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Jessica Bottaro

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Che Guevara: The man who became a myth.

Jessica Bottaro
Dr.Rector
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“The armed victory of the Cuban people over the Batista dictatorship was not only the triumph of heroism as reported by the newspapers of the world; it also forced a change in the old dogmas concerning the conduct of the popular masses of Latin America. It showed plainly the capacity of the people to free themselves by means of guerrilla warfare from a government that oppresses them.”¹

The man that wrote these powerful words is a legend of Latin American history. His ideals and beliefs not only affected revolutions of Latin America, but the entire world. Ernesto “Che” Guevara has become a myth and icon for revolutionary ideals across the globe. The interesting transition from revolutionary to international phenomenon is something of interest. His ideals and passion for power within the people continues to transcend through time and effect culture. It is interesting to walk through a mall in contemporary American society and see shirts with Che’s face plastered on them. It is a query to if the youth of America that is wearing these emblems actually understand the person and struggle behind it. His genius that was fueled with Marxist ideals is now labeled as fashion in the very country that Che opposed. It is also important to realize the surge of different films being celebrated about Che’s life. Films such as “The Motorcycle Diaries” are highlighting his life, and once again bringing him to the forefront of popular culture. The Cuban revolutionary that died for his beliefs continues to inspire new generations of dreamers, yet is not always understood by those who celebrate him. Che is becoming a symbol for rebellion through popular culture. It is

¹ Che Guevara “Guerilla Warfare”. (Lincoln, Nebraska) 1985 p. 157

interesting to look to see how this man's life has broke time barriers to continue to affect new generations. How is it that a forty year old revolutionary is and will continue to influence generations?

To understand the man that shaped Latin American revolutions it is first important to grasp his foundations. Ernesto Guevara was born into a middle class family in Rosario Argentina. As a child Ernesto was stricken with asthma; this illness created a sense of difference for Che. At an early age he was a leader amongst children. His father was quoted with saying "At the age of six he was the leader of all the children in the neighborhood. All came to my house... All came with him. And he captained them."² It is also important to note the make up of the Guevara household. They belonged to the middle class, yet did not cater to social class. Ernesto was brought up in a household that encouraged democracy and the acceptance of people. Perhaps this background aided Che's attitude of looking past class barriers to see the need to help all classes.

The asthma that held back a young Che led him to his goals in life as he became a medical student. To his mothers request, and to seek out a way to overcome asthma Che Guevara studied medicine in Buenos Aires. As he studied it was apparent that he was going to be more than just a doctor in the future. He often was distracted with studying and found other things to do. It seemed like school, like politics, failed to satisfy his need for adventure, often he would take on other activities to take up his time".³ The use of poetry as well as playing chess all were indicators of how a young Che didn't want to

² Ernesto Guevara Sr. in "Che Guevara" by Daniel James. (New York, NY Stein and Day Publishers 1969) pg 29.

³ James pg. 50

focus on the mere academic aspects of school. By interpreting his attitude at school and how he left before term ended to go on an odyssey with his longtime friend Alberto Granados is an interesting way to understand that school was a place to learn facts, yet for Che it was the real world that taught him his lessons.

In recent popular culture the movie “The Motorcycle Diaries” has hit the American movie scene. It has won many awards and has been taken notice. It is interesting how this part of Che’s life has become more famous. In recent years research continues to increase on Che’s life. The period of the trip he took around South America seemed to have been a real life changing experience. It is in these travels that Che seeks out his life goals. When reading his diaries later in life his father said that the writings brought you “to come to understand that he was following a truly missionary impulse which never left him”.⁴ These writings also illustrate his overwhelming turn to socialist ideals. His despondent attitude about the poverty that was apparent all over South America as well as his interest in looking to the past for strength in the people was an indicator of how he was going to motivate his struggles later in life. The impoverished people of the *altiplano*⁵ in Peru gave connections for Che to the great past of the mighty Incas. The suffering Indian masses that were apparent all over Latin America added to the emotional ties Guevara shared for revolution. His travels opened his eyes to the fact that revolution in Latin America was indeed a moral necessity. His diaries of his early travels also indicate the selflessness that was Che. In this period of his life it was easy to see how Che expected a lot from other people to help one another, but more importantly

⁴ Richard Harris “Reflections on Che Guevara’s Legacy” in *Latin American Perspectives*, Vol. 25, No.4, (July 1998) pg. 30

⁵ Richard Harris “Death of a Revolutionary” New York, NY. Norton and Company Inc. 1970 pg. 21

he expected a lot from himself. One important stop that Guevara made on his trip with Granados was that to the leper colony at San Pablo Peru. In this leper colony Che and Granados were noted for the apparent warmth and love that they showed to the lepers. Again it was in these travels that Guevara shaped his ideologies and let the people of Latin America inspire his work. To the request of his mother Che came home from his travels and finished his exams to get his degree in medicine. He was a doctor by degree, but now he had the experiences of a socialist who wanted to truly help others.

After Guevara received his medical degree he took off again on his last adventure of his youth. He traveled to Bolivia to witness the Bolivian revolution. There he met others who were interested in the cause of ending *La Violencia*⁶, a bloody struggle between governments and their people. The oppressive manner of these governments and the inspiration of others led Che to seek out the revolutionaries. He traveled through northern Latin America and headed up to Guatemala to aid in their communist revolution. On this mission he also went to Mexico where he would have his fateful meeting with Fidel Castro. Castro at the time was already leading the revolution in Cuba. With meeting Castro Che said “after my travels around Latin America it did not take much to incite me to join in any revolution against tyranny”⁷. The pair set off to create the revolution that they were destined for.

The work of Guevara in the Cuban Revolution is what created the legend. His ideologies and methods for revolution made him the famous military leader of Castro.

⁶ James pg. 73

⁷ James pg. 83

One of the ideologies that were Che's love was that of "The New Man" or "el hombre Nuevo"⁸. The ideal that there could and would be a change from the man who only cared about himself in a capitalist society would transform into one that wanted to help his fellow man. This new man would be the product of revolution and would liberate themselves from the individualism that capitalism entailed. In 1965 Che wrote his essay "Socialism and Man in Cuba" which illustrated the very essence that was Guevara's struggle. He said "the true revolutionary is guided by strong feelings of love...they must have a dose of justice and truth to avoid the dogmatic extremes of the masses... we will make the twenty-first century man, we ourselves"⁹. This idea of putting oneself on the line in order to help the greater good is exactly the ideals that would shape the *foco*¹⁰ theory and guerrilla warfare that Guevara would be the leader of. His tactics and ideals were the fuel of the Cuban Revolution, and is what may have contributed to the large following of Guevara fans.

The *foco* theory is Guevara's plan for guerrilla warfare. His method again was linked to the idea that the sacrifice of some would be better for the greater good. In his book "Guerrilla Warfare" Che points out on the first page what the basic concepts are to the *foco* theory behind the plan.

- (1) Popular forces can win against the army.
- (2) It is not necessary to wait until all the conditions for making revolution exist; the insurrection can create them.

⁸ Harris pg 21

⁹ Harris pg. 22

¹⁰ Matt D. Childs "An Historical Critique of the Emergence and Evolution of Ernesto Che Guevara's Foco Theory" in *Journal of Latin American Studies*, Vol. 27, No.3 (Oct 1995) pg. 595

(3) In underdeveloped America the countryside is the basic area of armed fighting.¹¹

In these basic concepts it is apparent that he is trying to do create a following of people in the guerrilla warfare by showing that the small man can overcome the tyrannical grasps of an army and the government behind them. It is the basic ideal that by using every means possible the small guerrilla army can overcome the regular army. The second main lesson to his theory is that a revolutionary can speed up history. Che was noted with saying “the duty of the revolutionary is to make the revolution”¹². This ideal embodies the fact that the revolutionary can catalyze history and speed up the process for change. The third lesson mentioned really referred to the idea that leadership regarding warfare must be localized and brought to the people. The people on the *sierra* (of the mountains, or countryside, as well as the people of the *llano* (urban) would all have to be involved in the struggle to overthrow a dictatorship. He realized that both played a relationship together to create change in the revolution. He also realized that the people had a relationship to their leaders, and visa versa. The concept that “leaders teach people” and “people teach leaders” was the foundation for the ideals of socialism and the need to help others. These basic ethics and goals were inspiration for groups all over the world. Not only were the ideals of helping one another and the hope that a small army could overthrow the large organized army, the idea of armed warfare also became a strategy to follow. Che’s plans of using guerrilla armed tactics gave premonitions that this would work in other parts of the world. Ideally it would spread through Latin

¹¹ Che Guevara pg. 1

¹² Childs pg. 600

America, as well as Africa and other areas were imperialist colonized governments still had hold on the people.

Perhaps the only true political stance that Guevara would take was that of anti-American sentiments. He passionately encouraged Cuba to become economically independent from the colony embrace that America still had. The imperialistic society and the push for capitalism were both anchors in his disdain for America. He worked with his people for agrarian reform and industrialization to create a more stable economy in Cuba. Che pointed out to his people that “weariness from being oppressed, abused and exploited to the maximum; weariness from selling one’s labor day after day for fear of becoming part of the great mass of the unemployed so that the maximum profit can be attained for the owners of capitalism is causing the ‘Hunger of the People’”.¹³ It was in this “Hunger of the People” that Guevara said the reason for revolution and change from the dictatorships that the “Yankee metropolis¹⁴” controlled. With such powerful ideals and anti-oppressive sentiments that Che embodied led to an international following of his principles.

In the time period that Che came to age in there were many injustices around the world. The sixties posed a time period where change seemed attainable. There was the hopeful struggle for liberation and independence from dictators, and the dream that the

¹³ Childs pg 610

¹⁴ Childs pg. 613

small man could make the change against a giant mogul. Guevara became the revolutionary struggle poster boy, and later its martyr. Groups throughout the world joined him in his ideals of armed struggle and the idea of guerrilla warfare. In the United States Stokely Carmichael who was a leader of SNCC (Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee), and then leader to the more militant Black Panthers¹⁵ also emulated the teachings of Guevara. They embraced the idea of dividing forces through the “one, two, three ... many Vietnams¹⁶” that Che shared. The Black Panthers also operated a training facility in Cuba where members would learn guerrilla tactics to create social change in America. Others would imitate the doctrines that Che produced so reverently. The Zapatistas of Mexico would claim inspiration from Che. The Russians would admire him and see their own past of the Russian Revolution through the passion that Che outwardly illustrated. It seemed that the world was embracing the morals and ideas of a man who took his socialistic ethics that he had learned through life experience. The motivations of Che were not political, they were social. He wanted to see the change that would occur through revolution. He learned his Marxist concepts not through books, but by the experience of the revolution.

The death of Che Guevara came as wonderment to the world. The denial of his death was experienced all over the world. As Che continued his revolutionary aspirations and left his place in politics of Cuba, he went to Bolivia to continue his work. The guerrilla warfare of Bolivia was failing, and Che thought he could turn the tides. When

¹⁵ Stokely Carmichael, “Ready for Revolution; the life and struggles of Stokely Carmichael (New York, NY.) Schribner Publishing. 2003 pg. 45

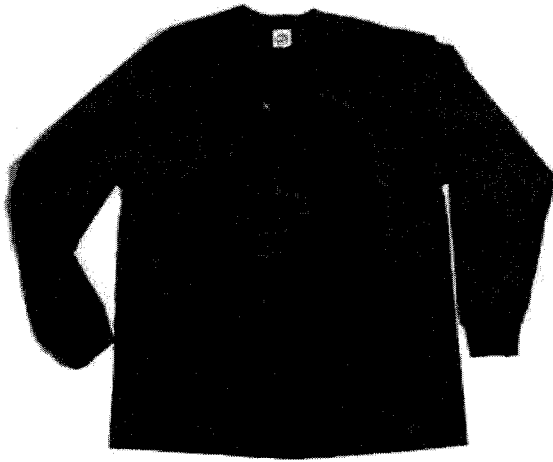
¹⁶ Childs pg. 598

the Bolivian leader of the guerrilla movement turned on him he was then shot by the Bolivian army. He then became the martyr of the revolutionary movement of the sixties. It was also the case that people lost faith in the guerrilla *foco* theory. They saw his defeat and death as a defeat of guerrilla warfare. However with his failure of guerrilla warfare he became something more. With his image he became a symbol of revolutionary courage throughout Latin America and the world. His dreams of a continental revolution in South America were not forgotten. His legacy became the power of society outside of politics and the state. He was the emblem of the cultural revolt.

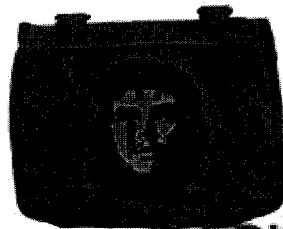
It is now the question of why has Che still remained apart of popular culture. ! Che Vive!, or Che Lives is a familiar idea that his fight for socialist ideals, as well as his commitment to not give up for a better world is still regarded as worthy. The fantasy of an adventurer who changed countries and crossed borders and broke down limits without once betraying his basic loyalties provides encourages the youth of today to not conform to the changing world we now live in. Perhaps it is his youthful adventures that intrigue us as we can still see the poverty and struggle that is apparent throughout the world. His socialist ideals of the New Man create a sense of warmth that man can create a better society for us. He also gave a word to live by with his *foco* theory or the idea that the guerrilla army can counteract the organized army. His death created his life as a legend and mythical man that will embody a resistance to mainstream culture. Perhaps this is why we can still see his face on shirts when you walk in a mall in contemporary America. He is an icon for the struggle to be different and to not succumb to political ideas. In a nation where big business thrives and politics seems more and more out of the people's

hands maybe the image of Che is a refreshing hope of rebellion and change. He essentially was a man of the past that created revolution for social change but never lost his passion and interest to power and greed. The persona that he illustrated was that of a real like Don Quixote. It is important to realize that Che considered violence as the pathway to revolution. His ideals were embraced by many groups around the world, even if they he himself was unsuccessful. It is a mystery as to why a man with a beret can still be seen in contemporary America. Most youth of today know his image, but don't know his story. The one connection they can make is that he is an image of rebellion and courage. It seems as if the man who was Che Guevara has been swallowed by his mythical persona that popular culture has imprinted on our minds.

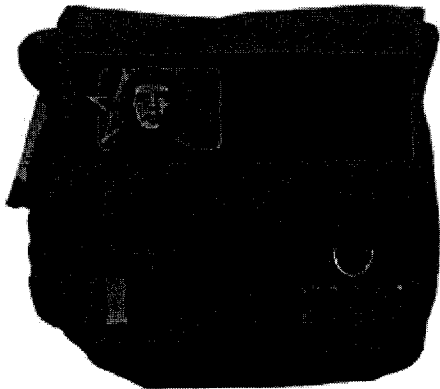
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**Che Canvas
Messenger Bag
17" x 15.5"**



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