

Ernest de Cerezo
1961

Economics Cannot be Separated from Politics

Speech at Punta del Este (August 8, 1961)

Che Guevara's speech on behalf of the Cuban government to the ministerial meeting of the Inter-American Economic and Social Council (CIES), sponsored by the Organization of American States (OAS) at Punta del Este, Uruguay, on August 8, 1961. Head of the US delegation, Douglas Dillon, presented Washington's recently proclaimed Alliance for Progress for official ratification by the meeting. The conference was presided over by Uruguayan President Eduardo Haedo.

Mr. President;

Distinguished delegates:

Like all the delegations, we must begin by expressing our appreciation to the government and people of Uruguay for the cordial reception they have given us during this visit.

I would also like to personally thank the distinguished president of this gathering for the gift he made to us of the complete works of Rodó, and would like to explain to him the two reasons why we are not beginning this presentation with a quotation from that great Latin American. The first is that I went back to *Ariel* after many years, looking for a passage that would express, at the present time, the ideas of someone

who is, more than a Uruguayan, a man of our Americas, an American from the Río Bravo to the south. But Rodó expresses throughout his *Ariel* the violent struggle and the contradictions of the Latin American peoples against the nation that 50 years ago was already interfering in our economy and in our political freedom. And it was not proper to quote this in someone else's house.

And the second reason, Mr. President, is that the head of one of the delegations here offered us a quotation from [José] Martí to begin his presentation. Well, we will answer Martí with Martí. But with the anti-imperialist and antifeudal Martí who died facing Spanish bullets, fighting for the liberty of his homeland and—as he put it in one of his last letters—trying, with Cuba's liberty, to prevent the United States from falling upon Latin America.

At that international monetary conference to which the distinguished president of the Inter-American Bank referred in his inaugural address when he spoke of the 70 years of waiting, Martí said:

Whoever speaks of economic union speaks of political union. The nation that buys, commands; the nation that sells, serves. Commerce must be balanced to assure freedom. A nation that wants to die sells to one nation only, and a nation that would be saved sells to more than one. The excessive influence of one country over another's commerce becomes political influence. Politics is the work of men who surrender their feelings to an interest. When a strong nation supplies another with food, she requires that the recipient serve her. When a strong nation wants to engage another in battle, she forces those who have need of her to become her allies and to serve her. A nation that wants to be free must be free in matters of trade. It must

distribute its trade among nations that are equally strong. If one is to be preferred, give preference to the one who needs it the least. Let there be neither unions of the Americas against Europe, nor with Europe against a nation of the Americas. Only the mind of some university student could deduce an obligation to political union from the geographic coincidence of our living together in the Americas. Commerce follows the land and sea routes of the earth, going to whatever country has anything to exchange, be it a monarchy or a republic. Let us be in union with the whole world and not with just a part of it, not with one part against another. If the republics of the Americas have any function at all, it is certainly not to be herded by one of them against the future republics.

That was Martí 70 years ago, Mr. President.

Well, having complied with the elementary duty of honoring the dead and of repaying the kindness that the distinguished delegate has shown to us, we pass on to the fundamental part of our presentation: the analysis of why we are here, to characterize the conference. And I must say, Mr. President, that I disagree, in the name of Cuba, with almost all the statements that have been made, although I do not know if I disagree with all the private thoughts of everyone.

I must say that Cuba's interpretation is that this is a political conference. Cuba does not agree that economics can be separated from politics, and understands that they always go together. That is why you cannot have experts who speak of models when the destinies of a people are at stake. And I am also going to explain why this conference is political. It is political because all economic conferences are political; but it is also political because it was conceived against Cuba, and because it has been conceived to counter the example that Cuba

represents throughout Latin America.

And if there is any doubt about that, on the 10th, in Fort Amador in the [Panama] Canal Zone, General Decker, while instructing a group of Latin American military men in the art of repressing the people, spoke of the technical conference in Montevideo and said that it had to be backed.

But that is nothing. In the inaugural message on August 5, 1961, President Kennedy asserted:

Those of you at this conference are present at an historic moment in the life of this hemisphere. This is far more than an economic discussion, or a technical conference on development. In a very real sense it is a demonstration of the capacity of free nations to meet the human and material problems of the modern world.

I could continue quoting the prime minister of Peru, where he also refers to political themes; but in order not to tire the distinguished delegates, for I can foresee that my presentation will be a bit long, I will refer to some statements made by the "experts" — a term we place within quotation marks — on point 5 of the draft text.

At the end of page 11, it is stated as a definitive conclusion:

To establish, on a hemispheric and national level, regular consultative procedures with the trade union advisory committees, so that they may play an influential role in the political formulation of programs that might be approved in the special session.

And to drive home my point, so no doubt can remain as to my right to speak of political matters — which is what I plan to do

in the name of the Cuban government — here is a quotation from page 7 of that same report on point 5 in question:

Delay in accepting the responsibility of democratic media to defend the essential values of our civilization, without any weakening or commitments of a material sort, would signify irreparable damage to democratic society and the imminent danger of the disappearance of the freedoms enjoyed today, as has occurred in Cuba...

Cuba is spelled out...

...where today all newspapers, radio, television, and movies are controlled by the absolute power of the government.

In other words, distinguished delegates, in the report we are to discuss, Cuba is put on trial from a political point of view. Very well then, Cuba will state its truths from a political point of view, and from an economic point of view, as well.

We agree with only one thing in the report on point 5 by the distinguished experts, only one phrase, which defines the present situation: "A new stage is beginning in relations between the peoples of the Americas," it says, and that is true. Except that the new stage begins under the star of Cuba, free territory of the Americas. And this conference, and the special treatment that the delegations have received, and the credits that may be granted, all bear the name of Cuba, whether the beneficiaries like it or not, because a qualitative change has taken place in the Americas. A country can take up arms, destroy an oppressing army, form a new popular army, stand up to the invincible monster, wait for the monster's attack, and then defeat it. And this is something new in Latin America,

gentlemen, and what makes this new language possible and what makes relations easier between everyone — except, of course, between the two great rivals of this conference.

At this time, Cuba cannot even speak of Latin America alone. Cuba is part of a world that is experiencing intense anguish because we do not know if one of the parts — the weakest, but the most aggressive — will commit the stupid mistake of unleashing a conflict that would necessarily be a nuclear one. Cuba is on the alert, distinguished delegates, because she knows that imperialism would perish enveloped in flames, but that Cuba would also suffer in its own flesh the price of imperialism's defeat, and she hopes that it can be accomplished by other means. Cuba hopes that her children will see a better future, and that victory will not have to be won at the cost of millions of human lives destroyed by the atomic bomb.

The situation of the world is tense. We are not gathered here just for Cuba — not in the least. Imperialism has to protect its rearguard because the battle is being fought on all sides, in a moment of great tension.

The Soviet Union has reaffirmed its decision to sign the Berlin peace treaty, and President Kennedy has announced that he might even go to war over Berlin. But there is not only Berlin; there is not only Cuba; there is Laos; elsewhere there is the Congo, where Lumumba was assassinated by imperialism; there is divided Vietnam; divided Korea; Formosa [Taiwan] in the hands of Chiang Kai-shek's gang; Algeria is bleeding to death, and now they also want to divide it; and there is Tunisia, whose population was machine-gunned the other day for committing the "crime" of wanting to regain their territory.

That is the world today, distinguished delegates. That is how we have to see it in order to understand this conference

and draw the conclusions that will permit our peoples either to head toward a happy future of harmonious development, or else become appendages of imperialism in the preparation of a new and terrible war. Or they may shed blood in internal strife when — as almost all of you have foreseen — the people, tired of waiting, tired of being fooled once again, set out on the road that Cuba once took: that of seizing weapons from the enemy army, which represents reaction, and destroying to its very foundations a whole social order designed to exploit the people.

The history of the Cuban revolution is short in years, Mr. President, but rich in accomplishments, rich in positive accomplishments, and rich also in the bitterness of the aggressions it has suffered.

We will point out a few of them so it may be well understood that a long chain of events leads us here.

In October 1959, the only fundamental economic measure that the revolutionary government had carried out was the agrarian reform. Pirate planes coming from the United States flew over Havana's airspace and as a result of the bombs that they dropped and the fire of our antiaircraft batteries, two people were killed and 50 were wounded. Then there was the burning of the sugarcane fields, which constitutes economic aggression, an aggression against our wealth. The United States denied all responsibility until a plane blew up — pilot and all — and the origin of those pirate craft was indisputably demonstrated. This time the US government was kind enough to offer apologies. The España sugar mill was also bombed in February 1960 by these planes.

In March of that year, the steamship *La Coubre*, which was bringing arms and munitions from Belgium, exploded

at the Havana docks in an accident that the experts said was intentional and that killed 100 people.

In May 1960, the conflict with imperialism became direct and sharp. The oil companies operating in Cuba, invoking the right of force and scorning the laws of the republic, which clearly specified their obligations, refused to refine the crude oil that we had bought from the Soviet Union, in the exercise of our free right to trade with the whole world and not with just a part of it, as Martí said.

Everyone knows how the Soviet Union responded, by sending us, in a real effort, hundreds of ships to annually transport 3.6 million tons—the total of our crude oil imports—to keep our whole industrial apparatus moving, which today runs on the basis of oil.

In July 1960, there was the economic aggression against Cuban sugar, although some governments have not yet recognized it as such. The contradictions became sharper and the meeting of the OAS took place in August 1960, in Costa Rica. There—in August 1960, I repeat—it was stated:

The intervention or threat of intervention by an extra-continental power in the affairs of the American republics, even when it is invited, is strongly condemned. It is declared that the acceptance by an American state of a threat of extra-continental intervention endangers American solidarity and security, which obligates the Organization of American States to condemn and reject it with equal energy.

In other words, the sister nations of the Americas, gathered in Costa Rica, denied us the right to be defended. It is one of the strangest denials in the history of international law. Of course, our people are rather disobedient to the dictates of technical

assemblies and they gathered in a great assembly of Havana, approving unanimously—with more than a million hands raised to the sky, one-sixth of the total population of the whole country—what was called the Declaration of Havana, one of whose points states:

The National General Assembly of the People of Cuba—confident that it is expressing the general opinion of the peoples of Latin America—reaffirms that democracy is not compatible with financial oligarchy, with discrimination against Blacks and outrages by the Ku Klux Klan, or with the persecution that drove scientists like Oppenheimer from their posts, deprived the world for years of the marvelous voice of Paul Robeson, held prisoner in his own country, and sent the Rosenbergs to their deaths against the protests of a shocked world, including the appeals of many governments and of Pope Pius XII.

The National General Assembly of the People of Cuba expresses the Cuban conviction that democracy cannot consist solely of elections that are nearly always fictitious and managed by rich landowners and professional politicians, but rather it lies in the right of the citizens to determine their own destiny, as this assembly of the people is now doing. Furthermore, democracy will come to exist in Latin America only when people are really free to make choices, when the poor are not reduced—by hunger, social discrimination, illiteracy, and the legal system—to the most wretched impotence...

To sum up, the National General Assembly of the People of Cuba condemns: the exploitation of human by human and the exploitation of the underdeveloped countries by imperialist finance capital.

This was a declaration of our people made before the whole world, to show our resolve to defend with arms, with our blood,

and with our lives, our freedom and our right to determine the destiny of our country in the way our people think best.

There followed many skirmishes and battles, verbal at times, with deeds at others, until December 1960 when the Cuban sugar quota in the US market was cut once and for all. The Soviet Union responded in the manner that you know. Other socialist countries did likewise and contracts were signed to sell to the whole socialist area four million tons of sugar, at a preferential price of four cents. That naturally saved the situation for Cuba, which unfortunately is still today as much of a one-crop country as are the majority of the countries of Latin America, and as dependent upon a single market, on a single product—at that time—as the rest of her sister countries are today.

It seemed that President Kennedy was initiating the new era that has been so talked about. And in spite of the fact that the verbal battle had been so intense between President Kennedy and the prime minister of our government, we hoped things would improve. President Kennedy in his speech issued some clear warnings on a range of Latin America issues, but he appeared to publicly accept that the case of Cuba must now be considered as a fait accompli.

We were mobilized at that time, but the day after Kennedy's speech, demobilization was ordered. Unfortunately, on March 13, 1961—the day President Kennedy announced the Alliance for Progress—the pirate attack on our refinery at Santiago de Cuba took place, endangering the installations and taking the life of one of those defending it. We were thus again faced with an accomplished fact.

In that speech, which I have no doubt will be remembered, Kennedy also said that he hoped the peoples of Cuba and the

Dominican Republic, for whom he felt great sympathy, could join the community of free nations. Within a month there was Playa Girón [Bay of Pigs invasion], and a few days later President Trujillo was mysteriously assassinated. We were always enemies of President Trujillo; we merely take note of the bare fact, which has not been clarified in any way up to the present time.

Afterward, a true masterpiece of belligerence and political naiveté was prepared, called the White Paper. According to the magazines that chatter so much in the United States—even provoking the ire of President Kennedy—its author is one of the distinguished advisers of the US delegation that is with us today. It is an indictment filled with distortions about Cuban reality, and was conceived to prepare for what was coming.

"The revolutionary regime betrayed their own revolution," said the White Paper, as if it were the judge of revolutions and of how to make revolutions, the great appraiser of revolutions in the Americas.

"The Castro regime offers a clear and present danger to the authentic revolutions of the Americas." The word *revolution* also needs the barnacles scraped off it now and then, as one of the members presiding here said.

"The Castro regime refuses to negotiate amicably." This in spite of our having said many times that we will sit down on an equal basis to discuss our problems with the United States. I take advantage of the opportunity now, on behalf of my government, Mr. President, to state once more that Cuba is ready to sit down to discuss as equals everything that the US delegation wishes to discuss, but on the strict basis that there be no prior conditions. In other words, our position is very clear on this matter.