

**Marcin Fatalski**

Institute of American Studies and Polish Diaspora  
Jagiellonian University, Kraków, Poland

## **Some Reflections on the Guevara Myth**

---

Ernesto Che Guevara's popularity climaxed several times in the last four decades. After his death Che became a symbol of revolution and his name and legacy were evoked by revolutionaries not only in Latin America. Guevara became a myth for rebels who fought with right-wing, military regimes, but also for people who rejected capitalism and social inequality. Still, he appears to be a myth also for the Right. For right-wing politicians and the public at large Guevara symbolizes the atrocities of communism. Some of the movements which bear Guevara on their banners could not do the same with his political and social views. The Guevara myth is falsification of a real revolutionary who was devoted to ideas of social equality and a new society, based on values opposite to those which are a cornerstone of liberal democracy. Moreover, Guevara also became a very popular symbol in modern culture. His image turned out to be a product – a fact criticized by those who knew and admired Guevara and those who condemned him as a murderer. As every myth, Guevara's myth fulfills the needs and delivers inspiration to people who require a symbolic figure.

Guevara is one of the most recognizable figures of modern revolutionary ideology. He was involved in Latin America guerrilla warfare, he was one of the closest comrades of Fidel Castro, one of the most important leaders of the Cuban revolution. Moreover, after the success of the Cuban revolution he did not turn himself into a satisfied leader of a communist country but remained an idealistic revolutionary who dreamt about continental revolution in Latin America. Che believed that he was able to continue a fight which he considered as the only way to liberate the oppressed masses of the Third World.

Ernesto Guevara de la Serna, known as Che, was truly committed to the idea of revolutionary war. He aimed to destroy the order based on what he understood as exploitation of oppressed people. Guevara considered the United States as a pillar of that system. He did not believe in a possibility of peaceful political changes; from the very beginning he claimed that the fight should be militant, not political if it was to be successful. According to his friend and comrade, Alberto Granado, Guevara had

believed in the idea of guerrilla even as a teenager and he did not change his views later. On the contrary – he chose to fight with a gun (qtd. in Daniels 24). Ernesto Guevara was one of the leaders of anti-Batista warfare conducted by revolutionary forces in Cuba till the successful overthrow of the regime.

However, Guevara took an important position in the new Cuban government, he decided to leave the safe office for further subversive activity in other countries. Che was involved in guerrilla war in Africa, however without any significant success. Then he came back to Latin America to revive the guerrilla against Latin American regimes. He chose Bolivia, one of the poorest countries of the Americas, as a place of his warfare. Guevara believed in the idea of *foco guerrillero*. It meant that a revolution demanded a kind of a *spiritus movens*: a group of revolutionary militants who were able to inspire and organize local peasants to guerrilla warfare. The plan failed as Guevara's troops were unable to attract Bolivian indigenous peasants to revolutionary ideology. Spanish-speaking white Argentine was not particularly convincing for Indians who understood only quechuan languages (Chmara 100-101, 393; Guevara).

Guevara was captured and executed by Bolivian soldiers on October 8, 1967. Various authors blame Bolivian or the U.S. policymakers for his death. It was never a question of debate that Americans were deeply involved in the searching of Che (Bolivia's strongman gen. Barrientos asked the United States for help, calling his own troops "green", i.e. inexperienced). Those who prove that the U.S. administration was interested in Che's physical elimination may always recall that Guevara symbolized for the Americans the idea of communist revolution. Anyway, the C.I.A. which tried to establish Guevara's whereabouts, assessed that a far too important role was attributed to him (U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations* 369-370). Even in the years of his subversive activity Che Guevara had seemed to be the phenomenon that he became after his death; as one author writes, "Che is far more about what he represents than what he achieved" (Schweimler 120).

We cannot be absolutely certain that the American authorities were interested in Guevara's death. The U.S. policymakers were afraid that the death of Che might inspire anti-American actions. Their fears seem reasonable: the dead Che could become a hero to be copied by young revolutionaries all over the continent. In other words, the Americans did not want Guevara to become a mythical *guerrillero* who posthumously inspired others to conduct warfare (U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations* 382). We are not going to address the debate on who was responsible for Guevara's death. We can conclude that, in spite of American fears, Guevara's death did not provoke stronger guerrilla warfare in Latin America. The decade of the 1960s was revolutionary enough even if Guevara had not become a martyr. In fact, the role of dead Guevara was not reduced to an inspiration for guerrilla warfare; he became a symbol for dissidents all over the world in the 1960s and later.

Even though he died, Guevara remained also a threat for those who condemned leftist ideology and revolutionary methods. Certainly, Che embodied and still represents anti-Americanism (which was for him a term equal with anti-imperialism), thus he remains a negative figure in the United States (at least in the opinion of middle class and elites of that country). In that sense, Guevara became a myth (anti-hero) for anti-communists and critics of revolution, not only in the USA. His critics believe that Guevara as a symbol is unacceptable and should be disallowed because

of what he symbolizes. It is worth to mention here a discussion which took place in the Polish parliament on a proposal to ban Che Guevara's image. The supporters of such a disallowance stated that this figure might "incite fascism and totalitarian systems" (qtd. in Gronbeck-Tedesco 26).

As we indicated, the paradox of Che's revolutionary appeal comes from the fact that this anti-systemic symbol also became the icon of pop culture and has remained so for last decades. That widely known critic of capitalism became a "product" willingly used as a symbol, particularly by young people. As one of the authors rightly pointed out, "one thing which all those who knew him are agreed on is that he would have hated the often banal way in which his image is used and abused" (Schweimler 120). The popularity of Guevara, his "face recognition" can be explained by the fact that modern culture is so "picturesque," based on a visage. Since the younger generation is particularly opened to such type of communication, one can observe the fact that Che Guevara is rather remembered by those who were confronted with him as a "posthumous collective symbol" (Larson, Lizardo 442).

The question is what does Guevara symbolize nowadays? His portrait, brought to immortality by Albero Korda, decorates innumerable shirts, bags, cups etc. all over the world. All those things are carried by those who not only do not intend to destroy the *system*, but they are also eager to take a high position in a social hierarchy. The abundance of articles with the Guevara picture made one of students of that phenomenon to describe this revolutionary as "not so much an historical figure as a tourist destination" (Daniels 22).

Being an iconic figure of popular culture, Guevara still remains an inspiration for current revolutionary movements all over the world. His views inspire people who actively, sometimes belligerently, intend to destroy capitalism and values of modern consumer society. Che has been popular among the left, especially Latin American left, continually for the last three decades. Latin America with its permanent deep social conflict creates an ideal environment for the development of Guevara's cult (Schweimler 119).

The existence and attractiveness of Guevara's myth in Latin America or other regions which suffer conflict (like the Middle East) has a different source and seems easier to explain than the popularity of that *guerrillero* in the western world. The source of Guevara's popularity in the West (especially in the U.S.) is difficult to understand and explain by those who experienced the communist system. A Cuban-American writer Teresa Dovalpage, who emigrated from Cuba to the USA, grew in the country of an institutionalized cult of Guevara. She experienced a kind of shock in the United States, since – in her opinion – it was the last country that could promote that idol of communist Cuba. Americans, when asked, why they bear Che's image on their clothes, explained that "he fought for the rights of oppressed people" or was a hero of their youth. She has been unable to share their fascination. Her perspective as a person who escaped from Cuba, is different (Dovalpage 80).

What is the source of this iconic position of Guevara? What is the nature of the myth of this revolutionary man? What does he symbolize for the Left? Is his image as a man of integrity who *fought for the rights of oppressed people* justified?

Myth is filled with expectations of those who sustain it. A symbol or image, bound with a myth, is a "depoliticized speech" as Roland Barthes calls it. Such an image lacks its previous meaning. It can be used in a way that is desired by those

who want to utilize it. They fill the image with a new meaning (Hess 183). It is the fate of Guevara's face in Korda's photograph, which became such a recognizable picture that one of the authors called it "the most iconic visage of the last 100 years" (Petrou 50).

As we have indicated, the importance of Guevara for business seems to be paradoxical, taking into consideration the anti-capitalistic character of his views and a *guerrilla* war which he waged. The explanation of that paradox can be sought in something which one may call the "revolutionary appeal" of Che. As one of the cloths-makers who used the Korda visage explained "We felt that the Che image – just the icon and not the man's doings – represented what we wanted: revolution, extreme change" (Larson, Lizardo 428-429).

The Guevara image became world value, both politically and commercially, after his death in 1967 and – according to the opinion of students of the phenomenon – continues to be such a value until the present day. The indisputable factor which contributed to the growth of the Guevara myth among revolutionaries was 1968 – a year of dramatic changes in the Western World societies and a rapid growth of the dissent movement. Guevara as a person who rejected capitalism and its conservative values seemed to be ideal point of reference for the rebelled youth. Still, the truth was far different than the image which occupied the imagination of upper- and middle class youth in the 1960s. The young rebels who studied at top universities of France, West Germany and the USA did not realize however that Guevara's social concepts were far different than their own ideas.

The idea of social revolution in 1968 assumed that the old order should be destroyed and replaced by a new society. The opinions on how the new society should look like varied tremendously but they were far more liberal than the views that Guevara represented. One should remember that revolutionaries always intended to change an old order drastically, usually its political, social and economic dimension. Since practically all Third World revolutions in the Cold War era were directed against right-wing regimes, young people in the western world considered revolution as a development which was to be progressive also in the cultural and social dimension. In other words, revolutions were expected to bring a change in morality. And they usually brought such a change into life indeed, but in totally different way that rebelled students in western capital cities expected. The revolutionary leaders, from Jacobins, through communists both in Russia and Latin America, treated revolution as a way to change societies and make them more moral. Revolutionaries such as Robespierre and Guevara rejected old order as a haven for decadency and moral collapse. Polish historian Jakub Polit aptly pointed that student protesters of the era of sexual revolution who carried banners with Mao Zedong's face had no idea what Mao's views on sexual morality were (Patek, Polit, Węc, 473). Mao's regime was genocidal (and that fact was denied or somehow justified by left-wing protesters and intellectuals of the 1960s) but it was also puritan when we consider its attitude towards sexuality. The same can be said about Cuban revolutionary leaders, both Castro and Guevara (especially when we realize that Guevara himself admitted that there was "no single discrepancy" between his and Mao's views (Fund 69). This quotation can be found in the "American Spectator," and that journal's conservative views are known. However, no one can deny the fact that after the victory of the revolution Cuban prisons were filled not only by old regime's officers, but also by those

who represented the alleged pathologies of an old society, like devout Catholics and gays (Fund 68; Arenas; Czarna księga komunizmu 609-610). In the very beginning also prostitution was banned in Cuba, but Castro's regime finally allowed that kind of decadent activity for financial reasons (Domosławski). That is a very instructive fact when we consider the moral principles of regimes.

Guevara's admirers are usually not aware of the fact that Che was responsible for the executions in Cuba. According to the relation of the witness of Guevara's last moments, before his death Che admitted that the Cuban revolutionary government executed "guerrilla leaders who invaded Cuban territory." He admitted also the executions of other people who were considered enemies of the revolution (U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations* 384).

The generation of the 1960s ignored also another fact, even more important from their point of view than minority rights. Guevara, as other communist leaders, rejected the idea of individualism. However, the generation for which that guerrillero was a hero, believed in the idea of "community" which was expressed many times and in many ways, they also emphasized the right of every individual to express himself or herself in a chosen way. Guevara would have denied them the right to be "different" or "individual." He rejected the idea that an individual could focus on his or her personal needs (Fund 69). Soviet or Chinese Communism excluded individual needs or uniqueness. Contrary to liberal democracies, so detested by Guevara as capitalist and consumerist, both totalitarian systems accepted uniformed society working for a common aim defined by authorities. Even if Guevara rejected the bureaucratic nature of those regimes, he followed their attitude towards the individual needs and aspirations.

Guevara rejected a free market as a concept of economy. Capitalism was for him, as for communists, a system of exploitation that the revolution fought with. However, it is more important to realize what his view on society which should be created after capitalism destruction was. One should remember that Guevara's views were far more radical than the Soviet or pro-Soviet communist authorities. Guevara refused any compromise with the social order and values that he considered a product of capitalism. Guevara aimed to create a new society with a new morality. Guevara criticized the Soviet model of communism which in his own view was bureaucratic. He probably saw one of the main weaknesses of that system in its bureaucratic nature and he criticized it. Che's concepts followed the idea that Latin American communism should differ from its Soviet version, especially when it comes to morality. Guevara had a kind of vision of communist morality. As he explained: "economic socialism without a communist morale does not interest me. We are fighting poverty, but at the same time alienation... If communism is dissociated from consciousness, it may be a method of distribution but it is no longer a revolutionary morality" (qtd. in Lowy 28). In other words, Guevara believed that the fight with inequality and exploitation should not aim to achieve the same level of consumption for socialist societies as in the capitalist world. It meant that he did not want to achieve equality by adopting capitalist values such as competition and self-individualism.

This observation leads us to a more general reflection. Guevara seems to be completely misunderstood by those who derive their protest against conservative society from more liberal values. It relates particularly to new social movements which are based on the middle class. Those movements focus on the protection of individual

rights, not class interests (as communists and revolutionaries of the 1960s). Thus, new social movements concentrate on such issues as women's rights, free speech, environment, LGBT rights. The birth of that phenomenon was possible due to the considerable improvement of the conditions of living in western societies.

Guevara may be a more justified symbol for those movements which have anti-systemic character, rejecting globalization and neoliberalism. In that sense, the Guevara myth was reborn in the beginning of 2000s (Larson, Lizardo 433-434). For those who reject the neoliberal concept of economic and social development, Guevara received the status of an idol, a martyr of a just case. In such a sense his activity was acceptable and justified even for the Left believing in the Marxist idea of class conflict. Many intellectuals believed that the leaders of the communist revolution (Soviet, Chinese, Vietnamese, Cuban) are morally superior because they fight for leftist values, mainly equality.

In such a context one cannot be surprised by the fact that the new Left refers to Guevara as a person and to his ideology. It is particularly instructive that Guevara is evoked by the leaders of the Latin American populist left, like President Evo Morales of Bolivia. That statesman took power due to popular support of Bolivians who rejected the policy based on neoliberal concepts. Neoliberalism dominated Latin America's development since the 1980s and was widely criticized as a source of deepening inequalities. Morales's presidency was expected to be a revolution. In fact, Morales's policy has revolutionary nature. Many of his decisions intended to undermine the position of the elite – white elite. One should remember that the social and economic conflict in Bolivia also has an ethnic dimension (a protest of indigenous people against the domination of white Bolivians in politics and economy) (Kennemore, Weeks 267-268). In that context the opinion that the developments in Bolivia can be considered as a continuation of Guevara's concepts seems justified. Not surprisingly, Morales evokes Guevara. His revolution has class nature (adopts the Marxist concept of social development) and for that reason one cannot compare the phenomenon of Morales's reforms in Bolivia and European liberal Left. European left-wing parties and groups neglect an issue of class interests.

As we mentioned above, Che Guevara's myth is sustained in popular culture. As in political communication, Guevara *imago* in cultural discourse is more or less falsified. It depicts one side of the *guerrillero* who seems to be a kind of a modern saint. He is not presented as a charming person. Mythical Guevara is demanding for himself and for others, a man of integrity, ready to devote himself to those who are oppressed and humiliated. He is like a man on a photograph taken by Alberto Korda: a hero of war against all the evils of modern world.

Anthony Daniels who writes about Guevara's myth in a context of recent film portrayal of Guevara aptly pointed out that popular depictions of Guevara are deceiving. In Daniels' opinion Walter Salles's movie "Motorcycle Diaries" is one of the best examples of such a deception. Moreover, he calls the movie the "latest and propagandistically most powerful product of the Guevara cult." Guevara's portrait in that movie is based on a few oversimplified opinions that Che was "a social revolutionary who died in the jungles of Bolivia and never made a penny for himself." That is why Daniels judges Salles's movie very harshly: "It is as if someone were to make a film about Adolf Hitler [sic! – M.F.] by portraying him as a vegetarian who

loved animals and was against unemployment. This would be true – Daniels writes – but again would be rather beside the point” (Daniels 23).

The movie depicts two young Latinos who travel across South America. Daniels pointed out that if someone in Cuba ruled by Castro (and Guevara) had liked to make a similar attempt, it would have been impossible because of all the restrictions which Cuban revolutionary leaders imposed over the society. As we know, communist dictatorships strictly controlled the migration of the people in the fear that the country could be depopulated. It is very emblematic that during the short period of the opened border between south and north Vietnam, only several hundred communists chose the migration to the North, whereas Thousands of people escaped from the North Vietnamese “promised land” to the South. However, it is obvious today that the communist system failed in practically every aspect, one should recall this fact since it occurred in the 1960s when people in the West were fascinated by the idea of revolution.

We found in the discussed movie all elements necessary to maintain Guevara’s myth. The film is beautifully made (South American landscapes), the hero (played by Gael Garcia Bernal) is an idealist, a medical student who is ready to help other people and who is worried about the injustices of the world. For the hero portrayed in the film a journey through South America was an experience which moved him on to the revolutionary path. He was a witness of cruelty, inequality and other pathological phenomena of Latin American societies and it aroused revolutionary feelings in him. Daniels seems to question the idea. He recalls the memoirs of Granado who claimed that contestation was in the nature of Guevara (and his own) and they were somehow fated to rebel against the social and political order. Daniels interprets Granado’s narration in such a way that Guevara was determined to fight with a gun from the very beginning. If he had to stand against the authorities and a system, he would have acted with a gun. We do not completely share such a radical interpretation made by Daniels since every revolutionary devotee (both theoreticians like Marx and armed rebels like Guevara) coined their worldview in the process of critical observation of the social order.

The movie serves Guevara’s myth in many ways. It is based on books but Guevara’s motives and opinions are presented in a much more “appealing” way to the audience. Bernal says in the movie words that Guevara never said (it means that opinions expressed by the movie hero are not to be found in books; they serve the idealistic image of Guevara). Such practices of movie-makers serve the idea that Guevara was a romantic figure so people can identify with him. It would be much more difficult to identify with a rigid communist (Daniels 25). That is the point: the world acclaimed portrayal of Guevara is wiped of any unpleasant aspects of his political activity.

The real Guevara was a communist activist swept by the ideology of revolutionary war. He never accepted the idea of liberalism, both political and social. For him a revolution against inequality was an aim. His worldview was dominated by the problem of social inequality, exploitation, not freedom. He was a communist in the sense of classic communist ideology, i.e. he headed to social revolution and elimination of groups which he identified with an old order. He did not refrain from physical elimination of those who represented the overthrown government and capitalism. Nevertheless, the myth exists and probably will continue to exist as long as

Guevara would be identified with protest, with rebellion. The idea of revolution will inevitably change its content, but those who evoke revolutionary ideas will use Guevara as probably the most recognizable and most attractive symbol of revolution.

## References

- Arenas, Reinaldo. *Antes que anochezca*. Barcelona: Tusquets editors, 2003.
- Chmara, Michał. *Ideologia rewolucji kubańskiej (1959-1970)*. Poznań: Wydawnictwo Naukowe UAM, 1991.
- Czarna księga komunizmu: zbrodnie, terror, prześladowania. Warszawa: Pruszyński i S-ka, 1999.
- Daniels, Anthony. "The Real Che." *The New Criterion*, 23:2, October 2004: 22-27.
- Domosławski, Artur. *Gorączka latynoamerykańska*. Warszawa: Świat Książki, 2004.
- Dovalpage, Theresa. "Why Che?" *Hispanic* 17:10, 2004: 80.
- Fund, John H. "Terrorist, Sadist and Left-Wing Saint." *The American Spectator* December 2007/January 2008: 68-69.
- Gronbeck-Tedesco, John A. "Memories of Che: Forging a Postmodern Radicalism in Cultural Studies?" *Studies in Latin American Popular Culture* 29, 2011: 24-39.
- Guevara, Ernesto. *Dziennik z Boliwii*. Warszawa: Książka i Wiedza, 1969.
- Hess, John. "El día que me quieras: History, Myth and Che Guevara," *Film-Historia* 9:2, 1999: 183-188.
- Kennemore, Amy, and Gregory Weeks. "Twenty-First Century Socialism? The Elusive Search for a Post-Neoliberal Development Model in Bolivia and Ecuador." *Bulletin of Latin American Research* 30:3, 2011: 267-281.
- Larson, Jeff A., and Omar Lizardo. "Generations, Identities, and the Collective Memory of Che Guevara." *Sociological Forum* 22:4, December 2007: 425-451.
- Lowy, Michael. "Che Guevara in Search of New Socialism." *Against the Current* September/October 2009: 28-30.
- Patek, Artur, Jakub Polit, Janusz Józef Węc (ed.). *Najnowsza historia świata 1945-1995*. Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie 1997.
- Petrou, Michael. "The Myth of Che." *Maclean's* 3 September 2009 122: 8: 50.
- Schweimler, Daniel. "Che." *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions* 9:1, 2008: 119-122.
- U.S. Department of State. *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964-1968*. Vol. 31. Washington: Government Printing Office, 2004.