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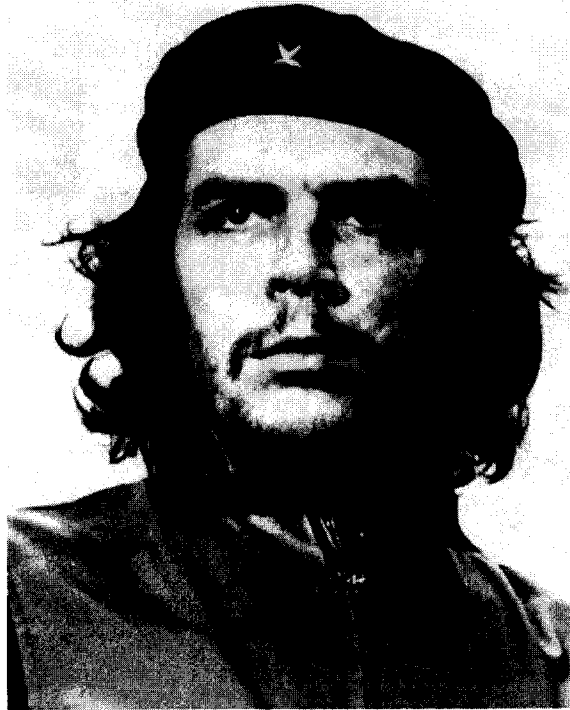
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**Che Guevara:
Maoist or Leninist?**



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**For:
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In the 1950's and 60's, revolutions were occurring across the world. Ernesto Guevara de la Serna born June 14, 1928 was commonly known as Che Guevara or El Che. He was an Argentine-born Marxist revolutionary, medical doctor, political figure, economist, and leader of Cuban and internationalist guerrillas. Che Guevara was an idealist with the zeal for social change and during his time traveling through Latin America, he was exposed to the impoverished lifestyles of which many of the people lived. These experiences during his journeys brought him to the conclusion that the inequality that existed within Latin America could be fixed through social revolution. This thinking led Che to study Marxism in all its forms to implement within his homeland.

The conceptualization of Che's Marxist views culminated in his *Foco* theory. The main purpose of his theory was to attempt to overthrow the region's government by gathering support of local peasants in a remote location and then moving on the capitol. The question remains; where did this theory evolve from? Was it based off the pure Marxist thought from the Manifesto? Was the *Foco* theory based off Maoist or Leninist revolutions in the past? Examining the origins and likeness of these very separate but similar revolutions may give insight into the inner working of Guevara.

The *Foco*, or Focus, theory was Che's ideological approach to how a revolution should occur. First, before any sort of revolution may occur, the conditions must be right. Before there can be any type of insurrection against a corrupt government, there must be a single point that the people have had enough before social reform may be introduced. Second, all other avenues to address the problem must be exhausted prior to revolutionary measures being introduced. This includes legal methods because violence is truly a last resort. Thus, the government has the appearance of legitimacy and any violence used prior to these actions being taken

will be viewed as inappropriate. These three conditions must be met prior to a revolutionary *foco* may introduced into the region.¹

Che's goals were not to create an autonomous and global communist regime as was believed in the United States, but was geared towards improving the lives of the people living in horrific conditions. The vision that Marx produced though his ideological Manifesto was designed in such a way to promote equality and justice for all men, not just those with wealth. This applied directly to the living conditions within Latin America as the social inequalities were rampant. Thus, the goal of his revolutionary Foco was to set the people free to living a happier and more fruitful life after all options have been explored.

The question as to why the *Foco* theory is used rather than a direct confrontation is more based on the region rather than the motivation of the people. By gathering a small base of operations as outlined in Che's autobiography^{II} and working to secure the support of the local populace, the *Foco* would build support and a network of information and defense sources. As the *Foco* expanded, the support of the local people would spread, adding new members to the guerilla insurgency and the ability to put pressure on the government.

To answer the question as to why this approach is used, mainly the region's terrain is the reason. Latin America is largely undeveloped, leaving vast swaths of the countryside wild with many places for a rebellion to occur. Mostly, the *foco* must be fairly isolated so that not to blend the local populations within the city in the initial stages of growth. In the latter stages of development, Che states that sending emissaries into the cities to gather support from the base of population. At this point, the guerilla fighters are no longer just a military unit fighting against a corrupt

¹ Jose A. Moreno, "Comparative Studies in Society and History", 12 (1970) 114-133.

^{II} Ernesto Guevara, Che Guevara on guerrilla warfare. New York: Praeger (1967)

government, but a symbol around which people may flock to. Che's understanding of the common people was integral to the development of his revolutionary concept. However, where this originated from is still not fully understood.

The original format for Marxism came from Karl Marx. Marx was a German philosopher who addressed a multitude of topics but was most famous for his analysis of history in terms of class struggle. This topic was summarized in the Communist Manifesto. His ideas were the primary cause for the revolt of the Russian Bolsheviks in the October Revolution of 1917. Marx-Leninism is marked by a distinct difference in the approach that is used than that Guevara theorized. Leninism focuses reform from inside the government to implement change. Leninism was a good approach to the situation in Russia as the population there was quite large. During the Bolshevik Revolution, it is marked that through political motivation leading to open revolt rather than political separatism accomplishing revolution is achieved.

The classic approach to Russian Populism was the concept that a single entity of "the people" as a single entity supported by overall social goals. The major long term goal of Leninism was defending the people against capitalist infiltration. This would eliminate the village community that is the basis of Russian peasant life. As this was motivated more from fear in the "pre capitalist" phase, it preempted any true threat that was perceived.ⁱⁱⁱ The relationship between Russian Populism versus the *Foco* theory is very unlikely due to the goals being based on different desires.

Within the idea of revolution, much is the same goal, but the methodology is different. Leninism's approach to Marxism is based on the desire to remove capitalism and eventually morph the culture into one where social class is not an issue. This being the core of socialism, but the aspect that evolved in Russia left

ⁱⁱⁱ Maurice Meisner, "Leninism and Maoism: Some Populist Perspectives on Marxism-Leninism in China", *The China Quarterly*, 45 (1971) 2-5.

more towards Communism with the advent of Stalin coming to power. Another major difference in the delineation from Guevara's *Foco* theory is the approach to violence.^{IV} The Bolsheviks used violence as a means to an end, not as a last resort. The October Revolution advocated for the rising up of the multitudes of peasants against the bourgeoisies in that country. Guevara advocated for violence against the nationalist forces that sought to stop a revolution, but not to harm those that did not actively oppose the revolution. Lenin's forces did not adhere to this. Capitalistic government was the enemy, not the corrupt governments that are seen in Latin America.

The similarities between Leninism and the *Foco* theory are slim, but most are ideological in nature. Leninism actively incorporated itself into the governmental body to attempt political change from within, but Guevara advocated revolution from outside. The use of violence prior to all avenues being exhausted was implemented by the Bolsheviks whilst the Latin American revolutionaries sought a dialogue prior to becoming guerilla fighters.^V The Leninist thought was geared more towards the defense against a social and economic change that would enhance the difference between the classes. Guevara was more concerned with the evolution of equality in oppressive atmosphere with military style governments that were ruling in Latin America during the 50's and 60's.

Maoism on the other hand, which was based more on the countryside rather than in the cities. Maoism embraced the countryside, as this is where its base was. It differed from Leninism due largely to the fact that the proletariat and its supporters could lead the revolution. The opposite is true with Leninism where the proletariat is influenced by its supporters. Rural development was the priority, rather than the

^{IV} Guevara, *ibid.*

^V Guevara, *ibid.*

cities. Mao felt that this was an appropriate stratagem due to the majority of the population of China were peasants. Maoism was inherently violent as it connects political ideology with that of military structure. Mao Zedong was quoted as saying “political power comes from the barrel of the gun” and he encouraged this thought by organizing the peasantry into a fighting force.

The *Foco* theory is more closely related to Maoism simply based on the region of its origination. In Latin America, much of the nation is considered peasantry, but as China is a much larger nation, the two cannot be compared because of the demographics is not similar as far as population numbers are concerned. However, the idea of origination in a rural area, supported by peasantry is more likened to Maoism rather than Leninism. However, as seen with Leninism, the use of violence is advocated prior to all other means of social recourse as been attempted. Indeed, within Maoist theory, the struggle against capitalism was the primary concern and to uphold the continuous class struggle.^{vi}

The major difference between Maoism, Leninism and the *Foco* theory is what happens after the struggle for social reform is complete. Leninism advocated for a proletariat with heavy influence to create a self-responsible government. The hope for this would be that the influence over the proletariat would prevent abuse of power and an equalization of power across the governmental body. Within Maoism, the opposite is true. Maoism actively encourages the continual revolution to keep its social order intact. These two focuses on post-revolutionary paths to how a government should rule do not reflect on how Guevara’s *Foco* theory and his endeavors in Cuba reflect themselves.

The most proper assumption based on how the *Foco* theory is approached is that Guevara took into account both Leninism and Maoism. As reviewing the history

of both of these revolutions, Guevara may have seen that the strength of the people of the countryside is integral as was the case with Maoism, but also a strong headman to govern on behalf of the people as seen with Leninism in needed. Thus, Guevara was neither a Maoist nor Leninist, but both, taking what worked in one situation and not another and incorporating it within his experiences in Cuba.^{VI} If Guevara had been successful in Bolivia, there may have been more explained to his *Foco* theory, but unfortunately, that was not the case as he was killed by Bolivian rangers.

However, up until his death in 1967, we do see how the *Foco* theory had affected the international politics of Cuba. The *Foco* theory became the guide by which Cuba's organizations such as the Organization of Latin American Solidarity and Tri-continental, which goal was to end the isolation of Cuba.^{VIII} In addition to this effort on the part of Cuba to end its solitude, Guevara's ideologies also helped serve as defining characteristics between the Marxist-Leninism of the Soviets. The distinctions between the two were noted as being the Soviets advocacy of the primacy of subjective conditions, the ability to speed up history, and the mocking attitude of *détente*.^{IX}

The concept of revolution has been with humanity since the beginning of time as we, as people, always are seeking a better life for ourselves. The unfortunate fact of the "utopian equality" as seen within the Communist Manifesto will most likely never be achieved as Marx described it as people are inherently greedy, selfish and above all, opportunistic. The goals of these revolutionaries may have been pure at

^{VI} Maurice Meisner, *ibid.*

^{VII} Guevara, *ibid.*

^{VIII} Jorge J. Dominguez, *To Make a World Safe for Revolution: Cuba's Foreign Policy* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1989), pp. 6-7.

^{IX} Matt Childs, "An Historical Critique of the Emergence and Evolution of Ernesto Che Guevara's *Foco* Theory" *Journal of Latin American Studies*, 27 (1995), pp. 593-624.

one time, and I believe that Che Guevara was a true believer in his cause until the end, but the corruption that followed in the wake of any of these revolutions is truly disheartening. The Bolshevik revolution in Russia transmuted into the horrific reign of Stalin. The revolution in China caused the deaths of millions of people based on fear and fanaticism. What can be learned from the *Foco* theory is this: The path of peace before war must be exhausted until no compromise can be accommodated.

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