

## [My meeting with Leonel Fernández, President of the Dominican Republic](#)

It took place last Monday, March 2, at 4:58 in the afternoon.

I had met him in the Dominican Republic when he was elected for the first time as president. He was especially courteous to me. He spoke of his first efforts to increase the capacity for generating electricity with much less consumption of fuel oil whose prices were rapidly growing.

Nobody handed him the job on a platter; he got there through a kind of process of natural selection by virtue of which he went up the political ladder while historical events were unfolding.

He is the son of a Dominican woman who had emigrated, like many of her compatriots, to the United States, and he was taken along with his brother to New York City where he learned how to read and write.

He was lucky in that his mother would closely follow the problems in their homeland and she communicated revolutionary opinions and criteria to him that would condition him for the new times the Dominican people were living through.

He arrived at his own criteria different from me, but they determined his attitude in regards to situations that were similar, and at the same time very different to those I had gone through in Cuba 23 years before; when I was not even 6 years old, I had a young Cuban schoolteacher who, together with her two sisters and without a doubt coming from a petit bourgeois Santiago background, was living in quite poor conditions, after having gone to school, one studying medicine and the other becoming a teacher and the third one studying piano at a university in Haiti, the neighboring country closest to Cuba and to Leonel Fernandez' homeland.

I endured the tough experience of hunger, without knowing what it was, taking it for a ferocious and uncommon appetite, in the city of Santiago, a city I saw for the first time with amazement; the schoolteacher who worked at the school in Birán during the Machado dictatorship, did not receive a salary but a generous fee from my parents, and she persuaded my family to send me to Santiago.

I learned to add, subtract and multiply thanks to the red-covered school notebook, before I learned how to read and write. In this way I began using my imagination, but they held me back two years, years I was able to recover later on with a lot of effort.

Thus one can perhaps better understand my interest in conversing with Leonel in the light of current times.

I met Juan Bosch, a Dominican historian and personality in 1946 when I was not even 20 years old; I was a second-year law student and leader in that faculty, also the president of the organization for solidarity with the Dominican democracy in that peoples' courageous struggle against the Trujillo tyranny, installed by American forces in their intervention on the island in 1928.

Bosch and I were in the Sandino Battalion, named after the Nicaraguan hero who fought against the Yankee interventionists and was murdered for it, after another imperialist intervention of that Central American country.

The distinguished Dominican intellectual was not the head of that expedition. Other Dominican

politicians were leading it. Almost all of them were acting in good faith, but they were motivated by class ideas and interests, even those of the oligarchy and bourgeoisie.

The worst is that the Cubans leading it were the most corrupt of the Cuban Revolutionary Party (Auténtico), the name stolen from the Cuban Revolutionary Party founded by Martí to fight for the independence of Cuba and Puerto Rico, the last two colonial enclaves Spain possessed in Latin America at the end of the nineteenth century.

Nobody could understand the confusing gibberish of Grau San Martín, the physiology professor and heir to the Revolution unleashed by Antonio Guiteras Holmes, Minister of the Interior for the Revolutionary Government which arose after the Machado years, after the tyrant was overthrown in 1933.

The innocent hunger I referred to earlier completed the picture.

When the Revolution triumphed on January 1, 1959, Leonel had just turned 6 years old.

Jiménez Moya, who along with other Dominican revolutionaries landed in the vicinity of the Sierra Maestra in a civilian Venezuelan plane outfitted with 150 semi-automatic Garand guns that were firing nine 30.06 cartridges per clip, and a FAL rifle personally sent to me by Admiral Larrazábal, President of the provisional Venezuelan government after the ousting of the pro-Yankee Pérez Jiménez, was incorporated into our forces along with other compatriots of his in the days when we were waging the last battles in the eastern region of Cuba.

He was seriously wounded during the siege by an enemy battalion of well-trained special troops; looked after by our field medics, he recovered and was ready for the June 14 operation in Santo Domingo in the year 1959.

That day, at 6:20 in the afternoon, 56 Dominican combatants landed at Trujillo's military airport in Constanza; that was the only alternative at that time, instead of doing it at the selected location. Almost all of them perished following a heroic battle.

A few days later, another 169 arrived by sea and faced the same fate. The plan their own combatants had coordinated and drawn up couldn't be implemented. As usual, the adversary resorted to torture and terror. It is a story that should be written.

The joint blood shed in our struggles for independence, and in the 50's and 60's, has united our peoples forever.

Once the Revolution triumphed in Cuba, the Eisenhower government submitted us to a brutal economic blockade, a ferocious terrorist campaign and later attacked the Bay of Pigs using Cuban mercenary troops.

Colonel Francisco Caamaño Deñó leads an uprising against Trujillo's military high command in 1965 and demands the return of Juan Bosch who had been elected president by the people in December 1961. A group of revolutionaries that had been trained in Cuba join him and his officers and soldiers.

The Dominican Congress elects him President of that country.

The United States imperialist government, alarmed by the events, sends the 82nd Airborne Division and more than 40,000 Marines to occupy the island.

Caamaño kept those powerful invading forces at bay and harassed them tirelessly, forcing them to negotiate. He had sworn to never surrender. When an agreement had been signed, with guarantees the Americans never fulfilled, Col. Caamaño abandoned the national territory and was appointed military attaché in London by the government.

But he was not the kind of man who would resign himself to such a task. He wanted to return to Santo Domingo to fight against those who were oppressing his people. He turned to us, asking for our cooperation.

We also didn't want him to give up his life at any time, we would have liked the circumstances to be more favorable, but our word was sacred.

He lived among us for a while, bolstered by the promise of providing him support to return, bearing arms, whenever he so decided.

We shall always consider the confidence he placed in our people an immense honor.

It is another story that needs to be written with all the necessary thoroughness.

I knew that Leonel, among other things, admired the culture of our people. Therefore, I allowed myself to present him with a page bearing 26 lines that contained a very short story of the black poet Gabriel de la Concepción Valdés, known as Plácido who, on March 1, 2009 commemorated one more anniversary of the date of his arrest, together with others of his race. He was accused of conspiring against the whites, and after 4 months in prison he was executed on June 29, 1844.

Such was the concept of justice applied by the Spanish Empire for centuries in Quisqueya and in Cuba.

I had learned about the famous Prayer to God written by that great poet when I was in sixth grade at the Jesuit Dolores School, and I shall never forget it.

Leonel read it; he was with comrade Esteban Lazo, Politburo member, recently appointed by the Party to organize the 200th anniversary of the poet's birth which will begin within a fortnight.

I am very pleased to know that our people will be able to learn about the life, thought and the insuperable verses written by Plácido.

Where the conversation with Leonel acquires its greatest dimension is when he deals with the subject of the cost of the current crisis. Starting with that instant, his mind doesn't stop for a minute reasoning, expressing each one of the main chapters in the cost of the current crisis with exact figures.

He begins by clearing up the doubt, almost universal, and the confusion between the meaning of the English "billion" and the Spanish "billion".

The English billion represents only 1,000 million.

The Spanish billion represents a million millions for us.

Enormous confusion ensues when dealing with news and figures in cables and articles.

For that reason, Leonel uses the word "trillion" to refer to the American billion. Its exact meaning corresponds to a "million millions".

If he wishes to refer to the U.S. GDP that reaches the figure of almost 15 "million millions", he expresses it by stating that the GDP of that powerful nation is approximately 15 trillion dollars.

Having made the clarification, he doesn't even pause to go on explaining about what Bush spent on the war in Iraq, added to the annual deficit in the budget of that country, which he calculates one after another, until next March 19th; he immediately adds Bush's bailout plan; and he follows this with the Obama bailout plan and so on.

In this case, he limits himself to what the crisis is costing the United States. He begins calculations with how much this is costing the European countries in turn, first those in the Euro-zone supported by the European Central Bank, and then all the countries in eastern Europe and finally Great Britain and Sweden.

Not missing a beat, Leonel goes on to review the costs to countries in the rest of the world.

He compaits the GDP of the United States and other nations. He adds them all up. He calculates the deficits proposed in each one of them. He goes on to calculate the loans taken on by the banks to sustain the production of each of the producing companies, the times money deposited in the banks is loaned, the grand totals of loans, generators of toxic derivatives, and the escalation to figures that equal hundreds of trillions of dollars.

Leonel states that financial speculation rules everywhere.

“Persons who do not produce are speculating”.

“One person sells oil he doesn’t produce and another person buys oil he doesn’t intend to consume”.

“The same is happening with food”.

“And so it goes with everything”.

The mortgage becomes a stock which is bought and sold on the market, he continues, without the homeowner knowing about it. He could lose his home because of an operation that is carried out in some faraway country.

“Neoliberalism is collapsing on its own.”

“Returning to Keynesian principles does not solve the current crisis.”

“That implies looking for new ideas.”

Leonel knows that the figures are mind-boggling; he is concerned about the necessity for such sums to be understood even though they appear absurd and he promises to go on supplying data.

I would define Leonel’s thesis just as he sees things: capitalism is a system that oozes poisonous toxins through every single pore.

With the passion heard in his voice, I deduce that the Yankees will curse the arithmetic taught to Leonel in New York when he was learning to read and write.

For its part The Wall Street Journal, which is the mighty voice of international finance, publishes an article by Tunku Varadarajan on March 2, stating that the economic guru Nouriel Roubini is firmly maintaining that a temporary intervention is the best solution for the financial crisis.

“Nouriel Roubini is always dressed in black and white. I have known him for nearly two years and have seen him in a variety of situations, en route to class at the New York University’s Stern Business School where he’s a professor; over a glass of wine in his boyish loft in Manhattan’s Tribeca; at an academic conference, seated sagely on the dais; at a bohemian party in Greenwich Village at 3 in the morning.

“He always wears a black suit with a white linen shirt”.

Roubini is the owner of the Roubini Global Economics consulting firm located in the heart of New York

City. Today he is the person whose opinion on the crisis is the most in demand by the main newspapers in the United States.

"The idea that the government should pay trillions of dollars to save financial institutions and keep on spending on non-receivable assets is not an attractive one because then the fiscal cost is much greater, instead of being seen as somewhat Bolshevik, nationalization is seen as being pragmatic. Paradoxically, the proposal is oriented more to the market than the alternative of the zombie banks".

"Then, shall the top level of the U.S. government be receptive to the idea of nationalizing the banks? 'I think so,' states Roubini without a pause for doubt. 'Persons such as Lindsey Graham (the conservative Republican senator) and Alan Greenspan (former Federal Reserve Board chairman) have already given their explicit blessing. In some way, that protects Obama.'"

"So, what exactly is Nouriel Roubini's economic philosophy? 'I believe in the market economy', he states, with some emphasis. 'I believe that people react to incentives, that incentives are important and that prices reflect the way things ought to be distributed. But I also believe that market economies sometimes have market failures and, when these happen, there is only room for prudent (not excessive) regulation of the financial system'".

Two things which Greenspan got completely wrong were that, in the first place, the market is self-regulating and, in the second place, that the market is failure-proof.

In a word, for Tunku Varadarajan of The Wall Street Journal and the eminent expert Nouriel Roubini, the capitalist system cannot function without the market, but the market needs to be regulated, therefore the state must ensure both.

I can understand Leonel's anguish when he seriously meditates on the cost of the crisis. The very society which has driven the developed capitalist system has no idea now about how to deal with the problem, and its most acknowledged theories toss out ideas like the ones we have just mentioned.

With the greatest serenity in the world, he returns to the more concrete problems of Santo Domingo and he points out each of the measures proposed for the coming years. On that point, social funds are to be his central issue. He compellingly takes up the idea that in the social funds of the countries of Latin America discounts in the real salaries of the workers constitute a source of capital that, when managed by the state, will accumulate resources which do not devalue, and so, that will grow each year.

Invested in homes and other important services for the population, discounting a real part of the labor invested each year in them, the value of these funds would continuously increase.

Observing the progress of the International Meeting of Economists on Globalization and Development, I noted during the first two days that a strong emphasis was made by the internationally prestigious economists meeting in Cuba that one should seek a source for the accumulation of capital at the service of society with the hopes of liberating society from the crisis it is suffering.

Suddenly, before the cluster of life-saving theories and solutions, other realities occur to me and I wonder.

Could science provide an urgent response to the melting of the Antarctic and Arctic polar regions, something which is visibly happening, and that the atmosphere is reaching levels of heat that are the highest in the last 700,000 years, something that the United Nations and other illustrious institutions know full well?

I understand that such figures might discourage a few of us, but wouldn't it be worse to just ignore them?

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However, my conversation with Leonel did not end there. He told me he would be traveling to Santiago de Cuba to lay a wreath at the tomb guarding the remains of our National Hero. It was this man who declared at Montecristi that the final battle against Spanish colonial power was beginning, to free Cuba and Puerto Rico. Traveling with him was Máximo Gómez who taught us and perfected the machete charges in the Cuban countryside.

At Dos Ríos, Martí launched the slogan that presided over our people's future struggles against imperialist domination in the counties of Latin America.

Before we said good-bye, he said to me: "Do you know something? I don't want to leave Cuba without visiting the Moncada barracks." I hadn't even remembered that fortress in the midst of so much history. I didn't comment too much on that and I thanked him for his courtesy. He wanted to take a digital photo. A camera was found and the picture was taken. When he told me that he didn't want people to think he was lying, I jokingly told him that there was no risk of that because everyone knew that I could get on a plane and fly over to that neighboring country.

And so the time went by pleasantly. While I was writing these lines on Wednesday the 4th, I was listening to the passionate words of Manuel Zelaya, the president of Honduras, who attended the Meeting on Globalization and Development and yesterday delivered a great speech at the conference. Even more passionate were his words condemning the blockade against Cuba; his oratory is impressive. It is too bad that he is leaving today without my being able to greet him. It is the second time he is visiting Cuba. But what am I to do? Where do I get the time?

**Fidel Castro Ruz**

**March 4, 2009**

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