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Che and the socialist tradition: a reply to Mike Gonzalez

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Mike Gonzalez's latest book, *Che Guevara and the Cuban Revolution* (Bookmarks, 2004), is published at an opportune moment, constituting a formidable challenge to all those who see in Che's symbolism a guiding star for their political actions. When saying that the timing of this publication is the right one, I am thinking of the development of the anti-capitalist movement, which, in spite of its deep-seated tensions and uncertainties, provides a real framework for revolutionary endeavours. Given the obvious fact that Che Guevara still appears as an icon and source of inspiration for many in that movement, this book deserves to be read and debated with passion and honesty. Gonzalez is well aware of this context: he seeks to trigger a fresh debate on Che Guevara and it is quite clear that he avoids the easy and laudatory tone so often found in writings on Che's life. Certainly, Gonzalez does not intend to adjust his arguments to mainstream feelings on Guevara. On the contrary, his book seems at first glance to be a harsh attack on Guevara and, above all, a scathing critique of the Argentinian's conception of Marxism and revolutionary strategy. I must state, right from the start, that I find myself in disagreement with Gonzalez's interpretation of many aspects of Guevara's thought. At the same time, however, I must admit that his arguments are powerful, founded on strong textual evidence and persuasively structured. It is not easy to rebut Gonzalez's contribution to this ongoing and necessary debate on one of the key figures of the worldwide revolutionary tradition. Therefore, in what follows I intend to identify some topics on which my disagreements with Gonzalez are most visible, and I will try to offer some evidence for an alternative reading of these matters. Far from expecting to bring the debate to a close, I want simply to add to it, fraternally. To be precise, there are two points on which I would like to focus: first, Che's understanding of class struggle and the role of the working class in the revolutionary transformation of capitalist society; and second, his idea that moral incentives were superior and more efficient than material incentives for the construction of socialism.

As for the issue concerning Che's revolutionary theory and strategy, Gonzalez essentially thinks that Guevara never came to understand one very basic and fundamental principle of the socialist revolutionary tradition: that the emancipation of the working class is to be attained by the working class itself and for itself. Even though Gonzalez presents us with some textual evidence on the matter, he dwells too much on only a couple of Che's writings at the expense of the bulk of his work. Gonzalez overemphasises Che's commitment to guerrilla war methods because he pays too

much attention to Che's military writings: *Guerrilla Warfare*, *Reminiscences of the Cuban Revolutionary War*, and 'Guerrilla Warfare: A Method'. Gonzalez rightly remarks that these texts were both military and political, but for some reason chooses to ignore the fact, well known to Che and Lenin for example, that war represented the continuation of politics by other means, a line of thought coined by Clausewitz. Far from being a warlord who chose fighting for its own sake, Che subordinated this strategy to a wider political understanding of the Cuban and Latin American situation. In saying that Che's works were both political and military, Gonzalez presupposes a separation of these fields, a view which runs counter to the revolutionary tradition. In short, guerrilla warfare was the instrument of anti-imperialist struggle in the Third World and was meant to ignite the fight of the masses against pro-American regimes.

Our author holds in the early stages of this argument that Che's interpretation of the revolutionary tradition 'crucially left out the working class as the agent for social transformation'.¹ Then he contends that Fidel Castro and his brother Raúl did not endorse a true Marxist conception of workers' democracy and thought that 'change could be the result of the armed actions of a minority'.² To reinforce this train of thought, Gonzalez adds that in Che's 'vision of the revolutionary war—a war conducted by revolutionaries on behalf of the masses—the state of the workers' movement or the mass urban resistance was not an essential issue'.³ In Gonzalez's view, Che preferred to wage guerrilla war in the remote areas of the Sierra Maestra where no alternative social base for the mass movement could be found. Guerrilla warfare in the mountains, then, constituted not just a tactical move in a wider revolutionary movement but the one and only way to make the revolution. Then, Gonzalez puts forward his understanding of the socialist tradition, the one that serves him to measure Che's distance from the true path to revolution. He says:

For revolutionary socialists, a revolutionary process is one in which people become involved directly in shaping their own destiny, and it is the experience of becoming an active agent that will shape the new—socialist—society that emerges. Socialism is not a matter of changing leaders, but of building a society based in different values (production for need not profit, for example). It involves a completely different view of what democracy means—direct day-to-day involvement in shaping society rather than the occasional vote for one or other self-selected politician.⁴

The paragraph quoted above is correct and impeccably attuned to the most sober and orthodox reading of the Marxist tradition. I am not conceding this for the sake of my argument; I genuinely believe it to be an accurate presentation of the tradition in question. However, I will argue that Che's thoughts are not contradictory. Of course, this is not Gonzalez's view. He asserts that 'in identifying the poor peasantry as the key social group in the revolution, Che was specifically rejecting Marxism's central idea—that it is the power of the organised working class alone that can bring about a social revolution'.⁵ The consequences of this conception of the social forces involved in the struggle would bear a pervasive mark on the society that emerged from that struggle. In the absence of a wider social basis for the revolutionary actions and given the overwhelming weight ascribed to military factors, the result could not be other than a society shaped by the logic of this strategy. Democracy and transparency, as Gonzalez holds, were features destined to be neglected in the new society. Here is an expanded version of Gonzalez's core argument:

In Che's description of the revolutionary process there is a fundamental and glaring omission. Where are the masses? Where is the working class, whose liberation is the very definition of socialism?... This notion that revolution comprises the self-emancipation of the working class is absolutely central to Marx's thought. From being the objects of the interests of others, the majority become the governors of their own lives by transforming society through their own actions. It is a core principle in revolutionary Marxism. Yet the guerrilla war theory replaces this idea with another—that the revolutionaries will make the revolution on behalf of the wider class... The guerrilla theory makes a virtue of the separation between revolutionaries and workers.⁶

Gonzalez is right in his theoretical proposition, but too severe when judging Che's point of view. It is true that Che's appeals to the centrality of the working class are obscured in his military writings, but if we look at the bulk of this work, we find plenty of references which satisfy Gonzalez's demands.

In the 'Preface' to the book *The Marxist-Leninist Party*, written by Che in 1963, he says, in the first place, that the vanguard party is the 'vanguard of the working class, the leader of that class, which knows how to show the road to victory and accelerate the pace towards new social situations'. The 'fundamental goal of the party in the first stage of revolution is seizing power' and it is 'logical that this party be a class party. A Marxist-Leninist party could not be otherwise; its mission is to find the shortest way to the dictatorship of the proletariat, and its most valuable militants, its leading cadres and its tactics come from the working class'.⁷ In this same 'Preface', Che makes a forceful statement which highlights the differences between the Mountains and the Plains. Che thinks that existing contradictions between the two areas are not merely matters of tactics. 'The Rebel Army already is ideologically proletarian and thinks with the dispossessed class in mind; the Plains are still petty bourgeois, there are future traitors in its leadership and it is heavily influenced by the environment in which it moves'.⁸ In his 'Notes for an Ideology of the Cuban Revolution', published in 1960, Che writes:

Parallel to the successive qualitative changes which occurred in the battle fronts, there run the changes in the social composition of the guerrilla, as well as the ideological transformations in its leadership... The peasant puts in his vigour, his capacity to withstand suffering, his knowledge of the terrain, his love for the land, his thirst for agrarian reform. The intellectual, any kind of intellectual, adds his little grain of sand by beginning to draft a sketch of theory. The worker brings his sense of organisation, his innate tendency to reunion and unification.

Che adds, 'Never before has the concept of interaction been so clear to us. We could sense how this interaction was ripening'.⁹ So, there is no such separation between the guerrillas and the working class. Che talks explicitly about interaction involving the fighters in the mountains, the peasants and the workers. Clearly, Che thinks that peasants comprise the military core of the guerrilla, but in no way are the peasants the social core of the revolutionary process. The peasantry is necessary to win the revolutionary war against the dictatorship, but they are not the main social actor in the construction of socialism.¹⁰

If the evidence offered above were not enough, let us look at another fragment in which Che touches again upon the same topic. He says, 'The basis of our Socialist Revolution is in the working class. The working class is the engine of this Revolution, its reason for being, and as our people make their fundamental decision to build socialism, there it is also established, in parallel, the dictatorship of the proletariat, that is, the democratic dictatorship of the working class in all the levels'.¹¹ Similar statements are found in his more private talks with his staff in the Ministry of Industry.¹² In a nutshell: Che does not see the working class as an auxiliary to the guerrillas, nor does he ignore that it is the working class itself and for itself that will make the revolution happen.

It is a pity that Gonzalez devotes so little space to the Cuban Economic Debate. As he admits in a footnote, what he does is 'a simple and schematic attempt to sum up a very complex debate'.¹³ However, he pays great attention to the issue of the new consciousness and the controversy on moral and material incentives. Gonzalez contends:

Why did [Che] lay such emphasis on the question of a new consciousness? It was certainly not for economic reasons, or because committed people are more efficient producers—although the debates about moral incentives did reflect what he saw as the urgent need to transform Cuba's economy at speed. It went to the very heart of Che's political ideas, for it emphasised the subjective over the

objective, the effort of will that could overcome unpromising material conditions... For Che, the new society is born of a spiritual transformation.¹⁴

As Gonzalez reminds us, men make history but in circumstances not chosen by them, but circumstances can be changed in struggle, and that was Che's point. There is a dialectical relationship between circumstances and human agency. Men are shaped by history and vice versa. Organisation needs not to be completed before struggle begins, it can be achieved in struggle itself. Moreover, classes are not simply defined by their position in the productive system; classes are defined and shaped in class struggle. That is what Marx notoriously says in his writings on France. The objective conditions are not separate from the subjective conditions. The latter can change the former and the other way around. So, the question is: were there in Cuba both the objective and subjective conditions for a socialist revolution? This leads to the formulation of another pressing issue, in fact the very issue that sparked a deep and furious debate in Cuba in the mid 1960s: whether revolution could be made in a country where the forces of production had not reached their full development, in other words, whether the objective conditions were ripe for the proletariat to take power and begin its self-emancipation. Che thought that even though Cuba was not an industrial country and some pockets in the economy reflected pre-capitalist relations of production, it was also true that Cuba, like every other country on the periphery of the developed world, was connected to the world market and so belonged to the capitalist world system. Sugar refineries and mining plants run by US capitalists in Cuba were evidence of the extent to which Cuba was indeed part of the capitalist world.

Che was sure that socialism could be achieved even if the productive forces were not completely developed. This stance received, during the highlighted debate, the support of the leading Trotskyist economist, Ernest Mandel, and other leading Cuban figures such as Luis Alvarez Rom. The group which opposed Che's vision was led by the pro-Soviet French intellectual Charles Bettelheim and the former PSP (Cuban Communists) leader Carlos Rafael Rodríguez. Gonzalez does not pause to look into this debate but makes a comment which, in my view, puts things in the right perspective. He writes, 'What had appeared to be highly technical debates about the economy conducted in the second half of 1963 were in fact extremely political. The moral/material incentives controversy was really about whether the economy would be organised around ideas of profitability and efficiency or around social need. In later official accounts this dispute has been described as a difference of degree—for Che it was a difference of politics and principle'.¹⁵ The politics and principles at stake in that debate highlighted the problems facing most revolutionary processes in the underdeveloped world. The Stalinist state had not been able to go beyond the experience of the New Economic Policy (NEP) and therefore advocated a centralised bureaucratic planning accompanied by a scheme of competition between firms. Each firm was allowed to save its profits in a separate bank account. The rationale underlying this system resembled that of capitalism, save for the fact that private property over means of production had been abolished. In order to meet the production quotas and increase their savings for investment, firms would not only cheat the plan but also seek to augment output by offering monetary prizes to the workers. The bottom line of this policy, according to Che, revealed that capitalism had not been totally superseded and the whole system ran the risk of collapsing again into the filthy business of capitalism.

For Che, socialism was not only a matter of building an affluent society but also a matter of conscience. Devoting all social efforts to obtaining abundance could not guarantee socialism as an outcome. If so, capitalist countries would automatically become socialist at some point. In my view, Che was addressing a crucial point which Marx had omitted in the Critique of the Gotha Programme. For Marx, distribution in the first stage of communist society would be made according to the individual quantum of production. This is known as the 'contribution principle'. Marx was not happy with this, but thought that this defect would be inevitable. For him, only when the productive forces had reached the highest stage could distribution according to needs be

realised. For Che, this was somewhat fatalistic and he thought that moral incentives could play a significant part in this process. He did not think that material incentives should be eliminated wholesale; in fact, he put forward a system labelled the 'Budgetary Financing System', in which moral and material incentives were mixed. He did think, however, that moral incentives were more efficient than material ones. The socialist society he envisaged was superior to capitalism, among other things, because it was based on a different set of values, and values should be part of the process of building that society. Gonzalez quotes Che saying, 'I'm not interested in an economic transformation unless it's accompanied by a socialist morality'.¹⁶ The full quotation comes from an interview with French journalist Jean Daniels and runs as follows:

Economic socialism without a communist morality is of no interest to me. We fight against misery but at the same time we fight against alienation. One of Marxism's fundamental goals consists in eliminating interest, the 'individual interest factor' and benefit from the 'psychological motivations'. Marx was concerned about economic facts as well as about their translation into the mind. He called this 'a fact of consciousness'. If communism neglects the consciousness facts it will amount to a distribution method, but it ceases to be a revolutionary morality.¹⁷

This paragraph is known as Che's 'general conception' of socialism. As we can easily see, he does not disregard economic factors altogether. What he says is that economic factors themselves should be taken into account as much as the ideological factors. He believes, rightly I contend, that sheer distribution of wealth and income could only give rise to something he calls 'economic socialism'. In other words, if moral factors are relegated to a secondary role or ignored altogether, society will stagnate at the first stage of communism where individual interests and natural privileges (such as physical strength) are allowed to determine distribution. In order to reach the goal of communism, understood as a society ruled by the 'needs principle', Che stresses the need for a new morality, detached both from alienation and the pursuit of selfish interests. Here the 'new man' comes in.

This hotly debated issue of the new man relates to one key feature of the future society as it was outlined by Marx: that communist society encompasses both an optimal development of productive forces and well rounded individuals. If socialism and communism are to be realised there is a need for a change in what is nowadays called a moral psychology of the individual. A new society shapes new individuals who at the same time, dialectically, make that very society a feasible project. If human nature were fixed to the patterns of capitalism, socialism would be impossible. Marx stressed the fact that socialism would be burdened by the 'birthmarks' of the old society, capitalism, but these traits would eventually disappear. The scant remarks Marx makes on this issue have motivated an array of interpretations.

Some think that abundance, that is to say, the full development of productive forces, would suffice to bring about the desired change in motivations. Others, like Che, thought that the surviving features should be erased by education, formal and informal. This, and not another, was the goal behind voluntary work. It was intended to reshape the motivation of the workers, to bring about a new scheme of preferences. This has direct bearing on the conditions required to achieve communist distribution according to needs. In other words, the subjective factors made this type of distribution possible given a moderate abundance. To think otherwise, to affirm the unlimited expansion of needs, would make communism a truly utopian project. This is one of the important points made by Mandel during his contribution to the debate in support of Che's positions.¹⁸ So, moral incentives were seen as taking precedence over material incentives because, in the first place, they could eventually prove to be more efficient and, second, because a change in the systems of needs was necessary in order to reach the stage of communist distribution. That is the reason why Che laid so much emphasis on the construction of a revolutionary morality. But, as we said above, Che admitted that material incentives were necessary at some point, and this must be underlined in

order to reject all charges of utopianism pressed against him. I will offer some evidence to support this view.

As early as 1962, in one of the bimonthly meetings with his staff at the Ministry of Industries he said, 'We are not excluding the material incentives, we simply state that we must fight for moral incentives to be— for as long as possible—the determining factor in the performance of workers. We propose a mixed formula: not to obstruct the material incentive but to turn it from something quantitative to something qualitative'.¹⁹ Later that year, during a public appearance, he stressed, '[Socialism] is based on social distribution of all goods, it is based on a new acquired consciousness, but also, in order for the construction of socialism to be possible, a sufficient amount of goods is needed to be distributed among the people'.²⁰ In 1963, the year when the Economic Debate begins, he makes an even more bold statement on this issue:

Moral incentives are necessary because we are coming out from a society which thought of nothing but material incentives, and we are building a new society on the basis of that old one...and because we do not have enough as yet to give to each one according to their needs. That is why material interests will be present for a time in the process of building socialism... Material incentives are a vestige from the past, they are something to be taken into account, but it is necessary to diminish their pre-eminence in the consciousness of the people as the process goes on... The material incentives will not be a part of the new society that is being created, they will vanish on the way.²¹

These remarks should shed some light into Che's real conception about the role of material and moral incentives. It is important to note that he does not move, as Gonzalez contends, in a world of 'moral certainties'. Che is keen to distinguish what is normatively right, and what is really possible. Normative thinking sets the goals, reality draws the limits for the realisation of the normative model. Che knows that material incentives will be demanded by the workers and is ready to understand these demands in the light of what Marx said about distribution under the contribution principle. But this explanatory approach can exist along with a normative view. So he judges material incentives as a 'necessary evil' and is ready—albeit unhappily—to let it operate within his scheme for promoting the industrial development of Cuba. In 1964, in his famous article entitled 'On the Budgetary Financing System', he makes another categorical statement on this matter. Che writes:

We do not deny the objective need for material incentives, we are instead reluctant to use it as the fundamental lever. We consider that, in economics, this type of lever rapidly acquires life of its own and then imposes its force on the relationships between people. We should not forget that it comes from capitalism and is destined to die in socialism.²²

Last but not least, the same argument can be found in Che's remarkable 'Socialism and Man in Cuba'. For some reason, Gonzalez prefers not to quote the following remark by Che: '[To] build communism, simultaneous to the material basis, the new man must be made. Hence the importance of correctly choosing the right tools for mass mobilisation. These tools should be fundamentally moral in nature, without forgetting a proper use of the material incentives', particularly those which are assigned on social and not on individual criteria.²³ In short, it is not totally true, as Gonzalez holds, that for Che, 'the new society is born of a spiritual transformation'.²⁴ Spiritual transformation was indeed necessary but not sufficient, the same qualification applied to material abundance. Both are essential and Che knew it.

To summarise, Gonzalez reaches a disputable conclusion out of a correct diagnosis. In truth, the Cuban Economic Debate was not only technical, it was political, and to be precise, it was a debate on the political economy of the transition to socialism. It involved more than arguing about concrete policies, it was about the nature of socialist and communist societies. Gonzalez has a strong point

when he says that Che favoured an economic scheme based on social need instead of a model oriented to attain economic efficiency and profitability. As Carlos Tablada Pérez, one of the most subtle of Cuban scholars, has noted, Che cared for social efficiency over cold economic and instrumental efficiency. Che defined socialism as a combination of high productivity and a new consciousness, without one being more important than the other. If he was committed to social need in the first place, in spite of dire scarcity, it was because he set out to build a communist society having in mind the distributive principle meant to rule that society, that is, distribution according to needs. This is not mere utopianism, but utopian imagination, an extremely useful mechanism to outline the desirable state of affairs and to choose the right policies to reach that goal.

Gonzalez misses the mark when he affirms that Che was convinced that an ‘effort of will’ could overcome ‘unpromising material conditions’. This is not Che’s position, at least not his more mature vision on the construction of socialism. It could be read as such in his military writings, Gonzalez’s dominant source; but Che’s economic works allow for a more balanced interpretation according to which moral factors alone, though necessary, are not sufficient in the face of scarcity. That is the reason why Che argues that the ‘new man’ is created simultaneously to an appropriate material basis. The bottom line of this argument consists in advocating a revolutionary morality built upon a reasonable material development. It could sound almost obvious, but it was not so obvious in Che’s times.

In those days, Soviet ideologues and economists defended a line of thought based on a mechanical and deterministic interpretation of Marxism. For them, communism was the offspring of the growth of productive forces alone, and any means to achieve the development of those forces was acceptable. Che was far from endorsing the Jesuits’ morality of any means justified by the right ends. For him, the ends were in the means, and so condemned the use of capitalist fetishes to build socialism, as he explicitly states in a letter to Ramón Medero Mestre.²⁵ So, as Gonzalez says, ‘socialism is not a matter of changing leaders, but of building a society based in different values (production for need not profit, for example)’. This is precisely Che’s vision, one that makes him a true member of the socialist revolutionary tradition.

NOTES

1: M Gonzalez, *Che Guevara and the Cuban Revolution* (Bookmarks, 2004), p18.

2: As above, pp47-48.

3: As above, p62.

4: As above, p77.

5: As above, p79.

6: As above, pp101-2.

7: E Guevara, *Escritos y Discursos* (Editorial de Ciencias Sociales, 1985), vol VII, pp4-5. My translation of all quotations from Che’s writings.

8: As above, p8.

9: As above, vol IV, pp210-11.

10: E Guevara, *El Che en la Revolución Cubana* (Ministerio del Azúcar, 1966), vol VI, pp580-581.

11: E Guevara, Escritos y Discursos, as above, vol VI, p130.

12: E Guevara, El Che en la Revolución Cubana, as above, p276.

13: M Gonzalez, as above, p185.

14: As above, p149.

15: As above, p145.

16: As above, p139.

17: In T Pérez, Ernesto Che Guevara. Hombre y Sociedad. El pensamiento económico del Che (Antarca, 1987), p45.

18: E Mandel, 'Las categorías mercantiles en el período de transición', in E Guevara, El gran debate sobre la economía en Cuba 1963-1964 (Ocean Press, 2003), p267. First published in Nuestra Industria Económica, June 1964.

19: E Guevara, El Che en la Revolución Cubana, as above, p146.

20: E Guevara, Escritos y Discursos, as above, vol VI, pp86-87.

21: As above, vol VII, p44.

22: As above, vol VIII, p14.

23: As above, p259.

24: M Gonzalez, as above, p150.

25: E Guevara, Escritos y Discursos, as above, vol IX, p384.



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