

Debate

# On Olivier Besancenot and Michael Löwy's book on Che Guevara

Friday 5 February 2010, by [DRUCKER Peter](#), [WAINER Kit Adam](#) (Date first published: 15 January 2010).

**We are reproducing below two contributions, published in the US magazine "Against the Current", debating Olivier Besancenot and Michael Löwy's book on Che Guevara and Che's legacy.**

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## A Letter on Che

— Peter Drucker

NOW THAT I'VE read Olivier Besancenot and Michael Löwy's book on Che Guevara, I'm disappointed with Kit Wainer's review (ATC 143, September-October 2009 [See below]).

It's not that I mind Kit's criticisms of the Cuban regime; I'm no fan of it myself. But I think that his characterization of Guevara's late politics as "a kind of hyper-voluntarism somewhat reminiscent of 'third period' (1928-1934) Stalinism" doesn't do justice to the evidence in the book he was reviewing.

Not only did Guevara reject a stagist strategy (unlike third period Stalinists), as Kit notes; Besancenot and Löwy present quite a number of examples of how Guevara was trying to enlarge the space for criticism and debate in Cuba in the early 1960s (while 1928-1934 were the years when what remained of criticism and debate in the USSR was almost totally stamped out).

I think it's a shame that Kit barely mentions the main themes on which Besancenot and Löwy argue that Guevara has something of substance to contribute to the post-Seattle generation: internationalist solidarity; the link between collective social transformation and individual ethics; and the relationship between economics and politics in the transition to socialism.

I think Kit is unfair in saying that Besancenot and Löwy "downplay Che's rejection of democracy" or discuss the problem "only briefly," when the book is full of statements like "Socialism must truly be a total democracy" (106), Guevara's failure to understand this was perhaps "the greatest lacuna in his work" (72) and "Che does not understand Stalinism." (74)

I'm also concerned about where Kit's approach to Guevara would lead if applied consistently to others. After all, as Sam Farber showed in *Before Stalinism*, while the Russian revolution was at its inception profoundly democratic in a way the Cuban revolution wasn't, Lenin and Trotsky were centrally responsible in 1918-22 for undermining soviet democracy. So should we classify them as non-Marxists as well?

How then can we pay so much attention to Lenin's work on imperialism and national liberation, or Trotsky's on permanent revolution and the struggle against bureaucracy? And what about other 20<sup>th</sup>-century Marxists who failed to fully understand or decisively break with Stalinism, like Mariategu, Lukcs and Gramsci? If we read them all out of our canon, what sort of Marxism will we have left?

I prefer Besancenot and Lwy's approach, which begins from the understanding that the "great revolutions [from Paris in 1871 to Russia in 1917 to Spain in 1936] must once again be assessed." Of course we should relentlessly criticize Marxists who failed to uphold the democratic essence of socialism — and for that matter who failed to integrate feminism or sexual liberation or ecology (starting with Marx himself).

But as Kit himself says, "arguably one can mine the works of even the most compromised figures for valuable nuggets if they will help renew a revolutionary socialist movement." In the daunting process of reinventing Marxism that we face, I think we should define our tradition broadly as well as examining it critically.

\* *Against the Current*, ATC 144, January-February 2010.

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## Looking at Che Guevara

— Kit Adam Wainer

*Che Guevara:*

*His Revolutionary Legacy*

By Olivier Besancenot and Michael Lwy

Monthly Review Press, 2009, 176 pages, \$16.95.

THAT CHE GUEVARA'S silhouette has found its way onto walls and T-shirts around the world is nothing new. A traveler through Latin America in the 1970s and 1980s would have seen Che's face spray-painted onto walls in working-class neighborhoods. In revolutionary Nicaragua Che graffiti was officially sanctioned, as was the massive outpouring of pro-Sandinista, anti-contra wall art. As a fallen martyr Che symbolized commitment and hope for anti-imperialist guerilla organizations throughout the Americas.

What is new today is the marketability of Che's image. Che is superimposed on clothing, decals, wristwatches. He shows up in high schools, college campuses, and the streets of lower Manhattan. For some the fiery beard and black beret undoubtedly have an aesthetic value by themselves. Does Che symbolize resistance, anti-authoritarianism, or a personal statement only the Che consumer understands?

Olivier Besancenot's and Michael Lwy's *Che Guevara: A Revolutionary Legacy* is a welcome

attempt to go beyond the chic Che and to recreate a usable past — a revolutionary socialist legacy based on the life and ideas of Che Guevara. The authors are, respectively, a French trade union militant and presidential candidate for the revolutionary left, and a leading Marxist theorist and writer on both European and Latin American revolutionary traditions.

For the authors a key to Che Guevara's legacy is an appreciation of his anti-Stalinism. Besancenot and Löwy trace Che's formative political years in Guatemala under the reform-minded regime of Jacobo Arbenz. Che witnessed the inability of the reformist project to withstand the imperial onslaught of 1954 and moved radically to the left.

He broke from the "two-stage" orthodoxy of the Communist Parties — a schema which posited a prolonged stage of "bourgeois democratic" development as prologue to the socialist phase. Communist theoreticians urged their cadre to restrain revolutionary impulses during the "democratic stage," to subordinate working-class activity in third world countries to alliances with "national bourgeoisies" for the formation of democratic, anti-imperialist blocs.

The consequences were tragic. Guatemala's democratic regime would be overthrown by a U.S.-backed coup d'état in 1954. Similarly, a military putsch would demolish Salvador Allende's Socialist project in Chile on September 11, 1973. In each case Communist rank and file would be imprisoned or murdered en masse.

Yet there was a logic to the strategy. Communist self-restraint dovetailed nicely with a Soviet foreign policy concerned less with promoting revolutions than with seeking Cold War alliances. Moscow wanted first and foremost to preserve a global status quo with sufficient balance of competing blocs that imperialist countries would not risk another attack on the Soviet Union.

In that context pursuing allies among national capitalist classes seeking some autonomy from the Washington consensus appeared to be a sensible exercise of great power politics. However, it had nothing to do with revolution. And according to Besancenot and Löwy, Che came to realize that in the 1950s.

Summing up the lessons of the Guatemalan experience, Che arrived at a point of view remarkably similar to that which Lenin postulated in his "April Theses" of 1917. (64) For Besancenot and Löwy, in rejecting the "stages" conception of socialist transition Che was breaking from the entire Soviet model and placing himself squarely in the camp of the anti-Stalinist revolutionary left. It follows that the rediscovery and restoration of Che's true legacy can be of enormous benefit to the reconstruction of a revolutionary left in Latin America today.

As the authors sum up rather poetically, "Many claim that the flame of our hopes was extinguished with the demise of the tragic and bloody experience known as 'real socialism.' We respond: an ember still burns — the communism of Che Guevara." (10)

### **Multiple Faces of Stalinism**

Besancenot and Löwy approach their subject with great literary skill, and an unambiguous dedication to the revitalization of the revolutionary project in the Americas and internationally. They are determined to use what is best in Che's legacy to further that goal.

Their commitment to the construction of a usable Che leads them, however, to downplay Che's rejection of democracy as the antidote to bureaucratic "Marxism," and to ignore evidence which contradicts their characterization of Che as an opponent of Stalinism.

Che's commitment to Stalinist ideas and practices, and his reverence for the memory of Stalin

himself, are extensively documented in the critical writings of Sam Farber. A break from the Soviet model of “socialist” transition and development does not equal anti-Stalinism. Quite the contrary, what Che rejected was the “popular front” period of Stalinism — but he rejected it in favor of a kind of hyper-voluntarism somewhat reminiscent of “third period” (1928-1934) Stalinism, with its extreme and destructive collectivization policies and delusional promises of imminent world revolution.

In fact, by the 1960s when Che’s break from Moscow was becoming public, Stalinist Communism was no longer monolithic. Among its leaders were advocates of revolutionary struggle, democratic reforms, splits from Moscow, and even the rejection of Stalin’s legacy itself.

Mao Zedong and Ho Chi Minh, for example, each led revolutionary movements which overthrew pro-imperial regimes and disrupted Soviet plans for postwar stability. Mao’s break from the USSR became public in 1960, leading to splits within Communist Parties throughout the world. Mao denounced Moscow’s non-revolutionary road to socialism and, during the Cultural Revolution, even launched an attack on “bureaucratism.”

Yet Mao was clearly an ardent Stalinist. utocratic campaigns were top-down and never relied upon the self-organization of Chinese workers. And his foreign policies turned out to be no less opportunistic than Moscow’s.

The 1948 Tito-Stalin split led to the survival of a renegade Communist state that openly rejected the Stalinist legacy and even Stalin himself. Ironically, the instruments the Yugoslav CP used to repress the Yugoslav Stalinists of the early 1950s included purges, a secret police, and criminal trials of dubious impartiality.

Among the Yugoslav Communist leaders were intellectuals who made valiant attempts to study the problems of bureaucracy, the need for decentralization and the production of good quality consumer goods. In the 1950s and 1960s these Communists even probed the question of workers’ control under socialism and devised a system of workers’ self management.

Yet workers’ self-management was generally illusory. Workers never controlled the apparatus of central planning and were never able to decide what Yugoslav socialism should look like at the macro level. While Yugoslavia remained less repressive than other East European countries, the Yugoslav CP never abandoned the central tenet of the one-party state in which party leaders’ authority and privileges rested upon police power.

Within the Warsaw Pact itself arose numerous Communist leaders who challenged Stalinist orthodoxy. In the context of Nikita Khurshchev’s de-Stalinization and propelled by movements of workers and intellectuals, Wladyslaw Gomulka (Poland 1956), Imre Nagy (Hungary 1956) and Alexander Dubcek (Czechoslovakia 1968) each rose through the ranks of Stalinist Communist Parties to chastise Stalinism.

While Gomulka’s anti-Stalinism was always designed to preserve the one-party state while appeasing a radicalizing working class, Nagy and Dubcek genuinely seemed to believe they could construct a more humanist socialism within the context of Communist Party rule. However, neither were willing to break from their Communist Parties or to attempt to form oppositional workers’ parties. And neither developed projects capable of resisting Soviet tanks.

## **Problematic Legacy**

Admirably, Besancenot and Löwy are trying to utilize Che’s most revolutionary ideas to intervene in the debates which are leading to the construction of a new left in Latin America. And arguably one can mine the works of even the most compromised figures for valuable nuggets if they will help

renew a revolutionary socialist movement. Perhaps the further removed historical figures are from our contemporary reality, the less impactful their errors and misdeeds become.

Yet the modern resurgent left in Latin America is coming to life in a period in which the questions of bureaucracy and workers' control are still pressing, and the prevailing view of socialist transition centers around a strong leader. And Che's Communist Party still rules Cuba. Consequently a more critical view of Che's "anti-Stalinism" is in order, given that his legacy is currently celebrated by groups as diverse as the Cuban Communist Party, Hugo Chavez' United Socialist Party, and the EZLN of southern Mexico.

The tension between the revolutionary Che and the pro-Stalin Che stands out in the book's first chapter, "A Marxist Humanism." Besancenot and Löwy movingly call for a socialism based on humanist principles, prioritizing the transformation of human beings into moral beings freed from commodification and the law of value.

They cite many of Che's writings to demonstrate Che's view that the revolutionary process transforms atomized individuals into collectivist actors committed to socialist solidarity. But we should confront Che's limits: What do we mean by humanism in post-revolutionary society? More specifically — what is humanism without democracy?

As Sam Farber has demonstrated, Che's antidote to working-class atomization and alienation was a top-down voluntarism in which workers were implored to sacrifice for the greater socialist good, not workers' control. He opposed efforts by Cuban workers to maintain independent unions and was instrumental in the construction of a one-party state.

Besancenot and Löwy do criticize Che for not recognizing workers' democracy as the antidote to bureaucracy (54-57) and for his support of the death penalty. But they do so only briefly and do not explore the contradictions between Che's humanism and his role in constructing a society in which workers have little role in determining what they produce, how much to produce, and in which they are still alienated.

We are still in the early phases of the reconstruction of a left that is both revolutionary socialist and democratic. It is inevitable that revolutionaries will rediscover past thinkers and actors without necessarily adopting all of their views. But it is imperative that in learning from the past we are at least as critical as we are admiring.

Che Guevara had admirable traits, but his advocacy of a socialism that did not include workers' democracy contributed to the failures of the old left and is one of the reasons that the project we are involved with now is one of reconstruction.

\* *From Against the Current, ATC 143, November-December 2009.*

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