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Latin America

The scandalous position of the São Paulo forum on Nicaragua

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July 2018, Havana. On the podium of Heads of State: Miguel Díaz Canal, Raúl Castro (President-Elect and President of Cuba), Nicolás Maduro (Venezuela), Evo Morales (Bolivia), Salvador Sánchez Cerén (El Salvador) opened the sessions of the XXIV São Paulo Forum (SPF), the annual summit of Latin American progressivism.

More than 400 delegates, guests and observers from 53 countries filled the Palace of Conventions. They were representatives of parties and fronts, many parliamentarians, civil servants, administrators, experts, beneficiaries of a "culture of government".

Tributes were made to Fidel and Chávez, "fathers of Latin American independence and leaders of the progressive currents of the region". There were demands for the freedom for former Brazilian President Lula, a prisoner in Curitiba. And congratulations were given to Andrés Manuel López Obrador's victory in Mexico.

In an energetic tone, Cuba's President-designate, Díaz Canel, warned: "The rise of the right makes it necessary to return to Fidel's ideal". The Brazilian president (overthrown by a coup d'état), Dilma Rousseff, highlighted this legacy: "Fidel watched over his people and, at the same time, he was concerned about the fate of other nations" [1].

Venezuelan President and successor President Nicolás Maduro recited the script: “As long as there is imperialism in the United States, although it is in decline, there will be conspiracy and intrigue against progressive governments.” His Bolivian colleague, President Evo Morales, highlighted the main enemy: Donald Trump. The Sahrawi ambassador to Nicaragua, Suleiman Tayeb Ahmed Salem, proclaimed: “Here we ask for support and we channel the global solidarity of the left.”

Meanwhile, far from the amenities of the Palace, the popular insurrection persists in Nicaragua. Students, workers, peasants, intellectuals, doctors, journalists, communities risk their lives without carrying offensive weapons in defence of freedom. The roadblocks, civic strikes and mass demonstrations reaffirm the democratic courage of the people of Sandino.

They are facing the Ortega-Murillo regime. The explosion of terror does not make them kneel. Nor do the paramilitary squadrons. Nor do the hundreds of murders, disappearances, political prisoners. Nor do the invasion of universities and hospitals. Nor do the massacres in Managua, Masaya, León and other cities. Nor does the persecution of former anti-Somozist fighters and guerrilla commanders, founders of the FSLN.

This did not distract Forum delegates. It is only one reactionary operation among many others. They continued to deliberate. Finally, they approved by “consensus” the proposal of the working group. [2]

The delegates accept this outrageous position. The Havana Declaration does not admit any nuances: “We vigorously reject the interventionist policy of the United States in the internal affairs of Sandinista Nicaragua, a country in which the formula that has been applied by U.S. imperialism to countries that do not respond to its hegemonic interests is being implemented, causing violence, destruction and death through the manipulation and destabilizing action of the terrorist groups of the *golpista* right, which is indispensable for the continuation of the process of social transformations promoted by the FSLN from the government presided over by Commander Daniel Ortega and which has notably reduced poverty and social inequality in that sister country.” (Translated by *International Viewpoint* from the site of the São Paulo Forum.)

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In one paragraph the “reasons of state” of the progressive camp. Like the armour of a friendly regime. This is called “internal affairs”. The political and economic causes of the “current crisis” are irrelevant. Even less so its consequences: the degradation of freedoms and social destruction.

“Reasons of state” is the excuse of accomplices. It legitimizes the criminal squadrons of the dictatorship. In fact it endorses the extra-judicial death penalty as a systematic method of political and social repression. It disregards the many democratic breaches behind the popular rebellion.

In Havana, the convergence of bureaucracies and political opportunisms has crossed a red line. The “ideological affinities” of the counter-revolutionary side once again bury the values of humanism in solidarity, internationalism and socialism. No confusion.

As the central force of the Foro de São Paulo, as the “historical reference of anti-imperialism”, the Castro leadership bears the greatest responsibility for this by once again imposing its “revolutionary authority” within the perimeter of their “partner forces”. This time it is to align them with state terrorism in Nicaragua. But when it comes to making strategic decisions (political, economic, diplomatic) that suit the particular “geopolitical” interests of the State Party, it forgets its “partner forces”.

Curious. Actually, indecent. Because the majority of parties and fronts represented at the Foro de São Paulo in their own countries operate a multi-party system, a pattern of elections, separation of powers, institutionalized governability, freedom of the press and respect for human rights. In other words, they strictly adhere to the basic rules of bourgeois “formal democracy”.

A clear expression of progressive double talk. Indefensible

July 1992, Managua

Third meeting of the São Paulo Forum. The FSLN was in opposition, Violeta Chamorro president.

Among the main guests was Ernest Mandel. The Sandinista press commented on his intervention: “In front of representatives of the various Latin American and European political parties, Mandel raised issues that did not seem to be on the agenda. By recommending “untying the political knots that tie ideas, the testimony of one of the most famous Marxists of the 20th century” served “to open a little the curtains of uncertainty, so that the sun enters, perhaps for the first time, the Latin American left.” [3]

In two paragraphs he summarized revolutionary principles, socialist ideas, a “programme” of struggle:

“*The principal task of socialist and communists is to try to restore the credibility of socialism in the consciousness of millions of men and women. This will only be possible if our starting point is the immediate needs and concerns of these masses. Any alternative model of political economy must include these proposals.*

“Such proposals must give the most concrete and efficient aid to the masses to fight successful for their needs. We can formulate these in near biblical terms: eliminate hunger, clothe the naked, give a dignified life to everyone, save the lives of those who die for lack of proper medical attention, generalize free access to culture including the elimination of illiteracy, universalize democratic freedoms, human rights and eliminate repressive violence in all its

forms.”

(Ernest Mandel "Socialism and the Future” *International Viewpoint* No 234, 14 September 1992.)

One thing is obvious. The “ideas” presented by Mandel were not “off the agenda”. They proposed actions from an anti-capitalist perspective; which was no longer the concern of the then united left.

The curtains remained closed and the sun did not shine through. Strategic uncertainty paved the way for “political realism”.

Ten years later, Roberto Regalado, a member of the working group and leader of the Communist Party of Cuba, described the 1992 Managua meeting as the maximum expression of a “childhood crisis”. The turning point, from which the definitions of “anti-imperialist” and “anti-neoliberal” would be imposed. Without the pretention of being a new International with a socialist agenda but on the contrary, a pluralist forum, with its head anchored in the management of the state. [4]

In 1997, the Forum parties already had about thirty per cent of Latin American parliamentarians and governed important cities. The “strategic approach to power” was recycled in the electoral process.

In 2001, when the Workers' Party (Brazil) and the Frente Amplio (Uruguay) were certainly approaching power, "anti-imperialism" and "anti-neoliberalism" were diluted into a neo-developmental agenda. Understood, according to Aloizio Mercadante, as a "strategic project" of the left. As "a transitional stage from the liberal model to the mass consumer market", in a "change of the redistribution mechanism within the internal market". [5]

Progressivism began its journey towards the "culture of government". The neoliberal crisis and mass insurrections of the years 2000-2003 in South America found it ready to be the restorer of capitalist order and guarantor of institutional "normalization".

July 1990, São Paulo

The founding meeting of the São Paulo Forum, organized by the Brazilian Workers' Party. Without heads of state. A bearded Lula welcomes the guests. He has the image of a trade unionist. No palace. Barely the discreet Hotel Danubio, long gone. Hand-painted posters. Black and white photos.

Representatives of 48 left-wing parties and fronts from 13 countries attended, mostly political leaders and social activists. There were few parliamentarians or public servants.

According to Eduardo Galeano, this was a meeting of the "lost children". Fidel Castro supported this initiative. The "strategic rearguard" is collapsing in the USSR and Eastern Europe. In Latin America, neoliberalism was attacking and destroying social rights. Privatization was spreading. The "Washington Consensus" was a paradigm of market fundamentalism.

Shortly before that, in February 1990, the Sandinistas had lost power.

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We discussed methods of struggle, institutional options, the strategy of popular power. [6] Stalinism was openly criticised. We demanded democratic socialism. The São Paulo Declaration summarized these intentions: "We thereby demonstrate our common will to renew left-wing thinking and socialism, to reaffirm its emancipatory character, to correct misconceptions, to overcome any expression of bureaucratism and any absence of a true social democracy and masses. We aspire to a free, sovereign and just society; socialism can only be the most authentic of democracies and the most profound of justices for peoples. The statement concludes with, "an active engagement with the value of human rights" and "the primacy of social values, based on solidarity". [7]

The contrast with Havana 2018 is shocking. What has happened in between is the "reasons of State" defence: the market management of public treasures, the institutionalization of social struggle, the circumscription of "possible change".

The idea of "structural reforms has been forgotten": agrarian reform, urban reform, nationalization of the banking system, free public health and education, subsidized public transport and public services, re-establishment of privatized companies, a price freeze on basic goods, the non-payment of fraudulent external debt. In other words, it is an almost "biblical" program, with a dynamic of rupture with the logic of private appropriation of social wealth.

There's nothing left of that. The inequality gap is a scandal. Poverty has increased again. Pay insecurity predominates in the "labour market". Wages are at the minimum level required for survival. Real estate speculation expels millions of people to the urban peripheries. "Colonies of irregular settlements" are being built. The productive matrix based on extractivism and foreign direct investment... is tax-exempt.

The photos this time are demoralizing.

Lula, champion of the Zero Hunger programme, distinguished at the time as a "global statesman" by the bosses of the Davos Economic Forum, is imprisoned as a common law prisoner. And the "PT-ist way of governing" is in ruins. Rafael Correa is self-exiled in Belgium, with his "citizen revolution" in his suitcase. Tens of thousands of Venezuelans and Cubans are fleeing hunger, poverty, unemployment and disillusionment. The "national-popular" project of the Kirchner clan is dragged through the courts for corruption. The IMF and the Wall Street Journal praise Evo Morales' "Andean capitalism". In Uruguay, 40% of the population is at risk of falling into poverty after 13 years of Frente Amplio government.

"Neoliberal peace" in Colombia – with Cuba and Norway as "guarantors" and Felipe González and José Mujica as "facilitators" – continues to steal the lands of poor peasants and kill dozens of social activists. In the end, Plan Colombia has imposed its counter-insurgency strategy.

The Union of South American Nations? The Bolivarian Alliance of the Peoples of Our America? The "21st century socialism"? No, the Pacific Alliance is the "area of integration". [8]

The employers once again have the right to directly decide government business, without any intermediaries.

This is the outcome of the "progressive cycle". The Havana 2018 Declaration is its macabre outcome.

Montevideo,17 August 2018

*Source **Correspondencia de Prensa**.*

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[1] "El Foro de San Pablo, con loas a Fidel", *Página/12* (Buenos Aires) of 18 August 2018.

[2] The Working Group (WG) is the coordinating body that serves as the governing body of the Forum, created after the 2nd meeting held in Mexico City in 1991. This is the framework in which “consensus” is negotiated. The working group prepares the agenda and drafts the statements. It is composed of the leaders of the main parties and fronts.

[3] Translated from *El Nuevo Diario* (Managua) of 19 July 1992.

[4] See Foro de San Pablo es un olmo, no podemos pedirle una pera".

[5] Aloizio Mercadante, then Secretary for International Relations of the PT and leader of Articulação (the majority fraction of the party). The quotes are taken from his intervention at the meeting of the FSP working group held in Montevideo, on 18 and 19 August 2002.

[6] Ernesto Herrera participated in the Forum meetings as a representative of the former Socialist Workers' Party (PST, Uruguayan section of the Fourth International), one of the founding organizations of the São Paulo Forum.

[7] Translated from “Declaración de San Pablo”, 4 de julio de 1990, *Inprecor/América Latina* n° 6, julio de 1990.

[8] The Pacific Alliance, was created on 28 April 2011, at the initiative of the Barack Obama administration. It is composed of Chile, Colombia, Mexico and Peru. Other countries (Argentina, Brazil, Costa Rica, Paraguay, Urugay and Brazil) participate as observers and potential candidates for integration.

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