

The Real Tragedy of Che Guevara's Life

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In Latin America we have a saying, “*Poner el dedo en la llaga,*” a phrase that means to call attention to a delicate or worrisome point. However, *llaga* means literally an open sore or ulcer. I believe that Cuban socialist and scholar Samuel Farber puts his finger indeed on a significant sore point in revolutionary history with his latest book, *The Politics of Che Guevara: Theory and Practice*. While recognizing the undeniable determination, egalitarianism, and selflessness of Che Guevara in his fight against imperialism, Farber meticulously exposes the contradictions of Che’s thought and the political, economic, and social detours that Guevara took in his honest quest for a better world.

Why is this important? Beyond the obvious fact that *El Che*, half a century after his death, still is a symbol of defiance against injustice for countless people across the world, key questions remain: Are his politics and methods applicable to our modern struggles and to contexts other than guerrilla warfare, and what did his ideas and policies actually accomplish in Cuba in the quest for liberation and socialism?

Farber’s political dissection takes as a starting point his own understanding of socialist revolution being the act of “self-emancipation of the working class,” in agreement with Marx’s historical formulation, and deeply tied to the question of democracy—of workers and peasants ruling themselves. A pervasive theme in his analysis is the inherently anti-democratic character of a one-party state as practiced and justified in Cuba by Guevara.

After initially addressing Guevara’s youthful political formation, for instance his family’s social position, their politics, and Che’s bohemian rejection of Argentinian upper-class politics and mores, Farber avoids a chronological analysis of Guevara’s revolutionary life in favor of addressing four key components of Guevara’s theory and practice. These are his views and actions regarding (1) “revolutionary strategy and the road to power,” (2) “strikes, workers’ representation, and civil liberties,” in the larger context of democracy and self-rule, (3) “his overall political ideas and philosophy” once he became one of the top three leaders of the Cuban Revolution, and (4) his “political economy,” that is, how he administered the Cuban economy and how his methods fit within his vision of how to attain “full communism.”

Throughout his narrative, Farber makes the connections between Guevara’s bohemian Argentinean political baggage and the undemocratic, ascetic formulation of socialism that he came to espouse during his revolutionary years. Guevara was born into an economically unstable, upper-middle-class family that professed contradictory politics: antifascist and bohemian (their form of rebellion against Argentinean Catholic identification with Spanish fascism), but also profoundly disdainful of Peronism, which had attracted overwhelming working-class support.

Thus Che’s youthful rebelliousness against Argentinean high society took a bohemian character, too, in the form of a “deliberately shabby appearance” and a propensity to “say outrageous things and scandalize people around him,” which dovetailed with his reluctance to join any leftist political organizations. He admired Mahatma Gandhi’s anti-imperialism as well as his asceticism, which reinforced in the young Guevara his “bohemian critique of bourgeois materialism”—a stance more grounded on moralism than politics.

Guevara’s asceticism, as Farber extensively describes, was a foundational element in his later formulation of moral incentives, as opposed to material ones, for the Cuban working class once the rebels seized power. The

truth was that while Guevara was in charge of the Ministry of Industry, and after he died, the Cuban revolutionary leadership periodically reinvigorated the notion of moral incentives in response to periods of scarcity of basic commodities in a calculated effort to maintain the productivity of Cuban workers.

Farber highlights Guevara's "political tone-deafness," which manifests itself on multiple occasions throughout his revolutionary life and which is inextricable from his "voluntarism." For instance, Guevara's insistence that revolutionaries make revolution regardless of the political conditions ended up costing him his life in the Bolivian countryside after he grossly ignored the specific political and social conditions of that country. Concretely, those conditions included a Bolivian peasantry that failed to identify with Guevara and his imported rebels, and a militant working class located in far-away mining regions and cities, whom Guevara, when he infrequently addressed them, asked to leave their jobs, unions, and families to join him in his isolated enterprise.

Guevara regarded with suspicion the political struggles that took place in urban areas, largely because he did not trust the leadership of those struggles. This was a key strategic bias that Farber covers in detail while providing a full political and organizational context describing the limitations and unexploited possibilities of the radical segment of the Cuban working class at the time. Guevara was partial to rural guerrilla warfare because it could be tightly controlled through a military hierarchical structure. However, Guevara's *foco* strategy, the creation of multiple guerrilla foci in the rural areas that would eventually surround and take over the major cities, was never successful in Latin America—a failure that Farber contrasts to the 1979 Nicaraguan Revolution "relying primarily on urban uprisings to succeed."

Farber does an outstanding job of concisely describing the various political and social currents that coalesced to bring about the Cuban Revolution, which he correctly characterizes as a "social revolution." That revolution was nonetheless led by an eclectic group of middle-class individuals, which, given the nature of the guerrilla struggle and the politically fragmented nature of the mass movement in the cities, made the top leaders of the revolution socially detached from the movements, or *déclassé*, to use Farber's formulation.

Farber characterizes Fidel Castro as the ultimate politician, who maintained the various factions together in the aftermath of the revolutionary victory through his sheer personality and astute political ambition. Indeed, Fidel Castro did not consider himself a socialist or communist before or in the immediate aftermath of taking power. In contrast, Guevara (and Raúl Castro) had already subscribed to a Stalinist notion of socialism by the time the rebels landed in the Sierra Maestra mountains.

Although Guevara eventually became critical of the Soviet Union, he never wavered from the Stalinist principle of a one-party state, as Farber amply documents. At a fundamental level, Guevara refused to accept the right of workers to form independent unions, to bargain as adversaries, and to control production, explicitly aligning himself with one-person management of the workplace. For Guevara, the state was the revolutionary vanguard which, for better or for worse, represented the interests of the workers, even if they had no recourse to democratically challenge those who controlled the state. The workers unions were meant to be transmission belts in the pursuit of the overarching goals decided by the top leadership of the vanguard party, which was inextricable from the state. The workers were responsible for implementing the decisions from high above, while having little or no control over their working conditions.

The tensions this context created resulted in a mismatch of ill-conceived production plans and material reality (such as technology, raw materials, skills, or transport capacity). Yet Guevara insisted that the workers had to raise their consciousness, to accept their lot, and improve their efforts. Or, as Farber writes, "Guevara was arguing for workers to have responsibility, but without power."

After the rebels' victory, it took a few years for Fidel Castro to fully embrace the formulation of a one-party Stalinist state, while in contrast, his brother Raúl and Guevara collaborated all along with the thoroughly Stalinist *Partido Socialista Popular* (Popular Socialist Party) in a political contest of maneuver approved by Fidel Castro that eventually led to the formation of the Cuban Communist Party. It was throughout this period that "Guevara played a key role in inaugurating a tradition of administrative, nonjudicial detention subject to no written rules or laws and solely based on the discretion of top leaders and administrators." In the long run, after Guevara was gone from the government, these practices were used in camps for the confinement of dissidents

and social “deviants” (including gays, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Catholic activists, practitioners of Afro-Cuban Santería, and years later, people suffering from AIDS).

In Guevara’s *Socialism and Man in Cuba*, perhaps his most famous revolutionary proclamation, he exalts the qualities of the “new man”: selflessness, idealism, heroism, self-sacrifice. While all these qualities are admirable, they occurred or did not in the specific context of a class society, a society that was economically underdeveloped. And they occurred or did not within a political and social context in which Guevara deemed most of the Cuban population as not conscious enough to be part of what he considered the “vanguard” that inhabited the higher layers of administrative and political power. Therefore, the bulk of the population found itself outside the decision-making process, without any formal or informal mechanisms to affect those decisions.

Unfortunately, Guevara’s “new man” is oblivious to the struggles against racism, sexism, homophobia, and other oppressions. This is a narrow conception of the liberatory potential of socialism. Farber actually describes Guevara’s traditional views of the social position of women, and how he shared his father’s disdain for homosexuals. His is a literally Spartan, militaristic notion of socialism. Farber connects this rigid framework to the influence that Edward Bellamy’s nineteenth-century novel *Looking Backward* had on Guevara; the novel describes a utopian future in which a beneficent state is modeled along the command structures of an army.

As Farber argues, “Guevara arrives at the Stalinist conclusion that the dictatorship of the proletariat operates ‘not only over the defeated class but also individually over the victorious class’ [Guevara’s own words], through a ‘conscious’ vanguard elite that will decide in some undefined fashion if and when the people are educated enough to participate in deciding their collective and individual fate.”

One of the most outstanding contradictions in Guevara’s thought has to do with his views of the Soviet Union. He made no secret of his increasing frustration with the USSR and what he described as economic practices that seemed to be sliding in the direction of capitalism, a tendency to which he counterposed his own centralized budgetary system. While leading the Ministry of Industry, Guevara assumed that he could neutralize the effect of the “law of value”—the core element of capitalism analyzed by Marx—by applying his budgetary system.

Yet, as thoroughly described by Farber, the myriad of economic obstacles found in a small and underdeveloped economy such as Cuba’s demonstrated in practice the limitations of his method. In order to overcome low productivity he repeatedly peddled the practices associated with moral incentives, voluntary work, and socialist emulation—an extraordinary but unsuccessful effort that diverted resources to expand production at the expense of basic goods. Guevara’s ascetic and egalitarian mind transmuted socialism into the egalitarian sharing of scarcity for a population that had no real say in the national priorities.

In this context, the combination of the siege imposed by U.S. imperialism and his frustration with both the USSR and China—the alleged socialist giants of that era—figured prominently in Guevara’s decision to pursue international revolution, first in Congo and later in Bolivia. Nonetheless, despite his sharp criticism of the USSR, he never broke with the idea that the one-party state there somehow constituted socialism.

Guevara is considered by many a tragic figure who died heroically fighting the most powerful empire that humanity has seen. The real tragedy is that despite his fierce commitment to fight the injustices of capitalism and imperialism, he chose to elevate a minority of society as the unimpeachable guardians of the best interests of society, in essence recreating the system of bosses and subalterns.

In this new era of authoritarianism and naked greed inflamed by Donald Trump and his associates, as new mass struggles emerge, the need to fight for socialism presents itself in sharp contrast to the barbarism of our rulers. If these masses are to appropriate the ideas of revolutionary socialism, we need to firmly move beyond the anti-democratic ideas and methods of Che Guevara. Otherwise the masses, in their need to wrestle with the scorching harms of pilfering authoritarianism, will seek answers elsewhere, at a dangerous and exacting cost to the downtrodden.