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Upon the Reported Death of Che Guevara

Stan Iverson

1969?

The Bolivian authorities have announced the death of Ernesto Che Guevara in insurrectionary warfare near Vallegrande, in a remote section of Bolivia. Guevara's death is fitting and poetically beautiful, a piece with his whole life, as was Trotsky's death at the hands of a Stalinist assassin or Adolf Joffe's suicide as his final revolutionary testament. It is particularly fitting that it took place in combat against the tyrants of Bolivia who have relentlessly suppressed the armed and revolutionary miners' unions of that country. A life-long opponent of the semi-colonial, military tyrannies of South America, Guevara gave his life in the struggle for which he lived his life—a struggle for freedom and the dignity of man as he understood it. Guevara's selflessness and devotion to the revolutionary ideal must be measured by the fact that as a participant in Castro's revolutionary seizure of power, he could have wasted his life in comfort and safety as a leading bureaucrat in that regime, but rather chose the frugalities and hardships of the guerilla camp. Guevara's intellectual force and moral stature has evoked the reluctant admiration of his

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most dedicated enemies who, with his death, feel secure in expressing it. As the Seattle Times has expressed it editorially, "... even Guevara's antagonists will admire his boldness and dedication to the cause which he espoused and died fighting for."

Che Guevara was the foremost advocate of the continental revolution, and in this he was right. Since Cuba—Cuba is now as much the name of a revolutionary event as it is a country—it is apparent that imperialist America will not permit another successful revolution in the countries of the Americas. The action of U.S. marines in castrating the revolution in Santo Domingo, and the role of the C.I.A. in directing the activities of mercenaries and green berets in half a dozen nations of Latin America, dramatically underscores this point. The military establishments of most of these countries are largely subsidized by the United States and serve the basic function, not of repelling foreign invaders, but of quelling domestic insurrection. The United States is the most powerful single reactionary factor in the life of the Americas, and it is determined that there shall be no more Cubas. The whole weight of the U.S. military and financial juggernaut will be utilized for this goal. The coming South American revolution has no choice. It must become denationalized and internationalized, indifferent to and contemptuous of national boundaries or it will be crushed a country at a time. Revolutionists have the choice of a series of disconnected and gallant risings, of daring battles, and finally of death and exile, or of continental unity against the latifundistas, the military, the establishment, and against the United States, a unity in revolution that can result in victory. To achieve this, revolutionaries must unite the Indian, the mestizo, the mulatto, the quadroon, the negro, the employed and the unemployed of town and countryside, they must unify the impoverished lower classes against all who have an investment in the national state. They must oppose themselves to the national political parties, the national demagogues, the liberals and reformers and bu-

reaucrats, and all who cluster about the national flag and have a stake in preserving the deadly archaism of the national state.

The slogan must be not *Patria o Muerte* but *Internacionalismo o Muerte*. Paradoxically, at the same time that the revolution must dissociate itself from the national revolution, from all the claims of the national state, it must become intensely local, even provincial in its expression. The nuances of local psychology, ethnography and history must be carefully considered. In certain areas Spanish speakers must learn the predominant Indian dialects, must develop within themselves a high sensitivity to Indian life and thought. In these places they must discover and rediscover the rhythms of Indian life. It is out of the mastery of the old that the new, the revolution, is brought to life. Revolutionaries in these places must lose their Spanish-ness, must become one with the most stolid, the most oppressed, the most "backward" sections of the population. It must be remembered that in large portions of South and Central America the Spanish and Portuguese tongues together with their cultural components represent the civilization of the oppressors. In certain countries only the ruling strata—the latifundistas, the higher administrators, the officers of the army, the intellectuals and the educated—are Spanish in culture. These live on the backs of the Indian campesino, the peon, and are alien to him. This is true even when the Spanish culture is considerably diluted and even when individuals in the ruling strata are mestizo, mulatto, or Indian. Under these circumstances, it is not enough for the young revolutionary to leave the city and, entering into the countryside, proclaim his solidarity with the Indian. He must abandon those psychological traits and habits of behavior which identify him with the privileged; he must become one with the Indian.

In this context it is interesting to observe that Guevara reportedly wrote in his diary that "the inhabitants of this region are as impenetrable as rocks. You talk to them but deep in their

eyes you note they do not believe you”, and ”they made many promises but I have little confidence in them”. Guevara was evidently unable to bridge the gap between the guerrillas and the predominantly Indian population of Bolivia. No less an authority than Castro has accepted as authentic Guevara’s death and the excerpts from the diary. Cuba went into a three-day period of mourning upon the report of his death.

In these countries the original colonial revolution against Spain was singularly fragile and limited in character. It was a revolt of colons against their counterparts in the old country. It had very little in common with today’s colonial revolutions; the life of the indigenous masses was not touched. If in the area now composing the United States there had been a dense Indian population and if it had been the colonists’ policy to exploit Indian labor instead of exterminating Indians, our revolution—which was a revolution of Indian-killers and slaveholders—would have been similar.

In these countries there is properly speaking no national life; the state is not bolstered by the mystique of nationhood. Nationality is an exoticism of the ruling class, an expression of their vanity, a means of differentiating their spheres of influence and power from those of neighboring rulers—it is a deed on the labor of the aboriginal population in a given geographical area. The Indian has no nation, no nationality, no nationalism. He has kinship, a village, a linguistic group. He is less than and more than the nation. The nation state is for him the tax collector, the soldier, the hacendado. For the educated revolutionary, with his infirmities as a member of the privileged orders, nationality is a problem; for the Indian it is an irrelevancy. It is in the lack of nationalism among the Indians that one of the great potentials of the continental revolution lies. It offers the prospect of a revolution which will bypass the stage of national revolt—and these national revolutions by the requirements of their own internal dynamics are, at their most progressive, limited and in certain ways, conservative—and pass

over into an intro-continental revolution, internationalist and multilingual. In this context the educated revolutionist who, due to the circumstances of his sharing to an extent the life of the privileged orders and absorbing albeit subconsciously certain of their prejudices, including nationalism, must consciously abandon nationalism and become internationalist not only in theory but in living practice. I say this with the knowledge that it will offend many revolutionists whose internationalism is limited—in this age of nationalist revolutions to the uncritical glorification of national liberation movements. In Central and South America internationalism is not a luxury, is not a desirable abstract goal for humanity, but is a necessary condition for the success of the revolution. In these countries there exists a certain category of revolutionist who is primarily a nationalist. He wishes to liberate his country from the influence of the United States and from the corrupt strangle hold of the military and the big owners. Primarily he wants independence and good government. He does not yet recognize the ambiguities of his own social role as participator in privileges which depend upon the activities of the United States and of a repressive military. Many of the revolutionists of this type are members of radical, ostensibly internationalist and socialist parties. These patriots—national revolutionaries—have ultimately only two viable choices: to abandon nationalism and privilege, join the intra-continental revolution and become one with the disfranchised, the despised and lowly Indian and Negro; or to become the malcontent creatures of an imperialism whose claims they hate. The illusions of ambivalent revolutionaries must be systematically stripped away and their program exposed. Latin America cannot afford the luxury of national revolutions—foredoomed and diversionary.

This is a mere precis of certain of the problems involved in continental revolution and could of course be vastly expanded. In addition there are many problems not even hinted at here: the vast differences in ethnic composition and economic devel-

opment in divers parts of Latin America, the interesting question of the role of Negroes in predominantly black areas, the conservatizing influence of trade unions in certain areas and their role as a vehicle of revolution in other places, the prospect of utilizing certain Indian communal and co-operative forms in revolutionary social reconstruction, and so on. I do not say that the views presented here correspond in whole or in part to the thinking of Che Guevara. What I do insist is that once the formula continental revolution is broached they become pertinent. There are problems connected with a continental revolution which do not exist in such a powerful form in the more limited national revolution.

Selfless and dedicated though Guevara was, it is not for this that he will be remembered. There are countless revolutionists equally selfless and equally dedicated, many of whom live and are known in their qualities only to a few comrades or a limited geographic area. Beyond a certain point such comparisons are meaningless and invidious. Undoubtedly his work on guerilla warfare will long remain a classic of its kind, but it is in essence the application of already known and enunciated principles to the conditions of Latin America. Guevara's lasting significance rests upon three points. He is the most important Marxist to break decisively with the Marxists' dogma that the proletariat—the industrial workers—must constitute the social basis of the revolution, and like Bakunin turned his attention to the exploited of the countryside. He is the most widely known revolutionist of our day who is identified with the concept of revolutionary internationalism both thru his writings and even more by the prominence given his wanderings—in this he resembles Tom Paine. And finally, for his advocacy of the continental revolution, he will be long remembered. It is not that he was the only or even the first revolutionist to think in these terms, but because of his prominence he has given such an impetus through his writings and even more his example to such a movement that it is unlikely to die out. The enemies of rev-

olution who breathe easier because of his death may find that Guevara dead will plague them even more than Guevara alive.

There are no perfect revolutionists, and Che Guevara was far from perfect. He was no friend of anarchy. He was a Leninist of sorts and advocated an elitist paternalistic organization to guide man to socialism. In one of his most famous articles he sets forth this view with his usual straightforwardness and clarity. (Guevara wrote with a singular directness and economy. He avoided the purple passages and flights of rhetoric which mar, at least in English translation, much of South American writing. He also avoided the mush-minded and hackneyed formulas with which many Marxists obscure their meanings. His writing is a model of its kind: lean, vigorous and clear.) He is deeply concerned with the conquest of power and the substitution of one state for another. On these questions, in several of their parts, no anarchist could agree with him. And Guevara was involved, I do not know how extensively or how slightly, whether by action or inaction, in the sporadic persecution of anarchist and other socialist movements which has taken place under Castro in Cuba. This is not to his credit but is compatible with what we know of his theory.

Anarchists have the responsibility of what Castro has called revolutionary honesty. Whatever our rivalries and disagreements with other revolutionists and movements, to be true to ourselves and our goal we should view them objectively and in historical context, honoring them for what there is to honor even when we write our disagreements with the bark of rifles, and leaving the picayune criticism and bitter, distorted polemic to the power-jealous rivals within the revolutionary movement who fear the flash of each others' ideas. There are no perfect revolutionists. Che Guevara was a great revolutionist and a brave man.

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