

A Comparison of the Political Philosophies of Fidel Castro and Ho Chi

Minh

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Abstract

Fidel Castro's first and principle ideology is that of nationality and political fluidity so as to best cope with the ever-changing world; he is secondly a communist dedicated to the cause of revolution throughout the world. Ho Chi Minh's principle ideology was communism; for it was socialist thought that first formed his own ideology. Nationalism assumed a lower position in Ho's political philosophy.

Fidel Castro first spoke out against Fulgencio Batista as a patriot dedicated to improving his country. Once he finally succeeded in revolution, Cuba faced desperate times and, in order to ensure the country's stability, Castro pledged loyalty to the nations of the socialist bloc. Ho Chi Minh traveled to France where the communist party befriended him, and he adopted Marxism and Leninism as ideologies for him to follow. After years of struggle, Ho achieved his nationalist goal: the unification of all of Vietnam.

The information gathered for this report consisted of a few primary sources, speeches given by Castro and Ho, and books, biographies, and Internet sources. The various works chosen for use were specifically selected to analyze the prevailing ideologies of these revolutionary leaders.

This paper argues that Castro started on his path of politics as a nationalist, but then became a communist. Conversely, Ho set his feet first upon the path of communist thought, but ended as a nationalist before his country's dream of unification was realized.

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Introduction

The motives and decisions of political leaders have always fascinated me because of their fluidity between ideologies that best suit the changing times and current world powers; meaning that, whichever power seems to be winning a war or to be dominating economically, that government's ideology is adopted in hopes that aid and alliance might be had. I can think of no other political leaders as crucial to the world of twentieth century third-world politics than Fidel Castro and Ho Chi Minh. I say crucial for indeed they were the focal points in two of the United States' most trying times: the Cuban Missile Crisis and the Vietnam War.

Fidel Castro and Ho Chi Minh were nationalists tired of the monopolies on their respective countries, and when the time was right they rose up in rebellion; but they needed support to ensure that their new nations could remain free. They turned to communism for support. Yet, how and why did the revolutionaries use and adopt communism to propel their nationalistic movements and what were their true convictions towards Marxism? It is the purpose of this paper is to not only answer such a question but also to prove that Fidel Castro's primary ideology was nationalistic and secondly communistic whereas Ho Chi Minh's primary ideology was communistic and secondly nationalistic.

Fidel Castro

Setting the Stage for Castroism

During the 1940s and 1950s Cuba was under the control of the dictator Fulgencio Batista. The government was corrupt and the capital, Havana, was a cesspool teeming with gangsters and the notorious mafia. It was during this time that Fidel Castro Ruz became a member of the social-democratic Orthodox party and became a vocal opponent of the Batista dictatorship. On July 26, 1953, Castro led an attack on the Moncada army barracks that failed, but he was hailed as a hero. At the time, his political ideas were nationalistic, anti-imperialistic, and reformist. He was not a member of the Communist party. In 1955, Castro went into exile in Mexico where he founded the 26th of July Movement and vowed to return to Cuba in order to fight against Batista. Fidel Castro along with Ernesto “Che” Guevara and eighty others returned to Cuba in December of 1956 and proceeded to attack the Batista regime using guerrilla tactics until Castro himself came to power in 1959 (some sources state that he did not truly come to power until as late as 1961). However a marked change had occurred between the time of Castro’s exile and his coming to power: he had become a communist.

Castroism

Communist ideology is not “...why Cuba became communist: not because of the pressures from the people, nor because of the machinations of the old-guard Communists of the PSP (Popular Socialist Party), nor because of any infatuation with Marxism-Leninism on Castro’s part but because of Soviet nuclear power (Suarez xi).” The support of the Soviet superpower must have been the key factor in Castro’s conversion to

communism, but one must not forget that Fidel Castro was a nationalist first and foremost and that his main political strategy was to side with the most supportive power. The essence of Castroism was political fluidity. Suarez further sustains this idea of Castroism or political fluidity in that “Fidel himself did not start out as a communist – but possibly a demagogic dictator of the type of Peron, or even a constitutionally elected president (Suarez xi).”

So it is seen that Castro was not in essence a communist but rather a nationalist that, through his own fluid politics, sought to bring stability to a struggling homeland. Indeed, it could be said as well that Castro’s massive efforts to nationalize all foreign and domestic business was a gesture to the Soviet Union as if to say “I do what you do, I believe what you believe, come help me out.” In the end, the many actions made by Castro to gain the communists’ support paid off as Cuban sugar began to be exported to the Soviet Union and the revenues from a healthy economy began to improve the life of the Cuban people. Still, it is important to emphasize that Castro believed in Castroism and its tendency to manipulate communism to suit perceived needs.

Communism dictates a revolution of the working class against the bourgeoisie to create a sovereignty in which the essential feature is the state, i.e., the people. How is it then that Castro was a product, not of the cane fields of Cuba, but of the hall of Havana University (Stormer 51)? How can one of the bourgeoisie even begin to be considered a communist? It then must be considered if Castro was part of the communist vanguard of his revolution sent to awaken the “hopelessly stupid” proletariat from their false consciousness. If not, then, the Cuban revolution must have been a communist revolution without a true working class leader who believed in the Marxist doctrine. The true

communists knew these things in 1961 and for that reason they denied Cuba admission to the socialist bloc. Realizing that drastic measures must be taken if Cuba were to become recognized among the socialist bloc, Castro made one final appeal to the communists.

“In a television appearance on December 1, 1961 he disclosed that he (Castro) had always been a Marxist-Leninist, pledged that he would continue to be one until he died, and tried to dispel any doubts or reservations that might remain concerning his real ideological position. This he evidently did to overcome the resistance of the socialist bloc, to establish himself as the leader of the Communist movement in Latin America, to maintain the initiative against the United States, and incidentally to obtain from the Soviet bloc the consumer goods he needed so desperately.” (Suarez xi-xii)

This was truly Castroism at its finest hour. Cuba had already been receiving aide from the Soviet Union, thus straining political ties with the United States and leaving Castro with no alternative but to swear unflinching loyalty to the socialist bloc.

Castroism versus Communism

Though Castro now professes to be and most indeed is a communist, conflict arose between Castro and the socialist bloc previous to his bold speech to the socialist bloc. This conflict may be described as the problematic relationship between Castroism and Communism. “The first school must explain the open disagreements and bitter rivalries between Castro and the Communists until well into 1959 (Draper 4).” Again it seems that Castro, and therefore Castroism, does not wholly adopt communism but is

rather an opportunistic political philosophy. If the United States had befriended Castro and his nationalistic movement, then Castroism might have favored relations with the United States rather than its Cold War enemy. Fearful of United States aggression, Castro was very careful in the development of his relations with the Soviet bloc. “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.’ 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 support to put it over (Draper 17).” It appears that Castro’s opportunistic politics adopted communism to support his newly revolutionized Cuba but the conversion to communism was gradual and strategic so as to benefit Cuba as much as possible. The most interesting thing though, is Castro’s pledge that he was and would forever be a Marxist-Leninist. Once stating this, he could never break his pledge; it would be contrary to his deep sense of machismo. While Castro had little exposure or ties with communism before his rise to power, another man, on the other side of the globe, would fight the same nationalistic fight in a most different and difficult way: Ho Chi Minh.

Ho Chi Minh

Ho’s Short Road to Communism

Ho Chi Minh also rose out of the prominent class of society and therefore Ho is not of the proletariat and should not have been destined to rise up against the bourgeoisie;

yet, Ngyen That Thanh, Ho's given name, rose up to overthrow the colonial French and the U.S. supported South Vietnam. He left his home in the village of Kimlien in 1911 and was employed as a cook on a French steamship liner. After World War I, Ho engaged in the activities of the French Communist Party and was later summoned in late 1924 to Moscow for training. One may ask as to how and why Ho became a socialist when his first and foremost ideas were purely nationalistic and wholly directed to the independence of Vietnam from French colonialism. Ho said, while in Paris and beginning to attend the French Communist Party, that

“At that time, I supported the October Revolution only spontaneously. I did not yet grasp all its historic importance. I loved Lenin because he was a great patriot who had liberated his fellow-countrymen; until then, I had read none of his books. The reason for my joining the French Socialist Party was because those ‘ladies and gentlemen’ – so I called my comrades in those days – had shown their sympathy with me, with the struggle of the oppressed peoples. But I had no understanding as yet of what a party, a trade-union, socialism, and communism, were.”

Ho was befriended by socialists and, by their group persuasion, became a socialist himself. He was curious and “wanted to know – and what was not debated in the [Socialist Party] meetings – was: which International sided with the peoples of the colonial countries (Ho 251).”

One can only wonder if Ho did not realize that the members of the French Socialist Party were, of course, French and therefore the enemy of his nationalistic views, for, the French had turned Vietnam into a colony. However, simply by the fact that he

was in France consorting with French socialists, not all French would have been pro-imperialist; yet, France was still responsible for the injury done to Vietnam and its hope for independence. And was not independence what Ho was fighting for? How, then, could he be befriended and persuaded to join a group of his enemies? If all that intrigued Ho was Lenin's patriotism, then why consort with those who did not share the same patriotic dream? Ho Chi Minh must have been desperate; he must have thought that the only power and support that could overcome the French imperialism was in the organization afforded by a communist party supported by the Soviet Union.

Freedom and Betrayal

After founding the Indochinese Communist Party (ICP) in 1930 and the Viet Minh after the outbreak of World War II, Ho Chi Minh raised a guerrilla army to fight the Japanese occupation in Vietnam. At this time, all of Ho's actions seem to be purely nationalistic because no communist agenda had as yet been presented specifically for Vietnam even though the agenda of the Communist Party of Indochina had been drafted in 1930. Ho proclaimed independence for Vietnam in September of 1945, but later agreed that Vietnam would remain an autonomous state within the French Union – this was the betrayal that was made by Ho against his country. Even though Ho had little choice to allow the French force to return because the British were given jurisdiction of Vietnam after World War II and gave France permission to return to Vietnam. If Ho were a true patriot, he would have fought against this new invasion. It is for this reason that it is said that he betrayed his country. This betrayal allowed the French forces to return to Vietnam, and "...Minh instructed the people to display flags. Ho showed to the

French that people appreciated their coming back...(www).” Richard Nixon, in No More Vietnam, wrote: “While nationalist groups refused to cooperate with the French, the communist Viet Minh chose to collaborate with the French. Ho signed the so-called March 6 agreement that brought the French army back into Northern Vietnam. His greetings were effused ‘I love France and French soldiers. You are welcome. You are heroes.’ Some say Ho compromised with the French to force the Nationalist Chinese to withdraw. But one week earlier, China had pledged to remove its army in a separate agreement with France. As to the real motivation of the communist, Ho’s right-hand man, Le Duan, later said it was to ‘wipe out the reactionaries.’ For the Viet Minh, this included all nationalists.” This betrayal seemed to be set aright, however, for, from 1946 to 1954, Ho Chi Minh and his forces fought against the French culminating in the French defeat at Diembienphu. At the Geneva conference in 1954, which was to settle the outcome of the war, Vietnam was divided at the 17th parallel with the intention that elections would be held in 1956 for the purpose of reuniting North and South Vietnam. When the puppet government in South Vietnam under United States control refused to hold elections, Ho organized guerrilla forces, the Viet Cong, to fight for Ho’s patriotic dream.

Ho’s Reason for Socialism

Though Ho had many communist dealings prior to his coming to power in Vietnam, his aims while in Vietnam seemed nationalistic until a certain point. When at first Ho embarked upon the path of socialism, he stated that, “Step by step, during the course of the struggle, by studying Marxism-Leninism while engaging in practical

activities, I gradually understood that any socialism [would] liberate the oppressed nations and the working people throughout the world from slavery (Ho 252).” After being thus convinced that socialism could free oppressed peoples, including the people of Vietnam, Ho was wholly dedicated to the communist cause. Now dedicated to the communist cause, Ho would rule as the communist did, eliminating the young men, many who played an important role in the overthrow of the French, in the bloody Land Reform from 1953-1956 only because they were the sons of the so-called “wicked landlords.” The culmination of Ho’s deeds were a unified Vietnam with an improved daily life for the common man, and extermination the old nationalistic revolutionaries whom Ho felt were no longer needed and posed a threat to his new government. In the end, Ho’s nationalist cause was subverted because he himself became subverted, wholly converted to the socialist way.

Comparison of Ideologies and Circumstances

Patriotism as a Beginning

It is my opinion that Fidel Castro began as a patriot, as a nationalist fighting for a cause, but he was manipulated in certain ways so as to allow his ideology to adopt socialism, but that Ho began as a communist with limited nationalistic views because communism was the first ideology he embraced but he did so hoping that it would unify and forge an independent Vietnam. Castro’s Castroism and Ho’s rhetoric both were designed to accomplish the respective leaders’ goals; but as dependency on communist support for Castro and firm in Marxism-Leninism for Ho crept into the respective ideologies, the original goals seemed to have been swept away. The reason why their

initial goals were forgotten or replaced was because of their early failure in starting nationalistic movements: Castro's failed attack on the Moncada army barracks and Ho's expulsion from China and imprisonment in Great Britain because of communist activities. The significance of these early failures serves to show how after such failure how communist thought appealed and, perhaps, revived hope of revolution. To further clarify the point that Castro was primarily a patriot while Ho was primarily a communist, the historical points to prove such a hypothesis must be overviewed.

Fidel Castro was an early and vocal opponent of Fulgencio Batista, and his views at the time, the reasons for which his attack on the barracks occurred, were nationalistic, anti-imperialistic and reformist – he wanted change and a better life for people. Ho, similarly, was nationalistic but was easily converted to the socialist order before a purely nationalistic rhetoric of his own could be formulated. With Castro and Ho's roots of ideology exposed, one can now see that Castro, because he had a nationalistic rhetoric first, was first a patriot, and that Ho, because his first adopted rhetoric was communism, was first communist. With such an approach to the question of whether patriotism or communism was the first and foremost ideology of each revolutionary leader, one may find the circumstances produced by the actions of Castro and Ho not as confusing to explain.

From One Ideology to Another

As stated above, Fidel Castro was at first a nationalist, whereas Ho Chi Minh was a communist. A puzzle that remains is to understand how and if these two switched from one ideology to another because of extenuating circumstances or because of a true belief

in Marxism. The transition from being more nationalist than communist, more believing in Castroism than communism, occurred because of the near economic collapse of Cuba and because Castro realized that Cuba could not survive on its own. This was only roughly two years after Castro's triumphal entry into Havana. What is proposed, then, is that the primary reason for Castro's speech and dedication to the socialist bloc and socialism itself was to preserve his country that he had worked so hard to liberate. If Castro could convince the Soviet Union and its communist allies to support Cuba, then all would be well and Castro would have all that he wanted as "A ruthless but effective political opportunist with demonstrated ideological fluidity (Thomas 3)." Once committed to the communist cause, Castro did everything that would be expected from a dictator even "proceeding, in classic communist fashion, to execute thousands of Cubans in bloody firing squad marathons (Stormer 97)." Ho Chi Minh, a communist from the beginning of his ideological thought, did not change as much as it seems that Castro did; however, his constant negotiating with the power most likely to free Vietnam of a stronger and more immediate threat made it appear as if he was so nationalistic as to adopt any ideology that would benefit Vietnam the most. It is my opinion; therefore, that Ho never changed political philosophies but rather was a chameleon communist – taking on whatever ideology that would best keep him safe.

Results of the Ideology Switch

As a result of Castro's speech and pledges, Cuba received loans and support until the fall of the Soviet Union. However, not all good came of converting to communism because,

“Fidel Castro’s powerful position as the president of the Cuban Agricultural Reform Institute has been turned over to Cuban Communist Carlos Rodriguez...The question which now arises is whether Castro controls or is controlled by the new president of the C.A.R.I.... Have the Communists now completely captured and are they retaining Castro as a showpiece? It is possible that a man as vain and as courageous as Castro would turn over leadership without a struggle? Has there been such a struggle and has the Cuban Communist party won it? (Stormer 188-189).”

Castro may have lost his power and authority, but because he is still President of Cuba even today, I believe that he was never wholly taken out of power. Ho, because of his chameleon communism, outwardly switched ideologies between communism, favoring the French, gaining the U.S. support after World War II to gain independence, and back to communism. The result of such constant shifting was the organization of nationalist-minded groups opposed to such political tactics and whose goal it was to Vietnam immediately without seeking to pacify larger world powers, like the French and the Soviet Union. These patriots were put down, executed, with the help of the French. In short, Castro, it seems, changed ideologies to preserve his country in a bold maneuver; while, Ho switched between ideologies to ensure his own seat of power and Vietnam’s independence.

Conclusion

Fidel Castro Ruz was firstly a nationalist, a man of the cult of machismo who promised loyalty to the communist cause in exchange for the support of his homeland,

and, lastly, a communist with an agenda for violent revolution. Nguyen That Than, Ho Chi Minh, was firstly a communist, a political deceiver whose former supporters paid with blood, and, lastly, a patriot dedicated to the unification of an independent Vietnam. The rhetoric of Castroism and the Vietminh served well for a time, but, when national crises occurred, the military and economic assistance obtained from the other countries of the socialist bloc are what saved Cuba and Vietnam but also led them down the course of communism because it would be ungrateful or even hostile to accept aid but not give something in return. The only thing that these countries could give over to the communists was their national ideology that was then mutated by their saviors into communism. Castro and Ho were nearly helpless to stop that chain of events once it started, but they went about achieving their goals in the manner that they did, and communism being integrated into each country: a system to rule supremely over everything once adopted. Logically, then, it ruled over Castro and Ho as well once adopted, and, by observing at what time it was adopted, we will know at what time each leader accepted communism and whether or not it was their primary ideology.

The only question now remaining is this: At what time did Castro and Ho adopt communism? The answer will either prove or disprove the entire thesis. Obviously one need not reemphasize Ho's very early adoption of communism. That fact supports the thesis entirely. The time at which Castro accepted communism is unclear, but a Senate report disclosed that U.S. officials had heard Castro broadcast, over a radio station that he had captured during the riots during the Foreign Ministers Conference in Bogota in 1948, saying, "This is Fidel Castro. This is a Communist revolution (Stormer 94)." Since this controversial evidence occurred before Castro's attempted coup in 1953, one may doubt

the claim of Castro being primarily a patriot, but, since no other supportive evidence can be found, then the thesis must hold true that Castro was truly a nationalist in the beginning.

Fidel Castro Ruz was a patriot who sold his own ideology to preserve Cuba, and Ho Chi Minh was a communist, always looking up to Marx and Lenin, and undisturbed by the fact that he gave up his own ideals so as to pacify and win over those powers that would benefit him the most.

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