

CUBA

## Education and Revolution

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IN 1795, FATHER JOSE AGUSTIN Caballero presented the first project for the creation of a system of public education for all the inhabitants of the island of Cuba. It was a visionary idea, but impossible to carry out at that time. The island was a colonial possession of the Spanish Crown, and most of the population was subjected to slavery or made up of Mestizos and freed blacks, the victims of segregation and racial discrimination. Education, within the reach of a very small minority, was confined within the strict canons of scholastic philosophy.

Father Caballero was profoundly critical of that philosophy and of the pedagogy springing from it. This would be the birth of an intellectual movement having decisive importance for the history of Cuba, a movement that would reach its pinnacle with another Catholic priest, Felix Varela, who was Caballero's disciple and the first Cuban intellectual who fought for national independence and the abolition of slavery.

It is intriguing that it was in Cuba, which, with Puerto Rico, was the last of the Spanish American colonies, where the most solid and deep-rooted questioning of the political system, struggling to keep both islands under its control, occurred. The melding of radical thinking with aspirations for the emancipation of slaves and other excluded sectors of the population took shape on October 10, 1868, the start of the first war for independence and a profound social revolution.

Public education was a refuge for Cuban patriotism throughout the first half of the twentieth century. But during the US domination of the island, either in a direct form or via repressive and corrupt US-sponsored regimes, it was education that enabled the student movement and the best of Cuban intellectuals to resist. In fact, student movements and Cuban intellectuals participated decisively in the political and social struggles of the Cuban nation both during the long period of Spanish colonialism and US hegemony, initiating and developing socialist and anti-imperialist thinking.

The last Batista tyranny, among its many crimes, unleashed a deep-rooted offensive against education. It encouraged the privatization of schools and universities while denying resources to and fighting against the official institutions—institutions that were to be transformed into the principal centers of popular resistance. Emblematic of his efforts, the dictator destroyed the ancient, two-hundred-year-old Havana University building in order to turn it into a helicopter terminal, which was about to be completed when he was forced to flee the country on January 1, 1959. Before he fled, however, Batista aimed for other bastions of Cuban national culture. His dictatorship suppressed the modest state grant for the ballet company of Alicia Alonso,

allowing the company to perform only within the student-sponsored university campus area, until the exceptional artist and her company had to leave for the United States.

Education was the number one priority of the Revolutionary government. One of the government's first measures was the broad-based Scholarship Plan, directed to facilitate education for thousands of students from the hinterlands who had seen their university studies interrupted because they lacked resources to move to and live in the country's capital. Several of the largest buildings in Havana were used for their housing, luxurious apartments that had just been built as part of the construction boom that characterized the end of the Batista regime. Those apartments were home to tens of thousands of Cuban university students and many other foreign scholarship students. Fifty years later, they are still being used for that purpose.

At the same time, wide-ranging university reforms began. These included attempts to modernize teaching and teaching methods, to encourage the previously unknown study of some sciences and technologies (the very few Cuban economists, for example, had been, until this time, educated in other countries), and to create university campuses throughout the country, launching what people call the "Universalization of the University." It was not an easy task to move such profound educational reforms forward in those early years when an intense campaign of isolation and hostility was being unleashed against Cuba from abroad. Notably, this foreign aggression culminated in the Bay of Pigs invasion and acts of sabotage and terrorism on the Island.

At the beginning of the 1960s, doctors were being trained only in the capital, and one-half of the then six thousand medical doctors in Cuba had already emigrated to the United States, attracted by a manipulative policy that created the "brain drain" as an instrument to overthrow the revolutionary system.

The results of that effort can be seen today. Every province has at least one university and one school of medicine. Cuba maintains a health system that is entirely free of cost for patients and covers the entire country and all its people. Tens of thousands of Cuban doctors are providing their services, also free of charge, in several countries in Latin America and the Caribbean, Africa, Asia, and Oceania. Cuba has developed research centers that have discovered, produced, and export vaccines, medicines, and specialized equipment, accomplishments that give the island a leading role in this respect among third world countries. This is especially noteworthy when one takes into account that this world health sector is strongly controlled by monopolies of the great capitalist corporations. Cuba has done all this despite the draconian measures of the economic blockade that the United States has imposed on it for half a century.

This year Cuba is celebrating two anniversaries that are closely linked to each other. Fifty years ago Cuba eliminated illiteracy and, at the same time, Cuba won victory at the Bay of Pigs, where in less than seventy-two hours, a military invasion organized, armed, and led by the CIA was overwhelmingly defeated. In 1961 the Cuban people achieved two hard-to-repeat prizes. Cuba became the first country on the American continent to eradicate illiteracy and the

first militarily to defeat imperialism. Ironically, in the same year that UNESCO certified that every Cuban had learned to read and write, President Kennedy ordered the military attack that, if it had been successful, would have returned the people to a past of ignorance and no education.

When the Revolution triumphed in 1959, at least one quarter of the Cuban population was completely illiterate. Many others were considered to be "functionally illiterate," which means that even though they could decipher and pronounce words, they were unable fully to understand them. Such a reality was striking in a country where there were thousands of jobless teachers and thousands of classrooms without teachers, a country where most of the children were not enrolled in any school and most of those who started education never finished the primary level. The data proving these statements are recorded in the last census carried out by the Batista regime, which was not exactly interested in exaggerating the dramatically unjust social situation prevailing in Cuba at that time. The Cuban literacy campaign offered extraordinary dimensions in terms of public participation. Scores of students, organized in brigades, "invaded" the entire country, armed only with a lantern and a literacy booklet, and they penetrated the most remote areas on their noble mission. One of them, Manuel Ascunce, was murdered by mercenary gangs who also killed his student, the campesino Pedro Lantigua.

Far from impeding the campaign, these crimes served as a stimulus for an even greater mobilization of student literacy workers. Unions also gave a decisive contribution. Conrado Benitez, a worker, was also murdered while teaching, reading and writing in the mountains. The names of these martyrs became beloved symbols for the Cuban teaching profession.

Successfully carrying out the literacy program was a solid foundation for a project with an even wider and more sustained scope. The program was followed by the battle to require every single person to complete at least primary education and to promote massive reading through the establishment of a publishing system that has by now printed millions of copies of books of diverse titles that are sold at incredibly low prices. This effort was begun with the publication of Miguel de Cervantes's timeless *The Ingenious Gentleman Don Quixote of La Mancha*. Having reached half a century ago what is even now one of the UN Millennium goals, a fundamental right still denied to hundreds of millions around the globe, Cubans believe it to be their moral duty to help others do the same. This is internationalism for us, the heart and substance of socialist ideals.

Cuban teachers devised an agile and suitable method for learning how to read and write, the "Yes, I Can" (*Yo Si Puedo*) method that has allowed millions of people in other countries to free themselves of illiteracy. *Yo Si Puedo* applies the method pioneered by Paulo Freire in Brazil, building literacy around the needs and initiatives of communities themselves, working with people to read the word and the world. Repeating the exploit their parents and grandparents carried out on the island half a century ago, tens of thousands of young Cubans have "invaded" the remotest areas in Latin America and Africa and other continents and

embarked on successful literacy campaigns. Venezuela, for example, now is an Illiteracy-Free Territory, officially acknowledged as such by UNESCO.

General literacy has already been reached by important segments of the population in Bolivia, Nicaragua, Haiti, and Ecuador, countries that are marching confidently toward the complete eradication of the scourge of ignorance. The Cuban literacy program *Yo Si Puedo*, approved by UNESCO, has been effectively implemented in twenty countries all over the world. To date, eleven versions of the program have been produced: seven in Spanish (for Venezuela, Mexico, Argentina, Ecuador, Bolivia, Colombia, and Uruguay); one in Portuguese; one in English; two recently completed versions for Bolivia in Quechua and Aymara; and one in Creole, used successfully in Haiti. The multiplying effect of this campaign is one of its most beautiful fruits. It is not only Cubans who are part of this noble and challenging quest. Side by side with them today are young Venezuelans, Bolivians, Nicaraguans, Haitians, Ecuadorans, and young people from other nationalities.

Something similar is happening with the massive spread of free medical care. For years, tens of thousands of Cuban doctors have provided their services in many places in Latin America, the Caribbean, Africa, and Asia. But now they are not alone in the fulfilment of this task. The Latin American School of Medicine (ELAM), located close to the west of Havana, has by now graduated many young people from many countries, including the United States. Some of the graduates collaborate with the Henry Reeve Brigade, a contingent of Cuban doctors that was created in response to the catastrophe resulting from Hurricane Katrina. President George W Bush, however, refused the Brigade's offer to help the victims in Louisiana. Unable to come to the aid of the American people, the Henry Reeve Brigade went off to the Himalayas to save Pakistanis affected by the devastating earthquake. More recently, it joined thousands of young Cubans who, since the end of the last century, have been providing the Haitian people with essential life-saving services, and have practically put an end to a terrible cholera epidemic there. Our doctors have been honored in Pakistan and Haiti, and acknowledged by international institutions.

The global corporate media, particularly in the United States, have said very little about this. Not many Americans have heard about these efforts, even though US doctors who received their professional training in Cuba have participated in them. And virtually no one in the United States knows about Henry Reeve, for whom the Brigade was named, a young American who fought and died for Cuban independence in the nineteenth century.

A similar media silence surrounds the internationalist work being done in the field of literacy. Cuban teachers have successfully applied the *Yo Si Puedo* method in New Zealand and are right now doing the same in Canada. They do so in collaboration with official authorities and the civil society of both those nations, neither of which can be considered, by any stretch of the imagination, to belong to the underdeveloped world.

The educational work developed by the Cuban Revolution has had to be carried out in exceptionally difficult conditions as a result of the blockade or, to be more specific, the

economic war unleashed by Washington in the days of the Eisenhower administration and which is fully in effect today under the Obama administration. One has to remember that this economic war was conceived from the beginning as a genocidal war, since its purpose has always been to make the Cuban people suffer. Stated in the official language of some unclassified US government documents, the purpose of that policy has been, and still is, to cause "disenchantment and disaffection based on economic dissatisfaction and hardship...denying money and supplies to Cuba, to decrease monetary and real wages, to bring about hunger, desperation and overthrow of government." (Office of the Historian, Bureau of Public Affairs, United States Department of State; John P Glennon, et al., eds., *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1958-1960, Volume VI, Cuba* [Washington D C: US Government Printing Office, 1991], 885.) (abridged) □□□

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