

CASTROISM

Theory and Practice

THEODORE DRAPER

FREDERICK A. PRAEGER, *Publishers* New York · Washington · London

I

WHAT IS CASTROISM?

THE QUESTION "What is Castroism?" inevitably leads to the question "What is the relationship between Castroism and Communism?" We must get to it sooner or later, and perhaps the sooner the better. The answer is a relatively simple one for two totally opposed schools of thought. One maintains that Fidel Castro is and always was a Communist; the other insists that he is not and could never be a Communist. The problem is far more complex for those who, like myself, think that Castro was not a Communist for all practical purposes before he took power but decided to cast his lot with the Communists sometime afterward.

Whatever position one may hold, however, the relationship between Castroism and Communism remains a problem. The first school must explain the open disagreements and bitter rivalries between Castro and the Communists until well into 1959; the second, why Castro and his closest associates now call themselves Communists and regard themselves as an integral part of the world Communist movement; and the third, why they were different in their origins and how their paths came together. Indeed, the fact that we can intelligibly ask whether or how Castroism is related to Communism already presupposes some distinction between the two, if only the distinction between a species and a genus.

For the immediate purpose of defining Castroism, and its relationship with Communism, the history of Castroism may be distinguished from the history of Fidel Castro. The movement could not exist without the man, but neither can it be reduced to the man. It exists, in varying degrees and forms, in Latin America as a whole, and its influence has even been felt in Europe, Africa, and elsewhere. Fidel Castro was born about a quarter of a century before Castroism came into existence, and therefore, he is older and in some ways more complex than his movement. Here we are primarily interested in the political phenomenon, Castroism, rather than in the personal history of Fidel Castro as a whole.

The 26th of July Movement

Historically, Castroism did not exist before July 26, 1953, the date of the unsuccessful attack on the Moncada army post in Santiago de Cuba, seventeen months after Batista's seizure of power. This act enabled Castro to emerge for the first time as an independent political figure with his own personal following. To it the "26th of July Movement" owed its *raison d'être* as well as its name. The conception of the movement appears to have been worked out concretely during Castro's imprisonment on the Isle of Pines from October, 1953, to May, 1955. It was in this period that he actually wrote, in its present form, the "History Will Absolve Me" speech, originally delivered at his trial in October, 1953. According to Melba Hernández, Castro asked her and Haydée Santamaría, the two women who participated in the Moncada attack, to take the first steps to organize the new movement. As a basis for this task, they asked him to provide them with a "program of action." Castro, it seems, had already conceived of dramatically casting such a "program" in the form of his defense speech at the trial. He wrote a letter to Melba Hernández in April, 1954, in which he mentioned "a pamphlet of decisive importance for its ideological contents and its tremendous accusations," and it was clandestinely published in June, 1954.[†] There is, therefore, reason to believe that the pamphlet was far more "programmatically" than the speech, which had not been delivered with the same purpose or audience in mind.^{*}

Politically, the pamphlet promised restoration of the 1940 Constitution and a "government of popular election," though not without a disturbing proviso for the immediate post-revolutionary period. In agriculture, it mainly advocated a land reform to restrict large holdings and increase the number of smaller ones. It made only marginal reference to the encouragement of "agricultural cooperatives," by which it clearly meant service organizations for independent landowners, rather than organs of state control. The most radical note in the speech -- but not to Cuban ears -- was perhaps a brief reference to the "nationalization" of the U.S.-owned electric and telephone companies. None of these points was new or startling. The pamphlet as a whole was little more than an anthology of familiar ills and cures, long the staples of Cuban politics, especially as practiced by the late Eduardo Chibás, founder of the party to which Castro at that time still nominally belonged.^{*}

As Cubans understood it, *History Will Absolve Me* represented a program of radical social reform well within the framework of traditional Cuban left-wing politics. For at least twenty years, there had been a well-defined "left wing," even a "revolutionary left wing," outside of and opposed to the Communists. There was virtually nothing in the social and economic program of *History Will Absolve Me* that cannot be traced at least as far back as the 1932 program of the ABC--the largest of the anti-Machado organizations -- or the 1935 program of Dr. Grau San Martín's Auténtico party, let alone the later propaganda of Chibás.

The 1932 program of the ABC had contained a seventeen-point economic plan that, among other things, had proposed the following: development and protection of small rural property holdings, gradual elimination of the *latifundios* (large landed estates), limitation on the acquisition of land by U.S. companies and measures leading to their nationalization, producers' cooperatives, nationalization of the public services, advanced social legislation, and preferential treatment for Cubans in commercial and industrial activities. The same program had put forward five fundamental principles: new men, new ideas and procedures, reconquest of the land,

political liberty, and social justice.* The 1935 program of the Auténtico party had been based on the political trinity of "nationalism, socialism, anti-imperialism."[†]

After Castro had won power in 1959, it became customary to cite the "History Will Absolve Me" speech, or rather pamphlet, as if it were the only significant document in the whole period of his struggle for power. Some pro-Castro writers have even labored to show that it foreshadowed Castro's later Communism. Curiously, however, Castro himself has felt the need to explain why it had not been more radical. He had written the document "with care," he later said, in order to set forth a number of fundamental points without making the movement he wanted to build "very small and very limited." He intimated that his published words had not been as radical as his private thoughts. "If we had not written this document with care, if it had been a more radical program -- though here it is certain that many people were a little skeptical of programs and often did not give them much attention--the revolutionary movement against Batista would not, of course, have gained the breadth that it obtained and made possible the victory."^{**} On another occasion, Castro pointed out that *History Will Absolve Me* owed its permanent value to its "vivid denunciation of all the horrors and crimes of Batista's tyranny" rather than to its "theoretical value from an economic and political point of view."[‡] He was undoubtedly right.

But he wrote something else in 1954, far less well known, which affords a much greater insight into his motivation. In that year, he sent a number of letters to Luis Conte Agüero, an Ortodoxo leader and popular radio commentator, to whom he appealed for aid in organizing his campaign for amnesty and to whom he confided some of his innermost thoughts about his nascent movement.

"I ought," he wrote on August 14, 1954, "to organize the men of the 26th of July and to unite into an unbreakable body all the fighters, those in exile, in prison, and in the street." They would constitute, he explained, "a perfectly disciplined human nucleus" and provide "the force necessary to conquer power, whether it be by peaceful or by revolutionary means." Then he went on, with rare candor:

"The indispensable conditions for the organization of a true civic movement are: ideology, discipline, and leadership. The three are essential, but leadership is basic. I don't know if it was Napoleon who said that one bad general in battle counts more than twenty good generals. It is not possible to organize a movement in which everyone believes that he has the right to issue public statements without consulting anyone else; nor can anything be expected of one made up of anarchic men who at the first disagreement take the path they consider more convenient, breaking and destroying the machine. The apparatus of propaganda and of organization should be such and so powerful that it.

would implacably destroy anyone who tries to create tendencies, cliques, schisms, or rebels against the movement."^{**}

Of the three conditions, Castro obviously concerned himself with ideology the least. What really interested him were the other two conditions, "discipline" and "leadership," especially the latter. His axiom "*La jefatura es básica*" ("Leadership is basic") was far more closely related to "leadership-principle" movements such as fascism and Peronism than to an ideology-and-party-conscious movement such as Communism. It is hard to imagine a Communist using the language of Castro in this extraordinarily revealing letter to Conte Agüero.

After Castro was released from the Isle of Pines, in May, 1955, he stayed in Cuba for only six weeks, after which he went to Mexico to prepare for his coming invasion of the island. On July 19, less than two weeks after his arrival in Mexico, he called a meeting of his adherents and formally decided to launch the 26th of July Movement.[†] It is common practice in Latin America to name new movements after dates of symbolic events, but it is not without significance that Castro should have decided to follow this pattern. His date symbolized a heroic act or gesture, not a political philosophy or revolutionary tradition. The act or gesture was all his own, something that no one could ever take away from him, the bedrock of his *jefatura*.

In August, 1955, Castro sent a message to a congress of "militants" of the Ortodoxo party in Havana in which for the first time since its formal inception he tried to explain publicly what the new movement stood for. He called it "Manifesto No. 1 of the 26th of July to the People of Cuba," and in substance, it closely followed the line of *History Will Absolve Me*. It invited the support of all Cubans who wished "to re-establish political democracy and implant social justice." It undertook to realize all "reforms" within the spirit and letter of "our advanced" Constitution of 1940. It contained a fifteen-point program of these reforms, from "distribution of the land among peasant families" to "confiscation of all property of all grafters." Yet, in this manifesto, Castro made clear that he was still an Ortodoxo, "faithful to the purest principles" of Chibás, and hopeful of getting the support of the "best Ortodoxos." In order to stay within the party but organize his own movement outside it, he carefully explained that "we do not constitute a tendency within the party; we are the revolutionary apparatus of Chibasismo." In effect, he did not claim to represent a political tendency as much as a more effective "*aparato*" to overthrow the Batista dictatorship.* Inasmuch as Chibás himself had been a consistent, militant anti-Communist, anyone who claimed to be his loyal disciple, as Castro did, was bound to have some of Chibás' reputation rub off on him.

At the end of 1955, the Ortodoxo leadership decided to participate with other opposition groups in a final effort to reach agreement with Batista for a peaceful transition to constitutional government. As soon as the negotiations had broken down, Castro seized the occasion to make a final break with the Ortodoxo party. In his letter of resignation of March 19, 1956, however, he continued to take the position that he was breaking away organizationally, not politically. "For the Chibasist masses," he wrote, "the 26th of July Movement is not something distinct from the Ortodoxia." On the contrary, he insisted that the 26th of July Movement was the true repository of the Ortodoxo faith, the authentic embodiment of Chibasismo. Ostensibly, then, the 26th of July Movement came into the world to fulfill, not to betray, the true Ortodoxo political mission. (After the victory over Batista, Castro made a pilgrimage to the tomb of Chibás, where he declared that the 26th of July Movement "was the continuation of the work of Chibás, the harvest of the seed that he planted in our people.")*

Thus, Castroism as a movement may be said to have been created in four stages. It was given its initial impulse and *raison d'être* by the attack on the Moncada army post on July 26, 1953. Its conception matured during Castro's imprisonment on the Isle of Pines, from October, 1953, to May, 1955. It was officially launched in Mexico on July 19, 1955. And it severed its last ties with any other movement, to strike out entirely on its own in March, 1956.

grams in Limbo

is impossible here to analyze, or even to touch on, all the programmatic statements made by Castro from March, 1956, to the end of 1958. Yet, it is noteworthy that, in this period, the 26th of July Movement continued to feel a need for a full "program," and various efforts were made to fill the vacuum, though they have been relegated to a historical limbo since the fall of Batista. At least two important documents were not composed by Castro himself -- the *Tesis Económica del Movimiento Revolucionario 26 de Julio* ("Economic Thesis of the Revolutionary 26th of July Movement"), written by Felipe Pazos and Regino Boti, first published in Mexico City in the magazine *Humanismo*, in January and February, 1957, and the pamphlet "*Nuestra Razón: Manifiesto-Programa del Movimiento 26 de Julio* (Our Cause: Manifesto-Program of the 26th of July Movement)" July Movement), published in Mexico City in the summer of 1957 and written mainly by Mario Llerena. Probably the most important single document, however, was the "*Manifiesto of the Sierra Maestra*," drafted by Castro and signed by him, Felipe Pazos, and Raúl Chibás on July 12, 1957.* This was actually the first and only formal program to which Castro ever put his name, if we exclude *History Will Absolve Me* as such a program. Unlike the latter, the Castro-Pazos-Chibás manifesto was published in Cuba's most popular magazine, *Bohemia*, in the issue of July 28, 1957, and thus reached many more Cubans than any previous programmatic statement by Castro's movement.† In any event, the "Manifesto of the Sierra Maestra" was taken to be an expression of Castro's more mature views in the heat of the civil war, and Castro himself directed attention to it as the basic document of the period.* He issued several other political statements and gave interviews in the next year and a half, but they were not intended to serve the same purpose.

It is not hard to understand why the "Manifesto of the Sierra Maestra," despite its exalted title, has never been cited as evidence that Fidel Castro made the kind of revolution that he said he would make. This document was primarily a plea for the unity of all the anti-Batista forces. It sought to close the breach between those who had hoped to get rid of Batista by means of peaceful elections and those who believed that he could be overthrown only by violent methods. To allay suspicions that Castro himself was not exactly a passionate devotee of democratic elections, the manifesto stated that they were precisely what the entire struggle was about. "Is it true that the rebels of the Sierra Maestra do not want free elections, a democratic regime, a constitutional government?" it asked indignantly. And it answered: "We have been fighting since the 10th of March, 1952, because they deprived us of those rights. We are here because we desire them more than anyone else." The manifesto then proceeded to spell out in detail the steps to be taken to achieve the desired objective. It insisted on only one condition: "truly free, democratic, impartial elections." It urged that "a provisional, neutral government" should preside over the elections. To lay the basis for such a government, it proposed the formation of a *Frente Cívico Revolucionario* (Civilian Revolutionary Front), made up of representatives of all

opposition parties and groups. It also told the future Frente what was expected of it: choice of an impartial, nonpolitical Provisional President; rejection of any foreign mediation or intervention and a request for suspension of all arms shipments to Cuba during the civil war; nonacceptance of any kind of military junta to replace Batista; commitment "to dissociate the army from politics"; and a "formal promise that the provisional government will hold general elections for all national, provincial, and municipal offices at the end of one year according to the standards of the Constitution of 1940 and the Electoral Code of 1943." In addition, the authors of the manifesto demanded that the provisional government should commit itself to a ten-point program that included "absolute guarantees of freedom of information, of the spoken and written press, and of all the individual and political rights guaranteed by the Constitution," an intensive campaign against illiteracy, and agrarian reform based on distributing barren lands and converting all renters and squatters into owners, with prior indemnification to the former owners, a "sound financial policy," "acceleration of the process of industrialization, and creation of new jobs."

It should be noted that the future provisional government chosen by the still unformed, all-embracing *Frente Cívico Revolucionario* was not asked to consider this program; it was told what its program would have to be -- a peculiar beginning for a constitutional democracy, irrespective of the program's desirability.* It should also be more understandable why there was so much concern about the holding of elections in 1959 after the fall of Batista. Castro himself had encouraged the widespread belief that the central issue in the struggle was the inviolability of "truly free, democratic, impartial elections." If he could not be trusted to carry out this "formal promise," which he had demanded of the proposed Frente Cívico Revolucionario, it was hard to know what to trust in the first months of his regime.

As one reads Castro's succession of statements in 1956- 58, the most striking thing about them is their increasing "moderation" and constitutionalism. For example, he had called for nationalization of the public utilities in *History Will Absolve Me* and again in "Manifiesto No. 1" of 1955, but he withdrew this demand on at least two occasions in 1958.* In virtually every document of this period, he reiterated his determination to live up to the "full enforcement" of the 1940 Constitution, including on one occasion the rights of "free enterprise and invested capital" as much as all the other constitutional rights. For the most part, he guaranteed elections in no more than a year after the fall of Batista and, to show that he meant to restore a traditional constitutionalism, gave assurances that he intended to convert the 26th of July Movement into a regular political party that would, after the revolution, "fight with the weapons of the Constitution and the Law."† His last important commitment came in the "unity pact" of July 20, 1958, which called for a common strategy of "armed insurrection," a brief provisional government leading to "full constitutional and democratic procedure," and a minimum government program guaranteeing "the punishment of the guilty, the rights of the workers, order, peace, liberty, the fulfillment of international agreements, and the economic, social, and institutional progress of the Cuban people."‡ Significantly, Castro made very few pro- grammatic statements in the second half of 1958, when Batista's regime was crumbling. The most important in this period was "Law No. 3 of the Sierra Maestra on Agrarian Reform," dated October 10, 1958, which he signed with Dr. Humberto Sorí Marín. It was a detailed working- out of the principle that those who cultivate the land should own it, and made no mention of "cooperatives" or "state farms."†

As far as most Cubans were concerned, Castroism was what these manifestoes, programs, pamphlets, and assorted declarations said it was. They had no way of looking into Castro's mind or analyzing his personality to know his real ambitions, motivations, and latent tendencies. Castroism was the creation of Fidel Castro, but he created and recreated it, partly in his own image and partly in the image of those whom he wished to win over.

Public and Private

Castro and his closest associates have clearly admitted, and even boasted, that there was some difference between Castro and Castroism, between what the man thought privately and what he made the movement stand for publicly, especially during the struggle for power.

We have already noted Castro's explanation of why *History Will Absolve Me* was carefully written in order that it should not appear to be too radical. In effect, he said that he had made it only as radical as could be politically effective or as a large number of Cubans would be willing to accept.

The 1954 pamphlet was not the only case of political double bookkeeping. This practice started at the beginning of the movement, and became more marked as it developed.

For example, Castro came dangerously close to implying that he had been something of a "Marxist-Leninist" in the Sierra Maestra but had consciously concealed it. "Of course," he said, "if we had stopped at the Pico Turquino [a height in the Sierra Maestra], when there were very few of us, and said: 'We are Marxist-Leninists,' possibly we would not have been able to get down to the plain. Thus we called it something else; we did not broach this subject; we raised other questions that the people understood perfectly."⁴

President Osvaldo Dorticós once played a variation on this theme. Soon after Castro had proclaimed the advent of the "socialist revolution" in Cuba, on April 16, 1961, Dorticós interpreted this act to mean that Castro had merely given "a name to the facts which had already occurred." When this comment aroused some speculation, Dorticós explained: "In other words, to a large extent, an integral revolutionary theory was not formulated previously for strategic reasons, wise strategy, and because it would have required a great effort of ideological training, and this effort could be avoided because the best ideological teaching that the Cuban people have received has been the incontrovertible teaching of the events themselves."⁵ These words suggest that the *timing* of the proclamation of "socialism" was purely "strategic" in the sense that Castro waited until he thought that he had enough popular support to put it over. Castro himself has often resorted to the factor of "objective conditions" to explain why he said or did something at one time and not at another. The implication has been that he wanted to do it earlier but had waited until "objective conditions" made it feasible.

But the occasion for these "confessions" must be held in mind. They were made in the year that Castro professed himself to be a "Marxist-Leninist," and it was in his interest at this time to make his present seem to be a logical development of his past. None of Castro's statements on this delicate subject can be accepted or understood standing alone, and it is necessary to view all of them in their contexts and in relation to each other

to get a reasonable facsimile of the truth. As I have tried to show elsewhere, Castro has given so many different versions of his evolution toward "full" Marxism-Leninism that it is foolhardy to jump to any conclusion on the basis of one or two quotations that, in any case, are open to more than one interpretation.* But the fact remains that Castro himself has encouraged the belief that he was guilty of dissimulation.

As we have seen, the "*Manifiesto of the Sierra Maestra*" of July, 1957, was one of the key documents of the civil war and particularly encouraged confidence in Castro's democratic convictions. Did Castro really believe in its pledges of "free elections," freedom of the press, and all the rest, or did he merely subscribe to them for purely opportunistic reasons? If we may trust Che Guevara—who should know, since his close association with Castro dated from the Mexican period—the latter was the case. According to Guevara, precisely the "democratic" provisions of the document were virtually forced on a reluctant Castro by Pazos and Chibás (though he does not explain why Castro subsequently reiterated most of them independently, as in the *Coronet* article or in the reply to Jules Dubois's questionnaire). The only thing that Guevara praises unequivocally is a short passage which called the Sierra Maestra "an indestructible bastion of liberty." Otherwise, he complains that "we were not satisfied with the agreement," that it "limited our effort," and that it was "a small halt on the road." Castro signed the manifesto, Guevara explains, because it was "progressive at that moment" to get such support, though it "could not last beyond the moment." He justifies Castro's failure to live up to the manifesto, or as he put it, the need "to break the inconvenient fetters," on the ground that a "tacit pact" recognizing the "authority of the Sierra" -- apparently to determine the future revolutionary government -- was later broken. Guevara had to make the pact a "tacit" one because he could not point to anything in the document itself to bear out such an understanding. In Guevara's authoritative version, then, Castro had really resented the "democratic" points in the manifesto because they might have tied his hands, and the only thing that had really interested him had been the alleged recognition of his future "authority."*

That power was the determining factor is even more strikingly demonstrated in Castro's explanation of his letter of December 14, 1957, to the Junta de Liberación Cubana, denouncing the "unity pact" which his representatives had signed in Miami.⁷ Ironically, Castro's main pretext for rejecting the December, 1957, pact had been its failure to include some of the provisions of the July, 1957, manifesto. After his victory, however, Castro told a different story. He revealed that he had not been interested in broad unity in December, 1957, because he had had only 120 armed men and, therefore, was not strong enough to dominate unified action. Later, when he was much stronger, he confided, he favored unity because he could dominate it. He even went on to say that he had actually decided to prevent any broad unity until the end of the war (though he signed just such an agreement in July, 1958) because he could not get the official Cuban Communists accepted by the other groups.*

A peculiar light has also been cast on Castro's agrarian- reform program of late 1958 by the Communist representative in the Sierra Maestra and later head of the Instituto Nacional de Reforma Agraria (INRA), Dr. Carlos Rafael Rodríguez. In the discussion on agrarian reform, according to Rodríguez, "some who were apparently extremist" had proposed eliminating *latifundismo* completely. But Fidel, "with an extraordinary

tactical and strategic clarity," had rejected the proposal on the ground that it would "range us against all the landowners of our country and the foreign imperialists" at a time when the fundamental task was the overthrow of Batista's regime. After he took power, however, Castro went ahead with his second step, "the liquidation of the internal enemy in agriculture," postponing the third step, against the "imperialist *latifundio*," until still later. For this reason, it appears, "Law No. 3 of the Sierra Maestra on Agrarian Reform," of October 10, 1958, did not provide for wholesale expropriation. "It was necessary to conquer the enemy piecemeal," Rodríguez observed admiringly.* (Like Felipe Pazos and Raúl Chibás, the co-signer of Law No. 3, Dr. Humberto Sorí Marin, who was Castro's first Minister of Agriculture, realized that he had been used for purposes which he had never intended, suffered disillusionment, and apparently went into the underground opposition, but less lucky than the other two, he was caught and executed.)

Thus Castro has suggested that he did not privately believe in principles and programs which he had publicly espoused, and he has suggested that he could not afford to espouse principles and programs which he privately believed in. He has intimated that he was much closer to "Marxism-Leninism" than he had ever let on, and he has confessed to his past political innocence, whichever seemed to suit his purpose best at the time. On the whole, he has been far more convincing in his efforts to show that he was not what he had pretended to be than what he actually had been.

