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A defense of Cuba from the Argentine left



By Mario Hernández / Claudio Katz

This Aug. 25 interview with Claudio Katz, Argentine member of Left Economists and political analyst, was published in lahaine.org and translated by Michael Otto.

Mario Hernández: A few days ago you wrote “Cuba tips the balance in Latin America.” (lahaine.org/eB8H)

Claudio Katz: The starting point of that analysis is Cuba’s accomplishment, because we must not lose sight of the fact that after so many decades they have managed to maintain the revolutionary process [proyecto] in the midst of adversity, isolation and plots.

And understandably, the fact that the country has had demonstrations is quite logical, in a scenario of economic collapse, of pandemic, compounded in the case of Cuba by the [U.S.] blockade. This is not just another fact. No other country faced COVID with such a brutal restriction to acquire food, medicines and spare parts. Cuba has to pay very high prices for freight or insurance.

MH: It is interesting the importance you give in your article to the blockade. Some people simply overlook it.

CK: I don't believe that the blockade is just another little problem faced by a country. It is a unique case of a small economy, of a small island suffocated by a superpower that prevents it from trading.

There is a study that says that during six decades of blockade, the losses exceed \$145 billion. Cuba is forced to take on additional debt because in order to be able to trade, it has to pay three times more for maritime shipping than any other country.

It seems to me that in this scenario, what Cuba has achieved is astonishing. Not only has it suffered a loss of foreign currency and a reduction in tourism with the impact of the pandemic, but it has also achieved two unusual victories at this moment: the progress made with the Soberana vaccine — Cuba is the first Latin American country to produce a vaccine — and Cuba is also the Latin American country that has won the most medals at the Tokyo Olympics, second only to Brazil.

Under these conditions, it seems to me that Cuba creates a parting of the waters. First of all, within progressivism there are two currents. There is a progressive current that adopted a position of solidarity with Cuba. That has been very significant, with [Mexican President Andrés Manuel] López Obrador Presidente mexicano Andrés Manuel López Obrador and other presidents who, facing the reality of Cuba, adopted attitudes in defense of the country, sending ships with food and medicines, even declaring it to be an historical patrimony of humanity.

I believe that a defensive response was created against the U.S. aggression, and this was joined by Peru. The Lima group [of pro-imperialist Latin American regimes] was left without Lima! Peru joined a project to rebuild CELAC, to recompose UNASUR and to

take up the Cuba issue as a starting point for a project to replace the OAS. That is the progressive current.

But there is another current of progressivism that turned to the right in a scandalous way. For example, the intellectuals who signed a letter attacking CLACSO [Latin American Council of Social Sciences] for not criticizing the Cuban government enough. There are names of people very well-known to us.

MH: Name names, Claudio, please.

CK: Pablo Stefanoni and Horacio Tarcus, for example [Argentine academics]. Both signed that letter. And then there are people who think that we no longer have to talk so much about imperialism, that we don't have to idealize the "Cuban drama." I think there is a strong pressure from the democratic society within the Cuban intelligentsia [linked to] the role that NGOs traditionally play in these conditions.

Two currents regarding Cuba

MH: So there is a current of solidarity with Cuba and one that is bent to the right.

CK: And on the left, it seems to me that we have also experienced a parting of the waters. I believe that the majority of the left in the region of Latin America has remained firm and without hesitation in the defense of the heroic accomplishments of the Cuban revolution.

But there are currents which are more dogmatic, and which have adopted, in my opinion, inadmissible positions. Some say, for example, that Cuba has already reinstated capitalism, and that what we are seeing is a neoliberal adjustment similar to the one applied in Chile, Colombia, Brazil, etc. According to this theory, it's necessary to march in the same camp with the right-wing forces [criticizing the Cuban government].

MH: I remember Guillermo Almeyra talking about "currents that never understood the problem of imperialism."

CK: And that's in spite of so many experiences that we already have had. Because if they march alongside right-wing forces against Cuba, I do not understand how a socialist process will ever emerge. It's a mystery.

MH: History proves that this does not happen.

CK: That is exactly my point. We already have the experience of what happened in past decades in Poland, East Germany [GDR] and Russia. Instead of a renewal of socialism, what we had was a pure restoration of capitalism. I believe that this is a totally deviant path.

There are other currents with “lighter” positions that pose another contradiction.

There are many thinkers who criticize the Cuban government, its bureaucratic structure, but in the same breath say that Cuba is the only socialist country where capitalism was not restored. So something is strange here, because they think that capitalism was reestablished in China, in Vietnam and in Russia, etc. In a world of 200 countries and 8 billion inhabitants, there supposedly exists an island with 11 million inhabitants that would be the only case of non-restoration of capitalism on the planet.

If they are right, I believe that the only thing one has to do is to declare one’s infinite admiration for Cuba and leave it at that. If Cuba is the only place in the world that has managed to keep flying the banner of socialism, then, rather than marching with the opponents, we should be congratulating the Cubans. Tell the whole world about their magic remedy used to achieve something like socialism. These are very contradictory positions, very inconsistent.

Measure problems in their context

MH: There are problems in Cuba. Regardless of the position of support, there are problems.

CK: The problems are very serious in Cuba, but one has to measure the problems in relation to the context in which they occur. Cuba has terrible economic problems because of a simple fact: all foreign currency in the country depends on tourism; and obviously a country without tourism today, without dollars, cannot buy a computer.

How does a country survive today if it cannot buy computers? It has to get foreign currency from somewhere. And where does it get it from? There is no doubt that they only

have tourism as a resource — and we all know the devastating effect that tourism has on a project of social equality, of equity.

They have to manage in this context. They do not have oil. They have to search for it.

They have an acute food problem, due to economic policy errors, but Cuba is not the humid pampas. The arable portion of the island is very small, and agricultural productivity is very low; it is a highly urbanized society. These are problems of great complexity.

I always see it as a major irresponsibility to observe and criticize Cuba from the outside, instead of placing oneself in that situation and offering an opinion on what must be done. Because if you do that, you immediately run up against the restrictions [sanctions].

For example, I actually heard someone say the other day that Cuba has to eliminate tourism. How does it make a living then? How does it get the dollars it needs to sustain the economy? What you cannot do is to utter nonsense, to issue opinions that are so alien, so vague, so disconnected from responsibility.

MH: Besides, with which countries should we compare Cuba?

CK: Of course. Cuba is not Argentina; Cuba is more like a poor province of Argentina. You have to take your hat off, when a poor province of Argentina manufactures vaccines, has an outstanding performance in the Olympics and has achieved the miracle of avoiding the level of delinquency that exists in any country of the region. Cuba has managed to contain drug trafficking. And it is a victim of its own success, because it has generated a highly educated population with First World demands on a Third World economy.

It has to deal with that contradiction and with an even more complex one. We are all used to challenging the embargo, the U.S. intervention, the attacks of imperialism. But the more complex question is not whether we can condemn all of that, but whether Cuba has the right to defend itself against those threats. And once one understands that it does and that Cuba has the right to defend itself, one must become conscious of what one is saying.

Because how does a country of 11 million inhabitants defend itself against the aggressions of the world power that, for example, has just devastated Afghanistan? How does an underdog without resources and without money defend itself against a monster? It should

be obvious that Cuba can only do so by introducing restrictions on rights that would not otherwise be enforced.

You have to be very serious, very careful about what you demand, what you demand and proclaim, as if we were not in a place that is 90 miles from Florida, without any resources to defend against the monstrous apparatus of the CIA. It is not a struggle of equals.

I believe that what we must do, from Latin America, outside of Cuba, is to be very clear that defense, solidarity and our support comes first. Our support follows the path of opening a breach for Latin American unity that will allow us to break the blockade. That is what we can do.

We can make demands for Argentina to break the blockade. We have to demand that [President] Alberto Fernandez repeat what Lopez Obrador has just done, by sending an Argentinian ship with food and medicines in an act of solidarity with Cuba. At the same time, establish the beginning of a Latin American unity, that if it were to be consummated, could structure an anti-blockade policy where Cuba could lean back on the Latin American region and escape that stranglehold imposed by the U.S.

Having said all this, I have written and discussed Cuba's problems on countless occasions, but always within the field of the Revolution. That is what one must first define. From which position are you going to raise questions and promote transformations for the Cuban political process? If that place is not defined, everything is up in the air, and you don't know who you are going to support with your preaching.

MH: One last question, which has to do with the new generation of Cuban leaders. Serious problems were faced successfully by the old generation of leaders: reacting to the Marielitos; confronting the Special Period. Now there is a new generation. Will they be up to the task?

CK: We don't know. And we have to judge with the warnings that I just discussed. I believe that there is a new generation in the leadership and also among the Cuban people, who have other concerns. That is absolutely true. But I believe that one can be in contact with different political expressions in Cuba via the internet and find a very wide panorama

of different opinions and visions that recreate in Cuba the same issues we have here and elsewhere.

Cubans bet on the Revolution

I have carefully noted that one month after the marches in Cuba, the balance sheets are quite interesting. They all reflect the existence of a malaise. At the same time, many emphasize that the bulk of the population is betting on the Cuban Revolution.

It was complete fiction to say that the [July 11] marches were the first big marches of the last decades, as if all the marches made by the Cuban people to commemorate their own deeds, were marches that are not worth mentioning — only those organized by the opposition are counted, and the rest are not considered valid.

It is a little weird to claim that “the government should not call for marches.” The government has every right to call for marches, and those who support the Revolution have every right to express themselves.

We must observe, analyze and, above all, bear in mind that there is a wealth of socialist thought present on the island, which is very rich and which can be observed when one witnesses the kind of analysis that is being made at this time.

I am betting that this generation will live up to previous generations. For one thing, Cuba is always going to surprise us. So many times throughout my life, I have heard pessimistic diagnoses about Cuba, about when the Revolution was going to end. The course of time has surprised us all with results very much the opposite of the majority of such predictions. Their track record of positive and innovative results can again emerge in Cuba, and that would be great news for all the Latin American people.

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