



Universiteit Leiden

**The Social Construction of Charisma: Cuba and the case of
Fidel Castro**

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MA International Relations: Specialization International Studies

Leiden University

July 2017

Word Count: 9546 (Including Footnotes)

Abstract

Fidel Castro's leadership and legacy in Cuba has been a fascinating and mystifying topic of matter in the field of International Relations. Much has been written and contended on how Fidel came to be the charismatic leader of Cuba and how he was able to maintain staying power and achieve legitimacy. The concepts of authority and legitimacy are attributed to the phenomenon of leadership and development of a society. This thesis will look at the roles of society, of Cuba in the twentieth century, and discourse and visual elements in the social construction of charisma in Fidel's leadership. In addition, there will be an overview of Fidel's background and how the approaches of gender, age, class, and race facilitated the social construction of Fidel's charismatic leadership and the social reality of Cuba. The theoretical framework of constructivism and the methodological approach of content analysis will be utilized in order to examine how Fidel go to be the charismatic leader of Cuba.

Key words: Fidel Castro, charisma, content analysis, visual studies, legitimacy, authority

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1) Introduction

Fidel Castro's regime in Cuba has time and time again fascinated the world with its ability to maintain power and legitimacy. Cuba has sustained the status of the only 'Communist' nation-state in the Western Hemisphere. Many other Communist regimes have fallen in the post-Cold War era, but Castro's regime has been able to withstand and survive all these years, despite external and internal obstacles. The political climate of Cuba under the control of Fidel has been characterized by authoritarian mechanisms of power. He had the means and tactics to trample any effort of political change or reform in the country, yet there was an absence of any visible internal threat to the regime.¹ The high level of consolidated political legitimacy that the regime has maintained over the course of its history has been contributed to its government and its capacity to govern.² In addition to the level of institutionalization and consolidation of power in Cuba, the leadership style of Fidel had facilitated his attainment of regime legitimacy and staying power since the conception of the Cuban Revolution in 1953. Throughout the world, "leadership is a crucial variable of political development."³ In Latin America, Cuba exemplifies the important role of leadership and how the different type of leadership style a leader possesses, is critical to the way the country is governed and how it interacts on the international arena, and to its development of its society. The relationship between Fidel and Cuban society must be explored in order to exemplify how and what social reality was constructed. Analyzing the type of society in Cuba during the twentieth century and Fidel's social background allows us to understand how Fidel got to be the charismatic leader of Cuba. Visual elements and discourse also play a role in the construction of charisma. Examining the leadership style of a leader can allow for a better understanding of their decision-making and use of power and their reactions to different types of matters and constraints, internally and externally. Therefore, the research questions are: how did Fidel get to become a charismatic leader, what role did the Cuban society

¹ Halperin, Ernst. "The Castro Regime in Cuba." *Current History*, vol. 51, issue no. 304, 1966, pp 354-359. Accessed 20 May 2017.

² Paz, Juan V. "Cuba: The Left in Government, 1959–2008." *Socialism and Democracy*, vol. 24, issue no. 1, 30 Mar 2010, pp. 31-48. Accessed 16 May 2017.

³ Silvert, K. H. "Leadership Formation and Modernization in Latin America." *Journal of International Affairs*, Columbia University, vol. 20, issue no. 2, 1 Jan. 1966, pp. 318-331. Accessed 13 April 2017.

in the twentieth century have during the Revolution, how was charisma socially constructed and what role did visual elements have in the construction of the same charisma.

I am interested in the concepts of authority and legitimacy. The concept of authority, according to the New Oxford American Dictionary, is the power or right to give orders, make decisions, and enforce obedience. The concept of legitimacy, according to the New Oxford American Dictionary, is the conformity to the law or to rules. In sociology, there are multiple ways of working with authority and legitimacy, one of the more useful is utilizing Max Weber. The three types of authority Weber writes about are: *traditional*, *charismatic*, and *legal-rational (bureaucratic)*, “which distinguish between regimes precisely on the basis of their claims to legitimacy.”⁴ Another description of authority and legitimacy, by David Lake, is: “authority locates legitimacy in a social contract between a ruler, who provides a social order of value to the ruled, and the ruled, who comply with the ruler’s commands necessary to the production of that order.”⁵ Furthermore, Lake states that “authority ultimately rests on the collective acceptance or legitimacy of the ruler’s right to rule. In this way, authority is fundamentally a social construct.”⁶ The overview of the type of society in Cuba in the emergence of the Cuban Revolution and Fidel’s social background and relationship to society can provide insight to the attainment of legitimacy. The process of achieving legitimacy draws attention to the use of discourse and forms of communication content on the construction of charisma. A leader’s charisma “comes into existence in the interaction with the audience.”⁷ Pertaining to the case of Cuba, Jorge I. Domínguez “identifies four key elements in the legitimation of revolutionary rule: charisma, political deliverance, distributional performance and nationalism.”⁸ While there are other meanings of authority and legitimacy, for my field in international affairs and through my

⁴ Hoffmann, Bert. “The International Dimension of Authoritarian Regime Legitimation: Insights From the Cuban Case.” *Journal of International Relations and Development*, vol. 18, issue no. 4, 18 July 2014, pp. 556-574. Accessed 27 June 2017.

⁵ Lake, David A. “Relational Authority and Legitimacy in International Relations.” *American Behavioral Scientist*, vol. 53, issue no. 3, November 2009, pp. 331-353. Accessed 27 June 2017.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 333.

⁷ Hoffmann, Bert. “Transitions from Charismatic Rule: Theories of Leadership Change and Cuba’s Post-Fidel Succession.” *GIGA Working Paper*, issue no. 56, August 2007, pp. 1-24. Accessed 28 June 2017.

⁸ Hoffmann, Bert. “The International Dimension of Authoritarian Regime Legitimation: Insights From the Cuban Case.” *Journal of International Relations and Development*, vol. 18, issue no. 4, 18 July 2014, pp. 556-574. Accessed 27 June 2017.

research questions I have found Weber's conceptual framework of authority very useful. The charismatic character of Fidel's authority must be emphasized. The thesis will utilize the concepts of authority and legitimacy in order to examine the sources of the regime's legitimacy, staying power and the implications on the society of Cuba. Furthermore, I will present elements of the *charismatic* authority to appropriate and analyze characteristics of Fidel's leadership style.

The methodology deployed in this thesis is content analysis. By applying this method, Fidel's governance can be examined, as well as how his type of leadership style had enabled him to maintain power and produce legitimacy in Cuba. Content analysis can shed light on how the use of immaterial and material sources and outlets facilitated Fidel's staying power and his attainment of authority and creation of legitimacy. Content analysis examines the surrounding social and historical contexts as well. According to Margaret G. Hermann, "content analysis provides us with a tool to gain some information about a political leader's beliefs, motives and relationships with equals, subordinates, and constituents. It lets us take advantage of the fact that communication is an important part of what political leaders do."⁹ Content analysis involves studying and extracting inferences and meaningful information from any form of communication content: "anything that is intended to communicate a message is useable as material for content analysis."¹⁰ Cuba under the rule of Fidel is an ideal environment to make use of the content analysis method, because of the withstanding loyalty and obedience of the Cuban people without the use of force. "Content analysis can also be used to examine nonverbal behavior", the way they present and carry themselves, their 'performance'.¹¹ The content will be contextualized and will showcase how legitimacy was communicated to the Cuban people. Content analysis can provide an insight of how Fidel managed to inspire and maintain the loyalty of the people through his relationship with society and psychological direction. Moreover, this thesis will include critical analyses of secondary sources. The secondary sources include articles, books, and journals written by a variation of sociologists whose "arguments provide the framework to

⁹ Hermann, Margaret G. "Content Analysis." *Qualitative Methods in International Relations: A Pluralist Guide*, edited by Audie Klotz and Deepa Prakash, Palgrave MacMillan UK, 2008, pp. 151-167.

¹⁰ Ibid., 152.

¹¹ Ibid., 152.

work out answers.”¹² The secondary sources will include an assortment of arguments and beliefs by different authors on leadership and leadership styles in connection to the historical role of Cuban society and Fidel’s *charismatic* authority. Fidel’s social background and the concepts of authority and legitimacy will also be introduced and examined through the secondary sources. The primary and secondary sources were found through different universities and libraries catalogues and databases.

The communication content of interest considered and studied for this thesis were formal and informal speeches and interviews, party manifestoes, and visual content. An example of a primary source of communication content, is a billboard that pictures Fidel and the slogan “Socialismo o muerte”.



Fig. 1. 1957. Billboard painting. Havana, Cuba.

According to Gillian Rose “interpretations of visual images broadly concur that there are three sites at which the meanings of an image are made: the site(s) of the production of an image, the site of the image itself, and the site(s) where it is seen by various audiences.”¹³ Furthermore she

¹² Trachtenberg, Marc. *The Craft Of International History: A Guide to Method*. Princeton University Press, 2006.

¹³ Rose, Gillian. *Visual Methodologies: An Introduction to the Interpretation of Visual Materials*. 2nd ed., Sage Publications, 2007.

explains that “modality contributes to a critical understanding of images.”¹⁴ I’m interested in Rose’s explanation of social modality, which “refers to the range of economic, social and political relations, institutions and practices that surround an image and through which it is seen and used.”¹⁵ The billboard, located in Havana, portrays a side profile painting of Fidel with the quote around him that translates to ‘socialism or death’. It was placed in the capital by revolutionaries in 1957. The billboard is very large in size and is located on the side of a factory building, whose audience are factory workers that see it every day going to work and leaving work. The billboard was purposely placed there containing revolutionary discourse to reinforce the Revolution and try and construct a sense of unity. This billboard is one of many all over Cuba, that “announce the values, heroes and challenges of Cuba’s socialist revolution.”¹⁶ In addition, it is reminiscent of the Cold War and anti-American sentiments because capitalism is American/Western and essentially the antithesis of socialism. Starting in 1947 and ending in 1991, the Cold War was described as an ideological and geographical competition between the United States and the Soviet Union, a struggle between capitalism and communism. The U.S. didn’t want communism spreading in their sphere of influence, and Cuba became involved in the Cold War when they allied with the Soviet Union and became an extension of the communist bloc in Latin America. The billboard is not just propaganda and a representation of reality, it helps build reality. In this case, the discourse of Socialism or death goes with the idea of Fidel as the revolutionary hero and savior. In a sense, Cuba’s patriarch.

Utilizing content analysis will further build on the theoretical framework of constructivism and the conceptual framework of legitimacy and authority presented in this thesis. I am following theories from the IR spectrum, such as a theoretical framework of a historical analysis of both primary and secondary sources. I am interested in the theory of constructivism because it argues that the world is socially and historically constructed. According to Maja Zehfuss, “constructivism is based on the notion that society and people make each other in an ongoing, two-way process.”¹⁷ Through constructivism we can see the construction of charisma

¹⁴ Rose, Gillian. *Visual Methodologies: An Introduction to the Interpretation of Visual Materials*. 2nd ed., Sage Publications, 2007.

¹⁵ Ibid., 13.

¹⁶ Soules, Marshall. *Media, Persuasion and Propaganda*. Edinburgh University Press, 2015.

¹⁷ Zehfuss, Maja. *Constructivism in International Relations: The Politics of Reality*. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge Studies in International Relations, 2002, pp. 1-37.

through discourses and forms of communication content. Also with constructivism, the gender, race, age, and class approaches are brought to light in the construction of charisma. Race, gender, age, and class are social constructs, shaped by interactions, which create a social reality. Utilizing constructivism and examining the different approaches, in relation to the type of society in Cuba that existed in the twentieth century, we can understand how Fidel got to be the charismatic leader. It is important to note that the sources I'm using are mostly pre-constructivist and before the cultural turn of the IR discipline.

The time frame of interest for this thesis starts from the early 1950's, to the early 1970's, a thirty-year period. The first section of the thesis will discuss political leadership, authority and legitimacy, it will also include a broad analysis of political leadership in Latin America. The second section will be a brief overview on Max Weber's conception of authority and legitimacy, with a focus on *charismatic* authority. The third section will examine Fidel's social background and contextualize the origins of his *charismatic* authority in relation to Cuban society. The fourth section will be an overview of Fidel's leadership in the 1960's and the impacts of the Revolution, while trying to be both descriptive and analytical. The last section will be a summary of the thesis, as well as a conclusion. By the conclusion, we will see the extent of the role of the type of Cuban society during the Cuban Revolution had, and how Fidel came to be charismatic and the implications of Fidel's leadership and leadership style. Furthermore, the social construction of charisma, with an emphasis on visual elements, will be examined.

2) Political Leadership in Latin America

The attribution of authority and legitimacy to political leadership makes it critical to the development of a country and how it functions, legitimacy also justifies political leadership and the political system. Kalman H. Silvert analyzed types of leadership formation, explicitly in Latin America, and has found that political leadership influences the direction in "which these societies will evolve."¹⁸ Analyzing a leader's qualities, values, and behaviors contributes to the assessment of the style of leadership. Examining a leader's characteristics, which could also be defined as constraints, provides greater insight on their decisions and interactions. According to

¹⁸ Silvert, K. H. "Leadership Formation and Modernization in Latin America." *Journal of International Affairs*, Columbia University, vol. 20, issue no. 2, 1 Jan. 1966, pp. 318-331. Accessed 13 April 2017.

Silvert, “leaders create and group power and employ it toward certain ends.”¹⁹ Understanding the style of leadership can help determine how a leader creates power and legitimacy and what he or she utilizes it for and applies it towards. For example, a leader can create the power to manipulate and restructure governmental mechanisms and institutions allowing them to politically and legally establish authority and legitimacy. Silvert explained that “leaders cannot exist without followers and their power is generated by consensus and legitimacy, which is evident in the instruments of overt control.”²⁰ Power and legitimacy can be measured in the ability of a leader to implement an assortment of policies and laws they see fit, and still be able to manipulate and maintain authority and control over the masses with no real threat or opposition.

William A. Welsh goes on to further emphasize that assessing the nature of political leadership in Latin American politics is necessary. Logically, as Welsh explains, “an understanding of any social order rests fundamentally on a systematic grasp of the background attributes, careers, value and issue orientations, behaviors and environmental context of political leaders.”²¹ Furthermore, Welsh explains that it is a commonplace occurrence “to find the major features of politics in Latin America described almost entirely in terms of factors directly associated with the nature of political leadership.”²² Latin American political processes, throughout history, have been characterized as violent, undemocratic, manipulative and included external interference and leaders that possessed assertive personalities. Martin C. Needler, reiterates that Latin American politics are associated with “the central role of the military, the prevalence of violence, the ascendancy of dominant personalities, and the widespread graft and nepotism.”²³

The reoccurring and enduring political leadership types of the late twentieth century in

¹⁹ Silvert, K. H. "Leadership Formation and Modernization in Latin America." *Journal of International Affairs*, Columbia University, vol. 20, issue no. 2, 1 Jan. 1966, pp. 318-331. Accessed 13 April 2017.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 319.

²¹ Welsh, William A. "Methodological Problems in the Study of Political Leadership in Latin America." *The Latin American Studies Association*, vol. 5, issue no. 3, 1970, pp. 3-33. Accessed 5 Nov 2016.

²² *Ibid.*, 3.

²³ Needler, Martin C. *Latin American Politics in Perspective*. Van Nostrand, 1963.

Latin America was the *caudillo* and the leftist totalitarian; seen in Nicaragua, the Dominican Republic and Cuba. Anastasio Somoza of Nicaragua and Rafael Trujillo of the Dominican Republic were *caudillos*, while Fidel Castro of Cuba can also be described as a leftist totalitarian. In the year 1926 in Nicaragua, Anastasio Somoza joined the rebellion supporting Juan Bautista Sacasa's presidential claims. Somoza's rise to power began when he was appointed as the Nicaraguan National Guard's director and ordered the assassination of the opposing General Augusto Sandino in 1934. In 1936 Somoza displayed his power and authority by utilizing the Nicaraguan National Guard to remove local officials that were devoted to president Sacasa and replace them with his own affiliates. By 1936, Somoza successfully forced Sacasa to step down as president and he appointed a series of puppet presidents until the following year when he became president himself. A few years earlier to the east of Nicaragua, in the year 1918, Rafael Trujillo joined the National Guard of the Dominican Republic and rose quickly through the ranks and became the commander of the National Army after just nine years. As he rose through the corps, he established a following of supporters and allies. In February 1930, Rafael Estrella Ureña led a rebellion against President Horacio Vásquez and struck a secret deal with Trujillo. Vásquez fled the capital as Estrella and his rebels marched in and Trujillo and his army forces looked on and declared neutrality. The deal between Estrella and Trujillo consisted of Trujillo allowing Estrella to take power unopposed, and in return Estrella would allow Trujillo to run for president in the next elections. On March 3rd 1930, Estrella was pronounced as the acting president and Trujillo remained as the head of the army and police. The presidential elections came in May of 1930, and as per the agreement, Trujillo became a presidential candidate. It soon became evident that Trujillo would be the only candidate with no opponents due to army personnel intimidating and harassing other candidates, who eventually withdrew from the presidential run. Trujillo "won" over ninety-five percent of the vote and was inaugurated in June of 1930, becoming the dictator of the Dominican Republic. Both Somoza and Trujillo sought to legitimize their rule and centralized all the power and amended the constitutions of Nicaragua and the Dominican Republic to their favor. Somoza and Trujillo both kept the military as the main source of power and oppression in the countries and, in addition, they gave family members and loyal supporters control of key positions in the government and military, in which they monopolized on.

The examples of Nicaragua and the Dominican Republic represent the political

phenomenon in Latin America, which is “the mimetic quality of political organization.”²⁴ Silvert’s definition of *caudillismo* in Latin America is a “highly personalistic and quasi-military regime whose party mechanisms, administrative procedures, and legislative functions are subject to the intimate and immediate control of a charismatic leader and his cadre of mediating officials.”²⁵ The *caudillo* asserts himself as leader and requires loyalty and following to attain power. “The *caudillo* is usually a self-proclaimed military officer, sometimes a civilian, and is assisted by an irregular or nonprofessional army.”²⁶ More often than not, the *caudillo* seeks social change in their country through revolution. Totalitarianism, Silvert explains, “embraces total political control and rejects mechanisms designed to build the checks and balances of rational decision making into the political process.”²⁷ The totalitarian, like the *caudillo*, can emerge from special circumstances and assumes the role of uniting and representing a movement away from the old established order. In addition, a totalitarian does not necessarily seek personal wealth gain in their path to rule. Fidel embodied aspects of both the *caudillo* and leftist totalitarian, requiring absolute control, unquestioning allegiance, and tolerates no resistance.

There are similarities between the *caudillismo* and totalitarianism type governments, with the use and functioning of ideology being one of them. The role of different ideologies is to differentiate between right and wrong, good and evil. They are deployed to generate enthusiasm and rationalization or reluctance and dislike, towards what those in power and the government choose and stand for or against. For example, throughout Latin America, the United States has been associated with negative ideologies and everything represented as American as detrimental. Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the U.S. had tried to maintain and exercise hegemonic control over Latin America and intervened in the affairs of the area, which is their claimed sphere of influence. The U.S. had supported and helped install military dictatorships throughout Latin America that were characterized as violent, oppressive and corrupt, like the examples of Somoza in Nicaragua and Trujillo in the Dominican Republic, while undermining the emergence of opposing Latin American leaders that were described as socialist and leftist, for

²⁴ Silvert, K. H. "Leadership Formation and Modernization in Latin America." *Journal of International Affairs*, Columbia University, vol. 20, issue no. 2, 1 Jan. 1966, pp. 318-331. Accessed 13 April 2017.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 326.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 326.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 328.

their own interests. Fidel's Cuban Revolution was against the right-wing dictator Fulgencio Batista and his regime, which was financially and militarily supported by the American government, that grew into the anti-American campaign in the hemisphere. Historically, Cuba existed because of colonialism, which was the consequences of the Spanish and then America's hegemony. "The Cuban Revolution's nationalist master narrative presented the triumph of Castro's guerrilla army as the culmination of the century-old struggle for national independence, which had been betrayed in 1898–1902, when Cuba was liberated from Spanish colonial domination only to fall under the tutelage of the United States."²⁸ Fidel painted the image of the United States as a villain, responsible for Cuba's problems and plight which also helped justify his alliance with the Soviet Union during the Cold War and the complete removal of American presence in Cuba.

In this section I presented a literature review that explicitly analyzed political leadership in Latin America, utilizing the work of the authors Kalman Silvert, William Welsh, and Martin Needler. The nature and style of the leadership must be studied to comprehend the extent the role of leadership on social order and functioning of society. I presented two political leadership styles, *caudillismo* and leftist totalitarianism, which are reoccurring in Latin America and gave the examples of Nicaragua and the Dominican Republic to showcase the *caudillo* leadership style and how authority and legitimacy was attained. We will see in the next sections that Fidel embodies characteristics of both the *caudillo* and leftist totalitarian, but also that politics is about aesthetics. Lastly, the use and function of ideology was highlighted as a similarity between the *caudillo* and leftist totalitarian leadership style seen in Latin America.

3) Max Weber's *Charismatic* Authority and Legitimacy

Max Weber, who worked on the concept of authority, wrote of three types of true legitimate authority: *traditional*, *charismatic*, and *legal-rational (bureaucratic)* in his essay, *The Three Types of Legitimate Rule*. For Weber, authority (domination) is defined as whether a society is accepting and obedient of some or all commands. The definition of authority is explicitly attributed to the legitimate forms of rule. "Hence every genuine form of rule implies a

²⁸ Hoffmann, Bert. "The International Dimension of Authoritarian Regime Legitimation: Insights From the Cuban Case." *Journal of International Relations and Development*, vol. 18, issue no. 4, 18 July 2014, pp. 556-574. Accessed 27 June 2017.

minimum of voluntary compliance in an interest in obedience.”²⁹ Weber explains that all three “systems attempt to establish and to cultivate the belief in its legitimacy, but according to the kind of legitimacy each claim, the type of obedience, the kind of administrative staff developed to guarantee it, and the mode of exercising authority, they will all differ fundamentally.”³⁰ Weber further states that the “types of authority are classified according to the kind of claim to legitimacy made by each.”³¹ Analyzing the type of authority allows for an understanding of how it is possible for a political leader to claim and exercise legitimate power. The focus, for the thesis purposes, will be on the *charismatic* authority.

Weber defines *charismatic* authority as “resting on devotion to the specific and exceptional sanctity, heroism or exemplary character of an individual person, and of normative patterns revealed or ordained by him.”³² The charismatic leader embodies a “certain quality of an individual personality by virtue of which he is set apart from ordinary men and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities.”³³ Charisma is not a physical attribute, but rather a unique, extraordinary personal quality, a gift of charm and grace, that can inspire loyalty and devotion in others. The charismatic leader’s authority derives from the perception the followers have of the leader. *Charismatic* authority’s legitimacy claim “lies in the conception that is the duty of those subject to *charismatic* authority to recognize its genuineness and to act accordingly.”³⁴ The charismatic leader appears at the helm of social movements and revolutions, leading the masses and their devotion “arising out of enthusiasm, or of despair and hope.”³⁵ Charisma was described by Weber as the “greatest revolutionary force.”³⁶ *Charismatic* authority can challenge legality and rationality and strays away from tradition rule. In a charismatic regime, the informal and personal power lies solely in the individual leader, no hierarchy or appropriation, because he

²⁹ Appelrouth, Scott, and Laura Desfor Edles. “Max Weber (1864-1920).” *Classical and Contemporary Sociological Theory*. Pine Forge Press, 2008.

³⁰ Ibid., 179.

³¹ Ibid., 179.

³² Ibid., 179.

³³ Ibid., 181.

³⁴ Ibid., 182.

³⁵ Ibid., 182.

³⁶ Weber, Max. On Charisma and Institution-Building, in *Selected Papers*, edited and with an introduction by S.N. Eisenstadt, University of Chicago Press, 1968.

essentially is the country, embodiment of the state, its institutions and government. Grand gestures and displays of authority are required to fortify his power. Weber also adds that for charisma to be routinized as an everyday phenomenon and “for his followers to live communistically in a community of faith and enthusiasm, it must be adapted to some form of fiscal organization to provide for the needs of the group.”³⁷ The administrative staff and set of officials that a charismatic leader does keep around him, are ones he summons that share similar qualities. However, “there is no system of formal rules, of abstract legal principles, and hence no process of rational judicial decision oriented to these officials.”³⁸ New laws, principles and regulations are created as situations arise and altered under respective circumstances. *Charismatic* authority has the capability of “altering central attitudes and directions of actions with a completely new orientation of all attitudes toward different problems.”³⁹ This notion reflects the constructivist theory on the social construction of charisma and the reality created during the Revolution, also through the gender, race, age and class approaches. Fidel was constructed as the father and guardian figure of Cuban society, looking after the people of Cuba.

4) Origins of Fidel’s Charisma

To begin the assessment of the origins of Fidel’s *charismatic* authority in relation to Cuban society, it is appropriate to look at both, the social background of Fidel, and the Cuban Revolution. Fidel Castro was born to white upper-class parents, on August 13, 1926, in a village in Cuba called Birán, in the southeastern province of Holguín, which used to be named Oriente. “His father, Ángel, was a wealthy sugarcane plantation owner.”⁴⁰ While living on the farm, “Fidel grew up alongside impoverished black workers and witnessed first-hand the immense inequality they suffered.”⁴¹ In the early years of his education, Fidel proved to be intellectually gifted and an exceptional athlete. In 1945, Fidel enrolled in law school at the University of Havana, which “was semi-autonomous and armed political gangs controlled the distribution of

³⁷ Appelrouth, Scott, and Laura Desfor Edles. “Max Weber (1864-1920).” *Classical and Contemporary Sociological Theory*. Pine Forge Press, 2008.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 182.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 183.

⁴⁰ Grant, Will. “Fidel Castro: Cuba’s Revolutionary Leader.” *BBC iWonder*. Accessed 30 June 2017.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

books and good grades.”⁴² Fidel was particularly interested in politics, amid the exposure of the socialist, anti-colonialist, and nationalist environment in the university. “His sense of injustice and rebelliousness” was cultivated while he attended university, from enlisting in an expedition intent on overthrowing the Dominican Republic dictator Rafael Trujillo to joining riots in Columbia.⁴³ In 1947, Fidel joined the political party *Partido Ortodoxo*, the Cuban People’s Party, founded by Eduardo Chibás, whose “popular socialist message of social justice and fighting corruption” impressed Fidel and made an ardent supporter out of him.⁴⁴ By 1952, Fidel began exploring Karl Marx’s ideas as he planned to run in the elections for a seat in the Cuban Congress. However, in March of 1952, “Fidel’s plans for a political career were thwarted” when Fulgencio Batista staged a military coup and re-seized power and cancelled elections.⁴⁵

Left without any platform or means, Fidel proceeded towards the recourse of an armed revolution to combat Batista’s violent and oppressive regime. Fidel assembled a group of insurgents and on July 26, 1953, he led an attack on the Moncada military barracks in Santiago, which ultimately failed and led to the execution of many rebels and the imprisonment of Fidel. The attack is recognized as the beginning of the Cuban Revolution. The young lawyer was brought to court as he justified his actions based on the illegitimacy of Batista’s regime and the fundamental right of a citizen to revolt against an illegitimate government. “When Batista turned Fidel’s trial into a media spectacle, Fidel took advantage of the moment to attack and condemn the regime in his famous four-hour *History Will Absolve Me* speech.”⁴⁶ This moment was an example of charisma being built through discourse as Fidel expressed the sentiments of the oppressed majority and outlined the plan he has for Cuba. “Although he was sentenced to fifteen years in prison, his words registered with the Cuban people.”⁴⁷ In an amnesty agreement in 1955, Batista released political dissidents, including Fidel.⁴⁸ He fled to Mexico, where he met Ernesto Che Guevara, fellow revolutionary, and garnered more support and dubbed his revolutionary organization after the date of the Moncada Barracks attack, *The 26th of July Movement*. “In 1956

⁴² Grant, Will. “Fidel Castro: Cuba’s Revolutionary Leader.” *BBC iWonder*. Accessed 30 June 2017.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

Castro and around eighty insurgents, boarded the *Granma* yacht filled with weapons, bound back to Cuba” determined.⁴⁹ They landed on the eastern coast of Cuba in December 1956, only to be ambushed by Batista’s army. Fidel and the few remaining survivors fled into the Sierra Maestra, Cuba’s largest mountain range that stretches along the southeastern coast of the island. From within the mountains, Fidel launched ‘guerrilla warfare’ against Batista’s army that lasted two years. Tired of the growing oppression and corruption of the Batista regime, Fidel garnered more support and followers throughout the island, especially from Cuba’s rural lower and working class. Fidel successfully orchestrated “a string of military skirmishes” and gained control of a large portion of the country.”⁵⁰ By 1958, Fidel’s efforts ultimately brought about the collapse of Batista’s regime and in January 1959, Batista fled Cuba as Fidel reached Havana. By the age of 32, Fidel successfully led the Revolution and took control of Cuba, establishing his vanguard revolutionary socialist government.

‘Guerrilla warfare’ is fundamentally a “national insurgency, war of liberation waged by an armed group against a sovereign state.”⁵¹ It is revolutionary in nature and a source of charisma, because it seeks to bring dramatic social change and requires the support of the people. According to Michael Gross, “the guerrillas represent the local people’s struggle against entrenched colonialism and a repressive regime and must prove themselves the legitimate representatives of their people’s national aspirations.”⁵² Fidel’s guerrilla revolution was unlike the Marxist based revolution of the Soviet Union that took place in the earlier years of the twentieth century. Revolution, characterized by Karl Marx in *The Communist Manifesto*, is gradual and over time and there are stages and pretexts, such as the creation of a ‘bourgeoisie’⁵³ and the industrialization of a country, that need to be in place before the people, the ‘proletariat’⁵⁴, are ready to launch a social revolution. Fidel did not wait for all of Marx’s argued

⁴⁹ Grant, Will. “Fidel Castro: Cuba’s Revolutionary Leader.” *BBC iWonder*. Accessed 30 June 2017.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Gross, Michael L. “Just Guerilla Warfare.” *The Ethics of Insurgency: A Critical Guide to Just Guerrilla Warfare*. Cambridge University Press, 2015, pp. 1-18.

⁵² Ibid., 3-6.

⁵³ The class that owns all the property and means of production and are the employers, the Capitalists.

⁵⁴ The industrial wage-working class that do not own any means of production.

conditions around a Revolution to fall into place in Cuba, before he launched his vanguard Cuban Revolution.

Fidel's rule ultimately began as he came to be the face of the Revolution, but "the power and attraction of Castro's personality was evident before his stunning defeat of Batista, which imbued him with *charismatic* authority."⁵⁵ Charisma was found in Fidel's ability to inspire the disgruntled and weary people of Cuba to stand behind him in the rebellion against Batista's regime and army, despite adversity and peril. Another instance of discourse constructing charisma, is the victory march to Havana in 1959. Along the way, Fidel made stops virtually all over the island to give speeches to welcoming crowds. This showcased his ability of attracting the masses and interacting with the audience, and further facilitated Fidel's efforts in acquiring the loyalty of the Cuban people from all corners of the country. The sight of a triumphant battle-worn Fidel making his way to Havana, with a gun swung over his shoulder, was branded into the Cuban people's memory and commenced a new era of Cuba: the era of Fidel Castro.

Post-revolutionary Cuba was the ideal environment and opportunity for Fidel to rise to power. Cuba in the 1960's was a product of colonialism and exemplified a patriarchal society. The traditional notion was that all power and authority was primarily held by white men from upper-middle classes, Fidel was the embodiment of this notion. The society was oppressed and segregated racially, around thirty-five percent of the population consisted of non-white Cubans. The people were searching and willing to recognize Fidel as their beneficiary and hero, as they saw Fidel intent on breaking Cuba from the past corrupted political system and liberating and caring for the people. The consequences of Batista's regime were especially felt by the rural lower class, who in turn became Fidel's most dedicated supporters. The younger generation of Cuba was also significantly impacted, as they sympathized and looked up to Fidel, because during the Revolution he was only in his late twenties and a recent graduate from law school.

Close to the end of the Revolution in 1957, Fidel invited Herbert Matthews, an American *New York Times* journalist, to the mountains of Sierra Maestra to sit down with him and be interviewed for the first time and photographed. Fidel consciously knew the widespread attention and exposure an American article would bring to the Revolution and its ideas. Matthews wrote that under President Batista's rule:

⁵⁵ Gonzalez, Edward and David Ronfeldt. *Castro, Cuba, and the World*. RAND Corporation, June 1986.

unemployment is heavy; corruption is rife ... Fidel Castro and his 26th of July Movement are the flaming symbol of this opposition to the regime ... One got a feeling that he is now invincible. Perhaps he isn't, but that is the faith he inspires in his followers ... Castro is a great talker. His brown eyes flash; his intense face is pushed close to the listener and the whispering voice, as in a stage play, lends a vivid sense of drama ... His is a political mind rather than a military one. He has strong ideas of liberty, democracy, social justice, the need to restore the Constitution, to hold elections. He has strong ideas on economy too.⁵⁶

Through the article, Fidel was depicted and portrayed in a favorable and charismatic manner, appearing again in a heroic context. Fidel's invitation of Matthews revealed that there was support for the Revolution from the progressive in North America. Corresponding with Matthews, Edward Gonzalez and David Ronfeldt reported that since Fidel "came to power in 1959, Fidel's public image has been that of an appealing, engaging, and accessible political leader who enjoys the warm support and admiration of his people."⁵⁷ Apart from his charisma, he was "endowed with impressive physical stature" and presented himself as a man of great confidence, passion, determination and intelligence.⁵⁸ Furthermore, Barbara Walters, another American journalist, stated, when discussing meeting Fidel, that "the word charismatic was made for him, when you were with him he was forceful, charming, and forthcoming."⁵⁹

When Fidel arrived in Havana in 1959, he started to orchestrate a campaign of visual content such as posters, pictures, paintings, billboards, and statues seen throughout Cuba, replacing any reminiscence of Batista and the former regime. Fidel's political and social slogans replaced the commercial messages of Batista's former regime on the billboards, which were utilized to advertise things like casinos or beach resorts. Fidel wanted to unite the people by manifesting in the visual content that the Revolution/(he) was the answer to Cuba's problems and it/(he) was there to stay. Depicted in most of the visual content were political slogans like "Patria o muerte" (Homeland or death) and "Yo soy la revolución" (I am the revolution) or large quotes focusing on the ideology and accomplishments of the Revolution accompanied by a portrait of Fidel, joined by other revolutionaries or alone, in his iconic green army uniform with a few

⁵⁶ Matthews, Herbert L. "Cuban Rebel Is Visited in Hideout." *The New York Times*, 24 Feb 1957. Accessed 12 June 2017.

⁵⁷ Gonzalez, Edward and David Ronfeldt. *Castro, Cuba, and the World*. RAND Corporation, June 1986.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 34.

⁵⁹ Walters, Barbara. Interview by Byron Pitts. *ABC News*, 26 Nov 2016. Accessed 28 June 2017.

different facial expressions and body gestures. Fidel had visual content set up across the country, even to the more rural parts of Cuba, in order for the visual messages to be seen by everyone on the island, similar to him stopping in all the villages to give a speech on his victory march to Havana. Fidel wanted to maintain an interaction with his audience. The purpose of all the visual content was “not how they looked, but what they can do.”⁶⁰ The visual tools constructed charisma and created the social world that was Cuba and signified the participation of the Cuban people and Fidel’s relationship with the masses.

Fidel’s comrade, Che Guevara, wrote in a letter to fellow revolutionary colleague in 1954, Melba Hernandez, “we cannot for a second abandon propaganda. Propaganda is vital - propaganda is the heart of our struggle.”⁶¹ Fidel became aware of the power of propaganda, especially the use of visual propaganda. In 1960, there was an establishment of a revolutionary propaganda apparatus. All media and communication aspects of the country were state-ran and monitored, such as newspaper outlets, publishing houses, and broadcasting facilities that produced content regarding the Revolution and the social change and achievements it brought about. These outlets were all part of the propaganda disseminations apparatus Fidel had installed, that kept constructing charisma. Visual content and tools facilitated the fascination and admiration of the Cuban people. Cuba was a highly religious country, with the majority of people identifying as Roman Catholics. Religion emblems under Fidel’s leadership were banned, which in turn expanded the belief of Fidel as Cuba’s messiah and the Revolutionary’s ideals replacing Catholic teachings.

One of the best-known pictures of Fidel, turned political poster, is him standing and overlooking a mountain landscape. The photograph was first taken by photographer Alberto Korda, the same photographer who took the iconic picture of Che Guevara in March of 1960.

⁶⁰ Rose, Gillian. *Visual Methodologies: An Introduction to the Interpretation of Visual Materials*. 2nd ed., Sage Publications, 2007.

⁶¹ Fontova, Humberto. *The Longest Romance: The Mainstream Media and Fidel Castro*. Encounter Books, 2013.

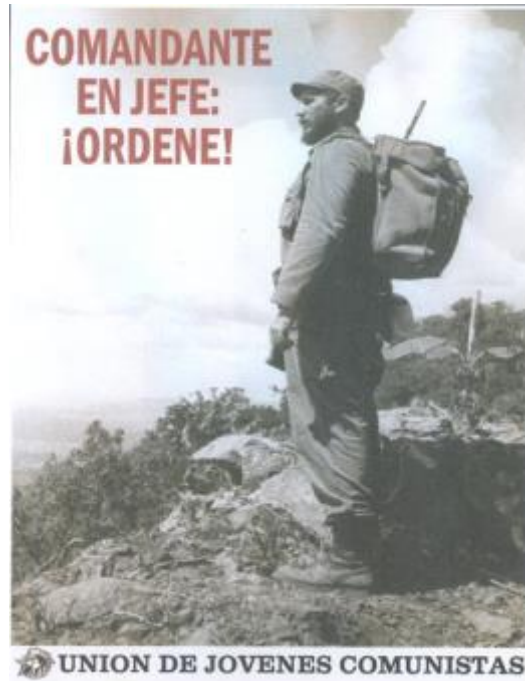


Fig. 2. Alberto Korda. 1959. Photograph.

Korda took this picture of Fidel in the Sierra Maestra mountain region in 1959, during the Revolution, when Fidel and his revolutionary army began their triumphant resurgent attacks on Batista's army. The picture was then reproduced during the Cuban Missile Crisis⁶², with the slogan "Comandante en Jefe: ¡Ordene!" (Commander in Chief: Order!) by the *Unión de Jóvenes Comunistas* (The Young Communist League). The poster depicts young Fidel in the Revolutionary days in his army uniform with his backpack, rifle on his shoulder and his eyes fixed on the horizon, as if looking to the future of Cuba. When the picture was taken, it was not intended to be used as a poster, but the UJC found that it demonstrated best the discourse and sentiment at the time. Following America's failed Bay of Pigs Invasion of Cuba in April 1961, and the CIA's plan to assassinate Fidel in 1961 as part of 'Operation Mongoose', tensions between the U.S. and Cuba were very tense and hostile. In 1962, Fidel felt another American attempt of invasion was highly probable, so the poster created a world in which there was a

⁶² A thirteen-day standoff in October 1962, during the Cold War, between U.S. and Soviet Union, as a result of the deployment of Soviet nuclear-armed missiles on Cuba. The U.S. threatened to use military force if the missiles were not removed off the island due to the proximity of Cuba, only 90 miles away from the southernmost point of America. This was the closest the Cold War came to the brink of nuclear war. An agreement was reached in which the U.S. agreed not to invade Cuba again, in exchange for the removal of the Soviet missiles from Cuba.

provision for the Cuban people to take up arms to defend their national sovereignty at a crucial moment in history. The historical reconstruction of the world in Cuba at the time, was the patriarchal and military society. The poster reminiscent of his victory march to Havana in 1959, when again he was in his military uniform carrying a gun. Fidel was the father figure of Cuba, the one the people looked up to. Moreover, the Sierra Maestra landscape in the poster was symbolic and significant to the people because it reminded them of Fidel leading the military crusade against Batista, for their liberation.

5) Fidel's Leadership in the 1960's

Under Fidel's leadership, Cuba and the Revolution transformed into something unique called 'Castroism'. There is no exact definition of 'Castroism', so it's open to interpretation. Ian Lumsden tried to explain in his article, *The Future of Castroism*, that "Castroism lies on action rather than theory. Its underlying principles are Marxist-Lennist, but its distinctive character really stems from Castro's dictum that Marxism is above all else revolutionary thinking and action and from his insistence that socialism depends upon the development of human awareness as much as material wealth."⁶³ Lumsden goes on to further explain that "every domestic policy implemented by the Castro regime was ideologically linked to the creation of this new socialist consciousness."⁶⁴

'Castroism' and the Revolution largely impacted the socio-political context of Cuba and brought many changes on all aspects of life. Fidel instituted a single-party government, under the Communist Party of Cuba, that had sole power of the state, with himself at the top. Aurelio Alonso explains that Fidel "had appealed to the masses from the outset to ensure that their efforts would be more than just elitist decisions, social change was not decided without a resorting to a broader popular consensus."⁶⁵ Fidel sought eradicate the deepening class divide that occurred under Batista's regime. In 1959, just four months after defeating Batista, Fidel signed a land reform "expropriating large estates and distributing the land among the exploited peasants who

⁶³ Lumsden, C. I. "The Future of Castroism." *International Journal*, vol. 24, issue no. 3, 1968-1969, pp. 545-558. Accessed 20 June 2017.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 554.

⁶⁵ Alonso, Aurelio. "Cuba: Society After Half a Century of Changes, Achievements and Setbacks." *Estudos Avancados*, vol. 25, issue no. 72, 2011, pp. 7-18. Accessed 29 June 2017.

were dedicated to developing it.”⁶⁶ In the years between 1959 and 1968, Fidel nationalized resources, industry and trade and abolished private businesses. “The socialization of virtually the entire economy through state ownership totally changed the face of society and with it the types of relationship with political bodies, which would no longer respond to private oligarchic interests.”⁶⁷ Along with the economic aspects of change, Fidel took “other initiatives with the aim of advancing the issue of social justice and equity, eradicating poverty, reducing inequality and mitigating habitat pressures.”⁶⁸ He expanded social services, such as housing, medical care, education, and public utilities, making them accessible to anyone and free of charge. The expansion and progression of the social services was strategic due to the government’s intent to deter any ideas of material incentives: personal gain, ownership, and profit. Rather, Fidel wanted it to be based on moral incentive, everyone unified for the greater good. Furthermore, under Fidel, race became more integrated. According to Johanna Fabregas, the Afro-Cubans experienced an “increased level of tolerance and opportunities under Fidel’s leadership and racism was addressed at the institutional level through the unprecedented opportunities for work, education, leisure, and social integration that the government extended to members of the most marginalized classes, where Afro-Cubans had been historically overrepresented.”⁶⁹ Growing up amongst the visible inequality of the Afro-Cubans and vast segregation under Batista’s regime induced Fidel to make efforts and progress in the race relations of Cuba.

6) Conclusion

A political leader rests at the top of a society’s stratum and their decisions trickle downward and have respective effects on all social and political units. The focus of the thesis is on Fidel and his first twenty years of leadership, because he was the architect of the world and reality in Cuba, in relation to the type of society that existed with the onset of the Cuban Revolution. The use of content analysis and critical analysis expanded on the theoretical

⁶⁶ Alonso, Aurelio. “Cuba: Society After Half a Century of Changes, Achievements and Setbacks.” *Estudos Avancados*, vol. 25, issue no. 72, 2011, pp. 7-18. Accessed 29 June 2017.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁶⁹ Fábregas, Johanna I. “The Cuban Woman's Revolutionary Experience: Patriarchal Culture and the State's Gender Ideology, 1950–1976.” *Journal of Women's History*, vol. 22, issue no. 1, 2010, pp. 61-84. Accessed 28 June 2017.

framework of constructivism and the conceptual framework of authority and legitimacy to study Fidel's charismatic leadership.

There were some limitations in the use of the content analysis method. When it comes to the material we use for content analysis, like speeches, press conferences and interviews, there is a need to exercise some caution since such material can be staged and written by staff members and the questions can be predetermined.⁷⁰ According to Hermann, "speeches are usually designed for particular audiences and occasions. Care and thought have generally gone into what is said and how it is said."⁷¹ Another limitation is when we are literally lost in translation. Many words and expressions in different languages don't always translate, so we are left unsure and wondering what was meant to be said. That was the case with one of the visual content I mentioned, "Patria o muerte" (Homeland or death). I got a few different translations when I looked up the word 'Patria' and had to settle with 'homeland'. Furthermore, while trying to find secondary sources for the thesis it became evident that there was more literature on the use of discourse, than the use of visual content in relation to the construction of charisma.

To gain an understanding of the attribution of authority and legitimacy to Fidel's political leadership in the development of Cuba, Max Weber's influential work on authority and legitimacy was used, most specifically *charismatic* authority. Fidel's captivating personality is depicted as having qualities of the charismatic nature. He was seen as the captivating 'hero and savior' of Cuba at the helm of the Revolution, able to induce devotion and loyalty. According to Paul Sondrol, the messianic quality assigned to Fidel by the people, was a "pillar of regime legitimization."⁷² The charismatic nature of his leadership was attributed by the Cuban society during the Revolution. As Weber explained, "the charismatic leader is always the creation of his followers."⁷³ The society believed in Fidel and his efforts, and in turn, he got to be the charismatic leader of Cuba. Fidel was charismatic as a result of the patriarchal and post-colonial

⁷⁰ Hermann, Margaret G. "Content Analysis." *Qualitative Methods in International Relations: A Pluralist Guide*, edited by Audie Klotz and Deepa Prakash, Palgrave MacMillan UK, 2008, pp. 151-167.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 153.

⁷² Sondrol, Paul C. "Totalitarian and Authoritarian Dictators: A Comparison of Fidel Castro and Alfredo Stroessner." *Journal of Latin American Studies*, Cambridge University Press, vol. 23, issue no. 3, Oct 1991, pp. 599-620. Accessed 10 Dec. 2016.

⁷³ Fagen, Richard R. "Charismatic Authority and the Leadership of Fidel Castro." *The Western Political Quarterly*, vol. 18, issue no. 2, June 1965, pp. 275-284. Accessed 20 June 2017.

society of Cuba in the 1960's. Cuban society was very much vested in Fidel and his ideas, that they kept a "primacy of personal loyalty over ideological definition as embodied in a slogan of the early 1960's that read, "Si Fidel es comunista, que me pongan en la lista!" (If Fidel is a communist, then sign me up, too!)."⁷⁴

The power and effectiveness of Fidel's discourse, with an emphasis on visual content, is evident in the construction of charisma, along with the social change and achievements brought on by the Revolution. The emergence of a new socio-political awareness known as: 'Castroism' and the Revolution's "social achievements became part of the citizenry's everyday life."⁷⁵ Fidel produced many forms of visual content and discourse in regard to the Revolution's achievements, consistently constructing charisma. In this sense, Fidel kept in constant contact and interaction with the Cuban people and "proved the credibility of his commitment to radically depart from a past associated with corruption and social exclusion."⁷⁶ Fidel's "charisma and personal interrelationship with Cuba's masses" during the Revolution secured him as the charismatic leader of Cuba for years to come.⁷⁷

The visual content, along with discourse and the relationship and interaction of society, constructed Fidel's charismatic leadership in Cuba. It is interesting to see the extent the role of image can have on the social construction of a society. The visual elements are part of a historical process, as they have the potential to preside over the people's memories, because they have a social life of their own. They are produced in a certain context and, through time, become part of the collective memory of a society. The images of Fidel became the archetypical symbols of the Revolution and in the end, Cuba. The role of discourse is widely understood and evident in the field of International Relations, but the question is how will the role of image in IR be further

⁷⁴ Hoffmann, Bert. "Transitions from Charismatic Rule: Theories of Leadership Change and Cuba's Post-Fidel Succession." *GIGA Working Paper*, issue no. 56, August 2007, pp. 1-24. Accessed 28 June 2017.

⁷⁵ Hoffmann, Bert. "The International Dimension of Authoritarian Regime Legitimation: Insights From the Cuban Case." *Journal of International Relations and Development*, vol. 18, issue no. 4, 18 July 2014, pp. 556-574. Accessed 27 June 2017.

⁷⁶ Hoffmann, Bert. "Transitions from Charismatic Rule: Theories of Leadership Change and Cuba's Post-Fidel Succession." *GIGA Working Paper*, issue no. 56, August 2007, pp. 1-24. Accessed 28 June 2017.

⁷⁷ Sondrol, Paul C. "Totalitarian and Authoritarian Dictators: A Comparison of Fidel Castro and Alfredo Stroessner." *Journal of Latin American Studies*, Cambridge University Press, vol. 23, issue no. 3, Oct 1991, pp. 599-620. Accessed 10 Dec. 2016.

developed and used in the future, in the discussion and study of a construction of society and leadership and legitimacy?

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