

Olivier Besancenot and Michael Löwy

Che Guevara: His Revolutionary Legacy, New York: Monthly Review Press, 2009

Helen Yaffe

Che Guevara: The Economics of Revolution, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009

Abstract

In this review of *Che Guevara: His Revolutionary Legacy* by Olivier Besancenot and Michael Löwy and *Che Guevara: The Economics of Revolution* by Helen Yaffe, I consider Ché's relevance to both contemporary anti-capitalist activism and our understanding of the problems of post-revolutionary socialist construction.

Keywords

Socialism – Cuba – Latin America – Ernesto Ché Guevara – law of value – revolution

Beyond the Heroic Guerrilla: Ché Guevara as a Revolutionary Thinker

What were Ernesto 'Ché' Guevara's actual contributions to the theory and practice of revolutionary Marxism, and what is their significance for a twenty-first century socialism or communism? With the re-emergence of socialist politics in Latin America, and the more recent revival of intellectual interest in communism, these are questions of potentially broad interest. Several obstacles, however, stand in the way of any serious attempt to answer these questions. The first, and perhaps most obvious, of these is Ché's mythic status as the heroic guerrilla and revolutionary martyr reflected in the ubiquity of his image on t-shirts and posters more than forty years after his death. A second, and more serious, obstacle among Marxists is the perception that Ché's interests were rather narrowly limited to the question of guerrilla warfare, where his view that small guerrilla groups or *focos* had the potential to initiate revolutionary processes is widely blamed for leading some of the most committed members of a generation of Latin American revolutionaries to defeat, capture, torture and death at the hands of the regimes they sought to overthrow. Ché's own ill-fated efforts to put his military theories into practice, first in the Congo, and then in Bolivia, where he was captured and killed in 1967, are often offered as illustrations of the problems with *foquismo*.

A corollary to this view is a dismissal of the significance of Ché's activities as a member of the Cuban government between the overthrow of the Batista regime in 1959 and his departure for the Congo in 1965. Ché, in this view, was essentially a guerrilla, temperamentally ill-suited to the administrative tasks of reorganising Cuba's economy. Thus, his tenure, first as head of the Department of Industries within the National Institute for Agrarian Reform (INRA), then as president of Cuba's National Bank, and finally, starting in 1961, as head of the Ministry of Industries (MININD), is regarded as an unwelcome, and not especially interesting, interlude between his military adventures.

A widely accepted narrative has thus emerged that casts Ché as a heroic and inspirational fighter for human liberation, but ultimately a theoretical lightweight with little of value to offer future generations of revolutionaries, either in the area of revolutionary military strategy or on questions surrounding the transition to socialism. Two new books, *Che Guevara: His Revolutionary Legacy* by Olivier Besancenot and Michael Löwy, and *Che Guevara: The Economics of Revolution* by Helen Yaffe challenge this narrative. Both books draw on newly available materials to argue that Ché's contributions to the theory and practice of socialist transition are more significant than has been previously recognised.

Besancenot was the 2002 and 2007 presidential candidate of the Revolutionary Communist League (RCL), the French section of the reunified Trotskyist Fourth International. His strong showing in 2007 in which he won nearly 1.5 million votes helped lead to the formation of the New Anti-Capitalist Party (NAP) in 2009. Löwy is the widely published Franco-Brazilian sociologist and philosopher long active with the LCR and now the NAP.

Their book repackages, for a new generation of activists, arguments made previously by Löwy in *The Marxism of Che Guevara*¹ even though a revised second edition of that book appeared in 2007. The newer book, however, is more popularly accessible, opening, for example, with a biographical sketch of Guevara where the older book had assumed a familiarity with the historical context and main events of his life that younger activists are no longer likely to have. The book also closes with a discussion of the connections between Ché's ideas and those of the alter-globalisation movement and includes as appendices a speech by Daniel Bensaïd and a short meditation on Ché's significance by the Zapatista's Subcomandante Marcos.

In their book, Besancenot and Löwy choose to focus on Ché's 'ideas, values, analyses, proposals, and dreams'.² Eschewing 'an imaginary systematization of a largely unsystematic and constantly changing work' they nonetheless argue that in a world in which 'the consequences of Stalinism weigh heavily on the

1 Löwy 2007.

2 Besancenot and Löwy 2009, p. 7.

socialist idea' that Ché's thought is 'an inexhaustible source of inspiration' to those searching for 'egalitarian, democratic, and anti-bureaucratic solutions'³ to the challenges of constructing a twenty-first century socialism.

Three interconnected themes dominate this interpretation of Ché's thought: his humanism, his commitment to a truly revolutionary transformation of society, and his search for an alternative to the Soviet model of socialism.

Ché is thus presented here as committed to a humanist vision of Marxism that rejects the determinist reading of Marx and insists on the critical role of the consciousness of individuals in the process of the revolutionary transformation of human relations necessary for the realisation of communism. He is located 'within an underground current of international socialism' that includes, among others, Auguste Blanqui, Rosa Luxemburg and Carlos Mariátegui, who all insisted on the necessity of a revolutionary morality, ethics or spirit as a complement to a scientific social analysis.⁴ In this view, Ché's humanism is the source of his radicalism – his recognition of the inadequacy of the reformist strategies embraced by the pro-Soviet communist parties of Latin America, with their faith in the progressive potential of their respective national bourgeoisies, and the consequent need for the exploited to organise themselves and to fight to take political power. It is in the combination of Ché's radicalism and his pragmatism about the necessities of the revolutionary capture and exercise of political power that Besancenot and Löwy see his value in resolving what they call 'the key strategic problem that has beset the workers' movement since its origins: is it necessary to take power and, if so, how not to be taken in by it.' Referring to his decision to leave the Cuban government in order to wage revolutionary guerrilla war in the Congo and then Bolivia, they argue that 'Ché's experience remains a hopeful example, countering theories used too often to justify the Left's repudiation of power' and that 'by participating in power without clinging to it, Ché represents an exceptional case in the revolutionary movements of the twentieth century.'⁵ An exceptional case, they argue, that demonstrates the possibility of practical solutions to the dilemmas arising from taking state power.

While citing Ché's decisions to return to the field of combat as particularly vivid evidence of the possibility of resisting the impulse to cling to power, Besancenot and Löwy do not then uphold the strategy that Ché pursued in either the Congo or Bolivia. Instead they turn their attention to his efforts to find or develop a 'communist and democratic alternative to the Stalinist model

3 Besancenot and Löwy 2009, p. 10.

4 Besancenot and Löwy 2009, p. 42.

5 Besancenot and Löwy 2009, p. 48.

of the Soviet Union,⁶ linking this with his rejection of the reformism of the pro-Soviet Latin American communist parties. Noting the early efforts on the part of the cadres of the pro-Soviet Popular Socialist Party to ‘put a brake on’ the ‘radicalisation’ of the Cuban Revolution in the vain hope of maintaining the support of the national bourgeoisie, they then examine the development of Ché’s thinking in the course of the radical reorganisation of Cuba’s economy following its near-total nationalisation. Here they examine several of Ché’s major speeches and writings, in particular his 24 February 1965 speech before the Second Economic Seminar of Afro-Asian Solidarity in Algiers⁷ where he sharply criticised the terms of trade with the established socialist countries, and his essay *Man and Socialism in Cuba*,⁸ published a month later, in which he argues that in relying on ‘the worn out weapons of capitalism (the marketplace as the basic economic cell, profit making, individual material incentives, and so forth), one can arrive at a dead end’⁹ – a barely concealed attack on the Soviet model. It is not a coincidence that Ché’s last public appearance in Cuba and his preparations to fight in the Congo coincided with the sharpening of his public criticisms of the Soviet Union.

This is where Besancenot and Löwy’s argument is most provocative and exciting. Unfortunately it is also where they stumble. While insisting early on that ‘no revolutionary current, not Guevarist, Trotskyist, or libertarian, can alone presume to incarnate the synthesis’¹⁰ of the various revolutionary experiences of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries that must underpin a revolutionary politics in the twenty-first, there is a persistent implicit suggestion throughout the book that Guevara is best appreciated as a sort of unconscious or incipient Trotskyist, and that his missteps would surely have been avoided if only he had more closely heeded Trotsky’s wisdom. Besancenot and Löwy are, of course, not alone in this view which has as much to do with Ché’s and the Cuban Revolution’s influence on Trotskyism as it does with Trotsky’s ostensible influence on Guevara.

This view of Ché is sharply contradicted by Samuel Farber’s tendentious 1998 review of several biographies of Ché where he rallies the evidence for characterising Ché as a ‘Stalinist’.¹¹ The evidence is certainly there to be found,

6 Besancenot and Löwy 2009, p. 77.

7 ‘On Our Common Aspiration – The Death of Imperialism and the Birth of a Moral World’, in Guevara 1968, pp. 378–86.

8 Guevara 1968, pp. 387–400.

9 Besancenot and Löwy 2009, p. 68.

10 Besancenot and Löwy 2009, p. 10.

11 Farber 1998.

from early gestures of admiration for Stalin to his asceticism to the repressive measures carried out under his authority in Cuba. For Farber, Ché's real crime, of course, is his supposed lack of any 'thought of workers' control (as distinct from participation controlled from above)'. As if the complex mediations between revolutionary processes from above (that is to say from the state) and from below (in which the actual workers fully become the subjects of their own history) can be understood as a simple matter of choice between the two. But what Farber's critique really reveals, and this is true to a lesser degree of Besancenot and Löwy as well, is how viewing the subsequent international development of revolutionary socialist or communist politics primarily through the lens of categories derived from the experiences of the Russian Revolution can obscure as much as it illuminates.

The Russian experience obviously remains an important point of reference, but to explain the dynamics of the Cuban (or Chinese or Nicaraguan or Venezuelan) Revolution principally in terms of their fidelity to either Trotskyism or Stalinism is to reify them. Corrigan, Ramsay and Sayer¹² made the same point with respect to understanding the contradictory experience of Maoism and the Chinese Revolution long ago. Judging revolutionary experiences as if they are more or less faithful re-enactments of previous revolutions inevitably drains them precisely of what is most revolutionary about them. There are continuities and discontinuities between Ché's praxis and not just Trotskyism and Stalinism, but also the whole Bolshevik problematic. Just as the Russian Revolution unsettled important formulations of Marx, the post-war wave of Third World revolutions unsettled the demarcations drawn by the Russian experience. Understanding how demands, in Mao's paraphrase of Lenin, 'the concrete analysis of concrete conditions'.¹³ In Ché's case this means a concrete analysis of the concrete conditions of the Cuban Revolution. This is where Helen Yaffe's book makes a new and valuable contribution.

While Besancenot and Löwy have written an excellent introduction to and defence of Ché's thought and its continuing relevance to twenty-first century social struggles, it is Yaffe's book that really covers significant new ground and demands a serious rethinking of Ché's legacy by scholars as well as activists. Drawing on previously unexamined archival material from Ché's tenure as a member of the Cuban government, including transcripts of Ministry of Industry (MININD) meetings he led and interviews with several dozen of his closest collaborators during this period, Yaffe's well-researched, well-written

12 Corrigan, Ramsay and Sayer 1978.

13 Mao Tse-Tung 1967, p. 164.

and important book gives us a fine-grained and fascinating account of Ché's struggles over several years against the Soviet model of economic planning that eventually prevailed in Cuba, and his efforts to implement an alternative. In the process, the picture of Ché as impatient with the nitty-gritty of building a socialist economy falls apart and the reasons for his return to armed struggle are also cast in a new light, although Yaffe does not really pursue this latter line of inquiry.

At the centre of Yaffe's account are Ché's efforts to develop and implement a new model of socialist economic planning – the Budgetary Finance System (BFS) – in opposition to the model known as the Auto-Financing System (AFS) promoted by Cuba's Soviet-bloc economic advisors. Ché's BFS model arose in the course of the rapid nationalisation of most of the Cuban economy precipitated by the deterioration of relations with the US. The BFS model was not copied from any of the already existing socialist countries, but rather, interestingly, from the internal budgeting systems of the US-based multinational corporations whose properties Cuba was in the process of nationalising. As Ché and his collaborators examined the accounting systems of the US companies, they came to realise that the model being pushed by Soviet advisors was itself based on the more primitive accounting systems used by the capitalist enterprises nationalised by the Russian Revolution and did not reflect the significant advances pioneered by US corporations in the intervening decades.

There were several important differences between the two systems. Under AFS every workplace enjoyed its own juridical identity, had responsibility for its own finances reflected in control over funds and access to credit, and encouraged increased productivity through material incentives in the form of individual bonuses for workers who produce over norms. In contrast, under the BFS developed at Ché's initiative, workplaces were organised into 'Consolidated Enterprises' by industry, with their finances and administration centrally controlled. Within the BFS, money functioned as a unit of account but not as a means of payment between enterprises, and enterprises could neither take out loans nor extend credit to other enterprises. While the BFS recognised the need for material incentives (collective as well as individual) to encourage productivity, 'moral incentives' were expected to play an increasingly important role. At the heart of these differences were two radically counterposed notions of the role of the law of value under socialism.

The Soviet model reflected a view that the economic underdevelopment of the socialist countries meant that the law of value had to guide the process of planning and that enterprise profitability must be at the centre of both the evaluation and the stimulation of production. In opposition to this, Ché argued that, while the law of value could not be simply abolished by decree, a central

purpose of planning was precisely to undermine it and that cost reduction, rather than profitability, should be the basis for the evaluation of enterprises.

This important struggle over the direction of the Cuban Revolution is commonly reduced to the question of the role of 'moral incentives' in production which in turn is treated as an expression of Ché's supposed romantic idealism. As Yaffe explains, 'voluntary labour and socialist emulation have been characterised as both means and ends rather than as part of a complex of policy instruments designed to increase productivity and efficiency while undermining the operation of capitalist mechanisms in the transition to socialism.'¹⁴ This 'complex of policy instruments' did not simply spring from Ché's head, but rather was developed in response to both rapidly unfolding events in Cuba and to the observations of the planning models of the socialist countries with which Cuba was developing ties. In the summer of 1959 Ché headed a three-month-long 'goodwill mission' to eleven countries including Yugoslavia.¹⁵ The example of Yugoslavia produced a contradictory response in Ché. On the one hand, Yugoslavia's independence encouraged him to view the Soviet model critically. On the other he saw in the Yugoslav model 'the potential for competition among enterprises to distort the socialist spirit',¹⁶ an observation that he would soon realise also applied to the Soviet AFS model.

Farber argues that Ché's support for highly centralised planning and the elimination of all market mechanisms flowed simply from an extreme voluntarism and lack of appreciation for 'the specific characteristics of a Cuban economy [in] which . . . a considerable degree of petty trade [was] a reflection of . . . a backward development of the still non-collective, petty commodity means of production.'¹⁷ In contrast, Yaffe's account suggests that Ché's position reflected a considered analysis of precisely how not just petty trade but also the market relations between 'worker-controlled' enterprises evident in Yugoslavia posed a special threat to the process of socialist construction in underdeveloped countries like Cuba.

Much of Yaffe's study is devoted to detailed description of the development of different features of BFS from training to salary structures to workers' participation and efforts to transform the political consciousness and psychology of workers. The result is an invaluable examination of the practical challenges of socialist construction in a small, highly dependent economy. The chapters dealing respectively with the collectivisation of production and workers' par-

14 Yaffe 2009, p. 2.

15 Yaffe 2009, p. 19.

16 Yaffe 2009, p. 20.

17 Farber 1998.

ticipation, and consciousness and psychology are particularly rich in the sort of empirical detail that brings to life the political stakes in what, at first glance, might seem like a dry and arcane dispute over accounting methods. Simply put, the differences over accounting reflected what Yaffe characterises as Ché's 'heresy', namely 'his profound perception of socialism as a transitional stage – the period between capitalism and communism – in which the qualitative tasks of preparing human consciousness and social relations for communist society were as important as the quantitative tasks of developing the forces of production.'¹⁸ This view was at odds with the Soviet position that the development of the forces of production was the priority, a stance that Ché increasingly came to believe would lead to the restoration of capitalism.

While the enterprises controlled by MININD were organised using the BFS model, those that came under the control of the National Institute of Agrarian Reform (INRA) and the Foreign Trade Ministry (MINCEX) adopted the AFS model. While the two models were able to coexist in the chaos of the first years of the revolution, a struggle over which one would prevail was inevitable. Yaffe's chapters detailing the different elements of the BFS are bookended by two chapters focusing on the sharp theoretical arguments that arose from Ché's departure from the Soviet model.

The first of these is an account of what was called 'The Great Debate', which took place between 1963 and 1965 and which, as Yaffe explains, 'has been variously interpreted as: an argument about the operation of the law of value under socialism; a disagreement about the use of moral incentives; a dispute over the level of financial (de)centralisation of enterprises; a conflict over the nature of Cubanidad and the New Man in a vision of utopia; and a power struggle within the Cuban leadership.'¹⁹ Previous considerations of the Great Debate have tended to focus on the published polemics involving not only members of the Cuban government, but also Ernest Mandel and Charles Bettelheim, with the former supporting Ché's position and the latter supporting that of Carlos Rafael Rodríguez, the president of INRA, and a leader of the pro-Soviet Popular Socialist Party before it was dissolved into the Cuban Communist Party. Yaffe enriches our understanding of the Great Debate by taking us inside the meetings of the government's Economic Commission and the Council of Ministers where the future direction of the Cuban Revolution was being determined.

The most interesting chapter in Yaffe's book focuses on Ché's notes on the Soviet *Manual of Political Economy* (forthcoming from Ocean Press as *Critical Notes on Political Economy: A Revolutionary Humanist Approach to Marxist*

18 Yaffe 2009, p. 10.

19 Yaffe 2009, p. 49.

Economics). Written between 1965 and 1966 just prior to his departure for the Congo and left unpublished for forty years, these notes reflect the maturation of Ché's critique of the Soviet model of planning as well as an opportunity for greater frankness than was an option for him as a prominent member of the government at a moment in which relations with the Soviets were critical. Yaffe describes the *Critical Notes* as Ché's 'most important contribution to socialist theory'²⁰ and explains that: 'The notes were smuggled back into Cuba by Aleida March, Guevara's wife who went on a clandestine visit to see him overseas and who passed them on to Orlando Borrego Díaz, Guevara's young deputy, . . . [who] for 40 years . . . kept them under lock and key, out of sight of scholars, political leaders, historians and compañeros alike.' While Ché had already argued for the superiority of BFS over AFS, 'sensitivity to the *realpolitik* of relations between the USSR and Cuba' had prevented him from 'publicly articulat[ing] his conviction that the Auto-Financing System (AFS) threatened to reintroduce capitalism in the socialist countries.'²¹ The *Critical Notes* are not constrained in this manner. They argue that, absent a free market, the law of value loses the 'revolutionising effect' it has under capitalism and that the stagnation of Soviet technology was the consequence. Importantly, the sole exception was in the area of military technology, the one sector where the law of value was not allowed to prevail. Ché's discussion of the relationship between technological development and the conditions for communism is particularly provocative. Here again, Ché's critique of the Soviet model is sharp. Yaffe quotes him: 'The technological seeds of socialism are present in developed capitalism much more than in [the] so-called system of economic calculus [AFS] which is also the heir of a form of capitalism that has now been surpassed, but which, nonetheless, they have taken as a model for socialist development.'²² Later he states: 'Humanity faces many shocks before its final liberation but – and we are completely convinced of this – it will never get there without a radical change in strategy of the principal socialist powers.'²³

While the *Critical Notes* includes an outline and two essentially completed chapters, one arguing for the necessity of the work, and the other taking the biographies of Marx and Engels as a departure point for discussing their method of investigation and analysis, the bulk consists of notes on the Soviet *Manual on Political Economy*. Yaffe rightly warns that the notes are just that, notes, and should not be treated as 'a comprehensive critique' of the Soviet

20 Yaffe 2009, p. 233.

21 Yaffe 2009, p. 234.

22 Guevara 2006, p. 13; cited in Yaffe 2009, p. 238.

23 Guevara 2006, p. 28; cited in Yaffe 2009, p. 241.

Manual, but her summary of them reveals just how provocative they are nonetheless. Yaffe organises the summary into five themes: (i) capitalism and imperialism, (ii) the Soviet Union's *kolkhoz* agricultural cooperatives, (iii) socialism, (iv) class relations, and (v) international relations. What emerges is an effort by Ché to use a critical analysis of the *Manual* to understand where the Soviet Union had gone wrong.

Ché is critical of what he sees as the failure of the *Manual* to adequately take into account the effects of imperialism on the consciousness of workers in the advanced capitalist countries, which, he insists, explains why they 'have stopped being the vanguard of the world revolution',²⁴ but is also critical of Lenin's characterisation of imperialism as 'dying'. He also 'noted the analysis of Lin Piao and the Chinese view that a new contradiction had emerged, between oppressed and oppressor nations, and that this must determine the strategies of progressive forces.'²⁵

The picture that emerges is of a Soviet Union instead preoccupied with emulating the levels of consumption characteristic of the imperialist countries and 'maintaining the discrepancies'²⁶ between the USSR and the poorer socialist countries like Cuba. While Ché holds Stalin responsible for, in Yaffe's words, 'embedding capitalist levers' in the Soviet system,²⁷ his sharpest criticism is directed at the post-Stalin leadership who 'give in to the impulses of the superstructure and emphasise commercial activity, theorising that the total use of these economic levers will take them to communism.'²⁸ Stalin's greatest contribution to this development, according to Ché, is that he 'underestimated communist education and instituted an unrestricted culture of authority'.²⁹

What is most striking in Ché's critique of the *Manual* is the extent to which it echoes very similar criticism being articulated at roughly the same time in China, in particular Mao Zedong's own critical commentaries on the *Manual* and Stalin's *Economic Problems of Socialism in the USSR*,³⁰ and the collectively authored *Shanghai Textbook on Socialist Political Economy*³¹ published at the height of the Cultural Revolution. This brings us to what is probably the greatest weakness of Yaffe's book, its failure to really locate Ché's 'heresy'

24 Guevara 2006, p. 64; cited in Yaffe 2009, p. 242.

25 Yaffe 2009, p. 251.

26 Guevara 2006, p. 130; cited in Yaffe 2009, p. 254.

27 Yaffe 2009, p. 249.

28 Guevara 2006, p. 195; cited in Yaffe 2009, p. 249.

29 Ibid.

30 Mao Tse-Tung 1977.

31 Lotta (ed.) 1994.

within the larger struggles taking place within the international communist movement, most notably the Sino-Soviet split and the struggles internal to the Chinese Communist Party that erupted in the form of the Cultural Revolution at the very moment that Ché was writing the *Critical Notes*. The 'Great Debate' in Cuba did not occur in isolation from the 'Great Debate' that erupted at the same moment between China and the Soviet Union or the longer running debate on 'market socialism' going back to the work of Oskar Lange.

Yaffe's final chapter is titled 'Guevara's Legacy in Cuba' in which she argues that Cuba has periodically swung away from and then back towards Ché's views on socialist planning. This is the least convincing chapter in the book in large part because it takes the official veneration of Ché in Cuba at face value and fails to acknowledge how Ché's departure from Cuba reflected a decisive political defeat for his views on both socialist planning and the character of Soviet relations with the Third World. While Ché's distinctive ideas undoubtedly left a permanent mark on the political culture of the Cuban Communist Party, the supposed later swings toward his views in Cuban policy all seem like faint echoes of his original radicalism. This, however, is a comparatively minor fault in what is an otherwise excellent book.

Besancenot and Löwy's fine book should serve to re-popularise Ché among younger activists not simply as an icon but also as a serious and important anti-capitalist thinker. Hopefully some of those who are provoked by it will then read Yaffe's book to deepen their understanding not just of Ché's intellectual legacy, but of the serious problems of socialist construction that he attempted to resolve in both practice and theory.

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