Chapter Forty-One

Marxism of the Will

A Review of Che Guevara, Venceremos! The Speeches and Writings of Che Guevara; Che Guevara, Reminiscences of the Cuban Revolutionary War; Che Guevara, The Complete Bolivian Diaries of Che Guevara and Other Captured Documents; Ricardo Rojo, My Friend Che; Régis Debray, Revolution in the Revolution?; and Jean-Paul Sartre, The Communists and Peace

Of these books, the two most important are Gerassi’s collection of Che Guevara’s writings and Rojo’s brilliant biography. Guevara’s own reminiscences of the Cuban revolutionary war are interesting, but the reader needs to be well informed already to make much use of them. Debray’s theorising is perhaps only interesting for the contrast between the Debray version of Che and Che as he was, and the Sartre is worth noticing in this context because it helps us to judge how much of Debray is Paris academicism. Finally, I notice the American version of Che’s diaries merely to note that it differs in important ways from the Cuban version. The publishers on their dust jacket say their edition ‘was authenticated not by Cubans or Bolivians but by Americans’; here’s news

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for you, Stein and Day – I still do not trust it. James accuses Che of ‘personal pique’; his publishers join with him in entertaining the suggestion that Castro was jealous of Che, deliberately denied the help he could have given, and so betrayed him. This obscene suggestion does not come well from Americans, who ought at least to realise that the death of Guevara may well cost them as much as his life did.

The death of Che had – and it is difficult to use the word after it has been so cheaply misused – tragic quality. To use a dramatic metaphor is not to suggest anything histrionic about Che’s actions or passions; it is to indicate that those actions and passions are an appropriate subject for poetry as well as for history, because, as Aristotle said, poetry is ‘more universal’ than history. Che was not just an individual, but a representative figure, who lived out a tragic action. A tragic action is one in which a hero encounters a catastrophe as a result of a flaw in his character. By character I do not mean a mere assemblage of psychological traits, I mean rather the incarnation of a role. (What poetry was for Aristotle, sociology is for us.) What was Che’s flaw?

To ask this question, I have suggested, is to ask about a role and not about an assemblage of personal traits. That personal traits can explain little in political or social action is made clear once again in reading reminiscences of Che by those who knew him well. He was an asthmatic who developed a will strong enough to take him onto the athletic field and through medical school. He was an ascetic who did not undervalue sex or alcohol. He was an altruist, but without any signs of that self-contempt which so often underpins altruism. I shall suggest later that these traits were not entirely unimportant in relation to some key positions that Che took up; but there are no splendid psychological generalisations to be constructed which will demonstrate that asthmatic, ascetic altruism is the seedbed of revolution. As so often, what is impressive is not the connection, but the relative lack of connection between individual personality and social role. The need to reminisce about Che has in any case obviously little to do with any task of explanation; it is much more as though his friends still have to reassure themselves that it all really did happen, that this living out of one of our political dreams was not in fact only a dream.

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