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### **Review/Reseña**

Drinot, Paulo, ed. *Che's Travels: The Making of a Revolutionary in 1950s Latin America*. Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2010.

### **Che's Cottage Industry**

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When Ocean Press published a new translation of Che Guevara's *The Motorcycle Diaries* in 2003, I wondered in a review in the *Hispanic American Historical Review* whether the Che cult had reached the level that justified such attention to one of his minor works. Several movies and many books later, Che-mania shows no sign of abating. I suppose I am as guilty as the next person for contributing to this phenomenon, having authored the introduction to the University of Nebraska Press's 1998 reissue of his *Guerrilla Warfare*, teaching a class on Che at the Movies, and

even being known to wear a Che t-shirt on occasion. But still I wonder whether all of this attention on Che is the most appropriate and useful expenditure of our academic time and political efforts. If we tell ourselves, as Cuban school kids are instructed, to “be like Che,” we also have to ask ourselves whether Che would have spent his time and energy advancing a personality cult. Clearly the answer is he would not have done so.

*Che's Travels* has its roots in a 2006 workshop at editor Paulo Drinot's home institution of the University of Manchester. Drinot's introduction to the volume reads rather like a book prospectus, overstating the need and importance of the collection of essays. He divides the literature on Che into the hagiographical, biographical, and autobiographical, and then proceeds to note a surprising lack of serious scholarship on the man, a statement which is patently untrue. Drinot characterizes the three massive biographies that Jon Lee Anderson, Jorge Castañeda, and Paco Ignacio Taibo published in 1997 as “of differing quality” (18), but the authors in this volume then, as has most of the scholarship on Che since their publication, proceed to rely heavily on them.

The essays in Drinot's *Che's Travels* intend to engage three interconnecting themes: the societies Che encountered in his travels across Latin America in the 1950s, his representations of those societies in his writings, and his subsequent legacy on those societies. As a result, the essays become somewhat formulaic. They use the young, pre-Che's published diaries of two of his trips out of Argentina as a point of departure to talk broadly and from a variety of perspectives about Latin America in the 1950s and then conclude with reflections on Che's return or contributions to that country at a later stage of life.

As an academic exercise, the resulting essays are useful for gaining a deeper understanding of the 1950s, which Drinot identifies as a crucial but understudied decade. Unfortunately, in soliciting essays Drinot also skipped over several countries through which Che traveled, including Ecuador and most of Central America (except Guatemala). These are also exactly the lesser studied countries that historians tend to ignore. The volume thereby misses an opportunity to fill in precisely some of the gaps that it purports to fill to justify its existence.

Eduardo Elena opens the book with an essay on Che's travels in Argentina, underscoring the point that he already had the markings of a vagabond long before he set out on the travels recorded in *The Motorcycle Diaries*. Elena contextualizes these travels with an examination of tourism and migration in Argentina, although unfortunately he muddles the discussion by combining what are really two quite different phenomena. More useful is Elena's interrogation of Che's ambivalent attitudes toward Peronism and how this shaped his later political activism.

Patience Schell compares Che's travels in Chile to those of his contemporaries, including a British couple traveling through the country determined to prove the road-worthiness of their car. Schell's extended discussion on the beauty of Chilean women, something that was also a frequent subject in *The Motorcycle Diaries*, is frankly weird. Even the portrayal of the meeting with the internally exiled communist couple searching for work in the northern Atacama desert through the lens of the wife falls flat as an attempted gendered reading of this experience.

Drinot's own contribution to the volume examines Che's time in Peru. Drinot presents contradictory images of Che's attitudes toward the country's Indigenous peoples, at once seeing them in a paternalistic, essentialist, and perhaps even racist light, while at the same time understanding their struggles and becoming dedicated to their liberation thereby leading to a close association between Indigenous movements and the Marxist left in Latin America. Although *The Motorcycle Diaries* places much emphasis on Che's time at the San Pablo leper colony, Drinot points out that he actually spent more time in Lima with Hugo Pesce, a close associate of the famed Marxist José Carlos Mariátegui. The movie version of *The Motorcycle Diaries* makes a point of showing Che reading Mariátegui's key work *Seven Interpretive Essays on Peruvian Reality*, something that the paper version does not mention. Nevertheless, through the contact with Pesce and his later marriage to the Peruvian exile Hilda Gadea, Mariátegui had a key influence on the subsequent development of Che's ideas. Even though we can see here the stirring of a political consciousness, at this point the primary interests of the pre-political Che largely lay elsewhere.

The most questionably and, thankfully, also the shortest, essay in this volume is that by Malcolm Deas on Colombia. Che did not spend much time in Colombia and left even fewer writings, and as a result Deas has little to say about Che or his legacy for the country. Nevertheless, Deas does not pass on the opportunity to do a real hatchet job on both Che and the Colombian left. Deas asserts, without providing any evidence to support his claim, that the Cuban government doctored his diaries to serve its political interests. From there, he continues into an extended screed against the entire Colombian left. All of this raises the question of why Drinot bothered to include Colombia in this volume to the exclusion of, say, Ecuador.

In a chapter on Venezuela, Judith Ewell returns to themes that several other authors in this volume examine. Although Che was a city boy and spent much of his time on these trips in urban areas, he says little about city life. Rather, he makes disparaging comments about the urban poor while feeling fascination for the “exotic other” of the Indigenous peasant. Particularly in Venezuela with its rapidly urbanizing population, this emphasis seems odd and misplaced. Ewell also notes a common theme of Che's seeming disinterest and even ignorance of Venezuelan politics. In part, this grew out of an expressed opposition to the reformist policies of mainstream politicians such as Rómulo Betancourt who held political power in 1950s Latin America. Ewell also surmises that in addition to Che's young age, his lack of overt anti-imperialist statement and emphasis on the personal rather than the political was because he was at the end of a long journey and simply ready to return home to Argentina. In contrast to Deas, Ewell provides an excellent extended discussion pondering Che's legacy for Venezuela. She interrogates competing interpretations for why he did not join guerrilla movements already underway in 1966 in that country instead of going to Bolivia, and his lasting influence on Hugo Chávez's subsequent government.

In 1953, Che once again left Argentina to travel overland to Venezuela. He never made it. Instead, from Ecuador he detoured to Jacobo Arbenz's Guatemala. After the 1954 coup he went into exile in Mexico where he met Fidel and Raúl Castro and eventually joined them on their Cuban expedition. This trip, published in English in 2001 as *Back on the*

*Road*, is more political than *The Motorcycle Diaries*, and provides the focus of the final three essays in this volume. Che's first stop on this trip was Bolivia, the subject of an essay by Ann Zulawski who finds Che still largely disengaged from the political changes sweeping the country in the aftermath of the MNR revolution the previous year. Zulawski attempts to link his failure to engage miners and peasants in 1953 with his eventual capture and death in that country fourteen years later, but the argument is trite and not convincing. In 1953, Che was still just a young kid looking for adventure rather than a mature, highly politicized, and deeply motivated guerrilla leader.

Cindy Forster's chapter on Guatemala is the most sensitive in the collection, and perhaps this is appropriate because it was in this country where, as a future Nobel Peace Prize winner would say, Che's consciousness was born. More than any other essay in this volume, Forster seamlessly blends Che's experience during the 1954 coup with his later influence on guerrilla movements in that country. Unlike other portrayals, Forster depicts Che as sensitive toward Indigenous identities and supportive and embracing of Maya struggles. Because of this, Forster argues, Che has been well received in Guatemala, even under extremely adverse political conditions. But the Che who activists in Guatemala speak of is not a single heroic individual, but rather is shorthand for a collective struggle and the promises of social justice that a revolution holds forth.

Personally I would have preferred to end the book on the tone that Forster hits, but unfortunately we still have one more country to go before the wanderlust Ernesto becomes the revolutionary Che. It is in Mexico where Che acquired from Cuban exiles the nickname by which he became best known. Cultural historian Eric Zolov frames his time in this final stop as that of a bohemian in the spirit of Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, and William Burroughs, fellow counterculture icons who similarly traveled to Mexico in search of something new. In short, Zolov returns Che to the status of an icon rather than representing an ongoing lived experience.

All of this is not to say that more useful scholarship on Che does not remain to be done. The Che Guevara Studies Center in Havana continues to undertake remarkable work on collecting and publishing his

work, often leading to important and new insights into how his thought evolved and how it might have continued to do so after his death in 1967. For example, Che began to rewrite *Guerrilla Warfare* in light of his debacle in the Congo, which casts his subsequent failure in Bolivia in a new light. Rather than misapplying the lessons he claimed to have learned on the importance of leadership and peasant support in the Cuban revolution, he was continually rethinking and challenging his own ideas on how to make a revolution. As long as we do not leave him on the level of a cultural icon, studying Che can continue to challenge us to think about how best to search for social justice in our world today.