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In Pursuit of the Real Fidel Castro

BY ROBERT KIRSCH
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Probably the one point about which Marxists and anti-Marxists could agree in discussing recent Cuban history is that Fidel Castro is unpredictable, the Peck's Bad Boy of the revolution. The question of personality and its influence on Communist orthodoxy has always been a knotty one; dialectical materialism does not seem to offer much room for the vagaries of character, the Titos, the Maos, the Che Guevaras.

But of all idiosyncracies, Castro's seem deepest; his marathon performances on television, his unexpected pronouncements, his Pirandello improvisations. It is no accident that in *THE RISE AND DECLINE OF FIDEL CASTRO: An Essay in Contemporary History* (University of California Press: \$12.95; illustrated) by Prof. Maurice Halperin, Castro is compared to Jeckyll and Hyde, Don Quixote, as well as Louis XIV and Simon Bolivar. The range of such similes can be summed up in the question, "What next?" which, Halperin says, was asked in Cuba, in the United States and in Russia, after the missile crisis of 1962.

Frustrated Effort

Though this volume covers the first five years of Fidel Castro and the Cuban Revolution (with some projections into the following years—a second volume is planned covering 1964-69), the question is still being asked.

At the core of this book by Dr. Halperin, who spent six years, from 1962 to 1963, teaching at the University of Havana, is a profound and sometimes frustrated effort to ask the real Fidel Castro to stand up.

Dr. Halperin, a political scientist and economist, a Marxist though not dogmatic, seems on occasion bemused by his subject.

After all, a man who plays baseball, and has the locker room sense of humor to go with it, who set up a five-hour televised free-for-all conference with the prisoners captured at the Bay of Pigs, and kept his cool while one prisoner accused him of having "salted away a lot of money in Swiss banks," but who fell out with virtually all his old comrades of the revolution and imprisoned or exiled them, is not easily summed up.

The author is frank to say that his experience in Cuba was disillusioning. The promise of Castro's revolution, sold by his "tarnished but unflinching charisma" would turn to disappointment and failure. After a half-dozen years of close, personal observation in Cuba, Dr. Halperin found himself "intellectually and morally stranded."

This may color his feelings about Castro but it does not affect his efforts to be fair and objective. In the event, he has produced a portrait which seems as accurate as any we have had, and immensely useful for American readers whose confusion about Castro is the product of the extremes of propaganda which first made him a kind of liberating hero and then a mischievous villain. The irony is that his character is so variegated that he provides evidence for any caricature.

Chief Performer

The fact is that Castro has talked so much as impresario and chief performer on Cuban television that his style has at least momentarily swamped history itself. In an almost sighing tone, Prof. Halperin writes, "to untangle the moods and motives that shaped Fidel's behavior on any given occasion can be an enormously complicated matter." . . . The singular character of the Cuban Revolution . . . is another way of saying the character of Fidel Castro; for it must be clearly understood that his personality, style and leadership have dominated the Cuban Revolution as profoundly as Louis XIV molded the destiny of 17th-century France," Dr. Halperin writes.

I do not wish to leave the impression that Dr. Halperin's study is slight or solely light-hearted. There are many serious and some surprising matters covered in deep detail. But always there is the puzzle.

Contacts Told

The narration, for example, of the contacts between Castro and President Kennedy, and later President Johnson, seeking a possible easing of relations between the two countries, is both interesting and informative. But then, characteristically, Castro kept Jean Daniel, a French reporter who went to Cuba with a message from President Kennedy, waiting for three weeks in Havana. On the night before Daniel was to have left, Castro suddenly visited his hotel room and talked to him from 10 in the evening until 4 in the morning!

The implication is that if we are ever to settle the differences between America and Cuba, we'll need a Henry Kissinger who is a baseball player, a practical joker, a drama critic and a master psychologist.