

# Cuba: After a long wait...“Critical Notes on Political Economy” from Che

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**We have been waiting a long time, a very long time, for this book to be published... [1] It consists of critical notes on the Manual of Political Economy of the USSR (the Spanish language edition of 1963), notes which Che Guevara edited during his stay in Tanzania and in Prague in 1965-66, after the failure of his mission to the Congo and before leaving for Bolivia.**

For decades, this document remained “out of circulation”; after the collapse of the USSR some Cuban researchers were allowed to consult it, but without being allowed to take notes. It is only now, forty years after they were written, that it has been decided to publish these notes in Cuba, in an enlarged edition which contains other unpublished materials: a letter from Che to Fidel Castro in April 1965, which constitutes the prologue to the book, notes on the writings of Marx and Lenin, a selection of notes of conversations between Guevara and his colleagues in the Ministry of Industry (1963 to 1965) - which were already published in part in France and Italy in the 1970s - letters to various personalities (Paul Sweezy, Charles Bettelheim) and extracts from an interview with the Egyptian periodical El-Taliah (April 1965).

Why were these notes of Guevara not published sooner? From the outside, we can understand that before the end of the USSR, there were (bad) “diplomatic” reasons for keeping them confidential. But after 1991? What “danger” did these notes represent? This concealment is really strange... Who decided that they should be kept in a drawer? Who finally give the “green light” for their publication? The preface to the book, by Maria del Carmen Ariet Garcia, of the Centre of Che Guevara Studies in Havana, explains nothing and confines itself to observing that “this document has for years been one of the most awaited ones” by Che.

Finally this material is now at the disposal of interested readers, and it is really very interesting. It bears witness to Guevara’s independent spirit, to the critical distance that he had taken towards the Soviet model of “really existing socialism” and to his search for a radical alternative. But it also shows the limits of his thinking.

Let us begin by these limits: Che, at this time - we do not know whether his thinking had moved forward in 1966-67 - did not understand the question of Stalinism. He attributed the impasses of the USSR in the 1960s to ...the NEP of Lenin! Certainly, he thought that if Lenin had lived longer - he made the mistake of dying, he noted ironically - he would have corrected the most retrograde effects of this policy. But he was convinced that the introduction of elements of capitalism by the NEP led to the nefarious tendencies that could be observed in the USSR in 1963, which were going in the direction of the restoration of capitalism. All of Guevara’s criticisms of the NEP are not without interest, and they sometimes coincide with those of the Left Opposition in 1925-27: for example, when he remarks that “the cadres allied themselves to the system, constituting a privileged caste”. We are left wondering whether he hadn’t read Trotsky, who is nowhere mentioned in these notes... But the historic hypothesis which made the NEP responsible for the pro-capitalist tendencies in the

USSR of Brezhnev is quite clearly not very applicable. It quite simply ignores Stalinism and the monstrous deformations that it introduced into the economic, social, and political system of the USSR. We find few references to Stalin in these notes; one of the rare ones is quite critical: "the terrible historical crime of Stalin: to have treated communist education with contempt and instituted the unlimited cult of authority". That is accurate, but it's a little bit insufficient as an analysis...

Most of Guevara's criticisms of the Soviet manual closely correspond to his economic writings of the years 1963-64, which we already know, during the polemic in which both Charles Bettelheim (against Guevara) and Ernest Mandel (supporting him) took part: defence of central planning against the law of value and against "self-managed" factories, that is to say those which were autonomous and functioned according to the rules of the market; defense of communist education against individual monetary incentives. He was also worried, and correctly so, about the material incentives for factory managers, which he considered as a principle of corruption. We also find a criticism of the absence of internationalism in the commercial practices of the USSR - unequal exchange with dependent countries - and this affirmation, of capital importance: "we cannot build communism in a single country". Lenin, remarked Che, "clearly affirmed the universal character of the revolution, something which was subsequently denied" - a transparent reference to "socialism in one country", but once again there is no question of Stalinism.

Trotsky is absent from these notes, but we find an interesting reference to him in the debates at the Ministry of Industry: you cannot destroy opinions with blows from a club, that would be the death of any free development of intelligence. "It is obvious that we can learn a series of things from Trotsky's thinking", even though his subsequent activity was a mistake. Guevara ironically adds that the Soviets accused him of Trotskyism, putting this label on him like a "San Benito" - that is the clothing in which the Spanish inquisition dressed heretics when it led them to the stake...

Guevara correctly defends planning as a central axis of the process of building socialism, because it "frees the human being from the condition of an economic thing". And he recognizes - in the letter to Fidel! - that in Cuba "the workers do not participate in the working out of the plan". Who should plan? The debate in 1963-64 did not reply to this question. It is on this subject that we find the most interesting steps forward in the critical notes of 1965-66. The masses, he writes, must participate in the formulation of the plan, whereas its execution is a purely technical question. In the USSR, in his opinion, they had replaced the conception of the plan as "an economic decision of the masses, conscious of their role", by a placebo, where the economic levers determine everything. The masses, he insists, "must have the possibility of directing their destiny, of deciding how much goes for accumulation and how much for consumption"; economic technique must operate with these figures - decided by the people - and "the consciousness of the masses must ensure its accomplishment". This theme returns on several occasions: the workers, he writes, the people in general "will decide on the big problems of the country (rate of growth, accumulation/consumption)", even though the plan itself will be the work of specialists. We can criticize this too mechanical separation between economic decisions and their execution, but with these formulations Guevara came considerably closer to the idea of democratic socialist planning, such as - for example - Ernest Mandel formulated it. He did not draw all the political conclusions from that - democratization of power, political pluralism, freedom of organization - but we cannot deny the importance of this new vision of economic democracy.

We can consider these notes as an important stage in Guevara's path towards a communist/democratic alternative to the Stalinist Soviet model; a path that was brutally cut short by Bolivian assassins in the service of the CIA in October 1967.

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## **Footnotes**

[1] Ernesto Che Guevara, *Apuntes criticos a la Economia Politica*, Ocean Press, Editorial de Ciencias Sociales, Havana, 2006, 397 pages.