**The Leadership Style of Fidel Castro: A Decolonial Perspective**

# **Abstract**

Leadership theory stands accused of being Western-centric. To address this, we investigate Fidel Castro’s leadership through 32 semi-structured interviews with Cuban people. Narratives reveal his decolonial leadership as he led the Cuban Revolution, and then Cuba for over fifty years, resisting Western hegemony. Findings problematise the applicability of conceptions of Charismatic-Transformational Leadership (CTL) to non-Western cultures. Benevolent paternalism emerged as a key additional aspect in the Cuban context. Western critiques of CTL as leader-centric and prone to hero-worship were not seen as problematic in the Cuban sample. We explain this with reference to the unifying effects of Castro’s decolonial project.

**Keywords**

Fidel Castro; Decolonial leadership; Cuba; Charismatic-Transformational Leadership; Leadership; Non-Western

**Introduction**

Decolonial theory, arising from Latin American scholars such as Quijano, Mignolo, and Dussel, critiques the ongoing legacy of European colonialism and its shaping of global power dynamics that marginalize non-Western knowledge and cultures (Dussel, 1993; Mignolo, 2011; Quijano, 2007) this has implications for mainstream leadership theories, rooted in Eurocentric enlightenment ideals, which assume the superiority and universal applicability of Western epistemologies (Nkomo, 2011). Instead, a decolonial approach to the study of leadership asserts the agency and values of colonised peoples, challenging neocolonial domination, and experimenting with alternative models (Jiménez-Luque, 2021).

In this sense, Fidel Castro’s leadership of the Cuban Revolution exemplifies decolonial leadership.[[1]](#footnote-1) By framing his movement as ending the legacy of Spanish colonialism and US imperialism, Castro challenged the global capitalist system that underpins Western power (Gott, 2005, Kapcia 2008). Though not entirely breaking free of Eurocentric influences (Kapcia, 2008), Castro’s leadership embodied a distinctly Cuban and Caribbean vision of decolonial struggle. His leadership drew upon Cuban and Latin American traditions, adapting Marxist-Leninist ideas to the Cuban context and emphasizing cultural decolonization. Under his leadership, Cuba developed an anti-racist, anti-colonial praxis, forging alliances with other Global South movements (Saney, 2004). Moreover, his revolutionary government promoted Afro-Cuban culture as an integral part of Cuban identity, supporting artists who celebrated this heritage (Pérez Sarduy and Stubbs, 1993) and took steps to incorporate black Cubans into national life (de la Fuente, 2001).

Castro’s socialism was therefore deeply rooted in Cuba’s historical context. It drew inspiration from José Martí’s vision of an ‘Our America’ resisting US imperialism and asserting its own identity (Martí, 1977; Saney, 2004). Castro deliberately constructed the revolution as a continuation of Cuba’s anti-colonial struggle (Castro, 1960; Quinn, 2007). This assertion of independence, Cuba’s interventions in foreign theatres such as Africa, and support for other revolutionary struggles (Pérez, 1986; Whitney, 2001) all contributed to the ongoing intense confrontation with the United States (Sweig, 2004; Schoultz, 2011).

Scholarly debates on Castro’s leadership are not immune from the positionality caused by this conflict and characterize him variously as a ‘charismatic authoritarian’ relying on personal magnetism (Eckstein, 2004), or as a genuinely popular leader whose government achieved significant social gains (Saney, 2004; Chomsky, 2015). Some emphasise his personalism and paternalism as drawing upon Latin American traditions of machismo and caudillismo (Kapcia, 2014).

Other scholars analyse Castro as a prototypical charismatic transformational leader (CTL) based on Weber’s theoretical construction (Fagen, 1965; Post, 2004; Hoffmann, 2009). There are Orientalist approaches that go so far as describing his rule as “sultanesque,” and that (wrongly) predicted dire consequences following his death (Centeno 2004, p. 410). There are those who portray him as an impulsive narcissist (Post, 2004) and others who argue he was a "Messianic" leader (Western and Wilkinson, 2010). More sympathetic accounts focus on the situational nation-building project that Castro led (Kapcia, 2014).

Our study aims to move beyond Western-centric biases by examining Castro’s leadership through Cuban people’s narratives. By privileging Cuban voices, we unpack views about his leadership using a postcolonial and decolonial framing. Decolonial perspectives challenge leadership scholars to reflexively examine their positionality and how their research may reinforce or challenge colonial hierarchies.

# **Charismatic-Transformational Leadership (CTL) and critique**

Max Weber (1968) proposes that charismatic leaders have exceptional qualities that affect entire systems, and arise in a time of crisis, due to people being more open to unconventional leadership styles.

Similar to charismatic leadership, transformational leadership (TL), was defined by Burns (1978) as leadership that would move followers to achieve a common goal. Later, Bass (1985) proposed a TL model including four components: idealised influence, inspirational motivation, individualised consideration, and intellectual stimulation. The same leaders are referred to as charismatic, transformational, or Charismatic-Transformational (CTL) (Knippenberg and Sitkin, 2013) due to the similarities between the charismatic and transformational leadership constructs.

Alvesson and Kärreman (2016) critique the leader-centric approach to CTL in which leaders lead and followers follow mindlessly and suggest a need to ‘de-ideologise’ leadership studies and put aside seductive fantasies of leaders as heroes or saints. Calling for more inclusive models for leadership, Tourish and Pinnington (2002) draw similarities between components of TL and cults, where followers are drawn in. Fourie and Höhne (2019) further argue that heroic bias pronounced in TL theory assumes that leaders are infallible and can disempower followers.

The criticism of CTL as leader-centric may not pose an issue in other cultural contexts. Farh and Cheng defined benevolent paternalism as a leadership style combining ‘strong discipline and authority with fatherly benevolence and moral integrity’ (2000:84). Karakitapoğlu-Aygün and Gumusluoglu (2013) found benevolent paternalism to be an emergent category of TL, and viewed positively in Turkey, a country that is relatively collectivist with a high-power distance.

Individualist Western cultures tend to be more critical of paternalistic leadership (Aycan, Schyns, Sun et al., 2013; Bedi, 2020). Critics draw attention to its associations with authoritarianism characterised by control and exploitation of individuals (Aycan, 2006). However, a paternalistic leadership style can include genuine concern and benevolence, as well as authoritarianism (Aycan, 2006; Bedi, 2020). Paternalistic leadership can therefore be seen as paradoxical leadership style whereby benevolence and authoritarianism co-exist and complement each other (Zhang et al.,2015).

**Postcolonial and decolonial theories**

Although belonging to different time periods and geographical locations, both post colonialism and decolonial theories question Western domination of the production of knowledge and contest the power structures established by European empires (Bhambra, 2014). Edward Said, a renowned postcolonial scholar, refers to processes of ‘Westernisation’ whereby European imperialism gave way after the Second World War to Americanisation to the extent that global/transnational cultures predominantly reflect Western European and North American culture. Said (1978) claims that cultures that don’t conform to this prototype are deemed to be problematic and in need of reform. His work on *Orientalism* illustrates how colonialism affected cultural discourses, resulting in Western ideologies and ‘truths’ about the ‘orient’ which hegemonised Western conceptualisations. In turn, these offer a basis for supporting Western intervention, and legitimate uses of coercive financial and/or military power (Said, 1993). The long-standing Cuban embargo could be seen as a manifestation of this.

Wanderley and Barros (2019: 80) similarly talk about geopolitics of knowledge – a concept derived from Latin American decolonial scholarship (Escobar, 2011; Mignolo, 2011; Quijano, 2010). They claim that knowledge needs to be understood within its geopolitical context, especially in a post-colonial society, which has historically prioritised Anglo-Saxon knowledge as the dominant source of theory.

With reference to leadership research, decolonial scholars argue that leadership theories remain incomplete unless they consider the context of coloniality and the power asymmetries imposed by the Eurocentric social order (Quijano, 2010). Jimenez-Luque (2021: 170), for example, defines decolonial leadership as ‘the deconstruction of coloniality’ and illustrates how decolonial leadership processes developed, which challenged the dominant Eurocentric social order. This is especially relevant to Cuba given its historic context, which was based on resistance to Batista’s regime, US Imperialism and, latterly, neoliberal hegemony.

# **Method**

We conducted thirty-two semi-structured interviews with Cubans. Ten participants are female and 22, male with ages ranging from 18 to the mid-70s representing wide-ranging professions and backgrounds (Appendix 1). Ethical approval was obtained from the institutional ethics committee (approval number 18872).

We conducted fieldwork between 2016 and 2017. We used a snowballing technique to find interviewees and sought opportunities to talk to citizens in informal settings, for example, when picking up hitchhikers, at Cuban music events, talking to people sat out on the street, through social events. We captured some interviews with high-level managers and small business owners during a research trip on Cuban business models in April 2016, when Castro was ill. We conducted eight interviews with Cubans living off the island in 2016. Twenty interviews took place six months after Castro’s death, sourced during a visit to Cuba in 2017. All interviews were anonymised.

Responses of participants residing in Cuba reached the point of saturation as interviews with additional participants on our second trip repeated similar themes rather than contributing new perspectives. However, the responses from interviewees who had left Cuba were more diverse. As such, the findings from the sample of Cubans who’d left Cuba should be interpreted as exploratory rather than conclusive.

The interview schedule comprised five key prompts from an initial open question. We adopted a modification of the critical incident technique (Flanagan, 1954) by asking: ‘Can you tell me any stories that typify Fidel’s leadership style?’ to avoid eliciting value judgement. We followed these with prompting questions. Interviews ranged from 30 minutes to one hour.

We adopted a thematic framework analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). In phase 1, we familiarised ourselves with the data by several readings of the transcripts. In phase 2, we summarised sentences into descriptive codes, categorising sections of text into the leadership qualitative framework, reading and rereading the texts, discussing differences until we reached a consensus. In phase 3, we manually searched for themes, grouping the initial coding of descriptive themes. For example: benevolent paternalism, heroic leadership, etc. In phase 4, we critically reviewed these descriptive themes and eliminated themes that didn’t directly speak to our research question, such as discussion around irrelevant historical events.

In phase 5, we sought connections between initial codes to group them into higher order families of codes, or analytical themes (see results section below). We aimed to detect themes that emerged against a theoretical framework of CTL, but also against contexts that could elicit ‘meaning areas’. That is, those other families of themes that emerged at the periphery, outside of the framework of leadership qualities under investigation, creating new categories of context, meaning, and interest. Finally, phase 6 relates to the presentation of findings of the investigation.

## *Reflexivity*

It is important acknowledge our positionality in relation to participants’ voices in the Global South so that their voices are heard, and we as researchers do not reproduce their Otherness (Manning, 2018). Author one conducted many of the interviews and oversaw the others. Author 2 participated in a few of the interviews with author 1 and translated where necessary. Author 3 participated in the thematic analysis, along with author 1.

Author one: My assumptions relating to Cuba were challenged during my visits to Cuba. I was surprised that no Cuban we spoke to expressed interest in a multi-party democracy or complained about the lack of a free media, although several were happy to critique other aspects of their system such as burdensome bureaucracy and perverse incentives. The reasons became clear when I was told that citizens are expected to attend local meetings, where potential policies are floated, and feedback sought (Ludlam, 2009)[[2]](#footnote-2).

I was also surprised by the openness with which Cuban people spoke to me, even when being recorded, especially when their comments were critical of their government’s policies. The Western neoliberal view of socialist regimes is that the people won’t speak freely, possibly due to having been brainwashed by state media or due to fear of the consequences. In my attempt to circumvent this assumed bias, I sought interviewees who had not been introduced by a Cuban authority, and in the process realised that propaganda was not the sole preserve of socialist/communist regimes. For example, a troubling incident occurred when interviewing a Cuban sitting on his doorstep who asked whether we were Americans offering money for him to criticise Fidel.

On another occasion, I witnessed a demonstration by the Cuban ‘Ladies in White’ against the Cuban system, under the media scrutiny of foreign official’s visit to Cuba. Several European diplomats I met at a formal function, and many Cubans, told me the US paid the Ladies in White to protest, and they were paid more if they got arrested. I was also told that they were released soon after, but the arrest enabled the story to be told that Cuba has large numbers of political prisoners in jail without trial – a partial truth, but one which serves useful propaganda purposes.

It's in these additional first-hand experiences, adjunct to the formal interview processes, that one sees ‘coloniality’ in practice, and how a partial ‘knowledge’ can be obtained that privileges Euro and US-centric worldviews.

Author two is an expert on Cuban politics and history and has written on Cuban literature. He has visited Cuba regularly since 1987 and advocates for an objective understanding of the Cuban process that is free from the ideological biases that dominate mainstream media and much scholarship.

Author three maintains a neutral position in relation to the macro-political situation surrounding Cuba but is committed to decolonising learning and is interested in actively seeking non-Western approaches to leadership studies.

# **Findings**

## *Benevolent paternalism*

A common theme is that many interviewees see Fidel as a father figure, both distant and familiar. Many spoke of loving him, being afraid he would die, learning from him, trusting he would look after their interests, hoping to make him proud, feeling both safe when he was around and also a little scared of him.

Fidel visited us. We made a circle around him and had a debate. We were secondary students, but the way he made questions you felt like ‘My God, he’s coming! What am I going to ask?’ You feel like he’s worse than your teachers, but it’s that feeling of development. (Mi, living off the island).

Se’, living off the island recounts an experience where Fidel demonstrates caring aspects akin to fatherhood: ‘in the mines, Fidel came down once and clasped my hand. ‘Is it too hot? How many hours do you work?’ … When he saw the situation of the workers, he analysed and acted to help these workers underground.’

Viewing Fidel as a father figure seems to redeem him of his failures:

I have a weird ‘Stockholm syndrome’ with Fidel, I can see his failures, I can see the things he did wrong. And yet I can’t hate him. I can’t feel angry against him. I feel a bit more like disappointed like ‘you should have done better’. I see him like a grandpa, he is like that sort of paternal figure to me. I don’t think he had an evil plan. I think that most of it was genuinely ‘I am trying to improve people’s lives’ he just did wrong things, like we as parents do with our kids, you do go wrong.(Tu, living off the island).

One interviewee shares her trajectory of feelings about Fidel, which mirror the changing views towards a parent – first uncritical, then in teenage years becoming more critical but then with age and wisdom, taking a more sympathetic view:

I met Fidel Castro… Immediately I put Fidel in the symbolic position of my grandfather, who was the biggest thing in my family. He has this warm, and I observed him as …someone that I can and need to learn from, someone that I admire… Later on, you start to see Fidel is not as perfect as he was, in those days, we sometimes think that Fidel was a little bit obsessed with the Americans. And maybe the Americans were not that bad. We are blaming the blockade for everything when most of the things are our own. Later in the UK I learned that Fidel was right in terms of the American blockade, I realised in my daily life in the lab how difficult it is when you cannot buy things, as a researcher, because everything is made in the United States! That day I said, ‘Goodness me, Fidel was right!’ How much the blockade has impaired us Cubans. (Mi, participant living off the island).

Even as she laments Fidel’s obsession with Americans, she acknowledges the oppressive impact of the American embargo, which Cubans refer to as the ‘el bloqueo’ (blockade).

## *Decolonial leadership*

Decolonial leadership can be observed in numerous quotes that reference Fidel resisting the Americans:

Fidel had always been very brave and so to challenge the most powerful country in the world and to say ‘we are a small island, but we are not scared of you’ that sent a message to the whole Cuban population and to the enemy as well, so this is how I see Fidel’s figure. I got a lot of respect for him and admiration. (D, living off the island).

Another participant highlights the importance of Fidel’s leadership in revolting against the abuse carried out by the military dictator, Batista, and by association, America.

Before him, Cuba was in a complete state of abuse, also by the economy, the previous President that was commanding the country well, behind him was an American telling him what to do. And he was taking sugar cane, he was taking money and all the benefits of the country – one big power was taking it – America – and giving it to the rich people. After Fidel and the revolution, this stopped. We became an enemy of Americans, of course he has stopped the main flow of the benefits to America. (G, living off the island).

The reason for Cuba no longer being in a state of abuse is largely attributed to Fidel’s leadership and the revolution. The participant highlights the end of the economic oppression by America and points to the emancipatory processes that led to the upliftment of Cuban people:

You know, before him [Fidel], nobody was able to go to school and study, and before him, if I was sick and didn’t have money to pay the doctor, I would die. Before him, was a lot of young people was shouting in the streets, because of the politicians and their disagreement and they did not agree with the politician system. (G, living off the island).

Many accounts reference how Fidel used the power of America against them, presenting Cuban socialism as a David vs Goliath situation whereby the smaller entity fights off a gigantic force:

The American Government have only tried to punish Fidel and his dictatorship but they haven’t realised how much damage they have done to the people, the fact that they were threatening him and the revolution and trying to take back the control of Cuba, again that was good for Fidel because whenever they were plotting to assassinate him, he would come and give a speech about ‘This happened, they tried to kill me again!’ and the people would get so mad because they loved him, that would increase his popularity. (Ma, living off the island).

Thus, every time Cuba withstood US interference, or Fidel survived another assassination attempt, it reaffirmed his leadership and bolstered the Cuban sense of identity and pride, as shown in the following extract:

We had just been attacked in three airports in Cuba, the Bay of Pigs invasion was right around the corner and Fidel in the middle of that said, ‘For those who are trying to attack us, they should know that Cuba is now a socialist county and we will not fear any attack and we will be strong’ and we were strong, we were actually the first country to stop an American invasion. (Ale, living in Cuba).

Decolonial leadership was not focused on economic and political independence from the US alone, Fidel was also lauded for his international activities:

Fidel Castro is someone who didn’t only help in the liberation of Cuba, he helped make work in Nicaragua, in the Sandinista war, in Africa and Congo and different parts of Africa, he also helped to liberate different nations in Latin America. (G living off the island).

So, with Fidel we had this global conscience… each time there is a crisis in the world. Whether it’s Ebola in Africa or Katrina in the United States of America, it doesn’t matter because we know that the Cuban people will be there to support in any way they can. (Ale, living in Cuba).

## *Leader-centrism*

The narratives confirm the image of Fidel as a strong leader but show no evidence of a disempowered population. The following extract points to collective action, which is a predominant feature of decolonial leadership, and to his role in mobilising the Cuban people to achieve their goals:

The main style that I believe he had, he wasn’t the only man in charge of the revolution, I think that the main character of the revolution was precisely the people, he was simply an organiser, he told the people ‘we should do this, or we should do that in order to build a better Cuba, but it was the people that was the one that was the true actor. So, his merit and his virtue were precisely to arrange this, so I believe that’s the main thing about Fidel, he gave Cuban people a purpose, he gave Cuban people a social conscience. (Ale, living in Cuba).

This highlights the contribution of the people in the revolution rather than an individual-centric view of leadership. The symbolic power of Fidel in driving people towards realising their ambition in building a better Cuba is emphasised:

Not only because of Fidel, Fidel was the leading figure of that movement but there are hundreds and thousands, and millions of people involved in this system in this socialist system, there are soldiers, doctors, workers but he is always, when something goes wrong, he gets the blame and when something goes well, he doesn’t get any recognition. (D, living off the island).

Many excerpts exemplify leader-centrism but also emphasise the importance of other people’s contribution to the movement. ‘The population are involved in Government leadership by Castro, by Fidel Castro’ (Se, living off the island).

*Heroic leadership*

Many attributed a larger-than-life, almost mythical quality to Fidel, with some presenting him as a kind of Robin Hood figure distributing wealth to the poor. A participant living in Cuba, ‘O’ suggests, ‘A very big man, in every aspect. He made the earth shake everywhere, in favour of the poor like no one ever did before.’

Some stories have an overtly spiritual nature, such as the dove landing on his shoulder during his first speech after taking power. There are also numerous tales of how Fidel escaped death – almost in the manner of a superhero such as Batman or James Bond. Many also mention his ability to pop up unexpectedly when there is a problem to be solved.

*Followership*

Participants’ accounts indicate that perceptions of Fidel’s leadership depended on follower identities and histories:

Because we were born in the revolution, we don’t have that sense of debt that our parents and grandparents have towards him. So, for us as a generation it’s a bit more of a ‘I will challenge your view’ and I will not take anything for granted, because you didn’t give me the revolution. I was just born into it, so there is a great massive difference with the way I think about Fidel and the way my grandparents think about Fidel. All conversations end up in shouting! … both my grandparents were poor farmers, so the family were struggling to survive, and he made their life better, he made their kids go to university when they themselves were illiterate, so to them he is a saviour, he is a Messiah who came to earth to release us from all the oppression before the revolution. But it is not the case for me. (Tu, living off the island)

This suggests a generational difference in how Cubans may view Fidel. While he may be a hero for those who lived through the revolution, those born later appear more likely to view him critically. These narratives point to the agency of followers, where they refuse to believe everything Fidel says, expressing their cynicism of his leadership.

*The dark side of Fidel’s charismatic leadership*

There were several critical comments, and one interviewee viewed Fidel’s experiments with socialism as an expression of ego:

Fidel and the Cuban people have been his lab, he has an idea, and he has gone ‘let’s try this’ it didn’t matter that it affected people’s lives it doesn’t matter if it takes fifty years, but fifty years is somebody’s life… I remember him around those years saying that he wanted to make Cuba the most educated country in the world, and everything would respond to his vision, he had always been driven by his ambitions, he wants to prove a point, he wants to show the rest of the world he can do something, well… try to do. Just for his own sake.(Ma, living off the island)

Two Cuban interviewees living outside Cuba talked about how leaving Cuba exposed them to a more critical view:

As soon as you leave Cuba it is not that you change your mind or you turn against Cuba it is just you get to see the world and look from a different perspective and obviously have access to reading and seeing documentaries and stuff and you go ‘Oh my God, how could they do all this?’ I think the people have been too busy finding a place for food or trying to buy a pair of shoes and everyday things that they don’t have because they are in a struggle, focusing on something else. They have been brainwashed as well by all the speeches.(Ma, participant living off the island)

This raises familiar questions – is Fidel seen as an oppressive leader? Two other interviewees made points pertinent to this.

If we were in Cuba, we would not be able to talk so openly about positive and negative aspects of Fidel. Fidel was too paranoid – he had a persecution complex. But he didn’t need to because the people loved him. (L, living off the island)

Several Cuban-based interviewees referenced the numerous CIA-led assassination attempts on Fidel’s life, which are also a matter of record (Pérez, 2002), but the reference to a persecution complex from a participant living off the island, along with the fact that most critical comments came from participants no longer residing in Cuba, suggests that, unsurprisingly, different narratives prevail in different political contexts.

**Discussion**

The interviews reveal Castro as a prototypical decolonial leader. The emancipatory processes led by Castro’s leadership are apparent in most narratives. Decolonial leadership is about resisting the dominant social order (Jimenez-Luque, 2021), and many interviewees spoke of how he led the Cuban people’s revolt against the American blockade and against Batista. Some also referenced his decolonial leadership in international contexts, such as offering support for African liberation struggles to defeat colonial regimes.

Cuban narratives confirm many existing assumptions relating to CTL in the literature. As Weber proposed, Castro emerged as a Charismatic-Transformational leader during a crisis – the Cuban revolution, when strong leadership was perceived as necessary. Consistent with Burns’ (1978) definition of TL, there were numerous accounts indicating that Castro showed a transformational approach harnessing energies of his followers towards a common goal. Castro’s leadership style also reflects all four of Bass’s (1985) components of TL. He communicated an inspiring vision, and many expressed how Castro developed a common purpose among the people. Comments on his speeches and how they contained something for everyone, appealing to emotional, intellectual, and spiritual aspects, reflect individualised consideration and intellectual stimulation. For example, quotes illustrated how Castro shared the problems facing Cuba with the Cuban people and encouraged them to participate in the solutions.

The narratives also support some critiques of CTL, such as naïve mythologising of leaders as heroes or saints (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2016). Many interviewees indicate Castro as possessing larger than life, heroic qualities. Tourish and Pinnington (2002) go further, equating transformational leaders with cult leaders. Out of the 32 Cuban participants, one (living off the island in North America) offered support to this notion in a comment referring to the Cuban people as brainwashed from the long speeches and being taught about the revolution in school.

Cuban narratives demonstrated aspects of the hero worship and leader-centrism associated with CTL, but few saw this as problematic. One explanation for such hero worship not backfiring is benevolent paternalism, a theme that was identified in the numerous accounts that referenced Castro as a father figure. Most saw him as a leader who cared about the wellbeing of the Cuban people but was also firm in his leadership. This view of Castro as a father figure resulted in his failures being forgiven. As seen in the literature (Zhang et al.,2015), there appears to be a paradoxical relationship between benevolence and authoritarianism. However, it is benevolent paternalism that comes through more prominently in our findings, with Castro being viewed as authoritarian only by some of those living outside Cuba (living in the UK and US).

The small sample size of participants who no longer resided in Cuba is insufficient to make any claims on this front, but one explanation for our findings might be that those living on the island are exposed to media discourses favourable to Castro, while those who reside off island, and in the US, will be exposed to a more critical view. Another explanation is that the United States is only 90 miles away, and those who have opposed the system have historically left Cuba (Lamrani 2021 and 2022), hence the remaining population is predominantly in favour of the government. Furthermore, those who left tended to be from the wealthier sectors of the population and those who remain are overwhelmingly from the poorer sectors. These are the very people whose living standards were most improved by the policies that the government introduced, such as free health care and free education (Benjamin, Collins, and Scott, 2003). They have also been able to have social mobility themselves, filling the roles in society that those who left the island used to fill. Thus, these people have reason to view Castro as benevolently paternal (Benjamin et al., 2003).

Decolonial discourse and values were a prominent feature of Castro’s rhetoric, providing a uniting narrative. This offers a further explanation for the positive regard the Cuban sample displayed towards Castro and his paternalistic leadership style. By tapping into the deeply felt desire for self-governance that grew from a centuries-long independence tradition, Castro could transcend traditional left/right politics. While there may be a variety of opinions on socialism vs capitalism within the sample, there is a discernible consensus about wanting to be independent, and relevant to our argument, a strong identification of Castro with that aim.

Many mentioned Castro’s ability to survive numerous assassination attempts. This contributed to his hero status and consolidated him as a symbol of resistance against outside interference. Unlike other decolonial leaders, such as Lumumba or Nkrumah from Africa, Gaitán in Colombia, Allende in Chile, and Arbenz in Guatemala, who were all assassinated or overthrown by external forces, Castro survived hundreds of attempts on his life and an invasion. While Western critiques of Castro tend to assume that his longevity was due to repression, our results suggest an alternative explanation that decolonial discourses provide a uniting narrative providing legitimacy.

This suggests that it may not just be that collectivist cultures view paternalist leadership styles more positively than individualistic cultures, but also that a decolonial leadership style can justify or mitigate against critical views of paternalistic leadership. This can operate in a variety of ways – the authoritarianism can be acknowledged but deemed as justified in the face of the perceived external threat. There are plenty of quotes in our data to indicate that the perception of the United States as a threat was a key factor in bolstering support for Castro. In addition, the paternalism was seen as predominantly benevolent due to the improvement in health care and education the Cuban population still living on the island experienced post revolution, which again many of the sample referenced.

Our findings also have implications for followership. Contrary to Fourie and Höhne’s (2019) contention that a heroic leadership bias disempowers followers, we found no evidence of the Cuban sample being disempowered by Castro. We explain this by reference to the collective action emphasised in his leadership. Leader-centrism has connotations of individualism, which seems to be antagonistic to decolonial leadership, where leadership is seen as co-constructed and shared. However, the narratives of the Cuban people assist in reconciling these contradictions, as many point to his ability to harness the energy and spirit of the people towards a common goal. For example, several referenced his long speeches as ways in which Castro shared issues with the Cuban people, whether it be failing sugar crops, or foreign interference, and inspired the people to step up and address them through concerted action and resistance.

**Limitations and conclusions**

The hostile relationship between the US and Cuba has been a barrier to research and the dissemination of objective information about the island and its leadership. Our focus on decolonial leadership enables us to address this lack by focusing on views of followers. Reflexivity is a key requirement of qualitative research, and particularly so when conducting research in Cuba, a state that has become intensely politicised by setting itself in opposition to Western hegemony. We have endeavoured to present participant views as we found them. Nonetheless, in such cases, extra care must be taken in terms of interpretation.

One concern is whether people spoke freely. Eight of the interviews were from Cubans who no longer lived in Cuba, and it was noticeable that there was a greater proportion of critical comments made from this sub-sample: four were positive, two were critical and two were mixed. This contrasts with the Cuban sample, who were 90% positive. One interviewee based in the US claimed that Cubans have been brainwashed by stories told of Castro and the revolution. Like Americans tell stories of Washington, the Cubans make the most of their more recent heroic tales of the revolution. However, for our purposes, perceptions are as legitimate as ‘facts’, indeed more so as our focus is on the perceptions of the Cuban people.

Another issue is the extent to which interviewees were accurately representing their views to us. We took the usual precautions, such as anonymity, to make interviewees feel safe in being honest. We carefully phrased our questions to avoid implicit value judgements. Our sample was broad. Four were people who had known Castro personally and were in positions high enough to possibly feel obliged to present a positive slant. However, the rest were not in exalted positions, and had not been presented to us by any Cuban authority. Indeed, we took opportunities, such as picking up hitchhikers, and talking to people sitting on doorsteps, for this very reason. Interviewees were uniformly happy to chat with the interviewers, and in most cases be recorded. There was a remarkable lack of curiosity about who would hear the recordings or read the result, suggesting no fear of free speech. Interviewees spoke openly and thoughtfully, and we saw no signs of interviewees being careful what they said.

On the other hand, as non-Cubans, we were outsiders, and Cuban interviewers may have elicited different comments. An analogy we believe best represents how these quotes should be interpreted is the idea of Castro as a father figure to the Cuban people. One may criticise one’s father to a family member, for example, but would staunchly defend him against an outsider’s attack, even if that attack is only presumed. Cuba also depends upon income from tourism and some may therefore have chosen to focus on the positive aspects. This should be considered in interpreting the data, but we would not like to dismiss a broadly representative sample of Cuban voices on the basis that they are either brainwashed or engaged in propaganda.

In conclusion, we have explored how Fidel Castro’s leadership was perceived and experienced by a diverse group of Cubans, offering insights into the complex dynamics of decolonial leadership in the Latin American context. Through semi-structured interviews with 32 Cuban citizens, we uncover the ways in which Castro’s leadership style, which challenged Western conceptions of democratic governance, resonated with the historical struggles and cultural values of Cuban people.

Our findings highlight the centrality of Castro’s role as a decolonial leader who mobilized resistance against US imperialism and neocolonial domination. Participants consistently framed their support for Castro in terms of his defence of Cuban sovereignty and his championing of the interests of the Global South against foreign intervention. These narratives reflect an understanding of the Cuban Revolution as a decolonial project that sought to overturn not just domestic inequalities, but the legacy of colonialism and US hegemony in the region.

Our study also reveals the importance of benevolent paternalism as a key theme in Cuban understandings of Castro’s leadership. Many interviewees described Castro as a father figure who commanded both respect and affection, evoking traditional Latin American notions of the caudillo and the ‘gran hombre.’ While such paternalistic leadership styles are often viewed negatively in Western contexts, our participants largely saw Castro’s paternalism as integral to his ability to unite the Cuban people and protect the gains of the revolution.

These findings suggest that Western critiques of charismatic, personalistic and ideologically driven leadership may have limited relevance in postcolonial contexts such as Cuba, where the legacies of colonialism and the demands of national liberation struggles have shaped distinct political cultures and expectations. Rather than uncritically applying Western leadership theories, our study suggests a need for a more nuanced and contextually grounded understanding of how decolonial leaders navigate the challenges of resistance and social transformation.

By focusing on Cuban voices and experiences, our research contributes to the literature on decolonial leadership in Latin America. It invites further exploration of how the region’s varied histories of colonialism, imperialism, and revolutionary struggle have moulded unique models of leadership that defy Western categorization. While the limitations of our small, random sample must be acknowledged, the insights generated point to avenues for future research on the cultural and political dimensions of leadership in the postcolonial context.

As Latin America continues to confront the enduring impact of coloniality and neocolonialism and faces the challenge of asserting alternative projects of development and social change, a deeper understanding of the legacies and contradictions of decolonial leadership is required. By illuminating the ways in which Fidel Castro both embodied and problematised the ideals of decolonial resistance, our study raises new questions about the role of leadership in the ongoing struggle for Latin American sovereignty and self-determination.

**Declaration of Conflicting Interest**

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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**Appendix 1: Table of interviewees**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Code | When | Location | Demographic details |
| Mar | 2016 | Cuba | F 70s/80s runs shop |
| H | 2017 | Cuba | M 40s Taxi driver |
| A | 2017 | Cuba | M 18 student |
| Ale | 2017 | Cuba | M 20s student |
| P | 2017 | Cuba | M 60s |
| O | 2017 | Cuba | M 70s retired fisherman |
| L | 2017 | Cuba | F 30s office worker |
| Mi | 2016 | UK | F 60s scientist |
| Se | 2016 | UK | M 60s/70s retired |
| G | 2016 | UK | M 20s/30s physiotherapist |
| D | 2016 | UK | M, 30s, writer |
| La | 2017 | UK | F 20s/30s unknown |
| Su | 2016 | US | F 30s/40s academic |
| Ma | 2016 | US | F 30s/40s academic |
| E | 2016 | UK | M 30s security |
| N | 2017 | Cuba | F 50s journalist |
| Da | 2017 | Cuba | M 20s/30s manual worker |
| M | 2017 | Cuba | M 70/80s on street |
| Ed | 2017 | Cuba | M 20s/30s works in comms |
| Au | 2017 | Cuba | F 70s ex athlete |
| Alb | 2017 | Cuba | M 60s veteran |
| Mar | 2017 | Cuba | M 70s retired |
| Ce | 2017 | Cuba | M 60s/70s unknown |
| Pu | 2017 | Cuba | M engineer 50s/60s |
| He | 2017 | Cuba | M 60s unknown |
| Ju | 2017 | Cuba | M 50s/60s unknown |
| FP | 2017 | Cuba | F 60s landlady |
| J | 2017 | Cuba | M 60 unknown |
| H | 2017 | Cuba | M s professor 40s |
| MM | 2017 | Cuba | M teacher 40s |
| Al | 2017 | Cuba | M security guard tourist 50s |
| Lu | 2017 | Cuba | F Hitchhiker 30s unknown occupation |

1. Consistent with most scholarship on Cuba, we will refer to Fidel Castro as Castro, except when distinguishing him from his brother Raúl. The findings include an exception, where we chose to follow the Cubans’ preferred nomenclature of Fidel. There are interesting points to explore that are beyond the scope of this paper on how nomenclature can reflect, and also perpetuate, certain attitudes towards persons. For example, ‘Fidel’ meaning faithful has more positive connotations than the harsher sounding Castro preferred by non-Cuban commentators. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. An alternative explanation for the apparent absence of interest in multi-party democracy could be that Cubans benefited more from the improvement in living conditions post-revolution under a one-party state than they had under the notional multi-party democracy that existed in Cuba from 1902-1959, which was marked by corruption and disregard for the interests of the majority of citizens. See for example Foran (2009). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)