

THE
CUBA
READER

HISTORY, CULTURE, POLITICS

SECOND EDITION, REVISED AND UPDATED

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Imagine—a .22! They passed out the bullets and I took my four boxes. And I waited. Before leaving, Fidel spoke to the comrades about the historic event we were about to live through.

I don't remember his exact words very well. But I do recall his saying that we would be remembered and even earn a well-deserved place in history books.

There were some comrades who had become frightened. Fidel gave them encouragement. For my part, I'd have shot them, because on account of them there was some confusion later on.

For the rest, all Cubans know what happened. The shooting: comrades killed, those who could manage it getting away, our stay in the mountains until 1 August. . . .

Fidel, Alcalde, and Pepe were captured in a hut. . . .

Comrade Mestre, who has died since, got the worst manhandling. They kept telling him, "Come over here. You a revolutionary? Don't you know Negroes can't be revolutionaries? Negroes are either thieves or Batista's supporters, but never revolutionaries!" As for me, they threw me down on the ground. When I got up they fired over my head. I had to get back down and then they told me to get up—I didn't know what to do.

Then Sarría came in and told me to stay on my feet.

[Eugenio] Ameijeiras: You weren't afraid?

Almeida: No, we weren't afraid. To tell the truth, numbness overtakes you in those cases, so you don't react to the danger. They loaded us on a truck, tied our hands, and took us to the bivouac area. There we met other men: Raúl Castro, Ramiro Valdés, and some whose names I've forgotten. Then there was the trial.

From the Boniato prison we were sent by plane to the Isle of Pines for twenty-two months.

Translated by Albert B. Teichner

Note

1. José Martí (1853–1895), Cuban writer, revolutionary, champion of the struggle for liberty in all Latin America.

History Will Absolve Me

Fidel Castro

On 16 October 1953, Fidel Castro (1926–2016) defended himself at his trial after the assault on the Moncada Barracks with what is probably his most famous speech, "History Will Absolve Me." The speech crystallized, for many, the goals of the 26th of July Movement and catapulted Castro into the limelight as one of its most eloquent spokespersons.

In terms of struggle, when we talk about people we're talking about the six hundred thousand Cubans without work, who want to earn their daily bread honestly without having to emigrate from their homeland in search of a livelihood; the five hundred thousand farm laborers who live in miserable shacks, who work four months of the year and starve the rest, sharing their misery with their children, who don't have an inch of land to till, and whose existence would move any heart not made of stone; the four hundred thousand industrial workers and laborers whose retirement funds have been embezzled, whose benefits are being taken away, whose homes are wretched hovels, whose salaries pass from the hands of the boss to those of the moneylender, whose future is a pay reduction and dismissal, whose lives are endless labor, and whose only rest is the tomb; the one hundred thousand small farmers who live and die working land that is not theirs, looking at it with the sadness of Moses gazing at the promised land, to die without ever owning it, who like feudal serfs have to pay for the use of their parcel of land by giving up a portion of its produce, who cannot love it, improve it, beautify it, nor plant a cedar or an orange tree on it because they never know when a sheriff will come with the rural guard to evict them; the thirty thousand teachers and professors who are so devoted, dedicated, and so necessary to the better destiny of future generations and who are so badly treated and paid; the twenty thousand small businesspeople weighed down by debts, ruined by the crisis, and harangued by a plague of grafting and venal officials; the ten thousand young professionals: doctors, engineers, lawyers, veterinarians, schoolteachers, dentists, pharmacists, journalists, painters, sculptors, etc., who finish school with their degrees anxious to work and full of hope, only to find themselves at a dead end, all doors closed to them, where no ear

hears their clamor or supplication. These are the people, the ones who know misfortune and, therefore, are capable of fighting with limitless courage! To these people whose desperate roads through life have been paved with the bricks of betrayal and false promises, we were not going to say: "We will give you . . ." but rather: "Here it is, now fight for it with everything you have, so that liberty and happiness may be yours!"

The five revolutionary laws that would have been proclaimed immediately after the capture of the Moncada barracks and would have been broadcast to the nation by radio must be included in the indictment. It is possible that Colonel Chaviano may deliberately have destroyed these documents, but even if he has, I remember them.

The first revolutionary law would have returned the power to the people and proclaimed the 1940 Constitution the supreme law of the state until such time as the people should decide to modify or change it. And in order to effect its implementation and punish those who violated it—there being no electoral organization to carry this out—the revolutionary movement, as the circumstantial incarnation of this sovereignty, the only source of legitimate power, would have assumed all the faculties inherent therein, except that of modifying the constitution itself. In other words, it would have assumed the legislative, executive, and judicial powers.

This attitude could not be clearer or more free of vacillation and sterile charlatanism. A government acclaimed by the mass of rebel people would be vested with every power, everything necessary in order to proceed with the effective implementation of popular will and real justice. From that moment, the judicial power—which since March had placed itself in contradiction to and outside the constitution—would cease to exist and we would proceed to its immediate and total reform before it would once again assume the power granted it by the supreme law of the republic. Without these previous measures, a return to legality by putting its custody back into the hands that have crippled the system so dishonorably would constitute a fraud, a deceit, one more betrayal.

The second revolutionary law would give non-mortgageable and non-transferable ownership of the land to all tenant and subtenant farmers, lessees, sharecroppers, and squatters who hold parcels of five *caballerías* (approximately 165 acres) of land or less, and the state would indemnify the former owners on the basis of the rental which they would have received for these parcels over a period of ten years.

The third revolutionary law would have granted workers and employees the right to share 30 percent of the profits of all large industrial, mercantile, and mining enterprises, including the sugar mills. The strictly agricultural enterprises would be exempt in consideration of other agrarian laws which would be put into effect.

The fourth revolutionary law would have granted all sugar planters the

right to share 55 percent of the sugar production and a minimum quota of forty thousand *arrobas* for all small tenant farmers who have been established for three years or more.

The fifth revolutionary law would have ordered the confiscation of all holdings and ill-gotten gains of those who had committed fraud during previous regimes, as well as the holdings and ill-gotten gains of all their legatees and heirs. To implement this, special courts with full powers would gain access to all records of all corporations registered or operating in this country, in order to investigate concealed funds of illegal origin, and to request that foreign governments extradite persons and attach holdings rightfully belonging to the Cuban people. Half of the property recovered would be used to subsidize retirement funds for workers and the other half would be used for hospitals, asylums, and charitable organizations.

Furthermore, it was to be declared that the Cuban policy in the Americas would be one of close solidarity with the democratic peoples of this continent, and that all those politically persecuted by bloody tyrannies oppressing our sister nations would find generous asylum, fraternity, and bread in the land of Martí, not the persecution, hunger, and treason they find today. Cuba should be the bulwark of liberty and not a shameful link in the chain of despotism.

These laws would have been proclaimed immediately. As soon as the upheaval ended and prior to a detailed and far-reaching study, they would have been followed by another series of laws and fundamental measures, such as agrarian reform, educational reform, nationalization of the electricity trust and the telephone company, the refund to the people of the illegal andressive rates these companies have charged, and payment to the treasury of all taxes brazenly evaded in the past.

All these laws and others would be based on exact compliance with two essential articles of our constitution: one of them outlawing large estates, indicating the maximum area of land any one person or entity may own for each type of agricultural enterprise, by adopting measures which would tend to revert the land to Cuban ownership. The other categorically demands that the state use all means at its disposal to provide jobs and insure a decent livelihood to each manual or intellectual laborer. None of these laws can be called unconstitutional. The first popularly elected government would have to respect them, not only because of a moral obligation to the nation, but because when people achieve something they have yearned for throughout generations, no force in the world is capable of taking it away again.

The problem of the land, the problem of industrialization, the problem of housing, the problem of unemployment, the problem of education, and the problem of the people's health. These are the six problems we would take immediate steps to solve, along with restoration of civil liberties and political democracy.



Fidel holds a press conference. From Lionel Martin, *The Early Fidel: Roots of Castro's Communism* (New York: Lyle Stuart, 1978), between 160 and 161. Photo by Lionel Martin. Courtesy of Curtis Martin.

This exposition may seem cold and theoretical if one does not know the shocking and tragic conditions of the nation with regard to these six problems, along with the most humiliating political oppression.

Eighty-five percent of the small farmers in Cuba pay rent and live under the constant threat of being evicted from the land they till. More than half of our most productive land is in the hands of foreigners. In Oriente, the largest province, the lands of the United Fruit Company and the West Indian Company link the northern and southern coasts. There are two hundred thousand peasant families who do not have a single acre of land to till to provide food for their starving children. On the other hand, nearly three hundred thousand caballerías of cultivable land owned by powerful interests remain uncultivated. If Cuba is above all an agricultural state, if its population is largely rural, if the city depends on these rural areas, if the people from our countryside won our War of Independence, if our nation's greatness and prosperity depend on a healthy and vigorous rural population that loves the land and knows how to work it, if this population depends on a state that protects and guides it, then how can the present state of affairs be allowed to continue?

Except for a few food, lumber, and textile industries, Cuba continues to be primarily a producer of raw materials. We export sugar to import candy, we export hides to import shoes, we export iron to import plows. Everyone agrees with the urgent need to industrialize the nation, that we need steel in-

dustries, paper and chemical industries, that we must improve our cattle and grain production, and the technology and processing in our food industry in order to defend ourselves against the ruinous competition from Europe in cheese products, condensed milk, liquors, and edible oils, and from the United States in canned goods; that we need cargo ships; that tourism should be an enormous source of revenue. But the capitalists insist that the workers remain under the yoke. The state sits back with its arms crossed and industrialization can wait forever.

Just as serious or even worse is the housing problem. There are two hundred thousand huts and hovels in Cuba; four hundred thousand families in the countryside and in the cities live cramped in huts and tenements without even the minimum sanitary requirements; 2.2 million of our urban dwellers pay rents which absorb between one-fifth and one-third of their incomes; and 2.8 million rural and urban residents lack electricity. We have the same situation here: if the state proposes the lowering of rents, landlords threaten to freeze all construction; if the state does not interfere, construction goes on so long as the landlords get high rents; otherwise they would not lay a single brick even though the rest of the population to live totally exposed to the elements. The utilities monopoly is no better; they extend lines as far as it is profitable, and beyond that point they don't care if people have to live in darkness for the rest of their lives. The state sits back with its arms crossed, and the people have neither homes nor electricity.

Our educational system is perfectly compatible with everything I've just mentioned. Where the peasant doesn't own the land, what need is there for agricultural schools? Where there is no industry, what need is there for technical or vocational schools? Everything follows the same absurd logic: if we don't have one thing we can't have the other. In any small European country there are more than two hundred technical and vocational schools; in Cuba only six such schools exist, and the graduates have no jobs for their skills. The little rural schoolhouses are attended by a mere half of the school-age children—barefooted, half-naked, and undernourished—and frequently the teacher must buy necessary school materials from his own salary. Is this the way to make a nation great?

Only death can liberate one from so much misery. In this respect, however, the state is most helpful—in providing early death for the people. Ninety percent of the children in the countryside are affected by parasites which filter through their bare feet from the ground they walk on. Society is moved to compassion when it hears of the kidnapping or murder of one child, but it is indifferent to the mass murder of so many thousands of children who die every year from lack of services, in agonizing pain. Their innocent eyes, death already shining in them, seem to look into some vague infinity as if entreating forgiveness for human selfishness, as if asking God to stay his wrath. And when the head of a family works only four months

a year, with what can he purchase clothing and medicine for his children? They will grow up with rickets, with not a single good tooth in their mouths by the time they reach thirty; they will have heard ten million speeches and will finally die of misery and deception. Public hospitals, which are always full, accept only patients recommended by some powerful politician who, in return, the electoral votes of the unfortunate one and his family so that Cuba may continue forever in the same or worse condition.

With this background, is it not understandable that from May to December over a million persons are jobless and that Cuba, with a population of five and a half million, has a greater number of unemployed than France or Italy with a population of forty million each?

When you try a defendant for robbery, Honorable Judges, do you ask him how long he has been unemployed? Do you ask him how many children he has, which days of the week he ate and which he didn't, do you investigate his social context at all? You just send him to jail without further thought. But those who burn warehouses and stores to collect insurance do not go to jail, even though a few human beings may have gone up in flames. The insured have money to hire lawyers and bribe judges. You imprison the poor wretch who steals because he is hungry; but none of the hundreds who steal millions from the government has ever spent a night in jail. You dine with them at the end of the year in some elegant club and they enjoy your respect. In Cuba, when a government official becomes a millionaire overnight and enters the fraternity of the rich, he could very well be greeted with the words of that opulent character out of Balzac—Talleyfer—who in his toast to the young heir to an enormous fortune said: "Gentlemen, let us drink to the power of gold! Mr. Valentine, a millionaire six times over, has just ascended the throne. He is king, can do everything, is above everyone, as all the rich are. Henceforth, equality before the law, established by the constitution, will be a myth for him; for he will not be subject to laws, the laws will be subject to him. There are no courts nor are there sentences for millionaires."

The nation's future, the solutions to its problems, cannot continue to depend on the selfish interests of a dozen big businessmen nor on the cold calculations of profits that ten or twelve magnates draw up in their air-conditioned offices. The country cannot continue begging on its knees for miracles from a few golden calves, like the biblical one destroyed by the prophet's fury. Golden calves cannot perform miracles of any kind. The problems of the republic can be solved only if we dedicate ourselves to fight for it with the same energy, honesty, and patriotism our liberators had when they founded it. Statesmen like Carlos Saladrigas, whose statesmanship consists of preserving the status quo and mouthing phrases like "absolute freedom of enterprise," "guarantees to investment capital," and "law of supply and demand," will not solve these problems. Those ministers can chat away in a Fifth Avenue mansion until not even the dust of the bones of those whose problems require

immediate solution remains. In this present-day world, social problems are not solved by spontaneous generation.

A revolutionary government backed by the people and with the respect of the nation, after cleansing the different institutions of all venal and corrupt officials, would proceed immediately to the country's industrialization, mobilizing idle capital, currently estimated at about 1.5 billion pesos, through the National Bank and the Agricultural and Industrial Development Bank, and submitting this mammoth task to experts and people of absolute competence, totally removed from all political machines, for study, direction, planning, and realization.

After settling the one hundred thousand small farmers as owners on the land which they previously rented, a revolutionary government would immediately proceed to settle the land problem. First, as set forth in the constitution, it would establish the maximum amount of land to be held by each type of agricultural enterprise and would acquire the excess acreage by expropriation, recovery of swampland, planting of large nurseries, and reservation of zones for reforestation. Second, it would distribute the remaining land among peasant families with priority given to the larger ones, and would promote agricultural cooperatives for communal use of expensive equipment, freezing plants, and unified professional management of farming and cattle raising. Finally, it would provide resources, equipment, protection, and useful guidance to the peasants.

A revolutionary government would solve the housing problem by cutting all rents in half, by providing tax exemptions on homes inhabited by the owners; by tripling taxes on rented homes; by tearing down hovels and replacing them with modern apartment buildings; and by financing housing all over the island on a scale previously unheard of, with the criterion, just as each rural family should possess its own tract of land, that each city family should own its own home or apartment. There is plenty of building material and more than enough labor to make a decent home for every Cuban. But if we continue to wait for the golden calf, a thousand years will have gone by and the problem will remain the same. On the other hand, today possibilities of taking electricity to the most isolated areas on the island are greater than ever. The use of nuclear energy in this field is now a reality and will greatly reduce the cost of producing electricity.

With these three projects and reforms, the problem of unemployment would automatically disappear and the task of improving public health and fighting against disease would become much less difficult.

Finally, a revolutionary government would undertake a thorough reform of the educational system, bringing it into line with the projects just mentioned with the idea of educating those generations that will have the privilege of living in a happier land. Do not forget the words of the Apostle Jos. Martí: "A grave mistake is being made in Latin America. In countries that

live almost completely from the produce of the land, men are being educated exclusively for urban life and are not trained for rural life.” “The happiest country is the one which has best educated its children best, both in how to think for themselves and how to develop their sensibilities.” “An educated country will always be strong and free.”

The soul of education, however, is the teacher, and in Cuba the teaching profession is miserably underpaid. Despite this, no one is more dedicated than the Cuban teacher. Who among us has not learned their ABCs in the little public schoolhouse? It is time we stopped paying pittance to these young men and women who are entrusted with the sacred task of teaching our youth. No teacher should earn less than two hundred pesos; no secondary teacher should make less than 350 pesos if they are to devote themselves exclusively to their noble calling without suffering want. Moreover, all rural teachers should have free use of the various systems of transportation; and, at least once every five years, all teachers should enjoy a sabbatical leave of six months with pay so they may attend special refresher courses at home or abroad to keep abreast of the latest developments in their field. In this way, the curriculum and the teaching system can be easily improved. Where will the money be found for all this? When there is an end to the embezzlement of government funds, when public officials stop taking graft from the large companies that owe taxes to the state, when the enormous resources of the country are brought into full use, when we no longer buy tanks, bombers, and guns for this country (which has no borders to defend and where these instruments of war, now being purchased, are used against the people), when there is more interest in educating the people than in killing them, there will be more than enough money.

Cuba could easily provide for a population three times as great as it has now, so there is no excuse for the abject poverty of a single one of its present inhabitants. The markets should be overflowing with produce, pantries should be full, all hands should be working. This is not an inconceivable thought. What is inconceivable is that anyone should go to bed hungry while there is a single inch of unproductive land; that children should die for lack of medical attention; that is inconceivable is that 30 percent of our campesinos cannot write their names, and that 99 percent of them know nothing about Cuban history. What is inconceivable is that the majority of our rural people are now living in worse circumstances than the Indians Columbus discovered in the fairest land that human eyes had ever seen.

To those who would call me a dreamer, I quote the words of Martí: “A true man does not seek the path where advantage lies, but rather the path of duty, and this is the only practical person, whose dream of today will be the law of tomorrow; because seeing back on the essential course of history and seeing flaming and bleeding peoples seethe in the cauldron of the ages one knows, without a single exception, the future lies on the side of duty” . . .

I know that imprisonment will be harder for me than it has ever been for anyone, filled with cowardly threats and hideous cruelty. But I do not fear prison, as I do not fear the fury of the miserable tyrant who took the lives of seventy of my compañeros. Condemn me. It does not matter. History will absolve me.

Translator unknown