

The New Criterion

Features October 2004

The real Che

by *Anthony Daniels*

On the cult of Ernesto Che Guevara; irrational reflection “kept alive by a good dose of commercialism.”

In the Prologue to his recent history of Cuba, Richard Gott, a British journalist of pronounced left-wing sympathies, remembers Ernesto Guevara’s arrival at a reception at the Soviet Embassy in Havana in 1963, at which he too was present: “Guevara strode in after midnight, accompanied by a small coterie of friends, bodyguards, and hangers-on, wearing his trademark black beret, and with his shirt open to the waist. He was incredibly beautiful.” There is no accounting for taste, of course, and I never had the advantage of seeing Guevara in the flesh. To my mind, however, his appearance in all post-revolutionary photographs of him, save the most famous one by Alberto Korda, is that of a man distinctly unwashed. No doubt this accounts for a proportion of his continuing popularity among youth.

Some purists, or rationalists, might object that one’s aesthetic response to Guevara is rather beside the point. The trouble with Hitler was not his absurd appearance, after all, or with Stalin his pockmarked complexion. And yet, if we analyze Guevara’s popular appeal more than a third of a century after his timely death, we can see that it is the result of aesthetic and emotional responses rather than rational reflection, responses that are now kept alive by a good dose of commercialism. On one website dedicated to his memory, for example (www.store.che-lives.com), I found twenty-seven different varieties of Guevara T-shirts for sale, including a distressed olive-green

one, one with reflective ink, a black one with glitter, and a black one with red glow. New berets were also available, the site announced with an exclamation mark, as if we had all been anxiously waiting for them, as well as baseball and trucker hats, bandannas, keyrings, Zippo lighters, desk clocks, and brooches. In short, Guevara is not so much an historical figure as a tourist destination. And most tourists don't read too deeply into the history of the places they are going to.

This frivolous attitude to Guevara started during his lifetime. Sartre said that Guevara was the most complete man of our time, and he, like Gott, had something like a religious experience on meeting him:

I heard the door close behind me and I lost, at once, all feeling of my tiredness and an idea of the time. In that office, night does not enter: in those men, in the best of them, they do not feel that sleeping is a natural necessity but a routine from which they have been liberated.

This, surely, would count as one of the three miracles required by the Catholic process of canonization, the abolition of sleep. St. Che of Cuba libre—it has quite a ring about it.

With few exceptions, the devotees of the cult of Guevara know little about him or what he actually stood for. This has always been the case. In 1968, only a year after Guevara's death, a professor of international relations at San Francisco State University, John Gerassi, published a collection of Guevara's speeches and essays, in whose introduction he relates the impact news of the death of Guevara had upon his students:

On October 9, 1967, the first news of Ernesto Che Guevara's alleged death reached the United States... . I was approached by a nineteen-year-old coed. She had tears in her eyes and a "Make Love Not War" button on her breast. "You don't really believe it, do you?" she asked. "I mean, he couldn't really be dead, could he?" ... [T]here were many liberals and many pacifists [in the class], in addition to the radicals. And yet to all ... the news of Che's possible death was very upsetting and very personal. Che had obviously caught their imagination. They respected and admired him. They knew very little about his life... . But they knew enough to know that he was an idealist... . Thus it became apparent to me, as we talked that day, that these liberal and pacifist students felt, incredibly, as if Che had died for them.

Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe. No doubt the students would angrily have disavowed any lingering influence of Christianity upon their thought.

The latest and propagandistically most powerful product of the Guevara cult is a film of Guevara's *Motorcycle Diaries* by the Brazilian director Walter Salles. It relies for its effect upon the fact that audiences will all know a minimum about Guevara: for example, that he was a social revolutionary who died in the jungles of Bolivia, and never made a penny for himself. But they will otherwise know little of his actual opinions or actions, and will not have read his tedious and inflexibly dogmatic speeches and writings. It is as if someone were to make a film about Adolf Hitler by portraying him as a vegetarian who loved animals and was against unemployment. This would be true, but again would be rather beside the point.

At the beginning of 1952, while still a medical student, Guevara set out with a companion to tour South America on a decrepit motorcycle. His companion was the Argentinian biochemist Alberto Granado, a few years his senior, who was later to settle in Cuba and also to try unsuccessfully to foment a guerrilla movement in his native Argentina, at Castro's and Guevara's instigation. The film is based on Guevara's diaries, and also those of Granado, published in 1978 in Cuba under the title *Con el Che por Sudamérica*. A shot of Granado as he now is, at the very end of the film,

portrays him as a wise, serene, and far-seeing old man. He acted as adviser to the filmmakers throughout, so it is hardly surprising that the portrayal of the two voyagers is sympathetic.

It would be difficult to make a film in the landscapes of South America that was not visually appealing. Having travelled quite extensively there, I found myself at once seized by a desire to return to their awe-inspiring magnificence. The two principal actors in the film, the Mexican Gael García Bernal and the Argentinian Rodrigo de la Serna (himself a second cousin of Guevara's), play the two young men extremely well, within the limits of the schematic script.

The message of the film is very clear. Guevara is a large-hearted and charming young man of the Argentinian bourgeoisie whose youthful journey is a kind of *éducation sentimentale*. He is forced into his later activities by his deep feeling for the suffering, cruelty, and exploitation that he witnesses en route. There he rebelled; he could do no other.

Actually, in his book Granado lets slip that the pair of them are rebellious by temperament. For some reason other than a knowledge of sociological conditions prevailing in South America, they were born not to conform to the bourgeois mores of their environment. After visiting a doctor friend in a small provincial town in Argentina:

[Guevara] and I remarked that this was pretty much what our futures would have been—me a small town pharmacist, he a doctor treating the allergies of wealthy ladies—if it weren't for that certain something that made us rebel.

When they reach Machu Picchu, Granado tells Guevara that one day he'll start a political party that is pro-Indian that, by winning elections, will revolutionize the politics of Latin America. Guevara, at this stage supposedly still a young innocent bourgeois, replies "Revolution without firing a shot? You're crazy." Then Granado recalls an occasion, ten years previously when Guevara was thirteen, when he,

Granado, had proposed to him to join a demonstration against the military government of General Farrel in Argentina. The sweet and supposedly innocent Guevara replied, “Go out and march unarmed so they can beat the shit out of us? Not on your life. I’m not going without a piece [i.e., a gun].” Granado reflects: “Ten years on the outlook is the same—the revolution is won with gunfire. Two different periods, but a single attitude to life.”

As it happens, I have noticed how, in the personality cults of communist leaders, from Ceausescu to Kim Il Sung, there is always the legend that, for their very accession to consciousness, they struggled against oppression and for social justice, taking part in violent pro-communist demonstrations. This, of course, is supposed to demonstrate their extraordinary, almost preternatural, prescience rather than arrested development; be that as it may, it is clear from what Granado writes that Guevara’s violent revolutionism derives as much from his temperament as anything he saw on the supposedly educative journey.

In the film, the two young men set out from Buenos Aires and are soon in the vast, empty open spaces of Argentina. We feel their sense of absolute freedom, the wind in their hair is the wind in our hair, and the cares of the big city are behind both them and us. Of course, before they started out, they had had to get visas to cross borders. Guevara wrote in his diary: “So began the monotonous business of chasing visas, certificates and documents, that is to say, of overcoming the many hurdles modern nations erect in the paths of would-be travellers.” You wouldn’t altogether guess from this, or from the film, that Guevara was soon to advocate a political and economic system that would make such journeys as his completely impossible for anyone who came after him, or that the central control he advocated over each and every individual would of necessity keep them within a very tiny radius. In this, Guevara was absolutely typical of the messianic bourgeois, whether of reformist or revolutionary stripe: he wants to make sure that no one ever again lives as well as he has lived. Inside every rebel, there’s a tyrant trying to get out.

The film soon gives us to understand that anyone who lives in comfort is necessarily cold-hearted, selfish, and unwelcoming, while anyone poor is—*ex officio*, as it were—generous, selfless and hospitable. In fact, both books make clear that the two young men, who were in essence spongers, were frequently treated quite generously by members of the bourgeoisie, and even by the police, to whom they often turned for food and accommodation. Moreover, they expected such generosity as their due: were they not youthful and adventurous, and did not the world, therefore, owe them a meal and a bed for the night? They had a sense of entitlement because they were who they were. In Guevara's diaries, there is this—to me—very unpleasant passage:

The main task at hand was getting to Iquitos... . The first person we hit on was the mayor, someone called Cohen; we had heard a lot about him, that he was Jewish as far as money was concerned but a good sort. There was no doubt he was tightfisted; the problem was whether he was a good sort. He palmed us off to the shipping agents, who in turn sent us to speak with the captain, who was kindly enough, promising the huge concession of charging us third-class fares and letting us travel in first. We weren't happy with this. ... [T]hen the second-in-command ... promised to help... . [Later] we came across him, [and] he said he's secured a great deal for us: as a special favor to him, the captain had agreed to charge us third-class fares and let us travel in first. Big deal.

There is a querulous tone of thwarted entitlement in this. I am reminded of the time I travelled on a river boat on the Niger, and the few young white passengers aboard, who would all have espoused the most correct of political views, insisted on being allowed on to the first-class deck because they were white, and therefore entitled to comfort. So what if they had paid only a third-class fare? Big deal.

Time and again Granado and Guevara are outraged that they are not taken straight to the bosom of whomever they are begging from. They have no hesitation in lying and even stealing. No doubt these are youthful failings, but they are not admirable, and easily become habits.

As with all film adaptations of books, the script sometimes takes liberties. When the pair of them see Machu Picchu for the first time, we hear Guevara saying, “The Incas had mathematics, astronomy, medicine [translated in the British subtitles as brain surgery]. The Spanish had gunpowder.” Guevara doesn’t actually say this in his book. It is the politically correct version of the famous apothegm in *The Third Man* about five hundred years of democracy in Switzerland producing the cuckoo clock. Suppose someone said, “The Spanish had writing, philosophy, and law. The Amerindians had feather headdresses.” Would this not be a travesty that brought wrath to the hearts of every right-thinking person? Why, then, does such a travesty pass unremarked when it is in the other direction?

In one scene, the pair are taking their leave of a cultivated, Marxist Peruvian doctor who has put them up for a time. The doctor has a secret vice: he writes. He has written a novel, and asks Granado and Guevara their opinion of it just before they depart. They think it is terrible. Granado tries to find something nice to say about it, but Guevara speaks the truth. His words are reported thus in the chapter of Granado’s book entitled “Ernesto Cannot Tell a Lie”:

“Look, Doctor, it’s not a good book... . [T]o me it’s unbelievable that a Marxist scholar like yourself would describe only the negative side of the Indian’s psychology. It’s a pessimistic book that doesn’t seem to have come from the pen of either a scientist or a communist.”

In the film, Guevara’s criticism from a Marxist point of view is downplayed to the point of obliteration. He criticizes the book stylistically instead. We don’t want the audience to think that Guevara, far from being a romantic figure of the kind with whom they might identify, was actually or incipiently a hardened and rigid dogmatist.

Perhaps the most distorted scenes are the crucial ones in the film. Granado and Guevara have gone to a leprosarium on a tributary of the Peruvian Amazon, run by a doctor and some nuns. The lepers live on one side of the river, the staff on the other. Granado and Guevara break with local tradition and refuse to wear gloves when they examine the lepers, thereby expressing their solidarity with them. The nuns, by

contrast, dispense a stony charity. They even refuse to give food to the lepers who don't attend mass. The two young men are outraged, though denying food or goods to those who don't conform ideologically has long been a practice of Communist regimes, including Cuba's. This irony, we may be sure, was lost on 99.9 percent of the people who have seen the film, and the director did nothing to point it out.

The staff of the leprosarium throws a party for Guevara's twenty-fourth birthday. In the film, Guevara leaves the party midway through and swims across the mile-wide river in the pitch dark to be with the lepers on the other bank, as another expression of solidarity with the downtrodden and oppressed, in contradistinction to the rich and privileged. The lepers, soon recognizing his gesture, cheer him over to their bank of the river. The scene implies that the leprosarium, like the world in general, is divided into two: the good downtrodden and the bad downtrodden. In the books, however, Guevara swims across the river two days after his party, during daylight, and arrives on the other bank three miles distant from where the lepers live. Moreover, he swims the river more as an athletic feat than as a political gesture. In other words, the film manipulates the books, which themselves are not unmanipulative, to make its point.

The lepers give Granado and Guevara such a hearty send-off in the film that no casual viewer would notice that, while Granado and Guevara leave, the nuns stay behind to look after the lepers. In fact, though no one notices it, Guevara is to lepers what Princess Diana is to AIDS patients. She used to hug people in hospital with AIDS; Guevara shakes hands with lepers without wearing gloves. But he is no more deeply committed to them than Princess Diana was to patients with AIDS. Lepers and AIDS-sufferers are or were walk-on parts in their respective psychodramas.

The film clearly intends to suggest that Guevara was a youthful idealist, and that his idealism—so generous, so disarming—was the source of his later opinions and activities, such as his liberal and open-handed signing of death sentences after perfunctory trials, his support of regimes that had killed millions and scores of millions, and his wish that much of the population of the world should be immolated

in a nuclear war for the sake of an alleged point of principle. The film is thus the cinematic equivalent of the Che Guevara T-shirt; it is morally monstrous and emotionally trivial.

In one sense, and one sense alone, Guevara remains eternally youthful: his ideas are irredeemably adolescent. They have all the puritan priggishness of adolescent fervor. He insisted that something that he called the New Man should be “constructed,” “built,” or “developed.” This New Man was to be utterly unselfish, and work only for the sake of the whole of mankind, and not for himself. Indeed, the construction of the New Man was the fundamental purpose of the revolution.

A socialist economy without communist morals does not interest me. We fight poverty but we also fight alienation. One of the fundamental aims of Marxism is to eliminate material interest, the factor of “individual self-interest” and profit from man’s psychological motivations.

Note that what does not interest him should not exist, surely a manifestation if not of material self-interest, at least of egotism on a pretty large scale. Of course, Guevara’s adolescent idea was also Marx’s adolescent idea: “for the production on a mass scale of this communist consciousness [i.e., that of the selfless New Man] the alteration of men on a mass scale is necessary.” In order that the New Man should emerge, Guevara advocated the most drastic centralization of all power and decision-making, which would make the Soviet Union by comparison look like the epitome of laissez-faire economics. You don’t have to be much of a political theorist to understand what his proposed centralization of everything would entail from the point of view of individual freedom.

But where did his rage for the New Man come from? What was so very wrong with the Old Man? This rage is already detectable in the supposedly free-wheeling *Motorcycle Diaries*. Reflecting on his visit to a huge copper mine in Chile, Guevara says:

Cold efficiency and impotent resentment go hand in hand in the big mine, linked in spite of the hatred by a common necessity to live, on the one hand, and to speculate on the other... . [W]e will see whether one day, some miner will take up his pick in pleasure and go and poison his lungs with conscious joy. They say that's what it's like over there, where the red blaze that now lights up the world comes from.

The New Man, then, already exists in the Soviet Union, where happy miners of the Don Basin work for the sheer joy of being useful to the inhabitants of the socialist motherland. One doesn't know whether to laugh or cry. Yet this was the foundation, indeed the whole, of Guevara's philosophy, politics, and economics.

One thing is certain: Guevara's desire for the development of the New Man did not emerge from his empirical experience of actual men. In the *Motorcycle Diaries*, he meets many excellent and indeed magnificent men, rich and poor alike. Guevara's desire for the development of the New Man, I believe, comes from his need to control the lives of others, his urge to power. With unique lack of self-knowledge, with an absolute absence of irony, he describes the character of Valdivia, the conquistador of Chile:

Valdivia's actions symbolize man's indefatigable thirst to take control of a place where he can exercise total control... . He belonged to that special class of men the species produces every so often, in whom a craving for limitless power is so extreme that any suffering to achieve it seems natural.

Could there be a better description of Guevara's career itself?

In presenting Guevara as a romantic figure, generous and compassionate rather than ruthlessly priggish and self-centered, and by suggesting that he has anything to teach us other than negatively, the director is guilty of mendacity of a very high order. The film is an exercise in moral frivolity and exhibitionism, self-congratulation, of course, opportunism. It should sell as well as Guevara T-shirts.

A new initiative for discerning readers—and our close friends. Join
The New Criterion's Supporters Circle.

DONATE

Anthony Daniels is a contributing editor of *City Journal*.

This article originally appeared in *The New Criterion*, Volume 23 Number 2 , on page 22

Copyright © 2022 The New Criterion | www.newcriterion.com

<https://newcriterion.com/issues/2004/10/the-real-che>