

CHE GUEVARA: A BIRTHDAY MESSAGE

Frei Betto*

Che Guevara would have been 80 years old on June 14th! His activism in our midst ended when he was 39. However they did not manage to kill him. Today he is more alive than he was during the four decades in which he lived. In fact, it is rare for revolutionaries like Mao and Fidel himself to grow old. Many shed their blood early fertilizing the project of a world of freedom, justice and peace: for example Jesus was 33, Marti was 42, Sandino 38, Zapata 39, Farabundo Marti 38.

Enemies must tear their hair out on seeing that Che is more alive today than when they believed they had the power to assassinate ideals. They tried everything to condemn him to oblivion, they dismembered his body and hid the parts in various places, they invented all sorts of lies about him, forbidding his writings to circulate in many countries. A persistent phoenix, Che re-lives in photos, music, theatre spectacles, films, poems, novels, sculptures and academic texts. There is even a beer named after him! His picture, taken from the famous photograph by Korda, occupies the centre of the lounge in the most sophisticated spa in Brazil, the *Unique Garden*.

When they saw that handcuffs cannot imprison symbols nor bullets kill examples, they invented false biographies to try and discredit him. All in vain. Posters of his image are raised even during football games. Not a penny is spent on propaganda to this end. Its only aim is to reflect ideals which made him into a revolutionary. None of this is the result of marketing. They are spontaneous gestures of those who want to make a point emphasising that utopia still lives.

To re-assume the legacy of Che today and to celebrate his 80 years demands that we keep our hearts and sight on the worrying situation of our planet where the hegemony of neo liberalism reigns. Multitudes, particularly young people, are attracted to individualism and not to a community spirit, to competitiveness and not to solidarity, to unmeasured ambition and not to the struggle towards the eradication of poverty.

There is so much talk about the failure of socialism in Eastern Europe and very little about the complete failure of capitalism affecting two thirds of human beings out of the four billion people who live below the poverty line.

Environmental degradation also worries us. If world leaders had listened to Fidel's warnings during Eco-92 in Rio de Janeiro, perhaps the devastation would not have reached the extreme of provoking frequent tsunamis, tornados, typhoons and hurricanes never before seen, apart from global warming, the melting of polar ice caps and the desertification of forests. The deforestation of Amazonia is alarming.

The barrel of oil which costs less than US\$10 at the source already costs more than US\$120 on the market. It is sad to see that large areas of land where food crops could be planted are reserved for the production of ethanol destined to feed the 800 million automobiles which move around the planet and not the 824 million hungry mouths threatened with early death. What can be done regarding a world where financial speculation has supplanted the production of goods and services, where the stock market supposedly serves as a thermometer for human happiness?

Bolivar must be happy with the democratic spring in South America. After the cycles of military dictatorships and neo liberal governments, now the people vote for governments which reject the ALCA (Free Trade Agreement for the Americas) and approve the ALBA (Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas), re-enforce the Mercosul and repudiate the US invasion of Iraq and blockade to Cuba.

What is the best way to celebrate Che's 80th birthday? I believe that the best gift would be to see new generations believing in and struggling towards another world which is possible, with solidarity as a habit and not a virtue, the practice of justice an ethical demand and socialism is the political name for love. To construct a world without environmental degradation, hunger and social inequality!

On the eve of the 50th anniversary of the Cuban Revolution we should all see it more and more not as an event of the past, but as a project for the future.

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Frei Betto has always been active in Brazilian social movements, and has been an adviser to the Church's ministry to workers in São Paulo's industrial belt, to the Church base communities, and to the Landless Rural Workers' Movement (MST).

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