

The History of Cuba's July 26 1953 Moncada Movement. Fidel and His Comrades

A Canadian Left View

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Global Research, July 28, 2022

Region: [Latin America & Caribbean](#)

Theme: [History](#)

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In 1953, when virtually all the progressive and revolutionary forces in Cuba offered no viable solution to oppose the U.S.-backed Batista dictatorship, Fidel Castro and his comrades did indeed work out a path. It was a route characterized by game-changing statements coupled with exceptionally courageous deeds, out of which emerged the July 26 Movement. This movement, supported by allies who later rallied to the cause, led to the January 1, 1959, Triumph of the Revolution. The rest, as the saying goes, is history. However, history is still being made today as Cuba endures major challenges.

Today, progressives throughout the world could learn many lessons from 1953. One particular lesson is worth delineating. How did the seed that was planted on July 26, 1953 rapidly grow into the July 26 Movement, which developed a plan that would eventually shake the foundations of the dictatorship? How did it break out of the box in 1953, straitjacketed as it was indeed? There was nothing on the horizon for the vast majority of Cuban people until July 26.

It is difficult to analyze this situation without embodying it in the persona of Fidel. By 1953, Fidel was already familiar with the life and some of the works of José Martí as well as other Cuban fighters in the nineteenth-century liberation struggle against Spain in favour of independence, a just society based on equality and the elimination of slavery. Fidel was simultaneously learning from the theories of Marx, Engels and Lenin, to the yet limited extent that he was aware of this source at the time. Yet, for Fidel, political thinking and action had always comprised one intertwined phenomenon. He had been very politically active for nearly one decade before July 26, 1953.

Thus, based on their accumulated experience and thinking since the mid-1940s, Fidel and his comrades worked out their July 26 plan by building upon different international and national political theories and varying practical participation. Fidel especially, as the acknowledged leader of this movement, was able to combine a variety of strands in political

thinking as well as practice into one coherent vision. He succeeded where so many others had failed because he was able to amalgamate principles of thought as a guide to action. While he never for one second abandoned international and indigenous revolutionary theory for momentary expediency, he also refused to allow thinking to become a hindrance to revolutionary action.

Fidel is, in the words of Gabriel García Márquez, “the anti-dogmatist par excellence.” Dogmatism in the revolutionary ranks is often manifested by the stiff and sterile interpretation of what is perceived as “theory,” but is rendered useless by this type of reading. This dogmatism hinders the capacity to draw from accumulated practical experience – either positive or negative – in order to analyze concrete conditions with the perspective of the future requirements needed to move society forward. Perhaps this was the problem with most of the Cuban revolutionary left in the 1950s that left them impotent until a new vision of thinking and practice opened up horizons for them. This is why, when reflecting every year on July 26, the words of Che Guevara always seem to invade the thought process. Che wrote on July 26, 1967 in Bolivia about the significance of that day as “a rebellion against oligarchies and against revolutionary dogmas.” This may raise some eyebrows. However, Che was of course referring to dogmatism even infecting revolutionaries. Che’s allusion to much of the Cuban left at the time was based not only on his own practical experience but on his many years of evaluating the international communist movement.

The July 26 attacks did not result in a victory that day, and many were killed, injured or arrested, including Fidel. However, the attacks led to Fidel’s self-defence in court after he was captured and forced to stand trial. He had written his notes in prison, but was forced to deliver his two-hour defence from memory because the prison authorities confiscated his notes. This epic rebuttal later became known as “History Will Absolve Me” and was a result of his reconstruction by memory while in solitary confinement. It was and is a masterpiece of anti-dogmatism par excellence by someone who knew how to combine theory with the practical evolution of Cuban society at the time.

By 1954, many thousands of copies of his defence were distributed clandestinely throughout Cuba. The defence was converted into an offensive in conjunction with the people, which led to the 1959 victory. It has stood the test of time, since serving as the genesis of Cuba’s current anti-imperialist socialist project. July 26 and its repercussion, “History Will Absolve Me,” sparked the Cuban Revolution.

Today, Cuba is going through one of its most difficult periods since 1959. Its economic situation is fragile, multiplied many times by the Trump/Biden tightening of the genocidal blockade. Thus, the economic system is being tested once again, as President Miguel Díaz-Canel, the Cuban Parliament, the Communist Party of Cuba, and mass organizations are introducing daring new economic measures. As soon as these new decisions were made public last week following the Cuban Parliament’s discussion and debate, the enemies of the Revolution, “left”, right and center, went into high gear to attack Cuba’s socialist culture. This attack organized in Canada. led [by the Canadian think tank](#) pressures organised in Canada, is similar to other countries such is the US, even before the recent Cuban measures.

Thus, in 2022, the dialectical approach combining principled thinking with the practicalities of the struggle as exemplified by Fidel Castro since 1953, stands valid today as a model.

How are the principles of Cuban socialism applied to the ongoing efforts to decentralize the state, further open up space for small businesses and much-needed increased foreign investment? How does this further opening of Cuba in the economic sphere affect Cuban socialism, its socialist political culture and sovereignty? Even though these are not easy questions to address, the Cuban Revolution has been striving to do so. In fact, once again, as in 1953 and in 1959, Cuban revolutionaries find themselves in ongoing largely uncharted waters that only their tradition of combining principles and practical tactics can navigate.

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This article was originally published on [The Canada Files](#).

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