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BOOK REVIEWS

Fidel! Castro's Political and Social Thought. *Sheldon B. Liss.* Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1994. xv + 246pp. \$60 (hard back), \$18.95 (paperback).

Reviewed by **BILL MAURER**
Stanford University

Sheldon Liss has done his readers the service of providing a synthesis of the speeches and writings of Fidel Castro. The result is an excellent resource for information about Castro's positions on a number of issues, from theoretical debates within Marxism to foreign policy and economic development to the role of sport and popular culture in forging revolutionary consciousness. The book will be useful for scholars of Latin American social thought and for undergraduate-and graduate-level classes on Latin America, the Caribbean and contemporary Marxisms.

The book contains nine chapters and a preface outlining its rationale. Rather than assessing the Revolution or providing an exegesis of Fidel's thought, Liss sets out to convey the Cuban leader's ideas in their own terms. For instance, Liss writes that he is "more interested in what Fidel has to say about the role of women in the Revolution than in appraising the gains they have made in Cuba over the past three decades" (xii). The result can be frustrating at times; readers interested in the background context to Castro's positions will not find it here. Endnotes direct the reader not to secondary or historical sources but to Castro's own speeches and writings. This ethnographer wanted to hear more about Cuban people's assessments of revolution. But as Liss writes, such is not the task of this book. As an explication of the development of Castro's thought, the book provides fascinating insight into the theory and praxis of revolution. As an account of a body of theory directed to radical action, the book poses important challenges to bourgeois social thought.

Chapter 1, "The Revolutionary Leader," and Chapter 2, "Preparing For Socialism," are primarily biographical, chronicling Castro's early life, education, and rise to power. Chapter 3, "Precursors, Philosophy, and Ideology," explores the impact of thinkers such as Jose Marti and Che Guevara on Castro's project. Exposing a thread that runs throughout Liss's account, this chapter argues that Fidel's Marxism is not merely the result of his studies of revolutionary thinkers. Rather, according to Liss (and apparently to the *jefe* himself), Fidel's Marxism is the product of first-hand, practical knowledge of the impact of capitalism in the Third World in general and Cuba in particular (29). This reviewer wished to see a fuller discussion of this historical context.

In Chapter 4, "Foundations of Cuba's Marxist State," Liss enunciates Castro's social thought and theory of revolution, his engagement with Marx, Lenin and Gramsci, and his approach to socialism and to the role of the party. Chapters 5 and 6, "International Concerns" and "The Americas," explore Fidel's thinking on Cuba's foreign affairs, Cuba's former relationship with the Soviet Union and its evolving response to the situation in Eastern Europe, and its role in opposing U.S. neo-imperialist policies in the Americas. Chapter 7, "Democracy, Human Rights, and Freedom of Expression," and Chapter 8, "Social Progress," are concerned with Cuban civil society and take up liberal criticisms of Castro's Cuba as authoritarian. Finally, Chapter 9, "Final Observations," discusses Castro's position on the inevitable transfer of power to a new generation of revolutionaries born under socialism and committed to the struggle.

The image of Fidel that emerges is of a modern humanist firmly located in the European Enlightenment and positivist tradition yet at the same time critical of its applicability to societies founded in colonial relations. Fidel speaks to us of his commitment to "science," "progress," "humanism, and "democracy." Liss writes that, "[l]ike Marx and Hegel, Fidel views history as progressive" (41). "He sees people, as did Aristotle, as essentially social animals, capable of evaluating and solving their problems" (39). Like Marx, Fidel believes that "human emancipation ... depended upon human control over the forces of nature, or the advance of science" (40). And Fidel holds out the promise of "universal" culture to overcome divisive forces of nationalism, racial conflict and sexism (159-161).

But like many national liberationists, Castro blends European modernism's appeals to universal human values with some very "non-modern" notions of primordial identity, cultural uniqueness and,

especially, *cubanidad*. Like a modernist, Castro is critical of pan-Africanism, yet like a liberationist he maintains Cuba's crucial connections to "African" culture in his claim that Cuba is a "Latin-African nation" and that "African blood flows through our veins" (92). As Liss quotes, "We shall always obstinately refuse to be servile copies of other people's recipes" (91).

The tension between universalism and particularism is apparent in Castro's position on sovereignty. Surprisingly, perhaps, Castro links sovereignty to trade and exchange — not production — in arguing for a kind of Latin American "free trade" zone: "Economic integration, coupled with socialism, would enable Latin America to prosper, as has economically integrated Western Europe" (126).

Fidel's modernism impacts his vision of the new society and the "new socialist person." In moving away from "profitability" as a guide for sociopolitical action and toward "moral incentives," for example (90, 129-130), Fidel seems to move toward romantic particularist notions of identity, be it cast as "African," "Latin American," or "Cuban." For Castro, nationalism can be a vital force as well as "chauvinistic" (98), and he is at pains to "reconcile nationalism with internationalism" (31, 75). Castro, unlike Marx and Engels, extols the "nuclear family" as the primary unit of society and the guardian of "tradition" (162). This tendency has recently been critiqued by Marvin Leiner (*Sexual Politics in Cuba: Machismo, Homosexuality, and AIDS*, Westview, 1994). Castro prescribes "universal culture" to overcome racism (159) and frequently invokes Rousseau (165). He locates religion in a "private" sphere (170). There are connections, then, between Castro's thought and classical liberalism, which subordinated "primordial" attachments to a modern civic order and at the same time relegated such attachments to the realm of the "private" and ahistorical, as Marx noted in "On The Jewish Question."

But Castro is not at one with the liberal model. A recurring theme especially in discussions of dissent (Chapter 7) is the opposition between action "within the revolution" and "outside the revolution" (144). This opposition parallels in some sense, but does not replicate, the liberal "public/private" opposition, except that the "within/outside" dichotomy relies on the idea that the body politic serves "civic friendship," not private interests (129-130). What kind of new socialist person, then, does Castro's thinking suggest? Decidedly not a liberal one where private desires and identities manifest themselves in the home and then clamor for recognition and resources in the public sphere. But because Castro's thinking here is self-consciously oppositional to and in essence a negative

critique of the liberal model of human nature, it is difficult to state in positive terms what his new socialist person would look like.

There are frequent references to and echoes of Gramsci in Castro's thought. Like Gramsci, Castro believes that one must not wait for the objective conditions for revolution, but must act to bring those conditions about (36), and begin to build a revolutionary superstructure (144) – hence Castro's emphasis on popular culture and sport (144-148). Like Gramsci, Castro emphasizes strategic praxis and continuous repositioning. The result is a "pragmatic, not theoretical, form of Third World Marxism" (47), a "flexible" scientific socialism that creolizes Marxism, transforming it "from a European to a Latin American form" (177).

Castro's theoretical "inconsistencies" are hence attributable to the flexibility of his hybrid Marxism. It is this hybridity, I believe, that becomes the strength of Castro's social thought and that provides a blueprint for praxis. Liss's book is a powerful reminder of the centrality of Cuba and Castro in fashioning alternatives to capitalism in our increasingly creolized world.

Silent Depression: The Fate of the American Dream. Wallace C. Peterson, New York: W.W. Norton, 1994. 317pp. \$25 (cloth).

Reviewed by **ADIL H. MOHAMMED**
Sangamon State University

Using the criteria of (1) changes in real weekly earnings for individual workers in the private nonagricultural economy, (2) changes in family real income, and (3) the average annual rate of change in productivity, Professor Peterson in his insightful book *Silent Depression: The Fate of the American Dream* concludes that the American economy has been in silent depression since 1973. The data show that the purchasing power of the earnings for a typical worker was 15.5% below what it had been 18 years earlier. The rate of growth for median family income slowed over the years 1974 through 1991. After 1973, the annual average rate of growth in output per hour in the nonfarm business sector dropped to 0.7% a 72% decline in the growth rate of this key indicator.

One of the major consequences of the ongoing silent depression is the nightmare of downward mobility, which was greatest for black families, for families headed by a woman, and for families with a head under 35 years old. In contrast, the well-known bourgeois