

Moncada: A heroic act



Imperialism and Revolution

Episode #29

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In the last episode of Imperialism and Revolution, we saw that, in the period 1934 to 1953, Cuban intellectuals kept alive the teachings of Martí, including his belief that courageous and heroic action in fidelity to the truth could create a more dignified nation.

By 1953, however, there had emerged the sentiment among the people that an ethical attitude in opposition to the neocolonial republic was not enough. One must act. Responding to this sentiment, Fidel Castro, a young lawyer who had represented the poor in Havana and had been an Orthodox Party candidate for the legislature in the elections aborted by the March, 1952 Batista coup, led an assault on the Moncada military garrison in Santiago de Cuba on July 26, 1953, with the intention of seizing weapons and launching a guerrilla armed struggle in the mountains. The assault failed, and 70 of the 126 assailants were killed, 95% of them murdered after capture by Batista's soldiers in a four-day period

following the assault.

The Cuban essayist Cintio Vitier maintained that the attack on the Moncada barracks had a powerful impact on the people. The attack responded to the popular sentiment that one must move beyond ethical attitude to action. At the same time, it was a courageous action, connecting to the popular belief in heroism, rooted in the teachings of Martí that a more dignified nation could be created through heroic, courageous action. As Fidel declared during his self-defense at the trial for the events, the attack demonstrated that Martí lives, because his people possess the rebelliousness and the dignity that he taught. In that attack, “youth in magnificent selflessness have come to die beside [Martí’s] tomb, to give their blood and their lives in order that he would continue living in the soul of the country.”

Moncada, therefore, in Vitier words, was an “enormous, ripping and creative new force that would project itself over the future of Cuba in an irresistible form.” And it lifted Fidel to a leadership position in a new stage of the revolutionary struggle, a role assumed in previous historic moments by Céspedes, Martí, Mella, Martínez Villena, and Guiteras.

In his October 16, 1953, self-defense, subsequently known as “History Will Absolve Me,” Fidel defended the legitimacy of the Moncada attack on the basis of universal principles that have been affirmed by humanity. He maintained that the Batista regime was illegal, because it was established by a coup d’état that ruptured the constitutional order and cancelled elections. Moreover, the Batista regime is tyrannical, for it has eliminated civil liberties and elections, and it has uprooted democratic institutions. The attack on the Moncada barracks was legal and constitutional, Fidel argued, because the 1940 Cuban Constitution was still in force, inasmuch as Batista’s abrogation of the Constitution did not have legal standing; and Article 40 of the 1940 Constitution affirms the right of insurrection against tyranny. In addition, ancient and modern political philosophy affirms the right of the people to revolt against tyranny.

Fidel invoked the right of rebellion against tyranny in the name of the people of Cuba, without giving emphasis to any one sector of the people, such as the working class. Fidel maintained that the people of Cuba live under unjust conditions. They for generations have been promised a more just and dignified nation, but they have been repeatedly deceived and betrayed. Whether they be agricultural workers, peasants, or industrial workers, they receive inadequate salaries, and many live in inadequate, in some cases wretched, housing conditions. Even teachers and professors are poorly paid, and many young professionals are unable to find work with their recently earned degrees.

Fidel explained that these injustices are rooted in Cuban economic structures. Cuba exports raw materials and imports manufactured goods, and therefore its industrial capacity is limited. Moreover, most of the land is foreign owned. In addition, the great majority of peasants do not own the land they work, and they do not have access to land for the production of food for their families.

The problems of Cuba, Fidel declared, cannot be resolved as long as the government gives priority to the interests of the economic and financial elite. A revolutionary government would ignore such interests and would act decisively in defense of the needs of the people. It would mobilize capital to develop industry; it would establish limits to the size of landed property and expropriate the land of large estates, distributing land to peasants and promoting the development of agricultural cooperatives; it would reduce rents; and it would universalize and reform the educational system.

Fidel proposed concrete steps to rectify the injustice that people experience, including: agrarian reform and the redistribution of agricultural land; profit sharing for commercial and industrial workers and employees; the confiscation of property that had been fraudulently obtained by government officials; the nationalization of U.S.-owned electric and telephone companies; the comprehensive reform of education; and the collection of taxes that had been evaded.

In History will absolve me, Fidel demonstrates a capacity to explain the sources of problems in a manner that was consistent with the understanding of the people. Jesus Arboleya writes, “Although some

historians consider [History will absolve me] a manifesto less radical than that of the Joven Cuba of Guiteras in 1935, in which the anti-imperialist and socialist ends of the revolution were clearly expressed, the key to the genius of Fidel Castro lies precisely in his explaining the anti-neocolonial project on the basis of a unifying proposal, avoiding ideological prejudices that would have limited its reach”.

In an interview by the Spanish journalist Ignacio Ramonet in 2006, Fidel declared that he had conceived a revolutionary plan by 1951. He viewed the people as having a healthy spirit of spontaneous rebellion, but lacking mature political consciousness. Therefore, he conceived bringing the people to revolution in stages. First, focusing on concrete problems, like unemployment, poverty, and the lack of hospitals and housing; and then a second stage of political education. In accordance with this strategy, Fidel did not declare the socialist character of the Revolution until 1961, during the mobilization of the people for the defense of the nation against the U.S.-sponsored invasion at the Bay of Pigs.

In the representative democracy of the neocolonial republic, politicians made promises to the people, but they defended the interests of the elite. When the people were mobilized to social and political action, military dictatorships intervened. In the aftermath of the March 10, 1952 coup d'état, the people were divided about what ought to be done, and even worse, they were disgusted and disheartened. In that apparently hopeless situation, Fidel on July 26, 1953 called the people to revolution through a courageous and galvanizing act, followed by a platform and manifesto. The movement that he led took political power in just five and one-half years.

What lessons does the Moncada event offer? For anyone inspired by the example of Fidel, it is not a matter of imitating, because the appropriate strategies depend on the context. Rather, it is a question of asking the questions that Fidel asked in his time and context. How can the people be galvanized to collective action in defense of themselves? How can the problems that the people experience be effectively explained? What concrete steps ought to be proposed? What politically intelligent plan can be formulated for the taking of power by the people?

This is Charles McKelvey, speaking from Cuba, the heart and soul of a global socialist revolution that struggles for a more just, democratic, and sustainable world.

Sources

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