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The hurt of no longer being

Daniel Barret

2009

Talking about a political regime so dependent on its tribal totem pole, it is not surprising that a fundamental chapter of its trajectory is about Fidel Castro; “commander in chief” by his own guerrilla merits and *per saecula saeculorum*. Fidel seemed to be dead but not buried back on January 11 2009 and very few dared to speak of missing him too much. By then he had already stopped his *Reflexiones* for some time and didn’t show much interest in appearing in person during visits by foreign leaders such as Rafael Correa of Ecuador and Martín Torrijos of Panama. Crowning the situation that very same day, in one of his periodic medical reports, a visibly moved Hugo Chávez said the following: “We know that the Fidel that walked streets and villages with his warrior image, in his uniform, hugging people, will not come back”. To finish by saying: “He will remain in our remembrances, because Fidel will live on, as he is alive today, and will live forever, past the physical life. And he must live – he knows it- many years”. That seemed like a poetic epitaph, the product of Hugo Chávez’s proverbial incontinence, who perhaps could not help offering the world such delicacies. But what Chávez probably didn’t take into account at that moment was the decision by the Cuban political rulers regarding the

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Fragment from a work by Daniel Barret about the evolution of Cuba’s political regime since November 17 2005 till today. This piece attempts to place the role of Fidel Castro these past months.

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immortality of its icon and thus had to backtrack suddenly and announce amid drum rolls that Fidel was “very much alive”.

The situation was on stand-by several days until the snob-bism and smarminess of Cristina Fernández de Kirchner set things in their place or out of their place. Using and abusing her prerogatives as a lady, according to the official explanations, she insisted on having an interview with history, even if it was with Tut-ankh-amon’s mummy: whereas the visitors to the Louvre Museum have their picture taken next to the Victory of Samotracia, she could not bypass adding to her collection of souvenirs a graphic illustration of her encounter with a revived Fidel Castro. Fidel,¹ in a majestic gesture of gallantry, accepted without hesitation the rendez-vous proposed by the extravagant amazon and put aside his self-imposed internal ostracism. There were some doubts and contradictions with respect to the duration of this encounter, but the truth is that it happened “officially” and was followed by mutual admiration, besides taking a photograph lacking in technical quality but which showed a Fidel somewhat shrunk but with more weight and aplomb than in his previous appearance in front of the cameras. And, since it was about ladies, if Fidel had met with Cristina Fernández he should also meet with Michelle Bachelet. Things got somewhat complicated in this instance since the “writer in chief” committed the faux pas of saying in writing that he had already informed the Chilean president of his taking sides in favor of Bolivia in the contentious Chile-Bolivia conflict; something that –as was said as an excuse- would not be too important coming from the lips

¹ There is a high probability that when we say “Fidel” we are naming a symbol and little can be done to know if in this case we are referring to a person, a circle of power, a cast of cinema doubles or the taxidermists of CIMEQ. However, for the sake of convenience, we stick to the narrative that passes in front of the eyes of the world and understand as such the totality of interviews, photographs and Reflexiones presented under that denomination.

of somebody who doesn't occupy any position in Cuba's state structure but who is barely the first secretary and undisputable leader of the only political party with legality in those lands. Michelle Bachelet took notice by saying that she had already communicated her displeasure to the real Cuban president and it all blew away as a passing upheaval and without visible consequences since the problems between Bolivia and Chile would be resolved by those countries themselves while Fidel -to the further chagrin of his large herd of unconditional and rueful sycophants- would not be invited to take part in any tribunal that would eventually rule on this conflict.

The pageantry of presidential visitors would not stop here. Right away, Guatemala's Alvaro Colom entered the scene, carrying, as homage to the illustrious convalescent, the highest distinction awarded by his country: the Order of Quetzal in the degree of Grand Collar. The world gasped, perhaps waiting for the "commander" in person, acting coherently with his past, to recommend that Colom stuff the Order in the anatomical parts where the sun doesn't shine. But fortunately, this didn't happen: Fidel simply gave thanks for the distinction received by Raúl as his representative while at the same time Raúl clarified that his brother could not socialize with whomever came to Havana and that such privilege was the exclusive prerogative of female presidents.

The problem was that, at that precise moment, Chávez decided to make a surprise visit to the lands of his putative father, and in such an especial case, to be neither less nor equal to the ladies, the interviews with history had to be two instead of one. Almost nobody knows for certain neither where they spoke, how they spoke nor what they spoke about but it was clear that the current ruse was crumbling in plain view of the large following of this soap opera. If now Fidel was also accessible to the male occupants of the highest office in the sister countries; what new reason could they argue for not accepting amiable conversations between the old warrior and the presi-

dents of the Dominican Republic and Honduras? It all seemed to go very well with Leonel Fernández but with Manuel Zelaya there were some problems of coordination. So much so that, while Fidel affirmed that he could not find any time to meet with the Honduran,² the latter sustained that the Grand Chief had deign to pose with his hat!³ However, everything was fixed with a speed worthy of a better cause and Zelaya also had the honor of seeing himself praised by the following “reflexión” of Fidel’s, who took it upon himself to elevate to the sky and beyond his intelligence, his affability and even his being in Managua, as a child, at the precise moment when the Prophet pronounced one of his unparalleled discourses. Meanwhile, the comedy had to display its biblical face, and since nobody would believe a new multiplication of bread and fish, Hugo Chávez, in his role as the unfailing teller of such stories, had previously shown us Fidel Castro taking a walk in Jaimanitas; something that only he had the privilege and exclusivity to hoard in the graphic testimonies that no one else in the world could own. Nevertheless, he did not fail to qualify the walk as “miraculous” or swear that people “cried when they saw him”, even omitting the minor fact that the sacred mantle was in this case replaced by the Addidas sport wear.⁴

The most important political event would not be one of these anodyne movements on the chess board but Fidel’s pronouncement on the ministerial changes that took place at the beginning of March. The official communication was laconic and almost resembled a corporate memo, even though among the displaced were such figures as Carlos Lage and Felipe Pérez Roque,

² On March 4, at 3:35pm Fidel had sustained in his “reflexión” the following: “It’s a pity that he leaves today without me saluting him. It’s the second time he visits Cuba. But what can I do, where do I find the time?” which can be corroborated in the most official address conceivable: www.cuba

³ Zelaya’s affirmations can be found in the coverage made by Cuba Encuentro, www.cubaencuentro.com.

⁴ A telling of this can be found in yohandry.wordpress.com.

nonsense or because it is a matter of the broken down genius of the ventriloquists of the day.

was saying that in Latin America, no country would be more affected than Venezuela, and by extension, Cuba.

the opiate of the charismatic conductor. In this dead end, in spite of all the efforts by Brazil, timely seconded by the rest of the Latin American countries, the historical leadership opted to be ridicule and didn't think of anything better but to increase the militarization of the ruling circles and to push to the end the average age, transforming itself into a mediumistic government in communication with the after life and whose legitimacy already has a ghostly character; even though the specter, according to recent declarations, swims in a private pool, studies Darwin, takes walks around the neighborhood and shows himself at a news stand to get our daily Granma. Of course, while the comedy lasts, there will never be a lack of Latin American presidents ready to exchange sweet nothings with Fidel, take pictures to decorate family albums and, by the way, try to present to their fellow country folk a progressive image containing at least some of the flanks of attack of its most unaware leftist adversaries.⁹ Although all of this does not produce anything but the wearing away of the undying image of the ghost;¹⁰ whether because of his latest apparition is his own

⁹ The success of this alignment is doubtful since in this round there hasn't been a lack of significant pronouncements about these false love affairs. See for example "Carta al gobierno de Cuba. Quién es Rafael Correa?" (Letter to the Cuban government. Who is Rafael Correa?) by the Secretariado por la Unidad de la Izquierda (Secretariat for Leftist Unity) www.kaosenlared.net -correa; "Carta de los mapuches a los gobiernos de Cuba, Venezuela y Bolivia" (Letter of the Mapuches to the governments of Cuba, Venezuela and Bolivia) www.kaosenlared.net; and also Narciso Isa Conde "No fue así, comandante Fidel" (It wasn't like that, Commander Fidel) www.kaosenlared.net.

¹⁰ A list of the inconsistencies and screw-ups written by the Venerable in his Reflexiones would be a titanic task that the preservation of our mental health precludes. It is enough right now to show a couple of samples. For instance, in his "reflexión" of January 22 he explained that the decrease in the number of his writings was due to his decision "to not interfere nor impede the Party comrades and the State", only to follow with a string of such articles. Second, let's recall that in his article of March 12 he used Joseph Stiglitz as an analytical reference on the global crisis, being that at the time the economist

both former stars in the Fidelista heaven and part of the inner circle of students of the "commander in chief" who perhaps never imagined that their turn at defenestration would arrive some day. But the heavenly divinity could not neglect to put his personal seal and transformed the changes into an execution: "The honey of power by which they never had to sacrifice anything, awakened in them ambitions that drove them to an abject role. The external enemy had many illusions about them." A few lines earlier he had made clear that he had been consulted about the changes and that nobody should interpret them as swapping "Fidel's men" for "Raúl's men". Slyly and without warning he dedicated the rest of his "reflexión" to the much more important Baseball Classic, taking all responsibility for any eventual failure in the same;^{5,6} a failure for which he later, in one of his habitual gestures of magnanimity, blamed it on the technical staff, the directors of baseball and also, if possible, on a vast and diffused structure that has proven incapable of incorporating the materialistic science of pitching that the Japanese and the Koreans brag about. We could add, as newsworthy that this latest turn of the leadership produced much stupor among the "friends of Cuba" everywhere and so it happened that in the following days we were able to see urgent smoke signals being sent to Havana by such writers of irreproachable loyalty as Narciso Isa Conde, Pascual Serrano, Carlo Frabetti or Miguel Urbano Rodríguez.⁷ Perhaps even the

⁵ Vid., Fidel Castro, "Cambios sanos en el Consejo de Ministros" (Healthy changes in the Council of Ministers) www.cuba.cu

⁶ Lately has circulated the interpretation by Mexican Jorge Castañeda that some of the baseball references in the Fidel Castro's article are a coded message to Hugo Chávez with respect to his supposed participation in a plot together with Lage and Pérez Roque. In any case, this conjecture by Castañeda applies only to a specific phrase. Therefore the rest of the baseball references by Fidel Castro, in this article and in the following, seem to be nothing but baseball references.

⁷ Vid., Narciso Isa Conde, "El caso Lage - Pérez Roque y los cambios en Cuba" (The Lage - Pérez Roque case and the changes in Cuba)

most faithful “friends” are trying to tell the Cuban political conductors that the game has its limits and not even they themselves know what to say to their closest listeners.

This soap opera is indecipherable; among other things because secrets are a State sport in Cuba and also, the intelligence and counter-intelligence services almost never fail to spread here and there the seeds of confusion and disconcerting incoherence. However, the elements external to these palace intrigues are perfectly comprehensible. For starters, it is obvious that neither the vocational “secrecy” nor the State Security can do absolutely anything with an economy in ruins, with people not believing and with bureaucratic inefficiency. Faced with this, the eternal bellicose way of presenting problems and the ever present paranoia are nothing but an obstacle and can not be the explanatory key or a reasonable course of action. This is precisely where the most pressing and immediate problems of Cuba’s political regime are; this is precisely where the State and its struggles for power have revealed themselves as totally bankrupt.

The government poses the problem from the perspective that the solution demands the incorporation of Cuba at least into the American inter-state system, the possibility of having commercial relations with the rest of the world and the creation of appetizing lures for a new resurgence of foreign inversion;⁸ none of this is alien to a reformulation

www.kaosenlared.net; Pascual Serrano “La institucionalidad y la luz” (Institutionality and light) www.kaosenlared.net; Carlo Fabretti, “Política y dignidad” (Politics and dignity) www.kaosenlared.net, and finally Miguel Urbano Rodríguez, “A propósito de las Reflexiones de Fidel” (About Fidel’s Reflexiones) www.lahaine.org

⁸ Foreign investment in Cuba has not followed a linear trajectory but rather it has had many ups and downs. After an avalanche on investments during the 90’s –mainly European and Canadian – the waters seemed to return to their normal course or even decrease in more recent times due to non-compliance on the part of the Cuban administration. However, the discovery in the last few years of important oilfields in Cuban territorial

of the relationship with the United States. The strongest endorsement of these pretensions had already happened in December 2008, at the meeting in Brazil’s Costa de Saúpe; in which occasion Cuba was admitted as a member of the Río Group. This and nothing else is the origin of the following parade of presidential visits to Cuba in the first months of 2009: in diplomatic code, if the presidents of Ecuador, Panama, Argentina, Chile, Guatemala, Venezuela, Dominican Republic and Honduras visit Cuba in that order it means that the one who has to discuss the matter with the United States has to be Brazil; even if Lula has discretely abstained from taking part in this parade and nobody, not even Chávez has had the privilege of seeing Fidel photographed as the standard bearer of a scola do samba. In the end, the meaning of all this is nothing less than Brazil’s confirmation as global player and regional leader; a country by itself capable of assuming the representation of its “lesser brothers” and to straighten out Latin American business rendering the United States unable to claim any priority in the matter.

Everything was working out well in this sense and Cuba got to score some diplomatic gains in the field of international relations unthinkable some time ago. The additional problem, however, is that the Cuban State and its Sole Party lack any legitimacy other than that which came from the Sierra Maestra and its founding epic, out of the biography and destiny of its “commander in chief”. Those who know say that Raúl is characterized for being an advocate of institutionalism as a dam against the legacy of ideas, arbitrariness and whims without stops that characterized his older brother; but the drama of Cuba’s political regime is that there is no longer much time left or ideas to give a formal and statutory character to a monumental failure and they don’t have at hand, as happened in the past 50 years,

waters and the inability of the State to exploit them by itself has put the issue on the table, with urgency, once again.