

The Marxism of Che Guevara

Searching for "Che" in Capitalism's Nightmare¹⁾

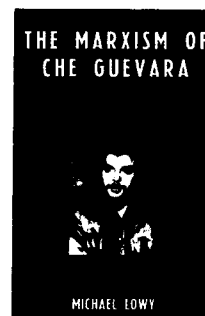
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Today socialist icons such as Che Guevara stare us from the crumbling walls of city slums reminding us of past struggles. Unlike the fate bequeathed to Frantz Fanon, whose memory is now partially eclipsed by the forces of history that have since enveloped his beloved Algeria (Macey, 2000), Che Guevara's popularity today is widespread not only in his adopted country of Cuba, but throughout Latin America and beyond.²⁾ Despite Che's iconic stature as a matinee idol image that adorns T-shirts and posters, it remains a truism that despite the amative imaginings that his image provokes, he stands as a powerful thinker whose understanding of Marx and other radical theorists cannot be easily separated from his life as a revolutionary actor on the stage of world history. In an article written to commemorate thirty years after the death of that intrepid revolutionary and daring thinker, Ernesto Che Guevara, Mi-

chael Löwy (1997) proclaimed: "Years go by, fads change, modernisms are succeeded by postmodernisms, dictatorships are replaced by 'hard democracies,' Keynesianism by neo-liberal politics, and the Berlin Wall is replaced by a wall of money. Yet Che's message still shines like a beacon in this dark and cold end of the century." A decade after those words were written, we can safely say that the beacon of Che's message is as bright as ever but nearly a decade into the new millennium has only seen the world get darker and colder.

In a world torn between the oppressed on the one side, and those who esuriently exploit them, on the other, there seems little hope today of a grand alternative for the wretched of the earth. They seem forever caught between the jaws of those scrupulously respectable people who offer them the slavery of wage labor and a lifetime of alienation in exchange for their labor power, and those



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Che Guevara*

who loathsomely criminalize their very existence, or feel justified to leave them to suffer whatever cruel fate the market has in store for them.

'the dictatorship of the proletariat'

The stages of liberation that were to follow lock-step from the contradiction between the forces and the relations of production—the accumulation of evolution powered by a law of dialectical development that would inevitably lead from the economic contradictions of capitalism to the establishment of a classless society under 'the dictatorship of the proletariat'—did not follow in the wake of the quixotic predictions of the dogmatists (a condition into which a great many fundamentalist Marxisms fall), ensuring the final victory of socialism over the cut-throat capitalists, the end of alienated labor and the flourishing of human culture. What young radicals such as Che Guevara had discovered in the interim was that it was not history that should drive the revolution but the other way around—the peasants and the workers should direct their own fate, making economic decisions and deciding which share of production is to be assigned to accumulation and which share to consumption (Tablada, 1998; Löwy, 2003). But today, nearly forty years after Che's death, when the contradictions at the heart of the market economy are more exacerbated than they were in Che's day (even in the industrialized capitalism of Marx's day!), there are no completed socialist revolutions to serve as a living model for the world, only those that

have been ceaselessly and violently interrupted, or those that, following in the intrepid footsteps of Simon Bolivar, are being tested in the barrios of Caracas or los altoplanos of Venezuela.

In the developed countries of the North, where we notoriously find a fawning acceptance of the benignity of American power and a postured accommodation to the idea of economic dignity, we also discover no real moral commitment to social and economic justice. Especially if it means accepting a change in one's present standard of living. The capitalist world system binds us together as a democratic polity in a structure of relations made valid by little more than our own predilections of convenience.

Transnational civil society, bolstered by the foundation-non-governmental organizational world, continues to serve as a staging ground for the ambitions of the transnational capitalist class (Roelofs, 2006). Like the Christian missionaries of the American west who helped Rockefeller Sr.'s infamous company, Standard Oil, gather intelligence on the Native American communities that inhabited oil-rich land, the US National Endowment for Democracy serves dutifully today as one of the many instruments of US Manifest Destiny, offering to bring civil rights and elections to countries not yet democratized, but on condition that those countries leave their door wide open to foreign capital, labor contracts, resource extraction and military spending (Roelofs, 2006). Public-private philanthropies still work in conjunction with Christian missionaries and imperialist states in the long-abiding

tradition of overthrowing any (organized or spontaneous) resistance to the exploitation of human labor, of disrupting revolutionary and reformist movements, of keeping marketized societies on a steady course, and of destabilizing governments unfriendly to neoliberal capitalism. In fact, capitalism seemingly has become the secular equivalent of The Great Commission of evangelicals who are charged with making Jesus known to every person on earth. Just as the Christian evangelization process weakened the communal social structures of indigenous populations, leaving them defenseless against exploitation by the forces of industrial capital wielded by the ruthless sword arm of colonial conquest, so today the 'symbiotic neo-conflation' (Adelman, 2006) of Christian values and capitalist 'for profit' ventures secures the hegemony of the United States (whose very national identity has been forged in the furnace of serial aggression, free market triumphalism and white supremacy). So long as the banquet table of free market democracy has been reserved exclusively for the capitalist class, and the mostly white capitalist class, there is little hope that the United States will break any time soon with the barbarism at the root of US society. Hence, there will always be the need for a Che Guevara to rise up among us.

Democracy and economic (and military) imperialism are forged in the same baptismal fire of self-regard that fuels the slaughterhouse vision of an impending Armageddon—the United States has been chosen by providence to save the world by whatever means necessary (40 % of Americans believe

that the final countdown to the 'end times' has already begun). Historically, those means have included accumulation by dispossession, by war, by 'humanitarian' intervention, by bringing freedom to those nations still uncivilized enough to reject the profit motive as the *sine qua non* of democratic society.

Capital's cultural imaginary works by transcoding the violence wreaked by capital accumulation and dispossession into acts designed to protect the wealth of the homeland, both in terms of family values and private property, and channel the anger into larger Christian ideals directed at annihilating evil and protecting family, property and nation (Ebert, 2006)—all wrapped up in a brummagem patriotism of plastic flags and bumper stickers. While violence is condemned, it is sexualized and made more alluring by the stupefying impact of the media, and justified as a necessary action in a world where freedom is, as rightwing pundits are wont to say, 'not free'.

politics of 'moral satisfaction'

Disguised as free electoral choices, voters are invited to feed at the trough of a politics of 'moral satisfaction' (attacking evil empires abroad and moral perversion at home) as studied diversion from fighting for economic rights. The disenfranchised poor can continue to suffer economically but feel some national pride in being part of a country that is 'liberating' dictatorships in oil rich sovereign nations and ushering in 'democracy'. Illegal wars, secret wiretaps, government monitoring

of library records and financial transactions, government attacks on an independent press, and blatant war crimes, and the firing of university professors and high school teachers are all tolerated as long as it is understood as in the service of the 'greater good' of weeding out 'terrorists' in our midst (or whatever country in which they happen to be hiding around the world). In a blatant display of legalized racial profiling, foreign nationals with visa violations can now be arrested in secret and detained indefinitely, and treated as guilty until proven innocent. Torture is now viewed as a necessary evil.

The fact that all Washington administrations are populated by a particularly venal cabal of career opportunists, theocratic sociopaths, anti-Enlightenment activists, pathological liars and vulpine opponents of democracy should in no way confound us into thinking that the problem of capitalism is rooted in acts of political malfeasance by clever but corrupted politicians. Such acts may be torturously accommodating to capital, and lead to impoverishment, bloodshed, repression, misery, and eventually to genocide and even to the obliteration of entire nations, but they are not the source of the problem. The problem itself can be traced to Marx's world-historical discovery: the alienated character of the very act of laboring and the exploitation that is a fundamental part of selling one's labor-power for a wage.

the capacity of society to change

The collapse of statist communism and re-

formist social democracy and the creation of the U.S. as the world's sole superpower has made it easier to re-write history and to control the future of the past. When young people are denied access to accurate scientific knowledge about the origins and evolution of life on Earth through the promotion of creationism and intelligent design, when the Florida Education Omnibus Bill bars the teaching of "revisionist" history in Florida public schools (a law that astonishingly states: "American history shall be viewed as factual, not constructed, shall be viewed as knowable, teachable, and testable, and shall be defined as the creation of a new nation based largely on the universal principles stated in the Declaration of Independence" [Craig, 2006]), and when teachers are charged with teaching "the nature and importance of free enterprise to the United States economy" (Craig, 2006), then we have reason to be gravely worried about the future precisely because there is less and less opportunity to debate the past. When seen in conjunction with President George W. Bush's 2003 fustian attack on "revisionist historians" who challenged his justifications for using force against Saddam Hussein, and his 2005 warning on Veteran's Day in which he proclaimed that it is "deeply irresponsible to rewrite the history of how the war began" (Zimmerman, 2006), we know that such interpretive authoritarianism is both an index of the creeping fascism within the United States and dire warning that disagreement with the official version of history (with its propensity for dehumanizing the poor and people of color) can be equated with misinterpreta-

tion, misrepresentation, or even deliberate falsification—these days all of the above could be considered acts of treason during a time of ‘permanent’ war. When seen in conjunction with President Obama’s recent push for educational standards linked to test scores and for private ‘charter’ schools to replace public schools, the situation looks grim. Texas textbook standards now call for fascists such as the anti-communist Senator Joseph McCarthy to be exonerated and for figures such as Martin Luther King to be downplayed. This is particularly troubling to me, given that in 2006 I was the subject of a McCarthy-like attack on my teaching and writing, when a rightwing group offered to pay UCLA students a hundred dollars to secretly audiotape my classes and those of other leftist professors. For those who feel more comfortable donning veils of ignorance, placing history beyond the pale of interpretation and castigating those who lay claim to a different reading of tradition may make the government appear a valiant defender of US democracy’s unsullied origins, but it can only unfailingly undermine the capacity of society to change.

As much as the world appears to have forsaken socialism, socialism refuses to forsake the world. The message contained in one of the most famous writings in the history of socialism, Rosa Luxemburg’s the *Junius Pamphlet*, rings as true today as it did when Luxemburg wrote these words: “Today, we face the choice exactly as Friedrich Engels foresaw it a generation ago: either the triumph of imperialism and the collapse of all civilization as in ancient Rome, depopulation, desolation,

degeneration—a great cemetery. Or the victory of socialism, that means the conscious active struggle of the international proletariat against imperialism and its method of war.”

to build the new man

Few revolutionaries have put Luxemburg’s choice to the test the way Che did. What was remarkable about Che was the way he went against the traditional left of his day in the pursuit of new, more egalitarian and humane roads to this worthy goal, roads that he felt were more consistent with what he understood were the ethical principles of communism. Che rejected the Eastern European models of socialism that claimed to “conquer capitalism with its own fetishes.” In his March 1965 essay, ‘Socialism and Man in Cuba’, he wrote: “The pipe dream that socialism can be achieved with the help of the dull instruments bequeathed to us by capitalism (the commodity as the economic cell, profitability, individual material interest as a lever and so on) can lead into a blind alley... To build communism it is necessary, simultaneous with the new material foundations, to build the new man” (1970, pp. 371-372, cited in Löwy, 1997). By conjugating contingency with necessity, Che was not only rejecting the layers of technocracy and bureaucracy that such a model would bring to Cuba but also challenging the economic view of socialism (which viewed the economic sphere as an autonomous system governed by its own laws of value or the market) with a more political view of socialism which issues concerning

prices and production are made on the basis of social, ethical and political criteria (Löwy, 2003a). It is important to underscore that Che's Marxism has an essentially undogmatic character. As Löwy puts it,

For Che, Marx was not a Pope endowed by the Holy Ghost with the gift of infallibility; nor were his writings Tables of the Law graciously handed down on Mount Sinai...Che stresses that Marx, although an intellectual giant, had committed mistakes which could and should be criticized... (p.13)

the challenge of human capacity

Che's antidogmatism in the realm of theory (Che viewed Marxism as a guide to action, a philosophy of praxis, a theory of revolutionary action) was not unrelated to his pedagogical practice, as he rejected outright the Stalinist cult of authority (which he often referred to as scholasticism) and claimed it was impossible to educate the people from above. Echoing the question raised by Marx in his Theses to Feuerbach ("who will educate the educators?"), Che wrote in a speech in 1960: "The first recipe for educating the people is to bring them into the revolution. Never assume that by educating the people they will learn, by education alone, with a despotic government on their backs, how to conquer their rights. Teach them, first and foremost, to conquer their rights and when they are represented in government they will effortlessly learn whatever is taught to them and much more" (cited in Löwy, 1997). For Che, students should not automatically defer to those who use their

donnish authority to reaffirm society's unequal social division of labor. By contrast, they should challenge the ideological and material premises upon which such dismal measures of wealth dispersal are allowed to persist—including the "free markets credo," the "pull-yourself-by-the-bootstraps" moralizing, the reflexive condescension on the part of the imperialist punditry towards the so-called Third World, and the laws which strengthen guarantees of profit expatriation for multinational corporations. Critique was not auxiliary to the revolutionary struggle for liberation, but a fundamental part of it (McLaren, 2000). Che began with the challenge of human capacity in the creation of the 'new man', with the imperative of transforming the many-sidedness of aggrieved and suffering humanity under the yolk of imperialist aggression; what Che advocated was, in essence, a politics of self-transformation through revolutionary struggle, the struggle for humanity, dignity, freedom and justice from the standpoint of the proletariat fighting the class war.

Critics of Che's role as a guerrilla fighter have tried to point out the contradictions that the figure of Che is supposed to embody, particularly his advocacy of humanism and the importance he places on the sanctity of human life. How did Che reconcile his respect for humanity with the emphasis he places on guerrilla warfare and the taking of human life. Löwy is correct in stressing that Che was highly critical of the tradition of Latin American national reformism (reformism via the electoral process) and he rejected the creation of a national-democratic revolution (a

Menshevik-type conception) that would either collaborate with or offer a revolutionary role to the bourgeoisie. The Cuban experience convinced Che that the national bourgeoisie would never accept agrarian reform and the expropriation of imperialist monopolies and would eventually attempt a counter-revolution through alliances with the latifundia-owners, the dominant oligarchy and with perhaps the military assistance of North American imperialists or mercenaries.

accomplish the permanent liberation

Rejecting the then prevalent view of the traditional Latin American left that the semifeudal and semicolonial character of the Latin American economies mitigated against a socialist revolution in favor of a national-democratic revolution, Che was absolutely convinced that only a socialist revolution based on an alliance of the workers and peasants could accomplish the permanent liberation of the Americas. The military-bureaucratic apparatus of the bourgeois state had to be destroyed because the politicomilitary machinery of the state will inevitably betray the people in support of the capitalists. According to Löwy, "the principle of the inevitability of armed struggle" was, for Che, "derived precisely from the sociology of the revolution: because the revolution is socialist it can be victorious only through revolutionary war" (1973, p. 86). Löwy writes:

Indeed Che, the theoretician of revolutionary war, of the liberating violence of armed struggle; Che, who insisted that "the oppressor must be killed

mercilessly," and who believed that the revolutionary has to become an "efficient and selective" killing machine, this same Major Guevara always showed profound and genuine respect for human life. It is because he regarded life as a value that he criticized the blind terrorism which strikes down innocent victims; that he called on the guerrilla fighter to treat kindly the defenseless vanquished; that he urged clemency toward captured enemy soldiers, and categorically declared that a "wounded enemy should be treated with care and respect." (1973, p. 86)

Löwy makes clear the profound importance Che granted the concept of dignity, with its roots firmly planted within the Latin American humanist tradition. For Che, the "standard of dignity" to which all revolutionaries should adhere is reflected in the words of José Martí: "A real man should feel on his own check the blow inflicted on any other man's" (cited in Löwy, 1973, p. 32). Löwy writes:

To hold life in profound respect and to be ready to take up arms and, if need be, to kill, is contradictory only in the eyes of Christian or pacifist humanism. For revolutionary humanism, for Che, the people's war is the necessary answer, the only possible answer, of the exploited and oppressed to the crimes and the institutionalized violence of the oppressors...(1973, p. 32)

Slavoj Žižek (2008) talks about the ultimate cause of violence is the fear of the neighbor. But he also describes what he calls "divine violence." He sees divine violence as an infusion of justice beyond the law. It is extra-moral but not immoral. It is not a divine license to

kill. It is divine only in a subjective sense, in the eye of the beholder, or in the mind of the person enacting such violence. It is Walter Benjamin's Angel of History striking back, restoring the balance to the history of the world. It is a violence that refuses a deeper meaning; it is the logic of rage, a refusal to normalize crimes against humanity, either by reconciliation or revenge, it is, in other words, a refusal to compromise. Zizek describes divine violence as pure power over all of life for the sake of the living, it is a type of sign that the world is unjust. It is not the return of the repressed, or the underside of the authoritarian legal order. Nor is it the intervention of some omnipotent God. Rather, it is the sign of the impotency of God. There is no objective criteria with which to judge divine violence.

Zizek uses the example of Che Guevara's two seemingly contradictory statements as an example:

At the risk of seeming ridiculous, let me say that the true revolutionary is guided by a great feeling of love. It is impossible to think of a genuine revolutionary lacking this quality.

Hatred is an element of struggle; relentless hatred of the enemy that impels us over and beyond the natural limitations of man and transforms us into effective, violent, selective, and cold killing machines. Our soldiers must be thus; a people without hatred cannot vanquish a brutal enemy. (2008, p. 172)

Zizek claims that Che's comments are united in Che's motto: *Hay que endurecerse sin perder jamas la ternura*. (One must endure [become

hard, toughen oneself] without losing tenderness).

the paradox of revolutionary love

Paraphrasing Kant and Robespierre, Zizek notes that love without cruelty is powerless, and cruelty without love is blind. This paradox is what elevates love over mere sentimentality. So it seems here that divine love is linked with violence, which does not mean that all violent acts are acts of love. What it does indicate is that there is always a split in the beloved and the true object-cause of our love for him or her. Hatred can be the only proof that we love someone. The domain of violence that does not found laws of the state nor sustain them is the domain of love. So there is, then, the paradox of revolutionary love in that, according to Zizek, it continually overlaps with violence.

Löwy also notes that the problematic of dignity also implied, for Che, the concept of freedom, and this does not refer in any way to bourgeois individualism but rather the liberation of humanity from alienation brought about by the capitalist production process. For Che, the transformation of human beings and the transformation of material conditions coincide, just as there is a dialectical relationship between means and ends. Löwy importantly demonstrates that the structure of Che's theory of revolution is that of Marx's dialectical thought, which rejects both metaphysical materialism ("conditions shape men") and utopian voluntarism. Like Marx, Che rejects the classical dilemma of fatalism or subjectivism,

setting forward the principle of the dialectic of history: at the same time as conditions create man, man himself creates new conditions, through his revolutionary praxis" (2003, p. 196, original emphasis).

struggle to become more fully human

As we look in contemporary socialist struggles for practices of direct and representative democracy, we recognize Che's signal insight that class struggle is more than an economic struggle, it is a struggle to become more fully human through the creation of ever widening sociabilities, of a boundless horizon for human enrichment. In this context, a pedagogy of liberation becomes the self-education of the people through their own revolutionary practice as part of class struggle. And class struggle in this sense refers to the struggle for a class in itself to become a class for itself through direct participation and antagonistic action on the part of the masses themselves. Che sought the abolition of the economic vestiges of capitalism not as the automatic result of the development of the productive forces (he rejected unconditionally the evolutionist strain of capitalist-industrial progress) but through the intervention of social planning (in contrast to the centralized planning practiced under Stalin). Furthermore, Che recognized the specific autonomy of social, political and ideological transformation that comprised the social whole, and he valued the importance of political-moral motivation and the need for multiform action to change the consciousness of the masses in order to bring about the ideo-

logical hegemony of communist values.

Such a struggle and change of consciousness is necessary for the revolutionary struggle worldwide. As Che notes: "socialism cannot exist without a change in consciousness that will bring about a more brotherly disposition toward humanity, both at the individual level in those nations where socialism was being, or had been, built—and at the world level, with all the nations that are victims of imperialistic oppression" (1970, p. 574. Cited in Löwy, 1997).

Today it is the informal sector that is keeping Latin America from sinking into a deeper abyss of poverty created by the politics of neoliberalism. Lands are being despoiled by international mining operations, water and forests have been destroyed by logging and toxic waste, air is clogged with lead and particulate matter, and health care, education, housing, sanitation are in shambles. The conditions which spurred Che Guevara to take up arms are still there; they have, in fact, worsened.

Civil society has increasingly become the stage upon which revolutions are now fought with the state having been abandoned by many groups who feel that those who focus on seizing control of the state find themselves upholding the very relations of capital they originally fought to abolish. But it seems clear that we need more than just efforts to catalyze the self-organizing action of civil society against the state, we need to transform the very foundations of the state. Che can give us hope that smashing the old state and creating a new one is still a possibility, even today,

while at the same time help us to recognize that there is no certainty to our struggle for socialism because in many ways certainty is the enemy of revolutionary struggle. As Löwy (1997) notes, "We all are searching our way, no one can say he has found the true and only strategy" (2002).

While social movements today seem wedded to nationalized property and the statification of natural resources, it is obvious that these measures, while important, do not go far enough. In the 1980s, the great Marxist humanist, Raya Dunayevskaya asked: "Have we faced the harsh reality that, unless the inseparability between dialectics of thought and of revolution may retrogress, since the world revolution cannot occur at one strike everywhere and world capitalism continues to exist" (cited in Hudis, 2006)? Che expressed a similar sentiment when he wrote in his book, *Guerrilla Warfare*, "A revolution which does not constantly expand is a revolution which regresses" (Löwy, 1973, p. 81). But are Che's sentiments and ideas those of a man who is hopelessly wedded to bygone era that has all too quickly vanished, an era in which most socialist regimes have disappeared under what seems to be the unstoppable juggernaut of capital? In *The Marxism of Che Guevara*, Löwy warns readers that it would be grievously misguided to assume that the figure of Che is an anachronism, who struggled in an ephemeral stretch of history. He writes:

It would nevertheless be a mistake to suppose that Che was a man from the past, a survival from another epoch, an anachronism in the computer age.

On the contrary, he was the avenging prophet of future revolutions, the revolutions of the "wretched of the earth," the starved, oppressed, exploited, a humiliated peoples of the three continents dominated by imperialism. He was the prophet who wrote in letters of fire on the walls of the new Babylon: *Mene Mene Tekel Upharsin*—your days are numbered. And it is as a prophet of the future, of the new man, the communist society of the twenty-first century, built upon the ruins of decadent and "one-dimensional" capitalism, that he has become the hero of the rebellious and revolutionary youth who are rising up in the industrial metropolitan centers of Europe and North America. (p. 113)

Taking inspiration from this proletarian internationalist warrior, this horseman of the impending apocalypse, we can find hope today in the enhancement of the regional integration of many Latin American countries within a new 'solidarity-based' Latin America. Yet while there are calls for a new production model, such models do not as yet refer to escaping from the current system of open and deregulated markets and replacing the internationalized market economy with an alternative system of allocation of productive resources. And while we hope, at least, that these new rumblings from the south signal the beginning of a new anti-capitalist initiative, we must admit that the struggles in Venezuela and Bolivia have a long way to go before they begin to approximate the socialist model of a Latin America free from the jackboots of imperialism that Che dreamt of and for which he gave his life. Che sought to create the conditions necessary for building a so-

ciety that was qualitatively different from that of capitalist society, a truly liberating alternative to capital in all its forms, a total revolution that would transcend the value for of labor. A world free of value production through the instruments of capital.

Che did not live to see his mission completed. Yet in another sense, Che can be considered to be very much alive, his valiant and gallant spirit reflected in every camarada ready to fight once again for the independence of Nuestra America. In fact, a case could be made that today Che's influence is felt more than during his lifetime. Löwy (1997) describes Che as a "seed of a different future planted in the Latin American soil; a star in the firmament of hopes of the people, a coal smoldering under the ashes of despair." He remarks that this seed "in the last 30 years has taken root in the political culture of the Latin American left, growing branches and leaves, bearing fruit. Or as one of the red-dyed threads that, from Patagonia to the Rio Grande, is woven into the fabric of dreams, utopianism and revolutionary actions".

a symptom of revolutionary romanticism?

But was Che's vision of the struggle for the liberation of Latin America a symptom of revolutionary romanticism? Some have criticized Che's struggle as a Blanquist or Bakuninist form of adventurism. As Löwy reports, "to the bourgeois philistine, Che was a utopian-romantic anarchist whose ideal of the future was nothing 'but the childish vision of Elysian

fields without bureaucrats or soldiers, that eternal nostalgia for a 'saved' world'" (1973, p. 116). While's Che's life illustrates overcoming the contradiction between freedom and necessity, he resisted falling prey to the most regressive manifestations of romanticism. And while he did admire elements of pre-capitalist societies, he did not remain trapped in the thrall of a superficial nostalgia. He did share, intuitively at least, a romantic sensibility in his rejection of the bourgeois-philistine tenets of social democracy that were so complacently restricted to reformism. To his credit, he did not retreat into a dilettante utopian idealism, a glorification of nature, a belief in socialism as an historical inevitability or Marxism as a kind of divine afflatus. He was able to bridge the gap between the radical demands of his revolutionary principles and his concrete actions on behalf of the dispossessed. If we decide to call Che a romantic, we must at least acknowledge that he was no 'mere' romantic, he was a revolutionary, forward-looking romantic who remained both appreciative of the achievements of modernity and at the same time critical of it's shortcomings. In recognizing the potentials and contradictions of modernity, Che called the very logic of modernity into question. Clearly he perceived the dangers in adhering blindly to the myth of progress. He was not interested in economic progress if that was not accompanied by a communist morality: "Economic socialism without communist morality does not interest me. We are fighting against poverty, yes, but also against alienation" (cited in Löwy, 1973, p. 65).

a utopian-revolutionary romanticism

Löwy and Sayre (2001) have recovered aspects of romanticism that can play a useful and important role in the revolutionary process of social transformation, which they call a utopian-revolutionary romanticism. They warn that this form of romanticism would not be the abstract negation of modernity but its 'sublation' or 'absorption' (*Aufhebung*), its insistent negation, the conservation of its best gains, and its transcendence toward a higher form of culture—a form that would restore to society certain human qualities destroyed by bourgeois industrial civilization. That does not mean a return to the past but a detour via the past, toward a new future, a detour that allows the human spirit to become aware of all the cultural richness and all the social vitality that have been sacrificed by the historical process launched by the Industrial Revolution, and to seek ways of bringing them back to life. (2001, p. 253-254). Perhaps seen in the light of a utopian-revolutionary romanticism, Che's revolutionary praxis can be reevaluated today and can serve as a catalyst in the building of a new world, a world outside of capitalism's value form. It is a world to which Che's revolutionary praxis pointed, but a praxis that was cut short by Che's murder in 1967 by the Bolivian Rangers and the CIA. Che's revolutionary praxis echos in many respects what Michael Steinberg refers to as a "negative politics":

A negative politics...is grounded in the fact that our mutual self-constitution continues regardless of the

ways in which we construe our experience. It opposes certainties and assurances of knowledge, but not in the name of either a different certainty or a human characteristic that is presumed to lie beneath the social. It has hopes, not of a world that it already knows how to think about, but one that will not claim to be the culmination of time and that will not hold to ideas, ideals, or even values that seek to arrest the endless transformation of our lives together. It looks not to the perfection of detached knowledge but to an expanding attentiveness to embodied understanding. It is a path not to the future but to a deeper experience of the present. (2005, p. 180)

the negative politics of Che Guevara

We can only speculate how the negative politics of Che Guevara might have developed. It is one of the great tragedies of history that his legacy was fatefully terminated before the full measure of his revolutionary project could be tested. Clearly, the life and thought of Che Guevara marks an important distinction between those who have accepted the inevitability of capital, and those who wish to pose a radical challenge to it, replacing it with a new world community that is qualitatively different. For this reason, it is important that this generation of scholars and activists revisit the intellectual as well as the historical legacy of Che Guevara.

World historical events only add to the urgency of the legacy of Ernesto Che Guevara. The example of his life and thought work directly against concerted attempts by über-revisionists in Washington (and in other imperialist capitals throughout the developed

world) to bury the history of genocide, slavery, the perdurable violence of colonialism, and the wrath of the Western imperialism—the structural unconscious of the US nation state—in the rag-and-bone shop of unwanted truths, it will open up new pathways for recognizing the life and thought of one of the world's great heroic warriors of the people who tried to create a place of freedom amidst the tyranny of capital.

Che's approach to education was dialectical and he saw in the act of knowing and becoming fully human the struggle for economic development. Che wrote:

I don't think education shapes up a country. This we even proved when with our uneducated Army we tore down an enormous amount of barriers and prejudices. But neither is it true that the economic process alone can bring about an economic transformation at that level. Education and economic development are constantly interacting and fully shaping themselves. (cited in Marti, 2008, p. 23)

Fernández Retamar (1989 pp. 44-45) has a wonderful quotation from Che Guevara, who, in accepting the position of professor, *honoris causa*, at the School of Pedagogy, University of Las Villas, in December, 1959, proposed to the university professors and students the kind of transformation that all of them would have to undergo in order to be considered truly useful to the construction of a socialist society. And in Marti's terms, this meant moving from the European University to the University of the Americas:

I would never think of demanding that the distinguished professors or the students presently associated with the University of Las Villas perform the miracle of admitting to the university the masses of workers and peasants. The road here is long; it is a process all of you have lived through, one entailing many years of preparatory study. What I do ask, based on my own limited experience as a revolutionary and rebel commandante, is that the present students of the University of Las Villas understand that study is the patrimony of no one and that the place of study where you carry out your work is the patrimony of no one—it belongs to all the people of Cuba, and it must be extended to the people or the people will seize it. And I hope—because I began the whole series of ups and downs in my career as a university student, as a member of the middle class, as a doctor with middle-class perspectives and the same youthful aspirations that you must have, and because I am convinced of the overwhelming necessity of the revolution and the infinite justice of the people's cause—I would hope for those reasons that you, today proprietors of the university, will extend it to the people. I do not say this as a threat, so as to avoid its being taken over by them tomorrow. I say it simply because it would be one more among so many beautiful examples in Cuba today: that the proprietors of the Central University of Las Villas, the students, offer it to the people through their revolutionary government. And to the distinguished professors, my colleagues, I have to say something similar: become black, mulatto, a worker, a peasant; go down among the people, respond to the people, that is, to all the necessities of all of Cuba. When this is accomplished, no one will be the loser, we all will have gained, and Cuba can then continue its march toward the future with a more vigorous step, and

you will need to include in your cloister this doctor, commandante, bank president, and today professor of pedagogy who now takes leave of you.

Shortly after his speech at the University of Las Villas, Ché spoke to the problem of illiteracy in Cuba:

There are more illiterates in Cuba today than there were twenty-five years ago, because the whole government educational policy has consisted of embezzling and of building a few insignificant schools at the more central crossroads of the country. Our task is another, *compañeros*; we can rely on the people as a whole. We do not have to go beg for votes by building an insignificant school next to a highway. We are going to put that school where it is needed, where it fulfills its educational function for the people's benefit. (cited in Supko, 1998).

developing socialist consciousness by means of revolutionary praxis

Che's stress on developing socialist consciousness by means of revolutionary praxis helped to produce what was surely the greatest educational achievement of the twentieth century—the Cuban Literacy Campaign. In *Ciudad Libertad*, an educational complex in the Playa district of Havana, there stands a small museum that commemorates Cuba's National Literacy Campaign (henceforth called the Campaign). This modest-looking white stucco structure is anything but a testament to negative nationalism; rather, it personifies critical global citizenship—a liberation movement designed to ensure the health and vitality of the

revolution and independence from Cuba's colonial past. Before the successful completion of the Literacy Campaign, almost a million Cubans lacked basic schooling due to race, class, gender and geographic isolation (Elvy, 2007). But that was not to last long. Like the rapid brushstrokes of British narrative painter, Ian Francis, voluntary literacy workers took to the streets and the fields, assembling in what was to become a massive enactment of the ethical imperatives of the revolution. A total force of 308,000 volunteers worked with 707,212 illiterate Cubans and helped them achieve a first grade level of reading and writing (to be followed in later years by the Battle for the Sixth Grade and Battle for the Ninth Grade). Cuba's overall illiteracy rate was reduced from over 20 percent, according to the last census taken before the Revolution, to 3.9 percent (Supko, 1998).

Volunteers included adult popular educators (178,000 *alfabetizadores* who taught in urban areas), workers from factories (30,000 *brigadistas obreros* who received their regular salaries while doing their literacy training), and 100,000 students, between the ages of 10 and 19 who came to be known as the Conrado Benitez Brigadistas and who carried in their knapsacks a pair of boots, two pairs of socks, an olive-green beret, a Conrado Benitez shoulder patch, a blanket, a hammock, a lantern, and copies of *Alfabetecemos* (the Campaign's official teacher's manual) and *Venceremos* (a student primer). City schools were closed down in order that students between the ages of 10 and 19, with a minimum grade

six education, could leave their homes in urban centers and live with *campesino* families in the countryside. As Joanne C. Elvy (2007) puts it: —Integrated into peasant households, they worked alongside their new families by day, and then taught them how to read and write by lantern at night. This profound revolutionary condition marked an important exchange between Cubans from urban centers and those who worked in the fields. Of particular significance was the social and cultural shift of the role of women in Cuba's civic society. Over 50 percent of the volunteer teachers in the Campaign were young women, marking the first time that many of them left home and were given the opportunity to take on the same tasks as their male counterparts (Elvy, 2007). Each act of shared labor and struggle with their *campesino* compatriots, each stroke of the pen made under the sturdy lanterns carried by the *brigadistas*, became gestures of solidarity, metonymical acts that reflected in their particular victories over illiteracy, the root metaphor of revolutionary praxis: making the revolution through revolutionary acts. Eventually, red flags were hung over doorways signaling *Territorios Libres de Analfabetismo* (Territories Free of Illiteracy). The figure of Che personified the pedagogical attitude that animated the Campaign and made it so successful.

a new sense of global citizenship

Today, Che's example is needed more than ever as we witness the destruction of public education throughout the world and the role

that schools and universities now play: the handmaiden of the corporations in which consumer identity has replaced the quest for global citizenship. Now, more than ever, we need to forge a new sense of global citizenship that animated Che's life and the accomplishments he bequeathed not only his own generation but future generations.

And so, to the final question, the final question: where can the example of Che take us and where should we take his example? We can only answer this with a response from our guts. To the plaintive and indignant voices of our establishment critics, we say this: We are inadaptable! We are maladaptable! We answer your charges of sedition with a burst of laughter. We will not be treated as overactive children with behavioral disorders. We will not swallow your pills. We do not live in temples on Mount Olympus but underground, in the sewers of Bogota, in the slums of Calcutta, in the Laconian jungles of Chiapas, in *las calles de Los Angeles*, in the occupied factories of Argentina, in the barrios of Caracas, in *casas de carton*, in classrooms without books, in restrooms without toilets, in board rooms without CEOs, in prisons without guards! We are the children of 1968 and of hip-hop, and of The Battle of Seattle. We will not accept bribes, we will not accept financial compensation, we refuse to let our subjectivities be cooked in the ovens of the corporate state, we refuse to ask permission for anything, we refuse to be colonized or to colonize, we refuse to be exiled from our own flesh, we refuse to let our languages, our songs, our histories and our dreams be expropriated by the mass media.

We will not let capital disfigure us. We will not let wage-labor tear us from our friends, our families, our communities. We refuse to be decomposed by the social machinery of the state apparatuses. We will not be the subjects of your social experiments. Our subjectivities are on permanent strike.

Che Guevara, Presente! **INDIGO**

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1) This is a revised version of the Preface to *The Marxism of Che Guevara* by Michael Lowy. Rowman and Littlefield, 2009.

2) Che made Fanon's book, *The Wretched of the Earth*, available in Cuba.