

The brain drain

I mentioned something and included a quotation on this topic for an example I used in my last reflection, titled "Bush, Health and Education", which I dedicated to children. In this reflection, aimed at the first class to graduate from the University of Information Sciences (UCI), I shall delve more deeply into this thorny issue.

These graduates were the pioneers, from whom I learned much about the intelligence and the values our young people can cultivate when they study assiduously. I also learned much from the excellent staff of professors, a great many of whom had studied at the José Antonio Echevarría University Complex (CUJAE).

Neither can I avoid to mention the example of the social workers, whose organizational skills and spirit of sacrifice enriched my knowledge and afforded me new experiences, nor the thousands of educators who graduated recently, who made the goal of having one teacher for every 15 students, in the seventh, eighth and ninth grades of our junior high schools a reality. All of them began their university studies almost simultaneously, infused with the ideas which were born and were applied in the battle to have a 6 year old child who had been kidnapped returned to his family and homeland, a child for whom we were willing to give our all.

In two days, 1,334 computer sciences engineers from around the country, whose exemplary conduct and knowledge earned them university scholarships, shall graduate from UCI. Of these, 1,134 have been assigned to different ministries, which provide important services to our people, and to state agencies which manage crucial economic resources. A centralized reserve of 200 young and carefully selected graduates, which shall grow larger every year, awaits different assignments. This reserve is made up of graduates from all of the country's provinces who shall stay lodged at UCI residences. A total of 56 percent are males and 44 percent females.

UCI opens its doors to young people from Cuba's 169 municipalities. It is not grounded in the model of exclusion and competition among human beings which developed capitalist countries advocate.

Our world order appears to have been designed to foster the egoism, individualism and dehumanization of humanity.

A Reuters press dispatch published on May 3, 2006, titled "African brain drain deprives Africa of vital talent", reports that, in Africa, "it is estimated that some 20,000 skilled professionals are leaving the continent every year, depriving Africa of the doctors, nurses, teachers and engineers it needs to break a cycle of poverty and under-development". Reuters adds that "the World Health Organization (WHO) says that Sub-Saharan Africa bears 24 percent of the world's global burden of disease including HIV/AIDS, malaria and tuberculosis. To face that challenge, it has just 3 percent of the world's health workers". "In Malawi, only 5 percent of physicians' posts and 65 percent of nursing vacancies are filled. In the country of 10 million, one doctor serves 50,000 people".

Quoting a report from the World Bank, the dispatch reports that, "stymied by conflict, poverty, lethal diseases and corruption, much of Africa is in no position to compete with richer countries that promise higher salaries, better working conditions and political stability".

"Brain drain deals a double blow to weak economies, which not only lose their best human resources and the money spent training them, but then have to pay an estimated \$5.6 billion a year to employ expatriates".

The phrase “brain drain” was coined in the 1960s, when the United States began to hoard UK doctors. In that case, one developed country dispossessed another; one emerged from the Second World War in 1944 with 80 percent of the world’s gold reserve in bullions, the other had been severely hit and deprived of its empire in the course of the war.

A World Bank report titled "International migration, remittances and the brain drain", made public in October 2005, yielded the following results:

In the last 40 years, more than 1.2 million professionals from Latin America and the Caribbean have emigrated to the United States, Canada and the United Kingdom. An average of 70 scientists a day has emigrated from Latin America in the course of 40 years.

Of the 150 million people around the world involved in science and technology activities, 90 percent is concentrated in the seven most industrialized nations.

A number of countries, particularly small nations in Africa, the Caribbean and Central America, have lost over 30 percent of their population with higher education as a result of migration.

The Caribbean islands, where nearly all nations are English-speaking, report the world's highest brain drain. In some of these islands, 8 of every 10 university graduates have left their native countries.

More than 70 percent of software programmers employed by the US Company Microsoft Corporation are from India and Latin America.

The intense migratory movements, from Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union towards Western Europe and North America, which began following the collapse of the socialist block, are worthy of special mention.

The International Labor Organization (ILO) points out that the number of scientists and engineers who abandon their native countries and emigrate to industrialized nations is about one third of the number of those who stay in their native countries, something which significantly depletes indispensable human resource reserves.

The ILO report maintains that the migration of students is a precursor of the brain drain. The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) reported that, at the beginning of the new millennium, a bit more than 1.5 million foreign students pursued higher studies in member states and that, of these, more than half were from non-OECD countries. Of this total, nearly half a million studied in the United States, one quarter of a million in the United Kingdom and nearly 200 thousand in Germany.

Between 1960 and 1990, the United States and Canada received more than one million professional immigrants and experts from Third World countries.

These figures are but a pale reflection of the tragedy.

In recent years, encouraging this type of emigration has become an official state policy in a number of North countries, which use incentives and procedures especially tailored to suit this end.

The American Competitiveness in the 21st Century Act —approved by the US Congress in 2000— increased the temporary work visa (H-1B) allotment, from 65 thousand to 115 thousand in the 2000 fiscal year and then to 195 thousand for fiscal years 2001 through 2003. The aim of this increase in the visa cap was to encourage the entry into the United States of highly qualified immigrants who could occupy positions in the high-technology sector. Though this figure was reduced to 65 thousand in the 2005 fiscal year, the flow of professionals towards this country has remained steady.

Similar measures were promulgated by the United Kingdom, Germany, Canada and Australia. Since 1990, this last country prioritized the intake of highly qualified workers, primarily for sectors such as banking, insurance and the so-called knowledge economy.

In nearly all cases, the selection criteria are based on the worker's high qualifications, language proficiency, age, work experience and professional achievements. The UK program grants extra points to medical doctors.

This relentless plundering of brains in South countries dismantles and weakens programs aimed at training human capital, a resource which is needed to rise from the depths of underdevelopment. It is not limited to the transfer of capital; it also entails the import of grey matter, which nips a country's nascent intelligence and future at the bud.

Between 1959 and 2004, Cuba has graduated 805,902 professionals, including medical doctors. The United States' unjust policy towards our country has deprived us of 5.16 percent of the professionals who graduated under the Revolution.

However, not even the elite of immigrant workers enjoy work conditions and salaries like those of US nationals. In order to avoid the complicated paperwork which US labor legislation requires and reduce the costs of immigration procedures, the United States has gone as far as creating a software ship-factory which keeps highly-qualified slaves anchored in international waters, in a kind of assembly plant which produces all manner of digital devices. Project SeaCode consists of a ship, anchored more than three miles off the coast of California (international waters), with 600 Indian computer scientists on board, who work an uninterrupted 12 hour daily shift for four months out at sea.

The trend towards the privatization of knowledge and the internalization of scientific research companies subordinated to big capital has been creating a kind of "scientific apartheid" which affects the vast majority of the world's population.

The United States, Japan and Germany combined have a percentage of the world's population similar to that of Latin America, but their investment in research and development is of 52.9 percent, as opposed to 1.3 percent in the latter. Today's economic gap foreshadows what tomorrow's may be if these trends are not reversed.

That future is already upon us. The so-called new economy mobilizes immense capital flows each year. According to a 2006 report published by Digital Planet, a World Information Technology and Services Alliance (WITSA) publication, the global Information and Communications Technology (ICT) market accounted for three trillion US dollars in 2006.

More and more people have access to the Internet each day—in July 9, 2007, the figure was almost 1.4 billion users. However, in many countries, including numerous developed ones, the people with no access to this service continue to be the majority. The digital gap spells dramatic differences, whereby part of humanity, fortunate and connected, has more information at its disposal than any generation before it ever had.

To have an idea of what this means, suffice it to compare two realities: while more than 70 percent of the population of the United States has access to the Internet, only 3 percent of Africa's entire population has such access. Internet service providers are based in high-income countries, where a mere 16 percent of the world's population lives.

The underprivileged situation our group of countries faces within these global information networks, the Internet and all modern means used to transfer information and images must urgently be addressed.

A society in which millions of human beings are considered superfluous, the brain drain of South

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Published on FIDEL Soldier of Ideas (<http://www.fidelcastroruz.name>)

countries constitutes a common practice and economic power and new technologies are wielded by only a handful of nations cannot be called human, not by a long shot. Overcoming this dilemma is as important for the destiny of humanity as mitigating the climate change crisis which scourges the planet, two problems which are completely interrelated.

To conclude, I need only add:

Whoever has a computer has all published knowledge at their disposal and the privileged memory of the machine belongs to them too.

Ideas are born of knowledge and ethical values. An important part of the problem would be technologically solved, another must be cultivated restlessly. Otherwise, the most basic instincts shall prevail.

The task ahead of UCI graduates is grandiose. I hope you are able to fulfill it. I am confident that you will.

Fidel Castro Ruz
July 17, 2007
11:05 am

Date:

17/07/2007

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