

THE CAPITALIST REGIME
IS THE PAST. THE FUTURE
BELONGS TO COMMUNISM
AND THE PRESENT IS ALSO
ON ITS SIDE

FRAGMENT OF A CONFERENCE
BROADCAST THROUGH THE RADIO
STATION *ECOS DE OCCIDENTE*

by CARMEN LYRA

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Tonight I will historicize a little about my experiences in communism.

When I got fully into communism, despite my age, I didn't have an exact idea of the enemy I was facing. I believed that because it was a struggle against miserable hunger and poverty, I would find many allies. However, during the last three years of studying the structure and practices of the capitalist regime through the work of Marx and Lenin, I have come to realize the magnitude of the task and also that potential collaborators will be few because capital has them tied to its interests. I must say that in these three years I've learned more than in all those when I was a student and a teacher. I now understand that even in 1928, when Haya de la Torre¹ came to Costa Rica, I did not know for sure what imperialism was nor where lay

1. Victor Raúl Haya de la Torre (1895-1979) was a Peruvian politician who, in 1924 while in exile in Mexico for his leading role in protests against Peru's authoritarian regime, founded the *Alianza Popular Revolucionaria Americana* (ARPA) which sought to foment Pan-American anti-imperialist movements across Latin America. In 1928 Haya de la Torre held a three month lecture series across Costa Rica espousing the relationship between capitalism and imperialism.

the roots of the social injustice in which we live. Social injustice and human selfishness stirred without a defined shape in my consciousness, and my rebelliousness was composed of blurred feelings and ideas, despite my experiences as an impoverished woman who had obtained her title of schoolteacher through great agonies and sacrifices. My long years of service in public education had also failed to make me come to terms with reality. At first glance, it might seem that the schoolteachers have many opportunities to exercise their senses and enrich their reason, but this is not so. Schoolteachers experience in their field what farmers do in theirs: because their attention is set on their seedlings, they fail to notice the events happening around them. Teachers spend their time thinking about what they will teach and do not see nor dwell on the social phenomena taking place around them. And if they do see them, they have to cut them down to a size that fits the interests of the class they serve. Not long ago, a seemingly intelligent teacher said that in Costa Rica there were no economic or social problems, and if he has subscribed to Beechism or to Cortesism,² he might come to believe that either of these two gentlemen, armed only with their personal capacities and knowledge, would be able to solve the difficulties that he deems small and inconsequential.

2. Beechism refers to Octavio Beeche (1866-1950), a liberal politician, and Cortesism to León Cortés Castro (1882-1946), a fascist politician who became president in 1936. These two *caudillos* [strongmen] were important anti-communist political figures at the time.

My years at the Maternal School³ were of great importance in my life. There, I was not constrained by a model aimed at putting more or less abstract knowledge into the minds of children. My key objectives were promoting the children's happiness and health. This human labor differed from that of a primary or secondary school teacher. There are teachers who look down on the labor of the kindergarten; they think themselves infinitely superior because they teach grammatical rules, decimals, fractions, and the square roots. Without understanding, they claim with disdain that the work of the kindergarten amounts only to bathing children, giving them milk, and observing them play. Well, by bathing children from four to six years old, seeing their little naked bodies, and watching their games, I learned more than I did in fifteen years of teaching primary school, and I realized that the task of an honest teacher is not to work in such a manner that their bosses give them a good evaluation for having their students advance to the next grade. In the Maternal School, I also realized that I was trying to stitch up a gigantic hole with a flimsy thread. What else could you call the cups of milk or oats, the spoonfuls of fish oil, or the used or new clothes in which we dressed the nakedness of those children? Did we cure the problem with these

3. In 1925, Carmen Lyra founded *La Escuela Maternal de Costa Rica*. *La Escuela Maternal* was the first school in Latin America guided by Montessori principles and primarily focused on preschool-aged children six years and younger. In 1933, after publishing an article in defense of fellow Communist Party member Adolfa Braña, Lyra was removed as Director of the school.

remedies or did we simply help prolong it? When I saw little barefoot children entering the school, pale and timidly hugging the walls, not daring to step into the open, as if they might lose their balance, I felt that something had to be done beyond bathing these creatures or giving them a cup of oats or milk. Have the schoolteachers who pride themselves in teaching the square root or the parts of a sentence noticed the way that the children humiliated by poverty enter the school?

And then there were the feet of those little kids! The little feet of those children became an obsession of mine: naked feet, often hurt and wrapped in dirty rags, hobbling from their homes; little feet shod in fantastical ways, with shoes that were never new, always crooked, with the heels sticking out, with the soles ripped open in grimaces mocking their misery, fearful little toes sticking out of the ruthless openings. The three children of a shoemaker were barefoot. Their father knew how to make shoes, but his abilities were of no use to his children. I thought about the feet of children that walked, half or fully barefoot, on the soil of Costa Rica, on the soil of America, on the soil of the planet. The doctors say that hookworm can enter through any wound and that bare feet are particularly vulnerable to this infection. I managed to pass my obsession onto Don Arturo Urien, the Argentinian consul, the kindest old man that I know, who every morning came by the Maternal School to see what could be done for the children. And Don Arturo provided sandals for all those naked feet, and since then, and as long as he remained in Costa Rica, Don Arturo spent part of his income caring for the little feet of Costa Rican children. When I saw the children of the *Maternal* running or jumping to the rhythm of piano music, I wondered where those little

feet would take their owners. If things remained the same, it would be towards despair, towards pain, perhaps to prison. The prisons are filled with feet that have almost always walked bare or poorly shod.

Capitalist society is a bad teacher not just for the rich but also for the poor: the difference is that, when the poor act on the bad lessons that they have received from the society that raised them, and from the bad example set by the rich, they end up in prison.

Another point of humiliation for me was the clothes that the mothers of the few wealthy kids of the Maternal School sent for the poor children. Except for two or three of these mothers, whom I always remember fondly, the rest sent only rags, ripped, dirty, and useless. "This is for the poor children," they would say to me. As if poor children should wear those garments that nobody could use. Well-to-do people truly believe that the poor are made from a different clay.

Sometimes the mothers of the wealthy kids would say to me: "Why don't you split the children into two groups: one with decent children and one with poor children? It's just that those brats have such mouths on them and know such things . . . !"

And then I saw them neatly delineated, the two classes into which capitalist societies are divided: the rich and the poor . . . the haves and the have-nots . . . for poor children: old clothes and the shoes that the wealthy children have discarded . . .

And poor children do not even have the right to innocence . . . they live in courtyards where people do not care what they say, and later they sleep in the same bed as their mother and father, and they often live in criminal neighborhoods.

Many times I wanted to send hygiene to hell. What is the

point of speaking about cleanliness to children who dwell in wretched shacks where a single toilet and tap serve ten families or more? These shacks belong to very honorable gentlemen, whose wives and daughters frequently attend church as good Catholics. One day, I received a good lesson from a child. I used to say to them: I hope you go to bed at seven, that you sleep under a warm blanket, but with the window open, and in your own bed. The little child replied: "In my house there are no windows and, because the house is very small, there is only enough room for one bed. My mom, my four brothers, and I sleep there together." There was also a young girl, with a greenish face, swollen by anemia, who lived in a shack of gasoline cans, planks, and burlap sacks, built on the corner of a plot that someone had lent to her father. When the rain was too strong, they had to stand on the bed and watch the water flow through the floor of the shack.

But the teachers who know so much about Spanish, mathematics, geography, and history say that in Costa Rica there are no economic or social problems . . . When the 1929 crisis came along, the situation of the parents and children of the Maternal School became worse. The Maternal School kept trying its pitiful remedies that I knew would go nowhere.

Ten years earlier the European war in which ten million died and twenty million became injured had ended. The economic resurgence that came after had filled the United States with optimism. But ten years later the banks were failing, the factories were closing, and panic and the specter of hunger were closing in from all sides. In Costa Rica the effects of anarchic production were felt. At this point I understood as well that the European war had not been fought for what I initially

thought—a war in defense of motherland and culture—but instead was a struggle for oil, for world markets, and for enriching the titans of industry and commerce. After the war, I saw the chests of soldiers adorned with crosses and medals won in a battle that had left them with no arms and legs, crawling through the streets, and begging for a handout. I saw as well monuments to the Unknown Soldier that the new rich and the great industrialists and businessmen had raised as a bloody mockery of the ten million soldiers that died so that the rich could increase their millions and their power to exploit workers.

The pieces of fabric with which we tried to patch up the world at the Maternal School amounted to little more than good feelings towards our neighbors, but they did not even come close to the cause of the societal illness. I understood that all of the things that made me feel as if I were living on thorns would not come to an end while the capitalist regime dominated. And I sought out the young men that had formed a group that upheld the principles of the Russian Revolution. I did not find in this group any of our intellectuals, nor any of our career politicians who chase after delegations, ministries, and the presidential chair by employing the demagoguery with which they hide their subservience to the capitalist regime. It was made up of young men, intelligent and honest, who, without even knowing it, held in contempt the many things that I was used to respecting, but that really deserve no respect.

It was a handful of young people, of healthy conscience, that collaborated in the revolutionary effort with righteousness and smart determination. And I began working with them.

At first, the Communist Party of Costa Rica was formed by such a tiny number of militants that people mocked us in the same way they laughed at the Marxists in Russia around '83, telling us that all the Russian Marxists could fit on a single couch. We would gather in a tiny, poorly lit room with smoke-stained walls across the street from the Porfirio Brenes School. But because since then the pressure has not abated and the capitalist class continues to oppress the working people more each day, because the coffee exporters continue to pay starvation wages and drive the dollar further and further up, the Communist Party has taken root all across the country, and no tyrannical government can do much against it. Terrorism and blood would only fertilize the ground and precipitate events. The selfishness and thirst for gold of the coffee planters and the bankers are no longer assured by the ignorance and resignation of the masses.

The past belongs to the capitalist regime. It can rely on the habits and entrenched interests which it has inculcated, it is true. But on the side of communism are the discontent of the peoples and the instability of the economy. The future belongs to communism and the present is also on its side.

TRANSLATOR'S NOTE: First broadcast in 1935, *The Capitalist Regime Is the Past. The Future Belongs to Communism and the Present Is Also on Its Side* was a radio conference by Carmen Lyra, a Costa Rican writer, schoolteacher, and communist organizer. Lyra's work has received little attention from academics and translators, due to both the chronic oversight of Central America in world affairs and the intense anti-communist repression of which Lyra and her work were victims after the 1948 right-wing coup in Costa Rica. Despite dying in exile in Mexico in 1949, Lyra's literary work became central to Costa Rican letters and she remains one of the country's most widely-read authors. Her image is now stamped on a bill, and her folktales are part of the standard primary school curriculum—yet her work as an activist remains thoroughly whitewashed of any mention of communism.

The Capitalist Regime Is the Past was produced in the interwar pe-

riod, after Lyra had returned from France where she spent a year studying pedagogy. In Europe, she had witnessed the devastating consequences of the First World War. Returning to Costa Rica, she found that the recovery following the Great Depression had only led to more misery and inequity in her home country. These circumstances led her to the study of Marxism as well as to engage in communist activism, leading her to launch the national primary school lunch program and becoming a founding member of the Costa Rican Communist Party.

Lyra's duality of concerns—both personal and political, national and international—is reflected in the structure of the text at hand. Its first section deals with Lyra's experiences as a kindergarten teacher in Costa Rica, while the second addresses the consequences of the First World War and the rise of fascism. The first section is particularly concerned with the physicality of

the human body—namely, the little bodies of the children she met at the Maternal School, the first kindergarten in San José. This section highlights as well the explicitly gendered nature of the work of educating and caring for children, which is particularly noteworthy given that her literary work has been read as ‘maternal’ and cleansed of any political connotations. Lyra’s emphasis on materialism is, however, anything but reductive or economic: she is concerned with the lived experience of bodies and the lasting effects of economic inequity on the flesh of her pupils. Yet the text is not deterred by sentimentality or romanticizations. Lyra deftly connects the bodily effects of child poverty with the macroeconomic causes of the First World War and makes the case against capital and its “demagogues” as the harbingers of fascism. She argues instead for communism as the future of humanity and the only political force that could bring humanity back

from the brink of another World War, which was to begin only a few years later.

CARMEN LYRA (born María Isabel Carvajal Quesada, 1888-1949) was a Costa Rican writer, teacher, and founder of the country’s first Montessori school. She was a co-founder of the Communist Party of Costa Rica, as well as one of the country’s first women’s labor unions.

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