

## 40 years dead but CHE LIVES

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Sure, Ernesto 'Che' Guevara, the Argentinean-born Cuban revolutionary, will be remembered around the world on 9 October, the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his death - but as what?

A cult figure depoliticised and reinvented as a brand to sell anything from T-shirts to beer mugs and posters, or as an internationalist revolutionary able to inspire a new generation of youth wishing to change the world?

Thirty years after his death Jorge Castañeda, author of *Compañero: The Life and Death of Che Guevara* remarked that: 'Whatever the left might think, he has long since ceased to be an ideological and political figure.' Hardly had the ink dried, when Che the political figure was inspiring the mass anti-capitalist protests of the global justice movement from Chiapas, Seattle, Genoa to Paris, and the hundreds of thousands of activists participating in the World Social Forum. What is more, during the World Social Forum in Caracas Venezuela in 2006, it was difficult to distinguish the banners and flags of Che from the Chávez banners. Clearly the Bolivarian revolution in Venezuela is deeply rooted in the political legacy of Che Guevara.

In fact, Ariel Dorfman, the Chilean writer, was closer to the truth when he wrote in *Time magazine* to commemorate the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Che's death, 'Even though I have come to be wary of dead heroes and the overwhelming burden their martyrdom imposes on the living, I will allow myself a prophecy. Or maybe it is a warning. More than three billion human beings on this planet right now live on less than \$2 a day. And every day that breaks, 40 000 children - more than one every second! - succumb to diseases linked to chronic hunger. They are there, always there, the terrifying conditions of injustice and inequality that led Che many decades ago to start his journey toward that bullet and that photo awaiting him in Bolivia. The powerful of the earth should take heed: deep inside that T-shirt where we have tried to trap him, the eyes of Che Guevara are still burning with impatience.'

Che was killed in Bolivia in an operation of the Bolivian armed forces, supported by the American CIA. As in life, his death amplifies the heroism that has come to inspire millions. The day after his capture, having endured extreme torture, Che's last words to his executioner were: 'I know you have come to kill me. Shoot, coward, you are only going to kill a man.'

Che was not only a heroic fighter, but a revolutionary thinker, with a political and moral project and a system of ideas and values for which he fought and gave his life.

The philosophy underpinning his ideas and politics was a deep revolutionary humanism. For Che, the true Communist, the true revolutionary was one who felt that the great problems of all humanity were his or her personal problems, one who was capable of 'feeling anguish whenever someone was assassinated, no matter where it was in the world, and of feeling exultation whenever a new banner of liberty was raised somewhere else'.

It was in this sense that internationalism was not just an idea but a compulsion that drove him to discard a comfortable life as an exalted revolutionary leader in Cuba and choose the life of the bush and the mountains with the peasants and rural poor in Congo and Bolivia.

It is not just his heroism and internationalism that continues to inspire – what set Che apart from others was his vision of revolution in Latin America. In 1967 he argued that: ‘There is no other change to make: either socialist revolution or the caricature of a revolution.’ In effect, Che freed an entire generation of revolutionaries from the straightjacket of the dogma of stages, i.e. first a national democratic revolution followed by socialist revolution at a later stage.

Che’s appeal lies in the fact that his legacy is above all untarnished by Stalinism. Not only in respect to his critique of stagism, but also in respect of the bureaucratized regimes that called themselves socialist. He saw that one of the main dangers of the model imported from the Soviet Union was the growth of social inequality and the formation of a privileged layer of technocrats and bureaucrats; in this redistributive system ‘it is the managers who profit. You only need to look at the latest project of the German Democratic Republic; the importance, there, of the director’s management, or, even better, the rewards which the director receives for managing.’

No other modern-day revolutionary continues to inspire like Ernesto Che Guevara, chiefly because Che is widely seen as an ideal – the embodiment of self-sacrifice, of struggle for social justice and for an alternative, non-capitalist future.

Jean-Paul Sartre’s famous dictum sums up the reason for Che’s iconic and cult-like status: Che was the most complete man of our age.

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**P.S.**

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