

Guerrilla war and hegemony: Gramsci and Che

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ABSTRACT: *La guerra de guerrillas* is one of the most known of Che Guevara's works. Providing a political-ideological analysis of this book, I aim to demonstrate that Che Guevara should not be considered only a man of action, but also a political thinker and theorist. To analyze the book, I will use the Gramscian concepts of hegemony and War of Manoeuvrer/War of Position as an interpretative framework.

KEYWORDS: Guevara. Guerrilla. Gramsci. Hegemony. War of Manoeuvre/War of Position.



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RESUMO: *A guerra de guerrilhas* é uma das obras mais conhecidas de Che Guevara. Oferecendo uma análise político-ideológica do livro, pretendo demonstrar que Che Guevara não deve ser considerado apenas um homem de ação, mas também um pensador e teórico da política. Para analisar o livro, usarei os conceitos gramscianos de hegemonia e guerra de movimento/guerra de posição como uma moldura interpretativa.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Guevara. Guerrilha. Gramsci. Hegemonia. Guerra de movimento/guerra de posição.

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RECEBIDO EM: 12/05/2017

APROVADO EM: 20/12/2017

1 INTRODUCTION

The one hundredth anniversary of the Russian Revolution is an appropriate moment to reflect on its repercussions on the world and, more specifically, on Latin America. Latin America was profoundly influenced by the October Revolution during the lifespan of the Soviet Union but, differently from Eastern Europe or the former USSR, in Latin America the US victory in the Cold War did not mean capitulation and obeisance to the dominant capitalist ideology. Because of profound historical reasons, one hundred years after the Russian Revolution Latin America obstinately refuses to conform to Western ideological dogmas, and expresses its opposition in a variety of forms. Among the long-term consequences of the October Revolution in Latin America, it is impossible to overemphasise the importance of the Cuban Revolution and the influence of its two main leaders, Fidel Castro and Ernesto “Che” Guevara.

Ernesto Guevara is today to many a pop icon, and his image can be found reproduced on a number of products, just as any of the latest Hollywood actors.¹ His mythical figure, which became an icon across the world from the 1960s, and even more so after his death, is often associated with that of a disinterested revolutionary, an action man, a restless freedom fighter ready to give his life for any people he thought needed his help, as eventually happened in Bolivia in 1967. This widespread image clashes strongly with the idea that Guevara might indeed have been an intellectual, a political thinker and theorist, apart from a *guerrillero* with the machine gun always at hand. In this article I will provide a political and ideological analysis of Guevara’s book *La guerra de guerrillas* using the Gramscian concepts of hegemony and of war of manoeuvre/war of position as an interpretative framework. By doing this, I aim to demonstrate that Che Guevara should not only be considered a guerrilla leader, but also a thinker and an ideologue.

¹ For the fortune of Che Guevara’s figure even out of politics, see Casey (2009).

2 CHE A THINKER?

Hugo Troncoso argues that Guevara can be indeed be defined an intellectual, though a particular one, who unites intellectual and practical – military – activity (TRONCOSO, 2004). Michael Löwy, on the other hand, summarises Che Guevara's thought in the definition of "revolutionary humanism," a special humanism which requires deep care for all peoples of the world and direct intervention in their emancipation (LÖWY, [1997?]). Though Guevara was a Marxist-Leninist, we should not forget that the Cuban Revolution led by him and Castro, as the most successful and enduring sovereign struggle in Latin America, was rooted in anticolonial, Afro-Cuban and labour struggles from the 1700s. Guevara and Castro were certainly influenced by older Latin American thought, like that of the Cuban intellectual José Martí,² and they inevitably influenced each other during their years of guerrilla and of rule together.³ Guevara was also aware of the thought of the Cuban Communist Julio Antonio Mella, who integrated Martí with Marx, and he de facto developed an independent economic thought while he served as minister of Industry.⁴ Guevara's attempt to develop a Marxist theory apt to Latin American conditions also shows similarity with the thought of another great Latin American Marxist, the Peruvian José Carlos Mariátegui,⁵ though I could not find any direct references to Mariátegui in Che's writings, nor is he in Löwy's list of authors read by Guevara (LÖWY, 1973).

The role of Che Guevara as a *guerrillero* is well known, and clearly his strategic contribution to the Cuban Revolution was crucial for its final victory. His booklet *La guerra de guerrillas*⁶ is equally famous because he synthesised there the experience he

2 See Martí (2005).

3 For a recent, original account of Fidel Castro's thought in English see: Jayatilleka (2007).

4 Helen Yaffe from the London School of Economics recently published a thorough account of Guevara's economic thought and practice while he was minister of Industry, and demonstrated that his thought had enduring consequences on Cuban economy up to the present day (YAFFE, 2009).

5 About Mariátegui's marxism, see Selfa (2017) and Mariátegui (2007).

6 Throughout this article I will always refer to the book as reproduced in Guevara (1977).

acquired during the Cuban Revolution, trying to present more general lessons for the success of a guerrilla movement in a Latin American country. In the analysis of *La guerra de guerrillas* which I present here, I argue that this booklet should not merely be considered a guerrilla manual. The book contains in fact much practical information on how one should organise a guerrilla movement, but that part of the book will not be the focus of this article.

Analysed with care, *La guerra de guerrillas* shows Guevara's ideas on the guerrilla war as a *political* movement, and as a war which is at the same time a war of manoeuvre and a war of position (in Gramscian terms) adapted to Latin American conditions which should enable a revolutionary political movement to gain hegemony over the population (as we shall see later, specifically over the peasant population first, then over the urban). I borrow the terms "hegemony" and "war of manoeuvre/war of position" from the thought of the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci, as they are some of his most important contributions to Marxist thought, and they are in fact strongly linked. Since I will use them as an interpretative framework to read Guevara's booklet, these related concepts require explanation.⁷

For Gramsci, "hegemony" is part of a dichotomy which includes the other important concept of "dominance." The two terms are absolutely not the same: "hegemony" is a form of cultural, political direction/monopoly over the masses – Gramsci sometimes even identifies "hegemony" with "democracy" (GRAMSCI, 1975) - while "dominance" implies a given power's coercive means in order to keep in the saddle. Interestingly, Gramsci claimed that Marx had theorized this concept before him, and that Lenin had further elaborated and applied it. In Marx "the ethical-political aspect of politics or the theory of hegemony and consensus is shortly contained, apart from the aspect of force and economy" (GRAMSCI, 1975, p. 1056) and "the theorization and the realization of hegemony made by Ilici [the word used for Lenin in the *Notebooks*] was [...] a great event" (GRAMSCI, 1975, p. 1315). Evidently, Gramsci thought that Lenin had successfully used this concept and practice to achieve power in Russia.

⁷ A good explanation of the concept of hegemony is in Cospito (2011).

As Gramsci says in his *Quaderni*: “There can and must be a ‘political hegemony’ even before going to the government and one cannot count only on power and on the material force it gives to exert political direction or hegemony” (GRAMSCI, 1975, p. 41). As we shall see, that is exactly what Che Guevara advocates in his *Guerra de guerrillas*: Guevarian guerrilla war implies both a “war of manoeuvre” (the military organisation of the revolution) and a “war of position”, that is a long work of political preparation and of “hegemony-gaining”.⁸ As Gramsci clarifies, “hegemony” can also be defined as “a combination of force and consensus which balance each other, without force surpassing consensus too much, but it appears supported by the consensus of the majority” (GRAMSCI, 1975, p. 59). In a way, as I will argue, Guevara’s booklet is precisely about reaching that majority through cultural and propaganda means, which are of course buttressed by armed action.

Certain Gramscian interpreters may disagree with my intent to syncretise Guevarian guerrilla war with Gramscian hegemony. In fact, for decades Gramsci’s thought in the *Prison Notebooks* and especially his concept of hegemony was interpreted as a radical breach with Marxism-Leninism, meaning that for Gramsci armed struggle was no more viable nor advisable, and therefore different, softer versions of political struggle were needed. This view certainly gained much popularity because of its political influences, but is deceptive. It ignores the obvious fact that as a convict Gramsci was writing under censorship and under enormous pressure, so it is hardly surprising that in the *Notebooks* he did not mention military means together with struggle for hegemony. All the *Notebooks* are in code, and to be seriously assessed they need to be read together with Gramsci’s journalistic writings, where he was freer (though never completely free). Even a very superficial confrontation of this kind shows that Gramsci’s thought can hardly be defined the thought of a pacifist or a Liberal, and that is why the comparison with Guevara is founded (BIANCHI; MUSSI, 2017).

⁸ For an in-depth analysis of Gramscian war of manoeuvre and war of position and a discussion on its origins, see Egan (2014).

Gramsci uses the concept of “war of position” sometimes as a synonym for “hegemony” (GRAMSCI, 1975, p. 973) sometimes as a means to reach that hegemony. “War of position demands enormous sacrifices from endless masses of population; therefore an unheard of concentration of hegemony is necessary” (GRAMSCI, 1975, p. 802) to win this kind of war, storming a “powerful system of fortresses and earthworks” (GRAMSCI, 1971, p. 233). The similarity between Guevarian guerrilla war and this Gramscian term is all too obvious: I therefore argue that this Gramscian concept can be useful to re-interpret Guevara’s *La guerra de guerrillas*. As an appendix to his *The Marxism of Che Guevara*, Michael Löwy (1973) presents a useful list of works which are known to have been read by Che Guevara. Marx, Lenin, Stalin, Mao and Giap are present, but Gramsci is nowhere to be found. However, oral sources indicate that Gramsci was translated and published in Cuba, and that Guevara did read him, though *after* writing *La guerra de guerrillas*. Interestingly, Aurelio Alonso, from the Cuban Marxist journal *Pensamiento Crítico*, once told the Cuban scholar Antoni Kapcia that “Che was Gramscian without knowing it.”⁹ In fact, the gist of Guevara’s thought as presented in *La guerra de guerrillas* is so reminiscent of Gramsci’s understanding of hegemony and war of manoeuvre/war of position, that I dare use these concepts as an interpretative framework.

3 THE GUEVARIAN CONCEPT OF GUERRILLA WAR: A WAR OF MANOEUVRE/WAR OF POSITION TO REACH HEGEMONY

By way of introduction to my analysis, it is important first to point out that from the beginning of *La guerra de guerrillas* Guevara (1977) makes clear that this book was born out of the Cuban Revolution and of the guerrilla war on the Sierra Maestra. References to concrete examples and experiences of the Cuban revolutionary struggles are frequent, though Guevara (1977) often warns that local circumstances must be taken into consideration and that the Cuban example is not a blueprint to be followed

9 I am particularly grateful to Antoni Kapcia for pointing this out to me.

blindly everywhere. At the outset, he makes clear that the Cuban Revolution had demonstrated three main elements which were crucial for all Latin America and which were the basic underpinnings of his theory.

Firstly, Guevara (1977) argues that the organised people could win a war against a regular army. The second point is about the importance of the insurrectionary *foco* ("focus"): he argues that not all the conditions for a liberation war must necessarily be present from the beginning. He instead argues that it is the insurrectionary *foco* which can bring them about. Thirdly, he argues that in Latin America the battlefield for social revolution must be the countryside. Che's famous voluntarism is clearly visible in his first point: a regular army is by definition better armed, equipped and trained than a guerrilla movement, but the experience of the Cuban Revolution showed him that the army could be overcome. The initial guerrilla army would with time become a regular army (GUEVARA, 1977). The concept of insurrectionary *foco* is crucial in Che's framework, as he sees the revolutionary guerrilla war as a catalyst, a progressive political movement which can create through its course the conditions of its success, if they were not present from the beginning. This Guevarian concept is the absolute negation of a mechanical and dogmatic interpretation of Marxism.

Che Guevara's conclusion that the successful battlefield for a liberation movement in Latin America is the countryside is also worth analysing. Néstor Kohan (2007) argues that Guevarismo is an application of Marxism to the conditions of Latin America, and the importance Guevara gives to the countryside and peasants is the best proof of this. In doing so, Guevara departs from the most orthodox Marxist tradition, according to which the real revolutionary class is the factory proletariat, while the peasants, stuck in the "idiocy of rural life" are like a sack of potatoes not even able to represent themselves. However, Guevara argues, the masses of the exploited in Latin America and in other underdeveloped countries were to be found in the countryside, and the countryside should have therefore been the starting point for the revolutionary movement, from which it could finally reach the cities through the weapon of the general strike.

The guerrilla, Guevara says, is an “agrarian revolutionary”, who “interprets the desires of the large peasant mass to be master of the land, master of its means of production, of its animals, of everything it has longed for throughout the years” (GUEVARA, 1977, p. 34). “The economic base” of the struggle is “the aspiration to land ownership” (GUEVARA, 1977, p. 34). According to Guevara (1977), an ideal is needed to carry out a revolutionary struggle in the countryside:

This ideal is simple, straightforward, without bigger aspirations, and, in general, it does not go very far, but it so firm, so clear, that for it you give your life without the least hesitation. It is, in almost all cases, the right to have a piece of one’s own land to work it and to enjoy fair social treatment. (GUEVARA, 1977, p. 67 – 68).

“Among the workers,” however, that ideal entails “to have a job, to receive a suitable salary and also fair social treatment” (GUEVARA, 1977, p. 67 – 68). As Gramsci (1975, p. 461) said, “hegemony is political, but also and especially economic”. Going to the context of guerrilla war, the ideological-economic base of the struggle is not only of utmost importance to reach popular support but, as we shall see later, certain basic economic activities initiated and/or favoured by the guerrilla movement – land redistribution, workshops – also contribute in gaining support, for they show the present and future sustainability of the new political-economic order. Apart from peasants and urban workers, however, the success of the revolutionary struggle may need the co-option of very different social strata. For example, Guevara (1977, p. 90) argues that “traders, professionals, and even priests” could be used as spies.

Here, a comparison between the contexts of the Cuban and of the Russian Revolution is in order. In fact, in spite all the differences between the enormous Russian Empire and a small Caribbean island, the revolutionary processes in the two countries shared one similarity: the important role of the peasantry. Russia by the end of World War I was a country whose population was no less than 80% peasant, with a very small factory proletariat concentrated in

a few main cities. This factory proletariat certainly had a role in the triumph of the revolution.¹⁰ However, the success of the revolution would have been unlikely without the passive acquiescence – more rarely the active support – of the peasantry. Lenin's decree on land sanctioned the autonomous redistribution of land that the peasants had already been carrying out, thus sealing an uneasy "alliance" with the countryside (*smychka*). It was through this politically skilful concession to the "petty bourgeois" instincts of the Russian peasantry that Lenin secured the survival of the revolution. In his theory, Guevara is calling for a similar conception: the longing for agrarian reform of the Cuban *campesinos* was the driving force which could trigger the revolution. I do not know if Guevara knew in detail this characteristic of the Russian Revolution, but this similarity is nonetheless noteworthy.

Here, two more relevant references to Gramsci are worth underlining. Firstly, immediately after the October Revolution Gramsci (1918) wrote a famous article titled "La rivoluzione contro il *Capitale*," where italicising the word "Capital" he meant Marx's book. In this article he shortly underlined the difference between Marx's theoretical assumption according to which the Communist Revolution would have begun in developed capitalist economies and the practice of the October Revolution, since the Bolsheviks took power in a largely peasant and backward country. Gramsci (1918), however, defended the Bolsheviks' choice, arguing that the practical conditions of the given moment justified their going "against" Marx's *Capital*, and therefore criticised a dogmatic interpretation of Marxism. "Facts have gone beyond ideologies" (GRAMSCI, 1918, [no page]), he wrote. This cannot but remind us of Guevara's conviction that social revolution could succeed in Latin America and in the Third World in general, the peasant nature of these countries notwithstanding. Secondly, the necessity of an alliance between the urban working class and the peasantry for a successful social revolution was also underlined by Gramsci, though he had of course the Italian context in mind, in an unfinished, yet important work on the Italian southern

10 See Fitzpatrick (2008).

question (GRAMSCI, 1966). Here we see one more point of similarity between Gramsci and Guevara. Undoubtedly, the Guevarian agrarian strategy was also justified by very concrete technical and military factors, since the perfect location for a guerrilla war could not but be the countryside. In Guevara's theory, cities and urban struggle are not neglected, but rather they come towards the end of the war, as we shall see.

Guevara points out that, in order to be successful, the guerrilla war must be a "mass struggle, [...] a people's struggle" (GUEVARA, 1977, p. 33) of which the guerrillas are only the armed vanguard. Without the support of the majority of the population, a guerrilla movement cannot win. Moreover, he states that the guerrilla is a "social reformer" (GUEVARA, 1977, p. 34). This strong claim accords closely with the role Gramsci gives intellectuals in his *Quaderni* (if we substitute "social reformer" with "intellectual"):

there is not a class independent from intellectuals, but every class has its intellectuals; but the intellectuals of the historically progressive class exert such a power of attraction that, finally, they end up in subordinating the intellectuals of the other classes and in creating an environment of solidarity among all intellectuals. (GRAMSCI, 1975, p. 42).

However, he says:

this phenomenon takes place 'spontaneously' in those periods in which that given class is really progressive, that is it pushes the entire society forward, not only satisfying its existential needs, but continuously enlarging its cadres for a continuous takeover of new spheres of activity. (GRAMSCI, 1975, p. 42).

This last quote explains us the process of the Cuban Revolution gaining allies among other classes during the guerrilla war, as we shall see later. According to Guevara (1977), the guerrilla is not a simple armed civilian, but the bearer of an ideological struggle. S/he should not only strive to increase the ranks of the guerrilla army and to acquire arms and ammunition – important steps of the war of manoeuvre to gain military dominance – but also carry out "mass popular work" (GUEVARA, 1977, p. 39) in the countryside. The

guerrilla should show “moral superiority” (GUEVARA, 1977, p. 46) compared with the oppressing army by building education centres and by spreading revolutionary press. In fact, Paolo Spriano (1958) noted that “hegemony” is also a “political-ethical concept,” since it “assumes the ability of the ‘new Prince’ to become the leader of civil society” (SPRIANO, 1958, p. 541) (“new Prince” is another important Gramscian term that here indicates a political actor fighting for hegemony, though Gramsci arguably meant by this term the Communist Party). The similarity with Gramscian hegemony is striking, for among crucial means for maintaining hegemony Gramsci listed “school activity” and “journalism” (GRAMSCI, 1975, p. 56).

However, Guevara (1977) says that the first and most important education must be received by the guerrillas themselves as soon as they join the movement: “from the very beginning [...] the social meaning” of the struggle should be explained, as well as the guerrillas’ “duties, finally clarifying in their minds and giving them moral lessons which will temper their character” (GUEVARA, 1977, p. 80). Setting positive examples, according to Che, is one of the most important educational strategies: “the leaders must constantly offer the example of a crystalline and selfless life” (GUEVARA, 1977, p. 80). Not that the exchange between the *campesinos* and the guerrillas should be one-way, according to Guevara. On the contrary, the guerrilla leaders could learn a lot from the peasants, and “as a product of this interaction of the guerrilla with his people, a progressive radicalisation arises which accentuates the revolutionary characteristics of the movement and they give it a national dimension” (GUEVARA, 1977, p. 63). A guerrilla war is an agrarian revolution, and “the fighting nucleus of the guerrilla army must be *campesino*”, because the “*campesino* is, evidently, the best soldier” (GUEVARA, 1977, p. 66).

Precisely because the interaction of the guerrillas with the local population is so crucial, Guevara argued that the guerrilla should ideally be a local himself. To build hegemony, “the peasant must be [...] helped technically, morally, economically and culturally” (GUEVARA, 1977, p. 62): ultimately, the peasants will get a positive or negative impression of the guerrillas according to

their behaviour. Sometimes, guerrillas left idle because of lack of weapons could collaborate with the campesinos in agricultural work, and roads, shops and hospitals could be built. The guerrilla movement should do all possible not to impoverish the zone of its operations. Moreover, when the guerrilla movement is sufficiently confident to do so, it will create peasant organisations which will sow “the seed, the oral and written propaganda” (GUEVARA, 1977, p. 103). Che Guevara envisioned that in the first phase of the guerrilla war the rich peasants should be hurt “as little as possible” (GUEVARA, 1977, p. 62). Nevertheless, with the ongoing of the struggle, class contradictions in the countryside would progressively exacerbate and the first revolutionary measures could be taken. Land and property in excess could be redistributed, land owned by enemies of the revolution could be seized and organised in cooperatives.

The guerrilla struggle in itself should be an occasion to practice absolute justice within its own ranks, according to Guevara. This should be firstly done with the distribution of any items from food and clothing to tobacco. From “the last man to the leader everyone must receive the same treatment,” because the “soldiery, very sensitive to justice, measures rations with critical spirit,” and “even the slightest favouritism with anyone shall not be permitted” (GUEVARA, 1977, p. 75). The life of the guerrilla war fosters feelings of “brotherhood” among the comrades, and “beneficial emulations” (GUEVARA, 1977, p. 80) should be promoted. Moreover, even discipline within the guerrilla movement must have “educational characteristics”: the guerrillas should not deal with “games which do not have a social function and which tend to dissolve the morale of the soldiery” (GUEVARA, 1977, p. 77), and alcohol should be prohibited. In the spirit of the guerrilla war being a mass struggle, Guevara favoured widespread sabotage but was sceptical of terrorist methods which, he argued, were not effective and brought dreadful reprisals against the population.

I have so far sketched the general lines of Che Guevara’s concept of revolutionary guerrilla war, which I assimilate to the Gramscian concept of reaching hegemony through war of manoeuvre and war of position. Clearly, what we can see in Che Guevara’s thought

is a fight for military dominance (war of manoeuvre) which goes *pari passu* with the process of gaining hegemony (war of position). In fact, according to Guevara, the two are strongly linked. It is only by continuous, consistent and efficient educational and propaganda work predominantly among the peasants – but, as we have seen, to a lesser extent among urban workers and other sectors of society – that the guerrilla army will gain momentum. It is the ideological success of the movement which enables it to improve from consciousness to self-consciousness. In Gramsci's words:

The consciousness of being part of the hegemonic force (that is political consciousness) is the first phase of a further and progressive self-consciousness, that is of unification of practice and theory [...] That is why [...] the development of the concept-fact of hegemony represented a great 'philosophical' and political-practical progress. (GRAMSCI, 1975, p. 1042).

Moreover, "the science of politics develops in the phase of struggle for hegemony" (GRAMSCI, 1975, p. 473). In Gramscian terms, in order to succeed the guerrilla army needs to become the organic, collective intellectual of the rising peasant masses.

Che Guevara outlines in his book the development of a successful guerrilla war (GUEVARA, 1977), and his narrative may be useful to see step after step the process of hegemony-building. Before even beginning the guerrilla struggle, the small group must undergo "ideological and moral preparations" (GUEVARA, 1977, p. 132) in secrecy, aside from military training. Then in the first, mainly rural phase, the initial small, isolated, and potentially unsuccessful group of *guerrilleros* makes contact with "peasants dispossessed of their land or in struggle to maintain it and with young idealists of other classes" (GUEVARA, 1977, p. 92). The guerrilla army thus becomes more and more popular, and more and more people begin to join it: "the work among the masses" makes "every peasant an enthusiast of the liberation war" (GUEVARA, 1977, p. 92). At the next step of the struggle for hegemony, the guerrilla group is "the head of a large movement with all the characteristics of a small government" (GUEVARA, 1977, p. 92), and as such begins to exert

its prerogatives: justice is administered, laws are sanctioned and taxes are collected. Both the internal and the external front are thoroughly organised. Guevara makes the example of the Cuban guerrilla war, where the guerrillas managed to issue a civil as well as a penal code, and rules for land reform (GUEVARA, 1977, p. 104).

“The work of indoctrination of the peasants’ and workers’ masses, if they [the workers] are close” (GUEVARA, 1977, p. 92-93), continues, and more and more of them are attracted to the cause. “[P]opular organisations of workers, professionals and peasants” have to sow “the seed of revolution in the respective masses, explaining, giving out the publications of the rebellion to read; showing the truth” (GUEVARA, 1977, p. 107). Che Guevara was in fact convinced that “one of the characteristics of revolutionary propaganda must be the truth” (GUEVARA, 1977, p. 107). Schools are also opened to train and politically educate new guerrillas. The guerrilla war is a learning process which, as mentioned earlier, goes both ways: the leaders of the guerrillas learn from the local population and become more experienced through time. Finally, the guerrilla movement penetrates the cities from the countryside until the final victory. Continuing the Gramscian comparison, this last phase recalls the “city of the future” which goes through the marsh of helplessness and smashes the walls of the “old city” conquering it (GRAMSCI, 2011, p. 03 – 06).

But, after having taken power, what has to be done to maintain it? Che Guevara makes clear that the operation of destruction of the old must go hand in hand with that of construction of the new. The enemy regular army must be subject to “systematic destruction” (GUEVARA, 1977, p.133), and so all the institutions of the old regime. The old guerrilla army must be organised in a new way to become a regular one and to be prepared to face possible attacks. The problem is that, according to Guevara, in this phase “thousands of last-hour revolutionaries, good or bad,” join the new army, and they must therefore undergo “accelerated and intensive courses of revolutionary indoctrination” (GUEVARA, 1977, p.134). Che Guevara points out that the “revolutionary indoctrination which must give the necessary ideological unity to the people’s

army, is the basis of national security in the long, and in the short run as well" (GUEVARA, 1977, p.134). This phase might be called the phase of consolidation and defence of the acquired hegemony.

4 ORGANISING THE GUERRILLA FRONT, GAINING HEGEMONY

The chapter of Guevara's book dedicated to the organisation of the guerrilla front is also very useful to see how this process may be interpreted as a war of position for hegemony, and includes subsections on the role women could play in the guerrilla war, and on propaganda and indoctrination (GUEVARA, 1977, p. 95 – 126). Guevara was convinced that women could play a crucial role in a guerrilla war, notwithstanding that fact that "in all our countries, of colonial mentality, there is a certain underestimation" of them which becomes "a real discrimination" (GUEVARA, 1977, p. 107). Apart from being able to carry out all tasks usually reserved for men, according to Guevara, "in rigid fighting life, the woman is a companion who puts in the qualities typical of her sex" (GUEVARA, 1977, p. 107). Women can carry important messages, or even ammunition carefully disguised under their skirts. Apart from more "classical" but nonetheless important tasks like cooking, women could perform good education and propaganda work. In fact, women can "teach basic literacy and even revolutionary theory, to the local *campesinos*, essentially, but also to the revolutionary soldiers" (GUEVARA, 1977, p. 107). Moreover, the "organisation of schools [...] must be done counting fundamentally on women who can instil more enthusiasm into children and enjoy more sympathy of the school population" (GUEVARA, 1977, p. 107 - 108). Women could be good social workers investigating the "economic and social ills" of the zone, and could be crucial in medical assistance, since they have a "tenderness infinitely superior to that of the rough comrade in arms" (GUEVARA, 1977, p. 108).

Not surprisingly, Guevara (1977) dedicates a special section to the role of revolutionary propaganda. The importance of propaganda to attain hegemony and win the guerrilla war is present throughout the whole text, but in this section it is discussed in

more detail. "A whole team and an organisation" (GUEVARA, 1977, p. 118) must be dedicated to propaganda. It must be organised for both the external and internal fronts, though the two sections should be under centralised direction. According to Guevara, propaganda publications should follow the line that "truth, in the long run, results beneficial for the peoples" (GUEVARA, 1977, p. 118). There must be different kinds of newspapers. Apart from general ones, many others must be directed to specific sectors of the population. At least one aimed at the peasants and one aimed at urban workers are needed. The workers' newspaper will be very important because it will motivate them for a general strike when the moment comes. Particular attention to propaganda will help to develop the critical mass which is needed to guarantee hegemony. "The great slogans of the revolutionary movement must be explained" (GUEVARA, 1977, p. 119), and special newspapers can be printed for the soldiers of the regular army. Finally, Guevara argues that radio is possibly an even more important propaganda instrument than the press.

The propaganda which will be most effective, notwithstanding everything, the one which will be made heard most freely in the whole national range and which will arrive at the reason and the feelings of the people, is the oral one via radio. In the moments in which the war fever is more or less beating in each one of the members of a region or a country, the inspiring, inflamed word increases this same fever and imposes it in each one of the future fighters. It explains, teaches, rouses, determines in friends and foes their future positions. (GUEVARA, 1977, p. 119 -120).

Guevara insists that radio propaganda, too, must be based on the fundamental principle of truthfulness: "radio must be ruled by the fundamental principle of popular propaganda, that is, truth; telling the truth is preferable, small it its dramatic dimensions, to a big lie charged with glitz" (GUEVARA, 1977, p. 120). "Doctrinal orientations" must be delivered through the radio together with "practical lessons to the civilian population" and "speeches of the leaders of the revolution" (GUEVARA, 1977, p. 120).

The indoctrination of rebel soldiers is a fundamental part of propaganda work, and Guevara (1977) analyses it together with their more general training. In fact, he maintains that indoctrination must be a crucial part of conscripts' schools. In conscripts' schools, apart from the training for military life, "indoctrination must be done for the most possible time and with the utmost dedication" (GUEVARA, 1977, p. 123). In fact, the new volunteers enlist "without a clear conception of why they are coming, only with totally widespread concepts like on freedom, freedom of the press etc., without any ideological foundation" (GUEVARA, 1977, p. 123). Their ideological education must include surveys of the country's history, together with economic elements and with explanations on why determined historical actors react to injustice in particular ways. Reading must be encouraged, especially "progressive readings" (GUEVARA, 1977, p. 124). This kind of training, in Che Guevara's opinion, provides the soldiers with "an internal discipline, which must be entirely justified with reasons" (GUEVARA, 1977, p. 124).

5 DEFENCE OF HEGEMONY

Che Guevara (1977) concludes his book with some considerations on the present and future of the Cuban Revolution. He clarifies that "this national revolution, fundamentally agrarian, but with the enthusiastic participation of workers, people from the middle class and, still today with the support of industrialists, has acquired continental and even world importance" (GUEVARA, 1977, p. 135 – 136). With its victory, the revolution could finally carry out important acts like agrarian reform and the law on mines, which left few doubts about its real nature. Che Guevara notes that, after the revolution, Cuba "assumes the leadership of the anticolonial struggle in America" (GUEVARA, 1977, p. 139). But Guevarian thought goes further: he thought, in fact, that he was living in "the dawn of a new era of the world" (GUEVARA, 1977, p. 140), in which a general revolution would explode from complementary anticolonial struggles of America, Africa and Asia.

Towards the end of the book, Guevara concludes by sketching the possible strategies of attack that US imperialism could implement against Cuba. The first way could be sheer economic terrorism. Another way, which Guevara lucidly envisioned, was the elimination of one or more of the revolutionary leaders: the Castro brothers, and Che himself. The CIA did succeed in killing Guevara in 1967, but was less fortunate with Fidel Castro, since he recently died aged ninety having survived no less than 638 attempts and planned attempts on his life, and having seen off 9 US presidents. Then, direct military aggression was also possible. As we know, this was attempted but with disastrous results for US imperialism at the Bay of Pigs in 1961. Che Guevara was convinced that a possible military aggression should be prevented with mass militarisation and education of the people. Again we see the vital role of political education to maintain hegemony. “A patient and complete education” of the masses was needed:

education which is born or has its foundation in the basic knowledge which anyway must be concentrated on the reasoned and true explanation of the deeds of the Revolution. The revolutionary laws must be commented on, explained, studied, in each meeting, in each assembly [...] The contact of the people with politics, that is, the contact of the people with its desires [,] deeds, laws, decrees and resolutions, must be constant. (GUEVARA, 1977, p. 148).

Guevara called for real moral vigilance in this phase, and pointed out that the “cult of work, especially collective work and with collective ends, must be developed [...] Brigades of volunteers who will build bridges, docks or dams, who will build school towns” will be more and more united and will demonstrate “their love for the revolution with their deeds” (GUEVARA, 1977, p. 149). According to Guevara, revolutionary zeal will be the glue which will unite the army with the rest of the population. Quoting Camilo Cienfuegos, Guevara clarifies that the “army is the people in uniform” (GUEVARA, 1977, p. 149).

6 CONCLUSION

The figure and works of Ernesto Guevara were crucial in the development of anti-imperialist struggles in the latter part of the Cold War, and even afterwards. One of the aims of this article was to show that Guevara should not be reduced to a pop icon devoid of meaning, and that Guevarismo still retains a theoretical value today. I argue that Che's life and works reward continuing study. At the same time, I do not maintain that he should be idolised or seen in radical contradiction with other Marxist thinkers and activists because of his being "defeated," similarly to figures like Antonio Gramsci and Rosa Luxemburg. This is indeed the risk Domenico Losurdo warns us of. Talking about Gramsci and Guevara, Losurdo says that they are "two personalities whose thought and whose action presuppose the Bolshevik Revolution and the development of the international Communist movement, [...] decades and decades of decisive world history which took place after Marx's death" (LOSURDO, 2011, p. 26). Losurdo (2011) argues that Gramsci's and Guevara's deeds are unthinkable without Lenin's influence, but Lenin is often ignored by many who profess admiration for Guevara and Gramsci.

Although very different from each other, Gramsci and Che Guevara have in common the fact that they are two defeated in some way, who could not participate in the management of the power sprung by the revolution and who had instead to suffer the consequences of the existing political-social order. Therefore, the martyrdom, and not the political thought and action of these two eminent representatives of the international Communist movement are appreciated, since they refer to an obstinately removed history. (LOSURDO, 2011, p. 26 – 27).

I argue that this is the way in which we contemporaries should proceed in our critical assessment of Guevara's deeds and works. His human and moral lesson cannot be overemphasised, but we should analyse his thought in the light of his deeds and of his ideological predecessors. Che Guevara's legacy is unthinkable without Marx's, Lenin's, and possibly even Mao's thought. In fact,

Guevarismo may be defined as a form of Marxism-Leninism adapted to and used in the conditions of the Third World, especially Latin America.

In this article I have sought to demonstrate that Guevara, who indeed was a man of action, should not be reduced to that. A careful analysis of his book *La guerra de guerrillas* shows that Guevara saw the guerrilla war as a revolutionary struggle for hegemony, to be reached not only through military means but with enormous importance accorded to political and ideological education. The guerrilla army had indeed to become the Gramscian organic, collective intellectual of the whole people in order to succeed in his struggle. In the end, it was supposed to basically fuse with the people itself. Che Guevara has often been gratuitously accused of lack of realism and utopianism. In reality, his works like *La guerra de guerrillas* and his deeds show the exact opposite. His obsession with the popular militarisation of Cuba was dictated by the necessity of defence against US military force. Guevara went to fight in the Sierra Maestra when he was already traumatised by the fate of Arbenz's government in Guatemala, which was overthrown in 1954 in a way for being too democratic. Decades of bloody US-backed upheavals in Latin America have demonstrated that Guevara's concerns were well-founded.

Guevarian thought and practice can be defined as utopian only in the sense the late Eduardo Galeano so aptly explained, that is, only if we metaphorically consider utopia as a figure standing at the horizon which you have to reach by walking. No matter how much you walk, you will never reach her. Galeano answered the question on why one needs utopia by simply saying: you need utopia to walk. Jorge Castañeda felt the need to point out in his biography of Che Guevara that his "ideas, his life and opus, even his example, belong to the past" and that, as "such, they will never be current again" (CASTAÑEDA, 1998). Though his book is a sound research work, he tends to present Guevara as a popular icon merely attached to the 1960s and to 1968 in particular, as a romantic revolutionary whose fight was driven by a psychological (or psychopathological?) longing for martyrdom. In conclusion, Castañeda (1998) argues, today there is nothing of current

importance left by this character. However, Castañeda's account was probably premature. In his article, Michael Löwy ([1997?]) pointed out that Castañeda himself expressed doubts in a 1997 *Newsweek* article whether it would be "really possible to redistribute, with democratic methods, wealth and power, concentrated in the hands of rich and powerful elites, transforming the ancestral social structure of Latin America" (LÖWY, [1997?]). Castañeda titled his article "Rebels Without Causes", therefore comparing Che Guevara to the character interpreted by James Dean in a 1955 film, a tormented adolescent who was in fact a "rebel without a cause". Nevertheless, Castañeda had to admit that we "may discover, by the end of the century [...] that Che Guevara had a point, after all" (CASTAÑEDA, 1997 *apud* LÖWY, [1997?]).

Writing at the end of the 20th century, Löwy points out that "Che Guevara's message, thirty years after his death, is a torch which continues to burn, in this dark and cold end of century" (LÖWY, [1997?]). Paraphrasing Walter Benjamin, he also notes that "the memory of the defeated and assassinated ancestors is one of the strongest sources of inspiration of the revolutionary action of the oppressed" (LÖWY, [1997?]). This is probably truer of Che than of any other figure. In fact, he argues:

In all the revolutionary demonstrations in Latin America of the last years, from Nicaragua to El Salvador, from Guatemala to Mexico, the presence, at times invisible, of 'guevarismo' is perceived. Its legacy appears in the collective imagination of the fighters, as much as in their debates on the methods, the strategy and the nature of the struggle. Che's message can be considered a seed which germinated, during these thirty years, in the political culture of the Latin American left, producing limbs, leaves and fruit. Or like one of the red threads with which the dreams, the utopias, and the revolutionary actions are woven, from Patagonia to the Río Grande. (LÖWY, [1997?], no page).

Writing at the beginning of the 21st century, I cannot but subscribe to the words of Michael Löwy. In the year of the one hundredth anniversary of the October Revolution, a lot of moralising

condemnation is done, and many celebrate the fortunate return to “normality.” History, contrary to the wishes and predictions of the historian and State Department functionary Fukuyama, has refused to end. Today, Che Guevara’s thought has more significance than ever. More precisely, many examples could be made on how Guevarian lessons could be of use in the present-day Latin American situation, but here I will make just two.

In the past years, the “pink tide” had given hope and concrete improvement in the lives of many Latin American peoples. However, one of the main pillars of this Latin American rebirth, the Bolivarian Revolution, is now facing a serious crisis whose final outcomes are still impossible to predict. This impasse certainly had many causes, first of all the economic crisis, but possibly also the death of Hugo Chávez, the leader who personified the revolution and whose charisma and authority were the cement which united the Bolivarian experiment. It is safe to say that the achievements of the Bolivarian Revolution were possible thanks to the strong hegemony it could secure over large sectors of the Venezuelan people. However, recent upheavals in Venezuela have demonstrated that political hegemony can be achieved, but it can also be lost. Venezuela is therefore in front of a very difficult task, since the only way for the country to survive without losing its independence is to reach a new hegemony.

The present situation of Cuba also arises the interest of the world observers. Obviously, the Cuban Revolution has been sentenced to death since its very birth, but it spectacularly managed to survive up to the present day, even going through the difficulties of the Special Period. To many hostile commentators who saw Cuba as nothing more but a personal dictatorship, the fall of the Cuban regime was only a matter of time: once Fidel was dead, Cuba could not but totally embrace capitalism and the disinterested help of its powerful northern neighbour. Things went in a different way, and one of the reasons is that from the very beginning the Cuban Revolution consciously and skilfully avoided the senseless personality cult so typical of other Socialist regimes – notwithstanding Fidel Castro’s attachment to power until he could (JAYATILLEKA, 2007) – and it successfully managed to build a

strong political hegemony. “The next revolution”, that is Cuba’s complete regime-change, has already been predicted (ERIKSON, 2008), but whether or not it will take place, and anyway the kind of change Cuba will undergo, depends on what kind of hegemony Cuban Socialism will be able to build. It would be naïve to think that Cuba is today devoid of problems, but the failures of capitalist restoration in Eastern Europe and in the former USSR should be an important memento not to fall into total renunciation of the Socialist legacy.

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