

On the 40th Anniversary of the Assassination of Che Guevara by US Imperialism

A Few Comments on ‘Critical Notes on Political Economy’ by Che Guevara

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Here we present a brief review of the book ‘Apuntes criticos a la Economia Politica’ (Critical Notes on Political Economy), consisting of various materials written by Ernesto Che Guevara, published by Ocean Press, Melbourne, Australia 2006 (in Spanish). This was published in conjunction with the ‘Centro de Estudios Che Guevara’ in Cuba, where the original documents are located. This book presents a collection of materials, most of which were unpublished and, therefore, represent a very important reference point for further scrutiny of Guevara’s economic thought.

It is convenient to warn the reader about our point of view with regard to the completeness of the materials selected by the editors. It is our firm belief that the published materials offer an incomplete reference point to Guevara’s overall view of political economy and that, if taken in isolation, these texts can help obliterate the essence of his economic thought and his contribution to the early stages of the economic reforms in Cuba. We hold the opinion that this publication does not contain all the available unpublished materials/notes on economic and philosophic topics that Guevara left us before taking off to Bolivia. Last, but not least, we call on the reader to see Guevara’s bare and sketchy language in the concrete historical context and circumstances in which Guevara was forced to scribble his thoughts. We find that a number of statements, especially those written by Guevara as comments to his readings, are not necessarily as clear as one would have hoped, leaving room for misinterpretation and misrepresentation of Guevara’s true intentions.

The book offers the following unpublished materials, which constitute, according to the editors, all the written materials left by Guevara with regard to his unfinished work for the publication of a manual of political economy. This manual of political economy would have been a response to the Soviet textbook of political economy with which he had already polemicised in public discussions:

- Tentative plan
- Prologue: the need of this book
- Biographical sketch of Marx and Engels
- 10 questions on the teachings of a famous book (referring to the Soviet textbook of Political Economy, Academy of Sciences of the USSR, Spanish edition 1963)

These are followed by a lengthy appendix, some materials of which were also unpublished. The appendix starts with a selection of critical notes (unpublished) on economic-philosophic Marxist works, which we believe is a rather incomplete set of notes, given the fact that Guevara presented himself as a rather methodical and critical person who, as we see in the book, loved to scribble his thoughts as he read. We are eager to see the rest of Guevara’s annotations,

particularly those related to Lenin's works on the New Economic Policy, Stalin's work, 'Economic Problems...' and Mao's 'On the Correct Handling of Contradiction' among others. We believe that these materials would be crucial to reconstruct a more cohesive picture of the later stage of Guevara's economic thought.

In our view, in these unpublished works Guevara does not contradict any of the principles of his economic thoughts formulated earlier in his published articles that have been available to the public for over 40 years. While consistent with the most relevant tenets of 'Guevarism' in political economy, this text is a most valuable document that reveals some remaining obscure aspects of Guevara's economic thought and evolution. This document is particularly revealing and assists us in gaining further insight into the heart of Guevarism and its distinct idiosyncrasy. It most definitely assists us in further refuting the theses of neo-Trotskyism with regard to Guevara's economic thinking and philosophy, which try to reconcile his criticism of the post-Stalin Soviet economic model with their anti-Stalinism. On the other hand, this new document further corroborates and sheds additional light on the negative aspects of Guevara's economic thought. As a matter of fact, as will be seen below, these documents help us gain additional insight on Guevara's interpretation of the dialectical method and how this leads him to commit serious mistakes of principle. In conclusion, this new set of documents sheds very important light on crucial aspects of Guevara's writings and it will be instrumental in building a more comprehensive picture of the revolutionary's economic thought, both in its glory and its misery, in its apogee and its defeat. This document is a mandatory source for those who wish to comprehend the intricacies of Guevara's thought and its implications on questions of political economy of the transitional society in the conditions of Latin America.

In the foreword written as an introduction to the political economy textbook he planned to write he synthesises his point of view with regard to the progress made in the political economy of the transitional society. The essential points put forward in the foreword are consistent with the spirit behind his critical notes, indicating that he had already arrived at the basic tenets of this economic thinking. This paragraph bears witness to Guevara's overall viewpoint on the state of Marxism-Leninism:

'The immense amount of writings that he [Lenin – *our note*] would leave after his death constituted an indispensable complement to the works of the founders [Marx and Engels – *our note*]. Then the source became weaker and only some isolated works of Stalin and some writings from Mao Tse Tung managed to stand out as a witness to the immense creative power of Marxism. In his last years Stalin sensed the results of this backwardness in theory and ordered the publication of a manual accessible to the masses that would deal with issues of political economy up to our days' (in 'The need for this book', p. 30).

Guevara worked on the manual of political economy in the period 1965-1966 during his stays in Tanzania and Prague, after stepping down from office in Cuba. These materials bear excellent testimony to one of the most complex periods of the thinker in which he finally rejected the model of economic development pursued by the socialist camp at the time and had reached the stage at which he formulated his own interpretation of the theoretical sources of that economic practice. Guevara had reached a point at which he felt ready to formulate a list of theoretical and practical problems that he believed had not been addressed by Marxists at the time, as he had the

firm belief that the state of theoretical development was not appropriate to the objective conditions imposed by the revolutionary process. To understand his state of mind it is most relevant to emphasise Guevara's disillusionment with the economic reforms in Eastern Europe (and the Soviet Union for that matter), which he criticised most of all:

'The solution that people want to give in Poland is the free development of the law of value, i.e. the return to capitalism. This solution had already been applied in the Polish countryside, where agriculture was de-collectivised; this year, due to drought and other natural adversities, Polish agriculture is in worse shape than before, has had more serious problems, in other words, the place where the economic calculus leads to ... is solving the problems using the same system, by enhancing the material stimulus, the dedication of people to their material interest, leading, in a way, to the resurrection of categories that are strictly capitalist. This is something that has been happening for a while, which Poland is now trying and I think it is also being tried in other socialist countries' (in 'Annexes', pp. 321-322).

In addition, Guevara was of the opinion that the reforms in Eastern Europe were of similar quality to those implemented in Yugoslavia, which Guevara refers to as aberrations due to mistakes of principles:

'Poland is going along the Yugoslav path, of course; collectivisation is reverted, private property inland is reinstated, a new system of exchange is established and contacts are maintained with the United States. In Czechoslovakia and Germany the Yugoslav system is under study in order to apply it' (in 'Annexes', pp. 404-405).

On the other hand, we are inclined to believe that Guevara would have disagreed with the assertion that there was capitalist restoration in the Soviet Union and the former People's Democracies in the sense implied by Marxist-Leninists. On pages 380-381 of the present volume he seems to agree with Sweezy's rebuttal of the Chinese thesis about the capitalist character of Yugoslavia, indicating that he would rather agree with the statement that 'Yugoslavia is moving towards capitalism'.

By openly objecting to the essence of the economic reform in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, Guevara alienates himself from the mainstream economic thought at the time. In doing so he becomes critical not only of the present but also of the past and as it becomes clearer to us now, he arrived at the belief that at the source of these economic deviations stands Lenin's attitude towards the economics of the transitional society and the first steps of the construction of socialism:

'In the course of our practical and theoretical investigation we have a clear suspect, with name and surnames: Vladimir Ilyich Lenin' (in the 'Prologue', p. 31).

Guevara is most likely a victim of the ideological confusion of the time in Cuba, which, in conjunction with the lack of materials in Spanish translation, may have created the pre-conditions for arriving at some dreadful conclusions. One of the most shocking pieces revealed by this document is Guevara's rebuttal of some of Lenin's theses on the construction of socialism in the Soviet Union. In particular, Guevara does not understand Lenin's call for the

New Economic Policy and its role in the prospective of socialist transformations in a predominantly petty-bourgeois country. To blame Lenin for the restoration, or to be more exact according to Guevara's reasoning, for the process of restoration of capitalism at the time in the Soviet Union and the former People's Democracies in Eastern Europe is a reflection, among other things, of Guevara's failure to grasp Lenin's dialectical approach to the solution of contradictions in the transitional society:

'It is a real fact that all the juridical superstructure of the current Soviet society comes from the New Economic Policy; in this the old capitalist relations are preserved, the old categories of capitalism, i.e., commodities exist, to a certain extent, profit and the interest that the banks appropriate exist and, of course, there exists the direct material interest of the workers' (*ibid.*, in 'Some thoughts about the socialist transition', p. 11).

To blame the New Economic Policy for the right-wing character of the economic reforms of the post-Stalin period shows how little Guevara understood of the essence of the transformation of the economic categories inherited from capitalism that occurred in the Soviet Union during the periods of transition to socialism and communism. This major mistake in Guevara's economic thought is due to a number of circumstances. We believe that his idealist mistakes are to blame for this blunder. We should also take into account the fact that he was not acquainted with the Soviet materials on political economy and philosophy of the Stalin period. We emphasise this fact also because he was certainly not the only one affected by this shortcoming. As a matter of fact it affects many of those who take Stalin's *Economic Problems* in isolation from the economic practice of socialist construction that this crucial work is a generalisation of. Without access to this documentation it is extremely hard to make a case in favour of the qualitative change of the character of the economic categories in the practice of the Soviet Union in the Stalin period. Unfortunately, so far the wealth of economic and philosophical materials published in major Soviet journals of the revolutionary period still remains in Russian only. At the time when the economic discussions under Guevara's leadership had reached their apogee, a number of various ideological trends were tolerated and even published in the official Cuban press. Needless to say, these trends had institutionalised the fact that their analysis of the economic history of the Soviet Union was based on pseudo-bourgeois if not utterly bourgeois sources and that for them questions of dialectics and the Marxist method are as much abstract notions as they are alien to a bourgeois thinker. With this we do not mean to exonerate or excuse Guevara's fundamental mistakes; however, we believe that this circumstance, together with preconceptions and ideological prejudices that became overwhelming and ubiquitous in ideological discussions at the time in Cuba, may have played a role in the formation of Guevara's views on political economy.

What seemed at the time to be a relative obvious statement to many in Cuba, including Guevara himself, that the existence of commodity-money relations in the Soviet Union was inherited from the period of the New Economic Policy, is no more than a reflection of sheer ignorance of the complexity of the economic reality of the transitional society.

Guevara went further when he stated that the New Economic Policy was a requirement particular to the social and economic reality of post-revolutionary Russia and that Cuba, or any other country facing the tasks of revolutionary transformations, does not necessarily need to

implement these policies. This statement is in principle correct. However, we think that Guevara may have wanted to make the issue of the disappearance of commodity-money relations a question of socialist education, rather than a question of the maturity of the relations of production and the development of the productive forces. We have certain evidence that Guevara does not necessarily agree with the fundamental principle of the objective character of the economic laws of the transitional society. Guevara's seemingly correct statement against the absolutisation of the New Economic Policy as an intermediate and necessary step to the transition to socialism, as advocated by modern revisionism, seems to be considered by him from idealist positions. Here lies the core of Guevara's deviation from the principles of Marxist-Leninist political economy. This does not necessarily deny the value of his fight against the tenets of modern revisionism, but it places severe restrictions on the value of his economic thinking.

It is extremely interesting to note that Guevara is aware of the evolution of the Soviet manual after the death of Stalin. He recognised that the manual changed both in its structure and its orientation as the Soviet economic structure evolved.

'This manual has been translated into many languages and several editions have been published, undergoing pronounced changes in its structure and orientation as changes took place in the Soviet Union' (in 'The need for this book', p. 30).

Unfortunately, we lack further detail on this reasoning, which would be crucial in evaluating Guevara's understanding of the history of the political economy of the Soviet Union. We believe we have a fair idea of Guevara's point of view with regard to the change of orientation (at least along general lines, i.e. Stalin's line for the suppression of commodity-money relations as opposed to their expansion under the revisionist economic model). But we are not particularly clear about what particular aspects of the economic policies in the 1950s he would refer to as a change in orientation, since the economic reforms of September 1953 onwards affected many aspects of the Soviet economic structure. As discussed above, we believe that Guevara does not necessarily understand the qualitative changes of the economic relations in Stalin's period and the economic discussions that led to the first draft of the political economy textbook.

Nevertheless, to acknowledge an evolution in Soviet economic thinking at the time is very important in analysing the intricacies of Guevara's own evolution and for the significance of his economic thought. It certainly reinforces the progressive aspect of his economic thinking with respect to what was widely accepted as a dogma by Trotskyite and neo-Trotskyite ideologists. Guevara does not subscribe to the dogma advocated by those who attacked and still attack the Soviet Union from 'left'-wing revisionist positions, that allegedly Khrushchevism-Brezhnevism represents a continuation of what is usually referred to as Stalinism. According to this reasoning a rift is established between Leninism and 'Stalinism' and the latter is understood as a deviation or even its antithesis, and was perpetuated after Stalin's death. They do not recognise a qualitative change in the economic policies in the 1960s compared to the political economy embodied in the policies of Stalin's period. On the contrary, they view the economic evils of Soviet modern revisionism as a result of 'Stalinist' thinking. Nothing can be more absurd from the point of view of Marxism-Leninism, and Guevara is not afraid to polemicise with those who

imply a rift between Lenin and Stalin, whether explicitly or implicitly, by rebutting the Soviet revisionists' claims of Stalin's mistakes:

'In the alleged mistakes of Stalin lies the difference between a revolutionary attitude and a revisionist one. He sees the danger enclosed in market relations and tries to break with it, while the new leadership is curved by the pressure of the superstructure and promotes the action of market relations by theorising that the use of these economic mechanisms may lead to communism' (in '10 questions on the teachings of a famous book', p. 214).

It is well known that Guevara had an overall supportive attitude towards Stalin's *Economic Problems*. However, the present text bears witness to the fact that he disagrees with some of the points raised by Stalin in this work. We will not elaborate more on this point since we would not be adding much of substance to what has already been said about the idiosyncrasy of Guevara's economic thought. Nevertheless, it would probably be helpful to give a quote in which Guevara clearly states his position with regard to Trotsky and Trotskyism:

'I think that the fundamental stuff that Trotsky was based upon was erroneous and that his ulterior behaviour was wrong and his last years were even dark. The Trotskyites have not contributed anything whatsoever to the revolutionary movement; where they did most was in Peru, but they finally failed there because their methods are bad' (in 'Annexes', p. 402).

We do not want to mislead the reader into believing that 'Guevarism' is a form of vindication of 'Stalinism'. While appreciating the revolutionary character of Stalin's contribution to political economy and demonising the tenets of modern revisionism, he also appears quite critical of Stalin's deeds. Guevara concludes the above paragraph by bluntly making a terrible accusation:

'Few voices oppose him publicly, showing this way the huge historical crime of Stalin: to have despised communist education and to have established a stiff cult of personality' (in '10 questions on the teachings of a famous book', p. 214).

Here Guevara manifests a lack of erudition and originality in perpetuating one of the most common criticisms of Stalin's legacy. To talk about Stalin's alleged contempt for communist education reflects a profound lack of knowledge of the history of the Soviet Union. It is factually incorrect and most likely reflects again the lack of translated materials and a general ignorance of everyday life in the Soviet Union. In essence Guevara echoes a rather superficial interpretation of the history of the Soviet Union, which is essentially divorced from the point of view and methodology of historical materialism. Revisionist ideologists, just like bourgeois historians, try to explain the essence of historical periods based on the personality of leaders and ascribe whatever prominent aspect of social life to them. Unfortunately, Guevara mechanically propagates subjective thinking into his economic analysis and discredits his image unnecessarily. It is unlikely that Guevara made a conscious effort to seriously evaluate the essence of such statements and to make a more objective analysis of Stalin's period. Here, Guevara propagates anti-Marxist reasoning to substantiate one of the central tenets of his economic theory: the inclusion of consciousness into economic relations and therefore to consider consciousness as part of the object of political economy.

This aspect of Guevara's economic thinking is well known and is repeated in these new materials on numerous occasions. In a letter to Fidel Castro, Guevara explicitly states something that we already expected as a result of the analysis of his published works. We were aware of strong similarities between Guevara's striving for communist education and the Maoist interpretation of the role of consciousness in the relations of production:

'Communism is a phenomenon of consciousness, one does not reach it by jumping into the vacuum, by a change in the quality of production, or by the simple clash between the productive forces and the relations of production. Communism is a phenomenon of consciousness and the consciousness of man has to be developed...' (in 'Some thoughts about the socialist transition', p. 11).

It is worth noting that Guevara's denunciation of Stalin's alleged contempt for education is quite similar to Mao's argument in his critique of Stalin's *Economic Problems*:

'Stalin's book from first to last says nothing about the superstructure. It is not concerned with people; it considers things, not people. Does the kind of supply system for consumer goods help spur economic development or not? He should have touched on this at the least. Is it better to have commodity production or is it better not to? Everyone has to study this. Stalin's point of view in his last letter [Reply to comrades A. V. Sanina and V. G. Venzher – *editor's note*] is almost altogether wrong. The basic error is mistrust of the peasants' (Mao Tse Tung, *A Critique of Soviet Economics*, Monthly Review Press, New York and London, 1977, p. 135).

This strongly suggests that this aspect of Guevara's economic thinking is not original, as some experts of his work insistently argue. It is evident that this aspect of his thinking is the result of the influence of various ideological trends that circulated in Cuba at the time. It is clear to us that Guevara made a serious effort in the course of his investigation to disentangle complex questions of political economy. In doing so the spectrum of literature he was exposed to could not have been as broad as one would have hoped. Unfortunately, Guevara is driven by the prejudice propagated by many different revisionist trends outside the Soviet Union, and within it after Stalin's death, that allegedly the economic thought at the time was characterised by dogmatism (on the other hand, we are unclear as to what exactly Guevara meant by dogmatism). While being progressive in the main, Guevara uncritically takes for granted what the Bettelheims and Sweezys propagated in Cuba without proof (speaking of dogmatic thinking...).

'After a long lethargy, characterised by the most outright apologetic, the XXth Congress of the CPSU made a leap, but not forward; constrained by the dead end that the hybrid system led to and pressed by the superstructure, the Soviet leadership took steps backwards that were complemented by the new organisation of industry. The lethargy is followed by repression; both have the same dogmatic character' (in '10 questions on the teachings of a famous book', p. 213).

Guevara on Collectivisation

This topic is probably the one in which this document gives us the most additional insight into Guevara's economic thought. Guevara's views on collectivisation are not really covered in the published materials available to us. One could only guess that for the sake of internal consistency

Guevara would have advocated for a progressive stand with regard to the role of the state and the main relations of production in the countryside and his attitude with regard to modern revisionism on this question. It is fascinating to see confirmed this initial view that Guevara opposed the selling of the machine tractor stations to the collective farms. This policy had become default at the time of the Cuban revolution and was one of the most important aspects of the agrarian program of the revisionists around the world and was very much supported and even imposed by the Soviet revisionists.

It seems probable that Guevara was unaware of the fact that the Chinese leadership also advocated these policies at the time. According to various biographers of Guevara, at some point the contradiction between his economic policies and those instigated by the Soviet revisionists became so acute that the latter started to accuse Guevara of deviationism (Trotskyism, in particular) and that he in turn allegedly rebutted those accusations by arguing that if anything, he was closer to the Chinese with regard to the controversy. We do not want to debate the accuracy of the eyewitness' accounts on which these authors based their assumptions about Guevara's Maoism. What is clear to us, however, is that Guevara fundamentally deviates from mainstream Maoism on this question, probably without really knowing it.

Guevara raises one point correctly. It is a well-known fact that the relative weight of strictly private agricultural production of peasants was dropping with respect to the overall output of the collective farms, as reported by the Soviets at that time. This was due to the natural evolution created by the growing disparity of labour productivity between mechanised and manual labour and the fact that capital investment in general favoured the former for obvious reasons. Guevara is right in pointing to the fact that, at some point in the development of the collective system of production, the contradiction between the people's property and the kolkhoz is not determined by the fraction of the means of production made up of private property of individual peasants.

'Private property is being eliminated within the kolkhoz and, moreover the relative weight of collective property becomes overwhelming, but even if it was 100% the main issue still remains, the contradiction between the people's property and the collective property' (in '10 questions on the teachings of a famous book', p. 185).

Here Guevara addresses the general problem of the contradiction between collective property and socialised property as a problem *per se*, which always remains as long as collective property has not merged into the property of the whole people. If put into historical perspective, Guevara's attitude represents a great step forward with respect to the character of the agrarian reforms fostered by modern revisionism. Here Guevara is aware of a basic element in the Marxist-Leninist approach to the resolution of contradictions between the city and the countryside, contradictions that modern revisionism tried to obliterate and reduce to a question of the different level of development of the forces of production and productivity. Guevara correctly disagrees with such a postulate, thus reinforcing the overall progressive character of his economic thought. This is further strengthened by Guevara's open rebuttal of one of the biggest attacks on socialism by the Soviet revisionists, namely, the selling of the machine tractor stations from the state to the collective farms in the late 1950s. After a section of the revisionist manual of political economy devoted to substantiating the selling of the machine tractor stations, Guevara writes:

‘This is a concrete example of the contradictions that become antagonistic between the social property and the individual collectivity. The MTS [Machine Tractor Stations – *editor’s note*] may have had bureaucratic deviations, but the superstructure imposed its solution: more autonomy, more wealth of their own’ (in ‘10 questions on the teachings of a famous book’, p. 187).

Nevertheless, one must always be careful with Guevara’s formulations. In fact, even though Guevara’s attitude to the revisionist plans for agriculture is overall progressive, one can never be cautious enough when dealing with this writings. Below we find a paragraph that may indicate that Guevara probably made his criticism for the wrong reasons:

‘Before, the need for commodity forms was explained by the existence of different forms of property. In practice the kolkhoz property acts as antagonist to the directly social property and therefore, the double character of labour is similar to that in capitalism. The double character of labour would disappear if this antagonism ceased to exist’ (in ‘10 questions on the teachings of a famous book’, p. 159).

The first sentence is not controversial. Guevara simple states that under Stalin the persistence of commodity categories in socialism was understood as a result of the presence of two forms of property under socialism: socialised or state property and collective property or the kolkhoz. Unfortunately, Guevara addresses the relationship between the collective property and socialised property as antagonistic. We cannot agree with this as a general statement. In the conditions of the restoration of capitalism the relationship between the state (no more socialised) and collective property is antagonistic and it definitely becomes similar to that in the countries of classical capitalism. However, as long as the state property is socialised, i.e., loosely speaking, the means of production is in the hands of the state of the dictatorship of the proletariat (regardless of the level of the development of the productive forces and the effective level of socialisation of the process of production), the relationship between the former and the kolkhoz system is not antagonistic. This type of statement is equivalent to saying that the relationship between the working class and the peasantry is a relationship of antagonism, which is definitely not true in the conditions of the dictatorship of the proletariat. Therefore, the double character of labour in the socialist system or in the transitional society is not driven by a relationship of antagonism.

Here one could argue that Guevara was implying that capitalist relations had been restored in the Soviet Union. He probably would have agreed to some extent with that statement. As a matter of fact, in the text of ‘10 questions on the teachings of a famous book’ he bluntly objects to the concept of the state of the whole people, a concept that was officially supported in the Soviet Union at the time, which clearly implies that he believed the dictatorship of the proletariat had been disbanded for good. Given the extent of Guevara’s criticism of the reforms in Eastern Europe and the fact that he openly talked about these as a regression with respect to earlier practices, one might be inclined to believe that perhaps Guevara was implying that capitalist relations had been restored to some extent in the countries of the former People’s Democracies and the Soviet Union. This might be the case, however, and very unfortunately, Guevara made the statement above in a general sense, as opposed to the case of the revisionist system alone. We

are able to disentangle this by means of a short paragraph in the ‘Annexes’ written following a famous quote from Lenin’s *On Cooperation* that we insert here for the reader’s benefit:

‘By adopting NEP we made a concession to the peasant as a trader, to the principle of private trade; it is precisely for this reason (contrary to what some people think) that the co-operative movement is of such immense importance. All we actually need under NEP is to organise the population of Russia in co-operative societies on a sufficiently large scale, for we have now found that degree of combination of private interest, of private commercial interest, with state supervision and control of this interest, that degree of its subordination to the common interests which was formerly the stumbling-block for very many socialists. Indeed, the power of the state over all large-scale means of production, political power in the hands of the proletariat, the alliance of this proletariat with the many millions of small and very small peasants, the assured proletarian leadership of the peasantry, etc. – is this not all that is necessary to build a complete socialist society out of co-operatives, out of co-operatives alone, which we formerly ridiculed as huckstering and which from a certain aspect we have the right to treat as such now, under NEP? Is this not all that is necessary to build a complete socialist society? It is still not the building of socialist society, but it is all that is necessary and sufficient for it.’ (V.I. Lenin, *On Cooperation* Collected Works, 4th English Edition, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1966, Vol. 33, pp. 467-468.)

To which Guevara, to our despair, bluntly objects:

‘I think this is a wrong conception. The fundamental mistake is to think that the collective character is above its private character, something that practice has ruled out. The cooperative is the result of an economic need; there is a class force behind it and its consolidation and to acknowledge it is to strengthen the class that Lenin so feared’ (in ‘Annexes’, p. 241).

Unfortunately, this reasoning is far from Marxist and reflects once again Guevara’s shallow understanding of dialectical materialism, without which a consistently Marxist treatment of political economy is simply not possible. Guevara is basically telling us, consciously or unconsciously, that the political union between the working class and the peasantry is not viable, even under the conditions of the dictatorship of the proletariat, by asserting that the collective sector acts as a private producer with respect to the socialised system. And if one reads his words literally one would have to conclude that Guevara does not see the progressive character of cooperation, however complex or simple, in the process of construction of the socialist economy. We are not even sure if Guevara thought carefully enough about the implications of such a statement.

Guevara on Mao

The present document sheds some light on the question of Guevara’s attitude towards Mao in a very revealing but brief passage, which touches upon a very important question in dialectical materialism. In particular, and possibly unconsciously, Guevara deals with one of the most distinct characteristics of Mao’s understanding of the interrelation of opposites in dialectical materialism. A more detailed analysis of this question has revealed a lot about the true essence of Mao’s understanding of the role of contradiction and equilibrium. Due to the lack of material the

conclusions drawn here with regard to Guevara's attitude towards Mao in general, and with respect to this aspect in particular, need to be taken with a grain of salt.

The revisionist conception of the role of commodity-money relations is ultimately related to questions of dialectical materialism, such as the role of contradiction and equilibrium. It is no coincidence to see both aspects linked one way or the other in the analysis of the political economy of modern revisionism. Conversely, we would expect that Guevara would have a well-defined attitude toward the question of contradiction and equilibrium in dialectics for consistency sake, due to the progressive character of Guevara's conception of the political economy of the transitional society. As a matter of fact the analysis of Guevara's economic thought indicates a well-defined system of thought, not always correct, but at least self-consistent. One excellent example of self-consistency is Guevara's negative attitude toward selling the machine tractor stations to the collective farms, as discussed in the previous section.

Before moving to the citation *per se*, it is relevant to emphasise our lack of understanding of Guevara's attitude towards the Chinese CP at the time of the controversy with the Soviets. The present document confirms accounts by various biographers of Guevara's positive attitude towards Mao. And rightly so, as already mentioned above:

'...Then the source became weaker and only ... some writings from Mao Tse Tung managed to stand out as a witness to the immense creative power of Marxism' (in 'The need for this book', p. 30).

As pointed out in the section on Guevara's stand toward collectivisation, he fundamentally departs from the mainstream stand on this question advocated by the Chinese at the time. It is clear that he opposed the selling of the main means of production to the communes and, if he had a chance, he would have probably rejected the policies of self-reliance that Chinese agrarian policies were based upon. We have no evidence at this point whether Guevara had a chance to analyse the Chinese policies in the countryside and whether he had the opportunity to develop a debate with Chinese officials on this matter. We do have accounts of intense discussion with Soviet and Eastern European economists, especially Czechoslovaks, but we do not seem to have accounts of similar contacts with the Chinese. We are also aware of Guevara's criticism directed at the Polish leadership. We believe that Guevara would have favoured the Chinese in the Sino-Soviet controversy given his critical attitude toward the Soviets in general and the new economic reforms in particular, which he calls revisionist. But it is not clear to what extent Guevara would have supported the economic policies of the Chinese leadership during the post-Stalin period. We simply lack any evidence. In this respect, it is also relevant to bear in mind that the ideological confusion reigning in the international communist movement at the time (the true nature of modern revisionism was not yet fully understood) had a strong impact on Guevara's reasoning. The analysis of Guevara's economic thought shows that he was also a victim of this ideological confusion.

The citation under study in this section belongs to a comment of Guevara allegedly written next to a number of paragraphs of Mao's *On Contradiction*. This complicated section of the document needs to be understood within a historical context and, of course, within the context of the pamphlet in its entirety, as Mao's paragraph quoted by the editors is not even necessarily

relevant to Guevara's footnote. The implications of Guevara's citation go far beyond the particular topic discussed in the paragraphs of *On Contradiction* that the editors of the book have chosen to publish, for understandable reasons, as will be discussed below. Guevara writes:

'... For the Chinese the fundamental contradiction lies between imperialism and the oppressed world, because the latter are the basis for the existence of imperialism. Imperialism can exist without socialism but not without the exploitation of the peoples where the main struggle is for the people's liberation. On the other hand, **there can be no equilibrium between antagonistic opposites** [our emphasis]; the socialist countries are antagonistic opposites of the imperialist countries; although they represent a solution of an earlier contradiction (exploited and exploiters) on a national scale, they do not solve the contradiction on an international scale' (in 'Annexes', p. 243).

Guevara's citation is open to all sorts of speculation. Needless to say, our analysis is for obvious reasons not necessarily unbiased. There are two relevant aspects that we deem necessary to comment on here. Firstly, Guevara points out the position of the Chinese with regard to what they believe are the main contradiction in the class struggle. Guevara voices one of the points that Mao insisted on in his work *On Contradiction*, that of the existence of a principal aspects of the contradiction, which determines the character of the contradiction and its most important manifestations:

'Of the two contradictory aspects, one must be the principal and the other the secondary. The principal aspect is the one that plays the leading role on the contradiction. The quality of the thing is mainly determined by the principal aspect of the contradiction that has taken the dominant position' (Mao Tse-Tung, *On Contradiction*, International Publishers, New York, 1953, p. 36).

While Mao's analysis of the role of imperialism in China in *On Contradiction* is overall correct, the exaggeration of the contradiction between imperialism and the oppressed nations, between rich and poor, eventually assisted the Chinese leadership in supporting and further developing the anti-Marxist theory of the three worlds (which by the way was not an invention of the Chinese leadership). To argue that the main contradiction is the antagonistic contradiction between imperialism and the oppressed nations, in the historical conditions of China at the time when the pamphlet was written, is correct. However, to exaggerate the dominant role of this contradiction by idealising and absolutising that relationship unavoidably leads revisionism to disregard the antagonistic class relations between the national bourgeoisie and the oppressed people, to disregard the internal contradictions, as secondary and therefore not relevant, following Mao's stiff attitude toward secondary contradictions. This idealisation leads to the schematic representation of the division of the world into three types of countries, regardless of social formation, which is anti-Marxist in its core. By idealising the relationship between imperialism and the oppressed nations, between rich and poor nations, such relationships are ripped off their class character and turned into classless concepts, as classless as the mechanical division of the world of exploited and exploiters into the three worlds.

It is not clear to us what Guevara is actually implying by his remark. We do not even know if this conclusion is biased by discussions with Chinese comrades at the time or if it is just an

overall comment on the pamphlet, written for his own benefit. Most likely Guevara agrees with the statement. Nevertheless and secondly, what is of particular relevant in our analysis is Guevara's statement that 'there can be no equilibrium between antagonistic opposites, which we find truly remarkable, for the lack of a better word.

In order to appreciate the relevance of Guevara's statement it is necessary to recall the specifics of Mao's understanding of the role of contradiction and the dynamics that determine the interaction between the opposites in that contradiction. In contrast to the classical Marxist-Leninist understanding of the concept of qualitative and quantitative change, Mao introduces two forms of movement in *On Contradiction*:

'The movement of all things assumes two forms: the form of relative rest and the form of conspicuous change. Both forms of movement are caused by the mutual struggle of the two contradictory factors contained in a thing itself. When the movement of a thing assumes the first form, it undergoes only a quantitative but not a qualitative change, and consequently appears in a state of seeming rest... Such unity, solidarity, amalgamation, harmony, balance, stalemate, deadlock, rest, stability, equilibrium, coagulation, attraction, as we see in daily life, are all the appearance of things in the state of quantitative change' (*On Contradiction*, p. 48).

According to Mao, there exist two types of motions, through which qualitative and quantitative changes manifest themselves. Qualitative changes take place through more or less violent motions and quantitative changes take place through relatively slow motions. From the point of view of a purely mechanical approach with regard to, for example, the transition of matter from one state into another and vice-versa, this reasoning would not necessarily provoke strong objections. However, Mao's reasoning does have serious implications generally speaking, and in particular turns the Marxist-Leninist understanding of the dynamics of the opposites of contradictions into a theory of mechanical equilibrium between them, which is broken when antagonistic contradictions are resolved through qualitative changes or upheavals. According to this reasoning, the accumulation of quantitative changes is viewed from the point of view of harmony among the opposites of the contradiction. Harmony is broken when qualitative changes occur; harmony, however, is the form through which the interrelation of the opposites of the contradiction manifests itself between periods of upheavals. This mechanical interpretation of the understanding of the interrelation between quantitative and qualitative changes is not an innovation of Mao. As a matter of fact, this type of thinking had been extensively developed and applied to the theory of class struggle and political economy by Bogdanov and Bukharin in the Soviet Union.

To understand Bogdanovism and how his theory of equilibrium was adapted by Bukharin to questions of the political economy of the transitional society is crucial to comprehend the theories of market socialism advocated by modern revisionism. Bogdanov was one of the objects of criticism by Lenin in *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* and Stalin fought all this life against remnants of Bukharinism in political economy. In essence, the basic philosophical and theoretical tenets of modern revisionism are inspired by Bogdanov's postulates formulated in his work *Universal Science of Organisation – Tektology* (1913-1922). Tektology has been highly praised by bourgeois scholars as a precursor of a whole trend of bourgeois 'natural philosophy of organisation in complex systems'. As Bogdanov put it, 'the aim of Tektology is the

systematisation of organised complexes' through the identification of universal organisational principles: 'all things are organisational, all complexes could only be understood through their organisational character'. The starting point of Bogdanov's Tektology was that nature has a general, organised character, with one set of laws of organisation for all objects. Two aspects of Bogdanov's contributions were central in the development of the first theories of right-wing revisionist political economy in the 1920s: first, Bogdanov's metaphysical concept of the law of organisation of a complex system (i.e. the economy of the transitional society) through the identification of universal organisational principles; secondly, the need for equilibrium of the complex system and the environment. Bogdanov believed he had developed a more complex conception of equilibrium, different from the purely mechanical conception, which considered that any complex system should correspond to its environment and adapt to it. But in practice Bogdanov's postulates were implemented by a trend of Soviet economists in the 1920s, including Bukharin as the leading member of the future right-wing opposition to the plans for massive collectivisation and the gradual liquidation of commodity-money relations in the Soviet economy. In the 1920s the concept of 'law of labour expenses' circulated among wide circles of Soviet economists. This concept was exposed at the time as no more and no less than the law of value, dressed up in the form of the Bogdanovite law of organisation of a complex system. The law of labour expenses, according to Bukharin, would be a general law (applicable to all historical epochs and modes of production) that establishes the proportions of labour. In the modes of production based on commodity-money relations, the law of value would be the manifestation of this general law. Under socialism, according to Bukharin, the law of labour expenses would act 'naked' without using the form of the law of value. In the end, the regulator of labour exchange under socialism would be the principle of exchange of equal labour (values in the commodity economy). In essence, Bukharin propagated the use of the law of value as the regulator of the proportions of labour in the socialist economy, which is a mercantilist approach to the questions of political economy of the transitional society. The observation of the 'law of labour expenses' provides proportionality and, therefore, the necessary equilibrium of the complex system. Bukharin's energetic opposition to the policies of collectivisation and massive industrialisation was based on the belief that the economic disproportions created by the systematic violation of the 'law of labour expenses' (i.e. the law of value) would disturb this abstract concept of economic equilibrium. The theories of market socialism that emerged after the Great Patriotic War and became the official theoretical foundation of the new regime after Stalin's death is just a sophisticated version of Bogdanov/Bukharin's 'law of labour expenses'.

It is not within the scope of the present article to deal with this question in detail. This topic will be covered in more depth in the near future. Nevertheless what is relevant to the present discussion is to point out that Mao's *On Contradiction* opens the way to conceiving the concept of harmony of opposites. These features of Mao's philosophical thinking blossom further and adopt openly revisionist manifestations in a later work, *On the Correct Handling of Contradictions Among the People* in 1957, in which the harmony of the proletariat and the national bourgeoisie is considered feasible. It is very possible that Guevara was also acquainted with this later work of Mao, as it had become one of Mao's most publicised works, especially at the time when Maoism was emerging as an ideological trend independent of mainstream revisionist ideology. The fact that Guevara explicitly denies the possibility of harmony of opposites strongly indicates that he was acquainted with this work.

By this we do not want to imply that Guevara had reached a point in his theoretical investigations at which he was in a position to systematically expose the tenets of what's known today as the theory of Maoism. On the contrary, Guevara agrees with Mao on the role of ideology in the political economy of socialism. Their conceptions of the object of political economy in the transitional society do not differ significantly in their essence. It is in this aspect where Guevara's economic theory stumbles into serious problems. This central shortcoming of Guevara's economic thought prevents him from fully and consistently grasping the theory of political economy developed by Lenin and Stalin.

Within the context of the quotation under scrutiny, Guevara is obviously protesting against the theory of peaceful coexistence between what he refers to as socialist countries and imperialism. While internal antagonistic contradictions were in the main resolved by the socialist revolutions, the class contradictions between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie continue mainly under the form of the antagonistic relationship between socialism and imperialism. As a matter of fact, internal contradictions are intimately connected to the antagonistic relations with the imperialist world.

The citation presented above is followed by a hopelessly wrong and rather absurd sentence, to say the very least:

'Finally, the law of uneven development is a law of nature, not of the dominant social system; therefore, the socialist countries also develop unevenly, which transforms itself through commerce into unequal exchange, or in other words, into the exploitation of some socialist countries by others.'

This sentence is not necessarily relevant to the above discussion. However, we bring this quotation up to make more evident the fact that our investigation on the heart of Guevara's thought is far from understood and is plagued with pitfalls and inconsistencies. This statement is a blemish on the reputation of Guevara's thought. To state that the uneven development of socialist countries is a necessary economic law is consistent with stating that the development of socialism spontaneously engenders exploitation of man by man, and therefore, the construction of communism is a hopeless illusion and lacks scientific substantiation both philosophically and from the point of view of political economy. Let us hope for the best, that Guevara was just being sarcastic. Unfortunately, whether this was the case or whether he was trying to make a point will probably remain a mystery to us.