

[Speech made by Dr. Fidel Castro Ruz, President of the Republic of Cuba, at the closing session of the 5th Meeting on Globalization and Development held in Havana, Cuba, on February 14, 2003 \[1\]](#)

Date:

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Highly esteemed participants in the Meeting on Globalization and Development;

Distinguished guests:

We have gathered here for a respectful debate and to listen to different points of view. We have been honored by the presence of eminent and perceptive thinkers, as well as representatives of international organizations, who were kind enough to accept the invitation extended to them, despite knowing that the majority of people attending this event have opinions that diverge considerably from the policies followed by the institutions they represent. Hospitality and respect for those who hold different opinions have become a tradition at these meetings. What worth would our analyses have if the ideas expressed were not matched up against other diametrically opposed ideas valiantly maintained by those who uphold another view of the world?

Those of us who are not academics also need a dose of courage. Even when we strive to be as well informed as possible about what is happening in the world, sometimes we simply do not have the time needed to satisfy our desire to learn about the growing number of facts and opinions regarding the unique historical process we are living through and to try to predict the uncertain future lying ahead of us.

But, we cannot complain. We have been given the privilege of living in what I would dare to call the most extraordinary and decisive era in all of human history. Just as U.S. professor Edmund Phelps of Columbia University said, when someone touched on an issue that departed from the economic theme he was addressing, "That is not my topic," I should say in advance that my topic today is not economics. My topic today is politics. Although there is no such thing as economics without politics, or politics without economics.

Everything that has ever existed or exists today has been imposed on humanity. From the natural laws that caused the human race to evolve to the category of rational beings, to ethnic origin and skin color; from groups of individuals who wandered through the forests gathering fruits and roots, hunting or fishing, to the capitalist consumer societies with which a group of wealthy nations are bleeding the Earth dry today.

Developed capitalism, modern imperialism and neoliberal globalization, as systems of world exploitation, have been imposed on the world, as has the basic lack of the principles of justice demanded for centuries by thinkers and philosophers for all human beings, yet still very far from being a reality on Earth. Not even those who liberated the 13 British colonies of North America in 1776, proclaiming as "self-evident truths" that all men are created equal, and that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, such as life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, were capable of

freeing the slaves. Instead, this monstrous institution was maintained for almost an entire century, until it became so anachronistic and unsustainable that a cruel and bloody war replaced it with other more subtle and modern, if not much less cruel, forms of exploitation and racial discrimination. The same could be said for those who waged the French Revolution in 1789 proclaiming liberty, equality and fraternity, yet were not capable of recognizing the freedom of their slaves in Haiti and the independence of that lucrative overseas colony. Instead, they sent 30,000 soldiers to suppress them, in a futile attempt to bring them back to submission. Despite the desires or intentions of the men of the Enlightenment, what was really commencing was a colonial era that extended to Africa, Oceania and almost all of Asia for centuries, including large countries like Indonesia, India and China.

The doors to trade with Japan were blasted open with bombs, in the same way that today, even after a war that cost 50 million deaths in the name of democracy, independence and the freedom of the peoples, the doors are being blasted open for the WTO and the Multilateral Investments Agreement, for the control of the world's financial resources, the privatization of state companies in developing nations, a monopoly on patents and technology, and the attempt to demand the payment of debts totaling trillions of dollars, impossible to collect for the creditors and impossible to pay for the debtors, who grow increasingly poor, hungry and distanced from the living standards attained by those who were their colonial powers for centuries and who sold their sons and daughters as slaves or exploited them to the point of death, as they did with the native peoples of this hemisphere.

It cannot be said that in the second half of the 20th century, the world was divided up again like it was in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The world today can no longer be divided up, because it is the almost exclusive possession of the nation that emerged at the end of this turbulent history as the sole superpower and the most powerful empire to ever exist. It is enough to observe how almost all of the world's capitals tremble before the last word or the last statement has been pronounced or is about to be pronounced in Washington. If there were ever any illusion that the United Nations existed, it was practically dissolved by imperial decree after that fateful day of September 11, barely 17 months ago, and entirely replaced by the fiercest unilateralism ever seen.

Throughout the last few days, as I listened to our distinguished participants and guests wield their well-sharpened arguments on issues like the world economic crisis and especially the situation in Latin America, the FTAA, the obstacles to the development of the poor countries in the world today, the role of social policies, and real facts, often in great detail, that such issues bring up on the causes of so many and such profound tragedies; when I heard that the GDP rose or fell, that sustained growth took place and then stopped, that an increase in exports is the only way to reduce the deficit, restore balance, create jobs, reduce poverty, boost development, fulfill obligations; and then other times, when it was said that privatization can be very useful, build confidence, attract investment at any cost, foster competitiveness, etc., etc., I could not help but admire the persistence with which, for half a century now, they have been recommending the way to leave underdevelopment and poverty behind.

I said earlier that all opinions deserve to be respected. But so must be the many questions and doubts that spring to our minds. What kind of idyllic world are we living in? Where are the minimum conditions of equality that could make possible the solutions we are taught in schools of economics for the development of the Third World countries? Is there even really any such thing as free competition, equal availability of resources, or free access to relevant technologies, monopolized by those who possess not only the fruits of their own talent, but also the talent of others, plucked from the least developed countries without paying so much as a cent to those who used their meager resources to train them?

In whose hands and under whose control are the international financial institutions and the enormous surplus of funds? Who owns the big banks? Where, how and by whom are huge sums of money laundered and deposited, money derived from financial speculation, tax evasion, large-scale drug trafficking and the fruits of massive embezzlement? Where are the funds of Mobutu and of dozens of other major embezzlers of public wealth, who handed over the resources and the sovereignty of their countries to foreign capital, with the blessing of their Western tutors?

Where are the hundreds of billions of dollars that vanished from the former USSR and from Russia and how did that happen while the advisors, experts, specialists and ideologues from Europe and the United States were guiding it along the brilliant and blessed road to capitalism, where a plague of vultures swooped down from every side to take control of most of the country's natural and economic resources? Who can be held morally accountable for the fact that today its population is decreasing and its health indicators –including infant and maternal mortality– have worsened, while many of its people, including old men and women who fought against fascism, are suffering hunger and extreme poverty, which afflict millions?

Who is destroying the national culture of other peoples through a monopoly on the mass media and spreading the poison of consumerism to every corner of the Earth? How can we view the expenditure of a trillion dollars on commercial advertising every year, when that money could be used to remedy the lack of education, health care, drinking water and housing, the unemployment, hunger and malnutrition, that afflict billions of people around the world? Is this simply an economic issue, and not political and ethical?

Neoliberal globalization constitutes the most blatant recolonization of the Third World. The FTAA, as has already been reiterated here, is the annexation of Latin America to the United States; a spurious union of unequal parties, in which the strongest will swallow up the weakest, including Canada, Mexico and Brazil. It is an immoral agreement that will bring free movement for capital and commodities but death for the "barbarians" who try to cross the boundaries of the empire through the slaughterhouse that the border between Mexico and the United States has become. For them there is no Adjustment Act that grants the automatic right to residence and employment –no matter what violations and crimes they may have committed– and which was created to destabilize Cuba as punishment for the revolutionary changes that took place in our country.

I must state resolutely and with no hesitation whatsoever, as a revolutionary and a fighter who truly believes that a better world is possible, that in my opinion, the privatization of the wealth and natural resources of a country in exchange for foreign investment constitutes a major crime. It is tantamount to handing over cheaply, practically for free, all of the means of survival of the peoples in the Third World. And it will lead to a new form of recolonization, more convenient and self-serving, in which the natives will now cover the costs for public order and other essentials, which formerly corresponded to the colonial powers.

In its relations with foreign capital, Cuba uses mutually beneficial and carefully considered forms of cooperation that do not impinge on the country's sovereignty or place the control of national wealth and the country's political, economic and cultural life at the mercy of any foreign capital or power.

As a rule, we do not give anything away for free, and when facing the dilemma of paying a price, we render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's and unto the people the things that are the people's. Make no mistake about it: we are a socialist country and we will continue to be socialists. And in spite of the colossal obstacles, we are building a new and more humane society, with more experience, enthusiasm, energy and dreams than ever. The U.S. dollar circulates, and the euro is beginning to circulate, and they may be followed by other currencies to facilitate tourism, but the currencies that fundamentally circulate are the regular Cuban peso and the convertible Cuban peso. The monetary situation is under control. The value of our national currency remained stable throughout the entire year of 2002, something almost unheard of in other countries, and there is no flight of hard currency.

Among the immense problems weighing down on this hemisphere –as is all too well known– is the colossal external debt. Payment on the capital and interest of this debt sometimes absorbs up to 50% of national budgets, which has an extreme impact on the services essential to any country: health care, education and social security.

The enormous interest that governments are forced to pay on deposits in the banks, so as to precariously defend themselves from speculative attacks and capital flight, make it absolutely

impossible for them to achieve any amount of development with the country's own funds.

The free exchange of currencies imposed by the new economic order constitutes a lethal instrument for the weak economies of countries striving to develop. It has been a long time since money was worth anything in itself, like it was in times past, something that could be saved and buried in an urn, like pieces of gold or silver.

At Bretton Woods –as all economists know –the United States, which possessed 80% of the world's gold reserves, was accorded the privilege of issuing the worldwide reserve currency. But back then, for each banknote issued, it contracted an obligation to convert its value to gold. This obligation was fulfilled, guaranteeing the value of the paper currency through a simple procedure applied by the country's government, that of buying or selling gold in the necessary amounts when there was a surplus or deficit on the market. This formula was in place until 1971, when U.S. President Richard Nixon, after huge military expenditures and a war without taxes, adopted the unilateral decision to take the U.S. dollar off the gold standard.

Nobody could have imagined the colossal speculation that would subsequently be unleashed in the buying and selling of currencies. Today those transactions have reached astronomical levels, totaling over a trillion dollars a day.

Because of the credibility it had accumulated, the habit of using it as an instrument of exchange accepted by all, the enormous economic power of the country that issues it, and the lack of another instrument, the U.S. dollar continued to play its role.

Such a privilege was not and could not be enjoyed by the countries of Latin America and the rest of the Third World. Our currencies are simply pieces of paper in the international market. Their value is limited to the amount of the country's reserves in hard currency, fundamentally U.S. dollars. No national currency in the countries of Latin American and the Caribbean is or can be stable. The real value of a currency may be equivalent to 100 today, and in a matter of months, weeks or days, depending on external or internal factors, it could be worth 50%, 40% or even 10% of its former value. What happened in Argentina with the idyllic, utopian and folkloric attempt to maintain parity between the peso and the dollar ultimately ended, as was only logical, in disaster. Something similar happened with the real and the dollar. Countries like Ecuador ended up throwing their own currency onto the trash heap, directly adopting the U.S. dollar as the only currency in domestic circulation.

In Mexico, as a rule, every six years the change in government led to a heavy devaluation that considerably lessened the value of their currency. Brazil, as a result of the last speculative attack and the crisis of 1998, lost in barely eight weeks the almost 40 billion dollars it had acquired through the privatization of many of its best production and services companies.

Capital flight is one of the worst forms of economic bleeding suffered by the countries of Latin America in recent decades. It is not a matter of transfers of profits earned by foreign investors; it is not a matter of the plunder entailed by the payment of foreign debts that were often contracted by dictatorial and corrupt regimes that squandered and embezzled the countries' funds, or used them to cover private debts or theft and shady dealings in private banks; nor is it a matter of the growing losses caused by the well-known phenomenon of unequal exchange. Rather, it is a matter of funds created within the country, surplus value earned off the backs of poorly paid workers, or the honest savings of intellectual workers and professionals, or the profits of small industries, businesses and services.

The asphyxiating yoke that binds the Latin American countries to capital flight is the free purchase, with no restrictions or requirements whatsoever, of hard currency with national currency, a formula imposed as a sacred neoliberal principle by the international financial organizations. It is estimated that this flight of capital, in some countries like Venezuela, throughout a period of more than 40 years, has totaled approximately 250 billion dollars. Add to this figure the national funds that have escaped from Argentina, Brazil, Mexico and the rest of Latin America.

Glory to the brave Venezuelan people and its valiant leader that have just established control over the exchange rate, thus putting an end in that country to the tragedy I have just described!

I recall that at the time of the triumph of the Cuban Revolution, in 1959, the entire combined debt of Latin America was only five billion dollars. Its population at the time, 214.4 million, has increased to 543.4 million inhabitants –of whom 224 million are poor and over 50 million are illiterate– while its total combined debt is no less than 800 billion dollars in 2003.

Why has this region of the hemisphere not achieved the post-war development seen in countries like Canada, New Zealand, and Australia, which were once European colonies, less wealthy and developed than us? Is it perhaps due in part to the doubtful privilege of being the backyard of the United States? Or could it be because we are a contemptible bunch of whites, blacks, Indians and half-breeds, and thus the negation of what the studies of the human genome and scientific research have demonstrated: that there are no differences in intellectual capacity among the different ethnic groups that make up the human species? Where does the fault lie?

I began by saying that everything that has ever existed or exists today has been imposed on humanity. I fully agree with Karl Marx, who said that when the capitalist system of production and distribution no longer exists, and the exploitation of man-by-man disappears along with it, this would mark the end of the prehistory of the human race. He based his reasoning on the dialectical development of the history of our species.

This way of thinking may seem overly simple and outdated to many. Marx studied the first stage of capitalism, an era that coincided with the birth of a new class, destined to transform that society, which inevitably became exploitative and ruthless, and to open the way to a new era and a more just world. When he put forth these views, there was still no such thing as electricity, telephones, internal combustion engines, modern ships that travel at high speed and carry huge cargoes, modern chemistry, synthetic products, airplanes that cross the Atlantic with hundreds of passengers in a matter of hours, radio, television, computers. He was spared from the horrifying vision of the irresponsible way in which modern technology has been used by man to destroy the forests, erode the earth, turn hundreds of millions of hectares of fertile soil into deserts, overexploit and pollute the seas, eliminate entire species of plants and animals, and poison the water we drink and the air we breathe.

Marx, who developed his theory in England, the most developed country of the time, did not state the need for a worker-peasant alliance, nor could he have possibly perceived the colossal problem that would arise from the colonial world of that time. This was something that Lenin, his brilliant disciple, following the line of his thinking in the special circumstances of Imperial Russia, would discover and elaborate later.

In the times of Marx, who witnessed the accelerated development of the English industrial revolution and the nascent industrialization of Germany and France, no one would have been able to predict, unless he were clairvoyant, something so alien to his character, the role that the United States of America would come to play barely 60 years after his death.

While Malthus sowed pessimism, Marx inspired hope.

In those days, the geography of the planet and the laws that govern the biosphere – the land, forest, seas and air – were little known. Very little was known about outer space. The theory of relativity did not exist, nor had a single word been written about the big bang.

Marx could not have imagined that cell phones would allow people to communicate from one end of the earth to another at the speed of light, that trillions of dollars in stocks, currencies, hedge operations, commodities that do not move from where they are and other securities would change hands every day, and that the profits from speculation would outweigh surplus value.

Marx believed above all in the development of productive forces and the infinite possibilities of science and human talent. He believed that a fully developed world was an essential condition for the existence of a social system capable of producing the goods needed to fully satisfy the material and spiritual needs of society. He did not envision a Revolution in a single country, and he saw so far into the future that he was able to come up with the idea of a globalized world, such as I have always understood it, a world joined together in peace and in access to the full enjoyment of the wealth it can create. He could not have even conceived of the idea of a world divided between rich and poor. "Workers of the world, unite!" he proclaimed, and in the real world today, this could be interpreted as a call for unity among all of the manual and intellectual workers, the peasants and the poor in every country, in pursuit of what has come to be called "a better world".

For the first time in human history, our species is facing a real threat of extinction. It is endangered not only by the destruction of its natural habitat, but also by grave political threats, increasingly sophisticated weapons of mass destruction and extermination, and extremist doctrines backed by lethal and annihilating force.

These are not days of hope and glory for peace in the world. A war is on the verge of breaking out. This would not be a confrontation between comparable forces. On the one side, there would be the hegemonic superpower, with all of its overwhelming military might and technology, backed by its main ally, another country with nuclear capability and a member of the United Nations Security Council. On the other side, a country whose people have suffered more than ten years of daily bombings and the loss of hundreds of thousands of lives, mainly children, through hunger and disease, following an unequal war provoked by Iraq's illegal occupation of Kuwait, which was an independent state recognized by the international community.

The vast majority of worldwide public opinion is unanimously opposed to a new war. Above all, they are opposed to the adoption of a unilateral decision by the United States government in complete disregard for international rules and the power and authority of the United Nations, as limited as they already are. This is an unnecessary war, under pretexts that are neither credible nor proven.

Completely debilitated by the last war against the United States in 1991, Iraq -which was backed and armed to a considerable extent by the West during its war with Iran- completely lacks the capacity to counteract the offensive and defensive weaponry wielded by the United States. The United States, on the other hand, is fully capable of wiping out any risk of the use by Iraq of nuclear, chemical or biological weapons, if Iraq does in fact possess any such weapons; this is in itself highly unlikely, and even if it did, any attempt to use them would be politically absurd and militarily suicidal.

The real danger lies in the fact that such an armed attack would become a patriotic war for the Iraqi people, and no one can gauge in advance their response and resistance, how long this war could last, how many deaths and how much destruction it could cause, and what the human, political and economic consequences would be for each of the adversaries.

The world would doubtlessly be subjected to enormous economic risks, in the midst of the profound crisis it is already facing today. No one can predict what would happen with oil prices under these circumstances.

On January 29, when I spoke on the occasion of the 150th anniversary of Jose Marti's birth, I quoted and analyzed a number of speeches made by the president of the United States. I will now quote just a few lines, which speak for themselves:

"We will use every necessary weapon of war."

"Every nation, in every region, now has a decision to make. Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists."

"This is civilization's fight."

"The great achievement of our time, and the great hope of every time – now depends on us."

"And we know that God is not neutral."

(September 20, 2001)

"Our security will require transforming the military you will lead -- a military that must be ready to strike at a moment's notice in any dark corner of the world (...) ready for preemptive action (...)"

"We must uncover terror cells in 60 or more countries."

"We are in a conflict between good and evil."

(Speech made on June 1, 2002, on the 200th anniversary of the West Point Military Academy)

"The United States will ask the UN Security Council to convene on February 5, to consider the facts of Iraq's ongoing defiance of the world."

"We will consult, but let there be no misunderstanding. If Saddam Hussein does not fully disarm, for the safety of our people and for the peace of the world, we will lead a coalition to disarm him."

"And if war is forced upon us, we will fight with the full force and might of the United States Army."

(Address to Congress, January 28, 2003)

Although President Bush states his conviction that God is not neutral, the fact is that Pope John Paul II and almost all of the world's religious leaders oppose this war. Who can actually interpret the Lord's designs?

Two days ago we were discussing the future of humanity here. Some wondered what would come after globalization, whether the current world economic order would be long or short-lived, how long the new imperial system would last. I will try, at great risk, to improvise an answer to these questions, on which I have meditated more than once.

I base myself on some personal convictions in which I firmly believe. Men do not make history. Subjective factors can accelerate or delay major events, even for relatively long periods, but they are not a decisive factor, nor can they prevent the final outcome. Extremely serious accidents of human or natural origin, a nuclear war, the accelerated destruction of the environment and a relatively abrupt change in the climate can alter all estimates and forecasts made by the most visionary talents of our species. All of these things could still be avoided.

Objective factors derived from the very process of development of human society are the decisive factors.

Economy is not a natural science, it is not and cannot be exact; it is a social science. Concepts and ideas, trends and laws that have emerged at a given time in a specific social and economic system tend to endure, even when these systems may be reaching their final stages or have even disappeared. This often prevents a correct interpretation of events. The huge diversity of views and theories we hear at social science meetings or gatherings bear witness to this. The huge mistakes made in any profound revolutionary process are another good example.

Politics, I would say, is a combination of both science and art, although it is more art than science.

We cannot forget that in both cases, responsibility lies with human beings, and they are as varied and variable as the particles contained in their genetic makeup.

There is a lesson we can draw from history on which I usually insist. Great solutions can only come out of great crises. I think that there are very few exceptions to this rule.

Today we are facing a great general crisis, both economic and political. It may be the first fully global crisis.

The prevailing economic order is unsustainable and unbearable. There is no possible solution without major and radical changes. It is not necessary to provide abundant data that has been repeated here and elsewhere to understand the reality. Examples of local, regional and hemispheric crises that are repeated with increasing frequency demonstrate this. No country, rich or poor, is spared from these crises. Many political parties are totally discredited. The people are increasingly ungovernable. International financial bodies and related institutions like the WTO, or groups of super wealthy countries like the Group of 7, can no longer find a place to meet. Social movements and organizations affected by or sensitive to the tragedy the world is living through are growing in number everywhere. Modern technology has made it possible to spread messages without help from the traditional media.

Despite the fact that 800 million people are still illiterate, billions of people have access to a certain amount of information, through one means or another, and they suffer on a daily basis from the scourges of unemployment, poverty, the shortage of land, poor health, insecurity; the lack of schools, housing, minimum hygienic conditions, self-esteem and social status. Even consumerist commercial advertising itself heightens their awareness of their own unmet needs and hopelessness.

There is no way to continue this systematic deception. They cannot all be killed off. There are already over 6.2 billion inhabitants on the planet, whose population has increased fourfold in just one century. The ranks of the discontent in the Third World are joined by millions of educated workers and men and women from the professional sectors and middle classes of the developed countries, who are increasingly concerned about their own future and that of their children, as they witness the poisoning of the air, the water, the soil and the plants, and the disappearance of everything beautiful around them, a consequence of the irresponsible and anarchic use of natural resources. The continued existence of human beings in any part of the world is increasingly becoming a fight for survival.

That there is no alternative for humanity but to change its course is something that no one can deny. How will it change? What new forms of political, economic and social life will be adopted? That is the most difficult question to answer, and it leads me to the final idea I want to express.

In this case, the subjective factor will play a more important role than ever, and for that reason, it must be informed and encouraged to think. Spreading information, fostering debate and building awareness will be the responsibility of the most advanced. The World Social Forum in Porto Alegre was an encouraging example of the new methods of struggle. The 100,000 people who gathered there to reflect and discuss have presented a vision of the forces that are emerging and will push forward the changes that are objectively imposed on the world.

In Cuba, we call this struggle the Battle of Ideas. We have been fully engaged in this battle for three years and two months now. More than a hundred social programs have emerged from it, the majority of them devoted to education, culture, the spreading of knowledge, a revolution in the school systems, the dissemination of information on a wide range of political and economic topics, social work, increased opportunities for higher studies, and the in-depth exploration of our most pressing social problems, and their causes and solutions. Our goal is for the entire population to achieve a high degree of comprehensive general knowledge and culture, without which even people with a university degree could be considered functionally illiterate.

Our plans are ambitious, but we are truly encouraged by the results we have obtained so far.

Despite the fact that the world is living through a major economic crisis, our country has managed to reduce unemployment to 3.3%. We hope to reduce it to less than 3% by the end of the year, which would give us the status of a country with full employment.

Perhaps the most useful contribution to the struggle for a better world that we can make through our modest efforts will be to demonstrate how much can be done with so little, if all of the human and material resources of a society are put at the service of the people.

Nature cannot be destroyed, and the rotten and wasteful consumer societies cannot prevail. There is a field where the production of wealth can be infinite: the field of knowledge, of culture and art in all its manifestations, including a painstaking ethical, esthetic and solidarity-based education, a full spiritual life, socially sound, mentally and physically healthy, without which it would be impossible to talk about quality of life.

Can anything stop us from achieving such goals?

We want to prove what we all proclaim: that a better world is possible!

The time has come for humanity to start writing its own history!

Thank you very much.

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