

LULA (Part Three)

The demise of the Soviet Union was to us like there were no more sunrises; a devastating blow for the Cuban Revolution. Not only did this translate into a total cessation of supplies of fuel, materials and foods; we lost markets and the prices that we had attained for our products in the difficult struggle for our sovereignty, integration and principles. The empire and the traitors, full of hatred, were sharpening their daggers with those who wanted to put the revolutionaries to the sword and recover the country's riches.

The Gross Domestic Product progressively plummeted to 35 percent. What country could have withstood such a terrible blow? We were not defending our lives; we were defending our rights.

Many left-wing parties and organizations became discouraged in the wake of the collapse of the USSR after its titanic effort to build socialism during the course of more than 70 years.

The reactionaries' criticisms coming from all platforms and mass media were ferocious. We did not add our voices to the chorus of capitalism's apologists, beating a dead horse. Not one statue to the creators or followers of Marxism was demolished in Cuba. Not one school or factory had its name changed. And we decided to press ahead with unchangeable steadiness. That was what we had promised to do under such hypothetical and unbelievable circumstances.

Nor had we ever practiced personality cults in our country, something that we had taken the initiative to prohibit right from the first days after the triumph.

In peoples' history, it has been subjective factors that have brought forward or delay outcomes, independently of the leaders' worth.

I spoke to Lula about Che, briefly outlining his story for him. Che used to argue with Carlos Rafael Rodríguez about the of self-financed and the budgetary method, things we didn't consider that important then as we were involved in the struggle against the US blockade, their aggression plans and the 1962 October Missile Crisis, a real survival issue.

Che studied the budgets of the great Yankee companies whose managers lived in Cuba, not their owners. He drew from this a clear idea about how imperialism worked and what was happening in our society and this enriched his Marxist ideas and led him to the conclusion that in Cuba we couldn't use the same methods to build socialism. But this didn't mean we were dealing with a war of insults; these were open exchanges of opinions that were published in a small magazine, with no intention of creating rifts or divisions among ourselves.

What happened in the USSR later would not have surprised Che. While he held important posts and carried out his duties, he was always careful and respectful. His language grew tougher when he collided with the horrible human reality imposed by imperialism; he became aware of this in the former Belgian colony of the Congo.

He was a self-sacrificing, studious and profound man; he died in Bolivia with a handful of combatants from Cuba and other Latin American countries, fighting for the liberation of Our America. He did not survive to experience the world of today, where problems unknown to us then have since come into play.

You didn't know him, I told him. He was disciplined in voluntary work, in his studies and behavior. He

was modest and selfless, and he set an example both in production centers and in combat.

I think that in building socialism, the more the privileged receive, the less will go to the neediest.

I repeat to Lula that time measured in years was now flying by very quickly; each one of them was multiplying. One can almost say the same about each day. Fresh news is published constantly, relating to the situations anticipated in my meeting with him on the 15th.

With plenty of economic arguments, I explained to him that when the Revolution triumphed in 1959, the United States was paying for an important part of our sugar production with the preferential price of 5 cents a pound; for almost half a century this would be sent to that country's traditional marketplace which was always supplied, at critical moments, by a secure supplier just off their shores. When we proclaimed the Land Reform Law, Eisenhower decided what had to be done, and we hadn't yet nationalized their sugar mills –it would have been premature to do so– nor had we yet applied the agrarian law of May 1959 to the large estates. Because of that hasty decision, our sugar quota was suspended in December 1960, and later redistributed among other producers in this and other regions of the world as punishment. Our country became blockaded and isolated.

Worst of all was the lack of scruples and the methods used by the empire to impose its domination over the world. They brought viruses into the country and destroyed the best sugarcane; they attacked the coffee, the potatoes and also the swine. The Barbados-4362 was one of our best varieties of sugarcane: early maturity, a sugar yield that sometimes reached 13 or 14 percent; its weight per hectare could exceed 200 tons of cane in 15 months. The Yankees resorted to pests to wipe out the best. Even worse: they brought in the hemorrhagic dengue virus that affected 344 thousand people and took the lives of 101 children. We don't know whether they used other viruses –perhaps they didn't because they were afraid of the proximity of Cuba.

When due to these problems we couldn't send to the USSR the sugar shipments under contract with that country, they continued sending us the goods we had agreed upon. I remember negotiating with the Soviets every cent of the sugar price; I discovered in practice what I had only known about in theory: unequal exchange. They were securing a price that was above the world market price. The agreements were planned for five years; if at the beginning of the five-year period you were sending an X amount of tons of sugar in payment for the goods, at the end of that period the value of their products, in international prices, was 20 percent higher. They were always generous in their negotiations: once the world market price temporarily shot up to 19 cents, we latched on to that price and they accepted. Later this served as a basis for the application of the socialist principle which says that the more economically developed should support the less developed as they build socialism.

When Lula asked me what the purchasing power was of 5 cents, I explained that with one ton of sugar at that time we could buy 7 tons of oil; today, the reference price of light oil, 100 dollars, will only buy one barrel. The sugar we export, at current prices, would only suffice to import oil that would be used up in 20 days. We would have to spend about 4 billion dollars per year to buy it.

The United States subsidizes its agriculture with tens of billions each year. Why does the U.S. not allow the ethanol you produce freely into the country? They subsidize it brutally, thus denying Brazil income for billions of dollars every year. The wealthy countries do the same, with their production of sugar, oleaginous products and cereals for the production of ethanol.

Lula analyzes figures on Brazilian agricultural products that are of great interest. He tells me that he had a study made by the Brazilian press showing how world soy production will grow 2 percent annually until 2015, which means an additional production of 189 million tons of soy. Brazil's soy production would have to grow at a pace of 7 percent annually to be able to meet the world's needs.

What is the problem? Many countries already don't have any more land available for crops. India, for example, has no more available land; China has very little and neither does the United States to grow

more soy.

I add to his explanation that what many Latin American countries have are millions of people earning starvation salaries and growing coffee, cacao, vegetables, fruits, raw materials and goods at low prices to supply US society which no longer saves and consumes more than it can produce.

Lula explains that they have set up an EMBRAPA research office -Agriculture and Livestock Research Company of Brazil- in Ghana, and he goes on to say that in February they are going to also open an office in Caracas.

"Thirty years ago, Fidel, that area of Brasilia, Mato Grosso, Goiás, was considered a part of Brazil that had nothing, it was just like the African savannah; in the course of 30 years, it was transformed into the major grain producing region in all of Brazil, and I think that Africa has an area that is very much like this region in our country; that's why we set up the research office there in Ghana and we also would like to become associated with Angola."

He told me that Brazil is in a privileged position. They have 850 million hectares of land; of these 360 million are part of Amazons State; 400 million of good soil for agriculture, and sugarcane takes up only one percent.

I make the comment that Brazil is the largest coffee exporter in the world. For this product, Brazil is paid the same as the value of a ton in 1959: around 2,500 of today's dollars. If in that country then they charged 10 cents a cup, today they charge 5 dollars or more for an aromatic cup of espresso, an Italian way of preparing coffee. That is GDP in the United States.

In Africa they cannot do what Brazil is doing. A large part of Africa is covered by deserts and tropical and subtropical areas where it is difficult to grow soy or wheat. Only in the Mediterranean region, to the north -where rainfall totals some eight inches a year or the lands irrigated with the waters of the Nile-- in the high plateaus or in the south, in the lands wrested away by apartheid, cereals production is abundant.

Fish in the cool waters that mainly flow around its western coast feed the developed countries that sweep into their nets all the large and small species that feed on the plankton in the ocean currents coming in from the South Pole.

Africa, having almost 4 times the surface area of Brazil (18.91 million square miles) and 4.3 times more population than Brazil (911 million inhabitants) is very far from being able to produce Brazil's surplus foods, and its infrastructure is yet to be built.

The viruses and bacteria affecting potatoes, citrus, bananas, tomatoes, and livestock in general, swine fever, avian flu, foot-and-mouth disease, mad cow disease, and others that in general affect the livestock of the world, proliferate in Africa.

I spoke to Lula about the Battle of Ideas that we are waging. Fresh news arrives constantly that demonstrates the need for that constant battle. The worst media of our ideological enemies are bent on spreading throughout the world the opinions of some nasty 'worms' who cannot even stand to hear the term "socialism" in our heroic and generous country. On January 20th, five days after the visit, one of these papers published the story of a young ne'er-do-well who, thanks to the Revolution, had attained a good level education, health and employment situation:

"Don't even mention socialism to me", and he went on to explain the cause of his anger: "many people were pawning their souls just to get a few dollars. Anything new that happens in this country, whatever it is, they should give it another name," he declares. Quite the little wolf dressed up as a granny.

The very same reporter, who prints this, gleefully goes on: "Official propaganda telling the Cubans to go

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to the polls talks more about the Revolution than about socialism. For a start, Cuba is no longer a country in a bubble, like it was until the end of the 1980's. The insular viewpoint is changing towards a global vision and the country, especially in the capital, is living through an accelerated mutation towards modernity. And one of its effects is that socialism, imported decades ago, is tearing at the seams."

We are dealing with imperial capitalism's vulgar appeal to individual egoism, as it was preached almost 240 years ago by Adam Smith to be the cause of the nation's wealth, meaning everything should be handled by the market. That would create limitless wealth in an idyllic world.

I think of Africa and its almost one billion population, victim of the principles of that economy. The diseases, flying at the speed of airplanes, proliferate at the speed of AIDS, and other old and new diseases affect its population and its crops, with not one of the former colonial powers being really capable of sending them doctors and scientists.

It is about these issues that I spoke with Lula.

Fidel Castro Ruz

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