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The Cuban Revolution and the Soviet Influence in Latin America
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The triumph of the Cuban revolution right in the middle of the Cold War went against the traditions of South American communist parties and reneged upon their orientations and policies concerning four points: the revolutionary strategy, the so-called Leninist model of the vanguard party, the dynamic and the goal of revolution and internationalism. We can add to that the aim, during the Cuban revolution of building a different sort of socialism starting from the criticism of « real socialism » divised by Che Guevara. So it is on the political and strategic levels that the Latino communist parties were to be criticised by the Cuban revolutionaries rather than on the theoretical level, with the exception however of the one and only debate launched by Che Guevara before leaving Cuba on the transition to socialism and the Soviet experiment.

Initially the Cuban revolution took on board the humanistic and democratic ideals inspiring the nineteenth century Cuban wars of independence greatly influenced by the Enlightenment, the French Revolution and Bolivar’s ideals of Latin American unity. Carried out ‘for the humble’ and « by the humble » the Cuban revolution was to come up against the excessively Stalinised communist tradition of the Latino Communist Parties. These last who claimed they represented Marxist orthodoxy were to confront a radical left that sometimes came from nationalist and populist currents whose anti-Stalinism was sometimes taken for anticommunism. On the one hand, you had the legitimacy of dogma, and on the other the legitimacy of Revolution. Contrary to the old communist parties, Castrism was rapidly in synch. with the anti-imperialist radicalism of the new generations of the fifties.
The wind blowing from Havana made the Revolution credible once more, brushing up once hackneyed discourse. In contrast with the Sino-Soviet conflict which was to disrupt the international communist movement, it seemed to herald an innovative and united third way. Faced with this new challenge, the orthodox communist parties did not react immediately, understanding that they were not the only ones invested with Marxist or revolutionary legitimacy. During this first stage, Castrism was on the up whereas the communist parties were on the defensive. In less than fifteen years from 1953 to 1967 when Che died, two personas who didn’t belong to the communist movement insolently led in the face of imperialism a socialist revolution in the western hemisphere. To crown it they were to defeat Washington for the first time on the South American continent. The originality and the novelty of the Cuban revolution were all the more spectacular as the orthodox South American Marxist left had been pushed to the margins by repression, of course, but also because of its mistakes. Although high flying intellectuals and artists had been members of it - the poets Pablo Neruda in Chile and Cesar Vallejo in Peru, the painter Diego Rivera in Mexico, the writer Jorge Amado and the architect Oscar Niemeyer in Brazil only to mention a few - the South American parties were not often influential except in a few favorable periods. Although they could resist repression and defend their organisation they were often passive and incapable of taking political initiatives. Nevertheless, in the 50's, there were many revolutionary uprisings. In 1952 in Bolivia the role played by the Communist party in the Revolution was minimal, for the party was weak and divided. The academic Alan Angell underlines the fact, writing: "At the time of the Bolivian revolution (as 7 years later with the Cuban revolution) the Bolivian communist party was one of the last left-wing forces to realize the importance of what was going on".\footnote{Leslie Bethell Editor \textit{Historia de América Latina} Ed. CRITICA Barcelone 1997}
In Guatemala the Communist party known as the Guatemalan Labour Party was incapable of opposing the toppling of Arbenz's progressive government in 1954 by organizing the people's self-defense against a coup d'Etat prepared by the CIA. Ernesto Guevara, then a young man, witnessed this event and was deeply marked by it. In Cuba the Popular Socialist Party as the Cuban CP was known, condemned the assault on the Moncada barracks led by F.Castro and his henchmen on 26th July 1953, severely criticised as "reckless putschists". In 1956, it was the beginning of the armed struggle in Sierra Maestra. Two years later, the Rebellious Army successfully revolted against the dictatorship of Batista and brought the leader of the 26th July movement to power. Yet for a lay observer there was nothing to tell that a revolutionary situation was brewing in Cuba, an island whose fate seemed to have been sealed geographically by its nearness to the American coastline as many Communist leaders later observed.

It is not possible within the framework of this article, to expatiate on the tragic political mistakes made by the Komintern, with its ignorance of what the South American social structures really were, its scorn for the poverty-stricken "lumpen-proletariat" living in slums, its total ignorance of what native communities really were and the way it underestimated nationalist movements. The essential weakness of the South American left was "the mechanical determination of its internal structure by external ones" observes the academic Gabriel Palma. The Komintern dominated the South America's Communist Parties ideologically, politically and tactically right up until its dissolution in 1943. They paid a high price for the subordination imposed upon them by Stalin, for during the second world war they have to toe Moscow's diplomatic line imposed by the United States' Soviet ally, thus minimizing their struggle against imperialism and dictatorship and implementing class-collaboration policies. This trend, known as "Browderismo" - named after the Secretary General of the American Communist party- was extremely influential on all the Communist
leaders. Thus did Lazaro Pena, the trade-union leader of the Cuban Confederation of Workers (CTC) declare in 1942: "Together with our American comrades we seek the most acceptable way - thanks the nation's cooperation- of avoiding strikes and social conflicts detrimental to bosses and workers alike, while guaranteeing the rights, claims and well-being of the workers". The same year the Congress of the CTC approved a motion stating that the workers would avoid the strikes and conflicts that could paralyse production for as long as the present circumstances, due to the war, lasted\(^3\). It was for the same reasons that Cuba's PSP participated in the government of Fulgencio Batista during the second world war despite Batista's criminal antecedents. However, PSP moderate self-criticism in 1949\(^4\) and the condemnation of Browder's revisionist ideal were not enough to wipe this episode out of Cuban memories when Batista came back to power by a coup d'etat in March 1952.

Considering this historical precedents, Castro's revolution in 1959 marked a turning point in South American history. The Cubans' victory when the Bay of Pigs was invaded in April 1961 -the first blow inflicted on Yankee imperialism" - immediately followed by the proclamation of the socialist nature of the revolution, raised unprecedented expectations. In the 20\(^{th}\) century, socialist ideas had inspired some of the most eminent of the continent's intelligentsia but never had the political authority of a revolutionary leadership been so great.

An "heroic creation"

In an article published in 1928, José Carlos Mariategui (1895-1930), a Peruvian who was one of the most genuine representatives of homespun latino marxism, wrote: "We do not want South American to be a mere copy and imitation. It has to be an heroic creation. We must give life, proceeding from our own

\[^2\] Gabriel Palma in « La izquierda en América latina desde 1920 » Historia de América latina
\[^3\] Alberto J. Pla La internacional comunista y América latina Ed. Homo Sapiens Rosario (Argentina) 1996
\[^4\] Historia del movimiento obrero cubano 1935-1958 Tomo II Editora POLITICA La Habana 1985
experience, in our own language, to Indo-American socialism. This is a mission
worthy of the new generations\textsuperscript{5}. His wish was to be fulfilled a quarter of a
century later. The Cuban revolution was "a rebellion against oligarchy and
revolutionary dogma" as Che Guevara put it in his Bolivian Diary. For over a
decade, the Cuban revolution was to foster never-ending debate. As early as
1961, Guevara, in a trail-blazing article asked, "Is Cuba an exception or the
vanguard of struggle against imperialism?" Could the model be reproduced?
Was the Cuban victory the result of historical circumstances, imperialism having
been misled, or was it due to a flawless revolutionary strategy? And could this
strategy be universally extended? Habana and then many parts of the continent
said «yes» and so the corollary was the calling into question of the former
communist parties judged as reformist and conservative. Arguments rapidly
became polemical by asserting that this revolution was genuinely socialist, the
Cuban leader cut the grass under the feet of the old communist criticisms who
had defended a different orientation. As the Cuban sociologist Martinez Heredia
underlined, the PSP "had to seek out and find a national bourgeoisie willing to
have a positive and active role in the teeth of the pro-imperialist favorable to the
international market and the rural feudal or semi-feudal landlords. The positive
national bourgeoisie would confront the mercantile bourgeoisie but history had
it otherwise. One cannot adhere to the idea that a simultaneous capitalist and
anti-imperialist revolution could have taken place in Cuba, for what happened
was the victory of anti-imperialism carried out by anti-capitalist forces, which
was the sole factor enabling social justice to be attained by freeing the country
from its relationship with the United States. That is why I call the 1959 Cuban
revolution "the socialist revolution of national liberation"\textsuperscript{6}. Such a social
revolution, breaking the neo-colonial links of the country with the United
States, was an unprecedented challenge for Washington. After the Bandoeng

\textsuperscript{5} JC Mariategui « Aniversario y balance » Amauta N° 17 septembre 1928 in Ideologia y Politica Lima p 249
cité par M. Löwy Fondation Ernesto Che Guevara Italie juin 2001
\textsuperscript{6} F. Martinez Heredia in Le pas suspendu de la Révolution Y. Bovy et E. Toussaint Ed. du Cerisier 2001
conference it wholeheartedly (intégralement) supported the Third World's emergent liberation struggles and its leaders were some of the most considered spokesmen.

By proclaiming that "the duty of every revolutionary is to really carry out the revolution" the 2nd declaration of Havana was creating quite a stir. Could you be a communist but not a revolutionary? The South American communist parties were the butt of this question. Very rapidly the debate extended to the armed struggle, guerrilla warfare, the role of the Rebellious Army in any victory. Was it to be the "sierra" or the "llano"? Urban warfare or guerrilla warfare? The discussion first took place in Cuba itself where it opposed the fighters of urban clandestinity and the Sierra Maestra guerrillas within the 26th of July Movement but it also indirectly concerned the members of the PSP. The latter, after having violently criticized F. Castro and the armed struggle, had finally rallied guerrilla warfare a few weeks before the fall of Batista. As early as the beginning of the sixties when the debate between the organisations was raging on the strategic level, training camps were set up for the Latin American volunteers ready to join the armed struggle in their respective countries. Wasn't the Cordillera of the Andes to be the Sierra Maestra of Latin America? Being able to deepen the revolutionary experiment in the later sixties was linked to the fact that the Cuban efforts had to be reinforced – corroborated by the victory of revolutionaries from Argentina, Brazil, Venezuela or other countries which would lead to a new international union making Cuba's economy viable with its ideological regime, independent of the so-called socialist trend of the Soviet Union and of the Maoist trend. Cuba appeared as a possible leader for a Third Way in the international communist movement.

The enthusiasm of the South American youth for the revolution spread to the Communist youth whose activists then broke away from the older parties. Different communist parties mushroomed everywhere, giving rise to new
Castrist organisations (often with the acronym ELN National Liberation Army) in most of the continent’s countries which rallied nationalist revolutionary or Christian trends. Thus did the Cuban Revolution radically shake up South American progressiveness. It was to recompose the outlook of the trade unionist and political left.

From now on the Cuban way was highlighted in contradistinction to the parliamentary pacifist electoral way towards socialism which had only experienced failure. Yet the Cuban way had to be interpreted, taking into account the subcontinent's sociopolitical realities whose social formations and traditions wer often very different from those of the Caribbean island. Now in the sixties the South American population was becoming more and more urban and Che Guevara's book on guerrilla warfare was already out of step with the way society was changing. The changes in class structure were underestimated. This was to be the source of many dramatic events. Rural guerrilla warfare was interpreted as the sociological imperative when it was actually a tactics of armed struggle enabling a build up in order to defeat dictatorship. Of course the poverty-stricken peasantry had been a very important basis for the nascent guerrilla warfare in the Sierra Maestra but the fact that in Cuba the rural proletariat was three times as numerous as those peasants within the rural population was underestimated. The consequence of this was capitalist exploitation in the countryside and a predominantly proletarian "social composition". The 26th of July Movement and the Rebellious Army comprised workers, factory-hands, independant workers, executive and farmers and among the latter there were more and more farm-hands. The revolution was neither a peasant revolt nor a lower middle class rebellion but was a socialist revolution as things were to show.

Added to the arguments over armed struggle vs mass struggle, rural guerrilla warfare vs urban guerrilla warfare, the Cuban experiment was calling into

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7 F. Martinez Heredia in *Le pas suspendu de la Révolution*  Y. Bovy et E. Toussaint  Ed. du Cerisier 2001
question the traditional notion of a vanguard party inherited from the Russian revolution. In Cuba, the 26th of July Movement had played a fundamental role; this poorly structured cross-sectional organisation with its heterogenous composition had a military branch -the Rebellious Army and an armed party with F.Castro as a political and military leader. In post revolutionary historiography and the popular conscience, the role of the urban struggle and uprisings was underestimated and it's the Rebellious Army that came out as (vue comme) the author of the victory. This unilateral simplistic way of understanding things completely ignored the complexity of the Cuban revolutionary process. The urban uprising and the decisive role of insurrectionary general strike in the final victory. It was to give rise to a distorted interpretation of the history of Sierra Maestra. The theory of « foco » which was to derive from it, had tragic consequences and it was very easy for many Communist parties to criticize a substitutive and leftist outlook. The exceptional caracter of the Cuban process also led to confusions in the discussions as to what the vanguard was. Such "hurried Leninism" according to R.Debray’s self critical expression, underestimated the specifically political role of the party's platform. It was forgotten that in Cuba political leadership and military stategy were one and the same thing within a vanguard nucleus around two exceptional personalities, F.Castro and Che Guevara who had been able to combine the sometimes contradictory demands of the revolutionary process. But such an unprecedented synthesis could not be reproduced. Exporting the Cuban model that had been distorted in this way only aggravated the tensions between the Castrist and the old communists. The defeat of the sixties guerilla warfare and the death of Che in 1967 and then Salvador Allende's triumph in Chile in 1970 put an end to the polemic. During the sixties the repercussions of the East/West conflicts in South America grew worse. The (brief) presence of Soviet nuclear missiles in an island in the heart of the American Mediterranean Sea at the time of the October crisis, the
numerous military coup d'Etats on the continent, made the Cold War colder. More and more isolated diplomatically, but more and more prestigious in the eyes of the world, the Cuban leader tried to make Havana a center of revolutionary action and influence throughout the world, thus reviving a bygone internationalist activism. In August 1967 the conference of the Latin American Organisation for solidarity convened (se réunit) in Havana to approve the formation of guerrilla warfare 'focos' over and against Moscow's opinion and that of many communist parties that were present. The leader of the Brazilian communist party Luis Carlos Prestes thought that those in favour of armed struggle were only "petit bourgeois''s who new nothing of the "people"; after the 1964 golpe against President Goulart he had declared that "the right revolutionary attitude consisted in acknowledging one's defeat coming back on one's step and beginning once more the patient work of propaganda by speaking to the people". Last but not least, for the Soviet government after the missile crisis, there was no question of jeopardizing peaceful coexistence in a region that was looked upon as Washington's backyard. To Cuba's "strategic adventurism" was added, for Moscow, the growing irritation caused by Che Guevara's public criticism of the soviet model and which probably caused him to leave Cuba. The polemic was to reach its climax with the Bolivian communist party's secretary Mario Monje and Moscow opposing Che's guerrilla. The Communist party's refusal to support Guevara caused the split of the Bolivian young Communists led by the Peredo brothers who joined the armed struggle. They carried on with it after Guevara died and that is how they died to.

*The "rapprochement" with the USSR*

Between 1960 and 1967 when Che Guevara died uprisings broke out with different degrees of violence in about 20 countries. The failure of "Foquismo" in

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8 Historia de América latina op.cit. p102
the late sixties was followed by two decisive events that changed the conflictual relationship between Havana and the communist parties. These were, on the one hand, Fidel Castro's unexpected approval of the Soviet intervention in Tchecoslovakia, and on the other, the fact that the socialist Salvador Allende won the presidential election in October 1970 in Chile. Castro's support for the military intervention in Tchecoslovaquia was the prelude to a "rapprochement" with Moscow. Cuba was experiencing an extremely difficult economic situation and it was increasingly dependent on the USSR. At the same time the "Chilean way" towards socialism put the peaceful transition towards socialism back on the agenda and seemed to disprove the generalisations on the necessity of resorting to revolutionary violence. Salvador Allende proclaimed "his loyalty to humanism and particularly to marxist humanism"; However during the thousand days of Popular Unity the arguments never stopped, with the Chilean Communist Party adopting an ultra legalistic point of view whereas the MIR linked to Habana advocated arming the people. Habana pragmatically supported Popular Unity and Salvador Allende but F.Castro, on his official visit to Chile, gave Allende a machine-gun. It was to be found at his feet after his death on the day of the coup d'Etat.

At the beginning of the seventies, Habana moved closer to Moscow and stopped attacking the Communist parties. In January 1974 Leonid Brejnev, the secretary of the Soviet Communist Party on an official visit to Havana condemned "exporting the revolution" but the fall of Salvador Allende's regime shook the arguments in favor of the pacific parliamentary way in the international workers' movement. For A. Rouquié, "So armed struggle was rehabilitated by those selfsame people who called its adepts adventurists , putschists and leftists". 

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10 Alain Rouquié *Guerres et paix en Amérique centrale* Ed du Seuil 1992
In 1979 the fall of the Somoza dictatorship and the victory of the Sandinistas in Nicaragua reinforced the Cuban position. The USSR was all the more inclined to modify its traditional approach as the 1975 American defeat in Vietnam widened its room for maneuver on the continent and more generally in the Third World. The Communist parties followed suite. In 1980 the extremely orthodox secretary of the Uruguayan Communist Party, Rodney Arismendi, once hostile to guerrilla warfare, revised his position and said he had always been for the armed struggle. Sergo Mikoyan in charge of the review "America Latina" (published in Moscow) admitted that "there was no example of a victorious revolution through peaceful means on the continent". Even more surprisingly, he declared that guerrilla warfare is "capable of replacing the proletariat's political parties" thus closing one of the hottest discussions of the 60's. The secretary of the Chilean Communist Party was not to be left behind: in 1980 Luis Corvalan declared he was for using "acute violence" against Pinochet's dictatorship. Not long after, the Salvadoran communist party, albeit very conservative, operated the same turnaround and said it was ready to join the armed struggle. For a few years, Cuba enjoyed a little more leeway. From then on, the old conflicts with the pro-Soviet parties were not on the agenda. It seemed that, in Central America, the hour of the revolution had come.

In this part of the world, the influence and the support of Cuba were decisive. Havana contributed to unify the different trends of the Sandinista Front, a unification which precipitated the fall of the Somoza dictatorship. The Nicaraguan Communist Party (PCN) in favor of a peaceful struggle against Somoza, simply looked on.

After this victory, Cuba heavily supported Managua militarily. Economic aid and cooperation developed in every field. Little by little, weapons were transferred from Nicaragua to San Salvador where the uprising of the FMLN

was fostered by Cuba, there again bringing the different movements together; at this time the Salvadoran Communist Party was in the picture. At the time of the general revolutionary offensive in November 1989 the Salvadoran FMLN seemed close to victory, but the upheavals of the world and the collapse of the USSR prevented it from winning.

By now, in the eighties, the Cuban strategy in Central America was still receiving Soviet support and imposed itself on the other Communist parties of the Central American isthmus. To be sure (certes) the divisions of the sixties had not all disappeared, and scores are settled, but the leadership of Havana was undisputable and it managed to impose unity for the insurrectionary struggle.

How to explain such an offensive in the American backyard? Cuba's autonomy and audacity can be explained by its determination to break the isolation of a fragile and vulnerable island and to extend its revolutionary process to other countries of the continent. For a few years the dominos that the American administration feared so much were to gather together- the progress of communism seemed inexorable. The general situation was exceptionally favorable but the American retreat after the defeat in Saigon did not last long.

Whereas under Jimmy Carter, America seemed to be experiencing "a period of moral and military weakening"\textsuperscript{12} the Reagan presidency trumpeted in (sonne l'heure) the hour of the counterattack. The American government did everything, even blowing up Nicaraguan harbors, to shield back communism and condemned the regional insurrectionary process to failure.

The Nicaraguan revolution was to fall victim to the "contras" and the mistakes of the Sandinista government. After the fall of the Berlin Wall, the American "Just Cause" intervention in Panama on the 20\textsuperscript{th} of December 1989 brings the curtain down on an historic era. The Peace Agreements signed in San Salvador then in Guatemala in the early nineties put an end to an exceptional revolutionary process in Central America.
The withdrawal

The fact that Gorbatchev wanted to normalize his relationship with Washington increased tension between Moscow and Havana. In 1990 the brutal breaking of commercial and economic links with the USSR left Cuba on the verge of collapse. From then on the only imperative was survival. And in any case the Cuban government was unable to have any other ambition than that of overcoming the crisis. Cuba’s projection on the international scene was only possible thanks to Soviet aid and logistics. The last ten years of the 20th century were characterized beyond the general declaration of loyalty to socialism, by market reforms and the dwindling away of the special relationship with former international communist movement. Cuba’s reinsertion within Latin America was now the priority, relations between the different states had to be mended and an end put to fatal isolation and the island no longer had allies in Eastern Europe and it had to go along with its natural environment. Taking up diplomatic relations with almost all South American governments was accompanied was a toning down of revolutionary perspectives and pragmatism. In 1990 F. Castro declared that the armed struggle was no longer on the agenda in Latin America, which the Communist leaders of the FARC in Colombia did not appreciate. On the continent the Cuban Communist party retrieved its former allies within the Sao Paulo Forum which gathered together all of the left but the Communist parties had been weakened, the left was in a state of disarray and was demoralized and social democracy had become more influential. Political links were reinforced with Venezuela whose President Hugo Chavez belong to a nationalist tradition. A faithful admirer of Bolivar, he really wanted to achieve Latin American unity, as did F. Castro. With the growing anti globalisation movement and the world Social Forum Cuba is now trying to extend its

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12 Alain Frachon *Le Monde* 16 février 2002
alliances by pitting the imperial North against the dominated Southerners. But if Cuba can still count on the solidarity of the South american left the Cuba regime is no longer an alternative. Avoiding any critical assessment of « real socialism » that it nevertheless admits having copied, the Cuban leadership is in the same political impasse as the left and the south american communist parties. Although it is still resilient the impetus of Castrism seems to have run out of steam.

We are left wondering. What will be left of the Cuban plural marxist tradition ? For Castrism was initially borne along by an anti imperialist revolutionary and nationalist tradition increasingly influenced by marxism whose most striking icon was Che Guevara. Then it joined up with the orthodox communist tradition, inherited from the Komintern of the thirties and so , the PSP that have been discredited was to experience a stunning revival by taking advantage of the cold war and the weight of the Soviet alliance to impose its views.

Little by little, Cuba’s economic dependence on Moscow induced its conformity with the Soviet political and institutional model. Fidel Castro’s vertical system (caudillismo) had to accomodate the Soviet type one party system stifling its original wealth and complexity which most certainly have not be lost for ever.

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