

Looking Back on Fidel

Maurice Halperin

With the transformation of Cuba into an obedient Soviet satellite, the Cuban Revolution no longer excites the imagination of romantic rebels and utopian dreamers. For the student of politics, however, the early years of the Cuban Revolution remains an intriguing phenomenon, and especially the figure of Fidel Castro, its creator and guiding genius. Castro remains Cuba's Commander-in-Chief, Prime Minister, and First Secretary of the Communist Party. His leadership still plays a role in molding Cuban institutions into the Soviet pattern and promoting Soviet foreign policy, but his charisma is now circumscribed by Soviet-style bureaucratic rationality and the Kremlin's surveillance. Fidel Castro before his domestication was something else.

The extraordinary character of Cuba's Maximum Leader—and hence of the Cuban Revolution—is illuminated by the story of André Voisin's brief and tragic visit to Cuba in December, 1964. Voisin, at that time in his early sixties, was a successful French farmer, teacher, and agronomist, unknown outside his narrow field of specialization, and with no strong political views of any kind. He had published several books dealing with soil chemistry, the care and management of pasture lands, and, for more popular consumption, the relation of soil to human health. It is not clear how Castro discovered him, but once he did, he was convinced that Voisin provided the solution to a fundamental problem of Cuba's ailing animal husbandry: How to nourish cattle, especially dairy herds, on pasture grass rather than on imported feed—which the Soviet Union could not provide (indeed, it could not produce enough for its own needs) and which meant, therefore, a constant and considerable drain on Cuba's limited convertible currency.

For anyone but Fidel Castro the discovery of Voisin

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might have led to a deliberate and painstaking consideration of the country's pasturage system by local and perhaps foreign experts. This might then have been followed by some discrete experiments. The process could consume a year or more. But this was not in keeping with a man of Fidel's temperament and the unlimited power to pamper that temperament. As if inspired by a providential revelation, Fidel decided to adopt the Voisin system and to mount a massive campaign of "grass" indoctrination of the entire Cuban population. As the first step in the campaign, Professor Voisin was invited to give a series of lectures in Havana. Accepting with some hesitation, he later explained, he worked day and night for two months, and at the end of September sent the text of his lectures to Havana for translation. At two o'clock in the morning of December 3, Voisin, accompanied by his wife, stepped off the plane at the José Martí International Airport...into the waiting arms of Fidel Castro.

A few days later an elaborate inaugural ceremony took place. Voisin, in the presence of Castro, was introduced by the French ambassador to an overflow audience of students and assorted university and government notables and to television viewers throughout the island. The ambassador was no doubt astonished by the homage being paid to a fellow countryman of whose existence he must have been unaware before Fidel discovered him. When it became the Professor's turn to speak, he expressed his own astonishment. The "first revolution" he encountered, as he put it, was to find a "head of government" waiting at the airport "to greet a modest French scientist at two o'clock in the morning." There were more surprises, Voisin continued, now addressing the "head of government" seated on the platform behind him: "...you accompanied us to our residence [a witness claimed Fidel had carried some of their luggage]. Then you said with the utmost consideration that we must be very tired and that you would stay for only five minutes. Very soon I forgot how tired I was. I listened to you talk with greater and greater astonishment....It was 6 A.M. when you left."

The Professor was not exaggerating. As others have

reported, Castro in a tête-à-tête conversation casts an hypnotic spell on his interlocutor, sitting close to him, transfixing him with his piercing black eyes, gesticulating freely, occasionally patting his victim on the knee. An incessant stream of flawless rhetoric flows from his mouth, and all the while he remains totally oblivious to the passing of time or the lateness of the hour.

Voisin also related how Fidel had presented him with a "beautiful book containing a complete translation of all my lectures." He had never expected the translation to be finished in so short a time, much less appear as a printed bound volume. When he asked how it was possible, the Prime Minister explained to him that "it was team work....many translators, designers, typographers, workers...." Almost certainly nobody in the audience shared the professor's amazement. This was one of the distinguishing characteristics of the Cuban Revolution. The Commander-in-Chief would have a



1964 (Photos: RNS)

brainstorm, for better or for worse. It triggered a crash program, with total mobilization of all available resources. If it came to nothing, the failure was never acknowledged. If it succeeded, as it sometimes did, it was hailed as an example of the superiority of socialism over capitalism. In neither case were the costs taken into account.

The Prime Minister was the last to speak. He told about reading three books by the Professor and how one of them, *The Productivity of Grass* (as translated from the French into Spanish, *La Productividad de la Hierba*), expounded a "system of rotating pasturage....from the practical point of view an inestimable contribution....it can add hundreds of millions of pesos to our economy....with this system plus fertilization, present yields of our pastures can be increased sevenfold...." This is, of course, what first drew Fidel to Professor Voisin. Grass was the quick, easy "scien-

tific" solution to the intractable problem of producing fodder for Cuban cattle. As sometimes happens with nonscientists who worship science, Castro tended to confuse science with magic.

Fidel spoke for nearly two hours. Part of the time he delved into the intricacies of soil chemistry, branching out into the "scientific laws of fertilizer application" and the "dialectical laws" of pasturage, all the while revealing his amazing capacity for rapidly assimilating and expertly expounding great quantities of newly acquired technical knowledge. It was one of his frequent demonstrations of sheer brain power. It dazzled even his most sophisticated listeners and gave a special quality to his charisma. Towering as he did over his subordinates, his awareness of his unique gift was in large part the source of his unwavering self-confidence. Even Voisin was enthralled, exclaiming that Fidel was his best student and that he could not understand how a prime



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minister, with the heavy burdens of his office, could manage to master such a complex technical subject in so short a time.

What Voisin never discovered—he did not live to see his system in operation—was that Fidel's mastery of a subject could be very costly. As René Dumont, another French agronomist, explained after observing Cuban management of rotating pasturage, Castro applied the Voisin method "as if it were something like the Gospel...organizing pastures of identical size with identical fertilizer...everybody doing the same thing at the same time," without any consideration for differences of soil, moisture, and the varying capacities of unit heads to respond intelligently to local conditions. "Something is always missing," he added, "for prefabricated schemes to work out as expected."

If a cost-benefit accounting of the grass blitz was ever made, which is unlikely, it was never revealed. A painful and prolonged period of trial and error eventually produced a modest contribution to Cuban animal husbandry. Grass, however, could not be the panacea that Fidel proclaimed it to be. After the Voisin euphoria wore off, Fidel turned his attention to developing conventional feed crops and utilizing molasses, a by-product of sugar production, as a feed supplement. This time he imported British and Israeli experts, and later still others, but again without any resounding success.

(In 1965 Dr. Thomas Preston, who had gained a reputation in England by using barley to fatten cattle, and two colleagues set up an experimental station on the outskirts of Havana. Fidel promptly gave it the inflated name of Institute of Animal Science. In 1969 Preston and his English staff publicly and severally criticized the incompetence of their Cuban collaborators. This led to a crisis in their relations with Fidel and their eventual departure from Cuba. In 1967 I accidentally ran into two Israeli agronomists in Havana. They were experimenting with the cultivation of sorghum, a source of fodder in many countries. Apparently nothing came of the experiment. The presence of the Israelis in Cuba was never publicly acknowledged. It would have complicated relations with the Arab brethren.)

To return to Castro's speech. At one point he introduced his audience to another book by Voisin, *Soil, Grass and Cancer* (as translated from the Spanish). This, he explained, is "a book for farmers, but even more so for doctors." As he went on his enthusiasm mounted. "There are things in this book really new, really unbelievable, and at times breathtaking. This book analyzes the influence of soil on man as transmitted by animals and plants. It permits us to see the extraordinary relationship between human, health and soil....Professor Voisin...is an apostle of humanity, of human health and especially of preventive medicine." Then followed another dazzling display of newly acquired erudition on the role of fertilizers, minerals, and vitamins in the metabolic processes of the human organism, interspersed with exchanges of questions and answers from medical students among his listeners.

Here, then, was a second and most convenient virtue Fidel had discovered in the works of Voisin. The Professor's "humanity" dovetailed perfectly with the incessantly proclaimed socialist ethics of the Cuban Revolution. Hence it further justified Fidel's inordinate praise for the scientist whose championship of grass would provide the Cuban economy "with hundreds of millions of pesos" of new wealth. Meanwhile, as was its invariable custom, the press dutifully projected and amplified the Leader's vision. One writer, for example, declared the Professor to be a "genuine revolutionary" and hailed his visit as proof that "the Technical Revolution is beginning to become a reality in Cuba."

Voisin had still a third virtue that reinforced the others, although Castro did not make it explicit. The Professor was a Frenchman and not a Russian. Animal husbandry in the Soviet Union was notoriously backward. Voisin's presence in Cuba inevitably drew attention to this fact and must have irritated the Russians,

which could not have displeased Fidel. It was a time in which he was becoming increasingly suspicious that he had been entrapped by the Kremlin's policy of peaceful coexistence with the United States and hostility toward China. (This was five years before his unconditional surrender to Soviet hegemony.) Thus the "French connection" was something of a demonstration of independence in Cuba's foreign relations, and also of success in circumventing American pressures to cut off Cuba's access to Western technology. In his closing remarks Castro pointedly expressed his gratitude to the French ambassador for his presence and for introducing Voisin to the assembly.

On December 9 Voisin opened the first of what was scheduled to be a series of ten lectures. There was full radio and television coverage. The next day *Revolución* displayed a large photo showing Fidel seated in the audience, listening intently to the Professor. On December 14 readers of the daily press discovered a special treat: facsimile reproductions of the first twelve pages of the book containing the Professor's lectures. These were accompanied by the news that it was the start of the serial publication of the entire work. Nothing like this publishing event had ever occurred in Cuba before (nor was it likely to occur after grass failed to live up to its promise), not even with the hallowed works of Marx, Engels, or Lenin. The science of grass was like a new religion; Voisin was its prophet and Fidel its high priest. It did not matter that the sacred text, replete with tables, graphs, equations, chemical formulae, and footnotes, would be incomprehensible to 99 per cent of Cuban newspaper readers.

Like the entire staging of Voisin's visit, this was part of Fidel's instinctive and frequently expensive showmanship, undoubtedly effective with his constituency because it projected an element of sincerity. But it was also eminently self-serving showmanship. Here was the Commander-in-Chief seeking the practical benefits of science for his people; discovering the life-giving science of grass; modest in the presence of an unheralded scientist; an eager student of science; and now incorporating the masses into the process of scientific learning. Foreign admirers of Castro who were impressed by the brilliant display of his talents failed to see the vanity and folly they often concealed.

On Monday evening, December 21, there was no lecture. Castro appeared in the auditorium to announce that Professor Voisin had died of a heart attack a few hours earlier. The next morning the news was headlined on the front page of *Revolución*. That afternoon Voisin was given a state funeral, with Castro delivering the oration. The Professor was buried as a hero and martyr of the Revolution. The final installment of his 263-page book appeared in *Revolución* on January 26, 1965. Later an institute was named for him. In the years that followed Madame Voisin would appear from time to time among the notable guests invited to celebrate the July 26 national holiday. But Voisin's "revolution," like so many others, has passed from this earth leaving few traces.