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DOI: 10.1080/09614521003710070

Helen Yaffe

Che Guevara: The Economics of Revolution

Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009, ISBN: 978-0-230-21821-5, 354 pp.

Helen Yaffe's book demonstrates how good history can make a timely and valuable contribution to contemporary debates. The socialist thought of 'Che' Ernesto Guevara (on top of his heroic guerrilla and internationalist role) has special relevance for the current global economic crisis and the strong resurgence of socialist-inspired 'alternatives' in Latin America.

I say 'good history' because, while the book deals with the debates in Cuba in the early 1960s when Che was an economic minister and a banker, the author engages with her subject more as historian than protagonist. The surprising thing is that, 40 years after the death of Che, a young historian can engage in substantial primary research, by way of 31 interviews with Che's former colleagues. Generally, the breadth of research is impressive and independent.

The major themes of Che's economic and socialist thought, as identified by this book, were post-revolution 'consolidation' and creation of a new budgetary system, and the 'great debate' in 1963–4 over the form of Cuban socialism and its consequences in education, salaries, administration, worker participation, and science. This discussion has only relatively recently attracted greater attention in the English-speaking world. The impact of earlier works such as Huberman and Sweezy's *Socialism in Cuba* (Monthly Review Press, 1969), Silverman's compilation *Man and Socialism in Cuba: The Great Debate* (Atheneum, 1971), and Bernardo's *The Theory of Moral Incentives in Cuba* (University of Alabama Press, 1971) was buried by the second cold war and the post-1989 triumphalism of the neo-liberal project.

Nevertheless, outside interest re-appeared as Cuba's 'great debate' was addressed in the English version of Carlos Tablada's book *Che Guevara: Economics and Politics in the Transition to Socialism* (Pathfinder, 1998). Later, a compilation of writings by Che and his contemporaries, called *The Great Debate on Political Economy* (Ocean Press, 2006) renewed interest. Such works include discussion of Che's criticism (at times stinging) of the Soviet model. Helen Yaffe's book adds a coherent and independent voice and overview of this discussion.

While Che's criticism of the Soviet system is well known, outside Cuba the persistence of this critical and independent line of thought within Cuban socialism is less well known. In the English-speaking world, in particular, the propaganda wars against Cuba (combined with nearly three decades of trade-dependency on the Soviet bloc) created crude stereotypes that portrayed it as a Soviet acolyte, with little capacity for independent thought. Yet, as Helen Yaffe points out, the human and moral themes associated with Che have been re-asserted in Cuban socialism from the mid-1980s 'rectification' period onwards. Those who study the thought of Jose Marti and its impact on Fidel Castro would say such themes had never disappeared.

Even the nature of this 'great debate' has been variously interpreted. Yaffe notes that some consider it an argument over the 'operation of the law of value under socialism', others a 'disagreement about the use of moral incentives', others a conflict between Cuban identity and an utopian view of the 'new man', still others a debate about 'the level of financial (de)centralisation of enterprises' (p. 49). The US perspective most often reduced such debates to simple personal power struggles. The author herself gives some weight to the debate about the method of state finance.

This book provides access to a debate that most outsiders never knew existed nor thought possible – that a small country would engage in its own theoretical and practical debate over how best to build a new and

shared economic system, in a hostile, imperial world determined not to tolerate any alternative. In a story that links to the current financial crisis, she reminds us that Che, as chief banker, prior to the US economic blockade, removed all reserves from the USA (those that had not been stolen by Batista and his cronies), placing them in Swiss and Canadian banks (p. 26). This was a precursor to the current financial reorganisation within the ALBA group of seven Latin American countries, and which Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez attributes to Fidel Castro's advice.

Helen Yaffe links Che's contributions to the current context, particularly in the last chapter by reference to a 'new great debate' under Raul Castro. Yet unlike the simplistic 'Fidel versus Raul' theories, she grounds that discussion in long-standing dilemmas of socialist construction, unfamiliar to those who grew up in the neo-liberal world.

While the entry point to this discussion is the extraordinary and multi-faceted personality of Ernesto Guevara, much less is said of the influence of Jose Marti and Fidel Castro. While Che linked Marxist thought to his ideas of the 'new man', it was Marti and Fidel who hammered out the themes of unity, education, and popular conscience. One of them had a powerful impact on the young Che, both in his revolutionary ideals and his socialist thought. Fidel Castro remains one of the most remarkable and misrepresented political leaders of the last century. Perhaps, in the future, Helen Yaffe will apply her forensic skills to assess his contributions.

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