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Fidel Castro and the repression against intellectuals

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The death of Fidel Castro has given rise – in some mainstream Western media outlets – to the dissemination of a large quantity of infamous statements against the Cuban Comandante. This has saddened me, and as it is known that I knew him well, I decided to add my own personal witness. A coherent intellectual should denounce injustices. Beginning with those of his own country.

When media uniformity crushes all diversity, censors any divergent expression and sanctions dissident writers, it is natural, in effect, to speak of "repression". How else can we describe a system that gags expression and represses different voices? A system that accepts no contradiction no matter how well it is argued. A system that establishes an 'official truth' and tolerates no transgression. Such a system has a name, indisputably it is called 'tyranny' or 'dictatorship'. Alongside many others, I personally suffered the lashes of this system... in Spain and in France. This is what I want to recount.

The repression against my person began in 2006, when I published in Spain my book Fidel Castro. Biografía a dos voces -- or Cien horas con Fidel[1] (Barcelona, Edit. Debate), the fruit of five years of documentation and work, and of hundreds of hours of conversation with the leader of the Cuban revolution. I was immediately attacked. And the repression began. For example, the Madrid daily «El País», where I regularly wrote in their opinion pages, sanctioned me. They stopped publishing me. Without offering any explanation. Moreover – in the best Stalinist

tradition – my name disappeared from their pages. Wiped out. They did not review my book again, nor did they ever again mention any of my intellectual activity. Nothing. Suppressed. Censored. A future historian who might look for my name in the columns of the daily «El País» would conclude that I had died a decade ago...

The same happened with «La Vox de Galicia», a daily in which I had also, for several years, written a column entitled Res Publica. After the publication of my book on Fidel Castro, and without giving any excuse, I was repressed. They ceased to publish my chronicles. Overnight, total censorship. Just like «El País», they completely ignored me. Treating me like someone with the plague. Never, from that time on, the slightest allusion to any of my activities.

As in any ideological dictatorship, the best way to execute an intellectual is to make him 'disappear' from media space in order to symbolically 'kill him'. Hitler did it. Stalin did it. Franco did it. The dailies «El País» and «La Voz de Galicia» did this to me.

In France the same thing happened. As soon as the publishers Fayard and Galilée released my book «Fidel Castro. Biographie à deux voix», in 2007, the repression immediately hit me.

In the public radio station France Culture, I had a weekly programme, on Saturday mornings, dedicated to international politics. On the publication of my book on Fidel Castro and as the mainstream media began to attack me violently, the director of the radio called me to her office and without more ado said to me «It is not possible for you, the friend of a tyrant, to continue to express yourself in our broadcasts» I attempted to argue. There was no way. The doors of the studio were from then on closed to me. There again I was gagged. They silenced a voice that was out of tune with the chorus of anti-Cuban unanimity.

In the Paris-VII University, I had spent 35 years teaching the theory of audiovisual communication. When my book was released and the media campaign against me began, a colleague told me «Watch out! Some officials are saying that they cannot tolerate 'the friend of a dictator' giving classes in our faculty». Shortly, anonymous pamphlets began to circulate against Fidel Castro, demanding my expulsion from the university. Soon after, I was officially informed that my contract would not be renewed... In the name of freedom of expression I was denied the right to express myself.

At that time I directed, in Paris, the monthly «Le Monde diplomatique», pertaining to the same editorial group as the well-known daily «Le Monde», and for historical reasons, I belonged to the 'Society of editors' of this daily, even though I no longer wrote in their columns. This Society was at the time very important in the organigram of the enterprise, due to its condition as the main shareholder, since it was there that the director of the daily was elected and because it oversaw the respect for professional deontology.

Precisely because of this responsibility, some days after the appearance of my biography of Fidel Castro in the bookstores, and after several important media (among them the daily Libération) began to attack me, the President of the Society of Editors called me to indicate the “extreme emotion” that according to him had emerged among the Society of Editors because of the publication of the book. “Have you read it?” I asked. “No, but that is not important”, he replied,

“it is a question of ethics, of deontology. A journalist of the 'Le Monde' group cannot interview a dictator”. I cited from memory a list of a dozen authentic autocrats from Africa and from other continents to whom the daily had complacently given space for expression over decades. “It is not the same”, he said, “This is why I am calling you. The members of the Society of Editors want you to come and give an explanation”. “You want to pass judgement? A 'Moscow trial'? A 'purge' for ideological deviationism? Then you will have to assume your function of inquisitors and of a political police, and bring me by force to your tribunal”. They did not dare.

I cannot complain: I was not gaoled, nor tortured, nor shot, as has happened to many journalists and intellectuals under Nazism, Stalinism or Francoism. But I was symbolically repressed. Just as in «El País» or in «La Voz», they 'disappeared me' from the columns of the daily «Le Monde». Or they cited me only to lynch me.

My case is not unique. I know – in France, in Spain, in other European countries –, of many intellectuals and journalists condemned to silence, to ‘invisibility’ and marginality because they did not think like the ferocious chorus of the mainstream media, for rejecting the 'obligatory anti-Castro dogmatism'. For dozens of years, Noam Chomsky in the United States, the country of the 'witch hunts', was condemned to ostracism by big media who denied him access to the columns of the most influential dailies and the broadcasts of the main radio and television stations.

This did not happen fifty years ago in a distant dusty dictatorship. It is happening now, in our 'media democracies'. It is still happening to me now. Simply because of doing my work as a journalist, and having published the words of Fidel Castro. Even in a trial, the accused has the chance to speak. Why could they not accept the version of the Cuban leader whom the large mainstream media judge and accuse permanently?

Is tolerance not at the base of democracy? Voltaire defined tolerance as follows: “I am not at all in agreement with what you have said, but I would fight to my death for you have the right to express yourself”. Media dictatorship, in the era of post-truth, ignores this elementary principle.