

“The tradition of all the dead generations”

Some critical notes on Che Guevara and the Cuban mirage

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Contents

STATE CAPITALISM AND ANTI-IMPERIALISM	3
ANGOLA AND SOUTH AFRICA	3
THE ICON TODAY	4
THE TRAGEDY OF CHE	4
REPRESSION AND REVOLUTION	5
IN CLOSING	5
SOME QUOTES	5
<i>Che on Stalin</i>	5
<i>Che on Kim Il Sung</i>	6
<i>Che on arresting Cuban Trotskyists</i>	6
<i>Che on the state</i>	6
<i>Che on the vanguard party taking power</i>	6
<i>Che on making the ‘new man’</i>	6
<i>Che on “revolutionary” discipline</i>	7
<i>On Cuba’s forced labour camps</i>	7
<i>On nuclear war</i>	7
<i>On death (for others)</i>	7

Unfashionable truths are still truths. Cuba is a state-capitalist dictatorship, even today despite shifts to neo-liberalism; Che Guevara helped establish that regime, and played a key role in its early crackdowns on opponents. His forthright opposition to US imperialism was commendable, and accounts for much of his reputation. He has, of course, also been attacked by all sorts of right-wing writers – most recently we can mention the tracts of the neo-liberal Álvaro Vargas Llosa. This has, of course, merely enhanced his stature for many.

STATE CAPITALISM AND ANTI-IMPERIALISM

However, it is a mistake to assume the enemy of your enemy is your friend.

The world is littered with anti-imperialist but decidedly bourgeois and/ or dictatorial regimes that combine their opposition to imperialism with repression of their “own” popular classes. Cuba is but one example; others that could be mentioned include the Park regime in South Korea, the Hussein regime in Iraq, the Mugabe regime in Zimbabwe ... its a long list.

It makes sense too: most of these regimes *are* frustrated with their lowly place in the world order, and most aim to rise in the world system *by* exploiting their main resource- abundant labour – as thoroughly and unremittingly as possible. To get technical: cheap, unfree labour, exploited via a relentless extraction of absolute surplus value is their ruling elites main means to climb the ladder.

This is where Cuba fits. It is a classic Marxist-Leninist regime. That is, a one-party, authoritarian state, controlling the media, labour, and the economy, and suppressing basic civil and political rights. In objective terms, such regimes, from the USSR onwards, were totalitarian state-capitalist systems, based on forced-march modernisation in agricultural and semi-industrial countries, under the direction of a new ruling class that claimed to act in the name and interests of the very working class and oppressed groups it ground under its heel. These regimes were not socialist, or “workers states” (degenerate, deformed, deranged or otherwise), but a variant of capitalism geared for economically backward areas.

(Such regimes are often immensely good propagandists: many, many decent people took their claims at face value, and deluded themselves – or blinded themselves- to the horrors they entailed. Even today many are taken in by the demonstrably false claim that Cuba has the best medical care in the Americas e.g. the Michael Moore film “Sicko”. This claim is based on the regime’s own figures: independent verification is very difficult, as its a crime to criticize the government, but data shows a very different picture e.g. substantial numbers of the medical personnel listed in state data are actually working abroad, contracted out by the state; many hospitals are rundown and short of basic medicines, toilet paper, sheets etc. The same blatant manipulation of data, aided by duped foreign visitors, was common in the old USSR).

This is precisely the sort of regime Guevara admired, and fought to create in Cuba.

ANGOLA AND SOUTH AFRICA

Che Guevara remains an icon of many on the left. In South Africa, Cuban aid to the anti-colonial struggle struggle of Angola’s MPLA – aid from which the exiled ANC (African National Congress) and SWAPO (South West African Peoples Organisation) directly benefited – helped

foster this image. Few realized that the aid that the Cubans provided the embattled MPLA (Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola) government was no free gift by the Fidel Castro regime. The MPLA had to have aid as its government was under fire from apartheid South Africa, right-wing Angolan rebels like UNITA, Congolese adventurers and the separatists in oil-rich Cabinda.

Nor was the USA far behind, for Angola was the great hot spot of the Cold War in Africa. The MPLA, which viewed itself as Marxist-Leninist, called for aid from the USSR, and the USSR subsidized a Cuban presence. The Cubans were central to the six month 1987/8 Battle of Cuito Cuanavale against apartheid South African forces — the largest land battle on the continent since the Second World War. While the MPLA/ Cuba were defeated militarily, the South Africans (aiding UNITA) were halted for the very first time.

Castro would claim that Cuban aid was an act of selfless solidarity: "... we are not after material interests and it is logical that this is not understood by the imperialist. They only know chauvinistic, nationalistic and selfish criteria. By helping the people of Angola we are fulfilling a fundamental duty of internationalism".

This was an outright lie. The Cubans forces were state-brokered mercenaries, and Cuban and Soviet aid had to be bought by the MPLA: by 1988, the Luanda government owed the Cubans and the Soviets \$4 billion for the provision of "internationalism". This was paid by oil revenues, which in turn required the MPLA to act ruthlessly against the Cabinda rebels. Cuban solidarity was, in short, a very profitable labour brokering service for Castro, in the name of "revolution" raising valuable currency for the regimes' modernisation schemes in Cuba.

THE ICON TODAY

Guevara's early exit from the Cuban regime, in 1965, and his awful death in Bolivia, doubtless enabled him to retain the revolutionary aura that a deep entanglement in the state bureaucracy would have eroded. Castro found this was not easy. Like an aging Western rock star, who looks somewhat ridiculous performing in tight jeans before an audience of people younger than his own grandchildren, Castro continued to relive his youth into his 80s, wearing his combat clothes until he retired in 2008 — nearly fifty years since he had seen any combat.

That Guevara can remain an icon of many on the left shows how (as a certain someone once said) "the tradition of all the dead generations hangs like a nightmare on the minds of the living". We are still shaped by the crushing weight of the short twentieth century — 1914–1991 — and evidently if the Soviet Union was reborn right now, many people would be happy to return to the old ways of the authoritarian left.

THE TRAGEDY OF CHE

Guevara exemplified the the tragedy of his generation: brave, self-sacrificing, passionate, a fighter, yet at the same time, committed to a Marxist-Leninist project that crippled socialism, and set back human emancipation with its contempt for freedom and objectively state-capitalist project. Had he remained in power, his role in these horrors would have been even worse than it was; as it was, it was already grim. It was he who forged the links with the Soviet Union, and who, as Minister of Finance, helped run the centrally planned economy.

REPRESSION AND REVOLUTION

Guevara was directly responsible for the repression of anarchists and other leftists, purging the unions of remaining anarchist influence and turning them into state conveyor belts, closing the “free schools” run by the working class movement (especially the anarchists, who had been since the 1880s the main force in the unions), and militarising labour through such measures as compulsory and unpaid “volunteer battalions”.

He was the key figure in the repression of Castro’s opponents in the first decade of the new regime, and when he left for adventure in the Congo and Bolivia in 1965, his hands were stained with blood. When I say “opponents”, I am not talking about the supporters of Batista, the Mafia or the CIA, all of which actively opposed the Cuban revolution to preserve an ugly, hateful regime. I am talking about leftists, unionists, peasant activists and students – I am talking about forces that despised and fought against Batista and his allies, and then found themselves in the cross hairs of the new regime.

This distinction must be drawn, since the regime and its apologists have always claimed their internal opponents were reactionaries. Many, no doubt were, but far more were not. The regime has always conflated the two, thus discrediting its opponents as reactionaries and stooges and discrediting their voices, and also, therefore reinforcing the pretense that the regime represents the great majority of the people. Since no free political activity is allowed, that pretense is easily maintained; there has been no open poll of popular views since long before Castro took power, for Castro was merely the latest in a series of dictators, among them Machado and Batista.

Guevara, in short, did to the working class, with its deep anarchist traditions, what figures like Machado and Batista had done – he wrapped this, however, in revolutionary rhetoric, with Soviet aid, and in the context of forced-march state capitalism.

IN CLOSING

Photo opportunities with the peasantry and proletariat (who smiled, of course), good looks and a dramatic and terrible death in no way exonerate him from his historical role in the suppression of the popular classes, state terror and capitalism, and changing Cuba from the semi-colony of one great power the US, to another, the USSR. His actions were not accidents, but followed his cult of the state, of authority and vanguardism. I’ll close with a few Che quotes which are important, but often neglected by his admirers.

SOME QUOTES

Che on Stalin

“I have sworn before a picture of the old and mourned comrade Stalin that I won’t rest until I see these capitalist octopuses annihilated”

AND

“I have come to communism because of daddy Stalin and nobody must come and tell me that I mustn’t read Stalin. I read him when it was very bad to read him. That was

another time. And because I'm not very bright, and a hard-headed person, I keep on reading him. Especially in this new period, now that it is worse to read him. Then, as well as now, I still find a series of things that are very good."

Che on Kim Il Sung

Korea impressed me "the most" of countries visited in 1960 to get aid and trade for Cuba, the very model [he told the press] "to which revolutionary Cuba should aspire"

Che on arresting Cuban Trotskyists

"I agree with your statement, but the Cuban Trotskyists are not inside the Revolution, but only 'divisionists.'...I won't say they are CIA agents — we don't know. They have no history of support to the revolution."

Che on the state

There is "one possible strategic end — the seizure of power", so "the guerrilla nucleus begins the construction of the future state apparatus"

Che on the vanguard party taking power

"the party's mission is to achieve the dictatorship of the proletariat as soon as possible"

AND

"To be a vanguard party means to stand in the forefront of the working class in the struggle for the seizure of power"

Che on making the 'new man'

"the dictatorship of the proletariat operating...on individuals of the victorious class"

AND

the "mass carries out with matchless enthusiasm and discipline the tasks set by the government...[and] initiative generally comes from Fidel or from the Revolutionary High Command," and is "subjected to stimuli and pressures"

AND

"direct education through experience is most important...It has to be organised by the educational apparatus such as the ministry of education and the party." The individual "becomes happy to feel himself a cog in the wheel, a cog that has its own characteristics and is necessary though not indispensable, to the production process, a conscious cog, a cog that has its own motor, and that consciously tries to push itself harder and harder to carry to a happy conclusion one of the premises of the construction of socialism creating a sufficient quantity of consumer goods for the entire population"

Che on “revolutionary” discipline

“To send men to the firing squad, judicial proof is unnecessary...These procedures are an archaic bourgeois detail. This is a revolution! And a revolutionary must become a cold killing machine motivated by pure hate.”

On Cuba’s forced labour camps

”[We] only send to Guanahacabibes those doubtful cases where we are not sure people should go to jail...people who have committed crimes against revolutionary morals, to a lesser or greater degree...It is hard labor, not brute labor, rather the working conditions there are hard.”

On nuclear war

“If the rockets had remained, we would have used them all and directed them against the very heart of the United States, including New York, in our defense against aggression”

On death (for others)

“I’d like to confess, papa, at that moment I discovered that I really like killing”

AND

“Hate will be an element of the battle, a merciless hate for the enemy, that will inspire the guerrilla-soldier to superhuman efforts of strength and changes him into an effective, violent, selected, in cold blood killing machine”

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