

# “What are Your Thoughts about Che Guevara?”

*[This is a query from a friend about Che and my reply on Jan. 20, 2009. –S.H.]*

----- Original message -----

From: Thomas ...

- > Hi Scott, although I don't usually reply to your emails, I do read them when I
- > can and have found them to be always interesting and at times entertaining!
- > There's a new movie out about Che Guevara, and that got me thinking about him.
- > From what I've read he seems to have been a complex and fascinating character. I
- > read that Jean-Paul Sartre called him 'the most complete human being of our
- > age'.
- >
- > I am curious to know your own thoughts on Che and his legacy.
- >
- > Thanks,
- > Thomas

**From:** Scott

**Sent:** Tuesday, January 20, 2009 11:48:49 AM

**Subject:** Re: Question about Che

Hi Thomas,

Thanks for the note!

I don't really have strong feelings about Che, one way or the other. On the one hand there is no doubt he was a life-long revolutionary, and I can certainly respect him for that. But on the other hand, there is a real question of how deep and profound his understanding of Marxism really was, and whether he actually understood what it means and requires to overthrow capitalism and create genuine socialism and then communism.

The Cuban revolution was something of an anomaly, and involved some exceptional good luck for Castro and his followers. They themselves did not really overthrow the U.S. neo-colonialist regime. The revolution was basically a matter of a small band of guerrillas led by Castro coming down from the mountains and taking over after a sudden mass revolt forced the dictator Batista to flee. It was more the story of an enormously unpopular, corrupt, and rotten regime collapsing than it was an organized revolution.

There was not, therefore, a great number of revolutionaries around who had been trained and tempered in long struggle, who were well educated in Marxist theory, and who had a good idea about how to start leading the people in transforming Cuba into first a socialist country and then move towards communism. This is one of the reasons that Castro merged with and took over the leadership of the revisionist Communist Party of Cuba and then allowed his revolution to come under the wing of the revisionist and imperialist Soviet Union (which still falsely claimed to be socialist). The other reason, of course, is that the bare-fanged U.S. imperialists were threatening nearby from the north, and Castro could only conceive of escaping their clutches by finding a different “protector”.

The small guerrilla band approach that Castro, Che and their followers had used involved almost no practice or experience on their part in mobilizing the workers and ordinary people of Cuba in revolutionary struggle. So once they came to power all they really knew how to do was to rule *on behalf of* the people, as best they understood how to do that. They did not know how to organize the masses to change society in their own interests.

In short, the approach of Castro and Che was that of a very radicalized, patronizing national bourgeoisie, which sought to make revolution “from above”, and do things *for* the people. They consciously looked down on the ordinary Cuban workers and peasants as uneducated and ignorant. This meant that the early revolutionary leadership already formed the nucleus of a new radicalized national bourgeois ruling class.

Real socialism, from the point of view of Marx, Lenin and Mao, is a transitional period from capitalism to communism. But from the “[revisionist](#)” perspective, “socialism” is an end in itself, a more or less permanent form for society. For them it means primarily state ownership and control of industry. Once this is set up there is little in the way of further social transformation. Instead, the “development” of socialism is viewed entirely as the expansion of production. (I call this conception “socialist economism”.)

It is certainly true that from a paternalistic perspective the Cuban revolution greatly benefited the Cuban people. Their health and education (i.e., such things as literacy and technical education—*not* Marxist education!) has been tremendously advanced, especially considering the poverty and backwardness of Cuba at the time of the revolution. And it is true that the U.S. blockade and then the collapse of their “protector” and benefactor, the Soviet Union, caused enormous economic and other difficulties for Castro’s Cuba.

But the one thing the Cuban revolution did *not* do was institute genuine socialism, where the mass of the people themselves actually ran society in their own interests, and which could continue to be gradually transformed in the direction of communism. In fact, the actual movement of society, such as it has been in recent decades, has been more back in the direction of intensifying the capitalist aspects of society and even some steps toward neo-colonialism again (first under the Soviets, and now toward returning U.S. control once again). It seems quite likely that sometime relatively soon after Castro’s death, his regime will finally collapse completely. In other words, the Cuban revolution is pretty clearly turning out to be another failed revisionist experiment.

I suspect that Che himself was beginning to understand this way back when he decided to leave Cuba and try to lead another revolution in Bolivia. Che never distanced himself ideologically from the Cuban revolution, however, nor even from the basic “[foco](#)” method of leading a revolution that (accidentally!) succeeded in Cuba. This method involves small guerrilla bands in the mountains, away from the oppressed population, and struggling pretty much without much support from them.

In Bolivia this didn’t work at all. Not only was the reactionary regime in control of the country much stronger, but Che’s guerrillas did nothing to win the support of the rural masses. So they were rather easily defeated, and Che himself was murdered by the Bolivian army.

So my view is that we can and should honor Che as a dedicated revolutionary, and someone who truly did have the interests of the masses at heart, but that—at the same time—we should also learn from his mistakes and try to make revolution and transform society in a much more rational way!

Scott

P.S. The new movie about Che sounds interesting. I enjoyed the *Motorcycle Diaries* film.

[Note: A much more thorough discussion of Che, the foco theory, and related topics can be found in Lenny Wolff’s fine 1985 article, “Guevara, Debray, and Armed Revisionism”, located online at:  
<http://www.bannedthought.net/Cuba-Che/Guevara/Guevara-Debray-Wolff.pdf> ]