

Book Reviews

Ernesto 'Che' Guevara, *The Motorcycle Diaries: A Journey around South America* (London: Fourth Estate 1996).

Almost thirty years after his untimely death, Ernesto 'Che' Guevara's diaries from a motorcycle trip made in 1951-52 were published in Havana, Cuba. In 1995, Ann Wright's fine translation appeared in England under the imprint of Verso, who produced t-shirts and calendars of the revolutionary eating an ice-cream to announce the book and introduce a new generation to the phenomenon of 'Che.' The book was reviewed by the conservative *Times* ("Easy Rider meets Das Kapital"), by the liberal *Guardian* ("It's true: Marxists just wanna have fun") and by the trade-journal *Bike News* ("Politically-correct revolutionary hero? Perhaps a few years later, but in this account Che Guevara comes over as one of the lads"). The consensus was that this was a "lusty travelogue" which was "free of pomp and full of life" (as the publicists of Fourth Estate put it for their 1996 paperback release). What the publication hoopla missed was the agonized and tortured 23 year-old from a bourgeois family who tried to square his faith in the ideologies of liberalism with the realities of capitalism: the journey, like the 1959 trek through the Sierra Nevada in Cuba, was the chrysalis which produced the 'Socialist Man' who went amongst the peoples of Bolivia in 1966 to create the proletarian revolution in the continental manner of the earlier bourgeois revolutionary, Simon Bolivar.

In 1951-52, 'Che' (which means friend in the patois of Argentina) left his native country in the company of a friend with whom he shared 'La Ponderosa' (the Powerful One), a 500cc Norton motorcycle. They planned to ride from Argentina up the West coast of South America through Chile, Peru, Colombia and finally, Venezuela. The two friends, with their basic medical training complete, left to discover their continent and to explore lives far removed from their own bourgeois families. Many of their encounters reaffirmed the worst elements of their socialization, while others tugged at the contradictions which lurk in the minds of us moderns.

The man who emerges in the diaries is by no means the perfect human being who congeals within himself the noblest hopes and aspirations of our collective civilization. Here is a young man who cheats for wine, who deceives for a ride on a truck, who makes strong prejudicial remarks about the Amerindians and who offers himself up as a sexist pig. Che, brashly, recounts a village dance at which he dances with a young woman who at first appears to want to go outside the hall with Che, but then changes her mind: "I was in no state to listen to reason," Che wrote, "and we had a bit of a barney in the middle of the dance floor, resulting in me pulling her towards one of the doors with everybody watching." (43) Fortunately for the young woman, a strong kick at Che resulted in some confusion which brought the other villagers to her assistance. The incident occurs shortly after Che leaves his fiancée behind in a gust of sentimental poetry of undying love. Both visions of women confirms once again the common denial of full moral equality to women: the Cuban campaigns forced the revolutionaries to reconsider their ideas regarding women, for many of their comrades on the front were women. Communism, as political practice, does not automatically eliminate all that is socially undesirable; rather, to paraphrase Lenin, it insists upon making the various struggles clearer, broader, more open and sharper ("A Caricature of Marxism," October 1916). The struggle for women's equality is a fight for the recognition of the moral equivalence of women and men as well as the attendant fight for economic justice. Che would only

confront these lessons in Cuba amongst a politically-active group of women whose materialist feminism was nurtured by their sacrifices in the struggle. Most reviews of Che's diary avoid the complexities of his development and use such sexist remarks to dismiss entire traditions of political thought and practice. Marxism must continuously acknowledge and relentlessly criticize all forms of sexist ideology and practice. The publication of these diaries offers us an avenue to confront the issues head-on.

The trip proved to be decisive in Che's life, for it was during this journey that he came into contact with the fundamental oppression of the Amerindians at the hands of those South Americans who claim European ancestry. In Chile, amongst the Ayamara, Che felt he could catch an occasional glimpse of what life must have been like prior to the Spanish Conquest. "But the people," he reflected, "are not the same proud race that time after time rose up against Inca rule and forced them to maintain a permanent army on their borders; these people who watch us walk through the town streets are a defeated race. They look at us meekly, almost fearfully, completely indifferent to the outside world. Some give the impression that they go on living simply because it's a habit they can't give up."(77) Che came to understand the depth of the exploitation of the Amerindians in the various mines along the western mountain ranges of Chile and Peru. For the Euro-American masters, the Amerindians were no better than beasts of burden. At one point, Che intervened to relieve the burden of an Amerindian: "there was no sign on his enigmatic face to show whether he appreciated our gesture or not."(108) During these travels, Che was confronted by the labyrinth of capitalism's exploitation: he had not yet come to appreciate the depth of popular unrest and the means for that unrest to lead to social revolution. In a letter to his family from Columbia, he complained of the semi-fascist conditions and exclaimed: "If the Columbians want to put up with it, good luck to them, but we're getting out of here as soon as we can."(144) Not a decade later, Che and his Cuban friends would offer the opposite assessment: it is time to buckle down for a fight.

In the aftermath of the Cuban Revolution (1959), Che wrote an account of the guerrilla warfare which was published as *Episodes of the Revolutionary War* (New York: International Publishers, 1968). After an early debacle, the Granma revolutionaries headed for the Sierra where they lived amidst the peasantry.

Guerrillas and peasants began to merge into a solid mass. No one can say exactly when, in this long process, the ideas became reality and we became a part of the peasantry. As far as I am concerned, the contact with my patients in the Sierra turned a spontaneous and somewhat lyrical decision into a more serene force, one of an entirely different value. Those poor, suffering, loyal inhabitants of the Sierra cannot even imagine what a great contribution they made to the forging of our revolutionary ideology. (Episodes, 57).

If the Sierra made the union between theory and practice more than “mere theory,” the 1951-52 journey played an initial role in the creation of a revolutionary. At the close of his diary, Che wrote of the emergence of self-consciousness amongst the oppressed and that he would take his humble place amongst the people. As if to foretell his murder in Bolivia on 8 October 1967, Che wrote the following prosaic lines:

I, the eclectic dissector of doctrines and psychoanalyst of dogmas, howling like a man possessed, will assail the barricades and trenches, will stain my weapon with blood and, consumed with rage, will slaughter any enemy I lay hands on. And then, as if an immense weariness were consuming my recent exhilaration, I see myself being sacrificed to the authentic revolution, the great leveller of individual will, pronouncing the exemplary *mea culpa*. I feel my nostrils dilate, savouring the acrid smell of gunpowder and blood, of the enemy's death; I brace my body, ready for combat, and prepare myself to be a sacred precinct within which the bestial howl of the victorious proletariat can resound with new vigour and new hope. (152)

For the man born on Bastille Day (the inauguration of the French Revolution), this journey was essential for it woke him to the

realities of our world and it drove him towards a reassessment of his future as a bourgeois Argentinian doctor. The belief in the power of human struggle and in the impossibility of capitalism to solve its crises, pushed Che towards the ragged band of Cubans who waited in Mexico under the able command of the baseball champion — Fidel Castro. With such gems as the motorcycle diaries hidden in the archives of Havana, one can only hope that we will soon be offered the diaries of Castro: with bated breath ...

Vijay Prashad

Trinity College, Hartford, CT., USA.

Himani Bannerji, *Returning the Gaze: Essays on Racism, Feminism and Politics* (Toronto: Sister Vision Press, 1993).

one learns that without trust in one's experience, expressed as a willingness to find words for it, without thus taking an interest in it, one is without authority for one's own experience. I think of this authority as the right to take an interest in your own experience. (Stanley Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness*)

The right to take an interest in one's own experience seems such a humble cousin of that basic demand for equal civil rights. But, lived lives are slow to improve even where these grander rights have been "granted." Rapid momentum toward such abstractly sanctioned change is gained with the sudden speaking from and of those everyday lives, and is maintained by the internal combustion that accompanies such a directed insistence on self-enunciation. The refusal to be directed away from one's own interests, or perhaps more accurately, the refusal to accept a prescription of one's interests, is a healthy sign of this humbler yet substantive right having taken root.

Returning the Gaze: Essays on Racism, Feminism and Politics, edited by Himani Bannerji, is just such a speaking from, a talking back, a selves-authorization. As Bannerji promises in her introduction, these twelve essays make a unique noise against a background