

Castro's retirement brings out the narcissism of the Western left

Andrew Kemp

After half a century in power Fidel Castro resigned in March this year. The opportunity for Cubans to get the political, social and economic freedom they desperately need has never been greater.

But who cares? Certainly not the left wing media. Castro's resignation was greeted by the same Western self-importance that has always infused commentary about Cuba since its revolution. For the left, Fidel Castro was an Western dissident, valiantly resisting American imperialism, not a totalitarian dictator, dragging eleven million Cubans further into poverty.

Certainly, the romanticisation of Castro's Cuba has waned since the fall of the Soviet Union. While it is still the subject of fawning adulation from some quarters—see Michael Moore's recent documentary *SICKO*—it has, in the mind of many, become little more than a poor country struggling with the global complexities of a post-Soviet world.

This is quite a different picture to the one of Cuba in the 1960s, with affluent Westerners of socialist sympathies making the pilgrimage to the communist holy land to discover what heights human organisation was capable of achieving. Jean Paul Sartre and Simon de Beauvoir are long gone, but once they walked with Castro around the primitive villages of a hopeful Cuban populace. Cuban analyst Brian Latell described a conversation between the philosopher and the revolutionary in his book *After Fidel*. Sartre reportedly once asked Castro, 'All those who ask, no matter what they ask, have the right to obtain?' Castro, with some pause, proclaimed that 'Man's need is his fundamental right over all others'. 'And if they asked you for the

moon?', continued Sartre. Castro replied, 'If someone asks me for the moon, it would be because someone needed it', to which the philosopher was inevitably 'overcome with emotion'.

The relationship between Castro and the far-left of politics has since eased. There is no split, but neither is there as much admiration. If both were logged on to Facebook, surely their relationship status would read; 'It's complicated'.

Indeed, the immediate reaction to Castro's resignation from the Western media was one of surprising calmness and solemnity. In a retrospective of Castro's reign, *The Guardian* did not discuss Castro's legacy until the final two paragraphs, where arguments from 'supporters' and 'critics' of the regime were briefly summarised. Good health care and education are cited by his supporters, along with 'independence' from the United States. Critics, according to the newspaper, have attacked Castro as a dictator who denies freedom of speech and movement.

Compared with the news story of Augusto Pinochet's death in 2006, *The Guardian's* Castro story is timid, perhaps bordering on sympathetic. The story of the former Chilean dictator's death was titled, 'Glee and grief as man "who brought Spanish Inquisition to Chile" dies at 91'. Its attack on Pinochet was justifiably merciless. It is a shame the same treatment was not given to Castro. One would like to know what arbitrary number of human rights abuses *The Guardian* has chosen before it categorises these as fact, and not opinion. Even so, R.J Rummel from the University of Hawaii, who has tracked human rights abuses across the globe over the last century, has shown Castro's regime to be worse than Pinochet's.

Pinochet, of course, was much closer to the United States than Castro was. The two were ideological opposites, but they shared a distaste for dissent and

political freedom. Pinochet infamously tried to adopt free-market economic policies; Castro stuck to the controlled socialist model. Pinochet employed Chicago-School graduates; Castro entertained Sartre. If it is the vanity of human beings to become attracted only to leaders who reflect their own prejudices, then surely these two dictators have had an extended legacy courtesy of Western narcissism.

It was in 1957 when American reporter Herbert Mathews conducted the now famous interview with Castro in the Sierra Maestra. The spirited endorsement of the Cuban revolutionary by the 57-year old reporter was highly electric in its political currents, but horrifically ignorant in its conclusions. Castro was not only 'anti-communist', but he was offering a 'new-deal' to Cubans. Already the revolution was being described in American terms.

The vanity still continues. Following Castro's resignation, both the BBC and CNN turned their attention to the question of America's trade embargo. Matters of domestic reform and the effects on the Cuban populace were again sidelined. It was frequently mentioned that Castro outlived nine different US administrations. Only last year, a plaque was unveiled in the place where Herbert Mathews interviewed Castro 50 years previously. One wonders which person the plaque is really dedicated to.

It is, after all, Cuba's political relations with the United States that has enamoured so many westerners. His country was, after all, the centre of a missile crisis that typified the peak of Cold War tensions. It is said that Kennedy had three boxes of mail on his desk—the In-Box, Out-Box, and the Cuban Box. Robert McNamara, serving as Secretary of Defence during the Kennedy years, remarked later that 'we were hysterical about Castro at the time of the Bay of Pigs and thereafter'.

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Man and horse waiting at a food distribution centre in Cuba. © Robert Paul Van Beets | Dreamstime.com

The ‘independence’ from the United States is regarded by Castro’s supporters as a worthy achievement. It is undoubtedly true that the story of this ‘independence’ is rich in political romanticism, if only for a decreasing minority. But with louder calls for an end to the US trade embargo, it is becoming unclear as to what independence will constitute in the twenty-first century. There certainly remains a degree of political and ideological independence, but there is a greater smell of hypocrisy in the air amongst those on the left who have disparaged trade liberalisation for the last century.

The United States is populated by 300 million people, leaving Cuba with another 6 billion people on the planet to trade with. Though international trade is not without complications and barriers, this predicament that the Cuban economy is now in highlights the extraordinary economic dependence the country once had with the Soviet Union before its collapse.

This dependence, as with all economic dependence, diverted proper at-

tention away from much-needed domestic reform. Compared with some of its Latin American neighbours, Cuba’s export industry has failed to catch on to the rapid economic growth of the last several decades. By the time of Castro’s rise to power, the total value of Cuba’s exports were almost double in value compared to Chile’s. Today, Chile far exceeds Cuba in exports. Economic independence from the United States is now an impossibility, and Castro has no one to blame but himself.

And if continued ‘independence’ also means continued economic socialism, then it must be recognised that the achievements of Castro’s regime remain questionable. The World Bank’s 1951 publication, *The Report On Cuba*, declared that Cuba’s ‘doctors and surgeons [were] among the best in the world’. Its infant mortality rate in 1957 was the thirteenth lowest in the world according to the United Nations—by 1997 it had become twenty-fifth lowest, with a staggeringly high abortion rate of 0.71 per live birth recorded in 1991.

The post-Soviet period was characterised by a noticeable lack of genuine reform at a time when Cuba’s economy was in tailspin. By this time, enthusiasm for the once ‘grand socialist experiment’ finally died.

As *The Guardian* insinuated (but certainly did not spell out clearly), there is little doubt that freedom of opinion in Cuba has worsened over Castro’s rule. In the late 1950s, Cuba had 58 circulating daily newspapers. This dropped to 17 by 1994.

In one of the many speeches given by Castro long ago, he concluded with the now-famous line, ‘Condemn me if you wish. It does not matter. Because history will absolve me’. Despite the efforts of a loud few, Castro is not yet absolved. History has not turned that way, but it is starting to forget him. What began as a thinly veiled fight for ‘independence’, has gradually now become a footnote in the grander history of Western democracy.

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