

Che Guevara: The spark that does not die

Wednesday 7 April 2010, by [LÖWY Michael](#) (Date first published: 1 July 1997).

Years pass, fashions change, post-modernism succeeds modernism, democratorships replace dictatorships, and the Berlin Wall falls under the new Wall of Money. But thirty years later, Che Guevara's message is still a glowing beacon to those who know that a better world is possible.

There is something in the life and the legacy of the Argentinean doctor/guerrilla/Cuban revolutionary which still speaks to the generations coming of age in 1997. How else can we explain the mounting numbers of articles, books, films, and debates on Che? It is not simply in commemoration of the 30th anniversary of his death; who was interested in the thirtieth anniversary of Joseph Stalin's death, in 1983?

Like Jose Marti, Emiliano Zapata, Augusto Sandino, Farabundo Marti, and Camilo Torres, Che is one of those heroic figures who died still fighting, gun in hand, and who have become, forever, seeds of the future planted in the soil of Latin America, stars of hope in the heavens of people's aspirations and desires, glowing coals banked under the grey ash of disappointment and disenchantment.

In every upsurge of revolutionary movements in Latin America over the last thirty years, from Argentina to Chile, from Nicaragua to El Salvador, from Guatemala to Mexico and Chiapas, there are traces of "Guevarismo" -sometimes clear, sometimes faint. Not only in the collective visions of those who struggle, but also in their debates over methods, strategy, and the very nature of "the struggle".

Seeds of Guevarismo have been germinating over the last thirty years, in soil furnished by the political culture of the Latin American left. Now these seeds are bearing stems, leaves, and fruits. Che's traces are one of the red threads of which people from Patagonia to the Rio Grand weave their dreams.

Are Che's ideas out of date? Is it now possible to transform Latin America without a revolution? This is the theory which some Latin American leftist theoreticians (calling themselves "realists") have advanced in recent years, starting with the talented writer and journalist, Jorge Castaneda in his well-known book *Utopia Disarmed* (1993).

Only a few months after the publication of his book, Castaneda's own country, Mexico, saw the spectacular uprising of the indigenous people of Chiapas, under the leadership of an organisation of armed utopians, the EZLN, whose principal organisers come from the guevarist tradition. True, in contrast to traditional guerrilla groups, the EZLN "Zapatistas", say that their objective is not "taking power", but providing inspiration and support for the self-organisation of Mexican civil society, with the ultimate goal of a profound transformation of the country's social and political system.

Nonetheless, without the uprising of January 1994, the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) -still armed, four years later- would not have become a reference point for the victims of neo-liberalism, not only in Mexico but throughout Latin America and the rest of the world. Zapatismo is a mix of several subversive traditions, but guevarismo is a key ingredients in the bubbling stew of this unprecedented revolutionary culture.

In a recently published Newsweek article, Castaneda has begun to ask whether it is really possible to use non-revolutionary methods to take wealth and power out of the hands of the rich and powerful elite, thus transforming the long-standing social structures of Latin America. If this proves too difficult at the end of the twentieth century, he admits that the world will have to recognise that, "Che Guevara had a point, after all". [1]

The political is personal

Che was not only a heroic fighter, but a revolutionary thinker, with a political and moral project and a system of ideas and values for which he fought and gave his life. The philosophy which gave his political and ideological choices their coherence, colour, and taste was a deep revolutionary humanism. For Che, the true Communist, the true revolutionary was one who felt that the great problems of all humanity were his or her personal problems, one who was capable of "feeling anguish whenever someone was assassinated, no matter where it was in the world, and of feeling exultation whenever a new banner of liberty was raised somewhere else." [2]

Che's internationalism -a way of life, a secular faith, a categorical imperative, and a spiritual "nationality"- was the living and concrete expression of this revolutionary Marxist humanism.

Che often quoted Jose Marti's words that "any human being should feel on his own face the blows struck on the face of another". The struggle for this dignity was one of the ethical principles which would inspire all of his actions, from the battle of Santa Clara to the final desperate fight in the Bolivian mountains. What Che called "the banner of human dignity" is still an important term in the culture of Latin America. Its origins may lie in Don Quixote, a work which Che read in the Sierra Maestra, used in the "literature classes" that he gave peasant guerrilla recruits, and a hero with whom he identified in the last letter he wrote to his parents.

This value is no stranger to Marxism. Marx himself wrote that "the proletariat needs dignity even more than it needs bread". [3]

Consideration of Guevara's strategic thought has often been limited to the idea of the guerrilla foco (expanding nucleus) But his ideas on the revolution in Latin America are much more profound. In 1967 he argued that "There is no other change to make: either socialist revolution or the caricature of a revolution". In effect, Che helped an entire generation of revolutionaries to free themselves from the sterile prison of the Stalinist dogma of "stagism". [4]

Of course, one does find in his writings -whether on the Cuban experience or on Latin America- and even more in his tragic Bolivian episode, a tendency to reduce revolution to armed struggle; armed struggle to guerrilla struggles in rural areas, and guerrilla struggle itself to the small knot which formed the foco. This tendency has subsequently dominated the guevarist tradition in Latin America.

But you can also find passages in his works which lent nuance to the guerrilla conception -for example in insisting on the importance of mass political work, or on the inadequacy of armed struggle in countries with democratic regimes. Not to mention his explicit refusal of assassinations or blind terrorism. [5]

The guevarist legacy, which left its imprint on the strategies of Latin American revolutionary groups from the 60s to the 80s, is still with us, as a revolutionary sensibility and an unyielding resistance to the established order on the part of the continental left, from social movements like the Movement of Landless Peasants in Brazil, to currents which call themselves socialist.

Socialism in the Americas, wrote Jose Carlos Mariategui in 1929, cannot be a copy, but a heroic creation. That is exactly what Che tried to do, in rejecting any possibility of copying the “really existing” models and in searching for a new path to socialism, a more radical, more egalitarian, more fraternal, more human model which would better fit a real communist ethic.

His ideas on socialism and democracy were still evolving at the time of his death, but in his speeches and writings, one can clearly see him taking an increasingly critical position on the self-proclaimed “real socialism” of Stalin’s followers. In his famous “Algiers Speech,” in February 1965, he called for those countries calling themselves socialist to “liquidate their tacit complicity with the exploiter countries of the West”. A tacit complicity which showed itself in the unequal trade relations with countries trying to liberate themselves from the imperialist ghetto. He added “Socialism cannot exist if there is no transformation in our consciousness which leads to a new fraternal regard for humanity, as much at the individual level in societies which have built or are building socialism as at the global level, vis-a-vis all people who suffer imperialist oppression.” [6]

In his March 1965 essay “Socialism and Man in Cuba”, Che analysed the models of constructing socialism that existed in Eastern Europe. Following his own revolutionary humanist precepts, he rejected a conception which claimed to “conquer capitalism with its own fetishes in pursuing the illusion of building socialism with the rotten weapons left to us by capitalism (commodities taken as economic units, profitability, interest rates as a stimulant and so on, we risk arriving at an impasse.” [7]

According to Che, one of the main dangers of the model imported from the Soviet Union was the growth of social inequality and the formation of a privileged layer of technocrats and bureaucrats: in this redistributive system “it is the managers who profit. You only need to look at the latest project of the German Democratic Republic; the importance, there, of the director’s management, or, even better, the rewards which the director receives for managing.” [8]

Che’s economic thought, especially concerning the transition to socialism, was both passionate and problematic. Its passion is in its egalitarian and anti-bureaucratic stance, and in his criticism of commodity -or market- fetishism, including commodity fetishism in so-called “socialist” countries.

The Belgian Marxist and Fourth International leader Ernest Mandel sided with Che against the partisans of Stalinist economics (like Charles Bettelheim) and the Cuban imitators of the Soviet model in the economic debates of 1963-64.

But Che’s reflections -obviously unfinished- are also problematic in many ways. Not so much in what they say, as in what they don’t. Particularly Che’s silence on the question of socialist democracy. Che Guevara’s arguments for economic planning and against market categories are not wrong: on the contrary, they gain new force when measured against the crude neo-liberal “arguments” which dominate today. But his thoughts shed no light on the key political question: who makes the plan? Who makes the big choices in an overall economic plan? Who determines priorities in production and consumption?

Planning inevitably becomes an authoritarian and inefficient bureaucratic system of “dictatorship over needs”, unless it is accompanied by political pluralism, a free discussion of priorities, a free choice by the population between different proposals and different platforms of economic alternatives.

The history of the former Soviet Union provides abundant evidence of this. In other terms: the economic problems of the transition to socialism are inseparable from the nature of the political system.

The Cuban experience of the last 20 years also demonstrates the negative consequences of a lack of democratic and socialist institutions -even if Cuba has been able to avoid the worst totalitarian and bureaucratic deformations of other so-called “really existing socialist” States.

Che’s polemic against market fetishism was completely justified; but his arguments in favour of planning would be much more convincing if they were situated in the context of the democratic control by the workers over the planning mechanisms. As Ernest Mandel emphasised in another context, there is a third way out of the impasse of the market on the one hand, and bureaucratic planned economy on the other: worker’s self-management, democratically organised and centralised, and self-government planned by associated producers. [9]

Despite his distrust of Soviet models and despite his strong anti-bureaucratic commitment, in this area, Guevara’s ideas were far from clear.

Che Guevara died on October 8, 1967: a date which will live forever in the millennial calendar of oppressed humanity’s long march to self-emancipation. Bullets killed the freedom fighter, but they could never kill his ideas, his hopes, and his dreams. To their rage and disappointment, those who killed Emiliano Zapata, Rosa Luxemburg, Leon Trotsky, and Ernesto Che Guevara have seen their victims’ ideas survive and take root in the consciousness of new generations who take up the struggle.

After the fall of the Berlin Wall, the end of the authoritarian regimes in Eastern Europe, the triumph of capitalist global expansion, and the hegemony of neo-liberalist ideologies, the world today seems light years away from that of Ernesto Guevara’s life and struggle. But for those who do not believe in the pseudo-Hegelian “end of history”, or in the eternal life of a liberal/capitalist market economy, and for those who oppose the appalling social injustices inherent in such a system and who oppose the marginalisation of people in the South by the “new world order”, Che’s revolutionary humanist message is still a window opening on the future.

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P.S.

* From International Viewpoint Online magazine : IV291 - July 1997.

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Footnotes

[1] Jorge Castaneda, “Rebels Without Causes”, *Newsweek*, 13/1/1997 “We may discover, by the end of the century (...) that Che Guevara had a point, after all”.

- [2] Che Guevara, *Works*, Volume III, *Textes politiques*, Paris, Maspero, 1968, p.118.
- [3] "Communism and the Rhine Observer" - (September 1847).
- [4] Message to the Tricontinental Conference, 1967.
- [5] See for example E. Guevara, *Military Writings*, Paris, Maspero, 1968, p. 162.
- [6] Ibid. pp. 266-267.
- [7] Che Guevara, "Socialism and Man in Cuba", Political Documents, p. 283.
- [8] Che Guevara, "People and the Plan", *Works*, Volume VI, *Unedited Writings*, Paris, Maspero, 1972, p.90.
- [9] E. Mandel, "In defence of socialist planning", *New Left Review*, no. 159, Sept.-Oct. 1986.