

Jun 22 2011

REVIEW: 'Che's Travels: The Making of a Revolutionary in 1950s Latin America'

Chloe Pieters

By Vanni Pettin 

Based on the analysis of Ernesto (Che) Guevara's Latin American road trips, '[Che's Travels](#)' presents interesting and quite innovative perspectives both on the political maturation of a world wide influential revolutionary and, ultimately, on the social and political landscapes he came across during his journey.

The book, edited by [Paulo Drinot, lecturer in economic history at the University of Manchester](#), is divided into eight chapters through which contributors examine a different Latin American country Che visited during his two trips: first, in 1951-52 and, later, in 1953-54. Using Guevara's own travel logs, the authors focus on three main interconnected issues. Firstly, they retrace the social and political context of the countries Che 'encountered and experienced' during his wanderings. Secondly, through Guevara's own writings, the authors analyze the representation Che gave of these societies and of the political events affecting the different countries. Eventually, each contributor tries to understand "Che's broader legacy for the societies he experienced".

Thus, the book helps us to follow Guevara along two extensive trips that, after a brief Argentinean prologue, brought the future guerrilla leader to visit Chile, Peru, Colombia, Venezuela, Bolivia, Guatemala and Mexico at a time when these countries and, the Western Hemisphere more generally, were going through a complicated process of economic and political changes.

There are two interesting points the book makes which I consider deserve special attention. Firstly, the analysis of Guevara's trips embraced by the book offer a perfect chance to appreciate how important and, at the same time, underestimated the 1950s are as a time of crucial changes for Latin America. Historians have largely concentrated their attention on the [historical period following the Cuban Revolution](#). Nonetheless, as this book shows indirectly, the problematic issues that would consolidate and deeply affect the continent in the 1960s and the 1970s had their roots in the 1950s.

Let's take, for example, the first chapter of the book [written by Eduardo Elena](#), which focuses on Guevara's trip first steps in Argentina. In the chapter, Elena describes two emblematic, contrasting phenomena of the time, which Guevara experienced in Argentina at the very beginning of his first trip: mass migration from the countryside to the cities, and tourism as a consequence of the spreading of the country's middle class. Both aspects exemplified the uneven, contradictory process of modernization Argentina, like many other Latin American countries, had experimented with between the 1930s and the late 1940s. On the one hand, the expansion of the Argentinean middle class signified the wealth the country had produced and, to a certain extent, started to redistribute during Juan Domingo Peron's regime. But, on the other hand, the migration from the countryside to the poor, urban suburbs of Buenos Aires also showed the presence of a pauperized rural population forced to move to the city in pursuit of better living conditions. Indeed, given the volatility which marked international prices for Latin American agricultural goods during the early 1950s, especially, following the end of the Korean War, this kind of urbanization became common to many countries in the Western Hemisphere.

As [Patience A. Schell's](#) and Paulo Drinot's contributions remind us, Che saw the effects of this kind of forced urbanization in Chile and Peru as well: in the early 1950's, waves of poor peasants, in this case mostly Indians, migrated from the Andean plateau and the countryside to Lima and Santiago. In the Peruvian capital city, as in Santiago and Buenos Aires, the main consequence of this phenomenon was the appearance of extended shantytowns, a future hotbed for social conflicts and numerous forthcoming guerrilla movements such as the Peruvian Sendero Luminoso or, in Argentina, the Montoneros. In this sense, the book establishes an interesting connection between Latin American societies in the 1950s, what Guevara saw and absorbed of these realities and the impact these factors had in his 'political education'.

Indeed, the second interesting element of the book is its attempt to break down Guevara's traditional monolithic image as a natural-born revolutionary. In fact, what all the contributors to the volume seem to underline is Guevara's lack of particular political interests and feelings, during his first trip, toward the countries he visited. Indeed, in 1951-52, beyond certain attention on the quality of life of the Indian population, the future revolutionary seemed to be more focused on women and just wandering around rather than on political speculations.

During his second journey, Guevara seemed to be much more focused on the political aspects of the tour and his personal, political orientations looked much more consolidated. During this second trip, Che was witness to the aftermaths of the Movimiento Nacionalista Revolucionario's (MNR) Bolivian revolution, and he also personally met the Venezuelan Alianza Democr tica's (AD) progressive leader Romulo Betancourt. In this regard, in their chapters on Venezuela and Bolivia, [Judith Ewell](#) and [Ann Zulawski](#) point out that, at this point, Guevara had not yet developed a clear, proactive political perspective but,

nonetheless, had formed a deep aversion for what he considered a moderate or reformist approach to politics. Thus both authors show that, in 1953, Guevara was a radical nationalist, who generally disliked reformist political projects, such as Betancourt's, or what he considered to be a moderate revolution like the MNR's in Bolivia. Guevara was also bitterly anti-American, another reason why he did not appreciate the MNR and AD, who maintained normal or even cordial relations with Washington.

The final stages of Guevara's "sentimental education" as a revolutionary leader took place between Guatemala and Mexico, where he arrived at the end of his second trip, and which are the subject of the last two chapters of the book. In the Central American country, Che actively participated in the defense of the [Jacobo Arbenz government against the CIA-backed coup](#). In Mexico, where he fled to from Guatemala in 1954, he eventually met a young rebel leader from Cuba, Fidel Castro, who was at that time setting up an expedition aimed at the overthrow of Fulgencio Batista's dictatorship. These last two chapters, written by [Cindy Forster](#) and [Eric Zolov](#), show how these two experiences, before his participation in the Cuban insurrection, crystallized Guevara's political cosmology. In Guatemala, Guevara saw what he perceived as the ruthless fist of American imperialism crushing a popular revolution. In Mexico he saw what, again, he perceived a once-authentic revolution quickly evolving towards a moderate and corrupted political project under the Partido Revolucionario Institucionalizado's aegis. Thus, the authors skillfully show how both experiences confirmed to Guevara the evil nature of Washington's policies in the region, the lack of a trustworthy political paradigm in the Western Hemisphere and, eventually, the need to explore new paths, including that of armed struggle.

To sum up, the book is an interesting reading and a welcomed contribution to a historical period that, as previously mentioned, has not yet received adequate attention by scholarship. Moreover, it represents an accomplished effort to break down Guevara's iconography and, in consequence, move in the direction of a deeper historical contextualization of his figure. For all these reasons, I consider this is enjoyable and informative reading.

Vanni Pettin  is Research Fellow at the Centre for Human and Social Sciences of the Spanish National Research Council where he works on the Atlantic and Caribbean Comparative History Team

This entry was posted in [Horizonte](#), [Latin America](#), [Review](#). Bookmark the [permalink](#).