



## SOCIALIST CLASSICS

# Che Guevara, 'Socialism and the New Man in Cuba'

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By 1965 Ernesto Che Guevara was a leading but unhappy figure in the government established by the Cuban revolution of 1959. Although it had proclaimed its socialism two years into the revolution, he was increasingly uneasy with what he saw as moves away from socialist principle. He decided to leave Cuba and take part in guerrilla struggles in the Congo and Bolivia. Just before leaving, he wrote 'Socialismo y El Hombre Nuevo en Cuba' for a newspaper in Uruguay. It is a kind of testament, attempting to draw lessons for socialists from the Cuban experience before he moved on to fresh battles.

A large part of Guevara's dissatisfaction had to do with Russia's influence on Cuba. It was beginning to look very much as though the island had only moved from economic dependency on the US to economic dependency on the USSR. The missile crisis of 1962, when Khrushchev opened military bases in Cuba and then arranged with Kennedy to shut them down without asking the Cubans, showed that the political relationship was much the same. Much of 'Socialism and the New Man in Cuba' criticises the Russian model – without explicitly naming it – and sketches a different one.

This was easiest for him to do in the field of art. Stalinist state patronage had produced "simplification, something everyone can understand, something functionaries understand. True artistic enquiry ends". Bland, naturalistic art, "the frozen forms of socialist realism", were prescribed "from the pontifical throne of realism-at-all-costs". A proper socialist policy towards the arts would instead be one "that permits both free inquiry and the uprooting of the weeds that multiply so easily in the fertilized soil of state subsidies". (*Che Guevara and the Cuban Revolution*, Sydney 1987, p 256.)

More controversial were Guevara's criticisms of the Russian economic model, which used market mechanisms and wage bonuses to promote economic growth. "The pipe dream that socialism can be achieved with the help of the dull instruments left to us by capitalism (the commodity as the economic cell, profitability, individual material interest as a lever, etc.) can lead into a blind alley", he wrote. While material incentives to increased output had their place, "Basically, this instrument must be moral in character" (p 250-1). What was needed was (p 250, 258)

to build the new man.... It is not a matter of how many kilograms of meat one has to eat, nor of how many times a year someone can go to the beach, nor how many pretty things from abroad you might be able to buy with present-day wages. It is a matter of making the individual feel more complete...

The problem is that socialism can only ever be built with what capitalism has left behind, at least to begin with. A socialist society doesn't start with a blank canvas or with a nest-egg put by but, as Marx put it, "still covered in the birth-marks of the old society from whose womb it has emerged". Commodity production cannot be decreed out of existence, any more than it was decreed into existence. Replacing production for exchange with production for use is a gradual process, faster or slower according to the economic circumstances the new society is confronted with. Profitability as such can be dispensed with quickly, but the need to produce a surplus beyond immediate consumption is an eternal necessity that socialism has to provide for.

Encouraging production by providing more things to consume is to encourage the

selfishness of capitalism, according to Guevara, and instead people should be encouraged by moral means to do their duty as citizens of a socialist society. But presenting the two as mutually exclusive misses the dialectical connection between the moral and the material, between altruism and self-interest. The two go hand in hand, not head to head. You help a neighbour who is locked out of their house not just because it gives you a warm glow inside, but because they will help you out the next time you're in such a situation. Supporting another group of workers out on strike is not based on solidarity as an abstract principle, but on solidarity as an active recognition that you have the same interest as them.

Socialism has nothing in common with Stakhanovite heroes over-fulfilling production quotas with chest expanded while masochistically denying themselves such base material things as food and sleep. The new human being that socialism seeks to develop works, of course, but also enjoys and consumes. He or she would want a secure supply of food on the table so as to be able to appreciate it properly, chances for rest and relaxation, and yes, beautiful things from other cultures too. Nothing is too good for the working class, said Larkin: a legitimate desire to expand your tastes and experiences is not the same as self-indulgent consumerism. The real moral sense of comradeship and friendliness towards others would be there in abundance, but it would grow together with a better material life rather than instead of it.

A workers' revolution would have no choice but to temporarily tolerate the persistence of market economy while always looking for ways to replace it as quickly as possible. But this was not what was happening in Russia, where the workers' grip on power had been broken four decades earlier. Neither was it happening in Cuba, where the workers had never held power, only having 'socialism' bestowed upon them by government decision in 1961. As a result, Guevara's exhortations as minister for industry to work harder and longer for little reward fell on deaf ears—as such ministerial exhortations generally do—and his economic arguments were effectively rejected by the government. This was certainly one of the factors leading him to look for another revolution elsewhere.

The Cuban revolution is a game of two halves, writes Guevara (p 247, 252):

the people, the still sleeping mass that had to be mobilized; and its vanguard, the guerrillas, the motor force of the mobilization, the generator of revolutionary consciousness and militant enthusiasm. This vanguard was the catalysing agent that created the subjective conditions necessary for victory.... The vanguard group is ideologically more advanced than the mass; the latter understands the new values, but not sufficiently. While among the former there has been a qualitative change that enables them to make sacrifices in their capacity as an advance guard, the latter see only part of the picture and must be subject to incentives and pressures of a certain intensity. This is the dictatorship of the proletariat operating not only on the defeated class but also on individuals of the victorious class.

So the Cuban revolution was not the work of the working class, or even of the people, but of a guerrilla vanguard who, by a leap of faith, had elevated themselves to a higher understanding of things. The people's role was subordinate, passive unless and until they were prodded and urged by those in the know. Clearly, it was not just a few counter-revolutionary individuals who were subject to dictatorial rule, but the entire people outside of this vanguard. This doesn't sound like any kind of socialism, if socialism has anything to do with the working class taking over things.

The people "follows its leaders, basically Fidel Castro, without hesitation", continues Guevara, because he has "interpreted the people's desires and aspirations" correctly. "The mass carries out with matchless enthusiasm and discipline the tasks set by the government ...The initiative generally comes from Fidel or from the revolutionary high command and is explained to the people" (p 247-8).

But a working class that had won its liberation would need no one else to interpret their desires and aspirations: they would be well able to speak for themselves. They would have a multitude of organisations, parties and forums to discuss among themselves what was needed. They would establish ways of directly expressing and implementing their own initiatives, instead of waiting for a charismatic leader to look into his heart and tell them what they wanted. Castro, then the vanguard, and the people bringing up the rear: the fact that Guevara held that such a system was socialist shows how little his socialism had to do with actual workers' liberation.

"At the risk of seeming ridiculous," he writes (p 258-9), "let me say that the true revolutionary is guided by great feelings of love. It is impossible to think of a genuine revolutionary lacking this quality." Guevara is quite right here. Socialism aims to replace human relationships based on misunderstanding and alienation with relationships based on mutual respect, caring and nurturing. Love is a good word to describe such a condition, and a feeling of love should animate the struggle to achieve it, a real love for real people. (Of course, he is also right about seeming ridiculous whenever you say such things...)

But this isn't quite what he has in mind (p 259):

Our vanguard revolutionaries must make an ideal of this love of the people, of the most sacred causes, and make it one and indivisible. They cannot descend, with small doses of daily affection, to the level where ordinary men put their love into practice.... The circle of their friends is limited strictly to the circle of comrades in the revolution. There is no life outside it.

This an abstract, idealised love of 'the people' and 'the cause', that has nothing in common with everyday love as practised between actual human beings. Having no life and no friends outside the revolution is bad for your political development as well as tragic for your personal development. Every socialist needs friends who aren't comrades, who disagree with you half the time, and take the piss out of you now and again: it's a necessary way of keeping in touch with the reality of a world that is nowhere near being convinced by socialism yet. Lefties who only eat, drink and sleep with other lefties are likely to think within that same limited circle, and end up following ideas that make sense there but nowhere else.

Guevara's vision of how a new person would develop in a socialist society can hardly be faulted (p 253-4):

he will reach total consciousness of his social being, which is equivalent to his full realization as a human creature, once the chains of alienation are broken.

This will be translated concretely into the reconquering of his true nature through liberated labor... He starts to see himself reflected in his work and to understand his full stature as a human being through the object created, through the work accomplished. Work no longer entails surrendering part of his being in the form of labor power sold, which no longer belongs to him, but represents an emanation of himself, a contribution to the common life in which he is reflected, the fulfillment of his social duty.

The tragedy was that this vision was not on the way to being realised in Cuba. A recognition of this, at least on some level, led Guevara to try fighting elsewhere. Such a vision, inspired by a revolutionary commitment as great as his, is still desperately necessary, but other ways than his are needed to put it into practice.

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