of Fidel is surely the fact that unlike in other equivalent countries literacy and health levels are high. Although people could definitely eat better, no-one goes hungry or dies of malnutrition. Cuban doctors go worldwide on solidarity missions. The economy has not collapsed and some sectors like tourism and biotech are going pretty well. The devastation of the narco economy that we see in Mexico or Columbia does not exist in Cuba. Cuba's prestige in the world is remarkable for a poorish country of 10 million.

Given it is a small non-capitalist country in a sea of rampant capitalism and its closest neighbour and dominant imperialist power has imposed a blockade on its economy since the 1960s, it is not surprising that Fidel's legacy is a mixed one. The blockade certainly contributes to the low productivity and poor wages most Cubans earn. Financing the necessary military apparatus to withstand US aggression also drains resources that could improve conditions. Opening up the economy and having a dollar based currency alongside another peso one that is worth twenty five times less means that inequality is inevitably increasing. Cubans who work in the tourist industry and can earn dollars or the 20% who get remittances from relatives in the US can live reasonably well. The 75% who still work for the state earn each month roughly what you can make from renting a room to tourist for a couple of nights. People, particularly young people, yearn for more freedoms too such as an open internet.

Fidel and his generation are leaving the scene. It will be up to those Cubans who are today considering these new problems to try and resolve them in the interests of working people. Fidel overall was on our side and never wavered in his resistance to US imperialism. His example inspired resistance in many places.

Venceremos, adios companero.

Dave Kellaway

P.S.

* <http://socialistresistance.org/fidel-dies/9306>