

CHE'S AMERICA IN MYTH, MEMORY,
AND CONTEMPORARY REALITY

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PACHO O'DONNELL, *Che Guevara: La vida por un mundo mejor* (Barcelona and Mexico: Plaza Janés, 2003)

Pacho O'Donnell's biography, the first major 21st century re-assessment of Che Guevara, draws on many new interviews and previously unavailable documents. This revealing bio demonstrates that the importance of Che in the 21st century lies less in his inspiring yet troubled life than in how we remember it and the memory of Che is inevitably split between the two Americas. The United States either admires or reviles Che due to his implacable opposition to North American imperialism. A different sort of memory prevails in "our America," as José Martí called it--Latin America, for the sake of which Che styled himself a Simón Bolívar-style liberator.

Pacho O'Donnell is an Argentine psychoanalyst who previously served as Minister of Culture in ex-president Menem's government. He is also the brother of Guillermo O'Donnell, one of the most respected Latin American political scientists, who has taught at Notre Dame and Berkeley. The arrival of O'Donnell's biography of "El Che" is timely for two reasons.

First, 2003 opinion polls around the world revealed that most people view the Bush Administration as the primary threat to world peace and justice. Che considered the U.S. to be "the great enemy of the human race" and considered opposing the U.S. his "true destiny." In late 2001, this view would seem to have been discredited, but the Bush administration has quickly turned international good will into hostility. Che's image even appeared in some of the protest marches against the U.S. invasion of Iraq.

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Second, in Latin America, a consensus was emerging that neo-liberalism, the “God of the free market,” had been tried and found wanting. “A wave of self-determination is washing across the entire landscape of the Americas,” as Gary Payne wrote in late 2003. Popular protest had toppled several leaders allied with the U.S. and brought to power a group of presidents with left-wing leanings. This “revolt is spreading,” and it is often accompanied by images of Che, whether in the capitol of Bolivia or in the jungles of Chiapas in Mexico.

O’Donnell’s subtitle, *La vida por un mundo mejor* (A Life for a Better World) might lead some to think that this book tends towards hagiography, like Paco Ignacio Taibo’s 1996 book, *Ernesto Guevara, también conocido como El Che*. (St. Martin’s Press published the translation, *Guevara, Also Known As Che*, in 1997). However, its sympathetic tone combined with sometimes piercing criticism makes it more reminiscent of the two first-rate biographies of Che published in 1997, Jon Lee Anderson’s *Che: A Revolutionary Life* and especially Jorge Castañeda’s *Compañero*. But unlike Castañeda’s biography, which caused a storm of protest in Cuba, O’Donnell lets his interviewees do most of the talking, whether it takes the form of praise or condemnation.

O’Donnell draws on several sources unavailable to previous biographers, including Che’s diary of his Congo campaign, as well as various C.I.A. and Bolivian government documents regarding his final attempt to foment guerrilla war in Bolivia. His unique status and family connections in Argentine society gave him access to those who knew Che best. Pacho’s father, Mario O’Donnell, was a pediatrician who cared for young Ernesto during the frequent asthma attacks he suffered as a boy, long before he became known as “El Che.”

These interviews, mostly conducted in late 2002, give this book its unique flavor and penetrating insights. For instance, Chapter 40, “Un Torquemada del Marxismo,” contains an interview with Che’s childhood friend Dolores Moyano Martín. Ms. Martín suggests that to understand Ernesto (as most family and friends call him), one should read the chapter in Dostoevski’s *The Demons* that retells a story from Luke 8. In this incident Jesus was about to cure a man possessed by many demons. The demons begged Jesus not to send them into an abyss. He cast them into a nearby herd of pigs, who ran off the side of a cliff into a lake and drowned. (212)

Martín told O’Donnell that “Ernesto was possessed by his ideology, which transformed him into a Torquemada [the chief Spanish inquisitor] of Marxism.” She remarked that, like earlier inquisitors, Che’s “faith had a religious character”. Like so many possessed by 20th century ideologies such as Nazism, fascism, and communism, Che “justified everything he did by feeling that he was in possession of an absolute truth.” (212)

To Che the absolutist, the search for utopia was a justification for everything he did. As with medieval crusaders, “he divided the world between believers and unbelievers,” observes Martín, a tendency that may be found in crusaders across history from Joan of Arc to George W. Bush who divided the world into “us” and “them.” But Martín believes that Che “is profoundly Latin American” in that he “embodies one of our myths: that of the Savior, the providential figure.” (213)

The North Americans, as usual, didn’t get it. They just saw him as a terrorist, a Communist menace to be feared and controlled. Walt Rostow wrote a memo to President Lyndon Johnson predicting that Che’s death “will have a strong impact in discouraging future guerrilla warfare” in Latin America. But in fact, Che’s belief that taking up arms was the only path to revolutionary change only really fired the Latin America imagination after his death. It was after his “Calvary,” as several biographers have called the final Bolivian march, that Che, as O’Donnell writes, was “rapidly enthroned as an anti-imperialist messiah”. (541)

This perception of Che as a sort of quasi-messianic figure continues to evoke a variety of reactions. One of O’Donnell’s interviewees, the French philosopher Bernard-Henri Lévy, recalls that in his youth, he and many of his peers saw Che as a sort of romantic *caudillo*, or chief, “fearlessly opposing the powerful, be that the United States of Fidel Castro.” But in maturity, Lévy’s assessment is much more sober. “The reality is that Che was also, in his manner, a totalitarian. He had a conception of society, and of the world, that if his revolution had triumphed, I would not have wanted to live in his supposedly perfect society.” (542).

Why? Because Che was a zealot who “had an obsession with purity, which in my judgement is one of the worst political temptations.” Lévy argues that it has been in the defense of purity, whether religious, ideological or racial, that some of history’s worst massacres have been perpetrated. And Che expected a level of ideological purity, and personal sacrifice, of which few human beings are capable.

The impersonal sacrifices that Che expected of the “new man” often arouse very personal reactions. On one hand, Che “related to abstractions more than to actual people,” as O’Donnell notes, such as honor, courage, etc. (294) His level of abstraction at times became inhuman to an extent that one can only view with abhorrence. After the Cuban missile crisis, Che claimed that the Cuban people had been prepared to “immolate” themselves, to sacrifice themselves on a nuclear altar, as the ultimate blow against imperialism. Such fanaticism is worthy of advocates of suicide bombings and was of course quite foreign to most Cubans, whose greatest gift to the world is arguably their extraordinary gusto for life, as expressed in their music.

On the other hand, even though Che spoke of abolishing the “I”—of overcoming his personal ego—he inspired remarkable loyalty among many who knew

him. In addition, the level of sacrifice he demanded of himself is legendary, and is still a source of inspiration to many people. In the final analysis, it seems to me that one can hardly avoid speaking in personal terms if one is to encompass the full complexity of Che's life.

Having made an in-depth study of Che's life and writings, I remain embroiled in mixed feelings that run from empathy to horror to great respect. Seen up close, Che both repels and attracts. He comes across at times as self-righteous and rigid, yet even if one disagrees with most of his methods, one cannot help being impressed by his single-minded commitment to social equality. Che's outrage against injustice is contagious--and who today would so fiercely refuse to accept any form of material privilege whatsoever? One can still today draw inspiration from the fact that Guevara never demanded any sacrifice from other people that he was not already making himself.

Seen from a distance, Che's vision of revolutionary change seems tragically flawed. Hindsight shows us that his "one-size-fits-all" model of the war against imperialism caused untold thousands to rush into an abyss, apparently without changing anything. (210) And yet, I must admit that personally I also oppose many of the same forms of injustice he opposed. I agree that if we are to have any hope of transforming that systematic injustice, we really would have to develop a "new man." And woman. It is easy to say that Che is not the father or husband I would like to be, but I do also find myself using religious metaphors to try to come to grips with Che's legacy. "Greater love hath no man than this, that he lay down his life for his friends."

Surely it is a mixture of Che's heroic image (that looks so good on T-shirts and posters) along with his ethic of self-sacrifice for the collective good ("the spirit of the beehive," Che called it) that continues to make him such a charismatic icon. From this distance, the heroic mannerisms may seem like self-parody, but the countless examples of his self-sacrifice for the benefit of the underprivileged (including those of future generations) cannot but inspire awe. His example continues not only to ignite the imagination of rebellious youths from privileged backgrounds, but that of those Fanon called "the wretched of the earth."

When O'Donnell did his research in Bolivia, he was amazed to find a thriving cult dedicated to El Che in and around La Higuera. He talked to a woman named Nelly Ramírez, one of many individuals who have erected altars and prayed to San Ernesto de la Higuera (541). They have ascribed miracles to Che, which at times took the form of animals sent to guide people in dire straits.

In the summer of 2003, while in Tepoztlan, Mexico, I saw a weathered metal poster, which declared "Ser Justo es Ser Revolucionario" (to be just is to be revolutionary). Half the face below the title was that of Jesus wearing a crown of thorns; the other half was that of Che wearing his beret. The eyes were identical

and the transition between the two martyrs was seamless. On either side was a text describing the way in which each prized justice above all other things. Beside Jesus were these words from the Sermon on the Mount: "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after justice, for they shall be filled." And beside Che was a short quotation from his farewell letter to his own children: "Be capable of feeling whatever injustice is committed in whatever part of the world. That is the most lovely quality of a revolutionary." (351)

O'Donnell puzzles over Che's belief that "moral incentives" rather than economic rewards should be what motivate the socialist "new man." A 1964 CIA memorandum correctly stated that Che's emphasis on moral incentives was the core of his disenchantment with Soviet communism, as it would be the root cause of his final rupture with the Castro regime. (305) But to my knowledge, no one has ever properly understood his fierce opposition to giving economic incentives to workers based on their level of productivity. This blind faith in moral incentives was rejected by communists and capitalists alike, with the latter seeing it as evidence of how Che's version of socialism posed a threat to free-market capitalism. The idea that moral incentives were sufficient to inspire men and women to work is every bit as unrealistic as Jesus' teaching that we should turn the other cheek when someone strikes us -- and every bit as threatening. It should not surprise us, then, that Che's views regarding work parallel Matthew 20, which relates the parable of a boss who pays all his workers the same, no matter when they arrive for work.

This political religiosity, so foreign to *realpolitik*, led directly to the last two tragic years of Che's life. There were true believers in Cuba willing to follow Che's example of volunteer labor, however once he tried to export the Cuban revolution, he began behaving in many ways like the imperialists he despised. The people of the Congo and Bolivia were not interested in his sacrifices, in fact they soundly rejected his model of revolutionary change.

Che had been warned in high places about trying to globalize the Cuban model. When Che informed Egyptian president Nasser about his intention to conduct a military expedition in the Congo, Nasser was appalled. "Do you want to look like Tarzan, a white man who protects and orders blacks?" Nasser asked. (341) Che seems only to have regretted being foolish enough to reveal his ambitions. In fact, Che's reception in Africa was much as Nasser had warned. O'Donnell's biography presents especially revealing interviews with "natives" who worked alongside Che in the Congo, and later in Bolivia, and who disliked him intensely.

In the Congo, Che had insurmountable translation problems, because his Congolese translator, Freddy Ilunga, whose French was poor, had to try to explain Che's words in Swahili to troops who often spoke only tribal languages. "I did

not like Che one bit," Ilunga recalled. "I didn't understand what he was doing there, or why I had to put up with that white man." (366) Another Congolese soldier who collaborated with Che confessed: "I didn't understand why a white man came to help we blacks. For us, fighting for our liberty was fighting against whites, and Che was white. That made Che inherently untrustworthy."

Che could not accept this view of himself as "white," as a member of the oppressor class he would fight to the death. He had, in contemporary terms, a "white liberal guilt complex." He came from a fair-skinned, privileged family in Argentina, but his travels in South America exposed him to such suffering, and made him so aware of his own racial privilege, that he began railing against "blond bosses," "imbecilic Gringos" and white oppressors. (68-69) If not self-hatred, this certainly expressed a hatred of the insularity of his own social class. His solution was to embrace a romantic version of *mestizaje*, or a *mestizo* identity, thus allowing him to believe that he was "semi-indigenous" and could understand the suffering of the wretched of the earth in a way that was impossible for Anglo North Americans. (71)

O'Donnell points out that Che was not able to accept many of the cultural differences he encountered in the Congo. (339) For example, he expected to find fighters like those in Cuba, who were willing to sacrifice everything for the cause. Yet the rag-tag mercenaries he encountered were more interested in whoring than in fighting, refused to carry their own bags and often did not know how to use a firearm. Yet as always, Che was brutally honest about his failures in Africa; one can only admire his honesty and his determination to live like the people he was fighting for, even if it meant marching barefoot.

But what is one to make of Guevara's messianic mindset? Clearly Che's core myth was his compulsion to make a Christ-like sacrifice that would change the world. He was determined to act this out, and required only a stage. His Quixote-like crusade fared even worse in South America, except that this time he headed a guerrilla force, and was therefore able to march to his long-awaited "Calvary." He again suffered from severe myopia—the single-minded determination to apply the Cuban model of armed resistance and an attitude towards the indigenous people that was, at best, paternalistic. Eusebio Aruni, a member of the Bolivian expedition, was an Aymara Indian towards whom Che seems to have been especially harsh. Their problems apparently began with Aruni's limited knowledge in Spanish, but further, deeper misunderstandings involved racial prejudices that Che thought he had transcended. Aruni told O'Donnell that the fair skin of the man he knew as "Ramón" was "disconcerting": "If we were fighting against the gringos, then what was a gringo doing amongst us?" (438) Aruni claimed that Che was "prejudiced against Bolivians." He seems to

have treated them like pack animals, making them carry heavier loads than the Cubans. (440)

Guevara visualized a single common enemy such as Batista had been. But the people he hoped to liberate did not share his true enemy, an abstract, demonized imperialism with a North American face. The poor people of Africa wanted Che's services as a doctor, not as a fighter; the Bolivia peasants wanted schools, not guns.

Che's anti-Americanism was both a driving force and a fatal limitation. "You think you can make a revolution behind the backs of the Americans?" he angrily asked Juan Oltusky when they were still fighting in the Cuban Sierra Madre. In Che's view, real revolutionaries had to state their aims clearly and for Che these centered above all around what he opposed: the North American model of imperialism and selfish consumerism. (187)

O'Donnell observes that "only a profound psychological study" could explain how Ernesto, the young idealist evolved into Che, the implacable warrior. The boy chastised his playmates for killing sparrows with slings; the student veered between a career as an archeologist or as a doctor devoted to the care of lepers. The young adventurer moving north towards his destiny still claimed that his highest aspiration was to travel to India to honor that master of passive resistance, Mahatma Gandhi. (209-10) How can we possibly reconcile that youth with the man who, just a few years later, wrote in praise of an "intransigent hatred for the enemy that takes one beyond the natural limitations of a human being and converts one into an effective, violent, selective, cold killing machine"?

O'Donnell does not quite attempt that psychological study, but as a psychiatrist he does lay heavier emphasis on Che's "inseparable companion," asthma, than any previous biographer. "I am convinced that asthma gave to Che the certainty that the line between life and death was very tenuous," O'Donnell has said. Virtually all of O'Donnell's interviewees who knew Guevara well confirm that asthma was a brutal companion that frequently laid him low, indeed, at times leading him to death's door. This seems to have both aroused his compassion for those less fortunate than himself and made him tend towards severity.

But that still leaves us with only a part of the equation. If we want to understand Guevara's tendency to think in extremes, and why, as O'Donnell writes, the "Guevarist doctrine" has been "elevated to an almost Biblical dimension," then we must also grapple with the true nature of his sworn enemy within the context of the two Americas. (210)

The relationship between darker-skinned South Americans and their fair-skinned overlords was not one that was likely to inspire confidence in the value of cooperation. After having been captured by the Spanish, the Inca ruler and rebel Tupac Amaru converted to Catholicism. In Cuzco, he made an eloquent

speech to his subjects, urging them to abandon the religion of their ancestors. Immediately after he finished his address, the Spanish decapitated him.

When Guevara saw the horrific conditions of Indians working under North Americans in Bolivia, Peru, and elsewhere, he decided that the new boss wasn't much better than the old one. At least the Spaniards openly consorted with non-European women, and usually recognized their offspring, leading to a continent of *mestizos* that enabled people like Che to claim kinship with all Latin Americans. His observations of how the North Americans dealt with moderate, left-leaning Guatemalan President Arbenz, who put the well being of his people before the profits of American corporations, convinced him once and for all that half-measures were as useless as Tupac Amara's conversion to the religion of the Spanish *conquistadors*.

In the case of the North American rulers, their religion was free-market capitalism whose credo was equal opportunity. However, as practiced in Latin America, inequality became rife. Che gave this enemy the name of imperialism, which may no longer be either fashionable or practicable. Yet the lifestyle being championed by North Americans, especially the virulent version of this represented by the present Bush Administration, appears to many people today to pose a real threat, leading them to support Che's claim that North Americans are the "great enemy" of the human race.

We must thus admit that, despite its defects, Che's analysis of the root of the problem was basically correct, even if he did suggest replacing it with another form of totalitarianism. In some ways, Che seems to have peered into the future and foreseen the consequences of globalization on the American model.

Issues of sustainability did not enter into Guevara's thinking, but if one looks at the "American way of life" from a distance, it becomes apparent that it is not applicable to the vast majority of the human race. A modern-day Che, looking at America's rush to pave the planet, might be especially sobered by the inability of most North Americans to even imagine an alternative to a lifestyle in which all human relations are defined by monetary exchange. He might point out that both animals and people increasingly live on concrete or in cages. The lifestyle we are championing as a universal good—namely, driving to a fast food restaurant to pick up a hamburger—cannot be embraced worldwide.

Looking at this lifestyle from a critical distance, we might come to the conclusion that our religious, political and economic systems are all based on blood sacrifice. And if we have come this far, then surely we would have to reject Che's solution as yet another sort of crusade that posits a sacrifice to end all sacrifices.

Yet the necessity of sacrifice for the collective good remains, I feel, the most important part of Che's legacy, the one with which we have not come to terms.

As Ziggy Marley sings:

*"The greatest things in life
Call for the most sacrifice
Are we brave enough?"*

Che was brave enough to sacrifice his life for the sake of what he saw as the central element of our collective life--a dedication to justice and to caring for those who are less fortunate than ourselves. Despite the fact the Guevara came to embody the antithesis of the philosophy of non-violence, that is really the same message that one finds in the parable of the Good Samaritan.

If we North Americans do not want the world community to see us as an enemy, then we, as less than 5% of the world's population consuming 25% of its resources, will have to make great sacrifices. Beyond the expectation that we will begin to respect international law, and to consider alternatives to our throw-away lifestyle, our Latin American neighbors expect us above all to learn to listen, to engage in dialogue. A growing number of our neighbors are telling us they are willing to resist what we propose as the only possible option: unrestrained growth ("the ideology of a cancer cell," as Edward Abbey once said).

At the hour of his death, Che told one of the guards mocking him that he was "thinking about the immortality of the revolution." (527) After reading O'Donnell's thought-provoking study, I reflected, as Octavio Paz suggested, that perhaps Latin Americans are hungry for revolution because their wars of independence were a failure. Their aspirations, embodied in an extreme form by Che, are made more acute by the reality that, as Kevin Phillips writes, the United States is now a plutocracy and "long shed of its revolutionary outlook." Surely an "immortal revolution," in the Western Hemisphere, would be impossible in the absence of U.S. leaders who are capable of engaging Latin American leaders in a dialogue focusing on issues of inclusion and sustainability, i.e., true democracy and the extension of life to future generations. One hopes that Che was wrong that violent revolution is the only means of achieving justice, but the jury is still out regarding what it will take to awaken North Americans from their self-absorption or whether we are capable of undergoing a rebirth of the revolutionary spirit.

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