

## **From the general to the particular**

*It's no secret that starting on December 17 2014 a new stage in the history of the revolution, full of challenges, dangers and opportunities has opened. Depending on how we the revolutionaries act we'll be able to take advantage of it to build the fairer society to which we aspire.*

*The new circumstances will have implications for each sphere of Cuban life. It is difficult to imagine an area of our society that will not be touched by them. At the same time, this situation creates a multiplicity of visions conditioned by the interests, expectations, philosophy, or any combination of them by the observer. Our purpose, according to what we announced previously, is the discussion to these assessments, starting with general valuations that seem to us of interest and serve for a serious debate.*

*Later on we will be moving to the analysis of particular areas. So far, we open the debate with an interview to Dr Agustín Lage Dávila. It seems to us a good starting point for addressing the issue.*

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### **The match Cuba vs USA is now facing a new game**

***Dr Agustín Lage interviewed by Rosa Miriam Elizalde and Layrene Pérez.***

*Tomado de Cubadebate.*

He has nailed a sheet next to his desk and it is impossible not to see it. The paper carries enough time there, because even the plastic envelope that protects it is colorless: "I belong on the side of the impatient, belong on the side of the hurry ones, those who always press to make things and who often try to do more than possible". The phrase is from Fidel, he warns before you start the interview. Doctor Agustín Lage Dávila, director of the center of Molecular Immunology (CIM), in Havana, a man who not only owns the impatience, but the prototype of the scientist like Einstein and an impressive curriculum.

He is a doctor by profession, specializing in biochemistry with studies in Oncology at the Pasteur Institute in Paris. Since its founding in 1994, manages the CIM, Center with a thousand workers and unlikely results for a poor country: develops "molecular vaccines", engineering of antibodies, cell engineering, Bioinformatics and regulation of the immune response. "Or simply, biotechnology, which is to use a live cell as a factory to produce things", he explains.

But we won't talk about this – he promises that there will be a second encounter- but about a fact impossible to evade these days: the announcement of the Presidents of Cuba and the United States to move towards the restoration of diplomatic relations and, on a longer term, the normalization of the bilateral relations. It is undeniable that the new air from Washington stir the national agenda and there are debates in all sectors of the country, including in the science. What a scientist as Agustín Lage says in this regard?

That is the issue on the table and here is the synthesis of an hour stolen from his time, in a place always so hectic "as the emergency room at the Hospital Calixto García", in the words of the own Lage.

A victory for the Cuban resistance:

- What do you associate with the 17 December 2014?

– The change of stage in the historical dispute between Cuba and the United States. The statements of the President of the United States on December 17, are effectively a change which we perceive as a victory for the resistance of the Cuban people. We did a simile conversing in our group: this resembles the double game of ball on Sunday. Obviously, we won the first ball game, no one argues that. You now have to play the second, because the match is not over. The second comes now with other challenges.

- A Track II with steroids?

-Not exactly, because the Track II is the arrogant ignorance of the institutionalism of the Cuban State. Now the starting point is the restoration of diplomatic relations and that means explicit recognition of our institutions. Here it is, in my opinion, a fundamental change that is a step back for the thinkers and strategists of imperialism. They accept that the tactic has failed them.

- But the grand strategy remains intact, i.e. regime change on the island to enforce the political U.S. model

– Because this dispute between the two countries did not begin yesterday, or half a century ago. It has more than 200 years. It doesn't start with the Socialist option of the Cuban Revolution, is not much older.

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You have to find the origins in the expansionist ambition which came with the American nation and the diametric opposition between the thinking of the founders of the United States and the thought of José Martí. There are two different conceptions of how human coexistence should be like. And these two visions are rooted in the culture of both Nations. Therefore, this difference in the notion of the society won't be diluted in 200 years more.

We have, as said the President Raúl Castro, to learn to live as civilized people with these differences, which are deep. Which weighs here is not a polemic with the properties nationalized, or certain political incidents which occurred over half a century. The fundamental difference has to do with the type of society that builds the Cuban culture and the kind of society that built American culture. They are very different. Let's not forget that in the independence of the Cuban nation, the number one of the number one day Act was freeing the slaves, while the independence of the 13 colonies of the United States left on foot slavery and decades and another war were needed to remove it. The equality of all human beings was not included in the original conception of the founders of the United States. It was included in ours. That gives you the idea that they are two social thoughts that go different roads, and the contradictions that we have to live with.

With U.S. scientists there have always been dialogue:

- Are these differences expressed in the same way in the scientific community of both countries?

-No. In decades of confrontation between the two countries always there has been closeness between the American scientific community and Cuban scientists. That has not ceased to exist. Of course, qualified or limited by the blockade and the hostility of the US policy toward Cuba. In this Centre, for 20 years, we call every two years an international scientific event of cancer immunotherapy. The foreign country that more scientists sends to that event is the US. But not now: in 1994, 1996, 1998, years more complex ideologically and in the special period, when American thinkers and the ideologues of capitalism figured that it was time for their ideological victory. And many people in the world rode in that car.

- Why scientists are less biased?

- It helps to approach the characteristic of the human activity that we do, science. By principle, I am far to think that science is the navel of the world. Science is not the only intelligent activity of man, of course. The essential science feature is objectivity, adherence to the verifiable data; and the negative side of that coin is reductionism. To be objective you have to reduce complex phenomena to simple variables and there are phenomena that are not left to be reduced to these variables. Therefore, science has huge potential and also has limitations.

But the scientist is very attached to the objective value of the data, to verify what it says. When you argue with people mentally trained to seek the facts and interpret them, many things are simplified. That scientist comes here and sees the events in Cuba, the results of the achievements of the Revolution, also the problems that we have, but scans them, study them, and that element of objectivity allows a dialogue between the scientific communities of different countries with a common connection base. You can have scientists of different nationalities and different cultural roots in the same room, and you'll discover that they understood each other perfectly, because they speak the same language.

-Does this have to do with the fact that, despite the blockade, United States issued a special license for the transfer to that country's technology of a Cuban vaccine therapy for lung cancer?

- Indeed. This Center signed a contract with an American company in 2004 and in the presence of the Commander in Chief, to jointly develop a vaccine for lung cancer. Product patent was ours and the Treasury Department gave a license, during Bush's Presidency. It is clear that authorization of this kind, in a Government of that kind, is not obtained without consultation.

- How did that exchange evolved?

- It ended because the American company had financial problems, related to the failure of some projects, others than the one they had with us. It ended for other reasons that had nothing to do with collaboration with us. But the project lasted several years, we worked together during that time and a contract was signed involving payments of the United States towards Cuba. We charged what was stipulated in the contract, after fulfilling our obligations. This shows that, if there is political will, he can lift or minimize the blockade.

At the level of business collaboration, this has been the only experience between the two countries, but

academic collaborations there are many. Today now a group of our researchers are working on the U.S. on projects of cancer immunotherapy, and North American patients have been treated with our products. That's to say, the possibility of a collaboration with American scientists has always been on the table, even at moments of maximum hostility from Washington.

Opportunity and risk

– Is the new attitude of Washington an opportunity or a risk?

-Both things. First of all is an opportunity because collaboration and dialogue are always opportunities. The collaboration is very fertile for the economic and scientific development. And, in addition, there's no denying that the United States possesses a huge scientific potential. But this is an opportunity for us and for them. Science has a huge cultural component and is equal everywhere in regards to the scientific method, but not in regards to the content of what is investigated, the strategy of what is investigated. That difference should well be marked, because the scientific method is an objective procedure, but scientific creativity is a cultural phenomenon. All of the human societies benefit from exchanges with other, different human societies. The fertilization of ideas enriches everybody. Not only Cuba has much to gain in that exchange, American scientists can also win, because our approaches to various issues may be different.

-In a context in which Cuba has made an enormous investment in human capital.

- And that it penetrates all of society. There are countries with an ocean of poverty, marginalization and lack of culture, and in the middle, you find a Science Center that make you think you're in England, completely out of context. This is not Cuba. Here you go to the General Agriculture Enterprise of Yaguajay – which I do all the time for my work as a member of parliament-, you get in the groove and find four engineers. The planting of human capital was not elitist, but massive, and that creates a very different context, especially for the implementation of the outcome of science. This enables scientific work approaches that are not feasible in another type of context. There is an opportunity. For both.

- But there are also risks...

– Yes, mistakes that we can commit on both sides – I'm talking about those that may be committed from the United States by those who take this path of rapprochement with Cuba with ethically clean intentions; I do not mean by others, non-ethical, that have always existed and will continue to exist.

The colossal mistake we could make on both sides is the mistake of naivety. On the Cuban side we cannot commit the naivety of forgetting that there is a profound difference of society-building strategy, and Americans cannot commit the naivety of believing that this is an opportunity to absorb the Cuban society, a mistake on their part that would derail the train of negotiations. If both parties can start walking without falling into such naivety, it can work.

-The possibility of absorption is not something hidden, the most senior United States officials have told with all of their letters. The Assistant Secretary of State Roberta Jacobson put it in Havana, to journalists. I witnessed.

-It would be naive of them to believe that they can achieve that absorption, they would dismiss the strength of the Cuban cultural roots. We already went through this. On the American continent there hasn't been a larger operation of absorption than that implemented with Cuba in the first 30 years of the 20th century: military intervention, Platt Amendment, control of the economy... All conditions were given, and they could not destroy the Cuban culture. The revolution triumphed in 1959 and in a week here everyone was anti-imperialist. That is, that anti-imperialism was in the national roots, was in the people. The only thing that had to be done was to bring it to light, and that occurred despite 50 years of U.S. domination.

The battle of Playa Giron occurred two years and three months after the triumph on the first of January and in that battle the people went, en masse, to fight against imperialism. How do you explain that after 50 years of massive U.S. economic, cultural and political influence? The lesson that must be drawn from there is that there is, unquestionably, a solid root culture and ethics at the origin of the Cuban nation, against which they couldn't after 50 years of American cultural penetration. What basis is there to believe that they can do it now, after 50 years of revolution?

We have only one big problem

- Why do you believe we also run the risk of the naivety?

-Because we could forget that those U.S. intentions have been and are still there. If we can avoid the error of naivety, there can be a construction that is very beneficial for Cuba, for the US, for Latin America and for the world as a whole, and would allow us to concentrate on the fundamental problem. I believe that the Cuban society today has a single problem: the economic problem. For me, all the others are derived from that and it is the problem for which we have to find a way to deal with it, that has to be very creative.

- Only economic?

-Countries that have recently had a great economic takeoff owe it to a huge domestic market, as in the case of China, and other countries, by controlling natural resources, such as Venezuela, Bolivia and Ecuador... In Cuba we don't have any of the two things. We have neither a domestic market large enough which build an industrialization inward, nor we have abundant natural resources that allow us the income to finance economic development. We have to build a science and technology-based economic development. There is no other alternative. That is our lever.

-How is it done?

-It is not written anywhere. That is to say, the intellectual and cultural challenge of Cubans that we have to face that and from this challenge the others arise. To successfully face this economic problem is equivalent to validate the concept that we have a choice of development based on equality, social equality, in a solidary society. If we fail in this project, we would be then validating the strategy of every man for himself, in which each solves his own economic problem. And that leads to the fragmentation of society. That is why the economic problem is essentially a cultural challenge of the Cubans.

– We could be a very prosperous society without being Socialist...

-I don't think so. Economic prosperity and socialism in Cuba are linked. There is not a possibility of building a prosperous, unequal society in Cuba and it is unfortunate that there are people who do not understand it. Cuban culture does not tolerate the levels of inequality with which average prosperity has been built in other countries. That will work in other places, but not here. A society with large inequalities would necessarily engender groups whose interests would distance themselves from the development of the whole society.

For a society as ours, which for economic reasons has to develop on the bases of science and technology, subordination to free market, competition and all those concepts from neo-liberalism which have never developed anybody are incompatible. There are rich countries that have scientific development and poor countries that do not have scientific development. There is certainly a correlation. But correlation is one thing and another is causality. Once there is a certain level of resources and prosperity, with those resources and that prosperity a scientific development is funded. That does not mean that that resource and that prosperity has been originated by the scientific development.

The origin of the prosperity of developed countries of this world has little to do with science. Europe owes the basis of prosperity to the conquest of America. It is not an option today for developing countries. Therefore, our economic prosperity has to be based on science and technology with roots in socialism and egalitarian society, or it's not going to happen. I think that Cubans have built enough ethics and culture to achieve this.

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