

ERNESTO CHE GUEVARA: IN MEMORIAM 50 YEARS ON

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ABSTRACT This article pays tribute to Ernesto ‘Che’ Guevara fifty years following his execution in the village of La Higuera in Bolivia and the subsequent exposure of his body at the Ospedal La Virgen de Malta in the city of Vallegrande, also in Bolivia. It reveals the making of this revolutionary, quoting extensively from people like Fidel Castro who were very close to Che. It concludes with the implications of Che’s work for education.

Keywords imperialism, education, economics, oppression, liberation

Ernesto Che Guevara was captured at Quebrada del Churo in Bolivia in the afternoon of October 8, 1967 and was shot dead in captivity in the school building at La Higuera on October 9. 2017 is the fiftieth year of his martyrdom for the cause of the oppressed people of Bolivia and the entire population of the global south. How did the world feel about his loss at the time of his death? Let me quote John Gerassi : “On October 9, 1967, the first news of Ernesto Che Guevara’s alleged death reached the United States. The next day, as I was about to enter my classroom at San Francisco State College to teach my course on Nationalism and Revolution in the Third World, I was approached by a nineteen year-old co-ed student. She had tears in her eyes and a “Make Love Not War” button on her breast.” You don’t really believe it, do you?” she asked. “I mean, he couldn’t really be dead, could he ?”

“Naturally, we spent the class period talking about Che, his guerrilla warfare concepts, and his personal commitments.

No one really believed at that time – neither the sixty students in the class, nor I – that he was dead. What was amazing , however , was that no one wanted to believe it.

“To my knowledge there were no conservatives in the class. But there were many liberals and many pacifists , in addition to radicals. And yet to all, even if they disagreed with his tactics, the news of Che’s possible death was very upsetting and very personal. Che had obviously caught their imagination”(Gerassi, 1968, p.1).

Today, fifty years from that date, Che has become an icon, recognized all over the world through Alberto Korda’s photograph, a symbol of the oppressed, persecuted and humiliated. Camilo Guevara , Che’s son, wrote “ October 9— In that poor, little school- house of La Higuera, a small space confines one of the most consequential human beings ever known. A great man patiently waits for death. The order to murder him comes from Washington; the underlings duly obey and with one bullet after another steal the vigor from the guerrilla fighter’s body, a sad and terrible error. He states that, contrary to the executioners’ will, Che became a hardened symbol of resistance, a “symbol of the fight for what is just, of passion, of the necessity of being fully human, multiplied infinitely in the ideals and weapons of those who struggle” (Preface by Camilo Guevara, in Guevara, 2006, p.7). We can also add that he became a symbol of postcolonial resistance and renewal.

Che’s Anti-imperialism

Fidel Castro delivered a speech in memory of Ernesto Che Guevara at the Plaza de la Revolucion on October 18, 1967. He said,” Tonight we are meeting to try to express, in some degree, our feelings towards him who was one of the closest, the most admired, the most beloved, and without doubt, the most extraordinary of our revolutionary comrades : to express our feelings for him and for the heroes who have fought with him and fallen with him, his internationalist army that has been writing a glorious and never-to-be-effaced historical epic” (Gerassi, 1968, p. 433).

He continued by stating that Che was “filled with a profound spirit of hatred and loathing for imperialism, not only because

his political awareness was already considerably developed, but also because shortly before he had had the opportunity of witnessing the criminal imperialist intervention in Guatemala through the mercenaries who aborted the Revolution in that country. A man like Che did not require elaborate arguments. It was sufficient for him to know that there were men determined to struggle against that situation, arms in hand, it was sufficient for him to know that those men were inspired by genuinely revolutionary and patriotic ideals. That was more than enough. And so, one day at the end of November, 1956, he set out on the expedition toward Cuba with us” (Gerassi, 1968, p.434).

Soldier and Doctor

Fidel reveals how they emerged victorious from the first battle, with Che being both a soldier and doctor among the troops. He states that they came through the second victorious battle, and lauds Che for being not only a soldier but the “most outstanding soldier in that battle”, achieving one of those singular feats for which he became renowned. Castro adds “Our forces continued to develop, and we faced another battle of extraordinary importance at that moment. The situation was difficult.” He states that the information they had was erroneous in many ways as they had to attack, in broad daylight, “at dawn, a strongly defended, well-armed position at the edge of the sea.” The enemy troops were right behind. In that confusing situation, Castro added that they had to call for a supreme effort by the revolutionary troops. “Comrade Juan Almeida had taken on one of the most difficult missions, but one of our flanks remained completely without forces; one of the flanks was left without an attacking force, placing the operation in danger. And at that moment, Che, who was still functioning as our doctor, asked for two or three men, among them one with a machine gun, and in a matter of seconds, rapidly set off to assume the mission of attack from that direction.”

Castro revealed how, on that occasion, Che proved to be not only an outstanding combatant but also an outstanding doctor, attending both the wounded comrades and the wounded enemy soldiers. “After all the weapons had been captured and it became necessary to abandon that position, undertaking a long return march under the harassment of diverse enemy forces, it was necessary for someone to stay behind with the wounded, and Che stayed with the wounded. Aided by a small

group of soldiers, he took care of them, saved their lives and later rejoined the column with them” (in Gerassi, 1968, p.434).

The Foreigner in Cuba

Fidel said that Che’s principal characteristic was his willingness to volunteer instantly for the most dangerous mission. This naturally aroused admiration. This was, according to Castro, enhanced by recognition of the fact that here was a combatant who had not been born in Cuba. Castro acclaimed him as “a man of profound ideas, a man whose mind stirred the dream of struggle in other parts of the continent and who was, nonetheless, so altruistic, so disinterested, so willing to always do the most difficult things, to constantly risk his life... an incomparable leader. Che was from a military point of view, an extraordinarily capable man, extraordinarily courageous, extraordinarily aggressive.” Castro did underline that his Achilles’ heel, as a guerilla, was his possession of an excessively aggressive quality with an absolute contempt for danger (Fidel Castro, in Gerassi, 1968, p.435).

“The enemy believes,” says Fidel, “it can draw certain conclusions from his death. Che was a master of warfare! He was a virtuoso in the art of guerrilla struggle! And he showed that an infinite number of times. But he showed it especially in two extraordinary deeds.” He points to his role in the invasion of Cuba from the *Granma*, in which Che led a column pursued by thousands of enemy soldiers. This occurred across a flat and absolutely unknown terrain. With Camilo Cienfuegos, Che achieved “an extraordinary military accomplishment.” The second was the “lightning campaign” in the province of Las Villas mounting the now famous and audacious attack on the city of Santa Clara. He entered the city, defended by tanks, artillery, and several thousand infantry, with a column of around three hundred men (Castro, in Gerassi, p.435).

Summing up the revolutionary qualities of Che, Fidel said, “If we wish to express what we expect our revolutionary combatants, our militants, our men to be, we must say without hesitation: ‘Let them be like Che!’ If we wish to express what we want the men of future generations to be, we must say: ‘Let them be like Che!’ If we wish to say how we want our children to be educated, we must say without hesitation: We want them to be educated in Che’s spirit! If we want the model of a man who

does not belong to our time, the model of a man who belongs to the future, I say from the depths of my heart that such a model, without a single stain on his actions, is Che! If we to express what we want our children to be, we must say from our very hearts as ardent revolutionaries : ‘We want them to be like Che!’ (Gerassi,p.441). As a revolutionary general, however, if he was extraordinary, he was equally marvelous in the post-revolution construction of socialism.

Cuba’s construction of Socialism

It is worth quoting from a brilliant researcher, Helen Yaffe, from the London School of Economics, who has done pioneering work investigating Che’s contribution to the construction of socialism in Cuba. She writes, “The problem facing the Cuban Revolution after 1959 was how to increase productive capacity and labour productivity in conditions of underdevelopment and in transition to socialism, without relying on capitalist mechanisms that would undermine the formation of a new consciousness and of social relations integral to socialism. Guevara set out to meet this challenge.” She argues that, far from Che projecting the image of the romantic guerrilla fighter or the idealist dreamer, he was an “intellectual who studied Karl Marx’s *Capital* with scientific rigour.” She reveals that his practical policies derived from three lines of enquiry, namely deep study and knowledge of “Marx’s analysis of the capitalist system; engagement in contemporary socialist political economy debates; recourse to the technological and administrative advances of capitalist corporations.” She argues that Guevara challenged the manner in which Marxism had been interpreted and applied in the Soviet bloc, condemned the USSR’s dogmatism and helped develop an alternative Cuban economic management system. She goes on to state that, by virtue of his systematic critique of the Soviet political economy, he concluded, around 1966, that without a dramatic change in policy, the Soviet Union risks embracing capitalism (Yaffe, 2009, p.2).

She also pointed out that, between 1959 and 1961, Guevara played a central role in driving through the structural changes which transformed Cuba from a semi-colonial underdeveloped country to an independent state being integrated into the socialist bloc. She states that his military, political and economic experiences contributed towards the creation, from 1961 to 1965, of the Budgetary Finance System (BFS) of economic

management through the Ministry of Industries (MININD) ... “The system was the fruit of dynamic interaction between theory and practice, emerging first as a practical measure to solve concrete problems in industry, but gaining a theoretical base as Guevara immersed himself in the study of Marxism, initiating the Great Debate in 1963 about which economic management system was appropriate to Cuba. Based on the productive and managerial techniques of US corporations, the BFS was an economic management system unique to socialism.” (Yaffe, 2009, p.2)

The constant learner/educator

Yaffe also revealed that Guevara’s commitment to constant learning led to education being an intrinsic part of revolutionary formation. He delivered literacy classes and general education among his troops and locals people during non-combat periods. She reveals that he studied “Cuban history, war strategy, and about the Mambisi resistance to Spanish colonists, and then would teach others, reading in groups and discussing the material.” Guevara was well versed in Neruda’s poetry which he shared with young soldiers. Education among the army was formalized in the first days of January 1959; the La Cabana fortress in Havana was transformed into Ciudad Libertad (Freedom City). Che is said to have “invited teachers and other university graduates, members and supporters of the M26J and the Popular Socialist Party (PSP) to provide literacy and political education for his column” (Yaffe, 2009, p. 75). The great Cuban literacy campaign in 1960 culminated from this initiative. Over 300,000 Cubans, including 100,000 students, many in their early teens, travelled across Cuba teaching 700,000 people to read and write.

A meteoric exemplary life

I would also like to quote from Michael Lowy’s classic *The Marxism of Che Guevara*, first published in 1973 and reissued later with an introduction by Peter McLaren, the latter having authored a book comparing Che’s revolutionary ideas with those of Paulo Freire (McLaren, 2000). Lowy says in his introduction, “His life was certainly a quite remarkable one: from the asthmatic medical student in Buenos Aires to the guerrilla commander, from the fighter in the Sierra Maestra to the Chairman of the National Bank of Cuba, and finally, from the Minister of Industries to the *guerrillero* hunted down and killed in Bolivia through the

efforts of the CIA. It was a vivid, meteoric, exemplary life – the life of a man whom Sartre described as ‘the most complete man of his time’, one who can easily be compared to the giants of the Renaissance for the stupendous many-sidedness of his personality: doctor and economist, revolutionary and banker, military theoretician and ambassador, deep political thinker and popular agitator, able to wield the pen and the sub-machine gun with equal skill. The extra-ordinary character of this life, without precedent in the history of the twentieth century, accounts for and illuminates the rise of the Che myth: Che the romantic adventurer, the Red Robin Hood, the Don Quixote of Communism, the new Garibaldi, the Marxist Saint-Juste, the Cid Campeador of the wretched of the earth, the Sir Galahad of the beggars, the secular Christ, the San Ernesto de la Higuera revered by the Bolivian peasants, the Bolshevik devil-with-a-knife-between-his-teeth who haunts the dreams of the rich, the red ‘pyromaniac’ (*Der Spiegel*) kindling braziers of subversion all over the world ..” (Lowy, 1973, p.7).

Lowy states further, “It is therefore necessary and urgent to suggest the initial outlines of a systematic study of Che’s thought, which is both orthodox Marxist and at the same time fiercely anti-dogmatic; rooted in the fertile soil of the Cuban Revolution and yet bearing a universal message; deeply realistic and yet animated by a powerful prophetic inspiration; scrupulously attentive to the concrete technical problems of financial administration or military tactics, but at the same time preoccupied with the philosophical questions implicit in the communist future; severe, inflexible, intolerant, irreconcilable on the plane of principle, but flexible, versatile, and capable of delicate variation as regards forms of application to a complex and changing reality” (Lowy, 1973, p.9).

With this aim, Lowy proceeds “to show that Guevara’s ideas constitute a coherent whole, and are built on the basic premises of Marxism-Leninism, their philosophical, humanistic, ethical, economic, sociological, political, and military themes all closely linked together.” (Lowy, 1973, p.9) He also wants to show “the relation between Che’s ideas and those of Marx and the different Marxist trends of our time, emphasizing the way in which Che’s ideas seem to me to transcend Stalinism and reformism, and go back to the living resources of revolutionary communism. Finally, I shall try to show how these ideas furnish

an original and stimulating theoretical contribution to Marxist thought, especially as regards three major problems: (1) the human significance of communism (2) the political economy of regimes in transition to socialism (3) the politico-military strategy of the revolution in the Third World.”(Lowy, 1973, p.9).

Revolutionary Solidarity

It would be appropriate now to reveal Che’s own view of revolutionary solidarity that he expressed in his message to the Tricontinental: “Our every action is a battle cry against imperialism, and a battle hymn for the people’s unity against the global enemy of mankind: the United States of America. Wherever death may surprise us, let it be welcome, provided that this, our battle cry, may have reached some receptive ear and another hand may be extended to wield our weapons and other men be ready to intone the funeral dirge with the staccato singing of machine-guns and new battle cries of war and victory” (Gerassi, 1968, p. 424)

Conclusion: anti-imperialist educator par excellence

Che Guevara, as McLaren (2000) has shown, was the revolutionary, anti-imperialist educator par excellence. He underlined the importance of radical education within revolutionary action. In the tradition of other guerilla fighters cum educators, such as Nicaragua’s Augusto César Sandino, he sought to combine military training and combat with learning. He also regarded basic education, including literacy and health education, as the *sine qua non* of revolutionary activity among troops and the local population in ‘liberated zones’ during revolutionary, anti-imperialist wars. It is ironic that this charismatic figure, who championed revolution through armed struggle and educational efforts – arms, books and the pen – would have his life summarily terminated inside an elementary school in La Higuera where it is believed he asked to speak to the local teacher so that he could indicate to her the misspelled words he spotted on the board of the classroom where he awaited his fate (McLaren, 2000). Selling the poor and destitute short in different ways of life, including their education, constantly irked this Argentinean from Rosario who would champion the cause of the meek, who, he must have felt, should inherit the earth.

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