

Che and the Return to the Tricontinental

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1. 'What we must create is the man of the 21st century, although this is still a subjective aspiration, not yet systematized. This is precisely one of the fundamental objectives of our study and work. To the extent that we achieve concrete success on a theoretical plane—or, vice versa, to the extent that we draw theoretical conclusions of a broad character on the basis of our concrete research—we will have made a valuable contribution to Marxism—Leninism, to the cause of humanity'. Che Guevara, 'Socialism and Man in Cuba' 1965
2. How can we think of the legacy of Karl Marx today? A legacy involves the act of bequeathing, usually in a will or testament. More generally, it is something handed down by an ancestor or predecessor. As a result, we tend to think of a legacy only in terms of something that has been received. Originally, however, the term operated quite closely to that of 'embassy', referring to 'the function or office of a delegate or deputy' and, beyond that, 'the message or business committed to a delegate or deputy ... a body of persons sent on a mission or as a deputation'.² If Marx left us a legacy, therefore, it involves not only what he bequeathed to us through his theoretical and political writings and activist example. He also sent us on a mission. Marx's legacy is not something ossified in the past but involves business to be done in the present and future, 'for the cause of humanity'. The work that has to be done is to address that legacy to the challenges of the twenty—first century. There is no better place on earth to address Marx's legacy than in Cuba.
3. With the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the end of the twentieth century was hailed by many as the moment of the death of Marxism, the end of history. Marx's legacy was declared null and void. Yet the active business of developing Marx's legacy in the past fifty years had been carried out not in the Soviet Union, nor even, I would argue, within much of European Marxism, but rather in the forms of socialism developed outside the first and second worlds, in the course of the anti—colonial and anti—imperial struggles in Africa, Asia and Latin America. Many of these have not survived, shipwrecked on the dangerous turbulent waters across which every decolonised nation has had to navigate. Cuba, however, is an exception. In 1964 Dean Rusk, US Secretary of State, remarked of the new Cuban government 'we regard that regime as temporary'.³ Forty years later, Rusk's own expectations look a good deal more transitory. Against huge odds, Cuba has survived, with its sovereignty intact and its dignity ever increasing. Its survival into the twenty—first century marks it out as one of Marx's great legacies, as a nation that continues to function as an example of a state dedicated to values of humanity to which ordinary people in the world aspire.
4. Cuba has not only survived as an autonomous sovereign socialist power, it has survived as a phenomenon that increasingly, particularly to the younger generations of Europe and

¹ Robert Young: Oxford University

² Oxford English Dictionary.

³ Guevara 1997, 264.

the Americas, stands for the most significant alternative to the globalising culture of Anglo—America— namely Hispano—America, the America of José Martí. In a recent visit to Puerto Rico, I was very struck by the extent to which Cuba represented for many Puerto Ricans the symbol and guarantee of their own non—US identity. Why do young people even in Britain walk around with T—shirts that have the simple word CUBA printed across them? It is not because of a sudden interest in the imperial history of Castilian Spain that Spanish is rapidly becoming the most popular foreign language for students to study at school and university in the UK. This affection for Cuba comes not only because young people enjoy the increasingly popular son, salsa and other vibrant varieties of Cuban music, but also because Cuba represents a different kind of society to those of the west: a socialist society organised on humanitarian principles in which the individual is defined as part of the community, not against it, and in which the community defines itself according to the needs of the whole society. A living socialist society that is confident, energetic, and youthful. It says a lot for Cuba that over forty years after the revolution, it has developed the reputation for being the most vibrant, youthful society in the world.

5. Cuba, therefore, has carried into the twentieth century a socialism that looks not backwards but forwards. A socialism that evolved after a revolutionary triumph over a neocolonial regime, and developed in the most difficult of circumstances—the contestation with the forces of US imperialism that have been arraigned against Cuba for over forty years for no better reason, it seems, than anger at the Cuban assertion of independence after its own long submission to neo—colonial control by the US from 1898. Cuba represents a society that has held out for its own values against intimidation from its giant neighbour, against all odds.

6. The title of Julio García Luis' introduction to his recent *Cuban Revolutionary Reader* was 'Relic of the Cold War or Herald of the Third Millennium?'.⁴ Luis argues persuasively that Cuba's history was indelibly marked by the Cold War. After the US campaign against the Cuban Revolution began, the Cold War at once enabled Cuba to benefit from the friendship and aid of the Soviet Union and at the same time meant that it absorbed somewhat uncritically certain characteristics of the decaying bureaucratic Soviet system. That Cuba survived after the collapse of the Soviet Union, on the other hand, points to the degree that it maintained its own ideological independence and a very different relation between the state and the people than that which had obtained in the Soviet Union. Cuba's survival as a socialist country points to the way in which it continues to show the way forward not as a model, in the sense of a universal model whose paradigm could be imposed elsewhere, but as an example, in the sense of the way Manuel Piñero spoke of Che as 'a great example'.⁵ The broader effects of the Cuban example continue to be felt across Latin America—one thinks particularly for example of recent developments in Brazil—and beyond. Cuba stands for a form of socialism very different from that which obtained in the Soviet Union after the death of Lenin. It shows that socialism can be developed as a process developed by the people themselves from within their own resources, and according to their own needs and priorities. What Cuba has demonstrated is that socialism is an objective towards which a society must move through popular

⁴ Luis 2001, 1—11.

⁵ Piñero 2001, 76.

consensus and debate. One of the things that has distinguished Cuban leaders and intellectuals from the leaders of many other socialist and, just as much, non—socialist countries, is the admission of the possibility of the mistake. ‘The state sometimes makes mistakes’, announces Che, and this honesty is a very evident feature of his writing on the Cuban experiment.⁶ A leadership that can admit that it made mistakes, that does not attempt to rewrite history and thus lose the trust of the people, is a leadership that can learn from experience and allow policy to evolve in a productive way.

7. Another way to think of this would be to say that socialism does not come in ready—made formulas, or forms of organisation and production applicable in a uniform way to all societies, but has to be adapted to the special needs and history of the nation, or, as in Kerala in India, the state within the federal nation. Anyone who claims that socialism cannot work should visit Kerala, the most equitable and relaxed state of India and the one in which wealth is most effectively distributed, and where the literacy rate is at a level comparable to that of Cuba. Kerala is an interesting comparison to make because there socialism has been developed outside the special constraints of the blockade and associated economic and political pressures that Cuba has suffered in the past forty years. Cuba, in that sense, has been a limit case, an exceptional example of what can be achieved even in such difficult circumstances. What Cuba has shown is that socialism is indeed a dialectical process, in which it must transform itself in response to the needs of society at the same time as it transforms that society itself, as well as the people who make it. This dialectical form of socialism was anticipated by Che Guevara in his argument that a change of consciousness with respect to the individual’s relation to society was as necessary for socialism as economic transformation: ‘the revolution is made through man’. The new man and the new woman are inexorably intertwined with the development of a new society. Socialism cannot be imposed from above: it must be produced as an ethical as well as material value from the people themselves. To be successful, socialism requires both objective and subjective conditions—a lesson that for many decades, and even now, socialists all over the world refused to learn.

8. Cuba stands out as the apogee of this transformative popular socialism, in which socialism is produced through a processual dialectic with the economic, material, cultural and ideological needs of the nation. This kind of socialism is not unique to Cuba, even if it has been uniquely successful there. It marks, rather, the particular form of socialism developed in the course of the twentieth century as a part of the anti—colonial and anti—imperial struggles. In my book *Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction* (2001), I argued that the Cuban Revolution should be seen first and foremost within the broad context of the anti—colonial movements, to which it subsequently made decisive contributions, both by direct assistance, as in Angola, and by its outstanding example. In that book, I offer a history of the anticolonial movements of the twentieth century in which I argue that despite all the diversity of the different struggles across the world, with only a few exceptions it was Marxism which provided the theoretical and political inspiration for anti—colonial resistance. While tracing Marx and Engel’s increasing interest in anti—colonial resistance in Algeria, Ireland and elsewhere, I argue that it was Lenin’s *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism* (1917) that constituted, and remains, the

⁶ Guevara 1997, 199.

founding text for anticolonial and postcolonial theory, and, it might be added, contemporary theories of globalisation. The great strength of Marx, as interpreted by Lenin, was that he offered a discourse of liberation, and the end of the exploitation of man by man, that could be translated across the continents into the specific situation and practices of particular struggles. The key move of anticolonial theory was to facilitate an articulation of the universal principles of Marxism to the local, vernacular conditions, whether it be that of Mao Tse Tung in China, the African socialism of the Senghors, Cabral and Nyerere, or the transculturation of Marxism to the conditions of Latin America by Mariátegui, Castro and Guevara.

9. Postmodern theorists have claimed that postmodernism involves the death of universals and the espousal of singularities, as if these things were mutually contradictory. Socialism has always offered a politics and a political language that allowed people from different parts of the world and from different societies to focus on common aspirations and aims. This universal ideal, however, does not become universal as a practice until it is translated into the particular language and culture of individual societies. In this second move, initiated by Lenin's concept of a universal Bolshevik model which could respond dialectically to the conditions of particular colonial situations, socialism has typically been allied with the forms of local nationalism: Cuba, for example, has developed a Cuban counterpoint of Marx with Martí. Nationalism too, it could be argued, is a universal language: but unlike socialism, once it is embodied in the language of a particular nation, at which point it no longer speaks a common language of aspiration and ethical values. Nationalism on its own merely replicates individualism at a national level. Its continuing universal validity after it has been adapted to the local is one reason why socialism always subsumes nationalism, rather than vice versa.

10. In Europe and elsewhere, this alliance of socialism with the principles of national self-determination has historically been regarded with some suspicion, and 'Marxist—Nationalism' has typically been regarded as one of the deviant aberrations of socialism in the so-called Third World. My argument is the reverse of this: that outside Europe and the USSR, the theoretical practices of the anti-colonial movements were a good deal more innovative, forging a vision of socialism in relation to the specific society to which socialism was being adapted, translating the universal into the idiom of the local. Where socialism has been developed successfully, it has always, as in Cuba, been developed from within. To that extent, Cuba generated a model for revolutionary practice antithetical to the Comintern model which assumed that in all cases a vanguard party could create a dictatorship of the proletariat from above, or to the comparable US assumption that, as Fidel Castro put it in the 'Second Declaration of Havana' in 1962, Cuba exports its revolution like just another commodity in the world market:

11. In their sleepless merchants' and usurers' minds there is the idea that revolutions can be bought, sold, rented, loaned, exported and imported like some piece of merchandise.⁷

12. Cuba stands for something that may indeed be exportable, but it is not exportable as a commodity. What Cuba has achieved is, to use Fernando Ortiz's suggestive term, a transculturation of Marxism that has enabled it to develop a model for a socialism for the twenty-first century, a socialism that has come not from above but from below, a

⁷ Castro 1972, 144.

socialism that grew in response to local conditions in the course of revolutionary struggle, a socialism founded on an ethics of humanity committed to the end of the exploitation of man by man. If Cuba stands for justice for the oppressed of the earth, its success in surviving into the twenty—first century means that it has a further role to play, even while it stands as an example and makes real the dream of a possibility available to all. For Cuba is also the home of an international socialist movement, that of the Tricontinental.

13. In historical terms, Cuba was the fulcrum for a decisive moment in the development of a distinct third—world socialism. From January 3—16th 1966, it held the first conference of solidarity of African, Asian and American peoples, known as the Tricontinental. There had already been the famous Bandung Conference of 1955 that had initiated the non—aligned movement between the peoples of Africa and Asia, who at that moment were still very much in the thick of the process of throwing off the yoke of colonial rule. In recent years, the work of the Tricontinental has tended to be overshadowed by the earlier Bandung Conference of 1955, which has, in the West, no doubt for ideological reasons, acquired greater symbolic capital. The Tricontinental, however, represented a decisive development of that movement, for two reasons. In the first place, it brought together all three continents of the South, uniting them and their interests in a common perspective and position vis—à—vis the overdeveloped world. In the second place, while those engaged in anticolonial struggles had developed alliances across colonial—national boundaries, and developed ideological formations such as pan—Africanism to counter the fragmentations of colonial rule, and while the Comintern of the Third International Congresses of the 1920s had developed an international organisation to promote resistance to colonial rule, there had never been an international organisation dedicated to the resistance of colonialism and imperialism based in and organised from the third world itself. The effect of the Tricontinental was to establish an alliance that brought together the anticolonial struggles of Africa and Asia with the anti—imperial movements of Latin America. This joining together was mediated at that time by the worldwide fight against imperialism represented by the American intervention in Vietnam, where an anti—colonial war against the French had been superseded by an anti—imperial war against the US.

14. While Latin America had, for the most part fought its anti—colonial battles in the nineteenth century, by the same token it was first to encounter the postcolonial reality of neocolonialism, of the imperialism by indirect rule that started with the Monroe Doctrine. It was the Tricontinental which brought together not just the three continents of the south, but also the two different time—schemes of the postcolonial world: the newly liberated and the about—to—be—liberated, with the long—time liberated nations which were struggling for the second liberation of establishing true national sovereignty and autonomy. It was the Tricontinental that focused on anti—colonial struggles across the world in the 1920s, initiated an overall framework for globalised struggle, and for the positive form of globalisation of which Fidel Castro has spoken, a real ‘proletarian internationalism’ of a globalisation of solidarity between the human family, for ‘a world that is really for all, without hunger or poverty, without oppression or exploitation, without humiliations or contempt, without injustice or inequalities, where everyone might live in full moral and material dignity, in true liberty’.⁸ In affirming these values, the Tricontinental positioned itself firmly against those forces in the world that sought to impose forms of domination and exploitation on

⁸ Luis 2001, 289.

peoples of the earth. The particular sentiments of the 1966 Tricontinental, and its commitment to wars of liberation, were developed in the context of the world of Che Guevara, Frantz Fanon and of Ho Chi Minh. Although the mode of violent revolution as the mode of liberation necessary for that era may have passed with them, the condition of global imperialism of which Che speaks in his famous 'Message to the Tricontinental' of April 1967 seems today more contemporary than ever. Che writes: 'Everything seems to indicate that peace ... is again in danger of being broken by some irreversible and unacceptable step taken by the United States'.⁹

15. A little earlier, Che had commented: 'In focusing on the destruction of imperialism, it is necessary to identify its head, which is none other than the United States of North America'.¹⁰ Today, in the United States itself, a different argument is being proposed, even on the left. In their recent book, *Empire*, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri claim that 'The United States does not, and indeed no nation—state can today, form the center of an imperialist project. Imperialism is over'.¹¹ The book has become a best seller in the US. No doubt it has been comforting for people there to believe that the US today is only defending the interests of the whole world. Hardt and Negri would never have made that claim, however, if they had lived in Cuba. History may be over for Fukayama, imperialism for Hardt and Negri, but if you stand on the ground in Cuba looking towards the prisoners from Afghanistan from so many countries held without reference to international law at the Guantánamo naval base, if you look towards the skies in Baghdād, if you stand in Kabul or in Gaza, you will see the continuing history of the same imperialism against which Che fought being played out before your eyes.

16. For many years, OSPAAAL through its publications has been the major organ of radical third world perspectives on world politics. It was the Tricontinental that first brought the political perspectives of anti—colonial and anti—imperial struggle together in a common project through its conferences and the international links developed through them, and through its publications, the *Tricontinental Bulletin*, which charted the struggles of peoples around the world in Vietnam, Southern Africa, and Palestine, and through its theoretical organ, *Tricontinental* bimonthly,

17. It was the *Tricontinental* journal which for the first time brought together the political perspectives of tricontinental radical thinkers under a single framework, and to that extent was the first example of the formal bringing together of a body of political and theoretical writing which, in many parts of the world, has now also become known as 'postcolonial theory'. I have argued that the real origins of contemporary postcolonial theory can be found in the work of the Tricontinental. Given the problems of the term, 'postcolonial' – starting with the question of whether colonialism is really over – I have also suggested that such theory might better be termed, simply, 'tricontinentalism'. This would emphasise the formal inclusion of Latin America, and in doing so also allow it to make a political identification with the work of the Tricontinental which should be considered as central to any sense of what postcolonialism involves. In the past twenty years, postcolonial theory has developed its own specific theoretical trajectory, much of which has involved analysis

⁹ Guevara 1997, 325.

¹⁰ Guevara 1997, 324.

¹¹ Hardt and Negri 2000, xiii—xiv.

of the subjective and cultural conditions and effects of colonialism and its aftermath. What is now required is a return to the commitment to social and political transformation derived from the 1966 Havana conference that the Tricontinental first established and which it has been developing over the past forty years.

18. It has not been customary in the past to make this link between postcolonial theory and the work of the Tricontinental. It seems extraordinary that the work of the Tricontinental has received so little attention in a field that is so resolutely focussed on many of the same issues and draws on the same body of political and theoretical work. Extraordinary until you remember that the Tricontinental journal is often inaccessible in the US where much counter—cultural postcolonial work is carried out, usually by peoples of diasporic origin. Even in Britain, it is not easy to find copies—I am lucky that my own library at Oxford has an (incomplete) set, but even that stops at 1980. Given this situation, I would like now to take the opportunity of trying to develop further such an articulation between the tricontinental and the postcolonial. In practical terms, this might involve a project of producing a volume that includes the most significant essays from the *Tricontinental* magazine, so that its work could be made more widely available in the west. At a more theoretical level, in what remains of this paper, I would like to consider further the question of the relation of the postcolonial to the tricontinental, and how links between them might be augmented and developed in productive directions.

19. Like postcolonialism today, anticolonialism was a diasporic production, a revolutionary mixture of the indigenous and the cosmopolitan, of situated local knowledges combined with universal political principles, constructed through international networks of party organisations, political contacts between different revolutionary organisations, and personal contacts between activists, generating common practical information with political and intellectual influences. The international structure of the anti—colonial movements helped to construct configurations of intellectual and cultural resistance, a huge production of new forms of knowledge, new epistemologies, that flourished alongside anti—colonial political practice and material forms of resistance. My argument has been that postcolonial theory today is fundamentally the product of that anti—colonial, anti—eurocentric political knowledge and experience and its construction of a non—European counter—modernity. ‘Postcolonialism’ also represents a name for the intrusion of this radically different tricontinental epistemology into the academy, the institutional site of knowledge, which remains dominated, for the most part, by western criteria of what constitutes legitimate and authorised knowledge. If its academic formation looks back to Edward Said’s *Orientalism* published in 1978, its theoretical and political identification goes back to the work of Frantz Fanon and Che Guevara. Through its interest in Fanon, postcolonial theory has always identified with a central feature of tricontinental theory that distinguishes the socialist tradition of Cuba: the articulation of its critique of objective material conditions with detailed analysis of their subjective effects, and the realisation that objective material conditions can only be transformed in the context of ‘the ultimate and most important revolutionary aspiration: to see man liberated from his alienation’.¹²

¹² Guevara 1997, 205.

20. In 1961, Fanon spoke of a revolutionary anti—colonialism in the name of ‘the damned’ (*Les damnés de la terre*).¹³ In the same year, in a Cuban contrapuntal gesture, Che Guevara spoke of the Cuban revolution as ‘a revolution with humanist characteristics. It is in solidarity with all the oppressed peoples of the world’.¹⁴ Oppressed but no longer damned and now resisting: in both cases, what was distinctive was the global reach of the political category: the wretched *of the earth*, the oppressed peoples *of the world*. A fundamental global solidarity between ‘the oppressed’ forms the basis of tricontinental politics and epistemology, a solidarity instantiated at the great Havana Tricontinental of 1966. The revolutionary politics of the Tricontinental were to break out across the world in the following year. Historians have never really quite been able to come to terms with 1968, a global revolutionary eruption that did not only operate in the more mainstream political domain of other revolutionary moments. This was because the revolution was epistemological as well as political, and it was epistemological in order to be truly revolutionary. If imperialism was, as Edward Said has suggested, a knowledge—producing as well as a more formal political project, then 1968 signalled the moment of the epistemic break, when the dominant form of western knowledge, which had increased its homogeneity in a virtually uninterrupted development for the past two hundred years, was broken by the intrusion of different knowledge—formations that were the product of the anti—colonial movements. ‘Postcolonialism’ can be identified as one subsequent development of these differently positioned forms of knowledge. Postcolonial theory operates within the historical legacy of Marxist critique on which it continues to draw but which it simultaneously transforms according to the precedent of the greatest tricontinental anticolonial intellectual—politicians. In that sense, the foundations on which it draws remain very close to those with which the Tricontinental has identified and which it has elaborated: Cabral and Senghor, Castro and Guevara, Césaire and Frantz Fanon, Mao and Ho Chi Minh.

21. If the history of the nineteenth century involved the imperial appropriation of the world, the history of the twentieth century witnessed the peoples of the world taking power and control back for themselves in the history of colonial liberation. That history did not end with Bandung in 1955. It was consolidated by the articulation of the anticolonial and anti—imperial movements at the first Conference of the Organization of Solidarity of the Peoples of Africa, Asia and Latin America at Havana in 1966. The postcolonial, as I have argued, would do better to position itself not from Bandung but from the Tricontinental, which marked the initiation of a global alliance of the three continents of Africa, Asia and Latin America against imperialism. Today that global alliance’s resistance to imperialism is all the more necessary given the imperial dominance of the USA which has only grown more hegemonic in the past forty years.

22. The scope of much work in postcolonialism, as a body of knowledge positioned against Eurocentric discourses, has been very broad, and it would be foolish to claim that it involves a single theoretical or even political framework. Some of it in the USA has been too exclusively concerned with local identity politics, or with aestheticised issues of interest only to diasporic elites who have evident little concern for material inequality in the world today. Nevertheless, the strongest work that has emerged in that field undoubtedly

¹³ Fanon 1961.

¹⁴ Guevara 1997, 229.

promulgates a radical socialism in its politics, and its attraction for many has been that in a time when, in the west at least, neo—liberal politics have subsumed almost all available positions, it represents a powerful counter—discourse that stands for universal justice and equality. For some on the left, its deviance from the narrow way of European Marxism represents a deviancy and a heresy: this is probably not surprising when we consider the long—standing eurocentrism of much of the European left.

23. In the pursuit of its goals, postcolonial theory comprises a related set of perspectives, juxtaposed against each other. It incorporates issues that are often the preoccupation of other disciplines and activities, particularly to do with the position of women, of development, of ecology, of social justice, of socialism in its broadest sense. Above all, postcolonialism seeks to intervene, to force its alternative knowledges into the power structures of the west as well as the non—west. It seeks to change the way people think, the way they behave, to produce a more just and equitable relation between the different peoples of the world. It disturbs the old order of the world. It threatens privilege and power. It refuses to acknowledge the superiority of western cultures. It demands equality and well being for all human beings on this earth.

24. It could be argued that my suggestion that ‘postcolonialism’ would be better renamed ‘tricontinentalism’ is inappropriate in so far as its relation to Cuban socialism remains relatively tangential at the present moment beyond their common intellectual and political foundation. This is an alliance which I would wish to forge and seek actively to develop – certainly to the benefit of postcolonialism as a politicised body of knowledge, and also, I would hope, to the project of the Tricontinental itself. I would also argue that in today’s world, where a broad swathe of global social movements are working energetically to counter different facets of imperialism, that the Tricontinental should be accepted as the overall international body through which the social movements on the left coordinate their struggles. Given their counter—cultural work in many different societies at this time, the time is right, I would argue, for postcolonial theorists to affiliate themselves to the Tricontinental, and to position their theoretical work in relation to its own. Hardt and Negri claim again that today’s political struggles are ‘always already old, outdated, and anachronistic ... because they cannot communicate, because their languages cannot be translated’.¹⁵ OSPAAAL through its historic activities and *Tricontinental* magazine has provided a forum where such struggles have been translated, and articulated with each other, for nearly fifty years. The time has now come to return to the source, to review that achievement and to create alliances with contemporary struggles that often operate in isolation across the wildernesses of the imperial landscapes of the world.

25. Che asks: ‘What is the role that we, the exploited of the world, must play?’ The tricontinental perspective, definitively outlined in Che’s ‘Message to the Tricontinental’, needs now to be developed for the conditions of contemporary global imperialism. In the situation which we all face in the world today, our responsibility is to reinvoké the anti—imperial politics, the socialist objectives of justice and equality for all, and the political commitment of the Tricontinental. We need, in other words, to go back to the foundations from which, historically, postcolonial critique was first generated. It is time for us to return, with Che, to the Tricontinental.

¹⁵ Hardt and Negri 2000, 56.

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